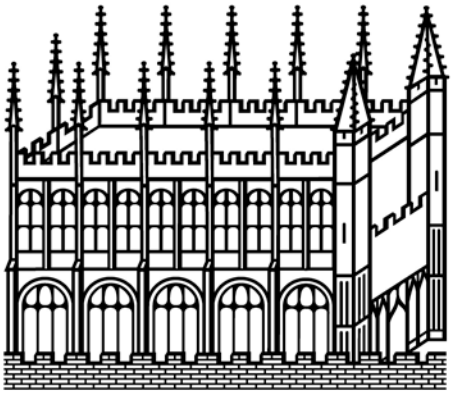

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THE BUILDER

FLORA ANNIE STEEL

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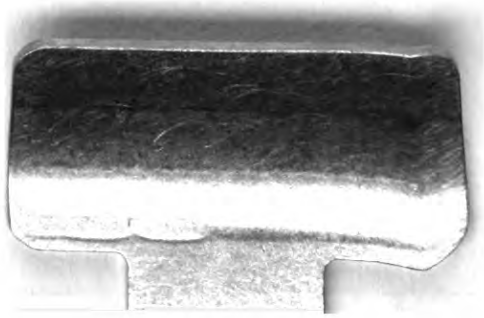

THE BUILDER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

KING–ERRANT
A PRINCE OF DREAMERS
MISTRESS OF MEN
ETC. ETC.

THE BUILDER

BY

FLORA ANNIE STEEL

LONDON
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FOREWORD

THIS book finishes one of the finest chapters in the whole history of the world: the record of the reigns of the four great Moguls, Emperor of all the Indies. I have attempted to portray the men themselves and their times: first in "King-Errant," which shows Baber the Knight Errant; secondly, in "A Prince of Dreamers," which shows Akbar the Great Dreamer; thirdly, in "Mistress of Men," which gives us Jahangir the Compleat Lover. Fourthly and finally, here in "The Builder" I have tried to set down truthfully the character of Shahjahan the Magnificent, and show what it was that made him—perhaps the ablest monarch of them all—fail to keep what he had inherited from his forbears. Thus my task is finished; the story is told.

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Book I

GRIEF

THE BUILDER

CHAPTER I

"IMPOSSIBLE! Impossible!"

The word permeated both the mind and the body of the man who, leaning over the broad sill of an arched embrasure, looked out over the wide plain, the curving river, the clustering wooded hills on the farther bank.

It was a fair scene; fair and fertile. Just below him the white city of storied palaces and circled domes rose silhouetted against the varied greenery of lush banana groves, ripening millet fields and swaying brakes of sugar cane. Here and there, a square of blossoming opium poppies lay like a multi-coloured flag; here and there a patch of snowdrift white showed where the cotton pods were bursting under the hot sun.

Fair and fertile. And it belonged, all of it, to the man who, though he looked, saw not. Far as the eye could reach and beyond that, beyond and beyond again it belonged to him; for he was Shahjahan, Emperor of all the Indies. Shahjahan, Great Mogul, Shadow of God, Lord of the World.

Yet he was waiting, as the veriest beggar must wait when the wife who is to bear him a child lies in travail. And this man had waited for so long.

It seemed years since Arjamand—his beloved Arjamand—had sickened; and, despite all the aid his vast power could compass, the omens were unfavourable. Yet it was impossible! Impossible that evil should befall her—the guiding star of his life! Befall her now, when, after nineteen long years of difficulties and dangers and despairs, which she had shared so bravely, so faithfully, he had come into his kingdom; when, at last, he could see her beside him Empress, as he was Emperor. Impossible! Impossible! She must win through as she had won through so many times before. How many? Thirteen, and this would be the fourteenth child she had borne him. Fourteen in nineteen years . . .

His clasped hands crisped finger on finger at the remembrance; for it brought with it the thought that it was small wonder she was so frail. Well, there should be no more! If this child were a girl that would make up the tale allowed to the reigning Mogul—four sons and four daughters. No more! No more! And yet how they had loved each other! It seemed but yesterday since that wondrous night when she had first come to him. Come so tender, so beautiful, so good! Come to him after three long years of waiting. And that memory brought a frown to the handsome, powerful face with its hint of sullenness; for it revived an old wound—a wound of jealousy. He had been his father, Jahangir's favourite son; yet that father had refused consent to marriage with Arjamand because forsooth—oh, yes! there was no hiding the fact that the refusal was due to her being Nurjahan's niece. Nurjahan who had contemptuously refused to satisfy his father's lifelong passion. And then? Then when at long last

Nurjahan had consented to become Empress, then in a moment, at her bidding, the refusal had been withdrawn. Yes, what he, the favourite son had failed to gain, had been given to a woman's lightest wish. That had been the beginning of it all. His growing distrust of one so beautiful—for she was beautiful exceedingly—more beautiful than her niece Arjamand (and here an added jealousy deepened the frown, for there was no denying the fact that the elder woman was the more strictly beautiful of the two); and clever! Women had no right to be so clever as that! Twiddling his father round her little finger, and all (herein lay the sting) for his and the country's good. And she was just also. It was bare justice, of course, that Khushran, his elder brother and rightful heir to the throne, should have another chance of redeeming his wasted life; but it was impolitic. He hadn't the makings of a man in him, while he, the younger brother—well, he had never been popular with the world at large, had never tried to be so; but he had seen straight. He had had Arjamand—by God, they had loved each other dearly! Never separated since that wondrous night; so it was impossible, impossible they could be separated now. He—yes! he, Emperor of all the Indies as he was; able to command every pleasure in the wide world, able to put out his hand and take anything he wanted, could not live without his Arjamand! and he was not going to die yet . . .

With a half-laugh he lifted his clasped hands to his face and smelt them. The scent of apples was still there! Strong, unmistakable; the scent of apples that the holy man had prophesied would be his till death drew nigh. Quaint; very! But how

well he remembered the incident. Arjamand was ailing. She ailed often in those long years of difficulties and child-bearing. Small wonder when they were scarcely ever at rest. She had been very ill that time, and the wiseacres had feared she would die—as they feared now; but they did not know her marvellous pluck, her will power as he knew it—as he had felt it ever since she came to him—his dearest dear! the only human being for whom he really cared! The only woman at whom he had ever looked! Yes, she had been very very ill, and she had craved for apples, when there were no apples! —here the half-laugh came again—it was so like her not to trouble about times and seasons but just to say "I wish." So he had gone about distractedly looking for apples till he met the holy man who had given him two; one for each hand! How relieve he had been; how glad, even when the holy man had told him that the child which should be born would be the destroyer of his race. That was Aurungzebe, his third son; little, white, skin-a-melink Aurungzebe, cunning and crafty enough to deceive the devil. He had always distrusted the child; Arjamand had said it was because of the holy man's prophecy and that such idle words should not be allowed to influence anyone; but, after all, the old man had been right about the scent of the apples! There it was on his hands, as strong as if he had just been holding the fruit. Queer; but so it was that the assuaging of a woman's craze should restore her to life. And now there was nothing, nothing that she could not command; so there could be no fear for her—none at all. As for Aurungzebe, it would have been better, mayhap, if he had not been suffered

to live—other sons came after; but, at the time none could have foreseen there would be so many boys, so few girls. But if this child was a girl it would be the last.

And Aurungzebe, little white snake—that was what he was, a little white snake—had his points. He was clever, over clever for his ten years. And pious—over pious, though in a way this had its political value. It pleased the orthodox and counteracted his brother Dara's heterodoxy. Dara, the most lovable, hare-brained, affectionate, well-meaning youth, who only needed experience to steady him. Those two—Dara and Jahanara his sister, inseparables—what a pair they were! No wonder they were the apple of Arjamand's eyes.

He stirred restlessly as if aroused from something like slumber. They were long coming to give him news—very long—but there could be no real danger—the scent of apples was still on his hands, and he could not live without Arjamand. Impossible! Impossible!

His head sank on his hands, and for the moment he forgot all things in a half dream.

"Aurungzebe—the Ornament of the Throne."

That was an ominous name. He had not given it. It was his father, Jahangir, who had settled it and he had never much felicity in the choice of names. Imagine calling him, Shahjahan, "Gracious Prince." He who had never been gracious to anyone—except to Arjamand. What was there to be gracious about in his youth? His father not so bad, but unstable and a drunkard until Nurjahan—always that woman—always successful where he had failed; for he had tried hard to stablish himself as heir apparent,

almost as Regent—— And why not? By rights, if his grandfather Akbar had not yielded in the end to the old family tradition and appointed his erring and rebellious eldest son to be his successor, he, Shahjahan the grandson, would have been Emperor of India instead of kicking his heels about his father's Court subject to the caprices of a woman. A just woman and a clever—but still a woman! A bitter disappointment, that, for a lad. Small wonder if he could not avoid distrust of one who had usurped so much. Yet in the beginning she had been kind. It was she who had changed his name to Shahjahan —Lord of the World. His father said it was his wish; but his wishes were always hers. Beautiful beyond compare she had been that great day of rejoicing when he returned victor from the Deccan. The trumpets were sounding, the jewels were glistening. His father held him by the hand and proclaimed him his heir and seated him on a throne beside his own . . .

There had been no heart-burnings that day. None . . .

But why had that woman, that just woman—that was the worst of it, she was always just—persuaded his father to forgive Khushran, his elder brother? Was it any wonder that fear lest his father should follow the example of his grandfather, and at the last let the succession go by primogeniture, should enter the younger son's heart? It was no wonder. What could a man do in such circumstances but try to outwit Fate and a woman as best he might? And he had outwitted her. Khushran had died. Of course he had died; not by distinct order—that was crude —but so that all danger was averted quite discreetly.

But Nurjahan was clever; she suspected; perhaps she actually knew—it was always difficult to keep anything from her—it was as if she had magic at command. Certainly she had magic; for, despite it all, she had kept her hold on Arjamand. That was not so remarkable, for Arjamand was her niece; but why should he, Shahjahan, still admire her? Why should he have entrusted his eldest son Dara, and Jahanara—that precious pair—to her care, even now? Of course Arjamand had wished it and arranged it; and at these times Arjamand's will was law. And surely, surely, the boy and girl could learn nothing but charm and cleverness and good breeding from one who was, indeed, a mistress of men, though she was only a widow living in seclusion. Strange! that she who had wielded absolute power during his father's lifetime should, at his death, have given up all—given it up so gracefully, so peaceably.

He had expected otherwise. For she knew—she surely knew the truth of Khushran's death. What else had prompted the high-handed treatment which had driven him into rebellion—unsuccessful stormy rebellion? How they had suffered, he and Arjamand! How they had wandered until at last . . .

Here dreaminess became real sleep, and in real dream he saw himself a prisoner within the walls of Bijapur. A prisoner held fast by those who on his father's death waited to see which side of the wall the cat would jump. And it was all important that without delay he should get to Agra and declare himself Emperor. How was it to be done? And in his dream he laughed exultantly at the trick he was playing. He lived it through again. The simulated illness of one short day. The darkling

hints of poison or the Great Sickness. Either way Death waiting ready with his sickle; either way wailings and chanted prayers. The swift fear which came when he held the deadening draught in his hand, and looked round the faces of those who stood by, to fathom loyalty or disloyalty. If he drank would he really wake again—or was it a deep laid scheme for actual death? Well, a man must take some risks! And for such a prize—the Empire of all the Indies! And Arjamand had been so brave; he had seen her face smiling at him as he sank into unconsciousness.

Of what followed he knew nothing; only what she had told him, between laughter and tears. The sudden, ear splitting wail; the outcry, "He is dead! He is dead!" The solemn-faced Court physicians bamboozled by his loyal servants. The hasty arrangements to carry the inert, corpse-like body outside the prison house for immediate burial because it was the Great Sickness; undoubtedly the Great Sickness that left one blue and cold!

Then the cortege at night—the flaring torches, the hurried confusion, the dull awakening as he lay wrapped in cere-cloths.

And then? And then?

Dawn! Dawn of a new day, a new life! He felt the cold kiss of the night-cooled breeze on his face in that mad gallop for freedom, for Empire. He felt his blood bounding in his veins stirred by exultant hope, by glad resolve, by certainty of success.

Yes! He, Shahjahan, Emperor at long last; and she beside him, beautiful, dominant, beloved—Empress . . .

A stirring at the doorway roused him. News at last!

It was growing dusk; too dark to see the warning blue handkerchief of death which the messenger held.

Shahjahan took one step forward. Every atom of the man, soul and body, thrilled with imperious desire to know.

"Well?" It was a mere whisper; but it held fear and hope and agony and joy.

"The Most High hath a daughter," came the reply.

Then in a burst of violent anger, imperious impatience rang out:

"Fool! As if that mattered! The Empress! The Empress! How——"

"Her Majesty hath found freedom! The child drew breath; she yielded hers."

For one instant Shahjahan stood silent; then with a fierce cry, "It is a lie—it is not true," he fell forward, smitten to the very earth.

So he lay silent, while the palace, and, after a while, the white city with its circled domes echoed and re-echoed to long drawn wailing.

So swiftly from village to village, from horizon to horizon, the news spread that Arjamand the Beloved was dead.

And the hearers looked at each other doubtfully.

CHAPTER II

"YEA, thou art made in the same mould as thy grandfather," said Nurjahan absently, pausing for a moment in her occupation of shedding into a basket the spent petals from a pile of half withered roses that lay on the ground beside her. "He was ever, as thou art, ready for tears or for laughter—ever ready to be led astray by either. God send thou find firm anchorage as he did."

And she resumed the shedding of rose leaves methodically.

She was still superlatively beautiful, even in her simple white robes the like of which she had worn ever since the day her Compleat Lover, Jahangir Emperor of India, had died. Her face, also, had not lost the look of supreme intellectual balance which had been its chief characteristic when, as Empress of all the Indies, she was virtually ruling every man in it from the Himalayas to Cape Cormorin. But the face softened suddenly, as she added:

"And God send, child, that thou beest as kind-hearted and generous as he was."

The lad she addressed, a tall handsome fellow of some fifteen years, responded immediately to the faint tremor of her voice. He laid aside the native guitar he was stringing and looked back at Nurjahan as she sat on the step above.

"God send it be so, Wisest of the Wise!" he

answered. Then, impulsively, he dragged himself closer to her feet and with coaxing face raised to hers continued in a voice that held the nameless note of charm, pure, unconditional charm. "Tell us of him, Wise One! I love to hear how he laughed; so few have the art, and it makes living worth while. Come, Jani, and listen too. 'Tis little use asking that one"—here he designated with contemptuous thumb a smaller boy who sat close by reading a much dog-eared book—"he reads of the silly saints or his idol, Timoor the Terrible, who butchered the begums and bolted the babies! Ho! *Rungsaze*,* come and learn charity from thy grandfather!"

The boy thus addressed did not raise his eyes from his book but spoke briefly, the words which came from his lips seeming to cut the air:

"I thank thee, brother; but the ancestor of whom I read suffices me for example. He was of the faith, as I would others were."

"And call not Aurungzebe out of his name, thou buffoon," put in a pert voice from a still younger girl who, crouched at the reading boy's feet, was engaged in re-threading a rosary. "He is no more 'dyer' than thou art; but rather the less, seeing *his* face is not coloured like a girl's."

"Nor as thine, like a man's," retorted the first speaker somewhat weakly.

"Peace, children!" came Nurjahan's clear, resonant voice. "Why art for ever wrangling? And about foregone things also! As if all the world with eyes could not see that Aurungzebe's face is white—almost as one new-dead—that thou, Roshanara, are not as well favoured as thy sister, Jahanara here, and

*Anglice "dyer."

that Dara for all his right of years to know better was certainly rude."

Dara was on his feet in a second. "If the Wisest of the Wise says so, I yield to her decision." And there was a twinkle of sheer good humour in his eyes as he marched towards his younger brother, and with hands holding his ears in approved penitent fashion said with charming open-hearted grace, "*Tobah!* I meant not evil, so my brother must forgive."

Aurungzebe looked up from his book. His thin, fine-featured face devoid of all boyishness wore a tolerant smile as he replied:

"I asked not for apology, knowing well that my deserts were beneath even thy estimate of them, my brother."

Dara drew back suddenly as from a snake, then with a shrug of his shoulders turned back to the woman who sat watching the two curiously.

"So! that is ended," she said, "to the liking of both. Dara hath been frank and courteous, Aurungzebe cautious and dignified. So let it remain."

But her outstretched hand sought Dara's and she pulled him down beside her once more, her eyes full of sympathy and understanding. So had she many times and oft turned aside her Compleat Lover's disappointment when his quick emotionality had met with a rebuff. She was no blood relation of these young people who had been sent to her charge while her niece Arjamand, the present Empress of all the Indies, was in ill health and, with constant craving for more and yet more devotion, was awaiting the birth of her fourteenth child; yet, as grandchildren of her Compleat Lover she recognized in

them much that was familiar, just as, despite her stern reprobation of their father Shahjahan, she recognized his many good qualities. For above all Nurjahan's infinite beauty, infinite charm, her grip on truth, her freedom from bias rose predominant.

So as she sat on the topmost step of a flight that led down from the walled garden to the river below, her mind was so full of sudden uncalled-for memories in that past of hers which had been so adventurous, so enthralling, that she scarcely saw the scene before her. Yet it was very fair. The rushing river—for the monsoon had just broken—hurrying tortuously through gleaming sand-banks and chequered fields where the autumn crops, rejoicing in the new-come rain, were sprouting high. A mango tope or two, and, beyond, the minarets and mosques of the city of Lahore showing—flushed rosy-red from the setting sun against purple-black storm clouds.

There was small sign of life. An ox waggon or two creaking their slow way along the winding rush-strewn road that, shirking the backwaters and streamlets intersecting the wide sand-banks, led to the deep stream where a bridge of boats swayed perceptibly in the current. That was all. And behind her as she sat lay death. Death personified in the mausoleum for her Compleat Lover on which she was spending all the allowances made her by the Emperor. For she herself lived by her own handi-work: on the attar of roses she would distil from the spent petals, on the cunning embroideries and delicate conserves which she only knew how to make. It was growing late, so the workmen had left their work, and the half-finished pile of fanciful tile work

and massive masonry rose silent, beautiful so far as it went, full of promise for the future.

So was Prince Dara, as with another swift recognition of her sympathy he exclaimed :

"Dignity! Nay! Wisest of the Wise! When thou art there all other dignities sink to insignificance. Ay! and all beauties also. Lo, Jahanara! Let us make her the 'Queen of Women,' as she was and is! Nay! dearest let be! 'Tis but to doff that white shroud and let it lie so—behind thee—and thy hair—thy beautiful hair! See, Jahanara! How it hangs to the very ground in waves and waves. Lo, Wisest of the Wise, at thy age thou shouldst have grey in it, and there is none, not a single strand."

As he went on both girl and boy were busy with their hands, while Nurjahan herself protested; but with a kindly smile.

"Lo," cried the lad, "that is beautiful—but a crown, Jahanara. She needs a crown!"

Instinct with vivacity, with absolute absorption in what he was doing, he glanced round. A group of eucharis lilies, close by, spread their wide umbels of blossoms against the bronze foliage of a pomegranate bush. He had one in a moment, snapped the stalk short, and, upside-down, placed the whole umbel on Nurjahan's head, where it rested a veritable crown of stars, white, fragrant.

For an instant he looked, almost startled at the effect; the next he was on his knees, his hands clasped as in prayer.

"*Ave Maria! Ora pro nobis!*"

His young voice echoed jubilantly through the garden.

"Dara!" cried Nurjahan, shocked. "Who taught thee that?"

He laughed merrily. "Who? Why, none; but Father Buseo who teaches me European wisdoms—lo, Wisest of the Wise, he is almost as wise as thou art—hath a book. And there is a picture in it as like thee as two peas; besides—— Look, Jahanara! Is she not like the picture on the wall at Grandfather Akbar's tomb—by the door—only the crown there is gold—and it hath the legend under it '*Ora pro nobis.*' And why should not a good woman pray for us? Why, I say."

He was on his feet again facing his younger brother who, paler than ever, had closed his book, risen, and now stood literally bursting with indignation.

"Why not indeed?" he said, his tone once more curiously cutting for one so young. "Truly thou needest it—— Yea! that we should all pray for thee, since thou art no better than an infidel—a shame and a disgrace to Islam."

"That is what thy precious tutor Sheikh Mir saith doubtless," sneered Dara, roused in an instant. "But he is an ignorant blockhead—he knows naught of science, naught of physics, naught of——"

"He knows the faith," retorted Aurungzebe. "Come, Roshanara, thou hadst best not stay here, with infidels—and 'tis nigh time for evening prayers."

"Dara! Thou art ever at fault," said Nurjahan when the two had left them. "Granted thou hast made me look like a picture," she would have said an infidel picture but for truthful memory. How often had not her Compleat Lover, whom she had buried with due Mohammedan rites, whose mausoleum where Mohammedan prayers for his soul should be

sung in perpetuity she was stinting herself to build—how often had he not repeated those words "*Ave Maria, ora pro nobis.*"

It was in the blood somehow. Akbar had toyed with the Christian legends, Jahangir had gone further—churches had been built, priests given full freedom; and now this boy . . .

"Fret not thyself, Most Wise," he interrupted. "I meant nothing save that thou wast the very marrow of a Madonna. And as for Islam! As heir to Empire, I am of the faith, despite Aurungzebe and his learned doctors! I would back my tutor Buseo against them any day, though in sober truth I care not much for either. I like Gopinath the jogi's philosophy more than either; and Sarmad—mad Sarmad is best of all—and so thou thinkest also, Wise One, if I be not mistaken."

This sudden attack left her for the moment speechless; for the imputation was true. Sarmad, the Jew by birth, the Greek by education, the wanderer through every religious maze, and now, half mad, half poet, dubbed by all beliefs "the Atheist," did stir her imagination as did none of the learned doctors. So, partly to evade answer, partly because what she saw roused instant interest, she pointed to a faint swirl of dust far on the road towards the city and said swiftly:

"A news rider for sure! God send it be good!"

The lad's eyes followed her pointing finger and his voice, youthful, exuberant, echoed her words:

"For sure—at last the news bringer! Quick, Jahanara! To the gate, so we be the first to hear." And he was off, followed by his sister.

"There is no need for unseemly haste, children,"

she called after them. "'Twill be a good quarter of an hour ere the last bridge is past. 'Tis perilously loosened by the floods."

So, having risen, she stood watching the wisp of dust pass on its devious way among the sand-banks; and, as she watched, her agile mind reverted to those words "*Ave Maria, ora pro nobis!*" The idea which underlay them, the idea of womanhood free from the smirch of sex, had always attracted her. For an Eastern woman her life had been abnormally devoid of passion. As she looked back over her long life, she knew absolutely that she had never been in love. Never once had her heart mastered her head. Was it a pity—or was it not? She could not say; yet there was no denying that virtue had come out of the passionate devotions of that marvellous inheritance of Kingship—Baber with his Mahum, Humayon with his late found Hamida, Akbar setting even sex aside in his strenuous determination to govern, her own Compleat Lover with his touching child-like incapacity to love anyone but herself. And now Shahjahan? Ye gods! were he to lose Arjamand how would he face life? Not only the mind, the brain deprived of all on which it had leant, but the body—the body of a strong man more strong than most, virile, self-assertive? And she, Arjamand, had pledged him never to marry again—never to have a child who might dispute the succession with her brood. Mean! Despicable! For nineteen years to teach a man incontinence and then to leave him to break his word or break his manhood? Poor Arjamand! Who would deny her pity. Who, for the matter of that, could deny her admiration? Giving herself, her health, her other interests in life

in order to monopolize a man—a worthy man doubtless, but still only one out of the many. And they had been very happy, very content. God! what would Shahjahan do without her? But, after all, the news might be good—must be good—for Death . . .

"Does not count," said a voice beside her—a musical, but curiously toneless voice.

She turned to the new-comer who had seated himself nonchalantly on the step behind her; so sat looking out, as she was looking out, over the river.

A strange, bizarre figure was Sarmad the Atheist. His fair skin had been burnt by the sun to browny gold, the colour of his close cut curls; and, as he wore no clothes save a waist-cloth, his long limbs as they stretched themselves over the white marble steps showed like new-cast bronze. Such limbs too! No Greek statue could outpass them for pure grace and strength, while the small head poised on the column-like throat was that of a young god. The face, beardless, was impassive in its calm, while the eyes, large, wide opened, held one by their dullness. Blue in colour as a sapphire, they had the opacity of a turquoise; so that many seeing them for the first time might say "The man is blind."

But it was not so. His power of vision was, indeed, so extraordinary, so well known that Nurjahan, noting the fixity of his gaze, said hurriedly:

"Dost see aught? Sarmad, say! what dost see?"

He raised his hand and pointed. "I see the blue ensign of death—death that counts for naught."

Without another word, Nurjahan, casting the lily crown from her, and hiding her unbound hair with

her close-folded veil, turned to hurry through the garden towards the gate, and as she hurried she seemed to see Shahjahan, Emperor of all the Indies, dragging his weary feet along the road to Agra—the mausoleum of dead kings and queens—behind his lifeless dearest dear.

But Sarmad did not stir. The discarded lily crown had struck his outstretched arm quoit wise, hung balanced on his hand for a space, and now, gripped by his lissom fingers, looked like his votive offering to some unknown, unseen god.

"Death doth not count," he repeated softly. "There is no room for it in the ceaseless circle of life."

CHAPTER III

THEY looked at each other doubtfully, feeling that were this sort of thing to go on their dream of a truly Moslem Empire would be imperilled.

The haggard, gaunt figure that, with a sudden imperious gesture, had ended the audience was no sure foundation on which to build a superstructure which would need initiative and vitality.

"He eats not at all," said a grey-bearded noble apologetically, "nor sleeps. But 'tis early days yet. He must have time to recover."

He to whom he spoke, a younger man in black robes and black turban, curled his bearded lips. "From the loss of one who at best was a woman——"

A tall man, also in the black robes of a preacher, interrupted harshly:

"It behoves thee not, O Learned One, to speak disrespectfully of one who, had she been alive, would have sent the hell-doomed ones to death without any parley. Was it not by the late Empress's orders that the Hoogly prisoners were brought hither for punishment—and if——"

"If she had not found Paradise!" laughed a young noble who wore his turban much awry, "I should not have had a winsome Portuguese maiden in my house to-night."

"Would that Shahjahan had kept her for himself," assented another dandy. "'Tis women he needs to

quiet his nerves. 'Tis like going without drink or tobacco when one has been used to the sex for twenty years."

"Peace, Mirza Sahib!" reproved the tall man. "Leave Royalty alone and, if thou must talk lewdly, go, as thou goest usually, to Chambeli the harlot."

His hearer laughed uproariously and arm in arm with the first speaker moved off. But a black-coated group, interspersed with a few brocaded and bejewelled *chapkans* moved off slowly, picking their way discreetly past ominous stains on the marble pavement which were being rapidly removed by the Imperial servants.

"He met his death like a brave man anyhow," remarked Said-ullah Khan, the grey-bearded man who had apologized for the Emperor's hasty retreat. "May I meet mine in like fashion when my turn comes." His speech showed a certain roughness, telling that he belonged to the northern peoples.

"The Prime Minister hath excuses for all men," said the Makdoom bitterly. "He would even find one for a hell-doomed infidel who hath righteously gone to his own; but we of the faith regard the Emperor's action in dismissing others of the same kidney to minor punishments as unworthy of one who calls himself Defender of the Faith."

Said-ullah Khan flushed dark under his fair northern skin. "Have a care, Preacher!" he answered angrily. "Speak no high treason, or those who know Shahjahan for what he is have weapons to defend his honour."

And, laying his hand on his sword, he too passed away, and others of the brocaded *chapkans* followed suit; for Said-ullah Khan was the head of the

Royalist military party, who knew the Emperor as the best and bravest general in Hindustan. All the greater pity that he should, for the time, have gone to pieces over the loss of a woman. Still, there were signs that he was recovering: that in a way he was escaping from the yoke which, undoubtedly, had held him a willing captive for so many years. The mere fact that he had stopped the day's butchery; that he had sickened when he saw how bravely even infidels could meet death showed that he was beginning to judge for himself; judge with that justice which was the heritage of his Mogul race. The Empress—God send her peace—would, woman-like, have had revenge to the enth, for the insult offered her by the Portuguese when in the past troublous years the Imperial couple were flying from their enemies; but women were made that way; men were different, a brave foe was to them a friend. So, followed by his flatterers, he made his way through the thronged bazaars where folk were gathered, discussing the morning's events from varying points of view; and as he passed he had a smile and a salute alike for the Hindu ascetic and the Jesuit priest hurrying churchwards. He even paused, when he was arrested under the courtesan Chambeli's balcony by a jasmine chaplet flung deftly over his neck, to look up and nod his careless thanks. They were all alike to him: pawns in the military game in which he, as expert, acknowledged the Emperor his superior.

"His claws will be cut nathless," laughed Chambeli, continuing the conversation which had been interrupted by the flinging of the chaplet, "unless he plumps for Prince Dara and the Jesuits. And mayhap that might be too big a mouthful even for

his tolerance to swallow. For, if the Emperor dies, the learned doctors will surely support their little white saint Aurungzebe, and if they succeed, farewell, my masters, to such as you!" And she leered round at the two young nobles with their turbans awry, who had followed the advice given them and were now, each supported by a beflowered and bejewelled girl, enjoying their morning dose of opium.

"And you," retorted one of them sleepily.

Chambeli's laugh was long and loud.

"Not I," she said. "My sort remain even so long as man is left. 'Tis the lack of me and such as me that is killing the Emperor. I swear 'tis true—I have it from the palace women. Now if he would but take God's gifts as you do, my masters." And here, again, she laughed long and loud.

An older man who had come in and taken a hookah and a place as an old habitué close to the courtesan, laid his hand on her arm and said quietly:

"Thou speaketh truth, harlot, and we of the palace have a plan. Lo, those two sots, half drunken, half asleep, will hear naught if we speak discreetly. So listen."

And a whispered conversation went on and on only broken by the gurgle of the hookahs.

Meanwhile the learned doctors of the law had continued their way and their discussion, and as they went the common folk of the bazaars stood aside to let them pass, with murmured petitions for a blessing. And this was given; but they had no salutation for the Hindu ascetic and when the Jesuit priest hurried past some of them spat into the gutter furtively: and one said in a low voice:

"If the Emperor dies, and Prince Dara be proclaimed heir——"

The Makdoom interrupted with a bitter laugh:

"Then the hell-doomed, uncircumcised mountebank who hath just passed with his shaven crown, he who teaches Prince Dara unlawful Western wisdoms and his like, will lord it over we learned ones of the Faith. For, mark me, the lad favours that witch woman Nurjahan who dragged the Emperor Jahangir—on whom be peace!—nigh to hell with her sorcery."

"We have the remedy in our own hands if the faithful are faithful," put in the tall young man, the youngest of the black-coated, full bearded group. "God and his prophet have sent us salvation in my pupil Aurungzebe. Never have I seen one so young, so——"

"Peace, Sheikh Mir!" said the Makdoom severely. "We speak not of successions ere the time comes. Yet surely Islam could have no better leader than the boy. He was his mother's favourite, and she was of the most faithful. Had God not taken her there would have been no more jangling bells, no chanted mummeries. Hark to them even now! *Tobah! Tobah!*—'Tis a disgrace to every Moslem in the land." He held up his finger as he spoke; and, sure enough, through the sun-bright air came the sound of chimes and the distant wail of funeral chanting.

"They are burying the hell-doomed ones," said another of the group. "The Empress would have given the corpses to the jackals and the kite. And Prince Aurungzebe, as all know——" The rest was lost in distance.

So, dark and sinister, the little group of the elect moved on its way, full of righteous indignation.

And the tolling bells, the sad chants went on, for, over in the Church of Our Lady, the Jesuit Fathers who had been given foothold in Agra by the great Akbar were indeed singing Masses for the repose of the souls of those murdered.

Censers were swinging, acolytes were shifting about with tall wax candles, priests in chasubles and albs were chanting sonorously. The high altar twinkled with many lights below the great golden crucifix, and placed above the bier where lay the body of the martyr, who had refused to forswear his faith, the figure of Mary Mother, her Child in her arms, smiled serenely. There was nothing from its eastern end to its western, from its arched roof to its tessellated pavement that showed the church stood in a strange land, amid people who thought its presence an outrage upon Islam. Built in the Italian style, decorated as Italian churches are, its very congregation showed no alien feature; for it was European despite its native dress; the European contingent of artillerymen, engineers, mechanics whom the Mogul Emperors employed so largely. And there was no hole and corner air about the men and women who listened or the priests who chanted. They were there by right—by the royal order of Akbar.

So the words of the requiem Mass rang out almost defiantly, and the preacher, taking as his text the words "The souls of the righteous are with the Lord," spoke in no faltering voice. A brother Christian had been foully murdered, but he was now wearing a saintly crown in Paradise. So the organ

pealed out, the bier was lifted, and the congregation trooped after it.

Only one or two priests remained behind to see the acolytes duly blow out the lights and make all secure. And one of them said to the other :

"The Emperor looked parlous ill. If he dies we of the Society must work for Dara. The *moulvies* will support young Aurungzebe. They have a strong following ; but if we keep Said-ullah Khan on our side, and if the Prince will only be discreet and——"

The second priest—he who had hurried through the bazaar—gave a quick, affectionate smile.

"Dara is ever Dara!" he said. "The most lovable of lads! I have tutored many, but none so gifted, so ready of sympathy, so full of great imaginings, so——"

"Enough! Enough!" interrupted the first speaker. "All know the virtue of thy pupil who know thee. So—if the Emperor dies——"

He shrugged his shoulders and blew out the last lights.

Meanwhile, over in the palace, the man of whom all spoke, on whose future life or death so much depended, sat alone, his head buried in his hands, as he often sat for hours when Imperial business was over ; since with a curious pertinacity he had adhered almost from the first to the routine of Imperial life. He sat very still ; he was, in fact, stunned body and soul by the blow. He scarcely thought. Sometimes in a flash memory would bring back some past delight ; more often he was back in the ghastly nightmare of that three weeks' march across desert lands to Agra, the burial place of kings and queens. That march through the long hot days with sheer

sunlight beating down on you and on the draped bier where she lay, she who had been sheltered all her life. Always, always ahead of him, heralded by muffled kettledrums, surrounded by wailing women, as he stumbled barefoot through the sand. The drops of perspiration chased each other down the bearers' cheeks; was it tears or sweat that bedewed his own? Then at night, under the irresponsive stars it was even worse. Just outside the tent—where the courtiers bade him try to sleep—she lay alone surrounded by hired wailers, watched by flaring torches —she who had so often nestled with low cries of content into his enfolding arms.

It was better now that she was at peace under the dome which he had chosen for her temporary resting-place, where the low-chanted rhythms of prayers and praise never ceased by day, or by night; where, at any rate, he could imagine her asleep, as he had so often seen her asleep when out-wearied by sheer delight and satisfaction.

But was she really only asleep? Would she waken when, in the years to come, he also should find death? The question obsessed him. For the first time in his self-centred life he found the visible world insufficient. Hitherto with Arjamand to satisfy his emotions, the struggle for supremacy to satisfy his ambitions, he had looked on religion, philosophy, as mere pawns in the game—to be neglected so long as he had more efficient pieces to move.

Now, he asked himself, if they had anything to give, just as he asked everything else in the world what they could bring him. At intervals he had interviewed his family—all but the youngest who had cost her mother so dear. Her he would not

see, but the others vaguely interested him. Dara was a fine grown lad, like what he had been as a boy—if indeed he had ever been a boy; but it seemed so far away now—— And Jahanara? It had given him quite a shock when he saw her just after her return from Lahore—she was so like her mother! So like—but, ah, the difference! He bowed his head down to the stone window-sill before which he sat and for a while was unable even to think.

Then the others—Roshanara and the two boys—Shuja and Morad—the little fellow who shadowed his elder brother and did everything he did. Between them the white snake Aurungzebe. Strange, he never could like the boy, and yet Arjamand had been fond of him—but then Arjamand had been—what had she not been? So, once more, he lost himself in regrets.

The hours sped on. The servants brought him food, but he would none of it. When he was hungry he would eat—not now. Let no one enter. He wished not to be disturbed. So noon passed to afternoon, afternoon to evening, and still he sat, listless, half asleep.

He was aroused by a gentle kiss on his brow. He turned—Arjamand?

No! not his dearest dear, but some one as beautiful. And—— God and his prophets! That was her robe, those her jewels—those . . .

He was on his feet in a second, his passionate temper blazing up with his instant recognition of the trick, with his instant scorn of the tricksters.

"Slaves!" he cried and his voice had never rung more fierce, more autocratic on the battlefield.

What he said matters little; his orders were brief

and cruel. Half an hour afterwards the thronged bazaars were giggling and jeering over the sight of a stark naked girl bound face tailward to the back of a sorry ass, being paraded through the town, a jest for all men.

"She is the most beautiful of us all," whispered Chambeli after her wretched tool had been brought back speechless with shame, half dead with terror, "but I did my best, so the fee is honestly earned. 'Tis not my fault the man was not a man.'"

CHAPTER IV

"SLUGGARD! Kingship will never come nigh thee!"

The words, uttered in a young voice, musical enough, but curiously measured and set, disturbed the scented silence in which, happed round with silken coverlets, Prince Dara slept. There was some excuse for him; since dawn had barely come, and the arched alcove was still dark; but Aurungzebe admitted none.

"Sluggard! Wake! or before God I will not wait for thee."

This time the sentence was barely finished before the sleeper was on his feet. The next instant Dara had clipped his younger brother round the waist, lifted him as easily as if he had been a baby, borne him to a neighbouring door, set him down within it and turning the lock said derisively:

"Bide you there, *Rungsaze!* till the Heir Apparent is ready," adding with his usual conciliation, "I shall not be long."

And, indeed, he was not. A minute at most and his hunting suit was donned, the door was opened, and with mock courtesy he apologized for his action.

"I trust I did not hurt thee, brotherling, but time pressed, and, if we are to get partridges, 'tis well we should be early afield. If your Highness is ready—

the horses wait below. Shall I show the way, or will your honourable Majesty precede me ? "

" Fool ! " said Aurungzebe, whiter still by reason of his rage, and stalked to the corridor.

" Nay ! brother ! I meant no harm—'twas but a jest——" began Dara.

The younger boy paused for a second. " Which may be earnest by and by," he said ; then recovering himself continued sharply, " But, as thou sayest, the horses wait and the hour is already over late. If we are to reach the best ground ere the morning call is over, we must needs ride fast."

It was a perfect whirlwind of flying tails and manes, rising dust and glinting hoofs that swept away from the palace precincts out into the open fields, bare now of the autumnal crops with here and there a patch of already ploughed land awaiting seed for the spring harvest.

And there was laughter and merriment from the troop of partridge hunters as it galloped past village and hamlet ; for the riders were all young men full of sheer joy in living. As who would not be when the first fresh breeze of an Indian winter dawn strikes cool on the young blood in each vein, when from the distance comes the low chirruping cry of the quarry, and on the far horizon the sun is rising to send great shafts of light into the cloudless sky. Prince Aurungzebe rode first on his gallant little grey Arab. He was a most accomplished horseman despite his few years and mean stature. None touched him in agility, though he was hard pressed by Dara on his favourite mount, a chestnut Waziri mare, hot as fire, uncertain as to temper who, for no visible cause, would discount her superior swiftness by sudden

affrighted prickings of her long ears and sudden crab-like caracole. But Dara's long legs clipped her sides tenaciously and he laughed uproariously when in one of these disconcerting bounds his turban fell off leaving his head bare.

"Keep it! Keep it!" he shouted to the young noble who dutifully dismounted to secure the lost headgear. "I go on! There is no time to lose!"

And on he went, his laughing face breasting the breeze, his hair streaming back; the picture of careless boyhood; but Aurungzebe, glancing at him, curled his lip disdainfully. Something surely was due to dignity. The spectacle of the Heir Apparent leading his fellows—and even his brother—turban-less, like a mountebank, was distasteful; therefore disgraceful, not to be borne. So, half unconsciously, he spurred the grey Arab; it shot forward, like an arrow from a bow.

Thus, in a second, the rivalry that was never long absent between the two shot ahead also.

"What! willst thou a race?" cried Dara, his quick imaginative instinct making him vaguely comprehend. "Then thou shalt have it!"

The Waziri mare responded eagerly and the two were neck and neck together, past the stubble fields and the plough out into the open Bar land where ripples of sand overlay the stretches of limestone soil smooth, hard, that resounded to the galloping hoofs.

But youthful ill-temper does not long withstand such pure pleasure as a race over miles on miles of unenclosed country where the horses are nigh equal; so after a while the brothers were galloping side by side, forgetful of feud, till Dara called joyfully:

"Enough oh! master horseman! The prize to

the little one, the little horse. Let us draw rein at yonder caper bush and breathe the beasts. Lo, we must be miles away from the others."

Aurungzebe, for once, responded cheerfully. "Yet by taking the short line of the bow they have to make to avoid the river-bed, we might overtake them if we are quick—the horses can breathe when they have done their work." And he moved his mount on at a walk.

But Dara stood up in his stirrups quickly alert.

"What's that?" he cried. "Dost hear it, Zehu? surely a child's cry?"

"What then?" answered Aurungzebe carelessly, "'twill stop doubtless, ere long. We have no time to do nursemaid."

"There it is again!" cried Dara. "By the twelve Imans it hath strong lungs—'tis a howl! The child's lost, for sure, out here in the wilderness. We had best go and see."

"And lose our chance of chase? Not I!" retorted the younger boy, starting his horse to a trot.

"It comes from close on our way," put in the elder, "and if the child is lost——"

"'Twill be God's will! When wilt thou learn, Dara, that fate is stronger than thou art! That 'tis always safer——"

But Dara had turned a little aside and was lost in the dotted caper bushes. The next instant his hearty happy laugh rang out, and Aurungzebe, stung by curiosity, followed his trail.

It was certainly a quaint picture that met his eye as he emerged on an open space. In its centre, her bare legs very wide apart, her mouth very wide open sat a nearly naked girl some nine years of age.

She was howling methodically; but there was not a trace of tears on her cheeks, no real trouble on her face. In fact the first glimpse of answer to her howls made her rise to her feet, and in the most courtly manner in the world, sweep a salute to the laughing boy who, mounted on the chestnut mare, pushed his way through the bushes and so stood, curbing the still eager horse that would fain have been after her rival.

For an instant Dara was silent, save for laughter. There was something irresistibly comic in the thin little figure—its sole garment a ragged petticoat—its fuzz of tangled hair almost hiding the level eyes, performing with such infinite grace all the fascinating genuflexions of an accomplished court dancer.

"Who, in Ali's name art thou, child?" he said at last.

The little image swept another salute, and replied, "Most noble! I am harlot by profession." (She used the tribal name "*Kanjari*" only to be translated by harlot or courtesan.)

By this time Aurungzebe had arrived upon the scene, and hearing the answer turned away impatiently.

"Come, brother," he called. "Let us go on! Such people can be trusted to look after themselves."

Dara hesitated. "True—but she was howling and there must be something wrong. How didst come here, child?"

"I ran away. They beat me because I would not learn. I ran far. Then I lost myself and howled." The answer came confidently, fearlessly.

Again the boyish laugh rang out. "Thou didst indeed! But tell me—how far——?"

"If thou wilt not leave the brat to howl, or die

if she will, I go on," called Aurungzebe, exasperated; and with the word dug spurs into the Arab muttering the while that he was not going to lose a partridge hunt for the sake of a chit who belonged doubtless to some encampment of the juggling tribe hard by, and whose howls were possibly a begging trick. Dara might be a fool, easily taken in—he was not.

So the echo of the little grey Arab's hoofs left Dara, dismounted the better to quiet the Waziri mare's desire to follow her stable companion, looking at the quaint child and cogitating her fearless answer.

"I know not, Most Noble; but I run fast—as fast as the boys."

He felt, somehow, embarrassed by her self-possession.

"And if I had not come?" he asked.

"I should have died," she replied gravely, "without doubt. Death would have come to me."

"And art thou not afraid of Death?"

A sudden smile illumined the thin face, half hidden by the tangled hair.

"I have not yet seen him, Most Noble; so how should I fear?"

The reply with its unanswerable wisdom found instant echo in the lad's own nature: a sudden friendliness made him say:

"Be that as God wills; but thou canst not stay here. So up with thee astride the mare—I will take thee to the first village."

She walked sedately to his side, looked at the mare appraisingly, then said:

"If the Most Noble will mount I can get up by his foot and find seat room beyond the saddle peak in front."

It was almost a command and he did as he was bid without a word and held out his hand. With a spring agile as a cat's she was on his foot, and so astride the mare's neck.

"Well done," he cried, "thou art nimble indeed."

"They teach us all things in the tribe," she explained, "dancing and singing and juggling and balancing and tricks so that if one fail the others may suffice. I can touch ground backwards with my head—but I will not dance—I will sing: but I will not dance."

She spoke with infinite firmness; Dara laughed.

So, a quaint pair, the Heir to Empire and the child of the harlot tribe, they went on, at first gingerly; then, as the lad's confidence in his burden's balance grew, faster; until at last out of sheer light-heartedness and the bewildering joyousness of youth they were careering over open spaces and through bushes at a break-neck gallop.

And then, suddenly, in front of them danger. A steep declivity, almost a quarry hole. Impossible to pull up in time. The best chance was in a forward jump and the hope that the mare's legs would stand the strain.

In an instant Dara had lifted the reins to make his mount rise; but at the same instant the child slipped—fell . . .

There was a rattle of stones. Was it all the back kick of the mare's leap—or . . . ?

Then came a shock, a stumble, a fall, a recovery and Dara standing beside his quivering mount looked back, dreading what he might see.

What he did see was a little ragged figure coming

towards him nonchalantly, and irritation at his own anxiety made him ask curtly :

" Why didst fall off ? "

" I fell not," came the reply. " I jumped."

" Thou didst jump ? Wherefore ? "

" My weight, Most Noble, would have been too excessive for the horse's legs, and that would have been a pity. Now, see you, her knees show no scratch. That is well——"

" Thy weight, child," he began, then paused Truly, if her bodily weight was negligible, her moral weight was distinctly excessive ! And yet he was conscious of a certain keen pleasure, a certain exhilaration of all the joys of life which made him add, " Yea ! it is well."

So, once more they started ; but this time he made the child hold the reins herself, showing her how to guide the mare ; and when suddenly, from out one of the bushes, a buzzing brown partridge skimmed away to the next clump of capers, his cry of " Ride it, ride it," sent all three, Prince, courtesan and mare in hot pursuit. Never was a hotter one ! Faster ! Faster ! All three pair of eyes on that buzzing brown patch, in at one side of a bush, out at the other—further and further. All three forgetful of this world or the next, pulses bounding, hearts and hoofs galloping, breath coming too fast for laughter until in one of the patches of new-ploughed land, the mare scarce needed Dara's cry of " Halt " or the child's answering tug at the reins to pull up beside what looked like a clod of earth half hidden by the furrow. It was the partridge absolutely outwearied by its flights seeking the only shelter it had strength to find.

"Thy first quarry! Thy first!" cried Dara, delighted. "Get down and pick it up—'tis thy first."

The child obeyed, picked up the bird, cuddled it in her small thin hands, then, looking up at the laughing young face above her said sedately:

"Shall I kill it?"

Dara, startled, met her questioning eyes.

"Kill it? dear heart no! Why should it be killed?"

"If the Most High wished it."

"But it is not so—and wherefore should I wish it?"

The answer came readily. "Because the Most High is Prince for sure, and Princes kill—they always kill—everything."

So they stood for a second. The sun was by now beating down on the whole wide plain, yellowing the white sand and making the caper bushes with their light seagreen leaves look frosty and cool. A dog bayed in the distance and almost beside them a village ox tinkled its bell as it grazed on a few sparse bents. Evidently humanity was not far off. Humanity that could be found without difficulty; so the child was safe.

"I don't kill everything," he said at last, "though I am Prince. Now thou hast best return to the tribe—I hope they won't beat thee hard."

