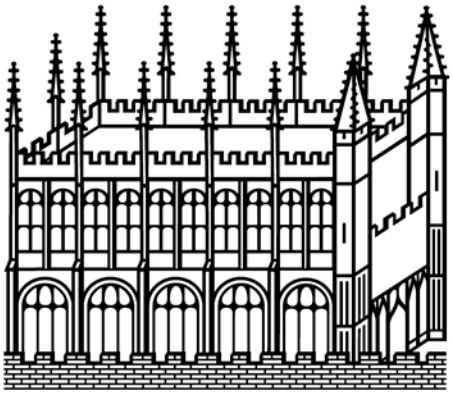

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"HERE IS SULTANETTA'S MARRIAGE GIFT"

Frontispiece

See PAGE 128

THE NOVELS OF ALEXANDRE DUMAS

THE SNOW BALL
AND
SULTANETTA

NEWLY TRANSLATED BY
ALFRED ALLINSON

WITH THREE COLOURED ILLUSTRATIONS BY
FRANK ADAMS

METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

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INTRODUCTION

IN December, 1858, in the course of his romantic wanderings in the Caucasus, Dumas became snow-bound at Tiflis. He placed a table in a window commanding a splendid view of the streets, which were filled with a ceaselessly moving throng of Tartars, Kalmucks, Russians, Greeks, Persians, Kabardians, Gypsies, and representatives of many other peoples, and set himself to write, knowing that work would be sweet after months spent in travelling. He had endured many privations, had sometimes run short of the common necessaries of life, but after all what he had most felt was his separation from his pen, with which his happiest hours were ever spent. His first task was to galvanize his amanuensis, Kalino (an idle young fellow whom he had taken from the University of Moscow), into activity. This was quickly done. Kalino caught the fever of industry from the author of *Monte-Cristo*, and day after day the two strangely contrasted men sat from dawn to midnight oblivious not only of time, but frequently of food. This was sent to them from a neighbouring shop, the dishes being put on a corner of their work-table, in the hope that the savoury smell would prove irresistible.

A few months before, when despatching to Paris a translation of Lazetchinckoff's well-known *Palace of Ice, or the Russian Gipsy*, Dumas wrote to his readers, "Puisque nous sommes en Russie, faisons du russe," and in pursuance of this resolution he was anxious to obtain translations of, and if necessary to re-write, some stories by Marlinsky.

The name Marlinsky was first heard by Dumas at Nijni Novgorod, which he reached after visiting St. Petersburg, Finland, Moscow, and descending the Volga. He was dining with General Alexander Mouravieff, when the door was thrown open, and he was warmly embraced by two totally unknown persons. "We are your Alexis and Pauline," they cried, to Dumas' speechless surprise. Slowly he remembered. Alexis and Pauline were no other than the hero and heroine of his novel *Le Maître d'Armes*, written some twenty years before. The material for the book, which had an enormous success in Russia, had been supplied to Dumas by the *Maître d'Armes* himself, the famous fencing-master, Grisier, who had lived for eighteen months in St. Petersburg. Alexis Annenkoff had taken part in the rising of the Dekabrists of 1825, which led so many men to the scaffold, and was condemned to exile for life in Siberia. There, at the Petrovsky mines, Pauline, although not his wife, obtained leave from the Emperor to join him, and there they found Bestuchef, afterwards known as the novelist Marlinsky, who had taken part in the same conspiracy. Twenty-seven years later the Annenkoffs were pardoned; Bestuchef had left long before to re-enter the army as a soldier in the ranks. Thus it happened that it was the hero and heroine of *Le Maître d'Armes* who, in relating their own adventures, introduced Dumas for the first time to the name of Bestuchef-Marlinsky. In the man, the brother Republican, and the brother novelist he became greatly interested, and eagerly gathered up every scrap of information concerning him.

There is the great tragedy of Marlinsky's life as it was told to Dumas on his visiting the tomb of Oline Nesterzoff, Marlinsky's ill-fated mistress:—". . . For a year they had lived happily together, when one day, as Bestuchef and three of his friends sat at table after dinner unduly long, the conversation turned on poor Oline. Bestuchef began boasting of her constancy, when one of the guests offered to bet that he would be able to make her unfaithful in spite of Bestuchef's confidence in her. The wager was accepted, for what a happy man seems most ready to throw away is his happiness. As the story goes, Bestuchef lost the bet. Next day Oline entered the poet's room, but what happened there will never be known exactly. A shot was heard and

a scream, and then Bestuchef rushed out, pale with fright. Help arrived, and Oline was found lying on the ground, bleeding to death. A ball had entered her chest, and a discharged pistol lay beside her. She was just able to ask for a priest, who came. Two hours later all was over. The priest affirmed on oath that Oline had told him that as she was struggling to get a pistol out of Bestuchef's hand the weapon had gone off accidentally, and that it was in this way she had been shot. She died forgiving Bestuchef for his involuntary crime. Bestuchef was put on his trial, but on the evidence of the priest was acquitted. From the moment of Oline's death Bestuchef was another man: he became a prey to melancholy, and exposed himself to every possible danger, thirsting for death. He joined many warlike expeditions as volunteer, but, strange to say, although he was always to be found where shots were thickest, he was never wounded. At last, in 1837-8, an expedition against the Abazertzkys was organized, and the troops were ordered to advance on the village of Adler. As they were about to enter a forest they were told that it was held by mountaineers, whose numbers were three times as large as their own. The retreat was sounded by the colonel's orders, but Bestuchef, who commanded the rifles, and another officer named Aldbrand disobeyed the signal and entered the forest to pursue the enemy. After some time Aldbrand reappeared, but without Bestuchef. The Colonel, Prince Tarakanoff, sent Aldbrand back to look for his comrade with fifty men of the Mingrelian Light Infantry. While they were absent a watch was brought to the General, which he at once recognized as belonging to Bestuchef. Nothing more was ever known of his fate."

At Derbend, where Marlinsky had held a post in the fortress after leaving Siberia, the MS. of *Ammalat Bey*, found in his room after his death, was given to Dumas. After visiting Oline Nesterzoff's tomb he gave his host, Prince Bagration, four verses, requesting him to have them engraved on it in memory of his journey.

On leaving Derbend for Tiflis Dumas observed Kalino absorbed in the perusal of a little Russian book. It proved to be Marlinsky's *La Neige du Mont Chakh-Dague.* As they went, Dumas learned the story, as it was intended he should do by Prince Bagration, who had placed it in the young man's hands, and decided that he would try to repair in France the ingratitude of Russia towards a man who, it seemed to him, had genius. He was told that during the reign of Nicholas I. no critic was bold enough to write in favour of the works of one who had been found guilty, as Marlinsky had been, of high treason, and as years elapsed he had been forgotten. It was to repair this forgetfulness, then, that Dumas galvanized the idle Kalino into activity. With him he plunged into a sea of ink, and worked until his travelling stock of paper, his large blue sheets on which he had written uniformly for some twenty years, and which have been celebrated by so many of his biographers, was exhausted. This brought Dumas to a full stop. Like indifferent spellers who never can write with the pen that one hands to them, he was lost without his blue paper. He ransacked Tiflis in search of sheets resembling his own, but no one there had ever felt the want of large blue MS. paper, and he was obliged to content himself with some of a sickly yellowish hue, which the vendor called white.

Dumas, it appears, was but little content with Kalino's translations, and as soon as they were made he re-wrote *The Snowball* and *Ammalat Bey*. Marlinsky, although a writer of merit, had serious defects, chief among which, according to Professor König, was his failure to make his characters talk naturally. "Everyone of his personages," says the Professor in his *Literary Sketches of Russia*, published in 1837, "speaks like the author; those who have once heard the latter converse hear him again in nearly all they say, and recognize the same turns of wit, the same points of a dialogue." Marlinsky's stories are also represented by the same authority to be somewhat tedious, abounding in long, drawn-out descriptions. However this may be, Dumas saw great merit in Marlinsky's work, since he not only published his *Snowball* and *Sultanetta*, but also his *Jane* and *Princess Flora*. We suspect that the Professor was not particularly fond of even the best romances, of which our novelist was certainly the better judge.

The state of the snow, which for weeks past had been freezing by night and thawing by day, at length enabled Dumas to leave Tiflis, and making his way to Poti, he took steamer and was soon again in Paris. There his death had been freely

reported. On the Boulevards, where he showed himself in the dress of a Circassian chief, he had a great reception. Almost immediately *Ammalat Bey* appeared as a *feuilleton* in *Le Moniteur Universel*, and having run its course there, was published by Cadot in the same year (1859). We do not know why Messrs. Calmann-Lévy changed the title to *Sultanetta*, on including the story in the *Œuvres Complètes* in 1862. We find, however, that Yermoloff, the Russian General, had published a French translation of it in 1835 as *Ammalat Bey*, and this circumstance may have had something to do with their decision. We refer the curious reader who does not know Russian to the General's translation published by Pougin and Lecointe (Paris). By comparing it with Dumas' version he can judge how much credit is due to Dumas, and how much to the original author, Marlinsky. The history of *Ammalat Bey* is well known to the Tartars, and near Derbend a little monument erected to the memory of his beloved Sultanetta was pointed out to Dumas. *The Snowball*, also known as "Moullah-Nour," is, in our opinion, the better story of the two; it has been compared to Ruskin's *King of the Golden River*. Dumas seems to have been the first to introduce it to the French public. Congratulations were showered upon him in connection with both stories by critics and public alike, and he had every reason to look upon his literary association with Marlinsky with unqualified satisfaction.

It will be recollected that a few years ago Dumas' MSS., entirely written with his own hand, of the two tales came to light, and that their owner, a Greek gentleman possessing great zeal, incontinently caused them to be translated and published as "posthumous romances of the elder Dumas." Should they ever be re-translated into Russian and appear in that country as by Alexandre Dumas, their adventures may be fairly considered to be completed—but "Habent sua fata libelli."

R. S. G.

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THE SNOWBALL

CHAPTER I

ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR IN THE SHADE

THE sad, sonorous voice of the *Muezzin* was heard as though chanting the death-strain of a splendid May day which had just taken wing to eternity.

"By Allah! it is hot at Derbend! Go up to the roof, Kassime, and look in what fashion the sun is setting behind the mountain. Is there any red in the west? Are there any clouds in the sky?"

"No, uncle; the West is blue as the eyes of Kitchina; the sun is setting with dazzling brightness, like a rose of flame on the evening's breast, and not the faintest haze obscures his farewell glance at the earth."

Night unfurled her starry fan, darkness had come.

"Mount to the roof, Kassime," said the same voice, "and look if you cannot see the dew distilling from the horn of the moon. Does she not hide her orb within a rainbow haze, like a pearl in its iridescent shell?"

"No, uncle; the moon floats in an ocean of pure azure; she sheds rays of fire upon the sea. The roofs are dry as the steppes of the Mogan, and the scorpions play over them merrily."

"Ah!" said the old man with a sigh, "that means that to-morrow will be as hot as to-day. The best thing to be done, Kassime, is to go to sleep."

And the old man fell asleep, dreaming of his money; and his niece fell asleep, dreaming of the thing every girl of sixteen, whatever her nationality, dreams of—love; and the town fell asleep, dreaming that it was Alexander the Great who had built the rampart of the Caucasus and forged the iron gates of Derbend.

Towards midnight all was wrapped in sleep, and nothing broke the universal silence but the cry of the sentries calling to one another, "*Slouchay!*" (Listen!), and the moan of the Caspian, as with moist lips it kissed its burning, sandy shore.

You would have said that the souls of the Dead were conversing with Eternity, the resemblance being all the more striking seeing that nothing so much resembles an immense graveyard as the town of Derbend.

Long before the rise of dawn, the surface of the sea was streaked with flame: the swallows, awake before the Mullah, were singing on the mosque. True, they were not long before him; the sound of his steps scared them away. He walked round the cupola, resting his head upon his hand, shouting in modulated tones which gave his words the likeness of a chant:

"Awake and arise, ye Mussulmans; prayer is better than sleep."

A voice, responding to his words, exclaimed:

"Up to the roof, Kassime, and see whether a mist does not descend from the mountains of Lesghistan. Say, does not the sea grow dark?"

"No, uncle; the mountains look as though robed in pure gold; the sea gleams like a mirror; the flag on the fortress of Nazinkale droops down its staff as a veil clings to a girl's form. The sea is calm; not the slightest breath of wind raises a grain of dust on the high road; all is still on the earth, all is clear in the sky."

The face of the old man grew gloomy, and, after performing his ablutions, he mounted to the roof to say his prayers.

He unfolded the mat which he carried under his arm, knelt down, and after finishing his set prayers, began to offer an *ex tempore* petition.

"*Bismillahir rahmanir rahim!*" he cried, looking sadly round him; that is to say, "May my words ring aloud, in the name of the holy and good God!"

Then he went on to say in Tartar what we shall translate, at the risk of robbing the prayer of Kassime's uncle of the figurative and poetic character with which the language of Turkestan clothed it:

"Clouds of the Spring, children of our earth, why tarry ye upon the summits of the rocks? Why do ye hide in the caverns like brigands of Lesghistan? Ye say ye love to wander on the mountains and to sleep on the peaks of snow or granite. Be it so; but could ye not find some other pastime than sucking up all the moisture from our fields to pour it into forests impenetrable by man, from which ye send down into our valleys naught but torrents of barren pebbles that seem the bleached bones of your victims, oh! ye fickle children of the sky? See how our unhappy land gapes open its thousand mouths. It burns with thirst, it implores a little rain. See how the ears of corn shake; how they crack when a butterfly is imprudent enough to alight on them; how they raise their heads in hopes of inhaling a little moisture, and how they affront the rays of the sun which devour them like a flame. The wells are run dry; the flowers have no scent; the leaves of the trees wither and fall; the grass smokes, the madder is destroyed, the crickets are hoarse, the cicadas' note is faint and harsh, the buffaloes fight for a mouthful of mud, the lads quarrel for a few drops of water. My God! what will become of us? Drought is the mother of famine; famine is the mother of pestilence; pestilence the sister of depredation! Oh! fresh mountain-breeze, bear to us on thy wings the blessing of Allah! Ye clouds, the udders of life, pour upon earth the milk of heaven. Change into storm-clouds, if ye will, but refresh the earth. Blast the sinners, if it suit you, but quench the thirst of the innocent. Ye grey clouds, angels' wings, bring us refreshment; come, hasten, fly hither and ye will be welcome, welcome indeed!"

But vain was the prayer of the old Tartar, the clouds remain invisible. The heat is stifling, and the inhabitants of Derbend are ready to throw themselves into their ovens to gain a little coolness. And observe that this was but the month of May, just the time when St. Petersburg hears loud crashing noises from the north-eastward, when the ice on Lake Ladoga is breaking up and threatening to carry away the bridges of the Neva, when you catch cold in crossing the Square of St. Isaac, and inflammation of the lungs in turning the corner of the Marble Palace; when from Smolnoï to the English Quay, people call to one another, "Are you going out? . . . Don't forget to put on your pelisse!"

At St. Petersburg, people were thinking that Spring was perhaps on the way; while at Derbend they were thinking of the harvest which was soon to begin.

For five weeks not a drop of rain had fallen in Southern Daghestan, and the thermometer stood at a hundred and four in the shade—if any shade there were at Derbend while in the sun it registered a hundred and twenty-five degrees.

Drought is a terrible thing in the East. It scorches up the fields and deprives every living thing of food—the birds in the air, the cattle in the fields, human beings in the towns. In a country where the transport of wheat is always difficult, and often impossible, drought is always the harbinger of famine. The Asiatic lives from day to day, forgetful of yesterday, not troubling himself about the morrow. He lives in this way, because idleness and *far niente* are his sweetest enjoyments. But, when he has no Joseph to explain to him the parable of the seven lean kine; when misfortune breaks suddenly upon his head in the hideous guise of famine, when *to-morrow* becomes *to-day*, then he begins to complain that he is not given the means of life. Instead of seeking them, he grows angry, and, when forced to take action, exaggerates the danger by present panic, just as he underrated it by previous incredulity.

You can now judge of the distress there was at Derbend, a purely Tartar, and therefore purely Asiatic town, when this tropical heat began to burn up all the hopes of traders and husbandmen.

To tell the truth, there were at this moment in Daghestan several causes of alarm; it was then the heyday of the *Muride* Kasi-Mullah, the foster-father of Schamyl; the inhabitants of Daghestan had revolted, and had sown more bullets in their fields than grains of corn; the cavalry had trod the ground instead of the farmer, incendiarism had burnt the houses, of which the sun now warmed only the ruins. The Mountaineers, instead of

busying themselves with their harvests, rode under the flag of Kasi-Mullah, or concealed themselves in the caves or the forests in order to escape the Russians, or rather to fall upon them at the moment when they least expected it.

The consequence of it all was not difficult to foresee,—in one word, famine. As no sowing had been done, there was no harvest. All that the war had spared, silver plate, rich weapons, fine carpets, were sold for little or nothing in the bazaars. You might have picked up the finest pearl necklace in Derbend for a sack of flour.

Those who had neither plate nor weapons, carpets nor pearls, started upon their flocks, eating all that had been left of them by their friends and their enemies, that is to say, by the Russians and the Mountaineers. The poor began to come down from the mountains and beg for alms in the town, until the time came for them to take what they wanted, instead of asking for it.

At last, some vessels laden with grain had arrived from Astrakhan. Voluntarily or on compulsion, the rich had helped the poor, and the people had calmed down for a time.

Everything might yet be put straight by the coming harvest.

The festival of the *Khatil* had come, and the inhabitants of Derbend had celebrated it.

The *Khatil* is a religious commemoration of the fate of Shah-Hussein, the first Caliph, who was martyred by the faction of Ali. While the festival lasted, they had enjoyed themselves with the childish gaiety that characterises Orientals.

Thanks to this festival, the only distraction which the people have during the whole year, they had gradually forgotten the harvest and the heat, or rather no, they had not forgotten anything ; they had quite simply and sincerely thanked Heaven that the rain had not interfered with their amusement. But, when the festival was over and they found themselves face to face with the reality, when they awoke with parched mouths and saw their fields roasting under the blazing sun, then they lost their heads.

It was curious then to see the black and red beards moving in prayer ; it was curious to hear the noise made by their rosaries as the beads rolled between their fingers.

All faces grew long, and you heard nothing but complaints.

And, indeed, it was no joke to lose a harvest and to pay two roubles a bushel for flour without knowing how much more you might have to pay for it later on.

The poor trembled for their lives, the rich for their purses. At the mere thought, both stomachs and pockets tightened.

Then it was that the Mussulmans started praying in the Mosque.

No rain came.

They prayed in the fields, thinking that in the open air they would have two chances to one ; the chance of being seen, as well as that of being heard.

Not a drop of rain fell.

What was to be done ?

They had recourse to their wise men.

First of all, the boys spread their handkerchiefs in the middle of the streets and collected the pieces of money thrown into them. Then after buying tapers and rose-water, they tied branches to the body of the handsomest boy, and, adorning him with flowers and ribands, marched in procession with him through the streets, chanting a hymn to Goudoul, the god of rain.

The hymn was terminated by a stanza of thanksgiving. There was no doubt but that Goudoul would yield to the prayer of his worshippers.

For three days, therefore, the youths shouted with all their strength this thanksgiving which we here translate, without claiming to render, otherwise than feebly, the Arab poetry :

"Goudoul, thou god of rain,
The drought has fled our land ;
The showers descend again
At thy august command.
To the fount, fair maiden !
Return with tottering gait
And bended body, laden
Beneath thy full jar's weight."

And all the young folk of Derbend danced round the Tartar lad with his ribands and garlands of flowers, so sure of getting rain that, as you see, they despatched the girls to the fountain beforehand.

And, in point of fact, clouds gathered in the sky ; the sun's face gloomed, like a miser's compelled to give up money which has been entrusted to him. The town assumed that sad look dull weather always imparts to the earth.

But the more downcast the sky became, the more joyful became the inhabitants.

A few drops of rain fell.

They shouted with all their might:

"*Sekour Allah!*"

But their joy did not last long; the wind blew from the direction of Persia, a wind as hot as if it had issued from a furnace, and carrying away with it all the clouds both great and small, soon to fall in snow at St. Petersburg. The sun blazed down fiercer than ever; the ears of corn cracked in the heat; the flowers drooped their heads; and the most faithful of the faithful began to doubt, not the power of Mahomet, but that of Goudoul.

Another day dawned; the sun pursued his fiery course, then sank to rest behind the mountain, as the weary traveller reposes on the burning sands of the desert.

It was during this day and the morning that succeeded it that the two conversations with which this chapter opens took place between the fair Kassime and her uncle.

The old Tartar had thereupon addressed to the clouds the prayer which we have attempted to translate. But, spite of the fervour of his supplication, the day passed, like the preceding one, without a drop of rain.

It was then that the Governor of Derbend ascertained that the thermometer indicated a hundred and four degrees in the shade, and a hundred and twenty-five in the sun!

CHAPTER II

A HOLY MAN

IF ever you should pass through Derbend, traveller, whatever country you may be of, whether you come from South, North, East or West, go, I beseech you, and visit the principal Mosque.

If you do not, you will have been in Rome without seeing the Pope, as Catholics say.

"What would you have to tell about Derbend," I ask you, "if you had not seen the Great Mosque?"

Whereas, if you have seen it, it is quite another matter.

"The Great Mosque," you will say, as you take out your snuff-box, if you are a *savant*, or flick off the ash of your cigar, if you are merely a smoker, "the Great Mosque," you will say, "was formerly a Christian Church."

Go on boldly; I take all the responsibility.

"It is a Christian Church, or rather it was, a Christian Church, since it faces towards the East, while the Mussulman Mosques in the eastern quarter of the North must face South-East, as we say in nautical language, so as to point to the two sacred cities: Mecca, where the Prophet was born; Medina, where he was buried."

That will at once give you a little air of scientific information which is an advantage.

Proceed.

On entering, you discover a great Court overshadowed by magnificent plane-trees with a well in the centre. Three doors, always open, invite the Mussulmans, symbolically and materially, to prayer.

A text from the Koran above the principal door attracts the eyes. Enter, but, as you do so, put off your shoes from your feet, and put away thoughts of earth from your mind. Bring neither the mud of the street nor that of your thoughts into the house of Allah. Kneel down and address your prayer to Him. Do not count your possessions, but reckon up your sins. *La illah il Allah! Mohammed rassoul Allah!* that is to say, "There is no god but God, and Mahomet is His Prophet."

At this point you must cough and make a pause: it is quite worth while to do so, for it gives you the air of knowing Turkish.

You resume:

"The Mussulmans say their prayers slowly, and remain kneeling, or prostrate themselves upon their mats, according as they pass from worship to ecstasy, and nothing then, especially in this last case, can divert their attention."

Then your historic memory goes back to bygone days, and you exclaim to yourself:

"Where are you now, Christian builders of this temple? does your memory survive elsewhere than in Heaven? You are forgotten, even in the history of Derbend, and to-day the verses of the Koran resound where formerly resounded the hymns of the Prophet-King."

And, now that you have told your story, now that you have made good your claim to be a Corresponding Member in the Section of *Inscriptions et Belles Lettres* in the French Academy, the most learned, as we all know, of all the Academies, I resume the thread of my story; for this, mark you, is a true story.

I resume, then, as I was saying, the thread of my story.

The Court of the Mosque is, for the Mussulmans of every country, and especially those of Daghestan, the habitual place of meeting. Thither come the merchants to discuss their business affairs, and the Tartar chiefs to discuss political matters. The first have but one aim, namely, to deceive their clients; the second, but one hope, that of ridding themselves of their ruler. The former have sworn to Allah to be honest; the latter have sworn to the Emperor to be loyal. But it is a singular thing, and one which will greatly astonish public functionaries in France, judges, senators, etc., that in Asia the oath is regarded as a mere formality entailing no consequences and involving no obligation.

Is it, I wonder, that the Asiatics, whom we regard as behind ourselves in the matter of civilisation, are, on the contrary, in advance of us?

That would be very humiliating, and, in that case, we should have to make haste to overtake them.

You will readily understand that at this time of frightful heat which we have tried to depict, the only place where there were trees and consequently shade, with a temperature of merely a hundred and four degrees—was thronged with people. The *effendis* with their white beards, the *muftis* with their red ones, conversed in the midst of circles more or less extended according as their eloquence was greater or less; but the learning of the first and the sanctity of the last did not wring from the sky the smallest drop of water, and the beards, of all lengths as they were of all colours, were powerless even to invent an equivalent for rain. There was much discussion, and even more disputation; but discussion and disputation alike ended with the word:

"*Nedgeleikh?*" (What is to be done then?)

Shoulders were raised to the ears, eyebrows to the *papaks;* the varied noises blended in a single cry:

"*Amani! amani!*" (Save us! save us!).

Finally, a prince began to speak.

He was not only a prince but a holy man in addition: a combination seen formerly in Russia and in France, but which is now no longer seen except in the East.

It is true that his sanctity came to him, like his princely rank, by inheritance; he was a descendant of Mahomet in the sixty-second degree, and all descendants of Mahomet, of whatsoever degree, are, as you know, holy. He warmed his eloquence by the smoke of the *kabam*, and his golden speech made its way through clouds of Turkish tobacco.

"'*Amani! amani!*' you cry to Allah, and you imagine that Allah will be simple enough to pardon you for merely that word, and to believe in your repentance, without other proof. No! you do not kiss the Koran with lips still greasy from eating pork; neither do you deceive God with your flatteries and plaintive cries. He is no Russian governor; He has known you for a long while. Your hearts are covered with more impurities than the book in which the angel Gabriel writes down the faults of men is covered with sins! Think not to cleanse your hearts, from one day to the next, by prayer and fasting. God sees your reflection during the day in the sun, and at night in the stars; He knows each thought of your mind, each beat of your heart; He knows that you go into the druggists' shops, and, under the pretext of buying balsam, get served with brandy bearing a false label. But you do not deceive God by such means. The word of Mahomet is sure: 'He who in this world hath drunk of the wine of the grape shall not in the world to come drink the wine of enjoyment.' No! you will get no rain for your crops, seeing that you have dried up the fountain of the waters of Heaven by exhausting the patience of the Lord. Allah is great, and you yourselves are the cause of your own misery!"

The orator ceased, raised his eyes to the sky, grasped his red beard with his hand, and, in this attitude, he resembled Jupiter ready to hurl a sheaf of thunderbolts from his omnipotent hand.

If the truth must be told, Mir Hadjï Festahli Ismaël Ogli was a very distinguished professor. When he began to speak, it was as though you heard a stream murmur, or a nightingale sing. Each

word he spoke produced on his auditors the effect of a melting sweetmeat, and not a single Effendi in the whole of Daghestan understood the half of what he said. Mirza Ali himself, the interpreter of the Governor of Derbend, who had devoured, digested, and commented on all the poets of Farzistan, after talking with him for two whole hours, had ended by saying: "I can make nothing of him."

This, in the Tartar language, corresponds to that Russian expression, which I believe to be not altogether incomprehensible in French or English, "I give my tongue to the dogs."

On this occasion our orator had taken the trouble to be explicit, the result being that he was understood by everybody, which, at such an important crisis, was very desirable; his discourse had accordingly produced a great effect. People gathered round him with a respect not unmingled with fear, while on all sides were heard murmurs of: "He is quite right, he has said what is true;" and everyone regaled him, like the bee, with the honey of his praise.

Then addressing his audience again with all the assurance which a first success imparts, he went on:

"Listen, my brothers, we are all guilty in the eyes of Allah, and myself above all others; our sins have ascended to the third heaven; but, happily, there are seven heavens, and we have four left in which the mercy of God has taken shelter. He punishes the innocent along with the guilty; but, on the other hand, He sometimes spares a whole people for the sake of one righteous man. Well, I am going to propose a choice to you; I know not if you will accept it, but, at any rate, here it is. This is not the first time that Daghestan has prayed for water; now, our fathers and grandfathers, who were wiser men than ourselves, were in the habit in similar circumstances of choosing from among the young Mussulmans a youth pure both in mind and body, and sending him, accompanied by the prayers and benediction of all, to the summit of the mountain that rose nearest to Allah, to the summit, let us say, of Mount Chakh-Dagh. Arrived there, he had to pray fervently, like a man praying on behalf of a whole nation, then take some of the spotless snow of the mountain, make a snowball as large as his head, enclose it in a vase, and then, without letting it touch the ground, bring it to Derbend. There he had to throw the melted snow into the sea. God is great! Scarcely had the water from the snow of Chakh-Dagh mingled with the water of the Caspian sea, than the clouds would collect above the spot where the waters had united, and the rain, falling as fast as it could pour, would restore life to the parched soil."

"It is true, it is true!" cried all the voices.

"I have heard my father speak of it," said one.

"And I, my grandfather," said another.

"And I have seen it," said an old man with a white beard of which the end only was dyed red, coming closer.

The crowd made way for him and listened.

"It was my brother," continued the old man, "who went to fetch the snowball; the miracle was accomplished, and the water of the Caspian became sweet as milk; the drops of rain were as large as silver roubles, and never in the memory of man had there been such a fine harvest as there was that year."

The old man was silent.

Then there was a simultaneous cry.

"We must choose the messenger, this very instant, and send him to the Chakh-Dagh without losing a minute."

"To the Chakh-Dagh! to the Chakh-Dagh!" shouted everybody.

The words spread to the town like a train of gunpowder, and all Derbend shouted with one voice, echoing the cry from the Mosque:—

"To the Chakh-Dagh! to the Chakh-Dagh!"

The key to the great puzzle was discovered, then; now at last they knew the way to make sure of getting rain.

Everyone capered with delight and shrieked with joy.

The rich especially seemed enchanted that a method had been found which would not cost them a farthing.

Nobody appreciates economical methods so much as your wealthy people.

The young people were saying to themselves proudly: "They will choose amongst us; it is on one of ourselves that the fate of Daghestan depends."

But where was this young man pure in mind and body to be found? It would be difficult in any nation, but among Asiatics! . . .

As they reflected over this difficulty, the inhabitants of Derbend were much embarrassed and the exuberance of their first delight was moderated.

Where was this innocent youth to be found, who knew not yet the taste of wine nor the sweetness of a kiss?

They began to discuss the matter seriously, to mention one and then another; but one was rejected as being too young, another as having had too much experience.

The first had no moustaches, those of the second were too long. It was a very difficult matter to handle properly.

This admission is not very creditable to the inhabitants of Derbend, but, I say once more, it is a true story that I am writing: truth then before everything. Were it a romance! ah! then indeed my hero would have been found in a moment.

"We must have Sopharkouli," said some; "he is as timid as a girl."

So timid, that he had been seen three days before, alarmed at something or other, to jump at daybreak from the terrace of a young lady's garden into the street, rush home as fast as possible and lock his door.

"Or Mourad-Annet: he lives as quietly and as lonely as a lily."

But they declared that a month ago, after a visit to the druggist's, this immaculate lily had gone home with a bottle of balsam in each hand, and had presently shouted out songs of such a sort as would make the very Devil stop his ears.

Then there was Mohammed-Rassoul, certainly, of whom no harm could be *said*, though it might be *thought*. He had in his house a charming Lesghian beauty whom he had purchased from her father; he had paid only nine and twenty roubles and had since refused a hundred roubles for her. After all, he was a man, and the steel sabre sometimes becomes rusty.

It was vain to seek; this man had too much said about him by others; that man made too many admissions about himself.

The inhabitants of Derbend began to be seized with melancholy, and, in such circumstances, from melancholy to despair is but a step.

"What about Iskander-Beg?" said a voice in the crowd.

"Iskander-Beg, true! Bravo! How came we to forget Iskander-Beg? It is incredible! incomprehensible! As well forget a rose in a bouquet, or a pomegranate in a dish of fruit! Allah! Allah! the heat must have withered our wits!"

"Well, Allah be praised!" said a voice, "we have found the man we want. Call Iskander-Beg."

"Call Iskander-Beg!" shouted the crowd. "Iskander-Beg! Iskander-Beg! Ho! there."

"Why, now indeed we are saved," was heard on all sides. "That dear Iskander-Beg! that honest, excellent Iskander-Beg! Why, he scarcely eats, and he drinks nothing! He is not on friendly terms with the unbelievers. You don't remember ever meeting *him* in a garden. Who has ever seen him look at a woman? Have you?"

"No."

"Or you?"

"No, nor I. He lives apart like the moon."

"Well then, run at once to Iskander-Beg," cried several voices.

"But you cannot go to Iskander-Beg like that."

"Why?"

"Because he is so grave that you know not how to approach him; so proud, that you cannot speak except to reply to him; so silent, that you might think each word he uttered cost him a rouble. Who of you has ever seen him laugh, eh?"

"I have not."

"Nor I."

"Nor I. You must think twice before you go to *him*."

"There is but one man who dare risk it," said a voice.

"And that man is Mir Hadji Festahli Ismaël Ogli."

It was but right that the man who had given the advice should complete what he had begun.

"Go, Hadji Festahli, go," cried the bystanders, "intreat Iskander in the name of all of us. Obtain his consent; it will not be difficult for you, since you are so eloquent!"

Hadji Festahli was not elated at the honour conferred upon him, but finally consented to undertake the commission. He was given two *Begs* to accompany him; the stout Hussein and the lean Ferzali.

The deputation started off.

"Ah!" said the crowd, "all is going well."

"For my part, I feel quite easy now," said a voice, "Iskander-Beg has as good as consented."

"Festahli will certainly be successful, if he wants to," said another voice.

"He could get half a poor man's beard from him."

"He is as cunning as the Devil."

"Such a respectable man!"

"So clever!"

"He would make a snake dance on its tail."

"And what eloquence! When he speaks, it is not words that drop from his mouth. . . ."

"Flowers, rather!"

"You have no time to gather them with your ears."

"He would cheat you in order to get you condemned for being cheated by him."

"All the same, we could hardly have sent *him* to fetch the snowball."

"He is not chaste enough for that."

"Nor sober enough."

"Nor brave enough."

"Nor . . ."

But let that suffice for the praises of Mir Hadji Festahli. We are not of the number of those who, after sprinkling a man's eyes with rose-water—as the Tartars say—give him, while he is wiping them, a scorpion to eat for a cherry, or an aconite flower to smell instead of a sprig of jessamine.

