Hookum Hai

A Tale of the Sepoy Rebellion

by Talbot Mundy, 1879-1940

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Chapter 1

A blood-red sun rested its huge disk upon a low mud wall that crested a rise to westward, and flattened at the bottom from its own weight apparently. A dozen dried-out false-acacia-trees shivered as the faintest puff in all the world of stifling wind moved through them; and a hundred thousand tiny squirrels kept up their aimless scampering in search of food that was not there.

A coppersmith was about the only living thing that seemed to care whether the sun went down or not. He seemed in a hurry to get a job done, and his reiterated "*Bong-bong-bong!*"—that had never ceased since sunrise, and had driven nearly mad the few humans who were there to hear it—quickened and grew louder. At last Brown came out of a square mud house, to see about the sunset.

He was nobody but plain Bill Brown—or Sergeant William Brown, to give him his full name and entitlements—and the price of him was two rupees per day.

He stared straight at the dull red disk of the sun, and spat with eloquence. Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead, and scratched a place where the prickly heat was bothering him. Next, he buttoned up his tunic, and brushed it down neatly and precisely. There was official business to be done, and a man did that with due formality, heat or no heat.

"Guard, turn out!" he ordered.

Twelve men filed out, one behind the other, from the hut that he had left. They seemed to feel the heat more than Brown did, as they fell in line before Brown's sword. There was no flag, and no flag-pole in that nameless health-resort, so the sword, without its scabbard, was doing duty, point downward in the ground, as a totem-pole of Empire. Brown had stuck it there, like Boanerges' boots, and there it stayed from sunrise until sunset, to be displaced by whoever dared to do it, at his peril.

They had no clock. They had nothing, except the uniforms and arms of the Honorable East India Company, as issued in this year of Our Lord, 1857—a cooking-pot or two, a kettle, a little money and a butcher-knife. Their supper bleated miserably some twenty yards away, tied to a tree, and a lean. Punjabi squatted near it in readiness to buy the skin. It was a big goat, but it was mangy, so he held only two annas in his hand. The other anna (in case that Brown should prove adamant) was twisted in the folds of his pugree, but he was prepared to perjure himself a dozen times, and take the names of all his female ancestors in vain, before he produced it.

The sun flattened a little more at the bottom, and began to move quickly, as it does in India—anxious apparently to get away from the day's ill deeds.

"Shoulder umms!" commanded Brown. "General salute! Present-umms!"

The red sun slid below the sky-line, and the night was on them, as though somebody had shut the lid. Brown stepped to the sword, jerked it out of the ground and returned it to his scabbard in three motions.

"Shoulder-umms! Order-umms! Dismiss!" The men filed back into the hut again, disconsolately, without swearing and without mirth. They had put the sun to bed with proper military decency. They would have seen humor— perhaps—or an excuse for blasphemy in the omission of such a detail, but it was much too hot to swear at the execution of it.

Besides, Brown was a strange individual who detested swearing, and it was a very useful thing, and wise, to humor him. He had a way of his own, and usually got it.

Brown posted a sentry at the hut-door, and another at the crossroads which he was to guard, then went round behind the hut to bargain with the goatskin-merchant. But he stopped before he reached the tree.

"Boy!" he called, and a low-caste native servant came toward him at a run.

"Is that fakir there still?"

"Ha, sahib!"

"Ha? Can't you learn to say 'yes,' like a human being?"

"Yes, sahib!"

"All right. I'm going to have a talk with him. Kill the goat, and tell the Punjabi to wait, if he wants to buy the skin."

"Ha, sahib!"

Brown spun round on his heel, and the servant wilted.

"Yes, sahib!" he corrected.

Brown left him then, with a nod that conveyed remission of cardinal sin, and a warning not to repeat the offence. As the native ran off to get the butcher-knife and sharpen it, it was noticeable that he wore a chastened look.

"Send Sidiki after me!" Brown shouted after him, and a minute later a nearly naked Beluchi struck a match and emerged from the darkness, with the light of a lantern gleaming on his skin. He followed like a snake, and only Brown's sharp, authority-conveying footfalls could be heard as he trudged sturdily—straight-backed, eyes straight in front of him—to where an age-old baobab loomed like a phantom in the night. He marched like a man in armor. Not even the terrific heat of a Central-Indian night could take the stiffening out of him.

The Beluchi ran ahead, just before they reached the tree. He stopped and held the lantern up to let its light fall on some object that was close against the tree-trunk. At a good ten-pace distance from the object Brown stopped and stared. The lamplight fell on two little dots that gleamed. Brown stepped two paces nearer. Two deadly, malicious human eyes blinked once, and then stared back at him.

"Does he never sleep?" asked Brown.

The Beluchi said something or other in a language that was full of harsh hard gutturals, and the owner of the eyes chuckled. His voice seemed to be coming from the tree itself, and there was nothing of him visible except the cruel keen eyes that had not blinked once since Brown drew nearer.

"Well?"

"Sahib, he does not answer."

“Tell him I’m tired of his not answering. Tell him that if he can’t learn to give a civil answer to a civilly put question I’ll exercise my authority on him!”

The Beluchi translated, or pretended to. Brown was not sure which, for he was rewarded with nothing but another chuckle, which sounded like water gurgling down a drain.

“Does he still say nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing, sahib.”

Brown stepped up closer yet, and peered into the blackness, looking straight into the eyes that glared at him, and from them down at the body of the owner of them. The Beluchi shrank away.

“Have a care, sahib! It is dangerous! This very holy—most holy—most religious man!”

“Bring that lantern back.”

“He will curse you, sahib!”

“Do you hear me?”

The Beluchi came nearer again, trembling with fright. Brown snatched the lamp away from him, and pushed it forward toward the fakir, moving it up and down to get a view of the whole of him. There was nothing that he saw that would reassure or comfort or please a devil even. It was ultradevilish; both by design and accident—conceived and calculated ghastliness, peculiar to India. Brown shuddered as he looked, and it took more than the merely horrible to make him betray emotion.

“What god do you say he worships?”

“Sahib, I know not. I am a Mussulman. These Hindus worship many gods.”

The fakir chuckled again, and Brown held the lantern yet nearer to him to get a better view. The fakir’s skin was not oily, and for all the blanket-heat it did not glisten, so his form was barely outlined against the blackness that was all but tangible behind him.

Brown spat again, as he drew away a step. He could contrive to express more disgust and more grim determination in that one rudimentary act than even a Stamboul Softa can.

“So he’s holy, is he?”

“Very, very holy, sahib!”

Again the fakir chuckled, and again Brown held his breath and pushed the lantern closer to him.

“I believe the brute understands the Queen’s English!”

“He understanding all things, sahib! He knowing all things what will happen! Mind, sahib! He may curse you!”

But Brown appeared indifferent to the danger that he ran. To the fakir’s unconcealed discomfort, he proceeded to examine him minutely, going over him with the aid of the lantern inch by inch, from the toe-nails upward.

“Well,” he commented aloud, “if the army’s got an opposite, here’s it! I’d give a month’s pay for the privilege of washing this brute, just as a beginning!”

The man’s toe-nails—for he really was a man!—were at least two inches long. They were twisted spirally, and some of them were curled back on themselves into disgusting-looking knots. What walking he had ever done had been on his heels. His feet were bent upward, and fixed upward, by a deliberately cultivated cramp.

His legs, twisted one above the other in a squatting attitude, were lean and hairy, and covered with open sores which were kept open by the swarm of insects that infested him. His loin-cloth was rotting from him. His emaciated body—powdered and smeared with ashes and dust and worse—was perched bolt-up-right on a flat earth dais that had once on a time been the throne of a crossroads idol. One arm, his right one, hung by his side in an almost normal attitude, and his right fingers moved incessantly like a man's who is kneading clay. But his other arm was rigid—straight up in the air above his head; set, fixed, cramped, paralyzed in that position, with the fist clenched. And through the back of the closed fist the fakir's nails were growing.

But, worse than the horror of the arm was the creature's face, with the evidence of torture on it, and fiendish delight in torture for the torture's sake. His eyes were his only organs that really lived still, and they expressed the steely hate and cruelty, the mad fanaticism, the greedy self-love—self-immolating for the sake of self—that is the thoroughgoing fakir's stock in trade. And his lips were like the graven lips of a Hindu temple god, self-satisfied, self-worshiping, contemptuous and cruel. He chuckled again, as Brown finished his inspection.

"So that crittur's holy, is he? Well, tell him that I'm set here to watch these crossroads. Tell him I'm supposed to question every one who comes, and find out what his business is, and arrest him if he can't give a proper account of himself. Say he's been here three days now, and that that's long enough for any one to find his tongue in. Tell him if I don't get an answer from him here and now I'll put him in the clink!"

"But, sahib—"

"You tell him what I say, d'you hear?"

The Beluchi made haste to translate, trembling as he spoke, and wilting visibly when the baleful eyes of the fakir rested on him for a second. The fakir answered something in a guttural undertone.

"What does he say?"

"That he will curse you, sahib!"

"Sentry!" shouted Brown.

"Sir!" came the ready answer, and the sling-swivels of a rifle clicked as the man on guard at the crossroads shouldered it. There are some men who are called "sir" without any title to it, just as there are some sergeants who receive a colonel's share of deference when out on a non-commissioned officer's command. Bill Brown was one of them.

"Come here, will you!"

There came the sound of heavy footfalls, and a thud as a rifle-butt descended to the earth again. Brown moved the lamp, and its beams fell on a rifleman who stood close beside him at attention—like a jinnee formed suddenly from empty blackness.

"Arrest this fakir. Cram him in the clink."

"Very good, sir!"

The sentry took one step forward, with his fixed bayonet at the "charge," and the fakir sat still and eyed him.

"Oh, have a care, sahib!" wailed the Beluchi. "This is very holy man!"

"Silence!" ordered Brown. "Here. Hold the lamp."

The bayonet-point pressed against the fakir's ribs, and he drew back an inch or two to get away from it. He was evidently able to feel pain when it was inflicted by any other than himself.

"Come on," growled the sentry. "Forward. Quick march. If you don't want two inches in you!"

"Don't use the point!" commanded Brown. "You might do him an injury. Treat him to a sample of the butt!"

The sentry swung his rifle round with an under-handed motion that all riflemen used to practise in the short-range-rifle days. The fakir winced, and gabbled something in a hurry to the man who held the lamp.

"He says that he will speak, sahib!"

"Halt, then," commanded Brown. "Order arms. Tell him to hurry up!"

The Beluchi translated, and the fakir answered him, in a voice that sounded hard and distant and emotionless.

"He says that he, too, is here to watch the crossroads, sahib! He says that he will curse you if you touch him!"

"Tell him to curse away!"

"He says not unless you touch him, sahib."

"Prog him off his perch!" commanded Brown.

The rifle leaped up at the word, and its butt landed neatly on the fakir's ribs, sending him reeling backward off his balance, but not upsetting him completely. He recovered his poise with quite astonishing activity, and shuffled himself back again to the center of the dais. His eyes blazed with hate and indignation, and his breath came now in sharp gasps that sounded like escaping steam. He needed no further invitation to commence his cursing. It burst out with a rush, and paused for better effect, and burst out again in a torrent. The Beluchi hid his face between his hands.

"Now translate that!" commanded Brown, when the fakir stopped for lack of breath.

"Sahib, I dare not! Sahib—"

Brown took a threatening step toward him, and the Beluchi changed his mind. Brown's disciplining methods were a too recently encountered fact to be outdone by a fakir's promise of any kind of not-yet-met damnation.

"Sahib, he says that because your man has touched him, both you and your man shall lie within a week helpless upon an anthill, still living, while the ants run in and out among your wounds. He says that the ants shall eat your eyes, sahib, and that you shall cry for water, and there shall be no water within reach—only the sound of water just beyond you. He says that first you shall be beaten, both of you, until your backs and the soles of your feet run blood, in order that the ants may have an entrance!"

"Is he going to do all this?"

The Beluchi passed the question on, and the fakir tossed him an answer to it.

"He says, sahib, that the gods will see to it."

"So the gods obey his orders, do they. Well, they've a queer sense of duty! What else does he prophesy?"

"About your soul, sahib, and the sentry's soul."

"That's interesting! Translate!"

“He says, sahib, that for countless centuries you and your man shall inhabit the carcasses of snakes, to eat dirt and be trodden on and crushed, until you learn to have respect for very holy persons!”

“Is he going to have the ordering of that?”

“He says that the gods have already ordered it.”

“It won’t make much difference, then, what I do now. If that’s in store for me in any case, I may as well get my money’s worth before the fun begins! Tell him that unless he can give me a satisfactory reason for being here I shall treat him to a little more rifle-butt, and something else afterward that he will like even less!”

“He says,” explained the Beluchi, after a moment’s conversation with the fakir, “that he is here to see what the gods have prophesied. He says that India will presently be whelmed in blood!”

“Whose blood?”

“Yours and that of others. He says, did you not see the sunset?”

“What of the sunset?”

Brown looked about him and, save where the lantern cast a fitful light on the fakir and the sentry and the native servant, and threw into faint relief the shadowy, snake-like tendrils of the baobab, his eyes failed to pierce the gloom. The sunset was a memory. In that heavy, death-darkness silence it seemed almost as though there had never been a sun.

“‘A blot of blood,’ he says. He says the order has been given. He says that half of India shall run blood within a day, and the whole of it within a week!”

“Who gave the order?”

“He answers ‘*Hookum hai!*’—which means ‘It is an order!’ Nothing more does the holy fakir say.”

“To the clink with him!” commanded Brown. “I’m tired of these Old Mother Shipton babblings. That’s the third useless Hindu fanatic within a week who has talked about India being drenched in blood. Let him go in to the depot under guard, and do his prophesying there! Bring him along.”

The sentry’s rifle-butt rose again and threatened business. The Beluchi gave a warning cry, and the fakir tumbled off his dais. Then, with the trembling Beluchi walking on ahead with the lantern, and Brown and the sentry urging from behind, the fakir jumped and squirmed and wabbled on his all but useless feet toward the guardroom. When they reached the tree where the goat had bleated, the Punjabi skin-buyer rose up, took one long look at the fakir and ran.

“Well, I’ll be!” exclaimed the sentry.

“You’ll be worse than that,” said Brown, “if you use that language anywhere where I’m about! I’ll not have it, d’you hear? Get on ahead, and open the door of the clink!”

The sentry obeyed him, and a moment later the fakir was thrust into a four-square mud-walled room, and the door was locked on him.

“Back to your post,” commanded Brown. “And next time I hear you swearing, I’ll treat you to a double-trick, my man! About turn. Quick march.”

The sentry trudged off without daring to answer him, and Brown took a good look at the fakir through the iron bars that protected the top half of the door. Then he went off to see about his supper, of newly slaughtered goat-chops and chupatties baked in ghee. His soul revolted at the thought of it, but it was his duty

to eat it and set an example to the men; and duty was the only thing that mattered in Bill Brown's scheme of things.

"Maybe it's true," he muttered, "and maybe it's all lies; there's no knowing. Maybe India's going to run blood, as these fakirs seem to think, and maybe it isn't. There'll be more blood shed than mine in that case! 'Hookum hai'—'It is orders,' heh ? Well—there's more than one sort of 'Hookum hai!' I've got my orders too!"

He doubled the guard, when supper bad been eaten and the guardroom had been swept and the pots and kettle had been burnished until they shone. Then he tossed a chupatty to the imprisoned fakir, spat again from sheer disgust, lit his pipe and went and sat where he could hear the footbeats of the sentries.

"They can't help their religion," he muttered. "The poor infidels don't know no better. And they've got a right to think what they please 'about me or the Company. But I've no patience with uncleanliness! That's wrong any way you look at it. That critter can't see straight for the dirt on him, nor think straight for that matter. He's a disgrace to humanity. Priest or fakir or whatever he is, if I live to see tomorrow's sun I'll hand him over to the guard and have him washed!"

Having formed that resolution, Brown dismissed all thoughts of the fakir. His memory went back to home—the clean white cottage on the Sussex Downs, and the clean white girl who once on a time had waited for him there. For the next few hours, until the guard was changed, the only signs or sounds of life were the glowing of Brown's pipe, the steady footfalls of the sentries and occasional creakings from the hell-hot guard-room, where sleepless soldiers tossed in prickly discomfort.

Chapter 2

Bill Brown, with his twelve, had not been set to watch a lonely crossroad for the fun of it. One road was a well-made highway, and led from a walled city, where three thousand men sweated and thought of England, to another city, where five thousand armed natives drew England's pay, and wore English uniforms.

The other road was a snake-like trail, nearly as wide but not nearly so well kept. It twisted here and there amid countless swarming native villages, and was used almost exclusively by natives, whose rightful business was neither war nor peace nor the contriving of either of them. It had been a trade-road when history was being born, and the laden ox-carts creaked along it still, as they had always done and always will do until India awakes.

But there are few men in the world who attend to nothing but their rightful business, and there are even more in India than elsewhere who are prone to neglect their own affairs and stir up sedition among others. There are few fighting-men among that host. They are priests for the most part or fakirs or make-believe pedlers or confessed and shameless mendicants; and they have no liking for the trunk roads, where the tangible evidence of Might and Majesty may be seen marching in eight-hundred-man battalions. They prefer to dream along the

byways, and set other people dreaming. They lead, when the crash comes, from behind.