A radiant smile seemed to envelop the little figure from head to foot. "What matters? I have this." And she cuddled the still exhausted bird to her thin, naked breast. So seen, against the sky pale with excess of light she showed a picture never to be forgotten, and Dara, starting to go, reined in his restive mount for an instant to call suddenly:

"Thy name, child. Thy name?"

"Rana-dil," came the reply. "Rana-dil harlot."

The name seemed to echo in the lad's brain, as carelessly, recklessly, he rode on to catch up his brother if so it might be.

Rana-dil—clear heart—clear heart—clear heart.

That seemed to suit—and for the rest?

Well, she might be truly of the tribe of Kanjars. On the other hand she might be one of the stolen children that tribe were given to pilfering. Anyhow she was Rana-dil—"Clear heart." Clear heart—he would remember that.

The same evening as he sat, according to wont, beside his favourite sister Jahânara, his head on her lap, her delicate, henna-tipped fingers stroking his hair, he related to her the events of the morning, and they laughed together at the picture he conjured up of the tousled hair, the lean brown body, the ragged petticoat.

"Rana-dil," he said at the close. "It is strange, sisterling, but I cannot get that impish figure out of my head."

"Was she so very beautiful? You said not so?" asked Jahanara roguishly.

Dara looked up into the face above him. There, if you like, was beauty indeed. An oval face, soft eyes that flashed under arched eyebrows, a perfect mouth, a dainty chin, all framed in ebon hair and decked with gems and scented tissue.

Yes! beautiful exceedingly.

Then he said appraisingly:

"No—she was ugly—very ugly!"

CHAPTER V

"There is no God but me
For everything I see
The earth the sea the sky
All centre in mine eye
There's no God but me
For I am I."

THE words, in a sort of rhythmic chant, rang out softly as Sarmad, the crazy atheist, made his way at dawn over the trackless Bar land where, but a day or two before, Prince Dara had hunted for partridge. It was just such another dawn, silver and gold in the sky, silver and gold in the shallow pools of water which the recent rains had left, here and there, held fast in the impermeable limestone soil. Silver the water showed, golden the light wisps of sand which even the faint breeze that come ever with the dawn was gently stirring. Scarce appreciable, the movement yet gave a curious instability to the round world. Perhaps in Sarmad's eyes—those dull blue eyes that looked so blind, which were so clear sighted—this movement was noticeable, for he stopped suddenly, at the edge of a pool, and looking at the reflection that lay on its ruffled surface ceased his chant, and after a while said dreamily:

"Naught is sure! The truth escapes us ever."

And he was silent as he passed on, striding over the pavement-like open spaces, brushing the dew from

the grey caper bushes as he forced his way through them to another, and yet another clearing.

A strange, incongruous figure out in the wilderness; for, despite its nakedness, it held a hint of another environment in the slender yet strong limbs tanned golden brown by the hot Eastern suns, in the fine thoughtful face, the small head with its covering of short wave hair; briefly, it was the figure of a Greek god.

Again it paused suddenly. This time to raise a forefinger and listen; but, beyond the almost inaudible stir of growth and life that is never absent, even in a desert, no sound could be heard. Not to the ordinary mortal ear at any rate; but Sarmad's hearing matched his sight. To the extraordinary keenness of both he owed much of his reputation as miracle-monger, for he could detect things which to the multitude were beyond apprehension.

In this case, he evidently heard something; for he instantly changed his course, turning to the right unhesitatingly.

Yet he walked a mile or two, always over the same country of capers and clearings until in one of the latter he came on an encampment of huts, clustered round a larger pond than usual. The huts were of the simplest and most primitive architecture, being formed by bending half a dozen or so of bamboos into the ground as archways, and covering this framework by grass-mats. A group of naked children, mostly girls being put through their acrobatic facings by an ancient beldame in front of one of these huts, and, further off, four or five naked men engaged in wrestling, showed that this was a permanent encampment of the Nut tribe; as permanent, that is to say,

as was consistent with the many varied occupations of its inhabitants. For if any of them, such as concerted cattle-straying and subsequent ransom, attracted undue notice huts and people would vanish like a dream. Meanwhile as acrobats, wrestlers, jugglers, they professed to live, even the girls earning a trifle by tumbling in the streets of the city. Later on, when heels over-head, and arching the body backwards till a cowrie could be picked up from the ground between the lip became indecorous, these same girls took, naturally, to the oldest profession in the world. In fact, this production of prostitutes was a recognized industry, and in order to further it, girl babies, having more chance of beauty than those of pure stock, would be bought, or stolen by the tribe; and, when properly trained, might come to be valuable sources of income.

The old Mai, for instance, who, holding a filthy pipe-stem in one hand, and an equally filthy leathern thong in the other, was coaching the class of acrobatic youngsters, had been such a one in her time. She had been queen of the harlot's quarter, and there was no one more competent to teach the tricks of the trade. Sarmad stood smiling at the children's antics; then his eyes wandered to a little figure that was sitting crouched up on a spit of sand hard by. A rag of a veil was tightly drawn round the thin body, and the eyes, remarkable for their hazel tint, were half hidden by a tousled mass of hair.

"Why dost not learn too?" he asked suddenly.

The old Mai's shrill voice clamoured instant and wrathful reply.

"Wherefore?" she echoed. "Because the good Lord should strike her dead for wickedness; but

that she hath the right stuff in her, I would kill her myself . . . "

"So instead thou didst only beat me till thou wert half dead thyself, and I got a holiday from business," interrupted the child calmly. "It was not wise, old woman; for, look you, I am no nearer dancing than I was."

The old instructress almost foamed with rage. "*Ai teri!*" she shouted. "I will kill thee outright if thou darest to run away again." Then something in the little figure, some promise of possibilities to come, made her whimper and she turned to Sarmad almost appealingly. "See you, master, she is of the best. Never have I had a better—yet she will not learn."

Once again the child interrupted. "I have learnt what I choose to learn—but not dancing."

The old woman turned on her, exasperated rage coming uppermost again. "Ai! have done! And what is a harlot without dancing? Pease pudding without salt—And thou couldst earn good money—do I not know? Was I not chief dancer once."

Here memory brought additional grievance and actual tears streamed from the blear old eyes. The child looked at her indifferently.

"Thou sheddest more tears than I when thou didst beat me," she said vindictively, "that is because thou art base-born, and I am not. Ramu told me 'twas from a good house he stole me."

In an instant the old harridan was on her guard; since here was a stranger who might tell tales. She gave a cackling laugh. "A likely story!" she said scornfully, "as if folk would steal such a babe when they have better ones at home! Ay, far better."

Here she turned to Sarmad apologetically. "She was born wicked, for sure; but these are good children and learn well—Lo, Mina," she added to one of the little girls, "show the master how well thou canst perform—she is the best pupil in the class."

The words had hardly left her lips before indignant denial came.

"It is a lie! I am the best!" And there was the little crouching figure on its feet. The rag of a veil was off and laid aside, and with a bound the child was head over heels.

A little shriek of dismay rose from the others. "Oh, sister, do not! 'Twill hurt—the healing stuff will come off!"

And truly as the small rebel did trick after trick some dirty rags wound round her did come off disclosing raw weals on the thin body.

Not that the performer cared. She went through the performance with inimitable nerve and sinking down at last to her old position gasped breathlessly:

"There! but I dance not, for all that." Her lips quivered with pain; but she spoke relentlessly.

Sarmad sat down beside her.

"What hast thou there, child, in thy veil?" he asked kindly, noting the care with which the garment was lifted.

In an instant the hazel eyes lit up—a smile rippled over the half-seen face.

"It is only a bird; but it is mine—my very own," came the answer broken in upon by the old Mai's querulous voice:

"There 'tis, my master—a bird—a partridge that would be better in the pot; but the child is such a little vixen she would kill herself for sure were we

to take it from her; and she is worth money, see you, she is worth money—she hath quick wits! None quicker. She can lie with the best of us. Doth she not say she caught the bird with her own hands—that she picked it up, and it came willingly. As if partridges——"

"I did!" interrupted the child cuddling the bird close. "I picked it up and it came willingly. 'Tis my very own. None take it from me."

Her acrobatics had pushed the tousled hair from a low broad forehead, showing arched eyebrows almost meeting in a fierce frown.

Sarmad smiled: the little maid was interesting.

"None will take it from thee, child," he said conciliatingly, "but tell me, why wilt thou not learn to dance?"

"Because it is ugly what they do; shuffling and jiggling and twisting their hands and feet. I like it not; but I will sing—but not through my nose as Mai wants."

Here the old harridan broke in with a wail:

"There 'tis, see you, my master! Through the nose! As if I had not been the best singer! Through the nose indeed! She lies."

"That I know not," put in the child viciously, "but 'tis ugly anyhow." And in an instant she showed a row of white teeth in a loud professional bawl which exaggerated every professional fault.

Sarmad laughed; there was something irresistibly comic in this duel between youth and age. "Thou hast a voice anyhow, child," he said. "How dost thou wish to sing?"

There was no pause. In an instant the fresh morning air was filled by the piercing sweetness of a

child's high treble voice singing Palestrina's *Ave Marie Stella Maris.*"

There was a shout of dismay. "Peace! Peace, little infidel," from the old Mai, a chorus of "She learnt it when we were tumbling outside the Christian church" from the other children; but the voice went on unmoved, reproducing absolutely what had been heard, compelling silence from other sound. The very men paused in their wrestling to listen.

When the last note had ended, the crazy atheist rose to his feet.

"Mai," he said, "touch not the child again! I am Sarmad of whom doubtless thou hast heard. God is my friend, for I am God. And by Him and myself I swear—if thou dost touch the child thou art accursed for ever! And hearken!" Here he stopped and from the sand at her feet he appeared to get something which he held out in his closed fist. "Lo, Gold is thy god—Let the child grow as she desires, and this will be the earnest of the reward that, in the years to come, shall be thine."

The hand unclasped itself, and showed lying on the palm a golden *ashrafi*. And ere the ensuing hubbub of astonishment was over, the miracle worker had disappeared. Did he indeed do miracles, this strange man who appears so often in the histories of those times? Certain it is that the records of them still exist, and that to his grave, outside the Great Mosque at Delhi, the people still bring flowers and prayers as to that of a saint.

Yet he was and is still *anathema maranatha* to the orthodox, if only from his refusal to repeat the Mohammedan creed beyond its opening "*La illaha*" (There is no God) so rejecting the context "*il Ullaho-*

Mohommed-ur-Rasul" (But God, and Mahomet is His Prophet). Even as he strode, chanting his constant refrain, through the Bar land on his way to Agra, the learned Ullamas were discussing his arrival in no measured terms.

"Wherefore could not the witch-woman Nurjahan who worked such harm to the faith have kept him in the north? He hath wrought enough evil already, in beguiling the Heir Apparent," said the Makdoom.

"'Tis a thousand pities," assented Sheikh Mir, "that the Emperor allowed——"

"Nay, friend," put in a genial looking man who, though he wore a black robe, did not let his beard grow long, "there was little allowance about it. A sick night hath no dawn and Shahjahan had no option but to let those two—Prince Dara and Princess Jahanara—remain as hostages with his father, the Emperor Jahangir. And 'tis small wonder they fell under the charm of one who was, and is, the most charming——"

"I saw not the charm, O doctor jee," retorted Sheikh Mir sourly. "Mayhap when she was ill she was more gentle. But this man—this Sarmad as he calls himself thus arrogating the everlasting quality of the Deity—is a danger to the faith with his infidel philosophy. He should be scotched like a snake."

The physician laughed. "Or you learned men should find antidote to his poison in argument."

Sheikh Mir scowled; for it was common knowledge that he had failed in the last solemn debate with Father Buseo, Prince Dara's tutor.

"My brothers," remarked the Makdoom solemnly, "'tis impossible to hide an elephant under a hen-

coop. Doubtless the man will betray himself ere long, and then we must take action."

"He hath a great reputation amongst the people for healing, especially amongst the mothers," said the physician dryly, "so 'twill be wise to choose a wrong to arouse the multitude. Ay! and the Hindus also."

"God's curse light on all infidels!" ejaculated the Makdoom piously.

Meanwhile by one of those coincidences so common in this mysterious world of ours Fate was busy, even at the very moment, in staging what was desired; for Sarmad, roused by the little harlot rebel's singing of the *Ave* to one of his frequent raptures, was striding through the city, careless for the time of all conventions, all worldly wisdoms. So he pulled up abruptly, at what was to him the most pitiful of all sights, an animal meeting death painfully. It was a miserable calf-ling, gaunt, famished, which had dropped exhausted, overdriven, in the gutter and, with the usual indifference to animal suffering which is so much at variance with the creed of the Hindu, had been left to gasp out its life unheeded. Almost automatically Sarmad was on his knees beside it. His quick ear told him the tale of slow suffocation, of needless pain. He glanced round; an onion-seller marketing his wares sat close by; his knife lay on the pavement beside him. It was ever so with Sarmad: what he needed lay ever to hand. So in a second there was one gurgling sigh, a spout of blood and the tortured body had found rest.

For an instant there was pause. Then a high caste Hindu who happened to be passing cried out; a speck of blood was on his foot. The cry was taken

up "He hath killed the sacred one—He hath defiled a Brahmin!" Like a flash of lightning the turmoil spread and, not a minute later, Prince Dara riding through the bazaar with his retinue found Sarmad in the hands of city watchmen.

"We hale him to the magistrates," explained a black-coated one who had rejoicingly joined the mêlée.

"Nay," said the Prince quickly. "Ye will hale him to Shahjahan. It needs an Emperor to judge such as Sarmad."

The arrested man looked at his deliverer with a smile, as he chanted:

"There is no God but me
For everything I see,
Earth sea and sky
All centre in mine eye
There is no God but me
For I am I."

"Hark to him," cried the learned Ullamas, gathering like crows round the quarry. "Hark to the infidel!"

But the Hindu priests, scowling at their confrères of another religion, murmured of the unclean.

CHAPTER VI

"ART thou afraid of death?"

"There is no death!"

Question and answer rang out curtly, died away in the echoes of the arched roof, and left two strong men looking into each other's eyes.

Two men only, though the vast audience hall was crowded with people, though the Emperor of all the Indies sat in full state on the judgment seat surrounded by his courtiers.

But everything, the ornate perfection of the hall itself, the gorgeous apparel, the blazing jewels, the whole ceremonial and circumstance of the most magnificent Court in the world, seemed obliterated by the tense clash of those two minds, those two sentences.

Even the multitudinous audience that had found room on which to stand and listen to the accusation against Sarmad, the crazy atheist, grasped the futility even of innocence or guilt before those few words and there was silence; absolute silence.

Yet it had followed approvingly the evidence given against the criminal who had just been sentenced to death. Without doubt he had wilfully killed a sacred and healthy cow-ling on the very threshold of a Hindu temple; he had wilfully defiled with its blood the whole priesthood of the shrine, he had uttered blasphemy, he had added necromancy to his

other crimes by—after his usual fashion—making his evil demon produce a knife wherewith to do the evil deed; finally, though nominally a Mohammedan, he had refused to complete the creed, though urged to do so by threats of death.

"There is no God——" So far he would go, but his lips closed like adamant over the sequel "but God and Mohammed is His Prophet."

Truly he was worthy of death!

But he stood almost smiling, looking into his judge's face.

"Wherefore dost dare to say that?" came sharply on the silence.

"Where all is life, there is no room for death."

The answer came as sharply. It seemed for the moment to stun the hearer, and there was silence again.

But thought is swifter than words; so in a second Shahjahan had realized that here was something new, something that touched keenly on his wounds. He had listened vainly to the set and somewhat slighting consolations of his own creed. Woman, after all, was but woman, and there were houris in Paradise; he had reached out after Truth in hazy Hindu philosophies; he had even listened listlessly to the Jesuit Fathers when they talked of Mary Mother and her infinite pities. All these had accepted the bitterness of death: but here was one who disclaimed it utterly.

He would at least be worth a hearing.

So Shahjahan, Emperor of all the Indies, whose word was law, whose lightest wish could be fulfilled, whispered languidly to his Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister passed the whisper on to the Court

officials, until a learned one with blazing insignia of office rose and said in stentorian tones:

"The sentence of death is annulled. The prisoner will be taken to the Most Mighty's private audience hall at the sixth watch."

It was very simple. There was no outcry; not even a murmur of disapproval. Some of the black-coated ones, it is true, scowled at Prince Dara who during the evidence had often questioned the asserted facts, and who, evidently, had done his best to influence his father in favour of the criminal; but even they kept their annoyance to themselves; doubtless, however, telling each other that nothing else could be expected from a Prince who had been practically brought up by the witch woman who had beguiled her husband, the late Emperor, from the true faith.

Dara himself was overjoyed at this respite for one whom the Wisest of the Wise had taught him to respect.

"He is mad," she would say, "without doubt he is quite crazy. But so are many folk; and he hath wisdom. Besides, he sees far."

So he retailed the incident with much gusto to his tutor, Father Buseo, the Fleming Jesuit who taught him Western wisdoms, but Father Buseo was not sympathetic. From his pupil's account it was evident that Sarmad was a Sufi, and, of all heathens, the Sufis were the most difficult to convert; their ignorance was practically invincible. "For, see you," said the amiable man, "they come armed with specious philosophies. Some can quote Aristotle and Plato to their own destruction. And some say even that their very name hath the Greek 'sophos'

for origin, though we know it comes from the woollen cap they wear."

"Sarmad doth not wear a cap," put in Dara gravely, "In truth he wears nothing! He hath a distich about it." And with mock solemnity he quoted:

> "Sin was God's tailor; but he dressed
> Only the guilty—naked stayed the rest."

Father Buseo frowned with difficulty, for he was a genial soul with a sense of humour. "Come, let us work," he said brusquely. "We were treating of the science of alchemy."

But Dara's volatile mind was occupied for the moment with the so-called Sufi. "Sarmad hath it for sure," he said, "or something of like knowledge. Whatever he needs seems to come to him. I have seen him pick up gold pieces from the dust to give to a beggar——"

"'Tis the Devil aids him," put in the priest with conviction.

But the young Prince looked puzzled.

"My father," he remarked, "Sarmad says it is because he is one with God, and God is nature, and nature is himself; so he possesses all things."

"Then said I truth," responded Father Buseo with spirit. "If he be God (Holy Mary, forgive me the blasphemous word) then is his God our Devil; so that settles it. Come, let us to work, time passes; there is but a scant hour ere the Court entertainment begins."

The mere mention of this was, however, sufficient to set Prince Dara's mind off on another tack; his tutor had difficulty in turning his interest aside from

the biggest elephant fight that had ever been staged; an interest which culminated in a wonder why all the animals in the world were so different. Had they been created so? Or had they grown so?

So, with a sigh, Father Buseo abandoned alchemy in favour of zoology. Not that it mattered since all was fish that came to Prince Dara's widespread net of curiosity. It was impossible not to love the lad; equally impossible to foretell what would be the course of such a bright particular star; yet he was the hope of the Christian cause. So when the lesson was over the good father went into the church hard by and prayed to Mary Mother and her Son that he might be enabled to lead the boy into the way of truth.

Meanwhile Prince Dara, forgetful of all things save the amusement to come, leapt on the horse which, with a dozen or more of mounted attendants was waiting outside in the Jesuit's quarter, and spurred his way at a gallop towards the entertainment enclosure.

As he did so, he scattered a group of children, tumbling for cowries in the gutter, upsetting one of them, a little girl in a rag of a petticoat who, thereinafter, sat up and glared after the offender, revengefully at first, afterwards with sudden wonder.

"'Tis Prince Dara, the Heir Apparent," said an urchin more knowledgeable than she was.

The child paused; then said sharply:

"Prince or no Prince, he was rude." And she held her tousled head high, though in her heart of hearts she was saying ecstatically, "I knew he was a Prince."

Quite unconscious, however, of any breach of

manners, Prince Dara found his reckless way to his appointed place at the Emperor's right hand. It was a brilliant scene. A long oval, fenced in by red pillars and roped, behind which frail barricade half the town of Agra stood, curiously immovable, curiously silent. Around the inner side of this slight boundary, the Princes of the blood royal, and the chief nobles of the Court, were grouped on horseback, each with his retinue and insignia. Prince Dara as Heir Apparent on the right, Prince Shuja as second heir on the left of the Emperor who was seated on a throne set high above a long triple line of female guards. Stalwart figures these; Abyssinian or Ethiopean each with her shield and sword. Further to the right young Prince Morad, almost too young to sit his horse fairly, centred a group of guardian courtiers, while to the left, beyond Prince Shuja was Prince Aurungzebe, small doubtless for his age, but of consummate horsemanship, and of a courage already famed.

But even the sight of those four fair sons, all worthy their positions, did not seem to cheer the Imperial mind; for Shahjahan himself sat listless, but half interested, under the long swing of the peacocks' feather fans that waved over his head.

Behind him was a grille whence the Court ladies, unseen, could watch the show; and here, as Prince Dara paused to make his obeisance to his father, a small fair hand waved welcome. It was Princess Jahanara; she had been watching for his arrival, while her younger sister Roshanara's eyes had been for her favourite brother Aurungzebe. "He shows a man, indeed, on his grey Arab," said the younger girl aggressively; but Jahanara's affection was almost

too deep for petty jealousies. Dara was the sun in her heaven.

And now, with a blare of trumpets, the entertainment began. It was good of its kind, there were bison fights and leopard fights; fights of all sorts and kinds. Yet all, in view of the great onslaught to come, seemed tame. So it was at long last, indeed, when from opposite sides of the arena two leviathans showed, urged into the unfamiliar surroundings by spears and darts. Yet there was no pause. Startled as they doubtless were, there needed but a glimpse of a foe to make the two "must" elephants throw up their trunks with a squealing roar of rage, and charge. A shiver, a sigh of expectation ran through the crowd, was lost in the thunder of the meeting.

Both animals seemed stunned by the impact. Each retreated a step or two, eyeing each other with their little bloodshot, wicked eyes. Then there was another trumpet call to courage; but this time one failed; he turned and fled. The next moment, hotly pursued, he had doubled, just grazing Prince Aurungzebe as he passed, and the pursuer head down, blind with rage, was in fair way to vent it on humanity. But Prince Aurungzebe had no stomach for escape; he dug his spurs into the grey, it bounded forward giving him and his drawn sword opportunity for a mighty slash at the leviathan's uplifted trunk. The next instant, however, saw that same trunk bleeding profusely, level both horse and rider in the dust. A cry of horror rose from the spectators; disaster seemed imminent; but the young Prince, nothing daunted, leapt to his feet, and sword in hand, alone, gave instant battle. Brave as he was,

nothing could have saved him had not help been at hand; but it was. His brother Shuja rushed to the rescue, diverted the beast's attention by a spear thrust from behind, the terrified suite roused up their courage and, almost before a wild shriek from behind the grille had told of imminent danger, the elephant was drawn off, and little Prince Aurungzebe was left centreing a circle of applauding courtiers.

"If thou hadst died," said the Emperor embracing his son warmly, feeling for once that such a son, so brave, so undaunted, was some consolation; feeling, as he looked round the group of congratulatory brothers, that the possession of such sons was something of great value.

But even in that moment of emotion, of excitement, Aurungzebe could not forget his jealousy.

"If I had died, Most Mighty," he replied, "there would have been no shame in dying bravely. The shame would have lain with my brother who did not help."

And he looked pointedly at Dara who had been loudest in praise. The latter's generous nature did not at first grip the sneer.

"But, brother," he began, "there was not time." Then he understood and the blood flew hotly to his face.

Shahjahan looked from one to the other. In that moment he had a foretaste of what was to come in later years; and, as usual, he temporized.

"No time indeed," he said, "except for one of you to show his courage. The next will have his turn in time, never fear!"

And it was true. Whatever wrong his sons may have done, however foolishly, however deceitfully

they may have behaved, none ever threw doubt upon the courage that they inherited from their immediate ancestors, the men who make Indian history at its best.

It was late that afternoon, in the sixth watch of the day, that Sarmad, the crazy atheist, had his interview with the Emperor of all the Indies. A quaintly matched pair of men; the one who had spent his whole life in pursuing power, and who had now got it absolutely; the other who had sought personal extinction in the realization of Unity. What did they say to each other, these two, as the Emperor sat on his throne, and Sarmad, the crazy wanderer, stretched his long limbs on the marble floor beside the splendid tapestries, the gold, the jewels.

For certain they talked of Life and Death, and asked why one was one and the other the other. Asked how to differentiate the one from the other since to live is to change, and death is but a change to something unknown, undefined. What right therefore had we to dogmatize? And doubtless, since one of them claimed to be the centre of an all-embracing circumference, he declared that annihilation and loss of identity were equally impossible because, whatever one is, one must be something. And if identity be that of which we are conscious then, even if a part of our body become a clod of earth, there is no transmutation, since you are, at every moment, what you are—no more, no less.

So, the crazy one having gripped Unity, the most likely declared that the world held all things for those who recognized that the present was eternity.

Thus the conflict between two minds, two theories

of life went on and on, while the shadows grew in the alcove where they sat, and the pure peacefulness of oncoming night enveloped them, bringing a sense of rest to one mind.

Then it was that Sarmad the crazy began, after his wont, to chant his vagrant verses. Verses engendered by the trivial things about him—the scent of roses held in the silken draperies of the Emperor's throne, the growing warmth of the marble pavement on which his hand lay outstretched :

" All things are mine ! Earth air and sea
Unfold their secret mysteries to me.
Red roses set Love's mystic perfumes free
Cold marble warms beneath my mortal flesh
Which is warm finger, which is chilly stone ?
Why should we care ? Both are our very own
Both thrill to life, will thrill when years have flown.
Keeping our touch, our love, our mem'ry fresh
Dear icy marble ! Safe in your hard heart
Are countless beauties in which I have part,
Crusted with gems and wrought with cunning art
That shall outlast the weary jealous years.

" Marble and flesh ! Oh master builders twain
With turquoise, ruby, jade, cornelian
We'll build and build, again and yet again
What will enshrine our laughter and our tears."

The voice ceased, and Shahjahan stirred faintly. " Again and yet again," he murmured as in a dream. Rest had come to him, and he slept. So, after a while, the crazy atheist slipped from the alcove, leaving him asleep and dreaming.

CHAPTER VII

GERONIMO VERONEO, the so-called Venetian, sat at a window in the Christian quarter, just behind the Jesuit church. It was rather a squalid quarter, differing not at all from the poorer quarters of the town, save that at the corners of the narrow alleys there were no bloody hands imprinted on the walls, no many-armed godlings sheltered in corbelled niches. One or two of the houses, however, had gone so far as to substitute a crucifix for the godling, but for the most part they gave no hint as to the religion of the inhabitant. And this was symbolic of the position which Christians held at the Court of Shah-jahan. They had freedom, as artillerymen and military engineers they were welcome, even pampered, since special laws had been made for them allowing spirits to be distilled for their use ; but the less their religion came to the front the better they were liked. Indeed a movement on the part of the super-orthodox was on foot to silence the church chimes by destroying its somewhat arrogant steeple.

Geronimo Veroneo, however, took little heed of such matters.

He was a small almost decrepit old man who confined his European and Christian proclivities to the wearing of an inconceivably shabby and patched suit of velvet doublet and hose. He had a *béret* to match, and a ragged ruff which he laundered with

his own hands; so that even in the dusk in some dark doorway or arcade he looked very much as he might have looked in those far-away days in Italy.

Some of his neighbours used half mockingly to call him "il conte Veroneo"; but, whether he was really a noble or not, none knew. In fact very little was known about him by anybody, except that a rich Portuguese down Hugli ways had ransomed him and some other miserable captives from an Arabian pirate-ship and that he had been brought to Agra with the other Portuguese prisoners, where, being utterly insignificant, he had been allowed to go free, in consequence of Shahjahan's sudden distaste to bloodshed. How he lived, none cared or knew. He got a pice or two for drawings which he made to amuse the children; they were mostly rough suggestions of a gaping lion on the top of a pillar. Connoisseurs or those acquainted with Venice might have seen in them suggestions of the Lion of San Marco; but none knew aught of such places, or, indeed, whether "il conte Veroneo" were really a Venetian. Certain it is, that tucked away in his attic of a room he had some really fine presentments of the Duomo at Florence which ever and again he would bring out in order to add some detail or another. At such times he was given to mutter imprecations and call down curses on the Grand ducal House of Medici. Possibly therefore he was a refugee from the tyrannies of that family! but, as has been said, none knew, and none cared.

He went to confession regularly, and appeared at Mass frequently, so that was all the good Fathers (occupied for the most part in trying to consolidate their position at the Court) asked, until one day

Geronimo Veroneo fell sick, and in visiting his room they saw the fine presentments of the Florentine Duomo. One of these they took as fee—for the Fathers had to make both ends meet as well as other folk.

"'Twill do to send the Emperor when it becomes necessary to placate him with a present. European dogs or European pictures are what he most likes, and 'twill mayhap prevent him from demanding one of the pictures of the saints as he did last year," said the Superior, Father Malpica.

So the picture was laid aside with the other presents which were held in reserve for occasion. Trifling things in value for the most part, since India, in those days, was over-rich in gold and jewels and fine stuffs, so that as Sir Thomas Rowe, the ambassador, writes sadly. "If I were furnished yearly from Frankfort where are all knacks and new-devices, an hundred pounds would go further than five hundred laid out in England and be here better acceptable." Thus the competition of Germany with England is no new thing. Meanwhile there seemed every chance that an ingratiating present might ere long be needed; for a cabal was already afoot against the church bell. The black-coated ones held it to be an offence and more than once had protested in the private audience hall. Hitherto the Emperor had not lent his ear to it; but there was no saying when he might not do so, as he seemed of late to be less absorbed in his grief.

And this was so. Jeremy Taylor says "a man is so frail a thing that even a raisin will kill him." A true saying, and one that is not confined to his digestive organs, since a look, a chance word may often

change the whole current of a life. So it had been with Shahjahan. When the crazy atheist had left him sleeping and dreaming, he had gone on sleeping, and when he woke the dreams were still in his eyes, in his brain. Vague dreams of chilly marble and warm flesh, of ruby, jade, cornelian, and through the dream that phrase " there is no room for death."

Close on four months had passed since he had last kissed Arjamand ; but the thrill of it, the craving for its repetition was strong as ever. Yet he could look back more calmly over the long years, though he realized more keenly what he had lost. That was because vaguely, he felt that here, in the mind, in the friendship, there was the possibility of survival. But the other ?

More than once, he placed his hand upon a chilly slab of marble, and waited, scarce thinking at all, until he could feel neither the one nor the other ; till both were equal, till both thrilled to life. And more than once, he sent for the crazy atheist again, and battled with his vague philosophies. But through all the words he was conscious that he could find no answer to the question, " If Life be endless change and Death be change, by what right do we call Death decay and Life progress ? "

There was no reason, no right.

So days passed, and, in the curious, uncertain, unconscious way in which the mind accepts what it cannot exactly prove, he began to see that he was bewailing as one thing what was really two things : that which could endure, that which could not endure.

He had got as far as this, when, as a prophylactic against a possible order to cease ringing the church

bell, the Jesuit Fathers, taking the opportunity of a bishop's arrival from Goa, sent an offering by the prelate's hand as Shahjahan sat in public audience. It was an ordinary ceremonial. And the Emperor treating it as such, rather to the good Fathers' disappointment, dismissed the offering to the treasure house with a wave of his autocratic hand; for in good sooth, he was not at the moment overpleased with the Jesuits; complaints had been made to him that the Heir Apparent was becoming enmeshed in their toils. Briefly too, the age-old, unfair, absolutely irrelevant comment had been made, "What would his poor mother have said?" And then, naturally, this had roused the Emperor's anger. So the picture of the Duomo at Florence might have been hidden away with the other trifles in the *Tosha Khana* but for a chance.

Prince Dara, flushed, happy, careless, coming in from a morning gallop with his retinue, met the Keeper of the Treasure House, bearing the offering thither.

"From the new-come Bishop," he laughed in answer to the information. "Now by all the saints and prophets in every calendar to say naught of Shiv Jee and Kali-ma, here is matter for a fine joke! Sir Treasurer! Take the offering to His Highness Prince Aurungzebe, and say that the Reverend Father in God sends it as earnest of love and affection for a possible convert!"

Now, despite Dara's recklessness and his brother's studied courtesy and charity, there was no question as to which was favourite with the Court servants. So they tittered and did as they were bid.

Hence it came that after the Emperor had left the

audience his privacy was outraged by the indignant entry of Prince Aurungzebe and his tutor, his foster-brother Bahadur Khan, and a posse of servants carrying the offensive offering. The young Prince was whiter than ever with rage, and was supported by Sheikh Mir.

"It was an outrage," Aurungzebe said, "not only on me, one who strives to be faithful, but it also was an insult to the faith. It is ever so with Dara; he cares not whom or what he attacks, so long as he may have his silly joke. Such things may cost him his kingdom if he improve not."

Shahjahan felt he could not say this nay; in truth the reckless light-heartedness of his eldest son gave him anxiety, though in his heart of hearts he could not help preferring him to his brothers.

So Dara was sent for, and came as usual very apologetic and conciliatory. "It was only a joke, father," he said, "and had he but kept it to himself none would have been the wiser save he and I. But now—the Court and half the city will by eventide be gossiping that Prince Dara has insulted Islam and that Saint Aurungzebe hath defended it. 'Tis ever so—truly I am the bewronged one, not he."

Shahjahan sighed; he sympathized with them both; and seeing no other way out of the difficulty sent them both to consider themselves disgraced for a day—Dara for ill considered joking, Aurungzebe for want of due consideration.

Thus they both retired scowling at each other, leaving their father, for all his sovereignty, a-weary and dejected.

"Leave the picture so, in the light yonder," he

commanded, seizing on anything which might distract him from unpleasant thoughts.

So they left him and the picture of the Duomo at Florence together in the sun-bright alcove of the Jasmine Balcony where he and Arjamand had so often sat, as lovers sit, clasped in each other's arms. What was it that happened then? Who knows? There are moments in life when, suddenly, the way seems clear. For four months he had been battling with grief for grief. Now both seemed to slip from him. Here was beauty of cold marble and warm flesh; but there was more beauty in that hard heart—hidden in "turquoise, ruby, jade, cornelian—we'll build and build and build again and yet again, what will enshrine our laughter and our tears."

"Bring me the artist."

The order came sharp and swift. So after a time a trembling, decrepit figure in doublet and hose stood before the Emperor of all the Indies.

"Hast seen many more beauties than these?" asked Shahjahan, pointing to the picture.

"Many more," came the half-alarmed reply.

"Then paint them—stay! Bring paints and brushes here and we will work together—master builders twain."

So, day by day, they worked together, and day by day half forgotten lore—the lore of a young Italian architect came back to the old man and he spoke learnedly of shafts and domes, of madelons and proportions, of canopies and bracket.

Then, as the work went on, the Emperor would repeat "Turquoise and ruby, jade, cornelian. All these must bring beauty also." And the old man would reply that "in Florence there were workmen

who inlaid precious stones in marble. These will we have ; and there is one Austin de Bordeaux, a Frenchman, who is master in the art. So when it is finished, long after I am dead, it will be the wonder of the world ; beautiful beyond words."

Thus there came an evening when Geronimo Veroneo, *il conte*, left Shahjahan before the draftsman's table looking at a plan drawn to scale of the Taj Mahal.

Was it exactly as it stands to-day, a thing apart ? A thing that cannot be touched by either praise or blame ? A beauty elusive and beyond criticism in three dimensional terms ? A beauty on which it is impossible to dislocate one stone from another, to think of it as in fragments, or as anything but a perfect whole ? A perfect whole that never was built, but that some primrose Eastern dawn coming after a velvet dark Eastern night found standing amid the cypresses of its garden.

This is not likely. In the two and twenty years that were to elapse before it was finished, new ideas, new aims must have come to those builders twain—cold marble and warm flesh.

But as Shahjahan stood looking at this, his first attempt at what has earned him the title of the Master-builder, he knew that he had separated his soul from his body, that the Taj would be no monument of wedded love, but a protest against love being handmaid to sex.

That night, for the first time since Arjamand's death, he slept in the women's apartments.

Book II
THE PEACOCK THRONE

CHAPTER VIII

SHAHJAHAN was emphatically a man of action. That he was also a dreamer is true; but he was one of those whose dreams must either materialize immediately or be forgotten. Now at first, doubtless, his dreams of cold marble and warm flesh had been blurred, confused; but it did not take him long to realize that if he desired to raise a memorial to love he must dissociate sex from it, and it came to him, looking back on those long years in which love and sex had been compatibles, that in the future he must either set aside and forget one or purposefully give separate space in his life to both.

He deliberately chose the latter course. He gave the rein to his passions, and at the same time lavished his revenues and his sense of beauty in raising a monument to love, unfettered by the body.

So, almost without pause, Agra became the centre at once of such artistry as India had never before seen, and such lasciviousness as is unequalled in the records of any other Eastern Court. A curious study this. The Master-builder of a Temple that for all time was to stand symbol for love divine, and the builder of a reputation for what gives the lie direct to the unselfishness of love. More curious still; despite this disseverance of body and soul, despite the absolute lack of self-control in his private life,

he remained a ruler such as India had never had before, has never had since.

Not even in the days of Akbar the Great did India flourish as it did under Shahjahan. Yet he would have been the first to admit that he had learnt much of the Statesmanship which characterized his administration from that same grandfather. Indeed, though he himself had no intimate friends, no trusty councillors such as Akbar had in Abul-fazl and Beirbal, he would again and again, when confronted by a difficulty, transfer the problem in thought to the arbitrament of those three, and abide by what he considered would have been their decision in like circumstance. Guided by much Western skill, yet still the outcome of the Master-builder's wonderful sense of the Fitting, the Beautiful, the Taj began slowly to rise skywards. Twenty thousand artisans were working at it day and night. How many millions of money were being spent on it none knew. Nor did the Master-builder care. There was always enough and to spare in the coffers for anything and everything; yet his subjects were not overtaxed; they were contented and happy. The West, it is true, had just become aware of the vast wealth of the East; but Shahjahan's strong hand was on the reins, and it was impossible for anything but fair trade to flourish; even in such a little thing as church chimes he decided that the few had no right to disturb the many; so they had been silenced. But the Fathers and their mission remained, though the feud between the Jesuits, with Dara as their hope, and the truly orthodox ones, with Aurungzebe as theirs, grew with the years. It was a strange medley, this India of the seventeenth century, of material absorption and

spiritual zeal. Hindus, Mohammedans, Christians, all at daggers drawn and the crazy atheist Sarmad's naked figure showing here and there through the welter of strange peoples, strange beliefs. And above all the crowd of money makers, all the religious fanatics, Shahjahan caring for nothing save his pursuit of sheer beauty in cold marble or warm flesh, yet holding the balance of justice fairly. He did his duty, and did it well, though at times he wearied of one or the other of his double pursuits. Sometimes for days he would leave the stone cutters, the gem polishers, the whole almost incredible number of artisans employed on the Taj, to work unsupervised, while he gave himself up to amusement in the women's apartments. At others he would forsake warm flesh for a while, and devote himself to cold marble absolutely.

On such occasions he would be carried after working hours in his state palanquin to the site on the river's curved edge where arch and wall were rising above the foundations of the Taj, and bidding his suite leave him would sit and dream for hours, while the sun set slowly in the west. Dream of more buildings and yet more building, of keener and yet more keen pursuit of pure beauty.

From such a dream he was aroused one evening by a sudden burst of childish laughter.

"Lo," came a voice instinct with enjoyment, "'tis far easier here on the smooth pavement than in the cobbley streets. Look!"

There was an inrush of half-naked children round the corner, headed by a biggish girl in the midst of a double back somersault. She brought up, with a shout of dismay, within a few feet of the Emperor's

till then, unseen palanquin. The shout was echoed by her companions, who, with almost incredible swiftness, disappeared.

But the girl, though evidently terribly frightened, stood her ground; and, after a brief moment of sheer terror, swept a most courtly obeisance.

"Who art thou, child?" came the Emperor's commanding voice.

"Most Mighty," was the reply with another even more perfect salaam, "I am of the Harlots' Tribe."

A flicker of a smile showed on the man's face; this was not the sort of courtesan to which he was accustomed.

"Thou lookest not like it, child," he said. "But beauty comes with the years—at times," he added cynically. "And why art thou here? Did any give thee leave?"

"None," replied the child unconcernedly. "But the gates were open and the pavement was so smooth —it looked nice."

The answers appeared, somehow, to flabbergast the Emperor, who, apparently, had expected contrition.

"Dost know what place this is?" he asked sharply.

"Most Mighty, yes!" and here the courtly obeisance came to the front again. "Sarmad told me——"

"Sarmad!" echoed the Emperor. "What dost know of Sarmad?"

"He teaches me singing," was the reply. "He learned something of it when he was in a Western city somewhere; but he knows not much. He cannot sing himself, his voice is as a crow."

Shahjahan could not forbear a laugh; there was something comical in the little maid's certainty of criticism. After a pause he continued:

"And what did Sarmad tell thee?"

"He told me 'twas the Emperor's playground where he turned somersaults; so I thought——"

But Shahjahan was on his feet, blazing with wrath. "He dared to tell thee that—curses on him—and on thee also, base-born brat—I will——"

It was his hearer's turn to interrupt. "I am not base-born," she said vehemently. "I got old Mai to tell me the truth. I was given her, but a day old, by a rich Rajputni whom a pig of a Moslem of the royal house had defiled—so there!"

She rattled out the words nervously, evidently repeating exactly what she had been told.

Shahjahan eyed the resolute, fearless little figure before him in a sort of amazed fury; but his wrath against it died down.

"'Tis not thy fault," he said at last, literally gulping down anger. "'Tis Sarmad's—and he shall suffer for it."

The little lips, that despite the child's courage had been quivering, set firmly.

"Thou canst not hurt him," she said quickly, "he is stronger than thou. He is God, and so am I——"

This was rank blasphemy even to Shahjahan's tepid orthodoxy, but it was impossible to be angry with the quaint little mortal who made her claims so undoubtingly. Shahjahan, like all his race till then, had a considerable sense of humour, so he sat down again and said with a smile:

"Tell me how that is, thou monkey of a brat, or Sarmad's head will come off."

To his surprise the little maid burst into tears. "It would not hurt him if it did!" she sobbed. "But thou shalt not hurt him, bad man! I will not have it——"

Shahjahan, like all Eastern fathers, had been almost foolishly fond of his children; and there had been many of them! How often in the past had he not taken some weeping little lass or lad to his knee and comforted them. For a moment he felt inclined to do so now; then dignity prevailed, and he only said softly, gently:

"So thou lovest Sarmad, little maid. Wherefore?"

"Because he is God, and because he teaches me to sing," came the reply through tears which were fast becoming vindictive.

The juxtaposition of the two causes was irresistible and Shahjahan laughed aloud.

"Sing me somewhat, child," he said, "and let me see if I can forgive him for being a good teacher?"

He spoke with genuine curiosity, but he was not prepared for the voice trilling like a bird that followed instantly. What the tune was matters little. The intonation, the modulation were Western, strange, new but pleasing as the song of the bulbul to the rose. The words, doggerel utterly, still fitted the lilt of the tune, and the girl's face, serious, intent, gave them a certain thrill.

"Listen! Oh, listen well
Is't God's or my heart beat?
Dear soul, how can I tell
Both rhythms are complete.

Hearken ! Oh, hearken well
Is't mine or a bird's voice ?
Dear soul, how can I tell
Since both rejoice.

Oh, look ! I pray look well
Is that me or a star ?
Dear heart ! How can I tell
Both are so far.

Touch it ! Oh, touch it well
Is that God's face or mine ?
Dear heart, how can I tell
Both are divine.

Taste it ! Oh, taste it well
Is that His blood or mine ?
Dear soul ! I cannot tell
Both are as wine !

Oh, think, I pray, think well
In which mind wisdom lies ?
Dear heart, that I can tell
God is all wise.

Oh, love ! I pray love well
Is His or mine the best ?
Dear heart, that I can tell
His love is best."

The voice trilling like a bird echoed for one instant through the cold marble arches and the walls that the sun-setting in the west was flushing to the likeness of warm flesh ; the next it had gone, for the little singer with incomparable agility had thrown a back somersault and disappeared behind the corner, leaving the Emperor breathless with surprise, pleasure and amusement.

For a moment he considered calling his attendants, who must be within earshot to pursue and capture the child; but the next his innate appreciation of the unexpected, the unconventional, came to tell him that the incident had better finish. As it stood it was perfect. But he must get hold of the renegade Sarmad and ask him what he meant by calling the Taj "the Emperor's playground where he turned somersaults." Yet, even as his mind recalled the words, their full meaning struck home. Doubtless, that was what he was doing. But how could it be helped when God made man's body different from his soul? And He was all wise.

The rhythm of the quaint little song was in his ears as he sat in his gilded palanquin watching the sun sink ruby red in the west.

"Dear heart, how can I tell?
Dear soul, how can I tell?"

But one thing was certain. He could build beauty that would remain for ever.

So, as the shadows deepened, he seemed to see the Taj as it stands to-day, guarded by sentinel cypresses, a memorial, not of what he knew, but of something he had not been able to reach. Yet in that moment his heart echoed the song:

"That I can tell
God's love is best."

Whether it was the result of this quaint incident or no, he himself could not tell, but the desire to build, and yet to build grew stronger and stronger as the days passed on—a half-formulated desire to build something that could not be called his play-

ground where he turned somersaults ; something that would show him as he was. So after a while he moved his Court to Delhi. The terrible famine which, owing to failure of the rains, had almost depopulated whole tracts of country in the year of Arjamand's death had been overcome, two or three campaigns in which the Emperor invariably appeared as a *Deus ex machina* to avert disaster due to bad generalship—for he was a great tactician—had been carried through. On one occasion he had fled from cold marble to a life of absolute pleasure in Kashmir where his standing camp took two whole months to pitch, so lavish was it in decoration, so replete with every luxury. Then he settled down steadily to build his new city of Shahjahanabad on the site of old Delhi. What he accomplished remains to this day, the wonder and admiration of all beholders. Truly a Master-builder was he who devised the stately Mosque which will contain 30,000 worshippers, where to this day the officiating priests pray for the souls of the Great Moguls. And, most truly, he was a dreamer in cold marble who built the Private Audience Hall, that masterpiece of refined fancy round whose walls in letters of gold runs the legend :

" If there be a paradise on earth it is this."

So the years passed by ; four sons grew up to manhood, and two of his daughters to marriageable age. Dara, as Heir Apparent, he kept beside him ; his three other sons, to avoid the jealousy of each other which grew with their growth, he planted out in various Vice-royalties and Governorships, keeping the while a strict account of their doing. Dara's official marriage to a cousin many years older than himself

had taken place some years back; but the Prince remained much as he had been in boyhood, that is to say, able, impulsive, warm-hearted, absolutely lovable, if somewhat irresponsible. The years had made him his father's favourite, and he was, as ever, the idol of his sister, Princess Jahanara. Under the inflexible rule of the Mogul dynasty that no daughter of the house should ever be wedded—a rule induced by fear of unwanted claimants to the succession—neither Jahanara nor her sister Roshanara were married; but, so far, their affection for their respective brothers Dara and Aurungzebe seemed to fill their lives with sufficient interest. In addition Jahanara had her father's absolute devotion. It seemed, indeed, as if her extraordinary likeness to her dead mother in some occult way enabled him to pursue his present life, and at the same time keep his memories of the past; so making it more possible for him to reconcile the two master passions of his life.

And at Agra and Delhi alike the sound of axe and hammer at their toil, the whirring of gem-cutting wheels, the soft settling to its place of stone by stone, seemed never to cease.

Building and beauty were in the air.

CHAPTER IX

"FATHER will, for sure, build my grave," laughed Princess Jahanara, stopping her ears, as a sudden rattle of chains and pulleys told that something unforeseen was happening on the dam below the corbelled balcony on which she and her brother, Prince Dara, were sitting.

