

# KING COBRA

---

---

---

The scene of *King Cobra* is laid in the wild and desolate mountains that lie beyond the North-West Frontier of India. . . . In every sense of the word it is an enthralling romance. . . . Its author spent more than twenty years in various parts of India and is one of those rare Europeans who have a keen insight into the native mind. . . . Through his evident love and understanding of the mystic magic of the East, he has been able to invest *King Cobra* with that mysterious atmosphere which so many writers have attempted and so few have been able to achieve. . . . Thrill follows upon thrill. The whispered intrigue of the Harem—ruled over by the beautiful and self-willed Shireen—mingles with the clash of steel. "The Cobra," the gigantic Hillman outlaw, kidnaps an English girl, and the same night her father is murdered. A brilliant officer on a Secret Service mission—Major Colin Gray, V.C., D.S.O.—goes to her rescue and is himself taken prisoner. . . . Their adventures in the hitherto unfindable XIIth century stronghold of Prester John—the search for which has already cost seven Secret-Service agents their lives—with its eerie Temple of the Snake and its coruscating treasure-house, make fascinating reading, while the fight in the arena between "King Cobra" and Colin Gray is, without any exaggeration, a magnificent piece of descriptive writing.



---

---

# K I N G C O B R A

by  
Mark Channing

---

---

“Some bold adventurers disdain  
The limits of their little reign,  
And unknown regions dare descry.”

GRAY

---

---

PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON  
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

---

---

**COPYRIGHT, 1934, BY  
MARK CHANNING**

**MADE IN THE  
UNITED STATES OF  
AMERICA**



TO  
“NIBS”



---

---

## CONTENTS

I	IN WHICH FATE SETS THE STAGE	11
II	THE SWASTIKA GURU	18
III	THE SHEEPSKIN COAT	25
IV	THE COBRA STRIKES AGAIN	31
V	THE CIPHER	38
VI	SHIREEN	45
VII	THE PUNISHMENT	52
VIII	THE FIGHT IN THE HILLS	60
IX	THE PALACE OF THE MIRROR	67
X	THE COBRA RETURNS	74
XI	KHOON DROPS THE MASK	81
XII	THE BLIND FAKIR	88
XIII	THE RUSE	96
XIV	DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND	107
XV	SHIREEN SCHEMES	113
XVI	WOODED—BUT NOT WON	120
XVII	ORDEAL BY FIRE	128
XVIII	DELILAH	133
XIX	THE COBRA'S WEDDING FEAST	141
XX	THE THIRD EYE	148
XXI	GRAY AND DIANA MEET	156
XXII	IN WHICH SHIREEN SCHEMES A SECOND TIME	162
XXIII	IN WHICH THE VEILED MAN HOLDS TWO COUNCILS	168
XXIV	IN WHICH THE COUNCIL CONSIDERS TWO MATTERS	175
XXV	IN WHICH GRAY DREAMS A DREAM	183
XXVI	THE EIGHTH MAN	189

XXVII	JAFFIR TRIES TO TRUMP SHIREEN'S ACE	194
XXVIII	CRISIS	202
XXIX	RISSALDAR SHER SINGH RETURNS TO LABAK, AND MAJOR MERCER LEAVES FOR SIMLA	209
XXX	MOHAMMED SHAH VISITS THE MIR	214
XXXI	SIMLA IS STILL MYSTIFIED	220
XXXII	JAFFIR THE EUNUCH DIES IN THE MARKET- PLACE	225
XXXIII	GULBUDUN AND SHIV MEET FOR THE LAST TIME	231
XXXIV	DIANA GOES TO HER ESCAPE	238
XXXV	LIMBU DOES SOME TRACKING	246
XXXVI	A HOUSE DIVIDED	253
XXXVII	THE PLACE OF FIGHTS	258
XXXVIII	"WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK . . ."	264
XXXIX	GALBRAITH PAYS A DEBT	270
XL	IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH	275
XLI	IN THE TEMPLE OF THE COBRA	281
XLII	BETWEEN THE ROUNDS	286
XLIII	THE RIVER OF DARKNESS	292
XLIV	ONCE MORE IN THE HILLS	297
XLV	THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS	304
	EPILOGUE	309

# KING COBRA



---

---

## CHAPTER I

### IN WHICH FATE SETS THE STAGE

FAR BEYOND THE NORTH-WEST Frontiers of India lies the mountain-locked land of Yanistan.

Wild, and for the most part barren, split by chasm-like gorges and narrow twisting valleys through which tumble a hundred turbulent streams, it is a land of savage desolation, inhabited by people as rugged and cruel as itself.

Perhaps one reason why so little is known about the country is that it has no roads—for the stony zigzag track which winds down from its capital, Labak, past the eastern borders of Afghanistan to British India, cannot by any stretch of imagination be called one. True, once a year or so the rickety motor-car belonging to His Serene Highness the Mir, bumps along it, hooting without surcease while it disputes a perilous right-of-way with some apparently interminable camel caravan from Persia or Turkestan; but the driver is congratulated when he reaches his destination.

Danger and inaccessibility apart (or perhaps because of them), Sir John Lindsay—the British Resident—loved Yanistan. Its sombre grandeur appealed to him. Its ruler was a friend who looked upon him as a sort of King Solomon, Nimrod, and the Government of India rolled into one, and would often ask his help to solve the more knotty problems connected with simple, but explosive politics.

And what the gaunt, grey Sir John Lindsay advised, the Mir always did. At least, that is what the Yanistanis say, and they are a hard, shrewd people. Only a few days ago, for instance, a powerful Border outlaw who had raided and harassed the Indian frontier for fifteen years and was

"wanted" for the murder of a score of white people, had been captured in a stabbing-knife fight in Labak bazaar.

The Mir had at once consulted his friend Sir John Lindsay.

"If I hang this rascal Alam Khan, Resident Sahib, my people will rise. If I let him go, the *Sirkar* [Government of India] will cease to be my friend. And I have promised not to hand him over to you. What am I to do?"

Sir John Lindsay had recommended the hanging; and the Mir had concurred.

To-night Labak city was in a ferment.

The reason was as simple as the explosive politics. The British Government, fumed the Yanistanis, was responsible for the condemning to death of a popular idol. And it was true. Alam Khan, ("The Cobra," or "King Cobra," as he was indiscriminately called because of the deadly rapidity with which he struck at his victims) *was* a popular idol; a sort of bloody edition of Robin Hood. He was, they even swore, invulnerable and protected by high heaven. Had not Azrael, the Angel of Death, appeared to a local *mullah* [priest] on the very night The Cobra was arrested, and announced that the land would be decimated if the prisoner were hanged?

He had!

And to-morrow The Cobra was to be executed. . . .

The night was oppressively hot. The flicker of lightning behind the surrounding hills was practically ceaseless, and every now and then a sullen rumble of thunder thudded dully, shaking the leaden sky. From out the heart of the city rose an ominous droning mutter—the deep-throated voice of an angry people.

Azrael, the Angel of Death, was abroad in the land.

On the lawn of the British Residency, close to that mighty mountain called Maha Chand, three people were listening to a thin, reedy wailing which rose and fell on the stifling hot air, mournful and reiterative.

To Diana Lindsay, the Resident's daughter, it somehow recalled the shepherd's piping in "Tristan."



"What do you think it is, Daddy?" she questioned uneasily. "I've never heard the jackals and pariah dogs so silent before!"

She laughed nervously. The nightly yowling of jackals in the foothills and the howling of pariah dogs had suddenly ceased.

"Don't know, Di! Nothing to worry about, anyway!"

The match with which Sir John Lindsay was about to light his cigar, broke in his fingers. Her remark had reminded him of a sinister Yanistani proverb: "When the jackals are silent, Death sings." . . .

He and Diana idolized each other. Ever since her mother's death three years ago she had been all-in-all to him, and the thought of her being caught in the vortex of this crisis, filled him with an overwhelming anxiety. And she knew it. They understood each other too well for it to be otherwise.

"Major Gray wants you to try his tobacco, Daddy. Shall I get your pipe for you?"

"No, thanks, dear; I'm having a cigar. . . . Nice of you, Gray. . . . To-morrow, perhaps! . . . How did the new pony go this morning, Di? Bit of a handful—eh?" He had bought her a fiery chestnut stallion a couple of days before.

Diana glanced at her father musingly.

"Barty? He's a dear! Inclined to shy; but he'll get over it. I've no use for a horse without a bit of 'pep' in him! Don't you agree with me, Major Gray?"

Major Colin Gray, V.C., though he loved horses and could talk about them by the hour, merely made a polite affirmatory noise. He was listening to a quick, soft thudding which had started somewhere in the city. It had the same menacing note that he'd once heard choked out by death-drums up the Congo, when he'd had to fight for his life until the dawn an hour after he'd heard them.

The conversation, which had been strained and patchy ever since the trio had left the dining-room, languished again. Sir John was silently puffing at his cigar, fighting hard against an increasing sense of foreboding. Diana was trying hard to

remember what poet it was who compared the sound of a drum to the beating of the world's heart.

"Creepy, isn't it?" she said suddenly, reaching out her hand to her father. The sense of foreboding that was weighing upon him was weighing upon her too . . . though that didn't explain why the thought of the Secret Service mission which would take Colin Gray into those mysterious unmapped mountains in a day or two was making her strangely uneasy . . .

Gray flicked the ash from his cigarette impatiently.

He seemed to sense she was thinking of him, and he longed to say, "I'll look after you, if things go wrong!" In spite of her fearlessness, this long-limbed girl with the auburn curls had aroused in him a fierce desire to protect her. She seemed so infinitely defenceless. Her unfaltering cheerfulness in all this danger reminded him of an incident in the stables that morning, when a small native toddler had run under the forefeet of a restive horse, laughing at the beast's frightened snorting. (Diana had seen him snatch it up, but he didn't know that. In spite of his great strength, this sunburned giant could be as gentle as a woman.)

Leaning forward, he addressed Sir John with quiet cheerfulness, determined to break the spell of depression.

"The local dance orchestra seems to be warming up, Sir!" The drums had now broken into a quick "*tippy-tappy, tippy-tappy*" rhythm.

His effort failed. The remark irked the older man.

"Don't see the joke, I'm afraid." The Resident tugged his moustache.

Diana hastened to Gray's help.

"Daddy dear, you're all on edge to-night! Major Gray only said it in fun!"

"Gray knows as well as I do that the present situation has about as much humour in it as the 'Dead March' in 'Saul'!"

"Thanks for coming to my rescue, Miss Lindsay!" said the delinquent gratefully. And returned to the attack.

"Surely, Sir, things are bound to brighten up—after tomorrow?" He was thinking of the hanging.

The remark was ignored.

"I wish to heaven I hadn't given in to you and let you stay down with me, Dil" fretted the Resident. "You'd have been safe in Simla by now. Stupid of me—very!"

Diana, who had been wondering what Colin Gray was thinking about, did not answer. . . . Was it about what might happen to her if there was trouble? She'd feel safe, if he were there. . . .

With the effortless ease that distinguishes some tall people, she rose and went close to her father's chair. She didn't want to go in; but a strange coldness seemed to be creeping into the night, recalling the sudden chilliness she once felt on a liner when it had passed close to an iceberg . . . It was curious, on this hot night!

"You're not to worry so much, dear!" she said soothingly, laying a caressing hand on his shoulder. "Think of my state of mind if things had gone wrong in Labak and I'd not been here to look after you! Cuts both ways, you see! You're just a dear, fussy old Daddy!"

He glanced up at her affectionately, and taking her hand, kissed it with a courtly grace.

"Turning in, Puss?"

"Yes, darling. I feel chilly. It's queer, when it's so awfully hot!"

Gray rose eagerly, a tower of a man.

"I'll come with you to the house, Miss Lindsay."

"No, you stay here and try to make Daddy see the bright side of things, Major Gray. Talk to him about . . . 'The Headstrong Girls of To-day'! He'll find quite a lot to say if you do—won't you, Daddy?"

Her father laughed in spite of himself.

"You're a minx, Dil!"

"Nice minx?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so! . . . I hope you're not in for a 'go' of fever, young woman! . . . You might tell the butler to put coffee and biscuits in my study in half an hour's time. I've got some papers to go through before I go to bed."

Blowing him a kiss, she was gone.

As she moved away, Gray's keen eyes followed her until her form was lost in the darkness.

"Whisky-and-soda?" asked Sir John's voice.

"Thanks, Sir."

A siphon fizzed.

"Sorry if I was a bit short-tempered just now, Gray; but Benson being on leave makes things a bit worrying. In case anything happens to me, I mean. . . . I didn't like to mention it in front of Di, but last night this 'Veiled Man of the Pamirs,' as they call him in the bazaar—the master-assassin you're out to track down—left what I suppose he wants me to take as a final warning—damn him!"

"Naked knife?"

"Yes. On my pillow!" The Resident relit his cigar for the third time.

Gray whistled softly.

"He's got an infernally efficient spy system, I'll say that for him!" resumed Sir John. "Able to think two moves ahead of us and checkmate our best brains. Trailing him is going to keep you on the stretch, Gray! Remember what I say: if you under-estimate his reach, he'll get you—as sure as my name's Lindsay! You'll just fail to report, like all the other fellows, and that Byzantine cipher of yours in which you are to report to Simla, will be in the hands of a devil in human form! . . . Ace of trumps for him, of course, if that happened!"

"Machiavelli is one of my patron saints, Sir!" Gray half smiled and reached for the matches.

"That's all very well; but you've got a master-mind for an adversary, and don't you forget it!" insisted the Resident. "Have a talk with Sirdar Mohammed Shah, my Intelligence Officer—he got back from Peshawar to-day. As a matter of fact, I've already told him you'll ride over first thing to-morrow morning. . . . His idea is that The Cobra is merely the instrument of this 'Veiled Man.' "

"Don't you think we're rather inclined to overrate The Cobra's political importance, sir?" Gray was deprecating.

The Resident frowned.

"Overrate him? No. The man's a demi-god to the hill-tribes—not to mention two million Tartar-Mongols who're waiting to swoop down and loot India if he'll lead 'em! He's promised them a British-Hindu pogrom; so they'll follow him all right! . . . He hates the Hindus even more than he hates us—which is saying a lot! . . . When are you starting?"

"Day after to-morrow, Sir!"

Sir John grunted.

"Keep in touch with us as much as you can, Gray."

"I will, Sir!"

A lump of ice in a glass tinkled musically. Overhead, something suddenly spattered through the leaves, followed instantaneously by the crack of a rifle.

The thoughts of both men flew to Diana. Things were getting uglier.

For them, this unexpected capture of The Cobra had merely brought about a state of affairs that was nothing more than a somewhat redder dawn of an ordinary working-day, so to speak; another familiar summons from that grim paymaster of the Border service—Danger. It meant a not-unpleasant tensing of minds trained to tension. But to Diana . . . ? The thought of her being at the mercy of a mob of bloody-minded fanatics filled both men with a sickening apprehension. If the city of Labak rose, Alam Khan would be set free and hell let loose within the hour.

The fact that the half-battalion of Gurkhas and the mountain Mule Battery for which Sir John had wirelessly could only just have started on their six-days' march for Labak, made the outlook more than ever grimly ominous.

A jerky flickering of lamplight was moving towards them from behind the oleander hedge.

The Commander of the small Residency cavalry escort was coming to make his report.

After Sir John Lindsay, Major Ralph Mercer knew Yanistan better than any other white man.

---

---

## CHAPTER II

### THE SWASTIKA GURU

ANY NEWS, MERCER?" demanded Sir John.

The lean, saturnine figure in khaki fingered the buckle of his Sam Browne belt and looked down musingly at the hurricane lamp he was carrying.

"Nothing much, Sir John! . . . One of our watchers says that a big crowd is 'hoo-hahing' round the jail. I don't think anything serious will come of it—not to-night, at any rate!"

He frowned.

"You'll remember to close your bedroom shutters, won't you, Sir! They're rather fond of shooting at lights . . . I've told Miss Di . . . Oh, Gray,—thanks for that tin of 'baccy! Quite sure you can spare it?"

"Rather!" (It was his last, but Mercer had "run out.")

"Well, good night, Sir John! . . . Cheerio, Gray!"

"Nigho, old Mercer! 'Keep the home fires burning!'" answered Gray cheerily.

"I'll keep on trying all right!" responded Mercer.

"Keep *on*—keep *on*—keep *on*!" thudded the drums.

The Resident passed a hand across his forehead and stared at the sky.

"Di was right! We're going to have a storm—and a devil of a one at that!" he muttered to himself.

Very far away a high-pitched voice had begun to chant.

"*Allaho Akbar! Ush'huddo-un', lah'illah-hah il'laylah.*"

It was the Mohammedan Creed.

And through it, and through all, throbbed the relentless beat of the drums.

"Hear that?" questioned Sir John gravely. "Means the *mullahs* are taking a hand in things! They started a rumour yesterday that the Prophet will send an angel to free The Cobra from jail! What d'you think of that!"

"Have you heard this bazaar gossip about the Veiled Man having got hold of 'Prester John's Mirror'?" queried Gray. "To me, that's an interesting bit of news! You see, the idea is that its possessor can see in it what is happening all over the world . . ."

"Really, Gray, for a man of your wide experience—!" expostulated Sir John.

Gray chuckled.

"It does sound rather far-fetched, Sir, I'll admit that. But my chief camel-man—and he's a hard enough nut—swears that there is a local legend in his part of the country that a 'Prester Jan' had a stronghold in these mountains . . . Well, I believe that!"

Sir John Lindsay clicked his tongue impatiently . . . These young fellows!

"If such a place existed, Gray, we'd have heard of it long ago . . . We know of a few scattered ruins—Greek, I believe . . . But *your* idea is fantastic, of course!"

"I don't know, Sir! There are any number of inaccessible valleys in these old hills where a formidable stronghold might exist and not be heard of, and not be visible from the air! I believe the Veiled Man is using some such place as his headquarters . . . If he is, I'll find it!"

"Well, I wish you luck; but, as I've said, I think it's moonshine, Gray! A mud hovel is more in his line! . . . Talking of something that really *does* exist—did you ever see this 'Cobra' fellow, by any chance? Goes about openly in the bazaars, damn him! Six-foot-nine, nose like a scimitar, and a black beard down to his waist. Colossal brute . . . You're six-foot-four, aren't you—?"

"And a quarter, Sir."

The two men fell silent. High up in the night a ricochet bullet whined plaintively.

Gray leaned forward and ground the stub of his cigarette in the ash-tray.

"You knew Galbraith, didn't you, Sir John?" he asked quietly. "The fellow who went out on this job before me, I mean."

The Resident's cigar glowed.

"Yes . . . Why?"

There was no answer. Then:

"The seventh they sent, wasn't he, Gray?"

"Eighth!"

The throbbing of the drums had ceased and the reedy wailing had begun again.

*"Galbraith Sahib knew too much!"*

A bell-like voice—as of one speaking from very far away—had addressed them out of the darkness.

The Resident swore crisply, and Gray drew in his breath with a soft hissing sound.

The speaker was slowly becoming visible—just as a wire heated by electricity slowly becomes visible. Yet there was no light on or around him—just increased visibility for which there was no apparent cause.

Seated on the ground close by them, swathed in snowy linen, was a grave-faced *Sadhu*, or Hindu ascetic. In the centre of his breast glowed a swastika, apparently of ruby light. His curiously luminous eyes were fixed on the two Englishmen with a burning intensity.

"Damme! How did this fellow get here, Gray? Is he one of your men?"

"No," answered Gray slowly, "he isn't. Go easy with him! He may have news!"

"I don't care a tinker's curse what he's got!" fumed Sir John. "I'll have every man-jack of that guard court-martialled for letting him in!"

"Even had they seen me, your sentries could not have stopped me, Resident Sahib," said the same clear voice. "I am but the shadow of one whom you will never see. It is written in the *Agrouchada Parikchai*: 'Power belongs to him who Knows.' "



"Talk sense, man! Who are you? And what the devil are you doing here?" demanded Sir John angrily.

"Many call me 'The Lord of the Swastika,' " answered the *Sadhu*. "For such, I am a Follower of the Way . . . For you, Sir John Lindsay, I come as the spiritual head of a hundred million Hindus . . . whose allegiance is perhaps important to your Government? I have a message for you." The *Sadhu's* tones were like the touch of cold steel.

The Resident, like all India, had heard of the miracle-working ascetic known as "The Swastika Guru" ("The Teacher of the Swastika"), who lived in an almost inaccessible valley in the Himalayas and was regarded by an immense following as the inspired mouthpiece of militant Hinduism.

But it seemed preposterous that this unsubstantial-looking being could be that powerful religious leader, although there was something about him which compelled belief in his words.

A cane lounge creaked.

"What message have you for me?" queried Sir John brusquely, pulling himself upright.

"For you my message is—*death!*"

The word cracked like a whip-lash.

"*Death?*" echoed the Resident. "The fellow's mad, Gray! Or dangerous!"

The Hindu's burning eyes were on Colin Gray's face now, who was bending forward in his chair. Neither of the two seemed to be aware that Sir John had spoken.

"For you, Gray Sahib," went on the *Sadhu*, "my message is of the coming of Fear and of many dangers; both of which a woman shall share. The Cobra will strike at you all. Yet, in a few more revolutions of the wheel of Time, that which I am perfecting with the aid of my *chelas* [disciples] shall surely slay him! When I shall speak, trust; and all will be well—even though Evil bare his hindmost teeth!"

With a stifled oath Sir John jumped to his feet.

"Stop this infernal nonsense!" he snapped. "Get hold of Mercer, Gray, and tell him to have this lunatic put in the guard-room!"

"Resident Sahib, my message is not yet finished! Listen!" His next words stunned Colin Gray and the Resident. *This man knew the Byzantine cipher!*

Then the stately white-clad figure rose to its feet.

To Sir John Lindsay the movement meant only one thing: a man who had evidently in some way got hold of a Government secret cipher, intended to escape with it. Well, by God, he should be stopped!

Wrenching a small Colt from the pocket of his dinner-jacket, he fired twice, the reports biting sharply into the night.

The *Sadhu* did not move.

"You are foolish, Resident Sahib!" resumed the voice sternly. "I have told you that I am but the spirit 'double' of one who is far from here! Why do you try to hurt a shadow?"

Sir John was now pressing a hand to his eyes as if he were unwilling to see what was passing. The hypnotic gaze of the ascetic seemed to have paralysed the Resident's brain.

"Major Gray! Daddy! Are you all right? What's the shooting about?" It was Diana's voice calling from her bedroom window.

Gray's mind worked swiftly. At all costs *she* must be kept out of this incredible crisis.

"All serene, Miss Lindsay!" he called back reassuringly. "I was only shooting a snake . . . your father is examining it." A similar shouted explanation in Hindustani satisfied the sentries. Then he turned his attention to Sir John Lindsay.

"Are you all right, Sir?" He felt the query was stupidly inadequate in the circumstances, but he, too, felt dazed; he could think of nothing else to say for the moment. Everything that was happening seemed like a queer dream.

"I'm sorry, Gray," said the older man unsteadily, as Colin Gray took the pistol from his unresisting fingers. "I didn't mean to fire like that! Something forced me—"

He broke off and sank into his chair, staring haggardly at the *Sadhu*, who had not moved.

Quickly mixing a strong whisky-and-soda, Gray gave it to

Sir John, who took the glass from his hand mechanically, but made no attempt to drink its contents.

Colin Gray had studied *Yoga*, and as he gazed with puckered eyes at that half-nebulous figure, he believed that what they saw was the astral, or spirit body of a Hindu adept of great psychical power; that is, of one who years of intense concentration had enabled to project his thoughts and an image of himself through space. . . . But what was stranger still, the young Englishman sensed the existence of some strange tie uniting him to this phantom-like being.

"Who are you, *Guru-jee* [Spiritual guide]?" he demanded tensely.

"I have said: 'One Who Follows the Way'—and whom you need not fear!"

"I am not afraid."

"Yet there is wisdom in the fear of evil!"

"What evil, then, threatens?"

"The Veiled Man of the Pamirs; and his servant The Cobra! There is a third; but his time is not yet! Between these three and me—whom men call 'The Lord of the Swastika'—exists an enmity which not even their deaths will end!"

"Why have you come?" questioned Gray, fighting a growing sense of apprehension.

"The power of The Name is known to you! Deep indeed are the secrets of *Prakriti*, the Essence of All Things, to which we cling as drops of water cling to a leaf," responded the *Sadhu* solemnly. "Our destinies are linked, Sahib. Centuries ago you were my *chela* [disciple]; I am about to repay the devotion of those days!"

It seemed as if a mist were drifting between them.

"Where can I find this Veiled Man?" asked Gray quickly. "The Cobra is already under lock and key!"

The cavernous eyes glowed.

"He whom they call The Cobra has escaped!"

The words roused Sir John Lindsay from a trance-like apathy.

As though moving in a nightmare dream, he rose to his feet, his face drawn and strained.

Gray sprang forward and seized him by the wrist just as a belching crash of rattling, reverberating thunder, rumbled and tumbled hollowly overhead.

The storm had broken.

A blinding blue-white flash tore through the night. Again and again, the crystal rods of the rain were lit to silvery brightness.

The two Englishmen—as they turned to run for the Residency, looked for their strange visitant.

The *Sadhu* had gone.

---

---

## CHAPTER III

### THE SHEEPSKIN COAT

AFTER LEAVING HER FATHER and Gray, the sense of foreboding which had weighed down upon Diana Lindsay since she had first heard the reedy piping, deepened as she walked towards the Residency.

Lost in thought, she almost ran into Major Mercer, who was coming round the corner of the house with a hurricane lamp on his nightly inspection of the sentries.

"It's all very exciting, isn't it?" she said with a strained little laugh, after he had warned her about closing her bedroom shutters.

She would have talked to him longer, but he seemed hurried and anxious.

With a clash of steel two stalwart Sikh Lancer sentries in the wide portico sprang to attention as she approached. Their Indian officer—old Rissaldar Sher Singh—once said that his men looked upon Diana as being as much their special charge as was the Resident himself. And it was true. They worshipped her.

Lissom and graceful in her clinging dress of apple-green satin, she crossed the broad verandah with its soft grass matting and palms, and at the foot of the wide staircase paused a moment to look round the spacious hall, the mirror-like parquet floor of which was covered with Persian rugs and lighted by a big Moorish mosque lamp. On the panelled walls the soft radiance of pink-shaded lights revealed a glittering display of Oriental arms. Hunting trophies were everywhere.

To one of the latter her fascinated gaze was drawn as if by some mysterious force. It was a huge king cobra shot by the

Resident, realistically set up, with its great jaws agape. Many of the servants shunned this open-mouthed, evil-looking thing. It was bewitched, they said. Diana's ayah [Indian help] had even sworn that she had heard it hiss in its shadowy red throat.

After telling the head-servant about taking coffee and biscuits into Sir John's study, Diana slowly mounted the wide staircase.

About to put out her hand to open her bedroom door, she hesitated a moment; the sense of impending danger had become unbearably strong . . . It was stiflingly hot in the house, too.

A stout Madrassi woman, voluminous in white muslin, rose and silently started to busy herself about her young mistress. Her ayah was a jewel among her kind—she seldom talked.

A few minutes later, clad in a pyjama suit of primrose *crêpe-de-Chine*, Diana sat before her mirror, one long thigh swung over the other. She had hurried through her undressing in order to be alone.

"Thanks, ayah! You may go now!"

The bulky woman waddled towards the door, but suddenly stopped and turned.

"Me frightened!" she muttered.

Diana, her comb caught fast in a rebellious curl, looked at her surprisedly. She knew that when a native servant is deeply moved she invariably expresses her feeling in her mother-tongue, and not in the broken English they normally love to use.

"Why are you frightened, foolish woman?"

"I not know, Misse Sahib!"

The lie came glibly. But to lie cleverly is so natural to most native servants, that Diana accepted this obvious untruth with a certain amusement.

"Of course you don't! Because there's nothing to be frightened of!" she half-smiled.

"But, Misse Baba—*listen!*"

A pair of "Punch-and-Judy" owls—for the natives, an omen

of death—were chattering squeakily in a tree outside the big window.

"They're only birds!" laughed Diana uneasily, and gave a quick glance at the closed and bolted shutters.

"That a bad noise!" said the Madrassi; and bent her head to hide her frightened eyes. Diana could see that she was trembling.

"I ask that Missee Sahib be very kind to her poor servant!" continued the woman falteringly.

"Want another advance of pay?" queried Diana, bouncing down on the edge of her bed and kicking off her satin mules.

The woman shook her head.

"No, Missee! I got plenty money! . . . You very kind to me!"

She paused, twisting plump brown fingers covered with silver rings.

"Well, tell me all about it, Foolish One!" said Diana, absently.

She was now studying the volumes in the bookstand by her bed. Some new books had arrived from England to-day. Which should she read?

"Please let me sleep in your dressing-room, Missee Babal! I not like going out into the dark! . . . There are *bhoots* [ghosts] under the trees—bad men's *bhoots*!"

"Oh, very well . . . But only for to-night, mind!" She found the request, like the circumstances, disquietingly unusual.

The ayah crossed to the bedroom door and locked it.

"No robber come now!" she said, showing red, betel-stained teeth in a satisfied smile. "God will bless Missee Babal!"

The dressing-room door closed behind her, and Diana opened her book.

No sooner had she done so than she laid it down. Concentration was impossible . . . She reached out an arm to the lamp . . . A click . . . Blackness . . . Her mind was aw whirl with disturbing thoughts: her father's worried state

of mind; the ayah's fear; Colin Gray's impending departure . . . She had a haunting dread that she might never see him again . . . Supposing she didn't? . . . *He* wouldn't care, of course . . . But she? . . . Life would be strangely empty without him . . . Owls . . . Empty. . . .

She had fallen into an uneasy sleep, when the hot stillness was shattered by the sound of the two shots in the garden.

To swing her long legs floorwards, slip her feet into the satin mules and realize that safety lay in darkness, were the instantaneous promptings of a mind trained to think quickly.

Snatching a friendly automatic from under her pillow, she crossed the room swiftly, and threw open the shutters.

With Gray's reassuring answer came inevitable reaction. Once more that crushing sense of uneasiness swept over her. His mention of "a snake" conjured up a terrifying vision of Alam Khan, The Cobra. Association of ideas no doubt; but knowing the man's sinister reputation, for a moment she imagined herself in his power. . . . Rather death!

"Di Lindsay, you're a fool!" she said to herself.

And throwing about her shoulders the green scarf she had been wearing in the garden, she crossed to the dressing-table, and groped in the dark for the silver cigarette-box.

A sound in the dressing-room caused her hand to remain poised in mid-air. She listened, but it was not repeated.

Rising, she tiptoed to the bedroom door.

The key was gone!

Two words from her father's vocabulary of expletives fitted the circumstances exactly, she found.

As she flung open the dressing-room door a half-smoky, half-sweaty odour, which she recognized at once, assaulted her nostrils.

It was the smell of a Hillman's sheepskin coat. She had noticed it too often when the hill chiefs and their followers had visited her father, to mistake it now.

With clenched teeth she stared into the darkness.

"Ayah!" she called softly.

There was no reply.



Again she called, her forefinger a shade tighter on the trigger of the automatic.

A blue-white flicker through the overlapping slats of the closed shutters was followed by a deafening peal of thunder. The storm which had been threatening all the evening had broken. Mingled with the lashing of the rain she thought she heard a faint, choking cry, but could not be sure.

Summoning up all her self-control she forced herself to believe that the ayah had not heard her (she knew the woman to be a heavy sleeper) and that the woman had taken away the key as a precautionary measure and was now peacefully asleep in a sheepskin coat borrowed from one of the other servants.

Then Diana Lindsay switched on the light.

She would have screamed, but a huge hand was clapped over her mouth, another gripping the back of her neck.

The second Hillman—there were two in the room—struck the pistol from her hand with lightning quickness and seized her wrists in a numbing grip.

The sound of the door being kicked-to, caused a feeling of physical sickness to sweep over her—an instantaneous agony of despair such as galvanizes the poor wretch on the guillotine when he hears the click that releases the fatal knife.

All hope left her.

Looking down at her, dressed in the usual Hillman's kit of baggy, greyish-white trousers that narrow towards the ankle-bones, was the biggest man she had ever seen. Over a long, stained and patched smock of dark-blue linen he wore a shaggy sheepskin coat. One end of his turban was wound round the lower part of his face to conceal it, and from under the lower edge of the swathing band a broad river of black beard flowed to his waist.

It was The Cobra.

The eyes glaring at her over that dirty turban-end were two fires—tawny, with an underlying redness like the smouldering glow that tops a smelting-furnace chimney on a dark night. All Hell was in them.

Ages later, it seemed to her, she turned horror-stricken eyes to the corner of the room.

The ayah, her white muslin garments drenched with blood, was standing bolt upright, pinned to the wall by a knife through her throat.

No oath or promise is sacred to a Hillman, and tool though she was, a last useless moment of repentance had cost the woman her life.

"Dost thou speak Yanistani?" questioned The Cobra, his lowered voice filling the small room like the diapason of an organ.

She nodded, wide eyes staring up into his.

"Then listen! Your father, also, is my prisoner!" (How was she to know that it was a lie?) "Make but a sound, and he dies! Not as I slew *that* fat sow" (he indicated the dead ayah), "but by the 'slow death' . . . at the hands of the women!"

A cold shudder ran through Diana. She knew the unspeakable things that the tigerish women of the hills do to their prisoners. Her father had once said that he would rather kill himself than endure them.

"Dost thou understand?"

Again she nodded.

"It is good! Bind her!"

His companion, who was eyeing Diana's automatic with evil eagerness, slipped it into his waist pouch, and bending quickly, picked up a rope.

With the same incredible quickness a ball of blood-stained muslin torn from the dead ayah's *sari* was thrust into her mouth, and a blanket slipped over her head.

Then, as a running-noose tightened about her shoulders, Diana Lindsay fainted.

---

---

## CHAPTER IV

### THE COBRA STRIKES AGAIN

THE "CHONK-CHONK" OF A Koil bird woke Colin Gray at sunrise.

It had been a night of broken dreams, in the most vivid of which he had been wandering in a densely dark jungle, pursued by a gigantic cobra. Just as it was about to strike, he had thrust a knife deep into its gaping maw; and it had disappeared into the darkness with a dry rustle.

He had wakened in a cold sweat of fear.

He laughed as he remembered it, now.

Leaping from his bed, he called to his Gurkha orderly.

"Limbu, thou lazy one!"

A squat, muscular Gurkha in khaki entered, his broad face one vast smile.

The saving of Limbu's life had helped to earn "Gree Sahib" his V.C. Ever since that day the little man had considered it a sacred duty to sleep every night of his life stretched across the threshold of Gray's door.

"Go—bring breakfast!" ordered his idol, stretching himself luxuriously. "And if the bay mare Leila be not ready in twenty minutes, surely will I 'burst' you!"

The Gurkha grinned contentedly. He gloried in Gray's great physical strength as if it were his own; and Leila of the satiny coat was the apple of his eye.

Gray felt that the happenings of last night were more portentous than he had cared to admit to Sir John Lindsay. As regards the strange visitant, he knew that the sending of an etheric or spirit "double" across an unlimited distance was a common occurrence among Hindus of sufficiently high

psychic development . . . The day would come, he believed, when such a thing would be looked upon almost as a normal happening . . . These considerations apart, however, something told him that the *Sadhu's* warning was not to be lightly set aside.

In half an hour he was due at the house of Sirdar Mohammed Shah, the officer in charge of the Intelligence Branch of the Residency.

In the Indian hot weather a wise man rides before the sun is high.

The entrance of Limbu with a pair of polo boots, raised the important question of clothes. Whether The Cobra had escaped or not, to visit the city in European dress during the Mohammedan feast of the Mohurram when fanaticism is rife, would be dangerous.

He would use a disguise.

"Bring to me the Hillman kit, Limbu. You may pack my European clothes. We shan't want them until next cold weather!"

Limbu beamed. So they were off on another adventure! Well, he would sacrifice a black goat in thanksgiving to the four-armed Kali—the Goddess of Destruction and Battle—that very afternoon, that all might go well.

Before the stipulated twenty minutes were up, Brevet-Major Colin Gray, V.C., had to all intents and purposes vanished. In his place, sitting on the edge of his tumbled bed, was a determined-looking Hillman.

The transformation was so complete that Limbu's expansive smile became even vaster and more ineffable than ever.

A short gallop brought Gray to the ancient city gateway with its great weather-beaten teak doors studded with rusty iron bosses. He was forced to ride through them at a walking pace, for despite the earliness of the hour the narrow streets were thronged with a truculent-looking crowd, which was narrowly observed by the eyes that were said by those who knew Gray to "miss nothing." Now and again he heard The Cobra's name mentioned, sometimes with apprehension or

doubt; but generally a laugh followed—the popular mood seeming to be one of swaggering self-confidence.

A string of heavily laden shaggy-necked Bactrian camels, the loosely roped bales swaying backwards and forwards as they moved with deliberate gait through a sea of white turbans, gazed at him superciliously. Clouds of dust were rising from the unpaved road, and the fierce morning sun was shining through it as through a golden veil. A lemon-water seller, clashing together two brass drinking-cups, cymbal-wise, was calling out in strident tones: "Cool water, Khan Sahibs! Cool, sweet lemon-water!" and through the babel of voices came the incessant shrill cries of the *ekka-drivers*, [the cabmen of Yanistan], as they urged through the jammed streets, skinny little ponies whose dilapidated harness was in many cases tied with string. A green-turbaned Haji, fresh from the holy wonders of Mecca, his beard dyed scarlet with henna in token of his pilgrimage, was giving a very un-Haji-like piece of his mind to the philosophic owner of a water-buffalo, which, loaded down with half-a-ton of maize, complete with earth-clogged roots and feathery tips, had lurched against him as it turned the corner . . .

Soon the musical sound of small hammers beating on innumerable anvils filled the air. He was now in the street of the silversmiths, whose cunningly wrought bowls, boxes and knife-handles inlaid with turquoise and cornelian, shone with the milky brightness of the new metal as they lay displayed confidingly in the open front of each tiny stall.

Sirdar Mohammed Shah lived half-way down the third street to the left, over the shop of a Hindu cloth-merchant.

An archway led from the street into a courtyard in which stood a sleek Brahminy bull tethered to a ring in the wall.

As Leila's hoofs clattered through the entrance, the heavy doors were at once closed by the gatekeeper, who had evidently been expecting him.

Handing the mare over to the man, Gray strode into the house.

At the top of a rickety wooden staircase was a door with the word *duftar* [office] painted on it in Arabic characters.

He knocked and entered.

A burly Punjabi Mohammedan, eagle-faced and grey-bearded, in khaki jodhpurs and a shabby Norfolk jacket, rose to greet him.

Gray gave a secret sign, which was answered by Mohammed Shah.

"May you never be tired, Sher Dil Khan!" exclaimed the Sirdar, giving Gray one of the names under which he was known in the Secret Service, and smiling his congratulations on the excellence of the Englishman's disguise.

"'May you never be poor,' Sirdar Sahib!" responded Gray, completing the customary Frontier greeting.

"Your Honour will excuse that the doors of my house were barred after you," said the Punjabi.

In Yanistan, the bolting of a door behind an incomer is sometimes the prelude to murder. But there was no mistaking Mohammed Shah's meaning; both he and Gray were in danger.

"May the gates of the jail remain as closely shut," returned Gray, quietly closing the door.

A second later a board creaked in the passage.

The two men looked at each other. Mohammed Shah's dark eyes narrowed and Gray's right hand dropped to the jade handle of an eighteen-inch Hillman knife attached to the bandolier round his waist.

"Many are the rats in an old house!" said the Punjabi softly, adding in a louder voice for the benefit of any eaves-dropper: "I have little news for you, Khan Sahib! But a letter has come from Lahore. Our friend is ill."

"What ails him?" growled Sher Dil. "For a young man, he is as full of sickness as a ten-months' camel!"

"Three days ago," said Mohammed Shah with emphasis, "a fever came to him. Now an abscess has formed. The *hakim* [doctor] says the boil must be lanced—to let the poison out!" He looked intently at Gray over the tops of his gold-rimmed spectacles as he spoke, and then glanced towards the closed door.

Again Gray understood; the Intelligence Officer was warn-

ing him that the Veiled Man was about to make an attempt to free The Cobra.

"If that cutting-open be done there will be much danger to the patient, of course!" continued Mohammed Shah loudly.

"*Allah Quee-o!*" [one of the 99 names for Allah] retorted Gray, shrugging broad shoulders. "All is in the hands of the Giver of Strength! Our friend may die before the *hakim* can cut him!" Then he added dryly, "I have heard of certain khaki pills and an *Inglis* medicine made of cold steel . . . !"

Almost imperceptibly Mohammed Shah nodded.

"Your Honour will remember, however, that the letter of our friend was written only last night; the shop that sells those medicines is six days' journey away!" He pinched his lip thoughtfully. "But there is another matter. The Resident Sahib says you seek a new trade-route over the unmapped hills into the land of the Mongols. . . . That, also, is a dangerous 'operation'!"

The ghost of a smile passed across Gray's tanned face.

"The Snake of Danger may lurk even in a market-place," he replied, with a meaning look towards the open window, through which a far-away shouting floated in to them. "I hear you have for me a guide who knows those hills even as the veins of the back of his hand! Where is he?"

"It is a true word! Such a one I have found," answered the Punjabi, striking a table-bell with his open hand. "Let his food be well salted with Fear, and there is not his equal in all Yanistan!"

A servant appeared in the doorway.

"Go, bring him who waits!" the Sirdar ordered crisply.

There was about Mohammed Shah a quiet masterfulness and an intense vitality which made Brevet-Major Colin Gray ("Zero" Gray, as the North-West Frontier Army had christened him) thankful he had the Sirdar at his back.

A few minutes later the man who was to be Gray's guide entered the room.

He was a stunted-looking Mongol dressed in a buttonless old Army tunic of faded red evidently picked up in some

corner of the bazaar. From a face that seemed to be made of crinkled yellow leather, looked out a pair of beady black eyes with saffron-coloured whites. He seemed mostly head and shoulders.

"Khoon, son of Mahata," said Mohammed Shah roughly, "this is the master you are to serve."

"It is well."

The yellow, leathery mask turned the fraction of an inch in the Englishman's direction.

"Fail him, and you shall be hunted to death like a mad jackal! The English Government can punish as well as reward."

"I do not fail," muttered the dwarf surlily, addressing his sandalled feet.

"Where he bids you go—go," went on the Intelligence Officer sternly. "Even if death find you in the going! Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Know you the road, O Khoon, that men say was used in a bygone age by one 'Prester Jan'?" broke in Gray.

"I know it," was the expressionless answer.

"Good! The Sirdar Sahib will send you to me to-night!"

The black beads in their saffron-coloured whites flickered window-wards.

"At what hour?" asked the dwarf, immobile.

"Did he not say that I would bring you, O Unbeliever?" exclaimed Mohammed Shah angrily. "You have leave to depart from our presence."

With another sideways glance at Gray as he salaamed to his superior, Khoon left them.

"Your hand is heavy, Sirdar Sahib," remarked Gray, as the door closed behind the dwarf.

"Any Yanistani will tell you that!" retorted Mohammed Shah grimly. He was reading a paper he had picked up from the table. "But they will also tell you that my hand is an open hand. They trust me. . . ."

Only with difficulty could Gray hear what the Sirdar was saying. Gradually the far-away shouting had drawn nearer,



till now it was beating on their ears like the sound of surf on a rockbound shore. Frenzied cries of "*Ya Ali!*" (O Ali!) mingled with exclamations of "*Shabash!*" [Bravo!] could be heard amid the general din.

Slowly Gray rose to his feet, his jaw set.

"The operation on our friend seems to have been successful!"

"I shall go and find out what is happening, Khan Sahib!"

Mohammed Shah's expression, was that of a man who, realizing the greatness of a danger, is determined to overcome it by coolness and quiet courage. "Thanks be to Allah," he continued, buttoning the shabby Norfolk jacket, "that Colonel Haughton is arriving with a mountain battery and half a battalion of Gurkhas in a day or so! We shall need them!"

At the door he paused to speak, his voice barely audible in the roar of the crowd.

"Please wait until I return, Major Sahib! It will be better if I ride up to the Residency with you."

Left alone, Gray crossed to the mantelpiece to examine a box of early Byzantine workmanship which he saw there.

Suddenly he turned, every nerve alert. Somebody was thundering up the stairs.

The door burst open and a breathless Limbu staggered into the room.

"The Resident Sahib is dead!" he gasped.

---

---

## CHAPTER V

### THE CIPHER

STARING INCREDULOUSLY AT THE Gurkha, Colin Gray strove to grasp the full significance of Sir John Lindsay's death at such a political crisis. Mingled with his anxiety on this score, the thought of Diana's grief and loneliness hurt sharply.

"Is this thing true?" he questioned, dry-throated.

"Yea. I touched him! He was dead," answered Limbu simply, wiping the sweat from his broad face.

For a few moments Gray was silent. Diana Lindsay would need comfort and protection as she had never needed it before. Something told him that he was to fill that rôle. He even thrilled to the strange certainty of it, though the fact that he was leaving, almost immediately, upon a dangerous mission seemed to contradict it. . . . But *could it be true*, this horror about Sir John?

"Where was the Resident Sahib when you—saw him, Limbu?"

"In his *duftar*, Sahib! I was passing, and the butler saw me and called to me . . . The Resident Sahib had been drinking coffee——"

"Get Leila, and bid them open the street doors that there may be no delay when I come!" commanded Gray, seizing the little man's shoulder and pushing him towards the staircase. He wanted to hear no more details.

Standing at the stairhead, he saw Mohammed Shah enter hurriedly, carrying something green in his hand.

Turning, Gray forced himself to re-enter the room. They could not talk out there.

Carefully the Intelligence Officer closed the rickety door.

"The Cobra has escaped!" he exclaimed, spitting as he spoke the name. "Gold is ever stronger than iron! . . . But there is yet worse news!"

"I know of it! He was poisoned!" answered Gray tensely.

"Poisoned? Who has been poisoned?" questioned the Sirdar bewilderedly, tearing off his glasses.

"The Resident Sahib! Dead. In his office!"

Mohammed Shah's keen eyes closed for a moment.

"May Allah be merciful to us!" he said softly. "Major Sahib," he went on, looking directly at Gray, "I have more terrible news than that! Miss Lindsay has been kidnapped!"

"Great God!" exclaimed Gray. "Have you gone mad?"

"No," responded the Sirdar in shaken tones. "As Allah hears me, I speak only what I know must be the truth! One of my most trusted men has just told me——"

"Told you *what*?" questioned Gray fiercely.

"A goatherd saw a band of Hillmen riding into the mountains like a storm, one of them carrying a long bundle across the front of his saddle. . . ."

"Well? Speak up, man!"

"Sahib, he swears he saw a white woman's feet and ankles protruding from one end of the bundle. Will Your Honour not question him?"

"No, not here!" snapped Gray. "Have him brought to the Residency at once! . . . When is all this supposed to have happened?" he continued, hardly able to wait until Mohammed Shah had given the necessary order.

"The man stated no time . . . Also, as Your Honour knows, these ignorant people have no clocks."

"Any news from the Residency?"

"None."

"Then how do you know it was Miss Lindsay they were carrying off? One woman's feet are much like another's." He moistened dry lips.

Mohammed Shah held towards him an apple-green silk scarf.

"The kidnappers dropped it," he said gravely.

It was Diana's. It had her initials embroidered in one corner. Gray remembered having carried it into the garden for her on the previous evening.

For one brief moment he reflected.

Then came a spate of inflexible orders.

"You will go at once to the Mir, Sirdar! Ask him to send troops to scour the country. Say I am starting immediately and place myself under his protection. He must send fifty picked men to meet me at the Residency in half an hour. . . ."

The Gurkha was waiting with the mare just inside the doors of the courtyard, which were open. Throwing a rupee to the door-keeper, Gray swung himself into the saddle and faced the crowd of muttering Hillmen gathered in front of the archway.

"You will have to run fast, Limbu!" he said, gathering up the reins.

Limbu looked up at him and grinned.

"Catch hold of my stirrup-leather!"

"Clear the road!" shouted Gray, rising in his stirrups. And again, "Clear the road!"

Limbu seconded him with stentorian lungs, and Leila's hoofs drove sparks from the stone lintel. The crowd scattered. The muttering rose to a roar. But the big Hillman on the satin-coated mare clove his way through that sea of dust and humanity as the bow of a ship forges through a tumbling sea.

Through Labak's ancient gateway to the open country.

"Can you do it, Limbu?"

The plucky little Gurkha nodded. He was too breathless to grin.

There are Hillmen who witnessed that ride; and they still speak of it with bated breath. The swift-galloping horse, and the trail of dust rolling behind her; the big figure in native clothes, grasping the collar of a squat little man in khaki . . . who did not so much run as fly . . . by incredible leaps . . . over stones and shale . . . through spear-grass and cactus . . . up hillside and through water-courses . . . holding

on to a stirrup-leather . . . It was a ride such as Rustum, the hero of fable, rode! . . .

The Residency reached, Gray slipped from his saddle and flung the reins to a wide-eyed servant, ordering another to take a bottle of whisky to the Gurkha who had fallen exhausted by the side of the drive just inside the Residency gates. . . .

Rissaldar Sher Singh, the Indian captain of Cavalry, who was standing on the steps, recognized Gray in spite of his disguise. The huge Englishman once seen was not easily forgotten.

"Your Honour has heard . . ." began the Rissaldar.

Gray nodded. It seemed to him that all the world must have heard this thing. And yet he was asked if *he* knew it!

"Major Sahib," went on the grey-bearded old Sikh, "it is my petition that I and my men go with you on this pursuit! We are as a tigress whose youngling has been stolen; we count the lord Sahib's child as *our* child! In the squadron is my sister's son, and great will be the honour to my family if the boy face *Dharamraj* [the Lord of Death] for the first time while serving you—and her!"

"I'll ask Major Mercer . . . Oh, hello, Mercer! What a damnable business this is! . . . Lend me some of your fellows, will you? And a machine-gun? Thanks! Mohammed Shah's getting fifty men from the Mir."

"I wish I could go with you," answered Mercer, turning his lean face away. "And with every man I've got! But those devils have seven hours' start, and they'll ride like hell for the next twenty-four. The Residency can't be left unguarded . . . Half a troop enough? . . . Yes, I'll send a machine-gun with them. Rissaldar Sher Singh can go with you. Ten to one The Cobra will make for the Maha Gunj Pass and get away into the unmapped country. . . ."

"Thanks, Mercer," said Gray quietly. "I suppose you've telegraphed Simla?"

At this the Residency surgeon, who was standing with them, joined in.

"My telegraphic report to the medical authorities—" he began, but Gray interrupted him. "What did you give as the cause of death?"

"Poison. And not *datura*, either! . . . He must have died instantaneously . . . What is it, Mohammed Buksh?"

Sir John's old butler beckoned to an under-servant who was carrying a dead cobra in a duster.

"We killed it in a corner of the lord Sahib's study," he said huskily.

"No, Gray," said the doctor, answering the unspoken question. "Couldn't have been. None of the symptoms."

"Who gave Sir John his coffee?" Gray asked sharply. "Did you?"

The butler nodded, unable to speak.

"Did you make it yourself?" He knew that the man had been twenty years in Sir John's service, and felt sorry for him.

"Nay, Sahib. The *musalchi* [cook's assistant] made it."

"Send for him!"

"He has fever, Sahib! I think he is dying," answered the butler huskily.

"I've seen him, Gray," explained the Residency surgeon. "He's pretty bad. Looks to me as if the swine who administered the poison gave the poor devil a dose to get rid of an awkward witness. . . . I'm asking the Kasauli Laboratory to examine the coffee . . ."

Followed, the inspection of the red horror in Diana's dressing-room.

The white paint of the window-sill was bloodstained and scratched and bore unmistakable signs of the friction of a heavily loaded rope.

Close by it lay a satin mule, looking so hopelessly feminine and incongruous amid its grim surroundings that Gray flinched at the sight of it.

Silently he swore to find the man who had committed this outrage. If it was the work of The Cobra—and everything seemed to point to it—then he would, himself, mete out to

this scourge of the North-West Frontier the death which he had already merited a hundred times over!

He knew, now, that he loved Diana Lindsay with all his heart and soul; and with a frenzied energy, born of his new, world-filling love, he threw himself into the organizing of the rescue party.

An hour later, a body of mounted men about a hundred strong, turned their white-sweating horses into the rugged foothills east of Labak.

Sticking like a shadow to his master was Limbu, perched on a sixteen-hands roan waler; behind him, riding a grey Kathiawari gelding as if he were part of the animal, was Khoon the guide.

At a turn in the narrow mountain track where a small stream bubbled up from the rocks, Gray threw up his right arm.

*"Ha-a-lt!"*

A tense silence followed the order. Now and then a bit jingled in the already hot, morning air; or a stirrup-leather creaked as a horse, troubled by the flies, brought down a questing hind-leg or fore-hoof, with a "klop." Somewhere up the vast, boulder-covered hillside a covey of red-legged partridge was calling shrilly. . . . A smell of sweating horses, and a faint tang of tobacco . . . Sun, blue sky and vastness . . . and silence.

Clambering to the top of a boulder, Gray scanned the hillsides with his glasses.

Suddenly the slow turning of his head stopped as the glint of a rifle barrel caught his eye. A tiny figure was moving along the skyline.

The next moment the report of a Martin rifle reverberated through the pass and a bullet spurted-up the dust a yard from his feet. An irregular fusillade sputtered into existence, and died down.

At the sound of this first shot, a buzz of conversation started among the troopers and the Mir's ragged-looking cavalry and mounted infantry. It ceased. Now and again a

rifle-bolt rattled sharply. One of the Mir's men had been hit and was moaning dully as the native assistant-surgeon cut away the stained cloth with a pair of bright nickelled scissors.

Gray's binoculars were still trained on the hillside; not a soul was to be seen.

True to the methods of Frontier warfare, The Cobra's men had flitted to take up another position further away—miles away, perhaps.

Gray knew that everything now depended upon smashing through to their main body—and Diana Lindsay.

He turned sharply.

"Rissaldar Sahib! Detail an N.C.O. and twenty men to form the rearguard; take thirty men and ride ahead with them, please! I will follow you with the main body in ten minutes."

"*Bohut achha, Sahib!*" ["Very good, Sir!"] A slight deepening of nostril-lines and crow's-feet were the only outward signs of a fierce inward joy at the prospect of a brush with the enemy. "*Mount! Forr-ward—marr-ch!*"

As Gray sat waiting impatiently for the ten minutes to pass, he watched Limbu fumbling in his pockets for a bit of sugar for Leila. Apparently he had none.

"You have even forgotten your *kukri*, O Limbu!" he chaffed.

His batman looked up at him beaming, and, opening his coat, showed the heavy, curved, razor-edged Gurkha knife in its black leather case, strapped about his waist.

"What is about my waist, Sahib, is about my waist!" he said, flashing white teeth happily.

Limbu's remark prompted Gray to feel round his own waist. Yes, the narrow canvas belt in which he carried the cipher was there.

To make matters sure he unbuckled it and slipped a questioning finger and thumb into the pocket on its inner side.