Though the men who made the policies of the Honorable East India Company were mostly blind to the moving finger on the wall, and chose to imagine themselves secure against a rising of the millions they controlled; and though most of their military officers were blinder yet, and failed to read the temper of the native troops in their immediate command, still, there were other men who found themselves groping, at least two years before the Mutiny of '57. They were groping for something intangible and noiseless and threatening which they felt was there in a darkness, but which one could not see.

Baines was one of them—Lieutenant-General Baines, commanding at Bholat. His troops were in the center of a spider's web of roads that criss-crossed and drained a province. There were big trunk arteries, which took the flow of life from city to walled city, and a mass of winding veins in the shape of grass-grown country tracks. He could feel, if any man could, the first faint signs of fever rising, and he was placed where he could move swiftly, and cut deep in the right spot, should the knife be needed.

He was like a surgeon, though, who holds a lancet and can use it, but who lacks permission. The poison in India's system lay deep, and the fever was slow in showing itself. And meanwhile the men who had the ordering of things could see neither necessity nor excuse for so much as a parade of strength. They refused, point-blank and absolutely, to admit that there was, or, could be, any symptom of unrest.

He dared not make new posts for officers, for officers would grumble at enforced exile in the country districts, and the Government would get to hear of it, and countermand. But there were non-commissioned officers in plenty, and it was not difficult to choose the best of them—three men—and send them, with minute detachments, to three different points of vantage. Non-commissioned officers don't grumble, or if they do no one gets to hear of it, or minds. And they are just as good as officers at watching crossroads and reporting what they see and hear.

So where a little cluster of mud huts ached in the heat of a right angle where the trunk road crossed a native road some seventy miles from Bholat, Bill Brown—swordsman and sergeant and strictest of martinets, as well as sentimentalist—had been set to watch and listen and report.

There were many cleverer men in the non-commissioned ranks of Baine's command, many who knew more of the native languages, and who had more imagination. But there was none who knew better how to win the unqualified respect and the obedience of British and native alike, or who could be better counted on to obey an order, when it came, literally, promptly and in the teeth of anything.

Brown's theories on religion were a thing to marvel at, and walk singularly wide of, for he was a preacher with a pair of fists when thoroughly aroused. And his devotion to a girl in England whom no one in his regiment had ever seen, and of whom he did not even possess a likeness, was next door to being pitiable. His voice was like a raven's, with something rather less than a raven's sense of melody; he was very prone to sing, and his songs were mournful ones. He was not a social acquisition in any generally accepted sense, although his language was

completely free from blasphemy or coarseness. His ideas were too cut and dried to make conversation even interesting. But his loyalty and his sense of duty were as adamant.

He had changed the double guard at the crossroads; and had posted two fresh men by the mud-walled guardroom door. He had lit his pipe for the dozenth time, and had let it go out again while he hummed a verse of a Covenanters' hymn. And he had just started up to wall over to the cell and make a cursory inspection of his prisoner, when his ears caught a distant sound that was different from any of the night sounds, though scarcely louder.

Prompt as a rifle in answer to the trigger, he threw himself down on all fours, and laid his ear to the ground. A second later, he was on his feet again.

"Guard!" he yelled. "Turn out!"

Cots squeaked and jumped, and there came a rush of hurrying feet. The eight men not on watch ran out in single file, still buttoning their uniforms, and lined up beside the two who watched the guardroom door.

"Stand easy!" commanded Brown. Then he marched off to the crossroads, finding his way in the blackness more by instinct and sense of direction than from any landmark, for even the road beneath his feet was barely visible.

"D'you mean to tell me that neither of you men can hear that sound?" he asked the sentries.

Both men listened intently, and presently one of them made out a very faint and distant noise, that did not seem to blend in with the other night- sounds.

"Might be a native drum?" he hazarded.

"No, 'tain't!" said the other. "I got it now. It's a horse galloping. Tired horse, by the sound of him, and coming this way. All right, Sergeant."

"One of you go two hundred yards along the road, and form an advance- post, so to speak. Challenge him the minute he's within ear-shot, and shoot him if he won't halt. If he halts, pass him along to Number Two. Number Two, pass him along to the guardroom, where I'll deal with him! Which of you's Number One? Number One, then—forward—quick—march!"

The sentry trudged off in one direction, and Bill Brown in another. The sentry concealed itself behind a rock that flanked the road, and Brown spent the next few minutes in making the guard "port arms," and carefully inspecting their weapons with the aid of a lantern. He had already inspected there once since supper, but he knew the effect that another inspection would be likely to produce. Nothing goes further toward making men careful and ready at the word than incessant and unexpected but quite quietly performed inspection of minutest details.

He produced the effect of setting the men on the qui vive without alarming them.

Suddenly, the farthest advanced sentry's challenge rang out.

"*Frie-e-e-e-nd!*" came the answer, in nasal, high-pitched wail, but the galloping continued.

"Halt, I tell you!" A breech-bolt clicked, and then another one. They were little sounds, but they were different, and the guard could hear them plainly. The galloping horse came on.

"*Cra-a-a-a-ack!*" went the sentry's rifle, and the flash of it spurted for an instant across the road, like a sheet of lightning. And, just as lightning might, it showed

an instantaneous vision of a tired gray horse, foam-flecked and furiously ridden, pounding down the road head-on. The vision was blotted by the night again before any one could see who rode the horse, or what his weapons were—if any—or form a theory as to why he rode.

But the winging bullet did what the sentry's voice had failed to do. There came a clatter of spasmodic hoof-beats, an erratic shower of sparks, a curse in clean-lipped decent Urdu; a grunt, a struggle, more sparks again, and then a thud, followed by a devoutly worded prayer that Allah, the all-wise provider of just penalties, might blast the universe.

"Stop talkin'!" said the sentry, and a black-bearded Rajput rolled free, and looked up to find a bayonet-point within three inches of his eye.

"Poggul!" snarled the Mohammedan.

"Poggul's no password!" said the sentry. "Neither to my good-nature nor to nothing else. Put up your 'ands, and get on your feet, and march! Look alive, now! Call me a fool, would yer? Wait till the sergeant's through with yer, and see!"

The Rajput chose to consider a retort beneath his dignity. He rose, and took one quick look at the horse, which was still breathing.

"Your bayonet just there," he said, "and press. So he will die quickly."

The sentry placed his bayonet-point exactly where directed, and leaned his weight above it. The horse gave a little shudder, and lay still.

"Poggul!" said the Rajput once again. And this time the sentry looked and saw cold steel within three inches of his eye!

"Your rifle!" said the Rajput. "Hand it here!"

And, to save his eyesight, the sentry complied, while the Rajput's ivory-white teeth grinned at him pleasantly.

"Now, hands to your sides! Attention! March!" the Rajput ordered, and with his own bayonet at his back the sentry had to march, whether he wanted to or not, by the route that the other chose, toward the guardroom. The Rajput seemed to know by instinct where the second sentry stood although the man's shape was quite invisible against the night. He called out, "Friend!" again as he passed him, and the sentry hearing the first sentry's footsteps, imagined that the real situation was reversed.

So, out of a pall of blackness, to the accompanying sound of rifles being brought up to the shoulder, a British sentry—feeling and looking precisely like a fool—marched up to his own guardroom, with a man who should have been his prisoner in charge of him.

"Halt!" commanded Brown. "Who or what have you got there, Stanley?"

"Stanley is my prisoner at present!" said a voice that Brown vaguely recognized.

He stepped up closer, to make sure.

"What, you? Juggut Khan!"

"Aye, Brown sahib! Juggut Khan—with tidings, and a dead gray horse on which to bear them! If this fool could only use his bayonet as he can shoot, I think I would be dead too. His brains, though, are all behind his right eye. Tie him up, where no little child can come and make him prisoner!"

"Arrest that man!" commanded Brown, and two men detached themselves from the end of the guard, and stood him between them, behind the line.

"Here's his rifle!" smiled Juggut Khan, and Brown received it with an ill grace.

“How did you get past the other sentry?” he asked.

“Oh, easily! You English are only brave; you have no brains. Sometimes one part of the rule is broken, but the other never. You are not always brave!”

“I suppose you’re angry because he killed your horse?”

“I am angry, Brown sahib, for greater happenings than that! The man conceivably was right, since I did not halt for him, and I suppose he had his orders. I am angry because the standard of rebellion is raised, and because of what it means to me!”

“Are you drunk, Juggut Khan?”

“Your honor is pleased to be humorous? No, I am not drunk. Nor have I eaten opium. I have eaten of the bread of bitterness this day, and drunk of the cup of gall. I have seen British officers—good, brave fools, some of whom I knew and loved—killed by the men they were supposed to lead. I have seen a barracks burning, and a city given over to be looted. I have seen white women—nay, sahib, steady!—I have seen them run before a howling mob, and I have seen certain of them shot by their own husbands!”

“Quietly!” ordered Brown. “Don’t let the men hear!”

“One of them I slew myself, because her husband, who was wounded, sent me to her and bade me kill her. She died bravely. And certain others I have hidden where the mutineers are not likely to discover them at present. I ride now for succor—or, I rode, rather, until your expert marksman interfered with me! I now need another horse.”

“You mean that the native troops have mutinied?” “I mean rather more than that, sahib. Mohammedans and Hindus are as one, and the crowd is with them. This is probably the end of the powder-train, for, from what I heard shouted by the mutineers, almost the whole of India is in revolt already!”

“Why?”

“God knows, sahib! The reason given is that the cartridges supplied are greased with the blended fat of pigs and cows, thus defiling both Hindu and Mohammedan alike. But, if you ask me, the cause lies deeper. In the meantime, the rebels have looted Jailpore and burned their barracks, and within an hour or two they will start along this road for Bholat, which they have a mind to loot likewise. My advice to you is retire at once. Get me another horse from somewhere, that I may carry warning. Then follow me as fast as you and your men can move.”

“Bah!” said Brown. “They’ll find General Baines to deal with them at Bholat.”

“Who knows yet how many in Bholat have not risen? Are you positive that the garrison there has not already been surrounded by rebels? I am not! I would not be at all surprised to learn that General Baines is so busy defending himself that he can not move in any direction. And—does your honor mean to hold this guardroom here against five thousand?”

“I mean to obey my orders!” answered Brown.

“And your orders are?”

“My orders!”

“Would they preclude the provision of another horse for me?”

“There’s a village about a mile away, down over yonder, where I think you’ll find a decent horse—along that road there.”

“And your honor’s orders would possibly permit a certain payment for the horse?”

“Positively not!” said Brown.

“Then—’

“To seize a horse, for military use, under the spur of necessity, and after giving a receipt for it, would be in order.”

“So I am to spend the night wandering around the countryside, in a vain endeavor to—”

But Brown was doing mathematics in his head. Two men to guard prisoners, two on guard at the crossroads, two at the guardroom door—six from twelve left six, and six were not enough to rape a countryside.

“Guard!” he ordered. “Release that prisoner. Now, you Stanley, let this be a lesson to you, and remember that I only set you free because I’d have been short-handed otherwise. Number One! Stand guard between the clink and the guardroom door. Keep an eye on both. The remainder—form two-deep. Right turn! By the left, quick-march! Left wheel!… Now,” he said, turning to Juggut Khan, “if you’ll come along I’ll soon get a horse for you!”

The Rajput strode along beside him, and gave him some additional information as they went, Brown taking very good care all the time to keep out of earshot of the men and to speak to Juggut Khan in low tones. He learned, among other things, that Juggut Khan had lost every anna that he owned, and had only escaped with his life by dint of luck and swordship and most terrific riding.

“Are all of you Rajputs loyal?” asked Brown.

“I know not. I know that I myself shall stay loyal until the end!”

“Well—the end is not in doubt. There can only be one end!” commented Brown.

“Of a truth, sahib, I believe that you are right. There can only be one end. This night is not more black, this horizon is no shorter, than the outlook!”

“Then, you mean—”

“I mean, sahib, that this uprising is more serious than you—or any other Englishman—is likely to believe. I believe that the side I fight for will be the losing side.”

“And yet, you stay loyal?”

“Why not?”

“All the same, Juggut Khan—I’m not emotional, or a man of many words. I don’t trust Indians as a rule! I—but—here—will you shake hands?”

“Certainly, sahib!” said the Rajput. “We be two men, you and I! Why should the one be loyal and the other not?”

“When this is over,” said Brown, “if it ends the way we want, and we’re both alive, I’d like to call myself your friend!”

“I have always been your friend, sahib, and you mine, since the day when you bandaged up a boy and gave him your own drinking-water and carried him in to Bholat on your shoulder, twenty miles or more.”

“Oh, as for that—any other man would have done the same thing. That was nothing!”

“Strange that when a white man does an honorable deed he lies about it!” said Juggut Khan. “That was not nothing, sahib, and you know it was not nothing! You know that from the heat and the exertion you were ill for more than a month

afterward. And you know that there were others there, of my own people, who might have done what you did, and did not!"

"But, hang it all! Why drag up a little thing like this?"

"Because, sahib, I might have no other opportunity, and—"

"Well? And what?"

"And the Rajput boy whom you carried was my son!"

Chapter 3

The finding of a remount for Juggut Khan was not so troublesome as might have been supposed. The rumors and plans and whispered orders for the coming struggle had been passed around the countryside for months past, and every man who owned a horse had it stalled safely near him, for use when the hour should come.

There were country-ponies and Arabs and Kathiawaris and Khaubulis among which to pick, and though the average run of them was worse than merely bad, and though both best and worst were hidden away whenever possible, good horses were discoverable. Within an hour, Bill Brown; with the aid of his men, had routed out a Khaubuji stallion for Juggut Khan, one fit to carry him against time the whole of the way to Bholat.

The Rajput mounted him where Brown unearthed him, and watched the signing of a scribbled-out receipt with a cynical smile.

"If he comes to claim his money for the horse," said Juggut Khan, "I—even I, who am penniless—will pay him. Good-by, Brown sahib!" He leaned over and grasped the sergeant by the hand. "Take my advice, now. I know what is happening and what has happened. Fall back on Bholat at once. Hurry! Seize horses or even asses for your men, and ride in hotfoot. Salaam!"

He drove his right spur in, wheeled the horse and started across country in the direction of Bholat at a hand-gallop, guiding himself solely by the soldier's sixth sense of direction, and leaving the problem of possible pitfalls to the horse.

"If what he says is true," said Brown, as the clattering hoof-beats died away, "and I'm game to take my oath he wouldn't lie to me, I'd give more than a little to have him with me for the next few hours!"

The men came clustering round him now, anxious for an explanation. They had held their tongues while Juggut Khan was there, because they happened to know Brown too well to do otherwise. He would have snubbed any man who dared to question him before the Indian. But, now that the Indian was gone, curiosity could stay no longer within bounds.

"What is it, Sergeant? Anything been happening? What's the news? What's that I heard him say about rebellion? They're a rum lot, them Rajputs. D'you think he's square? Tell us, Sergeant!"

"Listen, then. Rebellion has broken out. The native barracks at Jailpore have been burned, and all the English officers are killed—or so says Juggut Khan. He's

riding on, to carry the news to General Baines. He says that the mutineers are planning to come along this way some time within the next few hours!"

"What are we going to do, then?"

"That's my business! I'm in command here!"

"Yes, but, Sergeant—aren't you going back to Bholat? Aren't you going to follow him? Are you going to stay here and get cut up? We'll get caught here like rats in a trap!"

"Are you giving orders here?" asked Brown acidly. "Fall in! Come on, now! Hurry! 'Tshun—eyes right—ri'—dress. Eyes—front. Ri'—turn. By the left—quick—march! Silence, now! Left! Left! Left!"

He marched them back toward the crossroads without giving them any further opportunity to remonstrate or ask for information.

It was not until he reached the crossroads, without being challenged, that he showed any sign of being in any way disturbed.

"Sentry!" he shouted. "Sentry!"

But there was no answer.

"Halt!" he ordered, and he himself went forward to investigate. The blackness swallowed him, but the men could hear him move, and they heard him fall. They heard him muttering, too, within ten paces of them. Then they heard his order.

"Bring a light here, some one."

One man produced a piece of candle, struck a match and lit it. A moment later they had all broken order, and were standing huddled up together like a frightened flock of sheep, peering through dancing, candle-lit shadows at something horrible that Brown was handling.

"What is it, Sergeant?"

"What in hell's happened?"

"Who was that swearing?" inquired Brown, with a sudden look up across his shoulder. "You, Taylor? You again? Swearing in the presence of death? Talking of hell, with your two comrades lying dead at the crossroads, and you like to follow both o' them at any minute?"

Both of the guards lay dead. They lay quite neatly, side by side, without a sign about them to show that they had met with violence. Brown rolled one body over, though, and then the cause of death became more obvious. A stream of blood welled out of the man's back, from between the shoulder-blades—warm blood, that had not even started to coagulate.

"They've been dead about three minutes!" commented Brown, rising, and wiping his hands in the road-dust to get the blood off them. "Pick 'em up. Carefully, now! Frog-march 'em, face-downwards. That's better! Now, forward. Quick, march!"

The procession advanced toward the guardhouse in grim silence, and once again there was no challenge when there should have been. The lamp was still burning in the guardroom, for they could see it plainly as they drew nearer, but there was no noise of a sentry's footfalls, or hoarse "Halt!" and "Who comes there?"