The dam was to bend the river bed further from the palace wall, and so allow of a garden being planted between it and the river. Thousands of men were at work on it; but they had to work silently, without disturbance, so several of them looked up startled at the noise that had been made.

But the couple on the balcony were young and good-natured, so they only laughed.

Prince Dara reclined among silken cushions with his head supported on his sister's lap, and together they were looking at a book that was propped on a book-rest placed between them. It was a large thick folio book, and it was most exquisitely bound. The leaves of parchment edged and arabesqueed with gold showed full page illustrations, mostly of birds, beasts and flowers.

The young man paused in turning over one. "The feathers are correct as to colour and drawing," he said, vague dissatisfaction in his tone. "So far our Court painters go to perfection; but the eyes elude them. That is not the eye of a bird—'tis a stone

button. And 'tis far worse when they try to paint dogs. So I commanded one of the Italians father imported for his work to paint my Fido." Here he turned over several pages rapidly, then paused to appreciate a very fair presentment of an English mastiff. "Father Buseo says it is good, but I hold it not right in the eye; for there is much in the eye of a good dog. More than there is in that of many men—Aurungzebe's for instance."

Jahanara's slim hand was on her brother's lip in a moment. "Gibe not so constant on him, core of my heart," she said persuasively. "It seems a trifle now, when thy father is ever nigh to keep the peace; but if—if—I know not how it is, Dara; but the fear comes ever to me—if he were not so powerful—what then? And look you—dislike him or not, Aurungzebe is pious—he eats naught but vegetables and supports his whole costs by stitching skull caps. I tell thee truly, scapegrace; he is a saint."

Dara was on his feet in a second, bursting with mocking laughter. "That I am devoid of grace I admit; and if my revered sister says that Aurungzebe is a saint, 'tis doubtless so—but I differ."

"What evidence hast thou to go upon, hot-head?" she asked severely.

"None," he replied nonchalantly, "save that he seems too good not to be wicked; but let us not quarrel over it! I must with the book to my lady wife, who, being of the virtuous sort and amiability itself, will doubtless praise it—when she cares not at all for pictures."

There was that of vague disappointment in his voice which made Jahanara say quickly:

"But Nurmahal will care much for the kindly thought that brings the gift on her anniversary."

Dara's face cleared in an instant. "Ay! That will she and the boys will love the pictures. But see you," here he flung himself down beside her once more, and resting his head on elbows and hands, looked up at her whimsically. "I meant not to be captious, dearest dear, but I find it ever so hard to decide what I really like and what I do not like! Thou knowest that well, wise one! Father Buseo ever persuades me almost to be a Christian. Sarmad turns me atheist. Last week talking to the Swami—he is a saintly man for sure—I felt inclined to be Hindu and—and——" he laughed gaily—"as Heir to Empire I am staunch Moslem—I can be naught else. So sometimes I dream of rougher handling than I get—even from thy dainty fingers. Lo, Jahanara! Thou art the most beautiful thing in the world, and when I am Emperor, some one we wot of will have his chance!"

The Princess flushed visibly. "Speak not such foolish words, brother," she said reprovingly. "We of the blood royal are content, and my father's love and devotion are sufficient for me. And if thou needest rougher handling go to Aurungzebe. He will give it thee. Yea! Dara! in worldly ways—though he be a saint—he is more apt than thou art; and his advice—for he is clever—is worth much!"

"Clever!" echoed Dara, laughing. "Ay! that is he! Didst hear his last! Lo, I wish it had been mine since by all gods and goddesses 'twas a fine joke—and I love jokes! Well, he made great fuss last week of feasting mendicants—there were nigh a thousand of them, and all the learned ones approving

and lauding the saintly one. He fed them well, I'm told—not on vegetables, reverend sister—but the joke was here. After the feast they were bidden to doff their rags and don brand new clothes—also the gift of the saint! Well, some demurred, some even said they had sworn to be buried in their rags; and some wished to take them away, but there was no help; this was also forbidden. So there we were! A thousand new clothed mendicants and a pile of rags! Holy Prophet! what a joke! Since those rags afterwards unburdened thousands of concealed rupees. Ha! Ha! Ha!" And Dara went off into shouts of laughter in which perforce Jahanara joined, though she recovered herself to say primly:

"Which he doubtless gave in charity."

"A percentage, sister mine—a percentage doubtless; for Aurungzebe hath a hold on Paradise as well as this world. But there! mayhap I wrong him; for, at any rate, he holds the faith."

This was true; since in all the difficulty of deciding what came uppermost in Aurungzebe's complex character, the critic cannot but recognize the unswerving devotion to the Mohammedan creed, the intense desire for the glory of Islam, the religious fervour which made him try, by fair means or foul, to pose as a saint.

The result was not always successful. His last attempt to show his father that he possessed God-given powers had only produced half-hearted confidence. He had declared that by the gift of second sight he was enabled to see that a passing mendicant was a fraud; that he had gold pieces concealed in his loin-cloth. Sure enough, examination proved that it was so; but Shahjahan only remarked "If

thou didst not put them there, thou art saint indeed." The Emperor, in fact, generally distrusted "the White Snake." He never really forgot the prediction of the holy man who gave him the apples when Arjamand craved for them before Aurungzebe was born.

At the moment, however, the young Prince was in favour, for he had just returned victorious from a campaign, and in consequence had had honours showered upon him; for Shahjahan was lavish in all things. Despite the extreme laxity of his private life he was a marvel of strength and vitality for his years. And rich beyond compare, for India was prospering as it had never prospered before. There was but one fly in the ointment of perfect content, and that was the mutual jealousy of his four sons. Shuja and Morad, both of lesser brains, hung together, and were fairly tractable; but Aurungzebe and Dara were always at daggers drawn. In fact Shahjahan had been forced to appoint separate days for their reception at Court; since, if they met, they invariably quarrelled.

This day, however, being a family feast, on the occasion of the Princess Nurmahal's anniversary, they were both bidden to the entertainment which was to be given in the newly-finished Private Audience Hall. This is beautiful enough to-day, when long years have dimmed its brilliance. What it must have been like when the marble was fresh from the chisel, when the beaten gold was fresh from the hammer, the gems new-cut, is almost beyond imagination. And in its centre, to be used and seen for the first time, stood the famous Peacock Throne. Even the bare description of this—for the reality was reft away and disappeared in one of the Northern raids

which marked the decadence of Mogul power—reads like a fairy tale. A round seat, five feet in diameter, eighteen inches high, hewn out of one solid block of rock crystal, and encrusted thick with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds. This set on a dais of pure gold with six massive feet inlaid with turquoise, opal, topaz, amethyst. And behind the seat, forming as it were a back to it, two peacocks, their tails outspread, their natural colours, as in life, painted in precious stones. Overhead a golden canopy supported by slender pillars emblazoned with jewels, and edged by a long fringe of large pearls.

And, as if this was not enough to make reality turn tail and fly, on the one side of the golden balustrade of the dais sat a life-size parrot carved from a single emerald; on the other the egg-shaped topaz called "the Sun" since even in the dusk it shone translucent.

We of this later age of meritricious adornment must just leave it at that; it seems too magnificent to be true.

But on this particular day all old Delhi, all new Shahjahanabad was magnificent in its preparations for the festival. Even Aurungzebe, attired though he was himself in the plain white robes he always affected, was approving the beauty and worth of a string of huge pearls that dangled from his hand, as he held it against the light. Fine pearls every one of them, and a bargain at the price; for the seller was a princeling from the coast who was bankrupt of cash.

Should he buy them, with the gold which the mendicant rags had unburdened, as an offering to his sister-in-law, Dara's wife? It would be politic. Dara himself could be reckoned with in that day to

come, which was ever in Aurungzebe's purview; but the wife? She was strict in the faith; she might be an ally; it was always better to stand well with the women and——

But was it worth while?

He turned for guidance to the three persons beside him. One was Roshanara, his sister; close-veiled because of the presence of Sheikh Mir, who had been the Prince's tutor. These two, with the Prince's foster brother, Bahadur Khan, formed the innermost council of four who kept in touch with all the turnings and twistings of Aurungzebe's agile mind. It was Sheikh Mir, however, who finally said, "Pearls may mean much, but soldiers mean more. Keep the money, Most Mighty! In this world one rupee is worth many smiles, and, when the day comes to fight for the faith, he who has most soldiers will win."

Doubtless sound advice; so Aurungzebe's offering at the festival befitted a poor man who lived by his own work.

But others were not so parsimonious; for, under the rule of an Emperor to whom expenditure meant naught, everyone was lavish. The makers of fireworks were busy, and spared no rare ingredient to make their wares more attractive. The garland weavers wove chaplets of exotic flowers, the silk merchants brought out their richest bales to festoon the bazaars, the jewellers were hard at work beating out silver and gold rose-leaves to scatter amongst the crowd, the essence distillers were offering their wares enclosed in almond shells and cowries for a like purpose.

But nowhere was there more bustle of preparation than in the prostitutes' quarter. Something new, something original had to be prepared for the pro-

gramme of the evening, to say nothing of the furbishing up of old dresses, the preparing of new ones, the polishing of anklets and bracelets, the staining with henna of hands and feet.

"She is not much for the eyes," said Gulanar, the head duenna of the dancing-girls, "but Chambeli of Agra vouches for her; and she is new anyways." And she glanced at a tall figure which sat listlessly in a corner eyeing the other girls.

"Hast heard her sing?" asked the second in command.

"Not I! She is wilful, keeping herself to herself," replied the first speaker. "But Chambeli vouches for her. And, if 'tis new fashion, so much the better. Men weary of the stale attractions. My girls have to consider '*fason*' nowadays. Traa! '*Fason*' indeed when the profession is so old." And she went off into a chuckle, a fat, contented chuckle.

After a while, the girl in the corner—she seemed quite a girl, her figure undeveloped for one of her trade and her face thin and untouched by pigments as to lips and eyes—took up a *saringi*-lute that lay hard by and began with a slight frown to test the strings.

"'Tis all out of tune," she said suddenly, and her voice rich and round dominated the shrill cackle of the others in the balconied room.

Several of them, who after washing their long hair were daubing it with coco-nut oil and plaiting it in festoons, looked towards her and giggled. The matron duenna looked also and then turned to the second in command.

"She is new anyhow, and newness is to our customers even as garlic to a curry: some folk will not stomach it, but all admit it gives a taste."

CHAPTER X

"THE rose-red city, half as old as time," in other words old Delhi, had been astir since dawn; and in the new town of Shahjahanabad, down by the river, folk had scarce been asleep all night. For the preparations had been many, since the coming day was to be a great festival, as it would be by lucky coincidence not only the anniversary of the Heir Apparent's wife, but also that of the Emperor himself. In addition it had been chosen as a suitable occasion on which to honour Prince Aurungzebe, as he deserved to be honoured for his last victorious campaign. Races, animal fights, wrestling matches, juggling, fireworks; all the factors of Eastern festivities were to be there besides the ceremonial weighing of the Most Mighty against jewels and coin of the realm with the subsequent distribution of Majesty's equivalent amongst the populace. No wonder that even the crippled beggars in the streets were agog with expectation. On the last anniversary, over a million pounds worth had been scattered at large—this time there might be more, since the Emperor's wealth grew with the years. And he knew how to spend it! Yea! Yea! He was a king indeed! To be up betimes in the morning, to put on the best clothes you could scrape together, to spend the few pennies you had on sweetmeats and such like, to have the certainty of gorgeous sunlight, to have

all entertainments free—no gate money, no tax—to watch fireworks against the velvet darkness of an Indian night while bands galore played jazz tunes, and, in addition, to pick up a golden sixpence, or mayhap even a five-pound note! Would not that be a Bank Holiday worth having? Unfortunately, it is only compatible with paternal despotism, and the liability to have your head cut off at a moment's notice. This possibility, however, was always with the gay crowds that filled the narrow streets of old Delhi and new Shahjahanabad, and did not spoil their enjoyment.

Such gay crowds; but scarce a woman amongst them. So the noise of them was loud, a trifle uproarious at times; but there was no giggling, no shrill shrieking such as mar the crowds of to-day. "Room! Room! Room! for the Emperor's procession to pass!"

Such a procession! Enough beauty, enough lavish magnificence surely for one day, especially when you have to go home at night to one windowless slip of a room with no fireplace and only a reed stool and two copper cooking vessels for furnishing.

It is this extreme simplicity in the lives of the people at large in the India of those times, which makes the lavish luxury of such processions so almost inconceivable, so like the unfettered fancies of a fairy tale. A huge elephant half-hidden by plates of burnished gold, its trunk hung with priceless jewels, its very tusks damascened with gems and gold. On it, listless and yet alert, a figure in white satin, gems and gold. Gold everywhere! In the high wound turban beside the heron's plume and the Great Diamond big as an egg! In the ropes on ropes of

pearls, in the peacock's feather fans that wave in the sun-bright air, in the scarlet royal umbrella that sways and sways, in the great showers of silver and gold rose-leaves scattered like confetti at each step—Ye gods! What a spectacle!

The jets of rose and orange-blossom water, sprinkled before the Mighty Ones made the narrow evil-smelling bazaar like a scented fountain. And behind, sparkling in the sunshine, gay as butterflies, the tinsel-set litters of the royal ladies swinging, swaying. Daughters, doubtless, were some of those inside the tight-drawn bejewelled muslin curtains; but mistresses also, many of them. Why not when beauty is to be had for money?

So, from the expectant crowd, the curious wailing Indian welcome arose again and again, swelling to a storm of sound, dying away to a whisper. Truly, no "God save the King" in any country was more fervent than this unformulated chorus of content.

And wherefore not? Kings were the distributors of wealth—they took all, they gave back most. So the more they took, the more there was to give.

Thus the splendour, the pomp, the circumstance of the day never ceased. It went on untiringly from one thing to the other. Aurungzebe, an insignificant little figure in the purposefully meagre white robes of a holy man, took his lavish dress of honour, humbly, deprecatingly, and was made commander of more and yet more horses. Dara, who stood by, adding his meed of praise courteously, though in his heart of hearts he envied his brother; since why should he, Dara, be kept at Court tied to his father's apron-strings while his younger brother had opportunities of distinction?

"'Tis because thou art Father's favourite," said Jahanara when, after the show was over, he went to her with complaint. "Thou knowest, Dara, how he loves thee. Why, he hath made a small throne beside his own on which thou art to sit."

Dara made a grimace. "In which I will never sit—no! Never," he added, determination coming more and more into his voice. "Never till death gives Shahjahan rest from his labours."

"But surely, brotherling, thou wilt help him when he is old?"

"Ay! that will I," assented Dara heartily, "but that can be achieved without a throne! And as for Aurungzebe! Sister, thou shouldst have seen him when Father put the turban of honour on his head over the little stitched white capling of his own make! And he quivering with humility! 'Twas a sight to make a corpse laugh. I hid mine discreetly; but there 'tis! 'Tis ever laugh or frown with me when my saintly brother is nigh! 'Tis not to be helped!"

And Jahanara sighed assent. It was but too true. Those brothers stood at opposite poles; it seemed impossible for them to understand each other.

And now the long programme of the day's junketing was coming to an end. The sun was setting, the fireworks were beginning. It was the women's hour, and they trooped from the mean houses, shrouded in *burkas* or sheets that had once been white, to cluster like flies on the high roofs, or, more boldly, to venture afield into the open spaces.

Down in the palace, also, it was the ladies' time; for the great event of their festivities was shortly to take place in the Private Audience Hall. To begin

with, the inmates of the women's apartments were to be introduced for the first time to the splendours of the Emperor's new Peacock Throne; and there in strict privacy—for the Emperor himself would be sole audience—they were to hold a sort of dancing competition, in which, besides the ordinary professional dancers, several of the royal ladies would take part. In particular, no less personages than the Princesses Jahanara and Roshanara were to engage together in an entirely novel set piece. Now, though these two ladies were friendly enough on the surface, their mutual jealousy for their brothers was common knowledge; so a keen contest was expected. Jahanara was admittedly the more beautiful, but Roshanara had a fine figure and was always superbly dressed. On this occasion her costume was perfect. Could it be reproduced, say, at a twentieth-century ball it would surely gain first prize from all of artistic taste; for the Court dress of the Mogul ladies is incomparably becoming. It consists of a curious petticoat made of some diaphanous material cut to the absolute length of the figure at the sides, but lengthening in front and behind to yards on yards of soft, decorated edge. Gored tight to the waist, the effect of but a few steps is to send all this superfluous length backwards through the feet until the shapely contours beneath from waist to ankle are fully revealed and a train billows and billows in the rear. It is a most original, a most beautiful garment. In this case it was of palest pink silk muslin starred with golden roses, the bodice—showing an inch or two of bare flesh above the waist—to match in darker velvet, the filmy veil of palest green. The whole set with diamond dewdrops. As she took

her place in the front rank opposite the Emperor on his Peacock Throne and sank gracefully into her billowing train she looked a rose just opening to the sun. Jahanara was in white like a lily.

It is not easy to describe the scene. Easy enough to catalogue the dazzle, the splendour of the new-built Audience Hall, lit up by rows on rows of little lamps whose individual radiances were lost in soft, continuous glow. Easy to tell of the pale green semi-circular velvet dancing floor wreathed round by artificial roses and leaves below the dais. Easy to describe the multitudinous coloured parterre of fair women which filled every available corner. Not hard, even to picture the occupant of the Peacock Throne set high on the dais surrounded by his female guards. It is when one comes to consider his position —the only male within that gorgeous Hall crammed with beautiful women—when one realizes him as a man possessed of absolute power who had only to crook his little finger to have his wish fulfilled, that words fail to get at the underlying problem of sex, that one stands helpless before the greatest tragedy in the world.

The whangling of thin stringed *sutaras*, the soft throbbing of a muted drum begins; a figure sidles out from the silk festooned side of the dancing floor next the dais, where the professionals sit—a line of scarlet and gold—and begins posturing and sidling. The Emperor takes no notice; he sits immobile thinking of God knows what—possibly of crooking his little finger! Hot spiced wine is being handed to the ladies, and arouses a cackle of congratulations to Jahanara who holds a famous recipe for the favourite drink Sweetmeats arouse a second cackle

for Roshanara. Those two are the hostesses. So the entertainment goes on. One dancing girl after another sidles and postures and returns to her place without attracting much attention either from the multitudinous females or the solitary male, who, indeed, seems half asleep in the sameness of splendour. At last interest is aroused. Two competitors who have retired to change their dresses, since the Court costume is not suitable for dancing, appear, and the audience takes instant sides—and another glass of spiced wine. Even the Emperor yawns, looks for a while, and, apparently, goes to sleep or dreams again. One of the competitors is distinctly good-looking, and he might conceivably crook his finger at her.

His calm, critical attitude, however, changes when in due time his two daughters appear on the dancing floor and make profound obeisance. With the eye of a connoisseur he approves their qualities. Jahanara still carries off the palm in beauty, but her short dress of white and gold seems dull beside Roshanara, still habited like a rose. And she carries a rose in her hand. Jahanara a lily, both lit cunningly from within by a small hidden lamp.

This is new! This is good! How pretty the two graceful figures are twining, intertwining, their flowers held high above their heads. Roshanara is the more agile—that pirouette—that sweep of the flower was perfect. Now it is his favourite's turn—beautiful!—how the filmy film of muslin brought out the——ah!—What had happened? There was one agonized shriek, a swift flare—that far flung film had caught fire at the flower-lamp—Jahanara! Jahanara!

The Emperor had risen from his seat, the orderly audience had become a wild tumbled mass of helpless arms and diaphanous veils—but on the moment a figure—a tall figure had sprung from the line of professionals, had cast aside her flimsy veil, seized the rug on which she had been sitting and was beside the terrified girl. The next instant Jahanara was on the ground fighting desperately at what she scarce understood, and the flame was out.

So rapid had been the action that none scarce realized it, and in the onrush of help from the Emperor and his stalwart guard, the crowding round of scared whimpering women, none noticed that she who had come to the rescue had slipped back to her place. Her very companions occupied with their terror, had failed to observe anything else.

"Art hurt, child?" The Emperor's voice was agonized, trembling. "Tell me thou art not hurt!"

Jahanara had ceased to struggle; she lay still, fighting to be brave.

"Not—not much—father—only—oh! my arm—my breast!" And a heart-rending wail rent the air, half lost in the women's sobs and screams.

"Carry her, quick, slaves, to her apartment and—summon the doctors and—and Dara. Quick! Dost hear?"

The order was as quickly obeyed. The Emperor stumbled after the bearers, overwhelmed by anxiety and grief. The outcries gradually died away as the affrighted audience broke up into groups, chattering shrilly or weeping noisily. So by degrees the Private Audience Hall emptied itself. The musicians and professionals were the last to leave telling tales to each other of similar happenings in the past. "There

was a girl burnt to death that way in Agra last year" said one.

"Traa! Traa! ours is a dangerous profession."

"Yea! Yea!" snarled another who having passed age to be a dancer had taken to banging the little drum. "And 'tis likely to be more so to those who have no right to dance. Anyone might have known such a pirauelte was bound to bring danger. But there! what will you when folk who should be gentle take the bread from out poor prostitutes' mouths."

"They do that without dancing," giggled a third. "I tried to count how many mistresses of the Most Mighty there were present; but 'twas beyond my arithmetic."

"Peace! Peace!" laughed a fourth pertly. "'Twas not inexperience nor theft of bread that caused the accident. 'Twas the wine they drank. Didst not see the fine ladies swill it? Princess Jahanara had three glasses!"

So chattering, and casting gibes they passed out, leaving the Audience Hall deserted for the time; for the whole palace was in an uproar over the accident.

But, after a while, a figure close wrapped in a veil crept in stealthily, and began to search for something on the floor; starting at every sound at first, then apparently gaining courage. At last going down on her hands and knees and feeling over the carpet.

"'Tis so small," she muttered. "Yet I had it on—I know that." A footstep made her leap lightly to her feet. It was a young man whom she recognized in a second. It was indeed Prince Dara who was returning the shortest way from his sister's

apartments. He had found her less injured than he had feared; but suffering from shock, and was on his way to fetch a restorative which Father Buseo had given him a while back.

"What dost seek, mother?" he asked sharply. "Thou shouldst not be here alone."

The girl, for the slimness of her figure showed her to have scarce come to full development, swept him a courtly salaam. In so doing her veil parted, showing her professional dress.

"I came, Most Mighty," she said, and her voice was full and round, "to try and find a *ram rakkhi* bracelet that I lost but now."

"A *ram rakkhi!* A brother-bracelet! I wot not you wore them," he echoed with mocking laughter. "My good fool, buy another! 'Twill but cost a farthing. And be off—this is no place for you."

"Or for my *ram rakkhi*," retorted the girl instantly, "so, an't please the Prince, I will stay and find it till the Emperor's servants turn me out."

"Thou hast impudence anyhow, Kanjari!" he interrupted, half-amused, half-irritated, and using the caste name of her evident tribe. "But I have not time to waste on thee and thy sharp wits, so take that instead of Prince Dara!"

With that he flung a gold *ashrafi* on the ground at her feet, and passed on with never a look back.

Had he done so he would have seen a rigid figure looking down at the gold coin on the green velvet dancing floor. Then a shapely foot came down on it with a vengeful thud, grinding it into the soft pile.

After which, she wrapped her veil close once more and went out, carrying her head very high.

CHAPTER XI

PRINCESS JAHANARA'S burns were, luckily, only superficial. The flare of the flimsy veil had been extinguished too rapidly to permit of more than a scorch of her pretty face, and a big blister on her shoulder and breast; but, as the numbness of the shock passed, the pain of the injury increased, and the little princess was unaccustomed to pain. The learned Hakeems had prescribed ointments and bandages. She would none of them: they made her worse, she said, and if she had to die she would rather die in peace without their messes. So she wailed and wept like the spoilt child she was. The Emperor was nigh distracted. It seemed so hard that he, all powerful, should be helpless to soothe the darling of his heart. This, that, the other thing, was ordered to be brought from far or near; ice from the distant Himalayas, fruits from Kabul, fish from the Western sea, medicaments by the thousand from every aspirant to the healing art. Even sorcerers were set to work, but by the next evening, when Prince Dara came to inquire, he found his sister tossing amongst her silken coverlets and hard roly-poly pillows, with flushed cheeks, over bright eyes and pulses bounding. The room, with every chink of air excluded, was almost stifling and it was littered with every conceivable nostrum, and half filled by sympathizing females. The Princess, he was told, was evidently

dying; at any rate she was delirious and talked nonsense. The Emperor had gone away for an hour's rest, overcome with grief, and everything was as bad as it could be. Now most young men when introduced to a sick room where half a dozen so-called nurses are installed are apt to feel helpless, out of place, and Dara was no exception to his class. At the same time his affection for his sister was so great that he could not forbear going up on tiptoe to where she lay moaning, apparently unaware of his presence, laying his cool hand on her hot forehead, and saying almost piteously:

"Is there naught I can do for thee, sisterling?"

It was an action common to all races, all periods; as much akin to the twentieth century A.D. as it would have been to the twentieth century B.C., since human affection belongs to no special period. Neither do hysterical girls. So Dara felt just the same intense relief and kindly astonishment as many an anxious man before or since has felt in like circumstances, when Jahanara turned quickly to him and said quite loudly:

"Is it thee? Ah, I am so glad—those women will not understand. I want the girl—the girl with the *ram rakkhi*."

Dara sat down on the side of the bed stupidly. "What girl?" he asked.

"Oh, be not devoid of sense like those others," came the answer; "the girl who put out the flames, of course. I want her. I want to thank her—besides I have her *ram rakkhi*—I must have clutched it when she threw me down—oh, do bring her!"

"The girl with the *ram rakkhi!*" he echoed still more stupidly.

Jahanara was strong enough to sit up angrily.

"Yea! Yea!" she cried impatiently. "I have it here—see thou!" And from under the roly-poly pillow she produced one of those plaited silken bracelets which are supposed to symbolize a brother's unselfish love, that Rajputni women, at a certain season of the year make, and send to some friend or kinsman whose honest love and protection they desire.

Dara took the trifle—as a rule it is of no value whatever, being simply a strand or two of silk—from her hand and examined it. Evidently it had become unbuttoned, for the little blob of silk and the loop for fastening it were still intact; but the making of the *rakkhi* seemed unusual. It was not a simple twist of coloured silks; something had been deftly woven into a broader plait. What was it? He looked closer. Surely feathers of some sort; soft feathers from the breast of a bird—a grey bird—like a partridge.

"There was a woman," he began slowly, "one of the professional dancers. I saw her last evening in the Audience Hall, she was looking for somewhat she had lost—a *ram rakkhi* she said."

Jahanara nearly jumped out of bed in sheer excitement. "'Tis she, Dara! 'Tis she! How clever of thee, dearest!" she exclaimed. "Now canst thou bring her to me—quick—quick!" Then bethinking her of the part which she—poor spoilt child—was quite unconsciously playing, she added, "Quick, ere I die!" So sinking back, commenced to moan.

"But, sisterling, I know not——" began Dara. Then, recognizing as men so often have to do with womenkind, especially when they are overwrought,

that reason was of no avail, he broke off and finished soothingly. "Yea! heart's treasure, I will bring her without fail; but thou must be patient, since I shall have to search."

So, preparing to go, he buttoned the *ram rakkhi* he held round his wrist, thinking it might be useful in his task.

But how to begin, he knew not. He did not even know who had been responsible for last night's *nautch*, and he, the Heir Apparent, could scarcely with his retinue go round the various brothels and inquire! The Lord Chamberlain? Yes! but that would take time. No! (his spirits rose—as they ever did—at the very idea of an emprise out of the common) he would dismiss his attendants and go by himself. Anyhow, it would be amusing. So, handing all jewels and apparel that would mark his rank to the captain of his retinue and borrowing things plainer in exchange, he set off on his errand to the prostitutes' quarter. Here he was assailed, of course, from every flower-decked and scented balcony; but Dara was no ninny. He had plenty of the topical chaff of the time to give back as good as he got; but he was getting tired of bantering excuses to the invitations which followed the inquiries of so likely a lad, when a fat lollop of a woman who had evidently taken her evening potion earlier than the others—possibly from lack of custom—answered scornfully:

"Dunderhead! Hast yet ceased sucking thy mammy? It is Gulanar for sure. She hath the devil's own luck, though I swear she is older than I by two years."

"Gulanar!" He found her house easily, and,

leaving his horse tied to a balcony prop, went upstairs.

"Thou art early," said the duenna who sat half asleep in the wide, empty, scent-sodden room. "The girls still slumber. See you they were up three parts of the night, and then the young bloods were not satisfied, and it was dancing, and singing, and what-not till nigh noon; but I will see if any be awake."

She rose, yawned, but as she passed Dara her mien suddenly changed. Astonishment, delight, cringing flattery were in her face as, despite her stoutness, she flung herself down and kissed his feet.

"The Heir Apparent!" she exclaimed. "This is honour indeed! Never before—but I have one—a Georgian——"

"Peace! woman!" said Dara, seeing himself discovered. "I come not for thy cursed trade."

"Cursed mayhap, Most Mighty," came the quick answer, "but at times useful. Even the Most High's saintly brother Aurungzebe——"

"What!" interrupted Dara. "Does he—— But I have no time to waste over the saint's doings; I come to ask thee if one of thy women hast lost a *ram rakkhi?*"

Gulanar sat back on her fat haunches and became shrill.

"Have I? Nay! Most Noble, have I not? Was't not she—a new comer, forsooth, from Agra, sent with a warranty from Chambeli as the best singer—and she ought to have knowledge seeing that in her day——"

"Enough! Enough, good woman," interrupted Dara impatiently. "I am pressed for time—the girl——"

"'Twas she, who but this morning flouted the saintly one—a Prince of the Royal Blood and one of distinction——"

"Oh, curses on thee, procuress!" interrupted Dara again. "What care I if Aurungzebe be an archangel or a devil in disguise? 'Tis the girl—what of her? Is she here?"

Gulanar rose with dignity. "No! Most Mighty, and please God and his Prophet will never be again. Sing she may: but if—and the good young Prince was sore taken——"

"Peace, woman! or I will choke thee," cried Dara half in earnest, half in jest. "Remember I am Heir Apparent! What of the girl?"

"My humble house will not forget it, O Most Noble! Never while Gulanar lives——"

"Thou wilt not live long, fool!" put in Dara, now laughing really, for his sense of humour was ever easily roused. "Of thy goodness, mother, tell me where the girl is?"

"I know not—that is the truth. She left here, saying she could look after herself and her back was the best part of her. There! the Most Noble hast it." The answer came angrily.

"She had no friends?" he asked.

"None—she was but new-comer: so by now——" A contemptuous laugh ended the remark.

No more was evidently to be got from the woman, and Dara found himself on his horse again without an idea of where to go next.

A woman, a young woman in a courtesan's dress, alone in the streets, he thought cynically. The result was almost foregone; he had best return to Jahanara, and soothe her as best he could: or he might take

some other girl and pretend—Fool! not to have thought of that while he was in Gulanar's house! As he turned his horse, the rein caught on the *ram rakkhi* on his wrist, and he paused.

True, the girl had not given the token herself; for all that the bracelet was a tie. He was, in a measure—or he ought to be—her protector, at least according to the code of Rajput chivalry. And Dara, imaginative, romantic, had always admired this.

It was a curious adventure anyhow. He turned his horse again and rode on, cogitating what to do next.

The *Kotwal*, chief officer of the city? No. That might come afterwards. At present Jahanara, his real sister was waiting—the girl, or woman, wherever she was, was unreal.

Real and unreal? What was it that crazy Sarmad said about that? Sarmad with his quaint wisdom that was unlike other folks' wisdoms.

Sarmad! So suddenly the thought came—even if Sarmad knew nothing, definitely, and it was very unlikely he should, it was still possible that with his curiously far sight and his uncanny talent for what seemed like necromancy he might be able to suggest something. It was better anyhow than accepting failure without a struggle.

But where was Sarmad to be found? Possibly, though it was over late for that, in his niche by the Gate of the Big Mosque where he sat by the hour, sunning himself and doing what the common-folk called miracles—for his fame as a soothsayer, a healer, had grown.

It needed but the sight of his figure to bring from the squalid alleys, the tenement houses, mothers

with ill doing babies to be treated. God knows why: but the women persisted, saying that if the child died it was Sarmad who had given it rest, and that was better since it was but a drag to itself and to others. And ever as he touched some attenuated skeleton of a child, he would break into a weird chant to which after a time some listened:

"Ah, man! What hast thou done, thou that art God?
Lo, thou hast marred the earth
With monstrous birth,
With hunger and with death.
Woman, hast thou forgot that thou art God?
Forgot for pleasure's lure
The law that makes life sure,
That keeps the children pure!
Oh, needless, lawless babes that yet are God!
Lo, your dry bones will speak
When man and woman seek
Mercy from God!"

The time for this was doubtless overpast, yet there was chance he had been delayed by argument, for Hindu, Mohammedan, even Jesuits, often stopped in passing, for a passage of arms.

So Dara set spurs to his horse, and galloped thitherward; but the niche was empty. Sarmad therefore must be in the garden beyond the gates, where he had found a sort of lodging. Dara knew it well; he went there often. Sometimes he took Father Buseo there—and the two would argue and argue. It was far, a mile or two, so it would cause delay. On the other hand, what else was there to do? The spirit of adventure was calling almost imperatively to the young man's imagination. He could but choose to follow.

It was peaceful out beyond the city; so peaceful. The full moon was rising quite red over the sand-hills; but its light was silver on the sparse rocks, the stunted bushes. He could but rein in his horse to look around. On the far eastern horizon, where the low, broken hillocks clustered closer, a spear point showed clear on the sky; for it was light, almost as light as day. That was the Kutb; the broken outlines were the ruins of past dynasties. Not his—the Moguls were new-comers. Would they leave ruins behind them when they ceased from being kings—when their descendants sank to being but men and women once more? Were they anything else even now? Was not all the pomp and pageantry unreal?

Real and unreal! Which was which? Did either truly exist? With a careless laugh, he went on. There before him in the distance was the high wall of the garden, looking for all the world as if it was a square receptacle filled with green branches. How the moonlight glittered on the orange trees! One could not see the silver and gold flowers, but their scent was in the nostrils. How still it was . . .

Stay—what was that? He paused to listen while tying his horse by the arched and turreted garden gate that looked like the gate of some fortress.

It was a voice singing. Musical, though it only sang a wild chant. Even so, faintly reminiscent of the music he had so often heard in the Jesuit church. He opened the wicket in the iron-studded door and went in, feeling vaguely that he was going to something outside his everyday life.

It was a four-square garden of the olden time with marble aqueducts that had once been full of water and studded with fountains meeting crosswise in the

centre. Here, on a plinth, a marble summer-house showed its four-square arches, dilapidated, roofless, and beneath one of them, leaning against the pilaster, stood the singer—a slim figure in the red flaming skirts of the courtesan. She was softly fingering a two-stringed *vina* and at her feet sat Sarmad, his long limbs looking as if carved in stone.

Dara stood still inside the gate archway. He knew, at the first glance, that he had found what he sought; but the voice attracted him, he could hear the words; so he paused to listen. Doggerel as usual; but doubtless Sarmad's—if so with more sense in it than usual:

"Oh, strong and wise,
That fills the skies with twinkling stars!
Oh, wise and strong,
That guides the long hours in their course!
Oh, strong and just,
To grains of dust, none are forgot!
Oh, just and fair,
To all; that ne'er makes a mistake!
Oh, fair and pure,
Gold has no lure; lust does not tempt!
Who art thou, Lord?
By me adored, I know not now.
Thy work I see—
So Thou art me: I am as God."

The old story: the unreal trying to grip the real! Dara strode forward, and went straight to the girl.

"I have thy *ram rakhi*" he said, "so thou canst trust me. Come, my sister, the Princess Jahanara, is ill—she calls for thee. Come!"

The girl drew back a step. Now that he had full sight of her Dara could see she was not beautiful;

beyond, perhaps, a low, broad forehead, hazel eyes and the soft curves of a long-lipped mouth.

"Wherefore?" she said haughtily, without a stir in her face, though the eyes looked startled.

Then she turned to her companion. He had sprung to his feet, his face was alight with pleasure.

"My prince!" he cried. "Welcome—no need for speech—she hath told me all—Thou hadst best go, my child."

The girl still hesitated. "Wherefore?" she began, then hesitated again.

"Thou didst save her life, child, so thou dost owe her something, since but for thee she were in Paradise," said Sarmad quickly, then turning to Dara continued, "But how, my prince? There is none here to help."

"She might ride my horse. Dost think thou couldst —sister?" He, too, hesitated over the last word.

The girl laughed outright, a merry, heart-whole laugh. "Mayhap I could," she said demurely, "if my master—he taught me singing, Most Mighty—thinks it fit that I should go."

A minute later Dara, full of admiration for the deft way in which, with a single spring, the girl had leapt to the saddle before him, was spurring his way back to the town.

"Have a care lest thou fall off," he said, after a while, feeling a strange familiarity coming to him from the touch of her warm flesh, as, with encircling arms round her, he guided his horse. Then, as remembrance crept slowly through the intervening years, he added quickly, "Didst ever ride thus—before? Stay—Didst ever?—By the God who made me thou art—what was the name? Yea! Thou art

Rana-dil—I remember thee ! Speak ! Art thou she ? "

The girl did not move her head, she sat quite still and her voice came calm, measured :

" Most Noble ! I am that same Rana-dil."

Dara, as usual, felt inclined to laugh ; but he did not. So silence fell save for the thud of the horse's hoofs over the sandy road. Then, after a time, Dara spoke :

" Did the partridge live long—sister ? "

There was the faintest tremble in the answering voice :

" Not very long, Most Noble. When it died," the voice grew steadier, " I tried to stuff it, but it would not stuff like itself. The eyes of animals are so difficult—there is so much more in them than in the eyes of men."

The phrase struck her hearer as familiar ; surely it was his own ?

" That is so," he assented after a pause in which the thud of the horse's galloping hoofs was the only sound. " So thou didst make the feathers into a *ram rakkhi?* The one thou didst lose—that I have here ? " he added.

" Most Noble, yes ! " The answer was soft.

" And wore it—always ? "

" Always, Most Noble." The voice was softer still.

" I—I am glad," he said ; then almost impatiently he dug his heels into his horse's side. The animal gave a wild bound forwards. He was not sorry ; it gave him an excuse for holding the girl tighter. Then inwardly he laughed ; at any rate it was an adventure.

CHAPTER XII

TEN days had passed and Rana-dil was still in attendance on Princess Jahanara, for the burns, though slight, were—either from maltreatment or no treatment—not healing as they should have done. Day by day, indeed, they became more painful; what was more disquieting was that, day by day, the patient's strength seemed to fail; she grew weaker, more fretful. And none could do aught right for the captious little lady save Rana-dil. No other nurse would the Princess have; such food as she took must be from the girl's hand, and the only sleep she got was that when Rana-dil sat crooning away at Sarmad's crazy songs.

Thus, inevitably, the girl became more or less a person of consequence, and as such aroused no little jealousy amongst the palace-maids. Now maids, ever since the days of the prophet, have been gossipers; so the news of how a mere courtesan was treated, how even the Emperor would at times speak to her, was noised abroad, even to the prostitutes' quarters; where, also, it aroused jealousy.

In truth, Shahjahan, who had, of course, heard the whole story—with the notable exception of the partridge incident—from his son, could not help showing favour to one who had quite undoubtedly saved the Princess from more injury in the beginning, and who was evidently now doing her best to save

her pain. As he watched her day by day in the hot room where every breath of fresh air was excluded by the order of many physicians, and saw the patience with which she coaxed and beguiled, a feeling of confidence in her judgment crept into the Emperor's mind: an unusual event where women were concerned, since, vast as his acquaintance with the sex had become, despite his advancing years, not one of his many mistresses had any hold upon his intellect. Briefly, they were warm flesh and nothing else. Neither had they any great hold upon his heart. He kept his affections for his family. It was, indeed, as if he felt vaguely that they belonged to the cold marble side of existence. Perhaps it was this which made him so lavish in that affection. Even for Aurungzebe he was ready with admiration, with excuses, while Dara, simply, could do no wrong. And Jahanara? Had Arjamand, even in her youth, had more healthy, human devotion?

So as the days passed bringing no betterment to the darling of his heart, Shahjahan grew more and more anxious though from every one he got confident words, and promises of speedy improvement.

But something in Rana-dil's resolute face made him ask her one day what hope she had of quick recovery.

"None," replied the girl calmly, "unless the Most High ordains other physicians. These have had their chance, and their task is not yet begun. Would the Most High stand silent if his builders, his architects did likewise?"

"But these physicians are the best——" began the Emperor helplessly.

"In this land mayhap; but in the world, no!

Does not the Most Noble send afar for gem-cutters, for skilled enlayers for his Taj Mahal? I have seen them at Agra. And is not warm flesh and blood of more value than cold marble?"

Shahjahan was silent for a second as if taken aback; then he turned on her sharply. "Thou hadst that from the mountebank Sarmad."

But Rana-dil was undaunted. "Mountebank or no, crazy or no, Sarmad hath sense that other folk have not. So since the Most Noble hath mentioned him, let him see her, and abide by what he says—or—or Highness will lose her."

Her unabashed frankness had its effect and, late in the afternoon when the Princess dozed, the crazy atheist stood in the hot, airless room. A quaint group this by the little sick lady's bedside. The Emperor trembling, with tears in his eyes; Dara, who in all times of stress supported his father, striving to be calm; Rana-dil, who had crooned the patient to half slumber, watching Sarmad's face with mingled hope and fear; the crazy atheist himself, erect, self-reliant, devoid of clothes as ever, and, apparently, of emotion.

"I see not death in her face," he said simply, "if God's sun be allowed to touch it. For that, send seawards. *There* may a man be found who could combat the devil of darkness. Yea! he will be found for I see a ship—a ship sailing on a rough sea." Here the dull blue eyes took on intentness, a hand reached out with forefinger extended as if pointing. "Will it reach land? The waves batter it—See! it struggles on. Yea! It will reach. So hope well, my friends, hope well—that is the message."

The outstretched hand sank, the erect head

drooped, the tall figure shrank, as it were, into a sitting posture where it remained quiescent.

"He hath had a vision," whispered Rana-dil. "So is he ever taken when it passes. But the message is good. Hope well! Hope well!"

"Send for the Minister of Transport," said the Emperor quickly to Dara (for even in those days there were Ministers—even of Transport).

So the official in question got his orders, sharp, insistent, and all the varied forces of an Empire which brooked no delay in the execution of commands began instantly to function. For the Emperor was, like all his race, superstitious to the core, and he believed what he had heard; for all knew that, when God deprives man of sanity, He gives something in exchange.

And, as it turned out, he believed with reason. In less than a fortnight, a small, fair, but bronzed man in a British naval uniform was standing in the airless antechamber of the airless room where Princess Jahanara—largely owing to Rana-dil's constant care—lay still alive. Over and over again when the latter had found opportunity she had surreptitiously opened door or window. Over and over again she had substituted fresh oranges or grapes that she had smuggled in from Sarmad's garden, for the ginger and almond-paste of the doctors, over and over again she had secretly defied the learned ones, relying always on Sarmad's clear vision that death was not in the pale wan face, if God's sun could only touch it.

So much she had done in faith; and now was satisfaction or regret to be her portion? So her eyes were full of questions as after a brief survey the

stranger spoke through the mouth of the interpreter, Father Buseo, whom Dara had brought with him.

"The patient needs air and sun. Is there anyone here who can lend a hand to carry her bed into the veranda?"

The verdict appeared to startle all save Rana-dil; it was in direct defiance of the learned ones. Even the Emperor, who would gladly have supplied any outrageous medicament such as frogs' tails or human brains to save his darling's life, hesitated.

"Who are you, sir?" he began. "On what authority——?"

The small, bronzed man laughed. "I am one Gabriel Boughton," he said, "doctor of medicine in the East India Company's service, Gold Medallist in the school of Edinburgh, serving in the ship 'Hopewell'—Yes! I said 'Hopewell.'"

The company looked at each other reassured Here was a confirmation indeed! "Hopewell!" Truly Sarmad had had a vision. There was no more to be said. Fate had spoken.

So there were dozens of hands within call to carry little Jahanara's bed into the veranda!

"The girl with the red tinsel dress seems the most sensible of the lot," said the ship's doctor to Father Buseo. "Let her remain as nurse, and for God's sake send all the other women away."

The order did not make for peace in the palace generally; but it decidedly benefited the patient who, a day or two afterwards, as she lay under the open sky watching the sun sink redly in the west, bringing a flush of unwonted colour to her wan cheeks, and turning the light cloudlets overhead to pennants of flame, murmured hopefully:

"I feel, Rana, as if thy care were to be rewarded."

Was it to be so? The girl herself found the reward scarcely compensated for the treatment she received at the hands of the other attendants. There was nothing of which she was not capable according to them, and one thing was quite clear. She, with Sarmad's help, had cast spells over the Princess, the Heir Apparent and the Emperor. Many times she longed to escape, even to Gulanar's house; for, as she sat idle while her charge slept, she had had time to consider what had best be done in regard to the future. To begin with, in common with many of her caste, she was not a free woman. The tribe which had brought her up, and instructed her in the art of her trade, had sold her for hard cash to Chambeli, and Chambeli had in turn sold her for a certain sum to Gulanar. Whatever that sum was, it must be repaid, before Rana-dil could feel satisfied of her own freedom. So much was certain—quite certain.

For the rest—a smile would creep to her eyes and mouth as she thought of Prince Dara. Who could help smiling at him? and how glad she was that, quite unwittingly as it were, he had the *ram rakkhi* —the brother's bracelet. There could be no manner of doubt that if she were in any difficulty she could appeal to him for protection, and it would be granted. But she never would. That also was certain—quite certain. So soon as she could get away she meant to forget all about the palace and the palace people; though they were very kind. Even the Emperor himself was quite courteous when he came—as he often did—to visit his daughter. And Prince Dara? He would bring flowers to his sister, and once, yes, once he had asked her, Rana-dil, to take a rose

because it was so sweet; and once again he had appealed to her against the Princess who was lecturing him about a practical joke he had played on the Prime Minister. "Let us hear," he had said, "what the wise maiden who sits mum as a mouse hath to say on the matter. Was it not a good joke—sister?"

Yes, he had actually said "sister" instead of "mother." And she had answered back sharply after her wont, so that he had cried "*Tobah!*" and held his ears in conventional contrition. Still there was excuse for him. He was a brother of the bracelet. That thought always brought her content.

And vaguely, at first, the idea of this tie between them, this romantic adventitious tie which he could have broken in a moment by returning the *ram rakkhi*, pleased the Prince also. It tickled his fancy. At first, indeed, he had thought of cementing the tie of brotherhood and sisterhood indissolubly, by making the regulation return present of a bodice: he had even gone so far as to order a beauty to be prepared, but when it came his mood had changed. He had pished and pshawed, said it was not what he had commanded and had bidden it to be put in the dust-bin. Why, he did not understand at the time; but as the days passed he became conscious that his attitude towards the girl who sat so silently beside Princess Jahanara was changing. It was not that he admired her as men admire women, but—that bracelet on his wrist annoyed him. So, by degrees, he made up his mind to return it. Thus, one day when he came to find his real sister fast asleep and his unreal one leaning over the marble balustrade of the veranda watching the pigeons fluttering and fussing on the palace copings, he

called to her in a low voice to come nearer as he had somewhat of importance to say.

She came at once gladly, confidently. Somehow the fact made it very hard to begin, and he hesitated.

"'Tis because I was thinking," he began; then paused. Something in his voice roused her instant suspicion and suspicion brought resentment.

"The Most High is fortunate in having thought," she put in dryly.

He looked at her, and in a moment those two, oblivious of all else, became man and woman engaged in a battle of wits. Deliberately he took the *ram rakkhi* from his wrist and held it out to her.

"Pardon is needed," he said, "for having kept this—so long, but forgetfulness——"

She broke in upon his phrasings quickly. "Did the Prince forget? Or did he remember—as his slave does?"