CHAPTER III

ISKANDER-BEG

THE worthy and respectable Hadji Festahli walked slowly as he climbed the staircase of steep streets that leads to the upper part of the town, where the house of Iskander-Beg was situated. Occasionally he was obliged to pass through streets so narrow, that his two honourable companions, Hussein and Ferzali, who walked one on each side of him whenever the streets allowed of walking three abreast, were then obliged to fall back and walk in single file behind him, a humiliation from which they hastened to extricate themselves as soon as the street became wide enough to admit of three persons abreast. At times one or the other of them attempted to engage in conversation with the Hadji; but the latter was so preoccupied that he failed to notice that, when he spat to right or left, he spat, now on the black beard of Hussein, now on the red beard of Ferzali.

His absent-mindedness went to such a length that his two companions began to grow angry.

"There's a curious man!" said Hussein; "you speak to him, and, instead of answering, he spits."

"Let the mud choke him!" cried Ferzali, wiping his beard. "The proverb is true, Hussein: 'If the master is at home, you have but to mention his name and the door will be opened; but if he is not, you will gain nothing, even by bursting it open.' There is no use in talking any more to Mir Hadji Festahli; his mind is elsewhere, the house is empty."

Ferzali *of the pink beard*, as he was called in Derbend, because instead of employing the materials generally used by the Tartars for dyeing beards—materials of which the first starts by dyeing the beard pink, while the second completes the operation and turns it black—Ferzali, who only employed the first, and consequently kept his beard the colour of the dawn when it first makes its appearance, was mistaken in his opinion. The house was not empty; on the contrary, it was so filled with its own thoughts, and these thoughts, jostling together, made such a tumult, that Hadji Festahli, unable to hear even the voice of his own mind, was quite incapable of hearkening to speech of other people.

This is what his thoughts were crying to him:

"Take heed, Festahli! every step you take towards the house of Iskander brings you nearer danger. Remember how deeply you have offended him. Take care, Hadji Festahli, take care!"

What had passed then between Hadji Festahli and Iskander-Beg?

We will tell you.

Iskander was born at Derbend when the town was already in the possession of the Russians: their occupation dates from the year 1795; but his father had been the intimate friend of the last Khan, who had been driven from his dominions by

the army of Catherine. In the year 1826 he died of grief because the Persians, for whom he was waiting at Derbend, had been repulsed from Kouba, to which town they had advanced; but, in dying, he had bidden his son, then a lad of fifteen, never to serve the Russians, and never to make friends with the inhabitants of Derbend, who had routed the Persians.

The father was dead; but all his beliefs, customs, and opinions lived again in his son, and his ideas, his thoughts, and his desires were diametrically opposed to those of the people of Derbend. A handful of rice, a glass of water, a little light, and plenty of air, these were all that the young Iskander-Beg required.

In the spring, when all the world awoke under the influence of love and poetry, Iskander would saddle his good horse, throw over his shoulder his fine gun made by Hadji Moustaff, the most celebrated gunsmith in all Daghestan, take on his thumb his bold golden falcon, and hunt the pheasant along mountains and valleys until he dropped with fatigue, if fatigue can ever be felt in the satisfaction of a passion. Then he would throw himself from his horse and let him roam at pleasure, and lie down beneath the shade of some big tree on the bank of a stream whose murmur lulled him to a gentle sleep. If these sweet harmonious surroundings made him dream; if his dreams were of realities; if he were poet or philosopher, dreamer or logician, I do not know. All I know is that he lived in the sensation of living, and what more would you have?

During the winter, when the snow, driven by the gale, beat against his windows, he loved to hear the wind howling in his chimney; reclining on his carpet, he watched the play of the embers on his hearth, or the curls of smoke floating upwards from his pipe. Did he see the face of the Devil in the embers of his hearth, did he see the wings of angels in the smoke of his pipe? He said himself that he did. The fact is, he lived in a nameless kingdom, and, in this kingdom of which he was lord, he turned up bushels of emeralds, pearls, and diamonds; carried off women, compared with whom the green, yellow, and blue houris promised by Mahomet to the faithful were but Kalmuks or Samoyeds; plunged into fantastic dangers; fought with gnomes, giants, and magicians; slept amid phantoms of his imagination, and awoke in the morning so confused between the ideal and the real, that he knew not if he had lived or merely been dreaming.

At times he would summon his groom, a Lesghian, and make him sing. The Lesghian sang to him of the free life of his brethren in their mountains, their bravery in fight or in the chase, and then the Asiatic heart of Iskander would swell. He would take his dagger and wipe its point; his sword, and sharpen its edge, murmuring:

"Shall I never fight, then?"

His wish was not long in being fulfilled. Kasi-Mullah came and besieged Derbend. It was a fine opportunity for the brave to try their strength, and Iskander did not neglect it.

He engaged in sorties with the Tartars, mounted on his good steed who cared neither for rocks nor abysses. So he was always in the very front. To overtake him might still be possible; but to outstrip him—no. He did not rush, but flew like the eagle, scattering death at a distance with his rifle first, then, throwing his unloaded gun over his shoulder and with uplifted scimitar, hurling himself upon the foe with savage shouts.

One day, they had been fighting in the direction of Kouba, and, after dislodging the Russians from a vineyard, the Tartars, in spite of their success, fell into disorder, according to Asiatic custom, bearing two heads that had been cut off and fixed to a standard taken from the enemy; the Russian troops had already re-entered the town, but a young Russian officer and some Tartars, among whom was Iskander-Beg, had remained near the fountain. The bullets were whistling all round them; the Russian officer was drinking from the clear and limpid water. Raising his head, he saw before him Iskander-Beg in a plain white satin jacket; his turned-up sleeves displayed his hands and arms red with blood up to the elbow.

He was leaning on his gun, his lips curled with contempt, his eyes dim with tears, splendid in his anger.

"What is the matter, then, Iskander?" asked the Russian officer. "You seem to me to have done your share of the work well and to have nothing to regret."

"Chicken-hearted wretches!" he murmured.

"They march nicely so long as it is a

question of advancing; but when it comes to retreating, they fly like wild goats."

"Well, but it seems to me that the day is ours," said the young Russian.

"Yes, no doubt; but we have left poor Ismaël behind."

"Ismaël?" asked the Russian. "Is not that the brave lad who came and asked me to give him some cartridges when the fight began?"

"Yes; he was the only creature in Derbend whom I loved. He had the heart of an angel and—he is lost!"

He wiped away a solitary tear which trembled on his eyelid unable to make up its mind to fall.

"Is he taken?" asked the Russian officer.

"He is dead!" replied Iskander. "Braver than any man, he had all the rashness of a child. He wanted to pick a bunch of grapes, and crossed the space which separated him from the vineyard. That cost him his head; the Lesghians cut it off before my eyes. I could not help him, being engaged with ten men at once; I killed three of them; it was all that I could do. At this moment the wretches have retreated and are insulting his corpse! . . . Come," he exclaimed, turning to three or four Tartars who were listening, "which of you has still some courage, love, and faith left in him? That man will return with me to rescue the body of a comrade."

"I will go with you," said the Russian officer.

"Come on!" said the two Tartars also.

And all four threw themselves into the midst of the Lesghians, who, not expecting this sudden attack, and thinking that these four were followed by a larger number, retreated before them, while the four advanced to the lad's body, took it up, and carried it back towards the town.

His mother was waiting at the gate. She threw herself upon the decapitated corpse with cries and tears, sobbing as if her heart would break.

Iskander looked at her with contracted brows; and it was not a solitary drop that trembled on his eyelash, but tears, rushing like water from its spring, coursed down his face.

A mother's despair had caused this lion heart to melt.

"What a pity that you are not a Russian!" said the officer, holding out his hand.

"What a blessing that you are not a Tartar!" replied Iskander, grasping the hand held out to him.

It is a well-known fact that moustaches, which are the token of manhood, are at the same time the vanguard of love.

Iskander was no exception to the common law. As each hair of his moustache was developed on his lip, his heart gave birth at the same time to a desire. Desires still vague, unexplained to himself, but like the branches of the orange-tree which bear on the same bough both flower and fruit. Why are women so fond of moustaches? It is because, being the symbol of love, they spring from the same source as it, and curl with the warmth of desire. What does the youth with liquid eye, smiling face, and pink lips beneath his budding moustache, ask for, as he stands with nostrils to the wind? He asks neither for honours nor fortune, but merely for a kiss.

A virgin moustache is a bridge thrown between two amorous mouths; a moustache . . .

Let us drop the subject of moustaches, it will carry us too far; besides why, when one's own moustache has turned grey, talk of dark or fair moustaches?

Besides, moustaches, be their colour what it may, draw me from my subject, to which I now return.

In the preceding month of April, Iskander had gone out hunting, as was his wont. The day was beautiful—a veritable festival of spring, warm but without a blazing sun, fresh without dampness.

Iskander trod lightly in the midst of an ocean of verdure and flowers. He had already wandered for some hours from cavern to cavern, from mountain to mountain, looking for something that he missed, without knowing what he was searching for. For the first time, the air seemed to him oppressive to breathe; for the first time, his heart throbbed without a cause; his breast rose and fell uneasily, like a woman's veil.

And, talking of veils, let us note a fact.

Formerly, when Iskander passed along the streets of Derbend, he would not have bestowed a glance upon a woman, had she been bare to the waist; while, on the contrary, from the moment that he was able to twist the ends of his little dark moustache between his fingers, each little nose, each rosy lip, each brown or blue

ON THE EDGE OF THE POOL WAS A GIRL OF 15 OR 16 YEARS' OLD

eye, of which he got a glimpse through a half-opened veil, froze and burned him at one and the same time. To a certainty, he had never studied anatomy; and yet, in spite of this ignorance, he could have described a woman from the end of her slipper to the top of her veil, not only without mistake but even without omissions, and that from merely seeing a little foot in a silken stocking inside a velvet slipper beneath trousers of *kanaos*, trimmed with gold or silver lace.

I will not tell you whether, on this occasion, he had a successful day's sport; all I will tell you is, that the hunter was very absent-minded; so much so that, instead of searching the lonely spots in which pheasants and partridges are usually found, he guided his horse to two or three villages where there was absolutely no chance of finding game.

But the day was fine, and he hoped to catch a glimpse, either standing at her door or seated on her roof, of one of those pretty little animals of modern days which he could have put together with as great accuracy as that with which the learned Cuvier could reconstruct a mastodon, an ichthyosaurus, a pterodactyl, or any other antediluvian monster.

Unfortunately, he was compelled to refer to specimens already known. There were women at their doors and on their terraces; but the Mussulman girls, who sometimes draw aside their veils for infidels, never do so for the men of their own country. The consequence was that Iskander's longings, finding no face on which to fix themselves, were scattered to the winds.

The young man grew sad, heaved a deep sigh, threw the bridle on his horse's neck and left him to take him whither he would, which is what travellers and those who are in love should always do, when they have an intelligent horse.

The horse knew a charming road which led back to the house; by the side of this road was a spring that formed a pool beneath some lofty plane-trees, where he was accustomed to quench his thirst; this road the horse now chose.

Iskander-Beg paid not the least attention to the direction his horse was taking. It mattered little, however, for he rode along quite absorbed in his dreams; and as he went, on both sides of the road visionary forms accompanied him,—forms of women, all of whom, it is true, wore veils, but whose veils were put on in such careless fashion that there was not one of them but allowed something to be seen that should have been concealed.

Suddenly Iskander checked his horse, and it appeared to him as though he were passing from the vision to the reality.

On the edge of the pool was concealed a girl of fifteen or sixteen years old, more beautiful than he had ever pictured to himself that a woman could be. She was cooling her lovely face, which the April sun had tinted like a rose, in the clear water; then she looked at her reflection in the living mirror, smiled at herself, and took such pleasure in seeing herself smile that she saw nothing else, listening to and hearing nothing but the birds singing above her head that seemed to say to her: "Gaze at yourself in the fountain, fair child! never has a flower so fresh as you admired itself there before, nor never will again!"

Doubtless they said this to her in verse, but I am compelled to say it in prose, not being acquainted with the laws of poetry in bird language.

And the feathered flatterers were right; it would be difficult to find a fresher, purer, fairer flower than this one which seemed to have grown on the margin of the pool in which she was gazing at herself.

But it was one of those flowers such as Granville knew so well how to depict, with dark hair, eyes like stars, teeth like pearls, cheeks like peaches; the whole enveloped, not by one of those thick and ill-bred veils which conceal what they cover, but by a fabric so fine, so silky and transparent, that it seemed woven with those threads which the Virgin lets fall from her distaff when the autumn arrives.

Then, if the imprudent eye descended from the face in a vertical line, it was quite another matter. After a neck, which seemed to have served as a model for the 'ivory tower' of Scripture, there came . . .

Doubtless what came after, and was only half concealed by a vest of white *maufe* frosted with blue, and an *arkalouk* of cherry-coloured satin, was very lovely, for poor Iskander-Beg could not restrain a cry of admiration.

Hardly had he uttered this cry when Iskander wished fervently he had been born dumb; over her transparent veil the

girl threw a thick one, and ran, or rather flew, away, twice uttering the name of Iskander-Beg.

As for Iskander, dumb too late, motionless when perhaps he should have run; his arms outstretched in front of him as though to seize this reality which, in flying, became once more a vision, he remained breathless, with fixed eyes, like Apollo on seeing Daphne flee.

Only, Apollo soon dashed off on the track of his beautiful nymph, while Iskander-Beg did not stir so long as he could catch the slightest glimpse of a white veil through the bushes.

When he had quite lost sight of it, he was agitated in quite a different manner, for then it seemed to him that life, which had for an instant been suspended, returned to him in floods, and clamourously and violently invaded his heart.

"Allah!" he murmured, "what will they say of her and me, if anyone has seen us? . . . How lovely she is! . . . She will be scolded by her parents. . . . What beautiful dark eyes! . . . They will believe that a meeting had been arranged between us! . . . What lips! She knows my name; twice, as she ran away, she said, 'Iskander! Iskander!'"

And he fell once more into reverie, if you may call by the name of reverie a condition in which the blood is boiling, in which you hear harps sounding in your ears, in which you see all the stars of heaven in broad daylight.

Night would very certainly have overtaken Iskander on the margin of the pool, into whose waters he seemed to have let his heart fall, had not his horse, feeling the bridle, which had been tightened for an instant, gently loosened, continued his road without asking the advice of his rider.

Iskander returned home madly in love.

We are sorry not to have found time or place to tell in this chapter the reason why Iskander bore a grudge against Mir Hadji Festahli; but we promise our readers faithfully that we will tell it in the chapter following.

CHAPTER IV

ISKANDER LEARNS THE NAME OF THE MAIDEN WHO KNEW HIS ALREADY

AND yet Iskander-Beg recollected his father's words.

His father was in the habit of saying: "The loveliest rose lasts but a day, the smallest thorn lasts a lifetime. . . Fondle women, but do not love them, if you do not wish to become their slave. . . Love is sweet only in poetry; but, in real life, its commencement is fear, its turning-point, sin; its end, repentance."

And to these three maxims he added a fourth, their necessary complement: "Do not look at other people's wives, and do not listen to your own."

Let us say at once, to the credit of Iskander, that he forgot all this advice in less than five minutes.

The young Tartar loved and was afraid. The first part, then, of his father's prediction, "The commencement of love is fear," was being realised in him.

A week ago, poor Iskander slept so peacefully! the night seemed to him so calm and refreshing!

But now, he tosses on his mattress, and bites his pillow; his silk counterpane stifles him.

But who was *she?*

At this question, which he put to himself for the tenth time, Iskander sprang from his bed on to his feet.

She! what a miserable, paltry word!

Love, and especially love in Daghestan, cannot endure pronouns.

Until he learns her real name, Iskander will give her a fictitious one.

"I will discover the name of my . . . . Leila," said he, as he thrust his dagger into his belt; "I shall be killed, perhaps, but I will learn her name."

A moment later he was in the street.

The Devil has in all probability left one of his serpents behind at Derbend; for some, it is the serpent of ambition—how many celebrated men have contended for the possession of Derbend!—for others, it is the serpent of love—how many young folk have lost their heads at Derbend!

Decidedly, this last serpent had bitten Iskander-Beg. He wandered through all the streets, looked through every gate, tried to penetrate with his eyes every wall and every veil.

But all in vain.

From whom shall he inquire her name? Who will show him her house?

The curiosity of his heart urged him forward. "Go on!" it said to him.

But where? Of that he knew nothing.

He mingled with the crowd, the crowd took him to the Market Place.

Had he wanted to learn the price of meat, that would have been an excellent place; but for discovering the name of his darling, it was of no sort of use!

He went up to an Armenian—the Armenians, who sell everything and know everybody.

This particular Armenian sold fish.

"Buy a fine *chamaia*, Iskander-Beg," said the Armenian.

The young man went off in disgust.

At last he went up to the shop of a Tartar silversmith, a clever enameller.

"God bless you!" said he to the Tartar.

"Allah grant you happiness!" replied the jeweller, without taking his eyes off a turquoise which he was setting in a ring.

On the counter behind which the jeweller was working was a copper bowl, filled with various articles of more or less value.

Iskander-Beg uttered an exclamation.

He had just recognised an ear-ring which he was certain he had seen the previous evening, suspended from the ear of his unknown love.

His heart gave a bound; it seemed as though he had just discovered the first letter of her name. It was as though he had seen her pretty little hand with its pink nails beckoning him to approach.

He dared not utter a word. He hesitated to put a question; he did not know what to say. His voice shook; all his ideas were turned topsy-turvy.

All at once a flash crossed his mind.

A veritable military ruse, one of those artifices by which places are captured.

He emptied the bowl into his hand, as if to examine the jewels. The jeweller, who had recognised him, made no objection.

He cleverly picked out the ear-ring from the heap of jewels, put it in his pocket, and suddenly exclaimed:

"There! I have let the ear-ring drop!"

And he put back the other jewels into the bowl.

"Which ear-ring?" asked the dealer.

"The one with the little bells."

"By Allah! be quick and pick it up, Iskander; I would not have it lost for fifty roubles."

"Oh! it is not lost," said Iskander.

Then, after a moment, he added:

"All the same, it's very strange; I don't see it anywhere."

"You must look down, if you want to see it," said the dealer, putting aside the ring which he was embossing, and getting up and looking over his counter with his spectacles raised.

Iskander took a step or two and pretended to search for it.

"I can't see it," he said.

Then after an instant he added:

"Undoubtedly it is lost."

This time the jeweller removed his spectacles from his forehead, placed them on the counter, and said:

"Allah! What have you done, Iskander-Beg?"

"Lost the ear-ring, that is all."

"But you don't know what will happen. That old rascal Hadji Festahli is quite capable of prosecuting me. An ear-ring of Bakou enamel!"

"Upon my soul, Djaffar, you are joking me! What are you talking about? A man so grave as Hadji Festahli, a descendant of Mahomet, a holy man—you don't tell me he wears ear-rings?"

"Who told you he did wear ear-rings?"

"But he has neither wife nor child, so far as I know."

"He is too stingy for that, the old miser! but ten years ago his brother Chafy fled to Persia, leaving his wife and daughter behind. The child was only six at that time; now she is sixteen."

"Quite that! quite that!" murmured Iskander *sotto voce*.

Then, raising his voice, he asked:

"And what is the name of this niece?"

"Kassime," answered the jeweller.

"Kassime, Kassime," repeated Iskander gently.

And the name seemed to him a much prettier one than Leila, which he immediately threw on one side, like a lemon from which you have extracted the juice.

"And since her father's departure," he added aloud, "the child has grown, I suppose?"

"You know our country, Iskander; you know that the child of a year old looks like a child of two; a girl of five appears to be ten. Our girls are like the vine-stock, which is hardly planted before the

grapes are ripe: I have never seen her, but her uncle declares she is the prettiest girl in Derbend."

Iskander-Beg threw the ear-ring into the jeweller's hand and flew off like an arrow. He had found out all he wanted to know; the name of his love, and where she lived.

He ran straight to Hadji Festahli's house.

He hardly hoped to see Kassime, but perhaps he might hear her voice; and then, who knows? perhaps she might go out with her mother and, if he did not see her, she would see him. She would have a shrewd suspicion that he had not come there to see her uncle.

But, as was always the case, old Hadji Festahli's house was closed; Iskander anticipated the disappointment; it was the most difficult house in all Derbend into which to gain entrance.

He heard, not Kassime's voice indeed, but the barking of a dog, which was renewed each time he came near the gate.

At last the door opened.

But there came out only a wretched old woman with a broom in her hand.

Some old hag, no doubt, going to a witches' sabbath.

She had not even to take the trouble to close the door behind her; you might have thought it had shut of itself, but that you heard a hand drawing the bolts.

Iskander had almost determined to remain there until evening, until the next morning, until Kassime came out. But his presence could not fail to be observed, and would clearly hint to Hadji Festahli: "I love your niece; guard her more strictly than ever."

He returned home, and threw himself on a rug. There, being no longer afraid of being seen, or even heard, he rolled over and over, roaring and yelling.

Iskander loved after the manner of lions.

Good Mussulmans, true believers, have not any idea of what we call perfect love: Iskander was absolutely enraged. He wanted Kassime that very instant, without delay, on the spot.

He was like those readers who skip the preface of a book and plunge immediately into the first chapter.

An unsatisfactory class of persons both for authors and for uncles!

But Iskander soon reflected that it was useless to roll on his rug for a whole day, or to roar for a whole week, or to yell for a month; that all this would not bring him closer to Kassime by the thickness of a hair.

He must seek, then, some other means.

At last, by dint of repeating to himself "Kassime's uncle," he recollected that he too, if he had no uncle, had at least an aunt.

An aunt! What were aunts made for if not to promote the love-affairs of their nephews?

That is all an aunt is good for.

You do not know an aunt who has ever served for any other purpose, nor do I.

He went and bought a piece of silk for a dress, and then rushed to his aunt's.

The aunt took the dress, listened to the whole story of her nephew's love affair, and as aunts, no matter what their age, remember the time when they were young themselves, so Iskander's aunt, after a sigh of regret for her lost youth, promised him to do all in her power to bring about an interview.

"Come here to-morrow at noon, my boy," said she; "I will send for Kassime under the pretext of painting her eyelids with *kohol*, and I will hide you behind this curtain, you rogue! Only you must be prudent, and not stir, nor even breathe, and above all, be careful not to utter a word to anyone whatsoever of what I am doing for you."

Iskander went home enchanted, as you may imagine.

He went to bed at night, hoping that he would sleep, and that, while he slept, time would go on as usual.

Sleep was all very well once, but not now.

He fell asleep at one o'clock and awoke at two.

At seven in the morning he was at his aunt's house, declaring it was just going to strike twelve.

At each sound that was made at the door he ran and hid behind the curtain.

Then he would resume his place near his aunt, shaking his head as he said to himself:

"She will not come."

Then, getting angry and stamping his foot, he observed:

"Ah! if she does not come, I will set fire to her uncle's house; she will have to come out to avoid being burnt. Then I will seize her, carry her off on my horse, and away with her."

And each time his aunt quieted him by saying:

"Nay! she cannot be here yet, it is only nine—it is only ten—it is only eleven."

But at twelve o'clock the aunt exclaimed:

"Ah! this time she is really here."

Iskander, as well as his aunt, had heard the sound of the little heeled slippers on the pavement of the court-yard and had sprung behind the curtain.

In point of fact, it was she, with her friend Kitchina; Kitchina of the blue eyes, as she was called.

The girls put off their slippers at the threshold of the door, and went and sat beside the old aunt.

The two veils fell on the floor. The curtain quivered; luckily, neither of the girls was looking in that direction.

No; they were looking at the old aunt, who was stirring the pigment with a small ivory brush at the bottom of a little silver cruet.

Kassime knelt on both knees in front of the worthy aunt, who began by painting her eyebrows and then the eyelashes; but when Kassime raised her lovely eyes for this last operation, Iskander felt his heart pierced as if by a bullet.

Even the old woman was struck by her wonderful beauty, and, in her admiration of the girl, she embraced her, saying:

"Shall I soon, my pretty Kassime, paint you in your bath, to the accompaniment of the songs of your girl friends? You have such beautiful eyes, that I wish they may open each morning free from tears and be closed each evening by a kiss."

Kassime sighed and embraced the old lady with tenderness.

Iskander heard the sigh and felt the warmth of the kiss.

"My uncle Festahli says I am still too young," answered Kassime sadly.

"And what says your heart?" asked the old woman.

Kassime took the tambourine that was hanging on the wall, and, instead of replying, sang:—

Fair dawn! oh! why did I thus early chance
To feel the freshness of thy plumèd wing?
Fair youth! why did'st thou with thy amorous glance
My heart at eve with burning passion sting?

I saw in th' azure sky unswept by clouds
A star, God's image, that did brightly beam,
Then, through the storm which now the star enshrouds,
Like snakes of flame the lightning flashes gleam.

The ills we dread, the blessings we implore,
Which form the joy or terror of the skies,
Star, lightning, dawn, remembered are no more;
Why cannot I forget, fair youth, thine eyes?

And, while singing this last verse of the song which she had just improvised, Kassime blushed to her shoulders; next, laughing like a child, she let her tambourine drop and threw herself into Kitchina's arms, and then both the foolish girls began to laugh.

What were they laughing at, and what was there so laughable in all this?

But the old woman understood very well, and, for the sake of her nephew's happiness, wanted to get the key to the puzzle immediately.

"O my sweet rose," said she, toying with Kassime's rings, "if my nephew had heard the song you have just sung, he would have broken down the wall in order to see the singer, and, when he saw her, he would have carried her off as a lion does a goat."

At this moment the vase of jessamine water fell from a chest that stood close to the curtain, and broke into a thousand pieces.

The old woman turned round and the girls grew pale.

"What was that noise?" cried Kassime in a trembling voice.

"That brute of a black cat," said the old woman; "he is always doing it."

Kassime was reassured.

"Oh! I hate black cats," said she. "People say that they sometimes lend their skins to the Devil, and that is why their eyes shine so in the dark."

Then, turning to her friend:

"Come, Kitchina, mother only gave me an hour, and there is the Mullah crying."

Kassime embraced the old woman coldly, but the aunt, guessing that this coldness was assumed, said as she led her to the door:

"Never mind; it is no use being angry, Kassime. I should like to see you with bridal flowers on your head; your happiness is as precious to me as a chain of gold, and I know someone who would like with this golden chain to bind his soul to yours. But don't be uneasy, dear child, there are none but Allah and he and myself who know this."

Kassime opened her eyes wide, her astonishment doubling their size, but at this moment she had reached the threshold of the door. Kitchina, who was behind her, gave her a gentle push ; the door was closed again, and she got no other explanation than the sound of the key grating in the lock.

Iskander-Beg, on his aunt's return from showing Kassime out, almost smothered her in his arms. The worthy woman reproached him greatly for not having been able to keep quiet in his place of observation.

"Oh!" said she, "when that confounded vase fell, I nearly died with fright! Naughty child, you might have thrown the funeral earth on my poor head, if Kassime had guessed who it was had thrown it down."

"Was it my fault, dear aunt," cried Iskander, "and could I remain quiet when my heart was threatening to burst on seeing the roses spread over the cheeks of Kassime when you pronounced my name? I made a movement to gather them with my lips. What would you! He who sows ought to reap."

"Not when we sow in somebody else's garden."

"Then buy me that garden, aunt ; do not leave me to die like a nightingale on the thorns of a rose-bush. Kassime must be my wife ; ask her uncle for her at once, then, and be assured that I shall be as deeply grateful as I am deeply in love. Be successful in your embassy, aunt, and I promise you the finest pair of buffaloes in Daghestan."

Iskander-Beg received the answer of Mir Hadji Festahli the next day.

Alas! it was very different from what he had hoped for. Here it is ; and the reader may judge for himself how much hope is left to poor Iskander.

"Tell your Iskander from me," Festahli had replied to the old aunt, "that I have not forgotten his father. His father was a ruffian. One day, before all the people, he called me . . . well, I don't like to tell you what he called me ; I was unable to avenge myself because that was just the time when the power of Russia began to interfere with our customs, but I have not forgotten the insult. I did not burn his coffin. It is for the son to pay his father's debts, and I am not a dog to caress the man who has beaten me. But, to tell the truth, even if there were not this ground of quarrel between us, Iskander should not have my niece. A fine advantage, indeed, to be the uncle of that *Beg*. There are seventy *Begs* like him in Derbend. I will enumerate them to him if he likes. What is the use of talking to me of dowry? Yes, no doubt he can pay the price of my niece by beggaring himself, but how is he going to live with her afterwards? Has he any relations who can help him in case of need? How many crows' eggs does he get as the rent of his hovels? How many bundles of nettles does he gather from his fields? He is destitute, quite destitute, your beggar of a nephew. Tell him then no! a hundred times no! I don't want a good-for-nothing like him in my family. A head and a purse both so empty, that you have only to blow on them and they fly away . . . Good evening, old lady."

Knowing what you do of the character of Iskander-Beg, you will understand his rage when the old aunt gave him this reply, word for word.

At last, his wrath calmed down ; he had sworn an oath that he would be revenged on Mir Hadji Festahli in such terrible fashion as would amply satisfy the savage cravings of his Tartar blood.

It is now clear to you why Hadji Festahli was so preoccupied as he ascended the streets leading to Iskander-Beg's house ; why, in his preoccupation, he spat on Hussein's black beard and on Ferzali's pink one, and why, in the last place, having arrived at Iskander-Beg's door, instead of knocking loudly and impatiently, he gave but very gentle taps.

CHAPTER V

GIVE AND TAKE

ISKANDER was neither a wealthy man nor a married man, and so his door opened readily, not merely half way, but to its full extent ; for he had no fear, when people came to visit him, of their spying either upon his wife or his strong-box.

Accordingly Iskander received his

visitors, not on the threshold of the door, as Mussulman householders are wont, but in his innermost sanctum. There was nothing in his house to tempt either stealers of hearts or stealers of money.

"You are welcome!" he cried to his visitors from the other side of the door, even before he knew who they were. And the door opened.

Iskander-Beg had come to open it in person, his *nouker*, or groom being occupied in rubbing down his horse. He stood rooted in astonishment on seeing in the street Mir Hadji Festahli and his two attendants.

The blood mounted to his brow, and his first movement was to place his hand on his dagger.

But, thanks to a violent effort over himself, curiosity got the better of anger.

He laid his hand on his heart respectfully, saluted his guests and invited them to enter.

They sat down on the carpets, smoothed their beards with Oriental dignity, arranged the folds of their robes, and the conversation began with the usual common-places.

At last, after five minutes wasted in trifling observations, Mir Hadji Festahli broached the subject.

He spoke of the misfortunes that threatened Daghestan in general and the town of Derbend in particular, supposing the drought should last even a week longer.

After each sentence he turned to his companions, as if to ask their support; but it was now the turn of the latter to remain dumb, and, if they did not spit upon his beard, it is not that they lacked the desire to do so.

Iskander, for his part, seemed but little affected by the pathetic picture drawn by Mir Hadji Festahli of the misfortunes of the town and province; only, you could perceive by the redness of his face that a flame was burning in his breast.

The result of it all was that Hadji Festahli finished his discourse with this triple exclamation:

"Ruin! ruin! ruin! Derbend is ruined and undone!"

"Probably!" replied Iskander.

"Certainly!" added Hussein.

"Absolutely!" whined Ferzali.

After which there was a moment's silence.

During this silence Iskander eyed each of his visitors in turn with a glance of inquiry, but they remained mute. Iskander began to grow impatient.

"You did not come, my brothers," said he, "that we might wipe the sweat from our faces and shed our tears in company, and I presume that, either on your own account, or on account of those who have sent you—for you strike me as being ambassadors to my august person—you have something to tell me of greater importance than anything you have said as yet."

"My brother is full of perspicacity," answered Hadji Festahli with a bow.

Whereupon, with a host of Oriental periphrases on the honour that it was to Iskander to be the object of such a choice, he informed the latter of the service which the inhabitants of Derbend expected from his devotion.

But Iskander's brow contracted in a terrible manner as he exclaimed with vehemence:

"A strange choice! Hitherto the inhabitants of Derbend, for whom indeed I have often fought—true indeed, I fought more on my own account than on theirs—not only have not spoken to me, but have hardly greeted me civilly. And now, forsooth, they give me a commission which I did not solicit and of which I am unworthy. It is true there are plenty of precipices in the Chakh-Dagh; true, the brigand Mullah-Nour makes that mountain his habitual abode, and that it is five chances to one that I roll over a precipice, and twenty to one that I am assassinated by Mullah-Nour; but that matters little provided I can serve their purpose, and so they have cast their eyes on me. And why, I ask you, should I, who love warmth and sunshine, intreat Allah for clouds and rain? On the contrary, I am delighted that my house is dry, my stable healthy, and that there is neither fog in the air nor mud in the street. Besides, the sun hatches out my crows' eggs, and my nettles thrive quite well without rain. You jeered at me because I had no wheat to gather in! Why, if I have no wheat, should I disturb myself about yours? You slandered my father, robbed him, hunted him, despised him, and now you want me to risk my life in order to do you a good turn, and to implore God's pity for yourselves! But I am mistaken; it is doubtless to offer some fresh insult that you come to me, and, that there may be nothing lacking to

this insult, it is to the holy and most honourable Hadji Festahli that the task of making such a proposal has been entrusted. You do not load a camel when he is standing, but when he kneels down, and I, as you see, am standing."

And Iskander rose, proud as a King, terrible as a God.

"Now," said he, "we have a little account to settle, Hadji Festahli and I. We will retire for a few moments; excuse us, worthy sirs!"

And he beckoned to Hadji Festahli to follow him into the adjoining room.

On seeing his signal, the face of the holy Mussulman grew long and dark as an autumn night. He rose with a smile; but, as everybody knows, there are two kinds of smiles: the one, which pouts out the lips for a kiss; the other, which bares the teeth ready to bite.

They passed into the room together.

What Hussein of the black beard and Ferzali of the pink beard talked about during this interval we are unable to tell our readers, inasmuch as we were listening at the door of the room to which Hadji Festahli and Iskander had retired.

At the end of a few minutes, the two enemies came in with beaming faces, looking like two badges of the Lion and the Sun set in diamonds, and placed side by side on the breast of a Persian Minister.

Iskander then turned to the two other visitors and said:

"I had at first motives known to myself for not complying with the desire of the inhabitants of Derbend; but the honourable Hadji Festahli, whom God preserve, has given me such excellent reasons for making up my mind, that I am now prepared to go and fetch the snow from the summit of the Chakh-Dagh, even at the risk of rolling over the precipices and of encountering Mullah-Nour. Allah is all-powerful, and if a warm and fervent prayer can melt the heart of God, I venture to say that the heart of God shall be melted, and that the clouds themselves shall shed such tears that the thirsty land will be refreshed by them not only for this year, but even for the next. I start this evening. Pray you, and I will act."