Nor was there any sign yet of the man whom Brown had left to guard both "clink" and guardroom. Brown let them take their dead comrades into the guardroom first, then set two fresh guards at the door, and covered up the bodies with a sheet before commencing to investigate.

He started off toward the cell where he had imprisoned the fakir. He went by himself, and no one volunteered to go with him.

He had gone five yards when the second explanation met his eyes. This time there was no need to stoop down, nor to turn any body over. The sentry whom he had left to guard both cell and guardroom stood bolt upright, with his mouth and his eyes wide open; skewered to the wall of the guardhouse by an iron spike, which pierced his chest.

"A lamp and four men here!" ordered Brown, without waiting to let the horror of the sight sink in. "Take that poor chap down, and lay him in the guardroom beside the others. How? How should I know? Pull it out, or break it off—I don't care which; don't leave him there, that's all."

He walked on toward the cell-door, while they labored, and fingered gingerly around the spike, which must have been driven through the sentry's chest with a hammer.

"I thought as much!" he muttered. And, though be had not thought as much, he might have done so. "I knew that a man who could maim his own body in that way was capable of any crime in the calendar!"

The door of the cell stood open, and there was no sign of any fakir, or of any one who might have helped him go—nothing but an empty cell, with the haunting smell of the fakir still abiding in it.

Bill Brown spat, and closed the cell-door.

"I'm thinking that Juggut Khan told nothing but the truth," he muttered. "Things look right, don't they, if that's so! Obey, Obey! I'd have liked to see England just once again—I would indeed. If I could only see her just once. If I'd a letter from her, or her picture. This is a rotten, rat-in-a-hole, lonely, uncreditable way to die! I wish Juggut Khan were here. I'd have somebody to help me keep my good courage up in that case."

The lock on the cell-door was broken, so he only closed it, then started back toward the guardroom.

"Three rifles, and three ammunition pouches gone!" he muttered. "That's three weapons they've got, in any case. A hornet's nest'd be better stopping in than this place."

He overtook the men who were carrying in the nail-killed sentry, and he saw that their faces were drawn and white. So were those of the other men, who were clustered in the guardroom door.

"What next, Sergeant? Hadn't we better be quick? Why not burn the place? That'd do instead o' buryin' the dead ones, and it'd give us a light to get away by. Might serve as a beacon, too. Might fetch assistance!"

It was evident that panic had set in.

"Fall in!" commanded Brown, and his straight back took on a curve that meant straightness to the nth power.

"'Tshun! Ri'—dress! Eyes—front!"

He glared at them for just about one minute before he spoke, and during that minute each man there realized that what was coming would be quite irrevocable.

"I'm sergeant here. My orders are to hold this post until relieved. Therefore—and I hope there's no man here holds any other notion; I hope it for his own sake!—until we are relieved, we're going to hold it! Moreover, this command is going to be

a real command, from now on. It's going to buck up. I'm going to put some ginger in it. There are three dead men here to be avenged, and I'm going to avenge 'em, or make you do it! And if any man imagines he's going to help himself by feeling afraid, let me assure him that the only thing he needs to fear is me! I've a right to command men—I know how—I intend to do it. And if I've got to make men first out of whey-faced cowards, why, I'm game to do it, and this is just where I begin! Now! Anybody got a word to say?"

There was grim silence.

"Good! I'll assume, then, until I'm contradicted, that you're all brave men. Into the guardroom with you!"

"Sahib! Sahib!" said a voice beside him.

"Well? What?"

It was the Beluchi interpreter who had carried the lamp for him that evening when he arrested the fakir.

"Run, sahib! It is time to run away!"

"Go on, then! Why don't you run?"

"I am afraid, sahib."

"Of what?"

"Of the men who slew the soldiers. Sahib! Remember what the fakir said. You will be pegged out on an anthill, sahib, when you have been beaten. Run, while there is yet time!"

"Did you see them kill my men?"

"Nay, sahib!"

"How was that?"

"I ran away and hid, sahib."

"How many were there?"

"Very many. The Punjabi skin-buyer brought them."

"He did, did he? Very well! Did he go off with the fakir?"

"I think he did. I did not see."

"Well, we'll suppose he did, then. And when the day breaks; we'll suppose that we can find him, and we'll go in search of him, and I wouldn't like to be that Punjabi when I do find him! Get into the guard-room, and wait in there until I give you leave to stir."

Chapter 4

An Indian city that has yet to have its mysterie's laid bare and banished by electric light is a stage deliberately set for massacre. The bazaars run criss-crosswise; any way at all save parallel, and anyhow but straight. Between them lies always a maze of passages, and alleys, deep sided, narrow, overhung by trellised windows and loopholed walls and guarded stairways.

For every square inch where the sun can shine there are a hundred where a man could hide unseen. Through century piled on suspicious century, no designer, no architect, no builder has neglected to provide a means of secret

ingress, and still more secret egress, to each new house. And the newest house is built on secret passages that hid conspirators against the kings of men who lived before the oldest house was thought of.

After the Mutiny of '57 came broader roads—so that a cannon might be trained along them.

But in '57, Jailpore was a nest of winding alley-ways and blind bat and rat holes, where weird smells and strange unlisted poisons and prophecies were born. In its midst, tight-packed in a roaring babel-din of many-colored markets, stood a stone-walled palace, built once by a Hindu king to commemorate a victory over Moslems, added to by a Moslem Nizam, to celebrate his conquest of the Hindus and added to once again by the Honorable East India Company, to make a suitable barracks for its native troops.

From the rat-infested slums, from the hot shadows and the mazy back- bazaars, from temples, store-houses, shops, and from the sin-steeped underworld, there screamed and surged and swept the many-graded, many-minded polyglot rebellion-spume. A quarter of a million underdogs had turned against their masters. A hundred factions and as many more religions, all had one common end in view—to loot. All were agreed on one thing—that the first stage of the game must be to turn Jailpore and, after Jailpore, India, into a charnel-house.

Around and around the burning palace the mob screamed and swept uncontrolled. Moslem looted Hindu, and Hindu Moslem. Armed sepoys, with the blood of their British officers fresh-soaked on their British uniforms, and the unspent pay of "John Company" still jingling in their pockets, danced weird, wild devil-dances through the streets, clearing their way, when they saw fit, with cold steel or wanton volleys. Women screamed. Caste looted caste. Loose horses galloped madly through the streets. Here and there a pitched battle raged, where a merchant who had wealth had also courage, and apprentices and friends to help him defend his store.

And through all the din and clamor, under and above the howling and the volleys and the roar of flames, sounded the steady thumping of the sacred war-drums. The whole sky glowed red. The Indian night was scorched and smoked and lit by arson. Hell screamed with the cooking of red mutiny, and throbbed with the thunder of the sacred temple-drums. And that was only one of the hells, and a small one. India glowed red that night from end to end!

Juggut Khan, free-lance Rajput and gentleman of fortune, had ridden out of that caldron of Jailpore. His house was a heap of glowing ashes, and his goods were tossed for and distributed among a company. But his mark lay indelibly impressed upon the town. There were three European women and a child who were nowhere to be found; and there was a trail that led from somewhere near the palace to the western gate. It was a red trail.

In one spot lay a sepoy pierced through by a lance, and with half of the lance-shaft still standing upright in him. That had been bad art— sheer playing to the gallery! Juggut Khan had run him through and tried to lift him on the lance-end for a trophy. It was luck that saved the day for him that time, not swordsmanship.

But a man who has done what he had done that day may be forgiven. There lay nine other men behind him where his lance was left, and each of them lay face upward with a round red hole in his anatomy where the lance had entered.

And from the point where he had broken his lance and left it, up to where a self-appointed guard had refused at first to open the city gate for him, there was a trail that did honor to the man who taught him swordsmanship. One man lay headless, and another's head was only part of him, because the sword had split it down the middle and the two halves were still joined together at the neck.

There were men who claimed afterward that of the twenty-three who lay between his lance-shaft and the city gate, some five or six had been slain in brawls and looting forays. And Juggut Khan was never known to discuss the matter. But the fact remains that every man of them was killed by the blade or point of a cavalry-saber, and that Juggut Khan broke out of the place untouched.

And another fact worthy of record is, that underneath a stone floor, in a building that was partly powder-magazine-surrounded at every end and side by mutineers who searched for them, and very nearly stifled by the dust of decaying ages—there lay three women and a child, with a jar of water close beside them and a sack of hastily collected things to eat. They lay there in all but furnace-heat, close-huddled in the darkness, and they shuddered and sobbed and blessed Juggut Khan alternately. Below them the whispering echoes sighed mysteriously through a maze of tunnels. Around them, and around their sack of food, the rats scampered. Above them, where a ten-ton stone trapdoor lay closed over their heads, black powder stood in heaps and sacks and barrels. Closing the trapdoor had been easy. One pushed it and it fell. Not all the mutineers in Jailpore nor Juggut Khan nor any one could open it again without the secret. And no man living knew the secret. The three women and the child were safe from immediate intrusion!

Those three women and that child were not so exceptionally placed for India, of that date. Two of the women had seen their husbands slain that afternoon, before their eyes. They were mother and daughter and grandson; and the fourth was an English nurse, red-cheeked still from the kiss of English Channel breezes.

"If only Bill were here!" the nurse wailed. "I know he'd find a way out. There wasn't never nothing nowhere that beat Bill. Bill wouldn't ha' left us! Bill'd ha' took us out o' here, an' saved our lives. Bill—snnff, snnff—Bill wouldn't ha'—snnff, snnff—shoved us in a rat-hole and took hisself off!"

She had not yet lost her English point of view. She still believed that the strong right arm of an English lover could play ducks and drakes with Destiny. One-half of the world, at least, still swears that she was wrong, and her mistress and the other woman thought her despicable, ridiculous, unenlightened. It was a hardship to them, to be endured with dignity and patience, but none the less a hardship, that they should be left and should have to die with this woman of the Ranks Below to keep them company. She was an honest woman, or they would never have engaged her and paid her passage all the way to India. But she was not of their jat, and she was a fool. It happens, however, that her point of view saved England for the English, and that the other point of view had brought England to the brink of utter ruin.

"If you'd leave off talking about your truly tiresome lover, and would pray to God, Jane," said Mrs. Leslie, "the rest of us might have a chance to pray to God too! This isn't the time, let me tell you, to be thinking of carnal love-affairs. Recall your sins, one by one, and ask forgiveness for them."

In the gloom of the vault, poor Jane was quite invisible. The sound of her snuffling and sobs was the only clue to her direction. But her bridling was a thing that could be felt through the stuffy blackness, and there was a ring in her retort that gave the lie to the tears that she was shedding.

"The only sin I ask forgiveness for," she answered in a level voice, "is having let Bill come to India alone. Pray to God, is it? Go on! Pray! If Bill was here, he'd start on that stone door without no words nor argument, unless some one tried to stop him. Then there'd be an argument! And he'd get it open too. Bill's the kind that does his prayin' afterward, and God helps men like Bill!"

"Well—I'm afraid that your Bill isn't here, and can't get here. So the best thing that you can do is to pray and let us pray."

"I'll pray for Bill!" said Jane defiantly. "Bill don't know that I'm in India, and he surely doesn't know I'm here. But if he knew—Oh, God! Let him know! Tell him! He'd come so quick. He'd—snnff, snnff—he'd—why, he'd ha' been here long ago! Dear God, tell Bill I'm here, that's all!"

Chapter 5

General Baines was in a position to be envied. No soldier worthy of his salt is other than elated at the thought of war. Now for the proving of his theories. Now for the fruit of all his tireless preaching and inspection and preparing—the planned, pegged-out swoop to victory!

He knew—as few men in India knew—the length and the breadth of what was coming. And when two of his non-commissioned officers sent in word that the whole country was ablaze, he realized, as few other men did in that minute, that this was no local outbreak. The long-threatened holocaust had come, and he had to act, to smite, to strike sure and swift at the festering root of things, or Central India was lost.

But his hands were tied still. He knew. He could see. He could feel. He could hear. But he had his orders. That very morning they had been repeated to him, and with emphasis. In a letter from the Council he had been told that "slight disturbances, of a purely local character, were not without the bounds of possibility, due partly to religious unrest and partly to local causes. Under no circumstances were any extended reprisals to be undertaken until further orders, and generals commanding districts were required to keep the bulk of their commands within cantonments."

The countryside was up. All India probably was up. His own men, set by himself to watch with one definite idea, had confirmed his worst fears. And he was under orders to stay with the bulk of his command in Bholat! Corked up in cantonments, with three thousand first-class fighting-men squealing for trouble, and red rebellion running riot all around him though it might be quelled by instant action!

And then worse happened. Juggut Khan clattered in to Bholat, spurring a horse that was so spent it could barely keep its feet. It fell in a woeful heap outside the general's quarters, and Juggut Khan—all but as weary as the horse—swung

himself free, staggered past the sentry at the door and rapped with his hilt on the tough teak panel. They had to give him brandy and feed him before he could summon strength enough to tell what he had seen and heard and done.

"And Brown stayed on at the crossroads?"

"Aye, General sahib! He stayed!"

The general sat back and drummed his heels together on the floor in a way that his aides had come to recognize as meaning trouble.

"You say that all of the European officers in Jailpore have been killed?"

"I did not count. I did not even know them all by mine or sight. I think, though, that all were killed. I heard men among the mutineers declare that all had been accounted for, save only three women and a child, and me. Those four I myself had hidden, and as for myself—I too was accounted for, and not without credit to the Raj for whom I fight!"

"I believe you, Juggut Khan! Did you have to cut your way out?"

The Rajput smiled.

"There was a message to deliver, sahib! What would you? Should I have waited while they arrested me?"

"Oh! You managed to evade them, did you?"

"At least I am here, sahib!"

The general chewed at his mustache, leaned his chair back against the wall and tapped at his boot with a riding-cane.

"Tell me, Juggut Khan," he said after another minute's thought, "what is your idea? Is this sporadic? Is this a local outbreak? Will this die down, if left to burn itself out?"

The Rajput laughed aloud.

"'Sporadic,"' he answered, "is a word of which I have yet to learn the meaning. If 'sporadic' means rebellion from Peshawur to Cape Cormorin—revolution, rape, massacre, arson, high treason, torture, death to every European and every half-breed and every loyal native north, south, east and west—then, yes, General sahib, 'sporadic' would be the proper word. If your Honor should mean less than that, then some other word is needed!"

"Then you confirm my own opinion. You are inclined to think that this is an organized and country-wide rebellion?"

"I know of what I speak, sahib!"

"You don't think that you are being influenced in your opinion by the fact that you have seen a massacre, and have lost everything you had?"

"Nay, sahib! This is no hour for joking, or for bearing of false tidings. I tell you, up, sahib! Boots and saddles! Strike!"

The general chewed at his mustache another minute.

"You know this province well?" he asked.

"None better than I. I have traversed every yard of it, attending to my business."

"And your business is?"

"Each to his trade, sahib. My trade is honorable."

"I have good reasons for asking, and no impertinence is meant. Be good enough to tell me. I wish to know what value I may place on your opinion."

"Sahib, I am a full sergeant of the Rajput Horse retired. I bear one medal."

"And—"

“I sell charms, sahib.”

“What sort of charms?”

“All sorts. But principally charms against the evil eye, and the red sickness, and death by violence. But, also love-charms now and then, and now and then a death-charm to a man who has an enemy and lacks swordsmanship or courage. I trade with each and every man, sahib, and listen to the talk of each, and hold my tongue!”

“Strange trade for a soldier, isn’t it?”

“Would you have me a robber, sahib? Or shall I sweep the streets—I, who have led a troop before now? Nay, sahib! A soldier can fight, and can do little else. When the day comes that the Raj has no more need of him—or thinks that it has no more need of him—he must either starve or become a prophet. And his own home is no place for a prophet who would turn his prophesying into silver coin!”

“Ah! Well-now, tell me! What is your opinion, without reference to what anybody else may think? You have just seen the massacre at Jailpore, and you know how many men I have here. And you know the condition of the road and the number of the mutineers. Would you, if you were in my place, strike at Jailpore immediately?”

“Nay, sahib. That I would not. I would strike north. And I would strike so swiftly that the mutineers would wonder whence I came. In Jailpore, all is over. They have done the harm, and they are in charge there. They have the powder-magazine in their possession, and the stands of arms, and the first advantage. Leave them there, then, sahib, and strike where you are not expected. In Jailpore you would be out of touch. You would have just that many more miles to march when the time comes—and it has come, sahib! —to join forces with the next command, and hit hard at the heart of things.”

“And the heart of things is—”

“Delhi!”

“You display a quite amazing knowledge of the game.”

“I am a soldier, sahib!”

“You would leave Jailpore, then, to its fate?”

“Jailpore has already met its fate, sahib. The barracks are afire, and the city has been given over to be looted. Reckon no more with Jailpore! Reckon only of the others. Listen, sahib! Has any message come from the next command? No? Then why? Think you that even a local outbreak could occur without some message being sent to you, and to the next division south of you? Why has no message come? Where is the next command? The next command north? Harumpore? Then why is there no news from Harumpore? I will tell you, sahib.”

“You mean, I suppose, that the country is up, in between?”

“You know that it is up, sahib!”

“You think that no message could get through to me?”