He looked at her again. Tall and strong; so clear. Truly clear heart! And was there a ring of regret in those last words, or was there not? He could not decide.

"Remembrance and forgetfulness are slight things," he countered, "when fact is strong. This bracelet was not given, it was taken; so it remains hers from whom it was stolen."

She held her head a little higher, but her eyes twinkled. A passage of wits was to her mind, for hers were nimble.

"Taken or stolen are slight things," she retorted. "To start with, consent—is not to steal; it is to take. And to take with consent—what is it but to give? Thus I take the *ram rakkhi* from my lord

with consent, and with consent I give it back. Is it not so ? "

As she spoke her slim, nervous fingers were on his wrist, firm as a man's for strength, and the *ram rakkhi* was back in its place. Still holding the wrist fast, she looked into his face fearlessly while she said, " If the Most Noble hath aught to say that he wishes to say, let him speak without fear, and not make a stalking horse of my poor bracelet."

He gave back her look, and saw perfect clarity in her eyes. It was true what she said. Why not be bold ; so, following her lead as he did ever, he replied, swiftly, softly, without any preamble, certain of what he said, though till that moment he had not realized its truth :

" I love thee, Rana-dil."

In an instant she had let go his wrist and thrust out both hands as if to put him from her, and her expression became such as he had never before seen on any woman's face ; it was not fear, it was not dislike, it was simple physical repulsion.

" Say not so, Most Noble, ah, for pity's sake say not so ! " she cried. " And look not at me thus—as all men look when they say they love ! Dost think I lived for five long years in the house of Chambeli the procuress, and have not seen that look again and again ? Thou shalt not look it, brother, who hast been my strength, my stay, I will not see it." Here with incredible force and swiftness she turned him from her, and with both strong hands on his broad shoulders held him, while her words came in a torrent fast and low. " I say thou art too good for love like that—too good for the life thy father leads. Hast seen his tired eyes—thine must

not be as his! My Prince!" Here almost caressingly she laid her cheek down on her hand—a hand that held him fast. "I am not as most girls. I have seen, I have known—yea! even when I first met thee, a child, I knew. And I saw that it was loathly—this that the Most Noble would ask of me."

"Thou wrongest me," broke in Dara hotly, wrenching himself from her hold and facing her. "I ask thee for honourable marriage."

She stood back a step, scorn in every line. "Honourable! Hast not already a wife, a good loving wife? Hast thou not two fair sons? What would remain for me—for me—save that what men call love which is not love?"

In the very fire of her scorn, even resentment was destroyed: she clasped her hands as if in prayer, and her voice became full of pity—full of appeal.

"That, my Prince, would be to profane the shrine! Lo, Dara, as thou art, thou art more to me, brother, than all the world beside. All things I have given and I gave you free, with open hand. Is not that enough?"

Emotional, romantic, imaginative, impulsive as he was, Dara could not fail to be moved by her words. He recognized their truth. Saw that the girl was, indeed, not like other girls. The picture of her, a mere child still in years, holding herself secure from contamination even in such a hell of sheer vice as Chambeli's house must have been—and doing this because of—well, because of her ideal Prince-brother—because of *him* made him pause. For a moment he leant against the pilaster by which he stood, and covered his eyes with his hand as if to shut out what

he did not wish to see. Yet as he raised his head, he shook it in negation; that sort of thing was not of this world.

So he turned to argue; but his antagonist was not there, she had gone.

He stood for some little time watching the pigeons on the palace copings flutter and fussle as she had watched them. Then, as Princess Jahanara, looking greatly refreshed by her sleep, rose up amid her pillows and called to him, he went over to her and sat himself down by her bedside.

"Why dost look so glum, dearest dear?" she asked joyously. "Surely, with thy sister almost well, the sun shining, the birds singing and Father looking as though he could dance for very relief, thy face should be more cheerful than it is. 'Tis positively hang-dog, brother."

He was ever of open speech, frank, given to taking even strangers into his confidence, and Jahanara knew most of his secrets. So he could not help blurting out his grievances.

"So wouldst thy face be hang-dog, sisterling, if thy love had just been flouted as mine has!"

"Flouted!" echoed Jahanara, looking round surprised as if to find the delinquent. "Who was it, Dara, who dared so much with the Heir Apparent? There was none here, for sure, save . . . was it Rana-dil? But she is courtesan, a good kind girl to whom I owe much, yet still by profession courtesan."

Dara laughed suddenly, bitterly. "Lo, sisterling, women are all alike—at least most—no word of pity for each other. No understanding of the real. Yea! Yea! courtesan she may be, yet she would none of me—the Heir Apparent."

Jahanara shook her head wisely. "Thou didst not offer her enough, maybe. She hath been somewhat spoilt of late, see you, and well she deserves it. Father will, for sure, see her fairly recompensed, so money mayhap tempt her not so much as it doubtless did. But there be other things. Thou mightest make her concubine—that is honour enough for such as she. Yea! It is a heavy bribe——"

Dara's face grew dark and set.

"I offered her a heavier one, sisterling," he said. "I offered her marriage."

Jahanara gave a little shriek of dismay. "Thou didst not, brother, for sure! 'Tis not meet, 'tis not fitting. Father would never consent—think of what the palace ladies would say. A common courtesan amongst them."

"And what are they?" broke in her brother, angry and exasperated. "What are the most of them but the Emperor's mistresses? Ah, it makes me sick at times! He so good, so clever, so wise; and, then, no woman is safe from him—wouldst have me even so?"

Jahanara sat up very primly. "I would have thee not say such things about the Emperor, thy father. It is indecent. And what think you, Nurmahal, thy wife, would have said? She would have died of shame."

The young man felt himself worsted, but he would not quite confess defeat.

"I think not," he said, "for she is more sensible than most, may God preserve her! Yet does it not matter one way or the other, since she whom the easy ladies would call harlot will none of me."

"For which God and his Prophet be thanked!

Lo, darling of my heart, be not angry. Wert thou but the least bit more worldly-minded—if thou hadst but a tithe of Aurungzebe's sense of fitness thou wouldst do better. Canst imagine him thinking even of Rana-dil ? "

Dara burst into a fit of laughing, but for once held his tongue.

Meanwhile, in another apartment of the palace, Princess Roshanara was regaling her favourite brother Aurungzebe with the gossip of the palace. How much he owed to her keenness for intrigue, her quick apprehensions can scarcely be over-estimated, for though his rôle was generally that of pious deprecations he profited largely by the knowledge she gave him of affairs generally.

" And the maids say that Dara is making eyes at the courtesan girl," giggled the Princess. " And she—of course she being of the caste——"

Aurungzebe flinched almost imperceptibly. " Folk say more than is true, sister, and 'tis well not to listen. And Dara, for all he is so sadly infidel——"

Roshanara giggled again. " Nay, brother ! enough of that between you and me. 'Tis not his lack of faith that irks thee ; but my father's favour. Yet methought if Dara were to lose head over this girl it might rouse the Emperor's ire—what thinkest thou ? "

Aurungzebe rose, a small spare figure, and spread out his thin long-fingered hands. " 'Tis ill for the Emperor to be disturbed, sister," he said, " but—but I will see. Naught can be done in a hurry, and for the moment there is more pressing business than my brother's love affairs. I thank God that I am not that way tempted."

And he looked like a saint. There was, in fact, no limit to his self-deception; in half, at least, of his turnings and twistings he really believed in himself, believed, first of all that he was honest; secondly that if he was not, he was still doing his God good service.

There have been and there still are many such in this world. They are mostly successful.

CHAPTER XIII

"NAY! Mother of Virtue," said Rana-dil persuasively, "let not evil temper interfere with money-getting. Thou didst pay a round sum to Chambeli for my services in thy house of ill-fame; and she—as thou wouldst have done in like place—said nothing of my temper—evil or good as thou choosest—since that might have detracted from my price. For, mind you, we of the harlot tribe are bought and sold not only by man but by woman—such as thou art—evil or good I say not, mark you, that is between thee and thy Maker. This being so, thou didst in ignorance try to force me to what I will not, and I, having no other remedy, ran away. Since then fortune has favoured me. I have friends in the palace who would not sit to see me drowned in a sack. So thou, even though I am here beside thee, art powerless. Powerless, too, to get back thy round sum. Now this must not be. That money must be got back; and if thou art sensible it can be got back. Listen! Men as thou knowest desire new things; it was only when my singing grew stale at Agra that Chambeli foisted me upon thee. But in Delhi none have heard me—as yet. When they do, money will begin to chink, and thou shalt have all—I claim nothing—till thy expenditure is paid. Then shall I go free. But if this be not so, if I do not attract, let me go peaceable and I swear

the round sum will be paid by me to the last cowrie, somehow and sometime, for I will never rest till I have bought myself. Dost understand ? "

Gulanar's face under the paint and powder with which she still bespattered herself showed immobile. She leant back against the grimy wall, on which a gay patterned dado had lately been stencilled, regardless of fundamental dirt, and blew a cloud of opium-tainted smoke from her vermilioned lips.

" Traa ! " she said. " Traa ! Fine words ; but who will listen to thee ? "

" They listened to me in the palace," put in Rana-dil impulsively.

Gulanar chuckled with quick, evil laughter. " Ay ! that did they, and other things besides if tales be true," she said, suddenly as it were admitting the possibility of Rana-dil's proposition. " Listen, O girl, who settest thyself above the traditions of thy race. It seems that thou hast some attraction though what it is God knows, since thou hast no beauty, and art thin as a starving rat. Still, if tales be true, thou hast thy choice of two royal princes. Now that alone, if rightly managed—and thou mayest be sure that Gulanar will manage rightly—should bring better money than all the beggarly singing in the world. Trust me for that ! Lo, she looked kind on one, kind on t'other and the go-between gets the rupees. So, what I will do is this. Thou shalt have all honour, fine clothes, a room to thyself where thou canst thrum the *vina* all day long—ay, and sing the atheist's infidel songs too—that alone will give a zest to thy performance, and I will have it noised abroad that in Gulanar's house is one who——"

"No word of that, procuress!" broke in Rana-dil indignantly.

Gulanar laughed scornfully. "What! wouldst thou teach me my trade? Secrecy and darkness belong to the go-between. Fear not, girl! Thou shalt have fair play! After all am I not of thy tribe?"

Rana-dil would have liked to deny the fact; but, fairly well satisfied with the bargain she had made, she contented herself with settling the details of the arrangement, to which she had made up her mind after her outburst to Dara. For it did not take long to convince her that the little Princess was aware of what had happened. She had said nothing, but there was a perceptible change of manner which had made Rana-dil flame with vexation against Dara. Why should he, so lovable, so charming, so clever, so altogether desirable, be so weak as to confide in Jahanara who, sweet as she was, had no dignity? Why could he not keep his own counsel, as she did, and as she meant to do?

So she said nothing of her plans to anyone. As for Dara, she resolutely kept out of his way. Her dismissal was easily arranged, the excuse that her position was one of discomfort owing to the jealousy of the other palace attendants being sufficient; the more so because with returning health the Princess was reverting to the normal distractions and amusements of her former life. She loaded Rana-dil with gratitude and jewels, the Emperor gave her lavish reward in money, and what she valued more, a distinct break in his voice as he thanked her for her help in bringing his darling through the Valley-of-the-Shadow. For Shahjahan was lavish in all things. It was the keynote of his life.

"Thou canst have that as earnest money," said Rana-dil a trifle wearily to the somewhat awed keeper of the bawdy house, "but I put it down as against my price of freedom; remember that always."

So Gulanar, much impressed by the prospect of at any rate getting back some of her money's worth, went even beyond Rana-dil's stipulations, and the latter found herself installed in a highly decorated apartment of her own, and she was provided, not with the scarlet and tinsel of the common dancing girl, but with the really charming dress of a Persian lady.

"When the old ways are forsaken," said Gulanar shrewdly, "'tis best to startle folk out of comparison altogether; salt and sugar mix ill."

Be that as it may, Rana-dil's very first entertainment was a success. Whether it was the hot spiced wine that, after Court fashion, was handed round as an additional zest; wine that with a wink was hinted at as having been made by Princess Jahanara's private recipe (and, of course, the story of how the singer had soothed the great lady back to health was in everybody's mouth—Gulanar was shrewd enough for that also) or whether, really, the girl's unorthodox singing, and her gift of frank, clear-sighted speech was a relief to appetites cloyed with less wholesome food, cannot be said, but certain it is that, ere a week was over, she was the talk of the town.

As such, wild were the tales that were circulated about her past; many of them mothered shrewdly but silently by Gulanar.

"I have it on her authority," said Princess Roshanara to her brother Aurungzebe in one of her gossip bulletins, "for I took trouble to have her commanded to bring her girls to dance at my feast, that the woman

was Dara's mistress, and that he is mad after her. Yea! and the palace-maids have it so also."

"'Tis well not to listen to such tales," remarked Aurungzebe mildly, even while in his heart of hearts he was meditating how best to turn the gossip to his own account and to Dara's detriment; for to oust his brother from Shahjahan's favour was, until he succeeded, the main purpose of his life. Perhaps—Heaven alone knows if this be so—some natural almost praiseworthy craving for affection lay at the bottom of his jealousy. He had been his mother's favourite; but since her death he had been, as it were, overlooked by all his family save Roshanara; and for her, useful as she was to him, he had no real affection. Had he any, for anyone? It is hard to say. And yet the mere thought of Rana-dil being his brother's mistress was gall and wormwood to him. But was it true? He must find out and, if anyone could tell him the truth, it would be Jahanara.

Now, though there was little love lost between this brother and sister, the etiquette of life was kept up between them, so it was only decent that he should pay, accompanied by suitable offerings, a visit of congratulation on her recovery. No one had better manners than Aurungzebe, and on this occasion his admixture of affectionate joy and pious gratitude to the Almighty was so perfect that the little lady found herself once more silently regretting that her particular brother was not always so discreet. The practical joke on the Prime Minister for instance! Knowing the official in question to be a great supporter of Aurungzebe she could not help mentioning the affair and, in a way, apologizing for the offender.

Thus the subject of Dara came uppermost, and here, again, Aurungzebe showed at his best. None, he said, could doubt Dara's kindness of heart, though even that could be turned by evil tongues to his detriment, witness the stories rife in the bazaars about the new singer, Rana-dil. Grateful as the whole family—and he himself, in particular, must be to one who had done so much to bring happiness to it by enabling their beloved one to renew her health—it was impossible that a prince of the blood royal could make a regular mistress of a common dancing-girl, though, of course, a slighter and ephemeral fancy might be permitted to youth and virility. Possibly it was the spiced wine, of which the royal ladies of that time were somewhat immoderately fond, that loosened Jahanara's tongue, or perhaps the joke of the matter appealed to her ready sense of humour, but she could not resist a giggle and the information for which Aurungzebe had been so diligently fishing; namely, that Dara's fancy had not only existed, but had been considerably more than ephemeral. Whereat Aurungzebe had been duly shocked.

The result of this interview being that, protected by a posse of learned doctors of the law all eager, so they said, to see and condemn the new singer, he attended Rana-dil's next recital, or concert or whatever you choose to call the informal meeting at which one woman confronted a roomful of men and kept them amused by the clarity of her speech, and the strangeness of her songs—to say nothing of the excellence of her spiced wine.

Now, as luck would have it, on the very same evening three or four of the Jesuit Fathers had chosen to sample singing which, they were told, resembled

church music, egged on to this by Dara, who, after several days' gloom and angry thoughts over Rana-dil's choice of bazaar life, had come to the conclusion that he had best see what it was like before he made up his mind how to take it. Thus the company was such as to make Gulanar almost beside herself with satisfaction. Two princes of the blood royal! Was there ever such good fortune? There was but one fly in the ointment of content, and that was the presence of the crazy atheist Sarmad. He had been invited as an additional attraction, but as she bustled about adding more spice to the wine, a soupçon more opium to the hookahs, she told herself that the Devil must have been in it to make her choose this evening of all evenings for infidel songs. What would the good Fathers say, and what would Prince Aurungzebe do? That being the question with him, since his speech was invariably proper.

In truth the audience was a strange medley of East and West, almost unbelievable, and yet a fair example of India in seventeenth-century days. So the Jesuits smiled urbanely at the learned doctors of the law who scowled back at them, and Dara and Aurungzebe, both with their little knot of adherents, looked at each other politely, while the rest of the audience looked at them, and the whole posse of humanity looked at Rana-dil who sat singing unorthodox songs. Only Sarmad, their author, with his dull, far-away blue eyes, looked nowhere in particular.

"The woman hath a fine voice," assented Father Malpica when a song was ended. "Would she were of the true Faith, and could sing to God's praise in church."

"She sings much of thy chants already," said

Dara, somewhat reckless in his enthusiasm. "They would put the Princess to sleep, but I liked them much."

Aurungzebe, overhearing him, muttered, "Infidel!" under his breath. He was, however, too much taken up with the sight of Rana-dil in her Persian lady's dress to be openly captious over the Heir Apparent's indecorum in mentioning his sister in a bawdy house; but the fact added to his irritation at his brother's delighted face.

So the entertainment went on, a curious rivalry that was never far distant in those days between Mohammedans and Christians, growing as song followed song, each provocatively unorthodox. Voices began to be raised in argument; and, though Gulanar sought to calm by an extra round of spiced wine, this had a more exciting than soothing effect until Dara, who loved pitting the antagonists against each other, cried in his joyous voice:

"Peace! Peace! 'Tis Father Malpica against the Makdoom! Come, father! No drawing back, else shall we deem thee afraid, beaten!"

The rest of the audience applauded vehemently. Such discussions were common amusement at the Mogul Court, and in this case one afforded a welcome change in the programme. So at it, hammer and tongs went the disputants until Father Malpica, deftly smiling, posed his adversary thus.

"Lo, most learned! Thy book sayeth that the Prophet Mohammed sleeps until the Last Day. Our Prophet and King wakes. Now, if a traveller in a foreign country met two men one of whom slept while the other was awake from which should he ask his way?"

There was an awkward pause and the Mohammedans looked at each other until Aurungzebe rose, and craving pardon for thus interfering, said:

"The traveller must wait till he who sleeps awakes, since he was also waiting to ask the right way."

The answer was neat, effective, and roused an instant and delighted titter from the learned ones. But ere it had time to strengthen to a laugh Sarmad, who had been sitting silent as a statue beside Rana-dil, was on his feet, and his powerful voice brought silence from aught else.

"O fools and blind!" he cried. "God sleeps not neither does He wake. To sleep! To wake! Dost make of Him a man such as ye are! He hath no voice, no touch, no taste, no sight, no sound. Handless He holds the world. Feetless He leads the way. I, Sarmad by my sight, my touch, my taste, my hearing apprehend so much—I am God—no more—no more." His voice sank a little over the last words, then rose again as he turned to Rana-dil. "Sing of Him, child, sing the Hymn of God."

She began at once, the *vina* she struck giving out a hollow mellow note behind a wild, weird chant:

"Sleepless, showing the Stars
Their rightful way
Sleepless, speeding the Hours
To Night and Day.
Watchful, watching the seed
Burst through to Birth
Wakeful, helping the leaves
To rot to earth.
Voiceless, teaching the birds
Their tuneful song,

Voiceless, bidding the winds
Blow loud and strong.
Touchless, feeling each thrill
Present and past
Touchless, being as one
Both first and last.
Soundless, amidst the din
Of Love and strife
Soundless, amid the fight
For Death or Life.
Changeless, though through far space
Naught is secure
Changeless, though worlds spin round
And naught is sure.
So much I, Sarmad know
So much I see
'Tis I who see who knows
So I am He."

The singer gave one fierce dissonant chord as she finished; and all was silent. The listeners sat still, their eyes fixed, as if half hypnotized. Maybe it was the weirdness of the rhythm, its very monotony, its underlying sweetness which had touched some hidden psychic centre common to humanity; but the clash of words, the antagonisms of argument had died away. It was even as if the learned ones had forgotten to be orthodox. So they sat for a few moments; then the normal reasserted itself, and outraged voices began to be heard.

"Sing something cheerful, or the cat will jump the wrong way," whispered Gulanar hurriedly. "Sing 'Taza-ba-taza' or 'Zakhmi,'" she added, naming two well-known bazaar favourites.

But Rana-dil had more perception, she knew that novelty was more arresting; so swiftly she broke

into her own favourite tune, a Stella Maris she had picked up when turning somersaults for cowries outside the Jesuit church at Agra. The words had been beyond her, so she had fitted her own to the tune. They were not even doggerel, just plain, straightforward prose; the prose of a girl-child whom sex had not yet touched, her praise, her ideal of love, eternal, divine.

Her audience held their peace to listen. At the first stave of the tune the Jesuit Fathers looked at each other, recognizing it, and crossed themselves; but the patois of the wandering tribes was beyond them. Here and there they could gather such words as trust, confidence, devotion, and these fitting in with their preconceived ideals were satisfactory. The learned ones understood little also except the thoroughly orthodox benediction called down on the object of love, so they also filled in the remainder to suit. The courtiers and the young bloods frankly admired the tune, which in truth had a lilt in it, and trusted that the words were sufficiently lewd to match.

And Dara? He sat, his eyes on the singer, absorbed. The opening sentence, "I am going to sing of love," was clear. He knew what would, what must follow.

Was he content? Who could say. He neither smiled nor frowned. He listened.

So did Aurungzebe; but with an expression common enough in Gulanar's house of ill fame, and with also an occasional glance of sheer hatred at his brother's rapt face. So the entertainment came to peaceful end.

It was two or three days after this that Rana-dil, outwearied by her efforts in evening after evening

entertaining, her audience of men agog for novelty, was sitting in her room alone when that audience had departed. The air was tainted with stale tobacco smoke, stale scent and the stale fumes of spiced wine. Downstairs, yawning, Gulanar sat sleepily counting the night's gains. They brought the total close to the sum which was to be the price of freedom. In the dim, smirched recesses of her mind Gulanar was cogitating if it was worth while to continue the game, or whether she might not accept a bribe which had been offered; a big bribe, which would end the necessity for spiced wine and be more consonant with her ideals. It might be worth while. She had only to send a message and secure safety.

A call from Rana-dil sent her puffing upstairs. She came down again after a while, her mind made up. If the girl upstairs with her croaking voice knew as well as she did that the price of freedom was nigh complete, and if, as she had done, she could talk of taking her leave, then it was distinctly worth while to accept a bribe which would bring in more gold. So as Rana-dil sat upstairs thinking rather drearily of her freedom, a message was sent. Meanwhile the girl sat on. It was still early. Ten o'clock had just chimed from the palace gongs, yet it was late for the early hours of Eastern life; and late, indeed, for Sarmad, who ever looked in to see how things fared ere returning from his niche by the Great Mosque to his garden. Mayhap he had been called to the palace—the Heir Apparent held him in high honour, and often consulted him. Would that, more often, he would follow his counsels. But Prince Dara was—with a rush came the sense that Prince Dara was all things and yet so little. He

had not returned after that evening when she had sung her childish song of love. Doubtless it had disgusted him—though it had not done so to Prince Aurungzebe. Her face darkened at the thought of the latter, and his constant efforts at ingratiation, at persuasion. She would be free of that anyhow when she left Gulanar's house.

There was Sarmad at last. She turned to greet him and his excuse that the Heir Apparent had kept him.

"He bade me bring you this in all reverence," he said, and laid a packet beside her, then added: "Thou look'st weary, child. Open it and, if there be an answer, I can give it on the morrow. I will wait beyond these fumes of the devil. Pah!" So with a weighty breath or two he passed into a little balcony beyond. It gave, not on the bazaar, but on storied houses showing turreted against the moonlit sky. Here in the fresh air he sat down and waited.

Waited while Rana-dil, with a tumult of feeling she could not disentangle, drew out of its brocaded silk bag the *ram rakkhi's* return gift of a bodice. A simple bodice guiltless of gold or jewels, but painted all over with the delicate tints of a partridge's breast.

Her first thought was one of pure content. How like him! How full of imagination, almost of humour. And then suddenly she laid her head on the gift and wept silent tears.

Brother and sister! Ay, brother and sister for ever and a day.

A sound beside her made her look up to see Prince Aurungzebe, and in his eyes she saw that which made her ask haughtily:

"What doest here?"

"I have come to rescue thee from this impure house," he replied. "I come to offer thee an honourable place in mine; for, Rana-dil, I love thee as never before have I loved a woman." Here his voice broke, and he reached out his hands to her. "Come, I beseech thee, come! Let me not have to take thee. Listen! I know what thou hast been to Dara—Yea! I know all—my sister hath told me. Were my father to know it would anger him sorely. Force me not to tell him. Give thyself to me and never was woman more loved, more cherished than thou wilt be. I swear it."

His eagerness was almost pathetic; but she heeded nothing save his vague threat against Dara.

"So," she said slowly, "thou wouldst use Dara's love against him—yet doth thou protest thou art in like case to him? Canst thou hope to be believed?"

He took a step nearer to her. "Thou shalt believe," he cried. "I love thee madly—I would give everything in the wide world to possess thee."

She gave a scornful little laugh. "What everything—even thy religion, pious one?"

For an instant he hesitated; but his eyes were ablaze with imperative desire.

"Ay, all," he muttered hoarsely.

A cup of wine stood on the low stool beside her.

"Drink, and I will believe," she said and held it out to him.

He seized it, drank half and held it back to her.

"Drink thou," he whispered, "and clinch our bargain."

For answer she flung the glass from her and the

wine left in it bespattered his gay coat as it fell, while her voice rang out defiantly:

"Liar! Hypocrite! Dost call that love? Go! Out of my sight!"

With a cry of rage he would have sprung on her, but his arms were pinioned from behind by Sarmad, who, hearing voices raised had entered unperceived.

In an instant Rana-dil's hand was raised in swift negation. "No violence, I prithee," she said quietly. "Take the gentleman downstairs, Sarmad, and fetch a napkin wherewith to dry the drops of wine which have been spilt—by accident—over his coat. The Most Noble had best go home quickly, or evil might befall. *He might catch cold.*"

There was a world of significance in her tone.

CHAPTER XIV

"I BESEECH thee, Most Noble, to be careful," protested Said-ullah Khan, the Prime Minister, as he stood below the dais where, gloriously apparelled, the Emperor of all the Indies lounged on his Peacock Throne. It was the Private Audience Hall, and the magnificence, the lavishness of the *mise-en-scène* centred round that figure of a man in the prime of life, supine, satiate with his own dignity.

"Am I not careful?" replied the Emperor with a smile that brought out his great likeness to his son, Dara. "When in the past, Said, has the Empire been so flourishing, when the Treasuries so full? Gold brings gold! When, oh, when, wise one, wilt thou learn that?"

"True, sire!" said the Prime Minister caustically. "When there is gold as foundation. But these English folk are niggardly. Their presents are poor: they set no store by fine clothes and jewels. And they have no king. Only an upstart who beheaded his rightful sovereign."

Shahjahan frowned and stirred restlessly on the Peacock Throne. "'Tis the fault of a king, Said, if he be beheaded."

"In this case, no, sire," remarked Said-ullah. "'Tis a man of the people who rules—and with a rod of iron so folk say—but kings are ever kings indeed." He paused, then went on tenta-

tively, "And the Most High speaks well, acts ill. He hath four sons all man grown, all ambitious, all able, all——"

"Detail not the truth!" interrupted Shahjahan, annoyed. "But, see you, I love them all—ay, even little Aurungzebe. By the Prophet, Said, he sits more close to my generalship than even Shuja, brave though he be! Yea, so far, he is true son of mine. And Dara? Who could help loving Dara?"

"Those on whom he hath played a joke mayhap," retorted the Prime Minister dryly. "But——" he hesitated, "if the Most Noble would permit free speech to his slave——"

"Speak on, devoted servant," quoth Shahjahan, laughing.

"Sire, all things have beginnings and ends, even love. If this be disregarded, then is there ever trouble. For the sons I speak not. It hath been arranged that they become governors of provinces far apart—thus may the present bickerings and jealousies be avoided. God send it may be so! though the fortress at Gwalior and a daily dose of 'poust' may be a sûrer method. It hath at any rate the virtue of experience. 'Tis of the blessed lady who hath been restored to us that I would speak. Gratitude for her recovery is doubtless due, but the Emperor must not endanger his empire to pay the debt. This Englishman hath made request not for personal gain—I like not that: it engenders a doubt—but for the general right for his nation to trade free of custom throughout the Empire. 'Tis a big fee!"

Shahjahan leant forward and spoke in a lower voice. "Not so big as it seemeth, Said. These

Western folk are at each other's throats. Dutch, Portuguese, French, English, I like not any of them; but let them fight it out. And—and—there is no fee too big for Jahanara's health. Say 'tis weak of me, say I am fool to let my sons grow to manhood, but I cannot forget—I will not forget the long years before I was King." For an instant he sank into moody silence; then he brightened up. "The Florentine gem-cutter who came last is a master of his craft. He hath already lightened the design of the tomb itself, and made it far more beautiful. Lo, there must be perfect beauty somewhere, else would not mortal eye see it—as some do—the Florentine's and mine."

He relapsed into dreamy thought and there was silence until he spoke sharply, keenly.

"That new-cultivated land to the north! Hath it paid its dues?"

"Most Noble, yes!"

"Then must suitable controllers be appointed. Send in names for my approval. As ever up to three quarters of the revenue—the remainder to the royal coffers. Is there aught more of business ere I go to prayers?"

"Naught else, Most Noble, save, always, care—both as regards the Englishman and the upstart from the Deccan. He is Prince Aurungzebe's, heart and soul. Small wonder since the stratagems of the latter have made him what he is."

A slow smile crept to Shahjahan's mouth. "Even so," he assented. "Lo, Said, but for the prophecy of the holy man who gave me the apples, I could love that son of mine as I do the rest. He hath the brains of all; but memory will ever jog my

mind." And as he spoke he sought for the smell of apples on his hands.

It was still there, as if he had just handled the fruit; so, well satisfied, he went to his ceremonial prayers; for, of late years, he had stiffened in observance of the Mohammedan faith. Thus Dara's almost careless approbation of each religion in turn was the only flaw in his idol.

An hour or so afterwards the Open Audience was in full swing. The vast hall—red sandstone piped round arch and groin with white marble—was thronged by a many tinted crowd which, as it centred round the wide arched dais where Majesty sat supreme, became more and more a blaze of jewels as the rank and dignity of the wearers increased. Then, in single file round the dais that projected from the wide arch at the palace side of the hall, stood the female guard; upright, stalwart, full-breasted Abyssinian and Ethiopian negroes, each with her round buckler and drawn sword. On the silk carpeted dais—every rug worth a king's ransom—stood the Peacock Throne, empty as yet, though the two huge slaves behind it waved peacocks' feather fans, as if Majesty were already seated thereon. Behind this, again, a heavily jewelled lattice filled up the recessed arch, and behind this, yet once more, were doubtless women's eyes watching the men, appraising their jewels, their looks.

The curious buzz, the bee-like hum of many voices speaking in a whisper ceased suddenly as the shrieking, whistling blare of the royal *nakarahs*, the clanging roll of the royal kettle-drums, announced the entrance of the Emperor.

And there was Shahjahan, a tall manly figure in

white satin ablaze with diamonds, hung with pearls. No note of colour from head to foot, save the grey purple of the heron's plume fastened in his turban by a huge ruby which looked like a spot of blood amongst the whiteness.

To some moderns this blood stain might seem symbolic of the Oriental despot; but then few moderns have any knowledge of the conditions and limitations under which these despots lived their lives. It is true that the whole revenues of their kingdoms passed through their hands; but more than three quarters of it had to be immediately returned for the whole expenses of law, order, charity.

So Shahjahan, as he sat on his Peacock Throne, was not unlike the multi-millionaires of to-day. That is to say, his stomach being of the normal human size, all of which he, personally, could deprive the storehouse of the world was sufficient food to keep him in health. The remainder of his money he spent, whether wisely or unwisely matters little, beyond personal praise or blame; he gave it to others who in their turn spent it wisely or unwisely (praise or blame attaching itself to the spender only) until the whole of all the millions had been devoured by human mouths.

The question remains, of course, whether India would have been the better had Shahjahan not had the imagination, the love of pure beauty which made him squander his millions in building, say, that wonder of the world—the Taj?

In one way it is possible that benefit might have accrued. There would to-day be fewer tourists, fewer Padgetts M.P. to solve the problems of India

after a three months' return ticket from Cook's. As against that, however, must be set the enormous gain to humanity of pure beauty, whether artificial or natural. How many outwearied toilers have returned from their brief Bank Holiday by the sea, more capable of work by reason of a gorgeous sunset? How many eyes watching the sunset flush the cold marble of the world's most beautiful mausoleum have not caught a glimpse of the New Jerusalem?

Such questions, however, did not trouble Shahjahan as he sat, possessed of absolute power, unlimited wealth, on the Peacock Throne that had cost six millions of money He was there to judge the people; he had said his prayers, and he meant to judge righteously. On the whole he did so with legal penetration and common-sensical acumen.

On this morning there were few cases. One was an appeal from a lower court, concerning a cat, which belonged to four merchants who owned equal shares in a certain shop, the agreement being that each of them should attend the shop in turns, and be responsible for keeping the lamp alight and feeding the cat. One day the cat broke its leg and required surgical treatment. The expense of this, three of the partners refused to share as the accident had not occurred on their days. Now, while the cat was undergoing treatment, the bandage round its leg caught fire at the lamp, the animal, alarmed, ran under some straw and all the goods in the shop were burnt. The three partners claimed and were awarded damages against the partner who had paid the surgeon.

He appealed to the Emperor.

So there was the Oriental despot who had but to crook his little finger to have any woman he fancied brought to his harem, only to raise his hand to off with anybody's head, gravely listening amid that scene of splendour unparalleled to the question of the cat.

"I reverse the decree," he said without a flicker of a smile. "I hold that the cat's broken leg could not possibly walk, therefore the three legs which belonged to the other three merchants were responsible for the fire. They will therefore pay the one who had the expense of doctoring."

There was a murmur of applause, especially from the rear of the audience.

"He is a male-judge," said some one and the verdict passed.

So, justice merged into policy, and one after another noble or governor was presented each with his offering which was passed without a look, a word, to the Royal Treasury to be merged into the general revenue of the Empire. Stock may have been taken of its adequacy afterwards, in private, but dignity forbade anything but unconcerned acceptance in public.

Occasionally, doubtless, some more than usually interesting presentation aroused curiosity.

So it was when, introduced by Prince Aurungzebe, a tall, bearded man, in addition to trayfuls of rich stuffs and delicate enamels, held in his hand a single uncut diamond of almost incredible size. Shahjahan was alert in a moment.

"Whence cometh it?" he queried sharply.

The tall man bowed himself to the very ground again in elaborate obeisance.

"From the mines of Golconda, Most Noble. It weighs three hundred and sixty carats, and there be many such in the country of Bijapur."

And as he spoke he held out his other hand; it was full of cut diamonds of the whitest brilliance.

Shahjahan's eyes sparkled like the diamonds.

"Who is he?" he asked of Aurungzebe.

"Mir Jumlah," was the reply, spoken in the Prince's most deferential, most unassuming manner. "To him I owe much. Without his valour, his adroitness, my success in the Deccan would have been poor indeed. And he is still willing to serve Majesty even to the capturing of the diamond mines."

Sheer greed showed in the Emperor's eyes; but dignity remained. "That for the future," he said, "the diamond is accepted."

As Prince Aurungzebe and his protégé retired to their places, they exchanged satisfied glances.

The first step in their plot had been successfully taken; the plot that in the future was to bring absolute power into the hands of the Prince; a plot that was almost certain of success to judge by the stir of courteous admiration from the vast audience.

Only Prince Dara, who, refusing the small throne which his father set beside his own, was standing at his right hand, followed the two with scornful, half-amused eyes. The White Snake had mischief afoot; that was clear . . . what was it? But some one was now approaching the Lord Chamberlain who drove wonder as to his brother's intrigues from the Heir Apparent's mind.

It was Surgeon Gabriel Boughton of the ship "Hopewell," who had come to receive reward

for curing the Emperor's beloved daughter, Princess Jahanara.

His was a small figure, dressed in the plain dark blue naval uniform of those days. Not being of the belligerent forces, he wore no epaulettes, so as he carried his three-cornered hat under his arm he showed no sign of rank or importance; just a simple, dapper, little figure, fair and open of face. He made no courtly obeisance; but stood his ground courteously, yet resolutely, before all the splendour, making only a simple sailor's salute.

"He craves," said the Prime Minister, dissent in his voice, "that the presents of gold and silver be retained, and that in their place a *fatwa* in due order be granted, giving the English nation the right to trade fairly and freely, without payment of customs, throughout the whole of the Emperor's dominions. Is that so?"

The question came sharp: it was answered as sharply, through Father Buseo, who on these occasions acted as interpreter:

"It is so."

"And wherefore asks he naught for himself?"

The reply was longer; it needed words to make sure the priest understood, and even so it was difficult to put into Eastern phrases.

"He saith he hath done nothing, Most Noble. 'Twas not his drugs but the lady's sound constitution given her by God, and the sunlight and the air, also given from on high; therefore, reward is due to the Highest. And that to his mind, and the mind of every true son of England, is the land that gave him birth. So he asks for his country, not for himself."

"He speaks well," said Dara, in his father's ear.

"Then he thinks his country will benefit by the concession; benefit greatly?" put in the Prime Minister.

This time the question brought a quick smile to the Englishman's face.

"Of a surety, yes! The English are born traders—we trade fair, if we can trade free—and does not fair trade bring benefit to he who sells and he who buys."

This time it was Shahjahan who said to his son:

"Yea! he speaks fair."

And, as the Emperor leant back in his Peacock Throne, and listened to question and answer, to doubt and protest, a small slim hand thrust itself through the lattice work that screened the ladies, and a soft voice reached him:

"Give him what he asks, father! For my sake, give it!"

So it came to pass that Gabriel Boughton left the Assembly carrying with him in a brocaded satin bag a document duly signed by the Emperor, giving Englishmen free pass to trade where and when they liked throughout his Empire, north and south, east and west.

That also was the first step in that great sequence of events which made India what she now is—a dependency of the British Crown.

Book III

THE TAJ MAHAL

CHAPTER XV

AGAIN the years had passed, years curiously uneventful in a way, yet which still left India different from what they had found it. The Court was splendidly magnificent as ever, the revenues grew larger and larger in consequence of Shahjahan's genius for good government; also because with Mir Jumlah's help, and his own unrivalled aptitude for strategy and artifice, Aurungzebe had mastered the diamond country with all its untold wealth of treasure. Even Dara could not withhold his meed of praise. In fact once when temporary difficulties had beset the young conqueror, it was Dara who, receiving a piteous letter of appeal from his brother, had gone to the Emperor and begged further patience and help; for the Heir Apparent was easily moved to sympathy.

More so than his father who, even while he granted his son's request, remarked dryly:

"Thou art somewhat of a fool, Dara, thus to nourish a snake in thy bosom! Fear not but it will sting thee by and by."

But Dara was ever impulsive; he was always having to regret. Yet, so far, he had never regretted the imaginative, romantic impulse which had made him send the bodice of acceptance to the singer of a child's love song. For one thing, the friendship, the companionship which had followed on Rana-dil's

return to the garden where the crazy atheist had taken up his abode, had been heart satisfying. To sit under the orange trees at sunset time and discourse airy philosophy with Sarmad and Father Buseo, the Jesuit, who was always ready for an argument, to listen to the latter's translation for the benefit of the company of such Western lore as Mallory's " Morte d'Arthur " or Froissart's Chronicles, or to watch the moon's shadows shift over the marble pavement while Rana-dil sang Sarmad's quaint chants, or—from her mouth and in those surroundings—the still more quaint *Ave Marias* or *Glorias* she had picked up from the Jesuits Church when she was tumbling for cowries—all this was in itself pure pleasure to one of his temperament. And, by degrees, he learnt to rely on her judgment; not that he always took her advice, for he was self-willed and obstinate. Still when the mistake had been made, he was always ready to confess he was wrong, though in regard to her rebukes for rudeness to Aurungzebe he always had her on the hip by replying that a glass of wine in a man's face was a bigger insult than any of which he had ever dreamed.

" In truth, O sister of the bracelet," he would say, " thou hast made for thyself the bitterest enemy that woman ever had, and but for my guards round this garden——"

Here she would interrupt him by saying she needed no guard; whereat he would laugh lightly.

But he was right. Had it not been for his protection, constant but unobtrusive, she would doubtless have suffered for her defiance, since Aurungzebe was not one to forget or to forgive.

Meanwhile at the palace all went as usual. Shah-

jahan had it full of his mistresses, but he came out from the women's apartments clear-eyed, alert, more ready, if anything, than of old for decisive action. The least hint of aggression was instantly punished. For instance, in consequence of Jesuit pretensions, their Church at Agra, which had begun by losing its steeple, was now razed to the ground; but the Fathers still held to their mission and were well received at Court. In truth Shahjahan with his keen wit found the black-coated learned ones of his own faith rather dull; and with his equally keen sense of humour could not help laughing when he heard the tale of how his saintly son, Aurungzebe, had attempted to convert a Hindu rajah by the ordeal of fire. Each disputant was in turn to pick up a red hot iron bar, the truth of his religion being demonstrated by ability to hold the burning metal. The rajah began bravely but was forced in agony to throw the bar from him. It fell on Aurungzebe's tent which, catching fire, was burnt to the ground. Whereupon the idolater gravely remarked: "We be both in error. I because my hand, thou because thy tent was burnt. Truth is elsewhere."

In the palace itself was little change. The Emperor's mistresses swarmed as ever. Princess Jahanara, sweet and kindly, still unmarried, had grown fatter and was more fond of her spiced wine. Her devotion to her father and her brother had grown with the years. Her sister Roshanara, a trifle more bitter and also still unmarried, gave all her interests to Aurungzebe who had gone on from success to success. True, he had greatly enlarged his father's kingdom; but thereby he had consolidated his own power, so bringing to fruition the

plot which he and Mir Jumlah had hatched, the plot somehow or another eventually to filch the throne from his father.

And now the great day to which Shahjahan had looked for many years, towards which he had given all that was spiritual in him, had come. The memorial to his dead wife was finished, what remained of her warm flesh was to be transferred to the cold marble of the Taj, and the whole Court was on its way from Delhi to Agra for the ceremony. That it was to be magnificent, goes without saying; every function that Shahjahan ever arranged was the best of its kind. His sense of beauty and fitness was supreme.

And yet he was conscious of failure when, as he rode in from his last stately, leisurely march on the Delhi-Agra road, he caught his first glimpse of the perfection of the Taj. He had laboured to achieve it, he had dreamed of its cold beauty for more than twenty years. It stood as he had planned it, even as it stands now, with its garden of tall cypress trees; a garden intersected by orderly four-square marble aqueducts where fountains were splashing and pink lotus blossoms were sending out their aromatic perfume; for the month was July, the month in which Queen Arjamand had died. Yes! Perfection had been achieved, and yet—— It was not cold marble as he had planned it: for the setting sun—as it does to-day—had flushed arch and dome and minaret into the semblance of warm flesh.

He felt staggered. All these years the building of this marvellous memorial to a dead woman had, somehow, been a barrier between the past and the present; now the two seemed for a moment merged in each other, but only for a moment. The next he

had recovered his balance and was receiving the loud-voiced admiration of those around him with an immovable face. But after the regal party had arrived at the palace, after the royal ladies had regaled him with spiced wine, and he had listened—still with an immovable face—to their chatter, he went alone to the Jasmine Balcony where he had been sitting when the crazy atheist had sung the song that had started him on his quest of beauty in cold marble and beauty in warm flesh, where he had pored over the plans which he and the painter Veroneo had designed; a balcony which, when he first became Emperor he had built to please the dead woman. And there he sat and watched the whiteness of cold marble come back with the rise of the moon: watched alone in silence.

Not so the lesser lights amongst the palace ladies who, knowing that the morrow's ceremonial would entail their seclusion, were anxious to see the beauty of the Taj at closer quarters. So, after sundown, quite a company of bejewelled palanquins reeking of strong perfumes, and duly guarded by duennas and eunuchs, gathered on the wide platform of the mausoleum, and their occupants, with rustlings and jinglings and titterings, trooped inside through the high archway, so mysterious in its extreme height, as if sought, even at the entrance, to draw thought from bare earth, and lead it upwards to something beyond human ideals.

But the palace women passed in unconcernedly, and the troop of femininity at its worst, with more rustlings and jinglings and titterings, found itself under the central dome beside the two graves that are separated from each other, and from the outside

world, by latticed screens of marble fretwork fine as lace.

Together; and yet separate, apart. Surely, surely, the most beautiful resting-place that frail humanity has ever compassed for itself! Resting-place that makes most men silent, though women, less self-contained, more vocal, often whisper their love-born emotions. And the whispers, caught by the shadowful dome above, go on and on in lessening echo till the whole building seems full of the droning hum of swarming bees—that chorus of self-satisfied content.

Thus the palace ladies, being by nature and nurture of the whispering sort, as they tittered soft laughter, jangled their jewels, rustled their silken garments, so filled the air with echoes, that ears attuned to less mundane cadences might well have thought they heard behind the frivolous clamour a mighty "hush" to all the daintinesses, the reddened lips, the darkened eyes with which most women seek to secure their aim; that is the safe holding of the male from other females.

So, for the time, sex ramped over that poor victim to sex, Queen Arjamand, who died after nineteen years of wedded life when her fourteenth child was born.

Some of the women had brought a flower or two One, an old duenna, shed real tears as she deposited a tight packed posy of multicoloured flowers beside the screen behind which the embalmed body of Queen Arjamand would be laid on the morrow.

"She was good, none better," said the old retainer, "but she could have kept him without so many. I told her so once, but, see you, she was content, ay, and happy."

"So was he," assented a younger woman, "they say he near died when she left him."

There was a titter from a group of younger women.

"He hath consoled himself, as men do ever," said one of them.

And another, a tall *svelte* Georgian, tossed her head and frowned.

"Do they?" she asked. She was wondering if the man from whom she had been bought had consoled himself, and how much he had received for her.

"Traa!" said a third, answering the Georgian. "It matters little one way or the other; and, consolation or no, the Emperor is of the best. There are no sacks, but pensions to the discarded ones; so it must cost much, that and the building—but there! he is King indeed!"

So they chattered, and after a time they jingled back whence they came in their bedizened dhoolies, and the whispering dome was silent.

But the low chanting of versicles which had not ceased by day or by night these twenty years, ever since the embalmed body had found temporary resting-place in one of the corner buildings, went on as ever; a mournful cadence reaching far out into the still, moonlit night.

Shahjahan, as he sat in the Jasmine Balcony, could just hear it rise and fall; a low murmur, rhythmic, changeless, with a "hush" in it like the sound of a distant sea breaking upon a distant shore.

As he looked out, down the curve of the receding river, he could see beyond the turreted houses of the town, beyond a dark tope of trees, beyond the

tall spires of the cypresses in the Taj garden, those pearl-like bubbles of the clustering domes which still show so unearthly against the sky of an Indian night.

He looked, and he was satisfied. It was his dream, as he had dreamt it for more than twenty years; a dream of something he saw, but which could not touch his real life. Something which had never really touched it, even in those happy days of the past. Never! Never! For he and Arjamand had been man and woman, finding in that fact their highest happiness.

While the Taj?

A sudden overwhelming desire to see, to understand if he could, the beauty he had himself created, made him throw a white shawl over his royal raiment and go down to the palace door which gave on the river.

Giving the password he was outside in a moment.

"He hath the gait of the Emperor himself," said the sergeant of the guard sleepily, "but that is not for us folk! We have the password only."

Happy folk! A password and no responsibility!

It was not long before Shahjahan, half drugged by the pure beauty of his own creation, stood under the central dome where even his rapid, decisive steps were being turned to soft, lingering, whispering echo.

The air still reeked of attar of roses, but, so much of his life was spent in a similar atmosphere that he did not notice it, for his mind had reverted suddenly to another visit he had paid at night time to another mausoleum. To his father's. When from the shadows a tall figure, ghost-like, his father's widow, Nurjahan, had risen to say, "Trouble not the dead, O Shah-

jahan, with vain regrets! Confess not thy fault! I never told him and he never knew it! Let him rest in peace!"