The Byzantine cipher was gone!



---

---

## CHAPTER VI

### SHIREEN

HOW MANY HOURS HAD ELAPSED since that dread moment when she had found herself face to face with The Cobra in her dressing-room at the Residency, Diana did not know.

She recovered consciousness, to see a million other eyes looking down upon her in her misery; eyes from which she could not hide; cold, pitiless eyes; aloof, yet understanding; hard, yet not hostile.

They were the stars.

Wrapped, mummy-wise, in a black, evil-smelling blanket, she was lying looking up at the Indian night. Round her was the sighing of the night wind and the distant sound of falling water.

Desperately, her senses fought against a return of the unconsciousness that had come over her when The Cobra and his men had taken her prisoner. Slowly she remembered that gigantic, black-bearded figure . . . the dead ayah, her white *sari* drenched in blood. . . .

A cold terror once more laid hold of her; in another moment she would have cried aloud with the agony of it, had not her swimming gaze fallen upon a tall Hindu clad in flowing white robes who was standing looking down at her. Something in his curiously luminous eyes seemed to give back her courage, and recall to its duty that determination to "see things through" which had distinguished her father throughout a stormy career.

A far-away voice was speaking to her.

"Do not fear!" it said. "You are not without friends!"

"Where can I find help?" she heard herself ask.

"Love is stronger than all things!" came the answer. "Love will help you!"

The watching stars went into a mad dance, and once more she fainted. . . .

Then into the warm black comfort of unconsciousness crept the cold grey dawn of reality; she sensed Life again. Life—and a vast, rending loneliness. Like a trapped animal she felt the teeth of the undreamed-of snare holding her fast, biting through bone and flesh. Was *this* the end of her glorious freedom? *Freedom!* The very thought of it filled the Universe with a clangorous music. The far-flung night sky intoned its praises; the night wind singing its ineffable wonders.

Dizzily she sat up, loosening the blanket from about her. Her wide eyes searched the darkness. In front of her loomed a range of dark hills, a purple cloak of Night about their shoulders, their arrogant heads challenging the stars. Somewhere behind her, a fire was flickering; and high up the wind-swept hillside, two men were talking in some guttural hill-tongue.

With a shudder, she pulled the evil-smelling blanket about her; clad only in a thin sleeping-suit, she was cold. As she did so, she recollected how Colin Gray had draped a silky green wrap about her shoulders only a few hours ago.

Every thought which love sows is immortal; but the pain of remembered happiness can hurt like no other pain.

Dropping her head into her hands she strove to think.

The *Sadhu* had said, "Love will help you!" *Would* it? she wondered.

The teeth of the trap bit deeper; a wild longing to escape surged over her.

At all costs she must escape! She would dash down the hillside—run madly into the darkness, and so find blessed freedom!

But a moment's reflection shattered that fragile hope: she had no shoes! Even supposing she got away (and she would

probably be shot down at once), her bare feet would soon be gashed by the razor-edged shale; she would fall; and when daylight came, her captors would find her again. . . .

And so Diana Lindsay sat thinking; ever thinking—her hands locked about her slim knees, slow, warm tears falling like healing waters of pity.

Suddenly this solitude was invaded by fear incarnate.

A scrunching of heavy steps, and The Cobra was standing before her.

The height of the man, magnified as it was against the night sky as she looked up at him towering over her, brought a feeling of utter helplessness—helplessness such as a rabbit feels in the presence of a snake. Her personality and initiative seemed swamped by the overwhelming evil in him. Even indignation and anxiety were swept from her mind, as dry leaves are swept away by a mountain spate in the rains. Nothing was left; save only a hated obedience; yet, as hopeless as it seemed, she knew she must pit her will against his—or be lost.

“Canst thou ride?” demanded the thunderous bass which had vibrated through that blood-bespattered dressing-room at the Residency.

She nodded, her tongue refusing to utter the native affirmative. Strangely enough, it was not what might happen to *her* that was numbing her brain, now; it was the thought that she was about to go still further away from her father. Never before had the thought of him been so vivid in her mind.

“It is good!” answered Alam Khan. “In five minutes we start. Rise!”

“I have no clothes,” she answered, her chin high, despite the misery in her mind. Inwardly, her young womanhood shrank from the lustful glow in the cruel eyes gleaming in the light of the fire.

“Thou shalt have them!”

Turning his head, he shouted an order.

For a moment she had a mad idea of snatching the knife from his belt and attacking him; but resistance would be

useless and fraught with the danger of immediate death. Was there *no* way of escape?

She could see none.

For nearly a minute Alam Khan stood there, gloating over a Diana who was silently praying that rescue, in some form, might come quickly.

A few moments later, a handsome, half-naked young Hillman, his feet slipping on the loose shale as he climbed up to them, threw a bundle in front of her.

"Put them on!" commanded The Cobra brutally.

She hesitated.

"Ears that are useless," he snarled, "I cut off!"

He flicked the handle of a long narrow knife in a silver sheath.

Blinded by tears, she reached out a shaking hand and drew the clothes to her.

"Quick," he gritted, "or thou ridest naked!"

He remained there while she put them on.

"*You are not without friends!*" The heartening words of that tall figure in white were *true*, she told herself. She *had* friends! She was the daughter of the British Resident in Yanistan; her father would certainly go to the Mir, who would send and rescue her. Or Colin Gray would come. She was sure of it. . . . In any case she was not this vile man's slave; as a last resort there was always death. The fighting spirit of her father flamed up again. In fluent Yanistani she flung at him furious scorn and reckless gibes, mingling them with threats of dire punishments.

The Cobra stood impassive and silent. He was using silence, the deadliest weapon against a frightened woman.

"You are a coward!" she sneered, though her voice was shaking. "You are afraid to answer me!"

Her sudden courage turned to icy fear at his reply.

"My other women shall answer thee in my harem, whither thou goest! Upon any other Memsahib I would not wipe my knife, for the steel is good steel!" He spat viciously. "But thou art as a princess among thy people; and thou pleasest me!"

The savage sullenness of his tones was less terrifying than the look in his eyes.

"Dog!" she cried, white-lipped. "*Mad dog!*"

He came a step nearer.

"If to desire a woman be madness, then surely I be mad!" he said, fingering his black beard. "There is much *izzut* [honour] in mating with a Hillman Chief! I am strong; my women find me pleasing."

Diana's mind shrank from the picture that his words painted; shrank, as a man might shrink from a clutching leper. Fury and fear contended for mastery in her. . . . Perhaps, if she could anger him sufficiently, he would kill her! Then she would be safe . . . On the other hand, supposing she angered him and he did not kill her! She shuddered.

"A white woman marries only when she loves!" she said unsteadily.

"As thou wilt love *me!*" sneered Alam Khan.

"I will love only him who shall prove that I am dearer to him than his life!"

Alam Khan's great laughter reverberated among the darkling hills, a hundred mocking echoes rolling back from the steep bluffs.

"By the Prophet's beard!" he boomed. "Now it is *thou* who art mad! Wilt thou, then, that a man kill himself, and *then* marry?"

"I meant not that, O Coward Abductor of Unwilling Girls!" retorted Diana fiercely.

"Lest I make thee dumb," gritted The Cobra, feeling for the silver-sheathed knife, "go down to the horses—*thou!*" The insult in the using of "thou" to her, instead of "you," was intentional.

Curiously at ease in the loose blue smock and baggy thousand-pleated Hillman's trousers, Diana slowly made her way downwards.

The half-naked youngster who had brought her the bundle, led up to her a grey Kathiawari gelding.

"Yours!" he said tersely; and shivered.

"You are cold!" said Diana in low tones, sensing that he was friendly.

"You have my clothes!" he muttered. "Mount!"

Along the tops of the great hills there was now a pale lavender glow. The dawn was breaking. She could see a long line of mounted men, ghostlike in the half-light, winding its tortuous way down the narrow track in the hillside, each man with a rifle slung across his back—some of them with two. Like an army of white ants, others were materializing out of the darkness. She turned her head, wondering how many more were behind her.

"Keep thine eyes on thy horse's neck!" rasped Alam Khan, fingering a stolen Lee-Metford rifle balanced across his saddle-bow.

Slowly the lavender glow became tinged with rose-pink—turned to a delicate shade of saffron-yellow—brightened. The skyline became blue-black and clear-cut. The awesome desolation of the gaunt hillsides took on a mysterious softness in deep shades of black and purple. Somewhere she could hear—every moment with increasing clearness—the cold sound of a waterfall thundering into a deep chasm. The "*churruck-cheedul, churruck-cheedul*" of a sentinel partridge disturbed by the sound of the horses' hoofs, rang pleasantly clear on the still mountain air.

For hours they rode through barren heights and deep abrupt valleys, now and then fording a foaming torrent; and then, at the top of a high pass, the long cavalcade halted. Far below in a valley was a village, the smoke curling up from its flat roofs in thin, blue spirals. Around it were neat, irregularly shaped patches of cultivation of varying shades of green, and in the midst of them, a mud tower or two. Beyond were more hills; and beyond them, snow-capped mountains.

The young Hillman ran up and caught her horse's head.

"I will bring you food," he muttered as he led it away.

A score of fires quickly sprang up among the boulders as The Cobra's men started to cook the morning meal. Very

soon, the appetizing smell of meat roasting on improvised spits caused her to realize that she was hungry.

"From Sirdar Alam Khan!" said a voice.

She had been tightening the strap of her nail-studded sandals, and looked up inquiringly.

It was the young Hillman. He was holding out a small white metal bowl filled with boiled rice, in the centre of which were some pieces of broiled goat's flesh.

She thanked him in her slow, rich contralto.

"What is your name?" she asked kindly.

"Firoz," he answered; and averting his eyes, he placed the bowl on a flat stone and walked quickly away.

Three horsemen were now coming over the top of the pass.

The camel-track that led to the spot where Alam Khan was sitting, surrounded by a half a dozen of his sirdars, or officers, and eating prodigiously, passed within a few feet of her.

The three riders were coming along it.

Their leader was a slim, handsome youth wearing a pale-blue silk turban, who rode with the easy grace of a finished horseman. As he drew level with her, he gave a violent jerk to his horse's mouth, causing the beast to rear with the pain. Then he sat for a few moments motionless, slim hands resting on his knees, looking down at her shining auburn curls touched to gold by the new-risen sun.

"What is your name, girl?" he asked imperiously, in a clear soprano.

Diana sprang to her feet. "He" was a woman! Perhaps here was one who would understand—and help her!

"I am Diana Lindsay," she said eagerly, going up to the fretting animal and laying a caressing hand on its wet neck, "the daughter of the *Inglis* Resident Sahib in Labak—"

"I care not who you be!" said the girl rider furiously, her dark eyes flashing. "*My name is Shireen. And I hate you!*"

Wheeling her mount, she lashed it with her riding-whip and rocketed over to Alam Khan in a scurry of small stones.

As she wiped from her face a fleck of foam tossed from the horse's head, Diana felt she had made a new enemy.

---

---

## CHAPTER VII

### THE PUNISHMENT

TO DIANA LINDSAY IT WAS quite clear that the only person who might possibly have some slight sympathy for her in her desperate plight, was Firoz, the good-looking young Hillman whose clothes The Cobra had forced her to wear. Her woman's instinct told her that the boy liked her. He was probably lovesick for some Hill-girl, she thought; a tactful exercise of flattery and womanly wiles might induce him to help her in her desperate plight.

She had, however, one opponent to reckon with in playing that game—an opponent whose powerful influence might easily defeat hers. Fear. Physically brave to the point of fanaticism though Alam Khan was, she knew he ruled his savage hordes by fear, inspired by a super-fiendish capacity for cruelty. This lad might betray her to him, since, if it were discovered that he was friendly with her, his death would be a foregone conclusion.

Long and careful deliberation decided her that the risk must be taken.

Seating herself with her back against a big boulder, and on the side of it furthest from Alam Khan, she waited. . . .

A quarter of an hour later Firoz returned.

"Be welcome, O Firoz Khan," she said in the idiom and giving to him the princely title claimed by all Frontier Hillmen.

Picking up the empty rice-bowl, he stood gazing at her, his forehead knit into a frown.

It was now or never, she told herself.



"Firoz Khan," she essayed softly, "cannot we be friends? My father——"

"Water is yonder!" he interrupted quickly, with a sideways jerk of his head in the direction of The Cobra, who was sitting in conference with his lieutenants.

The beating of her heart almost stifled her, but her voice was caressing in its softness.

"Won't you tell me where I am, O Firoz?" she questioned, her eyes deep in his.

He lifted a foot, scratching his shin with the edge of a heavily-nailed sandal.

"On Maha Gunj Pass!" he muttered, casting glances to either side of him. "I cannot stay! The Khan Sahib saw me come!"

And turning, left her.

Hardly had he gone, when round the corner of the boulder came the jaunty figure of Shireen in her pale-blue silk pug-gri and man's clothes.

She seemed about seventeen years of age. A head shorter than Diana, her childish face with its determined little chin and sensuously sensitive mouth made a fascinating picture. Behind one small ear was tucked a red rose.

Measuring the English girl with insolent, heavy-lidded eyes, she spread her feet apart in a mannish pose, fingering a turquoise-handled riding-whip held across her thighs.

"Listen!" she said tersely. "Do not speak to him again! If you do, I will lash you across your white doll's face with this!"

The jewelled horsewhip swished viciously and there was an ugly whiteness at the corners of the chiselled nostrils. Something told Diana to remain seated. A difference of height is not always an advantage to the taller of two persons when the shorter is mad with jealousy and holds a whip which she is itching to use.

"You admire Alam Khan very much. I can understand it!" Diana said, adroitly. "He is a brave and daring man!"

"My lord is the bravest man in the world!" exclaimed Shireen passionately. "So many women love him that Allah

the Bestower alone knows why he should need *you!* He *doesn't* need you!" she went on tensely. "You understand? He will weary of you in a week—if you live as long!"

The English girl saw the danger; and met it.

"Alam Khan is nothing to me!" she said indifferently, with difficulty repressing a shudder. And then she lied, and gloried in the lying. "I am betrothed to an Englishman who is big and brave—like your lord!" ("*Love is stronger than all things.*" It was strange how the words kept recurring to her!)

The frown on Shireen's face vanished, and the sensitive rosebud mouth twitched with a dawning smile; but whether of contempt or pleasure, Diana could not tell.

"You are very beautiful, Shireen Bibi!" Diana murmured, giving her the wifely title. "More beautiful than any girl I have ever seen! . . . It is true! . . . If you love him, surely and indeed he cannot love another!"

"I said I hated you," said Shireen, tucking the riding whip under a small armpit. "But now I pity you! I thought you loved him and that you were proud he had carried you away—as he has carried away ten—twenty other women—more! . . . *They* were all *proud* to be taken. All save one—and her he killed the first night. . . . It is nothing to me how many women he carries away!" she declared contemptuously. "He wearies of them in one—two weeks. Of me, only, he will never tire!"

Slowly Diana rose to her knees, looking up into the dark, flashing eyes of this young fury, for whom hatred or contempt for any "second" woman was a corollary of Love as she understood it.

"Of a truth you know what love is, Lady Shireen. Also, you know—none better!—that you would rather die than yield yourself to any other! In the name of Allah, then, help me! If you tell *him*—"

"He would kill you!" Shireen's smile displayed two rows of small white teeth, and she nodded her head slowly. "Yes, he would kill you! And I should see you killed. I might

help him to kill you!" The tip of a pink tongue moistened the corners of her lips—cat-wise.

A shudder ran through Diana.

"Then you will not help me?"

For some moments Shireen remained silent, looking down at her, her head tilted critically.

"Yes, I will help you!" she said nonchalantly, tucking the rose more firmly behind her ear.

"How?" exclaimed Diana, catching at one of the girl's hands.

"I will give you poison before he loves you!" answered the child slowly. "Because your hair is red—and he has not a 'red' woman!"

Diana smiled through irrepressible tears.

"I would kiss your feet for the giving of it, Shireen," she responded gravely.

Her submissiveness seemed to touch some hidden chord in the little barbarian's heart, who, reaching out, took Diana's other hand in hers.

"Be not afraid! Until we reach the Palace of the Mirror, in three days from to-day, he will not speak to you! I am here!" The determined little chin tilted proudly. "Before he sends for you, Gulbudun and I will have thought of a plan!"

"Is 'Gulbudun' your *ayah*?" queried Diana, deft fingers ordering her auburn curls. The name, translated into English, means "She Whose Body is as a Pink Rose."

A trill of laughter like a peal of silver bells answered her question.

"Gulbudun is even younger than I," explained Shireen, still amused by the thought of her dearest friend being a grey-haired woman. "You, too, will love her! . . . What is your name? What does your lover call you, I mean?"

"*'Di.'*" The contralto voice was very low.

Shireen clapped narrow hands.

"Then I too will call you '*Di*'; and you may call me '*Shireen*!'" she added impetuously.

Diana smiled at the childish eagerness of it.

"Where is this 'Palace of the Mirror,' Shireen?" she questioned cautiously, once more vividly awake to her danger.

The girl regarded her solemnly.

"I do not know. No one knows that, save my lord and his sirdars! Not even I!" She shook her head vigorously. "Once I asked Khoon the Mongol, to whom my lord has spoken it. *And Khoon told upon me!*" She pursed her small mouth and pretended to spit. "I only know that the way to it is very long and difficult! . . . I have been waiting for my lord in a village many days' march away from it. He left me there a week ago."

"But surely you know what sort of country it is in?" suggested Diana soothingly.

"I only know that it lies among mountains with ice on them—mountains so big that the palace looks like a grape-pip lying in a basin. Often it is hidden in a white mist . . . You will see!"

"Why do they call it the 'Palace of the Mirror'?" asked Diana, her heart sinking at this description of the place they were taking her to.

"Because The Mirror is in it, of course!" laughed Shireen. "But the Veiled Man will let no one see it." She shuddered and lowered her voice. "My lord says a man can even know what is happening in *Inglistan*, if he looks into Prester Jan's mirror!"

"Have you always lived there, Shireen Bibi?"

"Yes. I am happy too! My lord comes to see me; and I have Gulbudun and Dilkoosh, my pet deer . . . Only one thing I do not like!"

"What is that?" asked Diana, spurring herself to take an interest in what the girl was saying. The mention of the Veiled Man had escaped her: she had been thinking that if Colin Gray had such a mirror he would be able to see her. . . .

"Shiv ['The Destroyer']—my lord's tigress!" answered Shireen, her eyes glittering. "We hate each other, Shiv and I—"

A whistle blew shrilly, and the girl rose.

"They are going to kill a man! Come and see!"

In vain did the English girl protest her unwillingness. Stamping petulantly, the Persian dragged her to her feet.

"You are to come! I order it!" she said imperiously.

Diana realized that to refuse might easily lose her this little savage's protection upon which everything now seemed to depend.

Sick at heart she went with her.

At the edge of the track, on the valley-side of it, was gathered a silent crowd of some two hundred Hillmen, the prevailing colour of their garments greyish-white and dark-blue. In their midst, and towering head and shoulders above them, stood The Cobra, his great beard whipped over his shoulders by the wind.

"Come quickly!" chuckled Shireen, dragging Diana after her. "The man cheated at the *Pachisi* [Chess] game, winning two rupees from his brother, who told my lord; and my lord will cut off his hands for it before he kills him!"

Cursing like a trooper she shouldered her way through the serried ranks of the half-ring clustered at the rim of the precipice, followed by an ever more reluctant Diana.

In the centre of the semi-circle, facing his leader, stood the offender—a Hillman of middle-age, whose small eyes never blinked and whose face was set in impassive acceptance of his fate.

"Put out thy right hand!" thundered Alam Khan.

The man did so, simultaneously tearing back his loose sleeve with the other. The hatred in his eyes was diabolic.

The Cobra's razor-edged sword flashed in the sun and a brown hand, severed clean at the wrist, fell to the ground with a thud, its brown fingers closing slowly.

"Now thy left!". . .

Then Alam Khan walked closer to the culprit, his eyes on the man's eyes and feeling with an appraising thumb the needle-like point of his long stabbing-knife.

The horror drew to a close, when, seizing the blinded man by his waist he lifted him high above his head, and striding

to the edge of the chasm, with a sharp grunt he hurled him outwards.

As the body described a parabola, the turban fell off and the blood-soaked garments flapped slowly as the downward fall began.

Alam Khan dusted his great hands together, glaring round at his cowed followers.

"Thus do I punish a betrayer!" he roared.

"Betrayer! . . . Betrayer! . . . Betrayer! . . ." echoed the mountains.

All through it, the Hillmen had not uttered a sound.

Indeed and *indeed* did The Cobra rule by Fear!

The shrill sound of the whistle caused Diana to open horror-filled eyes. The gathered Hillmen were scattering like dismissed schoolboys, laughing and talking as if nothing had happened. Horses were hastily bitted, bundles slung on saddles, fires kicked out. Someone started to sing a passionate Frontier love-song in a ringing baritone . . . It all seemed like an evil dream from which before long she would surely wake.

As she walked unsteadily over to her horse, she saw that Firoz was roping a sack filled with tiny lentils to the back of her saddle.

She stood stroking the animal's soft nose, watching the lad with haggard eyes.

"Will it not be too heavy for the beast?" she asked quietly. She could see Alam Khan was watching her.

For the first time the young Hillman smiled—for his head was bent and the horse's body was between him and The Cobra. There was something about this plucky *Inglis* girl that made him glad to serve her. Also, he had little love for The Cobra. Few men had.

"It will become lighter," he said in a low voice as he glanced up at her sideways. "*Mine is carrying two such!*"

Once again the cavalcade was on the move, a rearguard staying behind to hold the pass in case of pursuit . . .

The leading horseman turned aside from the narrow track and made straight for the precipitous cliff-side.

Diana wondered. Save for a few superficial fissures a thousand feet up, its smooth surface was unbroken.

At its foot lay a number of huge boulders. A dozen men went up to the largest of these, and driving their heels into the ground, thrust against it with their backs, chanting in unison as each mighty effort was made.

Slowly the rock yielded, turning on the smooth, embedded surface of another flatter one and revealing the opening of a tunnel some eight feet in height. From the inner side of the concealing boulder projected a number of iron loops, evidently intended to be used for pulling it back to its original position.

Their task completed, wiping the sweat from their foreheads, the twelve looked towards Alam Khan.

He raised his rifle above his head in an answering signal, and they entered the dark tunnel, leading their horses.

An overwhelming hopelessness filled Diana's heart as she saw man after man swallowed up in that cavernous darkness. Soon her turn would come. She looked round her in despair, resting a supporting hand on the sack of lentils tied to the back of her saddle. The sack was nearly empty! Evidently there was a hole in it.

One of the men near her was pointing downwards into the chasm. Instinctively her eyes followed the direction of his arm.

A small, flattish whiteness, shaped somewhat like a St. Andrew's Cross, lay on another flat-topped boulder three thousand feet below.

Already the vultures were spiralling down to it.

---

---

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FIGHT IN THE HILLS

FOR THE TIME BEING, GRAY HAD dismissed from his mind the loss of the cipher. He had sent back a message to the Residency saying he would use a cryptogram emergency code; and let it go at that. The chance that the thief could mislead Simla with faked dispatches was, in his opinion, remote, in view of the immediate action he had asked of Major Mercer.

His inability to press on in pursuit of The Cobra and his gang was worrying him far more than the missing code-book. But speedy progress was impossible owing to the treacherous going—the narrow mountain track being covered with loose stones, and where it skirted projecting shoulders of rock, barely broad enough for a horse to pass.

As his mare picked a cautious way round one of these, Gray heard the sound of rifle-fire mingling with the roar of a nearby torrent.

Swiftly he ran a trained eye over the ground ahead of him. Providentially the narrow track broadened and took a deep baylike sweep inwards for almost a quarter of a mile. Midway in the bend he saw a small untidy-looking camping ground about twenty yards deep by fifty long, evidently used by the *kafilas* or caravans carrying merchandise into Yanistan.

Followed by the Mir's native officers and some N.C.O.s, he galloped up to it and, dismounting, threw Leila's reins to Limbu.

Then he rapped out orders.



"Twenty men stay with the horses! Fifteen in reserve! The rest take open order up that hillside!"

With a jingling of chains the pack-horses with the Maxim and ammunition were trotted up. Four men worked frantically to off-load the gun and the narrow, rope-handled ammunition boxes.

The fighting seemed likely to be stiff. Already the wall of rock on the other side of the torrent was throwing back multiple repetitions of a brisk fusillade.

The enemy's position was a strong one. The hillside swarmed with tiny, crouching figures of men running for cover from rock to rock, their garments toning-in with the stone so well that, when they were still, their wearers were almost invisible.

Agile as mountain goats, Gray's men spread up the hillside, their commander—already notified of four casualties in his small force—moving forward with them.

In a few minutes he had linked up with the advance guard.

"*Salaam, Sahib!*" grinned Sher Singh, as he saw his nephew standing behind Gray. "These children of Satan have chosen their position well! They are as maggots in a cheese! Look!"

He pointed to a rocky spur about a thousand yards away.

Gray scanned it with his field-glasses; then he turned his head sharply.

"Maxim!"

Four sweating *sowars* [cavalrymen] once more developed fiendish activity.

A khaki-painted tripod clanked, its spiked feet were jammed into the shale, the gun clicked into position on it, and a shining belt of cartridges streamed upwards with a light metallic rattle.

*Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat . . .*

"Short!" snapped Grey. "Range?"

"Eight hundred, Sahib!"

"Nine-fifty!"

*Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat . . .*

The Maxim's tripod was shifting slightly with the quick recoils.

Gray's eyes quitted his lifted binoculars for a moment as he looked sideways towards the gunners.

"Nine hundred!"

Heavy firing had started high up the hillside. He glanced anxiously towards the sound.

"Rissaldar Sahib!"

"Sahib?"

"I go up. Take over command!"

"*Bohut achha, Sahib!*"

Furiously Gray climbed, digging the blunt toes of his Afghan sandals into the slippery shale. He was still in Hillman's kit. From rock to rock he leapt, till the sweat rolled into his eyes from under his khaki puggri and his muscles ached with the speed and strain. Close behind him was Sher Singh's nephew, now armed with a rifle and bayonet, taken from a casualty in the Mir's mounted infantry.

Suddenly, with discordant howls of "*Allah! Ya Ali!*" half a dozen Hillmen sprang from nowhere, and with greasy side-locks and tattered sheepskin coats flying in the wind, rushed at him like a whirlwind, their swords glittering in the sun. It was a band of *Ghazis*, seeking certain entrance into Paradise by the slaying of an Unbeliever. They seemed to have charmed lives, for they came through a galling cross-fire unscathed.

To whip out his automatic, snatch back the safety-catch and fire from waist-level, were almost simultaneous actions.

Almost as swiftly came the click of a bayonet being fixed.

The continued effort of the long climbing caused Gray to aim badly, and it was only with the last round in the magazine that he dropped one of the *Ghazis*. The next second a sword flashed as its wielder took a savage slash at the Englishman's head. Gray ran in and "tackled" his assailant Rugby fashion. The two men crashed to the ground.

Someone behind roared out the Sikh battle-cry: "*Wah guru-jee kee Khalsa!*" ["The Faith is the Faith!"] It was

the old Rissaldar's nephew driving his bayonet into the stomach of his first foe.

Englishmen and Hillman were locked in a struggle that could only end with the death of one of them.

In falling, Gray—who was by far the heavier and more powerful of the two—had hit the nerve of his arm on a stone, and for the moment the pain had rendered the limb useless. Wriggling like an eel, the Hillman freed his left hand and drew his stabbing-knife, fastening his teeth in his enemy's shoulder as he did so. The pain turned the Englishman sick, and only by a superhuman effort was he able to keep his man under him.

"Put thy head to one side, Sahib!" gritted a hoarse voice.

Exerting all his strength, Gray forced his head sideways, and the warm barrel of a Lee-Metford, topped with nine inches of reddened steel, slid by his neck.

There was a sickening "crick" as the bayonet pierced the *Ghazi's* windpipe.

"*Shabash!*" exclaimed Gray, rising to his knees. "The Government shall surely hear of thy bravery!"

But Sher Singh's nephew did not reply. He was lying on his face with a bullet through his heart.

The dull roar of an explosion caused Gray to look downwards to where he had left the horses. A dun-coloured cloud of dust was rolling slowly up the ravine.

They had blown up the road. His further progress was blocked.

The "bronze bees of death" were humming on all sides, and sinister grey splashes flashed out on the rocks as the leaden bullets from the enemy's matchlocks struck them.

Flinging himself on his stomach, he took out his notebook and scribbled a message.

Who would carry it to Rissaldar Sher Singh?

He cocked an eye upwards.

Four yards above him two of the Mir's men were cracking obscene jokes as they took careful aim at men who were probably their near relations. Their position was almost a

key one and should be held. Squirming himself round, he glanced downwards.

In a fold in the ground crouched Khoon, the dwarf, his yellow face impassive and his beady black eyes staring straight at him.

"Khoon!"

The Mongol jerked his massive chin interrogatively.

"Carry this *chit* [letter] to the Rissaldar Sahib! *Quickly!*"

The man glanced down the hillside to where a young Sikh was knotting a blood-stained puttee round his thigh.

"The Sahib needs thee, O Sikh!" he called.

Gray swore angrily.

He was about to repeat his order when it struck him that, after all, the guide was right: the *sowar* was wounded and ought to go down in any case.

Rising to his feet he ran down to him, reached him amid another hailstorm of soft-nosed bullets, and fell flat on his face.

"Can you carry this order down to Rissaldar Sher Singh?"

"*Ha, Sahib!*"

Steadying himself with his rifle, the wounded man started his slow climb downwards.

"We win, O Khoon!" said Gray over his shoulder as he climbed upward, followed by the dwarf.

The dwarf grunted. He had shadowed Gray ever since the action started, and was evidently fearless.

Gray realized that the enemy might at any moment try to get round his flank by working along the top of the hills. The orders he had just sent down to Sher Singh were that he should send up every man he could spare. He had not been able to picket the hills as he moved forward, since it would have meant holding up his advance while each picket went out, and waiting until it had signalled "All Clear". . . And in this race against time—!

Once more his glasses scanned the scene of operations.

The firing was still brisk, with a tendency to diminish. Far below, the Maxim was chattering staccato defiance in

bursts of ten rounds. The Rissaldar's right arm was swinging forward in the "Advance" signal, as if the enemy had given way. So far, so good! It was from *above*, that at any moment, annihilation might come! Every man he could collect on his upward way, he had taken with him; about a dozen were following him in a strung-out single file.

Suddenly a crashing fire opened on his left front.

A body of the enemy was trying to head them off.

Hastily he sized up the situation. His men could hold them. The only non-commissioned officer near was a young lance-*Duffadar* [lance-sergeant].

"Rapid-Independent! Seven hundred yards!" he snapped . . . "I go to the hilltop to reconnoitre," he added, shortly, addressing the non-commissioned officer.

"*Achha, Sahib!*". . .

"By the Holy Book, I speak a true word!" growled a perspiring, grey-bearded Sikh from Amritsar, when Gray had gone. "These children of Satan know not how to shoot!" He fired, and a Hillman pitched forward, tried to rise, and collapsed. "Not for nothing am I the best *markisman* in 'A' squadron!" he chuckled.

"It was but a lucky shot, O Brother!" retorted the *sowar* on his left, with the appropriate scorn of a 'C' squadron man from Jaipur, as he jammed a cartridge into the breech. He took careful aim at a hook-nosed Hillman who was shouting insults at Gray from the top of a rock.

And missed.

"Without doubt Jaipur is a very good country," commented the grey-bearded one, caustically, twisting the sling of his rifle round his hand to steady his aim. "But some of its young men know not the ranges! We of Amritsar shoot . . . *thus!*"

The Hillman toppled, shot through the forehead.

"Thou seest! 'A' comes before 'C',—even in The Letters!" chuckled the grizzled *sowar*, jerking out the empty shell with a vicious click . . .

When Gray reached his objective, not a single enemy was

to be seen. The firing had died down to an occasional desultory sputter. Still, until this crest-line was held by his own men, there was danger.

He sat down to sharpen his broken pencil-point.

His struggle with the *Ghazi* and the stiff climb had given him a raging thirst. No water was to be had—he knew that. Reaching out his hand, he plucked a few blades from a tuft of grass, intending to chew them as he wrote; but finding them more bitter than he had expected, he spat them out.

“Here is water!”

Gray turned and met a pair of malignant black eyes.

The Mongol was holding out to him a Hillman’s leather water-bottle.

Too thirsty to speak, Gray nodded his thanks and drank deeply of the lukewarm contents . . . God! What was happening to him? Why was it growing dark?

Then the hillside seemed to rise up and hit him in the face.

Kneeling beside the now unconscious Englishman, whom he hated with a savage passion, Khoon put two fingers into his mouth and whistled shrilly.

---

---

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PALACE OF THE MIRROR

SHIREEN'S DESCRIPTION OF THE Palace of the Mirror as "a grape-pip lying in a basin" was not inapt.

The Cobra's stronghold was, properly speaking, a miniature fortified town nestling in a small valley, ringed round by a chain of jagged, inaccessible peaks. Immense shoulder to immense shoulder, they resembled a group of Titans looking down upon an ant lying at their feet.

Overhanging the palace, so that a considerable portion of it lay under a stupendous canopy of grey stone, was a bulging bluff a sheer four thousand feet in height, the top of which sloped sharply backwards to end in a twenty-four thousand feet summit, whose dark sides were seamed with dazzling cicatrices of perennial snow. A score of cascades thundered down from the surrounding dizzy peaks, their slow-falling waters breaking into clouds of drifting spray which mingled with the mists that frequently lay over the valley. To the west, a couple of glaciers—like prehistoric monsters coming down to drink—pushed wrinkled grey snouts towards a small irregularly shaped lake into which tumbled noisily a dozen turbulent streams. These were apparently the source of the small river which found an exit from the valley through a narrow gorge in the mountains to the north.

Over all was the thin, pine-scented air.

The site of the palace was evidently the crater of an extinct volcano, which the winds and rains of ages had transformed into a fertile valley—smiling and flower-covered in the spring

and summer, and incredibly bleak and desolate in the winter.

The ancient stronghold was three sides of a square in form, and surrounded by the remains of two high, bastioned walls of grey stone, the outer one topped with crumbling crenellations. Yawning gaps and breaches had been filled up with carefully piled rocks, and midway in the outer wall were ponderous double doors of ebony. These doors, the hard wood of which had defied the centuries, were a foot thick and bound with massive iron bands and on them were great scrolls of hammered brass shaped like palm-fronds.

This main entrance opened on to an encircling street containing a small bazaar and the quarters of the garrison; and at the top of a steep slope, the slightly lower second wall, which was in far better repair, enclosed the palace and its gardens.

Suddenly the peacefulness of the shut-in valley was shattered by the long-drawn, quavering blasts of a horn.

As the last of a thousand mellow echoes died away, a distant rasping snarling tore the air.

Shiv, the tigress, was welcoming her lord . . .

The outer walls, a moment before deserted, now swarmed with blue-and-white-clad Hillmen, their rifle-barrels and naked sword-blades glinting and flashing in the sun. Into the encircling inner street, a sullen-faced crowd was pouring, in which here and there were to be seen women, hard-faced and keen-eyed, who strode mannishly out of their low-roofed mud hovels to discuss this sudden irruption of activity in unwontedly subdued tones. Incredibly dirty children, bold, yet furtive; ragged, yet arrogant; who did not laugh and shout as children when they come out into a street usually do, were scuttling furtively up gullies and into corners as if to exchange guilty secrets.

Fear, The Cobra's grey envoy, had already stalked through the ebon gates.

His cavalcade had been sighted trickling over the lip of a narrow pass some miles away.

As each horseman topped that black rim of road, his form



was sharply silhouetted a moment against the skyline; vanished; and gave place to another almost identical . . . It was like looking at the endless moving chain of buckets on a dredger.

On the flat roof of the watch-tower a sentry was gazing intently up the valley, his face puckered. Behind him, on the stone step of the small guardroom sat three others playing with a grimy pack of cards.

"Canst thou see him?" queried a broad Galcha of the Pamirs, turning a forest of beard and eyebrows towards him.

The sentry shook his head, and throwing his rifle into the hollow of his other arm, shaded keen eyes.

"Will he bring any new women, think you?" asked a lanky youth, rolling a greasy side-lock round a brown forefinger, complacently. "The last time he brought three."

"Four, fool!" snarled the Galcha . . . "And two Hindu priests, who stood their torturing badly. Pah!"

"Four, then! But they were not *Inglis* Memsahibs! . . . It is said that he has sworn to bring an *Inglis*—"

"*I see him!*"

Cards and money were forgotten as the three men jumped to their feet and gathered round the look-out.

"And there . . ." began the lanky youth.

The Galcha turned on him. He was evidently the commander of the guard.

"Where is thy gun, witless one? Thou knowest his orders: 'A Hillman's rifle sleeps with him!'"

Sheepishly the youth fetched the weapon. The Cobra's orders were as the ordinances of the Prophet—with this difference: they were invariably obeyed.

"A red-headed Unbeliever rides in front of him." The sentry dropped his hand to spit over the crenellated edge of the battlement.

Once more the snarling of Shiv was shaking the air.

The four heard it; and for a moment were silent. Then:

"The Mullahs say that Allah gave the animals no heart," growled the shortest of the Hillmen, "but *his* beast loves him more than most of his women!"

Hastily he stifled his laugh. It was not healthy to laugh when The Cobra was the topic of conversation.

"It is a true word," joined in the gawky one, blowing hollowly, a speck of dust off the muzzle of his flintlock. "My brother is one of the four who serve that beast. She is jealous—even of a man!"

"Is it true that he hangs flowers round her cursed neck each morning, and that she is perfumed with costly oils?" queried one of the three.

The lanky youth preened himself; the question had been addressed to him.

"It is a true word! Also, she eats from a basin of gold, set round with emeralds!" He sighed. "The goldsmith who mended it, told me the platter is worth a *lakh* [100,000] of rupees!"

"*Wah!*" exclaimed four awestruck voices. Their united pay for a month was not a thousandth part of such a sum.

"Yeal!" continued the lad contentedly. "And she sleeps on silken cushions at the foot of his bed."

In the meantime, The Cobra's women, ignorant of his imminent arrival, were living happily through another day of a changeless routine that varied only when they fell ill; and ended only when they died.

"My *soorma!* [antimony.] Where is my *soorma?*" called a lithe young Georgian, looking round for her antimony box. "How shall a girl make her eyes fit to charm, when senseless ones steal her things?"

"It is by thee on the table!" laughed a Turkoman girl, taking the amber mouthpiece of her hookah from between her lips and pointing it at a mother-of-pearl stool by the Georgian's side. "Thine eyes need a *hakim* [doctor]—not an antimony flask!"

Shrill laughter greeted the sally. The Georgian was not a favourite.

"A hundred times have I bid ye cease your splashing and robe yourselves!" vociferated a stout Nubian negress approaching the edge of a large fountain in the centre of the

hall, the water in which was provided by a natural hot spring. "The food will spoil if ye come not!"

Out from the water climbed the two girls she was addressing.

Scampering round its edge, they dodged each other playfully among the slender marble columns supporting a dome of many-coloured glass.

"Must I whip ye, Faithless Ones!" shrilled the negress angrily, setting her vast bulk in motion, as if to chase the lissomness that gleamed like wet ivory.

At the mention of the whip—no vain threat—one of the girls whirled herself to a sudden standstill by crooking a slim, wet arm round a pillar.

"It is Gulbudun!" she exclaimed to the Nubian, shaking wet curls from her eyes. "She will not leave me in peace!"

"Peace? Who talks of peace, ye parrakeets? Be silent, ye mountain cats!" squeaked a high-pitched voice from under the Moorish archway that led into The Cobra's apartments.

It was Jaffir, the chief eunuch, an over-fat giant who had a passion for scented sweets and whose word was law.

"Be ye ready," he continued, folding his hands on his paunch, "lest he cut off some of your heads for Shiv to play with! . . . Robe thyself, Gulbudun, thou shameless child!"

Instantaneously the laughter and the chaffing ceased. Only the musical tinkle of the fountain and the lapping of the still moving water against the sides of the bath were to be heard. Even the stout Nubian was silent.

Gulbudun—a child of about twelve—was unimpressed to the point of putting out a small tongue at the chief eunuch.

"I will dress myself when it pleases me, O Fattest of Fat Ones!" she exclaimed, impudently. And by way of demonstrating her independence, she dabbled a pink toe in the marble basin provocatively.

The thick lips of the eunuch drew back in a snarl.

"Wilt thou that I fetch Shiv to thee?"

He knew her fear of the tigress.

Gulbudun shook the pink toe thoughtfully, being wise enough to know it would not be good to let him see the fear

in her blue eyes. For Gulbudun was a Circassian, and shrewd for her age.

"One day, O Jaffir," she taunted, looking away from him, "if there be no oil for her coat, Shiv will eat *thee*! Then *thou* wilt be in peace!"

As if the beast had overheard her, a rasping snarl was heard, and the clinking of a gold chain. A yellow head and flaming tawny eyes were thrust between heavy red curtains of embroidered Bokhara-work.

Shiv had broken loose.

Gulbudun's flower face turned a shade paler.

The tinkle of the fountain and the lapping of the water seemed to become louder. The women pressed themselves against the marble walls in terror. A tame peacock squawked as it fluttered clumsily on to a ledge.

Slowly the striped monster paced into the harem, and, pausing a moment, sniffed the perfumed air disdainfully,—though she loved certain perfumes, even as a woman might love them. Then drawing up her belly, she bared fangs that were like yellow scimitars, and a low angry rumble rolled round the dome.

Alone, her slim, naked body rainbow-stained by the sunlight falling through the dome of many-coloured glass, sat Gulbudun, her eyes like two pools of blue light on a field of snow.

The artificially sharpened senses of the tigress told it that the child was an enemy—contemptible as such, but an enemy all the same.

The rumble deepened as the striped body sank between the mighty shoulders and the tawny eyes fixed themselves on its naked victim.

Fear of what they were soon to witness had frozen everyone into immobility. Even the chief eunuch closed piglike eyes. In a few seconds—thanks be to Allah!—it would all be over! He was quivering like a shaken brown jelly.

Then into the tense silence filtered the distant sound of the horn—this time in short, quick blasts.

The ears of the tigress unflattened themselves, and with

a belching snarl she swung round and pushed her sinuous way between the red curtains, the yellow chain clinking behind her.

She knew that Alam Khan had returned.

---

---

## CHAPTER X

### THE COBRA RETURNS

AT THE FAR END OF THE SUBterranean passage Diana could see a small half-oval of light—the top of the exit-opening showing above the floor of the tunnel where it took a sudden slope downwards. Neither Firoz nor Shireen were near her; and even if they had been, she could not have questioned them, the noise of hoofs and the booming of the men's voices under the low roof, rendering conversation impossible in anything less than a shout.

Would it never end—this stifling semi-darkness, filled with the warm smell of horses and the effluvia of beings who wash only when they swim? The rough-hewn roof, barely high enough to clear the animals' ears, seemed to crush down upon her with a savage relentlessness—seemed to be in some strange, suffocating way an unavoidable part of that depression which lay upon her as heavily as the hand of death. Oaths and laughter; neighings and the hollow ring of hoofs; the jingling of harness and the pithering of sandals rang in her distraught ears like the discordant strains of a *Danse Macabre*.

At long last the end of the subterranean passage was reached.

Emerging once more into daylight she saw that the way wound steeply upward between two sheer walls of rock, so close together and so high that, only by craning her neck could she see a narrow ribbon of blue sky far above.

The sombre grandeur of the scene caused her to forget for a moment that she was a helpless prisoner, faced almost certainly with dishonour, and perhaps with death.

At the top of the precipitous rise Shireen's voice brought her back to grim reality.

"The defile we have just passed through is called 'The Throat of the Snake,'" she announced gaily, spurring her horse close to Diana's. "There are still some men in it. They look like ants crawling between two upright tombstones!" The Persian had all the Oriental's love of metaphor.

A sharp scattering of stones caused Diana to glance over her shoulder. Alam Khan, followed by a group of his sirdars, was galloping furiously in her direction.

But he passed her like a whirlwind, and disappeared from sight at a sharp bend in the road.

Shireen looked after them musingly.

"The other half of the *lashkar* [army] is coming by another road," she said; and stopped abruptly. She had said too much.

At once, Diana knew that Alam Khan had split up his forces in order to confuse his pursuers. Curiously enough, her consequent realization that it was now hopeless to expect any rescue party to reach her before she was a prisoner in the Palace of the Mirror, brought back her strong natural contempt for physical danger. But the fear that she might never see Colin Gray again, persisted.

The stress of the contrasted feelings made her laugh hysterically. It was all so horribly grotesque!

Shireen, wild creature of impulse though she was, glanced at her curiously. This slim girl with the defiant eyes was utterly different from the women *she* knew. To have won the interest of a famous Border fighter and a great chieftain like The Cobra, would have meant much for any of *them*! To this girl, however, it was a thing repugnant—just as the killing of the cheat had been a few hours before. And now, by Allah! this so-recently disconsolate captive was laughing! . . . Surely and indeed the Memsahibs were a strange race!

Womanlike, she decided to find out Diana's secret.

"Are you happy now that I am your friend?" she asked softly.

For a moment Diana—who had been rapt in a day-

dream about Gray . . . and an English garden—was at a loss for a reply.

“There was no sun in the place we just came through! How can anyone be happy where there is no sunlight?” was the quiet reply. It was a lame remark; and she knew it. But the child would not have understood her true state of mind had she revealed it to her.

“‘The Night is to thank for the stars!’” retorted the Persian quickly, quoting from an Isphanhani poem.

“‘Without the Beloved, night is a desert!’” countered Diana, who, thanks to her father, knew her Persian poets well. And bending forward, she patted the gelding’s neck.

“*Shabash!*” exclaimed Shireen delightedly. “You have pretty hands! . . . Why did you laugh just now?”

“Because you have promised to help me to go to him whom I love!”

Diana’s tones were grave, and the light of truth was in her eyes.

Shireen, sensitive and quick-minded, knew Diana was referring to the poison Shireen had promised to give the English girl, and quickly changed the subject.

“Seel!” she said, laying a hand gently on Diana’s shoulder. “There—close under the belly of that hill—is the Palace of the Mirror!”

. . . . .

Normally, whenever The Cobra returned from one of his raiding expeditions, his progress up the steep incline leading to the palace was made amid a savage clamour.

To-day, save for an occasional shouted Frontier greeting from some truculent ruffian desirous of attracting his attention, a sullen stillness brooded over the crowd. They had expected the usual display of barbaric triumph; and there was no sign of it. Their chieftain was followed by no convoy of pack-animals laden with booty; he was riding at a hand-gallop and scattered no largesse among them. There were no prisoners to gloat over, the sight of whose fierce, haggard faces and bloodstained bandages was invariably the signal



for a savage outburst of threats and insults—hoarse or shrill, according to the sex of the hurler.

Therefore there would be no savouring of public torture in the Place of Fights!

The Cobra's people felt they had been defrauded of something that was their right by long-established custom. How were they to know that the Veiled Man's orders (his messenger had met Alam Khan on the way) were that there was to be no raiding during the several days' ride to the palace—and no triumphant entry?

The Cobra felt both these prohibitions to be personal insults—a tyrannical thwarting of one for whom bloodshed and savage pageantry were the very salt of life. He was shrewd enough to know, however, that this kidnapping of the British Resident's daughter might mean the crushing of the coming Mongol Hillmen revolt if Simla mobilized its troops and struck first. If it did nothing but send a protest to the Mir, then the hill tribes would rise, believing that the Government of India could be treated as The Cobra had treated many a hill village when he carried off the women of their chiefs. If that came to pass, then a Mongol army under Khoon the dwarf—that merciless descendant of Genghis Khan—would sweep India as the Tartar hordes had swept it centuries before. Doubtless the Veiled Man realized the delicate balance of things and did not wish the kidnapping of the English girl to be in any way stressed. Still, those last words of his written order rang in The Cobra's ears as he galloped: "Make but one error, and your big head shall swing by its beard on a gallows low enough for men to spit in its face!" The recollection of them caused Alam Khan to gnaw his knuckles in impotent rage.

"*Allah yen a'lek!*" he blasphemed, as the black stallion shied.

An old woman, her scanty grey hair hanging about her gaunt shoulders, had rushed forward and thrown herself under his horse's feet.

"Thou harridan! May Satan flay thee!"

A scraggy arm held up a paper.

"Read it, thou!" roared The Cobra to a trembling Hindu shop-keeper.

Masterly rider though he was, he was finding it difficult to control his plunging animal.

"I seek blood vengeance, O Khan!" screamed the crone, raising her face from the dust.

"Why?" Alam Khan's mighty voice drowned even the whinnying of the black stallion.

"Jaffir, the accursed, has cut off the ears of my son!"

"Be still, offspring of Satan!" gritted Alam Khan, apostrophizing his horse. "The ears of a fool serve no purpose, hag! Doubtless Jaffir Khan had a reason! Speak!"

"The boy but got in the way of the fat one's mule, and the animal shied and threw him! May Satan the Stoned One torture his soul!" shrilled the old woman vindictively.

"By the beard of the Prophet!" vociferated Alam Khan, "it seems that the mother would do as the son did!"

Driving his spurs into his plunging horse, he caused the great beast to rear; and with a sickening crash its fore hoofs came down on to the grovelling figure. . . .

The first person to meet him as he entered was Jaffir, the eunuch, who ruled the palace during his master's frequent absences.

"O Magnificent, O Magnanimous!" he squeaked, inclining as one who salutes a sultan. "Be pleased to hear the report of this miserable Sitter in the Dust!"

"Speak, or my elephants shall tread thee flatter than thy mule seems able to do!" snarled Alam Khan, flicking the dust from a curved shoe.

"Gulbudun, wanton child that she is——" began Jaffir.

"If one of my harem be a wanton, then her soul shall join a eunuch's on its way to hell!" exclaimed his master furiously.

Jaffir cringed. Shrewd though he was, he knew he had made a mistake and took refuge in a discreet silence. He had seen The Cobra slay messengers who brought him unpleasant tidings.

"Hast thou naught else to say?"

"Naught, O Light of the Universe! I am dumb, O King of Kings!"

"Harken then!" said Alam Khan fiercely. "According to my oath, I bring a red-headed girl of the Sahib race——"

"Did he not swear he would do so?" interrupted the eunuch, relying on his fulsomeness for his safety. "Allah, how mighty is he!" he added, fervently addressing the ceiling in an ecstasy of servile adulation.

"Cease thy chatter, fat ape! This white girl is to be more precious to thee than thy swinelike eyes! Prepare apartments for her; and beware lest she have any complaints against thee!"

"As a *houri* in the Seventh Heaven of Pearl shall she be lodged!" fawned Jaffir. "The lord Khoon's apartments are large——"

"Nay!" answered Alam Khan. "Khoon the Mongol returns in a day from to-day. For him, his apartments. Let the *Inglis* girl be lodged near the lady Shireen."

He stopped as Shiv, her broken gold chain dangling, bounded into the room. She thrust her heavy head against his thigh, and the noise of her purring was like thunder in a deep valley on a summer's night.

A few hours later, Diana Lindsay, bathed and perfumed by Shireen's women and robed in loose Turkish trousers of ivory-coloured silk and a Zouave jacket thickly embroidered with pearls, was lying on a cedarwood couch.

Beside her sat Shireen and Gulbudun.

Framed between slender pillars of pink and black marble, like a series of exquisite paintings, were the fairylike gardens of the palace—in which, Shireen had told her, a hundred gardeners worked daily.

"You will see," soothed the young Persian, stroking Gulbudun's long hair, which flowed to the child's waist like a river of gold. "You will not be unhappy with us! I will speak to my lord; and he always listens to what I tell him!" she added proudly.

So certain did Shireen seem of her power, that Diana drew fresh courage. Perhaps, after all, she would find happiness again. Perhaps every hour was bringing Colin Gray nearer!

Once again her thoughts went back to Alam Khan's threat to kill the Resident.

"Think you that your lord will let me see my father?" she questioned.

"Thy father?" answered Shireen, raising arched brows in surprise. "Thy father is not with my lord! I heard him say that it was too dangerous to lay a hand upon him—for the present."

A weight was lifted from Diana's heart. Evidently Alam Khan had lied to her when he had said that he held Sir John Lindsay a prisoner. Lies are as commas in a Hillman's speech. Was there not even a proverb that "A Hillman is born to treachery as a snake to crawl upon its belly"?

"One day, Shireen," she said thankfully, "you shall learn how grateful we English are to those who help us! Whatever you ask my father, he will give you!"

Shireen smiled as she fingered the five-row collar of emeralds clasped about the neck of Dilkoosh, her pet deer.

"What could he give me that I have not?" she said softly. "My lord is the richest man in the world! Nothing I wish for is denied to me . . . And now that I have *you*," she continued, turning bright eyes on Diana, "I am happier still! I may want to keep you!" she added mischievously.

"Thou canst not keep her after to-night!" squeaked Jaffir's voice from the door behind them. "It is the order of the Protector of the Faithful that the *Inglis* lady attend upon him at his evening meal to-morrow."

Shireen's eyes flashed angrily.

"My lord has no desire to speak with a sick woman—and the *Inglis* girl has a fever," she said, laying a hand on Diana's forehead. "I myself will speak to him. Go!" she exclaimed peremptorily.

The eunuch salaamed profoundly before one whose power he knew and hated; but there was an evil sneer on his puffy face as he turned to go.

---

---

---

## CHAPTER XI

### KHOON DROPS THE MASK

THE DRUG WHICH KHOON THE Mongol had put into the water he gave Colin Gray, during the skirmish with The Cobra's rearguard, kept the Englishman unconscious for many hours.

An intense pain in his wrists and ankles helped to bring him back to life—only to find himself a prisoner in the hands of the enemy.

He was lying face downwards across a camel pack-saddle, his arms and feet tightly bound with cords, the pain of which, as they cut into his flesh, had acted as a restorative.

A stoutish man, bearded to the cheek-bones and holding in one hand a heavy bamboo staff tipped with iron, and in the other, the animal's leading-rope, was striding along below him, humming a lurid Frontier love-song.

"For Allah's sake stay your beast and bid it kneel!" begged Gray feebly. His head seemed on the point of bursting, and the pain was excruciating.

The camel-man looked up into the darkly flushed face and bloodshot eyes of the prisoner and, tugging at the animal's nose-cord, forced it to kneel.

"Give help, brother!" he called to someone ahead of him. "The *Kafir* is ill!"

Between them they strove to lift Gray. But he was too heavy and, their hands slipping, he tumbled on to the ground like a sack of meal thrown from a cart.

"Get ready thy rifle, brother!" muttered the camel-man. "A shot in the belly is good against running!"

With two quick upward cuts of his knife, he severed Gray's bonds.

Gray looked about him.

They were in a wild gorge among the hills, over which the sun was setting redly. A short distance away a small party of Hillmen were sitting in their saddles, their rifles across their knees, watching him intently. Then, seeing that he was incapable of making any attempt to escape, three or four of them dismounted and stood round, looking down at him sourly.

With an effort Gray turned his throbbing head as, a few minutes later, the sound of a horse's hoofs reached his ears.