Then he added:

"Time is precious, I will not detain you."

The embassy thanked Iskander; feet were thrust into slippers once more, and the visitors took their departure.

Iskander was left alone, which was just what he wanted.

"Well," cried he joyfully, when he saw that nobody could hear him, "that old rogue of a Hadji Festahli is a great deal better than I took him for. He bore a deadly grudge against me because my father one day called him publicly the son of a . . . . never mind what! and lo and behold, like a veritable patriarch he sacrifices his resentment to the public weal and gives me his niece in exchange for a little snow . . . A worthy man indeed!"

Hussein and Ferzali, for their part, remarked as they came away:

"That Iskander is not a man, but an angel. He is furious with Derbend and enraged against Festahli; but when he heard of the tears and sufferings of the poor, he was no longer able to refuse us."

And the people, in their turn, delighted that Iskander had consented, began to sing and dance.

But Festahli laughed in his beard.

"A promise, a promise! . . ." he murmured, "what is there in a promise, especially when there are no witnesses? He cannot compel me to keep it. I should have died of shame if I had had to come back to the people without obtaining Iskander's consent. Then, besides, I added the words 'If you accomplish your journey successfully . . .' Well, Iskander has not returned yet, the paths on the Chakh-Dagh are very steep, and Mullah-Nour is very brave. We shall see! we shall see!"

Truly a very holy man was this Mir Hadji Festahli Ismaël Ogli!—a direct descendant of the Prophet.

Iskander kissed his good horse for joy, saying:

"Upon my honour, they are fools to think that I am undertaking all this on account of their wheat. Ah! for Kassime, for my beautiful, my adored Kassime, I would climb not only the Chakh-Dagh, but even the moon—Ho, Ibrahim! a feed of oats there, a feed of oats for my horse!"

CHAPTER VI

A PANEGYRIC ON NOSES

HAVE you ever reflected, dear readers, what an admirable thing a nose is?

A nose? yes, a nose?

And how useful a nose is to every individual who raises, as Ovid says, his face to the sky?

Well, it is a strange thing, and an unheard-of piece of ingratitude, that no poet has ever yet thought of writing an ode to the nose!

The conception of this idea has been left to me, who am no poet, or at any rate, only pretend to come in the rear of our great poets.

Truly, the nose has been unfortunate.

For the *eyes* men have invented so many things.

For the eyes there have been made sonnets, compliments, kaleidoscopes, pictures, scenery, spectacles.

For the ears:

In the first place, ear-rings, Robert the Devil, William Tell, Fra Diavolo, Stradivarius violins, sax-horns and Erard's pianos.

And for the mouth:

Lenten fare, the *Citizen's Book of Cookery*, *The Gastronomer's Calendar*, *The Gourmand's Dictionary*. Soups of all kinds have been made for it, from the *batwigne* of Russia to the *soupe aux choux* of France; it has been allowed to appropriate the reputation of the greatest men, from cutlets *à la Soubise* to puddings *à la Richelieu*; its lips have been compared to coral, its teeth to pearls, its breath to benjoin; in its honour have been served up peacocks with their feathers, woodcocks with their trails, with the promise of roasted larks to follow.

What has been invented for the nose?

Essence of roses and snuff.

Ah! this is not right, philanthropists, my honoured masters! poets, my brother craftsmen!

And, notwithstanding this neglect, with what fidelity does this member . . .

"It is not a member!" the *savants* will all protest.

"Pardon, gentlemen, I correct myself: this appendage—just so. Well, I was saying, with what fidelity does this appendage serve you!"

The eyes sleep, the mouth closes, the ears grow deaf.

But the nose is always vigilant.

It guards your repose, and contributes to your health.

All other parts of your body, feet, hands, all do foolish things. The hands let themselves be caught picking and stealing, fools that they are; the feet stumble and let the body down, clumsy things that they are.

And, in this latter case, who generally has to suffer for it? The feet do wrong, and it is the nose that gets punished.

How often have you not heard it said:

"Mr. So-and-So has broken his nose!"

There have been a great many broken noses since the world began, but quote me a single instance in which it was the fault of the nose!

No! everything falls upon the poor nose, and yet it bears it all with angelic patience. True, it has sometimes the hardihood to snore, but where or when have you heard it complain?

Let us forget the fact that Nature has fashioned it an admirable instrument for increasing or diminishing at will the volume of the voice. Let us say nothing of the services it renders in acting as the intermediary between our souls and the souls of flowers. Let us ignore its utility and take it only from the æsthetic side, that of its beauty.

Like the cedar of Lebanon it treads under foot the hyssop of the moustachios; as a central column it furnishes a base for the double arch of the eyebrows. On its capital rests the eagle, that is to say, thought. Round it blossom smiles. With what pride did the nose of Ajax rear itself against the storm when he said: "I will escape, spite of the gods." With what courage did the nose of the great Condé, who would never have been called "great" but for his nose—with what courage, I say, did the nose of the great Condé enter in front of everybody else, nay, in front of the great Condé himself, the Spanish intrenchments into which the victor of Lens and of Rocroy had had the hardihood, or rather the insolence, to throw his commander's staff! With what confidence did the nose of Dugazon, who had discovered forty-two ways of moving, each more comic than the rest, present itself before the public!

No, I do not think the nose ought to

be condemned to the obscurity in which the ingratitude of man has left it hitherto.

Well! perhaps it is because Western noses are small noses, as a rule, that they have endured this unjust treatment.

But Western noses are not the only ones; there are the noses of the East, which are fine noses.

Gentlemen of Paris, or Vienna, or St. Petersburg, do you question the superiority of these noses to your own? If you do, then take the Danube, ye Viennese; the steamer, ye Parisians; the *perecladdoï*, gentlemen of Petersburg, and say these simple words:

"To Georgia!"

Only I announce to you beforehand your profound humiliation; were you to bring to Georgia one of the biggest noses in Europe—like that of Hyacinthe or Schiller—when you reached the frontier of Tiflis, they would stare in astonishment at you and say:

"There's a gentleman who has lost his nose on the journey, what a pity!"

In the first street you come to, or rather, at the first houses in the outskirts of the town, you will be convinced that all Greek, Roman, German, French, Spanish, and even Neapolitan noses ought to bury themselves in the earth for shame at the sight of the noses of Georgia.

Oh! the fine, robust, magnificent noses of Georgia!

In the first place, they are of all shapes, round, large, long, broad.

They are of all colours, white, pink, red, violet.

Some are set with rubies, others with pearls; I have seen one set with turquoises.

You have only to press them between your two fingers, and from the very smallest will flow a pint of good Kaketian wine.

In Georgia, a law of Wachtang the Fourth has abolished the fathom, the yard, and the *archine*, and has kept the nose only as a standard of length.

Materials are measured by the nose.

You say, "I have bought seventeen noses of *tarmalama* to make a dressing-gown, seven noses of *kanaos* for a pair of trousers, a nose and a half of satin to make a necktie."

And the Georgian ladies find this measure more useful than all the European measures.

Nor in respect, then, to noses, must you look down with contempt upon Daghestan. Thus, for example, in the middle of the face of one Hadji Joussouf, a *Beg* of Derbend, rises a certain protuberance for which his compatriots have not yet discovered a suitable name, though some call it a trumpet, some a helm, others a handle!

Beneath its shadow three men might sleep comfortably. You may understand in what respect such a nose will be held, with a heat of a hundred and twenty-five degrees in the sun; when in the shade, at the other side, that is, of this nose, it is only a hundred and four degrees.

You will not be surprised then that Joussouf had been chosen to act as guide to Iskander.

But, to be strictly accurate, it was not solely and entirely on account of his nose that he had been associated with him.

As the title of Hadji, which we have prefixed to the name of Joussouf, indicates, Joussouf had been to Mecca.

To get there, he had traversed Persia, Asia Minor, Palestine, the Desert, part of Arabia Petræa, and a portion of the Red Sea.

What wonderful stories, then, had Joussouf told on his return about his travels and the dangers he had incurred; of the robbers he had felled to the ground, and the fierce animals whose jaws he had broken, like another Samson!

When he appeared in the bazaar at Derbend, people stood aside for him saying:

"Make way for the lion of the *steppe*!"

"He is a bold man!" exclaimed the most pointed moustaches and the longest beards, when Joussouf-Beg, telling yarns with his deceitful tongue, was cutting off heads right and left. It was said that on a certain Persian mountain, on arriving at the summit he hung his cap on the moon's horn, so great was the height of the mountain; that for a long time his only food was eagles' eggs, and that at night he slept in caves where, when he sneezed, echo answered "God bless you!" of its own accord. It is true that Joussouf generally speaks without reflecting, but, when he has spoken, his words give food for reflection to others. What animals he has seen! what men he has encountered! He has seen creatures with two heads and only one foot, he has met with men who had no heads, and thought through their bellies.

All these stories had certainly grown

somewhat stale, which was doubtless the reason why they had not thought of sending him to fetch the snowball; but when this mission had been assigned by general acclamation to Iskander, Joussouf mounted his Persian horse, passed his dagger from Andrev, his pistol from Kouba and his sword from Vladikavkas through his girdle, and strutted proudly through the streets of Derbend, saying:

"If you like, I will accompany Iskander, for what can the poor fellow do without me?"

The people answered, "Very well, go with him."

He then went home to strengthen his defensive armour with a copper coat of mail, and his offensive armour with a gun from Nouka. Yellow high-heeled top-boots completed his costume. Lastly, he hung his sabre and whip from his saddle, so that, when all was complete, he staggered under the weight of his arsenal of weapons.

He was ready long before Iskander and waiting for him at the gates, saying:

"Well, is he never coming? Had it been I who was chosen, I should have been off two hours ago."

Towards six in the evening Iskander issued from the courtyard on horseback, dressed and armed as people were in the habit of seeing him.

He crossed the town slowly, not with the least intention of making himself conspicuous, but because the streets leading from his house to the gates of Derbend were blocked with people.

At last he succeeded in joining Joussouf-Beg, gave him his hand, and with a farewell salute to the inhabitants of Derbend went off at a gallop.

Joussouf followed on his Khorassan courser. For some time riders and horses could be distinguished, then nothing was to be seen of them but a cloud of dust, and presently they disappeared entirely from view.

When they reached a large cemetery Iskander-Beg checked his horse's pace.

Night was beginning to fall.

But Iskander was thinking neither of the night nor of the cemetery, but of his beloved Kassime.

Joussouf looked somewhat anxiously to right and left, and took advantage of Iskander's having slackened his pace to draw closer to him, but the latter was plunged in his own thoughts.

If you have ever been young; if you have ever been heart and soul in love; and if, being young and in love, you have had to leave the place where your beloved one dwelt, you will understand what feelings were at work in the breast of Iskander-Beg. It is foolish, doubtless, to imagine that by breathing the same air we dream the same dreams; that by looking ten times at a window, though it be closed, we carry away ten distinct recollections; but the fond thought comforts us. Imagination is always more picturesque than reality; our imagination is poetry; it flies lightly as the angels and the birds, and its white wings are never soiled with the mud, nor even with the dust, of the streets.

Reality, on the other hand, is prosaic; it plunges into details; as it leans over the white neck of a mistress, it does not notice the clearness of the skin, but asks whether the pearls of her necklace are real or sham; it pays court to her husband, makes friends with the dog, and tips the servants.

"Give me poetry!" say I.

Iskander was engaged in almost similar reflections—only that, being five and twenty years younger than ourselves, this fact must have imparted to his thoughts the colour of the rose and the perfume of the hawthorn—when he observed that Joussouf was jogging his elbow.

"Well," asked he, emerging from his dream, "what is the matter, Joussouf?"

"Only this, that even if we have not thought it right to remain in the town with the living, I don't see why we should stay in a Cemetery with the dead. May I burn their coffins, if all these tomb stones don't seem to be rising up, and the gallows yonder pointing black, fleshless arms at us!"

"'Tis sighing for you, Hadji Joussouf; it is afraid of your escaping it after all," answered Iskander with a laugh.

"I spit on the beard of him who set it up there," said Hadji Joussouf. "Allah preserve me! but each time I pass by here, good Mussulman as I believe myself, pure in heart as I am, it always seems to me they are going to seize me by the neck; and confess truly, Iskander, that if we were not under Russian rule, we would not remain in the town long with our guns on our shoulders and our feet in the stirrup. Down with the caravans! Oh! how I would deal with

them, the caravans, how I would hack them in pieces no bigger than millet seeds!"

"Truly, my dear Joussouf, I did not know you were so brave at night time. . . . During the investment by Kasi-Mullah, I saw you fight during the day, or rather, I did not see you; were you not at Derbend then?"

"Why, my beloved Iskander, you will always have your joke against me, will you? Did I not, in your presence, decapitate a Lesghian, who was so enraged with me that, even when his head was rolling on the ground, he bit me so savagely in the foot that I feel it still whenever the weather changes? Come, seriously, did you not see that?"

"God did not grant me that favour."

"Besides, are these Lesghians men? Is it worth while to risk one's head against their bullets? If I kill a Lesghian, it is nothing; whereas, if a Lesghian kills me, Allah will find some difficulty in replacing me. So, when I had killed this one, I thought I had had enough of hand-to-hand fighting, and went off every day to the citadel, where I took a gun under my protection, appointed myself its marker, sighted it, and shouted to the fellow with the lint stock, 'Fire!' and then I saw the group at whom I aimed the piece dance. By Allah! how I enjoyed it. I have never boasted, but I can say it to you who are my friend, that I am certain it was mainly owing to me, seeing how much damage I caused him, that Kasi-Mullah raised the siege; and when you think that I was not rewarded with the smallest cross, not even that of St. George! . . . Ah! don't you hear something?" added the valiant *Beg* pressing close to Iskander.

"What the deuce would you hear here, except the whistling of the wind and the howling of the jackals?"

"Cursed beasts! I will kill their fathers, mothers, and grandfathers. What merry-making are they after now, I ask you?"

"Perhaps they guess that to-morrow evening they will be feasting on our carcases. The one who gets hold of your nose, Joussouf, won't come off badly."

"Come, come, no ill-timed jests, Iskander! Ill jests bring ill deeds. It is just the time for brigands. The devils infest the roads at the approach of night. Suppose we were to meet Mullah-Nour, Iskander!"

"And who is Mullah-Nour?" said Iskander, as if he did not know the man whose name his companion had just pronounced.

"Not so loud, Iskander! not so loud! I entreat you, by Hussein and Ali, or I declare I won't stop with you. This cursed Mullah-Nour has an ear in every tree; just at the moment when you are not thinking of him, down he comes on your head like a thunderbolt."

"And then?"

"How do you mean, and then?"

"What next? I say."

"Why, then you are caught. He likes to laugh and joke, but they are a brigand's jokes, you must understand. If he knows you are rich, he begins by taking all you have in your pockets, without reckoning that he still holds you for ransom. From another, if he be poor, he takes nothing; he will even give him money."

"What! give him money?"

"Yes, there have been instances of that. Honest lads who were in love and who had not twenty-five roubles to buy a wife, well, he has given them the needful sum. From others he will take gold of an equal weight to that of the bullets in his cartridges; from others he will demand as many roubles as he can place on the blade of his dagger. 'What would you have?' he says, 'I am myself a poor merchant, and every trade has its risks, mine especially.'"

"But," replied Iskander laughing, "do those whom he stops carry only pipes instead of guns, or is this Mullah-Nour made of iron?"

"Of iron? Say rather, of steel, dear boy. Bullets flatten against him as they would against granite. Allah is great!"

"After what you have told me, Joussouf, I prefer to think that Mullah-Nour is the Devil in person. He must be the Devil, and not a mere man, to be able to stop whole caravans."

"Ah! it is easy to see, my poor fellow, that you haven't stirred far from home! And who told you that Mullah-Nour had no companions? He is surrounded, on the contrary, by a crowd of lively fellows who think it better to eat bread grown by others than to take the trouble of growing it themselves. Companions! by Allah! he has no lack of them. Even I, for instance, have often thought that, supposing I had no relations, and no inheritance in prospect, brave and adven-

turous as I am . . . But what are you thinking about, Iskander? They say that darkness is the Devil's day, and I begin to believe it, for this night is as black as hell. Answer me, Iskander! What are you thinking about?"

"I am thinking that you are a poor soldier, Hadji Joussouf."

"*I*, a poor soldier? Are you not ashamed to say so? it is annoying that you did not see how I dealt with a troop of brigands near Damascus. I can say without boasting, that, when I had rescued it, the whole caraven of pilgrims was at my feet, and they had good cause. I had killed so many that my gun was red-hot and went off of itself. As for my sword, it had teeth like a comb. I left seven dead on the field of battle, and took two alive."

"What did you do with them?"

"I blew their brains out next day; they were in my way."

"That was a savage act, Joussouf."

"I can't help it; I am made like that."

"And don't you blush to tell me such tales? Your gun had more conscience than yourself; it, at least, blushed."

"Don't you believe me? Then ask Saphar-Kouli, he was there."

"What a pity that Saphar-Kouli died a week ago."

"True. As if he could not have waited, the simpleton! But, to hear you talk, one would think I was a coward. By Allah! put me face to face with a dozen brigands, and you will see how I will handle them. Come now, where are they? show them me at close quarters—only not at night. I don't like fighting at night; I like the sun to see my bravery; and, besides, I am always accustomed to aim with my right eye."

"I can't recover from my astonishment, Joussouf. Twelve brigands, and you settled the lot?"

"That is a mere breakfast for me."

"Let daylight come, then, and may we meet a dozen brigands,—a dozen neither more or less. I promise I will leave them all to you, Joussouf. I will not so much as touch one of them, no! not even with the pommel of my sword."

"My boy, you should never ask to see the Devil, or he will appear at once. Well, as the brigands are devils, and we are here on their territory, better not to call them up, especially as it grows darker and darker. Satan must have carried off the moon. Confound the darkness; it is dragging the road away from our feet. Oh! help! help!"

"What is the matter?"

"A brigand has seized me, Iskander! Will you let me go, you fiend?"

"Let me see him, and I will fire."

"Let you see him! that's easier said than done. I think he must have claws; he is holding on like a vulture. Who are you? what do you want? Come, my friend, let us come to an understanding."

Iskander approached Joussouf.

"I thought as much," said he. "Fear magnifies dangers; your brigand is a thorn-bush, a *dergy-de-revo*.[1] My dear Joussouf, you would have done better to go and fetch water from the fountain on a donkey than come with me to fetch snow from the summit of Chakh-Dagh."

"A thorn-bush? I declare solemnly it was a Lesghian or a Tchetchen, but he saw me put my hand to my dagger, and so he let go."

"He saw you put your hand to your dagger in this darkness, when, as you said yourself, the Devil has carried off the moon?"

"Oh! those rogues are like cats; it is a well-known thing that they can see in the dark. Halloa! my dear Iskander, what do you see in front of us?"

"It is the river. What! can't you scent water, with a nose like yours? See! my horse is cleverer than you!"

"Are you going to cross the river by night?"

"Of course I am."

"Iskander, it is very rash to attempt to do so. You had better wait until to-morrow. It is no joke to cross a river at this hour, and the Karatcha, too!"

Iskander was already in the middle of the stream.

Joussouf preferred following his companion to being left behind, so he plunged into the river, and, after cursing the coldness of the water, shouting that he was being dragged off his feet, invoking Allah and swearing that he was a lost man, he finally reached the opposite bank.

The two companions resumed their journey and passed the Alcha and the Velvète in succession.

At dawn they were on the bank of the river Samour.

The Samour was in flood; you could

(1.) A tree peculiar to the Caucasus, and the most thorny of any. The name means "the tree that holds."

see enormous stones being rolled down by the current, while uprooted trees followed its course, floating on its waves like straws on the surface of a brook.

This time, Iskander yielded to Joussouf's advice and paused.

The riders dismounted to give their horses a rest, and lay down under their *bourkas*, or rugs.

But Joussouf was not the man to go to sleep without recounting some of his feats of prowess.

Iskander listened this time without interrupting or joking him; he felt sleep beginning to steal over his senses.

The one related what had never happened.

The other dreamed of what was going to happen.

At last, seeing that he was carrying on the conversation all alone, Joussouf determined to go to sleep.

Iskander had been asleep for a long while already.

CHAPTER VII

MULLAH-NOUR

IT is pleasant to be awakened by the first ray of the sun, when that ray passes through silken curtains and withdraws the dark covering of night from the face of the girl lying by your side, fresh as a drop of dew on a leaf. But it is more pleasant still, after a short sleep, to open your eye beneath a blue sky, and suddenly find yourself face to face with the smiling features of Nature. The bride is ever more beautiful than the wife; and what is Nature but the everlasting bride of man?

Iskander slowly opened his eyelids still heavy with dreams and admired the lovely picture of the morning. All round him waved the forest, rich with its southern verdure; above his head shone through the clouds the snow-clad Chakh-Dagh. At his feet rolled the noisy Samour, now flashing in cascades, now rolling its waters in long meanderings, like the coils of a serpent caught among the rocks.

On the banks between which the river roared, a nightingale was singing.

Iskander remained for a minute in an ecstasy of delight; but, just as the nightingale resumed its interrupted song, a tremendous snoring from Joussouf recalled him to the prosaic reality.

The nose of the sleeper protruded from his rug a distance of some inches.

Iskander shook Joussouf by the nose and he awoke.

"Halloa! who's there?" asked Joussouf, quickly opening his eyes. "Oh! it's you, confound you!" he exclaimed as he recognised Iskander. "Have you ever seen a nose shaken as a Russian official shakes the bell with which he summons his subordinates? I would have you know, Iskander, that, when Allah has done a man the favour of giving him such a nose as mine, it is with the object of imposing respect and admiration on all. I admire and respect my nose; you must share my feelings in this matter, or we shall fall out."

"My dear Joussouf, forgive me; but when I am in a hurry, I take hold of people by the first part of their person which comes to hand; and the first, I will even say the only, thing belonging to you which I found being your nose, the rest of you being concealed by your rug, I laid hold of that."

"Iskander, my friend, one day we shall quarrel, and that day, I warn you, will be an unlucky day for you. What the deuce were you annoyed at, eh?"

"I was angry with that confounded nightingale which was singing and preventing my hearing your snores. My dear Joussouf, you snore so harmoniously, that the Georgian *djourna* is no better than a penny trumpet compared with the melodies to which you naturally give vent in your sleep."

"That's right, pacify me now; but may you all your life feast only on the scent of roses and have all their thorns in the soles of your boots, if ever . . ."

Iskander interrupted him.

"Don't you hear something, Joussouf?" he asked.

Joussouf listened uneasily.

"No, nothing," he said after an instant, "unless it be the voice of the Mullah of Seyfouri."

"Well, and what does that voice say, Joussouf? 'Awake, ye faithful Mussulmans; prayer is better than slumber.'—We have to travel, Joussouf; let us pray and then get on our way."

Joussouf grumblingly yielded to the invitation. It seemed to him that, in the

discussion, Iskander had somewhat given way to him, and this so rarely happened to him, that he wanted to profit by the frame of mind in which his companion appeared to be.

After performing their ablutions and their prayers, our travellers prepared to ford the river.

The water was not very high; however, it is recognised by those who are acquainted with mountain-streams, and the Samour especially, that the crossing of a river is always more dangerous than a fight. All depends, in these circumstances, upon your horse; if he takes a false step, you are lost.

But familiarity renders all travellers indifferent to these crossings, although every year some one of them remains behind for ever.

The two Begs, thanks to their skill, their familiarity with this kind of adventure, and above all to the excellence of their horses, arrived safe and sound on the further bank of the Samour.

Joussouf who, during the crossing, had remained dumb as a tench, began to grumble once more on reaching the other bank.

"Devil take this confounded river!" said he; "I will throw a pig into it. And when you think that in autumn and winter it is so dry that a frog can cross it and hardly wet its feet."

"Whose house shall we go to at Seyfouri?" said Iskander without listening to the jeremiads of his companion who, now that the danger was past, had forgotten all about it. "I don't know a living soul in the town, and we are bound to get breakfast for our horses and ourselves there."

"I will set fire to the beards of all those scoundrels with a wisp of straw," answered Joussouf. "It is clear that, without an order from the Governor, not one of them will offer us a drop of water or a radish, not if they saw us drop with hunger and thirst."

"The inhabitants of Seyfouri are no better and no worse than those of Derbend; but, after all, we have the Tartars left."

"Well, we shall see. Perhaps with money we shall get something . . . . Look into all the courtyards on your side as you go by, and I will look on mine. Perhaps we shall find someone with a grey beard; the grey beards are better than the red ones. The grey beard is usually a *starosta*, while the red beard is a wealthy man. The red beard has nearly always money and a pretty wife; two good reasons for closing the door against two good-looking fellows like us. By the bye, here is just what I was looking for . . . 'Here my friend,' continued Joussouf, addressing a man with a grey beard, 'can you let us rest for an hour at your house and give us something to eat?'"

"Are you on military duty or not?" asked the man, a tall stern-looking Tartar.

"No, my friend, no."

"Have you an order from the Governor?"

"We have money, nothing else."

"That's enough to get a welcome from me; I often take in noblemen of Khorassan, and, Allah be praised! neither riders nor horses have ever made any complaint against Agraïne."

The doors were opened, and the travellers entered the courtyard, dismounted, unsaddled their horses, and gave them a feed of oats.

Let us remark, in passing, that the inhabitants of Daghestan are remarkably clean, and that their houses are nearly all built of brick whitened with lime, and have an upper story.

Agraïne owned one of these houses. He invited his guests to go up to the first floor.

Joussouf required no persuasion and led the way for Iskander.

At the door of the first floor Agraïne took their weapons from them and placed them against the wall, in token that, now that they were under his roof, it was his duty to provide for the safety of his guests.

This custom is so universal, that our two travellers made no difficulty about complying with it.

Having entered the room, they saw nothing but a pair of women's trousers.

Nothing more annoys an Asiatic, and a Mussulman in general, whoever he be, than any question about his wife.

Hadji Joussouf was dying to question his host about these trousers, but Agraïne possessed one of those countenances which check the banter on the lips of the most inveterate jester.

"Won't you offer us a pinch of stewed rice?" he asked the Tartar.

"The Prophet himself never ate such rice as my wife used to cook," answered Agraïne. "By Allah! all my visitors used to wear out their fingers with licking them, it was so rich."

"What the deuce is he talking about?" asked Iskander of his companion.

"I don't know, but it seems to me that, talking as he does of the past, the rogue intends to regale us for the present on his wife's trousers!"

"Well, why not?" said Iskander. "They are greasy enough." Then, turning to the Tartar:

"Look here, my friend, couldn't we have a plate of soup and a bit of *chislik*? You have given us bread and cheese, certainly; but the bread is very wet and the cheese is very dry."

"Soup? And where am I to get soup from?" answered Agraïne. "And *chislik*, where am I to find that? Khan-Mouelle has eaten every sheep I had. Ah! but my wife, my young and lovely Oumi, used to make *chislik* beautifully!"

And the Tartar rolled his tongue over his lips.

"And where is your young and lovely Oumi?" asked Joussouf.

"Dead and buried," answered the Tartar. "When I buried her, I buried my last fifty roubles: all I have left of her is her trousers, and I weep over them."

And, suiting the action to the word, the Tartar took the trousers and kissed them as he wept.

"A nice souvenir," said Joussouf. "Your young and lovely Oumi was a charming wife no doubt. Give us each a cup of milk, and we will weep along with you."

"Milk? Oh! you should have seen my dear Oumi make it flow from our cows' udders between her fingers, that were whiter than milk. But no more Oumi, no more cows; and no more cows, no more milk! and now . . ."

"Now, you are beginning to bore us, my friend, with your young and lovely Oumi. Fifty kopeks if you bring us each a cup of milk; if not, you can go to the devil!"

And he pushed him out of the room.

"I will sell your mother for two onions, you ugly beast!" continued Joussouf, sitting down near Iskander and trying the cheese with his teeth. "I am nearly dead with hunger, and that rogue would feed us on the trousers of his young and lovely Oumi. There! now he's meddling with our guns and talking to the passers-by. What do you mean by whispering to that lousy Lesghian, like a dancing-girl of Schummak, you miserable knave, instead of bringing us our food! Allah preserve me! I am so famished that I would eat the fish that caused the universal Deluge by passing from the Ganges into the sea. Come, bring us something, quick."

"Anon, anon!" answered the Tartar.

And, in point of fact, he came in a few minutes later, with a cup of milk in each hand.

Our travellers soaked their bread in the milk, while their host resumed his weeping at the point where he had left it, as he looked once more at his wife's trousers.

Having finished their frugal meal, Joussouf threw sixty kopeks on to the trousers of the young and lovely Oumi, and both, mounting their horses, and taking the road to the mountains, had soon left the village of Seyfouri far in the rear.

"Just look behind," said Joussouf, who was always on the look-out, to Iskander. "That same Lesghian to whom the tender-hearted Agraïne was talking is staring after us and looking to see where we are going."

And standing on a small eminence behind the two travellers could be seen the same man who had talked to their Tartar host.

But when the Lesghian in his turn saw that he had become the object of the travellers' attention, he disappeared.

"Well, what then?" asked Iskander.

"I distrust those beggarly Lesghians."

"According to you every shepherd is a brigand."

"Fine sort of honest folk the shepherds in this country! The mountaineers murder travellers and rob their caravans, while the shepherds help the mountaineers, and hide their booty for them. Look at the whole band of Mullah-Nour; what are they? Mountaineers. And who support Mullah-Nour and his band? Why, the shepherds."

"Well, what then? Are not Mullah-Nour and his mountaineers men of flesh and blood like ourselves? Devil take me if you don't make me long to meet with this bandit of yours, if only from curiosity, and to see if his hide is really bullet-proof, as they say it is."

"Come! there we are, going over the

same old ground again. But you are not a dog, or a pagan, to wish such a thing as that. Do you find it so dull then to carry your mind in your body and your head on your shoulders? The Devil pull my nose, if I would not rather meet a lion than this Mullah-Nour . . . Well, what are you stopping for?"

"If you weren't so frightened you wouldn't have lost your road. Just look where you are taking us. The Devil himself couldn't get by here without a lantern."

Iskander's remark was caused by their now finding themselves on a precipitous mountain that formed, so to speak, the first stair of the Chakh-Dagh. The road had become so dangerous that our two travellers were obliged to dismount and cling on to the tails of their horses.

At last they reached a plateau, and then Joussouf, who, in accordance with his custom, had remained dumb while the danger lasted, began, when it was over, to curse and swear.

"May the Devil's tail hack this mountain into mince-meat," said he; "may all the boars of Daghestan defile it; may the earthquake overturn it, and the thunder reduce the whole cursed thing to powder!"

"The fault is your own, and you are blaming the mountain," said Iskander, shrugging his shoulders. "Didn't you tell me, 'I know the mountain as well as I know my mother's pockets; I will guide you through the defiles of the Chakh-Dagh as easily as through the windings of the bazaar. I have played at knuckle-bones on every rock and chuck-farthing in every cavern. Did you say so or did you not?'"

"Certainly I said so. Didn't I climb the very highest peak of the Chakh-Dagh three years ago? But three years ago it was not so steep as it is to-day."

And, as though to give point to his words, at the place which they had now reached, the Chakh-Dagh presented a regular wall, crowned by white battlements; these white battlements were the snow.

The travellers realised the impossibility of scaling the mountain from this side.

They determined to make the attempt from the eastern side, but this was a thing more easily said than done. Wildness and savage loneliness reigned supreme on these steep and difficult slopes; only the eagles disturbed with their cries the sombre, death-like stillness.

Iskander-Beg turned to Joussouf and gave him a look as much as to say, "What now?"

"May a thousand million curses light on the head of this wretched Chakh-Dagh. See how it welcomes visitors, the ill-mannered creature! drawing its *bachlik* over its ears, shutting itself up within its walls and drawing up its ladder after it! Where are we to go now? over the mountain or under it? You, Iskander, may ask advice from whoever you choose; for my part, I shall consult my flask."

And Joussouf drew from his pocket a flask filled with brandy.

"What a hardened sinner you are!" said Iskander to his companion. "Haven't you folly enough of your own, without adding to it what comes of drinking wine?"

"It is not wine: it is brandy."

"Wine or brandy, it's all one."

"No, let us make a distinction; Mahomet forbade wine, but he did not forbid brandy."

"I daresay; it was not invented in Mahomet's time, so he could not forbid what did not exist."

"There's where you're wrong, Iskander. In his capacity of prophet, Mahomet knew very well that brandy would be invented later on, or, if he did not know it, well, he must have been a false prophet."

"Come, Joussouf, no blasphemy!" said Iskander with a frown; "let us rather look for our road."

"There is our road," said Joussouf, tapping his gourd.

He put the gourd to his lips and swallowed five or six mouthfuls of the liquor the orthodoxy of which was in dispute, closing his eyes sanctimoniously.

"Joussouf, Joussouf," said Iskander, "I warn you of one thing, namely, that with such a guide as that you will reach hell sooner than you will reach the sky."

"Why, what did I tell you, Iskander? Before I gave my flask that friendly embrace, I could not see a single path, but now, hurroosh . . . why! I see a dozen."

"Very well, Hadji Joussouf; but it isn't I who will follow your paths. Take the right, or the left, or whichever you choose. I am going to try and climb straight in front. If either of us finds an easy passage, let him return here and call

to his companion or wait for him. I shall take half an hour for my search, and I give you the same. Till we meet again."

Hadji Joussouf, warmed by the five or six mouthfuls of brandy he had swallowed, did not deign even to answer Iskander, but went off bravely to look for his path, while Iskander, taking his horse by the bridle, began to climb straight up, as he had said.

The day drew to its close.

CHAPTER VIII

SHOWS HOW JOUSSOUF ARRIVED SOONER THAN HE QUITE LIKED AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN

JUST above the place where the two travellers parted company, near the border-line of clouds and snows, an enormous rock towered aloft, its flat summit affording a refuge for men and horses.

On this summit sixteen Tartars and a Lesghian were lying round a fire, while as many horses as there were men were eating some grass which had been cut for them with daggers.

At a distance of a few yards, lying on a carpet, was a man of about forty, remarkable for the beauty and the calm expression of his features.

He was dressed with great simplicity, but the mounting of his rifle and the sheath and hilt of his dagger shone with gold and silver, a sign, not of wealth, but characteristic of a life spent in warfare.