Rest in peace! Ay! that was best. What good to tell her, Arjamand, what her insistent love had done? He saw it clearly now; it had made him a slave to the passion of sex, yet how could she help it? Was it not woman's nature? Was it not their absorbing desire for love which made them tempt men with sex at all times, all seasons? What would be the good of telling her *now* that love and sex were separate? He himself had learnt this vaguely, dimly. He had half seen that in this comingling lay one great cause of the world's unhappiness, the world's crime, the world's poverty! But she? How could one expect women to face facts that were caused by their own acts?

Poor Arjamand!

He uttered her name aloud—the name that had ever been almost a caress. It was as if he had called her to come back. Come back? No! she would be hurt, angry; for she had ever been jealous. She had made him swear he would never marry again—that he would never again have a living child to dispute with hers. She was quite right, and he had kept his promise and meant to keep it; but for the rest? She might have known; she ought to have known that to cozen a man's material love for twenty years, and then to bid him refrain from sexual satisfaction was cruel, unkind.

It was almost dark; for the one jewelled lamp that hung in the dome only sent a hint of light over arch and aisle; but he could outline the two rectangular screens, in one of which all that remained

of the beauty, the charm which had held him captive for long years would be laid on the morrow.

In the other, when his time came, he would be laid, but his time had not yet come! With a smile he tested if the scent of apples were still on his hands and found it strong.

Involuntarily he straightened himself, and, holding his head high, looked round him proudly.

Undoubtedly it was beautiful. Undoubtedly so long as the Taj endured, the name of Shahjahan would be remembered. The world would call it a memorial of wedded love—but it was not that. It was a memorial of perfect beauty. He stood looking at that half-seen beauty for some time; then turned and went back to the palace and its ladies.

And, as he went, the rhythmic rise and fall of the funeral chant went with him, lessening and lessening till naught remained but a regular beat as of waves on a sandy shore.

The wild shriek of the royal *nakarah* woke him in the women's apartments at dawn, when he rose as ever, alert, dignified; and, after spending two hours in ceremonial prayers, he emerged, a blazing sun of diamonds, to show himself to the populace; and so, a right royal figure despite a shaven head of mourning, and much beating of the breast, to head the procession which bore the remains of Queen Arjamand to their final resting-place, with due pomp, diligence and dignity.

So the day drew down to noon, and noon passing to night, the setting sun once more flushed the cold marble of the Taj to warm flesh.

CHAPTER XVI

"AT long last!" cried Dara joyously as he flung himself off his horse at the gate and ran—positively ran—towards Rana-dil who, seated on the steps of the summer-house, was busy with shallow trays putting layers of orange blossoms between layers of cotton wool; for since she had returned to Sarmad's garden she had made her living by distilling and selling such perfumes as are used by all at wedding times. And this being the season of orange blossoms she was at work upon them. There were so many of them in the garden, half-hidden under the dark burnished leaves, that the air was almost overburdened with their scent, and her hands, her dress, were laden with it.

She looked up smiling. What a boy this Heir Apparent was despite his advancing years; to her eyes scarcely a day older than when she had first seen him. His close-shaven face (for one of the unorthodox crimes at which Aurungzebe girded was refusal to grow a true Moslem beard) was smooth, unwrinkled; and his eyes were dancing with boyish delight as, breathless, he cast himself on the ground beside her and reiterated his words:

"At long, long last!"

Her smile grew soft and sweet as a mother's. The years had not been so kind to her as they had been to him. She was distinctly older, and yet, as

women of her type so often are, she was in a way better looking than she had been when quite young. Then her face had been overstrong; now it suited her years.

"Of a surety! 'Tis something important," she said half jesting, "to make my lord so youthful!"

His face fell in a moment. Till then he had forgotten something though on that something, in his opinion, everything depended. Now he remembered.

"Spoken truthfully!" he began gravely, "and that's why——" Here he paused, then went on more cheerfully—"Lo, 'tis ever better with thee to begin at the very beginning. Well, thou knowest how my father hath ever kept me tied by the heels to his tent-peg like a stolen horse?"

"'Tis because he loves thee," put in Rana-dil.

"Mayhap," he answered, "so sayeth my sister Jahanara, and sisters are oft right. And 'tis true; but it hath irked me. Am I not in my forties? Yet a campaign hath never come near me while Aurungzebe——" The speaker's expressive face showed vexation for a moment, then brightened as he went on: "But at long last my chance hath come! Thou knowest how my saintly brother hath twice been beaten back from the walls of Kandahar? But maybe thou knowest not how these reverses have angered my conquering father. Anyhow he hath planned a third expedition and lo—'tis most too good to be believed—he destines me for the command." He paused, a break in his voice of sheer excitement, jumped to his feet and began to pace up and down, his face working with emotion. "Yea!" he went on, "'tis beyond belief, if it can be compassed.

To beat where the godly generalissimo has been beaten, to show myself something more than a dutiful son, to prove myself something of a man——"

There was that in his tone which made Rana-dil interpose quickly:

"My lord hath consented to go—doubtless?"

He stopped his pacing, turned and looked at her, his face full of grave affection.

"That is as—others—choose," he said, then suddenly he was on his knees beside her. "Leave thy flowers for awhile, O most diligent," he said, trying to be light though his voice trembled a little. "See! I will hold thy hands from work, so thou *shalt* listen—and fairly!"

Thus for a second of silence they remained hand in hand looking into each other's eyes.

"It depends on one, Rana-dil," he said at last. "Now, listen patiently! Thou knowest—Nay! thou dost not, thou wilt not know, how all these years my power as the Emperor's chosen heir hath protected this garden? Thou carest not, perchance, to hear it, but had I not been guardian, thou wouldst have been in a sack—or worse—many times. Nay! I am not joking. 'Tis true, and in thy heart of hearts thou knowest it. Have I not ever said that a glass of wine on a man's face makes a bitter enemy? Then, mark you! he loves thee—and—'tis well to speak truth—his world, nay, mayhap all the world—Jahanara's for sure—deems thee my light o' love—and so thou art, sister of the bracelet! Thou hast shown me the way of love—thou hast lighted my path with it—thou hast——"

He had turned aside, as he was apt to do, from the subject; and she brought him back remorselessly.

"Perchance, brother," she said softly, "but of that, anon. What care we of the world's falsehoods?"

"True!" he put in, "but 'tis well to recognize the cause of jealousy. So, were I to be in Kandahar, and thou still here—alone—for Sarmad grows old, and is more crazy—God reward him!—than ever, 'twould go ill with thee. So I will not have it, sister of the bracelet, to whom I—as thy true knight—owe protection. Thou dost remember, dost not? the tale of Arthur and his knights which Father Buseo brought hither to translate for Sarmad? The tale of devotion without fee—of love without——?"

Once more he had left the direct path, and she brought him back.

"Yea, my lord, I do remember—and the eyes full of tears that listened. But there is no fear. Still, if it seems best to thee, Sarmad and I could hide—or we might go with thee—what thinkest thou of that?" There was eagerness in her voice.

He shook his head.

"Thou couldst not hide from Aurungzebe's cunning; nor could I guard thee from it on campaign. There is but one safe protection——" He paused, hesitated, then said slowly, "One only—as my lawful wife none—not even he—would dare to molest thee—it—it could not be."

His wife! She stared at him, startled; then shrank back, but he held her fast by the hands, bowing his head over them as if to avoid her eyes. "Shrink not! Shrink not, Clear Heart!" he said impulsively. "There is naught to affright thee—naught in mine eyes ever to affright thee as thou

wast once affrighted. That has gone—or if it hath not gone quite, since I am man and thou art woman —woman most dear——" He paused again, gave a faint sound, half curse, half blessing, half sob, half laughter. "God help me," he went on, "I know not, but this I know—desire shall not find resting-place in mine eyes. Dost remember Father Buseo's tale? Was it of Tristram—nay! not he—he loved—it was of Galahad—strange how those Western tales find entry to my very heart, and yet—yet I am—what am I not? Lo, I am nothing —and sometimes I feel as if I had gone astray——"

He lifted his face to hers: it showed discouraged, doubtful.

"Yea! I am nothing," he went on recklessly, "Aurungzebe speaks true. Yet, sister of the bracelet, this much is certain. My wife, my duly wedded wife must thou be—or I go not to Kandahar. Thine is the choice! I am content both ways."

Content! She could feel the strong pulse in his clasping fingers quiver under the strain of his nervous excitement, she could see his breath come fast, uneven—How could this man, all the dearer, all the more lovable because of his quick emotions, his eager response to imagination, to all things in life—how could he be content to see others reap the glory which he might have had?

Incredible! Impossible!

Was it even possible what he promised? Yes, so far as he was concerned. She could trust him. Those Western tales—how often he had quoted from them—would be his safe-guard; and it was true what he said—he was as nothing—swayed by every new-come breath—but never to anything

mean or ignoble—never! Never! Yea! she could trust him. But what of herself? During all the long years of their close companionship, that which she feared, which she scorned, had never raised its loathly head. But if the relationship were changed? What then?

"Impossible!" she cried hotly. "Thou art brother of the bracelet. 'Twould be vile to change."

"Change!" he echoed, his face losing its doubt and becoming veritably transfigured by ardent imagination. "There need be no change, there shall be no change. Have I not always loved thee? Have I not always trusted thee? And dost thou not love and trust me? Lo, there shall be no change, I swear it. We will not break the bond."

And with the words his two detaining hands brought hers together as he kissed them passionately.

She was on her feet in a second, shivering from head to foot at the touch of his lips, and all the womanhood in her, womanhood which she had stinted, thwarted, all those years cried out within her. "Why not? You love him, he loves you, what else in the whole wide world matters? Nothing."

The humming-birds were twittering over their search for honey on the orange blossoms, the scent of the carven flowers hung heavy in the air, the clasp of those held hands seemed to grow tighter and tighter. No! She could not trust herself.

"I will not be thy wife," she cried, aflame with indignation at herself.

"Then I go not to Kandahar, and leave thee here, unprotected, to Aurungzebe's embittered lust," he replied quickly.

She looked at him keenly. She knew his obstinacy

when it was roused. She saw—in a way she approved—the attraction which this unreal marriage had for his almost wild romanticism, his quite unbalanced wavering between Western and Eastern standards; but at the same time she rebelled against them, and her voice hardened as she said:

"There is no need to leave me here. As thou sayest, the world holds me a light o' love. Why not therefore treat me as one? In thy women's apartments, as thy reputed concubine, should I not be safe?"

He dropped her hands, and anger came to his face.

"That is not like thee, Clear Heart," he said quietly; then in a softer tone he added, "Wise as thou art, thou dost not understand, poor soul. Were I true Moslem that might be possible; but, as I told thee, I am nothing, nothing at all——"

Despondency had come to his voice. She realized, not for the first time, how urgent was this man's need of help. "But thy wife? Thy wife Nurmahal? What of her?" she asked sharply, feeling herself somehow entrapped.

His face cleared. "She will not mind. She, like all the world, knows of this garden. Then, see you, we have been married these four and twenty years. Our sons are grown men. 'Tis time, for sure, after the custom of the country that I marry again."

"But not one who has been common woman of the bazaar," she put in hastily on his growing optimism. "And thy father, the Emperor? He will never consent. I may not be harlot born, but I am harlot bred, and such are no reputable brides for royalty——"

The expressive face showed instant uneasiness. "That is true, for sure; but if I will not go to Kandahar without consent—as I will not—and if he desires me to command, persuasion may prevail—it shall prevail."

"Mayhap," she admitted almost impatiently, "but thy lady wife—I must see her first—I must explain——"

He laughed, positively laughed. "Surely, surely, but she will not understand. See you she is good Musuelmani—none better—and goodness itself—heaven send her long life—but she knows naught of Arthur and his knights, nor any of the Western knowledges which tear my soul to pieces as they do."

He looked rueful, and Rana-dil could not choose but smile. "But I *must* see thy wife," she protested somewhat feebly.

"Of a surety thou shalt see her," he assented joyfully. "So, that being settled, let us talk of preparation."

And they talked, soberly on her part, joyfully on his, until Sarmad, arriving from the city, was confronted with the disturbance which Rana-dil's absence would cause. He took it with extraordinary placidity, for, as the years had passed, he had grown less and less troubled by the impingement of things mundane upon himself, more and more occupied with things impersonal. As to the question of Rana-dil's safety if the Heir Apparent's protection were slackened by absence, he was emphatic.

He knew, better than she did, how much this unobtrusive supervision had conduced to the peace and safety of the garden. And he was equally

emphatic on the danger of Prince Aurungzebe's army of spies. Indubitably the removal as a legal wife to the zenana would be the best way of escape, and if Rana-dil thought she could put up with the seclusion for the time Dara would be on the campaign, that solved the question.

For the rest, he set aside the tie of brotherhood, the tie of marriage as quite trivial personal matters to be dealt with as folk chose. There was but one reality, the Self that saw, that heard, that touched, that loved or hated.

As for his own plans, he was tired of Delhi, he would go to Lahore, to the garden where the Wisest of the Wise had dwelt, where stood the tomb of the Heir Apparent's great-grandfather Jehangir—on whom be peace. There he would stop within touch of the Delhi palace, almost within touch of Kandahar should the Most High ever require his services. Or he would go on to Kandahar. The world—worse luck!—always held sick folk and sick babies, so there would be no lack of work. The mothers would bring their children to him as well in one place as in another; and he could chant his unwanted, his unregarded wisdom to them as before.

It was all so clear, so cut and dried that the other two could only look in each other's eyes and feel that so it was settled, that is to say if the family consent was not withheld.

Yet after Dara had left the garden—left it cheerfully with courteous promises for quick return—Rana-dil resumed her packing of orange blossoms doubtfully. Yet what else could she have done? She could not have faced seeing him, for her sake, refuse what she knew he had hungered for all his life,

but was she strong enough to face the alternative? She did not know.

So the day passed dully, uselessly.

Dara, meanwhile, with characteristic impetuosity, went straight to his father, where he met with absolute disbelief.

"What?" asked Shahjahan, astounded. "Thou desirest to marry the woman thou hast protected these years past in Sarmad's orange garden? In God's name wherefore?"

To which Dara could only reply that he feared for her safety. So question by question, it was wormed out of him that his special fear was Aurungzebe. Thus, in the end the whole tale of the glass of wine had to be told. It had one good effect. The humour of it tickled the Emperor mightily, and, his laughter infecting his son, the guffaws which followed bred good temper in both.

"Holy Prophet!" chuckled the father, wiping his eyes. "Would I had been there to see the saint and the sinner! 'Fore God, the jade must have courage—there is that in her favour—but for marrying? Thou must be mad on her—and yet 'tis long since thou hadst her—Yea! I remember—'twas when she nursed thy sister that thine eye fell on her; so something is owed her. Therefore if thou fearest for her safety—though listen you, sonling, to thy father's wisdom—if fortune or favour fails with womenkind a good sound pension is sufficient consolation for most—still if thou thinkest otherwise send her here to me—none dare touch my women—of that thou mayest be certain. What sayest thou?"

But Dara had nothing to say. He could not tell his father that such safety might be bought by

danger, that there was small difference between Aurungzebe's lust and Shahjahan's except that the latter was more constant, more inexplicable. He could only fall back on obstinate assertion that he would not put insult on the woman he loved, and that nothing but marriage would satisfy him. This he reiterated again and again, a certain fundamental feeling that, despite all unstable Western wisdom, the ancient ways, his father's ways, were the simplest making him obstinate; for he was a house divided against itself. Temperamently, all licence in sexual matters was distasteful to him while he admitted that it was normal and permissible according to Mohammedan religion and morality. So, gradually, the good humour caused by the saint's lapse passed on both sides, until hot words began and Dara, tactless and rash, said openly that if his father refused consent to his marriage he on his part would refuse the Kandahar command.

Shahjahan's anger at this was almost pitiable. Accustomed to autocratic authority on all sides, and also to implicit obedience from this, his favourite and much honoured son, he became almost speechless with rage, and, accepting the challenge, gave instant orders for the recall of Aurungzebe who had already started on a minor expedition elsewhere.

So the fat was in the fire, and it was a most indignant, a most crestfallen Dara who returned to pour his impotent wrath into Rana-dil's ear.

She was still busy with the orange blossoms, and she heard the tale quietly, being accustomed to his diplomatic failures, due mostly to his impetuosity, and his inveterate habit of believing every one was made after his own pattern. But the corners of her

really beautiful mouth set as she listened, for she recognized that something must be done, and at once, to remedy the blunder. If once Aurungzebe returned this was hopeless; so such outside aid as Dara suggested, the influence of his sister Jahanara or the Prime Minister, must be set aside in favour of direct action. The Emperor himself must be got at. But how?

It was late in the afternoon ere, after hours of cogitation as she sat methodically working away amid the heavy fragrance of the orange blossoms, she rose and, putting away the filled trays, stood for a moment on the marble steps looking out into the peace of the garden.

Sarmad, as usual, was away in his niche by the Mosque whence he dispensed material and spiritual help to all who consulted him. Dara she had sent to what she knew must be a fruitless errand to his sister.

So she was quite alone among the flowers and the birds. Alone, she realized; as she had been from her very birth. What was it—this inherited dislike to human touch? Did it date from the awful moment when her Rajput mother had known herself defiled by Mohammedan lust? The thought came to her at times, bringing with it such a tempest of wild indignation that the nails of her clasped hands almost dug into the flesh.

And now! Now she must brave such insult, such degradation. But there was no way out of it. It must be done. In no other way could she hope to get at her quarry.

In the years that had passed she had been able in various ways to put by money. Then there had been Dara's presents. Dara, always generous, so

hurt at refusal, so clever in substituting Sarmad for herself as receiver. All this—of considerable value—she tied up in one bundle. There was never any use in splitting up a bribe. Money did more good in a lump, and this lump must be Gulanar's the pander's—Gulanar who had grown older and fatter, but who had risen in her profession until she now stood at its head, a recognized if unofficial agent to the palace. And all these years she had been friendly to one, who doubtless, had bribed her fairly. That was the advantage of being square : you made friends even with the wicked !

The bazaars as she walked through them smelt inexpressively foul after the orange blossom's fragrance : but she could not help that. Life such as she saw around her, yea ! even what she knew at times lay within her, was inexpressibly foul. But it need not be so. One could watch the butterflies chase each other, the birds couple airily, the very dogs, hard hit by nature at their definite pairing time, forgetful of all else save the instinct of race—one could watch all this without a blush. But humanity ! Never an instant without the great Obsession.

And here in the harlots' quarters it obliterated all else. Even the noisome air from the slimy filth-laden gutters reeked of the musk that was used to deaden the odour of disease.

Yet she must go on ; she must brave all this, if she was to gain the Emperor's ear.

She found Gulanar somnolent, as usual. But her black eyes glittered in their rolls of fat eyelids as she saw the pile of coins and jewels.

" Thou askest much," she said, " but the bribe is

sufficient!" For with all her incalculable vices the woman had her sense of fairness.

And then she burst out into a greasy chuckle that shook her flabby flesh from head to foot. "Lo," she said half breathless, "have I not been at this trade these forty odd years, and yet have I not plumbed woman's nature. There is naught at which she will not grasp—she desires all things! Look at thee! Hadst not two king's sons, and must clutch at their father?"

"I desire to sing to the Emperor," said Rana-dil coldly.

"Traa!" chuckled Gulanar derisively, "but as it so happens luck favours thee! The Emperor hath been perturbed, and from the palace they request amusement for this evening. And the prettiest little wench I have hit on for years, whom I was keeping for such occasions, is laid low with fever. So thou canst go, for the sake of these"—her fat hands gloated over the pile of coins and jewels—"in her place. The Persian lady's dress is here, and none the worse, and thou art better looking now than in thy youth. Thou canst go duly muffled in the palanquin—and none be the wiser—to sing to the Emperor if so be thy pleasure! Art satisfied?"

"Yea," answered Rana-dil scornfully, "if thou art satisfied with thy vile bargain."

"Satisfied?" echoed Gulanar, resorting lazily to a pull at her opium drugged hookah. "And wherefore not? No bargain is vile where fair, honest money passes as it hath here. Hearken, woman, to the wisdom of one who knows—good money purifieth all things!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE full moon was flooding the marble of the Jasmine Balcony with almost unearthly whiteness; all the whiter because of the intense blackness of the cornered shadows. It was one of those Indian nights when from very excess of moonlight the distant buildings of a city seem to sparkle like faint stars. So it was with those ethereal domes and minarets of the Taj seen through the wide fretted arches of the Jasmine Balcony. The faint streak of the river showed like a curving snake through the blue haze which was India, and beyond India the world. A world that was hastening through space—whitherwards?

All things were at peace; all things were motionless; save the figure of the woman who waited beside the low silken divan set, as ever, so that it gave full upon the dream of the Taj. A low table, octagonal, inlaid, bore fruits and confections, spiced wine; so all was ready for distraction.

So was the man who, entering alone, paused at the sight of the woman who waited; for this was no coy shrinking beauty, no bold, assured mistress of her art.

"Who art thou, woman?" he asked, pausing. There was little astonishment in his cool, somewhat wearied voice; for blasé as he was with pleasures, those who pandered to them found the unexpected useful, and he was accustomed to surprise.

The figure which rose at the question, and swept the most graceful of salutations assured him at once of two things. The woman, though not beautiful, had charm, and she was no raw recruit to Court etiquette.

"The Most High sees one Rana-dil of the Harlot tribe whom the Most Noble's son, Dara Shekoh, Heir Apparent, desires to marry," came the reply in a voice round, rich, musical utterly, which appealed instantly to Shahjahan's instinctive love of pure perfection.

Real surprise held him silent for a second; then he asked angrily:

"How camest thou hither—harlot?"

The answer came quick. "By what else but by bribes? As the Most High must know, in a bawdy house, such as the Most Noble's, bribes can win all."

His wrath rose; he took a step towards her of sheer passion, then her cool, collected air made him control himself.

"If thou darest to call it bawdy house," he said thickly, "art not afraid for thyself—dost not fear what happens, what shall happen in such places?"

She gave a low, scornful laugh, again musical utterly to that artistic instinct from which he could not escape.

"Afraid?" came the quick answer. "What! Should I fear that which my poor body could spew forth from it as a dog spews carrion?—as thou, O Shahjahan, hath spewed forth love—real love from thy life—yonder!" Her arm as she pointed to the distant Taj showed in the soft light, faultless in its contours; but it roused no thrill of covetous admiration in the Emperor's mind—he was too

staggered by her boldness; he felt his very anger dying down. He was no fool; he could recognize truth when he heard it. And this was true. The love such as he had had for Arjamand was no longer part of his life. So the shaft struck home, though with a bitter laugh he fought against allowing its entrance by saying:

"And thy lover—my son—what would he say if—as thou desirest——"

She cut him short.

"Thou couldst not harm me—myself—and true love counts not the body! Hearken, oh! Shahjahan, Emperor of all the Indies, and learn from thy son. He hath spewed lust from his life, even as thou hast spewed love—he would not care."

For all his autocratic power Shahjahan felt helpless.

"Thou art bold, woman," he said after a pause, "but that I knew—— Why didst come hither—because thou art hot to marry——"

Again she cut him short. "I came to sing to my lord, as I have sung before."

"Before?" he echoed almost dreamily; for the unexpectedness, the unconventionality of the whole experience was beginning to assail that love of change, of adventure, which was so marked a feature in his race. "I remember not——"

"If the Most High will rest himself awhile," she said quietly, "I will recount to him the tale, and sing the song I sang! Mayhap it may bring respite from care, since the day hath been full of trouble for my lord."

"What trouble?" he asked, though he knew that the music of that beautiful voice was indeed soothing him.

"The trouble of anger against what we love," she replied softly, "the trouble that eats away the heart-strings, so that the music of life is dumb. Let me bring it back, my lord, with song and speech."

He could not forbear a smile at the very certainty of her words. "Thou canst try," he said, seating himself amongst the cushions of the divan.

And she at his feet, taking up the *vina* which lay on the ground beside her, gently twangled its strings to a background of harmony after the manner of the professional reciter and began chanting the history of her life. She chanted sadly of her baby-hood in the camp of the Harlot tribe, humorously of her beatings and starvings because she would not dance; wittily of her lessons in singing outside the Jesuit Church, and when she came to her first meeting with Prince Dara, it lost nothing of its charm, its tenderness in the telling. Shahjahan sat veritably entranced by what was, in those days, a recognized form of entertainment. Indeed, when she paused a moment in the recital, he signed to her to go on with the words:

"Thou doest it well."

So, heartened by his praise, for she knew him good judge, she passed on lightly to the crazy atheist's help, and finally to how she had chanced to turn somersaults in the face of the Most High . . .

"And thou didst sing," he interrupted quickly. "Yea! I remember now. 'Twas in the beginnings of my work, and the sunset, a red sunset streamed in the sky! Thou hadst a ragged petticoat—— Yea; sing it again!"

So once again she sang the song of love, and he sat and listened, while outside in the moon-

light the completed work stood, as it will stand for all time, a monument to that love—that trustful, confident, supreme love that is not of the body, but the soul.

"And thou didst kick thy heels in my very face then as thou hast kicked them now," said the Emperor lightly, with a laugh when she had finished.

And, looking at him, she saw clearly the likeness which Dara bore to his father; it softened her unexpectedly to this man whose life she had hitherto loathed; whom she now pitied.

He leant back against his cushions, and gave her back her look. "Thou art not ill favoured," he remarked bluntly, "and thou recitest exceeding well. There is more—tell it."

So once more she set the *vina* twangling and told him of her life in the house of Chambeli the procuress. And here she spared him nothing. Every note of her contempt, her abhorrence of those who frequented the common women, rang loud through every incident, until, forced to it by conviction, he interrupted her to say:

"Thou mayest be harlot bred, but thou art not harlot born."

Then indeed her voice thrilled him unwillingly as she said in even tones:

"There my lord speaks truth. I was born of the lust of his race on the outraged virtue of a Rajput maid."

He started up. "My race?" he echoed. "What meanest thou, woman?"

She faced him squarely. "Thy race, my lord. It matters not if it was brother, cousin, uncle. 'Twas a Mogul prince, a conquering prince, who, despoiling

my mother, brought me into the world. Is it wonder therefore that I hate the very name of lechery; that to me the life of such as thou is abomination?"

"Yet thou wouldst fain marry my son and thou art hot on it as women ever are." He spoke straight, forgetful for the time of their relative positions, simply as man to woman.

"There my lord mistakes," she replied quickly. "I desire it not at all."

"What, then, dost thou desire so much as to risk —what thou hast risked?"

"I desire that my lord's son Dara should command at Kandahar; that his brother should not have his place."

Shahjahan gave a short laugh. "So, thou wouldst, like all women, cozen authority, to thine own profit?"

"Yea," she replied coolly, "for the good of one I love."

His laugh lengthened. "So! thou dost love him, yet desire not to have him! Verily thou art true woman, though such I deemed thee not."

"If the Most High will only consider," she answered with suave tone, "he will see that, having by repute been for long years mistress of thy son's youth, there is no reason for me to desire him!"

"There is the position, woman!" he put in quickly. "And thy sons——"

She interrupted him with a sarcastic smile.

"Dara hath two grown sons, and there are already enough heirs to the throne; more than even my lord had to wipe out ere he came to his father's kingdom."

The stinging shaft of allusion to the fate of his brothers struck home. Shahjahan's face darkened,

he almost rose in wrath, but he controlled himself with the words:

"Thou art over bold, woman, but let that pass . . . Are there not dresses and jewels? Such things as tempt women when age comes upon them."

It was her turn to laugh contemptuously. "Those will I never have," she said. "Never!"

"Thou canst not help it, fool," he answered. "Once thou art in the palace, palace ways will control thee."

She looked at him and laughed again. "What! Thinkest my lord that his slave will brook seclusion?"

His lip set. "I tell thee, woman, that if Shahjahan desires it thou shalt."

This time their eyes met, both pairs full of determination.

"And I tell my lord I will not. What! To live without a breath of God's clear air? Not to be able to beguile the birds, the squirrels. To have no joy in life save the drinking of spiced wine, the possible intrigue of a lover, no occupation save the bickering with other women, the trouncing of slave girls! Nay! my lord, did I not see enough of palace life, when I helped the blessed Princess back to life, not to shun it if I could."

The mention of his beloved daughter softened Shahjahan's natural annoyance at Rana-dil's vivid description of the life led by his ladies, and he changed the subject deftly by saying:

"Thou hast not told me of that; go on with thy recitation."

So she went on, turning many an incident to laughter that had been born in tears, many a happening from a jest to sober earnest, and in all ways

striving to make the man who listened understand the tie which had grown up between her and his son. Of the *ram rakkhi* he approved, interpolating that his grandfather Akbar had been fast bracelet-brother to a Rajput princess; and, even after all these years, anything done by Akbar was almost sacrosanct in Shahjahan's eyes. Thus, bit by bit she told the tale, and the silence, save for the rise and fall of her musical voice, seemed to grow between them, bringing perfect peace.

"So that is what thou callest love," he said when the even measure of her chant ceased. "'Tis not the love of man for woman—'tis the love of gods for gods!"

"Mayhap it is," she answered softly, "for all that 'tis true; for lo, I will sing thee a song that Sarmad made."

And with the words, sharp modulations rang from the *vina* preluding her voice at its fullest:

"Give me thy lips, sweetheart, I long to taste
Their warmth, their sweetness! Oh, make haste
Love dies without a kiss
Give me thyself! the gift that cannot pall
My flesh craves thine! Give me thine all.
Love dies without caress!
God! but thy lips are chilly as a stone
As marble is thy flesh that should be one
With mine in an embrace
What ails thee? Art thou dead? Or has Love flown?
Oh, no! Love's fire is hottest when alone
Without kiss or caress
Love touches not; it gives not, nor doth take,
For it is God. By Him it sleeps or wakes
All else it hath forgot."

The wild weird tune ceased and there was silence until from his lips came the echoed words :

" All else it hath forgot."

Then, suddenly, the Emperor rose from his cushions, tall, sinewy, dignified, and clapped his hands.

On the instant a servant appeared, and the order came sharp and stern :

" See this lady to her home with all care and honour, and send a speedy horseman to recall the message that hath been sent to Prince Aurungzebe Mahomed."

Then, turning to the singer of the song with that courteous grace for which his name stands still renowned, he said in even tones :

" Lady, thy request is granted. Prince Dara commands at Kandahar."

She said no word of thanks, so far these two had grown to understanding of each other. She only swept another courtly salutation, wrapped herself in her close white veil, and followed the servants from the balcony.

When she had gone the moonlight shone on the untouched fruit and wine, the scarce ruffled cushions of the divan, and the tall commanding figure of the man who in the wide central archway stood looking out on the distant Taj.

So he stood for a space. Then suddenly the rigidity of his figure seemed to melt, he sank to his knees, his arms outspread into the void, his empty hands seeming to reach out beyond the world as a cry rose into the air, and echoed beyond the light-hidden stars :

" Arjamand ! Arjamand ! "

CHAPTER XVIII

DARA meanwhile had been trying his luck with his sister Jahanara only to find her more indignant than his father. Her outcry at the very idea of marriage was loud.

"That the girl did me good service in the past, I admit freely," said the little lady, her dimpled, beringed fingers fluttering with excited indignation, "but that is no reason why thou shouldst marry a common woman of the bazaar——"

"She is no common woman," protested Dara in a fume of indignation.

"If she be not, she hath anyhow been thy woman for years past, brotherling! 'Tis no use denying it. So, as I told thee when thou wert first mad on her, the place of concubine is more than sufficient honour for such as she. And now, when thou sayest thou art not mad on her, to speak of marriage! Truly it must be her fault! She hath bewitched thee for sure. Let me send for Jani, the witch finder—she hath infallible remedies. Only last week she freed my musician, Dalara, from boils."

"'Tis not boils I am suffering from, sisterling," laughed Dara, ready as ever to be amused by trifles.

"What then?" retorted the little lady with ruffled dignity. "Are the two plagues not the same? Do they not both come from the devil? And doth not thou suffer from a devil of a woman who will

give thee no peace? Even as a boil! Lo, brotherling, when I had that one on my fore-arm last hot season —the devil comes most when the climate suits him— I slept not for nights and nights. Let me send for Jani—she will free thee."

Whereupon Dara, sure on this ground of sympathy, explained as best he could his fear of Aurungzebe's vengeance for the glass of wine, and how, for long years the orange garden had been guarded from evil. The recital assuaged the little lady's wrath against Rana-dil somewhat. She clapped her podgy little hands and tittered her amusement over Aurungzebe's discomfiture.

"Would I had been there to see!" she cried. "And the wicked one! the hypocrite! to drink wine and be a saintly follower of the Prophet—Oh, fie on him!"

"There be other faithful ones who drink spiced wine," said Dara slyly.

Princess Jahanara drew herself up with much dignity. "'Tis little wine and much spice," she said coldly.

So there, with an ill grace, Dara had to let the matter rest for the time.

But, the very next morning, the Emperor sent for him to the Private Audience Hall, and without preliminary said shortly:

"Thou canst marry a common woman if thou thinkest fit; but thou goest to Kandahar. Make thy preparations forthwith."

Dara could hardly believe his ears; but his father cut short even his thanks. And Rana-dil, when— overjoyed—he told her of the consent, was equally curt.

"So far 'tis well," she said, "but I must see my lord's wife first. That was in the bond."

The joyous face fell; its reception by Princess Jahanara had not been promising. "'Twill be of little use," he said argumentatively. "A co-wife is ever a co-wife unless she be chosen by the first one. And Nurmahal hath sense and is good indeed. So 'twere best left alone."

"Then will I not consent to the marriage," she replied still more curtly. In truth she was feeling sore, vaguely outraged despite her success with the Emperor, and, also, vaguely annoyed with Dara for his obstinacy.

So, with a sigh, also of vague resentment at her persistency Dara tried to arrange a meeting; but it was not so easy. To the high principled, strictly orthodox, and for the most part very religious ladies of the real inner circle of royalty, there was nothing reprobable in a husband, a brother or a son having as many illicit connections as he chose. The trouble, the disgrace lay in the proposition of marriage. Thus Nurmahal, Dara's wife, gentle and good though she was, withstood her husband's request that she should grant an interview to Rana-dil with the utmost primness.

"Thou canst not righteously ask me to meet a common, unknown woman of the bazaar," she said with great dignity. "If the Most High, the Emperor hath, as thou sayest he hath, given his consent to the marriage I say naught against it; but, until such marriage hath given her due position, I see her not."

And Dara had to admit the justice of her position; so, manlike, he avoided disclosing it to Rana-dil as

long as possible. In truth, since the expedition was to start at once, he was, if anything, overburdened with preparation.

Even nowadays, the rapidity with which news spreads in India is ever a marvel; it competes, almost, with wireless, and before the arrival of that latest wonder it was almost eerie. So when Rana-dil went back to Gulanar's house to return the Persian lady's dress, she found the prostitutes' quarter a-buzz with the news that one who in the past had belonged to it was to be raised to honour.

Gulanar herself sniggered over it wickedly. "Lo," she said, "if all knew what we two know of secret visitation they would perchance understand better. But thou didst ask a good price, Rana, and, if the philtre they say Jani the witch finder is to prepare to rid the son of his bewitchment fails its purpose, thou canst fall back on the father."

Rana-dil made no answer; there never was any use in answering such vile stuff; but as she went on through Harlot-town she overheard more of like talk. One begarlanded and bescented woman of like age to herself whom she remembered as the beauty of the place gave a scornful salutation, which merged into a loud remark to her neighbour that it should not be difficult to free the Heir Apparent from spells; to which another called across the narrow alley that it was so, though those who favoured faith and Prince Aurungzebe might desire ill to the infidel; whereat a lazy trollop of a girl yawned loudly.

"Had I my choice," she said, "of the two, give me the Heir Apparent. He hath a laugh in him, and with the other even his voice says its prayers."

There was a giggle of assent from the balcony.

Rana-dil as she passed along, close veiled, was aware of the gossip; but she paid no heed to it; such talk was part and parcel of the place, a place where the natural was stifled by the artificial, where sex perverted to lust reigned supreme.

A filthy alley sprang sideways from the narrow, tortuous bazaar, led down into the Christian quarter, and showed sprawling figures on the roadway, asleep, half drunk from the spirits which the followers of Christ were alone allowed to distil, the penalty for others, be they Moslems or Hindus, being death. Here the rank smell of steamy stills befouled the air, and drifting with the southern breeze, mixed with the musky reek of Harlot-town.

She hastened through it as fast as she could, only pausing for an instant beside Jani the witch-finder's balcony to wonder why two respectable men, whom she knew as staunch believers in God and his Prophet, should be conferring with the most evil character in all the bazaar.

So back to the peace of the orange garden, where, after a time, Dara arrived in a great hurry to be off again.

"'Tis no use, sister," he said, "thou hadst best be kind and leave it for awhile, for see you, as indeed is but natural, the palace women are up in arms since they heard my father had given his consent. 'Tis the lesser fry mostly; the royal ladies have at least dignity; but these women whom my father favours—God knows why—have it that I am bewitched—and so I am, kind one! bewitched by those Western tales and thee; Heaven alone knows what resting-place they find in my soul. Lo, Rana-dil!

at times I feel as if Buseo had indeed baptized me Christian, so far am I from my own people, my own creed."

And then with one of his sudden changes of *venue* he had drawn the *ram rakkhi* from his pocket and shown her how the button had come off, wrenched away from the loop in one of his hurried, impetuous leaps from his horse.

"Thou canst mend it for sure," he said confidently, "but I cannot wait for it now, see you; for if I go not at once to those accursed Frank artillerymen, Aurungzebe will get them. See you, he hath offered them an extra tot of spirit every day! Yea! he hath; faithful follower of the faith though he be. So I must needs double the bribe at least. Before God! those Christians drink deep; but they aim not straight without spirits—that is why Great-grandfather Akbar gave leave for them to distil their own liquor—as thou knowest, 'tis death to Hindu or Mohammedan."

So he was off, leaving Rana-dil with a certain distaste staring at the brother's bracelet which lay on the marble steps beside her. It had brought trouble. Without it Dara would have been, mayhap would be, safer. So they thought him bewitched. That would be a handle for intrigue against him, and she knew enough of palace life to be sure that cabal would be rife.

She felt inclined to destroy the symbol of the tie between them and leave him free; but would he, really, be better without her than with her, even if she was a tie?

So Sarmad returning at sunset from his daily self-imposed task at the Mosque found her glooming

amid the growing shadows, with the *ram rakkhi* on the step beside her. His dull blue eyes noticed it instantly, and he took it up, saying tentatively:

"So, he hath given it back to thee. Wherefore?"

She did not look round, but answered coldly:

"Ay, he hath given it back!" At the moment she scarcely seemed to care if he had, or if he had not.

So silently they sat for a space side by side saying nothing, till moved by sudden curiosity she turned to look at him. He was sitting still as if carved in stone, his hand holding the *ram rakkhi* drooping between his knees, a look of intense vision in his dull blue eyes.

"Master, what seest thou?" she asked rapidly, for experience told her at once that, for the moment, Sarmad saw what others could not see. "What seest thou, master?" she asked again almost in a whisper, knowing of old that it was well not to distract the seer from what he saw.

There was a long pause. Then his voice came quick and vibrant:

"They are busy in Jani the witch-finder's house. Yea! they are very busy. There be so many compounders, from east, north, west and south; but the south is the strongest poison. Yea! it is mixed and he will drink it, he will drink it to-night and he will not go—he will not go."

There was another long pause.

"Go whither?" she asked quietly, though her pulses were beating, her breath coming quick.

"Whither he desires to go—Yea! he will go to death's door instead—unless——"

Once again silence fell, a long silence.

"Unless what?"

"Unless she tells him at once."

"Tells who?"

There was a faint movement as if sight were growing confused. It almost seemed as if no more could be said; but at last words came, halting, scarce heard.

"He who grieves—and—lives—he who—loves and—builds—He who hath—all things—yet—hath naught—because—because—because——"

The voice trailed away into lasting silence. He had been sitting, his head supported on one hand, the other holding the silken bracelet hanging between his knees. Now the slack fingers relaxed, losing their nerveless hold, the bracelet slipped to the ground, and, as if the touch of it, and that only, had brought sight to the dull blue eyes the lids closed over them, the head sank lower and the seer slept.

Rana-dil was on her feet in a second. It was not the first time that she had seen Sarmad clairvoyant. Oft-times he gave folk useful warnings. Had he not seen the "Hopewell" on the rough sea? And now, what did this warning mean? "*Who grieves and lives, who loves and builds—who hath all things*——" A word picture of Shahjahan! The Emperor! He must be told—but what?

Suddenly it came to her. Jani—the philtre—the south—Aurungzebe on the Deccan—"*tell at once.*" She snatched up the *ram rakkhi*, slipped it on to her wrist with a knot, almost without thinking, and was off. Then thought came to her. She must see the Emperor at once; but how? She had no money left for bribes; besides that could not be

done twice. Yet she must get entry to the palace; but how? Her mind ran hopelessly from plan to plan, finally settled on an off-chance. The river which ran under the palace walls, after many bends and curves, skirted the orange garden in a back water. Here she had oft-times spent hours, for she was an expert swimmer. Could she make her way along the bank to a sandy spit just below the palace? thence swim to gain the wide string-course which ran round the walls marking flood height? Above the string-course, but perhaps not beyond her reach, since she was still supple beyond most, there were embrasures wide enough perchance to let her squeeze through. Once inside she must trust to luck—and herself—that bribe always remained. She could have done it easily as a girl: could she do it now? Or stay! The river was but at half flood. There would be no need for her to swim. She could mayhap gain the string-course at the back, there was a tree on the moat. So, she could wear the dancing girl's dress she still had put away, tarnished and crumpled no doubt, but if she gained entrance it would be useful—a sign that she had a bribe. So, covering the scarlet and gold with a modest white veil, she was gone long ere the sleeper woke to wonder what had happened. It was already almost dusk so she could lose no time; but she must avoid notice and the sentry by the river bastion. She eluded both and found herself safely in the moat. Oh, for the days when she was the best acrobat in the camp, when her dress was scanty, but she wound the white veil tightly round her, brought its ends *lunghi* fashion to the emblems of loose drawers, so succeeded in gaining the string-course at last.

Now, please God and his Prophet, none might see her edging her way along it! Once on the river front she was comparatively safe. But the embrasures were higher up than she had thought. She would have to jump for a handhold. If she failed, it was failure indeed, since, though the river was below, it would be almost impossible to gain the string-course again.

Once! She just grazed the sill; but mercifully her feet found foothold, and she tried again. This time she all but lost balance and a wild cry for her childhood's art swept through her. Again!

This time she had it, though with bruised and tingling fingers. Still, of old, she could have hung on easily and wormed her supple body upwards by the grip of her feet on the wall.

Why not now? Why not? She let go one hand to find firmer hold, then the other.

Now!

Her knee was on the sill at last. The next minute only the embrasure remained. Could she get through? Yes! with a squeeze which left her absolutely breathless, she was in a dark gallery. She paused to undo her veil and let her fluttering, crumpled skirt loose once more. In the palace, thanks to the Emperor's tastes her womanhood was in her favour.

Then she went on. At the corner, where the gallery met a wider corridor, stood a janitor! Thank God, a man, not a woman! Men could be tempted: did she not know by experience how easy it was! A kiss, a promise, a flirt of the full petticoat, an indecent gesture? She had the whole art at her finger-tips, and she must, she would get through. And she got through at less expense than she had feared.

"On my return," she called back, eluding his grip at last with a smart blow full in his face, and speeding forward like a lapwing, he far behind her, half stunned and blinded by the unexpectedness of the blow.

Whitherward she did not know; but somewhere—surely O God most merciful!—somewhere not far from the Emperor's private apartments! A flight of stairs, another corridor.

Another janitor—this time a woman! Was it to be failure after all? Or could she slip through?

No! The woman's arms were like a vice, and the man was coming up behind swiftly—failure! failure!

Then suddenly a last chance came to her, and lifting up her voice to its fullest she burst into Palestrina's "Gloria." It was the first thing that came into her mind, and the triumphant sound of it echoed through gallery and corridor. But only for an instant. A door opened, and as if framed by the lintel the Emperor's tall commanding figure stood revealed.

Not failure, but success!

"Who sings?" came the query in the Emperor's loud, strident voice.

A minute or two afterwards, crouched at his feet, she had finished her hurried tale, doubtful even while she told it if there were sufficient foundations for the superstructure her suspicions had raised upon them. The Emperor said not a word during her recital: she could not gather from his face what he thought. Therefore it came on her with a shock when she heard the order come quick on her last words:

"Bring one Jani the witch-finder hither with all

speed with all her belongings—bottles, drugs, everything. Leave naught behind; and bid the chief eunuch apprise me of the exact hour at which she is expected in the zenana—that she is so, I have already learned."

There was an instant mumble of obedience and they were alone, in the Emperor's most private apartment; a dark room guiltless almost of window, but lit by a seven-light candelabra that burnt scented oil. The silken cushioned divan showing where Shahjahan had been resting stood on one side in the shadow.

He looked at the woman, crouching at his feet for a moment; then with impatient gesture cast himself among the cushions once more.

"Sing on!" he commanded. "Mayhap the devil will not like it; and cover up that damned dress of thine. Why didst put it on—to tempt, for sure. Sing on, I say."

So she sang. At first a trifle tremulously, for she knew herself in the presence of one whose autocratic power was overwhelming, who could do as he chose and, brave as she was, to know that outrage and death might be hers, without anyone being the wiser, was paralysing. She scarcely chose what she sang. Instinct told her to avoid repetition, to go on from novelty to novelty. After a time her mind began to work. Since Jani had been requisitioned for the women's apartments that evening, she, Rana-dil, had not come an instant too soon, if her suspicions were well founded; but if they were not? It is true she had heard talk of a philtre in the bazaar, but philtres might be innocuous. Then, what would Shahjahan do, and how could he find out?

This question was persistent when, with many cries of protest, the witch-woman was dragged into the room followed by an assortment of necromantic paraphernalia—monkeys' skulls, stuffed rats and lizards and an assortment of bottles and baskets. She was a big lump of a woman whose flesh, once comely, had bulged in the wrong places.

"Peace! Nay," said the Emperor, cutting short her whining snivel for justice, "naught will happen to thee if thou art honest. Listen! Thou hast prepared a philtre for the Heir Apparent. Where is it? Show it me!" His keen eyes were on the evil face following its every shade of expression as he spoke. "What! Thou wouldst rather not," he went on, "then must we find it." So, turning to the chief eunuch, he queried sharply, "Did she try to hide aught? No—then that basket yonder—was it ready packed?" His eyes were still mercilessly on the evil face, watching its every flicker of expression. "That small phial—No, not that one—the other—give it me."

So, for an instant the Emperor and the witch-finder looked at each other; if indeed on her part that could be called a look which was rather an agonized shrinking from sight.

He took a step towards her, holding out the phial. "Drink!" he said quietly, and at the word a yell of fear burst from the woman's lips. "Make her drink it," came the order, in a still more quiet voice.

Rana-dil gave a sort of sob, covered her eyes, and bowed her head to her very knees. She could not look; but it was no use to stop her ears—she could not shut out knowledge of the horror that was

happening. She knew, and she was powerless—powerless even to escape.

The yells ceased at last; the chokings, the gurglings died away; there was a gasp, a horrid sob—then silence, and on it the Emperor's voice came undisturbed, indifferent:

"'Tis a quicker poison than the stuff Bhawani sells. If there is more of it, see that it be saved."

Rana-dil opened her eyes. The fat form of the witch-finder was still quivering; the attendants stood beside it in obeisance awaiting further orders. She stood up clutching her veil together.

"I would go," she murmured chokingly, "I must go."

"Take the woman to the entrance gate, and set her free. She hath done good service," came the Emperor's voice.

She staggered as she went; he stood calm and there was almost a smile on his face as he turned with commands to his attendants.