Silently the Mongol drew rein.

"Who cut thy bonds?" he asked after a pause, a cold glitter in his eyes.

"How should I know?" demurred Gray, shrugging aching shoulders.

"Said I not that until I ordered otherwise he was to remain on the beast's back?" demanded the Mongol, scrutinizing the faces of the escort, his own yellow countenance as inscrutable as ever.

"Without a doubt you said it!" cut in Gray. "But 'a dead horse carries no rider'! To hand over a dead body to your master would surely not be good for you!"

The impassiveness of Khoon's face underwent no change. But the stoutish man's eyes had joy in them. He seemed to be a favourite with the escort, whose looks were increasingly lowering; for Hillmen do not take kindly to any commander but a Hillman—or a Sahib.

"Get up, dog!" ordered the dwarf smoothly.

The Englishman tried to stand, but fell.

"Set the *Kafir* on the animal, O liar!" exclaimed the Mongol to the stoutish man, still pleasantly.

The camel-man looked distastefully at Gray.

"I care not to handle him!" he muttered sullenly.

The flicker of a smile passed across Gray's drawn face.

"Nor I to be handled by thee, O Son of a Pig!" he retorted, backing up the man's attempt to exculpate himself. Both

he and the escort realized that the camel-driver's life was in the balance. They knew Khoon.

"Thou swollen rat!" said the dwarf to the bearded man with ominous quietness. "Thy brothers of the pit shall welcome thee when I get thee back, if thou doest it not!"

The stout man's face went ashen-coloured. He knew the threat underlying the words. They meant death at the teeth of the famished rats kept for the purpose in a disused, bricked grain-pit.

With the help of three of the Hillmen, he thrust Gray on to the camel's back, roughly.

"Rope his feet under her!" swore the camel-man to his helping comrades, feigning anger. "If he fall, he shall dangle beneath her like a cow's dugs, for all I will do to help him!"

Even the welcome change of sitting upright did not bring the relief Gray had hoped for. Once more a raging thirst was torturing him, and the effects of the drug were still making his head swim dangerously. In one of these half-swoons he heard Khoon's voice. The dwarf had ridden up beside the camel. Clad in a yellow sheepskin coat embroidered with yellow silk—the skin-side of it outwards—though he sat his horse like a centaur, he looked half-ape, half-man.

"I will give thee a horse if thou desirest it," he said, looking up at Gray.

"Thy price?" queried the Englishman huskily. This hellish thirst made speaking difficult and was driving him to desperation.

"For a book. You know which!"

"I have it not," retorted Gray, who felt he might faint at any moment.

"It is in your head! Tell me what is written in it. Then you shall have water and rest!"

Gray's heart leaped. Why not pretend to reveal the cipher to the Mongol? His price—for the present—could be what he had been offered: water, rest, and a horse. . . . He would be found out later, of course . . . still, let the future take care of itself! Once he had back his strength and his senses, he could face whatever might be in store for him.

When the army of the North-West Frontier had christened Gray "Zero" Gray, they knew their man.

"Give me water, so that I may speak!" he said whisperingly.

"In five minutes . . ." answered someone.

Then an impenetrable darkness enveloped him. . . .

When he recovered consciousness it was to find that he was lying beside a small waterfall, of which he must have drunk deeply without knowing it, for his thirst was gone. A short distance away, cooking their evening meal, crouched armed men, sitting, native-wise, on their haunches. . . . Something was sizzling in a pan.

The recollection of a delirious dream came to him. In it he had been drowning in an ice-cold lake, when suddenly a voice had said to him, "*Drink!*" Whereupon he had drunk all the water in the lake and walked dryshod to safety. Mixed up with that mad fancy, had been another—that he was a prisoner of Khoon, the guide! Fantastic, of course! Those men by the fire over there were the Mir's men—whose else? . . . Well, he'd call Rissaldar Sher Singh, for he must ride on at once to save Diana Lindsay. . . .

"Sher Singh!" he said loudly.

"Are you still mad?" queried Khoon's voice.

Gray turned his head.

The Mongol was sitting opposite him, a formless yellow blotch in the darkness.

"Have you lost your hearing?" the dwarf queried.

"I hear," answered Gray quietly, stretching himself. The pain in his wrists and ankles was less and his head was clearing rapidly.

"What was in the book?" demanded the dwarf harshly.

"Much. It must be written," fenced Gray.

"You shall write it—for me!"

The Englishman noticed the involuntary pause.

"For whom else, then?" he asked.

"There are others—who could help thee less."

Gray began to repent of his decision to deceive this man—enemy though he was. After all, the Mongol had taken a



prisoner in a way that was not unfamiliar in Yanistan; and, so far, he had made him suffer infinitely less than the customs of hill warfare warranted. Unthinkable horrors might, of course, be in store for him—they almost certainly were. But, somehow, this idea of lying . . . !

"I cannot tell you!" he declared firmly. "You know the value we Sahibs set upon loyalty."

For a moment Khoon was silent. Then:

"If thine own safety means so little, perhaps that of the *Resident's* daughter means more to thee!" he sneered.

At the Mongol's remark, a wave of strangely mixed emotion swept through Gray. Anxiety for Diana's safety—the thought of her sweetness and beauty being at the mercy of that fiend in human form, The Cobra—these things suddenly loomed before him in their true perspective. He had not understood what she meant to him—how unbelievably precious she was—until this moment. To get news of her, and to be able to help her, were the two things that now mattered more than anything else in the world.

He raised himself to a sitting position. "It is a true word," he answered gravely. "Lindsay Miss-Sahib—*does* mean more to me. Much more!"

"Were she to bid you, would you tell me what is written in the book?"

"She would not bid me!" retorted Gray.

"I said 'if!'" snarled Khoon.

Gray hesitated. A negative answer might make things go badly for Diana. If, on the other hand, he said "yes," he might be taken to see her. Nor would the saying of it be a lie; for he knew he would tell them anything they asked if they threatened to torture her. So long as she was safe, what happened to him did not matter. Even if they killed him after he had spoken with her, having seen her again, would make it easier to die.

Nonchalantly he answered the dwarf's question.

"I do not know. It would depend."

"Upon what?"

"Upon her."

"To save her from death would you speak?"

"Yes," whispered Gray.

"Then, if torture fails, you shall do so," remarked the Mongol smoothly. "But my tortures seldom fail." He sighed. "They always kill—but slowly!" The yellow blotch stirred.

The threat was no more than the statement of a commonplace. Torture is almost always the time-dishonoured Hillman method of finishing off a prisoner taken in warfare. But the thought of his death, coming as it did so quickly upon these new-born thoughts of Diana and all that she and life now meant to him, roused him to fierce anger.

"The Sirdar Mohammed Shah spoke truly when he bade me salt your food with Fear!" he snapped. "Only cowards taunt unarmed men."

Khoon laughed contemptuously.

"Your fat Sirdar only *engaged* me! He knows me not as I am—and as you shall yet know me! Also, he is like the *Inglis* fire-carriages—he runs upon rails! He is but a dog on the rope of the *Sahib-lōg*!"

It was a long speech for the Mongol, and Gray was savagely content to have found a weak spot in his captor's armour.

"He is a good hunter of mad jackals," he said meaningly, recalling the Sirdar's threat to the dwarf in his office in Labak.

But Khoon was not to be further drawn.

"When the moon rises, we ride," he said slowly. "A horse is ready for you."

"It is good," said Gray in the idiom. And he, too, fell silent.

An hour later, behind an inky black line of mountain-top, the night sky was washed with a pale gold which slowly turned to deep orange as a sharp rim of yellow light—immense and serene, with the jagged spires of rock showing sharply clear against it—rose swiftly into sight.

"Mount!" uttered the Mongol tersely, rising to his feet.

Gray went over to the horse he was to ride, and noticed that it had neither stirrup, bit, nor bridle. Round its neck

was knotted a rope, the two ends of which were held by a couple of stalwart Hillmen, one on either side.

Behind him rode Khoon, a heavy automatic in his hand, its safety-catch at full-cock.

---

---

## CHAPTER XII

### THE BLIND FAKIR

THE PARTY ESCORTING GRAY, followed the same route as that taken by Diana Lindsay's captors.

As if he knew of it, hour by hour a conviction grew that he would soon see again the woman he loved. The wild, inhospitable country through which he was being led, took on (in a way which only lovers understand) a strange attractiveness from the mere thought that he might be passing over ground she had traversed before him.

Khoon had spoken a second time of the cipher. But Gray had fobbed him off, stressing the necessity for its being written—which he had agreed to do upon his arrival at whatever place he was being taken to. The Mongol seemed afraid lest the secret should not remain his exclusive property—an unexpressed fear that was Gray's ace of trumps.

And there the matter of the cipher had rested.

But another had forthwith been broached.

"Thou knowest thy life is as a speck of dust in the palm of my hand?" Khoon had suggested, as they rode side by side in the darkness.

"I know it. But dust can blind! Beware lest it blow into thine eyes," said Gray quietly.

"Life is sweet, if a woman be loved—and is with you!" hinted the dwarf with the imperturbable patience of the Oriental.

Gray smiled wryly.

"Her presence might make life bitterer than the tree of *al Zukkoom* which grows in the pit of Hell!"

The Mongol's face creased in the travesty of a smile.

"I can give you your life—and hers!"

"What is the price of thy wares to-day, O huckster?"

Khoon knew that the time had come to lay his cards on the table.

Apart from the dominant fact that Gray possessed this secret cipher, the dwarf knew that his prisoner was a highly trained soldier and a born leader. Also, like Saul, the son of Kish, in physique he was a king among men; and one who knew no fear. Such a man could not fail to appeal to the imagination of the half-savage Mongol hordes, and so undermine the influence exerted over them by the mysterious Wearer of the Veil. If, to save the life and honour of this English girl, he could be induced to help in leading them, Khoon intended to overthrow The Cobra, dictate terms to this Veiled Man of the Pamirs, and make himself ruler of India. The bitter hatred that has always existed between Tartar and Hillman burned like a consuming flame in this deformed Mongol who, through a Tartar father, claimed direct descent from Genghis Khan, the conqueror of India in the Middle Ages.

"I would make thee a king!" he continued in expressionless tones.

He meant it. His purpose served, Gray would at once be poisoned.

"King of a dunghill!" flung back Gray.

"Of the North-West—and mayhap of other countries!" returned his captor, still patiently. The black eyes seemed to bore into Gray's brain.

"I serve a king," said the Englishman. "I would not be one!"

At that, Khoon left him.

Just before they reached The Cobra's stronghold, Gray's hopes for the success of his stratagem crashed.

"Know you Alam Khan?" queried the dwarf with one of his quick, sideways glances.

"I know of him. Who in Yanistan does not?"

"Should he ask you what is in the book, what answer will you give?"

"The answer I gave you!" replied Gray with incautious frankness.

The yellow mask of Khoon's face turned towards him, a devilish hatred in every one of its million creases.

"Then there shall be a torturing of the Miss-Sahib (when he has tired of her) before he asks you!" he said, baring the yellow teeth at one side of his large mouth like a snarling cur. "Dismount!"

Gray, whose hands and feet had been left free since the previous night, slid to the ground.

His first impulse was to make a rush at the dwarf; but the sight of the levelled automatic stopped him.

"Put chains on him!" ordered Khoon.

When the party set out again, a tall, bronzed man wearing fetters was moving in front of the Mongol's horse, its rider every now and then striking at him with a hide whip to hasten his steps, until finally Gray was moving at a loping run.

As they drew near the great ebony gates, several hundred armed Mongols came out to greet their general-in-chief, many more being clustered on the sides and tops of the foothills.

Clad in flowing robes of vivid green silk, the worn leather sheath of his curved scimitar replaced by a gem-encrusted one of pure gold, Khoon was now a very different figure to the Khoon who had stood in Mohammed Shah's office in Labak, dressed in a buttonless old Army tunic of faded red. The gorgeousness and evil insolence of the man cowed even the brutal garrison and the savage inhabitants of the surrounding villages, to-day gathered together in The Cobra's eyrie. The Mongol had at least brought with him someone upon whom they could vent their hatred of a Power to which they were implacably hostile—a physically splendid specimen of the Sahib race, who wore his chains as a king wears the insignia of noble Orders.

Gray's appearance called forth a storm of ferocious threats and insults. The word had gone round that he was none other than the famous "Gree Sahib"—"Him of the Thousand Tongues," as the hill tribes called Gray—who could speak every known Frontier language and dialect as fluently as his

mother tongue. The news gave an added zest to the bestial taunts of cowardice and the even viler threats of indescribable mutilations which were flung at him.

One huge Hillman, after Khoon had ridden by, thrust aside the guards and struck Gray a terrific blow in the face.

Gray recognized him as a well-known Frontier wrestler who attended all the big fairs in India, and whose foul methods invariably made him a safe bet for his admirer's annas.

"This much I welcome thee, *Kafir!*" shouted the man insolently.

Dazed, Gray halted for a second.

Then, raising his joined manacled hands (it was momentarily thought by the crowd, in an appeal for mercy), he brought them crashing down upon his insulter's turban.

"A Sahib's greeting to thee!" he gritted.

The man dropped like a felled ox.

A roar of execration went up from the infuriated Hillmen.

Ever since The Cobra's disappointingly unobtrusive return they had been trying to find a scapegoat on which to vent their savage rage; now Colin Gray had met that need. They would have stabbed him to death on the spot if Khoon had not galloped back, swearing and blaspheming at the top of his cracked voice, and blowing sharp, shrill blasts on a small gold whistle.

At once something like a hundred Mongol soldiery seemed to materialize from nowhere; and reinforced the scattered escort.

Evidently Khoon was much feared, for he used his hide whip with impunity, striking right and left. The mere raising of it would have brought death to any other man.

And so a way was forced up to the gates of the palace, which were instantly closed again behind the gorgeously clad dwarf and his unshaven prisoner.

Smiling grimly at the angry comments of the forbidding-looking palace guard who had somehow learned of the incident of the wrestler, Gray strode into a spacious, weed-grown courtyard.

The eyes "which missed nothing" got busy taking mental photographs.

The open space in which he was to await Khoon's orders was surrounded on three sides by dilapidated thirty-foot walls into which were fixed about a hundred heavy iron rings for the tethering of horses. On the fourth side was the palace itself. Over the entrance gates, and against a background of blue sky, a couple of sentries were leaning on their rifles, looking down at him, their dingy garments fluttering in a breeze unfelt by those below. Even the loungers in the courtyard were heavily armed.

Khoon beckoned to a gaunt, bow-legged Hindu—evidently a man of low caste—and bending down from his saddle, spoke to him in whispers. Now and then the man nodded assent and cast a malevolent sideways glance at Gray.

Gray continued to look around him with a tense interest.

So this pitiable jumble of Byzantine and Oriental architecture was the famous stronghold of Prester John that he had heard about! Jove, what a ravine it was in! No wonder the place had never yet been discovered!

Over the main entrance was a semicircular panel containing fragments of Venetian mosaic-work. Above it, and cut into the stone of which the central portion of the palace was built, he could make out the words:

PRESBYTER JOHANNES AEDIFICAVIT, A.D. MCCXII.

(Built by Prester John A.D. 1212.)

Somewhere under that broken sea of cupolas and minarets—perhaps in that high tower with the three balconies—must be Diana Lindsay! The thought brought a feeling of fierce triumph. At last he was face to face with a situation which he had prayed to meet! When they took him to Alam Khan, he would begin by offering The Cobra such terms for Diana's release as would (he believed) induce him to set her free at once. If he refused—!

A violent shove from behind cut short his reflections.

"Go forward, Son of an Ox!" grunted one of the escort.



Gray refused to move; his chains clinked musically as he brushed some of the dust from his clothes with a nonchalance he was far from feeling.

"Take me, now, to Alam Khan!" he said grimly to Khoon, wiping a streak of blood from his face. "I would speak with him!"

"You shall see him in *my* time, *Kafir!*" snarled the dwarf. And turning slightly in his saddle, he once more addressed the bow-legged Hindu.

"Take him whither thou knowest, O Keeper of the Beasts!"

"Go with him—unless you prefer to be dragged!" he continued smoothly, addressing Gray.

Once more prudence counselled submission.

Stooping, the Englishman gathered up his leg-chains and, holding them in his hands, followed the Hindu through an opening in one of the angles of the courtyard.

"Go first!" ordered one of two Hillmen, whose rifles, held at waist level, were pointed at the small of his back.

Again, to hear was to obey.

He started slowly to descend a steep flight of worn stone steps.

The jailer, who was in front of him, carried a heavy torch of some resinous material by the light of which could be seen a smaller iron door at the foot of the stone stairs.

"Open, Ram Dutt, thou damned Unbeliever!" shouted one of the escort.

Someone inside threw it open, and an apelike form shuffled away into the shadows.

An overpowering stench of animal refuse of all kinds assailed Gray's nostrils, and a distant, muffled roaring and snarling filled the stale air.

At wide intervals in the walls of the stone-flagged passage there were now small oil lamps, their greasy smoke as it curled upward in solid-looking spirals, adding its quota to the soft black incrustation of soot on roof and ledge.

At length prisoner and escort reached a circular paved space some fifteen feet in diameter. From it, like the spokes of

a wheel, branched out six other passages identical with the one they had just traversed.

"Whither go we?" questioned Gray, lagging behind his jailer and defying two prodding rifle-barrels.

The man with the torch turned, but remained silent.

"It costs nothing to be civil, my friend!" expostulated Gray sternly. "Answer me! Whither go we?"

"How shall a man without a tongue answer thee?" interrupted one of the guards truculently. "Go forward!"

The flickering red light of the torch revealed, a yard or two ahead, a heavily barred window about two feet square.

A cracked and quavering scream rent the fetid air as Gray drew level with it.

Behind the bars was a face surrounded by a dirty mass of matted grey hair, from out which stared dull, pupil-less eyeballs.

The man was stone blind.

Gray stopped.

Something—perhaps the warming horror of that livid countenance—had determined him to stand his ground.

"I go no further!" he said, tautening his muscles for a struggle, his deep voice rolling defiantly into a hundred threatening echoes.

"There is no need!" retorted the taller of his guards, insolently, throwing open a low door. "Take up thy residence!"

"Neighbourly greetings to you!" screamed the blind man's voice in a cracked falsetto; and a clawlike hand was thrust through the bars as if to shake the Englishman's.

Gray's skin prickled. *This creature spoke English!*

"Who are you?" he called hoarsely.

"He is a *fakir*, and he is mad!" cut in one of the guards. "Enter!"

"*Be silent, thou!*" Again Gray's voice crashed into thunderous echoes.

Such was his power over men that the guard fell silent.

The torch sputtered.

"Simla's never written!" quavered the blind man. And burst into insane laughter.

Then Gray was pushed violently into a reeking dungeon, and the door slammed.

There was a shooting of bolts, a key ground in a rusty padlock, and the footsteps of the jailer and the guards died away.

That crazy voice was now repeating the word "Simla" over and over again. Other words there were. "Nine" was one of them. But it was mostly meaningless jargon.

Gray clenched his teeth till his jaw-muscles hurt. He knew that a few feet away from him, was Captain George Ian Galbraith,—“Gigs” Galbraith—late of the Royal Kohistan Rifles and the Secret Service. The eighth whom They had sent in quest of the Veiled Man.

Brevet-Major Colin Gray, V.C., was the ninth.

---

---

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE RUSE

FOR SOME MINUTES AFTER JAF-fir had gone, Shireen and Diana sat side by side in silence, heedless of Gulbudun, who, as usual, was chattering happily.

The Persian, brought up as she had been among women for whom intrigue was the forbidden spice of existence, having now driven out a first thought of jealousy, was turning over in her mind fantastic schemes for delaying Diana's interview with The Cobra.

Her dark eyes were sombre and her narrow hands lay listlessly in her lap. A set of crystal perfume bottles in a golden holder, with which she had been amusing herself by trying first one and then the other of them on a warm fingertip, stood neglected on a low table by her side; three of its stoppers were out, and the air was heavy with the mingled scent of narcissus, rose, and jasmine.

Diana Lindsay was wondering how long it would take to die after she had swallowed the poison Shireen had promised to give her.

"The silk man from Bokhara is here again, Shireen," remarked Gulbudun, pulling Shireen's pet deer towards her to give it a sugared comfit. "He has a roll of peach-coloured silk, more soft and beautiful than any I have ever seen! Will you buy it for me?"

Shireen looked at the child musingly. This silk man. Could *he* be made use of? She knew him well; a cunning-eyed go-between who often came to sell his wares to the inmates of The Cobra's harem.

"I will buy a silken carpet from him if he has one," she said

quietly. The time-honoured method of escaping from a harem—or entering one—rolled up in a carpet, had suggested itself to her.

Gulbudun shook her head.

“He has only silk! Silk of all colours. Will you buy the peach-coloured roll for me, Shireen?”

“Surely,” answered Shireen absent-mindedly.

Gulbudun unhooked slim fingers from the deer’s collar and pushed the animal from her.

“I will dress the *Inglis* girl in rose-coloured gauze!”

She tilted her golden head sideways, gazing critically at Diana’s beautiful body; but forthwith abandoned the idea in favour of finding out what was making the two elder girls so uncommunicative.

“Tell me what you are both thinking about!” she demanded with childish imperiousness.

Diana smiled at her wanly, but did not answer.

Shireen looked at Gulbudun and pursed her red lips. The young, she reflected, sometimes say wise things. Perhaps this child . . .

“Answer me!” insisted Gulbudun. “What are you thinking about so seriously?”

“I am thinking about *her*,” answered Shireen, glancing anxiously at Diana’s pale face. “She does not wish to meet my lord.”

“Why?” questioned Gulbudun, her blue eyes widening in astonishment.

“The women of the *Sahib-lōg* do not eat alone with men of our race.” In spite of herself, a touch of hardness crept into the Persian’s eyes as she said the words. “Di fears my lord will want to marry her. . . . I think he may. . . . Supposing a man asked you, Gulbudun, to eat alone with him, and you did not wish to go—what would *you* do?”

“If the Khan asked me, I would be glad!” The child was winding a rose-leaf round a small, henna-tinted fingernail. “Perhaps he will change his mind and not want her.”

“My lord never changes his mind when his heart is set upon a woman,” said Shireen coldly. “Also, Jaffir has talked

too much to him about the *Inglis* girl." The rosebud mouth firmed, and she fell silent.

Gulbudun wrinkled a small nose contemptuously.

"I *hate* Jaffir!" she said spitefully. And picking up a long gold pin, she stuck it into a cushion as if it had been the detested eunuch she was transfixing. "Can we not hide her?" she suggested at length, rather hopelessly.

"Silly chatterer!" retorted Shireen impatiently. "No one can hide from my lord! Khoon the Mongol once said that if a man were to hide in the belly of an ox, my lord would cleave it in twain and find him! And it is true!" she added, raising her voice. "He *would* find him!"

The certainty which was so emphatic in the Persian's tones, roused Diana from her numbing apathy.

"I have made up my mind!" she said quietly.

Shireen glanced up at her.

"You must give me the poison you promised to give me—*now*, Shireen!"

The Persian took the English's girl's cold hands in both of hers.

"Nay, Di! 'Open not the door into the night, when Hope is a guest!' . . . Do you not remember that poem? When there is *no* hope, then—!"

"Could she not hide in the garden!" suggested Gulbudun hopefully. "I know places . . . !"

Shireen frowned.

"I told that fat worm, Jaffir, that she was ill; and ill she must . . . seem to be!" She clapped her hands, and a stoutish woman-slave entered.

"Go at once and bring the herb-woman who came to see me when I was ill," commanded Shireen. "She shall have gold if she comes quickly!"

The woman salaamed and was gone.

"Light of my eyes," murmured the Persian soothingly to Diana, "the woman I have sent for will give you a potion which will make your body feel, to the touch, as if the fires of fever burnt in it; but you will sleep, and know no discomfort—nothing! When my lord sends for you, or comes here

himself to look for you, he will think you are ill, and leave you in peace for at least a few days. By that time I shall surely have thought out a plan for your escape. . . . Gulbudun, leave the peacock alone! Go, bid my women prepare a couch beside mine!"

Diana looked at her gratefully; as a hunted animal might look at one giving it asylum; then, drawing the girl to her, she kissed Shireen's forehead under the parting in the silky black bands of her hair.

"My life is in your hands, Shireen, dear friend. I have implicit faith in you," she said gently. "Perhaps when I wake, all will be changed." Could *anything* put things right now? she asked herself.

Shireen's beautiful mouth curved into a wry little smile.

"One thing I will change *now*! I like not 'Di' as a name for you. Henceforward you shall be called 'Deena.' Do you like it? It is like music, I think. '*Deena!*' " She repeated the name softly, several times.

Diana hugged her impulsively.

"You are as kind to me as if I were your sister!" she exclaimed.

"You are more to me than a sister would ever be; you are my friend," responded the Persian. Among the Eastern peoples, outside the love of parents, friendship is the most sacred of all ties.

"I wish I had more hope, Shireen," continued Diana despondently. "I suppose it is foolish of me, but I feel that even if I have not to obey the Khan's order to go to him to-day or to-morrow, a night will surely come—and before long—when I shall have to go to him—or die!"

Shireen stamped a small foot angrily.

"You will never have to obey such an order! And you shall not die! Have I not said that my lord always listens to me when I speak?" Then her voice softened. "Only once in my life have I asked a favour of him, and he granted it, saying I should ask for something that was difficult for him to give, so that he might show how great is his love for me. Do you

know what I am going to do? I am going to ask him to give me—you!”

“He will refuse,” commented Diana, remembering the evil things she had read in The Cobra’s eyes.

“No, he will give you to me. I am sure of it. But to ask him to-day, would be like snatching a bone from Shiv when she is hungry. I once saw Shiv kill a man who tried to do that, though he was her keeper and she loved him. My lord can be crueller than Shiv!”

She spoke—as one having the grave conviction which is born of an often-tried but unfaltering love—patiently.

“The herb-woman is here, lady!”

“Bid her enter!” Her mistress passed a gentle hand over Diana’s curls. “Will you be afraid to drink what she will give you, Deena?”

Diana shook her head, smiling faintly. One of those rare beings who can talk well and sweetly, she seemed to have lost all desire to speak, just as some wild birds cease to sing when they are caged.

If old age were a qualification for wisdom, then the haridan who was now moving towards them over the great black-and-white marble squares of the flooring—very much as if she were a black chess pawn pushed by a hesitating player—might have been wisdom personified.

Gazing at her half pityingly, Diana put down her age at a hundred, though she knew that in the East women grow old with a cruel rapidity. But in spite of her years there was about this herb-woman a quick awareness and detached attention, as evidenced by the quick sideways glances of the old eyes under those fallen lids. Her wrinkled lips twitched ceaselessly, as if tormented by something behind them.

The crone’s quick-working brain, sharpened by a lifetime of intrigue, at once grasped the situation and its urgency. Swiftly she produced from out her voluminous garments a battered tin box containing some dried roots and a few phials half full of brown and yellow powders. The stream of commentary which accompanied its opening and the selecting of



the ingredients for the potion, sounded to the harassed Diana like the incessant tolling of a cracked bell.

Actually, the hag was recounting the latest news from that wonderful, evil outer world which the inmates of The Cobra's harem dreamed of often, were unable to read about, and never likely to see. But Diana, plunged in a sudden surge of anxiety about her father, was not listening.

Shireen, however, was interested.

Tactful, and having the gift of unerring appraisal—obligatory qualities when half a dozen words will earn either gold or a beating on the soles of one's feet—the herb-woman was balancing up in her mind, while she was talking, which of these two rewards an item of news about Khoon the Mongol was likely to produce for her. The blasting effects of Shireen Bibi's lightning changes of mood were common talk in the bazaars of Yanistan; and nobody seemed to like the dwarf.

The sunken eyes darted a glance at Shireen. The appropriateness of the moment was being tested, as a dentist tests the gum round the base of an anæsthetized tooth before producing the forceps.

She would be safe, she decided, for Shireen Bibi was still interested.

"His Excellency, Khoon the Mongol——" the woman began.

"—has returned! I know it," cut in the Persian coldly. She had always heartily disliked the dwarf.

Discreetly silent, but determined to say what she had to say, in her own time, the harridan held out a cup to Diana. "Drink it before it settles, Miss-Sahib!" she said wheedlingly. And then, with smooth insistence, resumed her gossip.

"Not many are over-pleased to see the lord Khoon. Some men are indeed strange," she remarked warily.

"Come, tell me thy news, babbler!" commanded the Persian, even more coldly.

"What should a poor old woman like me know of the Great Ones? The skin of a datestone is not thinner than my knowledge of them!" And with that skilful parry, the old

gossip began searching busily for her pocket, to return to it the battered tin box.

"Come, Deena," soothed Shireen, leading Diana to the couch which had now been prepared for her. "You must drink what she has given you!"

Diana glanced distastefully at the muddy-looking contents of the cup.

"Fear not, Miss-Sahib," encouraged the beldame. "One, two, three—and lo, you will be asleep!"

"How long shall I remain unconscious?" questioned Diana, giving her back the cup.

A numbness was already creeping over her.

"Until the sun sets to-morrow, you will be dreaming of handsome young princes and fairy palaces!" chuckled the crone. "It may be longer; and it may be less. I cannot say to a few hours." The shrewd old eyes returned to the Persian.

"Yea. . . . As I was saying, His Excellency Khoon has returned. And few are glad; though he brought with him a strange prisoner—a Sahib dressed as a Hillman. He is bigger than Gog or Magog and as handsome as Rustum. His strength is the strength of six men! As they took him through the streets, he smote a man dead! They say he stands six-and-a-half *Inglis* feet, this Sahib! . . . You must lie down, Miss-Sahib!"

Diana raised herself on one elbow.

"Shireen!" she exclaimed, "please, *please* find out whether this prisoner is one of my countrymen! If he is, will you help him, for my sake? . . ." Her voice trailed away, and she sank back.

"Rest peacefully, Deena," murmured Shireen. "I will surely cause enquiries to be made!"

A deep sigh from the couch. The heavy eyes closed. The world seemed to be floating away. . . .

The herb-woman laid a finger on a slim, blue-veined wrist.

"She sleeps!" she croaked. "Who can mix a potion as well or as quickly as I?"

Gratefully hiding in her garments the gold coin Shireen

gave her, she knelt and kissed the ground at the Persian's feet and silently left her.

Shireen and Gulbudun were now alone with the unconscious Diana. The women and slave-girls had all been dismissed to their quarters so that, should they be questioned, they would be able to say they knew nothing of what had taken place.

Long blinds made of thin strips of bamboo, dyed green, and forming a semi-transparent screen, had been lowered on the verandah to keep out the hot sun, and the great bed-chamber with its two couches set side by side was plunged into a cool twilight . . .

An hour later the two girls were discussing in low tones possible plans for Diana's escape, when a distant sound as of a carpenter sawing wood, reached their frightened ears.

It was the snarling of Shiv, and it meant that Alam Khan was coming to visit Shireen.

A minute later the rings of the heavy curtains covering the door clashed noisily, and The Cobra entered the room.

The Persian's heart beat quickly, for there was in his face something which she had never before seen in it—a threatening look directed at her.

With a supple movement she rose from among her cushions and went swiftly towards him, her bare feet making no sound on the marble pavement. Not even her anklets clinked, so smoothly did she move.

"Hush, O Tree of my Desire!" she whispered, laying a finger on her lips. "The *Ingliis* girl sleeps, thanks be to Allah! In truth, she is very sick!"

"Let her be wakened!" retorted The Cobra, brutally, in his vibrant bass. "When I send for a slave, that slave comes! Or she goes nowhere ever afterwards!"

Shireen's graceful form, clad in a diaphanous robe of soft pink muslin, grew tense with apprehension. Here, indeed, was danger; not only for the English girl, but also for herself and Gulbudun.

"Her fear of you, lord, has turned her brain. She fell senseless from it an hour since."

Alam Khan glowered at her. He gave a savage jerk at Shiv's golden chain, which he held twisted round one of his great hands, for, as if she shared her master's ill-humour, the tigress was still snarling viciously and her baleful eyes were fixed on Shireen.

Gulbudun had gone into the garden with Dilkoosh.

"Be still, thou accursed daughter of Darkness!" ejaculated Alam Khan.

"The beast is not wearing her rope of mogra flowers," said Shireen, smiling up at him languorously. "Mayhap, like a woman, she misses that which she knows makes her beautiful!" She knew that it was The Cobra's order that each day a rope of the heavy-scented flowers of the mogra tree should be prepared for the adornment of Shiv, who loved the scent of them.

"She misses a *whip*!" growled Alam Khan as, exerting his prodigious strength, he dragged the great animal closer to him. "She all but killed the man who would have wound the flowers about her neck when he brought them this morning. In taking hold of her head his hand touched the key!"

He was alluding to a key of blued steel which hung from a spring clip on Shiv's broad, gem-encrusted collar. It was the second of two which opened the inner doors of the treasure-room, where lay the untold wealth that had been accumulated throughout the centuries by successive rulers of this fortified stronghold. The tigress would let no one but her master lay a finger on it.

"Sometimes I think you love her more than you love me," pouted Shireen. "And I love you more than my life!"

It was true. She loved Alam Khan with all the strength of her fierce and passionate young nature.

"I love who is faithful to me," he returned, fixing a burning glance on her.

Shireen went close to him, for she had no fear of Shiv when he was present. Rising on tiptoe, she reached up her arms to his mighty shoulders; but Alam Khan shrugged himself free.

"Art thou *sure* that thou lovest me more than thy life?"

he questioned. Her slightest touch thrilled him, and she knew it, however much he might pretend to the contrary.

Shireen half closed her eyes and turned tempting lips up to him as he towered over her. Something told her that if she did not ask, now, for Diana to be given to her, it would be useless to ask later.

"You know I do! You are more to me than all the world! But that apart, it is good you have come, for I have a favour to ask. Will my lord not sit awhile with his slave, and recount all that has passed since he left her? Come! It is cool—out there!" She pointed towards the verandah.

For a moment Alam Khan hesitated. Then her fascination and the call of her warm slimness as she pressed against him, won the day. But first he must assure himself of the truth of her statement that the *Inglis* girl was ill.

Bending down, he laid a hand on Diana's white arm.

In the tense silence of the next few seconds the only sounds to be heard were the cool plashing of the fountains in the gardens and the murmurous cooing of doves. Once or twice Shireen's bulbuls uttered a few thin, sweet notes.

"By Allah, it is true!" exclaimed Alam Khan at last. "She has a fever!" And turning, he strode towards the verandah, followed by Shireen.

As she sank down voluptuously on to a low divan piled with many-hued silk cushions, the Persian began crooning to a plaintive music which was now floating in from the quarters of her slave-women.

Shiv's chain knotted round a pillar, The Cobra threw himself down beside her.

To-day, the flawless beauty of this exotic "flower of love" had inspired in him a jealousy as fierce as it was groundless.

"Art thou *truly* loyal to me, Rose of a Hundred Leaves?" he demanded, his terrible eyes searching hers. Like all tyrants, he took no virtue for granted.

With a graceful movement Shireen nestled closer to him, gazing pensively at a small jewelled mirror on a ring on her thumb.

"Your heart is lord of my heart and I love you!" she sighed contentedly. This man was *her* man, her world!

"If once I doubted, I would slay thee! I swear it by the Holy Koran!" he persisted, combing his great beard with his fingers.

Shireen watched a bird of paradise as it pecked at a grain of millet which had fallen into a crack in the marble paving. She was thinking of a seer's prophecy that no human hand should ever harm her.

"In the chapter of the Koran which is called 'Light'," she said softly, "a curse is called down upon those who suspect a loving woman!"

"It is even so!" he answered craftily. "Therefore, to hear thee swear the fifth of the five innocence-proclaiming oaths laid down in that chapter of *al Koran* will be sweeter to my ears than the song of the koil bird!" If he knew nothing much else of the Mohammedan Bible, Alam Kahn knew well enough that portion of it dealing with Woman.

Once again Shireen's heart fluttered in her breast like a frightened bird; for she knew The Cobra's power of judging a man's truthfulness by his voice, and what he did to those who lied to him.

"I would swear on a thousand Korans that I love thee!" she said unevenly. But a trill of silvern laughter mingled with the songs of her birds. "It is now *I* who wish to test *your* love," she went on. "I said I had a favour to ask."

"What is the favour?" The words rumbled in his deep chest.

"When my arms are useless, owing to your absence," she answered softly, "and my eyes are as unlighted lamps because they cannot look upon you, I am lonely."

"Thou hast thy women, my Green-billed Cuckoo!"

"It is for yet *another* woman that your slave is about to ask," murmured Shireen, her heart beating in her throat. "Give to me the *Inglis* girl as a companion! She pleases me!"

The Cobra stirred on the silken cushions and crushed her to him.

"Thou shalt have her! It is my intention to marry the *Inglis* girl!"

---

---

## CHAPTER XIV

### DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

AS SOON AS HE HAD HANDED over Colin Gray to the keeper of the beasts, Khoon sent for Jaffir. He knew that Alam Khan had thrice threatened the eunuch's life, and that the man would rejoice to leave him—if he were sure he would not be captured and brought back to die by torture in the Place of Fights.

The Mongol intended to offer him the post of major-domo in his harem—on certain conditions. . . .

Sometimes when he was alone, awaiting some all-important happening on which perhaps his life depended, the impassiveness of the dwarf would fall from him like a discarded garment. It did so, to-day, as he passed his shadowy apartment with short quick steps. He was about to challenge the dread authority of the Veiled Man. Khoon knew that dreaded being's uncanny power of anticipating any attempt to subvert his influence. Never did it fail to bring death. It had brought it to plotters who had thought themselves safe in the slums of far-away Calcutta or Bombay; it had brought it even to women. . . .

For a moment he paused in his restless pacing, to look musingly out of a window overlooking the gardens of the palace. He was thinking of Alam Khan—the Goliath whom this child, Shireen, could twist round her little finger and whose judgment, when one of his fits of ungovernable temper seized him, was as a wisp of straw in the whirlwind of his passions. Such a one could be no cold, calculating thinker. . . . Obviously it was the mind of the Wearer of the Veil that controlled him.

*Who was this mysterious Veiled Man?*

For the thousandth time he asked himself the question.

The dwarf only knew that he invariably rode by night—clad, it was rumoured, in a black *boorka*—a shapeless, domino-like woman's garment from which the eyes of the shrouded wearer looked out through a narrow insertion of muslin. Arrived, he would straightway shut himself up in the subterranean part of the palace, where—on the rare occasions on which Khoon and Alam Khan had been bidden to his presence—the dwarf had observed that his sole attendants were the keeper of the beasts and his shockingly deformed assistant, both of them dumb. Where he came from, what he did when he locked himself in those rooms, the Mongol could not tell.

A soft knocking roused him from his reverie. . . .

"Safety and Peace to you, O Conqueror of the World!" whispered Jaffir as he entered.

"And to thee!" answered the Mongol, who was at once his impassive self. "Thy news?"

The eunuch looked around him furtively, his body still bent servilely.

"Be not afraid!" said the dwarf contemptuously. "Thine ears—which thou still hast, I notice!—are the only ones which hear me!"

"I passed the Galcha in the passage—him who was chief of the watch last night," answered Jaffir. "A most loyal man!" he added hastily, catching a menacing glint in the beadlike eyes. "Yet perhaps . . . unnecessary to our council!"

Khoon remained silent. He had no intention of being the first to broach the subject occupying his mind; and the Galcha was his most trusted spy.

The eunuch shuffled big feet uneasily; but the dwarf's will was too strong for him.

"The Khan talks much with the lady Shireen—" he began, and stopped. He could have sworn that the hangings in a far corner stirred. But remembering the dwarf's assurance that they were alone, he said nothing.



"Of what speak they?" queried Khoon smoothly. "It seems thy tongue needs oiling!"

He chinked a bag of gold pieces on the table before him.

"They spoke of an overthrowing . . . of the accursed British Government!" stammered the eunuch, licking his thick lips greedily.

"What of it?" demanded Khoon, a shade of impatience in his tones. "Wouldst thou feed me on mouldy cheese?"

Jaffir, an eye on the hangings, played for safety.

"He has brought with him a red-headed *Inglis* girl prisoner, and is enamoured of her. The lady Shireen—"

"Do the women like each other?" asked the dwarf, his shrewd mind seeking for a way of approach to the subject he was determined Jaffir should open up.

"For the present, the *Inglis* girl and the lady Shireen are as two roses on one stem," answered Jaffir. "But one of them will soon be taken. There will come—jealousy!"

"If the subject be worthy, jealousy is worth while!" hinted Khoon, his beady eyes watching Jaffir's face.

The eunuch, still looking at the distant corner, put up a final struggle.

"Barley-bread with peace is better than gold gathered amid the clashing of knives, lord!" he answered feebly.

"A dead man cannot eat!" said Khoon harshly, drumming impatient fingers.

And once again his will proved the stronger.

"The woman I bade listen to them," recounted the eunuch tremulously, "says that the Khan but awaits the Veiled One—who has sent word that his shadow will darken our doors before the moon changes. Then *you*, Mighty One (he says), will bring an army as numerous as the stones on the mountain-sides!"

Khoon thought for a moment. The bag of gold must be his trump card.

"It takes much gold to bring—and pay—such an army. . . . Also, there must be a paymaster!"

Jaffir glanced affectionately at the bag of gold on the table, as if already counting its coveted contents.

"The Khan has wealth that would buy all India, in the Room of Treasures," he said grudgingly.

". . . Which has two keys," helped the Mongol.

"Only the death of their keepers (and each guards the other) would cause those keys to be—picked up!" said the eunuch. "But the danger is great!"

"The reward is greater, fat slave! I have in my own country a place for thee in which thou canst grow even fatter than thou art—and be happier! That is, if thou servest me well . . . by picking up keys which are dropped, for example."

"As Allah lives, my lord," quavered Jaffir, "I will serve thee, and none other! Have I not been beaten by him three times——"

"Harken!" interrupted Khoon, brutally. "The Veiled One's arm is long, and the Khan is a mighty fighter (though his people are not as numerous as mine," he snarled, parenthetically). "But I tell you the arm of the British Government is mightier than us all! The *Sirkar* has engines and men that fly in the air, and far-reaching guns. It will quench Alam Khan and his armies, as rain quenches a dung-fire. Then, the treasure thou knowest of will be swallowed by it, even as a hen swallows a speck of gravel."

"How great is his wisdom! How infinite!" squeaked Jaffir, giving way to one of his ecstasies of adulation.

Then Khoon struck home.

"There is one who must die!"

The flabby face of the eunuch paled.

"Who—who shall do the killing?"

"The secret powder thou toldest me of," gritted Khoon implacably.

Jaffir squirmed, as an impaled beetle squirms on a pin. His rôle had been made unmistakably clear now. He was to poison The Cobra and Shiv, the tigress.

"Will there be crumbs of treasure for this poor gutter-worm?" he queried.

The yellow mask wrinkled into a million deeper creases.

"Thou shalt be fed," answered Khoon off-handedly. "Go, prepare that which is to be food for two others!"

Faint with fear, the man bent as low as his big paunch allowed, and hastily snatching the bag of gold off the table, backed towards the door.

The hanging *was* moving! . . .

As the door closed softly behind him, a soft knocking similar to that which had announced the coming of the eunuch sounded in the far corner of the room.

"Enter!" grated Khoon, wiping beads of perspiration from his forehead.

A door closed noisily, and from behind the tapestry emerged the Galcha, chief of the Mongol's spies.

With him the dwarf spoke openly.

"Have you sown the seed among his men?"

"I have, Master of the Universe!"

"In good ground?"

The Galcha's bearded face darkened.

"It bore a steel fruit, even as it fell from my tongue," he said grimly. "One of his men, when I spoke that which you told me to speak, about the Khan causing their wages to shrivel yet more, thinking I was loyal to him, would have stabbed me. Seel!" He lifted his dingy smock and displayed a blood-stained bandage about his ribs. "It is but a scratch; but I will kill him who gave it to me!"

"Fool!" ejaculated Khoon quietly. "If you lay a finger on even a lame ass of his, I will have you chopped into pieces too small for dogs' meat!"

The Galcha looked at him loweringly, and swore in his beard to the effect that vengeance is a Galcha's birthright and he did not intend to forfeit it.

Khoon, his eyes never quitting the man's face, rose and walked slowly towards him with the hide whip.

"Do you dare to teach me what is best, you dog?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"*I know that a knife is surer than any powder!*" was the defiant answer.

The yellow face of the dwarf paled. This man had heard too much.

Going up to him he lashed at him savagely again and again.

But the man uttered no sound; he knew that a cry or word would suffice to change the punishment into a sentence of death or torture . . .

"The next time I will have you and every member of your accursed family flayed alive!" hissed Khoon in level tones, as, exhausted, he threw down the whip. "Gol"

For a moment the Galcha, one eye totally blinded, and his livid face criss-crossed with weals, stood as if turned to stone. Injustice—to the Oriental an unpardonable sin—had in those few moments turned loyalty and dog-like devotion into flaming hatred.

Without a word or a salute, he lifted the tapestry and went out.

He had made up his mind: The Cobra should be told of the plot.

---

---

## CHAPTER XV

### SHIREEN SCHEMES

#### ALAM KHAN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

that he intended to marry Diana Lindsay made one thing very clear to Shireen. Diana must be spirited away somehow, and without delay.

It might, of course, be that The Cobra's decision to wed this English girl was nothing more than another move in the dangerous game Shireen knew he was playing against the Government of India. On the other hand, if this marriage did take place her own hitherto undisputed supremacy in The Cobra's harem would be definitely menaced. Diana's red-gold beauty was calculated to stir, and hold, the passions of any man. Certainly those of Alam Khan. Shireen knew that he rarely altered a decision once he had made it; she also knew of his mad love for women. Few, save herself, had held him for long, though! But, whether *this* decision was irrevocable or not, she was far too shrewd to try and change it—at present. "*I care not if she be ill or well: I wed the Inglis Miss-Sahib in three days,*" he had said. . . .

Clearly, the sooner the English girl knew of the situation and its complications and prepared to meet them, the better!

Already the herb-woman had been sent for to administer an antidote to the drug she had given Diana a few hours before.

At first the Persian's mind had turned to other means than escape for getting rid of one who was now obviously a rival; but a growing fondness for The Cobra's graceful prisoner, and the womanly sympathy which had sprung into being between them that day on the Maha Gunj Pass when Diana

had confessed to loving "an Englishman," finally turned the scale in her favour.

But the problem of escape was still one which could not be solved without a man's aid. The Persian's thoughts turned at once to Firoz—the young Hillman whose sympathy Diana had told her she had won during her ride into captivity. He and Gulbudun were sweethearts; and without Shireen's consent (Alam Khan having given Gulbudun to her) the young people could not marry. Which meant that Firoz Khan was certain to do his utmost to meet her wishes. So she had sent for him, also.

While she was waiting for the herb-woman, he arrived.

"It will be difficult to get her away," he said. "Yet I will try."

Shireen frowned.

"You will not 'try', you will *succeed!*"

"The guards have been doubled and the passes are picketed against the coming of *Inglis* soldiers," explained Firoz respectfully. He knew Shireen Bibi's temper.

"*Inglis* soldiers are as oxen among the hills," she retorted scornfully. "They lose their way!"

"They will *come!* Sahibs always arrive in the end," he said quietly.

"You talk a fool's talk," exclaimed Shireen.

The lad's handsome face, hawk-like in its keenness, was lit by a quick smile.

"It is not my talk; it is the talk of a Galcha of the Pamirs sent by the Mongol," he answered, brightening visibly at the thought that there would be fighting to be done. "That Galcha is no fool, and he says the Sahibs have started!"

"If they come, we shall beat them!" She set small white teeth.

"They will meet sharp steel and good shooting?" he declared cheerfully. "It will be a great fight, one that may, God willing, last several days. But *they* will have cannon——"

"Tell me your plan for the escape of this *Inglis* girl!" exclaimed Shireen fiercely. "I did not send for you to hear you talk of fighting."

"On the second night from to-night, I know a camel-man who will pass with a *kafila* [caravan] on his way to Labak," explained Firoz. Stopping short, he fingered the handle of his long stabbing-knife dubiously.

"Well . . . ?"

"There are outposts on the passes, I said," he muttered, shaking his head. "No man goes past *them*! Let alone a white woman in a basket!"

Shireen snapped a small finger and thumb.

"Few men can see through a gold piece," she retorted. "You will bribe the outposts and the guards."

He made a negative sign.

"There is a mingling of Mongol men among those picquets, who would not take gold from me—a Hillman!"

It was true. Relations between The Cobra's men and those of Khoon had been strained for some time past. There had been ominous mutterings among the Hillmen, who resented this alliance with the Mongols. The freeborn people of the hills, they argued, had no need of help from "monkeys." And were not the Mongols a monkey-people?

"What is in your mind concerning the *kafila* you speak of?" questioned Shireen, frowning.

"Certain of the camels carry baskets big enough for a grown man to hide in." He shrugged his shoulders and paused. Then: "The rest must be as Allah wills!"

"It is well! At nightfall on the second night from to-night, the *Inglis* Miss-Sahib must hide in the herb-woman's house. I will tell her. You may go."

Shireen chaffed at the prospect of the delay; but there was nothing to be done.

Firoz gone, she bade her women admit the herb-woman.

"Prepare an antidote for the potion thou gavest the *Inglis* girl—and with all speed! She must be awakened!"

The crone set to work.

"I have news of the *Inglis* prisoner, lady," she babbled, crumbling dried herbs into a cup. "He is an *arfsur* [officer] and is imprisoned in a cell near that of the blind fakir of whom they speak. He, also, is a Sahib—so they say—but mad!"

"Can you get a letter to this new prisoner?" asked Shireen, thoughtfully.

The herb-woman looked at her cunningly.

"Where money can roll, a letter can follow."

"Your messenger?"

"Him who is helper to the Keeper of the Beasts."

"Can you trust him?"

The wrinkled mouth half smiled.

"Fifteen years ago," said the woman in low tones as she stirred the contents of the cup, "he who is to be my messenger was a straight and comely youth—a gardener in these very gardens. But one of the Khan's women smiled at him—as women will—and he, breaking off a rose, gave it to her in homage. Wherefore the Khan made *him* bury her alive, as the Emperor Akbar buried his favourite, the girl Anarkali. Which done, the Khan Sahib had all the boy's bones broken, so that he might never be pleasing to any other woman. . . . Yea, *surely I can trust my son!*" she finished grimly.

"Then he shall carry the letter I speak of. The *Ingles* girl shall write it. . . ."

They went over to the couch where Diana, her auburn curls aflame on the long white pillow, lay in a deep sleep. . . .

Some hours later, by the light of the flickering lamps, pale and heavy-eyed, Diana Lindsay sat penning a letter to Colin Gray, who, at that moment, was to her nothing more than an English prisoner whose name she did not know.

*This is from Diana Lindsay, daughter of the English Resident in Labak. I am in grave danger. Is a rescue force on its way? Who are you?*

D. L.

Carefully, and many times, she read it over, her eyes blurred with tears.

Then, half fearfully, she handed it to Shireen.

Taking up a silver knife, the Persian made a slit in an orange, and folding the paper very small, slipped it inside the fruit, which she handed with a sum of money to the herb-woman.



As soon as the crone had gone, the flood of questions that Shireen had forbidden until the letter was on its way, burst forth. What did the prisoner look like? Was he wounded? Could not she see him? And a dozen other queries.

Shireen laid an arm about the shoulders of the overwrought girl.

"Deena, you know as much about him as I! He is handsome, tall, and very strong—like my lord." Then a sudden thought came to her. "He whom you love—was he a Major-Sahib? The woman says this prisoner wears the badges of that rank."

Diana started. A wild emotion surged through her. She had been deep in reverie, listening—not to Shireen, but to a far-away voice . . . bell-like, and so distinct that the speaker might have been in the room. It was the voice she had heard on the first night of her captivity as she lay wrapped in a blanket, looking up at the stars.

It was telling her, insistently, that this prisoner was Colin Gray.

"*Deena!*" exclaimed Shireen, shaking her gently. "What has come over you? Answer me! Is he whom you love a *Major-Sahib?*"

Diana nodded, her face transfigured with happiness. Her heart was too full for speech; and, taking one of Shireen's hands in hers, she kissed it.

Then into the clear waters of that mad rush of hope tumbled a discoloured spate of fear—fear for one who was far dearer to her than life. How could she help him (if it *were* him) or how could he help her? He was even more helpless than she was—shut away in those terrible dungeons about which Shireen had told her, shudderingly. Freedom and sunlight, even when temporarily filled with bloodshed and slaughter, were as the breath of life to Shireen.

"Can I not see or speak to him?" repeated Diana, twining agonized fingers.

"Listen, Deena," said the Persian firmly. "Not even my messenger can get to him! . . . Let us sleep! See, the dawn is already breaking!"

"My letter——"

"It will reach him! The woman knows one who sees him daily. . . . And an orange is not large!"

"When will his answer come, think you?" queried Diana, fighting her tears and finding defeat.

"Soon. . . . But there is another matter——"

Shireen had decided to face, here and now, an ordeal before which even her strong-willed nature faltered. She was going to tell Diana of Alam Khan's decision to marry her.

"You know that you are very pleasing to my lord?" she began slowly.

Diana heard; but as one in a dream which means nothing to the dreamer.

"When will this Sahib's answer come?" she repeated, turning to Shireen almost fiercely.

"I said you are more than pleasing to my lord," went on the Persian coldly unheeding, her eyes glittering.

*"He will marry you, he says!"*

Diana Lindsay made no reply. How should Alam Khan find place in her mind, filled as it was with the thought that Colin Gray was actually in the Palace of the Mirror?

Jealousy—after love the strongest emotion in her passionate nature—was rapidly getting the upper hand in Shireen, and she was once more thinking of what would happen to her if this attempt to effect Diana's escape failed.

"Where is the poison that I gave you?"

"I have it," answered Diana, turning away her face.

"It is well! Allah send that it be not necessary. . . . Do you remember, Deena, the young Hillman whose clothes my lord bade you wear?"

Still Diana remained silent. She was asking herself, over and over again, the same question: *Could it be possible that this unknown prisoner was Colin Gray?*

"That same Firoz," went on Shireen, almost impatiently, "is arranging your escape. On the night that my lord says he will . . . marry you . . . a camel-*kafila* passes on its way to Yanistan. Therefore, as soon as it is dark, you will go to the herb-woman's house and wait there until the caravan comes.

You will go with that *kafila* into Labak, hidden in a basket. It will be dangerous; and if they discover you—you will have to take . . . that which I gave you!”

“I will not return, have no fear,” said Diana breaking the silence. (If they were going to kill *him*, why should she go on living?)

Their raised voices had awakened Gulbudun, who was sleeping on a couch near by.

“Shireen,” said the child sleepily, “is it true that a *pandal* (wedding-awning) of shining red silk with gold bells on it, is to be erected in the Great Hall, and that there will be six hundred gold dishes for the wedding feast . . . ?”

Her voice trailed into silence as she saw the tears glistening on Diana’s pale face.

“Why, what is the matter?” she questioned, sitting up.

Neither girl answered her.