“I know that it could not! Else had one already come. My advice to you, sahib, as one soldier to another and tendered with all respect, is to up and leave this Bholat. Here, of what use are you? Here you can hold a small city, until the countryside has time to rise and lay siege to you and hem you in! Outside of here, you can be a hornet-storm! They will burn Bholat behind you. Let them! Let them, too, pay the price. Swoop down on Harumpore, sahib—join there with Kendrick

sahib's command. There make a fresh plan, and swoop down on some other place. But move, quickly, and keep on moving! And waste no time on places that are already lost."

"Then you would have me leave those women and that child, that you tell me of to their fate?"

"Nay, sahib! I am not of your command. I have done my duty to the Raj, and I now go about my own business."

"And that is?"

"To repay a debt that I owe the Raj, sahib!"

"Your answers are rather unnecessarily evasive, Juggut Khan. Be good enough to explain yourself!"

"I ride back to Jailpore, sahib. I would have stayed there, but it seemed right and soldierly to bring through the news first. Now, I return to do what I may to rescue those whom I hid there. I owe that to the Raj!"

"You mean that you will ride alone?"

"At least half of the distance, sahib. I had a favor to ask."

"Well?"

"Are you marching north, sahib?"

"I have not determined yet."

"Determined, sahib! This is no hour for dallying! Give orders now! Up! Strike, sahib! Listen! Should you march on Jailpore, the mutineers, who far outnumber you, will learn beforehand of your coming, and will put the place in a state of defense. It may take you weeks to fight your way in! Leave Jailpore, and those who are left in it to me, and lend me that non-commissioned officer of yours who guards the crossroads, and his twelve men. With a few, we can manage what a whole division might fail to do. And you march north, sahib, and burn and harry and slay! Strike quickly, where the trouble is yet brewing, and not where the day is lost already!"

It was case of the British power in India on one side of the scale, against three women and a child on the other; sentiment in the balance against strategy. And strategy must win, especially since this Rajput was offering his services.

"What are their names, you say?"

"Mrs. Leslie, wife of Captain Leslie; Mrs. Standish, wife of Colonel Standish and mother of Mrs. Leslie; Mrs. Leslie's child—I know not his name, he is but a child in arms—and the child's nurse."

The general still found it difficult to make up his mind.

"What proof have I of you?" he asked.

"Sahib, my honor is in question! I have a debt to pay!"

"What debt?"

"To the Raj."

"To the Raj?"

"Aye, Sahib! I have but one son, and his life was saved for me by a British soldier. A life for a life. Four lives for a life. I ride! I need, though, a fresh horse. And I ask for the loan of that sergeant, and those twelve men."

"I wonder whether a man such as you can realize exactly what it means to us to know that white women are in Jailpore, at the mercy of black mutineers? I mean, are you sufficiently aware of the extreme horror of the situation?"

“Knew you Captain Collins Sahib, of the Jailpore command?”

“Know him well.”

“Knew you his memsahib?”

“She was a niece of mine.”

“I slew her myself, with this sword!”

“When? Why?”

“Yesterday. Because her husband could not get to her himself, and since he and I knew each other, and he trusted me. I said to her, ‘Memsahib! I have your husband’s orders!’ She asked me ‘What orders, Juggut Khan?’ I said, ‘Why ask me, memsahib? Is my task easier, or yours?’ She said ‘Obey your orders, Juggut Khan, and accept my thanks now, since I shall be unable to thank you afterward!’ And then she looked me bravely in the face, and met her death, sahib. Of a truth I know! I am to be trusted!”

“I believe you, Juggut Khan. And, incidentally, I beg your pardon for having doubted you. Have you slept ?”

“Nay, Sahib. And I sleep not on this side of the crossroads!”

“I don’t place Sergeant Brown under your command—you’ll understand that’s impossible—but, it’s quite impossible for him to catch me up. He may as well cooperate with you. Wait.” He paused, and wrote, then continued, “Here is a note to him, in which I order him to work with you, and to take your advice whenever possible. Go to the stables, and choose any horse you like except my first charger. Here—here is money; you may need some. Count that, will you. How much is it? Four hundred rupees? Write out a receipt for it. Now, good luck to you, Juggut Khan. And if you should get through alive—I’ll pay you the compliment of admitting that you won’t come through without the women, and I know that Brown won’t—if you should have luck, and should happen to get through, why, look for me at Harumpore, or elsewhere to the northward of it. I start with my division in an hour.”

“Salaam, sahib!” said Rajput, rising and standing at the salute.

“Salaam, Juggut Khan! Take any food, or drink, or clothing that you want. Good-by, and your good luck ride with you. I feel like a murderer, but I know I’ve done the best that can be done!”

Chapter 6

Now if Sergeant Brown possessed a sweetheart, and the sweetheart lived in England, and if Brown still loved her—as has already been more than hinted at—it is not at all unreasonable to wonder why he had no likeness of her, no news of her, nothing but her memory around which to weave the woof of sentiment—at least, it’s not unreasonable so to wonder in this late year of grace.

Then, though, in 1857, when a newspaper cost threepence or thereabouts, and schools were so far from being free that only the sons of gentlemen (and seldom the daughters of even gentlemen, remember) attended them, the art of reading was not so common as it now is. Writing was still more uncommon. And it has not

been pretended that Brown was other than a commoner. He was a stiff-backed man, and honest. And the pride that had raised him to the rank of sergeant was even stiffer than his stock. But he came from the ranks that owned no vote, nor little else, in those days, and he owned a sweetheart of the same rank as himself, who could neither read nor write. And when people whose somewhat primitive ideas on right and wrong lead them to look on daguerreotypes as works of the devil happen too to be living more than five thousand miles apart, when one of the two can not write, nor readily afford the cost of postage, and when the other is nearly always on the move from post to post, it is not exactly to be wondered at that memory of each other was all they had to dwell upon.

A journey to India in '57 meant, to the rank and file, oblivion and worse. There were men then, of course, just as there are now, who would leave a girl behind them tied fast by a promise of futile and endless devotion; men who knew what the girls did not know—that India was all but inaccessible to any one outside of government employ, and that a common soldier's chance of sending for his girl, or of coming home again to claim her, was something in the neighborhood of one in thirty thousand.

But there were other men, like William Brown, who were a shade too honest and too stiff-chinned to buckle under to the social conditions of England in those days, and who were consequently not exactly pestered with offers of employment. And a man who could see the difference between doffing his ragged cap to a dissolute squire or parson, and saluting his better on parade, could also see the selfishness of leaving an honest girl to languish for him. Brown could not get a living in England. So he told his girl to get a better man, swung his canvas bag across his shoulder and marched away.

"What kind of a man is a better man than Bill?" she had wondered. Men like Bill seem to have a knack of judging character, and of picking girls who are as steadfast as themselves. So it is not to be wondered at that almost before her tears were dry she had set about attempting what few women of her type and time would have dreamed of. If Bill had set her free, she reasoned, Bill had no more authority over her, and she might do exactly what she chose. Bill could release, but he could not make her take another man. So, for all that the local yeomen, and local tradesmen even, haunted the little cottage on the Downs, and pestered her with their attentions, no one supplanted Bill.

Bill could tell her—and had told her—that India was no country for a white woman; that there were snakes there, and black men and tigers and even worse. But, since he had set her free, if she could manage it she was quite at liberty to brave the tigers and the snakes. And, once there, she would see whether she was free or not, and whether Bill was, either!

It took Bill Brown six years of constant honest effort to become a sergeant. It took Jane Emmett six weeks of pride-consuming and vexatious vigilance to procure for herself a job as nurse in a soldier-family. And it took her six more years of unremitting diligence, sweetened by all the attributes that seem desirable when nursing other people's children and embittered by the shame of grudging patronage, before she was considered dependable enough to be recommended for the service of a family just leaving for Bengal. Then, however, her world was a real world again!

Five months on a sailing-ship around the Cape—deep-laden, gunwales awash in a beam—on Bay-of-Biscay "snorer," hove-to for a week off Cape Agul—has, while the clumsy brigantine rolled the masts loose in her, all but dismasted in a typhoon come astray from the China Sea, fed on moldy bread, and even moldier pork, with a fretful child to nurse, and an exacting mother to be pleased! Jane Emmett laughed at it. Bill had been there before her, and had done more on his way, and worse Bengal did not frighten her. Nor did the knowledge, when she reached it, that Bill was very likely still some hundreds of miles away. She, who had come five thousand miles as the crows are said to fly and nine thousand by the map, could manage the odd hundreds. And she could wait. She had waited six long years. What was another month or two?

She had not even a notion where Bill was, beyond a vague one that he belonged to another province. For when the Honorable East India Company was muddling the affairs of India, the honors and emoluments and privileges—such as they were!—were reserved for the benefit of the commissioned ranks.

So a transfer to Jailpore did not mean to Jane Emmett ten extra degrees of heat, the neighborhood of jungle-fever and a brand-new breed of smells. Those disadvantages, which weighted down the souls of her employers, were completely overshadowed, so far as she was concerned, by the knowledge that she was traveling nearer by a hundred leagues or so to where her Bill was stationed. She was going west; and somewhere to the west was Bill. Anything was good—fever, and prickly heat, and smells included—that brought her any nearer him.

There would be no sense in endeavoring to analyze her sensations when the sudden outburst overwhelmed the inner-guard at Jailpore. The sight of white women being butchered, and of white men with the blood of their own women on their hands, selling their lives as dearly as the God of War would let them in a holocaust of flames, blinded her. It was probably just a splurge of fire and noise and smoke and blood in her memory, with one or two details standing out. The only real sensation that she felt—even when a tall, lean Rajput flung her across his shoulder, ran with her and dropped her down through a square hole into stifling darkness—was a longing for Bill Brown, her Bill, the one man in the world who could surely stop the butchery.

The others prayed. But she refused to pray. She felt angry—not prayerful! Had she come nine thousand miles, and sacrificed six good years of youth and youth's heritage, to be cast into a reeking dungeon and left to die there in the dark? Not if Bill should know of it! And so she changed her argument, and prayed for Bill. If only Bill knew—straight-backed, honest, stiff-chinned, uncompromising, plain Bill Brown. He would change things!

"Oh, Bill! Bill! Bill!" she sobbed. "Dear God, bring Bill to me!"

Chapter 7

When a man knows what is out against him, and from which direction he may look to meet death, he only needs to be a very ordinary man to make at least a

gallant showing. Gallery or no gallery to watch, given responsibility and trained men under hire, not one man in a thousand will fail to face death with dignity.

But Brown knew practically nothing, and understood still less, of what was happening. He had Juggut Khan's word for it that Jailpore was in flames, and that all save four of its European population had been killed. He believed that to be a probably exaggerated statement of affairs, but he did not blink the fact that he might expect to be overwhelmed almost without notice, and at any minute. That was a fact which he accepted, for the sake of argument and as a working-basis on which to build a plan of some kind—His orders were to hold that post, and he would hold it until relieved by General Baines or death. But there are several ways of holding a hot coal besides the rather obvious one of sitting on it.

It would have been a fine chance to be theatrical, had play-acting been in his line. Many and many a full-blown general has risen to authority and fame by means of absolutely useless gallery-play. He believed that he would presently be relieved by General Baines, who he felt sure would march at once on Jailpore; and had he chosen to he could have addressed the men, have set them to throwing up defenses and have made a nice theatrical redoubt that he could have held quite easily with the help of nine men for a day or two. And since the really worthwhile things go often unrewarded, but the gallery-plays never, nobody would have blamed him had he chosen some such course as that.

But Brown's idea of holding down a place was to make that place a thorn in the side of the enemy. And since he did not know who was the enemy, or where he was, nor why he was an enemy, nor when he would attack, he proposed to find out these things for himself preparatory to making the said enemy as uncomfortable as his meager resources would permit, when eked out by an honest "dogged-does-it" brain.

He buried the three men whom Fate had seemed to value at the price of a fakir's freedom. And, being a religious man, to whom religion was a fact and the rest of the universe a theory, he was able to say a full funeral service over them from memory. He said it at the grave-end, with a lantern in his hand and one man facing him across the grave—as the English used to drink when the Danes had landed, each watching for the glint of steel beyond the other's shoulder.

And, four on each side of the trench that they had dug, the remainder knelt and faced the night each way—partly from enforced piety, and partly because eight men back to back, with their bayonets outward and their butts against their knees, are an awkward proposition for an enemy. They mumbled the responses because Brown made them do it, and they kept their eyes skinned because the night seemed full of other eyes, and sounds.

"And now, you men," said Brown, changing his voice to suit the nature of his task, "you can get your sleep by fours. I don't care which four of you goes to sleep first, but there are only two watches of us left, and there are about four hours left to sleep in, by my reckoning. That's two hours' sleep for each man. And we'll keep clear of the guardroom. As I understand my orders, the important point's the cross-roads. I'm supposed to halt every one who comes, and to ask him his business. And that'd be impossible to do from the guardroom here. Let this be a lesson to you men, now. In interpretin' orders, when a point's in doubt, always look for the meaning of the orders rather than the letter of them, obeying the letter

only when the meaning and the letter are the same thing. The letter of our orders says the guardroom. The meaning's clear. We're here to guard the cross-roads. We take the meaning, and let the letter hang!

"Besides! The way it seems to me, if there's any more trouble cooking in this neighborhood, it's going to cook pretty fast, and it's going to boil around that guardroom; and if we're not in the guardroom, why, that's point number one for us! Leave the guardroom lantern lighted, and bring out nothing but your cartridge-pouches and the box of ammunition. Leave everything else where it lies. Quick, now."

They obeyed him on the run, afraid to be out of his sight for a moment even, trusting him as little children trust a nurse, and ready to do anything so long as he would only keep them up and doing, and not make them stay by the scene of the murders. Brown knew their state of mind as accurately as he knew the range of their service rifles, and he knew just how he could best keep panic from them. He knew too, if not what was best to do, at least what he intended doing, and he knew how he could best get them in a state to do it.

Behind his own mind lay all the while a sense of loneliness and hopelessness. He did not entertain the thought of failure to hold the crossroads, and he was so certain that General Baines would come with his division that he could almost see the advance-guard trotting toward him down the trunk road. But there is no accounting for a soldier's moods, and something told him—something deep down inside him that he could neither name nor understand—that he was out now on the adventure of a lifetime, and that the heart-cord which had held him tight to England all these years had been cut. He felt gloomy and dispirited, but not a man of the nine who followed him had the slightest inkling of it.

He halted them outside the guardroom, and bullydamned two of them because some unimportant part of their accouterments was missing; and he "'Tshuned" them, and stood them at ease, and "'Tshuned" them again, until he had them jumping at the word. Then he marched them two abreast in and out among the huts in search of any sign of native servants. They found no sign of any one at all. Though in that black darkness it would have been quite possible for half a hundred men to lie undetected. Brown decided that the camp was empty. He thought it probable that any one concealed there would have tried his luck on somebody at least, at close range as he passed.

So he marched them back to the guard-room once again, and sent two of them in to drag out the shivering Beluchi, who had taken cover underneath a cot and refused to come out until he was dragged out by the leg. The native's terror served to pull the men together quite a little, for Tommy Atkins always does and always did behave himself with pride when what he is pleased to consider his inferiors are anywhere about. They showed that unfortunate Beluchi how white men marched into the darkness—best foot foremost; without halt or hesitation, when ghosts or murderers or unseen marksmen were close at hand.

The Beluchi let himself be dragged, trembling, between two of them. It was he who first saw something move, or heard some one breathe. For he was absolutely on edge, and had nothing to attend to but his own fear. The others had to keep both eyes and ears lifting, to please Brown the exacting. The Beluchi struggled and held back, almost breaking loose, and actually tearing his loin-cloth.

“Sahib!” he whispered hoarsely. “Sahib!”

“What is it?” demanded Brown, scarcely waiting for an answer, though. Something told him what it was that moved, and his own skin felt goose-fleshy from neck to heel.

“The fakir, sahib!”

There was a murmur through the ranks, a sibilant indrawing of the breath.

“Did I hear anybody swear?” asked Brown.

Nobody answered him. All nine men stood stock-still, leaning on their rifles, their heads craned forward and their eyes strained in the direction of the gloomy baobab.

“Form single rank!” commanded Brown.

There was no response. They stood there fixed like a row of chickens staring at a snake!

“Form single rank!”

He leaped at them, and broke the first rule of the service—as a man may when he is man enough, and the alternative would be black shame.

His fist was a hard one and heavy, and they felt the weight of it.

“Form single rank! Take one pace open order! Extend! Now, forward—by the right! Right dress, there!”

He marched in front of them, and they followed him for very shame, now that he had broken their paralysis.

“Halt! Port-arms! Charge bayonets!”

He was peering at something in the dark, something that chuckled and smelled horrible, and sat unusually still for anything that lived.

“Numbers One, Two, Three—left wheel—forward! Halt! Numbers Seven, Eight, Nine—right wheel—forward! Halt!”

They were standing now on three sides of a square. The fourth side was the trunk of the baobab. Between them and the trunk, the streaming tendrils swayed and swung, bats flitted and something still invisible sat still and chuckled.

“One pace forward—march!”

They could see now. The fakir sat and stared at them and grinned. Brown raised the lamp and let its rays fall on him. The light glinted off his eyes, and off the only other part of him that shone—the long, curved, ghastly fingernails that had grown through the palm of his upstretched hand.

“How did you get here?” demanded Brown, not afraid to speak, for fear that fright would take possession of himself as well as of his men, but quite well aware that the fakir would not answer him. Then he remembered the Beluchi.