It was a bare hour afterwards that the select party of palace ladies, assembled in their Private Audience Hall, were surprised by a most unexpected interruption and, at the moment, a most unwelcome one—for they were somewhat nefariously employed.

"The Emperor craves admission."

Refusal was impossible; it was not a request, but an order; so, as hastily as might be, all that could be concealed was hidden, monkeys' skulls and stuffed rats huddled under cushions, the scented brazier thrust on one side, Jani's assistant—Jani herself at the last moment having been reported ill—disguised under an orthodox veil; and the ladies

seated themselves with due regard to etiquette; though the breath of some of them, Roshanara Begum and others of her following for instance, came fast with apprehension as to what this unexpected visit might portend.

For in an Eastern Court, if intrigue was universal, so was the fear of detection.

The Emperor entered, escorted by his female guards and attendants who bore a tray filled with cups and a large iridescent glass bottle. He gave a brief salutation and passed to the cushions hastily placed for him.

There was a murmur of blessings, half-audible, from the ladies; but none dared speak until the Lord and Master gave the signal. This he did suddenly and his words, courteous, suave, seemed to cut the incense laden air and bring reality to the scene.

"The Emperor," he said, "is loath to disturb his household, but it hath been brought to his notice that 'tis the pleasure of his ladies to administer to his son, the Heir Apparent, a philtre that shall rid the Prince of the malign influence from which he is deemed to suffer. Now, this pleases not the Emperor, who hath come hither to forbid the administration; but, as the removal of malign influences is wholesome for all mortals, and might be specially useful here, where of late there has been over much evil conspiracy, he proposes that the philtres of which Jani—who hath blabbed the whole secret—hath provided sufficient, as his ladies will see, should be drunk by those present."

He paused, his watchful eyes noting the varying expressions of the faces before him.

"'Tis so far innocuous," he went on quietly, "at least so I am assured, that it kills not at sight save those of extreme guilt; while those of lesser blame suffer more leisurely; and those who meant no evil may be safe——" He hesitated and a repressed smile came to his face as he looked to his eldest daughter and added, "with the minor plague of boils."

Jahanara Begum was alert in a second. "If the Most Noble alludes to me," she said, drawing up her little figure with dignity and as it were ruffling her feathers in defence of her devotion, "he knows that I would die a thousand deaths to save my darling brother from disgrace, so let him bid the slaves prepare my cup."

But Roshanara, her sister, had changed colour, though she, following suit, professed readiness to drink, if the Most High really designed the foolishness; whereat Shahjahan's smile had grown scornful. But there were others who drew back from the proposition as though from a poisonous snake, and protested loudly.

These the Emperor silenced by the remark that they must remember that refusal to drink would show disbelief in the compounder's assurance that to innocence the draught would be innocuous.

It was an almost inconceivable scene. The one man, autocratic, arrogant, secure in absolute power; a word and every woman in the room could have been put in a sack and drowned.

"Slaves, fill the cups and pass them round. Let none drink until I say '*Bismillah*,'" came his inexorable voice.

There was a moan; one of the party had fainted.

"Remove her, slaves, gently—the poor creature hath no courage. What thou too, Amina?" he added as shrieking hysterics began, "Let her go too, slaves; she hath been tested. Now, ladies, *Bismillah!* There is no fear for the virtuous."

There was a minute of dire confusion. Some, like Princess Jahanara and her faction, drank scornfully. Roshanara more dubiously; but one or two failed altogether, their trembling hands refusing to raise the cup. And on all the Emperor's eye was watchful.

"So!" he said at last. "May the Most Powerful apportion the results."

Then suddenly he burst into laughter, loud and long.

"Ladies," he said, rising, "excuse my mirth and the trick. The drink is naught but pure water: yet have I learnt something from its administration."

CHAPTER XIX

IN the Name of God!

From that unworthy one Roshanara Begum of the House of Timur to her God-favoured brother

Aurungzebe Mohammed

Greeting!

As is doubtless already known to him, the scandal concerning Jani, the witch-finder, and the philtre that was designed for our brother Dara grew to large proportions, but praise be to God, passed over without harm to any save the woman herself, and to two ladies of the circle on whom the Emperor played his unworthy trick. Of these one hath been withdrawn from full allowances, and the little fool Amina (whom my God-favoured brother exalted by his notice) hath been married off to a mere captain of twenty-five who, they say, beats his many wives. This should give her a lesson as to the behaviour of real ladies. This unworthy one herself hath regret she gave not so quick a challenge as her sister Jahanara, who hath risen in favour, if possible, thereby. It looked, at one time, as if discoveries might be made, but praise again to God, the prudence of agents, and the known saintliness of the Heaven favoured One prevailed, and folk began to believe that it was all a joke of the Emperor's, since it was represented that Jani died of the Great Sickness, as indeed might

well be. Then the happenings after the wedding withdrew attention. Of this, doubtless, also the saintly one hath heard, yet do I give details such as those outside the palace society cannot acquire. Wherefore none know, but the Emperor, after playing his trick, made great point of a wedding such as was most unfitting a groom who is no better than an infidel and the bride a common prostitute from the bazaar. Every ceremonial was gone through, and we of the innermost circle had to swallow our pride and attend with ill grace. All save Nurmahal, who is a true saint, and made no complaint. So there were singings (praise be, the woman herself was silent for her voice to my ears is as caterwauling) and prayers and celebrations and scatterings of gold and jewels. Everything to which a virtuous woman hath right. The groom himself, who had arranged to start on his expedition on the morrow (showing by that how truly it was witchcraft, since he thought nothing of his bride), was scented and oiled, the marriage bed decked with flowers—never was such fuss for so unworthy a couple. And in the end, as my lord doubtless hast heard, the woman disappeared! When the groom entered the bridal chamber there was naught but a pile of the fine clothes she had discarded, the jewels and—so some folk say, though Dara keeps his own council—a slip of paper on the clothes to say they irked her, and that she sought freedom in the river, which, as is known to my lord, runs round the balcony. And in the river was found her veil, so doubtless she drowned; though her body hath not yet been found; it was likely eaten by crocodiles which are numerous. Thus we are gladly quit of an unwanted companion, and

Dara, methinks, of an unwanted wife, for truly, after the first, he seemed to forget more than did the Emperor, who was much perturbed. As my lord will understand, the gossips have many wild tales, and some hint that the Most High, becoming enamoured of the woman himself, had her spirited away; but God alone knows truth. Meanwhile the Heir Apparent (in place of one far more worthy) is on his way by forced marches to Lahore, and so on to Kabul itself, whither the Emperor and the Court move next week, thus to be close by Kandahar should Dara, as is likely, make some mistake. Such precaution would not have been needed had the God-favoured One been given command. Yet hath the infidel made much preparation. He hath filched away the Frankish artillerymen, whom thy friend and ally, Mir Jumlah (may his lot be exalted!) had engaged to thy service, bribing them with much spirits, and he hath openly insulted the worthy gentleman by imitating his gait and in other unseemly ways. In fact there is no end to his iniquities. He hath taken the arch infidel, Father Buseo with him, and folk do say he hath been baptized Christian; though at the same time the crazy atheist Sarmad hath gone with him also, they say, as diviner and soothsayer. And the man hath gifts doubtless, but may he prophesy wrongly, since Dara, for all his cleverness, holds much with magicians. And that brings to memory that there is a man new-come to the city who hath gained great reputation as astrologer. He is devoted to the cause of the faith, and when I inquired of him as to future events in the life of my God favoured brother, he read in the stars that surely, surely, his cause, being that

of God and His Prophet, would prevail. Wherefore I was joyful, since I trust more to such lawful readings of the Book and the Heavens, than to the vapourings of atheists. I have more to tell my lord of sister Jahanara's pet musician Dalara and other court news of interest which I keep for my next news letter.

So far Aurungzebe read carelessly enough: for in truth his other spies had kept him well informed on recent happenings, and he was about to burn the letter in the brazier beside which he was sitting —since it was never safe to keep such documents longer than the mere time for reading them—when he paused, turned over a page and read again, " may he prophesy wrongly, since Dara, for all his cleverness, holds much with magicians."

Now Aurungzebe was also clever; it did not take much to start a new line of thought in his mind, and as he sat, a small, almost wizened figure, in the plain white robes of one who has renounced the world, he cogitated quite frankly with himself as to whether the suggestion those words had brought with them would be worth anything to his great project? For with one so steeped as he was, apparently from his very birth, in deceit, hypocrisy, intrigue, impulse goes by the board, all is clear-cut, settled, thought out beforehand.

Would it, could it be useful? There could be no harm, anyhow, in getting the astrologer's name; possibly getting at the man himself. Every little helped in the great emprise which he had deliberately set himself to accomplish. For those who see in Aurungzebe a great monarch, a commanding per-

sonality, must yet acknowledge that all his life long he never wavered for a moment in his determination to hound his brother to death and snatch the crown from his father. That his avowed motive for doing this was to render God service is true, but his is not the only case in which real, whole-hearted, religious beliefs have been responsible for crimes.

So after he had set a scribe to work on the inquiry he said his lengthy prayers, ate a sparing repast of lentils, and so, feeling intensely virtuous set out—a consummate horseman at the head of a glittering cavalcade—to drive a hard bargain with a rajah whose attempts at resistance his own huge, purely mercenary army had defeated.

It was as nothing to him that the proud conquered Rajput had to go back a beaten man to his wife and that she, prouder even than he, should refuse him entrance to the fortress, asserting that he was not her husband and that all his life long she would never look again on such a white-livered soldier whose soul was vile, else would he have gained the battle or died upon the spot, thus conferring on her one of two glorious fates—either the honour of being a hero's wife or an equally honourable and heroic *sati*.

Such romantic ideals had no place in Aurungzebe's life. And when he heard the tale of Dara and the *ram rakkhi*, garbled as it was, first by bazaar tongues, and next by Roshanara's pen always dipped in gall whenever Dara's name was concerned, he had lifted his eyes to Heaven and begged for God's mercy on such impious, benighted mortals ; for, to the world, he adopted this attitude towards his erring brother. How much of this charitable compassion was real,

it is impossible to say, for Aurungzebe is a riddle hard to read. Certain it is that from the moment that Dara's leadership of the third expedition to regain Kandahar was assured, Aurungzebe's chief end was to ensure that his brother should not succeed where he had failed.

His brother meanwhile, master of himself and his fortunes for the first time in his life, was so far doing well. To tell truth Rana-dil's disappearance on her wedding night was in many ways a relief. He had been quite prepared to play the part of Tristram in Brittany, and it hurt his pride not a little that she should not have trusted him to do so; at the same time that she should not be left at the mercy of his father was, he felt, as well, for Shahjahan had displayed a somewhat inexplicable interest in the marriage, and it was he who had insisted on all the ceremonials being observed with due pomp.

Under the circumstances Dara thought best not to allay regrets or anxieties by giving to the world the five words neatly written in Rana-dil's beautiful hand-writing—for like all dancing girls she had been excellently educated—which he had found on the heap of silks and jewels: "I seek safety by myself."

For him, knowing, as he did, her independence, her high spirit, this was enough. He knew her, also, to be an expert swimmer, and, so, knowing that the chief factor in a successful escape would be no pursuit, he carefully refrained from suggesting its possibility. All this was in his mind, though for the time being that extraordinarily volatile mind of his was chiefly occupied with the novelty of preparation for the campaign.

Shahjahan, likewise, had no intention of letting his son know how Rana-dil had twice interfered on his behalf; so he kept a vague remorse to himself. The woman had defied his power, and had drowned herself rather than submit to palace life.

Sarmad the crazy atheist alone did not allow Rana-dil's disappearance to affect him one way or the other. "There is no death," he repeated again and again to would-be sympathizers. "What she has been she is still. That which once exists can never cease to be."

As for the city, it thought anything and everything. The woman was drowned; she was still in the Emperor's zenana. The Heir Apparent had at last come to his senses, and put her in a sack. On the contrary it was the Emperor who had done this —not that it mattered one way or another since, after all, it was only one woman that the river had claimed. Or she might still be alive—not that it mattered whether she were or not. So after a very few days the town's talk fastened itself round something else and the disappearance of Rana-dil was quite forgotten. The police, the public, did not excite themselves about her, nor did the daily press fill its columns with details as to how many lollipops she ate at the wedding feast. Such things may interest the public of to-day, in the year 1650 A.D. the majority of the people were otherwise occupied.

So Rana-dil had, as it were, a clean slate. After the first crucial deep dive into the river from the balcony there had been nothing to alarm. She had drifted down stream to the orange garden wall, and thence, naked as the day she was born, save for the *ram rakkhi* about her wrist—for Dara, easily distracted,

or perhaps purposely, had never claimed it—had made her way inside to the narrow cloistered sheds which for so long had served her and Sarmad as home. He, she knew, would be absent. The whole city was making festival in honour of the wedding. Still, though time was ample, she made haste to cut off her long hair, wind a ragged wisp of cloth as a turban, another as a waist-cloth, so, with a torn bit of blanket to hide feminine contours, go forth to seek safety by herself. Tall and very slim, the dress, or the lack of it, suited her well, and for the present at any rate she felt secure from detection.

Leaving everything as she had found it, she passed, not without a pang of regret, from the containing walls of the garden, and made her way through the night to the wild Bar land which environs Agra. She had no plan of campaign, but the hard-baked ground, the dull caper bushes, the ripples of sand, the occasional pools of limestone-locked water were familiar to her. She walked on and on, her bare feet noiseless on the smooth pavement-like stretches, feeling that, at least, she was putting possible pursuit behind her. So hours passed, until, wearied, she chose a thicker drift of sand amid a cluster of bushes and lay down to rest. The dawn, she felt, might bring wisdom what to do next; for the moment sleep meant forgetfulness.

The sun had not risen; but there was a light in the sky when she was awakened by a rude shake of the shoulder. An oldish man with a three days' frost of grey beard on his wizened face was bending over her.

"Ari! son," he said, toothlessness making him thick of speech. "Thou sleepest hard, and I've

need of help, since the goats have gone astray. And if I be not at the first camping place ere the *amir*-people arrive, God only knows what may happen."

"The goats?" she echoed stupidly, being still half-asleep.

"Ay, *teri*," he answered irritably. "The goats! the best goats in India! The goats that go to Kandahar with my lord! If thou wilt help me to gather them to the right path I will give thee a whole *dam*. See! there is it." And he held up between finger and thumb the lowest coin of the realm.

Rana-dil was on her feet in a moment. In those old days of the encampment many were the straying goats she had brought back. The very cry of the true goatherd came to memory, and as she followed the old man she gave it with full lungs. He stopped and looked at her admiringly.

"Thou givest it well, sonling; better than I, borne down by a frog in my throat."

And as he spoke he was racked by such a fit of coughing that Rana-dil saw his hoarseness was not all want of teeth. The man suffered from asthma.

"'Tis the air of dawn that wakens the reptile," he said, gasping. "That is why I desired not to go with the army; but they said they would bastinado me if I refused. And when I said my son had died they said I should have had another, so, as the keeper of the best goats in the city I had to go—woe's me! And the evil born ones strayed the first night—God reward them!" He was all a-tremble, his face livid.

"Sit thee here, father," she said sympathetically. "I can gather the goats."

As she made her way through the thicket of caper bushes, she felt exhilarated. This was better than yawning on a silken bed, trying to decide which silken garments one should wear. And, by strange chance she *was* helping the Heir Apparent on his way to Kandahar! She smiled as she remembered his liking for a bowl of foaming goat's milk; and this herd—for the beasts came readily to her call—looked as if they would give plenty. Tall, well-groomed creatures, white as snow and so tame that one nuzzled up to her.

"Thou hast not been long, sonling," said their owner, still gasping. "And if thou wilt help drive them to the camp—'tis not so far—I will give thee another *dam*."

Should she? It was contrary to her preconceived plan of concealment; but, after all, if pursuit followed her the last place in which pursuers would look would be the camp. So she gave assent and they started; but the attack of asthma proved a bad one and the goatherd could only go at a snail's pace.

The sun had risen ere they reached the outskirts of the vast camp. All was in turmoil, for it was the first stage out, and nothing seemed ready. They were greeted at the spot which had been apportioned to the goats by an excited servant bearing a silver bowl, who shouted to them as they approached:

"Milk! Milk! Dost want death, ye pigs of sluggards! Lo, the Most Mighty will arrive on the instant, and where is my lord's bowl of milk?"

The goatherd, spluttering with hurry and anxiety, stumbled against a tent rope and gasped horribly.

"At the moment, my lord! Have patience! God's time is man's time," he faltered, trying to

recover his breath; then, in despair, he appealed to Rana-dil. "Canst milk, sonling? Do so and I will give thee yet another *dam*."

"Give me the bowl," she said to the servant; then, at his look of surprise at her tone, remembered that safety demanded humility and added, "If so be as the honourable one will trust his slave with a so magnificent vessel——"

The man laughed. "Thou wilt have no chance of stealing it with me by; so quick, slave! Quick!"

Nothing could be quicker. The tame goat, nuzzling up to Rana-dil, gave her milk in a stream. The bowl foamed.

"By God and his Prophet," cried the servant, "but just in time! Here comes my lord!"

There was a jangle of spurs and accoutrements; a clash of armour, a cloud of dust, a thud of hoofs, a burst of careless voices.

"Now then, hurry!" cried the servant. "Lo, 'tis the goatherd who offers the milk. Quick! stand in the road——"

For an instant Rana-dil felt herself undone. Then courage came to her. What must be, must; and Dara as likely as not would be too much occupied, too full of everything else in the world, to notice.

But, as she stood with the foaming bowl of milk in her hands, she bent her head, so that her face could hardly be seen.

There was a sudden reining up, a louder clash as sword and scabbards rattled. She could feel his hand on hers as he took the bowl.

"*Bismillah!*" he cried joyously.

She could not help it; the ending of the prayer "*ur-rahman-ur-raheem*" came from her very soul.

He laughed aloud. "Thanks for that, most modest lad! 'Tis the first blessing I have had, in this my great emprise. So there"—he paused to put his hand in his embroidered satchel—" is gratitude for thee!"

Rana-dil looked at the golden *ashrafi* which lay amid the milk froth at the bottom of the bowl, and her eyes filled with happy tears. It was good luck, indeed, to be the first to wish him well.

She would have liked to keep the coin; but she handed it to the goatherd.

He looked at her admiringly.

"Good fortune sits in thine eyes, sonling," he said, " and thou milkest like one of Krishna's maids. Stay with me therefore awhile. Lo, thou shalt have food—and—and such raiment as thou wearest now."

She laughed. The goatherd knew how to drive a bargain. Still . . . She considered for a moment. There was much to be said for the plan. The goats and their herds had a place apart from much humanity. During the day they were tied up and rested. At sundown they went out to graze and to reach the next camp.

So there would be little fear of disturbance. If she took the major part of looking after the herd, the old man could do the rest, whereas there might always be detection were she to frequent the shops and booths.

Last, not least, she would be able to watch over the Heir Apparent; for there was no use blinking the fact that he was much at the mercy of his own enthusiasms.

So, forthwith, she struck a bargain with her new colleague, in which—strangely enough—the only

stipulation was that, if she milked the goats, she should have the privilege of giving Prince Dara Shukoh his foaming bowl.

So, the very next morning, when she stood in the path of the jingling hoofs as they rode in to the next camp, a youth, not quite so modest, offered the silver bowl of milk.

She had disguised herself well. Her smooth cheeks were darkened to what looked like a day's sprout of beard, the very noticeable arch of her eyebrows had been shaved to straightness, and the fine curves of her mouth broadened almost to coarseness.

"*Bismillah!*" he said joyously.

"*Ur-rahman-ur-raheem*," she replied gravely.

CHAPTER XX

SO, day after day, the camp marched, and day after day, about sunset time, Rana-dil gathered her six goats together and set off for her ten miles or so of pathless tramp through, for the most part, wilderness and wastes, the old goatherd, whose asthma grew steadily worse, remaining behind to get a lift, along what was called a road, on some friendly camel or bullock waggon. Then all day, after she had presented the bowl of milk and seen to it that her charges had fodder and water, she could sleep undisturbed till the growing shadows gave promise of the coming night, which was to her as the day.

It was after a fortnight or so of this complete change in every habit that she realized how much it was altering her, body and soul. She grew much thinner. Feeding as she did, to save herself trouble, almost entirely on goats' milk and hearth cakes, her feminine contours were less troublesome to hide, her old agility came back to her, and, freed from every dissonant note in life, a placidity very foreign to her nature came to bring absence from care. Desire for active work also seemed to pass. She would sit, content, while the goats browsed around her, to watch the sunset fade into the mists that hid the distant edge of the round world. Again when light was gone, she would guide her way by the stars, or on moonlit nights, wonder, as she walked, why she

had never before realized how much more beautiful the world showed without the sun, until with sudden irrepressible joy, a grey glimmer on the eastern horizon would restore her allegiance to the great Giver of Light. Then the wild life in these pathless wastes or by the scraps of cultivation, which here and there told of some unseen village, gave her endless amusement. The tracery of birds' fine feet on the sand, or finer, more lace-like still, the scarce seen marks left by the sand rats in their midnight gambols—all these—the very flutter of wings heard in the dark as she disturbed the bushes, and not infrequently the grim eyes of jackals—possibly hyenas—seen like lamps in the shadows—all those made her feel herself part and parcel of a great Unknown lying behind these outward manifestations. She began vaguely to understand what Sarmad had so often sung; to recognize the silent, self-reliant Step leading all things on their inevitable path—a Step that made no mistake, that never lost its way.

Then every day there was the almost inconceivable bustle of a great military camp, and her glimpse of the leader's martial figure, joyous, almost elate. And every day—she wished it had not been so, though she understood the sentimental, impulsive romanticism which prompted the action—there would be a light-hearted "*Bismillah!*" and a golden *ashrafi* amongst the milk froth at the bottom of the bowl. At which the old goatherd rejoiced mightily, though he haggled harder than ever over his *dams*.

So they reached Lahore, and halted there awhile to let the Emperor and all his train come up to give last instructions to the Commander-in-Chief. Thereinafter ensued a few days of turmoil, for an Emperor's

camp in those days ravaged the country-side like a swarm of locusts. Rana-dil was glad to escape from it, by driving her goats away from the city, across the river; the more so because the Emperor's eyes were sharper than his son's, and the very first morning, when, riding in with the latter the usual pause had been made for the bowl of milk, she had overheard him say as he rode off:

"But for thy declared virtue, chaste prince, that lad might have claims. He favours thy dancing girl."

And Dara had looked back for a moment, then had ridden on.

But it had been enough to startle her. So while the joined camps rested, and the Emperor's eyes had to be avoided, she left her favourite goat with the old man, giving him instructions as to due presentation of the bowl of milk, and drove the rest of her charges to the low-lying land across the river. There they would find ample fodder and she would sit more secure. Dara would doubtless visit the tomb of the Wisest of the Wise, for he had been overwhelmed with grief at her death some six years before, and the Emperor himself would pay his respects to that of his father, both of which stood in a walled garden further up the stream; but, if they did, she need not be in their way, for the jingle of spurs and swords, the clatter of horses' hoofs on the swaying boat bridge, would warn her of their approach.

And it did. As she sat behind a sand-bank close to the water's edge she could see the brilliant cortège pass, flashing in the sunlight.

That evening, impelled doubtless by a senti-

mentality she would have refused to recognize, she made her way into the garden, and sat for a while looking at the blue-tiled and opal-tinted mausoleum of the man who to the end of Time will remain the Most Compleat Lover of the world. The sky behind it was purple-black, for the winter rain had come: those rains so short, so sharp, when clouds mass themselves to inky darkness in the north-east, and, with almost continuous roll of thunder, seemingly precipitate themselves on the parched earth, leaving the sky after a few hours' rain like a new-washed sapphire.

So the building, vast, beautiful, showed dazzling against the blackness of the oncoming storm. Pigeons that matched the blue, the green, the grey of the tiles fluttered on arch and cornice; the broad green emerald sword-blades of the banana leaves swayed with the advent of wind, and, as the first deafening peal of thunder reverberated from cloud to cloud, a flight of frightened green parrots scudded past, brilliant, bejewelled, in a shaft of sunlight. Two or three big tear-drops of rain fell in round stains on the sandy path beside her.

It was time to take shelter. She rose and went over to the grove of orange trees where, apart from magnificence, the tomb of Nurjahan the Incomparable stands half hidden away. Just a simple domed tomb, the like of which is to be seen anywhere. Yet here, she knew, Dara must have been a few hours before. Yea! there, on the pavement beneath the small dome, were freshly faded flowers. She sat down beside them and waited for the storm to pass, bethinking her of the woman who lay at peace after her long, brilliant, adventurous past.

She had brought up Dara. That was perhaps the reason why he was so different from his brothers. Had she seen? Yea! She must have seen his likeness to that Compleat Lover of hers, whom, after long years, she had consented to guide, and to protect. But had she loved him?

"Daughterling," said a quiet voice beside her. "I have a message for thee from the Wisest of the Wise."

She glanced up hastily. It was Sarmad; he looked as usual, serene, almost smiling.

"Master!" she faltered, taken aback. "How didst know?"

He took no notice of her words; it was as if she was the same as she had always been, as if those far-seeing, dull blue eyes had always seen the real behind her unreal.

"'Tis this, daughterling. Lo, I will chant it for thee."

He sat down amid the fading flowers and began, his voice echoing musically enough from the marble walls, the marble dome; so plain, so unadorned:

"O brave, O good, O kind!
Pour at his feet thy mind,
Thy guile, thy strength.
Woman! They will not serve
To keep him from the swerve
That comes at length
To such as he, who crave
That which the Godhead gave
To woman's care.
Lo, in the years long past
I gave it; kept him fast
From wrong or snare.

If thou wert by his side
To-day, thy hand could guide
Him through the maze
Of crooked ways.
Woman thou art, not man,
And since the world began
The twain are one."

When the chant ended she sat silent; her eyes on Sarmad's, and as she looked into those clouded depths she seemed for an instant to see a woman, beautiful exceedingly, adorned with every allurement the mind could conceive, leading a man by the hand. Then with a little gesture of disdain she rose and stood in the doorway. The violence of the storm had already passed, but darkness was coming on. It was time to gather in the goats.

"Give the Most Wise my thanks," she said suddenly, "but her wisdom is not mine." She paused an instant on the door-step to ask, "And thou, Master? Goest thou on?"

"I go where he goes," he replied. "And thou also?"

"And I also."

So she passed out almost defiantly.

After a while, he also rose and went back to the maze of crooked ways. There was never any fathoming of Sarmad's mind. Doubtless he had been aware of Rana-dil's presence in the camp since the march began, and doubtless as time went on he had gripped how urgent was the Heir Apparent's need of some stabilizing force such as the Wisest of the Wise had been to Jahangir. For in the welter of voices in the crowded camp his supernormal sense of sight and hearing had brought him much knowledge of the

network of intrigue which surrounded Prince Dara on all sides, intrigue set afoot by Aurungzebe and his agent. There was the new astrologer for instance. How carefully his entry had been staged! His almost casual prediction of a theft which occurred the same evening, followed by his still more striking uneasiness when the Emperor proposed to spend the night in a certain fortress on the way. A proposition which came to naught when the astrologer disclosed that the stars said the greatest man in the place would be found murdered next morning.

And was not the commandant so found? Small wonder that Shahjahan, ever inclined to credence, should set aside the question as to how and why the murder had been committed, in favour of earnest gratitude for the saving of his own life. Then there were letters, letters from Shahjahan's other sons. For already the fact that the Emperor did not feel strong enough, or did not choose to support his son all the way to Kandahar, had aroused suspicion of failing health, and as, in that case, the fight between the brothers for supreme power might be imminent it was as well to prepare the way. Shahjahan was past sixty and his habits were not those of long life. So letters expressing filial hopes and much obedience came fast, rousing in the Emperor vague regrets lest he might have favoured Dara too much; lest he had been unfair to his other sons. Aurungzebe, especially, was a master in the art of such letter-writing, and oft-times his father, as he read these effusions, would confess that for statesmanship, good feeling and general capability, the White Snake stood miles ahead of his brothers.

One such effusion was read to him by the Court

reader just before he passed into the great Durbar tent, where before the whole assembly of the Court and the army he was to take formal farewell of Prince Dara, give him final instructions, and call down Heaven's blessing on the campaign. It ran thus :

" If it be indeed true that my beloved and revered parent, being of enfeebled health, feels much the parting with that noblest of brothers, the Heir Apparent, on his glorious campaign where success must surely follow his movements and remove the disgrace of this unworthy one's failure, I do entreat of the Emperor that he will allow me to wait upon his pleasure. Well do I know my own nothingness in the royal affection in comparison with the love lavished on that Prince, that hero whom all the world must admire ; but I am at least a son, an unworthy son doubtless, but one who having devoted his whole life to piety and prayers, may, by the blessing of God and His prophets, be enabled to speak words of comfort. Tears in common are less bitter than those shed alone, therefore I beseech Majesty to give the order that I, ever obedient, may leave the Governorship with which I have been entrusted, so that I may hasten to join my regrets with those of my family."

It read well, and roused in Shahjahan the vague wonder if after all Dara, who of late had been apt to be headstrong, was indeed the flower of the flock.

But only for a moment. The trumpets of the Grand Assembly announced that it must begin, and, a gorgeous figure blazing with jewels, on a gorgeous white stallion bedecked with blue bows and scin-

tillating with inlaid armour, the Emperor took his stand in the middle of a semicircle of almost equally gorgeous nobles all on almost equally gorgeous horses.

Now one military display is very like another military display. And this is true of all the ages. The same blare of trumpets and rolling of drums, the same pennants and flags, the same champing of bits and jangling of scabbards. Then in serried ranks the same stiff lines of pikes, bayonets, whatnots, the same squared mass of humanity ready to be slaughtered. And, here, owing to the curious infiltration of Western ideals into India in the seventeenth century, there was more discipline than is usual in Eastern armies. The artillerymen, almost all Europeans, stood to their guns in European uniforms, and the front ranks, at any rate, of the infantry stood steady with shouldered arms.

As the Heir Apparent at the head of his staff galloped up to the salute, Shahjahan felt a thrill of pride. Truly had Aurungzebe written, "That hero whom all the world must admire." Here was a son of whom anyone might be proud! Gallant, gay, confident, sitting his horse as if new back from victory.

So the ceremonial began. A speech from the Emperor, a wailing cheer from the troops. Then the appearance of the astrologer, the jargon of Jupiter and Mars, ascendants and apogees. A prayer for guidance to the Great Ruler of all, the delivery of the sealed packet of orders to the Commander-in-Chief amid renewed cheering. Finally the only unrehearsed incident in the whole pageant, the sudden leaping from his charger of the Prince, his quick step

to his father's side. One swift embrace, and he was back.

"Sound the advance," he cried, and wheeled his horse. So, in orderly array the troops wheeled after him; the campaign had begun.

But Rana-dil, down by the river, saw but little of the order, for, even in those short four miles, inheritance had had its way over discipline and the whole army had become a continuous line of stragglers, horses, tents, camels, bullock waggons mixed up together. Only the guns kept their distance, while the artillerymen in horrid jargon, many of them already the worse for liquor, cursed and damned freely.

It was late evening ere the last batch of camp followers crossed the bridge. One of these was the old goatherd driving his goats. She joined him, saw him safely on a waggon, then, driving her flock before her, recommenced her old life.

But, ere she passed on, she found her way once more to the tomb of Nurjahan the Incomparable. Here was silence, though, over in Jahangir's mausoleum, the prayers that were sung day and night were being chanted. Here also were no fresh flowers, nothing to show that anyone thought of the dead Queen of Women. But she had picked a jasmine spray off a bush hard by, so she laid it among the faded petals and sat down beside it to think. For quite a long time; but when, after his fashion, the Commander-in-Chief rode into his camp early next morning, a lad was standing ready with a foaming bowl of milk.

"*Bismillah!*" he said, heedless of such trifles as a young man instead of an old one.

"*Ur-rahman-ur-raheem*," came the ready answer.

And there, among the milk froth at the bottom of the bowl, was the golden *ashrafi*.

But this time Rana-dil kept it herself, and, looking hardily at the old goatherd, said:

"This is mine, master! 'Tis time thou gavest me some wage—lo, even in *dams* thou owest me more than one *ashrafi*."

And he, unwillingly, acquiesced, for it was true.

That evening after she had driven the goats to a grazing ground—in the Bar land which had replaced the more cultivated ground about Lahore—she sped as fast as she could to the neighbouring town of Gujranwala and spent the *ashrafi*.

And as she bundled up something light, flimsy, betinselled into a convenient parcel to carry amid the folds of her blanket shawl she murmured to herself:

"Lo, Wisest of the Wise! God knows it may be useful."

It was only a dancing girl's scarlet muslin petticoat, a scrap of a bodice, a transparent veil. That was the foundation; the jewels must come later—if they ever came!

CHAPTER XXI

THE march, begun with such pomp, proved long. So long that Rana-dil, becoming accustomed to her solitary life, ceased almost to think of the bustling, hustling military world to which she was an adjunct. After a while, when Peshawar, embosomed in blossoming peach trees, was left behind, it became practically a desert life, for day after day there was nothing but sharp, rocky hills that showed opalescent in sunset and sunrise, and deep rocky ravines where her goats found but scanty pasturage. So she would carry out great bales of forage for them and amuse herself, with the aid of food, in teaching the beasts obedience. So, after a time, they came and went as they were called.

Then every morning she had her glimpse of Prince Dara—a figure to remain in the mind's eye—and every morning she could add her prayer to his, and so, perchance, bring luck to him and his emprise.

It was at Kabul city, beautiful, restful utterly, that the old goat-keeper finally decided to give up goat-keeping in favour of his asthma, and so escape from the onward, and still more difficult, march to Kandahar.

They halted at Kabul to readjust the divisions, and here Rana-dil caught an additional glimpse of Dara, as she fed her goats on the heights above the river, where, under a plain slab inscribed simply

"Heaven is the eternal home of the Emperor Baber," the King Errant who founded the Mogul dynasty sleeps in sight of his beloved city. Dara's great-great-great-grandfather, she thought, as she saw him scatter tulips on the slab; but, by repute, how like him in many ways—so lovable, so open-hearted, so impulsive. And he, also, had a woman who moulded his life—his Mahum. Strange how the race seemed to need—what was it?

She set aside the thought, which at best was vague.

The journey onwards was uneventful. Without the old man she had to brave her kind in order to get food in the camp bazaar; but by this time, Ranu, the goatherd help, had become such an institution that there was little chance of detection, small need of disguise, and the daily *ashrafi* being hers alone while she had but one mouth to feed instead of two, she spent the surplus on silver collars and ornaments for her goats, till her snow white flock became a sight to see.

Sarmad she saw at times. Sometimes in the distance surrounded by those who came to him for healing or help; more often when, in the evenings, she was grazing her goats far from the camp. He would appear suddenly, and after talking a while disappear again. Whence he came, and whither he went, she did not know; this had always been Sarmad's way. And he never alluded to her masquerading as a man, or to her supposed death; possibly he never noticed the first, while the second would have been a triviality. He brought her disquieting news in a way. Dara, in high spirits, and for the first time absolutely his own master,

seemed to be offending some of his captains by, in almost childish fashion, ruffling their doubtless over self-assertive dignity. For instance, though of course it was a mere joke, it was outrageous that he should call a soldier of the line "His Mightiness the World's Hero," promoting him to be lord of the bedchamber and affirming that he was the bravest man in the army simply because he had killed a disturbing owl that had got into the Heir Apparent's tent! Rana-dil, hearing the tale, could not help laughing; it was so like Dara, a boy still, despite his years. Yet she saw the danger of such levity, and she found herself wondering how many such pure sillinesses Nurjahan the Incomparable had prevented by her feminine hold on her Compleat Lover?

Then Sarmad hinted at another danger. The new astrologer was growing in favour every day by predicting little things that invariably came to pass; an easy trick with one so lacking in suspicion as the Heir Apparent; one who refused to believe the worst of anyone, not even when his great ally and counsellor, Father Buseo, reported trouble with his flock, the Christian artillerymen, who were becoming discontented with the difficulties of the march, and beginning to regret Aurungzebe's service in the fertile Deccan.

But, despite Dara's innate dislike for his brother, it had ever been hard to make him believe in active intrigue. Yet Rana-dil wondered if it were not at work here, and once again the thought came of the innumerable plottings and plannings against her Compleat Lover which Nurjahan the Incomparable had managed to counteract.

At last they reached Kandahar. They were at their journey's end; but the campaign——?

The first sight of the town, heavily fortified, sloping away to a perfectly inaccessible mountain of a rock on which the citadel stood, told even Rana-dil's ignorant eyes that here was a supremely difficult task; one that might well occupy months. Twice had Aurungzebe, the Successful, attempted to take it—twice had he been beaten back.

And now?

It was a trial of strength between the two brothers.

Dara must win! he must! he must!

Yet Kandahar had never been taken except once, by stratagem. Would stratagem be used now to prevent its being taken? Doubt and fear were hers as she listened to the gossiping soldiers as, after the day's work of pitching the tents was over, they came down in crowds to see the renowned "*Kashgul-i-Ali*," "God's water-pot," which stood under the tree (where it now stands) close to the spot apportioned as the goats' quarters. It was only a huge cup hollowed out of solid stone; a cup capable of holding a hundred gallons of water, a cup with a quaint, many-faceted lip, as if the hewer had foreseen that many gods might be held to have drunk out of it; a cup sacred beyond words. The great Buddha himself had used it. In the far past, bloody wars had raged for its possession and now Buddhist, Hindus, Mohammedans, alike held it symbol of their particular faith. Even Father Buseo came down to dip his finger in the water and sign himself with the sign of the Cross; for he was a broad-minded, kindly-hearted man was the Father, who was ever friendly to heretics even while he condemned their

tenets. And he recognized the need for welding the army together. Then Dara, always keen on religious novelties, rode down also. A splendid figure of a man in the prime of life, his face fair and open, his voice kindly and courteous.

Rana-dil from behind the goats' enclosure watched him with a thrill of glad admiration. Though she did not know it at the time, it was to be her last chance of seeing him at close quarters, since, now that marching was over, there was no further necessity for her to stand at the roadside and offer the foaming bowl of milk.

So the siege began in earnest. It lasted for months; for, though Dara with almost feverish haste took advantage of every opportunity, the besieged treated his efforts with disdain. They knew themselves secure. The citadel commanded the plain, the plain could not command the citadel. The high surrounding hills were too far away for the range of the guns, and though Dara with infinite pains built up a high mound he only succeeded in silencing the fire that was directed against his own headquarters, from which—having no lack of personal courage—he refused to budge. For there were spies everywhere, by whom directed none knew.

Skirmishes took place every day: one or two assaults in strength, which failed. So there was no lack of wounded, and to these Rana-dil would send milk, or give it to them when, convalescent, they came down to the *Kashgul-i-Ali* for spiritual medicine. It was from one of these that she learnt how Kandahar had once been taken.

"See you," said the old white-bearded man,

"I was of the Mogul garrison, and there I ought to be now, but for a goat, yea! even such a goat as thine."

"A goat?" echoed Rana-dil, immediately interested. "How was't, *duffadar?*"

"Thus!" mumbled the old soldier between his gulps of milk. "A goat escaped—ay! the King of Persia's goat when he was besieging as we are doing now. And the goatherd being agile, as maybe thou art, followed it from rock to rock. Yea! to the very entrance to the citadel. But none saw him so he came down again safely. Thus a path was found, and in the night, mountaineering Persians crept up and killed the sleeping sentries. So there we were surprised and had to yield!"

Rana-dil looked at her goats and wondered if such things ever happened twice.

Meanwhile spring had passed to summer, summer was fast cooling to autumn, autumn would bring winter, and with the first hint of snow the siege must perforce be raised, since it would be impossible to keep up communications with the base.

And day by day the investing army was getting more restless. Behind the fortifications there was a steadfast crew of born fighters, Durani Pathans for the most part, and reinforced, God only knows how, by constant influx of recruits and provisions from the high hills behind the fortress. In front there was an army divided against itself, Dara, bravest of the brave, impetuous, impatient, beseeching his captains not to send him back, disgraced, and giving free rein and countenance, for peace's sake, to all things likely to produce wholeheartedness; so that the call to prayer of the faithful, the Hindu conch,

and even Father Buseo's tinkling bell had equal claims to tolerance.

And the astrologer? Folk less simple-minded, less credulous than Dara, used to hint surprise at the faithfulness of his predictions, and, when he had foretold that a certain breach which had been made in the city wall would bring no advantage, some people smiled sardonically when an instant order to assault was, somehow, unaccountably delayed.

It was after this misadventure that one evening when Rana-dil was sitting among her goats, Sarmad appeared sitting beside her quite suddenly after his fashion. And, as usual, he began to speak as if he were cognizant of the thought which had been often in her mind since she had heard the tale of the old soldier.

"My lord," he said, "begins to lose judgment. Disappointment is telling upon him, and some way must be found of help. It might be well to try even the goats."

She sat for a moment too startled for words. Then the memory of the man's uncanny vision, his uncanny hearing, came to her, and she asked:

"Dost see anything, master, dost hear anything?"

"I see snowflakes falling," he replied dreamily, "and I hear lies—nothing but lies, so it is small wonder that my lord loses truth."

He would say no more and after he had disappeared in his usual eerie fashion—there one moment, gone the next, though none could say he had actually vanished—she sat and thought over his words. The suggestion was exactly that for which she felt she had been waiting. Why not try the goats? It was unlikely they would succeed a second time;

still it could be tried. Her preparations, very few, were soon made, and, an hour or two before dawn, she drove her flock as far round to the back of the fortress as she dared to go, and sat down to watch them graze among the tumbled rocks at the foot of what appeared to be an inaccessible precipice. A sleepy sentry or two of the camp had challenged her so far but, knowing the pass word, she had been allowed to go on. But beyond this were Kandahari scouts, and these must be avoided. It was not quite dark, for a week-old moon shone in a clear sky presaging frost. She gave the cry that meant her flock were free to disperse, and waited.

Surely, surely, that dim patch higher up was one of the goats. She scrambled after it, her heart beating wildly at this first hint of possible success, and found herself on a triangular patch of herbage behind a projecting scarp. Then another of the goats passed her to find foothold higher up.

Was it possible? It seemed as if it might be, until, after an ascent which left her breathless, athletic though she was, she felt herself seized by the throat, and a rough voice in execrable Urdu said hoarsely:

"What dost here, spy?"

The revulsion from hope to failure was, for a moment, overwhelming. "I am no spy," she gurgled, half choking, "my goats——"

There was a contemptuous laugh. "A likely story!—too old for belief." Then there was an instant's pause, and a note of admiration crept into the voice. "By the Prophet! that is a fine beast! Does it give milk like it looks?"

She glanced down as well as she could. It was her

favourite Nanny which, alarmed at a strange voice, had come to her side as it had been taught to do, for protection. A sudden inspiration seized on her.

"Ay! if thou hast a cup—I—will—show thee," she gasped.

The man's grip relaxed a little and his voice took on a tinge of apology. "We be short of milk up yonder; wilt stand still if I fetch one, or must I tie thee?"

For an instant she was free, but sense told her it was useless to try and escape; she must show no resistance if she did not desire immediate death; so she waited till the cup came.

"*Bullah!*" said the drinker, "that is good!"

It was growing faintly lighter and by the grey glimmer Rana-dil could vaguely see that her captor was a burly Durani no longer quite young. There was a pause of silence; then the man spoke:

"See you, I have taken of your salt, therefore, I will not kill. Get thee down whence thou camest. I keep thy goats. Lo, my son has been wounded and he craves for milk. Get thee gone, fool!"

Again, despite her terror, inspiration came to her and without a word she started; but as she did so she gave a low cry. In an instant she was surrounded by her flock, and with a defiant, "Yea, I go," she tumbled more than ran downwards. The man was after her in a moment, and once more his clutch was at her throat.

"So thou wouldst, wouldst thou?" he cried. "Lo, despite the salt I have a mind to kill thee."

But by this time the courage that is born to some

souls when hope is nigh gone, had come to Rana-dil, and she said quietly:

"They will not go without me."

He stood irresolute. The dawn was beginning to show the faint cloudiness of the encircling hills. A sleepy Mogul sentry not far off, roused by the coming light, began his tramp once more. The sound of his footsteps could be heard. The Kandahari stood irresolute then suddenly he said, modulating his voice:

"Then thou goest too—I lose not good goats for one like thee." So saying, he loosed his hand from her neck and taking off his turban used it as a bandage for her eyes. "Now! Give the call to thy cursed beasts," he said. "I will lead thee."

Whither they went she could not tell; but it was not the way she had attempted. This was smoother, more path-like. But it seemed interminable, and the challenge of a sentry at last came as a relief.

"'Tis I, Kaim-Baksh," was the reply. "Lo, I have caught a herd with his six fine goats, and by the twelve Imaums we need milk up here."

There was a laugh. "Good luck! but the herd is undesired. Kill him!"

Kaim-Baksh evidently demurred to this. "Not so—see I have eaten of his salt by drinking of his milk—besides, the beasts obey him. Perchance if he were killed they might refuse or mayhap go dry. Such things are." He spoke argumentatively and for the time apparently silenced the sentry.

"'Twere better maybe," pursued the captor after a pause, "to put him in the guard room till the commandant comes his round. Then can he give

the order of death and blood-guiltiness remain not on my soul."

"And the goats?" queried the other. "I claim one as baksheesh for letting them in."

An altercation followed in whispers which, as Rana-dil knew but little Pushtoo, was largely unintelligible, but after a while she was pushed through a narrow gateway or door, and so into some covered place. Here the bandage was taken off her eyes, she was told to milk the goats and the two men retired with the result in high glee, locking the door behind them.

Left alone Rana-dil felt inclined to sit down and give up further attempt at safety. Then the thought of Dara and the possibility of being able to tell the tale of *some* pathway up those inaccessible cliffs roused her, and she looked about her to find out if there was any chance of escape.

None!

It was a low, dark, smoke-grimed cave rather than a room, still dark, the only window a slit high up in the wall; doubtless one of the embrasures of the fortress.

There was nothing then to be done but to wait—wait for likely death. For how long?

She and her goats—she and her goats! They would kill her, but not the beasts—they were useful.

Poor beasts! Already they were settling down to chew the cud as if nothing had happened—or was going to happen. Wiser than she, even though she had always half believed Sarmad when he said, "There is no death!"

She shivered. The air of dawn was chill; there was no use in being uncomfortable—better try and

emulate the poor beasts. She had her blanket with her, strapped to her back as she always carried it when she was tending the flock at night. As she undid it an idea struck her breathless, and she sat looking at the roly-poly parcel tied up in a bit of old cloth which she sometimes used as a pillow.

An idea indeed! . . . but was it possible?

CHAPTER XXII

"SIX goats, didst say, and a herd. Why didst not kill him and have done?"

The words could be distinctly heard through the closed door; the answer, also, a trifle hesitating.

"I had drink of the milk, most honourable, so I deemed——"

There was a laugh. "The job better done by another. Open the door, man."

The key grated in the lock, the door swung back, letting in a flood of sunlight, for it was high noon.

There was a sudden silence; then an awed whisper —"God in His heaven! Thou saidst it was a man!"

For here, standing surrounded by her white goats, stood Rana-dil in the dancing girl's dress. There was not a trace of masculinity about her, or in the room. The turban, the *dhoti*, the worn shoes had all gone out of the high embrasure, and as she swept her most graceful Court salutation every curve was feminine. The full flounced, diaphanous, tinsel-edged skirt—a trifle crumpled it might be, but so the flimsy draperies are often—hid and yet revealed the long lines of her limbs. The tiny bodice outlining and upholding her breasts, left a wide bare strip of nut-brown flesh between it and the rucked gathers of her skirt; while the scarlet tinsel-edged veil,

drawn over the face so as partly to hide it, fell in folds behind, concealing the lack of long hair—a woman every inch of her! even to jingling silver! For she had robbed some of her goats.