He was smoking a *chibouque* and looking tenderly at a youth who was asleep beside him. Occasionally he uttered a heavy sigh and shook his head, throwing an inquiring glance around him.

The man was no other than Mullah-Nour, the scourge of Daghestan; the brigand Mullah-Nour, accompanied by his band of followers.

Suddenly, he perceived Joussouf who, at a thousand feet below, was advancing cautiously among the rocks, still trying to find a path by which to climb the Chakh-Dagh.

For some time Mullah-Nour, leaning on his elbow, followed the traveller with his eyes; at last he smiled, and, stooping down towards the youth, said to him:

"Goulchade, awake."

Goulchade in the Tartar language means a rose.

The young man opened his eyes, and he, too, gave a smile.

"Goulchade," said Mullah-Nour to him," would you like me to bow down to you to the very ground?"

"I should very much," said the young man; "it would be a novel sight for me to see you at my feet."

"Gently, Goulchade, not so fast! Before you take the honey, you must risk being stung by the bees. Look down there."

The youth lowered his eyes in the direction indicated by Mullah-Nour.

"You see that traveller down there?"

"Of course I see him."

"I know his name and his courage. He is as fearless as a tiger, and he is the best shot in Derbend . . . Go and meet him, disarm him and bring him to me. If you do this, I will be your humble servant for the whole evening, and will render homage to you before all our companions. Come, do you consent?"

"Willingly," answered Goulchade.

And the young man sprang upon a strong little mountain horse and dashed off along a narrow path, which more resembled a line drawn by a pencil than a road cut in the rocks.

You could still hear the stones rolling from beneath the feet of the horse, although both it and its rider were lost to view.

All the companions of Mullah-Nour looked downwards, curious to see what was going to happen, but their chief gazed more attentively than any of them.

Possibly he regretted having exposed the youth to this danger; for, when Goulchade arrived within a few yards of Joussouf, the chief's pipe dropped from his hands, and anxiety was depicted on his countenance.

Hadji Joussouf had not the least idea of what was happening, or rather, of what was going to happen. Excited by the draughts of brandy which he had taken, he tried to keep up his courage by talking away at the top of his voice, and thought himself braver than Schinderhannes or Jean Sbogar.

"No," said he, "it is not for nothing that my rifle bears the inscription, '*Be-*

MOULLAH NOUR'S BROWS CONTRACTED DARKLY

ware; my breath is flame.' I will burn the beard of the first bandit who dares cross my path. Besides, I have nothing to fear; my cuirass is bullet-proof. But where are these bandits, these brigands? The cowards are hiding themselves! No doubt they have seen me. By Allah; I hate cowards!"

All of a sudden, on arriving at a bend in the path, as he was just uttering these last words, he heard a peremptory voice shout:

"Halt there! and dismount."

And, raising his head in astonishment, he saw at ten paces from him the barrel of a rifle levelled at his breast.

"Come, dismount, and quick too!" shouted the voice again, in still more peremptory tones than before, "and mind you don't put your hand either to your gun or to your *schaska*. If you attempt to escape, I fire. First, give up your gun!"

"Not only my gun, but my heart, sir bandit," said Joussouf, trembling all over. "I am an honest man, incapable of injuring anybody. Don't kill me, and I will be your servant. I will look after your horse and brush your clothes."

"Your gun! your gun!" said the voice.

"Here it is," said Joussouf, laying it, with a trembling hand upon the rock.

"Now your other weapons; your sword, your dagger, and your pistol."

"There they are," said the unfortunate Joussouf, laying each weapon on the ground as it was named.

"Now, empty your pockets."

Joussouf threw down all the money he had by the side of his weapons, imploring the mercy of the bandit as he executed the orders given to him.

"I will cut your tongue out and throw it to the dogs, if you are not silent," said Goulchade. "Be quiet, or I will silence you for ever."

"Pardon me, sir brigand; I won't say a word, if such is your wish."

"Silence, I tell you!"

"I hear and I obey."

But it was not until Goulchade pointed his pistol at Joussouf, that the latter ceased to talk.

Goulchade tied his hands together, took his weapons from him, and made him march towards the plateau where Mullah-Nour and his companions were awaiting the end of this comedy.

After a climb of a quarter of an hour Joussouf was in the presence of the leader of the brigands.

His companions formed a circle around him, all preserving a menacing silence.

Goulchade laid Joussouf's weapons at the feet of Mullah-Nour.

Thereupon Mullah-Nour bowed thrice to the ground before Goulchade, and, the third time, kissed him on the forehead.

Then, turning to Joussouf, he demanded:

"Do you know who it was disarmed you, Joussouf?"

A shudder ran through Joussouf's whole body at the sound of that voice.

"The bravest of the brave, the strongest of the strong! What could I do against him, before whom the lion would be but a hare, and Goliath a new-born babe?"

The bandits burst into a roar of laughter.

"Look at him whom you call the bravest of the brave, the strongest of the strong," said Mullah-Nour, lifting the white *papak* from the head of Goulchade.

And the long dark hair rolled down over her shoulders, while the girl blushed as red as the flower whose name she bore.

Mullah-Nour opened his arms and she threw herself upon the brigand's breast.

"Joussouf," said Mullah-Nour, "I have the honour to present my wife to you."

A prodigious burst of laughter sounded in the ears of the unhappy prisoner.

He turned purple with shame; however, having rallied his strength, he said:

"Do me a favour, my master; do not sell me into the mountains; I can pay you a good ransom."

Mullah-Nour's brows contracted darkly, like two clouds charged with electricity.

"Do you know to whom you are proposing a ransom?" he cried to Joussouf. "Do you imagine, you miserable creature, that I am a Derbend butcher, that I sell putrid meat for fresh meat? Do you think I shall ask gold for you, when you are not worth an ounce of lead? Why should I sell you into the mountains? You cur without a tail, what are you good for? not even to dig the ground with your nose. You may say you can tell little children tales of ogres and giants, as well as any old nurse; but,

to do that, you would have to be dressed as a woman, and, instead of amusing the poor little innocents, you would frighten them out of their seven senses. Well, Joussouf, you see I know you, and that I pay you no compliments. Now it is your turn to tell me what you think of me. I am Mullah-Nour."

On hearing this terrible name, Hadji Joussouf fell with his face to the ground, as though he had been struck by a thunderbolt.

"By Allah!" he said, "you want me to tell you what I think of you, want me to judge you, I who should be proud to perform my ablutions in the dust of your feet? May Hussein and Ali preserve me from it!"

"Listen, Joussouf," said Mullah-Nour, "and remember this, that I have a dislike to repeating the same order twice. I have asked you once what you think of me; I now ask you for the second time, but remember that it is the last. I am listening."

"What do I think of you? May the Devil crack my head like a nut, if I think anything of you of which you would have cause to complain. I think any harm of you! I, a mere cipher! I, a mere grain of dust!"

"Joussouf," said Mullah-Nour, stamping his foot, "I have told you that I never repeat the same order a third time."

"Don't get angry! don't get angry, great Mullah-Nour! do not consume me with the fire of your wrath. Your wish has changed the thoughts of my brain into pearls, but these pearls are merely bits of glass in comparison with your virtues. You ask me what I think of you, illustrious Mullah-Nour? Well, since you wish it, I will tell you. I think that your mind is a rifle ornamented with gold and silver, loaded with wisdom, that shoots with truth and never misses its aim; I think that your heart is a flagon of essence of roses, which pours upon everybody the perfume of your virtues; I think that your hand scatters blessings as profusely as the husbandman sows his wheat; I think that your tongue is a branch loaded with the flowers of justice and the fruit of kindness. I hear you already saying to me: 'Return home, my good Joussouf, and remember Mullah-Nour all your life.' Well, is that so, great man?"

"There is nothing to be said, you are a great orator, Joussouf. Only, you are a bad prophet, and, to prove that you have lied, here is my sentence. Inasmuch as you, being a *Beg*, allowed yourself to be disarmed, bound, and taken prisoner by a woman . . ."

"Is not Death also a woman," interrupted Joussouf, "and more terrible than the most terrible of men?"

"Let me finish, Joussouf, I will not be long. Inasmuch as the man who has so much fear of death does not deserve to live, you are to die."

Joussouf uttered a groan.

"To-morrow will be the last day of your life, and, if you utter a single word, if you but once complain or murmur," added Mullah-Nour, placing his hand on his dagger, "you shall not even see to-morrow. Come, let him be bound more securely than he is at present, take him to the cavern and leave him there alone. There, he may speak freely and as much as he pleases."

Mullah-Nour gave a signal, and poor Joussouf was hoisted up and carried off like a sack of flour.

"He will die of fright before to-morrow," said Goulchade to her lover. "Don't terrify him so, my love."

"It's all right," replied Mullah-Nour, laughing, "it will be a lesson to him; he shall learn, coward that he is, that one does not get off by showing the white feather. 'The coward dies a thousand deaths, the valiant dies but once.'" Then he observed, turning to his bandits:

"My children, I leave you for an hour or so; should anything happen to me, should I chance not to come back, well, Goulchade will lead you. She has proved this day that she is worthy to be in command of men. Woe then to him who disobeys her. Farewell, Goulchade," he added, pressing the girl to his heart and kissing her forehead, "and I bid you adieu and embrace you, because I am going to an encounter more serious than yours was. For long I have desired to measure my strength with that of Iskander-Beg, and, thanks to my *nouker*, I know where to meet with him. If I do not return before night, follow my track and search for my body in the mountains and try to recover it, so that I may not be devoured by jackals, like a foundered horse. If you hear shouts and reports of guns, let nobody stir. Should

Iskander kill me, let nobody avenge me. The man who kills Mullah-Nour should be regarded by you as sacred, for he must needs be a brave man. I go in pursuit; farewell."

And, throwing his rifle over his shoulder, he started off.

CHAPTER IX

THE PRECIPICE

MEANWHILE, Iskander-Beg had discovered a path which wound round the mountain.

On the right hand yawned a precipice, on the left rose rocks that in some places had been riven by lightning.

It was impossible, however, for the intrepid traveller to turn back; he was obliged to advance, since the path was too narrow for his horse to turn, and forward he went accordingly.

At last he reached an overhanging rock beneath the arch of which he must pass.

Beneath this arch the path suddenly broke off, but a mass of ice, detached from the mountain, formed a fragile and transparent bridge.

Beneath this bridge, at the bottom of the abyss, roared a torrent.

The young man paused; for an instant he turned pale, and the perspiration stood on his brow. But the thought of Kassime restored his coolness.

Moreover his trained eye had recognised the track of a horse upon this bridge. He rode his own horse on to it, urging him forward with knees and voice. If he crossed quickly, the weight would be less.

He heard behind him the broken ice crashing down the precipice.

Presently he breathed more freely on seeing daylight at the further end of the vaulted rock, the light being rendered all the brighter by the reflection of the snow. Suddenly, however, there appeared before him a horseman, as though framed by the vault. By an optical illusion this horseman seemed a giant.

"Halt! and throw down your weapons, or you are a dead man!" shouted the horseman to Iskander. "I am Mullah-Nour."

In his first astonishment at this unexpected encounter, Iskander had checked his horse; but, on hearing the name of Mullah-Nour, one danger made him forget the other.

He urged his horse forward, and, unslinging his gun from his shoulder, shouted:

"You are Mullah-Nour? Well, then, out of my road, Mullah-Nour! You see that there is no room here for two."

"Let God decide then which of us shall pass," said the brigand, pointing his pistol at the breast of Iskander, who was not more than ten yards from him. "You fire first."

"Fire first yourself; I am not hiding, I believe, behind my horse."

They remained thus for some seconds facing one another, each holding his weapon raised and waiting for the other to fire.

Then both lowered the barrel, the one of his rifle, the other of his pistol.

"Come, you are a brave man, Iskander! and I do not deprive a brave man of his weapons," said Mullah-Nour. "Give me your horse, and you may go where you will."

"You must take my weapons first, and then you shall take my horse; but, so long as I have a charge of powder in my gun, and breath in my body, the hand of shame shall not take hold of the bridle of my horse."

Mullah-Nour smiled.

"I don't want either your gun or your horse," said he; "I simply desire that you should do what I wish. It is for no unworthy object that Mullah-Nour has become a leader of brigands, but because he is accustomed to command. Woe then to the man who disobeys his commands. I have often heard speak of you; your courage has been often boasted of to me, and now I see for myself that you are brave, Iskander. But it is not for nothing that I place myself across your path. We shall not separate until we have crossed swords. Here is my last word. Salute me; hold out your hand and say, 'Let us be friends,' and the road is yours."

"Here, then, is my answer," said Iskander, bringing his gun to his shoulder and pulling the trigger. But the gun did not go off; no doubt a drop of water had fallen from the arch and had damped the priming.

Iskander in a rage threw his rifle over his shoulder, drew his pistol and fired.

The bullet flattened itself against the

silver cartridge-box which ornamented Mullah-Nour's *tcherkesse*.

The latter did not stir ; he crossed his arms and replied to Iskander's anger with a mocking laugh.

"Oh! you shan't escape, brigand!" cried he.

And he dashed at Mullah-Nour with uplifted sword.

Mullah-Nour's sabre leapt from its sheath as swiftly as the lightning from the cloud.

Iskander's blade whistled above the brigand's head, and the blow fell like the wrath of God.

Then with a terrible rending sound, the bridge of ice cracked beneath the feet of the combatants. Iskander's horse had reared on its hind legs at the same instant as its master's sword descended on Mullah-Nour's head ; but the blow did not reach the brigand, who had been hurled over the precipice.

Iskander-Beg, thrown backwards, had caught hold of a projection of the rock, to which he clung with redoubled force as he felt his horse slipping from under him. The bridge of ice bent beneath the load, and the horse began to slide down the sharply sloping surface.

The animal with a supreme effort summoned all the strength of its hind legs, and, as though impelled by a spring of steel, cleared the yawning gulf and fell on the other side of the chasm, the sweat pouring down him, and trembling in every limb with terror.

Fortunately, Iskander had disengaged his feet from the stirrups. Had he been weighted with his rider, the horse could not have cleared the abyss.

Behind him and beneath him the bridge of ice broke away with a terrific crash. The chasm shrieked with joy, like a tiger devouring his prey ; then a death-like silence succeeded to the roar.

Iskander remained hanging to the vault.

Beneath him, revealed by the breaking of its covering of ice, was a projecting rock, presenting a surface of two or three square feet. All around was empty space.

Iskander's arms were growing numb, his sinews were shrinking. He felt that he could not hold on much longer ; if he let go his hold, he was lost.

With the calmness of the mountaineer he measured the distance with his eye, stretched his arms to their full length so as to lessen this distance, and let himself fall straight down on to the rock.

On this granite pedestal he remained standing, like a bronze statue of "Will."

He was saved, for the moment at least ; but, to avoid a fit of giddiness, he had to close his eyes for an instant.

Very soon he opened them again to look round him and search for a means of escape.

This excrescence of rock, if we may so term it, extended outwards, slippery, and in some places crumbled away, yet practicable for the foot of the mountaineer.

Clinging with hands and feet, Iskander succeeded in making a half-circle round the immense column.

He found himself then on the outer slope of the ravine. To climb up to the path which he had followed in coming was an impossibility ; as well might he have tried to climb a perpendicular wall.

There was no other resource then left but to descend to the bottom of the precipice, and, having arrived there, to follow the torrent until he found a path that was practicable.

Moreover Iskander-Beg was seized with the idea that he would like to ascertain what had become of Mullah-Nour. Mullah-Nour was a brave man, after all, brigand though he was. Were he only wounded, he must go and help him ; were he dead, he must rescue his body from the teeth of beasts of prey.

For any other than Iskander, or a mountaineer born on the yawning edge of an abyss, the descent would have been impossible ; but Iskander was ready to undertake it.

The road, or rather the path, which he had followed on his horse was interrupted, as we have said, by a deep cleft over which had stretched the bridge of ice which had given way beneath the horses' feet. He gained the angle of this cleft and descended by the aid of its rough edges.

It took him more than an hour to cover a distance of about three hundred yards.

At last he reached the bottom, and then, for the first time, he ventured to look above him.

Mullah-Nour, in falling from a height of about five hundred feet, had crashed through several bridges of ice lying one above another, and had finally been buried in an immense bed of snow, from which the torrent issued as from a glacier.

This snow, though it had not the solidity of the rock or the ice, could however, support a man's weight.

Iskander ventured upon it at the risk of being swallowed up. A light, pale and dull, penetrated the gloomy and cold depths of the crevasse.

So he recognised, by the broken bridges above his head, that he must have reached the place where Mullah-Nour had fallen.

Horse and rider had in their fall hollowed an immense funnel in the snow. Iskander let himself slip down it and felt some resistance beneath his feet.

He had just come upon the horse, whose head was completely broken to pieces.

He looked for the rider and caught sight of a protruding arm. He drew this arm towards him and, using the horse's body as a lever, finally pulled the body out of the bed of snow in which it lay buried.

Mullah-Nour was as white as death; his eyes were closed, and he did not seem to breathe.

However, no limbs were broken, and no serious wound was to be seen. In obedience to the laws of falling bodies, the horse had preceded the man and made a road through for him. The horse had saved the rider.

Iskander succeeded in throwing the body over his shoulder, in getting out of the funnel of snow and regaining the bottom of the valley.

He rubbed Mullah-Nour's face with his coat; beat vigorously in the palms of his hands and threw ice-cold water in his face.

But Mullah-Nour remained unconscious.

"Wait a minute," murmured Iskander, "if you are not dead, I will soon awake you."

He sat down and laid Mullah-Nour's head on his knee, loaded his pistol and fired it off close to his ear.

The report resounded like a peal of thunder.

Mullah-Nour opened his eyes, and made an attempt to place his hand on his *kandjar*.

"Ah! I thought so," murmured Iskander.

Mullah-Nour's hand was unable to accomplish the movement and fell back by his side

His eyes remained open, but with a vacant look; his mouth tried to articulate, but the tongue did not obey.

At last he gave a sigh; thought, returning to his brain, lighted up his eyes with a ray of intelligence.

He fixed his gaze on Iskander and recognised him; then, understanding that he had saved his life, he made an effort and murmured:

"Iskander-Beg!"

"Ah! that's all right! Yes, it is Iskander-Beg, who does not want you to die, do you understand? because you are a brave man; because jackals and foxes are common, but lions are rare."

A tear moistened the brigand's eye-lids and he wrung Iskander's hand.

"Next to God," said he, "it is to you that I owe my life; and to you, as to Him, I owe eternal gratitude. It is not for my own life that I thank you, but for yours which you have risked to save me. Men have insulted me, despised me, betrayed me; I owed my misfortunes to them, I repaid them with hatred. Nature has endowed me with many bad qualities, and men have credited me with more bad qualities than Nature has given me; but neither friends nor foes can accuse Mullah-Nour of ingratitude. Listen, Iskander," added the bandit, getting up; "misfortune pursues everybody, it may one day fall upon you. My heart and my hand are at your service, Iskander, and that heart and hand fear nothing upon earth. I will sell my head and let it be cut off, to save you. However, by my deeds you shall judge me. . . . . Now, let us see what I have broken."

The bandit rose, and, after some efforts, found himself on his feet. He felt first one arm and then the other, then his thighs, and then his legs; took a few steps, in a tottering fashion it is true, but he took them.

"It is my head," said he, "that is still a little shaky, but my body is all right. Come! Allah has preserved me; it seems that I am still necessary to His earthly designs."

"And now," asked Iskander, "which way are we going to get out?"

"You give me something to think about," said Mullah-Nour, "but I am obliged to give that answer which men so dislike giving, namely, I do not know."

"However, we cannot stop and die of hunger here," said Iskander.

"In the first place, before we die of hunger, we will eat my horse, and then yours; for I saw him when I fell, although I couldn't see very much, just ready to follow me."

"No, fortunately," said Iskander with a genuine feeling of delight, "my poor Karabach is safe . . . and hark! by Allah! there he is neighing."

Both turned in the direction from which the sound proceeded, and saw the horse making towards them, following the bed of the torrent.

"Upon my word," said Mullah-Nour, "you were asking how we should get out from here, and here is your horse to give us the answer; it is the deuce if we cannot climb up the way by which he came down."

Iskander went joyfully to meet his horse, while the horse, in his turn, made towards his master as quickly as the difficulty of the ground allowed.

When they reached each other, Iskander took the animal's head in his arms and embraced him as he would have embraced a friend. The horse neighed with pleasure; the man wept with joy.

"There!" said Mullah-Nour, who had watched them with a smile, "now that the greetings are over, if you will ask your horse the way, I think we need not stay here any longer."

Iskander let his Karabach go in front of him as he would have done with a dog, and the horse doubtless understood the service that was expected of his intelligence, for he took the same path again by which he had come.

After going about five hundred yards he stopped, scented the ground, glanced above his head, and without any hesitation began to climb the mountain.

On looking closely you could see a small path, almost imperceptible, worn by wild goats going down to drink at the torrent.

The horse was the first to take it.

"Follow my horse, and hold on by his tail in case, I will not say your head should grow giddy, but in case your legs fail you."

But Mullah-Nour shook his head.

"I am at home," said he, "the mountain is my house; I must do its honours, will you go first?"

Iskander followed his horse. After half an hour of almost impossible climbing they found themselves again in the path which the brigand had followed in order to meet Iskander.

This path naturally led to the platform where Mullah-Nour had left Goulchade and her companions.

The sun had just set. Goulchade and the rest, as the bandit had not returned within the time fixed, were about to proceed in search of him.

Goulchade fell upon her lover's neck and his followers surrounded him.

But Mullah-Nour put Goulchade aside, pushed his followers back, and drew Iskander within the circle of joyful faces. But these instantly grew gloomy at the sight of him.

"Here is my elder brother," said he to his comrades. "You all owe him, from this moment, the three things which you have sworn towards myself—love, respect, and obedience. Wherever he meets one of you, he can command him as I do myself. Whoever renders him a service, however trifling, will be my creditor, and will have the right to demand the price with interest. Whoever shall render him a great service, I will be his debtor unto death; but the man who touches a hair of his head shall not escape my vengeance neither in the depth of the sea, nor in the grave, that I swear to you, and may the Devil pluck out my tongue with his claws if I do not keep my oath. Now, to supper."

A cloth was spread and an indifferent supper served, the anxiety which the absence of their chief had caused the bandits having made them pay little attention to preparing their meal.

Goulchade, according to the custom of Tartar women, did not eat with her lover, but stood timidly by, leaning back against a rock.

Iskander observed her eyes moist with sadness, and requested a place for her on the carpet.

"You are right," said Mullah-Nour; to-day Goulchade is a man and not a woman."

Supper finished, Iskander, moved by the beauty of the summer's night, and touched by the fraternal attentions lavished on him by Mullah-Nour, could not keep back the secret that swelled his breast. He told him of his love for Kassime.

"Oh!" said he, "if I could but take a flight, like a bird, into the future, if only for a month, how I should love to bring Kassime up to this summit and point out

to her all this beautiful sight which I am ashamed and sad to look at by myself. I should have delighted in her admiration of it, and, when she said 'It is magnificent!' I should have pressed her to my heart, saying, 'It is lovely, but you are lovelier! you are better than the whole world! I love you better than the mountain, than the valley, than the torrents! than all Nature put together.' You see, Mullah-Nour, how the earth, softly lighted by the moon, sleeps amid creation's thousand smiles. Well, I think it is even sweeter for a man to sleep beneath the kisses of the girl he loves. You, Mullah-Nour, are happy; you are free as the wind. The eagle lends you his wings to mount above the highest summits. You are an intrepid comrade; that does not surprise me, but I envy you."

Mullah-Nour shook his head sadly as he heard the young man just on the threshold of his life speaking to him thus.

"Each has his own destiny," he replied; "but believe me, Iskander, do not envy mine, and, above all, do not follow my example. There is danger in living with men, but it is sad to live without them. Their friendship is the drug which intoxicates and lulls to sleep; but, believe me, it is hard to live hated by them. It is not my will, Iskander, but my fate, which has outlawed me from their circle. A stream of blood divides us, and it is no longer in my power to cross it. Liberty is a gift of heaven, the most precious of all its gifts, I know; but the outlaw has no liberty, he has but independence. Yes, I am lord of the mountain, and monarch of the plain; but my empire is peopled only with wild beasts. There was a time when I hated and despised mankind; to-day my soul is weary of contempt and hatred. Men fear me, and tremble at my name; the mother uses it to quiet her crying child. But the terror which one inspires is a plaything of which, like all other toys, one soon grows tired. Doubtless it is a pleasure to humble men, to mock at all their boasts, to reveal their baseness in opening the whited sepulchres of their lives. That thrills you with a momentary pride; you feel more criminal and yet less contemptible than others. This feeling delights you for an hour, but saddens you for a month. Men are bad; but, after all, man is the brother of man. Look around us, Iskander; the mountains are spacious, the forests are fresh, the lands of Daghestan are fertile; but the mountain has not a cavern, the forest has not a tree, the plain has not a house where I can rest my head and say to myself, 'There, you may sleep in peace, Mullah-Nour; there, you will not be struck while sleeping by a bullet from the foe; there, you will not be strangled like a wild beast!' Your towns are peopled and often thronged with inhabitants; yet each, whether rich or poor, finds his place there, his roof which protects him from the rain and shelters him from cold. For me, my *bourka* is my only house, my roof, my shelter. The town will not give me so much as a yard of earth in which to lay my bones. Grief is like the Khan's wife; she knows what it is to tread on velvet carpets; but, like the goat, she must also know what it is to jump from rock to rock. Grief is my shadow, and, as you see, my shadow accompanies me even here!"

"You have suffered greatly, Mullah-Nour?" asked Iskander with interest.

"Do not make me recall it, my friend. When you pass the rock in whose entrails I was buried and from which you dragged me out, do not ask whether it was the lightning or the frost that clave a chasm in its granite mass, but pass by quickly; its bridge is fragile and may crumble beneath you. We sow flowers in our gardens, but we do not bury our dead there. No, I would not darken the morning with the storm-clouds of the noon. What has been, has been; nothing, not even the will of Allah, can undo the past. Good-night, Iskander; and God grant that none may dream what I have actually suffered. To-morrow I will show you the shortest way to the summit of the Chakh-Dagh. Good-night!"

And he lay down in his *bourka;* the others had been asleep for more than an hour.

Iskander was long in getting to sleep; for a long while he pondered over the events of the day and the gloomy words of Mullah-Nour.

When at last he did fall asleep, he was disturbed by the most dreadful dreams. At times he thought a bullet was piercing his chest, at times he seemed to be rolling over a fathomless abyss.

Our dreams are the recollection of the pathway we have traversed, the storm and stress and stir of bygone passions.

One sleep alone is dreamless,—the heavy sleep we call Death.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH JOUSSOUF RELATES WHAT HE DID NOT SEE, BUT TAKES GOOD CARE NOT TO TELL WHAT HE DID SEE.

THE sun, as it lit up the mountain top with a rosy glow, awoke Mullah-Nour and his men. Their first business was to say their prayers, then they began to polish up their weapons, groom their horses, and prepare breakfast.

"Your travelling-companion has passed a bad night," said Mullah-Nour to his guest with a laugh.

"What! Joussouf?" asked Iskander.

"Joussouf and no other."

"Then you know where he is?"

"I have a shrewd suspicion."

"I asked you twice yesterday to have him looked for, but you did not answer me."

"Because I knew where to find him."

"And where is he?"

"Not fifty yards from us."

"What do you intend to do with him?"

"Nothing at all; to give him back to you; it is for you to do as you please with him. Here, my men," continued Mullah-Nour, addressing his followers, "take our prisoner something to eat, and tell him that Mullah-Nour does not wish to starve him to death."

Then he told Iskander of how Goulchade had stopped Joussouf, forced him to surrender his arms, and brought him back a prisoner.

Breakfast being over, Mullah-Nour took Iskander's hand and laid it on his heart and then on his head.

"You are at home here," said he, "I shall always be delighted to see you, I shall always love you with gratitude. Now, I have shown you the road by which to climb the Chakh-Dagh and the road by which to descend; hasten then to be of service to your compatriots. For myself, I am going in the opposite direction and on another errand . . . Farewell! never forget Mullah-Nour; if you are in need of a friend, summon him and he will be at your side as swiftly as the avalanche descends the mountain side."

And the chief and his whole band flew off like a flock of wild pigeons.

Thereupon Iskander descended to the cavern.

Joussouf was lying with his hands bound and his eyes bandaged.

The young *Beg* could not resist the desire to test for himself his companion's courage.

"Rise and prepare to die," he cried in stern tones, disguising his voice.

Joussouf trembled in every limb; but, thanks to a supreme effort, he succeeded in rising to his knees.

He was deadly pale; his nose seemed to have lost that solid foundation by aid of which, at ordinary times, it formed an acute angle with his mouth and an obtuse angle with his chin, and now hung limply over his lips. He raised his hands to heaven, imploring pardon in a moaning voice.

"Angel Azrael," he cried, "have mercy on my head, it is not ripe for death. Where and how have I offended thee?"

"It is not my will, it is the will of Mullah-Nour, who says; 'Joussouf has fought like a tiger; now that Joussouf knows my hiding-place there is no more safety for me in the mountain. Besides, the blood of my comrades, shed by him at the siege of Derbend, cries for vengeance and must obtain it.'"

"I!" cried Joussouf, "I fought at the assault of Derbend! Who is the abominable slanderer who said that? Shame on the grave of his fathers and grandfathers to the tenth generation! No, no! I am not the man to fight against my compatriots, not I. When the trumpet or the drum summoned us to the walls, I went down at once to the bazaar, and, when it was my turn to march, I took refuge in the mosque and slept there honestly and with a good conscience to the glory of the Prophet. True, one day I let my gun off three times; but it was clearly proven that the enemy were three miles off. As for my sabre, try and draw it yourself, and, if you can get the blade out of the sheath, I consent to your cutting my head off with it. Even in my father's time it could not be drawn out. Why then should I have fought against Kasi-Mullah, against a brave man, a holy man, a prophet? Had he not cut

off the heads of those who smoked and drank, I should certainly to-day be one of his most devoted adherents."

"Granted; but there is a question of religion in Mullah-Nour's vengeance against you; he knows you are a partisan of Ali, and he has sworn to kill all who believe in Ali."

"I, a partisan of Ali? Why, I would pluck the beards from this Ali and his twelve caliphs! Had I lived in Egypt in the days of the Fatimites, I should not have been content until I had dethroned them. I am a Sunnite, do you hear? a Sunnite, heart and soul. What is Ali? mere dust,—I blow and it is gone; a grain of sand,—I walk on it and crush it."

"But, you see, in addition to all this, there is what Mullah-Nour will never forgive you, your friendship for Iskander, his mortal foe."

"My friendship?" cried Joussouf.

"Is it not a proof of friendship that you have accompanied him to the Chakh-Dagh?"

"Friendship, perhaps; but I did it chiefly for my own pleasure."

"Well, things have turned out even worse for him than for you, and his head has fallen before yours."

"His head has fallen?" repeated Joussouf. "Well, that is no great loss; his head was not worth much. Instead of bearing a grudge against me, Mullah-Nour ought to thank me for having led Iskander and delivered him up to him, bound hand and foot. Iskander a friend of mine? A precious friend indeed! had he been alive, I would have given him for a gingerbread! Iskander my friend! one of the greatest rakes in Derbend, a man who eats ham with Russian officers; Iskander my friend! Why! I would burn his mother's beard."

"Leave the dead in peace, you scoundrel! If fear had not turned your head, you would remember that his mother could not have a beard."

"Not have a beard? I tell you that she used to shave. By Allah! how many of my razors has she not notched! I, a friend of Iskander? How should I be so stupid as to be the friend of a man whose father was a brigand, whose mother was a lunatic, and whose uncle was a cobbler?"

"I am tired of hearing you perjure yourself and lie, you renegade! you cur! Down with your head, the sabre is uplifted."

Iskander made the sword whistle round Joussouf's head, but, instead of striking it with the edge, he, with his usual skill, removed with the point the handkerchief which covered his eyes.

Joussouf looked in terror at his pretended executioner, and recognised Iskander.

He uttered a cry and stood thunderstruck.

"Well; what are you staring at me for, you wild-boar crammed with folly? Come, repeat that my father was a brigand, my mother a lunatic, and that my uncle cobbled shoes."

Joussouf, instead of apologising or appearing confused, burst out laughing and threw himself on Iskander's neck.

"Ah! at last I have succeeded in making you angry! it was rather cleverly done. It has taken me a long time, but I have done it at last. You spread nets to take a nightingale, and you catch a crow! But do you think I did not recognise your voice the moment you spoke? the voice of my best friend! Why, I should recognise it amid the howls of jackals, the mewing of cats and the barking of dogs."

"All right. Then you recognise me?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"No, you were making game of me."

"Only for a bit of fun, you understand; for nothing else."

"But how came you to give yourself up to Mullah-Nour's wife? Why did you let her disarm you?"

"Don't you remember seeing at the house of the Governor of Derbend a picture representing a very beautiful woman unlacing the cuirass of a *Beg* called Mars? Beneath it there was in Russian: "Mars disarmed by Venus." That is how I allowed myself to be disarmed, my dear friend. But, to such a handsome creature I would have given everything, Iskander, from my *bourka* to my heart. I should like to see what you would have done, you rogue, if you had met her face to face. Such a nose! such eyes! and a mouth no bigger than a pearl! And her figure too! you must have remarked her figure, a connoisseur like yourself! I wanted to steal her belt to make myself a ring."

"Then it is for love that you let your-

self be throttled by her and followed her at the end of a rope."

"I would have followed her at the end of a hair."

"No doubt; but one thing I am quite sure of, that you will not relate your love affairs with Goulchade at Derbend, and particularly when I am present."

"Goulchade! is that her name? how charming! But you make me chatter on so that I have not had time to ask you how you came to be here."

Iskander told him in a few words what had passed between himself and Mullah-Nour. When he came to the brigand's fall over the precipice, Joussouf interrupted him.

"But in that case he is dead?" said he.

"No."

"How is that?"

Iskander told him how he had rescued Mullah-Nour and brought him back to his men.

"Then this dear Mullah-Nour is there?" asked Joussouf.

"No, he has gone away."

"What for?"

"On an expedition."

"You are quite sure?"

"I saw the dust raised by his last horseman disappear."

"And he fell five hundred feet, you say and did not break his neck, nor his arms and legs, into a thousand pieces? I will spit into that brigand's gun some day. Ah! if he had come himself to seize me, instead of sending his wife, I would have taught him how the word 'brave' is spelt; but he did not venture, the coward!"