“Ask him, you! Ask him how he came here.”

The Beluchi found his tongue, and stammered out a question. The fakir chuckled, and following his chuckle let a guttural remark escape him.

“He says, sahib, that he flew!”

“Ask him, could he fly with nine fixed bayonets in him!”

There was a little laughter from the men at that sally. It takes very little in the way of humor to dispel a sense of the uncanny or mysterious.

“He answers, sahib, that you have seen what comes of striking him. He asks how many dead there be.”

“Does he want me to hold him answerable for those men’s lives?”

“He says he cares not, sahib! He says that he has promised what shall befall you, sahib, before a day is past—you and one other!”

“Ask him, where is the Punjabi skin-buyer?”

The fakir chuckled at that question, and let out suddenly a long, low, hollow-sounding howl, like a she-wolf’s just at sundown. He was answered by another howl from near the guardroom, and every soldier faced about as though a wasp had stung him.

“Front!” commanded Brown. “Now, one of you, about turn! Keep watch that way! Is that the Punjabi?—ask him.”

“He says ‘Yes!’ sahib. He and others!”

“Very well. Now tell him that unless he obeys my orders on the jump, word for word as I give them, I’ll hang him as high as Haman by that withered arm of his, and have him beaten on the toenails with a cleaning-rod before I fill him so full of bayonet-holes that the vultures’ll take him for a sponge! Say I’m a man of my word, and don’t exaggerate.”

The Beluchi translated.

“He says you dare not, sahib!”

“Advise him to talk sense.”

“He says, sahib, ‘You have had one lesson!”’

“Now it’s my turn to give him one. Men! We’ll have to give up that sleep I talked about. This limping dummy of a fakir thinks he’s got us frightened, and we’ve got to teach him different. There’s some reason why we’re not being attacked as yet. There’s something fishy going on, and this swab’s at the bottom of it! We want him, too, on a charge of murder, or instigating murder, and the guardroom’s the best place for him. To the guardroom with him. He’ll do for a hostage anyhow. And where he is, I’ve a notion that the control of this treachery won’t be far away! Grab him below the arms and by the legs. One of you hold a bayonet-point against his ribs. The rest, face each way on guard. Now—all together, forward to the guardroom—march!”

The fakir howled. Ululating howls replied from the surrounding night, and once a red light showed for a second and disappeared in front of them. Then the fakir howled again.

“Look, sahib! See! The guardroom!”

It was the Beluchi who saw it first—the one who was most afraid of things in general and the least afraid of Sergeant Brown. A little flame had started in the thatch.

“Halt!” ordered Brown. “Two of you hold the fakir! The remainder— volley-firing—kneeling—point-blank range. Ready—as you were—independent firing—ready! Now, wait till you see ‘em in the firelight, then blaze away all you like!”

His last words were cut off short by the sound of rifle-fire. Each rifle in turn barked out, and three rifles answered from the night.

“Let that fakir feel a bayonet-point, somebody!”

The fakir cursed between his teeth, in proof of prompt obedience by one of the men who held him.

“Tell him to order his crowd to cease fire!”

The Beluchi translated, and the fakir howled again. The flames leaped through the thatch, and in a minute more the countryside was lit for half a mile or more by the glare of the burning guardroom.

The flames betrayed more than a hundred turbaned men, who hugged the shadows.

“Keep that bayonet-point against his ribs. See? That comes o’ moving instead o’ sitting still! If we’d shut ourselves in the guardroom there, we’d have been merrily roasting in there now! We stole a march on them. Beauty here was sitting on his throne to see the fun. Didn’t expect us. Thought we’d be all hiding under the beds, like Sidiki here! Goes to prove the worst thing that a soldier can do is to sit still when there’s trouble. We’re better off than ever. We’re free and they won’t dare do much to us as long as we’ve got Sacred-Smells-and-Stinks in charge. Form up round him, men, and keep your eyes skinned till morning!”

Chapter 8

Of course, discussing matters in the light of history, with full and intimate knowledge of everything that had a bearing on the Mutiny, there are plenty of club-armchair critics who maintain that England could not do otherwise than win in ‘57. They always do say that afterward of the side that won the day.

But then, with history yet to make, things looked very different, and nobody pretended that there was any certainty of anything except a victory for the mutineers. All that either side recognized as likely to reverse conditions was the notorious ability that a beaten and cornered British army has for upsetting certainties. So the rebels had more than a little argument as to what steps should be taken next, once the initial butchery and loot had taken place.

For instance, in Jailpore

More than a hundred fakirs and wandering priests and mendicants had sent in word that the province from end to end was ready, and that the British slept. But there were those in Jailpore who distrusted fakirs and religious votaries of every kind. They believed them fully capable of rousing the countryside, of working on the religious feelings of the unsophisticated rustics and setting them to murdering and plundering right and left. But they doubted their ability to judge of the army’s sleepiness. These doubters were the older men, who had had experience of England’s craft in war. They knew of the ability of some at least of England’s generals to match guile against guile, and back up guile with swift, unexpected hammer-strokes.

There were men who claimed that what had happened in Jailpore would be repeated in Bholat and elsewhere. There was no need, these maintained, to march and join hands with other rebels. Each unit was sufficient to itself. Each city would be a British funeral pyre. Why march?

Some said, “The general at Bholat will learn of the massacre, and will learn too, that not quite all were killed. He will come hotfoot to find the four we could not find. For these British are as cobras; slay the he cobra and the she one comes to

seek revenge. Slay the she one and beware! Her husband will track thee down, and strike thee. They are not ordinary folk!"

There were other factions that maintained that General Baines was strong enough, with his three thousand, to hold Bholat, unless the men of Jailpore marched, to join hands with the Bholatis—who were surely in revolt by this time. There were others who declared that he would leave Bholat and Jailpore to their fates without any doubt at all, and would march to join hands with the nearest contingent, at Harumpore.

The bolder spirits of this latter faction were for setting off at once to prevent this combination. For a little while their arguments almost prevailed.

But another faction yet, and an even more numerous one, insisted it were best to wait for news from other centers.

Why march, they argued, why strike, why run unnecessary risks, before they knew what was happening elsewhere?

"Surely," these argued, "the English will hear that four here are still unaccounted for. Some attempt will be made to find and rescue them. But if we find and slay them, and send their heads to Bholat, then will the English know that they are indeed dead. Then there will be no attempt at rescue, and we shall hold Jailpore unmolested as headquarters."

That piece of logic won the day for a while, and parties were made up to explore the place, and search in every nook and cranny for the three women. and a child who surely had not passed out through any of the gates, and who were therefore just as surely in the city. A reward was offered by the committee of rebel-leaders and, although nobody believed that the reward would actually be paid, the opportunities for looting privately while searching were so great that the search was thorough.

It failed, though, for the very simple reason that nobody suspected that the huge stone trap-door in the floor of the powder-magazine had ever been opened, or ever could be opened. The magazine had been a white man's watch. White men had kept guard over it for more than a hundred years, and the natives had forgotten that a maze of tunnels and caverns lay beneath it.

So, while bayonet-points and swords were pushed into crevices, while smoke was sent down passages and tunnels and great, loose-limbed, slobbering hounds were led on the leash and cast to find a trail, the three women and the child lay still beneath the piled-up powder, and doled out water, and biscuit in siege-time measures. They lay in pitch-darkness, in a vault where not even a sound could reach them, except the whispered echo of their own voices and the scampering of the rats. They were growing nearly blind, and nearly crazed, with the darkness and the silence and the fear.

Every second they expected to see daylight through the cracks above, as rebels levered up the door, or to hear feet and voices coming through the vaults below, for doubtless the vaults led somewhere. But for their fear of snakes and rats and unknown horrors, they would have tried to find a way through the vaults themselves. But as each movement that they made, and each word that they spoke, sent echoes reverberating through the gloom, they lay still and shuddered.

Once they heard footsteps on the stone flags overhead. But the footsteps went away again, and then all was still. Soon they lost all count of time. They were only aware of heat and discomfort and fear and utter weariness.

One woman and an infant wept. One woman prayed aloud incessantly. The third woman—the menial, the worst educated and least enlightened of the three, according to the others' notion of it—stubbornly refused to admit that there was not some human means of rescue.

"If Bill were here," she kept on grumbling, "Bill'd find a way!"

And in the darkness that surrounded her she felt that she could see Bill's face, as she remembered it—red-cheeked and clean-shaven—six years or more ago.

Chapter 9

The blazing roof of the guardroom lit up even the crossroads for a while, and Brown and his men could see that for the present there was a good wide open space between them and the enemy. The firelight showed a tree not far from the crossroads, and since anything is cover to men who are surrounded and outnumbered, they made for that tree with one accord, and without a word from Brown.

"We've all the luck," said Brown. "There's not a detachment of any other army in the world would walk straight on to a find like this!"

He held up one frayed end of a manila rope, that was wound around the tree-trunk. Some tethered ox had rendered them that service.

"Fifty feet of good manila, and a fakir that needs hanging! Anybody see the connection?"

There was a chorus of ready laughter, and the two men who had the unenviable task of carrying the fakir picked him up and tossed him to the tree-trunk. The roof of the guardhouse was blazing fiercely, and now they had fired the other roofs. The fakir, the tree and the little bunch of men who held him prisoner were as plainly visible as though it had been daytime. A bullet pinged past Brown's ear, and buried itself in the tree-trunk with a thud.

"Let him feel that bayonet again!" said Brown.

A rifleman obeyed, and the fakir howled aloud. An answering howl from somewhere beyond the dancing shadows told that the fakir had been understood.

"And now," said Brown, paraphrasing the well-remembered wording of the drill-book, in another effort to get his men to laughing again, "when hanging a fakir by numbers—at the word one, place the noose smartly round the fakir's neck. At the word two, the right-hand man takes the bight of the rope in the hollow of his left hand, and climbs the tree, waiting on the first branch suitable for the last sound of the word three. At the last sound of the word three, he slips the rope smartly over the bough of the tree and descends smartly to the ground, landing on the balls of his feet and coming to attention. At the word four, the remainder seize the loose end of the rope, being careful to hold it in such a way that the fakir has a chance to breathe. And at the last sound of the word five, you haul all together,

lifting the fakir off the ground, and keeping him so until ordered to release. Now—one!"

He had tied a noose while he was speaking, and the fakir had watched him with eyes that blazed with hate. A soldier seized the noose, and slipped it over the fakir's head.

"Two!"

The tree was an easy one to climb. "Two" and "three" were the work of not more than a minute.

"Four!" commanded Brown, and the rope drew tight across the bough. The fakir had to strain his chin upward in order to draw his breath.

"Steady, now!"

The men were lined out in single file, each with his two hands on the rope. Not half of them were really needed to lift such a wizened load as the fakir, but Brown was doing nothing without thought, and wasting not an effort. He wanted each man to be occupied, and even amused. He wanted the audience, whom he could not see, but who he knew were all around him in the shadows, to get a full view of what was happening. They might not have seen so clearly, had he allowed one-half of the men to be lookers-on.

"Steady!" he repeated. "Be sure and let him breathe, until I give the word." Then he seized the cowering Beluchi by the neck, and dragged him up close beside the fakir. "Translate, you!" he ordered. "To the crowd out yonder first. Shout to 'em, and be careful to make no mistakes."

"Speak, then, sahib! What shall I say?"

"Say this. This most sacred person here is our prisoner. He will die the moment any one attempts to rescue him."

The Beluchi translated, and repeated word for word.

"I will now talk with him, and he himself will talk with you, and thus we will come to an arrangement!"'

There was a commotion in the shadows, and somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty men appeared, keeping at a safe distance still, but evidently anxious to get nearer.

"Now talk to the fakir, and not so loudly! Ask him 'Are you a sacred person?' Ask him softly, now!"

"He says 'Yes,' sahib, 'I am sacred!"'

"Do you want to die?"

"All men must die!"

The answer made an opening for an interminable discussion, of the kind that fakirs and their kindred love. But Brown was not bent just then on dissertation. He changed his tactics.

"Do you want to die, a little slowly, before all those obedient worshipers of yours, and in such a way that they will see and understand that you can not help yourself, and therefore are a fraud?"

The Beluchi repeated the question in the guttural tongue that apparently the fakir best understood. In the fitful light cast by the burning roofs, it was evident that the fakir had been touched in the one weak spot of his armor.

There can scarcely be more than one reason why a man should torture himself and starve himself and maim and desecrate and horribly defile himself. At first

sight, the reason sounds improbable, but consideration will confirm it. It is vanity, of an iron-bound kind, that makes the wandering fakir.

"Ask him again!" said Brown.

But again the fakir did not answer.

"Tell him that I'm going to let him save his face, provided he saves mine. Explain that I, too, have men who think I am something more than human!"

The Beluchi interpreted, and Brown thought that the fakir's eyes gleamed with something rather more than their ordinary baleful light. It might have been the dancing flames that lit them, but Brown thought he saw the dawn of reason.

"Say that if I let my men kill him, my men will believe me superhuman, and his men will know that he is only a man with a withered arm! But tell him this: He's got the best chance he ever had to perform a miracle, and have the whole of this province believe in him forevermore."

Again the fakir's eyes took on a keener than usual glare, as he listened to the Beluchi. He did not nod, though, and he made no other sign, beyond the involuntary evidence of understanding that his eyes betrayed.

"His men can see that noose round his neck, tell him. And his men know me, more or less, and British methods anyhow. They believe now, they're sure, they're positive that his neck's got about as much chance of escaping from that noose as a blind cow has of running from a tiger. Now then! Tell him this. Let him come the heavy fakir all he likes. Tell him to tell his gang that he's going to give an order. Let him tell them that when he says 'Hookum hai!' my men'll loose his neck straight away, and fall down flat. Only, first of all he's got to tell them that he needs us for the present. Let him say that he's got an extra-special awful death in store for us by and by, and that he's going to keep us by him until he's ready to work the miracle. Meantime, nobody's to touch us, or come near us, except to bring him and us food!"

The fakir listened, and said nothing. At a sign from Brown the rope tightened just a little. The fakir raised his chin.

"And tell him that, if he doesn't do what I say, and exactly what I say, and do it now, he's got just so long to live as it takes a man to choke his soul out!"

The fakir answered nothing.

"Just ever such a wee bit tighter, men!"

The fakir lost his balance, and had to scramble to his feet and stand there swaying on his heels, clutching at the rope above him with his one uninjured hand, and sawing upward with his head for air. There came a murmur from the shadows, and a dozen breech-bolts clicked. There seemed no disposition to lie idle while the holiest thing in a temple-ridden province dangled in mid-air.

"In case of a rush," said Brown quietly, "all but two of you let go! The remainder seize your rifles and fire independently. The two men on the rope, haul taut, and make fast to the tree-trunk. This tree's as good a place to die as anywhere, but he dies first! Understand?"

The fakir rolled his eyes, and tried to make some sort of signal with his free arm.

"Just a wee shade tighter!" ordered Brown. "I'm not sure, but I think he's seeing reason!"

The fakir gurgled. No one but a native, and he a wise one, could have recognized a meaning in the guttural gasp that he let escape him.

"He says 'All right! sahib!' " translated the Beluchi.

"Good!" said Brown. "Ease away on the rope; men! And now! You all heard what I told him. If he says 'Hookum hai!' you all let go the rope, and fall flat. But keep hold of your rifles!"

The fakir's voice, rose in a high-pitched, nasal wail, and from the darkness all around them there came an answering murmur that was like the whispering of wind through trees. By the sound, there must have been a crowd of more than a hundred there, and either the crowd was sneaking around them to surround them at close quarters, or else the crowd was growing.

"Keep awake, men!" cautioned Brown.

"Aye, aye, sir! All awake, sir!"

"Listen, now! And if he says one word except what I told him he might say, tip me the wink at once "

Brown swung the Beluchi out in front of him where he could hear the fakir better.

"I'll hang you, remember, after I've hanged him, if anything goes wrong!"

"He is saying, sahib, exactly what you said."

"He'd better! Listen now! Listen carefully! Look out for tricks!"

The fakir paused a second from his high-pitched monologue, and a murmur from the darkness answered him.

"Stand by to haul tight, you men!"

"All ready, sir!"

The rope tightened just a little—just sufficiently to keep the fakir cognizant of its position. The fakir howled out a sort of singsong dirge, which plainly had imperatives in every line of it. At each short pause for breath he added something in an undertone that made the Beluchi strain his ears.

"He says, sahib, that they understand. He says, 'Now is the time!' He says now he will order 'Hookum hai!' He says, 'Are you ready?' He says, sahib—he says it, sahib—not I—he says, 'Thou art a fool to stare thus! Thou and thy men are fools! Stare, instead, as men who are bewitched!'"

"Try to look like boiled owls, to oblige his Highness, men!" said Brown. "Now, that's better; watch for the word! Easy on the rope a little!"

The men did their best to pose for the part of semimesmerized victims of a superhuman power. The flame from the burning roofs was dying down already, for the thatch burned fast, and the glowing gloom was deep enough to hide indifferent acting. With their lives at stake, though, men act better than they might at other times.

The fakir spun round on his heels and, clutching with his whole hand at the rope, began to execute a sort of dance—a weird, fantastic, horrible affair of quivering limbs and rolling eyeballs, topped by a withered arm that pointed upward, and a tortured fingernail-pierced fist that nodded on a dried-out wrist-joint.