"'Twas a man last night—I dare swear that," trembled a voice, and another gave palpitating assent. "Yea! Yea! a very man for sure."

"May the Prophet defend us," said a third, "'tis magic—'tis the devil—smite the phantom."

"Nay!" interfered the commandant; he was a youngish man, a bit rakish in his dress. "If she be not *churail*,* she may be *peri*—she—she looks not of this world."

And, in truth the picture before them, flooded as it was by the ray of sunlight which, lighting it up to extraordinary brilliance, lost itself in the cavernous darkness of the room behind, did not look earthly. The milky whiteness of the surrounding goats with their silver collars, the scarlet of the dress, the grace of the attitude, the incomparable courtesy of the smile, all combined to make it like a vision.

The commandant took a step forward. "Who art thou, lady?" he asked.

There was no reply. Then he approached a little nearer, and repeated the question in a louder voice. Passing men had looked in at the door. There was quite a masculine crowd behind the speaker.

Still no answer. Then a sudden bewitching smile, as Rana-dil playfully touched her ears and shook her head. She had thought out her plan.

"She is deaf," said one.

* The ghost of a woman who has died in childbirth. Held inimical by all men. The feet of a *churail* are always turned backwards.

"Or knows not our language," suggested another. "God knows if they speak Pushtoo in Paradise, for she is *peri* for sure—See her feet are right side forward—she is not *churail*."

The commandant meanwhile had had recourse to signs. The only result being another brilliant smile, a putting out of a red tongue, a touching it with a dainty finger, another shake of the head.

"Deaf and dumb," came the comment. "Send for the wise man, he will exorcize her, for without doubt she is a vision of the devil."

"But the goats?" protested he who had made the capture. "The milk was real—ay, and good!"

"Too good to lose when we need it," put in another.

There was a stir at the door; the crowd made way for the entrance of a tall, broad figure with a full beard. It was the Captain-General of the fortress; nothing more masculine could be imagined.

"What? a woman?" he commented in loud tones. "How came she here?"

"That is what we desire to know, *malik-sahib*," replied the commandant submissively, "but she is deaf and dumb, so information is wanting. But this is certain—she was man last night."

"Traa!" replied the Captain-General. "How did it begin?"

So the whole story was told from the beginning, and at the end the man in authority stood and bawled at her:

"Thou art prisoner of war—dost hear that?"

Apart from the seriousness of the issues, the scene was comical in the extreme, and Rana-dil, who had been led on in the sequence of events by what she

heard, had ado to keep from laughing outright; so far had the remarks of her audience led her, but she deemed it best to yield in some measure to authority. So sinking down with approved grace into billowy draperies she made as though she were writing on a writing board, then smiled up into the bearded face as the pretended pen wrote slowly.

"She is true Mohammedan, for sure," said the bearded one in relieved tones. "She hath written '*Bismillah!*'"

A murmur of satisfaction ran through the audience.

"Bring materials," came the order, and while they were being brought Rana-dil had a minute in which to think what she should say. She looked round the audience tentatively. Honest, handsome faces, unlike with their long noses, their narrow faces, their thin lips, those of the Eastern races; but cruel, superstitious, ignorant!

It was with difficulty that the Captain-General managed to scrawl the question, "Whence camest thou?"

That decided her. With beautiful flourishes in her beautiful *nastalik* hand-writing the words showed clear.

"I came from God's Paradise to bring these goats to the faithful defenders of Kandahar."

A murmur of satisfaction once more ran through the rough audience.

"That settles it," said a voice. "We can drink the milk now, God be praised!"

But the Captain-General was meticulously orthodox. "Bring the *Moulvie-sahib*, let him catechize her and see if she be as she says."

The first zest of the adventure was passing. So far Rana-dil had been led on by suggestion, by sheer luck; but now she felt suddenly as if she could do no more, and she was within an ace of breaking down. The utter futility of the thing assailed her. If death came what did it matter? Was not Sarmad right? Was there any death? Her head swam, her eyes closed. Death seemed on all sides of her. Her mind reverted in its semi-consciousness to her first experience of Death, and quite involuntarily her voice rose in the *Dies Iræ* she had heard sung as a child when the Christian victims who had been murdered at Agra were being buried by the Jesuits.

But the first note brought home to her the danger in which she had placed herself. The startled incredulous look on the half savage faces around her warned her she must retrieve her error; but how——?

The next instant her voice, the voice she had not used for months from fear of detection and which had grown, as voices do, all the stronger for the rest, burst forth filling the room, and echoing out into the air.

The effect was instantaneous. Some drew back; others started, listening; but to all it came as a revelation; for Afghan music is much more akin to European than is the Indian, and the minor mode fitted in with tradition.

"Of a truth she is *peri*," said one connoisseur in the craft. "No mortal ever sang so loud." And his verdict seemed to find favour especially when the *Moulvie* attested that she could write the creed in Arabic lettering as well, if not better than he could.

Finally the Captain-General and the Commandant agreed that, being a mere feminine, she could do no harm by being kept until higher orders were received and she was removed with all honour to a small room with a balcony which literally overhung the precipice; an attempt on the latter's part to have her quartered close to his own being repressed by the stern orthodoxy and morality of the Captain-General.

Left alone she sank down despairingly. Could she keep up the farce, was it worth it? What good could she do to Dara? Would she ever see him again?

They brought her food which she could not eat, thus helping to keep up her character, which by this time was firmly impressed on the garrison. It was a special mark of God's favour: a real miracle. Such things were, and in this case it had brought, material benefits. But when she asked for a little of her goat's milk, they had to come and tell her that without her hand the beasts refused to give it them. This difficulty was met by bringing them to her when, by the aid of the writing board and a man who could read, she was able to give instructions as to how the creatures of Paradise required to be fed; which instructions, as the size and the beauty of these well-groomed white goats favoured their claim to be supernatural, were duly obeyed. So, there being a small patch of herbage to one side of the fortress, perched as it was on the pinnacle of precipitous rock, they were turned out there to graze. Looking sideways from her balcony Rana-dil could catch an occasional glimpse of them. Thus the long day passed. She was faintly interested in

a bustle that was going on below her just where the wall of the town joined the rock. Behind the wall men were at work digging with spades and matlocks, and after a time kegs of something were brought and apparently placed in position. Were they making a mine? Probably. Many such had been made and exploded by both sides, without doing much damage. But this one must be big, for several kegs were brought and hidden away. And something must be going to happen; for, though the Mogul camp, which she could see in the distance, seemed quite quiet, large bodies of troops were being moved about outside the walls, and a general sense of stir was evident.

This did not interest her much until dark when, the goats having refused to be caught by strangers, she had to be fetched to give the call. And as she stood waiting at the gateway for the beasts to come she overheard two men talking in Urdu in the guard room. Surprised at the language she attuned her ears to listen.

"'Twill finish it for certain," said one. "What is an army without a leader, and if the infidel falls into the trap——?"

"But will he?" put in the other.

There was a short laugh. "For sure—he is credulous and the astrologer is clever. Thou wilt see the sign given after dark—then at dawn."

She could not wait to hear more for fear of arousing suspicion, but this was enough.

Back in the balcony she asked herself what it meant and why the men were speaking a southern tongue. Plainly they were not Pathans. And the leader—that was Dara. And what had been arranged

for dawn? Something that would bring disaster. Down in the darkening depths below her, lights were moving about. Men were still working at the mine. Was it that? Could it be that? And how could they be sure that the attack—if attack there was to be—would be made just at that very point?

"Wait till it is dark—thou wilt see the sign from Heaven." What sign? Suddenly Sarmad's words about the trust Dara was giving to the astrologer came to mind, bringing instant fear.

Was it possible? She must wait till dark and see—Yes! if a sign were given, and if, led by the sign, attack were to be made on that very spot at a given time——

She sat straining her eyes into the growing darkness. She felt chilled to the bone in her light clothing, for the night had turned cold. Once more there was a hint of frost in the air; but she would not, she could not, leave the balcony. She must see.

Eight o'clock struck from the garrison gong. There was a clatter of accoutrements; the guard was being changed. Noiselessly she stole to the door, set open the little spy-hole half-way up, so that she might hear if possibly there was talk outside and stole back again to her post of vantage.

Nine—Ten—Eleven—Twelve!

What was that? a beam of light flickering up into the sky—Gone in a moment!—A minute's space, then another, and another. Some one must be flashing light from a mirror—she had seen it done to amuse the little tribe of acrobats. Father Buseo had done it with the little mirror ring the eldest girl had worn on her thumb. Yes! that was the sign. And who was watching for it? In

a second it came to her. Dara! Dara was being lured to his death. The next instant she was at the door, but it was securely locked. Could she squeeze through the spy-hole? She might. It was high up, she had had to jump to open it—out of reach of most—that was why they had left it unlatched.

Wrapping her veil tightly round her so as to confine her flimsy skirts, but leaving her arms free —she had no time to strip—no time for anything but the immediate action that, in times of stress, always came to her, she jumped for the sill, hung on, raised herself by her arms and essayed the opening. It was larger than she had thought. She could get through; but what lay on the other side? What matter? Somehow she must get through—somehow—Dara must be warned.

She almost dropped on a sentry who was fast asleep; but her bare feet on the stones were noiseless, and she sped away. Not to the gate—that would not do—but to the left, above where her goats were grazing, there might be—there must be some embrasure, some opening from which she might possibly drop. Once outside, would there be a path? Could she find it? Again what matter? Dara must be warned.

A glimmer of light in the blackness of a wall made her pause to look through—not there! There was nothing but a depth of darkness; she must go further to the left.

Ah! there was a wider glimmer, but her foot touched another foot. It stirred . . . a sleeping man! Still she must risk it if Dara had to be warned. She edged round the figure, gained a small window.

Some way below, there was a faint lightening of the darkness. Was it the patch of herbage or was it not? Could she venture? Soft almost as a whisper she gave a call—she scarce heard it herself. But from the dark came an instant loud bleat, and a voice close beside her said sleepily:

"Curses on those beasts—would they were in hell instead of Paradise—they rouse me from sleep!"

"Traa!" said another voice farther off, and less sleepy. "And thou a sentry! Fie on thee!"

There was no time to lose. She was through the embrasure in a second and let herself drop on to grass. So far safe!

But she had reckoned without the goats. They were round her in a second, bleating wildly.

She started to run whither she knew not. A shot, then another rang out from the embrasure. She felt one whistle past her as she dodged.

The path! the path!

Then a despairing hope came to her—the beasts might remember it, they had not been blindfolded, and as she ran she gave the cry she had always used to gather the flock for home. The mists which till then had obscured the crescent moon lifted for a moment, and she could see faintly lighter streaks in the darkness before her. Were these the goats? Anyhow she must follow, for the alarm had been given, sounds of pursuit were heard, a shot or two rang out, and, as she stumbled recklessly after the disappearing streaks, her left arm fell helpless. But she was round a rock and in shelter. Before her lay—what? . . . a foot lost hold! She fell, rolled over and over, downwards and downwards; but only to pick herself up bruised, but not broken.

Only her arm was that. But she could no longer hear pursuit. Most likely she was off the path—perhaps on the old way they had tried at first. Well, she must follow the goats. One ran bleating up to her then passed on. She must follow, though she felt sick and faint. But she was not cold now, though the night was colder—she was hot as fire and running down with sweat—she must follow! follow! The goats could find foothold anywhere; but she—and one arm was helpless.

Another fall, this time not so far, though she gave a stifled cry as a rock struck her injured arm. Now it was surely less precipitous—the rocks lay tumbled about—Yes! it was even . . .

Where she struck the level she did not know, but she was down, under the walls of the town. Ahead she could see the watch-fires of the Mogul camp. Behind them there was a faint hint of dawn, so there was no time to lose, and she struck to the right, direct for the headquarters' tent. The camp seemed very quiet. Could she be too late? Had the attacking party started already?

No! In a shadowed declivity she could see companies and companies of men squatting on the ground, awaiting the summons. And faint jinglings and trampings in a hollow told that cavalry was ready also.

The screens of the tent were open. Groups of mounted soldiers clustered round it, and within—by a feeble light she could see a figure bending over a plan that lay upon a table . . .

Dara!

It came to her that she must make herself as much like herself as she could—she must be calm.

She halted behind a rock to arrange her tattered veil, to straighten her tattered skirts and regain her breath. Then she went on, and setting aside a startled sentry with the imperious words:

"Let me pass! I am my lord's wife," found herself inside beside the table.

Dara, absorbed, did not look up.

"My lord," she said, courage seeming to fail her at last—"I—I am Rana-dil—thy wife."

He was on his feet in a second, stupefied, speechless. Save for his casque which lay on the table beside the map, he was in full armour, and her heart beat wildly at the sheer beauty of the martial figure.

"Rana-dil?" he echoed at last. "I—I knew thou wert not dead—but—but how—and in this guise?"

She sank on her knees beside him and her right hand clutched his arm. "My lord, it matters not—not even if I be Rana-dil—Nothing matters but that thou shouldst listen . . . they have made a mine where thou wouldst attack—I have seen it—I saw the lying lights go up. Go not thither to court death, certain death. If attack must be made seek defeat or victory elsewhere."

"Seen it?" he repeated incredulous.

"My lord—from the citadel whence I come—but it matters not I saw it—I saw it. Oh, listen, I pray thee, listen——" Her voice was at breaking point.

"Thou sawest it—where—show me the place!" He pointed to the map.

She rose unsteadily, looked for a second, then her fingers went out unhesitatingly—but she herself swayed. He caught at her and, as he did so, saw

her helpless arm. The sight turned his vagrant attention utterly, he forgot everything else in sudden kindly sympathy.

"Thy arm," he cried, "it is hurt."

She tried to wrench herself away. "'Tis nothing —I fell—but what matter? Oh, listen I pray thee, listen!" But even as she spoke she staggered and, without a word, he lifted her in his arms and carrying her, half unconscious, to the inner tent laid her on the bed.

"Bid Father Buseo come quick!" he said to the startled attendant, "and stay! Sarmad too! They await me outside the tent."

And he stood looking down at the prostrate figure, almost too bewildered for thought till they came.

"The forearm is broken by a bullet," said the surgeon-priest. "How——" then he paused too astonished for articulate speech.

But Sarmad with his dull blue eyes, said quietly:

"She went with her goats to the citadel, and she saw what she said."

"Saw what?" queried Dara swiftly.

"The mine that has been laid behind the wall where the stars foretold a breach could be made—where the astrologer caused false lights to be shown by treachery to deceive my lord. Yea! she saw the mine with her earthly eyes—as I see it now in her mind with the eyes of God."

With sudden impulse Father Buseo left his patient and came towards them.

"My pupil," he said solemnly, "believe the man! The God of whom we have so often spoken, speaks through many mouths. There is much here

which needs thought. Give time—for God's sake, give time for us to understand."

Dara stood irresolute for a moment, then with a muttered imprecation he left the tent. As he stepped outside he cursed again; for flakes of snow were falling fast; snow that meant an end to all things.

Dawn had passed to day when he returned, but the camp had remained quiet; not a bugle had sounded the advance. Father Buseo had gone, after bandaging the arm. Sarmad sat still as a statue in the tent veranda, waiting for Rana-dil, who had refused to go before she could speak to Dara.

She was crouched by the curtains separating the outer from the inner tents when he entered and sitting down dejectedly by the table rested his hands on the map.

"I have failed," he said quietly, "dearest dear, I have failed."

She rose swiftly and with sudden passion tore the *ram rakkhi* which she had worn so long, from her arm with her teeth, crossed to the brazier which stood on the opposite end of the tent, dropped it into the glowing embers, and going over to where he sat bent and kissed his nerveless hands.

"Thou hast not failed," she cried, "love knows no failure, and thou hast that—in thy wife."

He gave a little glad cry like the cry of a child when it finds its mother, and turned to her.

"Clear Heart!" he said, "Clear Heart!" and held her close.

Book IV
NEMESIS

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was five years since the Heir Apparent Dara Shukoh had retired, unsuccessful, from Kandahar. They had been curiously peaceful prosperous years, so far as the Empire was concerned ; but the Emperor himself had failed. He was now sixty-five ; the pleasures of warm flesh had become less keen, and, unable to live without them, he had had recourse to drugs. And those in turn had brought retribution. Bit by bit he had yielded government to his son, retaining for himself merely the honours and the glory.

For Dara, whether by reason of his great failure, or because for the first time in his life his volatile manhood was supplemented by clear-eyed, clear-hearted womanhood, had changed much. His boyishness remained, but he was not so impulsive. He no longer recklessly offended the courtiers and the nobles, while his quick response, his sympathy, endeared him to common folk. A tall, still extremely good-looking man of forty-five, he stooped somewhat, and grey hair had begun to show amid the black.

And Rana-dil ? She was hardly to be recognized in the silk-robed, bejewelled figure which had taken its place with calm dignity in the palace. If she ever regretted the freedom of the orange garden, the companionship of the birds and the squirrels, she never showed it, and her readiness to do, her capability

of doing anything and everything that the palace ladies might desire had made their mark. Gradually she became an institution, until "Ask Ranu, she will know," was heard on all occasions. And Dara had been right in one thing. Nurmahal his wife had been good and sensible, nay! more than that! Hearing the story of how Rana-dil had ventured death in the river to escape from the position of co-wife, her admiration had paved the way to affection when she saw how little stress was laid upon that position now. Truly the two might be brother and sister! She did not understand it, but she accepted it.

And as for the tale of how Rana-dil had passed as a *peri*, that was a perpetual joy to the zenana, and many were the improvements on it which the heroine made as she recited the incidents in approved fashion. For one of the new-comer's chief merits was, as Princess Jahanara said:

"See you 'tis everything to have jokes made that will not be retailed in the bazaars. One can say what one pleases. And her voice is less outrageous than it was. Dalera, my musician, hath taught her much."

Mayhap he had; but a determination to stand by Dara in all ways had taught her more; even to give up her own sense of beauty.

Yet she still sang in the old way at times, when Dara took her out to the orange garden where he had built a fine festival palace in place of the old summer-house; where Sarmad would appear suddenly, and Father Buseo would come and listen, and airy philosophies would be talked and romantic Western tales be translated. Sarmad had grown

much older, and was more crazy, the people said, than ever; still, since all knew that when God takes away a body's wits He gives something in return, his power of healing, by cure or death, had increased; so diseased-racked babies were brought to him from far and near for the touch that would bring the rest of one or the other.

It was like the old times; but there was a difference. Dara's hand would hold hers fast; his eyes would seek hers again and again for smiles or tears, assent or negation.

And Aurungzebe? The success of his intense desire to beat his brother had not brought him the satisfaction he had anticipated. Something—was it only the woman he at once hated and loved—had militated against its full result. So far from undermining Dara's influence with the Emperor, it had enormously increased it. Part of this was undoubtedly Shahjahan's chuckling admiration for his daughter-in-law's achievements; but was there anything else?

Even Roshanara's constant news-letter could give no hint save that her father seemed to be gradually sinking into a sort of semi-dotage.

Could Dara be giving him slow poison? To Aurungzebe's mind, saturated with intrigue, this seemed as likely as not, and as time went on he grew, apparently, to believe it; but then he seems to have been able to believe anything he chose. He could imagine an injury, ask Heaven piously to forgive the offender and then proceed to punishment himself as a divine duty.

Such was life when Dara coming in hurriedly to Rana-dil's apartment one evening said gravely:

"Trouble is upon us, dear heart! My father is

taken suddenly ill, seriously ill. He fears poison, and therefore hath ordered all doors to be closed in his part of the palace. Jahanara stops with him; and I am to be allowed in twice a day—but only with a retinue of ten—doth he fear me?"

Rana-dil went over to him at once and laid her hand upon his shoulder affectionately. "Not thou, my lord—but there are others."

"Ay!" he said more cheerfully, "and even Jahanara hath had to take an oath—it must be terrible indeed to fear poison," he added with a shiver.

"Worse to give it," she replied, her lip set.

"The doctors think ill of him," continued Dara, "and if——"

"Let ifs alone, my lord," she interrupted, "it is but a devil's word. There is naught to be done save wait—— Ay—and see that thy sister Roshanara Begum sends no letter to the Deccan! That is the first necessity!"

The advice came too late. At that very moment a hasty note was being sealed by the Princess, and given to a swift rider. Always alert, she had, even as a waiting woman had brought tidings of illness, gripped the certainty of silence being enforced, and on the instant had frustrated the order. But she had had scant time for ceremonials. So there were but few words scrawled on the paper.

"The Emperor dies; be ready!"

Thus, while those in the palace were waiting in silence, while Dara, refusing to take advantage of his position on the spot, was quiescent, Aurungzebe was, with the skill of a past master of intrigue, arranging his plans.

If his father died, a battle for the throne must ensue. So much was certain. There were four brothers, and three of them would have to die ere the successor was secure. So much was clear as crystal. The question that remained was, had he better enter the lists at once, or bide his time, leaving the three to fight it out first? Shuja was the one most to be feared. He was bold, brave, and had military talent. Also his long vice-royalty of rich Bengal had given him treasure. He therefore must get the news first. Morad, the third claimant, could be dealt with afterwards. So Aurungzebe delivered his first blow by letter, said his prayers faithfully, beseeching his God to look with favour on his efforts to preserve the faith from infidel hands, and waited.

He had not long to wait. Without a moment's hesitation Prince Shuja took the field and, asserting that Shahjahan was dead of poison given by Dara—between dying and dead there is little difference in Eastern intrigue—marched to seize Empire.

But by this time Shahjahan's own constitution had prevailed over the result of his habits, and after days of unconsciousness he was convalescent.

"Thanks be to the Most High," said Dara piously, as he sat at Rana-dil's feet in the orange garden. "That danger is over! Lo, Buseo! what is't that the new poet says about kings and crowns?"

Father Buseo—for, as in old times, he was a privileged visitor despite Rana-dil's new seclusion—smiled and quoted:

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

Dara put up his hands to his bare head and laughed. "God send I never wear——"

But Rana-dil's hand was on his mouth ere he could

finish the sentence. "Say not so, my lord!" she put in, then turned to Sarmad quickly. He was sitting as he so often sat, statuesquely still, his eyes dull. "Seest thou aught, master?" she asked, and there was a note of anxiety in her voice.

He pulled himself together with an effort. "Naught," he said. "Naught, my child."

But a chill had fallen over the party. After a while it dispersed, and Dara, saying that he had to see to the letter his father was writing to Prince Shuja bidding him return to Bengal, rose to go.

"See that it be sent by faithful messenger, my lord," said Rana-dil.

A presage of coming evil had laid a chilly hand upon her, why she scarcely knew, and when the Prince had left she turned again to Sarmad.

"Didst really see naught, master?" she asked.

"I saw a spider in the south weaving a web," he replied shortly and would say no more.

Mayhap he spoke true, and Prince Shuja was enmeshed by the web. Anyhow he persisted in his march, persisted in saying Shahjahan was dead, and it was not until, utterly routed, he was driven back to Bengal by the Imperial Forces that he desisted from his attempt to seize the crown.

"That danger is over also," said Prince Dara with a sigh of relief, "though I understand not why he was so obstinate. He was not wont to be so as a boy—and the Emperor wrote him many letters with his own hand—he even promised him reward to go back."

"Perchance he never received the letters," replied Rana-dil, setting her lip.

Dara looked at her and smiled. "Thou art ever

full of suspicion, dear heart! Had I so many I should lose hold on life."

She sighed and changed the subject. Despite his distrust and dislike of Aurungzebe, he never could be got to understand the depth of deceit in his brother's character; it was too far removed from his own extreme clarity for comprehension.

Yet Rana-dil was right, and Sarmad's words were true. The spider was diligently weaving his web. The one solid fear—Shuja's wealth and strength—was removed. Now he could go ahead.

Aurungzebe was great at letters; there are folios of them still intact, and this is one of them:

"Be it known to the Mighty Prince Morad Baksh that I have received word that Prince Dara has killed our father by poison and has taken possession of the Government, meaning to assume the title of Emperor. This fact forces me to write this letter to let you know that there is no one, no other prince except you, worthy to be Emperor of the Mogul Empire. Dara is an infidel and idolator, a destroyer of the Mohammedan faith. Shuja is a heretic, following the sect of Ali, and thus opposed to the true faith; while my zeal for the Koran requires me to devote all my strength to making you Emperor of the whole empire.

"For, as everyone knows, it is long since I renounced the world, and made a solemn vow to end my days at Mecca.

"All that I ask of you is a sincere statement, supported by an oath on the Koran, that after I have, relying on the strength of God, seated you on the throne and made you absolute sovereign, you will

be pleased to take compassion on my family and cherish them in memory of me with paternal love. If you give me your oath on the Koran thus to act, I promise to use all my strength, devices and ingenuity to seat you on the throne. In guarantee of which I send you one hundred thousand rupees to establish between us a firm and perpetual union, being brothers as we are of one father, one faith and both defenders of holy Koran.

"Awaiting your arrival,

Your faithful brother

AURUNGZEBE."

Was it the bribe of one hundred thousand rupees, or the bigger one of Aurungzebe's devices and ingenuities, which made Morad—always a bit of a fool—fall into the trap? But he did. He wrote back saying that as a mark of great affection he would accept the rupees, and that he was making ready for the junction of the two armies to carry out what God should decree.

So here was the rebellion of two more sons while poor Shahjahan, still weak from his illness, was attempting to dispel the rumour that he was dead by showing himself to the populace, and even by journeying from Delhi to Agra.

He tried letter writing again, but there was little use in that when every letter coming from the north was carefully *viséd* and all that contained mention of the Emperor as still alive studiously destroyed. The net was fine and little could escape through it. Day by day, more and still more of the orthodox, convinced that the Emperor was really dead, and that there was danger to Islam in Dara's succession,

joined the standard of Aurungzebe, until Shahjahan, old though he was, and still weak, lost his temper and proposed marching in person against the rebels. It is difficult, in the welter of treachery and fanaticism which permeated the Court, to disentangle truth. Possibly if Dara had had entire authority he might have crushed the rebellion ; but what was to be done when two nobles, dabbling in traitorous conduct, so under order of death by the Heir Apparent, were forgiven by the Emperor on the representation of his ladies ? And what could Shahjahan do when Dara, wearying perchance of perpetual pupilage, insisted that his father should not undertake the difficulties and dangers of a march in person against the rebels ? Be that as it may, the generals sent—for if the Emperor was not allowed to lead, neither, he swore, should his son—were badly defeated. Again by treachery. It was in the air ; no one could be trusted to be loyal to anything but the faith.

And Aurungzebe was praying in public for the conversion or death of his infidel brother ! History gives no parallel to the hypocrisy.

So in the end it came to the issue of brother against brother.

It was the 14th May, 1658, that Dara's army left Agra. It made a brave and splendid show, covering the ground as far as the horizon ; for the Prince was so personally popular among the poor that thousands and thousands flocked to his standard ; but, though they looked well enough on their horses, they were, for the most part, butchers, barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors and such-like, who knew nothing of war. Yet the army in the field, says an eye-witness, " Looked like a lovely city adorned with

beautiful tents, flying innumerable flags of different colours and different shapes, each tent having its own device so that it might be recognized." There was a solemn leave-taking in the Hall of Audience. Shahjahan, still majestic, though his hands, his voice trembled. And behind the lattice whence the women could watch there were floods of tears; all except Rana-dil, who sat calm, her eyes on Dara's tall martial figure, recognizing that, martial though it might look, it was not that of a born soldier.

"My beloved and cherished son," came the Emperor's voice, young for its years, "ever hast thou given me respect and obedience. That thou shouldest become Emperor peacefully has ever been my prayer; but none can fathom the decrees of God. I wished in person to chasten the rebels, unworthy as they are of the name of son or brother; but, in compassion on my years, my infirmities, thou goest to expose thy life for the peace, the freedom, the safety of empire and father. For this I thank thee and place all in the hands of God on whom we trust for victory."

It was all very stately, very magnificent, very affecting, and the sound of sobbing from behind the women's screen became acute.

But there were other farewells to be made which touched Dara more deeply. Father Buseo for instance. With him he shook hands in European fashion, then moved by sudden impulse sank on his knees and asked a blessing. It was given, while a friendly noble standing by shrugged his shoulders, and when the Heir Apparent had moved on said cynically, "Dost think he will make good Emperor?" To which the honest father replied,

with tears in his eyes, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven, not of earth. Ye are a stubborn race and require more of the devil."

Then there was Sarmad, white-haired, his long limbs less sinewy than of old, but his face serene, aloof as ever, his voice even and calm as he quoted: "Go! draw thy sword! Smite down thy foes! Think not of death, for to die well is life immortal."

So with a brilliant smile Dara passed to his last sight of Rana-dil. They did not say much to each other. Life had brought them for so many years such gifts of comprehending spirit that there seemed little to say. Still, as he held her hands and looked into her face, his voice broke over the impulsive remark:

"Mayhap, dear heart, that after all the *ram rakkhi* was best."

She gave a sort of sob and put her head down on his shoulder for a second. "What was't," she said, "that Father Buseo quotes so often? 'Father thou art to me, and brother too, kind husband——'" her voice trailed away into silence.

"'Tis well I have been kind," he said cheerily and went, full of hope and confidence.

As he passed from the women's apartments a note was given him by an obsequious eunuch. It held but a few words:

"May God preserve thee! Trust not my husband. He is black traitor."

It was from the Emperor's favourite mistress, Kalilullah's wife. With an oath he tore it into fragments and passed on.

As he rode out to the camp the Taj stood out soft yet clear against the cloudless sky.

CHAPTER XXIV

BUT a few days afterwards, Dara's army, which, as an eye-witness has said, "Moved over the heights and through the vales like the waves of a stormy sea, the lanceheads of the Rajput cavalry with tremulous motion sending forth rays of light, Prince Dara, amidst his squadrons appearing like a crystal tower," had halted within three miles of the enemy on the banks of a river.

Eager as always, the Heir Apparent was for attacking at once, since scouts reported that the whole of the rebel forces had not arrived; but, once more, traitorous astrologers were to the fore, and the assault was deferred.

It is difficult, indeed, to give with full strength any adequate impression of the atmosphere of intrigue which, emanating from the brain of one small man, surrounded Dara on all sides. Beyond the Rajput forces, and the tagrag and bobtail of the newly raised foot-soldiers, there was never a man in the army who was whole-heartedly loyal. Thirty thousand Mogul horsemen, alone, were ready to rat on occasion; while, beyond one or two personal friends, the nobles were in favour of Aurungzebe, though many of them were well aware of his deceit, his untrustworthiness. Still, he preached Islam, he defended the Koran.

It seems incredible, but it is a fact that attack

was delayed until Aurungzebe, by the preconcerted signal of three guns at midnight, should proclaim that he would be prepared and ready to fight at dawn.

Even so, when the noontide sun beat down on the opposing troops, Dara's were in the ascendant. So much can personal courage do, and the conspirators, as they watched the turn of events began to wonder if they had chosen the right side. Thrice had Dara turned aside from what would have been certain victory had it been pushed, to help where help was wanted; but, even so, the unexampled courage of his subsequent advance had carried all before it. For once treachery had failed and Kalilullah Khan, the arch traitor, inactive with his five thousand horse in the rear, felt that if something were not done his cause was lost. He spurred his horse towards Dara and threw himself from it, and pointing to Aurungzebe, who close by, and with but scanty following was, bravely enough, trying to ally his broken forces, cried:

"My hero Prince! Seize on the glory before you! My squadrons are here! Descend from your elephant—take my horse, head them and capture the rebel with your own hand!"

Was it the temptation of personal glory; or had fatigue—for he was unused to battle-fields, unused to strenuous work, weakened his judgment? He looked round; behind Kalilullah Khan were five thousand Mogul horsemen, lances in rest. He hesitated; then, without real thought, yielded to the suggestion, and gave the signal to the elephant's *mahout*. It needed but one touch of the guiding goad and the huge creature sank to the ground, obedient.

From that moment Dara's cause was lost. The raw levies following him, no longer seeing him towering ahead, instinct with fight, deemed him dead, and the half-hearted thought the time for choice had come. So, ere the Prince could realize the blunder, a regular rout had begun. He looked round for Kalilullah's advice. He and his Mogul horsemen were galloping to the rear! He was left almost alone. And from Aurungzebe's small force a shout of victory was raised.

The *mahout* did not wait for orders; his first thought was for the Heir Apparent's life, so the elephant was on its feet again, and shambling away to the rear also, before Dara could grip what had happened. Then in an instant it flashed upon him—Kalilullah the arch traitor! Why? Because Shahjahan had stolen his wife. And that one! and that one!—all the same—the same outrage—women—always women!

But it was not all his father's fault. It was his own! Why had he offended that one? Why had he been so reckless, so . . . He groaned aloud . . . A regular rout! Not one capable of being rallied. The very guns, European artillerymen and all, in full flight! Why? What had happened? A few minutes ago victory had been his. And now? Disgrace . . .

As he was borne along above the fleeing multitudes he was absolutely alone. Amid the clouds of dust arising from innumerable feet he could discern at times, some one whom he had thought a friend, pricking his horse, his retinue, back to safety. There was no one left. Should he turn back and face Aurungzebe alone? What use? What use to leave

his womenkind, to leave Rana-dil especially at the White Snake's mercy? For a time he almost lost consciousness in the extremity of his horror at himself, his father, his brother, his friends.

But, after a while, he began to recover his senses. There might still be a chance of repairing the disaster up country. At Delhi, surely, surely the people still liked him and the peasants were not touched by the Court life, the Court scandals! No! he would not see his father—the father who had ever been so kind and who yet had been his enemy. Even so it was not resentment which he wanted to show—what was he, beaten, disgraced to show resentment—he was ashamed. He had been so confident—so arrogant. O Gods! how arrogant . . .

He would stop the night in the orange garden . . . he could send for Nurmahal, and perhaps Rana-dil, if she would come with a man so disgraced as he was. He counted up the men—if they called themselves men—the horses, the guns, the elephants that had been at his disposal. All routed, all sent a-flying by one blunder. He saw it now, why had not he seen it before? Fool that he was—treble distilled fool! Kalilullah was traitor, but he—he ought to have known. It was all his fault—his own fault.

So he went on and on in a dreary round of self-deprecation, of senseless rage at himself, at everybody. He could not even think of what he must do—there would be so many things to arrange; and everything must be done in a hurry—when the one thing for which he craved was the forgetfulness of sleep.

It had been dark some hours when he arrived at the garden gate more dead than alive; too weary

even to think of the happy hours he had spent there ; obsessed with the hope that mayhap he might find forgetfulness even for a brief half-hour before the servants he had sent to call could arrive, and he must bestir himself to make arrangements for a hasty escape.

And, lo, the garden was lit up as it had often been when they made festival there. And who was this hastening to meet him with outstretched hands ?

" Rana-dil ! Oh, Rana-dil ! "

" Dost know ? " he said hoarsely. " Dost know—that I am—disgraced ? "

She smiled and, taking his hand in hers, helped his faltering steps to the pleasure palace.

" Nay ! my lord," she said. " I heard not that. What I heard of was treachery that disgraces those who practised it, not those wronged by it."

" Who told thee ? " he asked hoarsely. " Has the news come already ? "

" Sarmad saw," she answered quietly. " So I came here, since I knew my lord would like the garden best. And Nurmahal and the boy are here also, and the camels will be ready by daydawn since they are swifter than elephants ! Basant, thy faithful eunuch, is in charge. So my lord can safely get some sleep, for all arrangements have been made already."

He caught at her hands with both his frantically. " But thou dost not know the fool I was—the arrant fool."

She paused in arranging cushions on a low divan and drew herself up proudly. " I know naught, my lord," she said, " save black treachery—such treachery as will assuredly damn the doer." Then

suddenly she was on her knees, kissing the hand she held. "Lo," she cried, and for the first time her voice showed emotion, "thou standest to-day as thou hast always stood—honourable. Dost hear? Honourable! fool if thou wilt—but honourable! Now sleep, for thou wilt need all thy wits to-morrow."

"But my father——" he began.

Her lip stiffened. "Thy father will know of defeat ere this, and he must not know of thee till thou art away. No harm will come to him. 'Tis thee they seek not the Emperor. Listen! The city will be in an uproar—there is no good in staying here—but at Delhi and beyond there are men untouched by revenge. So sleep, dear heart, sleep!" Her voice changed to the infinite tenderness of a mother's. "See I will sing thee to sleep with the Mogul lullaby, as if thou wert a child—so shall forgetfulness come."

The peace, the comfort of all things was almost too much for his manhood. He turned his face into the pillows to hide the salt tears.

She took no notice, but went on crooning the quaint cradle song till he lay still; the cradle song which the Mogul mothers, fleeing on horseback from their enemies, must have sung first, but which now belongs to every Mogul nurseling:

"Sleep, croodie. Talk with God
Know not the path thou'st trod
God knows it. Why shouldst thou?
Sleep, childie! Sleep just now
Fear not! I keep awake!
Heigh ho! My bones do ache
Heigh ho! My horse does pull
Can't it see th' river's full?

No pebbles in *that* bed
Mine holds an hundred.
Dreams ! Dreams ! Who lies dead ?
Some one in the river's bed
Praise God ! He rests his head
Hush ! Hush ! I hear thee, sweet,
Mother's arms around thee meet.
Praise God ! the night's nigh past
Childie sleeps at last ! at last ! "

At last, at last ! She rose, seeing he slept, and, her task done, fierce wrath seized on her, and even while she went about calmly, giving instructions, she was in her heart cursing with all the vehemence and vitality of her nature ; a vitality which seemed to infect those she ordered ; so that long before dawn all was ready for secret start. Even Nurmahal, who had been weeping quietly, helplessly, dried her tears, and tried to do something, while Dara's little son grew quite excited over the preparations.

" The camel men say they can reach Delhi in two days," he reported exultantly, " or sooner if need be, so Father can easily raise another army, and all will be well."

" God send it may be so, sonling," she said kindly, for the lad was a favourite of hers. " Doubtless it will be so ; then thou and thy mother will be safe and rejoice." But as she said the words, her voice trembled for the first time ; for the moment she seemed to share Sarmad's uncanny vision and see what lay before them.

But, for that moment, there must be no thought of evil ; all must be hope ; all must be confidence.

So, when the dawn came, and Dara, roused from a sound forgetfulness, jumped to his feet at a touch

on his shoulder, he found her standing, smiling at him with a foaming silver bowl of milk in her hands.

Lost for a moment in a tumult of old memories, present comfort, and such a gratitude in both, as filled him with passionate affection, passionate admiration, he took it from her without a word.

But the old "*Bismillah*" came as, with eyes brimming over, he handed her back the cup.

"*Ur-rahman-ur-raheem*" she added softly. So he stood for a second, then said, "Sister! I have no gold, but love," and turned alert, confident, to face the day.

As they rode past the Taj, it showed pure and cold as a snowdrift against the grey of the dawn.

The city was still asleep after the turmoil of the night, and Shahjahan, Emperor of all the Indies, had forgotten all things in drugged sleep within the women's apartments of the palace.

CHAPTER XXV

MEANWHILE, Aurungzebe, after infinite precautions against a possible trap—the worst of deceit being that it brings fear of its like in others—had taken possession of Dara's camp, with all the baggage and stores, without any opposition. This was more than he had expected, but he felt that much more remained to be done. So doubtless he said his prayers, thanked his Maker for having aided him, and besought Him for similar help in the future; for it must not be forgotten that he was absolutely sincere in his religion.

Then he sent for his brother Morad Baksh and prepared a reception fit for one who was to be Emperor: nay more, who at the moment *was* Emperor, since Aurungzebe had no difficulty in forgetting a letter which he had just indited to his father and sent off to Agra by swift messenger.

As usual, it was crammed full of fine phrases and carried a thousand beautiful expressions of love and obedience. He regretted in it that the evil thoughts and ambitions of Dara had necessitated a resort to extremities, and expressed a hope that as the offender had been forced to abandon his evil designs, and seek a safety which he, Aurungzebe, would not deny him, his father might long be able to enjoy his renewed health.

And, as he despatched the missive, he sent another

directing that the road to Delhi should be closed to fugitives, and that every effort should be made to capture Dara.

It is, briefly, impossible to overstate Aurungzebe's duplicity: he was past master in the art.

Morad Baksh, a tall, stout young man with no brains and a vast capacity for pleasure, received his brother's obeisance congratulations on a victory ascribed to his own personal prowess, and expression of subservience with a gravity which would have been farcical if it had not been so pitiable.

So the day passed in absolute unreality, and the night was spent by the two brothers, Morad in debauchery, Aurungzebe in the writing of countless letters to everybody who might have the will or the power to assist or delay; for he spared no pains.

He was in no hurry to press on to Agra, where the palace people were in a sad state, not knowing what to do or how to take the situation.

So much of his former spirit was left to Shahjahan that at first he thought of leaving the fortress, and, as it were, relying on the loyalty of his subjects, but in this he was too late. Nearly all the men of influence had already gone over to the sworn defender of Islam, and the rank and file, even if they were willing to come out, were worth nothing. During the past five years, Dara, loyal, obedient, had done all things; now that he had gone Shahjahan realized for the first time how important he had become.

It was four days after the battle when the two rebels encamped their army close to the orange garden and quartered themselves in the festival palace inside the walls. Then ensued such a plethora

of protesting letters and protesting replies as leave the historian helpless. Did either, father or sons, believe in themselves, or, having thrown truth to the dogs, did they lie at leisure ?

So Shahjahan, anxiously waiting in the Jasmine Balcony a reply to his latest communication which asserted that Dara's evil condition and small capacity had been a constant grief to him, and that he held Aurungzebe in parental love and was longing to embrace him, was considerably startled one afternoon to find the fort invested, the gates closed from outside, and no one allowed ingress or egress. He was practically a prisoner ; he and some two thousand women pensioners, to say nothing of his daughters. So, since Shahjahan was no coward, open war was declared ; broken and weak as he was the Emperor took the initiative, and for three days and nights the guns belched forth defiance. To no purpose. Aurungzebe, sheltered by the town, made no reply, until the third night when an arrow carrying a letter was shot into the European artillerymen's guard-room. What was the bribe offered—more spirits or more gold—is not stated ; but an hour or so afterwards one Reuben Smith, their captain, descended the wall by rope ; and, after that, similar means of escape were to be seen from every embrasure ! A pitiful, pitiful sight, when one considers that the only man in the place who could not so escape was Shahjahan, Emperor of all the Indies, who but a week before had been able, with a certitude of obedience, to give any order that he chose. But, even had he been able to escape, he would not have done so. Two thousand females are a drag upon any man and Shahjahan was still—like his son

Dara—honourable, at any rate so far as females were concerned. And the women for the most part were, or said they were, brave. Many of them followed Jahanara's example and asserted their willingness to die in defence of their privileges, and some followed Roshanara's lead, and with ill-concealed glee awaited the end complacently; while the rest were more concerned with the possible fate of their jewellery than of themselves, since a woman could always find a protector but not always a nose-ring.

So the fort held out, until bit by bit it became noised abroad through the city that the father of his people, the ruler who, whatever his faults, had always ruled justly and well, was being held to ransom and starved. That the gates had been closed, wickets built up so that the Monarch of all the Indies could not even stroll in his garden nor despatch a letter to a friend.

Thus there was danger of revolt; and this was not part of Aurungzebe's plan.

So early one morning a sentry from the palace wall, dishevelled and bleeding, came excitedly into the place where Aurungzebe was, in default of the real audience hall, holding his Court, and held out a sealed letter asserting that he had found it on a man who had been hanging about the palace, but who, after a terrific fight, had escaped.

"It is doubtless some trivial request for dainties," said Aurungzebe lightly, handing the missive to his chief minister—the husband again of another of the Emperor's favourites—"Read it, I pray thee and give suitable direction."

But the official's face grew grave. "'Tis of more

serious import, my lord," he said. "Mayhap it had best be kept private."

"Nay," returned Aurungzebe, smiling and innocent. "Let all men know what my father desires. Read it aloud, my friend."

So it was read aloud:

"To my beloved and only son Dara. Go not too far from Agra since the time is close at hand when thou wilt see the rebels Morad and Aurungzebe slain by the very hands of him who indites this letter. Lo, 'tis arranged that they come to visit me. They will come in alive, but they will not come out on their own feet; but rather will they be carried out by my servants' hands for burial. Thus thou, my son, will return to rule the empire. This is the only wish of thy loving father,

SHAHJAHAN."

As the last word was uttered a cry of distress rose from Aurungzebe:

"My father—O my father! Why, O why! And I thy son. 'Tis not true—'tis a forgery—never wouldst thou—let me see the writing." He snatched the letter from the minister's hands and after one glance sank face down among his cushions, striking them with outstretched palms, beating the ground with his feet.

As fine a piece of acting as ever was seen, and the nobles looked at each other in mingled doubt and concern. Was it true? or what had they there?

It is to be supposed that the master hypocrite watched them through closed eyelids, for he sat up again, more calm.

"'Tis like the hand-writing," he cried, "but I hold it a forgery! I will to my father on the instant." And he rose to go.

"But, Highness," expostulated the arch-traitor Kalilullah Khan. "What of murder—what of the threat?"

"Naught!" replied Aurungzebe. "This must be proved forgery. I go!"

Half a dozen courtiers joined their protests to the arch-traitor's—a dozen; finally, with one voice, the whole Court.

Aurungzebe hesitated. "But, friends, I must. Lo, 'tis not possible that I should rest, not knowing of my father——" His voice positively broke with emotion.

"Most Noble," said the arch-traitor, "this visit seems to us all, your humble servants, undesirable, dangerous; since in your Highness lies our hope. But what of a letter? If one were drafted now—if it were read to the assembled company, to the whole durbar, then would the truth be known."

Again Aurungzebe hesitated. "Yet my father desires to see me; every day he inquires for me. 'Twould surely be better to go and put matters to the test. Yet, since ye all have fears—lo, I have none—I will write. Let a scribe bring paper and pen."

And the scribe wrote:

"Most dear and honoured father. A forged letter to my infidel brother Dara hath been brought to me purporting to have been writ by the Most High. But though I know of the mule loads of gold sent to aid that arch rebel, and the love and esteem that

hath hitherto been lavished on him, I refuse to believe that countenance is still given to him. O my father, excuse and pardon me, and persist not in anger! All that I do is in the true interests of the Most High, and so soon as I have overcome the danger which threatens the Emperor from the arch infidel, that very day will I wait upon the Emperor, and prostrating myself at his feet declare myself what I am ever, the most humble and obedient of sons,

AURUNGZEBE."

The letter, duly signed, was read aloud, sealed and given to Kalilullah Khan for delivery.

So the audience, much impressed, melted away to tell the tidings of Shahjahan's treachery and his son's unexampled patience.

Thus the object of the whole carefully rehearsed scene was secured, and the bazaars, talking over the investment of the fort, said, "See you! 'Tis for safety's sake. So long as Dara is at large, he might pounce down any time and kill the Emperor. He tried by poison as all know. This time it will be the sword. God protect us and the protecting son."

They did not see Kalilullah, when he was alone, tear the letter into strips and burn them in a brazier. But the object with which it had been written was attained. The growing concern of the populace had been placated, and the way paved for more strenuous tightening of the net round the palace. It would have been easy to subdue it, but that would mean violence, which must be avoided. So, by one trivial order after another, Shahjahan's comfort was lessened, until, seeing himself helpless, he voluntarily gave up

the keys of the fortress, and accepted his position as prisoner. Beyond the fact that he was not so much harassed, it made little difference. Princess Jahanara, of course, elected to stay with her father. So did most of the two thousand women—what else could they do, poor souls? Only Roshanara and her immediate following left; partly, no doubt, moved thereto by affection for her brother, but also by the fact that, since Jahanara had no longer any use for it, she came in for all the latter's magnificent equipage, her liveried servants, and the pomp and circumstance of her position. Thus Aurungzebe, after making yet another injured husband governor of the city with strict instructions not to relax his vigilance over the palace, but to keep it and all it contained secure under lock and key, was free to carry on his settled design; which was, briefly, to seize the Empire and destroy all claimants to it. After all, much as it shocks our civilized humanitarianism to think of the murder this implies, it must be remembered that it is only the morality of the Old Testament. But, before he began on this seriously, he doubtless once more said his prayers and thanked his Creator for making him the instrument of divine justice.