The dread meaning of the preparations Gulbudun had so gleefully described, had struck cold terror into Diana’s heart and fanned the flame of Shireen’s jealousy to almost uncontrollable fierceness.

With an exclamation of impatience the Persian rose to her feet and clapped her hands.

The chief of her women entered.

“Go, bring the jewels and the wedding garments my lord has ordered to be given to the *Inglis* lady!” she ordered harshly. “Thou wilt tell the Khan Sahib that she has recovered, and will receive him here to-night. Go, I say!”

“Upon my head and my eyes be it,” said the woman respectfully. Then, kneeling, she kissed the ground in front of her mistress and remained there, grovelling.

“I bade thee go!” exclaimed Shireen, angrily.

“Thy slave has news, lady!” faltered the chief of her women. “The herb-woman has been thrown into prison!”

---

---

## CHAPTER XVI

### WOOD—BUT NOT WON

WHY DID YOU TELL THE SIRDAR Alam Khan that he should come to see me to-night?" asked Diana reproachfully. Weariness was fighting indignation in her.

Shireen, who was fondling her pet deer, Dilkoosh, glanced up sharply.

"Because he is already suspicious of me for protecting you so much. And that does not please me. . . . Also, if he thinks you do not look upon marriage with him as *Kismet* [Fate] he will have you guarded; then it will be impossible for you to escape! It is necessary that you make yourself pleasing to him, so that he may give you more liberty."

The English girl sighed in despair. It seemed so hopeless to try to explain her horror-ridden state of mind. Still, what the Persian had said was perfectly good common sense, although it did not fully account for her action in thus practically sending for Alam Khan.

"Why did you tell your woman to bring the wedding clothes and the jewels, Shireen? There are still three days!" She had to force herself to say that last sentence.

Shireen laughed—a hard little laugh—and tweaked the supple brown hide of Dilkoosh, till the animal shook its long ears with the pain.

"I sent for him because I want him to think *I* accept this marriage as *Kismet*—and that it means no more to me than—*this*. . . . Nor does it!"

She raised the palm of her hand to the level of her lips and blew from it an imaginary speck of dust.

Soon there entered more than a score of slaves bearing

beautifully folded silken clothes in small bales wrapped in white linen. Others carried covered trays on their heads filled with barbaric but inestimably valuable jewellery of all kinds—Alam Khan's wedding gifts to his bride-to-be.

Laying them in a semicircle before Diana (after opening them that she might be more easily able to inspect their contents) they then withdrew.

Shireen came and sat beside her. Her ill-humour had vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Which colour do you like best, Deena?"

"Green," answered Diana, the artistic soul of her rejoicing at the riot of colour spread out before her.

"He will like you in that! Green is the colour preferred by the Holy Prophet (may the Peace of God be upon him!). You can wear those with it—and those!" She touched with the point of her slipper a gold belt made in the form of a snake encrusted with emeralds, and a heap of emerald bracelets that blazed like a green fire.

Once more Shireen's women bathed Diana, having first massaged her with perfumed oil till the weariness had left her limbs and her defiant eyes shone like a northern sea on a summer's day as she stood gazing at her reflection in a long mirror of polished silver.

"I do not wonder my lord loves you, Deena," exclaimed the Persian. "You are very, very beautiful! . . . You look like a white-stalked poppy in a green cornfield!"

On the auburn curls was set a green-satin skull cap embroidered with iridescent beetle's wings, a smocklike garment of emerald-green silk, flowing halfway to her knees over loose Turkish trousers of the same material. A short, sleeveless jacket was covered with arabesques of small, flashing diamonds. Her bare throat and arms blazed with the necklaces and bracelets of irregularly-cut emeralds, while about her waist was clasped the golden snake, its tightness setting off the beauty of her lissom figure. Curly-pointed slippers of soft green leather completed her costume.

A clashing of arms in the corridor announced the coming of Alam Khan.

"It will be better he should find you here alone," whispered Shireen hastily. "Gulbudun and I will be near at hand in the garden."

Putting her arms about her, Shireen kissed her.

A trace of the Persian's perfume still lingered in the air, when The Cobra strode across the room and stood triumphantly before his bride-to-be.

Diana tried to rise lest he might seat himself beside her; but the strength seemed to have gone out of her.

Every fibre of her was thrilling with the horror of possible physical contact. The ages-old hatred felt by the female for the unwanted male, was surging up in her—clamant and irresistible—rousing her to desperate rebellion. Why not take the poison Shireen had given her, *now*, before those great hands were laid upon her. . . . Before it was too late!

This sickening feeling of mingled fear and repulsion was becoming almost too much to bear, when, of a sudden, she seemed once again to hear the Swastika *Sadhu* saying to her: "*Love will save you!*"

At once peace and courage seemed to flow into her heart.

She met The Cobra's eyes bravely. As much as she detested this man, she was forced to grudging admiration at his appearance. The six-foot nine inches of him was clad in scarlet silk, over which that river of black beard swept to his waist. From his enormous turban with its aigrette of osprey feathers, to his straddled feet in their crimson slippers, he was ablaze with rubies.

"By Allah, thou art beautiful!" he exclaimed.

His eyes as he stood looking down at her, seemed to strip her naked.

Remembering Shireen's advice about not displeasing him, she forced herself to smile, her hands clasped between her knees.

"Make room, that I may sit by thee!"

Diana rose, and the jewelled bracelets on her arms clinked musically as she moved.

"I am weary of sitting," she demurred. "The fever has not quite left me. I would go out into the air!"

She shuddered as one of his great hands touched her bare shoulder.

"You see," she said nervously. "I still tremble!"

"The woman said thou wert well!" He bent bushy black brows.

"Well enough to wish to see you, Sirdar Alam Khan," she faltered, with an effort controlling a mad longing to shrink away from him.

"Likest thou these things?" he demanded, touching with a huge forefinger one of the necklaces about her throat.

"I have never seen their equals," she answered, hoping he would not see the fear in her eyes. "They are worthy of a queen!"

"I am a king—as thou knowest," he said boastfully. "When thou art married to me I will give thee jewels that will make these toys look as pebbles in a *nālā* [dry watercourse]!"

"You are generous to your . . . prisoners," said Diana subtly.

He looked at her with suspicion. This was not the speech of one who realized that she was about to become his wife!

"Since I have decided to marry thee—and I could have kept thee as one of my concubines and dancing girls—thou art no longer a prisoner!"

"Shireen Bibi will not let me stir from these rooms," she answered protestingly, playing for freedom. "She says it is your order!"

He seemed pleased.

"She did well! But I say that thou art now free to come and go within the palace as thou pleasest. Is it good?" His eyes glowed with an evil eagerness.

"It is good, and I am grateful."

"Harken, Lindsay Miss-Sahib," he went on, his voice shaking with suppressed passion. "I lie not when I say that I love thee! And when I love, I am hungry for her who pleases me! Speak to me, therefore, as one who is to help me rule my people and bear me sons! . . . Art thou of ice that no love stirs in thee?" His eyes, as he stretched out appealing hands to her, glowed like live coals.

Diana's heart stood still. What she had been dreading had come. He expected her to reciprocate his love.

In that moment, danger, torture—death, dwindled to infinite unimportance compared with the horror of having his arms about her.

Her frightened eyes, dilated to blackness by her terror, roamed wildly round the great room, seeking a way of escape.

She caught her breath sharply.

In the shadows, immediately behind Alam Khan, was standing the Swastika *Sadhu*.

Seeing the look in her eyes The Cobra spun round on his heel.

The next second, his naked scimitar glittering in his hand, he strode towards the grave-faced Hindu.

"Thou dog!" he thundered; and the great curved blade swept through the air with a force that would have beheaded an ox.

The *Sadhu* should have been sundered from neck to waist; but the lean, tall figure in white did not stir.

It seemed to Diana as if, now, the ruby swastika glowed with quivering fire.

Swiftly Alam Khan stepped back.

"Thou witch!" he hissed at her.

And, raising his scimitar, he would have cut her down; but the weapon remained lifted. He had no power to strike.

Then, as the white-clad figure faded, he slowly lowered his arm.

Shireen crossed the verandah and entered the room.

Swiftly she looked from one to the other of them.

"What has angered my lord?" she asked, going up to him and frowning darkly at the unfortunate Diana as she passed her.

"There was a *bhoot* which *she* called up!" swore The Cobra, driving his weapon home into its scabbard with a click. "I said she is a witch, and it is true! . . . But I have other ways of dealing with witches," he added, glaring ominously.



Shireen's trill of laughter somewhat relieved the tenseness of the situation.

"The *Inglis* girl has given you her fever, Beloved!" she declared with well-simulated amusement. "She is no witch—or she would not be here! Witches come and go as they please!" She clapped her hands.

The chief of her slave-women entered.

"Bring sherbet; and bid the musicians play!" She turned again to Alam Khan. "Let us talk of the wedding, my lord. . . . You will have a beautiful wife—one whom I already love! . . . Deena is enchanted by your presents!"

Alam Khan did not seem to hear her.

"By Allah, it was *not* a fever-dream!" he swore angrily to himself. "It *was* a pig-eating Hindu *bhoot*! Didst thou, too, not see it?" he demanded of Diana. "Did I not strike at it?" It was his boast that nothing he lifted his sword against lived a moment after.

"I saw what I thought was a man," she answered, seeing that, for the moment, safety lay in keeping alive his evident awe of her. "I saw him once before, in a dream!"

The Cobra sneered. He seemed to sense her desire to temporize.

"If thou canst see the ghosts of dead men, thou canst, perhaps, see other hidden things. . . . There is a book I seek—a secret book—in which a certain Sahib has written strange words in order that he may write letters to the *Sirkar* which no man, save one having that book, may read! Canst thou tell me where it is? And what is written in it?"

In a flash Diana understood. She had heard her father mention the secret Byzantine cipher that Colin Gray had invented.

"I can sometimes read what is in the mind of a man," she said impressively. "But I cannot see or read what is not before me." She had a faint hope that he might decide to confront her with Colin Gray; and for a moment, the hope seemed not altogether wild.

"I too can read what is in the heart of a man—or of a

woman," said Alam Khan slowly. "I can read thine. *Thou liest!*"

Diana glanced at him interrogatively.

"I lie not," she said. (What had he in his mind? she wondered.)

"Thou liest, I said!" he retorted furiously. "Thy very mouth is a lie—it is too beautiful to be true! Thou madest bad fool-play in saying thou wert glad to see me! Thou art *not* glad. . . . Yet one who has thy beauty must love—or die! Whom lovest thou?"

"An Englishman!" Such a challenge allowed of no equivocation.

"What Englishman? There are many!" He spat viciously.

"A soldier," answered Diana defiantly. "One who frightens not children," she went on, glancing at Gulbudun, who had returned and was cowering in a corner, her small arms round the deer's neck. "One who does not kidnap unwilling girls!"

Alam Khan shook off Shireen's restraining arm and began to stride up and down the great chamber, gnawing his knuckles. One of his fits of temper was coming upon him.

"I said thou wert free to come and go," he roared, kicking viciously at a pair of tame pigeons which fluttered away from him with a whispering of clipped wings. "That permission I revoke! Until I have married thee, thou *art* a prisoner—unless thou wilt do the thing I shall bid thee!"

"What thing?" demanded Diana, who in some queer way felt a mastery of the situation coming to her.

"Get from the Sahib who made up this book of strange words, their meaning!"

"I will try; but our Sahibs are bad at revealing secrets."

"Then thou shalt be chained to a wall and whipped until thou dost; and I will tell those dogs who bark in Simla, that I have done it to thee, thou slut!" he vociferated. There were specks of foam on the black beard, and his great hands twisted to shapelessness a heavy silver Byzantine dish he had snatched up from a table, as if it had been made of putty.

"My father shall exact a bitter payment for the shame thy words have put upon me!" flamed Diana.

Alam Khan's laughter pealed to the domed roof.

"Thy father! Thy dog of a father is dead!"

Quietly Diana patted the arm Shireen had slipped about her. Pale to the lips, she looked up at him. This devil was no doubt lying again—just as he had done when he had said her father was his prisoner. She would test him.

"Do you *swear* that you have killed him?" she questioned, her eyes challenging his.

"I said not that I *killed* him: I said that he was dead!" retorted The Cobra with fiendish satisfaction at seeing her defiant pride broken at last.

"If it be as you say, that my father is dead," said Diana, now convinced that it was a lie, "there are those who will avenge him! Those whom I love, and who love me!"

It was strange, but the words she wanted to use to express her utter hatred and loathing of him, she could not speak. Her thoughts were stillborn.

"He whom thou lovest, is the lover of another woman!" snarled Alam Khan.

"Thou art a lying dog!" cried Diana, her cheeks aflame.

"Thou shalt see for thyself—*wife-to-be!*"

Then, wrenching his great body round, he faced Shireen.

"I said I would marry her to-morrow. It is changed. I wed her to-night!"

---

---

## CHAPTER XVII

### ORDEAL BY FIRE

**D**ESPITE THE FILTH OF HIS CELL and the discomfort of his chains, Colin Gray slept soundly. Despite his great physical strength he was tired out. The Sahibs of the North-West are used to taking their rest where they find it; and as one who had spent fifteen years of his life among Hillmen, he knew the Frontier saying that "An enemy who has slept, is two enemies."

He was awakened by the rattling of chains and the harsh grinding of rusty bolts in their sockets. Standing at the open door of his cell were the dumb jailer and the same pair of stalwart guards.

"The Khan has sent for thee, *Kafir!*" said the more insolent of the two men sullenly. "Hurry! He likes not to be kept waiting!"

Gray rose to his feet unhurriedly. Orientals are quick to draw inferences.

"Tell that Tongueless One to bring new straw for me to lie upon!" he said sternly. "Sahibs are not used to living in hog-pens, as ye are!"

The soldier pushed forward the muzzle of his rifle until it was a few inches from Gray's broad chest.

"Take care, prisoner, lest thy tongue be too strong and push the trigger of my rifle! Walk in front of us!"

Instead of turning to the left, and so passing by the cell of the blind prisoner, the party continued down the passage and turned sharply to the right.

Mounting a few steps, the jailer pushed open a low door, and stooping to avoid the top of the archway, Gray entered a long room with a low-groined roof.

Judging from the ancient instruments of torture hanging here and there on its grey walls, it seemed to be the old torture chamber of Prester John's stronghold. In the dark shadows at the far end of it, glowed a charcoal brazier beside which were standing four men, stripped to the waist.

Gray smiled to himself. This ultra-medieval setting of the stage for his trial, had for him a grimly humorous side.

But near the four men sat Alam Khan—colossal even when seated—holding his great sword naked between his knees.

The Englishman's eyes met his as steel meets steel.

"May you never be tired!" said Gray, purposely giving the customary Frontier greeting an ironical ring.

The Cobra leaned forward and spat at Gray's feet.

"Thou dog! It is not *I* who am like to be tired—as thou wilt soon see! Unless thy tongue speaks reason, *they* shall make you tired!" He indicated the torturers with a sideways jerk of his sword-hilt. "But if you speak reason . . ." A savage smile distended his nostrils, and he shrugged gigantic shoulders.

Gray's chains clinked a little as he joined his hands behind his back.

Standing there, he was a head taller than any of The Cobra's men, and they were big men. True to his nickname of "Zero," he eyed Alam Khan coolly, and decided to go straight for his objective—information about Diana. There should be none of the word-fencing, so dear to the Oriental heart.

"I will gladly speak, if what you ask may be told," he said quietly. "What have you done with Lindsay Miss-Sahib?"

"We will speak of her later," answered Alam Khan cunningly. He had realized that this was a man whom even he could not frighten. "Why should we not be friends, Gray Sahib? My heart wishes it . . . Those chains—which I knew not of—if you act wisely, shall be struck from you. And there shall not be a torturing—if you speak as I shall ask you. What is to happen to you is in Your Honour's hands, you see! *Where is the book?*"

"I do not know," replied Gray tersely. "Answer my ques-

tion: where is Miss Lindsay?" The mystery of the cipher's disappearance from the belt around his waist while he slept that night in the Labak Residency, still baffled Gray.

"But that which was in the book is in *here!*" pursued The Cobra, ignoring the question and tapping his forehead significantly.

"What lies in a tomb, is dead!" riposted Gray. He was waiting for Alam Khan's pretence of friendship to break down; and it almost immediately did.

"The four who stand behind you can open such tombs! And they work slowly—and dig deep!" returned Alam Khan, licking lips that looked as if they were wet with blood.

"They will find nothing for their digging," answered Gray defiantly, and again repeated his question.

"Where is Miss Lindsay?"

And once again his question was ignored.

This Englishman did not puzzle Alam Khan. He was merely typical of a race of which he knew little beyond the fact that they liked to weary themselves chasing a ball; hated lying; and fought like demons.

"Bind him!"

Gray smiled contemptuously as he heard the order: he had expected them to try and frighten him. Doubtless this was part of their game. They were unlikely to do him any serious harm, he felt, while any hope remained that they could get the cipher out of him by any other means.

In a way he was right; but the prospect of torturing a man as big as Gray had roused a mad sadistic joy in The Cobra, who was turning over in his mind the best way to use Diana Lindsay as a bait for trapping this obstinate English fool. He intended to try the tortures that leave no mark . . .

Then ensued for Colin Gray a quarter of an hour of Hell . . .

Cold water being dashed into his face brought him to his senses.

The feeling uppermost in his mind as he looked dazedly around him, was an agonized anxiety lest he should have re-

vealed anything in the delirium of pain through which he had just passed. But Alam Khan's next words reassured him.

"Like all the men and women of your race, you are stubborn, Gray Sahib! Were it not that the Wearer of the Veil has ordered that you be kept for *him* to question, I would *still* make you speak!"

Gray wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

"Is it a man's game to torture another to make him speak that which loyalty to his country forbids him to utter?"

"Loyalty!" spat The Cobra. "Like the people of India, Gray Sahib, you are a dupe! We of the Border know well what loyalty and honour are—and how to reward them! The *Sirkar* promises—but it cares not how many die because its promises are not kept!"

"It is new to me," returned Gray fiercely, "that the honour of Border chiefs allows them to murder old women, and insult their religion by carrying off the daughter of a man who was their friend!"

Alam Khan laughed.

"So you *know* the Miss-Sahib who is the daughter of that old fool who was Resident in Labak! Perhaps I carried her off because I love her! . . . White women are sometimes pleasing!"

Gray's heart started to thump. His desire to strangle this lustful giant was shaking the very foundations of his self-control; but outwardly he remained the imperturbable "Zero" Gray.

"Yes, I know her," he answered with well-assumed nonchalance.

The tawny eyes glittered.

"Do *you* love her? Answer me that, Sahib!"

Keeping a strong hold on himself, Gray studied the face of his tormentor. What lay behind the question? He knew the subtlety of the mind he had to deal with . . . Supposing he were to admit that he loved Diana, she would probably never know it; and the speaking of those words—to him, the most sacred words he could speak about her—would make dying

easier, his own death being now almost a certainty. He knew The Cobra's merciless hatred of the English, and had little hope of escaping from his clutches.

"Yes, I love her," he answered simply.

And rising to his feet, he stretched his great limbs as one who is refreshed.

Alam Khan, to whom Khoon the dwarf had reported this talk with Gray after the episode of the camel-man, sneered evilly.

"It sometimes takes a woman to make a man talk!" he said. "This time you speak the truth—for a changel!" he added ironically, nodding his great head. "Does the Miss-Sahib love *you*?"

"I cannot tell. She barely knows me."

"Then you can barely know her!" said Alam Khan craftily. "And still you love her! If I were to tell you that she *does* love you—what then?"

"I would say it was a lie," answered the Englishman gravely.

The Cobra evaded the challenge.

"Listen, Gray Sahib! I will give you a day—two days. You shall be lodged as becomes a Sahib who is my guest. If at the end of that time you speak not, then far more than has been done to you, shall be done to *her*—and in your presence!"

Gray would have replied, but The Cobra silenced him angrily.

"Take him away!" he ordered.

And stooping his huge bulk in order to pass through the doorway, he was gone.



---

---

## CHAPTER XVIII

### DELILAH

THE COBRA NOW KNEW THAT Gray loved Diana. What he had still to find out, was how much Diana Lindsay loved this detested Sahib. Her eyes had said "much." Well, she must be put to the acid test of jealousy. He counted on her pride of race resenting with fierce intensity, an insult to her love. If he were right, then he knew of a way that should make her play into his hands.

Immediately on reaching his audience-chamber he sent for Jaffir the eunuch.

"The chains of the *Inglis Kafir* are to be struck off," he said. "Lodge him in the room that hath the 'eye' in its wall. See that he be bathed and attended to by the barbers and masseurs. Let him be richly robed and well fed. After he has eaten and rested, set in attendance upon him the Greek girl—she whom I bought from the slave-merchant whom I slew for cheating . . . Stand not gaping at me, but do it!"

"It shall be done, King of the World!" exclaimed the eunuch, rolling piglike eyes in astonishment. "But (may I be forgiven!) to bestow a pearl of such flawless beauty on that accursed Unbeliever! Truly, the sublime Presence is more generous than Hassan, the son of Ali!—on whom be prayer and peace!"

"Perhaps my 'generosity,' as thou callest it, will cause that same accursed unbeliever to draw a knife across his own throat!" retorted Alam Khan savagely. "The Greek girl to be ordered to make him forget all other women! Dost thou understand?"

"I join my hands before my forehead!" answered Jaffir

humbly. "Have I not, myself, trained this Greek woman to be a veritable Moon of Accomplishment? There is none like her—save, of course, the peerless lady Shireen! None! Her body is a whispered prayer to Folly! Her eyes would make any man—save thee, Mighty One!—forget Heaven! Perfumed with the essence of narcissus and musk, and with her lips stained with scarlet sugar, the *Kafir* will surely fall into the net of her cheating—or I know not women!" He smirked, squeezing damp hands together.

"There is yet another thing thou shalt do!" hissed The Cobra. "See that his sherbet be sweetened with the drug that takes movement from body and tongue, but leaves the mind clear. Thou knowest which? Then go! Ten minutes after thou seest me leave the wedding feast, strike upon a gong, that the girl may know it is time to cast that 'net' thou speakest of so confidently!"

. . . . .

All Gray's efforts to get into communication with the blind prisoner had failed. After his jailer and the escort had gone, he tried shouting to him in English; but there was no answer. Nor was there any response when he called 'Galbraith!' with all the force of his lungs as the jailer opened the wooden shutters outside the barred windows of his cell to pour water from a *mussack* [skin water-bag] into the chipped earthen jar Gray held up for it.

Some hours later, he thought he heard the blind man crying out; but the sound became merged with the laughter of the hyenas and the noises of other wild beasts, all of which were almost certainly better cared for than The Cobra's human prisoners.

On the heap of filthy straw which served him as a bed, his manacled hands clasping his knees, Colin Gray sat staring into the inky darkness, wondering how it would all end. He thought of the horrors that Galbraith must have endured before he became what he now was: torture, certainly; and after it, probably nameless mutilation, followed by the blinding . . . Poor old 'Gigs'! He was the best Rugger forward Sand-

hurst had ever had . . . Gray remembered well how he had laughed at the genial Scotsman's negro-patter songs when he sang them at the concerts they used to get up.

Suddenly he lifted his head—listening.

Down the stone-flagged passage were coming nailed sandals. Three men, he judged.

This time, he was going to know where they were taking him, before he would consent to move a step. If he were shot for it, at least he'd be spared what poor Galbraith had been through. He'd question them; and if he gathered they had come to take him to be tortured, then he'd put up the fight of his life. One or more of them should die with him—that he was determined on.

Groping for a metal dish which he had found in a corner of the cell and the edge of which he had started to rub to sharpness on the stone floor, he took up his stand near the door.

The light of the torch—this time borne by the deformed assistant-jailer—dazzled him, and it was some moments before he could see that the two guards who accompanied the assistant-keeper of The Beasts, were leaning against the opposite wall of the corridor, their rifle-butts resting upon the flags. Evidently something to his advantage must have happened in the world outside, for their attitude betokened a peaceful mission—the carrying of a rifle being as usual for a Hillman as the wearing of a hat is to a man of the West.

But there was something strange about the look in the torchbearer's twisted face—a strangeness which was not caused by the distorted angle of the cruelly smashed jawbone or those livid scars.

It was the intentness of the man's gaze.

Slowly the jailer's eyes dropped to an orange he was holding.

"You are to be freed, Sahib!" he said. "I give you congratulations—and this . . . *It will refresh you!*"

As the man handed him the orange, the juice of it wetted the Englishman's fingers, and he knew it had been cut.

"Eat it—slowly!" went on the Keeper of the Beasts' assistant. "It is not good to eat some fruits quickly!"

Gray stretched himself. Wise in the ways of the East, he knew better than to show, too soon, that he had understood. Nor did he ask any questions. Maybe the orange contained a key or a phial of poison. It certainly contained something which no one but himself was intended to know about.

"I thought you had brought me water," he said nonchalantly, throwing the dish with the sharpened edge carelessly on to the heap of straw. It might still be useful: the moods of men like Alam Khan change quickly; he might once more find himself a prisoner there. Then:

"I know not where I go, but if you will come to me—wherever it is—I will give you payment!"

The cripple nodded. He had understood.

"Give the reward to my mother when you see her," he said meaningly. "It will mean more to her."

And turning, he led the way to the upper air.

Accompanied by the escort, Gray was conducted to the great door of the palace where, in the centre of the many-pillared hall, stood a corpulent, turbaned man dressed in a long gown of some flowered white material, his pudgy hands folded across his paunch. He was apparently awaiting Gray's arrival. Respectfully he saluted the ex-prisoner, scrutinizing him with small, quick eyes set in cushions of pale fat.

"Of your kindness, Illustrious One, be pleased to follow this worthless slave!" he said obsequiously.

Traversing the immense vestibule, with its high dome filled with panes of ruby-coloured glass, many of which were broken, they turned down a wide corridor. The walls and roof bore numerous traces of century-old frescoes and paintings.

Before a door, in front of which stood a gigantic Nubian sentry holding a naked scimitar, Jaffir halted and indicated to Gray that he was to enter.

The eunuch, watching the Englishman's every move, noticed the surprised glance Gray gave at the huge, curved blade of the weapon the Nubian was holding.

"He can strike off a man's head as easily as a cook strikes off the head of a chicken! It is pleasing to watch him!" he commented unctuously, licking moist lips.

The corners of Gray's eyes puckered. He disliked this oily cicerone.

"I have a servant," he said, "who can behead a bullock with a knife not a quarter the size of that thing; and at a single stroke!" He was thinking of Limbu, the little Gurkha and his *kukri*.

Jaffir's fat shoulders shook with silent laughter.

"This man too can do it—and with his left hand—and blindfold!" he said. "Be pleased to enter!"

They were now in a set of apartments the gorgeousness of which Gray had never suspected to be possible in this tumble-down pile of domes and minarets. Evidently the palace or castle had been built in the time of the Crusades—a period when Moorish art influenced the architects of the world.

"My lord will be pleased to unrobe," directed Jaffir. "The Khan Sahib has ordered that everything you wish shall be given to you!"

And bowing profoundly, the eunuch left him.

Immediately he found himself alone Gray tore open the orange and took out the folded paper, with difficulty deciphering the writing on the juice-sodden paper:

*This is from Diana Lindsay, daughter of the English resident in Labak. I am in grave danger. Is a rescue force on its way? Who are you?*

D. L.

For a moment the thought of Diana's nearness held him spellbound. Then came reaction. The thought of the host of formidable difficulties that stood between his getting to her, made him clench his hands until their sinews cracked. *Somehow* he must get an answer to her . . . *Somehow* he must help her!

But how?

The sound of Jaffir's slippers on the marble pavement as

he came to lead him ceremoniously to the bath, caused him hastily to swallow the paper.

The eunuch's satellites worked swiftly and well. Even Jaffir the obese was moved to add his admiration to the compliments of masseurs, tailors and barbers on the transformation they had effected in Gray's appearance.

"It wants but a *peri* [fairy] to complete the miracle!" he exclaimed rapturously. "And one shall come! Let there be music!" he called. "Bring food for this prince among Sahibs!" Then addressing Gray he continued: "Let the Presence seat himself and eat—if he be hungry!" He had divined that this huge Englishman disliked him, and there was a shadow of a sneer on his soggy face as he spoke the last word.

Gray ignored the remark.

"If the fare prepared for me be as good as my hunger is great, then it will indeed be fit for a *peri*!" he smiled. He must win over this man.

"A *peri* more beautiful than she who loved Majnoon [the Romeo of Indian romance] shall share it with you, O Magnanimous and Mighty One!" answered Jaffir suavely.

He struck his hands together.

"Behold her!"

Gray raised his eyes. Towards him was coming one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen; and if the admiration he felt had been lacking, the detailed catalogue of her attractions furnished by the eunuch, would most certainly have aroused it.

"Look, O Presence, at those ivory flanks!" he murmured unctuously. "Would they not seduce a king? See how she walks! . . . Nay, she floats, as upon air! Oh, the bliss of dreaming upon those firm breasts, that are like pomegranates of Paradise with silken rinds!" . . .

A profusion of richly spiced dishes; of quails boiled in goats' milk and stuffed with raisins; savoury morsels of lambs' flesh cooked on silver skewers; fragrant mangoes, the flesh of which melted like butter in his mouth, these things and many more, soon appeased Gray's ravenous hunger.

"My lord finds his slave pleasing?" said the Greek girl

softly. Her voice was extraordinarily like Diana's, Gray noticed.

She sank on to her knees before him as he reclined on a large black divan littered with orange and crimson silk cushions. The attendants had withdrawn, and she and Gray were alone.

"You are indeed beautiful!" he answered. "What is your name?"

"Call me only 'She Who Loves,'" answered the girl, sighing. Her eyes, as she looked at him, were half closed. "I love thee, thou mighty man!" She passed a caressing hand over Gray's arm, her eyes widening with astonishment as she felt the swelling muscles beneath the silk.

"You do not know me," he answered, laughing. "How can you love one you have never seen before?" He was thinking hard, but he did not want her to know it . . . How could he answer Diana Lindsay's letter?

"To see you is to love you, my lord," went on the Greek. "You are as the crescent moon when it cuts the night! All the world looks at you, whenever you come before them. Will you not love me, O Moon of my Soul?"

Reaching out, Gray caressed her black hair.

"Dance for me, 'She Who Loves!'" he said kindly. "But first, give me to drink; for the dishes I have eaten, have made me thirsty!"

The girl rose, and taking a flagon of sherbet from out a wooden bucket filled with snow, filled a gold chalice almost to the brim, and brought it to him.

A thought crossed Gray's mind as he emptied it at a single draught. Once before, in this chain of strange happenings, he had been drugged. Was it to happen again to-night?

Dismissing the thought, he raised himself on an elbow.

"Now dance for me, 'She Who Loves,'" he said, taking the amber mouthpiece of a hookah from her hand. He wanted time to think—to think out the reason for this sudden change in his circumstances.

Sweet low music stole through the incense-laden air.

Raising her arms above her head, the girl moved slowly

away from him like a flower swayed by the wind. Gradually the music quickened . . . A far-away soft throbbing of drums was beating . . . or was it his pulses? He neither knew nor cared. He only wanted to see this beautiful woman dance!

Longing—the joy of living—the seduction of it—the half cherishing, half submissive gathering of the beloved to his breast by the lover—the mad ecstasy of love returned—this girl danced them all—her eyes lit with the desire that made her lithe beauty burn before him like the veritable flame of passion that it was.

Then, somewhere a gong sounded.

The dance ended. With an indescribable gracefulness she subsided on to the cushions beside him, making little nestling movements, like a bird settling down beside its mate.

“Love me, O Tree of my Desire!” she murmured, slipping a cool arm round his neck and stroking his face gently with her other hand.

For a moment he abandoned himself to the sensuousness of it all. Was it the dreamy languor that was stealing over him, or was it the smooth warm body of this dancing girl, that was thrilling him to an almost eager forgetfulness of reality? . . . Was it all a dream? Was everything that had so far happened, a dream?

The beautiful Greek stretched her long slimness beside him, the little golden bells on her wrists and ankles tinkling musically as she laid a flushed cheek to his. In vain he tried to lift himself, that he might push her from him. His limbs were powerless. His mind seemed to inhabit a dead body. He could think clearly; but that was all.

Again and again she kissed him, his arms lying passively about her neck just as she had placed them.

Yet through it all he knew, with a strangely vivid certainty, two things; that the *Sadhu* was fighting some evil power on his behalf, and that Diana Lindsay was looking down at him.

Both these things were, in fact, at that moment happening.



---

---

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE COBRA'S WEDDING FEAST

**E**VEN SHIREEN'S INGENIOUS mind could see no way out of the tangle caused by Alam Khan's sudden decision to wed Diana that same night.

But a single ray of hope shone in the deep gloom which had fallen upon her—so slender and so flickering that the merest breath of chance might extinguish its heartening light: both she and Diana Lindsay knew that Colin Gray had received the English girl's letter.

By a clever ruse, the herb-woman had caused herself to be arrested, in order to be able to hand it to her son, whom The Cobra, when he made him assistant to the Keeper of the Beasts, had condemned never to leave the subterranean passages of the palace. Forthwith released by Shireen's orders, the old woman had repeated to her mistress the cripple's account of his handing over to Gray of the orange. So much, then, was certain. But to what extent, or how, all this was going to help them, neither girl could at present see. Still, the facts, plus Diana's unshakable faith in Gray's resourcefulness, kept hope alive in their hearts. Should his resourcefulness fail, it would mean Diana's death; she would be forced to take the poison Shireen had given her. If only the searching aeroplanes, which they had once or twice heard, would fly low enough to pierce the almost continual mists!

"When I first met you, Shireen," Diana said to her sadly, "I thought you were heartless and cruel. Now I know that you are not only a brave and true friend, but that you have also risked your life for me! God will bless you for it!"

The Persian girl looked at her earnestly; and for the first

time in her young life there were tears of pity in her eyes.

"You are far braver than I, Deenal" she returned. "I have but reflected your courage—even as that fountain reflects the moon and stars!"

Evening had fallen. From the Great Hall of the Palace of the Mirror rose up the sound of music and the roar of voices. The guests were gathering for the wedding feast. . . In a few minutes Diana and she would be down there.

And in a few hours . . . ?

Suddenly, in Jaffir's shrill tones, came the summons to descend.

Alam Khan was determined that his wedding feast should be worthy of his dual and carefully fostered reputation among the hill peoples, of being the richest and most powerful chieftain India had ever known. In other words, he had set himself out to dazzle the imagination of the tribesmen and the Khoon's followers.

Meat, flour and oil were being distributed in the market-place to all who asked for them, and without limit. Even the outposts picketing the hills were not forgotten. Inside the palace, a perspiring and semi-distracted Jaffir was everywhere: now directing a small army of cooks; now superintending the laying of the several hundred dishes of food on long narrow carpets woven in Penjdeh and Khorassan, which served as both tables and tablecloths; now bidding the gardeners strew more flowers. Outside, men were placing small coloured lamps in the trees; before the doors leading into the Courtyard of Fountains were standing Alam Khan's elephants, their foreheads painted with fantastic designs in red and white ochre. Caparisoned with hangings of crimson and green velvet stiff with gold embroidery, save for the occasional flapping of their enormous ears the great beasts might have been made of grey stone. Finally, three bands of musicians and singers were striving to outdo each other—two in the Great Hall, and one in the "Paradise of Palms," that secret centre of the palace gardens to which only Alam Khan and his women had access.

"Be quick, shameless ones!" piped the eunuch. "If the rice

be not boiled in time, there shall be a Beating! Bring more snow, ye sons of idleness! And light the ninety-nine silver lamps about the wedding awning! Is it not known to you, O ye blind children of Satan, that there must be one lamp for each of the ninety-nine names of Allah? How many times must I say so? Set the *juhaz* [the nuptial ship] afloat upon the lake that the Khan Sahib—that Eye of the Universe!—may look upon its illuminations and be pleased with you!”

He was referring to the rough representation of a ship made of the upcurved branch of a tamarind tree, and bearing little oil lamps, which the rich, in Yanistan, set afloat on a wedding night as an emblem of the two parties' voyage through life.

At last all was ready.

Under the red-and-gold *pandal* in a deep domed bay at one end of the great hall (which was an almost exact replica of the Church of St. Sophia, Constantinople) stood the gigantic bearded figure of The Cobra, a hand ever on the hilt of his great sword. About him were grouped his *sirdars* [officers].

Bristling with weapons, although in festal attire, their savage appearance was in strange contrast to the austere magnificence of the setting—the great central dome, with its fifty rounded-arched windows fitted with panes of ruby glass, many of them broken and open to the night, and the softly lustrous remains of the Venetian mosaics encrusting the walls. Standing in serried lines down each side of the five long carpets—now covered with heaped-up dishes—were five hundred specially favoured, armed retainers, waiting in noisy impatience for the signal to start the feast. Up and down the aislelike side corridors, divided from the main hall by long rows of pillars, came and went a throng of busy servants.

The babel of talk was deafening. If a man did not hear his neighbour or if he whom he was addressing was distant, he shouted. The music and singing could barely be heard above the roar of conversation.

Standing beside Alam Khan, and grotesquely small compared to him, was the wizened and shrunken figure of his mother—an ancient little wisp of a thing dressed in a *sari* of dark-blue silk. Dominated by a nose like a macaw's beak, her lined and creased face resembled a withered russet apple. But her fierce bright eyes were the eyes of her son; and in his features were reflected hers.

She was not going to stay for the feast. She was only come to salute, perfunctorily, this red-headed woman of the Unbelievers whom her sole remaining son was about to espouse . . . Of his five brothers, three had been killed in Border raids and two had been murdered . . . That done, she would go to her simply furnished quarters under one of the many cupolas of the palace and read the Koran aloud, dreaming, between whiles, of fresh worlds for him to conquer. So far, none of his women had borne him a son . . . and the *Sahib-lōg* were a race of good fighters . . .

Suddenly the air was rent by the shrill sound of a bugle.

Diana Lindsay, only daughter of Sir John Lindsay, *late* Resident at the Court of the Mir of Yanistan, was coming to meet her husband-to-be, Alam Khan—alias The Cobra, Border outlaw, thief, and murderer.

A long "*Wah!*" of astonishment and admiration rolled like thunder round the immense dome as she appeared—a slim figure in shimmering green, but with breeding in every line of her. The pride of race and her grace dimmed the fires of that load of gems to mere glowing nothingness. And these savage men sensed it.

"*Us salaam aleikoom!*" ["Peace be with you!" is the Mohammedan salutation; to which the response is: "And to you, peace!"] Five hundred deep voices roared out the customary welcome as she walked towards Alam Khan, her chin high.

"*Aliekoom us salaam!*" answered Diana's deep contralto in the tense silence which followed the greeting of the assembled Hillmen. Come what might, these representatives

of disorder, murder and rapine should see that an English girl's courage was greater than theirs.

Beckoning an attendant, Alam Khan held two enormous hands over a basin of chased gold into which the chief of his *sirdars* poured rose-water from a golden ewer.

The same service was then rendered to Diana.

Then The Cobra raised an arm, and an intense silence fell.

Here and there a man coughed, and was nudged savagely by his neighbour.

As Diana glanced over that sea of keen, dark faces, she knew that every man standing there probably had at least one murder to his name. For such as they, life is as much to be taken as to be lived.

Slowly The Cobra looked about him, fingering his great beard, the flashing rubies on his brown fingers looking like fires in a dark forest.

Then he boomed out a single word.

"*Bismillah!*" ["In the name of God."]

"*Bismillah!*" roared back the five hundred.

Like straight rollers breaking upon shores of coloured sand, the long lines of turbaned heads broke irregularly as the men seated themselves.

The feast had started.

"Give me of those fat quails, O Brother!" nudged a stalwart Hillman.

Not being heard, he reached for a handful, the mutton fat in which they had been cooked, trickling down his hairy wrist.

"May the crows peck out thine eyes!" grumbled the unhearing one; and started to make a fresh ball of rice and minced flesh with his fingers to replace that which had been knocked from his hand.

"One who comes from the killing of his enemy," retorted the quail-eater indistinctly, "has no need to be as sour as an unripe lime!"

His neighbour turned fierce eyes on him.

"My enemy is dead: it is a true word!" he snarled. "But I would he were *married!*"

The men on either side laughed. His wife was well known as a shrew.

"Were he married to *her*," said the first speaker, indicating Diana with a sideways jerk of his head, "it would be no punishment!" He pushed an over-full cheek with an adjusting forefinger.

"She is an unbeliever! . . . Ayzeed—he who poisoned Azoom—should give her to drink! I like women whose hair is as the soot under a cooking-pot! *She* is red!"

"By the four deputies of Satan," grunted his neighbour, spitting out a mouthful of scrunched quail-bones, "thou art wise to dislike what thou canst not have! She is a *houri* [nymph of Mohammedan Paradise] this Miss-Sahib! Our Khan chooses his women well!"

"So Khoon the accursed dwarf—son of Satan that he is!—seems to think! See!" growled the eater of rice-balls, pointing a greasy forefinger in the direction of the *pandal* near which sat the Mongol in robes of orange-coloured silk staring fixedly at Diana Lindsay.

The other man glanced at the dwarf, and then quickly turned his gaze to a dish in which pieces of boiled mutton were swimming in a thick yellow turmeric sauce.

"Who could eat *that* after looking at *him*?" he glowered.

"They say he expects us to give him the *koornish*" [the third in degree of respectfulness of the Seven Salaams] growled another.

"What Hillman ever bent his body to a Tartar?" snarled a lean man from Waziristan, who was sitting opposite them. "It were better if he demanded the *Gullaymilna* [the Embrace of Friendship], for then one's knife might stick into his belly by mistake!"

"He stuck a knife into his own guts when he beat the Galcha of the Pamirs—him who was his spy!" belched a one-eyed Yanistani, his beard full of saffron-coloured rice grains sticky with butter. "That dog's son has sworn to make him eat dirt for it!"

There was a sudden commotion among the guards and retainers clustered about the entrance to the Banqueting Hall.

Alam Khan hitched forward the hilt of his scimitar, glaring angrily at the newcomer across five hundred turbaned heads. Who had dared to disturb the peace of his wedding feast?

Men ceased eating and looked around them. The roar of conversation lessened; dwindled to detached whispers—died away. Swords were silently loosened in their scabbards and stabbing-knives glittered among the gold dishes—ready.

A messenger, his garments dark with sweat and dust, was picking his way between the serried rows of guests, carrying a letter in his hand.

Alam Khan opened the despatch angrily.

*In the Name of God, Salutations and Greetings!  
To our friend Alam Khan:*

*See that mailmasti [the frontier rights of hospitality] be not broken towards the English girl. On your life be it. There is danger. I come.*

*Him of the Veil.*

---

---

## CHAPTER XX

### THE THIRD EYE

FORTUNATELY, DIANA WAS NOT expected to talk during the wedding feast. Save for an occasional "Your Honour is kind," addressed to some person who had pushed a dish of food or fruit towards her, she was able to sit in thrice-blessed silence.

Raising her eyes, she scanned the upper galleries. Behind a curtain of double black muslin hung across the space between two pillars of the right-hand gallery she thought she could discern Gulbudun and Shireen sitting side by side among The Cobra's women.

Soon the roar of the men's voices had sunk to a deep bass murmur, broken only by customary sounds indicative of repletion, most of them purposely exaggerated in order to increase the compliment their sound was intended to convey to the giver of the feast.

When Alam Khan had read the despatch brought by the messenger, he at once thrust it into a brazier and watched it burn to ashes.

"Him of the Veil is coming," he had muttered. That was all.

But within a few minutes every Hillman present knew the tidings; and a quarter of an hour later the market-place was whispering the news.

Meanwhile, her eyes betraying nothing of the fear that was torturing her, Diana sat upon her piled cushions, now and then taking food, knowing that if her strength failed her she would be in evil case. But, with the lighting of the *kalyans*, or hubble-bubble pipes, the hall filled with the acrid



fumes of the pungent tobacco which hung in the heavy air in flat blue layers, and she could no longer eat.

At last Alam Khan rose.

"Come!" he said, taking her hand. And with a guttural salutation to his *sirdars*, led her from the hall.

Her last impression of that nightmare ordeal was the look in the Mongol's small eyes—a hateful mixture of lust and cunning triumph.

At the foot of a spiral staircase, Alam Khan halted.

"Go up!" he commanded.

As she climbed it seemed to her as if the ceaseless twisting and turning of those steps—like the tightening of The Cobra's coils about her life—would never end.

At last they reached a narrow archway, so narrow that Alam Khan was forced to pass through it with his massive shoulders at an angle of forty-five degrees to its sides.

They were now in a small cell-like chamber where a smoky oil lamp flickered in a niche.

Crossing to the further wall, The Cobra pressed a thumb on a concealed spring, and a deep piece of masonry, some eighteen inches square, swung outwards as the door of an iron safe swings open—slowly.

Bent almost double, he remained gazing into the blank space behind it until somewhere a gong sounded.

Straightening himself, he turned quickly.

"Look! See, now, that which thou wouldst not believe!"

Diana approached the opening.

Visible through the aperture at the far end of a long shaft sloping through the masonry, was the centre of another room. In a medieval French château she had once seen a similar "eye," through which, in ancient times, an observer used to spy on the guests at a banquet.

Stifling an overwhelming sense of foreboding, she forced herself to watch what was going on below her.

On a large divan heaped with silken cushions two lovers were reclining in amorous abandonment. She could hear the madly passionate words of the girl as she twined her bare white arms about the man.

Then it was that the feeling of foreboding turned to agonized apprehension. Surely there was something familiar about that richly clad Oriental lying with his arms round his beautiful companion?

God! It was *Colin Gray*!

At the quick intake of her breath, Alam Khan came swiftly to her side.

"Was I not right?" he hissed in a triumphant whisper. "Wouldst thou see more? . . . Good!"

With a contemptuous gesture he swung the stone into place.

Wide-eyed, Diana gazed at him. Once again the overpowering hugeness of the man seemed to crush her. She felt she must get away from him, or faint.

"Have I your leave to go?" she asked, edging towards the door, a hand against the wall.

The Cobra's eyes gleamed.

"Thou dost not like to see the Sahib love the woman? . . . Why should he not love her? . . . He is wise! He knows he will never leave this place alive!"

"He is free to love whom he pleases! It means nothing to me," Diana answered disdainfully.

But her voice shook. The anchor-chain of her hopes had snapped.

"Thou talkest fool words! It may mean thy freedom," retorted Alam Khan, regarding her evilly. "Harken well to what I say." He gripped her arm. "If there be no willingness between a man and a woman, there can be no love. Between *them*—as thou seest—there is willingness. Between thee and me there is none! Therefore I will not marry thee as I said!"

"You—you will set me free?" questioned Diana incredulously.

The Cobra looked at her curiously.

"Yea, I will set thee free—if *thou wilt get from this Sahib the meaning of what is written in the secret book he has made!* If thou tellest him that thy life depends upon it, he will surely tell it to thee!"

"If he does . . . will you . . . let him, also, go free?" The beating of her heart was almost choking her.

Fingering his great beard, The Cobra pondered. Her quickened breathing, and the question, showed him that she loved this Sahib, whatever she might say to the contrary.

"Thou heardest my question!" he fenced, relying on the delay making her the more eager to fall in with his plans.

Into Diana's heart once again there crept the fighting spirit of her father. She was going to battle for the life of the man she loved. Something told her that what she had seen had been "staged" by The Cobra for his own vile purposes.

"I, too, asked a question, Khan! Answer it!"

Alam Khan looked at her with grudging admiration. Here was a woman after his own heart! No wonder the Sahib people bred good fighters!

"If he tells thee, I will free him also. I swear it!"

"Then I will ask him what you wish."

"It is not an 'asking' I speak of; but a 'getting'!" gritted The Cobra, his anger rising. He knew that if he did not obtain the secret cipher before the Veiled Man arrived, that dreaded being would certainly either extort it from Gray, or kill the Englishman for withholding it; and in neither case would *he* profit. Like Khoon the Mongol, The Cobra's objective—once he obtained the key to the Byzantine cipher—was to checkmate the Government of India by misleading it with forged messages in Gray's code, kill off his two rivals, and make himself Master of India.

"Art thou *sure* thou wilt get the book?" he demanded.

"How can I be sure of getting it, when I have not asked him?" riposted Diana impatiently. Slowly, but surely, she was getting towards her objective—an interview with Colin Gray.

"Thou shalt speak with him to-morrow. But when thou art with him, remember to speak in *my* tongue, that I may understand the words thou sayest! Also, thou wilt be seated with him on that divan on which thou sawest him with the

woman. Fail, or use the *Inglis* tongue in thy talk, and thou shalt see him made to speak—my way!”

“It is good,” said Diana unsteadily. She knew that Gray would refuse, and that he would be tortured. “Now may I go?”

“Thou hast leave.”

While these things were happening, the Galcha whom Khoon had thrashed, had made his way to the apartments of Shireen. It would be safer (he had reasoned it all out) to tell The Cobra’s favourite of the Mongol’s plot with the eunuch. To go direct to Alam Khan, would be dangerous. The Cobra would almost certainly be seized with one of his Berserker fits of rage, and slay him; whereas, if the Persian girl told him the news, it would not be a Galcha of the Pamirs who would be killed for the telling of it!

“One of the lord Khoon’s men—a Galcha—asks audience of you, lady,” announced the chief of Shireen’s women.

“I give audience to no man,” answered her mistress angrily. “Bid him go, or he shall be whipped for coming to the women’s quarters!”

The woman stood her ground.

“Your pardon, O Henna-tinted Nail of the Universe!” she stammered. “The man says the life of the Khan is in danger!”

“He has still a tongue! Let him go to my lord!”

“He fears the Khan’s anger,” pleaded the woman fearfully. Shireen rose. This slave should be taught a lesson.

“Fetch hither Jaffir the eunuch!” she commanded. “And bid him bring with him those who beat the feet of impertinent slaves!”

The woman grovelled with fear. Rather than face that torture, suspended by her feet from a bamboo pole, she preferred to risk her life in a last effort.

“He says that Jaffir the eunuch is going to slay the Khan!” she whispered hoarsely, fright and her tears choking her.

Shireen realized what the woman’s words meant, if they were true.

"If thou hast lied, thou hell-cat, there will be—not a beating of one, but a burying of two! Thou and the Galcha shall be tied back to back, and buried in the same grave, *alive!* Bring in this man!" . . .

"As Allah hears me, it is the truth!" asseverated the Galcha, after the frightened woman had left him alone with her mistress.

"Why dost thou betray Khoon, thy master? It is said he pays thee well."

"He beats me. We of the Pamirs take not beatings silently. Also I have a wife and a family of ten, and he has threatened to flay them."

"Then speak."

The man's revelation of Khoon's slow, remorseless building up of his treacherous plan—his subversive propaganda among The Cobra's men—the plot with Jaffir to ambush the Veiled Man and murder Alam Khan—the stealing of the palace treasure that was to come after it was done, horrified even the Persian by their nearness and grim reality.

"It is finished," said the Galcha. And forgetfully shrugging his swollen shoulders, winced with the pain.

For a while Shireen sat, chin in hand, staring at him stonily. She was fitting together the pieces of a puzzle—debating how best to use the dangerous information this man had imparted to her. Like her lord and master, the revelation of the Mongol's treachery had roused her anger to white heat. At first she had thought of having the Galcha slain, lest he should communicate his news to others, and so precipitate matters and give the plotters time to escape. But she dared not kill him: Alam Khan would need him as a witness.

Suddenly her eyes grew sombre and the black arches of her brows drew together.

The man sank on to his knees, expecting her to give an order for his execution. Instead, the favourite motioned him to rise.

"Thou hast done well," she said slowly, "and thou shalt be rewarded . . . But until I have told the Khan, guard this

secret as thy life! One word from thee, and thy tongue shall be torn out! Go!"

The curtains over the door had hardly ceased to move when Diana Lindsay's voice called to her faintly, and the English girl entered.

Deathly pale, she was standing in the painted Moorish archway that formed the entrance to Shireen's apartments.

"Allah!" exclaimed the Persian, going towards her, "you are whiter than snow! Are you ill, Deena? What has happened?"

"My heart and soul are sick," answered the English girl in the idiom. "I will tell you . . ." And she told Shireen what she had seen through the observation shaft.

Shireen's quick mind at once discerned the working of The Cobra's plan to let Diana see the dancing-girl with Gray; and having reassured her, she went on:

"If it be as I think, then the drug they gave your Sahib will leave him unharmed. After sleep, there will be no trace of it . . . Now you shall hear *my* news! It is good news," she continued reflectively, "for it brings us a useful ally." And she repeated what the Galcha had told her.

"Will you not tell the Khan to-night?" asked Diana, remembering Khoon's evilly intent stare during the feast in the Great Hall.

Devil as Alam Khan was to all the world save Shireen, Diana knew that his death at this crisis would be a fatal disaster. It would inevitably mean that those of The Cobra's women whom the Mongol did not keep for himself, after the murder of The Cobra, would be shared among his followers; and she shuddered at the vision the thought of that sharing conjured up.

"Nay!" said Shireen slowly. "I will not tell him to-night. I have a plan: I will threaten that fat pig Jaffir, saying that I hold information against him—of what kind he shall not know. If this sexless pig will help you and your Sahib to escape, I will give *him* time to escape also. If not—" A trill of laughter stirred the echoes.

"How can you laugh, Shireen?" queried Diana reprovingly.

"It is but the beginning of a long Laughing that will come to me when I see that accursed hog torn to pieces by wild bulls in the market-place!" answered Shireen fiercely. "Gulbudun will laugh with me—but louder! . . . Now go to sleep, Deena of the snow-white face! All will be well. You will see!" Gently she patted Diana's shoulder.

"Sleep near me, Shireen," begged Diana, whose overwrought nerves caused every slight sound to seem a menace.

"In a little while, when I return, I will sleep near you."

"Why must you leave me, Shireen?"

The Persian laid a cool finger on Diana's lips.

"Hush!" she whispered. "I must leave you because I go to see your Sahib!"

---

---

## CHAPTER XXI

### GRAY AND DIANA MEET

**D**AWN BROUGHT A SECOND DESPATCH from the Veiled Man, announcing that he would arrive in a few hours. The outposts on the two passes leading into the valley were, the letter went on to say, to be immediately doubled. It ended with a repetition of the statement contained in the first despatch, viz., that grave danger was impending.

Its receipt sent The Cobra into one of his mad frenzies.

When it was given to him, he was in his bed-chamber—to which the unfortunate courier was admitted that he might deliver the letter personally, according to his orders.

Alam Khan read it, strode up to the messenger and, with one backward sweep of his sword, sent the man's head rolling into a corner.

The fear that Diana Lindsay would fail to obtain the secret cipher from Gray then redoubled his fury. Even his personal attendants, chosen though they were for their callousness to danger, recoiled before him each time he drew near to them, pacing up and down and tearing at his great beard.

One by one they slipped away, until he was alone with Shiv the tigress and the dead body of the courier.

With a rumbling snarl the animal slowly approached the pool of blood, dragging after her a long yellow scarf belonging to Gulbudun, and which the tigress had been tearing to shreds.