"*Hookum hai!*" he screamed suddenly, waving his sound hand upward, and bringing it down suddenly with a jerk, as though by sheer force he was blasting them.

“Down with you!” ordered Brown, and all except Brown and the Beluchi tumbled over backward.

“Keep hold of your rifles!” ordered Brown.

The fakir’s wailing continued for a while. With his own hand he took the noose from his neck and, now that the flames had died away to nothing but spasmodic spurts above a dull red underglow, there was no one in the watching ring who could see Brown’s sword-point. Only Brown and the fakir knew that it was scratching at the skin between the fakir’s shoulder-blades.

“It is done!” said the fakir presently. “Now take me back to my dais again!” And the Beluchi translated.

“I’d like to hear their trigger-springs released,” suggested Brown. “This has all been a shade too slick for me. I’ve got my doubts yet about it’s being done. Tell him to order them to uncock their rifles, so that I can hear them do it.”

“He says that they are gone already!” translated the Beluchi.

“Tell him I don’t believe it!” answered Brown, whose eyes were straining to pierce the darkness, which was blacker than the pit again by now.

The fakir raised his voice into a howl—a long, low, ululating howl like that he had uttered when they found him on his dais. From the distance, beyond the range of rifles, came a hundred answering howls. The fakir waited, and a minute later a hundred howls were raised again, this time from an even greater distance.

Then he spoke.

“He says that they are gone,” translated the Beluchi. “He says he will go back to his dais again.”

“‘Tshun!” ordered Brown. “Now, men, just because we’ve saved our skins so far is no reason why we should neglect precautions. We’re going to put this imitation angel back on his throne again, so the same two carry him that brought him here. There’s no sense in giving two more men the itch, and all the other ailments the brute suffers from! Form up round him, the rest. Take open order—say two paces—and go slow. Feel your way with your fixed bayonet, and don’t take a step in the dark until you’re sure where it will lead you. Forward—march! One of you bring that rope along.”

The weird procession crawled and crept and sidled back to where it had started from not so long before—jumping at every sound, and at every shadow that showed deeper than the coal-black night around them. It took them fifteen minutes to recross a hundred yards. But when they reached the earthen throne again at last, and had hoisted the fakir back in position on it, there had been no casualties, and the morale of the men in Sergeant Brown’s command was as good again as the breech-mechanism of the rifles in his charge.

They were scarcely visible to him or one another in the blackness, but he sensed the change in them, and changed his own tune to fit the changed condition.

His voice had nothing in it but the abrupt military explosion when he gave his orders now—no argument, no underlying sympathy. He was no longer herding a flock of frightened children. He was ordering trained, grown men, and he knew it and they knew it. The orders ripped out, like the crack of a drover’s whip.

“Fall in, now, properly! ‘Tshun! Right dress! To two paces—open order—from the center—extend! Now, then! Left and right wings—last three at each end forward—right wheel—halt. That’s it. ‘Bout face. Now each man keep two eyes lifting till the

morning. If anything shows up, or any of you hear a sound, shoot first and challenge afterward!"

They were standing so when the pale sun greeted them, in hollow square, with their backs toward the fakir, who was squatting, staring straight in front of him, on his dais, with his back turned to the tree and his withered arm still pointing up to heaven like a dead man's calling to the gods for vengeance.

A little later, Brown made each alternate man lie down and get what sleep he could just where he was, with a comrade standing over him. He himself slept so for a little while. But one of the men heard something move among the hanging tendrils of the baobab, investigated with his bayonet-point, and managed to transfix a twelve-foot python. After that there was, not so much desire for sleep. The fakir either slept with his eyes open or else dispensed with sleep. No one seemed able to determine which.

When the day grew hotter, and the utterly remorseless Indian sun bore down on them, and on the aching desolation of the plain and the burnt-out guardhouse, the fakir still sat unblinking, gazing straight out in front of him, with eyes that hated but did nothing else. He seemed to have no time nor thought nor care for anything but hate and the expression of it.

At noon, three little children came to him, and brought him water in a small brass bowl, and cooked-up vegetables wrapped in some kind of leaf. Brown let him have theirs, and bribed the frightened children to go and bring water for the men and himself. He gave them the unheard-of wealth of one rupee between them, and they went off with it—and did not come back.

Meanwhile the fakir had drunk his water, and had poured out what was left. He had also eaten what the children had brought him, and suddenly, from vacant, implacable hatred, he woke up and began to be amused.

"Ha-ha!" he laughed at them. "Ho-ho!" And then he launched out with a string of eloquence that Brown called on the Beluchi to translate.

"Who said there would be thirst, and the sound of water! Is there a thirst? Who spoke of an anthill and of hungry ants and raw red openings in the flesh for the little ants to run in and out more easily?"

The Beluchi translated faithfully, and the men all listened.

"Tell him to hold his tongue!" growled Brown at last.

"Ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho!" laughed the fakir. "The heat grows great, and the tongues grow dry, and none bring water! Ho-ho! But I told them that I needed these for a deadlier death than any they devised! Ho-ho-ho-ho! Look at the little crows, how they wait in the branches! Ha-ha-ha-ha! See how the kites come! Where are the vultures? Wait! What speck sails in the sky there? Even the vultures come! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"I hear a horse, sir!" said one of the men who watched.

"I heard it more than a minute ago," said Brown.

The fakir stopped his mockery, and even he listened.

"Ask him," said Brown, "where are the men who set fire to the guardroom?"

"He says they are in the village, waiting till he sends for them!" said the Beluchi.

"Keep an eye lifting, you men," ordered Brown. "This'll be a messenger from Bholat, ten to one. Mind they don't ambush him! Watch every way at once, and shoot at anything that moves!"

“Clippety-clippety-clippety-cloppety—”

The sound of a galloping horse grew nearer; a horse hard-ridden, that was none the less sure-footed still, and going strong in spite of sun and heat. Suddenly a foam-flecked black mare swung round a bend between two banks, and the sun shone on a polished saber-hilt. A turbaned Rajput rose in his stirrups, gazed left and right and then in front of him—from the burned-out guardhouse to the baobab—drew rein to a walk and waved his hand.

“By all that’s good and great and wonderful,” said Brown aloud, “if here’s not Juggut Khan again!”

Chapter 10

It is not easy to give any kind of real impression of India twenty-four hours after the outbreak of the mutiny. Movement was the keynote of the picture—stealthy, not-yet-quite-confident pack-movement on the one hand, concentrated here and there in blood-red eddies, and, on the other hand, swift, desperate marches in the open.

The moment that the seriousness of the outbreak had been understood, and the orders had gone out by galloper to “Get a move on!” each commanding officer strained every nerve at once to strike where a blow would have the most effect. There was no thought of anything but action, and offensive, not defensive action. Until some one at the head of things proved still to be alive, and had had time to form a plan, each divisional commander acted as he saw fit. That was all that any one was asked to do at first: to act, to strike, to plunge in headlong where the mutiny was thickest and most dangerous, to do anything, in fact; except sit still.

Even with the evidence of mutiny and treachery on every side, with red flames lighting the horizon and the stench of burning villages on every hand, the strange Anglo-Saxon quality persisted that has done more even that the fighting-quality to teach the English tongue to half the world. The native servants who had not yet run away retained their places still, unquestioned. When an Englishman has once made up his mind to trust another man, he trusts him to the hilt, whatever shade of brown or red or white his hide may be.

But, since every rule has its exceptions, there were some among the native servants, who remained ostensibly loyal to their masters, who would better have been shot or hanged at the first suggestion of an outbreak. For naturally a man who is trusted wrongly is far more dangerous than one who is held in suspicion. But it never was the slightest use endeavoring to persuade an average English officer that his own man could be anything but loyal. He may be a thief and a liar and a proved-up rogue in every other way; but as for fearing to let him sleep about the house, or fearing to let him cook his master’s food, or fearing to let him carry firearms—well! Perhaps, it is conceit, or maybe just ordinary foolishness. It is not fear!

So, in a country where the art of poisoning has baffled analysts since analysts have been invented, and where blood-hungry fanatic priests, both Hindu and

Mohammedan, were preaching and promising the reward of highest heaven to all who could kill an Englishman or die in the attempt, a native cook whose antecedents were obscured in mystery cooked dinner for a British general, and marched with his column to perform the same service while the general tried to trounce the cook's friends and relatives!

But General Baines felt perfectly at ease about his food. He never gave a thought to it, but ate what was brought to him, sitting his horse most likely, and chewing something as he rode among the men, and saw that they filled their bellies properly. He had made up his mind to march on Harumpore, and to take over the five-hundred-strong contingent there. Then he could swoop down on any of a dozen other points, in any one of which a blow would tell.

He was handicapped by knowing almost too much. He had watched so long, and had suspected for so long that some sort of rebellion was brewing that, now that it had come, his brain was busy with the tail-ends of a hundred scraps of plans. He was so busy wondering what might be happening to all the other men subordinate to him, who would have to be acting on their own initiative, that his own plans lacked something of directness. But there was no lack of decision, and no time was lost. The men marched, and marched their swiftest, in the dust-laden Indian heat. And he marched with them, in among them, and ate what the cook brought him, without a thought but for the best interests of the government he served.

So they buried General Baines some eighty-and-twenty miles from Harumpore, and shot the cook. And, according to the easy Indian theology, the cook was wafted off to paradise, while General Baines betook himself to hell, or was betaken. But the column, three thousand perspiring Britons strong, continued marching, loaded down with haversacks and ammunition and resolve.

It was met, long before the jackals had dug down to General Baines' remains, by the advance-guard of Colonel Kendrick's column, which was coming out of Harumpore because things were not brisk enough in that place to keep it busy. Kendrick himself was riding with the cavalry detachment that led the way southward.

"Who's in command now?" he asked, for they had told him of General Baines' death by poison.

"I am," said a gray-haired officer who rode up at that moment.

"I'm your senior, sir, by two years," answered Kendrick.

"Then you command, sir."

"Very good. Enough time's been wasted. The column can wait here until my main body reaches us. Then we'll march at once on Jailpore. This idea of leaving Jailpore to its fate is nonsense! The rebels are in strength there, and they have perpetrated an abominable outrage. There we will punish them, or else we'll all die in the attempt! If we have to raze Jailpore to the ground, and put every man in it to the sword before we find the four Europeans supposed to be left alive there, our duty is none the less obvious! Here comes my column. Tell the men to be ready to march in ten minutes."

He turned his horse, to look through the dust at the approaching column, but the man who had been superseded touched him on the sleeve.

“What’s that? Better have a rest? Tired out, you say? Oh! Form them all up in hollow square, then, and I’ll say a few words to them. There are other ways of reviving a leg-weary column than by letting it lie down.”

Ten minutes later a dull roar rose up through a steel-shot dust-cloud, and three thousand helmets whirled upward, flashing in the sun. Three thousand weary men had given him his answer! There was no kind of handle to it; no reserve—nothing but generous and unconditional allegiance unto hunger, thirst, pain, weariness, disease or death. It takes a real commander to draw that kind of answer from a tired-out column, but it is a kind of answer, too, that makes commanders! It is not mere talk, on either side. It means that by some sixth sense a strong man and his men have discovered something that is good in each other.

Chapter 11

“You’ve made good time, friend Juggut Khan!” said Brown, advancing to meet him where the men and the fakir and the interpreter would not be able to Overhear.

“Sahib, I killed one horse—the horse you looted for me—and I brought away two from Bholat. One of them carried me more than fifty miles, and then I changed to this one, leaving the other on the road. I have orders for you, sahib.”

“Hand ‘em over then,” said Brown. “Orders first, and talk afterward, when there’s time!”

The Rajput drew out a sealed envelope, and passed it to him. Brown tore it open, and read the message, scowling at the half-sheet of paper as though it were a death-sentence.

“Where’s the general?”

“With his column-twenty or thirty miles away to the northward by now!”

“And he’s left me, with this handful, in the lurch?”

“Nay, sahib! As I understood the orders, he has left you with a very honorable mission to fulfil!”

Brown stared hard at the half-sheet of notepaper again. Reading was not his longest suit by any means, and at that he infinitely preferred to wrestle with printed characters.

“Have you read it, Juggut Khan?” he asked.

“Nay, sahib. I can speak English, but not read it.”

“Then we’re near to being in the same boat, we two!” said Brown with a grin. “I’ll have another try! It looks like a good-by message to me—here’s the word good-by written at the end above his signature.”

“There were other matters, sahib. There was an order. I can not read, but I know what is in the message.”

“Well?”

“You, and your twelve—”

“Nine!” corrected Brown.

“Three dead?”

Brown nodded.

"Your nine, then, sahib, and you and I are to proceed immediately to Jailpore, and to gain an entrance if we can, rescue those whom I concealed there and bring them to Harumpore, or to the northward of Harumpore, wherever we can find the column."

"Eleven men are to attempt that?"

Brown was studying out the letter word by word, and discovering to his amazement that its purport was exactly what Juggut Khan pretended.

"If there are no more than eleven of us, then yes, eleven! And, sahib, since you seem to hold at least an island here where a man may lie down unmolested, I propose to sleep for an hour or two, before proceeding. I have had no sleep since I left Jailpore."

"Nothing of the sort!" said Brown. "If we're to march on Jailpore, off we go at once! You can sleep on the road, my son! It's time we paid a visit to that village, I'm thinking. Those treacherous brutes need a lesson. I'd have been down there before, only I wanted to be in full view of the road in case anybody came looking for me from Bholat. We'll need a wagon for the fakir. You can sleep in it too."

"Sleep with a fakir? I? Allah! I am a Rajput, sahib! A sergeant of the Rajput Horse, retired!"

"I wouldn't want to sleep with him myself!" admitted Brown. "Come and look at him. You can smell him from here, but the sight of him's the real thing!"

The Rajput swaggered up beside Brown, after loosening his horse's girths and lifting the saddle for a moment.

"He's not the only one that needs a drink!" said Brown. "We're all dry as brick-dust here, except the fakir!"

"He must wait a while before he drinks. Show me the fakir. Why, Brown sahib, know you what you have there?"

"The father of all the smells, and all the dirt and all the evil eyes and evil tongues in Asia!" Brown hazarded.

"More than that, sahib! That is the nameless fakir—him whom they know as HE! Has there been no attempt made to rescue him?"

"They rescued him once, and murdered three of my men to get him. When they tried again, I put a halter round his neck and he and I arranged a sort of temporary compromise."

"And the terms of it?"

"Oh, he's supposed to have performed a miracle. He made us unslip the halter, and fall down flat, and he's supposed to be keeping us by him, by a sort of spell, so's to give us something extra-special in the line of ghastly deaths at his own convenience. That way, I was able to wait for news from Bholat—see?"

"You could have captured no more important prisoner than that, sahib, let me tell you! They believe him to be almost a god; so nearly one that the gods themselves obey his orders now and then! It was he, and no other, that told the men of Jailpore that he would make them impervious to bullets. If we have him, sahib, we have the key to Jailpore!"

"We, have certainly got him," said Brown. "You can see him, and you can smell him. I'll order one of the men to prick him with a bayonet, if you want to hear him, too! I wouldn't feel him, if I were you!"

“He must come, too, to Jailpore!”

“Of course he comes!”

“Then, sahib, let us move away from here to where there is water. There let us rest until sundown, and then march, in the cool of the evening. It will be better so. And of a truth I must sleep, or else drop dead from weariness.”

“Does that message put you in command?” asked Brown, a trifle truculently.

“No, sahib! But it orders you to listen to my advice whenever possible.”

“That means that you are under my orders?”

“That letter does not say so, sahib!”

“Very well, are you, or are you not?”

“We are supposed to act in concert, sahib.”

“It doesn’t say so in the letter! Yes, or no? Are you going to obey orders, or aren’t you? In other words, are you coming with me, or do you stay behind?”

“I come with you, sahib!”

“Then you obey my orders!”

“But the letter says—”

“That I’m to take your advice whenever possible! I don’t need advice just at the moment, thanks! I’ve got orders here to march, and I’m off at once! You can please yourself whether you come with me or not, but if you come you come on my terms.”

“I go with you, sahib.”

“Under my orders?”

“Yes, sahib.”

“All right, Juggut Khan. Here’s my hand on it. Now, we’ll swoop down on that village, and take the fakir with us, with a halter round his neck for the sake of argument. We’ll get two bullock-carts down there, and we’ll stick him in one of them, with Sidiki the interpreter tied to him. Sidiki won’t like it, but he’s only a Beluchi anyway! You get in the other, and get all the sleep you can. You and I’ll take turns sleeping all the way to Jailpore, so’s to be fresh, both of us, and fit for anything by the time that we get there!”

“I am ready, sahib.”

“You two men who carried old Stinkijink before, pick him up again!” shouted Brown. “Let him feel the bayonet if he makes a noise, but carry him gently as though you loved him. The rest—‘Tshun! Form two-deep—on the center—close order, march. Ri’ dress. Eyes front. Ri’ turn. By the left—quick march.”

The Rajput strode beside Brown, wondering wearily whether it was worth his while to offer him advice or not, and keeping his tired eyes ever moving in the direction of the distant huts.

“They have rifles, sahib?” he queried.

“Lots of ‘em! Three that they took from my men, among others.”

“It would not be well to march into a trap at this stage.”