CHAPTER XXVI

AND all this time Dara was being harried about from place to place. Delhi, forewarned by Aurungzebe's untiring letters, refused him entry, and he had to go further north to seek asylum. There he left one disadvantage behind him. He had no longer to combat resentment due to his father's vicious habit, but the animus against him as an infidel grew stronger amongst a people more purely Mohammedan. Still, with almost unlimited treasure at his command—for it was true that Shahjahan had sent him many muleloads of golden *ashrafis* and jewels—he was almost every day able to enlist recruits. Thus his confidence remained unimpaired, and he worked hard to get together a force which would enable him to turn back to Agra and release his father from captivity.

Aurungzebe was well aware of the danger of this, he foresaw also that, if Dara were once more to appear on the horizon, his personal popularity with the city folk might be dangerous ; therefore he must be scotched as soon as possible. But before this could be safely done another thing was needful ; Aurungzebe's own position must be secured and until Morad was out of the way Aurungzebe had none. So arrangements were made for both the brothers, with their respective armies, to leave for Delhi in order to follow up and destroy the fugitive

Dara, after a solemn coronation of Morad as Emperor.

But this the astrologers—Aurungzebe seems to have had a round dozen of them up his sleeve ready to foretell exactly what he desired—declared could not be done until a certain day and hour which would have delayed the march to Delhi inconveniently. So, strangely enough, this date fell upon a day on which the armies would be far away from any large town. So much the better, said Aurungzebe, since a rabble was apt to be in the way and mar the full solemnity of an occasion. Thus it was in a beautiful spot, close to a rushing river that, by Aurungzebe's order, his army halted to make preparation of the crowning. It must have been one of the chief trials of the time that it was quite impossible to believe in anyone's truth or loyalty. Thus many were the warnings Morad was given by his faithful eunuchs—eunuchs, indeed, seeming to be the only persons who had any conscience or sense of honour; but being headstrong, and so inflated by the prospect before him as to be incapable of common sense, he disregarded them, and, most gorgeously apparelled for the occasion, he rode over accompanied by a select personal guard to Aurungzebe's camp on the appointed day.

He found it decorated with flags and garlands, *nakarahs* blowing, drums beating. Yet, even here, he was warned. A cavalry officer in Aurungzebe's pay, it is true, yet still in his heart loyal to the throne, laid hold of Morad's bridle and saying, "His Majesty desires, doubtless, the coronation hall, but he is on his way to prison," deliberately turned the horse round whence it had come. And a chief magistrate,

while making a lowly salutation, remarked meaningly, "God send Majesty returns willingly as he has come."

But Morad, whose whole camp passed its days in music, dancing, wine-bibbing and revelry, only laughed, quoting a Persian proverb to the effect that fools fear, where men fight.

And there was Aurungzebe, for once suitably attired in silk and cloth of gold, surrounded by glittering officials, and there was a handsome throne on which Morad could seat himself, while his elder brother with smiles and protestations flicked away the flies with a scented handkerchief. And there were musicians and dancing girls scattering flowers and scents. So, on to a feast such as surely never had been excelled, and wine not to be beaten. It was hours before the last sweetmeat had been crunched, the last cup of wine finished. Nor was Morad the only one feasted. The officers and men he had brought with him as guard, seeing their betters had settled down to a night of festivity, followed their example; only one faithful eunuch stood all the time at his master's back fully armed against attack. But none was made. Violence of that sort was too crude for Aurungzebe's methods. Instead of this, when the lengthy meal was ended, Morad, full of meat and drink, was invited to rest awhile in the adjoining tent, while the throne was made ready, the astrologers consulted as to the most favourable moment for coronation.

So he rested, and naturally fell asleep, while the faithful eunuch watched at the door with drawn sword.

All to no purpose. Quiet fell upon the camp, for

in truth most of the company was either drunk or asleep.

Then Aurungzebe in *négligé*, cotton drawers and dressing-gown, came out carelessly, deliberately, from an opposite door; in passing made a faint sign to the eunuch, shook his head and passed on round the corner.

What had he wanted? Curiosity seized on the eunuch; he rashly put his head out and peered . . .

That was sufficient. Four men had him legs and arms. A fifth gagged him with his hands. So forthwith they strangled him, and promptly buried him; it did not do to have corpses lying about even when guards were drunk.

And there was Morad, snoring, helpless, at the mercy of anyone. But he still had his sword beside him, a dagger in his belt. These were hardly safe factors when a noiseless abduction was desired. So Aurungzebe disappeared into his own tent, to reappear with his youngest son, a child of four years old.

"See there, Mammu!" whispered the father, "there lies thine uncle asleep! What fun couldst thou steal away his sword, his dagger! Then we could hide them, and when he wakes? what fun! I bet thee thou canst not do it."

What a picture! God's sunlight streaming down on the innocent child, the man without one scruple, and the senseless half-drunken figure in the shadow.

"Well done, sonling!" came praise as the child returned, and the weapons were safe in Aurungzebe's hands. "See! Here is a sweetie for thee. Now run and tell thy mammy how clever thou art!"

Clever indeed! No need now for hurry. Aurungzebe drew a deep breath of relief; his plot had succeeded. There was nothing left to do now but summon the men ready with the fetters, order the musicians to strike up loudly once more to deaden possible outcries, and bid the four elephants requisitioned beforehand with their appropriate escorts stand ready to start.

But there were no outcries. It is true that Morad awakening still half-drunk looked into his brother's face and said sleepily: "Is this thy word sworn on the Koran?" then sank into stupor again.

So there really was nothing to do save convey the drink-sodden body to one of the four elephants.

Which one?

Ah! There was the rub! Which of the four leviathans had the privilege of carrying Morad Baksh, Emperor of all the Indies? A difficult question to answer, withal an important one, since the first elephant started northwards, the second southwards, the third eastwards, the fourth westwards, so that possible pursuers and rescuers had their choice of all the four airts!

So, it being about sunset, Aurungzebe doubtless went into his tent, said his prayers, and thanked his Creator once more for being allowed to do Him good service.

After which, since it was a pity all the preparations should be wasted, he had himself crowned Emperor instead of the drunken fool now on his way to drink poppy juice day by day in the fortress of Gwalior, until he should lose what little wits he had and die a drivelling idiot.

The whole affair had gone off splendidly, and there

was nothing left to be done save to bribe lavishly. Bribe everybody. Morad's troops, his nobles, his captains; and if any refused acceptance not to be angry, but to let them go free. And the same with such of Dara's or Shahjahan's adherents who fell into his hands. There never was any use in proceeding to extremities with people who, if not ready to help at the time, might become so in the future.

It was different with such creatures as those who had strangled the faithful eunuch, and such-like. They had tongues in their heads which it was wise to silence; so they were silenced.

And that night he wrote a letter to one Shahjahan presently confined in the fortress at Agra, telling the prisoner firmly but politely that being unfit to reign, partly because of his immorality, but more because of his age, he had better reconcile himself to his present life, and enjoy himself in his harem among his women. That due respect and courtesy would be shown him so long as he was quiescent and did not plot to break the peace.

The letter was signed, as ever, by his "dutiful and affectionate son"; and there the plottings and plannings, the deceits and intrigues had to rest.

Far away in the south one brother, Shuja, was a fugitive, daily becoming more and more helpless. Far away in the north, Dara, still confident, still vital, was being checkmated at every move. And in the middle at Gwalior the last remaining brother was being fed on poppy water.

So, for the time being, Aurungzebe had leisure to think of governing, and there is no question but that he did it uncommonly well. In fact all the race of

Timur, up till then, had had the instinct of rulers; it was in the blood. But it was only up to then. Something there was of that old Mogul blood that could not survive the almost incredible duplicity of Aurungzebe. After he died, not one of his race was worth the shoes in which they stood.

CHAPTER XXVII

"WHAT thinkst thou, Basant?" said Rana-dil to the faithful eunuch who had accompanied the fugitive party from Agra.

He had been Dara's personal servant ever since the day when, reft from the tribe of hill dwellers of which his father had been chief, Shahjahan—after the fashion of majesty—had had him mutilated as a companion and servant to his son. Both small boys, they had grown up together, the one never forgetting his royalty, the other glorying in his servitude.

But, ever since the fatal day of flight from Agra when he, aching under Rana-dil's orders, had arranged for their hurried departure, he had been her right hand. Capable, determined, his common sense had over and over again saved the fugitives from disaster. He was a typical hill-man, fair of skin, light-eyed, of medium or below medium height, but immensely broad and powerful.

He stood for a moment thoughtful; then he said firmly:

"My lord should leave Multan without delay."

"Wherefore?" asked Rana-dil, fearing the answer, yet desirous to gain confirmation of her own doubts.

"Because the months have passed without fruition, despite our many efforts. At Delhi, at Lahore, the same failure save for some gold and a few troops.

Everywhere hath Aurungzebe sown distrust and lies! Lo, God or the devil hath given him a ready pen! My master is infidel, he is son of one who steals womenfolk, and some"—here Basant's wholesome face took on a faint smile—" like Mohabut of Kabul, hath refused entry or help because of a long past indiscretion of my master—ay! and a well deserved one also," he added vindictively. " But right or wrong, 'tis ill having rebuffs always. We should get into new country untouched by the arch-plotter. There is a fortress—impregnable—with bold men inside it, where the Five Rivers meet to make the mighty Indus. There we might halt and rest; besides 'twould be a vantage point, safe, defensible against all comers."

Rana-dil looked at him approvingly yet doubtfully. " But thou hast forgotten faithful Da'aud Khan who even now comes to join his force with ours—and 'tis a fine force. Hath it——"

Basant fell on his knees, and raised his joined hands to her in quick entreaty. " If my mistress will forgive this slave, he will tell her the truth. Da'aud Khan will never come."

" For why ? " she queried sharply.

" Because my master hath given him his dismissal," he continued. " Stay! let me tell the tale. 'Tis forged letters once more, and he, my master, is so easy to deceive! A child might do it—my mistress knows this well. So the evil hath been wrought, and but yesterday—lo, 'tis not my master's fault, the arch-traitor would deceive the very devil—a letter went. ' I, Dara, discharge thee, Da'aud Khan, command thee to withdraw from my army, and accord to thee leave to serve whom thou wilt.' They

say the man wept to read the letter saying, 'It seems as if evil fortune dogs the steps of Dara.' But what will you?" he added, rising to his feet, subservience vanishing, his face setting hard and determined. "The wrong is wrought. We must to Bakkar and begin afresh."

Rana-dil stood for a long time in silence after the eunuch had left her looking out mechanically at a dust storm which was raging, as it so often rages in Multan during the month of June.

One could scarce see anything. The world beyond the half-ruined palace where she stood seemed naught but wind-driven dust. Yon faint shadow bending southwards, was it a man, or only a storm swept bush? The heat was intense, stifling. No weather this in which to march; and Nurmahal was frail: still it must be done.

Dara was never hard to persuade, and his late experience had made him more pliant than ever. He had lost much of his still youthful belief in his own wisdom. Then Bakkar offered rest, not for himself, but for those who were with him, and half his anxieties of late had been for Nurmahal's frailty. The plan would ensure her some measure of comfort, until the advent of the cold weather would make marching possible once more. Rana-dil—might Heaven always bless her, his stand-by, his comfort, his sister!—needed, or said she needed, no such care.

Change, of any kind, was ever a stimulus to his vitality, so he was almost his own cheery, vagrant self again as they left Multan and its dust storms behind them.

Then as they approached Bakkar he rejoiced, as Baber's great grandson was bound to rejoice, in the

beauty of the swift rushing river, tearing through the low-lying land where the spring sown crops were flushing green in the oncoming of the rains, the opalescent hills on the one side, on the other tumbled rocks, and beyond them groves on groves of tall feathery palms. And the fortress rock itself! A towering splintered mass of black limestone in mid-stream, crowned, every inch of its sharp, narrow summit, with high, embrasured walls with here and there, showing light against the sky, a pillared and domed balcony.

That evening, after a crossing had been made when the boat went swirling down the rapid stream, roused to extra swiftness by the mass of rock obstructing its path, the fugitives held quite a carnival of content behind those protecting walls. A cool air, born of the distant sea and of the broad river, swept upwards through the valley, and, as Nurmahal from her balcony looked down on the broad rushing river hundreds of feet below, safety seemed assured.

And it was such a river! The outcome, first of the holy Himalayas, that stand aloof from all mankind apart from human activities, and next of the five streams which bear on their bosoms memories of the fertile plains, the desert stretches, the scattered villages, the crowding towns of the Punjab. Its very water told of multiple experiences, for the blue colour from the far-away hills had hardly mixed with the yellow from the sandy deserts.

They slept in peace that night, knowing that till the autumn floods subsided enemies might attack, but could not win their way in. In fact, so secure were they that Dara, in the holiday which he allowed himself, ventured more than once to go hunting

tiger and lions in the Khanpur jungle, while the ladies, taking a boat, went to see the shrine of the old river god—now turned into a Mohammedan saint—which stood on a tiny islet further down the stream. But such diversions did not last long; a small band of the enemy under the arch-traitor Kalilullah Khan came and made an attempt to invest the rock. But it was beyond the power of so small a force, and Basant the eunuch, whom Dara had appointed commandant, was too busy in getting his guns into position, and munitioning the fortress against the siege which must come with the cold weather, to take much notice of the enemy.

Thus a month passed peacefully, happily. Rana-dil sang and recited, and once there was great joy among the grandchildren who had been sent to Dara's care—because his eldest son, their father, had been driven into the hills—when Grandfather appeared, in a green beard and flowing blue robes, as Father Indus, promising every one everything they desired. Rana-dil, who was responsible for the costume, laughed like the rest, but her heart was sad over the parting to come; for Dara felt he could not be idle, and now that the weather had cooled, and they were not so far from the sea, he had settled to go south in order to find help, leaving Basant in command at Bakkur.

Then the question arose who was to go with him? Burdened he must not be with womenkind, yet Rana-dil felt that it was unsafe that he should go, without Basant, without her. Yet if she went, Nurmahal must go too. Dara, of course, was for taking them all; and so uncertainty prevailed; Nurmahal weeping, Rana-dil very quiet, but with

a frown on her face when she was alone, until, but a few days before the march was begun, Fate intervened and settled the point.

In saving one of the grandsons from a dangerous fall, she slipped herself, fell but a little way, but broke her leg. It was one of those foolish accidents which occur at times, and which, so often, bring in their train serious consequences.

As she lay on her bed after very incompetent surgery had set the broken bones, she turned her face into the pillows and cried silently. This finished everything! Vaguely she felt that the triviality—for the bone would set of course and what did it matter if one leg were shorter than the other?—was the beginning of the end. Dara would have to go without Basant, without her. He would have others with him, of course, and as plentiful a following as was possible with due regard to the garrison; but . . .

"Art in pain, dear heart?" said Dara's kindly, solicitous voice. He was bending over her; she could almost feel the touch of his cheek on her hair. It thrilled her. Fool that she was, when what he needed was a man's brain.

"No!" she said in muffled tones. "I suffer not at all." Then she added, regaining composure with an effort, "But I fear me I shall not be able to accompany my lord."

"What then!" he replied cheerfully, "and wherefore dost thou fear? 'Tis better thou shouldst stop here in safety, and I would that Nurmahal could be persuaded to follow thy example."

Something in his failure to grip the salient point of the situation, something in his unconcern, irritated

her. She turned her face to him and said, half-angrily, half-jestingly :

" Dost mean to break her leg also ? "

His reply cut her to the quick, making her ashamed.

" Dear heart ! Thou hast been crying—and—Rana ! I never saw thee cry before. What is't, sweetheart ? "

" 'Tis the pain," she murmured for apology. His face was so soft, so kind, so sympathetic, she could not choose but to seek excuse.

His easy laugh rang out. " And thou dost bid the babes not tell fibs ! No pain ! A pain." Then he was on his knees beside the bed, his arms around her. " Heart of my heart," he said tenderly. " Dost think I do not know ? Dost think I have not seen ? Lo, thou hast been the good God's providence to me all these years. Art thou woman ? Am I man ? Ranu ! with thee I do forget—yea ! I forget all things save content, save that which hath no wishes, no desires—that which goes with me where I go—thy perfect faith, thy perfect love—nor time, nor distance——" He laid his head beside hers and was silent. There was no need for further words.

So, after a space, she spoke in matter-of-fact tones. " And my lord will not believe everything that he is told ? " she pleaded.

He laughed, rising. " He will believe nothing, if wisdom so desires," he replied.

Thus the preparations began. Time must not be lost if the advantage of the cooler months for a campaign was not to be lost ; besides it would be easier to steal away ere the enemy was reinforced. So, when a new moon was just lighting the river sufficiently to make it possible to steer clear of the

rocks round the bank, quite a little fleet of boats full of men and horses and baggage, with the royal party (including the grandson's mother to take Rana-dil's place in keeping Nurmahal company) sped swiftly down stream to join the small retinue of horsemen who had gone landwards by the opposite bank of the river.

The two boys left behind clambered to the window-sill and shouted progress to Rana-dil as she lay helpless, almost overwhelmed by a sense of coming evil.

"I see them! Yea! they are at the corner! Some one waves a kerchief—now they are gone!"

Gone! She could have cried, but for those words of his: "Nor time, nor distance." Yet the world seemed empty! But the next morning brought her the knowledge that it was still full of things to do, still full of arrangements to be made; for Basant craved audience to tell her, what she had not known before, that, in his anxiety to send as many men with his master as possible, the garrison had been dangerously weakened. But, he added, not very far up the river was a halting-place where the caravans from Kabul and Persia rested ere crossing the Indus, and where business was often done by the Western adventurers who came to purchase the goods brought down by the merchants. "These," he said, "are the folk we need, not the men who fear damnation because Aurungzebe hath called my master infidel. And these men can be bought if there is enough gold. And they can fight—yea! They can fight if there be enough gold. So if the mistress permit, I will go and see what gold can do. There is a young Italian by name Manucci—the mistress knows him and he

was in favour with my lord, having been loyal and faithful always—he can command until I return. The Western artillerymen who have remained, since the guns were here a necessity, love him and will obey."

Thus it was settled, and Basant with one or two of his immediate followers set out with a mule-load of gold; for, unlucky as Dara had been throughout his wanderings, there was never any lack of money.

So days passed without any news, and she had difficulty in keeping up her spirit and so encouraging her scant garrison; but one evening three foreigners, whose capabilities of communication only extended to a few mercantile words, arrived in a boat, and the next day, after dark, half a dozen more signalled to be taken in from the tower of Sukkar which stood on the Kabul side of the river. Then after a good fortnight during which it rained incessantly, and the Indus rose higher and higher, Basant reappeared with quite a number of arrant mercenaries—English, French, Portuguese, Germans, Pathans from the fastnesses of the hills.

"They will fight, see you," said Basant, "and we are well provisioned. So the rest is with the Lord."

But he did not say his prayers or take any credit to himself.

So the fort was well garrisoned, and he brought with him also one whom Rana-dil welcomed with whole-hearted joy. This was Sarmad, who had been left behind, sick of a fever at Delhi, and who had been marching through the desert to rejoin them ever since. How he had managed in the waterless waste of sand, Heaven alone knew. He was more

aloof than ever, more lost in his own thoughts; but Rana-dil felt he might be useful; for he could see.

He would sit in some sheltered corner by an embrasure whence the rushing river, the waving palms, the opalescent hills were visible, and look and look and look, his dull blue eyes almost vacant.

And Rana-dil, passing on her evening round to see all things were in order—for she had taken the provisioning under her special care—would pause beside him to say:

"Dost see anything, master?"

And the answer was always the same:

"I see glory."

Thus the months passed. The enemy was reinforced, but the garrison was brave almost to recklessness. It made sorties, it hurled defiance at Kalilullah Khan, the enemy's general.

"What is he," Basant would say scornfully, "but a pimp; one who has taken shoe-beatings from his wife, the Emperor's mistress, and promotion from the Emperor, who wronged him! He is no soldier."

And, indeed, it seemed so; for the guns of the fort belched forth well-directed fire on the least attempt at assault, while the intermittent bombardment of the other side never seemed to hit the crowning walls; it either flattened itself on the hard rock, or sailed out of sight in the blue sky.

"The saint doth not give enough spirit," laughed the English artillerymen; for Basant saw to it that *their* wants were duly fulfilled.

And letters came at long intervals from Dara; as ever, cheerful, optimistic; but Rana-dil took most comfort from a postscript to one:

"I am believing nothing, sweetheart."

CHAPTER XXVIII

AND the postcript said sooth. For a marvel Dara refused to be trapped by Aurungzebe's second son, who, as it happened, was governor of Aurungabâd, which lay on the southward route. An elaborate plot, including forged letters and feigned rebellion emanated from the Spider in Chief ; but failed, partly because Aurungzebe himself was for the moment hard put to it, in his effort to suppress Prince Shuja once and for all.

Thus Dara made his way without mishap to Guzerat where he found a friend in an old Mohammedan pantaloon, who, descended from ancient Persian princes, was a stickler for etiquette, and held it not to be correct, while his ruler, the Emperor Shahjahan was still alive, to oppose his legitimate heir.

So there Dara could rest and renew his strength after having been received with all possible honour, feasted and entertained ; for the old pantaloon passed his life in pleasure.

But Dara had learnt much in his six months of wanderings, and he found more interest in the preachings of a barefoot Carmelite friar, a man learned beyond most, who had come up, likely, from Goa. To him Dara listened, as ever, with assent to the Catholic teaching, promising that, if the Lord Jesus made him Emperor, he would himself build a church to the Blessed Lady Miriam and permit the

Fathers to preach their faith freely throughout the Empire.

He wrote this to Rana-dil, who shook her head gravely. When a man has to combat a charge of infidelity, such promises were unwise.

Still, as spring came on, Dara found himself at the head of thirty thousand experienced horsemen, and the possessor of a solemn promise from a Rajput Rajah that he would join forces.

Full of hope, he set out, and when he reached the Rajah's territories halted for him to redeem his word.

He failed!

Once again the Arch-Spider's web had captured a fly; but it had needed much art to effect the capture; much art and many letters. Long years before in the days of his careless youth Dara had deeply offended a neighbouring and equally powerful Rajah by saying he was like a musician! Possibly, nay probably, there was truth in the assertion; all the more reason for the enmity which, accentuated by lavish bribes from Aurungzebe, made the one neighbour persuade the other neighbour that, being both Rajputs of one breed and faith, it was unwise that they should fight against each other, suffer mutual loss, and so give the Mohammedan cause for rejoicing.

No matter how it was engineered, the first Rajah ratted, and Dara, with the enemy in front of him, was left to fight his own battle alone!

Dara was no soldier, and his capacity for credence was unimpaired. It seems almost incredible that, after so many treacheries, Dara could have believed in one Daler Khan, a Pathan, whom he had

known during the Kandahar expedition. But he did. He relied upon the promise that on the day of battle, if entry were given his division into the trenches, he would turn his twelve thousand horsemen against Aurungzebe.

And, in truth, the Spider in Chief was not, at the moment, so very secure in his web; as might have been inferred from Aurungzebe's face when, the very day before the battle, the court astrologer said that, though the stars predicted victory to the army, they also foretold the death of its leader. Now, it is one thing to brave death with a sword in your hand and shouts of victory in your ears; another to face it in the cool, uninterested word of an astrologer. So Aurungzebe blenched, and caught at his tutor Sheikh Mir's suggestion that *he*, duly robed in royal robes, and with the royal umbrella over his head, should mount the royal elephant, and lead the way.

This, therefore, was done; and sure enough in the very first charge a musket ball fulfilled the prediction; but the attendant seated behind, fearing disaster like that which had befallen Dara, held the dead body into suitable position, and, all unseen, waved the slack arms to encourage the fighters.

But even this self-sacrifice would not have sufficed for Dara's defeat. What, however, was to be done, when, having obtained entry to the trenches by lies, a body of twelve thousand Pathans attacked the rear?

Small wonder that as evening came on, after almost incredible personal bravery, Dara had to fly precipitately leaving much of his baggage behind.

It was a stunning blow, made weightier by the

defection of two of his most trusted friends. Now, at long last, confidence, optimism, gave way. Broken, dispirited, Dara's one object, now, was to safeguard his women. Harassed in the rear, he made his way through the desert suffering from heat, from lack of food, from—worst of all—lack of water. But he reached the river Indus, and crossing it on rafts—which he had to make, since boats were denied him—he found himself with but five hundred followers on the other side; and one by one these deserted, leaving bare two hundred.

What to do next? Go southward to Bakkar and claim sanctuary in that still unconquered fortress? The thought of all it held tempted him sorely, but he made his way westward towards Persia. No need to bring the misfortune that seemed to dog his own steps to that heroic, beleaguered garrison. Better to face fate alone. And on the road to Persia lived one Jiwan Singh. Surely, if on God's earth remained one honourable man, he was to be trusted. In the old days, not once but thrice had he, Dara, begged life for this man from his father Shahjahan; begged it, why? Not from personal motive, but simply because death under an elephant's feet had seemed to his soft heart too great a punishment for a trivial offence.

Surely! Surely there must be some gratitude left in the world! So he turned aside to give his womenkind a few days rest in Jiwan Khan's territory.

Again disillusionment; though the first sight of the rugged fortress crowning one of the faintly opalescent hills brought a sense of safety. But here, after a friendly reception, he was suddenly seized by the man who thrice over he had saved,

and, doubtless well furnished with bribes, made close prisoner against the arrival of his pursuers.

This, indeed, seemed the end; but worse, to one of Dara's soft heart and quick sensibilities, was to come. Nurmahal Begum, who up till then had borne hardships, discomforts without complaint, relying largely on her husband's unfailing tenderness, suddenly gave way. She carried with her, as was the custom East and West in those days, a ring, beneath the inset stone of which was poison. This poison, when she saw her protector ensnared, she was about to swallow when her favourite house-slave caught at her hand.

"Listen, Most High," he cried. "Wait yet awhile! To-night when Jiwan Khan comes to hold court in the outer room I will kill him—yea! there is no doubt! My own life will doubtless be the forfeit; but what of that? The Most Noble will go free—the followers are ready. I have told them. In Persia will be safety."

"Art sure?" asked Nurmahal doubtfully; it was no longer possible to trust anyone.

"Sure!" he replied. "At sunset be ready. I have warned all who need be warned. At the first sign of tumult escape! Farewell! Farewell!"

He fell at her feet and kissed them. His face was full of enthusiasm, of vitality; evidently the man meant what he said, meant to be faithful. So she spent the rest of her day in making preparations for flight. If not, there was always the rest of death! She was outwearied, too tired and worn to think of others; her one thought was to creep away and forget.

Sunset time approached, and with much trum-

pery ceremonial and blowing of trumpets Jiwan Khan came to take his seat in the court and give audience. He was a typical Pathan, long of nose and face, wily in eye; yet not without a twinge of regret that greed of gold did not permit of gratitude.

And there was the house-slave, holding in both hands a brocaded bag.

"What dost want?" came the query.

The slave bowed low, but his watchful eye seemed measuring his distance from the arrogant speaker.

Then he spoke:

"The Princess Nurmahal, wife to the Heir Apparent Dara Sahib whom thou hast, with base ingratitude for the love he gave thee, detained a prisoner, sends these jewels; all she had—which far outweigh in value any bribe thou canst receive from Aurungzebe who, even now, shakes on his pilfered throne. These will she give for freedom to pass on—no more. Therefore she bids thee be wise and look!"

He took a step nearer and held out the bag. Jiwan Singh gave a sneering laugh; but inwardly he knew truth lay in the words. If the jewels were really valuable, as they well might be, it might be worth while—if only because it would remove a lingering remorse—for by God! he did owe something.

"Step nearer, fool!" he said harshly. "Give me the bag!"

The slave seemed to take a bound closer: the bag held in both his hands was close to Jiwan Singh's heart . . .

There was a single click, no more, a startled look on the slave's face. The pistol concealed within had evidently missed fire.

But none saw; none understood save Jiwan Singh

himself, but he read clearly on the slave's face what he had dared to try and do. He realized also that the danger was over, so there was no need for outcry. The slave stood before him trembling like a leaf. He had failed, and now, without the exultation of success, had to face the consequences.

But Jiwan Singh was Pathan to the finger-tips. Bravery brought admiration; besides, the man was at his mercy. And he was only a tool; the real offender was a woman; and, even by the rules of Pathan behaviour, he could not touch a woman—except by scorn.

"Give the bag, fool!" he said again harshly, took it, looked into it, saw the pistol, then civilly gave it back. "Tell her who sent thee," he said, "that she hath failed!" And with that he burst into rude laughter.

In her prison room, the Princess, ready for a tumult, heard none; and there was her slave at the door, trembling, scared. He had failed—he must have failed!

She gave a cry between a laugh and a sob. The ring was at her mouth in a moment. The sudden conviction that the last hope, the last chance had gone, assailed her. She saw in a flash the sequence of events—Dara's capture and death, herself doomed by the common ways of her race, to concubinage in Aurungzebe's hands.

"I go! I go!" she said in a choked voice, "such infamy shall not be mine. It shall not——"

Her waiting maids, screaming, ran towards her, but it was too late. The poison had been swallowed and almost ere they could wrest the ring from her, she became unconscious, for there was a spot of

blood on her lip where the concealed pin had pricked it, and the poison was cobra poison.

"My lord! my lord!" shrieked the woman. "Oh, fetch him, ere she dies!"

But Jiwan Singh was there, attracted by the outcry. "Not so," he said with a sneer. "'Twill be less painful when she is dead."

Was it? Who could say? Who could fathom the depth of despair in Dara's heart as he looked down on the face of the dead woman. He was very quiet, he made no complaint; he laid no blame; but something came into his face that never left it again —a look of hopeless resignation.

That same night Jiwan Singh Khan came to him as he sat alone in the room where he was watched day and night, and even to that cruel, treacherous, material mind came a touch of pity.

"Listen!" he said. "Listen . . . my lord . . . Thy house hath tried to murder me; so that is one life gone. But thou didst give me three; so two remain. Well, thou shalt have them back, thou and thy men, if thou wilt give me the jewels with which she sought to bribe me. Give them and thou art free! The way to Persia is clear, and thy men are sufficient for safety—give them!"

There was no pause for reply: the answer came swift, stern:

"The jewels are the Princess Nurmahal's in life, in death; and my men are her escort to her royal tomb in Delhi."

Jiwan Khan stepped back a pace in sheer astonishment. "But the enemy is close—if the road to safety is not taken at once——" he began when Dara cut him short.

"Defile not the presence of the dead who die in God's keeping with thy bargaining, thy chaffering. Out of my sight, cur!"

So, a day or two afterwards, as Bahadur Khan, Aurungzebe's foster brother who headed one of the many pursuing forces sent out to try and capture the infidel, rode up the valley that led to Jiwan Khan's eyrie he came, at a turn of the road, on a procession which made him rein in his horse with an oath, and inwardly call on Providence to protect him; for in truth, seen against that background of jagged rocks and bare precipitous hillsides, where not one blade of grass, not one winged or footed thing told of life, this stately funeral procession seemed eerie.

And as he stood, reining in his horse, a rustling viper that had lain asleep in the sunshine that beat down upon the sandy road slipped noiselessly away from the advancing steps of those who bore the coffin.

A woman or two wailed from their litters behind it, and behind them again came the escort, their lances in rest, their heads bowed.

"'Tis Nurmahal Begum, the Heir Apparent's wife who goes to the royal tomb in Delhi," said the captain doggedly. His heart was sore at having to obey orders. He longed to strike down the questioner, and when the quick query came—"And he? Where is he?" he rose in his stirrups and pointing backwards, said in a voice that held contempt, anger, hatred in it, "He waits his murderers as a brave man should yonder—alone."

And so they found him, standing tall, dignified. As Bahadur Khan, followed by his chosen supporters,

burst hastily into the room, an outstretched left hand held them back, while the right hand took up a pistol—it was the same mother o' pearl inlaid pistol which had failed its purpose in the embroidered bag, but which now carefully primed, lay on the table beside him.

"Touch me not or I fire, curs," he said. "I come willingly."

Bahadur Khan drew back and made a courtly salutation.

CHAPTER XXIX

"THE time passes," said Basant thoughtfully, "ere long the floods will be subsiding, and then the fighting will begin in earnest again. Would we had news of the master!"

Rana-dil looked at him anxiously. "Yet evil can scarce have come to him. Sarmad says ever that he sees glory—only glory."

Basant turned his head away as if to avoid her eyes. "Yet there be different kinds of glory; yea! many different kinds."

He had been all those months the life and soul of the garrison, sympathizing, cajoling, heartening, ay, even amusing the motley crowd bound together by one common love of adventure, one common obstinacy of temperament. Many were the small misfortunes, the small successes of those varied months through which he had steered them cheerfully; and once—even the memory of it still brought inextinguishable laughter—he had roused languishing spirits by a joke the like of which could never be repeated. Nor was there need, since it had done its work well.

It was when Kalilullah the arch-traitor, the pimp who took shoe beatings from his faithless wife and money from her seducer, had come down from Lahore with fresh troops, and orders by hook or by crook to reduce the recalcitrant fortress. When he

had begun sending flags of truce and propositions of bribery. When Basant had led him on to believe that surrender was possible. When, flushed with the prospect of success, he had come in an open boat across the stream, only to be received, full in the face, with the contents of a gun loaded to the muzzle with old shoes and cuckold's horns! How the men had laughed as they prepared the salutation, how inextinguishable had been their mirth over the very recollection of it ever since; for the mirth had spread to the enemy's side of the water until Kalil-ullah, from very shame, had had to post back to Lahore for further orders.

But all that merriment, that light-heartedness, was over now. The men—such a motley crew—were settling down to their task grimly. There was still plenty of ammunition, still plenty of provisions, but the siege could not go on for ever; some ending must be found, and there was no certain news of the master.

Rumours of defeat there had been; but since then—nothing!

Until one evening as the sun dipped low in the west a glitter as of the distant sea showed on the horizon of hill; then disappeared to show again against the sky on the crest of a nearer eminence.

"Horsemen," said Basant, "'tis their lances glittering."

Rana-dil started up. "Can it be Dara? Can it be my lord?"

Basant shook his head; then crossed to where Sarmad, sitting silent, had his eyes fixed on what they too saw; but the dull blue eyes held something more and the seer's face showed a faint smile.

"What dost see, Sarmad?" he asked softly.

The reply came at once. "I see death, and glory."

Rana-dil gave a little cry and buried her face in her hands.

Basant said nothing, every atom of him was watching that line of glittering spears sweep over the intervening ground. That it meant disaster he was sure.

Nor was he long ere knowing its full extent. A white flag showed on the opposite side of the stream, and after due parley a messenger appeared bearing a letter from the enemy. It was short, unmistakable.

"I, Bahadur Khan, commandant of the Emperor's forces, demand on behalf of my master Aurungzebe that this fortress be immediately surrendered, since we have with us Prince Dara, a prisoner, whom we hold as hostage."

Even Basant faltered for a moment over this unexpected news; then, seeing a number of boats full of armed men crossing the stream as if there could be no doubt of acquiescence, he calmly ordered the guns to fire on them; which they did with such considerable damage that the assailants turned tail.

Then, pausing not at all, he sent back this verbal message:

"Tell those who sent thee that we bargain not at all with those who disregard the rules of war. Neither do we surrender to any save by order of our master who set us in charge—Prince Dara."

So silence, terrible silence, fell on every one within the walls. The few women who had been left behind, it is true, wept behind closed doors, but the garrison fingered its guns, its muskets, idly, and Rana-dil,

as if turned to stone, sat waiting. It seemed ages, yet it was not so long before another messenger, duly escorted by unarmed men, came to the landing-place, and was as duly met by unarmed men.

He bore a letter signed by the Heir Apparent—a mere note, no more, but unmistakable:

"Unfortunate as my brave garrison hath been in the master for whom it fought, he now requests and requires it to deliver up the fort."

Basant, bidding the envoys wait, hurried to give Rana-dil the disastrous news. He found her quite calm, her face set and hard, her voice steady.

"I must see my lord," she said. "I must! Look you! Say that we are not convinced this letter was written willingly. That we must see no duress was employed, that we will send"—she gave an odd sound, half sob, half laugh—"the—the second-in-command!"

He started. "And, then, my mistress?"

She flung her arms wide. "Then I will go! Look not so, Basant! Dost not remember the goatherd? Lo, I can pose as man—and—and——" her voice softened. "I must see my lord—I must—I must!"

There was almost a suspicion of tears in the last words, and Basant, not far from them himself, bowed low and left her. It was possible, of course, and, before Heaven she deserved it. None knew better than he the use she had been in the last long year.

It was almost dark, when dressed in the ordinary dress of a soldier, she found herself in a boat on the swift rushing stream. Idly she let her hand trail in the swishing water. How cold it was—fresh, doubtless from the melting snows beyond—beyond—

beyond—even Mount Kailasa, the Mount of the Gods, rearing its inaccessible purity to the calm sky! She had heard of that, as every one in India had heard of it whether Hindu, Mohammedan, Buddhist or Jain. And which of them was she? She did not know. Born a Rajputni, brought up a Harlot, married as Mohammedan, she was none of these now. What was she?

The stars were beginning to show in the moonless sky as they had shown since the beginning of time.

So, with a sense of rest, the thought of Sarmad, watching all things and realizing the great Unity, came to her. The water might be cold, Fate might be unkind; but behind all things was order.

"The envoy from the garrison is here," said the rude voice of the captain of the guard as he lifted the curtain of the tent. "The commandant gives short time."

Dara was seated on a camp bed, resting his head on his hands.

"So be it," he said briefly. "Close the curtain, we would be alone." He could still give orders in the old imperious voice.

The man did as he was bid, and in an instant Dara was on his feet, his manacled arms outstretched, his voice almost joyous.

"Ranu! I knew that thou wouldst come!" but even as he spoke his hands, outspread, stopped her swift onrush. "Nay! dear heart! 'Twere dangerous for thee. Stay where thou art——" then he added as much for himself as for her, "Nor time, nor distance."

So silence fell between them. She could have cried as she looked at him. His hair gone almost

white, the boyish face lined and wrinkled, yet, still . . .

"Oh, Dara! my lord!" she said impulsively, almost involuntarily. "How like thou art to Father Buseo's picture of the saint with arrows——"

He laughed gently—so he could still laugh and his smile was as ever—"St. Sebastian?" he said, then the smile vanished. "Truly dear heart, I have been pierced with many arrows. Thou hast heard—Nurmahal is dead!"

"Dead!" she echoed incredulously.

"Yea, dead!" he said, and his chained hands dropped slackly to his side. "She grew weary—and small wonder—and the life was hard. So she went, and 'twas as well."

"And left thee," broke in Rana-dil, "left thee—alone?"

He cheered up. "Nay! not alone. See you, dear heart, I have learnt many things of late. I see it all clear now. My birth—the first fruits of a love that was not love, since it claimed all things and love claims nothing; my boyhood—Ranu! How I enjoyed life! Then my father and the Taj—the Western wisdoms that made me nothing, that taught me and left me rudderless—But one thing stable, one thing sure, one thing certain—what thou hast been to me, dear heart! . . . Yea! I have learnt this—there is no manhood, no womanhood in love! Sarmad was right——"

"The time is done," came the raucous voice of the captain of the guard.

Rana-dil, crouched on the floor where Dara had arrested her, stood up mechanically. So, face to face, they looked into each other's eyes, a whole

commonplace world between them. She could realize nothing, not even that this was farewell.

"Thou wilt tell Basant that more lives must not be lost, that I desire him to make what terms he can, what terms brave men can make, and for the rest remember"—there was a slight pause—"that neither time nor space, nor death nor life can touch—loyalty."

She pulled herself together then.

"My lord," she said firmly, "I will remember till death."

"And after, maybe," he said in a low voice—"who knows!"

So she turned and went out of the tent; but she took with her a picture that never afterwards really faded from her eyes. The picture of a tall figure in the white robes of mourning, chained, bound by sins that were not all his own; a face still smiling at life, smiling even at death.

It was not until she was safe back in the fortress that she gave way, and throwing herself on her bed burst into a passion of tears.

"I have made good terms," said Basant next morning. "They would have haggled, but I told the cursed curs that if they did not yield, the guns, the treasure would go to the safe keeping of the river, and we would fight our way out, hand to hand. So they yielded. We go with honour. There is but one thing I like not altogether. We are to remain eight days on the further bank of the river ere following my master; yet——" he gave a short, scornful laugh, "'tis in a way a compliment. They feared a rescue were we too close."

"Eight days!" thought Rana-dil. Much might

happen in eight days. Still, if they marched quick, some of this lost time might be made up.

She reckoned, however, without the Arch-Spider's anxiety to get his prey really within his net; so, despite their hurry, the released garrison was days behind the captive when, mounted on a sorry elephant, Dara was paraded through the streets of Delhi.

But here again was faulty reckoning, and Aurungzebe, as from a point of vantage he watched the procession, positively gnashed his teeth with rage; for despite the miserable mount, despite the drawn sword held over Dara's head, despite his own beggarly dress, this was no humiliation, but a royal progress. The poor, who crowded the bazaars, greeted him with tears, with welcomes, with blessings, with out-cries. And one, a fakir, naked, hungry, cried to him, "Ah, Dara! When thou wert master, alms were ever mine! Now, alas, thou hast naught to give!"

"Yea! this!" replied the Prince with a brilliant smile, and with the word drew off the dirty shawl which served him as a cloak, for the day was cold, and threw it to the man. But it was rudely taken from him by Bahadur Khan's orders. A prisoner had naught of his own that he could bestow. For all that the populace applauded the gift so loudly that Aurungzebe grew alarmed, and bade the guards take Dara outside the city to the orange garden where, once, Sarmad had lived, where Rana-dil had found refuge from Gulanar's house.

It was full of memories; but time was short. Aurungzebe made a show of taking the advice of his principal courtiers as to whether it was advisable

to send Prince Dara to Gwalior, there to be done slowly to death with poppy juice, or to end matters more quickly, but he knew well his own mind was made up. And Roshanara's, his unnatural sister's also. She clamoured for immediate death; her dearly beloved brother was not safe, she said, while her detested infidel brother was alive.

So a farce of trial was given, in which the question was asked: "If thou wert in Aurungzebe's place, and he in thine, what wouldst thou do?"

To which Dara, drawing himself up to his full height, faced the little White Snake Aurungzebe squarely, and said:

"Were such the case the four gates of Delhi would answer thy question with the four quarters of thy body exposed on them for kites to feed upon."

It is a picture that remains on the memory even after all these years.

So that ended it, naturally, and Dara went back to the orange garden a doomed man. As a last favour he begged that Father Buseo or any other Christian priest should be allowed to come to him. The request was refused, and the careworn yet still boyish face smiled as it heard the decision.

What did it matter? Nor time nor space, nor life nor death mattered in love, and the Great Unknown beyond; the Strength, the Stay which ruled all things in order without mistake—the Unity which Sarmad saw with his dull eyes—that was love.

"He marks the sparrows fall."

Father Buseo used to quote that. Strange how all things came back to love.

That same night they murdered him in the garden, and his blood stained the marble steps.

And Rana-dil, under the quiet stars that held in their shining canopy the wide desert over which she was hurrying, cried vainly: "O God! Let me not be too late!"

EPILOGUE

A BAND of workmen were sitting in the shadow of a wall for their noontide rest. They were not eating, or drinking like Western workmen, but sitting idle, backs to the wall, puffing in turn at a communal pipe that passed languidly from hand to hand. They had been engaged in blocking up a window in the Palace Fort at Agra.

"'Tis likely to prevent him from seeing the Taj he built," said one. "See you, the old king—he is half dottled they say—was for ever sitting to look out; the Emperor forbade him. They put a sentry to shoot; but that would not prevent him. So now they make sure. Lo, Aurungzebe is not to be disobeyed!"

"But by the jade Rana-dil," put in another voice with a chuckle in it. "By Allah! She was a wild one. Harlot, they say, to begin with, but she had the Emperor in the end. It half-killed him, they say, when she sent him her head as a present when he bade her come to him as a bride." And the speaker went off into a snigger.

"Peace, brother!" said a sedate-looking older man with an orthodox grey beard. "'Tis no laughing matter! He did right! A brother's widow takes the brother according to the faith, and it hath doubtless sent the woman to hell."

"If the good God troubles himself to damn a

woman," interposed another, "seeing that most of them are damned already." (He suffered from termagent wife.)

"Patience! Jahdu! Patience!" grinned a third speaker, "and, *baba-ji!* After all 'twas but tit for tat. Aurungzebe sent Dara's head to his father as a present. Yea! and the old man got it as he sat at supper in royal fashion with his ladies. So, when the attendants lifted the cover, there it was, and the old man—he was a just king in his time they say—fell among the golden platters and broke his false teeth; which was a pity."

"Ay! Ay!" assented yet another. "And the head was buried in the Taj before Aurungzebe could say yea or nay; for I helped to lift the marble pavement between the two screens to find place for it. And the face looked not infidel at all, but peaceful, like a child that has had its fill at his mother's breast."

"Mayhap that is why the Emperor cared not for the old king to look so constant. Aurungzebe was ever jealous, and he could not stomach——"

A derisive laugh came from a younger man, lean, cadaverous. "Yet hath he had to stomach some things. Sarmad the saint's curse for one. I was there. 'Twas before the mosque at Delhi where the saint's tomb is now, and the mothers were all waiting for their babes to be touched when the Emperor, coming to say his prayers, saw that Sarmad, as ever, was unclothed. Then he bade the janitors arrest him, and bid him not trust to Dara's protection since he was in hell as infidel. 'Twas meant as a gibe, but Sarmad had him like a vice. 'Nay!' he said, 'he stands beside thee, now, murderer; but thine

eyes are blood filled; thou canst not see. Wait till death clears them, thou blind worm.' Yea, 'blind worm,' that was it, 'blind worm.' So Aurungzebe, being Emperor, cut off his head."

"Lo, these be gruesome tales for a body's rest time," interposed a stalwart fellow. "And though all know thrones rest not save on dead men's bones, the Emperor goes too far for me. Lo, I can scarce get a girl or a drink without being hauled to the *kazi*." Here he began to chuckle. "Lo, I will tell thee a tale to take the bitter from the mouth. I had it from a serving woman at the palace. The Emperor forbade Princess Jahanara's spiced wine, and when she objected as being King's daughter—sure she deserved better if but for the care she takes of her prisoned father—told her women must abide by menfolks' decisions, and that 'twould be such disgrace to make exceptions that he would be unable to face the *pious* ones again, and that what was sauce for the gander was sauce for the goose. So what does she do—being of quick wit and loving a joke like her brother Dara—but invite all the women of the learned ones, and the magistrates, and the preachers, to a grand feast, which they, gratified at the honour, accepted. Then having plied them with spiced wine to their fill, she sent for the Emperor—and there they all were drunken, sprawling about—ay——" here the voice was broken by choked laughter and half-drowned by the guffaws of the others—"and—in tight trousers too—which is also—forbidden—ha! ha! ha! And she said what was sauce . . . ha! ha! ha!" The rest was laughter. So tragedy ended in comedy after the way of the world.

. . . . .

Yet fifty years after Aurungzebe, then on his death-bed, wrote his last letter:

"Naked I came into the world, naked I go out of it. What will happen to me I know not. I launch my vessel on the waves. Farewell! Farewell!"

And the Taj still stands: a wonder of the world.

A memorial of what?

Of wedded love? Of uncontrolled passion? Or love without sex?

If the chief actors in the tragedy could speak what would they say?

Dara, whose head lies between his father and his mother.

Rana-dil who lies, God knows where.

Sarmad, to whose tomb the women still bring flowers.

Mayhap the crazy atheist, the whilom saint, might carry on the great tragedy of life by the words which, with a disease-racked child in his arms, he so often spoke.

"Woman, hast thou forgot that thou art God?
Forgot for pleasure's lure
The law that makes life sure,
That keeps the children pure!"

THE END