Swiftly her infuriated master went over to her and, picking up the rope of fresh mogra flowers (which one of her attendants had brought according to custom, but, fearing lest The Cobra slay him too, had left lying on a ledge), Alam Khan



lashed the beast across her head and nose with the heavy coil of flowers, again and again, until the floor was littered with white petals. Then, bending down, he snatched from between Shiv's jaws the torn scarf of Gulbudun, and kicking the tigress savagely, chained her up.

"Jaffir, thou dog," he roared, "come hither!"

The pasty face of the eunuch appeared in the doorway.

"Did the Great One call?" The man was trembling in an ecstasy of fear.

"Thou wilt take the *Inglis* Miss to the Sahib!" snarled The Cobra. "At once! She has my orders. See that thou carriest out thine own!"

"The Presence wishes——?"

"That thou shalt listen to them while they talk—even as I will. If either of them speak in the accursed *Inglis* tongue, part them! . . . I go now to the chamber of the eye to watch their . . . love-making."

After conducting her to the apartment in which she was to have her interview with Colin Gray, the eunuch left her.

Entering, Diana's eyes fell upon the voluptuous-looking divan which occupied the middle of the room. Not even the thought of what she had come for could give her the strength to withdraw her fascinated gaze from it . . . Shamelessly gross and broad . . . From its centre a pitiless eye seemed to be regarding her with a sardonic, challenging regard—a regard, it seemed to her, of hard hatred and jealousy.

Drawing nearer, she saw a woman's gold bangle lying on one of the cushions, its polished surface touched to fire by a ray of the morning sun.

The room was empty.

"Major Gray!" she called.

There was no answer to the strangely small voice that must have been hers.

Again she called; and again there was no reply.

Passing under an archway which gave on to a balcony, she saw him lying asleep on a couch . . . Evidently they had not warned him of her coming. The drug, perhaps . . .

A feeling of mingled pity and gladness came to her at the

sight of those drawn features, in which kindliness and decision were so finely blended.

"Major Gray! It is I—Diana Lindsay!"

At the sound of her name he sat up, bewildered.

"Good lord! . . . Of course! . . . I *knew* you were here! . . . You all right? Have they hurt you? . . . They doped me last night. Second time, damn 'em! . . . Sorry! . . . I say, won't you sit down?"

"Are you ill?" she asked softly.

"I'm all right. Look here, we've got to get you out of this! Alam Khan—"

The mention of that dread name had brought remembrance of The Cobra's words: "Thou wilt speak in *my* tongue, that I may understand every word thou sayest."

"He—he's watching us. Listening!" she interrupted, whispering rapidly. "We've got to talk in there—and speak in Yanistani!"

Somewhere, the gong she had heard in the watching chamber sounded loudly.

"Please, *please* come!"

"All right! I'll play up," he whispered back, as they walked towards the big divan. "I saw his little lady last night—'Shir—' What's her name? . . . Shireen . . . She told me about the caravan. . . . Diana! Is it true that you care for me—dear?"

Her smile answered him.

With a quick movement he gathered her to him.

"You poor, beautiful, brave, fatherless thing!" he said tenderly.

. . . . .

Seated on the big divan, Diana Lindsay and Colin Gray began their acting of the tragi-comedy commanded by an unseen and implacable watcher, and on the playing of which their lives depended. Of the two, Diana was far more aware of the possible hideous ending it might have. Gray had only one thought: that she was near him again. That realization filled all the known world.

"Do you know why I have come?" she questioned, seeing his state of mind and giving him a lead.

"To see me, I suppose!" he answered, feigning surprise. (How beautiful she was!)

In spite of herself, her frightened eyes were wandering round the audience chamber looking for the opening of the observation shaft, from one end of which she knew The Cobra was watching them. But the high, carved cornice revealed no sign of it.

"I have come because . . . I want you . . . to give me . . . something," she said, pausing a little between each word. "To ask you to help me."

"I—give you something? What can I give you? I am a prisoner, like yourself!"

"Surely that is all the more reason you should help me, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to give me the book containing the secret cipher you made for the *Sirkar*."

He frowned at her in assumed displeasure.

"Going to try and buy your freedom with it?" (He'd get her out of this, or die!)

She nodded.

"You're asking a lot—I suppose you know that?" (As if she could ask too much of him!)

"I know," she said in tones of ice; but her eyes were studying his face tenderly.

"And if I refuse?" (She'd understand why he smiled as he said that, he felt.)

"You would not refuse the—the woman you were with last night!" (How she hated this apparent insult to his love for her!)

What might have been a sinister chuckle sounded far up in the dark shadows overhead.

"I might and I might not. That's my business," he retorted. ("I love you! I love you!" his eyes were saying.)

"I have asked you to do me this favour because you were

my—my father's friend." There was no make-believe in her emotion now. "Will you not grant it?"

"Why do you—an Englishwoman—ask me a thing like this?"

"Because it is of the utmost importance that I should have it," she answered. "You asked me just now whether I was going to buy my freedom with it. I am. It may even mean your life too!"

Leaning forward, Gray dropped his hands between his knees. His life? A few minutes before it had mattered little what happened to him, provided she was safe. Now the saving of her precious body from the torturers depended with a dreadful certainty upon his giving her this cipher. He wondered if she knew that. He hoped not.

"The Sirdar Alam Khan has already asked me for it. And I refused!" he said heavily.

"Perhaps his price was not sufficiently high?" she suggested, hating the very sound of the words.

"And *your* price?" (But his heart said: "Oh that she should be in this hell!")

"As I said, freedom for us both!"

". . . a caravan . . . the following night." Shireen's words were hammering at the gates of Gray's brain.

"What guarantee have you?" (Her father is dead; and she has no one!)

"The word of the Sirdar Alam Khan."

"Is it sure?" (Surely it isn't true she is going to leave me again?)

"He says so; you must believe him, as I do."

A small piece of mortar dropped upon the back of her hand. It had fallen from the roof. Involuntarily she looked up.

Almost invisible in the shadows was the outline of a deeper square of blackness. It was the "Eye"!

An icy fear gripped her heart, and she seemed to see the burning gaze of The Cobra fixed upon her.

"For God's sake accept the offer I make you!" she gasped, pale and shaken.

His genuine surprise at the tense earnestness in her voice was mingled with a feeling of relief. That she really wished him to reveal the Byzantine cipher made things easier.

"I accept the offer," he said gravely. "But the code must be written out. It is long and complicated. If I were to tell it to you, you could not remember it. I will ask that writing materials be given me . . . It shall be finished by to-morrow morning."

"Is that definitely your answer?"

"It is my answer. Alam Khan is too strong for me! I was foolish not to have realized it before. We are his prisoners; and since your freedom depends on his having this cipher, he shall have it!"

She questioned him with a look.

He nodded his head slowly.

"What must be, must be . . . It is *Kismet!*"

"God send that, before you finish writing it, the caravan will arrive!" she answered impulsively. Forgetting The Cobra's instructions, she had lapsed into English.

Barely had the words left her lips than the door opened and Jaffir the eunuch entered.

"It is the Khan's order that when you tired of speaking our language, you should leave the Sahib!" he said insolently. "Be pleased to come!"

Both she and Gray realized that this parting might well be their last. Eagerly she took the two hands he held out to her, and unresisting, went close to him and raised her face to be kissed.

"Whatever happens, Diana, thank God we know we love each other!" he said. And bending down, he kissed her long and tenderly.

As she reached the threshold she turned to say, "I love you."

But the tears choked her.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXII

### IN WHICH SHIREEN SCHEMES A SECOND TIME, AND THE VEILED MAN TALKS WITH SIMLA

WHEN JAFFIR THE EUNUCH came to conduct Diana to Colin Gray, the sun had only just risen. A faint twittering filled the trees in the palace gardens and a light breeze was stirring the cool air.

She had forborne to wake Shireen, who was in a deep sleep; but on her return she found the Persian eagerly awaiting her news.

"I do not wonder you look despondent, Shireen," Diana said, after she had recounted what had passed at the interview. "But I have faith in my Sahib's resourcefulness, which is as great as—oh, it would be impossible to measure it!"

"Love is Hope's eldest brother, Deena! I, too, hope because I love! Well indeed is it, however, that the Galcha told me of Jaffir's plotting with Khoon! For that sexless dog, who is a sworn enemy of the *Sahib-lōg*, suspects me!"

"Suspects you of what?" questioned Diana anxiously.

"Of helping you. Listen: I met him on my way to see your Sahib in his prison. It was late, and I read the suspicion in his eyes. . . . May that day soon come when I shall see him torn to pieces by those wild bulls in the market-place! It *will* come—for I pray for it, daily!"

"Did Colin—Major Gray—give you any message for me? Any news of a rescue force?" questioned Diana tensely, ignoring the mention of Jaffir and the plotters.

"You shall hear all, Deena! The eunuch said that my lord was in one of his great angers, and that he had sent him to fetch me. For once the fat hog spoke the truth. I found the

Khan shouting oaths of vengeance against Him of the Veil." Her eyes darkened. "I tried to stop him. Always there is danger in speaking against *him*; for he knows all that a man thinks, no matter where he be—when it is thought against *him* . . . But my words were as chaff blown by the wind."

"Was I the cause of his anger?" asked Diana, upon whom a fresh sense of foreboding was settling. She seemed to feel, physically, the toils of The Cobra tightening about her body.

"The Veiled One arrived unexpectedly last night," went on Shireen. "Only a short half hour before I saw the Khan. And he has ordered that your Sahib be taken before the Council of the Three at noon to-day!"

Diana's face blanched.

"What will they do to him?" she faltered. "God! If only I could help him!"

"I know not what they will do," answered Shireen evasively. "If he gives in to them, all may be well."

"But already he is writing out for the Khan the secrets in the book he wants," protested Diana. "What more can he do?"

Shireen shrugged small shoulders.

"My lord wanted this book, and if your Sahib had given it to him he would have set him free. But now that the Veiled Man has come, it will never be allowed to become my lord's. The secret will be taken from your Sahib by Him of the Veil—the master whom we all obey—and he will keep it for himself. What *he* will do for the Sahib when he has gotten it from him, I know not."

"Cannot Firoz help us in some way?" suggested Diana unhappily. "Perhaps he can arrange——"

"I have sent for him again," answered Shireen. "He should be here any minute now; and you will hear what he says . . . But I have not told you all! The herb-woman's house is watched. You cannot hide there. Her, I saw, that she might ask her son to get duplicate keys to the palace gates; but he, too, is watched."

"Do you think Major Gray will be again put into those awful underground prisons you told me of, Shireen?"

Shireen inclined her head.

"It is almost certain; though much will depend upon what he answers when he appears before The Three," she responded gravely.

"Firoz Khan is here, lady," said the voice of Shireen's chief woman from the doorway.

"In the name of Allah, welcome, Firoz Khan!" exclaimed Shireen. "Your *kafila* has passed, and she is still here!" She indicated Diana. "Have you a new plan? Speak quickly, for we have little time!"

"Yea, I have another plan, Shireen Bibi . . . With the money you gave me, I have purchased camels. To-night they will be near the little door in the wall of the palace garden; and he who holds their lead-rope will be me—Firoz Khan! . . . If, then, the Miss-Sahib, when night comes——"

"I will not go without the Sahib!" exclaimed Diana determinedly.

Shireen's eyes softened. This was Love as *she* understood it!

"I have not told you all that he and I spoke about, Deena," she said soothingly. "He bade me tell you, first, that he loved you; secondly, that it was his wish that you should escape if you can. . . . You know well, Deena, that if his plans for his own escape fail——" She stopped.

"What will happen then? Tell me! I demand to know!" Diana Lindsay spoke as her father would have spoken to one defying his authority.

"It is well," conceded Shireen. "I will tell you!"

And she sketched the fate of Captain George Ian ("Gigs") Galbraith, V.C., late of the Royal Kohistan Rifles and the Secret Service.

"——and for almost a year," she ended up, "he has been a blind, half-crazed prisoner in the palace dungeon!"

For a moment, horror rendered the English girl dumb. It was incredible that human beings could treat one another so. What was God doing to allow it? She rose to her feet; but her soul was on its knees in prayer. She knew that Shireen



was speaking the truth. Had it been a lie, her heart would not have hurt her as it did. Let them kill her, so long as they spared him! His life was by far the more valuable. And without him, she did not want to live . . . where they would not let her be true to his memory.

"I will tell the Khan, and Him of the Veil," she said defiantly, "that I wish to die with Major Gray! I will tell them that I love him! That I am ready to die in his stead, if they will set him free!"

"And so deprive him of the one chance of rescue that he has?" retorted Shireen impatiently. "Nay, Deenal! You are wrong, though I understand you! I would think as you do, were my lord in danger. I would walk barefoot over a mountain of broken glass to bring aid to him. . . . But you, and you alone, can bring rescue to your Sahib. And remember, he wishes you to go."

Diana turned tortured eyes towards her.

"Yes," she said brokenly. "I must go, as he says . . . to bring help before it is too late . . . Why, oh, why are your people so cruel, Shireen? What has Colin done that the Khan and Him of the Veil should treat him so *devilishly*?"

Ignoring the question, Shireen turned to Firoz, who was standing silent, his frank young face dark with anger at the sight of Diana Lindsay's distress.

"Thou hast gold enough?" asked the Persian coldly. Somehow his evident sympathy with this English girl did not please her.

He nodded.

"What gold cannot pay for, *this* shall!" He laid a hand on the handle of his heavy stabbing-knife. "'A dog whose throat is cut, barks not'," he added grimly. "I will guard the Miss-Sahib with my life! She need not fear!"

Diana Lindsay smiled gratefully at the chivalrous young Hillman.

"Gulbudun is fortunate to have such a lover as you," she exclaimed, genuinely moved.

The lad frowned.

"She is too young to marry. And I—I am a fighter; and fights are uncertain things. It is a true word that the knife that kills a man often first passes through a woman's heart!" Suddenly he changed the subject. "The hand of a jailer is always open to gold," he said slyly. "He who guards the Sahib is as others of his kidney."

Shireen understood.

"I gave this Sahib jewels sufficient to bribe a tribe of jailers!" she interpolated. "If aught can be done with the Tongueless One, he will surely do it. He has the means. . . . Go, leave us now! The very stones in these walls seem to have grown eyes and ears, these days! . . . The Miss-Sahib shall be at the place thou hast mentioned."

"And if *I* be not there," answered the young Hillman grimly, "she shall find a message—written with the only pen I know how to use—which will tell her why!" And once more he laid a hand meaningly upon the bone handle of his stabbing-knife; and turning on his heel, strode from the room, lithe and gallant. . . .

While these events were taking place, strange things were happening deep down under the foundations of the palace in a vaultlike room opening off the Council Chamber of the Veiled Man. A sinister, shrouded figure was moving swiftly about in a maze of glittering electrical apparatus. Dials, magnets, batteries and switches seemed to be everywhere.

Bending over a small ebony and brass machine in a glass case about two feet square, and of which one side was open, a harsh voice was speaking slowly and distinctly.

"Simla! . . . Simla! . . . Is it thou? . . . I cannot hear thee plainly, K110 . . . That is better . . . Have they given Mohammed Shah the leave he asked for? . . . It is well . . . The Mongol is to die . . . Yes, aeroplanes have several times passed over the valley; but the mists make them blind, thanks be to Allah! . . . Telegraph the Mir of Yanistan in the name of the Government of India, and say the five hundred men are not now needed . . . 3333, 46 and 816 . . . I will lead the combined armies . . . Speak not so near to the instru-

ment. . . . How many Gurkhas? . . . And guns?" (A grating laugh.) . . . They shall be buried! . . . The gases accumulate, it needs but the spark . . . I will speak to thee before it . . . *Bismillah!*"

---

---

## CHAPTER XXIII

### IN WHICH THE VEILED MAN HOLDS TWO COUNCILS

AS HE MADE HIS WAY TO THE Council Chamber to which the Veiled Man had summoned him, Khoon the Mongol seemed to walk beside an invisible companion of whom he was in deathly fear. Every now and then he would pass a crooked forefinger across his forehead to dredge from it great beads of perspiration; and as he turned each corner in the subterranean passage he was passing through, the yellow mask of his face was turned quickly over one or other of his misshapen shoulders, as if he were looking back at some person who was following him.

But he was alone.

Arrived before the door of the Council Chamber, he assumed a bravado he was far from feeling.

"The Veiled One must make haste to say that which he has to say. I have other and weightier matters to see to!"

The dumb man's leer as he threw open the door, was so eloquent of contempt that the dwarf quailed before it, and gathering his gorgeous robes about him entered hurriedly.

Directly underneath a lamp with four wicks, burning in an emerald-coloured glass bowl which was suspended by four silver chains from the vaulted roof, sat a shrouded, motionless figure in an Inquisitor's black gown and cowl. In the centre of a long, narrow, twelfth-century trestle-table, and close to the Veiled Man's hands in their thick black gloves, was a human skull, the two immense emeralds set in its ivory-framed eye-sockets shining balefully. At the feet of the seated figure, and coiled on a large square of green velvet, was a

big reticulated python, its evil-looking head laid on the topmost of its slow-heaving coils and turned towards the dwarf, as if watching him.

"Welcome, trusted friend and ally!" said a harsh voice.

Again Khoon swept the sweat from his forehead, and salaamed profoundly.

"I, Paramount Chief of the Mongol Armies, salute thee," he said evenly. Whatever he may have felt, his voice betrayed nothing of the fear in his heart. He was defiantly arrogant.

"To thee, Khoon the Mongol, in the Name of God, Peace! To thine armies *War!*" answered the Veiled Man quietly. "We have need of thy loyal counsels, O descendant of the great Genghis Khan!" Those half visible eyes seemed to dart flames at him.

Khoon sneered.

This adroit mention of his descent from the twelfth-century Tartar conqueror of India had given him back his self-assurance. It had raised him, not to the level of this mysterious being, but far above him.

Yet the unquiet turning of the great yellow head over one or other of the misshapen shoulders persisted.

"It is our hope that the Englishman we bade thee capture—or kill if he resisted—gave thee no trouble?" suggested his master suavely.

Again Khoon smiled—this time, with an evil pleasure.

"Is it necessary for the Presence to trouble himself about that?" he questioned pompously. "When We say——"

"When *thou* sayest aught of what *thou* hast been ordered by *Us* to do—say it as one who has obeyed his orders!" cut in the occupant of the ebony chair, icily.

Once more Khoon's boastfulness evaporated.

"I had him imprisoned, Master," he said in a low voice. "But His Excellency Alam Khan——"

"Released him for purposes of which We know," answered the Wearer of the Veil smoothly. "Also, he set two women to ensnare this Sahib's brains—one of whom failed. . . . We asked thee whether he gave *thee* trouble?"

"He gave none," answered the dwarf sullenly. "How should he, seeing that he was drugged?"

"A drugged Sahib is often dangerous—afterwards! . . . But We sent for thee to speak of other things! We hear (although, God knows, it is probably untrue!) that there are those in whose minds have been sown thoughts hostile to Us! Men—and those who are not men . . . Knowest thou aught of these things?"

A wide silk sleeve was swept across the yellow forehead.

"Naught, or I should have told thee."

"Without doubt thou wouldst have told Us! Hear, then, what We have to say: Thou, who art descended from that tall Tartar who had, it is said, the eyes of cat, art destined by Us to rule India; for thou seest as We see and as he saw—from afar off. Thou shalt drive before thee with a scourge of steel and lead, these *Inglis* people whom thou hatest even as We hate them!"

"Thou art the Power of Powers, Master!" exclaimed Khoon, his small black eyes aflame with savage ambition. "We—I, that is—will rule as thou commandest, and in no other manner!"

"Thou shalt rule India as *thou* pleatest, O Khoon! We seek no part in that. When thou hast driven the Sahibs into the sea, *We* (not thou—nor him they call The Cobra) will go and overthrow them in their cow-pat of an island! Yea, We shall drive them even from that! . . . And there are other things We have in mind, besides these, which will leave Us no time to help thee rule India! . . . Thou shalt do with the accursed Sahibs and the Hindu swine-peoples, as thou wilt—when We say 'Begin'! *But see that those who hold thoughts hostile to Us become not, by some strange chance, thy friends!* . . . At noon—in four hours—We shall need thee in council, when there will come before Us this Sahib who gave thee and thine 'no trouble' . . . Thou mayst go!"

Wiping damp hands on his gown, Khoon went out.

A minute later the door opened again, and though the Veiled Man had made neither sign, sound or movement, the

dumb janitor appeared; the look in his doglike eyes asked for orders as clearly as ever speech could have done.

"Hast thou fed That Which Never Sleeps?" asked his master.

The man understood, and turning his gaze to the python, shook his head.

"It is well! . . . Where is the Sahib thou holdest for Us?"

The man pointed downwards, and then crossed his wrists as one who is manacled.

"It is well. There is coming the Sirdar Alam Khan," went on the Veiled Man slowly. "Thou wilt take from him all his weapons before he enters!"

A faint tapping, as of a quick cracking of knuckle-joints, sounded in the silence; and as if it heard, the python stirred throughout its coils.

"It is he! In two minutes he will be here. Go, do as We have ordered!"

Left alone, the Veiled Man rose, and after listening awhile to the increasingly loud tapping, lifted the Byzantine tapestry behind the ebony chair, and disappeared from view.

Hardly had the curtain swung into place again, when the door of the Council Chamber opened slowly, to admit the mighty figure of Alam Khan.

As the lock clicked behind him, his eyes fell upon the python. Instinctively he felt for the hilt of his sword; and not finding it, his hand moved up to his breast. But as he bent his arm, the python stirred again, raising its great head; and a long, loud hissing accentuated the intense stillness.

"By Allah!" swore the Chieftain under his breath. "If I had with me that which has been taken from me, I would send thine evil head to hiss alone in a corner!"

"Heads that roll, hiss not!" said a harsh voice. "Even thine, Sirdar Alam Khan, will be silent when they who are sharpening a sword to lop it from thy shoulders, strike! Lay at thy feet the knife thou hast forgotten to give to the guardian of the door!"

Muttering in his beard, Alam Khan took from his breast

a long, stiletto-like blade and placed it on the ground. There was no one but himself to be seen in the Council Chamber.

"*Salaam Aliekoom*, O Wearer of the Veil!" he said hoarsely, as he straightened himself. "Dost thou now veil even thy veil when thou speakest?" He had turned in the direction of the voice; but he could see no one.

"We need not to be seen, that Our orders be obeyed!"

The answer seemed to come from the end of the vaulted room furthest from the table.

Alam Khan swung his huge body round.

The room *was* empty!

Swiftly he strode over to the foot of a small winding stone staircase, and mounting a few steps, gazed upwards. There was nobody there. . . .

When he turned the Veiled Man was seated, quietly watching him.

"Our greeting is slow," he said, "but it is true as thine! . . . Peace to thee, Sirdar Alam Khan!"

"And to thee, Master!" Even Alam Khan's brazen self-confidence was shaken.

"It is unwise to walk far, in Our Council Chamber. . . . Thou spakest of a shearing-off of heads. Is thine own safe, thinkest thou, Alam Khan?"

"Who would dare——?"

"We alone 'dare'! Thou and thy like '*obey*'! Answer me!"

"Two million Hillmen stand behind me——" boomed Alam Khan defiantly.

"They stand not here, nor in thy bed-chamber! Other heads besides those of messengers (those of snakes, for instance: thou hast said it thyself) may roll into a corner before they know it!"

"I like not word-play!" retorted Alam Khan hotly.

"Nor We those who would play with Us—or with that which is Ours!" said the rasping voice threateningly. "Must we teach thee thy letters from *Aleef to Yay* [A to Z] even as that yellow ape, Khoon, is taught?"

Alam Khan's eyes glittered. This abuse of Khoon was sweet hearing.



"As for the cursed Mongol," he snarled, "say but the word——"

"It is about *thee* We would speak! . . . Can thy big head hold, safely, all We shall say to thee, thinkest thou?"

"By the Prophet——"

"Swear not until there be need to swear! We will shortly give thee that need. . . . Thou and Our other loyal and tried friend and ally, the Mongol Khoon—love not each other, it seems?"

"Nay," boomed Alam Khan's deep bass, "I said not that!"

"Thou saidst far more! But fear not! Mayhap in a day—and surely before many days—thou wilt have orders, to do what thy heart thirsts to do without them. There is a man who is overfat, and who is not a man——" He paused, and with a black-gloved finger and thumb took a live toad from a basket of damp leaves at his side, tossed it to the snake, and watched the reptile catch it in its jaws. "Didst thou see? The hour is near when I will throw him to thee, and another also, even as I threw the toad to that which I wished to feed!"

One of Alam Khan's great hands strayed to his beard. By Allah! This was man-talk!

"He whose unclean hand is in the hand of Khoon—who is he? Is it Jaffir the eunuch?" he questioned, unfolding his arms from across his huge chest.

"Him!"

"In what forbidden sty has that fat pig been rooting?" demanded Alam Khan furiously, his easily aroused suspicions aflame.

"*In the sty of thy clean secrets, which sometimes thou unwisely speakest before her who is called 'Shireen',*" answered the Veiled Man—softly for him. "We like not to be discussed with women!"

The beard in Alam Khan's hands bunched. Was there *anything* which this dreaded being did not know?

"What said he about me?" demanded The Cobra hoarsely. "Hast thou seen him?"

"We see and hear all!" answered the harsh voice craftily.

"And as, and when We will! Thy gelded hog has found a yellow keeper. That is all."

"Thou sayest? . . . *Khoon*—?"

The cowed head nodded.

". . . I will tear the eunuch piecemeal with my hands!" swore Alam Khan blasphemously, his terrible anger bubbling up in him.

"Wouldst thou cut a rope that holds thee over a mountain's edge, even as thou didst hold him who cheated his brother of two rupees?" sneered the Veiled Man. "Nay, thou shalt lean upon Us, whose true friend thou art. Together we will throw two yellow frogs to that which eats frogs. But, lift a finger without Our order, and thou knowest what shall come to thee! . . . What of the *Inglis* girl and the Sahib? . . . Thy Greek women have poor brains!"

Alam Khan no longer made any pretence or bluster. This omniscient Wearer of the Veil had cowed him, as he cowed all who came before him.

"The *Inglis* girl is well—" hesitated The Cobra, a trickle of fear leaking into his mind.

"Of what speaks she, Khan Sahib? Of her marriage?"

Alam Khan's eyelids flickered the fraction of an inch.

"How shall she marry a man who is a prisoner?" he asked with assumed nonchalance—"even though she love the Sahib, and he her!"

"Women prisoners have been known to marry their jailers—even by force," said the Veiled Man icily. "Enough of this! We, too, dislike word-play. At noon, in four hours, I will see this Sahib who now spends his time writing . . . Perhaps what he writes will interest Us. It may not. Bring him, *and what he has written*, at the time I say!"

---

---

## CHAPTER XXIV

IN WHICH THE COUNCIL CONSIDERS TWO  
MATTERS, AND DIANA LINDSAY AND COLIN  
GRAY ARE CONDEMNED TO DEATH

THE COUNCIL OF THREE WAS IN session. For over an hour Colin Gray, surrounded by guards, had been kept waiting outside the door of the Council Chamber. A few feet away was lying Shiv the tigress, a paw upon the temporarily discarded sword of her master. Now and then the great beast yawned, revealing the glistening armament of her maw and its great curled tongue and red throat. . . .

The Three had been discussing the coming invasion of India by the combined Mongol-Hillman hordes.

Suddenly the black-cowled figure turned towards Alam Khan.

"Then thou art sure of those commanding the *lashkars* [fighting forces] which are to enter Hindustan by the other pass?" he questioned.

"Without doubt I am certain!" answered Alam Khan fiercely. "A *jihad* [Mohammedan religious war] will be preached the day thou sayest; and a fire among dry grass, runs swiftly! He who will preach it knows that the thread of his life rests on the edge of a knife held by one who makes no mistakes—as others do!" He darted a fiery glance at the dwarf.

"And the Hillmen of Yanistan—?" riposted Khoon spitefully. "Hast thou *them* on a thread against thy knife-edge, O Khan, who never makes the mistake of being caught and put into the jail-khana of the *Sahib-lōg*?"

Alam Khan glared at him.

"If so be that thy *lashkars* need a *fighter* to whip them into battle, Mongol," he snarled, "then he who will do it is known to thee!"

Khoon's eyes blazed with the age-old hatred of a Tartar for a Hillman; and he would have gone further with the quarrel, had not a black-gloved hand struck the table violently.

"Ye talk of whips!" rasped the Veiled Man. "Whom will ye, then, that *We* whip?"

The two rivals glowered at him in silence. One who was their master had spoken.

"Let there be peace between ye, I say! Hindustan looks to both of you for her freedom. Your united armies alone can defeat the *Sirkar*: the two hands of a body work not against each other. Quarrel, and ye cast away greater loot than Akbar or Genghis Khan ever won. Also, ye will place the heels of the accursed *Sahib-lōg* upon your own necks!"

"What know we of their plans?" asked Khoon loweringly. "Maybe they hold the better cards."

"Even for a fool, thou speakest rashly, Mongol!" said the Wearer of the Veil with ominous quietness. "Thou forgettest good advice too quickly!"

"It is a good word!" cut in Alam Khan impetuously. "Let the *Sahib* whom I hold prisoner—"

"*Thou?* Neither thou, nor this Mongol, hold anything! *We* hold ye both—and all that ye both possess—in the hollow of Our hand!" interrupted the Veiled Man savagely. "Will ye both die where ye sit? Force me not to the anger that kills!"

"Nay, Master!" placated the dwarf. "Hot words pass even between brothers. We are friends—the Khan and I!" By far the shrewder of the two generals, he knew that what the Veiled Man had said was true. Their lives did indeed depend upon the will and pleasure of this dread being. He had seen the working of the "anger that killed." It was a twisted death, though quick.

"The Sirdar Alam Khan," he went on, "is a great chieftain;

but his tongue is not the tongue of a courtier. He but meant that if this Sahib be questioned before us, it might help us to a knowing of the *Sirkar's* plans."

"Let this Sahib be brought before us then," ordered the Veiled Man.

For hours Colin Gray endured a "third degree" such as few men could have passed through and remained conscious, let alone sane. But before the ordeal had started, bribes, cajolery and threats were tried; and had failed.

"A brave man is worthy of respect; but a fool is worthy only of whips!" said the black-cowled figure at length. "For the last time We ask thee: Wilt thou be Our man in the war that is to come?"

"If I be given time," said Gray hoarsely, "I will work out the cipher."

"For the tenth time thou liest, thou dog of an *Inglisman*!" said the Veiled One angrily. "How long, thinkest thou, will We bear with thy cheating and fooling? Thou canst speak nought but lying words! Thou spakest lies to the Sirdar Alam Khan when he bade thee, after a woman had spoken with thee, write out for him that which is in the book." He took up a paper lying before him. "Dost thou take *Us* for a brother-fool? The words that are written here, are false words!"

"Why should they be false?" protested Gray, conscious of the weakness of his defence, for the cipher he had commenced to write out was nothing but a useless dummy.

"Because they are not in the language of them who were Byzantines; the cipher thou madest for the *Sirkar* was written in that tongue! . . . Without doubt thou takest us for half-wits, or babes! . . . Well, We shall show thee other-wisel!"

There was no answering that. Gray knew he was cornered. No subterfuge could save his life now. In a few minutes they would condemn him to death.

Rapidly reviewing the situation, he saw that his aim must be the concentrating upon himself (if it were possible) of the

attention of The Three until nightfall, when Diana would—with luck—have escaped.

But the Veiled Man had yet to press home his final attack.

"Seel!" he said, laying a hand upon a small bundle of documents. "Here are thy Government's defence plans, and the secret treaty between the Mir of Yanistan and the *Inglis Sirkar*. What, then, will it benefit thee to withhold a secret writing? Thou seest We are reasonable! Be thou likewise!"

"If they are the plans of my Government (and whether your word is a true word, I know not, never having seen the papers), then, as you say, the cipher I invented will help ye little! Why, then, bother about it?"

"I will tell thee why, Gray Sahib!" rasped the cowed figure, bending forward quickly. "What passes over the wires between the Mir of Yanistan and Simla will be useful to us for a few days. This is why! The *Inglis* army that will be sent against the millions I will pour into Hindustan in twenty-four hours from now, will melt like a snowflake in a hot cooking-pot. Your book will be useless to us then. All Yanistan will be on our side!"

"The Mir is the loyal friend of the Government!" retorted Gray, who felt his strength beginning to give out. "The Government of India and the Mir of Yanistan will smash the armies of these jungle savages as a man crushes an empty eggshell!" He glanced contemptuously towards the listening Alam Khan and the Mongol as he spoke.

"Let him be given to Shiv to question!" exploded Alam Khan. "Her claws will at least tear out what is in him!"

The Veiled Man raised a black-gloved hand deprecatingly and continued: "Thinkest thou, prisoner," he said slowly, "that a *dead* Mir can help anyone?"

Gray pulled himself together. Did the question mean that the Mir had been assassinated? If so, then the outlook was indeed hopeless for Diana and himself.

"Fatigue has rendered me foolish," he hesitated, playing for more information. "I understand not."

"It is nevertheless easy to understand," retorted his questioner. "In two days, I say, the first of Our many millions

of armed men will pour into Hindustan as water from an overturned bucket pours into a trough. On the *third* day he who is Mir" (Gray thanked God for that "is") "will die by Our order . . . Knowest thou his son?"

The Englishman's heart sank. He did indeed know the Mir's heir-apparent—a drug-sodden young degenerate of eighteen. With him ruling Yanistan, and the North-West ablaze—!

The Veiled Man leaned forward and locked black-gloved fingers.

"What the lord Khoon told thee was true," he said. "Put into our hands the key which will open that which we would open, and it shall also free thee and the Miss-Sahib!"

The strain was mastering Gray. With a supreme effort he steadied his reeling consciousness. . . . The deformed jailer had whispered to him, as he pushed him before him, that his escape was being arranged. . . . Well, he'd stake everything on that, and hedge once more.

He was about to speak when a woman's scream rang out.

"Colin! Colin! Save me!"

It was Diana's voice.

A reckless fury seized Gray.

"You devils! You shall get nothing from me!" he shouted, struggling to shake himself free from the six men who had at once laid hold of him.

But it was hopeless; the door of the Council Chamber swung open and more guards ran in.

Quicker than they, was Shiv the tigress, who, thrusting past them, bounded into the room.

Even before Alam Khan could thunder out an order to her, she had seen the great python coiled on the square of green velvet in front of the trestle-table; and the hair along the great beast's spine bristled with fury. Nothing could stop her now.

The snake knew its danger. Quick as lightning, its scaly body spread into a circular supporting base for the coffinlike head now swaying some five feet above floor level, its forked tongue flickering, and its evil eyes fixed on its enemy.

For a moment Shiv paused, her striped body leaning back upon its haunches until her great forepaws, their claws out, were stretched before her at an angle of some forty-five degree to her chest. Then with a rasping snarl she struck at the python's throat as an angry cat strikes at a dog which is attacking it.

No movement of beast or reptile is quicker than the striking of a snake—save only the sideways leap of a mongoose.

In the fraction of a second, what seemed to be spinning rolls of cable half as thick as a man's thigh flashed through the air, and the python had thrown three coils about the tigress—one round her throat, one behind her fore-legs, and another encircling her loins. That done, the great snake seemed turned to stone. Its deadly grip obtained, it was constricting—but no sign of the movement was visible.

Alam Khan, now beside himself with fury, roared to the guards to use their weapons against the python; but the black-cowled figure behind the trestle-table, without stirring from his place or raising his voice, dominated all.

"Let them fight!" he rasped, at a moment when Shiv gave a coughing snarl as she tried to bite at the backwards-held upper part of the python's body. "He who interferes with them, dies!" His eyes, behind the eyeholes of his cowl, glittered insanely.

The struggle could not last long; those deadly coils would quickly crush the tigress to a limp length of striped yellow fur. And every man present knew it.

Suddenly the coil about Shiv's neck seemed to swell . . . and shift. In a flash the maddened beast's right forepaw struck again at the snake, and as if to meet those deadly hooked claws as they swept sideways, the snake's head shot forward, its long narrow jaws agape.

But too late.

As a pale yellow curtain might be torn aside to reveal the bleeding cavity of a carcass hanging behind it, twelve inches of the python's scaly throat, ripped away, dropped sideways; and as the blood poured down the writhing trunk-like



body in a quick-sliding cascade of scarlet, the deadly coils loosened.

The fight was over.

In the few seconds that it had lasted, Gray alone had eyes for something else than the death-struggle between the Jungle's two mortal enemies. He was looking for a way of escape. At all costs he must get to Diana . . . Perhaps that small door on the far corner. . . .

A furtive glance to each side having shown him that his guards seemed to be oblivious of his existence, he dashed towards the door, but forgetting his leg-chains—tripped over them, and staggered sideways.

With an impatient oath, one of the escort dealt him a savage blow in the pit of the stomach with his rifle-butt, and Gray collapsed, momentarily insensible.

Throughout all these happenings the Veiled Man had not stirred.

Khoon, his arms folded across his chest, was leaning against the wall, a fiendish joy written on his yellow countenance. Bloodshed and violence were as wine and incense to him.

The Cobra was livid with fury.

As soon as Shiv was free from the coils of the death python he seized the great beast by her collar and dragged her, choking and snarling, into the corridor, glaring at the sinister black figure of his master as he did so. His eyes were like the eyes of the tigress—lambent with implacable hatred—incandescent, almost.

The python's torn body was dragged away by the guards and a carpet thrown over the blood-stained floor. The Council Chamber once more resumed its grim orderliness; but it seemed strangely quiet after the recent hideous uproar.

Gray's iron will was fighting desperately against imminent unconsciousness. He tried to speak, but the Veiled Man silenced him with a gesture.

"Take care, thou dog of an Englishman!" he said in a slurring bass whisper. "It takes but a moment to cut out a tongue!"

Then those insanely glittering eyes were turned on Khoon and The Cobra.

"Ye have seen a foreshadowing: the Tigress of Hindustan slew the snake that is Sahibdom. . . . The days of the accursed White Race in India are numbered, thanks be to Allah! Ye are to tell your peoples that a *tamasha* [sight-seeing] has been arranged for them. To-morrow they shall see two of the *Sahib-lōg* [white people] and a Miss-Sahib, die in the Place of Fights, at sunrise."

"You damned swinel" shouted Gray, struggling to free himself.

But they dragged him away.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN WHICH GRAY DREAMS A DREAM, BRIBES HIS JAILER, AND ONCE MORE MEETS WITH THE BLIND GALBRAITH

THE DUNGEON TO WHICH GRAY was taken after his appearance before the Council of The Three was not that in which he had been previously confined, but one opposite the blind prisoner's cell. While the door was being opened, he peered through the barred window at which he had once seen that tragic face. But there was no sign of its half-crazed occupant in the densely dark interior.

For one thing he was thankful: during all his ordeals, the canvas belt in which he used to keep the cipher, but which now contained the jewels Shireen had given him to bribe his jailers, had been neither noticed nor examined. After a few hours' rest had restored his strength he intended to try what her gift could do. It was his last chance; but a betrayal by the jailer to whom he would offer the bribe, could hardly make matters any worse than they were.

Hugging that cold comfort, he stretched himself out on the floor of his cell and closed his eyes.

How long he had slept when the coming of the jailer awakened him he could not tell. But he felt strangely equal to the task he had set himself. He attributed his cheerful confidence and renewed energy in a great measure to a heartening dream he had had, in which the Swastika *Sadhu* had appeared to him as he lay asleep: "*She is safe. . . . All that now seems hopeless will be set right . . . There is safety in the snake's throat!*" So had the ascetic spoken, in those curiously resonant tones of his.

He had not understood the reference to the "snake's throat," though it had been repeated several times.

When the dumb jailer threw open the creaking wooden shutters outside Gray's dungeon window, instead of the haggard and fear-filled countenance he expected to see, there looked out at him the face of a rested, quietly resolute man.

After giving the customary Frontier greeting with a heartiness that at once arrested the jailer's attention, Gray held towards him a small handful of loose diamonds and pearls, amongst which lay a ring—a magnificent blue sapphire set in a Byzantine setting. The shimmering iridescence of the cut stones seemed curiously—almost ludicrously—out of keeping with the filth and horror of that subterranean prison.

"Likest thou such things?" he asked, watching the look of cupidity grow in the man's eyes.

The jailer nodded, and the brown hardness of his face cracked into something that was like a smile.

"I give them—for three services!" said Gray slowly.

The janitor's eyebrows rose interrogatively, and he glanced to each side to see whether he was observed. The eyes of the Veiled Man could see through walls, it was said . . . However, the prize seemed to him worth the risk, for he came close to the window, and jamming the torch into an iron bracket in the wall, thrust a hand between the bars, nodding his head vigorously in token of assent.

"No, my friend!" exclaimed Gray, drawing back his hand. "I have spoken! I said I gave them *for three services!* . . . But first tell me whether you have an *Inglis* girl among your prisoners?"

The mute shook his head emphatically.

Something told Gray that it was the truth.

*It could not, therefore, have been Diana's voice which he had heard calling out, "Colin, Colin, save me!"*

In a flash he remembered the resemblance he had noticed between the voice of the Greek girl and that of Diana, and also the dancer's childish pride in her few sentences of English. "She Who Loves" could easily have been taught to cry

out those four words . . . That was what they had done! They had tried to hoax him!

Like light in a dark place, the blessed truth was now apparent.

*Diana was safe!*

"Listen carefully to the three things you must do, my friend, before you get these," said Gray; and his heart was singing with joy.

"Firstly, you will arrange that I speak with the blind Sahib at once. Will you do that?"

In grim pantomime the jailer signified that Galbraith was ill.

Gray moved his open hand to and fro, so that the yellow light of the torch played upon the precious stones he was holding, till they sparkled and shone like the sea on a hot summer's day.

"Look well at them! . . . I must speak with him—either in this cell, or in his . . . It is good? . . . Secondly, then, you will bring me much good food and fresh milk."

Once more the man nodded.

"Now for the third thing!

"Signify, in some way, that you will see that this ring gets to Shireen Bibi . . . He who takes it," he went on, looking intently at the listening man, "is to tell her where I am, and that I beg for news of the Miss-Sahib. Will you swear to do this also?"

Joining his hands before his forehead and raising his eyes to the vaulted roof of the passage, the jailer moved his lips as if he were praying.

"Then here you are, friend!" exclaimed Gray gladly. And he poured the gems into the jailer's palm which was curiously small for a man's, he noticed.

"Lest the ring be lost, wear it upon a cord about your neck, or on your little finger, turning the stone inwards so that it may not be seen. . . ."

An hour later the Keeper of the Beasts returned with a large earthenware pitcher full of fresh milk; on his head was

a flat basket containing some cold broiled flesh and some rice and vegetables.

Gray asked what he had done about the meeting with Galbraith.

The mute placed the palms of his hands together and laid them against his cheek, inclining his head sideways as he did so. He meant to signify that his other white prisoner was sleeping.

"It is good that he rests," said the Englishman gravely. "But it must be soon that I see him, for in a few hours—" He left the sentence unfinished.

The man shrugged his shoulders. But there was that in his face which told Gray his wishes would be met. . . .

Once more Gray was alone in the darkness, and, his hands clasped behind his head, he listened to the scuttering of the rats, and pondered the three problems which now dominated all else: Was Diana safe? Would he see Galbraith? Would the ring reach Shireen?

Out of the uncertainty of everything, grew a host of nightmare thoughts and forebodings, which not even the heartening memory of his dream about the *Sadhu* could dispel . . . Supposing they *didn't* have him out into the arena next day, while he was still fit and strong, but kept him cooped up in this dungeon for months—perhaps for years—becoming more hopeless and verminous every day! Would his mind stand the strain? Or would it crack, as Galbraith's had done? . . . What if he were never to leave this stifling fetor—this awful, almost tangible darkness! . . . No wonder poor old "Gigs" had gone mad . . . Blindness? Of what use were a man's eyes in this Stygian blackness? . . . God send that Shireen would be able to do something! . . .

A faint redness tinged the darkness of the passage—grew deeper—flushed and faded again. Then a square of orange light shot to the low roof as the bearer of the light suddenly turned a corner; the shadows of the window-bars danced a grotesque jig on the lamp wall. A small army of big grey rats, squeaking shrill, scuttled into their holes as if they

thought this medieval hell of cruelty was bursting into flames.

Gray heard a cell on the other side of the passage being opened, and a few minutes later the door of his own dungeon was flung open with a crash.

Grim indeed was the picture framed in that narrow doorway lit by the flickering light of the torch.

At the side of the jailer, who had an arm about him, sagged what had once been Galbraith—a Galbraith now so piteous, so broken, and so frail, that Gray sprang to his feet, horrified.

“Hello, Galbraith! It’s me—Colin Gray!” he exclaimed.

There was no response.

“It is you, ‘Gigs’, isn’t it?” he questioned anxiously. “Don’t you know me?”

Slowly the opaque white eyeballs were turned towards him—and Gray remembered.

He looked at the jailer, as if expecting the dumb to speak. Had another damnable atrocity been committed against this pathetic bit of human rubbish in the last few hours? Had Galbraith, too, been made a mute?

The janitor was making signs to him with his right hand, quickly raising and lowering it towards the floor.

Gray nodded comprehendingly.

Gently taking hold of the bearded and bent skeleton, he lowered Galbraith to the floor as if he had been a crate of delicate glass. It needed no persuasion, for the blind man was as a child that is sick, and subsided weakly into those strong supporting arms.

“We can talk better sitting down, old chap; don’t you think so?” said Gray huskily.

There was still no reply.

The jailer now brought in another torch and a piece of sacking, in which was some unleavened bread, a small flagon of oil, and what appeared to be an old boot-polish bottle half-full of some transparent yellow liquid. Evidently, he felt that the value of the jewels demanded that something more than had been asked for should be given in exchange for them.

For a moment the dumb man stood looking enquiringly at his two seated prisoners. "You have done well, my friend!" said Gray quietly. "Forget not to give the ring to her whom I named—and, with it, the three messages! . . . Do you remember them?"

Even if the man could have answered, Colin Gray would not have heard him. With every nerve tense he was listening to a voice from the dead Past. Galbraith's voice.

"Come . . . from . . . Simla . . . don't you?" it was saying gratingly. And putting out one of his clawlike hands, he touched Gray's face.

And found it was wet.



---

---

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE EIGHTH MAN

PATIENTLY GRAY NURSED BACK to larger life that spark of intelligence; and soon Galbraith's benumbed mind had kindled to understanding.

If he had any doubts as to whether it *was* Galbraith, the big crescent-shaped scar on this spectre's right nostril would have identified him beyond the shadow of a doubt. Gray remembered, well, the polo match at which the accident had happened. . . .

Quickly he stripped off the blind man's filthy rags and started to massage the skeleton-like body with the oil brought by the jailer, all the while talking soothingly, as one who reassures a frightened child.

"Nice being together again like this, old boy, isn't it! . . . Do without that, I think! . . . Feeling miles better, old man, aren't you? . . . Good! . . . Rotten food in this place . . . Enough to upset anybody . . . Now for the other arm . . . Sol! . . . Hurts, does it? (Damn them!) . . ."

Then taking off his own outer garment, Gray slipped it over the tangled mass of grey hair and guided the grimed skinny hands through the sleeves.

"Now we'll have dinner!" he said cheerfully, and began to set out the contents of the small basket.

Galbraith reached out a hand and patted one of Gray's.

That "dinner," as Colin Gray had called it, was a pathetically slow business; for it was necessary to break off special morsels and put them gently into the mouth from which the teeth had been knocked out—or broken off—with a hammer and chisel. The Cobra was ingenious in his tortures.

At last the menu was exhausted.

Remained only the small bottle containing the yellow-coloured liquor.

Tasting it warily, Gray found it contained synthetic whisky, or "Firewater." Ordinarily he would have thrown it away; but to-night the brutal stimulus it could give had a grim value: it would stimulate Galbraith's brain—make him talk.

"Have a 'peg', shall we, 'Gigs'? . . . For Auld Lang Syne's sake, and all that . . . Ever sing now? (Damn them—*damn* them!) . . . Run out of soda, Galbraith, old boy! . . . You used to like your whisky neat . . . Took 'Chasers', d'you remember? . . . Open! . . . Sol! Taste good?"

The effect of the raw spirit was as that of a hot bath on a half-frozen man. The lips that had never ceased their silent moving steadied themselves. Words were no longer uttered with difficulty; short, disjointed sentences were replaced by quick logical answers, the strange accuracy with which the words were chosen making them terribly vivid.

"They killed the others—Dudley, Ferrers, Boileau and the rest. You knew them . . . Gray . . . He keeps us . . . till the next fellow comes . . . You'll see me . . . done-in . . . as I saw Curtis . . . Torn to pieces by wild beasts . . . with his head in an iron case . . . Likes to keep our heads in spirit . . . *faugh!* Can't drink that filth! It reminds me of them. . . ."

"I heard a good story the other day, 'Gigs'!" interpolated Gray breezily. (Over-stimulation of a weakened mind means delirium!) "A fellow was walking down Piccadilly—remember Piccadilly, don't you?"

"Albany? *The Albany?* . . . Ferrers had rooms there . . . Sh'd think I *do* know it! I know lots of things. . . . You *did* say your name was Gray, didn't you? . . . *I'm 'grey'* now, aren't I? Always hated puns! . . ."

"You're looking far better than I thought you would!" Gray gulped, and cleared his throat.

Then Galbraith started to laugh, and the crazy ring of it caused his fellow prisoner hastily to put an arm about him.

"Steady, old boy! . . . It is all rather amusing, of course! . . . In a week or two we'll be able to laugh at it together, you'll see! . . ."

"See? I'll never see anything again! . . . Only the face of that black-bearded swine! It haunts me night and day. They held my head in front of a red-hot iron plate . . . Gray! Gray! My God! You won't let them do it again, will you?"

Gray's heart contracted. The pitifulness of it all!

"You and I are going to get out of this rotten hole, 'Gigs'! That's why I've come to see you. The jailer-fellow is a pal of mine——"

"Which one?" cut in the blind man excitedly. "The one whose hands are all wrong? I've felt them . . . Is it *him*? . . . Alam Khan had them pounded in a mortar just hard enough to break them . . . *That* one's all right . . . The other is a spy—the eunuch's spy!"

Gray clenched his jaws till they ached. Galbraith mustn't sense the despair with which his words had filled him.

"He seems . . . all right," he said soothingly. "Bit afraid of old Alam Khan, of course——"

At the mention of The Cobra's name the scarecrow sitting by Gray's side once more started to laugh; but this time he stopped himself.

"Gray, I'll tell you something!"

He put a drumstick of an arm about his friend's broad shoulders, and, finding his face with his other hand, turned it gently towards him.

"Listen! The man with the broken hands hates him," he whispered. "I soon found that out. (Give me some more of that whisky-stuff . . . Thanks! Faugh, what filth!) . . . I don't know why he and I became friends. I think he sympathized with me in his queer way . . . Well, one night I dreamed that that devil (I can't speak his name, Gray!) was killed by his blasted tigress—torn open. It gave me an idea, that dream did! And I told it to the fellow with the hands."

The skeleton-like body was now trembling with excitement, and Gray gently tightened the clasp of his arm.

"Tell it to me!" he whispered back.

"I got him to get made for me in the bazaar, two sets of five, small, curved knives (they're as sharp as razors, Gray!) shaped like a tiger's claws, but double-edged. Each set is welded on to a knuckleduster arrangement. I've got them hidden under a stone in my cell. One day (and I *know* the day will come, Gray—that's why I keep on living) I shall wear them, and throw my arms round the swine's big waist (he's even bigger than you, Gray!) and I'll tear the guts out of him! . . . Good idea, isn't it!"

"Top-hole, 'Gigs'. I'll help you when it comes off! 'Keep the Ring' for you, so to speak." He had understood what Galbraith meant. The weapons he had had made were an invention of the ancient Mahrattas, who called them *bagh-nakhs* [tigers' claws], and their famous leader, Sivajee, had killed one of Akbar's generals in the very way Galbraith hoped to kill Alam Khan. He'd seen the things in the South Kensington museum.

"Are they going to let me stay with you, Gray?" asked the blind man anxiously.

"Well, we're neighbours, anyway!" answered Gray as breezily as he could. "We can talk to each other 'over the garden wall,' dear old fellow! . . ."

"I've always liked gardens," said Galbraith slowly.

Hurried footsteps were coming down the passage.

"It's a case of 'Time, gentlemen, please!' I'm afraid, 'Gigs'!" said Gray huskily.

"There's a *third* gentleman in this foul hole, Gray," said Galbraith sleepily: "the feller . . . who got those . . . knives made for me, I mean!"

The dumb man's sudden return saved Gray having to answer.

The mute's face was dark with anger, and there was fear in his eyes as he made impatient signs that Galbraith should return at once to his cell.

"Up we get! . . . There we are!" said Gray with assumed cheerfulness, helping Galbraith to his feet. "*I'll* take him to his cell!" he added, addressing the jailer.

The man shook his head energetically.

"What's gone wrong?" asked Gray.

"Speaking to me?" queried Galbraith, moving unsteadily towards the door of the dungeon.

Gray patted his shoulder. "No—to our friend 'Cerberus'!" he answered. And repeated his question.

The mute glared at him, and pointed to the finger on which he had placed the ring Gray had given him.

"Lost it? (Mind the lintel, 'Gigs'!)" His disappointment and despair *must* be kept from Galbraith!

Again the dumb man shook his head, and screwing up his eyes, by pantomimic gestures pretended that he had a paunch. In a flash Gray understood: Jaffir the eunuch had got the ring.

But he said nothing. He was watching Captain George Ian Galbraith, V.C., late of the Royal Kohistan Rifles, feeling his way along the opposite wall. A blurred picture.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXVII

### JAFFIR THE EUNUCH TRIES TO TRUMP SHIREEN'S ACE

THY ORDERS FOR THE DANCING girls to appear before thee and the Khan this evening shall be obeyed, lady! Have I thy permission to leave the Presence?"

Shireen did not reply. She was studying Jaffir's face.

So far, she had kept the conversation to subjects connected with everyday matters of the harem; but the moment had now come for hinting that she held against him the information the Galcha had given her. She knew she was on dangerous ground. One slip, and Diana's escape, planned for that evening, would become an impossibility. The eunuch's subordinates now patrolled the palace gardens; and the keys of all the entrances were in his personal possession.

"Have I leave to go?" he repeated, shifting uneasily. There was a look in the favourite's eyes that disquieted him. It boded no good.

Great as was his power over the inmates of The Cobra's harem, Shireen's influence over his master put her beyond his control. One day, however, she would surely make some mistake that would displease the Khan. *Then* she would be handed over to him for punishment! *Then* he would take an ardently desired revenge for the many times she had thwarted his attempts at petty tyranny. He would beat her—spit on her—crush her—himself tie those slim wrists and throw her to her knees before the executioner! . . .

"For how many years have you served the Khan?" she asked musingly.

"Three, gracious lady! May Allah shower His choicest blessings upon him—and thee!"

"My lord has showered many things upon one named Jaffir!" responded Shireen maliciously, thinking of the three beatings he had had, and for one of which she had been responsible.

"There is no generosity like his generosity!" puffed the superintendent, trying to conceal his increasing sense of foreboding. The rôle of the mouse irks one who has always played that of the cat.