“As well now as later.” “True, sahib! And my time has not come yet; I know it. Else had I died of weariness, as my horse did.”

Brown kept rigidly to that point of view in everything he did, from that time on until he reached Jailpore. He believed himself to be engaged on a forlorn hope that was so close to being an absolute impossibility as to be almost the same thing. He had no doubt whatever in his own mind but that his own death, and the death of

those with him, was a matter now of hours, or possibly of minutes. His one resolute determination was to die, and make the others die, in a manner befitting their oath of service. He had orders, and he would pass them on according to his interpretation of them. He would obey his orders, and they theirs, and the rest was no business of his or anybody's.

They put the fakir in a hut; where Juggut Khan—too weary for foraging—stood guard over him. When a crowd collected round the hut, and Juggut Khan applied the butt of a lighted cigarette to the tender skin between the fakir's shoulder-blades, the anxious fakir-worshipers were told that all was well. They were to let the white soldiers take two wagons, or three even, if they wanted them. They were to return to their houses at once, and hide, lest the devils who would shortly overwhelm the white men should make mistakes and include them, too, in the whelming. He, the fakir, intended to take the white men for a little journey along the road toward Jailpore, where the devils who would deal with them would have no opportunity to make mistakes. And, since the natives knew that Jailpore was a rebel stronghold, and that ten white men and a native would have no chance to do the slightest damage there, they chose to believe the fakir and to obey him.

Hindus have as stubborn and unalterable a habit of obeying and believing their priests—when the fancy suits them—as white men of other religions have.

If the fakir had told them through the doorway of the hut that he intended going with the white men in the direction of Bholat, they would most surely have prevented him. But it suited them very well indeed to have the white men killed elsewhere. It was not likely, but there might be a column on its way from Bholat now; and if that column came, and found the bones of British soldiers as well as a burned-out guard-house, vengeance would be dire and prompt. Between where they were and Jailpore, the white men could not possibly escape. And at Jailpore, if not sooner, they must surely die. So they believed the fakir, and retired to the seclusion of their houses.

It was wonderful, of course, but no more wonderful than a thousand other happenings in '57. All laws of probability and general average were upset that year, when sixty thousand men held down an armed continent. Even stranger things were happening than that two bullock-carts should dawdle through a rebel-seething district in the direction of a plundered, blood-soaked rebel stronghold; stranger even than that on the foremost bullock-cart a lean and louse-infested fakir should be squatting, guarded by British soldiers, who marched on either hand; or that a Rajput, who could trace his birth from a thousand-year-long line of royal chieftains, should be sleeping in the bullock-cart behind, followed closely by a black charger with a British saddle on its back, which ate corn from the tail-board of the wagon; stranger things, even, than that a British sergeant should be marching last of all, with his stern eyes roving a little wildly but his jaw set firm and his tread as rigid and authoritative and abrupt as though he were marching to inspect accouterments.

In more than a dozen places, about a dozen men were holding a fort against an army. They were using every wile and trick and dodge that ingenuity or inspiration could provide them with, and they were mostly contriving to hold out. But there were none who did anything more daring or more unusual than to march to the attack of a city, with a hostile fakir in the van, and nothing else but their eleven

selves and their rifles to assist them. There is a tremendous difference between defending when you have to, and attacking when you might retire.

Chapter 12

There were many more causes than one that worked together to make possible the entry of Brown and his little force into Jailpore. They were brave men; they were more than brave and they held the ace of trumps, as Brown had stated, in the person of the fakir known as “He.” But luck favored them as well, and but for luck they must have perished half a dozen times.

They marched the whole of the first afternoon, and met no one. They only overtook little straggling parties of rebels, making one and all for Jailpore, who bolted at the sight of them, imagining them probably to be the advance-guard of a larger force. The very idiocy of marching eleven strong through a country infested by their enemies was in their favor. Nobody could believe that there were no more than eleven of them. Even the English could not be such lunatics!

That night, they rested for a while, and then went on again. During the day following they lay in a hollow between some trees and rested, and slept by turns. They suffered agonies from the heat, and not a little from hunger, and once or twice they were hard put to it to stop the Rajput’s charger from neighing when a native pony passed along the nearby road. But night came again, and with it the screen of darkness for their strange, almost defenseless caravan. Once or twice the fakir tried to shout an alarm to passing villagers, but the quick and energetic application of a cleaning-rod by Brown stopped him always in the nick of time, and they came within sight of the battlements of Jailpore without an accident.

Then, though, their problem became really serious, and it was a series of circumstances altogether out of their control and not connected with them that made their entry possible. The mutineers in Jailpore had learned that Kendrick sahib was coming down on them from the north by forced marches with thirty-five hundred men or more. They were putting the place into a state of siege, and getting ready by all means in their power to oppose him.

Little attention was being paid to small parties of arrivals from no man knew or cared where. And, in a final effort to find the four who were the lure that was bringing Kendrick down on them, the city was once more being turned upside down and inside out, and men were even being tortured who were thought to know of hiding-places.

With purely Eastern logic, the leaders of the rebels had decided that the sight of the bodies of the four, writhing in their last agony on the sun- scorched outer wall, would mightily discourage the British when they came. So no efforts were being spared and no stones left unturned to find them. The hooks on the wall were sharp and ready, so that they might be impaled without loss of time in full view of their would-be rescuers.

Almost every secret passage of the thousand odd had been explored. In the hurry to run through them and explore the next one, doors had been left open here and there that had been kept closed in some instances for centuries.

One door in particular, placed cornerwise in a buttress of the outer wall, was spotted by Juggut Khan as he circled round the city on his charger at dusk on the day following their arrival. He brought his charger back to where the others lay concealed, and then went on an exploring-expedition on foot—to discover that the outer city wall was like a sponge, a nest of honey-combed cells and passages wandering interminably in the fifty-foot-thick brick and rubble rampart.

And while he searched amid the mazy windings of the wall, Bill Brown sat in the forked top of a tree and studied out the ground-plan of the city. He was imprinting landmarks in his memory for future reference, and trying—with a brain that ached from the apparent hopelessness of the task—to figure out a plan.

He knew by now that the four he had come to rescue were hidden underneath the powder-magazine, and he could see the magazine itself. But he could think of no way of rescuing them, for the city absolutely boiled with frantic, mixed-up castes and creeds picked at random, and thrown in at random from the whole of India. A mouse could not have passed through the streets undetected! And yet, from a soldier's point of view, there were certain fascinating details to be noticed about that powder-magazine. In the first place, it had been constructed for a granary by an emperor who never heard of Joseph, but who had the same ideal plan for cornering the people's food-supply. And since labor had been unlimited, and cheap, he had gone about building the thing on the most thoroughly unpractical and most pretentious plan that he and his architects could figure out. It was big enough to hold about ten times as much grain as the province could grow in any one year of plenty. And, since that was the least practical and most ungranary-like shape, he had caused it to be built like an enormous beehive, with a tiny platform at the top.

Winding round and round the huge stone dome, and on the outside, was a six-foot-wide trail, which was the elevator. Up this, each with a sack or a basket on his head, the population was to have been induced to run in single file, dumping its hard-won corn into the granary through an opening at the top until the granary was full.

The emperor died—by poison—before he could see his cherished project put into execution, but he had been a very thorough calculator, and a builder who believed in permanency. He had foreseen that when the granary was full, and the screw-jacks were turned beneath the cost of living, there would probably be efforts made by unwashed, untutored, unenlightened mobs to rape his storehouse. So he had made the little platform at the top a veritable fortress of a place, such as a handful of men could hold against a hundred thousand.

There was no known entrance to the granary above ground, except on the ground level, where a huge stone gateway frowned above a teak-and-iron door. Above that door there were galleries, and fortalices and cunningly invented battlements in miniature, from behind whose shelter a resolute defending-party could pour out a hundred different kinds of death on a hungry crowd. The place was naturally fire-proof and naturally cool—as far as any building can be cool in Central India. It was a first-class, ideal powder-magazine, if useless as a granary;

and the last new conquerors of India had hastened to adopt it as a means of storing up the explosive medicine with which they kept their foothold.

Naturally, none but White soldiers, and a very few of the more trusted natives, had ever been allowed to go inside the powder-magazine. The secret passages beneath it had never been intended for public convenience or information. They had been designed as a means of rushing defenders secretly into the granary, and they connected with a tunnel underneath the palace that had just been burned. They also connected with the outer wall in such a way that defenders from the ramparts might be rushed there too, if wanted in a hurry. But, since there never had been corn kept in the granary, and nobody had ever had the slightest need to force an entrance, the knowledge even of the existence of the passages had become barely a memory, and there was not a man living in Jailpore who knew exactly where they began or where they ended. There was a man outside who knew, but none inside.

The point about the powder-magazine which most appealed to Brown—next after his knowledge of its contents, mineral and human—was the fact that the little platform at its summit overlooked the city-wall, and that the side of the granary actually touched the wall on the side of the city farthest from where he sat and spied it out. Ten men on that protected platform, he thought, might suffer from the sun, but they could hold the building and command a good-sized section of the city ramparts against all comers.

He noticed too, though that seemed immaterial at the time, that one well- aimed shot from heavy ordnance might crash through the upper dome and set off the powder underneath. There was no artillery that could be brought against the place, either with the British force or with the mutineers, but the thought set him to wondering how much powder there might be stored on the huge round floor below, and what would happen should it become ignited. It was a sanguinary, interesting, subtle kind of thought, that suited the condition of his brain exactly! He climbed down from the tree, feeling almost good-natured.

At the bottom he met Juggut Khan, waiting for him patiently.

“What have you seen, sahib?” he asked him. “Have you formed a plan?”

“I’ve been wishing I was Joshua!” said Brown. “I’d like to make my men march round the city and blow trumpets, and then see the walls fall down. I can think of several things to do, if we could only get inside. But I can’t think how to get there.”

“I have found a way in!” said Juggut Khan. “I have cross-questioned that fakir of ours as well, with a little assistance from a cleaning-rod wielded by one of your men. He knows the way too. He says he is the only man who knows it—in which he lies, since I too have discovered it. But his knowledge may help as well.”

“What’s that about a cleaning-rod?” asked Brown.

“It was used on him to help him forget his vow of silence.”

“When?”

“When you were up that tree, sahib!”

“Have you been giving my man orders?”

“Nay, sahib!”

“How did he come to beat the fakir, then?”

“We both arrived at the same conclusion at the same moment, and the fakir received the benefit!”

“Who held him, you?”

“Nay, sahib! God forbid! I am a clean man. I listened to his conversation. The Beluchi held him.”

“Oh! Well, I like you well enough, Juggut Khan, but there are things about you that I don’t like. You’re too fond of doing things on your own responsibility, and you’re much too fond of using oaths. Y our soul is none o’ my business; you’re a heathen anyhow, and no longer in the Service. But, I’ll trouble you not to use those disgraceful oaths of yours in the presence of the men! Do you understand me?”

“I understand you, sahib. If my respect for all your other qualities were not so profound, I would laugh at you! As it is, if your honor should see fit to turn the bullocks loose, and tie the fakir fast between two men and follow me, it seems to me dark enough by now, and I know the way. Might I furthermore suggest that the ammunition-box would make a reasonable load for another two men?”

“Hadn’t we better bring our rifles too?” asked Brown sarcastically. “Upon my honor, Juggut Khan! You’re getting childish! Are your nerves upset, or what? Lead on, man! Lead on!”

“Listen. There are two ways, sahib. One way leads from the burned-out barracks to the cellar where the women lie hidden. That way is closed by debris. The other way leads from the outer wall by a very winding route to the cellar where the women are. The fakir knows that way, and I do not, though I know of it. There is a third way, though, that leads from the outer wall, where I have been exploring, straight almost, if you disregard a wind or two, to the inside of the powder-magazine. It enters the magazine through a doorway secretly contrived in an upright pillar—or so the fakir swears. Now this is my notion, sahib. If we go in by the lower way, we must come out that way, and run the risk of being caught as we emerge. That risk will be greatly enhanced when we have frightened women with us whose eyes have been blinded by the darkness. But, if we go in by the upper way, and enter the magazine itself, I can make the fakir show us how to lift the stone trapdoor I spoke of—the one that I closed when I hid the women. Then I can ascend with him, and with say four men, while you ascend to the platform at the top with the remainder of the men, and guard our rear and our exit. From the top, you will be able to see us as we emerge, and can cover our retreat, and follow.”

“That sounds like a roundabout sort of plan to me!” said Brown. “Why not go straight in by the lower route, and gather up the women, and carry ‘em out, and make a bolt for it?”

“Because, sahib, we will be at the fakir’s mercy.”

“Nonsense! He’s at our mercy.”

“Think, sahib! There, he will be in his own bat’s nest, so to speak. These fakirs are the only men who know the windings of all the secret passages. They are the rats of religion and intrigue. At any step he might lead us into an ambush, and we might be overwhelmed before we knew that we were attacked. If we go the other way, though, I can lead the way myself, and we need only take the fakir to show us how to open the door.”

“Very well,” said Brown. “Let’s get a move on, though! I’m beginning to think that you’re a better talker than a fighter, Juggut Khan!”

“Yes, sahib? I trust there will be no fighting!” But the Rajput smiled as he said it, and thought of a certain lance-shaft which had been broken in the streets of Jailpore.

“Lead on! Fall in behind me, men! Walk quietly, now, and remember. Hold your tongues! Each man keep his eye on me, and a finger on the trigger!”

The Beluchi and the fakir and Juggut Khan moved in the van, with two men to hold the fakir. Next marched, or rather tiptoed, Sergeant Brown, followed by the other men in single file. In that order they hastened after Juggut Khan, through the darkness, across a dried-out moat and round the corner of a huge stone buttress. There they disappeared inside the wall, and a stone swung round and closed the gap behind the last of them. There was no alarm given, and not a sign or a sound of any kind to betoken that any one had seen them. Inside the walls the city roared like a flood-fed maelstrom, and outside all was darkness and the silence of the dead.

Chapter 13

There was some smart work done inside the powder-magazine. To be able to appreciate it properly one would be obliged to do what they did—wander through a maze of tunnels in a city-wall, blinded by darkness, oppressed by the stored-up stuffiness and heat of ages and deafened by the stillness—then emerge unexpectedly in the lamp-lit magazine, among mutineers who sprawled, and laughed; and chewed betel-nut at their ease upon the powder-kegs.

Both sides were taken by surprise, but the mutineers had the nominal advantage, for their eyes were accustomed to the light. They had the advantage in numbers, too, by almost two to one. But they dared not fire, for fear of setting off the magazine, whereas Brown and his little force dared anything. They fully expected to die, and might as well die that way as any other. And a quick death for the women down below would be better than anything the rebels had in store for them. Brown yelled an order, and the rest was too quick, nearly, for the eye to follow.

Three rebels died with bullets in them, and the rest stampeded for the teak-and-metal door, to find it locked on them, and Brown and the Rajput standing in front of it on guard. The mutineers attacked fiercely. They flung themselves all together on the two. But they had yet to learn that they were tackling, or endeavoring to tackle, the two finest swordsmen in that part of India. And when they turned, to find more room to fight in, or to draw their breath, they had to face nine bayonets that hemmed them in, and drove them closer and even closer to the swords again. They shouted, but no sound could pierce the walls or escape through that tremendous door. Even the sound of firing merely echoed upward until it reached the dome, and then filtered out and upward through the opening above. They might as well have shouted to their friends in Bholat!

For ten minutes, perhaps, the battle surged and swayed on the stone floor first one side rushing, then the other. But man after man of the mutineers went

down—appalled by the amazing swordsmanship, disheartened by the grim determination of their adversaries, bewildered to feebleness by the suddenness of the attack.

Soon there were but eight of them facing the blood-wet steel, and then Brown shouted for a fresh formation, swung his contingent into line and led them with a rush across the floor that swept the remaining mutineers off their feet.

Three more went down with steel through them, and then the rest surrendered, throwing down their arms, and begging mercy. Brown made a bundle of their arms, stowed it in a corner and made the prisoners stand together in a bunch, while he searched them thoroughly.

"If we can't get that trapdoor open now, with these to help us," he remarked, panting and wiping the dotted blood off his sword on a Hindu prisoner's trousers, "it'll be a heavier proposition than I think!"

"There's a trick to it," said Juggut Khan, panting too, for the battle had been fierce and furious while it lasted. "The fakir knows the trick. It is heavy, in any case. But, if we make him tell us, we can manage it."

There followed delay while the fakir was induced to forego the pleasure of a sulking fit. He seemed like a child, anxious to emphasize their dependence on his knowledge, and needing to be recompelled to each new thing they needed of him. He was perfectly content, though, to surrender when he felt the weight of a cleaning-rod on his anatomy, or something in the way of fire—a match or cigarette for instance—placed where he would get the most sensation from it.

Then followed more delay, while they rigged a lever of sorts, and a rope through an iron ring in the trap, and while Juggut Khan hunted for the secret catch that the fakir swore was hidden underneath a smaller stone that hinged in the middle of the floor. He found it at last, moved it and came across to lend a hand with the lever and the rope.

The fakir sat still and smiled at them. His eyes gleamed more horridly than ever, and his withered arm seemed more than ever to be calling down dire vengeance on them.

"I believe that monster is up to tricks of some kind!" swore Brown.

"He can't do anything," said Juggut Khan. "If we were all to put our weight against this, all together, we and the prisoners, sahib, we could get it open in a second."