"Come, braggart, will you be quiet? Why, if you had encountered Mullah-Nour in person, there would have been an end of all your lies and boasts, for you would have died of fright."

"Of fright! I? Learn, my dear Iskander, that there is but one man in the world who can frighten me, and that is the man whom I see in my looking-glass."

This time, Iskander could not contain himself. For a Tartar, the boast was so tremendous that he exploded with laughter.

"Enough on that subject," said he. "I thought I knew you pretty well, but you have shown me that I had still something to learn about you. To horse and away, brave Joussouf."

"You know the road?"

"Yes, Mullah-Nour has pointed it out to me."

"Well, then, go on in front and I will follow you, and woe to him who attacks us in the rear!"

Iskander took the path which the bandit had pointed out to him.

Looking at it from below you would not have thought human beings could venture by such a road.

Having reached the region of snow, Iskander gave Joussouf his horse to hold, and began to scale the highest peak, his pitcher in his hand.

For the first time this virgin snow had been pressed by the foot of man.

Iskander prostrated himself on the topmost peak where, before himself, none but angels had ever prayed.

When he raised his head and looked around him, he had a glorious view of the earth below.

Before him was unrolled the entire mountain chain extending from the Caspian Sea to Avaria; his eye dived to the depths of the valleys, where he saw the rivers thin and shining like threads of silk.

All was calm and silent. Iskander was too far off to distinguish either men or animals; too high to hear any sound.

He would have remained longer to admire the splendid spectacle, had not the atmosphere, completely freed at this height from all terrestrial vapour, been too rare to be breathed by human lungs.

All the young *Beg's* arteries began to beat as though his blood, not sufficiently compressed by the atmosphere, were ready to burst through the pores of his skin. He thought therefore that it was time to fulfil his commission, and, in full belief that all was possible to that God from whom nothing here seemed to part him, he made a ball of snow, put it in his pitcher and began the descent, holding the vessel high above his head in order to carry out the injunction that the snowball should not be soiled by contact with the ground.

The descent presented as much difficulty as the ascent had done; but a higher power had seemed to watch over Iskander throughout his whole expedition. After about an hour's absence he found himself again with Joussouf.

The latter questioned him, but Iskander shook his head.

Joussouf tried to joke, but Iskander

raised his finger solemnly towards the sky.

He had come down again to earth filled with the sublime influence of the high peaks.

"Why, you seem to have eaten some sun up there," said Joussouf, "and to be terrified to speak, for fear you should let a little bit escape."

But Joussouf talked in vain, he did not succeed in drawing a word from Iskander.

So he, in his turn, finally subsided into silence.

The travellers, spite of making all the haste they could, did not reach Derbend till the night was far advanced, and the gates had already been closed for a long while.

Iskander's heart was beating violently; fear, doubt, hope contended at each pulsation. He hung the pitcher to the branch of a tree, looked sadly, now at the dark wall which separated him from that which he loved best in the world, then at the sky, which seemed to be growing dark. He seemed to be inquiring from all Nature: "Must I fear the worst, or hope the best?"

Soon he saw with joy that the clouds were gathering in the sky and sweeping across the bright face of the moon.

In his delight he seized the arm of Joussouf, who was dropping off to sleep, and said to him:

"Look, Joussouf, look at those clouds racing over the sky faster than a flock of sheep."

"A flock of sheep!" murmured Joussouf. "Buy the tenderest and take the ramrod of my gun to pound it into *chislik*. I am simply dying of hunger."

"That's just like the animal," said Iskander, "thinking of nothing but his stomach, as usual. The sheep I speak of are clouds, Joussouf; it is going to rain, my friend."

"Ah!" murmured Joussouf, "if it would only rain larks, wouldn't I put myself under the spout with my mouth wide open!"

"Sleep, then, you brute! since there is a proverb that says, 'Who sleeps, dines.'"

"Good night, Iskander!" said Joussouf with a yawn.

And he fell asleep beneath his *bourka*. As for Iskander, he did not close his eyes through the night, and never ceased looking at the sky, which grew more and more black.

At daybreak the gates of Derbend were opened, and after a few minutes the news spread through the whole town that Iskander had arrived with the snow from the Chakh-Dagh.

All the inhabitants flocked together; the mosque and the courtyard were thronged with people eager to see the water from the Chakh-Dagh carried to the sea.

After a short prayer, the Mullahs, accompanied by the people, took their way to the harbour.

Iskander carried somewhat bashfully the pitcher containing the melted snow; but Joussouf, the centre of an immense crowd, was noisily relating the incidents of their journey. In Joussouf's narrative, however, Iskander disappeared from view; as for himself, he had mounted so near the sky that he had heard the Seven Sleepers snore and the Houris speaking. He had suffered terribly from cold; but, fortunately, had warmed himself by fights with two bears and a serpent of incredible size. He had wanted to carry back the skin of this serpent and had stripped it off for this purpose; but his horse had been so terrified at it that he had been obliged to leave it on the road. However, he knew exactly the spot where he had left it, and would send the *muezzin* next day to fetch it.

But, interesting as were the stories of Joussouf, he had not a single listener at the moment when Iskander prepared to throw the water from his pitcher into the sea.

All the morning, the wind had been increasing in force; wind, however, was not rain, and not a drop of water had fallen.

When Iskander, after the Mullah had offered a long prayer, was ready to empty his pitcher into the Caspian, he turned to Festahli, who was standing in the first rank of the spectators.

"Remember your promise," said he.

"Remember our conditions," replied Festahli; "your fate does not lie in the snow, but in the rain. You are dear to me, if you are dear to Allah.

Iskander raised the pitcher above his head, and, in the sight of all, poured into the sea the water from the snow of the Chakh-Dagh.

At once, as though by a miracle, a mighty tempest arose; clouds loaded with rain covered the sky; far away the thunder growled; the leaves, tossed violently by

the wind, shook off the dust that covered them. The Tartar girls looked joyfully through their veils, which the wind was almost tearing from their heads. All hands were extended to feel the first drops of the rain so eagerly awaited ; presently, a flash of lightning rent the vault of clouds collected over Derbend, and it seemed that all the fountains of the sky opened together as though for a new Deluge.

Torrents of rain poured forth from the clouds and flooded the land of Daghestan.

This time, nobody thought of taking shelter, or even of opening an umbrella.

They were not joyful ; they were delirious with delight.

Papaks were thrown up into the air and fell into the water ; prayers and shouts of joy ascended together to the sky. People embraced and congratulated one another, pointing to the rain which descended like a gigantic cascade, or rather like a hundred cascades, from the Tartar quarter to the Russian quarter of the town, and rushed from the citadel to the sea.

Iskander himself was more delighted than all the inhabitants of Derbend put together.

For him a wife was falling from heaven with the rain !

CHAPTER XI

A BRACE OF SAINTS

WHAT is youth without love, and what is love without youth ?

The flame burns easily in the pure air, and what air is purer than that of the spring-time ?

It is true that the walls of Mussulman courtyards are high, that the locks of their gates are stout ; but the wind passes over walls and through locks.

The hearts of beautiful maidens are well protected ; they are locked by a thousand prejudices. But love is like the wind ; it soon finds out a way to gain an entrance by.

Kassime was already in love, without having the courage to admit it to herself. Iskander-Beg filled her thoughts by day and her dreams by night ; as she embroidered with gold lace the pistol-case of her as yet unknown lover, which every young Tartar girl does beforehand, Kassime would say to herself :

" Oh ! if it could but be for Iskander ! "

Picture, then, her delight when her uncle came to make her the official announcement that she was the promised bride of this handsome young man.

She blushed redder than a cherry, and her heart began to beat like that of a dove set at liberty.

Thus her most cherished and secret longings were fulfilled.

From this moment her unnamed hopes were translated into Iskander ; from this moment she could receive with pride the congratulations of her friends, and, in her conversations with them, speak in her turn of her future husband.

As for Iskander, he hardly felt the ground beneath his feet, and, by way of consoling himself for not seeing his *fiancée*, he thought of her morning and night.

" She will do her work sitting on this carpet ; she will drink out of this cup ; she will refresh her pink cheeks with water from this silver ewer, and sleep beneath this satin quilt."

It is the custom for preachers and mullahs from Persia to pay frequent visits to those districts of the Caucasus which adhere to the religion of Ali, for the purpose of explaining the Koran and relating the miracles performed by their priests. These visits usually occur in the month of May.

Beginning from the first day of this month, the Shyites commemorate the death of Hussein, Ali's son, who, after his father's death, rose against Yezid, son of Moaviah, with the object of wresting the caliphate from him, but, being defeated by Yezid's general, Obeid-Allah, was slain in the fight. The Shyites celebrate the anniversary of this event with great splendour. The festival takes place at night by the light of immense numbers of torches ; and, on this particular occasion, Mullah-Sedek, having come to Derbend from Tebbes,* to preside over the festival, had remained there during the whole month of May.

Mullah-Sedek was a man of forty-five, who affected a supreme gravity of deportment, and, with that object in view,

* Thapsus.

walked as slowly as a man of seventy; in a word, sanctity and oil of roses breathed their fragrance for twenty yards all round him.

Sedek, however, while fixing his eyes on heaven, never forgot the things of earth. His friends were few; but, if anyone came to him with money in his hand, that man was welcome. At Derbend he had gathered a rich harvest of presents, but he wished to take away from Derbend something more than money and jewels. He thought of getting married, and, after obtaining information concerning the largest heiresses in the town, had made overtures to Hadji Festahli in respect of his niece, whose dowry he had ascertained to be ample.

He had begun by praising up Hadji Festahli, and, self-esteem being the weak spot in Kassime's uncle, Sedek had by this means soon become his most intimate friend.

"Ah!" said he to Hadji Festahli, "the end of the world cannot be very long delayed now. The Fish, on whose back the universe is built, is weary of bearing not only the weight of human beings, but the heavy burden of their sins as well. The Mussulmans are being corrupted; they are worshippers of money; they wear decorations in their button-holes; their swords are adorned with ribands of many colours. I really do not know what would have become of Derbend when menaced by the Lord, had you not been there to counterbalance with your virtues the crimes of its inhabitants. You are a pure man, a worthy man and a holy, a true Shyite; you are not in league either with Armenians or Russians. The only thing that I will not and cannot believe is, that you are marrying your niece to that wretched Iskander, who is as poor as a Dervish. When I heard it mentioned, I said to myself, 'It is impossible! A man like Hadji Festahli will not throw the Prophet's pearl into the mud; he will not give his brother's daughter to the first comer. No, it is a lie or a joke, I feel sure.'"

"It is the truth, for all that," said Festahli, somewhat confused.

And he told Sedek the whole story, and how, in consequence of Iskander having fulfilled the conditions, he had been forced to consent to the marriage.

"Though, to tell the truth," he added, "there are no young suitors with any large fortunes in Derbend; the rich men, as bad luck would have it, are all old."

Mullah-Sedek pulled his beard and said:

"Everything comes from Allah and will return to Allah! Are there no true worshippers of Hussein in Persia? The sun rises and sets twice a day in the empire of the great King, and it is there that you should choose a husband for your niece. Oh! holy prophet, if you wish to marry the moon to one of the brightest stars in the firmament, I will send to you my cousin Mir-Heroulah-Tebris. He is intelligent and handsome. He is so wealthy that he cannot keep count of his pearls and diamonds and, withal, as timid and blushing as a girl. When he passes through the bazaar, everyone salutes him, and there is a rush to supply him with fruit and cakes and grapes. There is no fear of any visitor going to see him without taking a present. Should your niece ever become his wife, you may be certain that she will have the first place at the baths of Tebbes."

This proposal was calculated to cause Festahli all the more pleasure since it would drive Iskander, whom he could not endure, to the depths of despair.

He had scruples however with regard to breaking a solemn promise in this way.

Accordingly he replied to Sedek that such a scheme, if realised, would make him the proudest and happiest man alive, but that he feared one thing, namely, that Kassime's mother would not approve. There was the further consideration that the Governor of Derbend would very likely refuse to allow a girl who was an inhabitant of this town, and consequently a Russian subject, to marry a Persian. And, lastly, what would the people of Derbend say to it?

The question of "What will people say?" has some weight in Paris or in St. Petersburg; but in the East and on the shores of the Caspian Sea it acts, so to speak, as the second conscience of the man who has neglected the first.

"What will they say?" replied Sedek in a jeering tone, "why, they will say that you are a man of sense! It is excusable to make mistakes, but it is praiseworthy to repair them, and, to speak frankly, what has this Iskander done that is so remarkable? Do you think it was really his snow that brought down the rain? Leave it to me, and I will tell you how to work

the business. Meanwhile, give out that your sister is dangerously ill, and that, being in dread of death, she has vowed to marry her daughter to none but a descendant of the Prophet, to an Imaun. Your sister never leaves her room, and even then she is as dumb as a fish; don't listen to her advice. Have you not read in the sacred books how Job beat his wife because she advised him to make friends with Satan? Besides, Kassime's mother is not your wife. She is only a sister after all. Spit, then, on her wishes."

"And the Governor?" said Festahli with a sigh.

"What can the Governor do? and besides, can't we deceive him? What is to prevent you from getting a passport to go to Persia and see your relations?"

Festahli consented, or rather, he had already consented, a long time ago.

Next day the *kalmi*, or basket of wedding gifts, which Iskander had already given to his promised bride was returned to him.

The young man, not being able to tear out his hair, almost tore off his ears. For a long time he could not believe that this insult had been offered to him; yet the bag, with the money it contained, was there before his eyes. The old aunt could not understand it, and pitied him with all her heart.

Iskander was overwhelmed.

He reviewed in his mind every possible method of avenging himself on Festahli without infringing the Russian laws.

Ah! had there but been a Khan at Derbend instead of a Russian Colonel! A stroke of the dagger, and the thing would be done, and Kassime his.

But he must not think of that method, expeditious as it was.

Iskander grew pensive, and silent as the grave.

He did not even notice Hadji Joussouf, who had been standing close to him for some time.

Apart from his tendency to tell lies and to play the coward, Hadji Joussouf was in reality an excellent sort of man. He was genuinely affected by his friend's sorrow, and would have wept, had he known how to do so.

He touched Iskander softly and asked him in a timid voice:

"What is the matter, my dear Iskander?"

"And you," asked Iskander with a frown, "what do you want with me?"

"I came to tell you that three ships laden with wheat have arrived and that the people are delighted. It is good news, Iskander."

"Had you come to tell me that three ships laden with poison had arrived, it would be better news still."

"Oh! the weather is stormy, it would appear. Come, tell me what annoys you."

"Tell you, do you say? You haven't yet heard, then? All Derbend doesn't know about it, I suppose?"

"Is it true that Kassime's mother declines you as a son-in-law?"

"Her mother?"

Iskander laughed in a way that made Joussouf shudder.

"Her mother?" said he. "No, it's that wretched Festahli; but I will kill him!"

"It is easy to see that you have never lived on mountain fare, my poor Iskander. It is not very difficult to kill a man and then run away; only, it involves abandoning all return to your native town till the end of your life. If I have any advice to give, it is that you should give him a good sound thrashing; after which you can withdraw quietly to Baku. If you are absolutely bent on having a wife, well, you can get married there for three months; it will cost you twenty-five roubles. That kind of marriage is a noble invention, especially for travellers. I have tried it myself; I got married one day for six weeks only, but I had not the patience to finish my time, and ran away at the end of a month. Whenever I went to sleep, I was afraid that my wife would bite my nose off, she was so snappish and ill-tempered. Try it, and I wager that, when you come back, you will bring me a present in token of gratitude."

Iskander remained thoughtful and silent.

"My dear soul, my beautiful lily, my proud palm-tree, my Iskander, don't you hear me? are your ears full of water? A bride! upon my word, a bride is a fine thing! Take a fistful of roubles, and go into the Square of Derbend crying:

"'Wanted, a bride!' and they will come flocking to you like hens."

But Iskander still remained silent.

"Why, what have you got to be so gloomy about, Iskander? Confound it! your Kassime is not a star. In the first place, she has one eye larger than the

other, and she is so dark that she will simply ruin you in Spanish white. I may even add that she is a trifle humpbacked. Don't deny it, I know her, I have seen her."

This time Iskander did hear, and seized Joussouf by the throat.

"You have seen her? Where? when? how? In what place did you dare let your basilisk's eyes rest on her? Answer me, wretch!"

"How can I answer you, when you are strangling me? Let me go, in Allah's name! Don't you see I was only joking? You know quite well that I keep my eyes in my pockets, and that my pockets have no holes, thank heaven! Where could I have seen her? And if I could have seen her, why should I have looked at her? Don't I know that she is engaged to my greatest friend? Don't you ever get married, Iskander; you are a deal too jealous—for a man who is on good terms with the Russians. You will have to keep awake every night, and in the day as well, to look after those who will come to your house. I don't know how these Russians manage it, but they have hardly been in the town two days before they are on friendly terms with all our pretty women. You know Mullah-Kasim; he is jealous enough, heaven knows; well, he bought a charming wife, and, having paid a pretty high price for her, he hoped he had bought her for himself alone. His wife had but one friend in the world; it is hardly possible to have fewer. This friend used to come to Mullah-Kasim's three times a week, and he himself used to admit her to his wife and guard the door, fearing lest the two women should come out on the balcony and look down into the street. Do you know who this friend was? A young Russian ensign who had not yet grown a beard."

Iskander seized Joussouf's arm, but without anger this time.

"In women's clothes?" said he. "Yes, no doubt that might be possible. Thank you, Joussouf, for your story, it has amused me greatly."

"All the better. Well, now that you are in a better temper, I will leave you. I have a heap of things to do. To-night I take the part of the French ambassador at the Court of Yezid, and I must try on my tights. I am afraid I shan't be able to get into them. May the Devil make himself a waistcoat from the skin of a Russian, for having invented these infernal tight trousers! Now, if I meet a cock, he may make up his mind that I shall pull out his tail to make myself a plume. You will see how majestic I shall look, Iskander, when I appear on the scene. All the soldiers will greet me with: 'We hope your Excellency is very well.' Good-bye! I have no time to lose if I don't want to miss my cue."

And Joussouf went off, throwing back the sleeves of his *tchouka* over his shoulders so as to run quicker. Iskander remained alone, full of thought, but smiling amid his reverie. The story related by Joussouf, though accompanied by so much worthless chatter, had put an idea into his head, namely, to take advantage of the festival about to be celebrated—a kind of Mussulman carnival—to disguise himself as a woman and so get near Kassime.

Let us say at once that nothing lends itself better to this disguise than the Tartar costume, with its flowing trousers, its *arkalouk* and immense veil.

Since he had taken this determination Iskander had ceased to be so despondent.

"Oh! I shall see her," said he, "and she shall be mine! Then you will know what it is, Festahli, to arouse a tiger. Kassime, Kassime, expect Iskander, though the road that leads him to you were paved with sword blades."

And that very instant Iskander left the house and went to the bazaar to buy a complete female costume under pretext of making a present to his *fiancée*. On returning home, he sent off his groom to the meadows with the horses, not feeling certain that he could rely on his discretion; when he had gone, Iskander completely shaved off his beard, which, however, had only just begun to grow, dyed his eyelids and painted his eyebrows, rouged his face, and put on the trousers, *arkalouk* and veil; then he practised walking, in this new costume, after the style of the Tartar women, but retaining his *bechemette* so as to get back into male attire in case he might require to attack others or to defend himself.

He awaited the night with impatience; but the day, just like a rich uncle, could not make up its mind to die.

At last, the drum sounded to prayer and the theatre was lighted up.

Then Iskander put on his cheeks the two little golden plates that are always in-

dispensable; passed his dagger through his belt on one side and his pistol on the other; wrapped himself from head to foot in an immense white veil, and started out, holding a small lantern in his hand.

After a quarter of an hour Kassime came out with two of her friends; all three were going to see the religious drama which was being presented at Derbend in honour of the death of Hussein, and which bore a considerable resemblance to the Mystery Plays represented by the confraternity of the Passion in France during the Middle Ages.

The public spaces and the streets were thronged with people on foot and on horseback, for spectacles in the East possess this remarkable feature, that, however crowded the spectators are, there is always at least one-third of them on horseback. This third circulates backwards and forwards without taking the least notice of the feet that they crush or of the shoulders that they jostle. It is the business of the pedestrians to get out of the way and to keep clear of them. The only warning they get is the occasional outcry of the Tcherkesse word *Kabarda! Kabarda!* corresponding to our "Clear the way!"

The roofs of the houses, the only places to which the riders cannot climb, were filled with women wrapped in long veils of every colour.

The play had not yet begun. On the stage prepared for the representation of *Yezid*—that was the name of the tragedy—Mullah-Sedek, standing between two other Mussulmans, was reading the prologue, stopping short at each pathetic passage to cry to the audience: "Weep, then; why don't you weep?" and the people responded to this exhortation with groans and lamentations.

With mad eagerness Iskander, who had followed Kassime, climbed close after her up the small staircase of the house which led them to the roof, where a number of Mussulman women were already seated beneath the light of several torches.

The women exchanged embraces as they met and recognised one another, laughing and talking amongst themselves with endless chatter.

All were richly dressed, adorned with necklaces of gold and silver, and each showed the other, in a manner suggestive of rivalry rather than friendship, whatever article of attire she happened to be wearing for the first time.

He who has not made acquaintance with the women of Asia, knows not and never will know the half about an Asiatic, though he were to live with him a hundred years. In presence of foreigners the Mussulman women wear a perpetual mask, while, outside the harem, the Oriental never shows his own brother either the bottom of his heart or of his purse. Every nation has one passion which dominates all others, that, namely, of vaunting its own peculiar customs; and more than any other nation the Mussulmans are infected with this trait. If you are to believe Mussulmans on their word, you must regard them all as saints. To hear them talk, husbands and wives, in the execution of their duties, walk between the lines of the Koran and never deviate either to the right or the left. Only in the privacy of his home does the Mussulman show himself as he is; the reason being that he has to render no account of his conduct either to his wife or to his children. The wife, on the contrary, is quite unrestrained in the absence of her husband. Scarcely has she seen the heels of his slippers than she becomes quite a different creature. Silent and submissive in his presence, she becomes talkative, proud, immodest even, in the company of her female companions, with whom she is always truthful, since jealousy does not exist in the East between women, except in respect to the richness of their costumes and the value of their jewels.

Hence this double life, quite foreign to that of Europe, and to which the present work will at any rate serve as one of the first to draw attention—a life even more inaccessible to men than to women, inasmuch as the man unbosoms himself continually to his wife; the wife to the husband, never.

Suppose now, that in some way—it is not for me to say how—but suppose that in some way you are here with a Mussulman woman; suppose you have penetrated to the bath and heard her chatter with a female friend; that you have entered the harem and seen her romping—it is the only word that presents itself to my pen, the Greek language was richer than our own—romping, I say, with her companions; it is clear that you will have learnt more by yourself than a Mussulman will ever tell you, more even than he knows himself.

Judge then of Iskander's astonishment when he found himself in the midst of

these ladies' unreserved remarks; lost in a crowd of pretty and talkative young women; he who had never spoken to a woman, unless she had passed her sixtieth birthday! He devoured them with his eyes; he was eager to hear everything they said.

"Ah! my dear, how prettily your hair is dressed! My miser of a husband has been to Snizily and brought me back a pair of trousers embroidered with gold. I ought not to call him a miser, for he is not that to me; he refuses me nothing I ask him for. It is true he is exacting, and that I have to comply with his wishes, summer or winter, without troubling myself about any difference of times or temperatures."

"Do you know, Fatime," said another, "that my old baboon of a husband has taken a second wife at Baku? When I began to cry out and to complain, just guess what answer he made me? 'Can I exist without stewed rice?' Oh! I'll have my revenge! The old wretch takes a second wife, and then he is not in a condition to spend the Saturday in my company. No, my dear, no! It's incredible, is it not? but it is the fact. By-the-bye, do you know that they have got an Imperial edict now in Russia ordering women to wear trousers? I have seen the Derbend ladies myself with white ones all embroidered with festoons of open-work. It was quite time! it was disgraceful to see them when the wind was blowing."

"Oh! what lovely soap that was you gave me, my dear Cheker," said a third, "I am so much obliged to you! Fancy, after I had rubbed myself with it, my skin became just like satin."

"Well, yes, she is dead," said a fourth, "he killed her, worse luck for her. If she wanted to be intimate with another man, she should have known how to conceal her movements. But, directly her husband's back was turned, she went off to keep an appointment, and with a lantern too! My word, he killed her on the spot!"

"Ah! my dear," said a fifth, "my children are such an annoyance to me! I never saw children grow up so fast! To look at them, you would think I must be an old woman, and then they get headaches. It is very strange, for I have never had the least thing the matter with me. They must get that from their father."

"Ah! if your little ones have headaches, my big children have heart-aches. My Megely worries me dreadfully. He won't give me a moment's peace, until I buy him a wife."

"Well, then, buy the lad one. He is tall, and old enough to have a wife. I saw him going by only yesterday."

"I like that! You talk as if a wife were a mere trifle of a few kopeks! A wife costs a great deal; and how, I ask you, shall I get the money?"

"Oh! how shameful!" cried a sixth, "and you say, my dear, she was with an Armenian? as if there were no Mussulmans or Russians!"

"If you only knew," said a seventh, "how good my husband is, and how handsome; you might call him the Prophet in person, and, though he is stout, you wouldn't believe how light he is. Just fancy . . ."

Iskander was listening with such profound interest that he almost forgot the real reason he had come for. But all this chatter was put a stop to by cries of: "The play's beginning! the play's beginning!"

Everybody turned towards the stage and paid attention to the play. Yezid, in scarlet caftan and green turban, was seated on his throne. At his left, at the bottom of the four steps of the throne, stood the European ambassador in a fantastic costume, the principal features of which were a three-cornered hat surmounted by an immense plume, an enormous sabre, and spurs six inches in length.

Yezid's suite, composed of supernumeraries in white turbans, stood in a semi-circle round the throne.

But neither Yezid on his throne, nor his magnificent suite in their white turbans, produced an effect to be compared with that of Joussouf, with his hat which he was unable to balance on his shaven head, his sabre which he did not know how to deal with, and his spurs which got caught in the trousers of the noblest and most dignified personages of the court of Yezid.

But what aroused the greatest mirth among the men, and the most eager discussion among the women, was his gigantic nose and enormous plume.

"Oh! look, sister," said a little girl, "look at that animal near Yezid. What sort of a beast is he intended to be?"

"A lion, little silly," answered the sister. "Don't you know that that dreadful tyrant Yezid, the executioner of the caliphs, always had a lion by his side? If anyone displeased him, he was thrown to the lion, who devoured him. Hush! listen; Yezid is just saying to Hussein:

"'Adopt my religion, or you shall be put to death.' Hussein sneezes, as much as to say, 'I will not.'"

"It is not a lion," insisted the child; "lions have not got beaks, it is a bird."

"A bird with a tail on its head! have you ever seen any birds like that?"

"It must be a crested plover."

"I tell you it's a lion's mane."

"The child is right," said a third person joining in the argument. "Don't you see that it's a parrot? This parrot was interpreter at Yezid's court. Do you see how the caliph fondles him?"

"Then why does he shout in that dreadful way?"

"Can't you hold your tongues, nieces of parrots yourselves!" said a worthy Tartar dame weighing about twenty stone, who occupied the place of four ordinary persons and wished to hear as much of the play for herself alone as if she were an entire audience.

At this remark the argument became general. Some continued to assert that it was a lion, while others maintained that it was a bird; but what must have flattered Joussouf tremendously was the unanimous opinion that it was an animal of some description.

Meanwhile, quite unsuspecting that the sounds he heard were caused by his nose and feathers, Joussouf was conversing with the tyrant.

"My sovereign, the ruler of Frangistan," he was saying, "having heard of your conquests, sends me to make you an offer of his friendship."

Yezid replied:

"Let your king cease to eat pork and forbid his allies to eat it, and order them to become Mussulmans."

"But if his friends refuse?" replied the ambassador.

"Then let him introduce my method."

"Let us see your method," asked the ambassador.

"Bring in my method," said Yezid.

An executioner entered with a drawn sword in his hand.

Joussouf shook his head.

"What do you mean?" asked Yezid.

"I mean, great prince, that your method would not answer in Europe."

"Why so?"

"Because it would be impossible to cut off European heads as easily as you cut them off in Asia?"

"Impossible?" said Yezid. "You shall see if it is impossible."

And turning to his guards and the executioner, he said:

"Take the European ambassador and cut off his head to let him see that my method is adapted to all countries."

The guards and the executioner advanced towards Joussouf; but it was such a short time since he had taken part in a similar scene with Mullah-Nour, that his eyes and his mind confounded the imaginary with the real, and when he saw the guards about to lay hands on him, he wanted to run away; when he saw the executioner raise his sword, he uttered shrieks of terror. He was seized just as he was about to jump from the stage into the street, and dragged back amid the frantic applause of the crowd, who had never seen terror acted in so natural a fashion.

Long after he had retired behind the back scene, he was heard still calling Iskander to his rescue.

But Iskander was far too much occupied in other ways to attend to him.

Iskander had succeeded in slipping close beside Kassime. He could hardly breathe for joy; his heart was on fire; he felt the warmth of Kassime's cheeks, and inhaled the perfume of her breath.

What would you? He was twenty years old, and was in love for the first time.

But he could restrain himself no longer when Kassime, rising in order to sit more comfortably, rested her hand on his knee.

"Kassime, I must speak to you," he murmured in her ear and pressed her hand softly.

The girl's heart and thoughts were full of Iskander. She was hoping to see him at this festival, at which the whole of Derbend would be present. It was not to see *Yezid* that she had come, nor were her thoughts taken up with the executioner of the Caliphs.

Her eyes had sought Iskander in every direction, but she had not caught sight of him anywhere.

Picture, then, her astonishment and imagine her delight when she heard his

well-known and dear voice close to her ear.

She had no strength to resist: Iskander rose, and she followed him. He took her to the darkest corner of the roof.

The audience were so absorbed in *Yezid* that there was nothing to fear; still Iskander realised that he had no time to lose.

"Kassime," said he, "you know I love you? you know I adore you? You see what I have undertaken just to see you for a moment and speak a few words to you; so you can understand what I am capable of doing, if you say, 'I do not love you, Iskander.' Kassime, is it yes, or no?"

Iskander's eyes flashed through his veil. His left hand was round Kassime's waist, his right grasped the handle of his pistol. The poor child looked round her and trembled.

"Iskander," she said, "I ask only two things; do not kill me, do not disgrace me! I should like to hold you in my arms as tightly as the belt that clasps your sword; but you know my uncle."

Then, after a moment's hesitation, carried away in spite of herself, she whispered:

"Iskander, I love you!"

And her lips were pressed tightly to Iskander's, like steel to the magnet.

"And now," she said, "let me go."

"Very well, my love, but on one condition; that you will meet me to-morrow night."

Kassime made no answer; but in the look which she bestowed upon her lover at parting was so clearly to be read the word "to-morrow," that Iskander regarded the assignation as already accepted.

I cannot tell you what sort of a night Kassime passed, but Iskander's sleep was very sweet.

There are certain forms of wrong doing after which you sleep better than you do after good deeds.

CHAPTER XII

ACCUSATION AND ACQUITTAL

TWO days after the festival, a large gathering assembled in the fortress of Narin-Kale, close to the Governor's house.

The grooms, armed to the teeth, were holding their masters' horses by the bridle; there were crowds in the courtyards, by the fountain, on the staircase; the hall was full of visitors, consisting of the leading men of the town. At the entrance-gate the Governor's interpreter was eagerly relating something that was doubtless very extraordinary, for people were eagerly listening and questioning him. The conversations moreover were carried on in low tones. The older men shrugged their shoulders; in short, it was easy to see that some strange and unusual action was taking place, or already had taken place.

"Yes," the interpreter was saying, "that is exactly how the thing happened. The brigands made an opening through the wall and entered the room of Soliman-Beg. He awoke, but not until one of the brigands was making off with his weapons, which were hanging up over his bed. Then Soliman drew a pistol from under his pillow and fired, but the bullet did not hit anyone. Meanwhile, two or three other brigands were gagging his wife in the next room. Hearing the report, they ran in to help the others who were in Soliman's room. The darkness made it difficult to aim; however, Soliman wounded two or three of them, but fell dead himself, stabbed in four or five different places. The report of the pistol and the cries of Soliman and his wife aroused the neighbours; but while they were dressing and lighting their lanterns and running to his house, the bandits had broken open and emptied the strong boxes and had gone away without anyone being able to see them, and consequently without one of them being recognised."

"So not one of the rascals has been arrested?" asked a new arrival.

"No; but it is thought one of their accomplices has been secured."

"One of their accomplices?"

"Yes, he had been placed on guard; he had a rope round his body, no doubt in order to help his companions to scale the wall. In his girdle he carried a pistol and a dagger; but it should not be forgotten that, being a *Beg*, he had the right to wear arms."

"What! a *Beg!* But it is impossible that a *Beg* should be the accomplice of robbers!" cried several voices together.

"Why impossible?" replied a *Mirza* (nobleman), throwing a mocking glance around him; "the Tartar young men

are very fond of distinguishing themselves."

"Yes, but this one is a real *Beg*, related to one of the best families in Derbend, and you will be much astonished when I tell you his name. It is Iskander-Ben-Kalfasi-Ogli. See, at this very moment the Governor is reading the report of the Superintendent of Police, and you will see Iskander directly; the order has been given to bring him here."

The news indeed astonished everybody greatly.

Iskander was much pitied. How could a young man of such exemplary conduct, who had been chosen to fetch the snow from the Chakh-Dagh, be the accomplice of such bandits?

The entry of the Governor put a stop to the discussion. He was one of those men possessing an admirable knowledge of Asiatic character. He was affable, but with discrimination, so as to make his affability the more appreciated; severe, but without that harshness that gives a sting to the administration of justice, even when it is justice.

He entered the hall in full-dress uniform.

All the assembly bowed, placing their hands on their hearts and dropping them by their sides.

The Governor bowed to everybody and talked for a short time on current affairs. Some he reproached gently for unpunctual performance of their duties; others he thanked for discharging their duties conscientiously; with some of the landowners —there are landowners to be found everywhere!—he shook hands, and invited two of them to dine with him the next day.