"My generosity can be as great as his—to those who earn it!" purred Shireen.

Jaffir pricked up his ears. If she was going to ask a favour, she might yet play into his hands!

"How ineffably true is every word she speaks!" he rhapsodized, apostrophizing the mosaic ceiling. "And she deigns to turn her sublime thoughts to a miserable worm like thee, O Jaffir! Allah, I thank Thee for letting me serve such a flawless pearl of benignity and beauty!"

Shireen smiled a thin little smile. She saw the mind of this creature working beneath his words like an eel striving to hide itself in mud.

"My lord trusts you much," she said, cat-like.

"And should he not do so, benign *Houri*?" fenced Jaffir, dodging the claws. "Is it not known that, were he cold, I would give my skin to warm his feet?" His paunch lifted with emotion. "He is right to trust one who would die for him!" He sniffed.

"Those whom my lord trusts not—die," answered Shireen quietly. "But some of them are first flayed!"

Jaffir squirmed. Could she possibly know that he was a party to the Mongol's plot to poison Alam Khan?

"My accounts are as accurate as is the justice of Allah," he squeaked. "And my devotion to the Khan (may the peace of God reign in his heart!) is common talk." (She *did* know something!)

"Naught is more accurate than the justice of Allah, as you say," returned Shireen, fixing him with hard, bright eyes. "And sometimes a woman administers it!"

The eunuch raised pudgy hands to heaven, the sweat-marks dark round the armpits of his white gown.

"Oh, that there should be discord in the sweet harmony of our relations!" he mouthed. "Yet, if this Sitter in the Dust has displeased you, lady, may his mouth be beaten with the slippers of lepers! I swear upon the Holy Book that it was not intended!" Her eyes were holding him fast.

Then Shireen struck, King Cobra-Wise.

"There are two in whose hearts lie the twin adders of treachery and murder! Know you of whom I speak?"

Jaffir's puffy face turned a pale yellow and the pupils of his usually half-closed, piglike eyes were suddenly surrounded by staring rings of white. He shook his head vehemently.

"You are a better liar than your memory!" went on Shireen relentlessly. "One whom he trusts, has spoken treacherous words! Mayhap we know to whom they were spoken—and even the words themselves!"

"I will go and warn the Khan of this accursed treachery!" squeaked the eunuch tremulously, making as if to leave.

"You will stay until we are pleased to give you leave! You are strangely anxious to have your hide flayed from your greasy carcass!"

Jaffir, who saw himself handed over to the torturers within the hour, fell upon his knees. "When the knife is at a man's throat, he remembers God," says the Eastern proverb.

"Merciful Allah!" he exclaimed. "What black-tongued liar has said such lying words, O Moon of Brightness? . . . Yet, since they have been said, protect me, Sublimity!"

"You can be sure, O most faithful Jaffir, whose accounts are as accurate as the judgments of Allah, that within a few hours my lord shall hear the things I have spoken of—but from *my* mouth—not yours! I forbid it! Do you understand?"

"Where shall he live, whose house has been destroyed?" faltered Jaffir. His universe was crumbling about him.



"There is one who will provide another kind of house for you if you sit too long among the ruins of the old one!" retorted Shireen. "My protection depends upon your silence!"

"I will go! I am dumb! . . . For the love of Allah tell him not till I be gone! Hand me not over to the Khan! There have been happenings in the Council Chamber, and he is as one mad! Even the heart of Shiv the tigress has turned to water, and she hides from him! If he hears words such as these—although, as I say, they are lies as black as the pit of hell!—he will believe them, and kill me!"

"It is a true word. He would kill you. And the red mess you would make, Jaffir, would be a large one!" answered Shireen, contemplating his flabby bulk appraisingly. The strain of cruelty in her character gave her a keen enjoyment in baiting this cowardly traitor.

The eunuch grovelled.

"Be merciful!" he blubbered. "I will disappear—kill myself, if you order it—but let not the Khan deal with me!"

"You shall have time to escape, you mangy dog!" retorted Shireen contemptuously. "Although I would give much to summon my lord and tell him here and now! But time you shall have, only if you help the Miss-Sahib and the Sahib who is a prisoner, to escape."

Slowly Jaffir climbed to his feet. Her mention of this thrice-cursed Sahib, and her desire that he should escape with Diana, explained something. That morning, when the dumb jailer had come to him to receive his daily orders, the eunuch had seen Shireen's ring upon his little finger, the stone having slipped round; but until now, even his cunning mind had not seen how he could safely use the discovery of it as evidence against her; she had only to say it had been stolen, and the Khan would believe her.

Now, he saw clearly what he could do! He would go to Alam Khan, betray Khoon's plot, and Shireen's plan to help Diana and Colin Gray escape, and thus save his own life, and (which was almost as pleasant) bring ruin upon this hated favourite.

"Give your faithful slave his orders," he mumbled, drop-

ping his eyes that she might not see the triumphant gleam in them.

"You will arrange for the setting free of the *Inglis* prisoner. See that the small gate of the palace garden be left open when evening falls," commanded Shireen in low tones. "See, also, that the guards keep away from that part until the Sahib and the girl have passed through it. When they have gone—make haste to go yourself! I give you until midnight!"

"The freeing of the Sahib will be difficult, lady," remarked Jaffir, his self-assurance returning. (At last she was playing into his hands!) "The Pearl of Beauty does not perhaps know that a guard has been posted at the door leading down to the prisons? . . . But all shall be arranged as you wish!" He sighed. "Were I rich, I could give the guards money . . . or jewels!"

He flicked a lightning glance at her, but her countenance betrayed nothing.

"Upon the security of my word, the gold that is necessary will be easy for you to get," answered Shireen coldly. "When the two have escaped (I, also, shall watch) come to me, and you shall receive enough to provide for the rest of your days. I will keep faith with you better than you have kept it with another!"

"What if this Sahib, knowing naught of your plan to save him, should refuse to trust me? The Sahib people are slow to give their confidence," he added craftily. "He may fello me, as he felled the wrestler who spat at him in the market-place and who died of the blow he dealt him. I like not fighting!"

Shireen saw the danger in the cunning question.

"He spoke with the *Inglis* girl this morning, as you know," she said. "And since he is no fool, he knows that his only chance of escape is to be guided to where he may get away to the hills. Therefore he will go with you."

"Has not the gracious lady a message for him? The Sahib reads Persian even as his mother-tongue! A few lines written by your gracious hand, instructing him——"

"Tell him that if he follows you, he will find her whom he loves! He will ask no questions, then! Go!"

"See, the *Inglis* lady comes," said the eunuch, observing Diana Lindsay enter the apartment. His eyes narrowed. If he could compromise both these women, his task in approaching The Cobra would be all the easier.

"It is to be my privilege to serve you also, Lady-Sahib," he said, addressing Diana obsequiously. "At the risk of my worthless life, I go to free one whom you know. Surely *you* will give me a message for him?"

"Is it true, Shireen? Is he going to see Colin?" questioned Diana anxiously.

Shireen nodded.

"He has good reason not to fail me," she said, glancing bodefully at Jaffir.

"To serve *you*, lady, is sufficient reason for any man to face death," fawned Jaffir. "But although I fear not dying to serve you, I dread, greatly, failing in your service. If this Sahib strike me with his clenched hand when I go to him, I should surely die of it. And what then—?"

Shireen bit her lip with annoyance. It was Diana Lindsay who resumed the conversation.

"A prisoner does not strike one who comes to free him!"

"Do I not know how slow the *Sahib-lōg* are to believe in anyone? He may think I come to deliver him up to the beasts!" The eunuch's eyes gleamed at the thought that he might yet do so. "Give me a writing, that I may show it to him," he suggested humbly. "A few words only: 'Trust him who brings this letter. He takes thee to me.' That, and nothing more! It will be as a key to *Behisht* [Mohammedan Paradise] for me, who am no fighter, gracious lady!"

Diana, who had seen writing materials on a table close by, was about to take up the pen, when Shireen prevented her.

"No, Deena! A writing is like a snake—it may turn and bite you! I have told you to go, Jaffir! If what I have promised you is not sufficient to give you courage, then I will ask my lord for the Sahib's freedom in exchange for something I will tell him!"

The bluff half worked.

"Much that is to be done may have danger for others,"

hinted the eunuch, his eyes puckered. "I have heard a rumour that the jailers have been tampered with."

"If that be true, it will make it easier for you to do what I have ordered. A second time I bid you leave us. Beware, lest I have to say it a third time!"

"My poor life is as a grain of dust," began Jaffir stubbornly, and stopped.

His face began to glisten with sweat.

Standing in the doorway was Alam Khan, bloodshot eyes fixed on him.

"Thy life, hog, is worth *less* than a grain of dust—which is clean compared to thee or any slit-eyed dog of a Mongol!" snarled his master. "What is all this talk of 'lives'? And why sweatest thou of a sudden?" he demanded, glaring down at him. "I come from a killing," went on Alam Khan through clenched teeth. "It would take but a little word from thee to make me do another!"

Shireen paused a moment to let fear purge resistance from Jaffir's terrified mind. Then she spoke.

"I found fault with him for a certain small matter which he is going to set right," she said nonchalantly. And signing to Jaffir with her head, she went up to Alam Khan, slipped her hand through the crook of his right arm and held him to her.

"May my lord be pleased with me," she said softly. "I have ordered a *nautch*, in which the dance of the women will portray a battle for thee. Is it good?"

"Women and mock battles are nothing to me," growled Alam Khan, his glowing eyes on the retreating eunuch's back. "That fat slave was right; his life *is* as a grain of dust. And there is rising a wind which will blow it into the pit of hell!"

Shireen looked at him in alarm. Not for herself; she relied upon her power over The Cobra, and upon his mad passion for her, to save her from any harmful consequences of her connivance at Gray's and Diana's escape. But if Alam Khan's temper should cause him to imprison the eunuch before she had been able to get them away . . .

Diana looked from one to the other, half afraid to speak,

lest a chance word should prove the spark to fire the mine of the giant's anger.

"What wert thou writing?" he questioned, turning tawny eyes on the English girl. He had seen the pen in her hand.

"She was about to write down a poem I have composed for thee, O Tree of my Desire," interpolated Shireen quickly. "The girl writes Persian even better than I!"

And pressing herself closer to him, she reached up a hand and stroked one of the black side-locks which curled from under his turban in flat oily hooks.

*"My lover is a hunter,  
He has caught me in the snare of his hair,"*

she crooned, quoting from a Persian poem.

Alam Khan laughed. His mood had changed.

"Allah send that on the day of Resurrection I meet not Jaffir the eunuch on the bridge of *Al-Sirat*, which, it is written is as fine a hair and as sharp as the edge of a sword; for I should surely push him from it into Satan's arms!"

Then turning once more to Diana, he said:

"Thy fox of a Sahib has fooled me, and thou knowest it! The writing he did was a false writing. . . . Thou shalt see the price of it in the Place of Fights to-morrow!"

---

---

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### CRISIS

THE SAYING, "DESPERATE ILLS justify desperate remedies," summed up Jaffir's state of mind after leaving Shireen and The Cobra.

In refusing to give him any further evidence of her connection with the escape of Gray and Diana, the favourite had once more been too clever for him. Also, her quick-wittedness had snatched away his chance of getting a letter from Diana, addressed to Gray. Well, now he had two more scores to settle with her!

The escape should never take place if he could stop it.

As he descended the wide stairs of the palace leading from the women's apartments to the Great Hall, he met Khoon the Mongol coming from the Council Chamber.

The dwarf looked even more malignant than usual, for the fear that lay behind his eyes gave his yellow face a flaming ferocity that, normally, he would not have permitted to appear. He was in no mood for speech, and would have brushed past Jaffir as one not seeing him, but the superintendent of The Cobra harem laid a fluttering hand on his shoulder.

"Master! I have important news!"

"As I may yet have for you!" snarled the dwarf. "I will see you in the Place of Fights to-morrow."

Jaffir shuddered visibly. His guilty and fear-racked conscience gave to the Mongol's words a sinister meaning—as if they meant *he* was to be one of those who would stand naked in the sandy arena waiting for the half-starved wild beasts to tear them limb from limb.

"I go not to the Place of Fights!" he whispered tremu-

lously. "The Khan takes food after these *tamashas* [exhibitions]. I must be present in the kitchens to see that the meal be ready."

Khoon twitched a misshapen shoulder free from the hot hand the eunuch had laid upon it, and stared at him stonily.

"Stand away, pariah! . . . As to this food. You have something that should flavour a buffalo's dinner to a nicety, something which leaves no hunger . . . *Use it!*"

"Nay, Master!" pleaded the shaking Jaffir, who knew he was alluding to poison. "Until Him of the Veil is gone, I dare not! It is rumoured he leaves to-morrow."

The dwarf sneered.

"For you there may be no to-morrow, unless you do it to-night!"

Near to them stood two huge copper urns holding rhododendron shrubs.

"How grow you these plants?" asked the dwarf smoothly, walking over to them. "Tell me! I take joy in flowers." And, as they stood together before the great ringed urns, between the words he spoke aloud concerning the growing of flowers, he whispered short sentences.

". . . They are strong plants. (Him of the Veil knows!) I have heard that bones buried at the roots increase their strength. (The Khan suspects you.) How keep you them in the cold seasons? (Speak up, man! What is your news?)"

"I give them water. (O, Allah, why did I not tell him a few minutes ago?) Three times a day, my lord. (The girl Shireen is planning the escape of the two Sahibs.) I will try the burying of bones at the roots. (The Khan is enraged against you, noble Khoon!)"

Hastily Khoon looked round. There was no one watching them. The two sentries in the doorway leading to the courtyard were squatting on their haunches, exchanging smutty stories, and laughing at them between whiles, their rifles held upright between their knees. The other six men of the guard and their commander were lying asleep in the shadow, three on each side of the doorway, their faces covered with the ends of their turbans.

"Speak quickly, but low, that no one may hear you," he muttered. "How spake the Khan of me?"

"He called you a 'slit-eyed dog of a Mongol'!" replied Jaffir, with a relish that was perilously near being obvious.

The dwarf's upper lip rose slowly at one corner.

"May he eat dirt! May Satan tear out his liver!" he gritted. "That belching mountain of flesh shall be rolled flatter than a *chupatti* [a flat, round cake of unleavened bread]—and by these hands—or I lie before God!"

"How will you flatten him?" quavered Jaffir, relieved at the thought that perhaps, after all, he might not have to risk the wrath of the Veiled Man for killing Alam Khan—who, so far as he knew, was a close friend of that most dreaded of mortals. "Mountains may fall on those who 'uproot' them," he said in a squeaky whisper.

"*Others* shall do the 'uprooting,' as you call it. I will but spit into the dust of it. What is this plan of the woman Shireen, fat gabbler?"

It was now the eunuch's turn to look furtively about him. No one seemed to be taking any notice of them. Outside was shimmering heat. An old woman passed across the glaring square of light framed in the doorway, her nailed sandals echoing loudly through the vast hall. The grinding of the palace gates on their hinges, and the "klop-klop" of horses' hoofs in the courtyard as the riders were admitted, sounded extraordinarily loud in the silence.

Jaffir was reflecting. If he told the Mongol all he knew, what was to stop the dwarf from, himself, going to The Cobra and telling him of the plot, and so robbing him of his one chance of safety?

Like a wild beast snared in an unbreakable net he saw he must take that risk. Khoon might already have told the Veiled Man of his plot. How, otherwise, by murdering Alam Khan would he dare "the anger that kills"—which all the world knew, never failed to slay him upon whom it fell?

"The Tongueless One, he who is Keeper of the Beasts," he whispered hoarsely, "was given a ring belonging to the



lady Shireen." His frightened mind had started his explanation in the middle.

"By whom, fool?" demanded Khoon irascibly. "She is free to give her jewels to whom she pleases?"

"The Sahib whom you took prisoner, Most Mighty One, gave it to him," faltered Jaffir, white-faced.

"What of it? She has given many jewels to the *Inglis* girl, who may have given it to her Sahib when they met. Lovers do such things."

Jaffir's cowardly heart sank. It was true. Evidently he had no case against the favourite. But, was there not a proverb: "If you take hold of sword-grass, grasp it tight?"

"The lady Shireen has ordered me to leave the small door of the palace gardens unlocked at sunset to-day, and has bidden me free the Sahib and withdraw my guards from the gardens."

"Now you talk as a man!" said Khoon. "And what does thy pig's head tell thee to do about these orders?"

Once more Jaffir hesitated, remembering his intention to betray this misshapen bully and the two women.

He blinked, and moistened his lips.

"That is the very question on which this miserable slave seeks your counsel, Master," he lied. (What *should* he do? His terrified mind was a blank.)

"You shall have it! And what is more, you shall act upon it, or there will be another for the beasts to tear in the Place of Fights to-morrow morning! Do you hear me?"

The eunuch's affrighted eyes were roaming wildly round the pillared hall. How he hated this Mongol!

"I hear, Master," he stammered. (Why, oh *why* had he stopped this creature of evil omen? Why had he not taken his own way to the Khan and told *him* all, as he had intended—and would still do, Allah being willing?)

"Then listen, thou lump of rancid lard," hissed the dwarf. "You will carry out her orders! Leave open the gate. Go to the Sahib and free him. See that he is led to——" He paused and fixed gimlet eyes on the trembling Jaffir. "What is to happen when they have gone through the door? The passes are

picketed and the valley patrolled by my men and His."

"How should I know?" moaned Jaffir, quaking more and more at the terror of the prospect before him. "Allah, what will become of me?"

"Two people already know who is to help them outside the gate," rejoined his tormentor coldly. "The woman Shireen, and the *Inglis* girl. Them you cannot question. Ask the Sahib this thing. Mayhap the girl has told him. Lovers keep not secrets well—from each other. Do you understand, thou clot of corrupt jelly?"

"Yea—without doubt I understand! Would that I did not," whimpered Jaffir. "But when I have done these things (which are fitter for a hero, rather than a poor eunuch) what will happen to the piece of camel-dung that is your humble servant? How shall he prove that *he* is not the key to this accursed lock of intrigue? That *he* is not the mind responsible for this getting away? That *he*—and he alone—is not the Eater of Bribes?"

Khoon smiled evilly. The eunuch's fear had told him that he held the card that would trump Jaffir's plan to tell Alam Khan—for the Mongol's quick mind had guessed the eunuch's intention long since.

"You forget, O Jaffir, that you have sworn to render me a service," he said quietly. "It will be a great service. And for it I shall pay you well, as I have told you. Think you that I wish to throw away the only weapon with which I can safely kill one whom I hate more than Him—?"

"—Of the Veil?" whispered Jaffir, aghast at the thought of it.

The dwarf's hand shot out and seized the eunuch's damp wrist in a grip of iron.

"I said not that!" he gritted. "*I said not that, you accursed monstrosity!* Say aloud, three times, and on your most sacred oath, that I did not speak the words! Quick, or I slay thee as thou standest!" As he spoke he darted quick glances to the right and left and thought he saw something slip behind a pillar some fifty feet away from them.

"By Allah, I swear you said it not," quavered Jaffir. "On

the Holy Koran, I swear you said it not! By the Beard of the Prophet, I swear that you said it not! Oh, Master," he blubbered, seizing Khoon's other hand and slobbering it with kisses, "forget that my accursed tongue spoke the words!" Tears were now mingling with the rivulets of perspiration that were trickling down his pasty face.

"It is well. I heard you not," responded the dwarf, unclasping his hand and wiping it on the eunuch's gown. "You will do as I have commanded."

"Were it a hundred times more difficult I would do it!" breathed Jaffir. "But lay thy protection about me as a buckler of brass, that it may cover this worm from the foot of Him who would crush it!"

Khoon smiled malignantly. For the first time in many hours he was enjoying himself.

"Fear not! I will so weave my words that the elephant you serve will walk blindly into the pit I have dug for him, and at the bottom of which he will find . . . something you will have dropped into it . . . a powder. Is it not so?"

The eunuch licked the salt sweat from his mouth, but his trembling lips could form no word. He nodded.

As he looked at him, a doubt lest this creature's abject fear might cause him to fail to use the poison as he had ordered, caused Khoon to take a sudden decision.

"Give *me* this powder which you are afraid to use!" he whispered.

"To-morrow," parried Jaffir.

"Now! Before I go!"

"To hear is to obey, lord. . . . Go you to the Khan?" asked Jaffir in a quavering whisper, his relief at the prospect of being freed from this yellow devil's presence enabling him to speak again.

"Yea. To whom else, dolt?"

The eunuch seated himself upon the edge of one of the copper urns which held the rhododendrons.

"My bones and my heart have turned to water!" he gasped. "How shall I live? How find the courage to do all that I must do?"

"That which you will surely find, if you do not do it, will answer the question of your 'living'!" sneered Khoon. "Go, get me of the powder!"

Slowly Jaffir dragged himself to a small door leading to his office, about twenty paces distant, and unlocking the door after several attempts, entered and was lost to view.

Going up to the other urn, the Mongol drove his fingers into the soil, and, withdrawing them, washed his hands with the dry earth as if he had handled something that was noisome.

He was dusting them together, when a thin, shrill scream like that of a rabbit seized by a stoat, echoed in the high roof.

Spinning round, Khoon faced the sentries.

"Let two of ye come instantly!"

Ambling to the door of the eunuch's office he threw it open, the noise of its impact against the inner wall rolling thunderously down corridor after corridor.

His drawn knife glittering in his hand, he went in. The cell-like little room was empty. And yet there was no second door or trapdoor in it, and the window was barred.

It seemed to Khoon that the edges of two of the great blocks forming the walls, might outline a secret door. But all his efforts, and those of the two guards, failed to move either of them a fraction of an inch.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXIX

### RISSALDAR SHER SINGH RETURNS TO LABAK, AND MAJOR MERCER LEAVES FOR SIMLA

IN THE SKIRMISH IN THE HILLS the day after the kidnapping of Diana Lindsay, the Rissaldar took over command when Colin Gray disappeared. But he had been unable to drive back The Cobra's rearguard.

When Gray had been reported as "missing," the hillside where he had last been seen had been thoroughly combed; but no trace of either him, or Khoon the guide, was to be found.

During the retreat (the enemy sniped them to within a mile of the Labak foothills), a disconsolate Limbu led Leila, Gray's bay mare, on foot. If the old Rissaldar was bitterly chagrined by having to retire his small force, his feelings were mild compared with the grief and fury of the little Gurkha; and both officer and man swore many an oath to exact a grim revenge.

"Were it not for *her*," muttered Limbu, looking affectionately at Leila as he spoke, "I would not go back to Labak without him!"

"And so add another to those already on my casualty list?" queried Sher Singh, gnawing brown knuckles, but glancing approvingly at the squat sturdy figure walking beside him.

"Without my Sahib, how shall I face his people?" queried Limbu savagely. "He risked his life to save mine, in the Tirah country. For three weeks the doctor Sahib could not say whether the bullet he had taken in his lungs while carrying me on his shoulder, would put *him* on a list of casualties! Of what worth is my life compared with his?"

"I understand, Gurkha," responded the fine old Sikh. "But a man venturing alone in these hills comes not safely back." He glanced up at the gaunt, grey hillsides which, like clutching hands, seemed to be striving to hold back the slow-moving force of horsemen, encumbered as it was with its dead and wounded.

"The cradle of a Gurkha is the hills," retorted Limbu obstinately. "They are his other father and mother; I know them, too, as a child may know his sisters and his brothers. Also I can shoot as straight as any cursed Hillman. If it were not for her, I say," he repeated, looking with caressing eyes at the proud-stepping bay, "if it were not for her, I would take one of Your Honour's dead men's *riffels* [rifles] and go to find him . . . and the Miss-Sahib—since he loves her! . . . Mayhap I will yet do so!"

Sher Singh smiled down at him.

"How know you he loves her?" he asked, trying to change the gloomy current of the little man's thoughts.

"A Sahib like 'Gree' Sahib says not a woman's name a hundred times in one night, during his sleep, unless he loves her," replied Limbu in low tones, as if he were speaking of something he had no right to mention. "I lay awake that last night in the Residency, until an hour before dawn, listening to him." The broad face grew grimmer. "Then I slept as the dead are said to sleep—shameful word though it is to say so! My face is blackened."

"Thou and I will yet find him," said Sher Singh, pretending not to see the tears glistening in the faithful brown eyes. "In a day or two at the most we shall be once more in the saddle!"

"I will not ride again until I have found him," answered Limbu resolutely. "Her I will lead. Is it in your Honour's thoughts that Major Mercer Sahib will let me take the mare with me when I go, so that my Sahib may ride her when I find him?"

"When go you? And where?" questioned Sher Singh, again looking down at him and biting his lip.

"To find him, wherever he be, I said," answered Limbu, his big mouth one straight line.

"Nay," answered the Sikh, shaking his head. "Surely the Major-Sahib will not let you take her! How would you (were you to go at all, that is) lead her, *and* fight?"

"It is a true word," admitted Limbu, crestfallen. "The mare must not be risked. He loves her, too!"

"See," went on Sher Singh ("thy name is 'Limbu'?)—see. O Limbu. It is but the chance of war whether a man be killed or taken prisoner—though by all the ten *Gurus* [Sikh religious leaders] I would rather be killed ten times over than be taken prisoner by *them*!"

Limbu's simultaneous spitting was eloquent of his contempt for all Hillmen.

"Your Honour will please pardon me—but it is *not* only a chance of war that has led to my Sahib being taken prisoner," he objected. "I know what I speak. I, too, know well such chances; 'Gree' Sahib and I have shared them together, many times. . . . There are also Me, a goddess, and a goat, who are to blame."

"You mean—?" queried Sher Singh quietly.

"I swore to Mother Kali—her of the four arms who danced upon the body of her dead husband," responded Limbu angrily, "that I would sacrifice a goat to her on the day my Sahib told me we were going on a journey. . . ."

"Well?" Sher Singh blinked quickly.

"I did not sacrifice it! *Therefore* it is partly my fault that 'Gree' Sahib has been captured," growled Limbu gloomily.

And in that frame of mind he remained until the Residency was reached, when, having bedded down Leila, he went off to seek out a goatherd who sold black goats. . . .

The rescue party's return with its commanding officer missing, fifteen of its number killed, and twice as many wounded, caused a ferment of jubilation in Labak city, and something like consternation in the British Residency.

All further rescue measures had, however, to be held in abeyance pending Simla's instructions.

They soon came. Major Mercer was to await the arrival of Colonel Haughton and the half-battalion of Gurkhas and the pack-mule mountain battery which the late Resident had telegraphed for. The Mir (the orders went on to say) had agreed to place five hundred of his levies at Colonel Haughton's disposal, who would forthwith follow up Alam Khan's force. A flying column (Simla added) was on its way to Labak in case of further trouble.

Major Mercer and Mohammed Shah, the Residency Intelligence Officer, were discussing the despatch of the rescue force.

"What your Honour says is true," said Mohammed Shah thoughtfully, looking earnestly at the Major's set face. "Nothing can be done until Colonel Haughton has taken over the levies of His Highness the Mir. The Colonel is due to arrive to-morrow, is he not, Major Sahib?"

"Yes," answered Mercer tersely; "to-morrow."

"There are bad rumours in the city, Sahib," said Mohammed Shah, polishing his thick glasses. "Has Your Honour heard them?"

"New ones?" queried the Englishman, lighting a cigarette. "I know all the old ones, I think." He laughed shortly. "They seem to live on rumours, in Yanistan!"

"They are indeed new ones," responded Mohammed Shah gravely. "It is said that the Mir's men are not to be trusted. Myself, I take leave to doubt it, for I know their devotion to His Highness."

"I entirely agree with you, Sirdar Sahib," replied Mercer musingly. "The old Mir is rightly beloved of his people."

"There are those—as Your Honour knows," interpolated Mohammed Shah, "who deserve not the confidence of a loyal heart."

"I still think you are wrong, Sirdar Sahib. Anyway, I want you to go and see the Mir at once. Tell him the idea you have expressed to me. He will understand, and tell you frankly what he thinks. As you know, I have long had my fingers



upon the pulse of his people; and not yet have I felt the fever of disloyalty beating in them."

"May Allah send that Your Honour is right," replied Mohammed Shah slowly. "But even though His Highness' men be loyal, to track Alam Khan is going to be a very difficult task, even for those born in these hills. Let me go with Colonel Haughton, Major Sahib! I have an interest of my own that I wish to follow up."

"I have spoken," said Mercer, his lean face tightening. "When I have heard what the Mir Sahib has said to you, we will talk of your going with Colonel Haughton. You cannot easily be spared from Labak. I would rather you stayed here."

Mohammed Shah rose, his face full of anxiety.

"The one man who could have guided the Colonel Sahib's force has, it seems, proved a traitor," he said grimly. "When I find that accursed dwarf—as I most surely shall—I pray Your Honour not to listen to his complaints of harsh treatment, for when I have done with him they will be true complaints! I have a certain idea concerning what shall be done to him."

"Do with him as you think fit, Sirdar Sahib," answered Mercer, "so long as you do not compromise the Residency or the Government. I shall see you this evening."

Mohammed Shah nodded.

"I shall be anxious to hear what His Highness has said to you. . . . You have leave, Sirdar Sahib. . . ."

As Mohammed Shah left him, an orderly entered with a telegram.

Eagerly Mercer tore it open. It was from the Director-General of Intelligence, and in code. Locking the door, he took out his copy of the code-key.

*Unable understand [he deciphered] messages received from Gray in his code. Stop. A.G. directs you hand over command to Captain Lascelles and come Simla immediately. Ends.*

An hour later he had started for Simla.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXX

### MOHAMMED SHAH VISITS THE MIR

THE SENTRIES OUTSIDE THE ENTRANCE to the Mir's palace—an ugly mud-brick building with innumerable windows and wooden balconies carelessly daubed with whitewash—loured to a semblance of attention as the burly figure of Mohammed Shah in his shabby Norfolk jacket and khaki jodphurs rode past them into the courtyard. The strain of the past few days had evidently told upon him, for he looked gloomy and preoccupied.

Warned by a friendly shout from the outside sentries, the inner guard scrambled for their rifles, tugging down rumpled, ill-fitting tunics amid the objurgations of their commander, who was concealing behind the door the hubble-bubble pipe he had been smoking. Nudging each other into some semblance of two lines, they then presented arms—slantingly.

“The Mir Sahib is waiting to receive your Honour!” announced the dignified Vizier who greeted Mohammed Shah.

The aged ruler of Yanistan, keen and hawk-like, was seated in a red plush armchair at one end of a long, gloomy room, whose dark-blue distempered walls were decorated with ill-cared-for Oriental weapons and shields. To his right was another, smaller chair for the heir-apparent—unoccupied. Dressed in flowing beige robes, his patriarchal beard half concealing the star of a British order glittering on his breast, he seemed too frail and venerable to be the energetic ruler he was.

Mohammed Shah bent low in salutation, and the Vizier, having announced the visitor's titles in complimentary pro-

fusion, took up his stand behind his royal master, his arms folded across his chest.

"Peace to you, Sirdar Mohammed Shah, Sahib Bahadur," said the old man. "We are happy to welcome the envoy of the *Inglis* Residency!"

In a few words Mohammed Shah outlined his mission.

"What the Sirkar wishes we shall, as always, do," pronounced the Mir gravely.

The envoy glanced round the listening crowd of courtiers.

"Your Highness' kindness will be great if you will grant me a private audience," he said deferentially.

The Mir lifted a wrinkled hand, and with a rustling of robes and the pithering of sandals the disappointed crowd of officials moved slowly backwards out of earshot—the Vizier, according to custom, remaining.

"Let your Honour be seated," said the Mir courteously, indicating some cushions on a Persian carpet some five feet away from him. "We received a telegram from our good friend, the Viceroy, asking us to send five hundred of our soldiers with the Colonel Sahib; and we gave the necessary orders. Yet, this morning, there has come to us a second telegram from Simla, cancelling the request that we should send them! Can you explain it?"

"At the time of the *toofan* [storm] even the strongest seek shelter," began Mohammed Shah warily. He knew the Oriental is quick to suspicion; the Mir might think that the Government felt itself too weak to cope with the situation.

"*Toofan*?" questioned the Mir. "Your Honour doubtless refers to the troubled state of our country?"

"That is so, Highness," replied Mohammed Shah gravely. "Black clouds are gathering fast where Your Highness' wisdom would have all to be fair——"

"'From black clouds fall white drops!'" was the quick response. "What of the second telegram?"

"All things are known to the Mir of Yanistan," suggested the Intelligence Officer, with true Oriental floweriness. "Yet when a cloud hides the sun, the slug may eat the rose. It may be that the *Sirkar* has heard rumours of evil propaganda—

in some corner of your kingdom unlit by Your Highness' omniscience?"

"Who was to lead the five hundred we were sending?" demanded the Mir of his counsellor.

"The Chief, Yussuf Khan, Royal Master."

The Mir nodded.

"We trust him," he said simply.

"I have asked that I, myself, go with the rescue force, Your Highness," remarked Mohammed Shah slowly. "It is my hope that my petition will be granted. If the Prince, your son, were allowed to come——"

The old ruler sighed.

"Our son is not a man of war, as we were," he said regretfully. "It is our intention that he shall succeed to the Mirdom in our lifetime, so that we may guide hands that are inexperienced. Were it not that the man Alam Khan escaped the death we had destined for him, we should be sitting in the Oasis of Peace in our old age."

The eyes of Mohammed Shah glowed, and he restrained with difficulty an explosion of the hatred which boiled up in him at the mention of The Cobra's name.

"Not only is that disciple of Satan the Stoned One responsible for the poisoning of the Wells of Truth to which we have alluded, Mighty Prince," responded the Sirdar. "He, and he alone, is also responsible for the kidnapping of Miss Lindsay and the disappearance of Major Gray Sahib—though, miserable wretch that I am, it was *my* voice which spoke the words to Major Gray Sahib which caused him to take with him one who was certainly a traitor."

The old Mir looked enquiringly at his Vizier. He had not understood the reference.

"The Sirdar Mohammed Shah Sahib speaks of one Khoon, a Mongol dwarf, O Cherisher of the Poor, who went as guide to the Sahib who is lost."

"Our dear friend Sir John Lindsay Sahib was not poisoned by him, you think?" queried the Mir anxiously. "That was assuredly done by one of his servant-people! Have they all

been put to the ordeal of questioning, Sirdar Sahib?" More than once the Mir had found torture to be "the key to the door of truth."

"They have been questioned, Presence of Presences! But the Resident Sahib's butler, who took the coffee to him, has been in his service twenty years!"

"You must look low down, for evildoers!" sighed the Mir.

"Your wisdom speaks with a voice of thunder, Majesty!" responded Mohammed Shah. "There was a dish-washer whom we suspected; but the man was taken suddenly ill with a fever the day after the Resident Sahib's death, and we were unable to question him more."

"He will recover. And then . . . ! *We* have ways of making unwilling tongues speak!" The nostrils of the thin aquiline nose distended slightly.

"The man died this morning, Highness!"

"The Answerer of Prayers will hear my petition!" said the Mir, the ready tears of old age glistening in his faded eyes. "Since the breath of Allah blew upon the flame of our dear friend's life, we have prayed, three times daily, that he who killed him may be brought to justice! A poor dish-washer, whose pay was not ten rupees a month, can surely not have struck so high?"

"Have I your gracious leave to speak, Royal Master?" asked the Vizier.

"Our Vizier's words are always welcome to our ears. Speak!"

"The key to that lock of mystery is surely made by Mongol hands. The dwarf has an evil reputation, it is said."

Mohammed Shah's face grew gloomier.

"Your Vizier but adds to a burden almost as heavy as the mountain of men's sins! He speaks a true word. It is so!"

A sudden gust of a temper that still made hardened warriors tremble when it struck them, shook the frail form in the red-plush armchair.

"If we have to drain our kingdom of the youngest sons of every house, we will find Lindsay Miss-Sahib!" He paused and pointed a shaking, wrinkled forefinger at a large oleo-

graph of the King and Queen of England, hanging to one side of the dais and opposite a signed photograph of the Viceroy in a heavy gilt picture-frame.

"Always, Lindsay Miss-Sahib's grace and dignity reminded us of that most gracious lady, whose royal husband touched the hilt of our sword in Agra many years ago."

The conversation was cut short by the appearance of a tall, pale youth dressed in a wide-skirted coat of green velvet heavily embroidered with gold, his slim waist girdled by a silver belt set with turquoises and cornelians.

The Mir looked down at him affectionately as the lad bent before him and touched his father's sandals with the tips of effeminate hands.

"Welcome, Royal Son!" he said. And, after repeating the titles of his visitor (who had risen as the young Prince entered), he mentioned that Mohammed Shah had suggested him as leader of the five hundred levies.

The boy turned his heavy-lidded eyes, darkened with anti-mony, to Mohammed Shah.

"I like not war," he said sulkily.

The old Mir sighed

"It would teach thee much, to go with the Colonel Sahib and the Sirdar," he said hesitantly.

The lad shook his head, his hand feeling at the down on his chin.

"I have other matters, Royal Father——"

"Other *women*!" exclaimed his father indulgently. "Yet what are women to the joys of battle?"

He turned to Mohammed Shah.

"If you have spoken to us all that was in your heart, you may leave us, Sirdar Sahib."

Mohammed Shah rose and made the three profound obeisances required of him.

"I have spoken all. . . . Yet there is one thing more!"

"Speak!"

"If Your Highness will allow, I will telegraph Simla saying that your heart is set on sending your men, if I lead them. Is it Your Highness' will that I should do so?"

The Mir's rheumy eyes flashed into life.

"We will have no further correspondence with Simla! Even the Sirkar cannot stay us leading our own men to catch a thief in our own territory—which we shall surely do, if we do not send our soldiers with the Colonel Sahib!" he said decisively.

That night came a second telegram from Simla cancelling the other, and accepting the Mir's offer of five hundred troops.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXI

### SIMLA IS STILL MYSTIFIED

IN A DEODAR-HIDDEN BUNGALOW on the outskirts of Simla cantonments, a short, wiry man sitting in a revolving chair was tapping the table automatically with his pencil: "tip-tip-tip-tap; tip-tip-tip-tap." . . .

"Major Mercer not reported his arrival yet, Lockyer?"

"No, Sir."

The wiry man looked up with an air of mild surprise and ceased the unconscious tapping of the Morse code.

"Should have been here yesterday. . . . Did you have him covered against interference?" The head of the Secret Service looked up enquiringly as he put the question.

His assistant glanced at the topmost of a pile of files on the table.

"Mohunn Dutt, the chauffeur who drove his car for the four days between Labak and Peshawur, is one of our best men, General. Yussuf Ali took over from him there."

"Have they sent in any reports?"

"Mohunn Dutt telegraphed saying that the car was twice heavily fired on, and two attempts were made to block the road. His wire is in that basket to your right, Sir. There's nothing in from Yussuf Ali."

A knock, and a messenger entered with a small square of paper.

"Talk of the angels—!" commented the short, wiry man. "Send him in at once, will you?" . . .

Mercer saluted.



"General Phillips says you wish to see me, Sir?"

"That's right, Major! Sit down. Have any trouble getting here? . . . There are cigarettes in that box . . . Only 'gasps,' I'm afraid."

"Thanks, Sir." Mercer lit a cigarette and then gazed at the burning match musingly. "They nearly got me the day I left. Never saw a man drive like that chauffeur. Top speed on three flat tyres! Over a hellish road too!"

"How are things in Labak?"

"We're all a bit on edge about Sir John's death and this kidnapping of Miss Lindsay, of course. . . ."

He blew out the match and placed it carefully in the ash-tray pushed towards him.

"Your old friend the Veiled Man again, eh? He's out to stir up big trouble this time. India's soaked with this propaganda. The Hindus are terrified of him."

"Does that include the big cities, Sir?"

The General made affirmatory noises.

"One of our agents, who'd got on to a plot to blow up Government House, was found dead last week. That was Calcutta. Same thing happened to Bannerjee, in Bombay, directly he launched our 'anti' propaganda . . . Got any idea what happened to Gray?"

"No, Sir." Mercer studied the ash on his cigarette thoughtfully. "We think the guide had something to do with it. Must have had!"

"Did Gray ever speak to you about a cipher he'd invented?"

"No, Sir."

"Did you know he had one?"

Again, negation.

"Gray isn't the kind to talk—well, *you* know that, of course, Sir!"

The shadow of a smile passed across the wiry man's face.

"Yes. We know Gray . . . Look here, Mercer. A curious thing is happening. We're getting messages in that Byzantine code. Now there are only two copies of it in existence—his, and the one I've got."

"Somebody's evidently got hold of Gray's copy," commented Mercer, staring out of the window.

The General shrugged his shoulders.

"You can have a look at the messages; they're decoded."

He pushed across a sheet of foolscap on which, pasted on it by their upper edges, were five telegraph forms, each slightly overlapping the other. On them were typed in "clear" the contents of the five "cipher" originals.

"We're getting one of 'em every day," went on the head of the Secret Service. "Started the day after Miss Lindsay was kidnapped."

"Where do they originate from, Sir?" questioned Mercer.

"We don't know. It's evidently a private station, and a powerful one at that."

Mercer's lean saturnine face grew sombre as he studied the five short sentences, consisting mainly of compass bearings, with here and there a mention of Diana. "Miss Lindsay unharmed"; "Danger"; "Use all speed"; and so on.

"Compass bearings!" remarked Mercer frowningly.

The General drummed impatient fingers.

"Of course. But how far the bearings are reliable, Colonel Haughton will have to find out!"

"Could Gray be sending these messages, d'you think, Sir?"

"By wireless? How could he? No. They're sent by some third person. They lack Gray's code signature. Even if—as you've suggested—Gray's copy of the cipher has been stolen, there's a certain check, which only he and I know. And without it, I don't see how this third party could use it—and fool us!"

The revolving chair swirled round towards the door as an officer entered, laid a telegram before his chief, and went out.

The keen eyes behind the pince-nez scanned the flimsy piece of paper rapidly.

"By God! Here's another of 'em! . . . Help yourself to another cigarette, Mercer, while I decode it."

Rising, he went over to a safe and, twisting the combina-

tion lock, took out a small red book and crossed to the bay window.

In the short pause which followed, the harsh croaking of a hill-crow sounded eerily in the warm stillness outside.

"Listen to this, Mercer!

*"Death weds The Cobra. I will prevail.*

*"Him of the Swastika.*

"I can't make head or tail of it! Can you?"

Mercer shook his head. He was obviously distressed. He and "Zero" Gray had served on a Boundary Commission in Persia three years before, and Gray was, to him, both idol and friend.

"I'll have it wirelessly to Colonel Houghton, all the same!" The wiry man pressed the bell-push. ". . . After we've had a talk, Mercer, I want you to start back to Labak immediately. I'd like to hear your opinion on affairs in Yanistan. General Phillips has told you, I suppose, that the First, Third and Sixth Divisions have been ordered to stand by for mobilization? Personally, I think this Tartar-Mongol business will fizzle out . . . That is, if the Mir takes a strong line. I want you to take him into your confidence. Mohammed Shah—your Intelligence fellow—has been able to help our policy a good deal by fostering friendly relations between the Mir and the Residency . . . Put Mohammed Shah on the trail of the sender of these messages when you get back. . . . Finding him useful?"

"Rather, Sir! He's been working like ten men since Sir John's death. He idolized the Resident, and feels that he's to blame for sending that guide with Gray. But it was my fault that the man was chosen, General! I'd heard that he knew the hills for a hundred miles round Labak, 'like the veins on the back of his hand,' as the Hillmen put it; so I suggested him for the job . . . Wish to God I hadn't!"

The head of the Secret Service tapped pursed lips with his pince-nez.

"I understand. Tell old Mohammed Shah not to worry on

that point. Now about these disaffection rumours in Yanistan, and this Russian, Petrinoff. What's your opinion? . . ."

And during the two hours' discussion which followed, death in the Place of Fights drew nearer to Diana Lindsay and Colin Gray by one hundred and twenty minutes.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXII

### JAFFIR THE EUNUCH DIES IN THE MARKET-PLACE

NOT UNTIL THE EVENING OF the day on which Jaffir the eunuch had so mysteriously disappeared, did Khoon the Mongol obtain an audience of The Cobra. To all his urgent requests the same answer had been returned: "The Khan will see no one!"

When, finally, he was admitted, his reception would have appalled a far stouter heart than his.

He found The Cobra, turbanless, seated on the edge of his great couch, biting his nails with fury. It was not Alam Khan's way to control his rages. But this time the orders of Him of the Veil demanded it: and having read the letter containing them, he had torn it into the score of pieces that lay scattered about him; and stayed his anger at that point.

As usual, its contents had been brief:

*I have thy frog. I will throw him to the snake in an hour.  
Betray nothing.*

*Him of the Veil.*

It was not regret for the savage justice that was about to be meted out to Jaffir which had lashed Alam Khan into this white fury. It was the thought that he would not have the joy of torturing him before he died: that he would not be able to hear him scream for a mercy he would pretend to be about to give, and then revoke. But he knew that disobedience of the Veiled Man's orders would simply mean his own death.

Now there is a saying which is as true in the East as it is in the West: "A still tongue maketh a wise head"; and Alam Khan had a dim notion of putting it into practice.

"What wilt thou, Mongol?" he asked, his bass voice shaking with suppressed passion, despite all he could do to control it. That *this* man, of all men, should come to him at such a moment!

"I am not come to ask anything of thee, O Khan!" replied Khoon, foreseeing trouble and unobtrusively hitching his knife into a handier position.

"Why come, then?" snarled Alam Khan. "My mood is not one of peace!"

"Nor is mine, for that matter!" riposted the Mongol defiantly. "Yet what I have to say thou needs must listen to!"

"Thou chooseth thy words badly, Mongol!" grated The Cobra, glaring at him as if he would have leapt at him and strangled him with his bare hands.

"I pick not my words when it is a question of thy life and mine!" returned Khoon, braving the situation, of which he fully knew the peril.

"What meanest thou, thou deformed leader of a troop of dancing dogs?" demanded Alam Khan insultingly. It mattered little now, he told himself, what he said to this doomed dwarf.

Khoon stiffened. If *this* was to be his reception, why should he trouble to tell this detested Hillman anything?

But things had gone too far for him to hold back.

"There are those who are about to free the two Sahibs whom thou holdest as prisoners. . . . But since thou hast no interest in the news I bring, I will take leave of thee," and he made as if to go.

The Cobra sprang to his feet.

"Thou wilt *take* nothing!" he thundered, reaching for the naked sword lying by his side.

As if she understood that she, too, was involved in the quarrel, Shiv the tigress rose slowly to her feet, and drawing up her belly, snarled loudly and long, baring the yellow swords of her fangs threateningly.

Khoon stepped back two paces, fingering the handle of his long knife.

"I seem not to be welcome, Khan Sahib!" he said, trying hard to conceal his double apprehension of master and beast.

"Thou hast said it!" shouted Alam Khan, now beside himself with fury. "Thou art as welcome as Satan! Thou shalt tell thy news to *him*, in hell! I have a fancy to see thy head roll in this room—as other heads have rolled before it!" He advanced towards Khoon slowly, the fingers of his left hand feeling the edge of the sword.

Then suddenly he stopped, and tore at his great beard. Death was too big a price to pay for killing this Mongol rat.

"Art thou looking for death before he comes to thee himself, thou misshapen liar?"

"Nay, Khan Sahib!" protested the dwarf. "I came but to render thee a service—one for which thou wilt surely thank me when thou hast heard it!"

"Go, thou twisted abortion!" hissed Alam Khan, "or the sweepers shall cart away thy dead carcass! I swear it by the Holy Koran!"

Something told Khoon not to move: that he must stick to his guns or be lost. He realized that unless he gained control of the situation within the next few seconds his life would be forfeit.

"Thy prisoners are to escape at sundown!" he blurted.

"Why sayest thou so?" snarled The Cobra. "Answer, thou swine of a Mongoll!"

The dwarf's mind worked swiftly. To mention the eunuch's despised name in such a crisis would merely be to draw down upon himself the unleashed fury of this madman.

"Thy woman, Shireen, can answer many questions!" he retorted defiantly, loosening his knife in its sheath. (He would die fighting.)

"Thou slit-eyed eater of garbages!" roared Alam Khan. "Were it not that there is One who has thee in mind for a reckoning which thou shalt not escape, my beast should lick up thy blood—even though it poisoned her!"

Khoon retreated, backwards, to the door.

His mind was made up. This insane Khan was no longer to be borne with. The more so, because he had let drop a dangerous secret; for the dwarf's keen brain had at once understood the unguarded reference to the Veiled Man's intention regarding himself. The time had clearly come to place himself under the protection of a power that he had long seen was greater than the trio of which he was himself one. The Government of India would acknowledge his status as leader of the Mongols; and it would make short shift of The Cobra, once the Veiled Man had been handed over to it.

That handing-over he was now going to arrange.

"I go!" he snarled, his beady eyes looking malevolently at Alam Khan. "But the day is near at hand when thou wilt pray to Allah for another such chance as I came to offer thee——"

The Cobra's great hand tightened on Shiv's chain. A last spark of reason had lit up a mind blinded by fury. If Shiv killed the Mongol, who could blame *him*? Bending down, his anger-shaken fingers fumbled with the spring-catch on the tigress' collar, and as the heavy gold chain clinked to the floor, he glanced up quickly, sideways.

But the dwarf had gone.

That there should be no longer within his reach, one whom he knew to be conspiring against his life, caused a fresh access of rage to seize upon Alam Khan; and he stamped in fury on the torn-up pieces of paper on the marble floor.

"Come here, ye sons of dogs!" he roared aloud to his body-guard in the passage outside.

A tall, lean Afridi entered. The meaning of the word "fear" is unknown to the men of his race.

"Thine orders, Khan Sahib?" he asked sullenly, his rifle held negligently across his thighs.

"Bid Shireen Bibi come hither at once!" commanded Alam Khan. . . .

"My lord sent for me?" asked Shireen, as she entered a few minutes later. She drew her veil over her breast, lest he should see the beating of her heart.



The Cobra glared at her.

"Why else should my messenger have come to thee?" he demanded furiously.

Shireen knew that to show fear was to ask for death.

"Thy slave meant but to ask *why* thou hadst sent for her," she returned soothingly.

"Knowest thou aught of a plan to set free the two *Inglish* prisoners?"

"I? What fool has been talking to my lord?" queried the Persian surprisedly.

"The accursed Mongol says——"

"It is *I* who have to tell thee news of *him!*" retorted Shireen exultantly. "He is a traitor! He and Jaffir the eunuch conspire to kill thee, Beloved One!"

"I know it!" spat Alam Khan. "And the fatter of the two hogs dies within the hour!"

Shireen clapped narrow palms excitedly. For the moment she had forgotten her two English protégés and all that depended upon Jaffir's being able to carry out her orders that evening; the thought of a sweet and longed-for vengeance filled her savage young heart.

Seeing her delight, The Cobra's mood changed.

"Thou and I, O Well-beloved Flower whom I joy to wear in my heart, will see him die together! Come!"

"How dies he?" queried Shireen, seating herself. She had suddenly remembered. Time was everything now!

"Four bulls, beaten to the four quarters of the world by men with whips, will tear him asunder!" said Alam Khan. . . . "Kiss me, my Pearl of Beauty!"

"My lord will let me tell Gulbudun?" begged Shireen. "She, too, hates the eunuch."

"Let the child be! There is no time, save for what *I* would tell thee . . . of my love for thee . . ."

Half an hour later, while Alam Khan and Shireen were watching the long ropes being tied to the wrists and ankles of the fainting Jaffir, Khoon the Mongol was writing a letter.

*In the name of God the Compassionate and the Merciful.  
To the Commander of the Army of the Sirkar, Salutations  
and Peace!*

*He who brings this letter will guide you to where you shall  
find Him of the Veil, whom ye have long sought for. Come  
quickly. In token of the truth of what is herein written, I  
offer myself as your hostage.*

*Khoon,  
Descendant of Ghengis Khan, Emperor.*

Looking down at the still wet ink, the dwarf pondered. Who would carry this dangerous missive? To risk its going astray would be to bring death nearer to him than even it was at present, and that was chillingly near.

Whom could he trust? His heart answered, "No one."

Then he would himself carry it to the Sahib commanding the English rescue force! He—and none other!

As he descended the great staircase, a messenger sped past him, almost oversetting him in his hurry.

His nerves stretched to breaking-point, the Mongol shot out a sinewy arm and caught the man by the shoulder.

"Dog!" he exclaimed furiously. "Knowest thou who I am?"

"Yea, I know!" gasped the man. "But I also know that the Khan is my master! Free me!"

"What news takest thou to him?" questioned the Mongol, feeling for his knife.

But the man wrested himself free of the dwarf's grip and again sped on his downward way.

As he ran, Khoon heard him call back something about the favourite of the harem, and a slaying by Shiv the tigress. . . .

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### GULBUDUN AND SHIV MEET FOR THE LAST TIME

SHIREEN AND ALAM KHAN

were riding together to the market-place, where Jaffir was to be executed.

Somewhere a drum was beating furiously, and from out the mud hovels lining the narrow streets poured a jostling, jesting crowd of men, women, and children, called to holiday by that rolling, thunderous drumming. Yet despite their hurry to see a man done to death with a cruelty no pen can adequately describe, not one of them failed to notice the bearded giant on the black stallion, and the slim figure in man's clothes riding beside him.

And those who saw him, mostly fell silent.

"Is it *two* Sahibs who are to die?" shrilled a small boy to his father, as, leaping and hopping, he tried to keep pace with the tall Hillman, covered in bandoliers, who could stride along quickly enough, it seemed.

"Nay, wolfling! 'Tis to-morrow that thou shalt see the Sahibs and their woman die, in the Place of Fights. (*Salaam, Aliekoom*, brother!) To-day it is but an accursed eunuch . . . But he should tear well—being both big and fat . . . Hurry, or I leave thee! . . ."

"*Shabash*, Khan Sahib! Thou dost well to at last rid us of thy governor!" shouted a one-eyed ruffian, planting himself with insolent bravado in Alam Khan's path.

Without a word, his chief rode straight at him, and, making the stallion rear, caused the obstructor hastily to run backwards till he tripped, falling upon his back. Then

wrenching the foam-flecked beast round on its hind legs so that its fore-hoofs crashed clear of the discomfited man, The Cobra joined in the roar of savage laughter that went up.

For Shireen the crowd did not exist. She saw nothing of the thousands of eyes that gazed at her supple beauty, nor did she hear the shouted greetings to him who rode beside her. For the first time in her life—on her way to witness what was, after all, but one more of a score of such sights—her mind was filled with other thoughts than those connected with what she was going (more than willingly) to see. This coming of death to one of The Cobra's victims at the present juncture, had cast an intolerably lurid light upon the danger in which Diana and Colin Gray were. A few short hours and one of *them*—at least one—would meet a death only a degree less horrible than that coming to the eunuch, since wild beasts would do what human beasts were about to perpetrate, with far less excuse.

If Diana's attempt to escape failed, she would die.

She had come to love this long-limbed, red-curled English girl. Diana's devotion to a persecuted Sahib she barely knew, had wrought a change in the Persian's outlook on life. That, and her affection for Diana Lindsay, had caused Shireen to realize the meaning of Injustice.