"All together, then!" said Brown. "Come on, there! Lend a hand!"

The prisoners and Brown's men and Juggut Khan and the Beluchi bent their backs above the lever, or hauled taut on the rope, and the fakir wriggled with some secret joke.

"At the word three!" said Brown. "Then all together!"

"One!"

"Two!"

The fakir writhed delightedly. He seemed more than ever like a wickedly malicious child.

"Three!"

They strained their utmost, and the huge stone trap gave way with a sudden jerk.

"For the love of—"

They all jumped, but they were strained in the wrong position for a quick recovery, and the ten-ton rock rolled back on unseen hinges to crush them all, and rolled back and yet farther back—and then stayed! Brown had snatched a rifle, and had placed it between the rolling rock and the wall!

He stood wiping the sweat from his forehead, while the rest recovered their lost balance and walked out from behind unscathed. The rifle creaked and bent and split. Then the stone leaned farther back, reached the wall and stayed there!

"A near thing that!" said Brown. "That fakir's a bright beauty, isn't he!"

"Shall I kick him, sir?" asked one of Brown's men.

"Kick him? No! What good'd that do? What next, Juggut Khan?"

But Juggut Khan was bending down, and listening at the hole laid bare by the huge hinged trap.

"Silence!" commanded Brown.

The men held their breath, even, but not a sound came up from the darkness down below.

"Are they dead, d'you suppose?" asked Brown.

And, even as he asked it, some one in the darkness snuffled, and he heard a woman's voice that moaned.

"Snff-snff-snff! I wonder if I'm dead yet! I wouldn't be, I know, if Bill were here! He'd ha' got us out!"

"There is one of them alive!" said Juggut Khan.

"So I notice!" answered Brown, with a strange dry quaver in his voice. "Go down and bring her up, please! Take three or four men with you. It won't do to bring women and a child up here and let 'em see this awful fakir and these corpses. Take your time about bringing 'em up, while I make the prisoners carry their dead up on to the roof. I'll take the fakir up there too where he's out of mischief!"

Just as a six-foot-wide pathway ran round and round the outside of the dome, another one, scarcely more than a yard wide, ran round the inside, and formed a roadway to the top in place of a stair. It took the prisoners and Brown's men fifteen minutes of continuous effort to carry up the dead and the fakir, and lay them on the roof.

"Pitch the dead over!" ordered Brown, and the mutineers obeyed.

"I've a mind to pitch you over too!" he growled at the fakir, and the strange creature seemed to understand him, for his eyes changed from their baleful hatred to a look of fear.

The bodies slid and rolled down the rounded roof, and fell with a thud against the battlements, or else went rolling down the circular causeway that led to the street below.

Brown seemed to be garnering ideas from watching them. He gazed down at the noisy tumult of the city, watching for a while the efforts of an ill- directed crowd to put out a fire that blazed in a distant quarter of the bazaar.

There seemed to him something strangely preconcerted about much of the hurrying to and fro below him. It struck him as being far too orderly to be the mere boiling of a loot-crazed mob.

His prisoners gave the secret to him. They were leaning against the parapet on the other side—the side closest to the city-wall, and farthest from the top of the causeway—and they were chattering together excitedly in undertones. Brown

walked round to where they stood, and stared where they stared. Just as they had done, he recognized what lay below him.

It was faintly outlined in the blackness, picked out here and there by lanterns, and still too far away for most civilians to name it until the sun rose and showed its detail. But Brown, the soldier, knew on the instant, and so did his men.

Suddenly and unexpectedly and sweetly, like a voice in the night that spoke of hope and strength and the rebirth of order out of chaos, a bugle gave tongue from where the lanterns swung in straight-kept lines.

"Oh, Juggut Khan! Oh, Juggut Khan!"

Bill Brown's voice boomed through the opening in the dome, and spread down the walls of the powder-magazine as though in the inside of a speaking- trumpet.

"Brown sahib?"

"The army has got here from the north! It has come down here from Harumpore! It's outside the walls now, lying on its arms, and evidently waiting to attack at daylight!"

"I, too, have news, Brown sahib! All four are living! All four lie here on the floor of the magazine, and they recover rapidly. They are all but strong enough to stand."

"Good! Then come up here, Juggut Khan!"

That winding pathway up the inside of the dome took longer to negotiate than an ordinary stairway would have done, but presently the Rajput leaned against the parapet and panted beside Brown.

"D'you see them? There they are! Now, look on this side! D'you see the preparations going on? D'you realize what the next thing's going to be? They'll come for powder for the guns, so's to have it all ready for the gun-crews when the fun begins at dawn! Listen! Here they are already!"

A thundering had started on the great teak door below—a thundering that echoed through the dome like the reverberations of an earthquake. It was punctuated by the screams of women. The prisoners changed their attitude, and eyed Brown and the Rajput with an air of truculence again.

"They'll be up this causeway in a minute, sahib! Listen. There! They've seen the dead bodies that you tossed over. Better it had been to keep them up here for a while."

"Never mind! We can hold this causeway until morning! Men! Take close order. Line up at the causeway-entrance. Kneel. Prepare for volley-firing. Now, let 'em come!"

"I am for making an immediate escape, sahib!"

"Go ahead!" said Brown, almost dreamily.

He seemed to be thinking hard on some other subject as he spoke.

"Sahib, one of the women there—she who is maid to the other two—asked me where Bill Brown might be! She swore to me that she had recognized his voice when the trapdoor opened up above her. Are you not Bill Brown?"

"Yes, I'm William Brown!"

"Her name, she says, is Emmett!"

"You don't surprise me, Juggut Khan! I thought I had recognized her voice. It seemed strangely familiar. Well—here come the rebels up the causeway. See? They're at the bottom now with lanterns! Ready, men!"

There came the answering click of breech-bolts, and a little rustling as each man eased his position, and laid his elbow on his knee.

"Can you find your way out through the way we came, Juggut Khan?"

"Of course I can!"

"Are all the women on the floor?"

"Three women and the child."

"Can you close the trap-door again?"

"Surely! It is only opening it that is difficult."

"Then close it before you go. I've got a reason! Send one of my men up here with a lantern—one of those that are burning in the magazine. I want to signal."

"Very well, sahib!"

"Then take the women, with four of my men to help them walk, and get out as quickly as you can by the way we all came in. Wait for the rest of my men when you reach the opening in the outer wall, and when they reach you allot two men to carry each woman, and run—the whole lot of you—for the army over yonder. One of the women will object. She will want to see me first. Use force, if necessary!"

"Are you, then, not coming, sahib?"

"I have another plan. Here they come! Hurry now, be off with the women! Volley-firing—ready—present!"

Pattering footsteps sounded on the causeway, and a little crowd of nearly doubled figures came up it at a run.

"Fire!"

The volley took the rebels absolutely by surprise, and no man could miss his mark at that short range. Five of the rebels fell back headlong, and the rest, who followed up the causeway, turned on their heels and ran.

"'Bout turn!" Brown shouted suddenly. "Use the steel, men! Use the steel!"

His own sword was flashing, and lunging as he spoke, and he had already checked a sudden rush by the prisoners.

They had thought the moment favorable for joining in the scrimmage from the rear.

"All right! That'll do them! I'll attend to 'em now!"

A man came running up with the lantern Brown had asked for, and Brown took it and began waving it above his head.

"They must have heard that volley!" he muttered to himself. "Ah! There's the answer!"

A red light began to dance over in the British camp, moving up and down and sidewise in sudden little jerks. Brown read the jerks, as he could never have read writing, and a moment later he answered them.

"Now, down below, the lot of you! Give me your rifle, you. I'll need it."

"Not coming, sir?"

"Not yet. There's something else yet, and I can do it best. Besides, some one has got to guard the causeway still. There might be a rush again at any minute. Listen now. Obey Juggut Khan implicitly as soon as you get down. His orders are my orders. Understand? Very well, then. And you without a weapon, your job is to shut the door that you leave the magazine by tight from the outside—d'you understand me? Call up when you're all through the door, and then shut it tight!"

"But, how'll you get out, sir?"

"That's my business. One minute, though. Here they come again. Get ready to fire another volley!"

The mutineers made another and a more determined rush up the causeway, coming up it more than twenty strong, and at the double. Brown let one volley loose in the midst of them, then led his men at the charge down on them and drove them over the edge of the causeway by dint of sheer impact and cold steel. Not one of them reached the ground alive, and in the darkness it must have been impossible for the mutineers below to divine how many were the granary's defenders.

"That'll keep 'em quiet for a while, I'll wager! Now, quick, you men! Get down below, and follow Juggut Khan, and don't forget to shut the door tight on you. These prisoners here are going to follow you—they may as well go down with you for that matter. No! that won't do. They could open the door below, couldn't they? They'll have to stay up here. Got any rope? Then bind them, somebody. Bind their hands and feet. Now, off with you!"

Brown spent the next few minutes signaling with the lantern, and reading answering flashes that zig-zagged in the velvet blackness of the British lines. Then, as a voice boomed up through the granary, "All's well, sir! I'm just about to shut the door!" he fixed his eyes on the fakir, and laughed at him.

"You and I are going to turn in our accounts of how we've worked out this *Hookum hai* business, my friend!" he told him. "You've given orders, and I've obeyed orders! We've both accounted for a death or two, and we've both accepted responsibility. We're going to know in less than five minutes from now which of us two was justified. There's one thing I know, though, without asking. There's one person, and she a woman, who'll weep for me. Will anybody weep for you, I wonder?"

A lantern waved wildly from the British camp, and Brown seized his own lantern and signaled an answer.

"See that? That's to say, you glassy-eyed horror you, that our mutual friend Juggut Khan has been seen emerging like a rat from a hole in the wall. I'll give him and his party one more minute to get clear. Then there's going to be a holocaust, my friend!"

He cocked his rifle, and examined the breech-bolt and the foresight carefully. The fakir shuddered, evidently thinking that the charge was intended for himself.

"No! It won't be that way. I know a better! I'm taking a leaf from your book and doing harm by wholesale!"

Brown leaned down into the opening of the dome, and brought the rifle to his shoulder. There was a chorus of yells from the prisoners, and a noise like a wounded horse's scream from the fakir. The rest were bound, but the fakir rose and writhed toward him on his heels, with his sound arm stretched up in an attitude of despair beside the withered one.

A chorus of bugles burst out from the British camp, and a volley ripped through the blackness.

"All right! Here goes!" said Brown. And he aimed down into the shadowy powder-magazine, and pulled the trigger.

Ten minutes later, an army three thousand and five hundred strong marched in through the gap made in the outer wall by a granary that had spread itself

through—and not over—what was in its way. There were seventeen tons of powder that responded to the invitation of Brown's bullet.

Chapter 14

Explosions are among the few things—or the many things, whichever way you like to look at it!—that science can not undertake to harness or account for. When a gun blows up, or a powder-magazine, the shock kills whom it kills, as when a shell bursts in a dense-packed firing-line. You can not kill any man before his time comes, even if a thousand tons of solid masonry combine with you to whelm him, and go hurtling through the air with him to absolutely obvious destruction.

The fakir's time had come, and the prisoners' time had come. But Sergeant William Brown's had not.

They found him, blackened by powder, and with every stitch of clothing blown from him, clinging to a bunch of lotus-stems in a temple-pond. There was a piece of fakir in the water with him, and about a ton of broken granary, besides the remnants of a rifle and other proof that he had come belched out of a holocaust. The men who came on him had given their officer the slip, and were bent on a private looting-expedition of their own. But by the time that they had dragged him from the water, and he had looted them of wherewithal to clothe himself, their thoughts of plunder had departed from them. Brown had a way of quite monopolizing people's thoughts!

There were twenty of them, and he led them all that night, and all through the morning and the afternoon that followed. He held them together and worked them and wheeled them and coached and cheered and compelled them through the hell-tumult of the ghastliest thing there is beneath the dome of heaven—house-to-house fighting in an Eastern city. And at the end of it, when the bugles blew at last "Cease fire," and many of the men were marched away by companies to put out the conflagrations that were blazing here and there, he led them outside the city-wall, stood them at ease in their own line and saluted their commanding-officer.

"Twenty men of yours, sir. Present and correct."

"Which twenty?"

"Of Mr. Blair's half-company."

"Where's Mr. Blair?"

"Dunno, sir!"

"Since when have you had charge of them?"

"Since they broke into the city yesterday, sir."

"And you haven't lost a man?"

"Had lots of luck, sir!"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Sergeant Brown, sir."

"Of the Rifles?"

"Of the Rifles, sir."

“Were you the man who signaled to us from the magazine and blew it up and made the breach in the wall for us to enter by?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you alive, or dead? Man or ghost?”

“I’m pretty much alive, sir, thank you!”

“D’you realize that you made the taking of Jailpore possible? That but for you we’d have been trying still to storm the walls without artillery?”

“I had the chance, sir, and I only did what any other man would ha’ done under like circumstances.”

“Go and tell that to the Horse Marines—or, rather, tell it to Colonel Kendrick! Go and report to him at once. Possibly he’ll see it through your eyes!”

So Brown marched off to report himself, and he found Colonel Kendrick nursing a badly wounded arm before a torn and mud-stained tent.

“Who are you?” said the colonel, as Brown saluted him.

“I’m Sergeant Brown, sir.”

“Not Bill Brown of the Rifles?”

“Yes, sir!”

“You lie! He was blown up on the roof of the powder-magazine! I suppose every man who’s gone mad from the heat will be saying that he’s Brown!”

“I’m Brown, sir! I had written orders from General Baines to enter Jailpore and rescue three women and a child.”

“Where are your orders?”

“Lost ‘em, sir, in the explosion.”

“For a madman, you’re a circumstantial liar! What happened to the women?”

The colonel sat back, and smothered an exclamation of agony as the nerves in his injured arm tortured him afresh. He had asked a question which should settle once and for all this man’s pretentions, and he waited for the answer with an air of certainty. It was on his lips to call the guard to take the lunatic away.

“Juggut Khan, the Rajput, took them, with nine of my men, and brought them in to your camp last night, sir. I naturally haven’t seen them since.”

“Will the women know you?”

“One of them will, sir.”

“Which one?”

“Jane Emmett, sir.”

“Well, we’ll see!”

The colonel called an orderly, and sent the orderly running for Jane Emmett. A minute later two strong arms were thrown round Bill Brown from behind, and he was all but carried off his feet.

“Oh, Bill—Bill—Bill! I knew you’d be all right! Turn round, Bill! Look at me!”

She was clinging to him in such a manner that he could not turn, but he managed to pry her hands loose, and to draw her round in front of him.

“I knew, Bill! I felt sure you’d come! And I recognized your voice the minute that the trapdoor opened and I heard it! I did, Bill! I knew you in a minute! I didn’t worry then! I knew you wouldn’t come and talk to me as long as there was any duty to be done. I just waited! They said you were killed in the explosion, but I knew you weren’t! I knew it! I did! I knew it!”

“Face me, please!” said Colonel Kendrick. “Now, Jane Emmett, is that man Sergeant William Brown, of the Rifles?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is he the man who entered Jailpore with nine men and a Rajput, and came to your assistance?”

“Yes, sir! He’s the same man who spoke in the powder-magazine.”

“Do you confirm that?” he asked Brown.

“Under favor, sir, my men must be somewhere, if they’re not all killed. They’ll recognize me. And there’s the other lot I led all last night and all today. They’ll tell you where they found me!”

“Never mind! I’ve decided I believe you! D’you realize that you’re something of a marvel?”

“No, sir—except that I’ve had marvelous luck!”

“Well, I shall take great pleasure in mentioning your name in despatches. It will go direct, at first hand, to Her Majesty the Queen! There are few men, let me tell you, Sergeant Brown, who would dare what you dared in the first place. But, more than that, there are even fewer men who would leave a sweetheart in some one else’s care while they blew up a powder-magazine with themselves on top of it, in order to make a breach for the army to come in by! My right hand’s out of action unfortunately—you’ll have to shake my left!”

The colonel rose, held his uninjured hand out and Brown shook it, since he was ordered to.

“I consider it an honor and a privilege to have shaken hands with you, Sergeant Brown!” said Colonel Kendrick.

“Thank you, sir!” said Brown, taking one step back, and then saluting. “May I join my regiment, sir?”

He joined his regiment, when he had helped to sort out the bleeding remnants of it from among the by-ways and back alleys of Jailpore. And the chaplain married him and Jane Emmett out of hand. He sent her off at once with her former mistress to the coast, and marched off with his regiment to Delphi. And at Delphi his name was once more mentioned in despatches.

When the Mutiny was over, and the country had settled down again to peace and reincarnation of a nation had begun, Brown found himself hoisted to a civil appointment that was greater and more highly paid than anything his modest soul had ever dreamed of.

He never understood the reason for it, although he did his fighting-best consistently to fill the job; and he never understood why Queen Victoria should have taken the trouble to write a letter to him in which she thanked him personally, nor why they should have singled out for praise and special notice a fellow who had merely done his duty.

Perhaps that was the reason why he was such a conspicuous success in civil life. They still talk of how Bill Brown, with Jane his wife and Juggut Khan the Rajput to advise him, was Resident Political Adviser to a Maharajah, and of how the Maharajah loathed him, and looked sidewise at him—but obeyed. That, though, is not a war-story. It is a story of the saving of a war, and shall go on record, some day, beneath a title of its own.