Then, addressing everybody, he said:

"Gentlemen, you know what took place last night, do you not? I have every reason for thinking that it was the work of our friends the mountaineers, and not the act of any of the inhabitants of Derbend. I beg you to use your utmost endeavours to catch the robbers and bring them to me. Well," he added, turning to the *Mirza*, "has the Mullah questioned Iskander, and if so, what answer did the *Beg* make?"

"Iskander naturally answered that he was as innocent of this whole affair as a new-born babe. He says he took the rope to go for a walk and climb up the wall when he wanted to return, alleging that he is stifled in the town. As for the weapons, he vouchsafed no other explanation than this: 'Being a *Beg*, I had the right to carry them.'"

"It is a queer way for a man to go for a walk, with a rope round his middle!" said the Governor, "and yet I must admit that all Iskander's past conduct is a protest against the crime of which he is accused. I should like to see him and question him myself. Bring him in."

Iskander-Beg entered, wearing his *papak* on his head in accordance with Asiatic custom; he saluted the Governor respectfully, and the assembly proudly, and waited in the place pointed out to him.

The Governor looked at him coldly. At the thought of the suspicion hanging over him, the young *Beg* could not help blushing; but his glance remained firm and clear.

"I did not expect, Iskander," said the Governor, "that I should ever see you brought before me as a criminal."

"It is not crime, but fate, that brings me to judgment," answered Iskander.

"Do you know the consequence of the crime with which you are charged?"

"It is only now that I have learned what my supposed crime is. I confess that I have acted imprudently; I feel that appearances are against me, but God knows I am not guilty."

"Unfortunately, Iskander," replied the Governor, "men have to submit to visible proofs, and you will have to remain in the hands of justice until your innocence is established. However, if anyone here is willing to be responsible for you, I am willing to release you on bail."

Iskander threw a glance of inquiry around him; but nobody offered to become security.

"What!" said the Governor, "not one?"

"It is at your pleasure, sir," answered the spectators, bowing.

"Well, I will be responsible for him, and I offer myself as security," said Joussouf stepping forward.

The Governor smiled and the visitors burst out laughing; at which the Governor frowned and the faces immediately became grave.

"I am truly surprised, gentlemen, that you, who so readily go bail for the biggest scoundrels our town produces, for the wretches who have time after time run away to the mountains, after you had

made yourselves responsible for them, should hesitate to become security for a young man whom a week ago you recognised as the chastest and most honourable among you. His previous good character will not save him from punishment; on the contrary, if proved guilty, he will be severely punished. But, until he is convicted, he is your comrade, and his exemplary life ought to be respected. You may go home, Iskander; if you had not found security, I would have acted in that capacity myself."

The Governor bowed to the assembly and went away to the church.

Iskander returned home, his eyes moist with tears of gratitude.

The morning sun gilded the porch of the mosque of Derbend. The old men warmed themselves in his reviving rays as they talked of bygone days; two or three beggars stood in front of the gate of the courtyard.

At a little distance from them a traveller lay sleeping, wrapt in his *bourka*, and near the traveller Mullah-Sedek was sitting on his mat.

The holy man was preparing to leave Derbend the following morning, and was reckoning up from memory the little gains which his journey had earned him. While casting up these small sums in his head he consumed a kind of pastry which he soaked in milk and garlic. From time to time he dipped his reed pen in his wooden inkstand, and wrote a few words on a small piece of paper which he had beside him. It was curious to see with what an appetite the holy man ate his breakfast and with what delight he added up his accounts.

So absorbed was he in this two-fold pleasure that he did not notice a poor Lesghian standing before him and begging an alms. The unfortunate man was asking for a kopek in such piteous tones that it was really a crime to refuse him.

The poor fellow succeeded at last in making Mullah-Sedek hear the kind of litany he was chanting; he raised his eyes, but almost immediately bent them down again to his accounts.

"I have not tasted food for three days, sir," said the Lesghian holding out his hand.

"Ten, twenty-five, fifty, a hundred," counted Mullah-Sedek.

"A kopek will save my life and open the gates of Paradise to you."

"A hundred, five hundred, a thousand," continued Mullah-Sedek.

"You are a Mullah," persisted the Lesghian; "remember what the Koran says: The first duty of a Mussulman is charity.

Mullah-Sedek lost all patience.

"Go to the devil," said he angrily. "Did Allah invent charity for such wretches as you? You have sticks in the town and grass in the fields. When you are strong enough, you play the brigand, and when you are not, you demand alms, and you no sooner get the money in your hand than you abuse the fool who has given it to you. You will get nothing from me; I am a poor traveller, and your friend Mullah-Nour has taken all I had from me."

The traveller who was lying beneath his *bourka*, and who had remained till now without saying a word, got up quietly, and, smoothing his beard with his hand, asked Mullah-Sedek politely:

"Has Mullah-Nour been so cruel as to leave a holy man like yourself absolutely without money? I have heard it said that Mullah-Nour is a conscientious man and that he seldom takes more than two roubles from each traveller."

"Two roubles indeed! that Jew of a Mullah-Nour! Trust yourself to him, and you will be very lucky if he does not take both your eyes. May the destroying angel blast him, and may he boil eternally in the gold of which he has robbed me, had I to melt that gold myself. Why, he wanted to take from me even my camel-skin shirt!"

"It is quite true," said the old man, "Mullah-Sedek arrived here without an *aba* and with merely his cloak: we have done our best to provide him with clothes. Curses on that bandit Mullah-Nour!"

The traveller with the *bourka* got up with a smile, and, taking a piece of gold from his pocket, showed it to the Lesghian, observing:

"Curse Mullah-Nour as these good people have just done, and this coin is yours."

The Lesghian at first put out his hand to take it; but almost immediately withdrew it with a shake of the head, saying:

"No, Mullah-Nour helped my brother in his distress; he gave him a hundred roubles; on ten occasions at least he has succoured my compatriots. I do not know him by sight, but I know his heart.

Keep your money, for I will not curse Mullah-Nour: I sell neither my blessings nor my curses."

The traveller looked at the Lesghian with astonishment and at Mullah-Sedek with contempt.

Next, drawing out four other gold coins, he placed them with the first, and gave them all five to the poor Lesghian.

Then, resting one of his hands on Mullah-Sedek's shoulder, and raising the other above his head, he observed:

"There is a God of truth in heaven, and there are good men on earth."

Whereupon, picking up his *bourka*, he threw it over his shoulder, mounted his horse, which was tied to the wall of the mosque, and rode down quietly to the bazaar.

After crossing the bazaar, still at a walking pace, he entered the street in which was the house of the Superintendent of Police.

This functionary was at his door, surrounded by several persons to whom he was dispensing justice; though already an old man, he dyed his beard so successfully that he deceived even himself in regard to his age, and thought himself ten years younger than he really was. His *tchourka* was adorned with lace in the style of a man of fashion, and, to serve as an even more forcible reminder that he was still young, he still kept four wives and three mistresses, and drank several bottles of wine every night. In short, had he not worn spectacles and been wrinkled like a withered apple, with a stomach like a pumpkin, you might really have credited him with that youthful vigour which he declared himself to possess.

On this particular day, the Superintendent was in a bad temper; he was annoyed with everybody, and even quarrelled with the passers-by.

He was in this state of mind when he saw a traveller dismount from his horse and come towards him.

"*Salaam Aleikoum*, Mouzaram-Beg!" said the traveller.

The Superintendent started as though stung by a snake, and put his hand to his pistol.

The traveller, however, stooped to his ear and whispered: "Mouzaram-Beg, if I have any advice to offer you, it is not to meddle with old friends. Besides, I have come to you for your own advantage; but let us go into the house, and I will tell you something for which all Derbend will be grateful. But I warn you that, if you make any doubtful gesture, my pistol has a bullet in it, and that that bullet will go just as exactly where I wish it to go as if, instead of directing it with my eye, I directed it with my finger. At the first sign, then, I fire. I appear to be alone, but don't rely on that. A dozen of my brave fellows are keeping their eye on me. and will rush up at my first call for help. Come, Mouzaram-Beg, show me the way."

The Superintendent of Police made no objection, and led the way into the house.

What passed between them? The interview was without witnesses, and so nobody can tell.

All we know is that, a quarter of an hour after he had gone in, the unknown traveller came out again, quietly remounted his horse, threw a rouble to the man who had held his bridle, and rode out of the town.

It was not until two days afterwards that the report got about that the notorious brigand Mullah-Nour had had the audacity to come into the town, and that, thanks to his efficient supervision, the Superintendent of Police had been warned of his presence and had despatched twelve horsemen in pursuit of him, to whom Mullah-Nour had been satisfied with showing his horse's heels.

Ill-bred people told a much less flattering story, but you must never believe what ill-bred people say.

Meanwhile, poor Iskander was passing his time sorrowfully within the four walls of his house. He had but to speak a word in order to establish his innocence; but he would rather have died a thousand deaths than bring dishonour upon Kassime.

The period of waiting for a sentence is a dreadful one for all Asiatics. An Asiatic will endure with better grace a punishment which he has not deserved, than a merited sentence if it be delayed.

"Ah!" he cried in his impatience, "perpetual chains, the snows of Siberia, anything, rather than the suspicion of the Russians, who compel me to be their friend, and the jeers of my compatriots, whom I detest. Death by the sword I would welcome, but death by a rope, that is to die twice over."

And, a prisoner on parole, he howled and leapt like a tiger in its cage, tore the

sleeves of his *tchourka* and wept like a child.

That evening, at the hour when all the streets of the town were deserted, but the houses lively with the sounds of voices and the blaze of lamps, when the married Mussulman was enjoying repose by the side of his wife—or even of the four wives permitted to him by the Prophet—while the bachelor, on the contrary, sat sadly by his lonely hearth, Iskander sitting also by his, with his head buried in his hands, suddenly heard one of the window-panes break with a crash, as some object was thrown through it and fell upon the floor of his room.

This object was a stone to which was fastened a tiny note.

He unfolded the note.

"Mullah-Nour to Iskander, greeting! Better, believe me, be a captive and innocent, than a criminal at large.

"I know all, and will do all in my power to establish your innocence.

"The rest lies in the hands of Allah.

"Patience and hope; you will not have to wait long for your acquittal."

Next day, Iskander was summoned to the Governor, but he had not time to get there before he had been already congratulated by all whom he met on the happy termination of his affair.

The brigands had been caught; they had met together at Baktiara to divide their booty, and there they had been surrounded and made prisoners. Two of them were Lesghians, two of them inhabitants of the town.

In the house of one of the latter was a double wall, and between these two walls the articles stolen were concealed.

Iskander was entirely innocent.

It was now the turn of Iskander, deeply touched by the kindness shown him by the Governor, to request a private interview with him, at which he told him everything; his love for Kassime, and the failure of Festahli to keep his word. The Governor heard his story, half smiling and half sadly.

"Iskander," said he, "see for yourself whither your imprudence has led you. Granted that Festahli has acted deceitfully, still you do not revenge yourself on a deceiver by acting deceitfully yourself. There are other thefts than thefts of money; an honourable man does nothing underhand. Stealth and darkness are the cloak of ravishers and brigands. Your future happiness lies in your heart; I will do what I can to make it pass from thence into your life. Adieu, Iskander! In the name of those who love you, remain what you are, and what you have almost ceased to be—a man of honour."

And he wrung his hand affectionately, repeating his wishes for his happiness.

Iskander was acknowledged innocent and was at liberty, but his delight at this double good fortune did not last long; it was so sad for him to think that he must give up his beloved Kassime. The kiss she had imprinted on his lips found a response every moment at the bottom of his heart. He recalled minutely each detail of his last meeting with his well-beloved; his soul seemed almost to fly from his body at the remembrance of that sweet voice whereof it had become the fond and faithful echo.

"No," said he, "what Mullah-Nour wrote me is nonsense, and as for what the Governor said, it is clear that *he* is not in love. I am prepared to win Kassime even by a crime, and I am sure that, in spite of the crime, I shall be happy with her; happy, even though I should be forced to carry her off to the mountains, with or against her will. I will carry her off, were it but for an hour; I would fain steep my soul in the delights of heaven."

Poor Kassime was sad also. In solitude she learnt, at the cost of her tears, to reckon the long hours of their separation.

"A rose was fastened to my breast," she said, "and it murmured, 'I am the Spring-time': a nightingale sang me its hymn of love and I called it 'Joy'; Iskander looked at me and kissed me, and, with that kiss, I knew the meaning of love. But where are you, my fair rose? Where are you, my sweet nightingale? Where are you, my Iskander? They are gone whither my happiness has fled."

CHAPTER XIII

THE MILLER

DO you know the Tengua?

It is in turn a brook, a torrent, a river, a deluge.

It flows in a confined channel for about three hundred yards through a narrow cavern into which it plunges with dread, and through which it tears with rage.

The storms of centuries have not washed the dark traces of fire from the walls of this cavern in which the Tengua roars.

Massive boulders, hurled from the mountain's summit to the bottom of the abyss, have formed the bed over which it foams and bounds with tumultuous roar.

The surroundings of this cave are wild and sombre; its entrance is awe-inspiring.

The right bank of the torrent throws the shadow of its rocks far across the valley.

The left bank half overflows a narrow path, which first crosses a small wood.

Woe to the traveller who, without a guide, pits his strength against this hellish torrent,—above all during a thaw, when the snow is melting. Woe to him who encounters brigands in this spot, which seems specially constructed for an ambuscade. Defence and flight are alike impossible.

Here did Mullah-Nour, the same bandit from the leaves of whose life we are detaching a page, with a dozen of his companions, stop three regiments returning with enormous booty from General Pankratief's expedition.

As they were on the point of descending into the river, he appeared before them on horseback fully armed, threw his *bourka* on the ground and called out:

"I greet you, comrades! Allah has granted you victory and booty. All honour to you! but it would be acting the part of good Christians as you are to make me a sharer in your joy. I do not demand, I entreat; be kind, and each one give me what he pleases. Just think, my brothers, you are coming back rich, with presents for your relations, while I am poor, I have no home, and have to pay a handful of gold for a moment's repose in the house of others. Men have in dastardly fashion despoiled me of everything; Allah has fortunately left me my bravery, and has given me, besides, these dark caverns and bare rocks which such as you despise. Of these caverns and these rocks I am monarch, and no one passes through my territory without my permission. You are numerous and you are brave; but if you mean to pass by force, you will lose much blood and even more time; for you will not pass until I and my brave men have fallen. Each rock will fight for me, and, for myself, I will shed the last drop of my blood here and fire my last charge of powder. Choose, then, you stand to lose a great deal, and I, nothing. My name means 'Light'[1]; but my life, I swear, is sadder than darkness."

A murmur rose from the ranks of the soldiers; some frowned fiercely, while others grew furiously angry.

"We will crush Mullah-Nour under our feet, and will pass over his dead body," said these latter. "Look at our numbers and at yours. Forward! and charge the bandits." But nobody ventured to be the first to enter the roaring torrent whose passage was guarded by the muskets of the twelve brigands.

Bravery yielded to reflection, and the three regiments consented to do as Mullah-Nour asked.

"We will give you just what we choose and nothing else," said they.

And with these words each horseman threw a little silver into the bandit's *bourka*.

"But remember that you wouldn't have taken a single nail from our horses' feet by force."

And they passed one by one in single file before Mullah-Nour, who saluted them with a smile.

"By Allah!" he exclaimed, after this adventure, which had yielded him three or four thousand roubles, "it is not difficult for me, who have stripped the wolves of Karabach of their skins, to shear the wool of the sheep of Daghestan. I don't know why these folks of Daghestan should grumble about their harvest; I neither take the trouble to plough, nor sow, nor harrow; I stand in the road and ask, and my request brings me in an ample harvest. You must know the way to go to work, and then you will draw an *abbase*[2], not only from each carriage, but from each musket barrel."

But, at the beginning of the summer of the year in which the events that we are relating were taking place, Mullah-Nour had not been seen, nor had his name been mentioned on the banks of the Tengua. Where was he? Perhaps in the district of Chekine, or perhaps in Persia;

[1] *Nour*, in Tartar, means *light*.

[2] A coin nearly equal to two francs.

or perhaps he had been forced to take sanctuary, possibly even he was dead. Nobody knew anything about him, not even Mullah-Sedek, who asserted that he had been stripped by him when on his journey from Persia to Derbend.

This worthy and honourable Mullah-Sedek had left Kouban early in the morning, and had reached at mid-day this spot where the Tengua, released from its imprisonment in the cavern, regains its liberty. Being as miserly as the sand of the desert, he had preferred to do without the guide whose services he would have been obliged to recompense with a few pieces of the money which he had gathered in bushels at Derbend.

The June sun was blazing down fiercely, and our traveller kept shifting his rifle from his right shoulder to his left.

When he observed the little wood at some distance, he was delighted, but, when he saw the river at close quarters, he was almost in despair.

Never had it been so high, so noisy, so sullen.

"The devil take it!" he murmured, "even if this river were carrying down gold and silver, instead of rocks, had I known what it was like, I should not have attempted to cross it without a guide. Truly I am very foolish not to have taken one."

And he gazed with terror on his surroundings, which were lonely and silent to the last degree.

However, after a more careful search, he discovered a horse bridled and saddled tied to a tree in the wood, and, beneath this tree a simple Tartar, having for sole weapon his *kandjar* without which no Tartar ever stirs abroad.

Mullah-Sedek approached step by step and looked at him attentively.

The flour which whitened the Tartar's beard and coat proclaimed that he was a miller. The miller was having his breakfast.

Our holy man, who had felt his heart beat wildly for a moment, was reassured.

"Hi! my friend," cried he to the stranger, "I fancy you belong to this part of the country, do you not?"

"Yes, I do," replied the miller, with his mouth full.

"In that case, you must be acquainted with all the fords of this river?"

"Oh! yes, I think I ought to know all the fords of the Tengua, since it flows only by my permission. This river, such as you see it, is my servant."

"You will be very useful to me, my good man, and Allah will bless you, if you will guide me to the other side of the cavern."

"Wait until the night," answered the miller calmly. "Between now and night the river will get lower, my horse will rest, and I myself shall be refreshed. Then a quarter of an hour will suffice us to cross the cavern; but at this hour, it is dangerous."

"In the name of Allah! in the name of Ali and Hussein, in the name of my prayers, I am a mullah; guide me without delay, now, this very instant!"

"Oh!" said the miller, "prayers and blessings do not affect the question. Never will I cross the Tengua when such a stream is flowing."

"Let me prevail upon you, my friend; Allah will recompense you, be sure, if you do anything for a mullah."

"Mullah as much as you please, but I won't risk being drowned, were it to guide the Prophet himself."

"Do not despise me; perhaps I am not so poor as you imagine; and, if you do me a service, it will not be for nothing."

The miller smiled.

"Well, come, what will you give me?" said he scratching his beard.

"I will give you two *abbases;* I hope that is reasonable."

"What! two *abbases?* not enough to get my horse shod with. No, I won't guide you even for two roubles, for you cannot buy a new head with that sum, and you run the risk of losing your head in this dreadful crossing."

They bargained for a long while, and finally Mullah-Sedek agreed to give the sum demanded by the miller.

Letting his guide take hold of his horse's bridle, Mullah-Sedek surrendered at discretion and yielded himself entirely to the other's experience. The holy man nearly died with fright as he began to cross the river and enter beneath the opening of the cavern. But when, at the further end, he began once more to see the grassy valley with its flowers and sunshine, his courage returned to him, and, thinking there was nothing further to fear, he called to his guide:

"Come, get on faster, you scoundrel!"

But our worthy Mullah had regained his courage a trifle too soon. It was just

here, towards the end of the ford, that the river was deepest and most dangerous.

The guide stopped exactly at this spot, and turning his horse, observed:

"Well, Sedek, only ten yards more and you are on the bank. Now let us square our accounts, You know I have well earned my piece of gold, eh?"

"Piece of gold! have you no conscience, my friend? But perhaps you are joking. For so much I could have built myself a bridge of silver to cross by. Finish your work, then, and when we reach the bank I will give you two *abbases* and you are well repaid."

"Why! we agreed on more than that, I think."

"Oh! no doubt. But necessity—— You held a dagger, as it were, to my throat and I had to submit. Where do you think a poor traveller can find so much money? Alas! I have been robbed of so much already! Come, lead me to the other bank, my brother, and, when we get there, you can go about your business and I will go about mine."

"Not so," said the miller shaking his head.

"I have told you, and I tell you once again, I will not leave this place without settling my account with you, and our accounts do not date simply from your crossing to day. You have no conscience, Mullah-Sedek, but no doubt you have a memory. At Derbend, in order to inspire more pity and gain more money, you trumped up a tale that Mullah-Nour had stopped you and robbed you of everything. Tell me, where did that take place?"

"I never said so, Allah punish me if I did!" cried Mullah-Sedek.

"Recollect the courtyard of the mosque, Sedek; recollect what you said to the Lesghian, and the tale you told to the traveller who was sleeping under his *bourka*. And now look at me as I am looking at you, face to face, and perhaps we shall recognise one another."

Mullah-Sedek looked at his guide; beneath the covering of flour he was at first unrecognisable; but the flour had disappeared, his beard, from being white, had gradually turned black, and beneath his contracted brows flashed two dark eyes. But, seeing him with no other weapon than his dagger, Mullah-Nour seized his musket; before he had cocked it, however, the point of the dagger was at his breast.

"If you move a single hair of your moustache," said the pretended miller, "I warn you that, like Jonah, you will go and preach to the fishes not to drink wine or brandy. Your business is to cajole people in their shops and in the pulpit, to tell lies morning and night and always; but fighting is the business of brave hearts; therefore it is not your's. Don't stir, I tell you, you son of a dog! I have no need to waste a charge of powder on you here, and that is why I brought no fire-arms; I have but to let go of your horse's bridle, and in five minutes you are a corpse."

Mullah-Sedek at these words turned pale as wax. He clung to his horse's mane, feeling that his head was turning and that he was going to slip from the saddle. But, without losing sight for a moment of the cursed dagger, which gleamed like a lightning-flash at his breast, he cried:

"Mercy! I am a Mullah!"

"I too am a Mullah and, more than that, I am Mullah-Nour."

Mullah-Sedek uttered a cry and fell upon his horse's mane, clasping its neck with both hands as though he felt already the sharp edge of the steel.

Mullah-Nour began to laugh at Sedek's terror; then, lifting him upright, said to him:

"You have dishonoured me by the tale which you told to the people of Derbend; you made everybody believe that you had been robbed by me of your last kopek, of your last shirt, by me who give to the poor man the bit of bread which he has begged for in vain at the rich man's door, by me, who never take even from the merchants more than one piece of gold, and that not for myself, but for my companions who, did I not check them, would plunder and slay without shame or remorse. Nay more; it is you who are a robber, for you wanted to rob your guide by refusing him what you had promised him; lastly, it is you who are an assassin, for, when I demanded of you what was my lawful due, you wanted to murder me."

"Have pity on me, forgive me, good Mullah-Nour," said Sedek.

"Did you ever pity the lot of the beggar whom you saw dying of hunger? should you have felt any remorse if you had killed me? no; for you are a villain. You coined money with every letter of the Koran, and, in your own interests,

and for your own profit, you sowed dissension in families. I know you ; I know what sort of a man you are, and I did not touch you when you passed by here on your way to Derbend. You didn't see me, you didn't meet me, you didn't know me, and yet you insulted me. Well, now you will be telling no lie when you say that I have robbed you. Mullah-Sedek, hand over your money."

Mullah-Sédek uttered loud cries and shed big tears ; but he was caught and had to yield. He threw all his poor roubles one after the other into the bag which Mullah-Nour held out to him, pressing each one before letting it go, as if the oil of the silver might remain in his fingers. At last, when he came to the last one,

" That is all," he said.

" You will lie then to your grave ? " cried Mullah-Nour. " Come, Sedek, count better than that, unless you want to make a closer acquaintance with my dagger. You have still some silver, or rather gold, in the inner pocket of your *tchouska* ; I know how much, and can tell you : fifteen hundred roubles, is that right ? "

Sedek bewailed loudly, but was obliged to give up his gold to the very last piece.

Then Mullah-Nour guided Sedek to the bank of the river which he had so longed to reach, and there he made him dismount from his horse.

Mullah-Sedek thought he was now free of the bandit, but he was mistaken.

" Now," said the latter, " there is another matter ; you have prevented the marriage of Iskander-Beg, and you will have to repair the injury which you have done. There is an ink-horn at your belt ; write to Hadji Festahli saying that you have received on your road a letter from your brother, in which he says that his son has no wish to be married and has gone away on a pilgrimage to Mecca : you may even say that he is dead, if you choose. It should be no difficulty to you, you know, to invent a lie. Only arrange it so that Iskander marries his promised bride ; otherwise it is you, Mullah-Sedek, whom I will give in marriage, and that to the houris."

" Never, never ! " cried Mullah-Sedek. " No, I cannot do that. You have taken all that I had from me, be content with that."

" Oh ! that's how it is, is it ? " said Mullah-Nour. He clapped his hands thrice and instantly a dozen bandits appeared, as though they had sprung out from the rocks themselves.

" The most honourable Mullah-Sedek wishes to write," said Mullah-Nour ; " second him, my friends, in that laudable intention."

In an instant, had such really been Mullah-Sedek's desire, nothing was left to wish for.

One of the bandits unfastened his ink-horn, another dipped the pen in the ink, another handed him the paper, while a fourth, placing his hands on his knees and bending his shoulders, presented his back by way of a desk.

Thrice did Mullah-Sedek begin to write, but thrice, whether from having made a mistake or from lack of will, he broke off.

" Well ? " asked Mullah-Nour in a voice that was the more threatening in that it seemed perfectly calm.

" The ink is bad, and my thoughts are so troubled that I cannot find words."

" Then write with your blood and think with your *papak*," said Mullah-Nour, making his terrible dagger gleam once more ; " but write quickly, or I will put such a mark between your eyebrows that the devil alone will be able to say what letter of the alphabet you resemble."

Mullah-Sedek realised that his hesitation had lasted long enough, and at last made up his mind to write.

"Now put your seal to it," said Mullah-Nour when the letter was finished.

Mullah-Sedek obeyed.

" There, now give it to me," said Mullah-Nour, " I will undertake to post it."

He took the letter and read it, assured himself that its contents were satisfactory, stuffed it into his pocket, and then, throwing to Mullah-Sédek all that he had taken from him, observed :

" There's your gold and silver, Sédek, take them, there's not a kopek missing. And now tell me which of us two is a miser or a thief. However, I am not making you a present, I am paying you. You have blackened my name at Derbend, you must gild it again at Schoumaka, and that in full mosque. Be off then, and know that, if you do not carry out my orders, my bullet will find you out however well you may hide. You are convinced that I know everything ; I

will prove to you that I can do everything."

Mullah-Sedek undertook to do all that the bandit required of him, took his money joyfully, replaced it in his pockets after making quite sure there were no holes in them, and, remounting his horse, went off at full gallop.

Two days later, Mullah-Sedek scandalised the inhabitants of Schoumaka by an address in which he sang the praises of Mullah-Nour, comparing him to a lion that had within his breast the heart of a dove.

CHAPTER XIV

CONCLUSION

PRESUMABLY the letter written to Festahli by his friend Mullah-Sedek left to the former no hope of the union on which he had set his heart; for, a week after that letter had reached its address, music and singing were heard one evening in the streets of Derbend.

The fair Kassime was being escorted to the house of her bridegroom, Iskander.

She was followed by the whole population of Derbend; shouts and acclamations rent the air on every side, and from the roof of every house there burst like flashing rockets innumerable musket shots.

The whole town, on fire as it were, seemed to rejoice at Iskander's happiness.

Iskander-Beg, on hearing these sounds and this music, had gone to his door twenty times at least, and, each time, custom had forbidden him to open it.

At last, at the twenty-first time, just as the procession had almost reached his threshold, as he held the door half open and put out his head timidly, a horseman extended his hand to him with the words:

"May Allah grant you all the happiness that I wish you, Iskander!"

And instantly he turned his horse round so as not to be surrounded by the crowd.

But, on turning the horse, he found himself face to face with Joussouf who, very naturally, was acting as Iskander's best man.

Joussouf-Beg recognised the horseman and could not help uttering a cry of terror.

"Mullah-Nour!" he cried.

This name, as you may readily imagine, threw the whole of the proceedings into the utmost confusion.

Shouts of "Mullah-Nour! Mullah-Nour!" resounded on all sides.

"This way! no, that way! catch him! stick to him!" roared ten thousand voices all together.

But Mullah-Nour had darted off like lightning.

All the young men who were riding behind the bride's procession started in pursuit of the bandit.

Mullah-Nour flew rather than rode through the streets of Derbend, and all that could be seen in the darkness was the train of sparks struck by his horse's hoofs.

But the Gates of the Town were shut, and Mullah-Nour could not get out.

The course he had taken was revealed by the gleam of several musket shots fired at him, and he was seen to be making for the sea.

There, he would find himself trapped between the walls and the water.

The bandit hesitated for a moment; the sea was rough. You could see the waves mount and toss their spray; you could hear them roar.

"He is caught! we have got him! death to Mullah-Nour!" shouted the pursuers.

But Mullah-Nour's whip whistled like the wind, flashed like the lightning, and his horse leapt from the rock on which for a moment he had paused and plunged into the midst of the waves.

The pursuers stopped the moment the waves of the Caspian Sea wetted their horses' legs.

Placing their hands above their eyes, they stood at gaze, striving to pierce the darkness.

"He is lost, drowned, dead!" cried at last those who were pursuing the robber.

A loud burst of laughter answered to these shouts, and hurrahs uttered by a dozen voices on a little isle that rises about three hundred yards from Derbend announced to the disappointed pursuers that not only had Mullah-Nour escaped, but that he was moreover once more surrounded by his trusty comrades.

The doors are close shut in Iskander's house. All is very quiet in his chamber; you can just detect a faint whispering.

Gaiety loves noise; happiness loves silence and retirement.

SULTANETTA

A SEQUEL

PREFACE

FIRST a word concerning the manner in which the tale you are about to peruse came into my hands.

I was at Derbend, the town of the iron gates, at the house of the officer in command of the fortress, with whom we were breakfasting. The conversation happened to turn on the novelist Marlinsky, the same individual as the conspirator Bestuchef, who was condemned to the Siberian mines for his part in the affair of 1825, and whose brother was hanged at St. Petersburg, along with Pestel, Mouravief, Kalkovsky, and Ryleïef.

Released in 1827 from his labours in the mines, Bestuchef had turned soldier and been sent to join the army of the Caucasus. Brave as a lion, and flinging himself desperately into every peril, he soon rose once more to the rank of ensign, and in that capacity was quartered for a year in the fortress of Derbend.

The reader will learn from my "Travels in the Caucasus" what was the fresh catastrophe that finally disgusted him with life, and how, in an encounter with the Lesghian mountaineers, he got himself killed by them, his death being just as much of his own seeking as though he had committed suicide.

Among the papers left in his room when he died was a manuscript. This manuscript had been read subsequently by several persons, and, among their number, by the daughter of the officer in command in my time, who spoke of it to me as a story full of interest. At her recommendation I had it translated, and finding the little romance, as she had done, not only very interesting, but also remarkably strong in local colouring, I resolved to publish it.

Accordingly, I took it from the hands of my translator, re-wrote it so as to render it intelligible to French readers, and I now publish it, without any further alterations, being convinced that it will produce on others the same effect it has done on myself.

It gives, moreover, a highly curious picture of the kind of warfare carried on between the Russians, representing the civilization of the North, and the wild and ferocious inhabitants of the Caucasus.

ALEX. DUMAS.

SULTANETTA

CHAPTER I

"BE SLOW TO GIVE OFFENCE AND PROMPT TO TAKE VENGEANCE"

(*Inscription engraved on the daggers of Daghestan*).

IT was a Friday.

Near Bouinaky, a large village in North Daghestan, the flower of Tartar youth had assembled for a horse-race, accompanied by all those trials of skill which fearlessness and courage can add to a celebration of this nature.

Let us give some idea of the magnificent surroundings amid which the scene is laid.

Bouinaky rises on the two prominences of a craggy mountain, and dominates the surrounding neighbourhood. To the left of the road leading from Derbend to Tarky appears the crest of the Caucasus range, covered with forests; to the right, the shore on which the Caspian Sea breaks with its eternal murmur, or rather, its eternal lamentation.

Day was drawing to a close.

The inhabitants of the village, attracted by the freshness of the air even more than by curiosity to see a spectacle which is repeated too often not to be familiar, had left their huts, descending the slope of their mountain, and had gathered in rows along each side of the highway.

The women, without veils, but with bright-coloured silk handkerchiefs rolled turban-wise round their heads, with their long silk robes drawn tightly to the figure by their short tunics, and their wide trousers of *kanaos*, were seated in rows, while their children played beside them.

The men, gathered in groups, were either standing or squatting in Turkish fashion. The old men smoked Persian tobacco in their Tchetchen pipes.

A sound of gaiety rose from the throng, and amid this continuous sound was heard at intervals the clash of horses' hoofs upon the pebbles of the road, and the cry of "*Katch ! katch !*" ("Make way!") uttered by the riders making ready for the race.

Nature is superb in Daghestan in the month of May. Thousands of roses cover the granite rocks with a tint as fresh as the rise of dawn; the air is balmy with their perfume; nightingales sing unceasingly amid the verdant twilight of the groves. Joyous flocks of sheep, embellished with orange-coloured spots, which the shepherds, with almost lover-like care, paint on them with the same substance their masters use to dye the nails of feet and hands, namely, *henna*, spring from rock to rock. The buffaloes, plunged in the marshes, in which they wanton luxuriously, gaze at the passing traveller with their large deep eyes, which would appear threatening, were they not so dreamy. The steppes are carpeted with heather of every hue. Each wave of the Caspian sparkles like the shell of a gigantic fish. In short, something of that seductiveness in sky and atmosphere which inspired the Greeks to divine instinctively that here was the birthplace of the world, and that its cradle was the Caucasus, exhales at every breath, and at once revivifies the body and rejoices the heart.

Such was the impression which any one, whether native or foreigner, would have experienced on approaching the village of Bouinaky during that joyous Friday which saw the beginning of the series of events we shall endeavour to present to the reader.

The setting sun was just gilding the dark walls of the flat-roofed houses, the shadows of which presented a clearer and stronger outline in proportion as he withdrew his rays. At a distance you

heard the shriek of the plaintive *arabas*,* the long file of which could be distinguished through the Tartar tombstones, upreared like spectres, in the cemetery, and, in front of their noisy procession, galloped a horseman raising on the road a cloud of dust.

The snowy crest of the mountains and the calm sea opposite imparted a magnificent effect to this picture.