"Didst thou see that dog fall into the gutter, Light of Mine Eyes?" queried Alam Khan, still guffawing, his hawk-like nose wrinkled from the nostrils up with savage amusement.

"I saw him not," answered Shireen absentmindedly.

For some reason which she could not analyse, her thoughts had that moment turned with a rending intensity to Gulbudun—her playmate and gentle friend.

"Thou art right!" boomed The Cobra, lashing out with his whip at a blind beggar standing in the middle of the street, and cutting the man's face open from ear to chin. "*Thy* thoughts are already in the market-place!" He laid a huge hand on her slim forearm as he spurred the stallion to a place beside her.

"If thou art blaming him whom thou lovest because of his sudden angers," he remonstrated, "then thou hadst as well be angry with the lightning for striking him whom it strikes!" He glanced down at her. The contemplation of her beauty always filled him with a fierce pride in the thought that it was all his—all his! . . . Allah help the man in whose eyes there glowed even a spark of interest when she passed!

"Nay, lord," answered Shireen tersely, turning towards him. "It is not that."

Do what she could, the tears brimmed up every minute nearer the brink of her long lashes.

"By the beard of the Prophet," growled Alam Khan, regarding her intently. "Has aught hurt thee, Sweetling?"

Shireen met the terrible tawny eyes.

"Yea, something has hurt me."

"What is this thing?"

The thought that vengeance on the first one of his three rivals was about to be accomplished, had put Alam Khan into an exceptionally good humour—for him.

"An arrow is in my heart," she answered.

"Have I—?" began the giant.

Shireen shook her head, shading her eyes a moment as if the sun she loved so well were too strong for them.

"Then—what?" he demanded, this time ill-humouredly. He rarely asked a question twice.

"My heart grieves for the *Inglis* girl, lord!"

Alam Khan roared with laughter.

"It is true!" answered Shireen fiercely. "I love her, I tell thee!"

The Cobra swore in his beard.

"It was Him of the Veil who ordered that he die! The Sahib is brave. Yea, by Allah! But I hate him! He has stolen from me, by cheating, that which I had set my heart upon. And, by the Prophet, he shall die for it! Also he is but a hand of the *Inglis Sirkar*, thrust into my pocket to steal something else! For that alone he should die!"

"To steal?" queried Shireen, turning her horse aside for

a small child that had run in front of the spirited animal. "What did he steal?"

"He has *taken* naught!" gritted Alam Khan. "But he was coming as an accursed spy to the Palace of the Mirror. Well, seven of his tribe have died before him for attempting such a stealing. . . . And I would not pluck a hair from my beard to save him! Dust be upon his head! Enough!"

"Thou hast never refused me anything, Mighty Lord," persisted Shireen. "Give *me* this Sahib's life, that I may give it to her who loves him. . . . I have told thee I love her; and it is true. They will both serve thee faithfully if thou wilt let them live."

The Cobra did not answer her, but drove his spurs into the stallion's sides, and scattering the crowd to right and left, galloped towards four red-eyed bulls that were standing in the centre of the market-place. . . .

Like a bird that has lost its mate, Gulbudun was sitting alone in Shireen's great apartment. She was tired, for she had been wandering unhappily in the palace gardens, throwing crumbs to the small red fishes in one of the fountains, expecting Shireen to call to her.

And returning, had found no one.

The child had sought to pass the time of waiting for her friend's return by using all the means at her disposal. And all had, alike, failed her. She had fed Shireen's tame peacock with sugared corn till in its greed to get yet another of the sweet grains, the bird had pecked her soft hand and forthwith been chidden into windy, feathered flight. She had given Dilkooch, the deer, rose after rose to munch, till too lazy to eat another blossom the gentle beast had lain down at her feet. A pink rose-leaf was still lying between its long ears, where Gulbudun had balanced it. She had sung to herself; but the songs, despite her efforts to sing others that were more cheerful, had all been about lovers who had died of love or lost each other in a forest; so that the tears had sprung to her eyes, and casting aside her lute, she had had much ado to stop herself from crying.

The same fate of discardment had been meted out to a book of Persian fairy tales, from which Shireen had taught her to read.

"Of what use are *djinns* and *peris* if I cannot find one to bring her back to me when I want her?" exclaimed the poor child, plucking rebelliously at a long rope of heavy-scented mogra flowers which she had wound about her slim white neck. Then she threw herself down on to a pile of silken cushions, and with her small hands clasped behind her fair head, lay idly listening to the fountains plashing in the garden, wondering why Alam Khan kept Shireen so long.

Suddenly the sharp impact of a heavy body falling on to the marble floor caused her to open wide blue eyes.

Lying a few yards from her was a stone. About it was tied a paper secured by a dirty strip of rag.

Rising, she went over to it—touched it with her small foot—studied it a moment with puckered brows—and then bending, picked it up.

Her dainty nose wrinkled as she untied the dirty strip of rag; but because she badly needed something to occupy her mind, she flattened out the piece of paper and read it many times:

*Khoon the Mongol (it ran) has gone to betray to the Inglis army, thy lord, and Him of The Veil.*

It bore no signature.

For some minutes Gulbudun pondered.

Clearly Shireen should know of this. And soon. The little Georgian was no stranger to the need for speedy action when lives are threatened in the Hills. She must find Shireen at once!

The echoing corridors were deserted; everybody had gone to see the hated Jaffir die.

The damaged frescoes of long-faced, Byzantine knights and rigid, bearded Crusaders, holding small-headed horses against a background of innumerable lances, now and then interested

her as she passed by them; she paused to trace with a delicate pink forefinger, the faded outline of what might once have been a beautiful lady. But it was a very brief pause, and she was soon moving hurriedly onwards again.

At last she stood before The Cobra's door. Would the Khan be angry with her, she wondered. Prudence bade her knock again before pushing open the heavy cedarwood portals.

This time a rolling, as of distant thunder, answered her.

Gulbudun, heated by the haste with which she had traversed the many corridors, said "Pouf! It is hot! There is going to be a storm!" For she thought the sound was the sound of thunder.

As she spoke the word "storm," she entered.

The great room was empty.

Disappointment, mingled with that same strange sense of loneliness and depression, pricked her so sharply that she sat herself down on the side of Alam Khan's couch, and tearing the rope of mogra flowers from about her neck, dashed it petulantly to the ground.

As she did so a great gust of wind from the direction of the market-place, laden with a hoarse, terrible shouting, floated in at the open windows, slamming the cedarwood door and causing her long golden hair to drift towards it, as if invisible fingers were trying to draw her from the room.

Now, at the other side of The Cobra's couch lay Shiv the tigress—unchained. For Alam Khan had forgotten to refasten the spring catch he had undone when he loosed her that she should slay Khoon the dwarf.

Slowly the great beast came round the end of the wide bed. And once more the thunder that Gulbudun had heard rolled through the room.

She knew, now, that it was Shiv's voice she had heard.

Coming leisurely up to the petrified child, the tigress sniffed her. This human smelt as the yellow scarf had smelt when she had torn it to pieces, the day that Alam Khan had beheaded the messenger, and she had been beaten with a rope of mogra flowers for the tearing!



Then the baleful eyes turned to Gulbudun's rope of mogra flowers which was lying on the floor. Distending the hooked claws of one of her great forepaws, Shiv dragged the soft white blossoms towards her, lashing her striped sides with her tail, while tremors of fury rippled down her back.

"Alas, poor beast!" soothed the trembling child, forcing her pale lips to form the words. "Perhaps you, also, miss my Shireen! . . . Please do me no harm, great Shiv, for she loves me dearly!"

But Shiv was gathering and working her hindquarters under her body. . . .

Gulbudun made no sound when Shiv sprang upon her.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### DIANA GOES TO HER ESCAPE

FOR MORE THAN AN HOUR DIANA Lindsay had sat silently beside a grief-stricken Shireen, whose dark eyes stared stonily out into the garden, seeming to see nothing.

Gulbudun's death had changed the Persian. Her new-born hatred of injustice was growing hourly stronger, deepening her love for Diana and forcing her to an unwelcome realization of Alam Khan's cruelty. Indeed, the cold heartlessness of Alam Khan had hurt her almost as much as her companion's death.

When they found the little Georgian lying like a torn lily in a pool of spilled wine, The Cobra's first thought had been neither for the child's fate nor for Shireen's grief: he had merely been transported with fury because the tigress, as if conscious of her blood-guilt, had taken to the Hills, killing two guards who had endeavoured to lay hold of her as she bounded through the palace gates.

"... Little Gulbudun! ... The child was defenceless. ..."

Diana started. The whispered tones were Shireen's.

She stroked the listless, henna-tinted hand lying in her lap, not trusting herself to speak. The sun was setting redly behind the tree-tops: the hour of her parting with Shireen was at hand.

"You and your Sahib, too, are defenceless, even as she was!" went on the Persian mournfully, turning her dark eyes on her.

Diana tried to comfort her.

"Don't you also know that in another world we shall find our friends?" she said softly. "You and Gulbudun will meet again! It is certain!"

"It is certain that the children of a dead happiness are Regrets," replied Shireen bitterly. "She will always be with me in *this* world—that I know! When my eyes have ceased to look for her, and my ears have become deaf to her last calling of my name, always—always I shall see that which I saw in my lord's audience chamber." She shuddered.

"I wish I could stay to comfort you, Shireen," whispered Diana as she put her arms about her. Her woman's heart went out to the Persian girl in her misery. For a moment she forgot how much she needed comfort herself . . . When, on the day of that incredible interview with Colin Gray which The Cobra had staged, Colin had told her of her father's death, her mind had reeled under the shock; only a merciful incredulity had saved her from collapse. . . . And now the very man whom Fate had sent to replace an adored being who had passed out of her life for ever, was himself threatened with death by that same hand!

How would it all end?

"Sometimes I, too, wonder why God lets such things happen." She had spoken half to herself, and half to Shireen.

Shireen lifted her head. The silent magic of sympathy had worked in her.

"Allah knows best! . . . When you are safe in your own country, Deena, will you send me a Writing sometimes? The caravans will find me and give it to me!"

"Perhaps you will come to *my* country one day," answered Diana, trying hard to dispel a sudden feeling of icy dread, identical with that which she had felt on the night she was kidnapped.

"Perhaps," replied the Persian.

The measured footsteps of a patrol, as it passed through the palace gardens, caused Shireen's strong will to reassert itself. Diana must go!

"Go, Deena!" she said resolutely. "Put on the Hillman's dress I have ready for you! . . . Are you afraid?"

She had not told Diana that Gray was to die at sunrise. To do so would merely be cruel, useless and dangerous, as she saw things.

Diana shook her head. She was not afraid for herself, but only lest something should hinder her getting away in time to get help for Colin Gray. Every minute's delay was a torture.

"Allah forbid that anything should stop Firoz coming!" she said apprehensively.

Shireen's face grew sombre. If such a thing happened . . . !

"I have spoken with the herb-woman, Deena," she said in low tones. "Firoz Khan has his camels tethered near a spring not far from the little door. He slept there last night. . . . Remember: so far, your Sahib is well, and his jailer is friendly. . . . Fear not! . . . Go, put on the Hillman's garments!" And Shireen rose and went over to a heap of silken cushions upon which lay an open book of Persian fairy tales; and seating herself there, she let her dark eyes once again stare stonily out into the garden, seeming to see nothing. . . .

A quarter of an hour later a slim young Hillman entered. It was Diana Lindsay.

"I am ready, Shireen!" The contralto tones shook a little.

"By Allah, you make a good-looking youth!" exclaimed Shireen admiringly; and rising to her feet, she laid her small hands lightly on the English girl's shoulders.

"I will call the woman who will guide you to the grotto in which you are to hide," she exclaimed, turning from her.

A stout negress entered.

"Hast thou told the patrols to keep away from the fountain that is near the small door, because I will bathe there?" asked her mistress.

"Yea," answered the Nubian, rolling frightened eyes. "I have bidden them." Silently she held up a key.

"Deena, it is time! Put on this *boorka* [a domino-like robe worn by purdah women of the East] that those man's clothes be hidden, lest anyone see you walking through the garden. . . . When you hear this woman call 'Dilkoosh,' run quickly to the door facing the grotto."

The two girls embraced. A moment later the great apart-

ment was empty. Shireen had gone to see to the preparations for the *nautch* she had ordered to be danced before Alam Khan during the time Diana was escaping.

The grotto reached, Diana strove to compose her strung nerves. And love and prayer aided her.

Suddenly she became aware of a white-clad figure seated close by her in the cool dimness. It was the Swastika *Sadhu*. Moment by moment, she saw him more clearly.

"Did I not tell thee, that night on the Maha Gunj Pass, that you had friends? And was I not right?" he asked gently, in those far-away bell-like tones.

"Yes," answered Diana, once more drawing strength and comfort from his serene regard. "But why are you here?"

"To bid you have courage in a trial that is coming to you."

Diana knew nothing of *Yoga* and its mysteries. She felt puzzled, even more puzzled than Colin Gray had been when first he saw the *Sadhu*. What interest, she asked herself, could this strange being have in her that always made him appear at some crisis in this incredible series of adventures? Apparently his sole object was to encourage and comfort her. Before this moment her practical mind had not seen in the appearance of the grave-faced ascetic, anything super-natural. She had imagined him to be just a dream-phantom—a creation of her overwrought nerves; but now, the place and the circumstances and the curiously unsubstantial look of this white-clad figure, recalled something her father had once said: "India is more full of what is still called the 'super-natural,' than any other country in the world. . . . The Hindu people are nearer the truth about these things than we of the West. . . ."

The thought did not frighten her. This frail-looking man inspired her with a sense of trust, which allowed of no feeling of fear: the only sensation she had at the moment was one of eager curiosity.

"Who are you, *Guru-jee* [Holy Teacher]?" she whispered, her chin in her hand and her eyes fixed upon the curiously luminous eyes of the Hindu.

"I am the sworn enemy of him whom they call The Veiled

One," answered the far-away voice. "Of him who is the destroyer of the shrines of my people, and their most bloody persecutor. Therefore I—and none other—will shortly slay him!"

"Is it true," whispered Diana, "that Alam Khan is the servant of the Veiled Man?"

The *Sadhu* inclined his head.

"He of the Veil found the Palace of the Mirror when it was a temple of Manasā, the Snake Goddess; and, unable to guard it himself, set Alam Khan over it, tempting him with a sharing of the treasure it holds—which he will never share. Before that, no Hillman dared to go near it. It was haunted, they said, and death lurked in its shadow." The *Sadhu* nodded slowly. "And death *was* there—death and madness. . . . Certain Holy Ones of my faith have strange powers; and those of them who lived in these ruins, were seemingly lepers; though it was only *Maya*—illusion—an appearance assumed for their protection. But He of the Veil, defying the death which will come to him because of it, drove them out."

"Why doesn't The Cobra kill this Veiled Man—whoever he is—and seize all this treasure? It is not like him to let one man's life stand in the way of something he wants!"

"Nay. He fears him because of the power he controls."

"What power?"

The lips of the ascetic curved in a faint smile.

"Powers that lie under the earth, and above it, are controlled by him. Ask no more."

Fearful of being overheard by the guards, whose footsteps were clearly audible as they paced up and down, Diana crept a little nearer. If only he would help Colin Gray to escape!

"There is one who is a prisoner——" she breathed.

"I know him!" answered the *Sadhu* instantly. The grave face was lit by a kindly smile. "And I will be with him when the time comes: not I, as you see me, but the power which is mine to strike from afar . . . Karma—the inerrable sum-total of deeds and actions—must be fulfilled. But the Eternal All-Good is on our side. . . ."

These, and many other things which need not be written here, Diana heard from the *Sadhu*. And almost before she knew it, the hour of her escape had struck.

"Dilkoosh, thou imp of Satan, where art thou?" It was the voice of the Nubian woman. And, twice again, came the signal: "*Dilkoosh! Dilkoosh!*"

Diana rose to her knees, listening. She had not noticed that the *Sadhu* had left her. A light "tap-tapping" on the sun-baked earth of the path outside had attracted her attention.

A second later the slender-legged form of Dilkoosh the deer was outlined against the blue dusk at the mouth of the grotto. The animal, scenting her, had come to seek her; for it remembered how she had fed it with the little sweet cakes made of sugar and parched corn which the Persian girl loved.

"I will catch the deer for you!" shouted a man's voice. "It went this way!"

There was a sound of running feet; and the light of a bobbing lantern flickered down the pathway . . . came nearer . . . nearer . . . shone redly into the mouth of the grotto, and fell upon a slim form in Hillman's dress.

"Come out, thou!" exclaimed the guard, a lanky Afridi youth.

And his gaze fixed warily on the frightened eyes staring into his, he set down the lantern, unslung his rifle, and barred all exit.

Diana fumbled for the phial of poison; but it slipped from her trembling fingers, and falling upon the rocky floor was shattered into a thousand pieces.

"Ho, brothers!" shouted the young guard. "Come quickly! I have caught a robber!"

"A robber! A robber!" The cry was taken up by other patrols. Someone let off a rifle; and in the twinkling of an eye the enclosure swarmed with armed men.

A small, squat man was now lashing Diana's hands behind her back, nudging her as he tied the rope. She looked down wearily, but her heart missed a beat when she saw it was Limbu. Gray's Gurkha orderly had managed to get himself enrolled under The Cobra's banner.

"I have come to find him!" he whispered.

Then the other guards closed round her.

"What means this *tamasha*?" boomed Alam Khan's voice. "Bring hither the robber ye have caught!"

He was standing on the balcony outside Shireen's apartments, the Persian by his side; and in the room behind him, that was lit by heavy silver lamps burning perfumed oil, were huddled all the musicians and dancers, the alarm having caused the *nautch* to be hurriedly abandoned.

Shireen's fear-filled eyes were burning in the pale oval of her face like brown fires. There was no mistaking those auburn curls that gleamed so redly in the light of the lanterns.

Seizing The Cobra's hand, the Persian fell upon her knees.

"It is the *Inglis* girl, lord! Harm her not—for my sake! Give her to me! I love her. I swear by Allah that I die unless thou givest her to me!"

She threw herself at his feet.

Alam Khan was strangely moved. Never before had he seen her prostrate at his feet; it had always been he who had lain—and even knelt—at hers; for she was precious to him . . . After all, why should this red-headed *Inglis* girl be killed? She might still be useful to him.

"Free her!" he shouted in stentorian tones.

Shireen seized The Cobra's hand and covered it with kisses. "I love thee—I love thee—thou Great-hearted One!" she cried.

"*Hold her! Or ye die—all of ye!*" rang out a harsh voice.

From the Tower of the Mirror a black-veiled figure was looking down at the actors in this minor drama.

"Hand her over to the Keeper of the Beasts," went on the Veiled Man raspingly. "To-morrow she dies in the Place of Fights!"

Alam Khan's eyes blazed with impotent fury. He had been publicly derided. And with impunity. He who had slain more than one man for an incautious curling of a lip, had been sneered at, and his authority set at naught. He had been humiliated before his own men. His *izzut* [honour] among them was shattered!



But such was his superstitious dread of the Veiled Man's power that he did not dare to reply.

Thrusting the Persian brutally from him with his foot, he strode into the palace, striking the marble pillars with his bare fist as he passed between them.

In the moment of silence before the stupefied guards took her away, Diana could hear Shireen weeping.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXV

### LIMBU DOES SOME TRACKING

THE STORY OF LIMBU'S ADVENTURES after his return to Labak with the Rissaldar, began again a day later, at midnight, on the Maha Gunj Pass. Overhead was the starlit sky. The flickering of camp-fires, and the neighing of horses and pack-animals, the tang of wood smoke, and the "clink-clink" of iron picketing-pegs being driven into the shaly soil, told of a bivouac.

Since three o'clock that afternoon, the rescue force under Colonel Haughton, had marched almost without a halt.

The little Gurkha was busy getting an evening meal ready for Gray's mare, which, despite his forebodings to the contrary, he had been allowed to bring with him. He had not joined up with the five hundred of his fellow countrymen forming the half-battalion of the 90th Gurkhas. A grim aloofness had settled upon him. It was connected—though they did not know it—with the slaying of a certain skinny black goat and an all-night vigil before a polychromatic statue of Kali, the four-armed Goddess of Destruction. He had sworn an oath to cook no food, and to speak to none of his race until he had found Gray—dead or alive. He had even had a wordy passage of arms with two of the Mir's men, who, admiring the mare, had tried to become friendly with him.

Thoughtfully he took out from his haversack a flat round cake of unleavened bread and some boiled pulse in an aluminium box (he was carrying a ten days' supply of both); squatting on his haunches, he ate apart, his keen eyes studying the grim mountain-tops as he munched. That somewhere

on the other side of those forbidding, rocky battlements should be his "Gree" Sahib, while a squat Gurkha named Limbu was on this side of them, was something that was fantastically wrong; a state of affairs that had got to be put an end to—and quickly. . . .

His evening meal finished, he sat lost in thought, his eyes closed in a half-sleep . . . He had to thank Mohammed Shah for being allowed to take Leila the mare with him. The Sirdar, whom the constant strain had evidently broken down, had risen from a bed of fever to intercede with Major Mercer that Limbu should be allowed to take her. . . . He would remember Mohammed Shah for that! . . . Perhaps act as his guide on that shooting-trip along the Nepal border next year.

"The finding of thy Sahib will be difficult, Gurkha!" said a voice at his elbow.

"There was a frog, they say," responded Limbu sleepily, "which sat upon a clod of grass and thought it saw the valleys of Kashmir! Go, you two Hillmen! I have told you—how many times!—that I would be alone!"

A low laugh, as once more the unseen speaker addressed him.

"No Hillman I, but one of your own faith, Gurkha!"

Limbu opened an eye and looked lazily sideways, expecting to see one of his Hillmen would-be friends.

Instead, he saw a grave-faced *Sadhu*, upon whose forehead was painted the white-and-red caste mark of Vishnu. About his neck was a string of the holy rudruksha berries, and over his left shoulder he wore the triple thread of the priestly Brahmin caste.

The Gurkha sprang to his feet bewilderedly, his eyes on a glowing swastika in the centre of the *Sadhu's* breast.

"Pardon thy servant, *Guru-jee!*" he stammered, and bending, touched the ground in front of the seated figure, afterwards lifting his joined hands to his forehead. "I did not know thou wert a Thrice-born, Most Holy One!" he murmured deferentially.

"Mayhap a Hundred-times-born One!" responded the

*Sadhu*, smiling faintly. "Listen well to what I say. Your feet are like to go astray in this search for a Sahib!"

"Go astray?" queried Limbu, aghast at the possibility.

"Yea. To-morrow the Colonel Sahib will follow a wrong path. The tracks he has been told of are those of a decoy party . . . What eatest thou?"

"A *chupatti*!" answered Limbu perplexedly. He knew he dare not offer a Brahmin food, and wondered at the question.

"And with it—pulse?" retorted the *Sadhu*.

"Yea—pulse! What of it, Holy One?"

"Thine eyes are keen; look carefully, and thou shalt find the path to thy Sahib marked out in pulse, Gurkha!"

"A false trail, saidst thou, Thrice-Born?" exclaimed the Gurkha impulsively. "I go to warn the Adjutant Sahib! Wait for me, that I may ask thee more about this 'pulse' when I return!" And he raced towards the fire around which the officers of the half-battalion of the goth Gurkhas were taking their evening meal, knowing that Sahibs often decide upon the next day's battle-plan as they eat.

It was a dejected Limbu who returned to the spot where he had left the *Sadhu*. The Adjutant Sahib had said that the Colonel would not change his route, and had then taken hold of his wrist, asking him if he had fever, since no such caste-marked *Sadhu* could possibly be with the rescue force. Let Limbu go and bring him, and prove it!

But the Brahmin had gone.

"I wait until dawn, Mother Kali!" gritted Limbu, who felt it would help things if he could hit somebody. "If, then, thou showest me not the grains of pulse that mark the way to my Sahib, surely I will knock off thy stone head when I get back!"

The first streaks of dawn saw him afoot. Leila fed, watered and groomed, he waited impatiently for the coming of day; but just before it was light enough to distinguish among the stones and shale anything like a trail of small grains, the force began to move off.

Disappointedly, the little Gurkha led the mare up to the

Colonel's *syce* [groom]. The *Sadhu's* statement should be tested. Holy men do not lie, Limbu told himself.

"Thou admirest the mare, O Gobind Ram," he said. "Lead her awhile for me! . . . And if I come not back, care for her as thou wouldst for thine own daughter—or when I meet thee again," he added savagely, "I will beat thee to such a jelly as a famine-pig would turn aside from! . . . Take hold of her neck-rope, fool!"

With the rising of the sun came joy; an hour's searching discovered the trail of millet that had dropped from the sack which Firoz Khan had tied on to the back of Diana's saddle and which he pierced for the express purpose of laying a trail.

As he followed it, bent almost double and half running, the sharp report of a rifle and a spirt of dust two feet away from him, brought an instantaneous realization of his danger. The life and property of any Hindu who ventures alone into the Hills, is, by Hill law, legitimate prey.

Someone, and a good shot at that, was sniping him.

Slipping behind a rock he unslung his rifle, and jamming a cartridge into the breech, peered out to scan the hillside.

There was no one to be seen. High overhead droned a squadron of bombing 'planes.

Taking off his round felt cap, he placed it on the muzzle of his rifle and raised it cautiously over the top of the rock—an old Frontier trick.

Two bullets greeted its appearance, one sending the splinters flying from the stone, and the other causing the felt cap to spin round with its impact.

"*Sri Guru Nanak!* [Great Guru Nanak] . . ." swore Limbu angrily. "If there be but two of ye, ye shall see how a Gurkha slays a brace of carrion Hillmen!" He sat down, his rifle across his knees, patiently waiting.

Soon, far up on the hillside, a small grey blotch moved.

The weapon flew to Limbu's shoulder, and, even as it recoiled, the grey blotch crumpled.

"One!" he counted grimly.

After a further wait of twenty minutes, seeing no sign of life on the mountain-side, he emerged from behind the shel-

tering rock, once more to take up the trail he had been following.

Here and there it was almost too faint to be seen; but the instinct of a born tracker, plus a savage determination to win through to his goal, kept him on his path. And had he not the word of the Thrice-born One?

Eighteen times in five hours his single pursuer fired at him, each time missing him by inches; and eighteen times Limbu forebore to attempt retaliation; time was too precious to allow of luxuries.

At length he reached the cluster of boulders at the foot of the cliff, behind one of which was the tunnel through which Diana and The Cobra had passed. There the trail ended.

And there his casting round in search of a possible continuance of it very nearly cost him his life, for a bullet from his unseen pursuer grazed his shoulder.

Swearing between his clenched teeth, Limbu took cover behind one of the great masses of rock, and, straining his eyes till they ached, again searched the hillside for his enemy; but though there was still no one to be seen, his keen eyes observed something else—something far more important than the mere sighting of a relentless pursuer.

There were unmistakable indications all round him of a large body of horsemen having halted there.

The problem which now faced him was to discover where they had gone to, for a careful search failed to reveal any sign of their having continued their march.

Thoughtfully his eyes studied the cliff and the boulders.

Something shining among the pebbles near the base of the biggest of them caught his eye.

Swiftly he ran out towards it, took a bullet through the fleshy part of his thigh as he did so, and picked up what he had seen.

It was a gold bracelet, on the inside of which were engraved the letters, "D. L. from J. L." One of Diana's!

Enemy or no enemy, this was a clue that was going to be followed up!

The vicious "*tss-ss! plup!*" of another bullet hastened his limping disappearance behind a projecting wing of the boulder, there to think out a plan of action as he sat binding up the flesh-wound in his thigh. Suddenly he felt a thin, cold air blowing on his neck.

Limbu grinned ecstatically. That chill draught on this hot morning had told him that there was a concealed opening behind the great stone—probably the entrance to a cave or a passage.

Setting his broad back to it, with his feet against the cliff and exerting all his strength, he straightened his body by inches.

Slowly the rock yielded, turning on its smooth base. One inch—two—four—eight inches. Then it stuck, and no further efforts of his could budge it a further fraction of an inch.

The blood drumming in his ears, he tried to force his way through the narrow opening he had achieved; but his clothes caught in the rough surface of the stone and held him back.

Rapidly he tore off his upper garments and pushed them, with difficulty, together with his rifle, into the tunnel beyond. Then he squeezed his way between cliff and boulder.

Safely inside, he once more sat down, the muzzle of the Lee-Metford pointed at the narrow opening.

What he expected, happened about half an hour later.

A shadow darkened the ground outside, and a man's head was slowly craned forward till its owner could see into the tunnel. It was one of the two Hillmen who had tried to make friends with him.

Limbu's rifle leapt to his shoulder. There was a sharp report, and the man fell, a hole drilled through his forehead.

Having propped his late pursuer's body into a sitting position against the boulder, he stood regarding it musingly. He was pondering how the dead man could best be made to act as a messenger.

At first he had thought of cutting off the head with his *kukri* and setting it on a rock to attract the attention of Colonel Haughton's advance scouts; but the recollection of

"Gree Sahib's" displeasure when he had done it on a previous occasion, caused that plan to be abandoned.

Tearing a leaf out of a small notebook Gray had given him, he scribbled, painfully enough, two lines of a pencilled message on it.

Folding it in two, he placed the paper between the front teeth of the corpse, winding the dead man's puggri in such a manner that it kept the mouth firmly closed.

Then he plunged into the tunnel.

His plan was now clear. When he came up with the raiders—as he knew he ultimately would—he would pretend he was a deserter from the *Sirkar's* forces, and enlist under The Cobra's banner. After that . . .

Nearly two days later the little Gurkha's message reached Colonel Haughton, who had spent thirty-six precious hours searching for a practicable road over the mountains. As the *Sadhu* had said, the route he had followed proved to be a false one. It had led him into a veritable death-trap—a three-hundred-feet-deep, blind gorge, on the surrounding heights of which swarmed The Cobra's men, who poured a devastating fire into the huddled troops.

Only in the nick of time was their Commander able to withdraw his force, under cover of the mountain guns, and retrace his steps, finally to take his instructions from between the clenched teeth of a dead Hillman.



---

---

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### A HOUSE DIVIDED

UNDER THE FIG TREE BEHIND the house of Ali the gunsmith sat a ring of ten men. Now and then one of them would take a suck at the *kalyan*, or hubble-bubble, in the centre, and slowly exhaling the smoke, pass the pipe on to his neighbour. They were The Cobra's chief *sirdars* gathered together to discuss his plans for the forthcoming battle with Colonel Haughton's force, which was now at the foot of the pass leading to the Valley of the Mirror.

"Allah! It should be a good fight!" said one of them, his lean face lit by the glow in the earthenware bowl of the *kalyan*.

"They will have guns which climb mountains, and we have none such!" grumbled another, whom they called "Baba." He was seventy, and had the eyes of a hungry hawk. "Of what use is it to lie behind a stone when death spits from the air?"

"Yea," added a third discontentedly, "though a man cover his shoulder-blades with his shield, the shrapnel can still bite his liver—and that is a bad death!"

"All must die!" said a tall, red-bearded Hillman sententiously, tightening the folds of his green turban. He was a *haji*—one, that is, who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. But though he was also a mullah, he had little influence. "Ye know the reward the Prophet (on whom be prayer and peace!) has said awaits those who die fighting the *Kafirs*! What matters it how ye die, so long as ye die in the killing of a *Kafir*!"

"The *Sahib-lōg* have good *arspitals* [hospitals], wherein they cure bad wounds—easily, they say," commented a fourth

man. "We have none such! Medicine and bandages are better than rewards, sometimes, Haji!"

"They say the *sipahees* [soldiers] of the *Inglis* army are paid a rupee a day," coughed a deep voice; some of the pungent tobacco-smoke had gone the wrong way. "Even we *sirdars* get not that! And our men are in rags! *Ai*, but it will be good to loot India and dress ourselves in silks and jewels and have many women—as others have!"

"Thou wouldst grow a belly like a mare in foal," rumbled the *haji's* deep tones. He felt that he was not meeting with the respect he was entitled to. "To fight for the Faith is better than fat times! Nought is better than Martyrdom for the Faith."

"They to whom people bring food and cloth, have no need to worry about what they shall eat and wear, Mullah!" remarked a man with one arm sarcastically. He knew that the *haji* levied heavy toll on the charity of the Faithful.

The mullah leaned forward.

"When didst thou lose thine arm, Karam Ali?" he demanded arrogantly.

"I lost it not. I gave it—to save His life," answered the one-armed man simply.

A low murmur of approval rumbled round the circle. It was a good play to see a mullah worsted.

"Is it not true," insisted the *haji*, fighting hard for his prestige, "that the day before that fight thou shouldst have given a fat-tailed sheep to the guardian of the shrine at Pir Bagh, and did not give it?"

"I offered it; but he said it was like some mullahs—all hardness!" retorted One-arm, encouraged by the murmured approval of his fellow *sirdars*.

"The Holy Koran—" began the mullah angrily.

"What know we of the Holy Book?" spat a burly Afridi. "That is *thy* trade, mullah! A sirkari rifle cost fifteen hundred rupees; and without a good rifle how shall a man fight the *Sahib-lōg*? What says the Book about *that*?"

"Nay, brother," creaked Baba's voice. "Thy words are foolish! I have a gun—a flintlock that was my father's and *his*

father's before him—and with it, I have picked off Sahibs at a thousand yards!”

“Yea! And the shrapnel comes to spit where they see the smoke of thy gas-pipe!” said another voice scathingly. “We are badly armed. It is a true word!”

“Those who are badly armed are also badly paid!” grated a harsh voice from the entrance to the little courtyard.

A low “*Wah!*” rumbled round the circle, and stabbing-knives whispered sharply as they flashed from their scabbards in the dark.

“Put by your steel! Ye spoke of gold. I say ye shall have gold! But first I have orders to give ye.” A tall, cowed form in black came up to the circle.

“Allah! It is Him of the Veil!” whispered the youngest of the *sirdars* hoarsely.

“We are Alam Khan’s men,” interjected the mullah. “Or *they* are; I am a man of God!”

“Thou talkest well of Paradise, mullah! Mayhap thou wilt soon enter it—or some other place!” The cold threat in the tones evidently struck a chill into the mullah, for he remained silent.

“As shoes are tested upon the feet, so are men tested in fighting time! Ye have fought well; but as ye say, ye have been ill-paid,” went on the Veiled Man.

“It is a true word!” muttered one or two voices.

“Why put ye not your grievances to the Khan?” asked the speaker gutturally.

“There are those whose ears hear not,” grumbled Baba.

“Or who snap at themselves, as a mad dog snaps,” supplemented another.

“Are ye afraid of him, then?”

“He has much power and a mighty sword-arm,” cut in the youngest of the circle.

“Yea, power from a power against which no sword can avail. *My* power! If a mouse were as big as a bullock, it would still be the slave of a cat!”

“Thou speakest a true word, Khan-Sahib,” said the youngest of the *sirdars*. “But I for one would not cross him! His

anger smoulders not as a Hillman's anger smoulders—like a dung fire. It blasts!"

"Mine also!" said the Veiled Man quietly. "But I come not to listen to the squeakings of frightened mice. I come to speak to leaders of fighting-men. Harken! It is given me to foresee many things—as ye know." The Veiled Man's tones were lower than they had ever heard them.

"We know it!" rumbled the listening circle. They were thinking of the all-seeing eye of the mirror in the tower.

"It may be written that Allah will call the Khan from amongst ye! If that come to pass, and he be not there to lead, will ye that *I* lead in his stead?"

"You could only lead us where *he* has led us! And he has led us well," riposted the mullah defiantly, taking courage from the silence which had followed the Veiled Man's last words.

"*'Us'?*" grated the Veiled Man. "There was a toad which burst itself, I have heard! Also, is there not a proverb which says: 'Under his arm the Koran and his eye on the bullock'?" He knew the *haji's* unpopularity because of his extortionate charges for "services rendered."

Turbaned heads wagged and several of the men chuckled. The circle was now in high good humour. It enjoyed mullah-baiting.

"Thou art right, Veiled One!" said a chorus of deep voices.

"Without doubt I am right! To-morrow ye go to see the *tamasha* I have prepared for ye in the Place of Fights," went on the veiled figure. "It will be a good *tamasha*."

"Yea, indeed we go!" sighed the group rapturously.

"If I call upon ye there, will ye answer '*We are your men!*'? Listen, brothers," went on the speaker, without waiting for their answer. "All the riches of India shall be yours, if I lead ye! Not one rupee will I take for myself!"

"Without doubt we will so answer!" replied the one they called "Baba," knowing he spoke for his fellow *sirdars*. For weeks past, thanks to Khoon the Mongol's propaganda, disseminated under the orders of the Veiled Man, discontent had been simmering among The Cobra's men.

"It is well!"

"It may not be well!" riposted the mullah hoarsely, making a last desperate bid for authority. "The Khan may have heard by then——"

A loose black sleeve shot forward and something flashed from the hand of the black-cowled figure.

Coughing thickly, the *haji* fell forward, his hands clawing at the knife.

"Take him and bury him! He was a traitor!"

The shapeless form of the Veiled Man melted into the shadows, and he was gone.

For almost a minute after he had gone, the circle sat gazing dumbfounded at three inches of steel projecting from the back of the dead man's neck as it glittered redly in the now risen moon.

"He did well," said Baba at last. "We are *his* men. We have said it!"

And in the burial-ground which lies half a *kos* behind the house of Ali the gunsmith, the jackals fell suddenly silent.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THE PLACE OF FIGHTS

THE PLACE OF FIGHTS ADJOINED the Palace of the Mirror, to which it was connected by underground passages. With its tiers of grey stone seats rising one above the other in the manner of a Roman amphitheatre, its general design resembled the Coliseum at Rome. Evidently at one time (as the extensive ruins round the lake and elsewhere bore witness) there had existed in the valley a big city, of which the nucleus of The Cobra's stronghold had almost certainly formed the citadel, and this was its amusement centre.

The *tamasha* had been proclaimed by drum-beat.

Long before dawn, a stream of eager men, women, and children had been moving towards the two entrances of the amphitheatre.

The morning was sultry, and a thick haze hung over the valley. From behind the enclosing mountains to the south, livid cumulus clouds were rolling up and spreading rapidly, the snow-capped peaks showing tensely white against them. Now and again, a choked rumbling of distant thunder made the air quiver.

The older spectators shook their heads uneasily as their hard brown eyes scanned those up-piled vaporous masses. There was a legend current among them that many centuries before, on just such another day as this, similar portents had heralded an earthquake in which a hundred thousand Hill-men had been buried under the riven and shattered hills. . . .

By sunrise, the seating accommodation was packed.

Mingling with the babel of human voices could be heard

noises of famished wild beasts waiting to be glutted on human flesh. Occasionally, attendants crossed the wide sandy space with leisurely steps, carrying sinister-looking implements of steel and iron which jingled or clanked as they were thrown down amid an exchange of sadistically grim humour with the nearest spectators.

In a semicircle around a pile of logs and brushwood, twelve stout wooden posts had been dropped upright into stone sockets, long chains hanging from their iron rings. Close by them were three large braziers, the hot air quivering above the glowing charcoal.

Overhead, was the wide peace of a patch of blue sky.

The crowd was becoming impatient. The news had gone round that on this occasion the spectacle would not begin until He of the Veil had taken his place. Soon the sun would be hot, and many of those present had a long journey before them after the spectacle was over.

Now, auditorium manners in Yanistan do not, in some ways, differ much from those of London, Paris, or New York. A discontented murmuring gradually bubbled into sporadic vocal protests, rose, *crescendo*, to a sustained calling, and finally swelled to a clamorous uproar.

"Let the *tamasha* begin! Bring out the prisoners! Khan Sahib-ho! Khan Sahib-ho! Begin! Begin! . . ."

That something might at the last moment deprive them of seeing two Sahibs—or was it three?—and an *Inglis* girl done to death, after having been tortured in various delectable ways, was whetting savage passions to fever-heat. The eight Hillmen who were to die with them were, by comparison, of little interest. Red blood on white skin this crowd had been promised; red blood on white skin they intended to have.

Suddenly the clamorous uproar changed to a shout of applause, as the gigantic black-bearded figure of The Cobra entered.

For a moment his glowing eyes—which, it was said, no guilty man ever looked into and lived—scanned the crowded amphitheatre.

But the long-awaited signal was not given.

The resultant pandemonium ended some ten minutes later, in a long-drawn "*hss-ss*," as if a mass of molten metal were being plunged into water.

The Veiled Man had taken his seat.

At the raising of his black-gloved hand, the great gates slowly opened.

At the head of the grim procession which then entered the arena were the three—unchained. Behind them clanked eight manacled Hillmen, on either side of whom was a line of escorting guards.

As Gray came out into the sunlight, a deep "*aah!*" of satisfaction went up from ten thousand throats. His splendid physique and six feet four inches of height, promised good "*sport*."

He was holding one of Diana's hands, who, bareheaded and still in Hillman's dress, seemed almost diminutive beside him—tall though she was.

His other arm was about the shoulders of a scarecrow being with a tangled mass of greyish hair and beard, who stumbled as he walked with his arms crossed upon his breast, his clawlike hands hidden in his armpits.

"Can you *see* him, Gray?" asked Galbraith hoarsely.

Colin Gray did not answer. He was watching Diana's face with an anguished intentness—as a lover might watch the face of the beloved grow paler with the coming of death.

"Gray!" repeated Galbraith. "Tell me! Can you see him? Is he near?"

Unanswered, he sank to his knees.

The procession halted. There was some bustling among the guards; but Gray kept them away from Galbraith, standing over him like a Colossus.

The spectators thought the blind man was begging for mercy, and a momentary curiosity hushed the crowd. But . . . "O just and merciful God, let him come near to me!" . . . meant nothing to them; and they lost interest in the scene when Gray lifted Galbraith to his feet and patted him on the back.

The prisoners had now reached the centre of the arena



and were ordered to halt. Evidently some orders were awaited.

The bank of leaden cloud had now spread upwards toward the sun, and a purplish gloom had succeeded the bright sunlight of a few moments before.

A quick, short trembling of the earth brought a few seconds' silence, and then increased babel. But the excitement soon subsided. Earthquakes are common happenings in Yanistan.

It was in those few seconds of quiet that, for the last time but one, Diana and Colin heard as clearly as if it were being broadcast upon the ether, the voice of the Swastika *Sadhu*. It seemed to be quite close to them.

"*Chela* [disciple] that was!" it said, "challenge him to wrestle! Afterwards, pass through the door on the right of the gates! . . ."

Then the bell-like tones faded.

The eyes of the lovers met.

"Will you, Colin?"

"Yes," said Gray tensely, "if he'll come down!"

He turned to Limbu.

"I go to challenge the Khan!" he said.

Limbu—who had arranged by open bribery and corruption that he should be chosen as one of the escort—thumbed the razor-edge of his *kukri* while an ecstatic smile—carefully directed heavenwards—spread slowly over his broad face. What a Sahib was his! *O Sri Guru Nanak! What a Sahib!*

For a moment Gray looked into Diana's eyes; then, without a word, he crossed the arena.

None of the guards tried to stop him. They seemed to be in a state of bewildered stupor. The ullulations of the watching horde once more ceased. What was he going to do?

A few yards from the wall he stopped and, folding his arms, looked up at The Cobra.

"I call you all to witness," he shouted, "that Alam Khan is afraid of me! His heart is a heart of glass! If what I say be untrue, then let him come down and wrestle with me! Ye, O people, shall decide which of us is the better wrestler! But he will not dare!"

A bass muttering—half-angry, half-approving—rose, continued a brief moment, and died down.

Alam Khan jumped to his feet, livid with fury.

"Seize him and chain him to a post!" he roared to the astonished guards.

"Lay no hand upon him!" counter-ordered the Veiled Man in tones like a harsh trumpet-blast. "The Khan shall teach this *Kafir* to respect Our presence! . . . We bid thee go down and wrestle with him, Sirdar Alam Khan! What thou leavest of him, the beasts shall finish!"

Almost before he had ended, The Cobra had left his seat and, a minute later strode into the arena.

Quickly Gray moved back to the centre.

"If I fail, Limbu, you know what you have to do!" he shouted above the roar of voices.

Once more Limbu felt the edge of his *kukri*, but there was no smile on his face this time as he glanced at Diana Lindsay. . . .

If Alam Khan's appearance was impressive when he was clothed, half-naked it was terrific.

A barrel-like chest and gigantic shoulders were covered with black hair, and huge muscles bunched and knotted under the wheaten skin as he swung, bent and lifted his enormous arms to limber them, clenching and unclenching the fingers which could twist a metal dish as if it were a thing of putty.

A few yards from Gray he bent down; and driving the point of a long stabbing-knife some inches into the floor of the arena, so that it stood upright, he rubbed his great hands and forearms with sand.

The silence was now intense.

Gray took one last look at Diana.

Then the eyes of the two men met—tigerish hate in the Hillman's and cold contempt in the white man's.

"Said I not that thou art afraid of me, O Khan?" jeered Gray. "See! Thou needest a knife to give thee courage!"

That second ringing defiance was heard in the furthest corner of the amphitheatre.

"I handle not the flesh of a dead dog!" retorted Alam Khan furiously. "I will cut it off thee—even though the steel is good steel!"

And pushing his greasy black hair behind his ears he spat in Gray's face.

Gray's nostrils whitened.

"Thou shalt eat dirt for that insult, thou son of a pig!" he said.

And his fifteen-stone-five of bone and muscle moved warily forward to meet twenty stone of rage-shaken Hillman, breast to breast.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

“WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK . . .”

THE GREAT DIFFERENCE IN THE two men's height and weight, made them a striking contrast.

Five inches taller and almost five stone heavier, Alam Khan was the incarnation of colossal brute-force in human form; but Gray was the better built, and despite his magnificent muscular development, easily the lither. Certainly he was the cooler-headed of the pair—incalculably valuable advantages when the quick changing of a grip means life or death for its changer.

Strength for strength, The Cobra was unquestionably the mightier man; and “Zero” Gray knew that his only hope of defeating this mountain of brawn lay in the exercise of superior science. He could never do it by strength alone.

Strangely enough, the spectators were displaying no sign of favouritism, a fact which heartened Gray, even though he knew it was merely the outcome of a conflict between an eager anticipation of seeing him defeated, and a cruel hope that he might win.

The hope, of course, arose from the realization that, should The Cobra prove the better man, the subsequent torturing of a maimed and half-conscious Sahib would provide comparatively poor sport.

The silence could be felt.

The two men, stripped to the waist, stood facing each other half-crouching; eyes watching eyes; their left legs thrust backwards, buttress-wise.

Two pairs of brown hands with tensely curved fingers, felt

the air warily as they groped for a first hold—like men in a dark room groping for the knife-hand of an assassin.

Save for this slow movement, the two adversaries might have been a group of bronze and marble statuary. Even the skin-shadows cast by their bulging muscles, moved not the fraction of an inch.

A sound like two whips being cracked.

Gray's hands had smacked downwards on to The Cobra's huge wrists, locking round them like steel bands.

With a savage grunt, Alam Khan made a violent upward movement with his arms, striving to throw off the Englishman's grip. And failed.

The great muscles in Gray's hams, rippled and tightened. He tugged the Hillman towards him with a short, quick pull. He was trying for a cross-buttock throw, hoping that the man's great weight would cause the fall to daze him.

But The Cobra, with three hundred and forty Frontier wrestling victories to his credit, was too quick for him.

Forcing his hands outwards, he drew Gray towards him instead, who, to avoid his arms being wrenched from their sockets, was compelled to loose his hold on his opponent's wrists.

Then with a dull thud, the two men's arms clamped themselves about each other's body at waist-level.

Gray, his head turned sideways to avoid being blinded by The Cobra's great beard, drove his left shoulder hard under his enemy's armpit.

And there, for what seemed interminable, slow-ticking minutes, they stood—locked, their skins shining with starting beads of perspiration.

Gray knew that among Oriental wrestlers, the heavier of two adversaries will often trust to his weight tiring out a lighter opponent; he had once seen a grip such as he and the Hillman were now in, held almost without a move for the best part of half an hour.

His greatest danger lay in The Cobra's getting a Nelson-lock (or even a half-Nelson lock) on him, and so, with a lightning wrench, breaking his neck, or an arm. Now and

then, Alam Khan would suddenly bear downwards with all his three hundred pounds of weight, in a desperate endeavour to break the resisting convex curve of Gray's back; and the bands of muscle lacing the Englishman's thighs would tighten into marble hardness as each grunting effort was made and failed.

Inch by inch the two men's feet sank into the sand, until their ankle-bones were hidden.

An extra mighty downward thrust, given with every ounce of The Cobra's prodigious strength, brought a further fierce driving in of Gray's shoulder.

The next second, a mighty hammer-stroke of the Hillman's left heel against the back of his prisoner's right foot, nearly threw Gray.

With lightning quickness he crooked his leg, and throwing his weight backwards, with a wrenching twist tried to throw The Cobra.

Swiftly Alam Kham countered, shifting his back-heel grip and driving his right knee between Gray's thighs.

Gray realized his peril as the gigantic Hillman started to lift him bodily from the ground. "What's sauce for the goose—" he thought grimly. And from mid-air, delivered a smashing blow from his own heel behind The Cobra's knee.

The two men crashed heavily to the ground.

Gray was underneath Alam Khan.

A rending roar went up from the crowd.

"*Sri Guru Nanak!*" shouted Limbu, dancing with excitement. His voice was louder than them all.

The fall had winded Gray, and it was all he could do not to loose his hold as he lay under that crushing bulk, waiting for his lungs to fill again.

The crowd's impassivity had vanished.

Animal passions were aflame. A raucous din of shouting filled the air. Curses on the "*Kafir Sahib*," cries of encouragement to The Cobra (Gray thought he heard one or two in his favour)—taunts definitely hurled at Alam Khan—all these mingled in that deafening roar of savage enjoyment.

"Mother Kali, thou witch!" hissed Limbu, as he peered

between two of the guards who had moved in front of him. "Either he wins, or thy head comes off when I get back!"

Diana, white to the lips, was staring at the contestants.

They were moveless now, lying locked together in the sand a few yards from her.

Terror fighting with an unshakable belief in Gray's invincibility, she stood as if turned to stone.

A sharp pricking in her thigh caused her to look down.

Galbraith, still on his knees, was tugging at her baggy Hillman trousers—his hands armed with a fearsome set of five-curved, double-edged steel claws fitted on to a knuckle-duster-like arrangement—the needle points of which had pricked her.

"For God's sake be still! It isn't finished! They've fallen!" she said impatiently, glancing down at him.

"What's happening? . . . I have been praying! . . . Take me to him! *Now!* God has told me He will grant my prayer! Take me near to him, I say!" he begged, moving closer to her on his knees.

With an effort Diana forced herself to answer him, bending down to make herself heard above the shouting.

"Take you near to whom?"

"That beast, Alam Khan!"

"He and Major Gray are wrestling," she cried shakily. "They have *fallen*, I tell you! No one can go near them!"

"Gray's underneath? Zero'll beat him! God told me so! 'How long, O Lord? How long?' . . . I think I'm dying."

She helped him to rise.

He had once more hidden his hands in his armpits, and the loose sleeves of his filthy upper garment as they fell back, revealed the pitifully shrunken arms and grimed skin. She knew, vaguely, why he wanted to get near to Alam Khan. Yet what could so frail a being do against such a Colossus?

But Limbu's sharp eyes had seen the narrow, clawlike knives that the blind Galbraith had persuaded the assistant jailer to get made for him. And because he knew the use to which the Mahrattas put such weapons, his heart warmed

to this ruin of a Sahib; for he realized what Galbraith wanted to do.

"I will lead thee to him, Sahib, when the time be come!" he said grimly. "It will not be long now!"

"Who are you?" quavered Galbraith, turning sightless eyes in his direction.

"I helped thee to the pavilion after a polo accident in Lahore, Sahib, two years ago!" responded Limbu rapidly. "Your Honour gave me a tobacco-pouch like the Sahibs use, when you came out of *arspital*. It is in my father's house in Kathmandu," added the little Gurkha proudly.

The tortured face of the blind man softened.

"You're—you must be his Gurkha orderly, then! . . . I remember you!"

A ghost of one of Limbu's genial smiles came, and was exorcised.

"Your Honour speaks truly . . . When my Sahib has throttled this buffalo of a Khan, there will be others to do a killing, besides you, Sahib!" He glanced at the eight watchful Hillmen prisoners as he spoke. He had given them their orders: when he struck down a guard with his *kukri*, they were to seize the weapons of the others and close round Gray and Diana, and fight their ways across the arena to the underground passage; and once there, to close the gates. It was a forlorn hope, but the only one. . . .

The struggle between Gray and The Cobra had entered its last phase; the two adversaries were now rolling over and over in the sand, reviled, advised, jeered-at and encouraged, indiscriminately, by the half-frantic crowd.

The fight had already lasted half an hour.

Gray's back and waist were badly knocked about. Great patches of raw skin, torn off by the dragging of The Cobra's sand-smeared arms and hands, showed redly between the deep blue of the bruises caused by those iron fingers and great arm-bones. There was no science in the Hillman's methods, just savage cruelty—limb-twisting and indescribable fouls following rapidly one after the other.

The two men got to their feet again after a mutual release.



Alam Khan's bulk was beginning to tell against him. He was gasping for breath. His greater height, besides having saved Gray from a dozen wild-animal attempts to bite off his ear and tear out his jugular vein, was now to prove his downfall.

Head down, the Englishman dashed at him, and dodging his grip, bent, turned his left side inwards, locked his arms, gave one mighty heave, and threw him over his head.

The shout that went up seemed to split the sky.

"O Mother Kali! O truly mighty Mother Kali! Not one, but *twenty* black goats will I behead for thee!" shouted Limbu, almost beside himself with joy.

"He has won! Oh, thank God!" cried Diana, the tears running down her face.

But Gray had not won.

The little Gurkha had seen something that was making him spit on his right palm and balance his *kukri* preparatorily.

In The Cobra's hand glittered the heavy eighteen-inch stabbing-knife.

---

---

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### GALBRAITH PAYS A DEBT

LIVID WITH FURY, AND FEELING the point of the weapon with the ball of his thumb, Alam Khan glared at his adversary through strands of sand-matted hair which he no longer troubled to brush from his eyes.

His chest heaved like a pair of bellows as he stood a moment to regain his breath; he was gazing gloatingly at the spot in Gray's body in which he would drive home his weapon.

Gray, breathing deeply and slowly, to steady his heart, watched him. He knew that the next few seconds would decide all. His one chance seemed to lie in another sudden rush of "tackling low." The Cobra must be thrown before he could use that long dagger to strike upwards. The world's master of a knife when he uses it his own way, a Hillman is clumsy and awkward with it when he is forced to strike downwards.

At that moment a blinding blue-white flash of lightning lit the overcast sky, a deafening crash of thunder rattled overhead, and the whole vast amphitheatre rocked like a ship in a gale. Great masses of masonry, loosened by the shocks, toppled slowly from the topmost arches on to the shouting and terrified spectators below; cracks appeared in the walls, with reports like cannon being fired.

Pandemonium reigned.

Gray's first thought was for Diana.

Foot by foot he backed towards her—keeping his eyes on The Cobra. To look away from the holder of that knife, meant death.

The ring of guards had broken. Most of the men were seeking safety in flight; three or four of them were fighting vainly for their lives with the other eight prisoners.

A little apart stood Diana and the Gurkha, both watching Gray and The Cobra, as if hypnotized, Limbu mechanically wiping the blade of his *kukri* with a piece of wet, dark-red cloth . . .

Nobody seemed to notice a stumbling, scarecrow-like figure with its hands hidden in its armpits, moving out, alone, towards the centre of the arena.

Onwards, step by step, his breath hissing between his clenched teeth, came The Cobra.

"Thou hast yet time to save thy life, O Khan!" shouted Gray tauntingly.

"That I will do when I have taken thine, thou dog!" roared Alam Khan, his great voice dominating even that appalling uproar.

At the sound of his words, the blind Galbraith turned sharply.

His meagre form seemed to stiffen.

Uncertainty left his steps. Swiftly he moved towards The Cobra, the sharpened faculties of the blind telling him where his prey was.

With three quick, running steps he cannoned into the centre of Alam Khan's back, and flinging out his shrunken arms, wrapped them round that huge, naked waist.

"*My God, I thank thee!*" The blind man's voice was a scream of triumph.

With the maniacal strength which comes, sometimes, to the mentally afflicted, he pressed The Cobra's great body to him, driving the ten curved knives through the stomach muscles on either side, as ten sharp pen-knives might be driven through the parchment of a drum.

Then he drew the razor-edged *bagh-nakhs* sideways, so that his hands ultimately met at his victim's navel. . . .

With a last dying effort The Cobra severed the girdle of those thin avenging arms, and turning, drove the knife home in the way a Hillman knows. . . .

When he had seen Galbraith coming up behind Alam Khan, Gray had at once realized what was going to happen; but the sight of the frail stumbling figure, its lean neck stretched forward as if striving to pierce the impenetrable veil of blindness, had held him spellbound. He knew that any sign or word of warning from him would merely hasten what must, now, inevitably come to pass—besides depriving the doomed Galbraith of his long-prayed-for revenge.

What was best, he had allowed to happen. . . .

There was not a second to be lost, if Diana and he were to escape with their lives. Already Hillmen from the lower tiers of seats were dropping into the arena and running towards him, leaping a wide, jagged fissure which had opened in the ground as they advanced.

“Come on, Di!” he shouted.

As they passed Alam Khan’s body, he stooped quickly, and plucked the stabbing-knife out of the dead Galbraith.

Onwards, towards the gates. . . .

Once again the powers of Heaven seemed to be aiding them. The darkness had increased to a twilight gloom, and a high wind had risen, causing the dense clouds of sand and dust from falling masonry to envelop them in a welcome obscurity.

As they got to the gates Gray glanced back.

“*Khubberdar* [“Look out!”], Limbul!” he shouted warningly.

Three of their pursuers were gaining on the Gurkha, who, redoubling his speed, took a short half-circle, jumped into the air, and hurling his body round, faced them.

A circle of dull silver light ringed Limbu’s head. One after another, three heads fell into the sand, severed so cleanly that they remained a moment on the broad shoulders to which they belonged, before falling. One of the Hillman’s whirling swords, encountering the heavy blade of the kukri, was shattered, even as the swordsman’s head dropped sideways.

Pushing Diana before him, Gray thrust The Cobra’s

stabbing-knife through the waistband of his torn and stained riding-breeches as he ran.

Grasping the bars of one of the heavy gates, with one mighty effort, he closed it, the bolt dropping into its socket as he did so.

The next moment Limbu was by his side, and the second gate shut and locked.

"Follow me, Sahib!" panted the Gurkha, making for one of the four corridors converging on to the gateway.

"No—not that way!" roared Gray, remembering the warning voice he and Diana had heard as they entered the fateful arena, now shrouded in dense darkness.

Spear-like jets of orange-coloured flame were spurting between the bars.

They were being fired at.

"Lie flat, Di!" he cried, hurling himself at a small iron door.

With shaking fingers he fumbled for the means of opening it. Ordinarily, no man would, in the circumstances, have found them so quickly—if at all; but two thin, cool hands seemed to guide his, as he twisted frantically at two hexagonal iron knobs, praying, the while, that the door might not be jammed. Already the great gates were heaving inwards towards them, the earthquake having demolished one of the pillars.

"Now, Di!" he shouted, as the small door swung open.

She was at his side before he could finish the sentence.

There was no sign of the little Gurkha.

"Limbu!" he roared, with all the strength of his lungs.

His voice was smothered in a shattering peal of thunder.

"I must go and find him, Di!"

A blaze of forked lightning revealed a squat, sturdy form standing astride two dead bodies just inside the leaning gates. Half a dozen Hillmen had forced their way between the shattered pillar and the wall, and were pressing him hard.

Whipping out The Cobra's knife, Gray buried it in the

stomach of a gawky youth who was aiming point blank at the Gurkha from the side.

Then, reaching out his left hand, he gripped Limbu's shoulder and drew him backwards.

Inch by inch the two men retreated towards the door, hacking and stabbing as they went.

"Quick—jump backwards!" Gray cried, and with a quick pull, drew Limbu after him into temporary safety.

As the door was slammed-to, the Englishman slid to the ground, exhausted.

---

---

## CHAPTER XL

### IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH

WHERE DID THIS PITCH-DARK passage lead to? Gray wondered. And if there were others branching off from it, which of them should they take? What if the exit were blocked by fallen masonry!

Diana seemed to divine his thoughts.

"If we can't get out, we'll die together, Colin dear! I'm not afraid."

"I know, my beautiful!" he whispered. And wiping the sweat from his forehead as he sat there, leaning against the wall, he smiled at her through the darkness.

Their lips met.

Kneeling beside him, Diana stroked his face, speaking to him with anguished tenderness, every word of which seemed to give him new life and strength.

The earth tremors had ceased, and the great thickness of the door shut out all sounds of the clamour outside. The velvety silence and the darkness seemed to mock them by its soft peacefulness. . . .

Together they rose.

"Keep close, Di! Grab hold of my shoulder, dear! . . . Limbul!"

"Present, Sahib!"

"I lead. Keep close behind Miss Lindsay!"

"*Bohut achha*, Sahib!"

Cautiously they moved forward, Gray testing the ground in front of him with his foot before each step, to detect possible pitfalls.

Whenever he tells the story of their escape, he lays stress

upon the seemingly interminable length of that underground passage.

At last, round a sudden turn, they saw a dull red glow some twenty yards ahead.

It proved to be a dying brazier standing in a dungeon, and by the feeble light it gave, Gray recognized the torture chamber in which he had been through that fearsome "third degree" ordeal in The Cobra's presence.

"Search for a lamp, Limbu!" he ordered, himself groping round the base of the wall. He remembered having seen one in a corner near where Alam Khan had sat.

A few seconds later the Gurkha was lighting it at the brazier.

A stifled exclamation of horror from Diana as its flame grew slowly to fullness, caused Gray to glance swiftly towards her.

She was gazing wide-eyed at the piteous figure of a man, stripped almost naked and suspended from the roof by his wrists, his toes just touching the floor. The blood, as it trickled down his brown skin from indescribable mutilations, glistened like dark-red varnish.

It was the Galcha, Khoon the Mongol's chief spy.

"Don't look at him, Di!" called out Gray.

The bearded head hanging forward on the horribly slashed chest, stirred as the Englishman spoke; the heavy, anguished brown eyes half opened and saw the knife in Gray's hand.

"Please . . . please . . . Sahib! . . . Cut me no more!" pleaded the poor wretch.

"We are friends," answered the Englishman hoarsely. . . .

"Let us go, Sahib," urged Limbu, after they had laid the dying man gently on the stone floor. "The gods have called him!"

"Sahib! . . . Sahib! . . ." whispered the victim of the Veiled Man's vengeance.

Gray bent down to catch the faintly uttered words.

". . . door . . . near the corner . . . the Hills . . ."

The tortured face became peaceful. The Galcha had gone home to the Great Hills. . .



They were now in a passage narrower than the previous one, and a few yards away was another door, which Gray tried in vain to open.

"Colin, Colin, look! Someone is watching us!" exclaimed Diana, seizing his arm.

He gazed down the long low-roofed passage, dimly lit by the faint rays of the lamp, and was just able to discern a tall white figure which seemed to be beckoning to them.

As he rose to his feet it melted into the surrounding shadows and was gone.

"Seems friendly, whoever he is! Come on! We'll follow him. . . ."

Suddenly Gray, who was in front with the lamp, stopped.

"Good God! We're trapped!"

The passage ended in a blank wall.

Diana bit her lip to keep back her tears, and Limbu muttered something about knocking off somebody's head.

Gray, hearing him, made the little man's remark a way out of the subsequent harrowing silence.

"Thou wilt have to knock thy way through these stones before thou canst do any more knocking-off of heads, Limbu, my friend!" he exclaimed grimly. And, lifting the lamp, he gazed at the imprisoning stones with cold despair in his heart.

Limbu took him at his word, and brushing past him, began to examine the wall. Suddenly he swore in Ghorkali, and thrusting the point of his *kukri* into a seam of mortar, began to scrape it away.

Gray, for the moment utterly at a loss to know what to say to reassure Diana, placed the lamp on the ground and took her into his arms.

"We'll get out of this place, somehow! But we shall have to go back, sweetheart!" he said.

"Don't let's go back, Colin!" she whispered tensely. "We shall be killed if we do! I know it! If we must die, let us stay here, together and in peace!"

"Sahib, come quickly!" called Limbu excitedly. He was

now standing on tiptoe scraping furiously at the huge blocks of masonry above the level of his head.

"There is a writing; and there is a door!" he called, desisting a moment from his frenzied labours in order to remove a particle of mortar that had fallen into one of his eyes. "Together, you and I will open that door! Yea, by Kali, we will open it! Perhaps the goddess' head will stay on her shoulders, after all!" he added, half to himself.

Taking up the lamp, Gray examined the wall.

Cut into the stone were the words:

✠  
✠ *Hoc in loco Johannis Presbyter dormit* \* ✠  
✠

Picked out by the Gurkha's *kukri* point, was the outline of what might have been a door about six feet by three.

"Put your shoulder to it, Sahib! What can be shut, can also be opened! Does not the writing say so?"

"A door without hinges . . ." began Gray, and, remembering Diana, stopped short. "Thou hast found the tomb of a King whom thou wouldst have joyed to serve, O Limbu, for he was a great fighter! It may be that it opens!"

"In the temple of Kali, in Kathmandu," retorted Limbu imperturbably, bumping at the stones with his shoulder between each word, "there is a door which turns round on a stalk of iron. One of the Brahmin priests showed it to me. I dreamed he took me through it last night. . . . Try, Sahib!"

With a silent prayer that the little Gurkha might be right, Gray put his shoulder to the stone. He did not dare to look at Diana.

"*Ek—doe—teen!*" [One—two—three] counted Limbu. "Push—*push*, Sahib!" And their united weight was driven against the stone.

At the third impact, Limbu let out a yell of triumph.

"It has moved, Sahib!"

Gray turned eagerly to Diana.

"By God, he's right!"

A few more thrusts and three great blocks of stone swung round on a central pivot.

Gray led the way into a miniature Byzantine chapel.

Evidently the chamber in which they now found themselves possessed some hidden system of ventilation, for the air in it was refreshingly cool and sweet after the warm dankness of the low-roofed corridors.

The domed roof and walls were covered with exquisite mosaics, their sheen and colours as bright and fresh as the day when the workmen had laid them seven centuries before. The roof subject was that of the Holy Trinity in refulgent glory, surrounded by the heavenly choirs, the mosaic wall-panels, on the other hand (according to the inscriptions below them) depicting incidents in the life of Prester John.

Under the centre of the small dome stood a glittering oblong block of rock crystal, supported on the heads of four lions of bronze, whose smooth, pupil-less eyeballs seemed to stare at the three intruders in blind enquiry.

Shut in that glistening sarcophagus, lay the embalmed body of Prester John.

Wrapped in a cloak of blue velvet, so thickly encrusted with diamonds that in the faint rays of the lamp it seemed to be surrounded by tiny flames of multi-coloured fire, the figure's waxen-looking hands were clasped about a long, two-handled sword in a jewelled sheath, the pommel of which was formed of a single uncut emerald. On the broad chest rested a swastika in blazing rubies.

Silently the three fugitives gazed down upon the recumbent form of one who, in the Middle Ages, popes and kings, travellers and historians, had heard described as Emperor, King and Priest; whose wealth was fabulous; who had (it was said) seventy-two kings as vassals; whose lord high steward was a primate and king; who never went into battle without fourteen gold and bejewelled crosses were borne before him, each one of them followed by ten thousand cavalry and a hundred thousand footmen; and in whose

country precious stones littered the banks of the rivers. . . .

The immense value and significance of this discovery, from half a dozen angles, was not lost upon Gray. But their three lives were at stake; there was no time to linger. If they got away there would always be the possibility that, some day, he would return. Somehow . . .

He looked at Diana.

Her lips were moving. She was praying silently.

Signing to Limbu to bring the lamp to him, he began testing the wall-panels for another hidden opening. But there was no trace of one.

At length, behind the altar, they came upon a pair of small bronze doors. Placing the precious lantern on the floor (the oil was beginning to give out) Gray ran his fingers over the embossed metal-work in search of a concealed spring. On each door, in alto-relievo, was the life-sized figure of a golden angel, his wings close-folded, holding a sword in the manner of the body in the rock-crystal sarcophagus.

Feeling round the hilt of one of the swords, he thought he detected a slight movement, and on taking a firmer hold of it, found he could pull it towards him a few inches. It was evidently a lever by which the bolts of the door were fastened, for he heard them grind in their sockets, but they were stiff, and he could move them no further. Perhaps the two doors should be opened simultaneously.

"I've found a way out, I think, Di!" he called. "Come here, Limbu. There is work for you!"

In turning, he knocked over the lamp and it went out.

He cursed himself for his clumsiness. "That's a dam' fool thing to do! . . . Can you find your way to me, Di? . . . We'll have to keep close touch in this darkness!"

"The darkness of death will soon separate ye! I am waiting!"

Gray swore.

It was the Veiled Man who had spoken.

---

---

---

## CHAPTER XLI

### IN THE TEMPLE OF THE COBRA

THE CURIOUS HOLLOWNESS OF the tones recalled Diana's account of the opening through which she and The Cobra had looked. Evidently the Palace of the Mirror was honey-combed with such shafts, the acoustic properties of the apartments and passages being cleverly utilized.

"He's trapped us at last, Colin!" whispered Diana, groping her way to him.

"I'm damned if he has!" retorted Gray hotly. . . . "Catch hold of that knob, Limbul! When I say 'Pull!'—pull like hell!"

With a harsh, groaning sound the narrow doors swung open, revealing a small vaulted chamber lighted by a torch of some resinous material thrust into an iron bracket in the wall. Evidently somebody had only recently left it.

Three sighs of relief turned into three gasps of astonishment.

Before them lay the treasure of Prester John.

It was indeed a breath-taking sight. An orgy of colour scintillation. Necklaces, turban-ornaments, anklets and bracelets were scattered everywhere, sparkling dazzlingly in the wavering light of the torch. Flashing arms and armour, vases, and even small tables, every square inch of them encrusted with precious stones, rained iridescent light, splashing the shadows with a spray of coloured fire. Every stone was a magnificence. Jumbled together in shimmering confusion on shallow earthenware platters and trays, like so many pebbles, were heaps of pearls, rubies and sapphires.

Goblets and boxes of exquisite Byzantine cloisonné work lay half-buried under countless brooches, buckles and collars of solid gold set with the dull cabuchon stones beloved of the Ostrogoth and earlier Persian jewellers. The very walls blazed with splendour, for hung by their corners from rough iron hooks were jewelled carpets, their patterns worked out in cut gems.

But the object that held three pairs of astonished eyes and dwarfed all else into insignificance by its sheer, incredible splendour, was a throne literally incandescent with white diamonds, round the edges of which ran a key-border design in enormous table-cut rubies and sapphires—one ruby or sapphire to every four diamonds. Gray, as he glanced at it, estimated its value at untold millions. He knew that Tavernier, a French jeweller of the XVIIth century, had valued one of the Grand Mogul's thrones in Delhi, at £12,037,500.

"Colin, how—how *unbelievably* marvellous!"

"You're entitled to a souvenir or two, I think, Di!" he said, glancing at her smilingly as he strode towards the further door of the treasure-chamber.

Limbu evidently held a similar opinion.

Cut into the stone above the doorway, Gray noticed the words, "*Sic transit Gloria Mundi*". ["So passes the glory of the world."] Prester John had been philosopher as well as potentate, he reflected grimly. How utterly useless all this wealth was to *them*!

He turned to Diana.

"The sooner we're out of here, the better, Di! Come on! Keep behind Limbu. . . . Ready?"

Inch by inch he opened the door, and a thin reedy piping similar to that which they had heard in the Residency garden on the night Diana had been kidnapped, but fainter, reached their ears.

One—two minutes they waited, ready for attack or defence. But nothing stirred.

As they pushed the door wide, a wave of steamy air, heavy with an acrid musk-like odour, enveloped them.

They were standing on the threshold of a temple to Manasā, the Serpent Goddess.

Judging from its nave-and-aisle formation, it had once been a Christian church, which doubtless some Hindu conqueror of the Valley had converted. A row of twelve oil-lamps, their wicks burning in deep, transparent green bowls, shed a sickly light, and lent an intense blackness to the fantastic shadows cast by the flickering flames. On what had been the high altar, was reared a gigantic twenty-foot effigy of a hooded cobra, made of carved gilt wood, its eyes being either two green lamps, or huge cut emeralds: Gray could not decide which.

The floor had a curiously untidy appearance, for it seemed to be littered with small bones and what seemed, in the uncertain light, to be pieces of rope, similar ropelike fragments swaying from the capitals of the pillars as if in an unfelt breeze. In the arched side aisles, lay what were apparently great coils of thick cable.

The door swung-to with a click.

It had no handle on the inside.

The reedy piping was now loud and clear; and once more its rhythm reminded Diana of the shepherds' slow piping in *Lohengrin*.

Suddenly she screamed.

A piece of "rope" on which she had stepped, had writhed from under her foot.

It was a snake.

Gray threw an arm about her waist.

The litter of rope (they could now see) was a multitude of serpents of all kinds. The reptiles seemed lulled into harmlessness by the sound of the piping, for none of them—not even the one Diana Lindsay had trodden upon—gave any sign of anger or of even being aware of their presence.

Gray tried to open the big doors of the temple; but he could not move them.

They seemed to be trapped without hope of escape.

There was a clang, and an iron door was slid back.

Diana ran to him with a cry of terror.

In an opening in the wall about twelve feet from the floor, stood the form of the Veiled Man silhouetted against a background of bright-green light.

"I told you that you could not escape!" jeered the black-robed figure.

"You've caught us all right, God damn you!" swore Gray. (Was *this* to be the end of everything?)

"I have but let ye catch yourselves! Hunted rats run into a trap!" was the contemptuous retort.

"Put it as you will," flung back Gray, "we're your prisoners! For myself I do not care. Do what you like to me. But you have got to let Miss Lindsay go! You have got to set her free! Do you understand?" His outward defiance was belied by an agonizing inner sense of utter hopelessness.

"Why should I free her? In return for what, thou dog?" came the sneering retort.

"The *Sirkar* will reward you!"

"Your cursed *Sirkar* will soon cease to exist!"

"Listen! Whatever you ask of me," urged Gray earnestly, "I will give you! I swear it!"

"It is easy to offer that which thou knowest thou art about to lose! What can you give me—now? I no longer want the book!"

"For God's sake do what I ask!" pleaded Gray desperately. "If I give you a Writing addressed to the *Sirkar*, saying that you have helped us, and asking that you be given a free pardon—will you *then* release the Miss-Sahib?"

"No, Colin! I'm damned if I'll leave you!" exclaimed Diana, catching his arm. "Don't ask me to do that, dear!"

"If I knew that he'd let you go——"

"Even if he promised, he wouldn't keep his word!" she said fiercely. "I'm going to see it through to the end with you! I'd kill myself rather than fall into his hands!"

"The thought of dying bravely in the presence of the woman you love—who speaks as all women speak, foolishly—should fill you with joy, Rat! Afterwards, she shall find comfort with *me*!" The malignancy in those guttural tones was clearly that of a madman.



The Veiled Man disappeared from the opening, and the reedy piping, which had been growing fainter, stopped.

A muffled roar of shouting could be heard coming nearer and nearer. Their pursuers were on their track.

A cold sweat broke out on Gray's forehead. Where was Limbu? Between them they must save Diana—somehow!

Then Diana Lindsay and Colin Gray heard the Swastika *Sadhu's* voice for the last time.

It seemed to come from behind the great image of the hooded cobra.

The Gurkha was holding his kukri by its shining tip, preparatory to hurling it at the Veiled Man, who had now returned, the barrel of an automatic glistening in the greenish light as he came to the opening.

"Put up thy knife, Gurkha!" commanded the *Sadhu's* voice sternly; "it is *I* who will strike!"

Limbu hesitated and looked at Gray. Whom should he obey?

In the silence which followed they heard the click of the automatic's safety-catch.

But the weapon dropped from the Veiled Man's hand.

A sharp sizzling sound was followed by a rending cry.

Between the eye-holes of the cowl concealing the Veiled Man's head, blazed a swastika of white fire.

"The death-ray, Gray Sahib! Save me from the death-ray!"

The veiled figure fell heavily to its knees, lurched sideways, and lay still.

Gray's flesh prickled.

*The voice of the Veiled Man was the voice of Sirdar Mohammed Shah.*

---

---

## CHAPTER XLII

### BETWEEN THE ROUNDS

THEIR ONLY WAY OF ESCAPE lay through that opening twelve feet above their heads, where the convulsed body of the Veiled Man was lying, a faint greyish-blue haze hanging over it.

There was no time to be lost.

"Get down on to your hands and knees, Limbu!" rapped out Gray.

Standing on the Gurkha's broad back he helped Diana climb on to his own shoulders, and then, gripping her ankles, pushed her up to the opening.

"Can you see anything to let down to us, Di?"

Under the body lay the rope-ladder by which the Veiled Man had mounted after leaving the treasure-chamber, one end of it fixed to hooks in the floor. Averting her eyes, Diana tugged it free and dropped it down to Gray.

A minute later he and Limbu had joined her.

Gray pushed the black-swathed body half over with his foot. But it rolled back, as corpses roll—limply.

"I had already tried him, Sahib," snarled Limbu, fingering his *kukri* disappointedly.

As they slid to the iron door and barred it, a heavy thudding rolled hollowly through the temple, causing a strange thing to happen: the hundreds of snakes, no longer lulled or mesmerized by the sound of the piping, started to hiss and stir angrily. They were writhing towards the main entrance door! The floor was a mass of wriggling, cord-like bodies. That howling rabble would receive a venomous welcome when it entered! . . .

Gray saw that they were now in the Veiled Man's Council Chamber.

The door leading into the passage through which Shiv had made her unbidden way for that fight to the death with "That Which Never Sleeps"; was locked and could not be opened, though Gray knew it was possibly openable from the outside.

"Well, we're comparatively safe for a few minutes, at any rate!" he remarked, looking anxiously at Diana's white face.

"Safe?" she questioned wearily. "How can we be safe? Is any place in the *world* safe?"

Gray could see that if she did not have a few minutes' rest she would almost certainly break down.

"Even *that* mob wouldn't dare to enter this room, Di!" he assured her. He knew that only the dumb jailer and his assistant would dare to do that; and one of *them* would be unlikely to want to succour the tyrant who had mutilated him!

He looked towards the winding staircase he had noticed when he had stood before the Council of Three.

"Find out where those stairs lead to, Limbul!"

Diana had now sunk wearily on to a stool, her back towards the Veiled Man's body and her face hidden in her hands.

"Feeling queer, Di?" (If she *did* break down they were lost!)

"No, I'm all right, Colin dear. . . . All these horrors . . . one on top of another . . . shaken my nerve a bit, I suppose. . . . It's strange those loathsome snakes never attempted to harm us, wasn't it? . . . That nice old Hindu ghost, or whatever he is—I!"

"He's no ghost, dear!" cut in Gray. "He's a living person who somehow has the power of projecting his image and his voice across space."

"People who are in love with each other can go pretty near to doing that, I think!" said Diana softly.

"It's a sort of 'mental television,' as I understand it, Di, which only those possessing tremendous powers of concentra-

tion and a high purity of spirit are capable of 'broadcasting.' 'Broadcasting' is not the proper word, of course; but it's the nearest I can get to it. . . . Good lord, there's a box of cigarettes!" Going over to the table, he lit one for her and another for himself.

"Thanks, Colin! . . . Well, whatever he is—he kept on telling me, when I was shivering in that grotto, '*In the snake lies safety!*' He said it over and over again. Evidently he was thinking of those snakes in the temple place!"

"Perhaps," demurred Gray; "but these *Sadhus*, like all Orientals, often speak figuratively."

"What do you think he meant, then?"

"They see much further ahead than we can, and knowing the ordinary person wouldn't accept as true the existence of such powers, they cloak their meaning in phrases that are purposely obscure. There's a pretty deep meaning in everything *he* says, though! The snakes have so far, secured our safety!"

"Colin, dear, let's get out of this awful room!" She shuddered. "I'd rather be in one of those catacomb-like passages, than in here!"

"You go and 'sit it out' on the staircase with Limbu for a bit, Di, will you? I've got to explore this place. It won't take me more than a few minutes!"

His first action, after she had left him, was to examine the body of the Veiled Man.

Brushing away the charred linen, he looked down at the terribly burned face. It *was* Mohammed Shah!

The meaning of the Intelligence Officer's frequent absences on those "secret investigatory expeditions" which Sir John had mentioned to Gray, was now clear.

On the trestle-table was lying a thickish, red-leather-covered notebook, which Gray slipped into a pocket of his riding-breeches to be examined at some future time. Fixed to the under edge of the table were three electric switches. He would have liked to try the effect of putting them "on" and "off"; but prudence counselled him not to tamper with

them—a decision that, although he did not know it, was a fortunate one.

Then he passed into the Veiled Man's laboratory, the entrance to which was concealed by the Byzantine tapestry behind the great ebony chair.

There was no time for a detailed examination; even if there had been, he would not have understood the uses of the majority of the glittering brass-and-ivory electrical machines, dials, switchboards, chemicals, crucibles and retorts which it contained.

Mohammed Shah (he remembered Sir John Lindsay saying) was a Doctor of Science of Cambridge, as well as an M.A. of Calcutta University.

At one end of the laboratory was a small dynamo, evidently the source of power for a wireless station. He tried to start it, but failed.

The minutes were flying. Seizing a heavy metal pestle, he started to smash everything smashable. . . .

"Colin! They're coming!" called Diana's voice.

He rushed out to her.

A far-away shouting reached his ears—apparently coming from the wall to the left of the ebony chair. Their pursuers were once more on their track!

With a powerful jerk he tore down the tapestry. Behind it was an opening about a foot square. It was another of those acoustically-perfect spy-shafts.

"They won't be here for a few minutes!" he exclaimed. "Where's Limbu?"

"Present, Sahib!" answered the little Gurkha, appearing at the foot of the staircase.

"Well?" snapped Gray.

"The stairs lead to a live world painted upon a round table, Sahib!" reported Limbu in awestruck tones.

"They lead to the top of a tower, Colin," chimed in Diana; "I've been up there. It's weird. You can see all the country round for miles, 'painted on a table,' as Limbu says. It's rather like looking through a telescope!"

"Sounds as if Prester John's mirror were a camera-obscura!" said Gray. (Which, in fact, it was.)

"For God's sake, let's go!" cried Diana, running worried fingers through her curls.

"If the Antwerp black-letter manuscript I read is right, Di, there's an underground river under the Tower of the Mirror! We've got to find it. It's our only chance. The place outside must be swarming with Hillmen. . . . By the way, what did the weather look like in that camera-obscura arrangement?"

"Stormy," answered Diana promptly. "Patches of sunlight on the hills. It was so good to see the outside world again, Colin!"

"We'll soon be among those same old hills," responded Gray cheerfully. "Come on, Precious! We'll diddle 'em yet!"

As the three hurriedly left the room, the reflected image of a small group of galloping horsemen passed slowly across the white surface of the table in the Tower of the Mirror.

Shireen and Firoz were escaping. . . .

When Khoon, the dwarf, reached the rescue force, Colonel Haughton plied him with questions, to each one of which he returned a frank and instant answer. His offer to lead the force to the capture of the Veiled Man was evidently a genuine one.

"What of this Russian agent, Petrinoff, whose propaganda is inflaming the Frontier against the *Sirkar*?"

Khoon's beady black eyes flashed, and the yellow mask-like face creased with venomous hate.

"He is a lying dog who would make himself master of my people, and whom I will one day slay!" he spat.

"But he has the same objective as you had," persisted Colonel Haughton—"the invasion of India and the overthrowing of the *Sirkar*. Why, then, should you hate him?"

"Because he looks upon me even as all Hillmen look upon all Tartar-Mongols—as sweepers to clean for them!" snarled the dwarf. "Though the great Hill tribes of the Orakzai and the Bungush are but descendants of the Scythian camp-

followers of my Tartar ancestor, Timur Subaktageen! . . . I tell you, Colonel Sahib," he went on, "once He of the Veil is dead, I will make that Russian dog lick the dust! . . . You have my order to my troops that they should return to their homes. I ask that the *Sirkar*, now that I am its ally, shall extend to me a free pardon!"

"If we find Miss Lindsay and Major Gray through your help," said the Colonel, "you will probably be given one. But I cannot answer for the Government. Until its orders have been conveyed to me, you must consider yourself my prisoner."

"Ye will surely find them—or I am no Tartar-Mongol, but an accursed Hillman!" answered Khoon.

And with an inclination of his misshapen body he turned and walked away between the files of an armed escort.

The officer placed in charge of him was a grey-bearded Sikh whose name was Rissaldar Sher Singh.

---

---

## CHAPTER XLIII

### THE RIVER OF DARKNESS

A SHORT, SLOPING GALLERY, AT the further end of which was a small archway, now opened out before the three fugitives.

The white circle of light from a small electric torch Gray had found in the Veiled Man's laboratory, zigzagged unsteadily from its low roof to the side-walls.

Gray, who was leading, gave a sudden exclamation of horror, which was echoed by Diana and Limbu.

Ranged along the right-hand wall, on seven slim iron rods (one of them had fallen with its gruesome burden) were seven dried human heads. At first Gray thought they were those of Hillmen, but the one lying on the floor had red hair.

"God, it's poor old Beaton!" he exclaimed; and at once remembered Galbraith's remark about The Cobra's grim custom of keeping the heads of the British officers he had captured and killed.

Owing to the way they had been preserved, the features of three of his eight predecessors—Dudley, Ferrers, and Boileau—were easily recognizable.

A ghastly vision of two other heads—one of them with auburn curls—surmounting two more rods, caused him to seize Diana's cold hand and hurry her away.

The downward slope continued. The flooring of the passages had now changed from stone to soft earth, the dampness of which told of nearby water. A few minutes later they were splashing through it. Fortunately, the mingling of a natural hot spring rendered it pleasantly warm: had it been the icy water of one of the glacier-fed streams, Diana could



not have stood the cold. And owing to the lowness of the roof, it would have been impossible to carry her.

"We've struck the water-conduits of the old city," called out Gray, his voice echoing with the curious ringing, "wet" hollowness peculiar to tunnels or caves in which there is water.

At the end of an hour they halted, knee-deep in rushing water.

Gray knew that they were lost—hopelessly lost—in a network of passages so narrow that he and Limbu had frequently to turn three-quarters sideways in order to pass along them.

A short stretch of stone-slab roofing showed that the upper world was only just above their heads. The sharpness of a thin spear of daylight which stabbed the darkness through a crevice between the slabs, hurt their eyes with its brightness. Doubtless the stone slabs could be driven upwards and they could climb out through the opening so made; but they decided against taking the risk, as Gray estimated they were still too near the palace. They had passed the dark openings of many other smaller tunnels giving on to the one in which they were; and before each of them they had halted for a few precious moments, wondering in an agony of anxiety whether it was the one they ought to take.

This recurring uncertainty had added enormously to the general strain; and when (as happened once or twice) there had been a difference of opinion as to whether to go straight on or not, it had increased it to an almost unbearable degree.

Gray gave the electric torch to Limbu.

"Take a turn at leading, Limbu!" he said. Then, turning to Diana, he affected a cheerfulness he was far from feeling.

"We've shaken 'em off at last, Di!"

"Think so, Colin?"

"Why, of course! Even if they'd followed us, they'd never be able to decide which of those scores of apertures we'd gone down! . . . That roaring sound ahead of us is the noise of falling water! We're near the end of our tether, I'm afraid."

"Colin—supposing we're trapped—never able to get out!"

"Well, the water's warm; and considering we're now waist deep in it, it's something to be thankful for!" he answered jocularly.

Her wet fingers found his and held them tightly.

"Where do you think we'll come out, Colin?"

She had asked him the one question he had been asking himself for the past half-hour: *Where would they come out.* As far as possible, he had followed the direction in which the water was flowing. Unless they had unconsciously doubled back they must, he reckoned, sooner or later come into daylight. If they didn't . . .

Diana uttered a sharp exclamation. A bat had flapped past her, fanning her face with its soft india-rubbery wings.

To Gray the creature was a messenger of hope, for its presence meant that an opening to the upper world was fairly near at hand.

But they took the wrong turning, and half an hour later were still in Stygian darkness, although nearer to that thunderous waterfall.

"Sahib!" shouted Limbu, who had been ahead to explore.

"What's the news, Limbu?"

"The river under the ground, of which Your Honour spoke, is near!"

"That damned old manuscript was right, Di!"

But Gray's heart sank at the little Gurkha's next words.

"It falls into a great hole, Sahib! And the noise of it is an evil noise!"

Round two sharp bends, on hands and knees through openings barely six inches above water level, and then the light of the torch revealed a wide, twelve-foot tunnel.

Limbu was right; it was the natural channel of an underground river.

The flaming sword of the Angel at the gates of Paradise was not more relentless in its prohibition of further advance than was the flood of glittering black water they could now see before them. Even if it were shallow enough to allow of wading, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to make headway against that swift-sliding flood—certainly not in

Diana's case, for her Hillman's sandals had already slipped off several times, the softening of their straps by the water having caused the buckle thong to tear through the leather.

Their only hope lay in a desperate attempt to work upstream by clinging to such projections as the rocky walls might offer. But there would be no margin of safety for the quick correcting of numbed fingers that slipped—no hope that the prompt aid of a supporting hand would be able to stop a tearing, swirling rush into mid-stream . . . into the arms of death. By holding the torch at roof-level, they could see at the lip of the chasm, a broad, smooth curve, like a roll of black glass, cut into thin, rippling, ever-changing lines. And beyond and over it was a cloud of cold spray. The rest was glistening wet stone, and blackness.

"Diana . . ." He stopped. It was hard to tell her that death was now palpably the fourth member of their party.

"Looks pretty grim, Colin! But it'll be kinder to us than those devils would have been!" Better death by drowning than death by torture.

He gathered her into his arms, straining her to him. How good it was to feel her warm breath on his cheek in this tomblike darkness!

"I'd like to have one more look at that water, Colin! It would make things easier—you know what I mean. . . ."

Gray shouted Limbu's name at the top of his voice, for the Gurkha had the electric torch.

No answer. The darkness was absolute.

For long minutes they waited vainly, every now and then calling "Limbu!" in unison. Evidently the orderly must have gone to try out the possibilities of Gray's working up-stream plan, and had been swept away and drowned. Gray's heart was heavy with a new sorrow, for he had loved the plucky little Limbu as one brave man loves another who had been ever ready to give his life for him.

For them, it was now the deadly, invisible river tearing past the end of this tunnel of death.

The roar of that unseen torrent as it thundered down through the blackness was now deafening.

"We can't go much further, Di!" Gray shouted. "Only a few feet, at the most!"

She came close up to him and put her arms about his neck.

"Not separately! Together!" They clung desperately to the glamorous reality of their love—to the glory of the realization that, out of all the world, they had chosen each other. Their love was so young and so strong, and life so very sweet. . . . He could not bring himself to end his, and hers.

But each moment's delay was only making the end more bitter. Both of them realized that.

A minute later, locked fast in each other's arms, they slid down into a cold, swift-moving blackness.

---

---

## CHAPTER XLIV

### ONCE MORE IN THE HILLS

**A** STRANGELY COMFORTING powerlessness; the close embrace of downward-pressing waters; a merciful incapacity to think; and a dizzy somersaulting in icy blackness—these things left bright and unshaken in the fast-beating hearts of Colin and Diana one star-like memory of the world they had left: they were together. If this were death, they were meeting it—together, conscious of their “togetherness.” He could feel her face pressing against his.

The cold chill of the water had begun to steal into his lungs, when the downward pull slackened, and their intertwined bodies began to mount up, up, until suddenly they shot out into the world of day and night—into the blessed world of light and fresh air.

Actually they were in the centre of the lake, which lay about a mile from the Palace of the Mirror.

Dazedly Gray struck out for the shore, supporting an unconscious Diana. As his feet touched bottom, his own senses began to go . . .

The next thing he knew was that Limbu and Diana were chafing his hands as he lay under a bush. Her pallor frightened him; but with his return to consciousness a little colour crept into her cheeks. Strangely enough, she had been the first to come round under Limbu’s rough but thorough efforts at artificial respiration.

The Gurkha was little the worse for his harrowing experience.

It was now afternoon and oppressively hot. The sun was hidden behind an ominous array of purplish-black clouds, here and there splotched with solid-looking patches of silver-grey. A heavy mist was beginning to cover the valley from end to end.

Since the night before, none of the three had eaten; but there was something far more important than the finding of food—concealment. Fortunately there was a small patch of scrub close at hand, and into this they crawled, there to hide until nightfall. The two men cleared a small hollow in the ground of sticks, stones and thorny weeds, and lining it with such dead leaves and coarse grass as they could collect, made a rough couch for Diana, in which she stretched out her slim length gratefully, and was soon sound asleep.

"We make for the pass at nightfall, Limbu!" whispered Gray.

"There are double pickets on it, Sahib," answered the Gurkha softly, whetting the edge of his kukri on a smooth stone.

"We've got to get across," returned Gray tensely, "pickets or no pickets! They'll comb the valley to find us!"

"Will they not think we are dead, Sahib?" queried Limbu sagely. "There was a moment—when we were going down into that hole of black waters—when we were!"

"The Miss-Sahib can't stand much more, Limbu. She must have food and shelter, or she will fall ill—and that will be a bad *tamasha!*"

The Gurkha did not reply. He was peering out from behind the scrubby bushes at the almost invisible cleft in the distant hills that was the pass.

"There are no white birds in this accursed country are there, Sahib?"

"In the summer, no," answered Gray, staring at him curiously. "In the winter there are wild geese. Why do you ask?"

"But a goose is not a round ring?"

Gray looked up at the little man, thinking that the ordeal he had just come through had shaken his reason. But Limbu looked back at him with bright steady eyes.

"Look, Sahib!" he exclaimed, pointing towards the pass. "Can you not see it? There, against that black cloud?"

"I see a shred of white," answered Gray, shading his eyes. "What of it?"

Limbu chuckled.

"That is the smoke of a shrapnel shell, Sahib! Colonel Haughton is the other side of the pass. And with him"—his voice had dropped into a soliloquizing mutter—"is that son of a fool, Ram Dutt, the *syce*, to whom I gave her head-rope!"

He frowned darkly.

"Gave whose head-rope to whom, fool?" queried Gray absentmindedly, his eyes fixed on the pass. That the Gurkha was talking of Leila the mare, never occurred to him.

"If that *was* shrap—! By God, you're right, Limbu!"

A curling white wreath of smoke had just broken above the pass and was now floating in a tiny white circle against the bank of black cloud. The pickets were being shelled by the mountain guns. The distance and a faint breeze would account for no sound of the explosion reaching the fugitives.

"We can do nothing yet awhile, Sahib," remarked Limbu imperturbably. "Sleep, and I will watch."

Gray agreed. Unless he slept even his great strength would be unable to meet the further heavy demands that would shortly be made upon it.

Then he called into existence Limbu's first really ecstatic smile in many days.

"Thou art a worthless, bat-eyed jungle-man!" he growled.

The heavy pall of clouds that had hung over the valley since early morning had not moved when Gray awoke. It was dark and misty, although the sun had barely set.

Diana was still asleep.

Of Limbu, once more there was no sign.

In a few minutes a rustling in the undergrowth caused Gray to sit up, every muscle tense. He was unarmed, for The Cobra's knife lay at the bottom of a lightless chasm into which ceaselessly thundered a torrent that curled like a roll of black glass . . .

Limbu had returned from a foraging expedition. Without

a word he produced six figs and a large, round, flat cake of unleavened bread about half an inch thick.

"Where did you get them?" asked Gray.

"From one who is not hungry—any longer," answered the Gurkha, patting his kukri. "I could also have brought one of his goats; but we can have no fire!"

Dividing the victuals into three equal portions, Gray awakened Diana. . .

At last, the mist and darkness made it safe to move. Cautiously they crept out into the open, keeping to the lowest folds in the ground. For hour after hour they plodded on, only pausing for a few minutes every now and then to let Limbu go on ahead to reconnoitre.

Then they struck into the hills, and the hard climbing began.

Far above them, to their right, twinkled innumerable orange points of light—the fires of The Cobra's men, who were waiting for orders. From whom would those orders now come—if they ever came at all, Gray wondered!

Their upward progress was slow, on Diana's account. Her strength was giving out; and for long, terribly difficult stretches—even though the imperative need for silence caused them to be taken very slowly—she had to be helped.

Limbu the Tireless was ever out in front, nosing round for a possible enemy or enemies.

"*Psst!*" called the Gurkha warningly.

Gray and Diana halted, hardly daring to breathe.

A squat form loomed up out of the darkness.

"We have passed the pickets! There is a house three hundred yards further on, Sahib!"

Gray glanced up to the barely visible skyline. They must certainly by now be either at the level of the pass or above it. About half a mile to the right of it, he judged.

"Wait for me here!" croaked Limbu. And was gone again.

"What a splendid little fellow he is!" sighed Diana, leaning her head contentedly on Gray's broad shoulder as she sat by his side. "And how good it is to be out under God's open sky with you, Colin!"



"A loaf of bread and a flask of wine, is about all we need, sweetheart!" whispered Colin, putting an arm about her waist. "Are you *very* hungry, Di?"

Diana's next remark, to the effect that their paradise was a very dark one, called forth from Brevet-Major Colin Gray, V.C., the first poetical speech of his life, which, as it had to do with Diana and a moon, and the superiority of the one over the other, need not be set down here.

"Please God, it is only the first of many, many nights that I shall watch over you, my darling!" he said softly.

"Many . . . many . . ."

"*How* many?" queried Gray, loverlike.

But the curly head on his shoulder did not stir. Diana Lindsay was once more sound asleep. Nature was taking her revenge.

The minutes ticked by. Ten—fifteen—twenty—half an hour.

Save for the distant and incessant barking of the pariah dogs in the surrounding villages, and now and again the howling of a jackal, a sullen, ominous silence brooded over the valley—as if this night were the eve of some dread catastrophe. Gray almost welcomed the lone droning hum of the nocturnal beetles, and when one of them hit sharply against his cheek and fell into the torn front of his shirt, he took it out carefully, so as to avoid waking Diana, and rendered it its precious liberty. Was there anything more blessed than Freedom?

Then, almost without a sound, Limbu appeared.

"They will give us shelter!" he said softly.

"Who?" asked Gray in a whisper. "Was there a knocking-off of heads?"

"Nay. I paid them well, Sahib! Few Hillmen can see through a rupee—no Hillman through a thousand rupees. Ask me no questions—yet, Sahib!"

"We've reached our 'hotel,' Dil" whispered Gray, gently shaking Diana.

"I was dreaming we were . . ." began Diana sleepily; and realizing the circumstances, pulled herself together.

"It won't be long before we are!" answered Gray tenderly.

The house of the Hillman who had agreed to shelter them was a poor, one-roomed hovel built of ill-laid slabs of shale and stone, the interstices being filled in with cow-dung and clay. A skeleton-like mongrel started to bark as Gray and Diana appeared; but a savage kick from its burly owner sent it whimpering into a corner.

Two stalwart lads—his sons—and an eagle-faced woman, gaunt and old-looking, though Gray knew she was probably not more than thirty, made up the household.

The Khan (Limbu was careful to so address him) was a fine specimen of a Hillman, frank and open, hard and shrewd—as life makes all Hillmen. The deeply-lined brown face with its hooked nose, the full beard and greasy black sidelocks streaked with silver, the piercing eyes with the sun-graved crow's feet at their corners, gave him a certain indefinable dignity. He and his sons, besides carrying an arsenal of swords and knives, were wearing three bandoliers apiece, crammed with cartridges. Their rifles were in their hands, and at the "ready."

" 'May you never be tired!' " greeted the Hillman in low tones.

" 'May all be well with you,' " answered Gray. "Can you give us food?"

"The woman has prepared it. Eat, and sleep in peace!" answered the Hillman, looking in open admiration at the Englishman's magnificent physique.

Gray held out his hand, and it was gripped by one who was a man in the best sense of the word.

While they were eating, Gray questioned their host, who told him that the pass had been heavily shelled all that afternoon, and that an attack would surely be made by the *Inglis lashkar* at break of day. The Cobra's men, he said, were at a loss to know what to do, as they now had no paramount leader—Alam Khan being dead and the Veiled Man having, so far, sent no orders.

"Him of the Veil, also, is dead," said Gray slowly, watching the Hillman's face. But it was impassive.

"Allah is great!" responded the man, simply. "Such as he die not easily. But if he be truly dead, then I and my sons can till our fields in peace."

"We have eaten your bread and your salt, Khan Sahib," said Gray. "Therefore we, too, shall rest in peace to-night." He knew that the life of anyone who has eaten a Hillman's bread and salt is sacred, his host preferring to die in his defence, rather than deliver him up to his enemies.

"My sons and I will mount guard. Ye may sleep in peace," said the Khan gravely.

And while the trio slept, another trio watched.

The dawn was within an hour of its birth, when Gray was awakened by the Hillman shaking him by the shoulder.

"Armed men are coming, Sahib. There will be a fight."

"Have you a spare rifle?" asked Gray.

The Hillman gave a low laugh.

"Rifles grow not like thorn bushes in the Hills! An axe you may have," he said, pointing to one leaning in the corner.

"Di," said Gray tensely, as he balanced the long-hafted wood-axe with its small head and razor-keen edge, "keep in that far corner, while this show is on!"

Diana's heavy eyes widened.

"If they force their way in, I want you to kill me, Colin."

Gray nodded, his face pale and drawn.

"*Hokumdar?*" [Who comes there?"] challenged Limbu hoarsely.

"Friend!"

It was Major Mercer's voice.

---

---

## CHAPTER XLV

### THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

LORDY, BUT IT'S GOOD TO SEE you, Zero! We'd almost given up hope!" exclaimed Mercer. "Miss Lindsay all right?"

Gray glanced over his shoulder.

"Yes, thank God! Glad to see *you*, you old villain! . . ."

"Your Byzantine cipher's been found, Zero!"

Gray stared at him incredulously.

"*Found? How?*"

"When they were packing Sir John's trophies, the book was found in the throat of the big stuffed cobra that stood in the Residency hall. . . You *have* been known to walk in your sleep, you know, Zero!" bantered Mercer. "You probably hid it yourself!"

Gray frowned. He had remembered his dream . . . how he had thrust a knife down a snake's throat in a dark jungle. . . . *Down a snake's throat!* . . . Hadn't the *Sadhu* said to him several times '*Safety lies in the snake's throat?*' Of course he had. He understood, now!

"I suppose I did hide it," he said slowly. "Must have acted under telepathic influence. . . *That's what it was*, Mercer! *His* influence!"

"What do you mean, Whose influence?" queried Mercer.

"The Swastika *Sadhu's*! He probably 'got through' to me while I was asleep that night! That's the only explanation I can think of. . . . I'm jolly glad it's found! . . . Never discovered who poisoned poor old Sir John, I suppose?"

"Yes, we did!" Mercer's eyes grew sombre. "That *musalchi*

fellow didn't die at once; and he told us. One of Sirdar Mohammed Shah's informers did it. . . . Hello, Miss Lindsay! Congratulations on your escape! You must have had a pretty bad time!"

He turned to Gray.

"Oh, by the way, Zero—your friend the Swastika *Sadhu* has offered Simla a death ray invented by one of his *chelas*, 'for the protection of the great British Empire,' as he put it."

"Good for him! He's a good sort. . . ."

"Colonel Haughton is attacking the pass at dawn," resumed Mercer. "I'm lucky. I'll just be in at the death! Came up by aeroplane last night. . . . How did you get past their pickets, Zero?"

"The Lord—and Limbu—only knows!" smiled Gray. "You'd better ask the little fellow. We owe him our lives."

Mercer glanced at his wrist-watch; and looking up, saw Limbu standing rigidly at attention.

"Hello, Limbu! I hear you've been doing great things!" The Gurkha saluted smartly.

"Sahib, is there one, Ram Dutt, a *syce*, with Colonel Haughton?" he asked anxiously.

"I think so. Why?"

"Has he Gray Sahib's mare with him?"

Major Mercer laughed quietly. He understood.

"Yes; the mare's in fine fettle, too!"

"Thank you, Sahib!" ejaculated Limbu, and sighed with relief.

As he spoke, in the valley far below a great sheet of red-and-violet flame suddenly flared upwards.

Hastily Mercer turned his glasses in the direction of the explosion.

If it had been light enough, he would have seen a thousand-foot, zigzag crack run down the side of the bulging bluff—widen—yawn till the immense mass leant slowly forward and seemed to pause—and then fell. A moment later a second thunderous echo clapped and blundered round the encircling hills.

A black-gloved hand had fumbled among the three

switches in the Council Chamber—and erred. The Palace of the Mirror had been blown up.

Hurriedly Mercer scribbled a message in his field notebook, and tearing out the leaf, folded it and handed it to an orderly to carry to Colonel Haughton. In half an hour day would break. . . .

One of the first persons to meet Gray and Diana as they entered the perimeter of Colonel Haughton's camp in the open valley on the other side of the pass, was Rissaldar Sher Singh.

"*Wa Guru-jee kee Khalsa!*" exclaimed the old Sikh delightedly, striding up to them.

Gray smiled.

"Sorry I left you in the lurch during that skirmish, Rissaldar Sahib! It wasn't my fault—my guide's, I'm afraid!"

"That cursed dwarf is in camp, Major Sahib!"

Gray whistled softly. . . .

A muffled and long-drawn-out rumble shook the air, and the earth quivered under their feet.

"Glad you're both safe!" said Colonel Haughton as they walked up to him.

"We're in for an earthquake, Gray! We had one or two stiff shocks yesterday morning, as a matter of fact. Did you feel them?"

"Yes," answered Gray quietly, "we felt them all right! . . . About this Mongol, Sir. . . ."

In a few graphic sentences, Colin Gray sketched Khoon as he knew him.

The Colonel smiled grimly.

"He's a *pukka* swine, evidently. But he's come over to the Government's side, and we badly need an ally like him. We can't hold his past record against him—not for the present, at any rate, Gray."

A deep droning caused him to look up.

"I'm afraid our bombing 'planes won't be able to see much of the enemy, with the clouds as low as they are!"

He turned, tugging a survey-map out of a side pocket.

"Bring that lamp, orderly! Now, Gray, tell me something about that valley."

Ten minutes later the mountain battery opened fire.

As if in answer to the puny voice of the guns, a shattering peal of thunder shook the dark hills, and blinding lances of lightning rent the four quarters of heaven.

The cohorts of Azrael, the Angel of Death, were about to be loosed.

Earth and sky alike, quivered as if in an agony of travail. The very air shuddered. Landslide followed landslide; with each successive shock, masses of loosened earth and rock came crashing and rolling their way down to a shrill, harsh arpeggio of shale and small stones. Tremor succeeded tremor. A furious wind had arisen, and before it reeled a dozen fantastically twisted, whirling pillars of dust, hundreds of feet high, which staggered down the valley like drunken Titans, then hitting the hillsides, broke and subsided.

On the other side of the pass the breath of that annihilating wind drove before it hot, stinging clouds of grit, that blinded and choked the fleeing hordes of fear-maddened men, women, and children who were seeking a way of escape from this apocalyptic dawn.

The outlet from the Valley of the Mirror to the north was blocked by a new, precipitous hillside which had been hurled into the gorge by the earthquake. Like trapped beetles trying to climb out of a sand-pit, The Cobra's doomed people strove to clamber up its treacherous steepness, and were buried in their hundreds, even as they climbed. Mothers clung to their children; and found death in the clinging. Strong men fought each other for a few inches of foothold, and died fighting. Son slew father—knowing him; and friend tore the throat of his friend. There was no mercy anywhere. The hills which had borne these people and known their tilling, shook them angrily to their death—rolled down upon them their stony, disintegrating masses in a roaring, grinding din of cataclysmic triumph. The watching Force saw the

skyline suddenly change before their eyes. The murk was suddenly lit by an immense funnel-shaped flame, and a second explosion out-roared the thunder.

Lightning had exploded the mined lip of the gas, as the fumbling hand in the Council chamber had meant to do—and erred.

The earth tremors were now growing shudderingly weaker, though streams of shale still slid intermittently down the hillsides as the gigantic boulders underneath settled to their timeless rest. The congested black-and-purple of the sky was shading to the pastel colours of dawn, and like the drums of a retreating army, the thunder was rolling to faintness among the distant hills.

Azrael, the Angel of Death, had passed over a decimated land.

The Valley of the Palace of the Mirror was closed for ever.

Throughout that fear-filled half-hour, the lines of the mustered Gurkhas had stood patiently awaiting orders, their rifles at the "stand easy," while the Mir's cavalry, massed further down the valley, strove to quieten their maddened horses.

A thin bugle blast rang out. The order to retire had been given.

Galloping ahead of the long cavalcade as it emerged from a chasmlike gorge, the first to see the roofs of the city of Labak clustering under the shoulder of that mighty mountain, Maha Chand, were Colin Gray and Diana Lindsay.

And side by side they rode into the sunlight.



---

---

## EPILOGUE

It was on the roof of a houseboat moored in the cool shade of a plane tree on the bank of the Jhelum river, in Kashmir, that Shireen's letter reached Major and Mrs. Colin Gray.

*In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate!  
To my well-loved friend, Deena, greeting!*

*We have heard of your marriage, and pray Allah to give you many sons. Perhaps I may marry Firoz. I rule over a fortress that was my lord's, many days' journey away from the Palace of the Mirror. The mountains are black, and the way difficult. If you and your lord would find me, Fazal Ali the gunsmith, House 310, in the Street of the Ironworkers, Rawalpindi, knows a guide who will lead you to me. Many thousands of my lord's men are here. Which is well, for Khoon the Accursed wishes to take me prisoner and steal from me certain things my lord gave me. He has also sworn revenge against thee.*

*My heart has learned to say your name instead of Gulbudun's. The peace of Allah be upon thee, and her! Come soon, Deena!*

*Thy friend,  
Shireen.*