You felt creation to be teeming with its warmest and most ardent life.

"'Tis he! 'tis he! He comes! There he is!" shouted the crowd at sight of this dust, and of the rider whom it still concealed from their eyes, but whose identity they guessed.

At this shout a movement took place among the crowd.

The riders who, up till now, had been standing bridle in hand talking to their acquaintances, sprang on their horses' backs; those who were galloping to right and left, in no order, and according to their whim, joined together, and all hastened to meet the horseman and his followers. The horseman was Ammalat-Beg, nephew of Prince Tarkovsky.

He was wearing a black *tchouska* of Persian shape, ornamented with that elegant silver lace the manufacture of which is a secret known only to the makers; the sleeves, hanging halfway down, had their ends thrown back over the shoulder. His *arkalouk* of *tarmalama* was drawn tight about the waist by a Turkish shawl; his red trousers disappeared into yellow high-heeled boots; his gun, dagger, and pistols were mounted in silver embossed with gold; the hilt of his sabre was adorned with precious stones. Add to all this that Prince Tarkovsky's heir was twenty-four years of age; that he was handsome and well-made, with a frank and open countenance; that long curls of dark hair flowed from his *papak* over his neck; that small moustaches, dark as ebony, which seemed as though painted by a brush, adorned his lips; that his eyes sparkled with a proud good-nature; that he rode a black courser, which pranced and curvetted at every step; that he was seated on a light Circassian saddle embroidered with silver; that his feet rested on stirrups of dark Khorassan steel embossed with gold; that twenty followers in embroidered *tchouskas* galloped beside him on magnificent horses—and you will understand the effect produced by the young Prince upon this throng of people over whom wealth and grace and beauty, all those external gifts, in short, which the Eastern skies pour down on the elect, have such supreme influence, and for whom they possess such an irresistible attraction.

The men rose and greeted him, bowing and laying their hands upon their breasts.

A murmur of joy, respect, and, above all, of admiration arose among the women.

Having reached the middle of the throng, Ammalat-Beg halted.

The old men leaning on their staves and the other chief inhabitants of Bouinaky gathered in a circle round him, in the hope that the young Chief would address them; but he did not so much as glance their way—merely making a gesture with his hand as a signal that the race should begin.

Some twenty riders then dashed off at a wild gallop, each man trying to outstrip his neighbour.

Then all seized their *djerids*, or javelins, and still at full gallop, hurled them at each other.

The most skilful picked them up without setting foot to the ground, letting themselves slide under their horse's bellies.

The less skilful, trying to imitate them, rolled in the dust, amid shouts of laughter from the spectators.

Then began the shooting.

During all the time that the races had lasted, Ammalat-Beg had remained aloof; but his esquires had allowed themselves to be tempted away one after the other, and had mingled with the competitors.

Two only of them had remained with the Prince.

But, as the racing grew more animated and the report of firearms resounded, while the smoke of powder mingled its pungent odour with the air, the young Prince's reserve began to thaw. He began to encourage the combatants with his voice, to animate them by rising in his stirrups, and when his favourite follower missed with his bullet the *papak*

* The *arabas* are carts, the wheels of which, being never greased, owing to the dislike which the owners have for pork lard, utter a groan at each turn, which can only be compared to that of the Spanish *norias*.

he had thrown up into the air in front of him, he could contain himself no longer, but seized his gun and galloped into the middle of the marksmen.

"Way for Ammalat-Beg!" was shouted on all sides. And every one cleared off as quickly as though the cry had been, "Way for the water-spout! Way for the hurricane!"

Over a space about a thousand yards in length had been fixed ten stakes, each surmounted by a *papak*. Ammalat-Beg, putting his horse to a gallop, rode past these in succession, holding his gun raised above his head; then, having passed the last one, he turned round, and, rising in his stirrups, fired without slackening his pace.

The *papak* fell.

Then, still galloping, he reloaded his gun, returned on his tracks over the same road that he had come, struck off the second *papak* in the same manner, and so on until the ten had fallen.

This proof of skill, ten times repeated, elicited universal applause.

Ammalat-Beg did not desist; having once started, his pride must achieve a complete triumph. He threw away his gun and took his pistol, faced right round in his saddle, and, at the moment when his galloping horse raised his two hind feet, fired and struck off the shoe from the right foot; then, loading his pistol again, did the same with the left foot.

Shouts of admiration resounded.

Then he took his gun again and ordered one of his esquires to gallop in front of him.

Both set off, as quick as thought.

Having reached the middle of the course, the esquire took a silver rouble and threw it up in the air.

Ammalat-Beg brought his gun to his shoulder; but, at this moment his horse stumbled, fell, and rolled over, ploughing the ground with its head.

A simultaneous cry of alarm arose from all the spectators.

But the skilful rider remained standing in his stirrups, as little disturbed as if nothing untoward had happened, and, at the instant when his two feet touched the ground, he fired.

The rouble, struck by the bullet, fell well beyond the circle of the spectators.

The crowd, intoxicated with delight, uttered frantic bravos.

But Ammalat-Beg, to all appearance calm and impassive, quickly freed his feet from the stirrups, forced his horse to rise, and threw the bridle into the hands of one of his attendants, telling him to get him shod immediately.

The racing and the shooting continued.

At this moment Sophyr-Ali, Ammalat-Beg's foster-brother, and the son of a poor *Beg* of Bouinaky, approached him.

He was a handsome young fellow, simple and merry; he had been reared and had grown up with Ammalat. There was the same familiarity between them as there would have been between two brothers.

He leapt from his horse, saluted Ammalat, and said—

"The *nouker* Mahommed is tiring your old horse Amtrim, trying to make him jump a ravine more than fifteen feet wide."

"And Amtrim won't jump?" cried Ammalat, impatiently, with a frown. "Let the fellow bring him here this instant."

He went up to the horse, signed to the *nouker* to dismount, jumped into the saddle, and took Amtrim straight to the ditch to let him see it.

Then, returning on his tracks, he took a long run and set him at a gallop towards the ravine.

The nearer he approached it, the closer he gripped him with his legs and tightened the reins.

But Amtrim, distrusting his own powers, made a rapid dash to the right.

Ammalat-Beg took another run and galloped at it a second time.

This time, Amtrim, urged by the whip, rose on his hind feet as if he were about to jump.

But, instead of completing the movement, he turned on his hind legs as though on a pivot, and dashed off a second time.

Ammalat-Beg grew furious.

Vainly did Sophyr-Ali beseech him to spare the poor beast, which had gloriously spent his strength in fights and races; Ammalat would not listen to a word, but, drawing his sword from its sheath, forced him to take a third run, urging him this time no longer with the whip, but with the blade of his sabre.

But all to no purpose; this time, as before, the horse stopped on the edge of the ditch.

This time, however, Ammalat-Beg gave poor Amtrim such a blow between

the ears with the hilt of his sword, that the horse dropped like an ox felled with the club.

Ammalat-Beg had killed him.

"There's the reward of a faithful servant!" said Sophyr-Ali, with a sigh, looking sadly at the dead animal.

"No, but the penalty of disobedience," replied Ammalat-Beg, angrily.

Sophyr-Ali said no more.

The riders continued to gallop.

All at once the roll of drums was heard, and from behind the mountains were seen shining the ends of Russian bayonets, growing gradually more distinct.

This was a company of the Kousinsk regiment returning from escorting a convoy of wheat that had started from Derbend.

The Captain in command of this company was marching with another officer some yards in front of his troop.

Thinking that it was time to give them a little rest, the Captain halted his soldiers.

The latter piled their guns, leaving a sentinel near them, and stretched themselves on the turf.

The arrival of a Russian detachment was no novelty to the inhabitants of Bouinaky in the year 1819; but even at the present day such a sight is never agreeable to the people of Daghestan. Their religion makes them regard the Russians as eternal foes, and, if they sometimes smile, it is because beneath this smile their real sentiments are concealed, these real sentiments being an implacable and deadly hatred.

A murmur passed along the crowd as they saw them halt upon the race-course. The women went back to their houses, not, however, without bestowing a surreptitious glance upon the new arrivals; while the men looked askance at them, gathering in groups to talk in low tones.

The older men, however, acting more prudently, approached the Captain and made polite inquiries as to his health.

"Personally," said he, "I am fit and well; but my horse has cast a shoe and goes lame. Fortunately, I see a worthy Tartar yonder"—pointing to the farrier who was shoeing Ammalat's horse—"who will put things right."

Then, going up to him, he called out—

"Ho, friend! when you have finished shoeing that horse, you can do as much for mine."

The smith, whose face was darkened both by sun and smoke, turned a gloomy eye on the Captain, turned up his moustaches, pushed down his *papak* level with his ears, but made no reply; and, having finished with Ammalat-Beg's horse, quietly replaced his tools in his bag.

"Did you hear what I said?" demanded the Captain.

"Perfectly," answered the smith.

"What did I say, then?"

"That your horse had lost a shoe."

"Well, then, since you understood me, get to work."

"To-day is Friday, that is to say, a holiday; and I don't work on holidays," answered the Tartar.

"Listen," said the Captain; "I will pay you what you ask; but you must understand one thing, that if you do not do it voluntarily, you shall be forced to do it."

"I must obey the commands of Allah before those of any one else, and Allah forbids me to work on a Friday. It is quite enough to sin on ordinary days, but on a day like this I will think twice before I do wrong! I have no wish to purchase by my own act the coal that will burn me in hell."

"What were you doing, then, just now?" replied the Captain, beginning in his turn to frown. "Weren't you working? It seems to me that a horse is a horse, mine especially, which is a pure-bred Mussulman. Look, don't you recognise him as a *karabak?*"

"A horse is a horse, true; and there is no difference between those which are of pure race; but it is not the same with men. The horse that I have just shod belongs to Ammalat-Beg, and Ammalat-Beg is my Prince."

"Which means that, if you had not obeyed him, he would have cut off your ears, you knave! and you won't work for me, because you don't recognise my right to treat you in the same manner. Very well, my friend, I won't cut off your ears, because it is forbidden to us Christians to do so, but make sure you will receive two hundred lashes on your bare back, if you don't obey me. You understand what I say?"

"I understand."

"Well?"

"Well, as I am a good Mussulman, I answer you the second time as I answered you before: to-day is Friday, and Mussulmans do not work on Fridays."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Since you have worked for the pleasure of your Tartar master, you shall also work for the necessity of a Russian officer. I say necessity, inasmuch as I cannot continue my road unless my horse is shod. Here, soldiers!"

A large circle had already formed round the two disputants; but at this moment the circle became both larger and more crowded, and voices began to be heard among the Tartars, saying—

"No, it ought not to be; it must not be. To-day is a holiday; no work must be done on a Friday."

At the same time several of the farrier's comrades began to pull their *papaks* down over their eyes, and to put their hands on their daggers, drawing closer to the Captain, and shouting to the farrier—

"Don't shoe the Russian's horse, Alikper, don't touch his animal; what you have done for Ammalat-Beg, who is a good Mussulman, you ought not to do for a dog of a Muscovite."

The Captain was a brave man; besides, he knew the Asiatics thoroughly.

"Will you clear the ground, you scum?" he shouted, drawing a pistol from his holsters. "Or, if you stay here, hold your tongues; for, as true as you will all be damned, the first man who utters a word, I will close his lips with a leaden seal."

This threat, backed up as it was by the bayonets of several soldiers, produced its effect. The cowards fled, the bolder stood their ground, but did not utter another word. As for Alikper, seeing that things were going badly for him, he looked to see if there were any means of escape, and, finding none, he muttered some words in Turkish, evidently by way of apology to the Prophet, turned up his sleeves, opened his bag, and, taking out his hammer and iron, prepared to obey.

One thing must be said, namely, that Ammalat-Beg had seen nothing of what had passed. As soon as he perceived the Russians, not wishing to have any disagreeable encounter with them, he had spoken a few words to an old woman who had been his nurse, and who had followed with her eyes the exploits he had just performed with all a mother's fondness, and, jumping on his horse, had taken the road back to his house, which, like an eagle's nest, overlooked the village of Bouinaky.

But, if one of the chief actors in our story had just quitted the scene in one direction, another character, also of some importance, was entering it at the same moment from another.

CHAPTER II

THIS was a horseman of small stature but strongly built. He appeared to belong to the easily recognised tribe of the *Avars;* he wore a breastplate and helmet of mail, a small shield in his left hand, and a sword with straight blade hanging at his side.

The only thing lacking in the costume of the new arrival—a costume which even to-day is exactly the same as that of the Crusaders—was the cross of red cloth worn on the right breast by those mountaineers who have remained faithful to the Christian religion.

The rest, who have become Mussulmans either on compulsion or from conviction, have preserved the same costume, but have removed from it the sign of our Redemption.

This horseman was followed by five *noukers*, or attendants, perfectly armed like himself.

From the dust with which they were covered, and the foam which bathed their horses, it was easy to see that they had made a long and rapid journey.

The first rider, of whom we have given a special description, as he passed slowly by the Russian soldiers, whom he seemed to regard with insulting indifference, rode so close to the rifles that he caught his stirrup in one of the stands and knocked it to the ground.

He continued his course, however, without appearing to notice the accident, while his followers carelessly allowed their horses' feet to step upon the overturned muskets.

The sentry, who from a distance had shouted to the horseman "Keep off!"—an injunction which, as we see, had had little effect—sprang to the bridle of the horse, while the soldiers, regarding themselves as insulted by the contemptuous behaviour of the Mussulmans, began to growl menacingly at them.

"Who are you?" shouted the sentry,

seizing, as we have said, the leader of the little band by his horse's bridle.

"You are new to this country if you have not recognised Ackmeth-Khan of Avaria," the rider replied quietly, snatching his horse's bridle from the sentry's hand. "I imagine, however, that last year near Backli I gave the Russians good cause to remember me."

Then, as he had spoken in Tartar, he turned to one of his followers, and added—

"Translate to these curs, in their own language, what I have just done them the honour to tell them."

The attendant repeated word for word in Russian what Ackmeth-Khan had just said.

"It is Ackmeth-Khan!" shouted the soldiers in chorus. "Seize him; don't let him go now that we have got him; we must avenge the business at Backli."

"Back, wretches!" shouted Ackmeth-Khan, striking the sentry's hand with his whip. "Have you forgotten that I am now a Russian General?"

This time he spoke in such pure Muscovite that the soldiers did not lose a word.

"You mean a Russian traitor!" shouted several soldiers. "Take him to the Captain, or to Colonel Verkovsky at Derbend."

"With such an escort I will go only to hell," said Ackmeth-Khan in a tone of contempt, at the same time making his horse rear on his hind legs, and wheeling him to right and then to left; then, lashing his hind-quarters violently with the whip, he made him spring over the sentry, who was knocked to the ground by the shock.

The attendants put their horses to the gallop and followed their Khan, who rode at full speed for about a hundred yards, then let his horse resume its ordinary pace, and began playing idly with his bridle.

It was only now that the crowd of Tartars gathered round the farrier, who had begun shoeing the Russian Captain's horse, attracted his attention; for, just as the Captain had been unable to see what was going on behind him, so Ackmeth-Khan was ignorant of what had taken place in front of him.

"There seems to be some uproar here," asked the Khan, stopping his horse. "What is the matter, and what is the dispute about?"

"Ah! it is the Khan!" cried the Tartars, and they saluted him respectfully.

Ackmeth-Khan repeated his question.

They told him of the dispute between the Captain and the farrier.

"And you look on, as stolid and stupid as buffaloes, while your brother is being forced to work, your customs are treated with contempt, and your religion trampled under foot!" cried Ackmeth-Khan; "and you whine like old women instead of taking your revenge! Why don't you start crying at once?"

Then he exclaimed thrice in a tone of the most profound contempt—

"Cowards! cowards! cowards!"

"What can we do?" answered several voices. "The Russians have guns and bayonets."

"And haven't you got muskets and bayonets? Shame! shame on suchlike Mussulmans! The sword of Daghestan to quail before the Muscovite whip!"

Their glances kindled.

Ackmeth went on—

"Ah! you are afraid of guns and bayonets, but you are not afraid of disgrace. Set betwixt hell and Siberia, you choose hell. Did your ancestors act thus? Did your fathers think as you do? They did not stop to count their enemies, but marched against them, shouting '*Allah!*' and, if they fell, at least they fell with glory. Do you think the Russians are made of different metal from yourselves? Have their guns never turned anything but their mouths towards you? You attack the ox by his horns, dastards! You catch scorpions by their tails, cowards!"

And, as he had done before, he repeated thrice—

"Cowards! cowards! cowards!"

This time the reproach struck the Tartars full in the face.

"He is right, Ackmeth is right," they shouted. "We are fools to allow the Russians to act like this. To the farrier's rescue! To Alikper's rescue!"

And they began to crowd in a more threatening manner than ever round the soldiers, in the middle of whom the farrier was shoeing the Captain's horse.

The revolt was growing.

Satisfied with having brought things to this point, and not wishing to compromise himself in so petty an affair, Ackmeth-Khan left two of his followers to encourage the Tartars, and, followed by the other three, took the steep road up the mountain that led to the house of Ammalat-Beg.

The latter had reached home, and was smoking his *khalian*, reclining on a divan.

Seeing Ackmeth-Khan appear at the threshold of his door, he rose, and went to meet him.

"May you be victor!" said Ackmeth to Ammalat.

This Tcherkess compliment of welcome was pronounced with an accent of such significance that Ammalat-Beg, after embracing Ackmeth-Khan, asked him—

"Is it a joke or a prediction, my dear guest, that you have just addressed to me?"

"That depends upon yourself, and will be as it suits you. The heir to the Principality of Tarkovsky has but to draw his sword in order to——"

"To never replace it in the sheath, Khan!"

Then he continued, with a shake of the head—

"It would be a bad business for me, and it would be better to remain in peaceful and undisputed ownership of Bouinaky than to hide in the mountains as an outlaw."

"Or as a lion, Ammalat! Lions also inhabit the mountains in order to be free."

The young man sighed.

"Better to dream always and not to wake, Ackmeth. I am asleep, awake me not."

"'Tis the Russians who serve you the opium that puts you to sleep, and, while you sleep, another gathers the golden fruit in your orchard."

"What can I do with the small forces at my command?"

"Force lies in the soul, Ammalat. Only be daring, and everything will yield before you."

Then, stooping to his ear, he went on—

"Listen! a voice is calling to you, as it does to me, to awake; it is the voice of victory."

Just at that moment the sound of brisk firing reached the two Princes.

At the same instant Sophyr-Ali entered the room, pale, and with a look of consternation on his face.

"Do you hear, *Chamkal?*" said he. "Bouinaky is in insurrection. The mob is surrounding the Russian regiment, and the Tartars are firing on the soldiers."

"Ah! the villains!" cried Ammalat-Beg, springing towards his gun. "How dared they act without me? Run on in front, Sophyr-Ali; command them in my name to be quiet, and shoot down the first man that disobeys."

"I tried to calm them," answered the young man, "but they would not listen. Ackmeth-Khan's attendants are with them, and excite them by crying, 'Shoot down the Russians!'"

"Did my followers really shout that?" asked Ackmeth-Khan, smiling.

"Not only so, but they set the example by being the first to fire," said Sophyr-Ali.

"In that case, they are brave fellows," said Ackmeth, "and understand at a word what is said to them."

"What have you done, Khan Ackmeth?" cried Ammalat-Beg, sadly.

"What I should have done many a long day since."

"What answer am I to make now to the Russians?" asked the young Prince.

"Answer them with the bullet and the dagger. Fate is working on your behalf, lucky rebel! Come, out with our swords, and let us fall upon the Russians."

"They are here!" cried the Russian Captain, in a voice of thunder, as he dashed into the room, accompanied by two of his men, with such rapidity had he climbed the slope of the mountain leading to the house of Ammalat.

Then, turning to his two men—

"Guard the doors," said he, "and let no one go out."

The soldiers obeyed.

Disturbed by this unexpected rising, in which he might quite possibly be implicated, although he had not taken the slightest part in it, Ammalat went up to the Captain, and, in a friendly tone, which contrasted with the angry accents of the latter, asked him in Tartar—

"Do you bring peace to my house, my brother?"

"I don't know what I bring to your house," said the Captain, "but I know what reception I have met with in the village; I have been treated as an enemy, and your men have fired on the soldiers of my—your—our common Emperor."

"They have done wrong to fire on the Russians," said Ackmeth-Khan, reclining carelessly on the cushions of the divan, and drawing a mouthful of smoke from the *khalian* abandoned by Ammalat; "they have done very wrong if each shot they have fired has not brought down its man."

"Look, there is the cause of all the

mischief, Ammalat!" said the Captain, pointing angrily at Ackmeth-Khan. "But for him, all would be quiet at Bouinaky. Truly, you are charming fellow, Ammalat. You call yourself the friend of the Russians, and you welcome their foe as a guest! you hide him as an accomplice! Ammalat-Beg, in the name of the Emperor, I demand that you surrender this man to me."

"Captain," replied Ammalat, in a quiet but firm voice, "you know that, with us, the guest is sacred. It would be a crime to deliver up my guest; do not demand it. Respect our customs, or, if need be, respect my entreaty."

"I say to you, in my turn, Ammalat, duty before customs; the rights of hospitality are sacred, but an oath is more sacred still. Our oath forbids us to screen from justice even our brother, if our brother is a criminal."

"I would sooner betray my brother than my guest, Captain. Besides, it is not your business to dictate to me my line of conduct. If I sin, Allah and the Padishah shall judge me. The Prophet may protect the Khan in the plain or in the mountains. Once there, it is not my business to look after him; but here, beneath my roof, I am bound to protect him, and," added the young Prince, in a firm tone, "protect him I will."

"Then you make yourself answerable for a traitor?" asked the Captain.

Khan Ackmeth had taken no part in the dispute, and was quietly smoking his *khalian* as though the person under discussion were not himself, but some one else. At the word "traitor," however, he sprang rather than rose to his feet, and approaching the Captain, observed—

"You say I am a traitor; it would be nearer the truth to say I wished to turn traitor to those to whom I am bound to remain faithful. The Russian Padishah has conferred rank upon me, and I have been grateful to him, so long as he did not demand from me what was impossible. He wanted me to allow Russian troops in Avaria, and that fortresses should be built there. What would you have called me, then, if I had betrayed the blood and the freedom of those of whom Allah has made me Chief and father? But, even if I had been willing to do so, I could never have succeeded; a thousand daggers would have pierced my heart, the very rocks would have torn themselves from their foundations, and rolled upon my head. I withdrew from the friendship of the Russians, but I was not yet their enemy. What reward did I receive for my patience? I was insulted by a letter from one of your Generals. This insult cost him dear at Backli. For a few words written by him, I shed a whole river of blood, and this river of blood separates me from you for ever."

"Well, that blood cries for vengeance," said the Captain, furiously; "and that vengeance you shall not escape."

And he made a movement to seize Ackmeth-Khan by the throat.

But, before his hand had touched the Mountain-Chief, the latter's poniard was buried to the hilt in his body.

The Captain, without breathing a word or uttering a gasp, fell dead upon the carpet.

Then, with the same rapidity, drawing his pistol from his belt, and snatching Ammalat-Beg's from his, Ackmeth-Khan with two shots, swift as lightning, deadly as the thunderbolt, stretched at his feet the two Russians who were guarding the door.

Ammalat-Beg had witnessed this triple murder without having had time to prevent it.

"You have ruined me, Ackmeth," he said sadly. "This man was a Russian, and my guest to boot."

"There are insults which the roof does protect, Prince," said the Khan. "But this is not the time for discussion; close the doors, summon your men, and march upon the enemy."

"An hour ago they were not my enemies," said Ammalat-Beg, "and how would you have me march against them now? I have neither powder nor shot, and my people are dispersed."

"The Russians, the Russians!" cried Sophyr-Ali, rushing in and turning pale with terror at the sight of the three dead bodies.

"Come with me, Ammalat," said Ackmeth. "I was on my way to Tchetchina, to rouse it to revolt along the frontier. What will happen, God only knows, but in the mountains there are bread and water, powder and bullets; these are all that a mountaineer needs. Do you agree?"

"Let us go, then," replied Ammalat, in a determined tone. "Besides, there is nothing left for me but flight. You are right, it is no time for recriminations and

reproaches. My horse, Sophyr-Ali, and six attendants to follow me——"

"You will take me too, will you not?" said the young man, interrupting him with tears in his eyes.

"No. You, my dear Sophyr, remain here to see that my house is not pillaged. Give my wife my parting greeting, and take her back to her father. Do not forget. Farewell!"

And as Ackmeth-Khan and Ammalat went out by one door, the Russians entered by the other.

CHAPTER III

THE sultry noon of a day in spring lay heavy on all the land of Caucasus. The cries of the Mullahs were summoning the inhabitants of Tchetchina to prayer, and their monotonous chant, after awaking a brief echo from the rocks, gradually died away in the still air.

The Mullah Hadji-Soleiman, a pious Turk, who had been sent by the Council of Stamboul into the mountains to confirm the true faith among the mountaineers, and at the same time to incite them to revolt against the Russians, was taking his repose on the roof of the Mosque after performing his ablutions and his prayers. He had not long been chosen as Mullah of the village of Tchetchen-Tgalis, which no doubt was the reason why he was engaged in such solemn contemplation of his beard, and of the rings of smoke that issued from his pipe.

From time to time, also, his eye rested with a look of satisfaction on the dark mouths of two or three caverns hollowed in the rock just opposite to him.

On his left lay the crests which separate Tchetchina from Avaria, and, further off, the snowy peaks of the Caucasus. The huts scattered along the slopes came tumbling like waterfalls halfway down the mountain side, and then stopped, forming a natural fortress inaccessible, except by precipitous paths, which constituted a very ark of liberty for the mountaineers.

The village and its neighbouring mountains wore a peaceful appearance; not a soul was to be seen on the roads or in the streets. The flocks of sheep had sought shade in the ravines, the buffaloes were herded together in a narrow and muddy stream, and lay in the slime, showing only their heads above the water. The light hum of insects, the monotonous cry of the cricket, were the only signs of life afforded by Nature amid the gloomy silence of the mountains, and Hadji-Soleiman, lying beneath the shade of the cupola, admired, with the quietude that belongs only to dreamy peoples, the passive splendour of Nature, so completely in harmony with Mussulman idleness. Scarcely did he blink his eyes, in the vacant expression of which the sun's light seemed to have died out, when, through this apparent vacuity, he saw two horsemen climbing the mountain opposite to that in which the caverns were hollowed.

"Nephtali!" cried the Mullah, turning to the hut nearest to the Mosque, at the door of which stood a horse ready saddled.

On hearing this call, a handsome Circassian with a short beard and wearing on his head a *papak* which covered half his face, appeared in the street.

"I see two horsemen," continued the Mullah; "they are going to pass outside the village."

"They are Jews or Armenians," answered Nephtali. "They want to do without a guide from motives of economy, and they will break their necks in the path where they now are; none but wild goats and the best riders in Tchetchina pass along that road."

"No, Brother Nephtali," said the Mullah; "I have made two journeys to Mecca, and I know the Jews and the Armenians thoroughly. These horsemen belong to neither of those two nations. If they were Jews or Armenians, they would be travelling on business, and would have baggage with them; but look for yourself, your eyes are young, and, consequently, surer than mine. In my younger days," continued the Mullah, "I could count the buttons on a Russian soldier's uniform at a distance of more than half a mile, and the bullet which I fired at the infidel never missed its mark; but to-day, at the same distance, I can hardly distinguish a buffalo from a horse."

And he uttered a sigh.

While he was speaking to himself rather than to his companion, the latter had rapidly climbed up beside him and

was looking at the travellers, who continued to approach.

"The day is hot and the journey is fatiguing," said the Mullah; "invite these two travellers to refresh themselves and rest their horses. Perhaps they may know some news. The Koran bids us welcome travellers."

"Even before the Koran had penetrated our mountains," said Nephtali, "no traveller ever left the village without resting there and being fed, nor bade us farewell without his blessing, nor set out without a guide for the remainder of his journey; however, I suspect these two travellers. Why do they shun honest folk, and, instead of passing through the village, keep beyond it at the risk of their lives?"

"At any rate, I think they must be fellow-countrymen," said Hadji-Soleiman, placing his hands over his eyes to shield them from the sun's rays. "They wear the Tchetchen garb; perhaps they are returning from the expedition on which your father has gone with a hundred of our men, or perhaps they are two brethren united by an oath who are going to avenge blood by blood."

"No, Soleiman," said the young man, shaking his head; "no, those two men do not belong to us; no mountaineer would come here expressly to boast of a fight with the Russians and to show his weapons. Neither are they *Abrecks;** for they would not draw their *bachliks* (hoods) over their faces, not even if they were passing through the midst of the most implacable enemies. Dress is sometimes deceptive, Hadji; who can tell that they are not Russian deserters? It is not long since a Cossack escaped from the village of Goumbet after killing the master of the house where he was living, and stealing his horse and weapons. The devil is very cunning, and the strongest often yield to temptation."

"There is no strength where faith is weak, Nephtali; but wait, I see ringlets beneath the *papak* of the second horseman."

"May I be ground to powder if you are not right!" cried Nephtali. "That man is a Russian, or, worse still, a *Shyite*† Tartar. Wait, wait, I'll curl his ringlets for him. I will be back in half an hour, Soleiman. In half an hour either they will be our guests, or one of us will know what is the depth of the precipice."

Nephtali descended the staircase quickly, took his gun, sprang into the saddle, and set off at a gallop towards the mountains, paying heed neither to ravines nor rocks. From a distance the pebbles could be seen flying like dust beneath the heels of the intrepid horseman.

"*Allah akbar!*" said the Hadji, proudly, as he relighted his pipe, which had gone out.

Nephtali had soon overtaken the two horsemen. Their horses, dead-beat, and covered with foam, moistened with their sweat the narrow path by which they were climbing the mountain. The one who rode in front wore a coat of mail, the other a Tcherkess dress; but, instead of the sword, out of keeping with this costume, a Persian sabre hung from the rich belt that encircled his waist. It was impossible to see their faces, over which their *bachliks* were drawn, either to protect them from the sun, or because they did not wish to be recognised.

Nephtali rode for some time behind them along the narrow path skirting the precipice; but, as soon as the road became a little wider, he passed in front of them and barred their passage.

"*Salam aleikoum!*" said he, laying his loaded musket across his saddle.

The first of the two strangers raised his *bachlik*, but only enough to allow him to see without being seen.

"*Aleikoum salam!*" replied he, disengaging his musket in his turn and rising in his stirrups.

"May God protect your journey!" continued Nepthali, preparing to slay the traveller to whom he wished Divine protection, on the first hostile movement that he saw him make.

"And you," replied the stranger in the coat of mail, "may God give you sense, so you may not in future cross the path of travellers. What do you want, comrade?"

"I offer you repose, and food, and stabling for your horses. My house is always open to travellers, whose blessing multiplies a man's flocks and herds. Do not let the reproach fall on our village that it is one of those by which the traveller passes without staying."

* *Abrecks* are mountaineers who have taken an oath to go in search of danger, and who, consequently, take no sort of precaution to avoid it.

† Mussulmans are divided into two hostile sects, Sunnites and Shyites; Nephtali and Soleiman are Sunnites.

"Thank you, brother; but we have not come into the mountain to pay visits; we are pressed for time."

"Be careful!" replied Nephtali; "you are running in the face of danger, if you go without a guide."

"A guide?" said the traveller, laughing; "a guide in the Caucasus? Why, I know the mountains better than any of you; I have been to heights which neither jaguars nor serpents reach, to which only the eagles mount. Make way for us, comrade; your house lies not on our road, and I have no time to waste in chattering to you."

"I shall not stir a step until I know your name," replied the young man.

"You may thank Heaven, Nephtali, that I know your father, and have often marched to battle by his side. But out of the way, or, spite of the friendship I bear him, your mother will weep to-morrow, when she sees her son's flesh between the teeth of jackals and the beaks of eagles. Unworthy son! you infest the roads trying to pick a quarrel with travellers when your father's bones are bleaching on the Russian plain, and the Cossack women are selling his weapons! Nephtali, your father was slain yesterday on the other side of the Terek! Now, since you would know who I am, recognise me."

"Sultan Ackmeth-Khan!" cried the young Tchetchen, agitated both by the news he had just heard and by the stern glance of the traveller.

"Yes, I am Ackmeth-Khan," replied the Prince; "but remember, Nephtali, if you say to any man 'I have seen the Khan of Avaria,' my vengeance shall pursue your descendants to the latest generation."

The young man drew aside respectfully, and the travellers rode past him.

Ackmeth-Khan relapsed into the silence out of which Nepthali's appearance on the scene had drawn him. Gloomy recollections occupied his thoughts. The second traveller, Ammalat-Beg—for it was he—was, like the Khan, pensive and silent. Their garments bore the traces of recent fighting, their moustaches were singed with powder, and drops of blood had dried on their faces. But Ackmeth's haughty glance seemed to defy all nature; a contemptuous smile curled his lips.

As for Ammalat-Beg, his features denoted fatigue. He scarcely glanced around him; from time to time the pain of his wounded hand forced from him a sigh.

The gait of his horse, unaccustomed to the mountains, made him both impatient and weary.

He was the first to break the silence.

"Why did you refuse that worthy young fellow's invitation?" he inquired of the Khan of Avaria. "We should have stopped for an hour or two."

"You think and talk like a child, my dear Ammalat," replied the Khan. "You are accustomed to rule Tartars and order them about like slaves, and you think mountaineers are to be treated in the same fashion. The hand of fate lies heavy on us; we are beaten and pursued; more than a hundred mountaineers, your followers and mine, have fallen beneath the Russian bullets. Do you want us to show the Tchetchens the defeated face of Ackmeth-Khan, the face that they are accustomed to regard as the star of victory? Do you want me to appear before them as an outlaw? that I should confess my own shame? That I should receive a beggar's hospitality, should hear myself reproached with the death of their husbands and sons drawn by me into this fight, would be to forfeit all their confidence. With time their tears will be dried; then will Ackmeth-Khan appear again among them, preaching pillage and slaughter, and lead them afresh to battle on the Russian frontiers. Were I to appear to-day before the despondent Tchetchens, they would forget that it is Allah alone who gives and withholds victory. They might insult me by an imprudent word, and I have never forgiven an insult. Then some paltry personal vengeance might bar the wide road which I shall one day open in the Russian ranks. Why quarrel uselessly with a brave people? Why dethrone with my own hand the glorious idol which they are wont to look at with dazzled eyes? If I descend to the rank of ordinary men, each will come and measure shoulders with me. And you yourself, who need a surgeon, you will never find a better one than with me. To-morrow we shall be at home; keep up your courage until then."

Ammalat-Beg placed his hand on his heart and forehead in token of gratitude; he recognised the soundness of the Khan's words, but he was growing weak from loss of blood.

Still continuing to avoid the villages, they passed the night among the rocks, eating a little rice and honey, provisions without which no mountaineer ever undertakes a journey, no matter how short. They crossed the Koassou by the bridge thrown over it near Scherté, and left behind them in succession Ande, Boulins, and the crest of Salatahour. The road passed by forests and precipices terrifying to eye and mind alike. At last they began to climb the crest which separated them on the north from Khunsack, the capital of the Khans. In order to reach the summit of this crest, the travellers were obliged to follow diagonal lines, returning continually on their tracks, but gaining a little in the ascent at each turn. The Khan's horse, a mountain-born animal, and accustomed to these precipitous paths, stepped cautiously; but Ammalat's young and fiery steed stumbled and faltered at every stride. A favourite of his master, by whom he had been spoilt, he could not endure this rough journey over the mountains. Beneath the blazing sun and amid the snows he could scarcely draw his breath, and his nostrils, dilated with his desperate efforts, seemed to breathe forth flame, while the foam streamed from his bit.

"Allah be praised!" cried Ammalat-Beg, when they reached the culminating point of the range, from which their glance could embrace the whole of Avaria.

But at that very moment his horse broke down utterly; the blood rushed in torrents from the noble animal's mouth, and his last groan burst his girths.

The Khan helped Ammalat-Beg to free his feet from the stirrups, but he observed with uneasiness that in the fall which Ammalat had just sustained, his handkerchief had become detached from the wound, and that the blood, which it had been so difficult to stanch, had begun to flow once more.

This time, however, it was not his wound that Ammalat felt; he was lamenting the death of his horse.

A drop suffices to make the full cup overflow.

"You will never carry me again, my good steed," he cried, "like a feather in the wind, neither in clouds of dust over the race-course, where I ever heard the shouts of the competitors whom I outstripped, nor amid the cries of warriors, in the flame and smoke of battle. With you I won glory as a horseman; why am I condemned to survive my glory and your loss?"

And he buried his head between his knees and fell silent, while the Khan bound up his wound. At last, noticing the care his companion was bestowing on him, he suddenly broke out—

"Leave me, Ackmeth-Khan, leave an unhappy man to his bad fortune. The journey is long and my strength fails me. If you stay with me you will perish with me to no purpose. See yonder eagle circling round us; it knows that it will soon hold my heart between its claws, and, thank God! better to have a grave in the breast of a noble bird than be trampled underfoot by Christians. Farewell, go!"

"Are you not ashamed, Ammalat, to make such an ado about nothing? What is your wound? What is a dead horse? Your wound will be healed in a week. Your horse—we will find you a better one. Misfortune comes from Allah, but happiness comes from him likewise. It is a crime to despair when one is young. Mount my horse, I will lead him by the bridle, and we shall be at home ere night. Come, each moment is precious; time is dear."

"Time exists for me no longer, Ackmeth-Khan," replied the young man. "I thank you for your brotherly concern, but I will not abuse it. We have still too far to go, and we cannot travel such a distance. Leave me, then, to my fate. On these heights, which take me close to heaven, I shall die free and happy. My father is dead; I have married a wife whom I do not love; my uncle and my father-in-law are under the heel of the Russians. Outlawed from my home, a fugitive from the battle-field, I ought not and I do not wish to live."

"It is fever, and not you, that speaks, Ammalat; your words are delirious. Are we not destined to survive our parents? As for your wife, does not our holy religion give you the right to take three others? That you detest the Prince I understand; but you ought to love his inheritance, which will one day make you free and a Prince. A dead man has no need of wealth and power; a dead man can no longer be revenged, and you have to revenge yourself upon the Russians. Be yourself again, if only for

that. We are beaten; are we the first who have experienced a reverse? To-day, the Russians are victorious; it will be our turn to-morrow. Allah gives happiness, but man creates his own renown. You are wounded and weak, but I am sound and strong. You are sinking under fatigue, but I am as fresh and active as a man who has not yet crossed the threshold of his door and who has just put on his sandals and girded his loins. Mount my horse, Ammalat, and, as true as that eagle was not there to devour your heart—for, see, it flies away and disappears—so surely will we make the Russians pay dearly for our defeat of yesterday."

The face of Ammalet-Beg brightened. "Well, yes," said he, "you are right. I will live for vengeance—a vengeance, it may be secret, it may be open, but in any case stern, implacable, and deadly. Believe me, Ackmeth-Khan, it is for vengeance that I cling to life. Henceforth I am yours alone; I swear it by my father's grave. Guide my steps, direct my blows, and, should I ever forget my oath, remind me of this moment, of my dead steed, my wounded hand, the eagle hovering above my head. Should I slumber, I will awake, and my dagger shall flash like the lightning."

Khan-Ackmeth embraced the young man, raised him in his arms like a child, and placed him in the saddle.

"And now," said he, "I recognise in you the pure blood of the Emirs, that blood which flows in our veins like saltpetre, and which, once it catches fire, lays low the very mountains. Come, Ammalat-Beg, and I swear by Mahomet that every word I have promised you shall be fulfilled."

And, supporting the wounded man as he went, Khan-Ackmeth began to descend the mountain. The stones rolled from beneath their feet, and more than once the horse fell, but at last they arrived in safety at the level where vegetation began once more.

Soon afterwards they entered a forest containing several different kinds of trees. The richness of the forest growth and the gloomy stillness of the eternal twilight which reigned beneath this vault of verdure impenetrable by the rays of the sun, inspired a feeling of awe and reverence for the wild freedom of Nature.

At times the path was lost among the trees, at times it followed the edge of a precipice in the depths of which gleamed a murmuring stream. Scarlet-throated pheasants flew from bush to bush. Everything breathed that reviving freshness of evening unknown to dwellers in the plain.

Our travellers had almost reached the village of Akhak, which is only separated from Khunsack by a small acclivity, when they heard the report of a gun.

They stopped in some uneasiness.

But suddenly Ackmeth-Khan observed: "They are my hunters; they do not expect me at this hour, and especially in this condition; I bring to Khunsack much joy and much grief as well."

Ackmeth-Khan bowed his head and sighed, and his brow clouded.

Sweet and bitter sentiments succeed each other so easily in the heart of an Asiatic!

A second report was heard, and then a third; then the reports succeeded one another without intermission.

"The Russians are at Khunsack!" cried Ammalat. And drawing his sword, he gripped his horse with his knees as though he would have cleared at a bound the distance that separated him from them.

But the effort exhausted his strength, his sabre escaped from his wounded hand and fell to the ground.

He employed the little strength that remained to him in dismounting from his horse.

"Ackmeth-Khan," said he, "hasten to the succour of your compatriots; your presence will be more valuable to them than a reinforcement of a hundred horse."

But Ackmeth-Khan did not hear him; he was listening to the whistling of the bullets as though he were trying to distinguish the shots of the Russians from those of his own warriors.

"By what road have they come down?" he cried. "Have they the feet of the wild goat or the wings of the eagle? Farewell, Ammalat, I am going to die in the ruins of my fortresses."

But, at this moment, a bullet fell at his feet. He picked it up, smiled, and then said quietly—

"Get on my horse again, Ammalat. You shall soon know what is the meaning of this; the Russian bullets are made of lead, and these are of copper."

Then, looking at the bullet, he remarked—

"Thou dear compatriot! This bullet has come from a quarter whence the Russians can never come—the south."

They continued to climb the hill which separated them from Khunsack. When they reached the summit, they overlooked a veritable field of battle, beyond which rose the village of Khunsack, itself dominated by the two towers of Ackmeth's Castle.

Some hundred men, divided into two parties, ambuscaded in the houses which either stood out in front of the masses of rock or were entrenched behind them, were firing upon each other, while the women, without veils, their children in their arms, their hair flying in the wind, were running between the combatants and encouraging them.

Ammalat looked in astonishment at this spectacle, and directed a glance of inquiry at the Khan.

"What would you?" said the latter, shrugging his shoulders. "It is a custom with us. In the plain, if a man has a grudge against another, he gives him a blow with his dagger and the matter is ended; in the mountains, one man's quarrel is the quarrel of everybody. What is the cause of all this uproar? A trifle, perhaps; some cow stolen. With us, it is no disgrace to steal, the disgrace consists in being caught, that is all. Admire the courage of those women, Ammalat," said the Khan, with growing excitement, as he sniffed the powder with dilated nostrils. "The bullets whistle in their ears, death beats his wings above their heads, and they laugh at him. Truly they are worthy mothers and wives of brave men, and it would be a pity if misfortune happened to them! I am just in time to put a stop to this sport."

And taking his gun, he advanced to the extreme edge of the mountain and discharged his weapon in the air.

At the sound of this report coming from quite an unlooked-for quarter, the combatants turned in astonishment.

Then, with his left hand, Ackmeth lowered his *bachlik*.

A loud shout arose from all sides. The combatants had recognised him.

"Keep your powder and your balls for the Russians," he shouted to them. "Don't fire another shot. I will judge your dispute and give justice to him who is in the right, and punishment to him who is in fault."

But it did not require the Khan's order to bring the combat to a close; the joy at seeing him again was so great that all resentment seemed forgotten. Men and women rushed towards him shouting—

"Long live Ackmeth-Khan!"

"That is right, my children!" said Ackmeth to them. "To-morrow I will come down to the Square and speak to the old men; but I bring with me a wounded friend who needs prompt succour; do not delay me, then, for he can only find this succour at my house."

And, in truth, Ammalat-Beg could now only vaguely see what was taking place. He had let go the bridle the better to hold himself in the saddle.

In a moment a litter was constructed with the muskets, still blackened with powder and hot with firing. Friends and foes united to spread their *bourkas* on it. The wounded man was placed upon the litter, and Ackmeth-Khan remounted his horse, as befitted a Prince returning to his fortress.

Thus Ammalat-Beg, now completely unconscious, was laid upon the rich carpets of the Khan's dwelling.

CHAPTER IV

IT was not till the following day that the wounded man recovered consciousness. Then his thoughts returned to him like phantoms floating in the mist. He remembered nothing, nor did he feel any pain. He found the situation pleasant rather than the reverse, a gentle torpor which obliterated all sensation, and consequently all sadness, from his life.

With equal indifference he would have listened to the announcement, whether of life or death. He had neither the strength nor the desire to utter a word. Had his existence depended on a movement of his finger, he would not have taken the trouble to stir that finger.

This condition, however, did not last long. At noon, after the doctor's visit, and when all the Khan's servants were at prayer, and the Khan himself, in accordance with his declaration of the previous evening, had gone down to the Great Square, Ammalet-Beg, thus left alone, thought he heard light and timid footsteps

on the carpet of the room which adjoined his own.

With an effort he tried to turn round, and no doubt was successful, for he seemed to see—though he was too weak to distinguish fancy from reality—the curtain of his room raised, and a girl with dark eyes, in a robe of yellow silk, over which was fastened a red *arkalouk*, ornamented with enamel buttons, and long hair falling over her shoulders, approach his bed softly, and bend over him to look at his injured hand. This she did with such a sweet and tender solicitude, that Ammalat-Beg felt a hot wave surge through all his frame at the sound of her breath and the touch of her garments. Then she poured the contents of a phial into a little silver cup, passed her arm beneath his head, raised it, and—— Ammalat neither felt nor saw anything more; his dull eyelids had closed again; all his faculties seemed to be concentrated into the single sense of hearing.

He listened, and the rustling of the girl's dress seemed to him as the beating of an angel's wings. Only—the angel flew away.

All became still and silent once more; and, when Ammalat opened his eyes again, he was alone, and found it impossible to clothe his imagination in any substantial form. Fragments of thought, floating like clouds in the vastness of space, lost themselves in feverish dreams, and, as soon as he could utter a word, he said to himself—

"It was but a dream."

But in this he was mistaken. She whom he believed to be but the creation of his delirium was a girl of sixteen, Ackmeth-Khan's daughter.

Among the Mountaineers, even those who are Mussulmans, girls enjoy in regard to the male sex an infinitely greater freedom than married women do, albeit the Mahometan laws prescribe exactly the contrary.

Now Ackmeth's daughter enjoyed a freedom all the more unrestricted since it was only in her company that her father rested from his toils; it was only when near her that his countenance relaxed into a smile. It was the salvation of the criminal when the young Princess was present at the trial; the uplifted axe was arrested in mid-air. To her everything was conceded. Ackmeth could not refuse her smallest request, and the suspicion had never entered his head that the innocent maiden could do anything unworthy of her duty or unbecoming her position. Besides, who was likely to inspire her with those tender sentiments that lead a girl to act foolishly? Her father had never hitherto entertained a guest who was her equal in birth; and, indeed, her feelings had never troubled her in regard either to the rank or the age of her father's visitors. The reason was, no doubt, that she had hardly yet emerged from childhood. But since last night she had felt she had a heart. When, that evening, she threw herself upon her father's neck, she had seen a young and handsome man fall unconscious at her feet. Her first feeling had been one of fear, and she had averted her eyes from the wounded man. But after her father had told her the circumstances in which Ammalat had become his guest, she had cast a glance at the young man in which a tender pity was expressed; then, when the surgeon had declared that this alarming prostration was only the result of loss of blood, and not of the serious nature of the wound, the girl was seized with a feeling of tender compassion towards him. Might not the leech be mistaken? Was not this severe and terrible wound more dangerous than he thought? Haunted by this fear, she went to her couch. All night long, in her dreams, she saw the handsome youth covered with blood. More than once she suddenly opened her eyes in the darkness, thinking she heard him groan; and when she rose next morning, found herself for the first time in her life less fresh than the dawn itself. For the first time she employed artifice to accomplish her desires. Her father was in Ammalat's room, and she chose that moment for bidding him good morning. But Ammalat's eyes were closed, and she could not see them. At noon she returned. Ammalat was alone, but the young Prince's dazed eyes closed on perceiving her. The poor child was in despair; he must have such beautiful eyes, she thought. Never in her childhood had she coveted rich jewels, but she would have given two diamonds as large as her own eyes, could she but see those eyes open, which she thought must surely flash with all the fire of diamonds.

In the evening she came back yet

again. Then, for the first time, she encountered the feeble but bright and expressive glance of the sick man; and once she had met his look, its meaning was plain to her for ever.

She understood perfectly what those eyes were saying to her: "Shine on, star of my soul! You are my sole, my only light, and if you disappear, everything will be plunged in darkness!"

She could not understand the change that had taken place in herself; yet she hardly knew whether she were still on earth or already transported to heaven. Never before had she experienced what she was feeling now. The blood flew to her heart so swiftly she thought it would choke her, and quitted it so suddenly she thought she was going to die.

She had seen Ammalat's eyes, and had discovered the fact that they were the most beautiful in the world. Now she wanted to hear his voice. But Ammalat remained dumb. Entirely absorbed in his thoughts, it did not occur to him to speak. What could he have said that his eyes did not convey as clearly as his voice?

In a girl's mind one desire gives birth to another. Possessing such beautiful eyes, he must surely have a very sweet voice too. What a misfortune not to have heard its sound!

Then the thought occurred to her that, if Ammalat did not speak, it was no doubt because he was too weak to do so; and if he was too weak to speak, the wound must certainly be dangerous—more so than the surgeon would allow.

She certainly could not leave his room with this fear agitating her mind; she determined therefore that she would be the first to speak. What could be easier? It was only right she should inquire about his health.

You would have to be a Tartar, and to regard a word spoken to a woman as an insult offered to her, and to have seen nothing of a woman except a veil, and through the veil two eyebrows—possibly the eyes shaded by these eyebrows,—in order to have any idea of the emotion which throbbed in Ammalat's veins when the girl's voice struck his heart, already pierced by her eyes.

And yet the words of Sultanetta—that was her name—were very commonplace.

"How are you?" she had asked.

"Oh! quite well," replied Ammalat, trying to raise himself on his elbow; "so well, that I am ready to die."

"Allah preserve you!" cried the girl in a terrified voice. "You must live a long while yet. Should you not be sorry to die?"

"In moments of sweetness death itself is sweet, Sultanetta, and, were I to live a hundred years, I should never have a sweeter moment than this."

Sultanetta did not understand her guest's words, but she understood fully the expression of his glance, and the tone of his voice. She blushed vividly, and, motioning to the wounded man to lie down and rest, ran out of the room.

Among the mountaineers there are certain surgeons who possess great skill, especially in regard to the treatment of wounds. They possess recipes for the healing of sores that are unknown to the world in general, and that appear to be mysterious revelations of Nature; but the presence of the charming Sultanetta was a more efficacious remedy in the case of Ammalat than those of any doctor. At night he fell asleep with the sweet hope that she would appear to him in his dreams; in the morning he woke with the certainty of seeing her in the flesh. He gained strength rapidly, and, with his growing strength, there grew likewise an undefined sentiment, the same which he had experienced from the day that he first saw Ackmeth-Khan's daughter, and which had now taken root in his heart in such fashion that it would never leave it.

Ammalat-Beg, as we have said, was married; but his marriage had been brought about as marriages in the East generally are. Until his wedding-day he had never seen his intended bride; and, when he did see her, he thought her ugly, and all the sentiments of youth and love that lurked in his heart remained entirely undisturbed. Following upon that had come political quarrels with his uncle and his father-in-law. Affection, which among Orientals is based solely upon passion, had gradually died away altogether; so that, when his eyes rested upon Sultanetta, he had not to demand of his heart the sacrifice of even the remnants of a former love. The young man had been married, but his heart was still virgin. Naturally ardent, and by habit independent, Ammalat surrendered himself utterly to the sentiment which he experienced. To be with Sultanetta was for him supreme

happiness; the waiting for her coming absorbed his whole time when she was absent. He trembled at the sound of her step, and when he recognised her voice. Each tone of that voice penetrated his being with enchantment, that he felt was near akin to pain; but it was a pain so sweet, a calamity so full of charm, that he thought he must die in the absence of this pain.

Doubtless the two young people, unaware themselves of their own true feelings, gave to this undefined sentiment the name of friendship; for they were allowed full liberty, and were continually together. Khan-Ackmeth made frequent journeys to Avaria, leaving his guest in his daughter's company. He was perhaps the only person who had observed that they loved each other; but this fact crowned all his wishes. A previous marriage, as he had said to Ammalat, counts for nothing with a Mussulman, who is allowed to have four wives. Besides, he knew how little affection existed between the young married couple. To become father-in-law to Ammalat, the heir to the Principality of Tarkovsky, to a man who could be of such important service to him in his war against the Russians, was more than a desire for Ackmeth; it was an ambition.

As for the two lovers, they entered into no calculations; we might almost say that they had no desires. They lived in happiness, asking for nothing more, having no thought that this happiness might come to an end. The days passed without their knowing how, in gazing through the window at the mountains, the flocks on their summits, the rivers at their base.

When Sultanetta was working at the embroidery for her father's saddle, Ammalat reclined by her side upon his cushions, and related the adventures of his youth, but most frequently remained with his eyes fixed upon hers, without uttering a word. He neither thought of the past, nor dreamed of the future. All he knew was that he was happy, and, without removing the cup from his lips, he tasted drop by drop the greatest happiness that man can find upon earth, —the delight of loving, and of being loved. Thus the summer wore away.

One morning, one of the Khan's shepherds arrived in a state of the direst terror. At daybreak a tiger had emerged from the forest, and, crawling up to the flock like a cat, had sprung upon a sheep, and carried it off.

The shepherd was telling this story in the courtyard to the attendants who had gathered round him.

"Very well," said the Khan. "Is there any one who would like to kill the tiger? If so, let him take my best and finest gun, and if he kills the tiger, the weapon shall be his."

One of the Khan's attendants, an excellent shot, came forward, selected among all the Khan's weapons the one that suited him best, and said—

"I will go."

The Khan went into the house, and related the incident to Ammalat and Sultanetta, but the young people were so occupied with each other that neither appeared to hear a word of what Ackmeth said.

Next day they waited vainly for the *nouker's* return. It was the young shepherd who returned.

The boy related that, when the *nouker* reached the mountain towards evening, he had found the track of the tiger. Next morning before dawn he had ensconced himself on the path which the animal had taken when he quitted covert to carry off the sheep.

However, the tiger had not come out again, though his roar had been heard about half a mile off, within the borders of the forest. Probably he had not devoured the whole sheep in one day, and enough remained for his morning's meal.

The *nouker*, seeing that the tiger did not appear, determined to go in search of him, and entered the forest. A quarter of an hour later the boy had heard the report of a gun, then a roar, and all was still.

He had waited an hour, but not seeing the man return from the wood, he had come to report what had happened.

In all probability the man was dead.

On the fourth day the tiger reappeared, and carried off another sheep.

The young shepherd ran, in the utmost alarm, to announce this fresh appearance of the savage animal.

This time, Sultanetta happened to be watering her flowers at the window when the shepherd entered the courtyard, and heard the boy's story from end to end.

She went in and told Ammalat what she had just heard.

Ammalat had paid no attention when

Ackmeth had told him a similar tale, but Sultanetta's words were too precious for one of them to be lost.

Just as Sultanetta had finished, Ackmeth came in.

"Well," he asked, "what do you think of that, Ammalat?"

"I have always longed to shoot a tiger," replied the young man, "and I thank Allah for accomplishing my desire. I will try my luck against the tiger's."

Sultanetta turned pale, but smiled at Ammalat; she understood, and, though she trembled, she was proud of him.

Ackmeth-Khan shook his head.

"The tiger is not the boar of Daghestan, Ammalat."

"Only let them put me on the tiger's track, and I will follow it up as if it were a boar's."

"The track of the tiger often leads to death," persisted Ackmeth, who, having watched his young friend's lethargy with some uneasiness, was delighted to see him now shake it off.

"Do you suppose," said Ammalat, "that my head will turn giddy on that slippery path, and that I cannot go where your *nouker* has gone? If the heart of the Avar is strong as the granite of his mountains, the heart of him of Daghestan is as finely tempered as his steel."

Ackmeth held out his hand, smiling.

"And on the steel of your heart, my brother, the tiger will break his teeth, until the eagle too breaks his beak upon it. And when will you start?"

"Two hours before dawn."

"Very well," said Ackmeth, "I will find you a guide."

"He is already found," said a voice behind them.

Ackmeth turned and recognised Nephtali.

"Ah! it is you?" said he.

"Yes; I heard that a tiger had eaten one of your sheep, and killed one of your *noukers*, so I came to say: Friend of my father, I wish to prove to you that I am good for other things than stopping travellers on the mountain-path to offer them hospitality. I have come to kill the tiger."

"Good," said Ammalat; "but you are too late."

"Why so?" said the young Tchetchen. "We shall be two for the journey and two for the fight. My father's son is worthy to march beside a Prince, even if he be the nephew of the Prince Tarkovsky. Ask Ackmeth-Khan."

"I need no man to share my enterprise," said the young man, haughtily.

"You need nobody," said Ackmeth; "no one doubts it; but you have no right to decline the companion who voluntarily offers to share your danger. My opinion is that you should accept Nephtali's offer. Swear your oath, like two gallant *abrecks*, and Allah defend you!"

Ammalat turned his eyes towards Sultanetta.

The girl was gazing at him, with her hands clasped. She knew Nephtali to be one of the boldest and cleverest hunters in the mountain, and she was not at all sorry that Ammalat should have a companion of whose courage she felt sure.

"Well, be it so!" said Ammalat, holding out his hand to Nephtali.

It is customary among the Avars and the Tchetchens, when two men undertake to encounter the same danger together, that they should swear on the Koran not to forsake each other. If either of them breaks his oath, he is thrown from the top of a rock, with his back turned towards the precipice—a meet punishment for a coward and a traitor.

The two young men went down to the Mosque and took the oath. The Mullah blessed their weapons, and they started for the mountain amid the acclamations of the crowd.

"Both of you, or neither!" shouted Ackmeth to them.

"We will bring back the tiger's skin or perish," replied the two hunters.

Ammalat had not said farewell to Sultanetta; but the girl was standing on the highest tower of the Khan's palace, in her hand her handkerchief, which she waved until the two young men had disappeared in the mountains.

Need we say that Ammalat walked behind, and was the last to lose sight of the village?

CHAPTER V

THE following day passed without any news of the hunters. Indeed, there was small chance of learning much about them for the first four and twenty hours.

But the day after that dawned, and drew towards night, and still the same uncertainty prevailed.

The old men of the village were weary with gazing along the road; nothing had been seen.

There was not a hearth perhaps in all Khunsack round which the enterprise of the two *abrecks* was not discussed; but the heart of Sultanetta was by far the saddest and the most uneasy of them all.

If a shout echoed in the courtyard, if a footstep sounded on the staircase, her blood would course wildly in her veins; she would run to the window and inquire at the door, and then, disappointed for the twentieth time, resume with bowed head and vacant look her embroidery, which, for the first time in her life, seemed to her dull and dreary work. She never once uttered his name, yet all her questions bore reference to Ammalat.

She asked her father and brothers what sort of wounds a tiger inflicted; how far off the place was where he had been seen; how long it would take to come back from there to the village; and after each question shook her head sadly, saying to herself—

"They are lost!"

The third day proved that she had not been uneasy without good reason.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, a young man, pale of face, his clothes torn, covered with clotted blood, enfeebled by fatigue and hunger, reached the nearest houses of the village.

It was Nephtali. He was surrounded and questioned with eager curiosity.

His story was as follows:—

"The same day that we left Khunsack we came upon the animal's track, but it was then late and night was falling; we might lose the animal's track and miss our way, and come upon him unawares. So we postponed the attack until the morning.

"A hundred yards from us was a cavern, which I recognised; we entered it. Blocking up the entrance with a stone, we went to sleep peacefully on our *bourkas*.

"We awoke next day at dawn; a roar, which we had heard echoing in the mountains had warned us that it was time to rise.

"We examined the priming of our muskets and passed our ramrods through the barrels; then we satisfied ourselves that our daggers slipped easily in their sheaths, and resumed our way.

"The further we penetrated into the forest, the narrower grew the path and the more evident the tiger's track.

"Pools of blood, crushed bones, fragments of flesh, all announced to us clearly, 'The tiger has been here.'

"On the road we found untouched the two hands of a man, doubtless those of Ackmeth-Khan's *nouker*. It is well known that beasts of prey, though they devour the rest of the body entirely, do not dare to touch the hands, which are the symbol of the sovereignty of man over Nature.

"We advanced cautiously step by step; it was evident that we were approaching the tiger's lair.

"Suddenly we reached a clearing, all white with bones. In the middle crouched the tiger, and, just as a kitten plays with a wooden ball, the great beast was sporting with a human skull.

"I was seized with the ambition—and I blame myself for it—to kill the tiger by myself, without troubling about where my companion was; I aimed at the tiger and fired.

"Where did I hit him? I do not know. But amid the smoke, before it had dispersed, I saw as it were a yellow flash of lightning pass, and at the same instant the whole mountain mass of Elbruz* seemed to fall crashing upon my head.

"I saw and heard nothing more, unless it were a shout and the report of a gun.

"I had fainted away.

"How long I lay there unconscious, I cannot tell. When I opened my eyes again, it seemed to me by the keenness of the air and the position of the sun to be two hours or so after sunrise.

"All was quiet around me, and I was still holding my gun in my hand.

"Ammalat's weapon, broken in two, was lying ten yards from where I had fallen.

"The stones were covered with blood, but whose blood? was it the tiger's or was it Ammalat's? All round me the bushes were torn up by the roots.

"It was plain that a terrible, a desperate, a deadly struggle had taken place.

"And yet I could discover the body neither of man nor beast.

* The highest peak of the Caucasus.

"I called Ammalat with all my strength, but no answer came.

"I wanted to follow the tiger's track and find Ammalat alive or perish on his corpse; but I was so weak that after walking a hundred yards I was obliged to sit down.

"Suddenly the hope flashed across my mind that he had killed the tiger, and believing me to be dead, had returned to Khunsack.

"I collected all my strength and took the road to the village. You have not seen him?

"My brothers, I come back like a bruised serpent, you hold my life within your hands. I have abandoned my comrade in the hour of danger; do with me as you shall think good: whatever sentence you pass upon me, I shall not complain; if you think I have deserved death, I am quite resigned to die; if you grant me my life, I shall bless you as long as I live. Allah is my witness that I have done all that a man could do."

A muttering arose among his audience. Some excused Nephtali, others blamed him, but all pitied him.

The opinion that prevailed most widely was that Nephtali had run away, leaving Ammalat to his fate; that he had made up the whole story he had just related, and really and truly had betrayed his companion.

His wounds were mere scratches, and it appeared incredible that the blow from the tiger could have produced such a profound fit of unconsciousness, lasting for such a length of time.

Then other suspicions began to suggest themselves. Nephtali had been partly brought up by Ackmeth-Khan, who was, as we know, a friend of his father's.

He had ceased to come to the village of Khunsack, it was said, because he was in love with the fair Sultanetta, and, though all Mountaineers are regarded as equal, was not of sufficiently noble birth to marry the Khan's daughter.

The probability of a union between Ammalat and Sultanetta had been discussed in the village.

Might not Nephtali through jealousy have left Ammalat-Beg to die, or even have killed him with his own hands? An evil thought entering a man's head is like bad seed falling upon the soil, which grows more quickly and vigorously than the good seed which it presently chokes, and, spreading over the whole field, ends by dispossessing the other entirely.

One cry, however, dominated all others, one resolve carried the day.

"Let us take him to Ackmeth-Khan; he shall decide the matter."

And the whole crowd betook itself noisily to the Castle.

Sultanetta hearing the shouts, ran to the window and saw the crowd, but searched vainly among the villagers for Ammalat-Beg.

But she recognised Nephtali — and alone!

And the poor child, who had never thought any ill of her neighbour, she too felt an evil suspicion cross her mind.

She ran to the flight of steps, which she reached just as her father arrived there, and as Nephtali was being led by the crowd into the court-yard.

He bowed to the Khan.

"Speak," said Ackmeth to him.

Nephtali repeated his story without altering a word.

Sultanetta heard it out, standing rigid, cold and motionless, mute as a statue.

"Coward!" was all Ackmeth-Khan said to him. "Fortunately, you are Tchetchen and no Avar."

"By the bones of my father whose death you announced to me, Khan Ackmeth, I have spoken the truth," replied Nephtali; "now do with me as you will."

"You swore," said Ackmeth, "that you would return with your companion or with the tiger's skin. You voluntarily devoted yourself to death in case you should not keep your oath. You have not kept it, and you must die."

"And when?" asked Nephtali.

"I give you three days, during which a search will be made. If in those three days Ammalat is not found, or some proof of your innocence forthcoming, you will die. You hear, all of you," said Ackmeth to the crowd, "I give him three days. No one is to mock or insult him or touch a hair of his head during that time; only, should he attempt to escape, shoot him down like a dog. Son of Mohammed-Ali, I have pronounced sentence upon you as your own father would have done."

Then he added to his attendants—

"Take him away, and be answerable for him with your lives."

Then, drawing his *papak* over his eyes, he said to Sultanetta—

"Come, let us go in; if we do not find Ammalat alive, at least he shall be avenged."

Nephtali was conducted to the prison of the fortress.

The same day, thirty Mountaineers, armed as though for battle, started in search of Ammalat.

Ackmeth-Khan regarded it as a point of honour, if he did not find Ammalat alive, at least to recover his bones and give them burial.

The Avars often hurl themselves into the midst of the most desperate struggles in order to rescue from the hands of the Russians their friend or their Chief who has been slain, and then fall upon his corpse, preferring to die with him rather than abandon him.

Sultanetta left her father's arms and now returned to her chamber. To all outward appearance she seemed calm; she neither complained nor wept.

When her mother spoke to her, however, she did not answer. The sparks from her father's pipe burnt her dress; she did not notice them. The wind from the mountain roared; she exposed herself to it bare-headed.

Feelings of the most opposite nature struggled in her bosom and tore her heart. But her heart was hidden deep within her breast, and not a muscle of her countenance betrayed her inward sufferings.

The pride of the Khan's daughter wrestled with the love of Sultanetta, and it was impossible to say which would yield first, her love or her pride. She passed the rest of the day in this condition. When night came, and she found herself alone, she was able to weep at her ease.

She opened the window, rested her arms upon it, and remained with her eyes fixed upon the mountains.

Each moment she seemed to hear some cry announcing Ammalat's return, her own name uttered in the darkness by his beloved voice, something resembling a song of joy or an exclamation of despair.

But she heard nothing in reality save the plaintive howl of the jackals—those slaves of the tiger and the lion to whom the monarchs of the mountain and the plain entrust the duty of heading off their prey—and the far-off never ceasing roar of the waterfall which rushes from the summit of the *Gaudour-Dagh*.

The sound recalled to her mind a walk which she had often taken with Ammalat. This was to the ruins of a Christian Convent—the Avars have been Mahometans for less than two hundred years—situated about a mile and a half west of Khunsack. The hand of time had respected the Church, and, what is more rare, the hand of man had not proved more destructive than that of time. It had remained intact amid the ruins of other buildings; only, the ivy had made its way through the broken windows and pushed its dark-green mantle into the interior; trees had grown in the spaces between the stones, forcing them farther and farther apart; a moss, finer than the finest carpet, had spread itself over the flags, and its freshness, maintained by a spring which made its way through the wall, and flowed clear as crystal along the whole length of the building, formed a delightful retreat during the burning days of summer.

Often had Sultanetta, accompanied by her handmaid Sakina, gone thither with Ammalat, sat beneath the cool shadow of the dome, and mused by the little murmuring stream, at which sometimes a mountain-goat would come to quench its thirst, and bound off in alarm at the sight of the two lovers.

"To-morrow," she said, I will go without you to the Chapel where I have gone so often with you, dear Ammalat."

And, troubled by the howls of the jackals, which seemed to her to be of bad augury, the girl closed the window and threw herself upon her bed.

In the morning she called Sakina, and said to her—

"Let us take a walk on the banks of the *Ourens*."

All the way there Sultanetta was think ing with a tender sadness of that charming spot, so sweet and cool and quiet.

When she reached it, it seemed to her that it would be a profanation if she did not go in by herself, accompanied only by her memories. So she sent Sakina to gather blackberries, telling her that she would find her near the stream, and then she crossed the mossy threshold of the Chapel.

The dim light in the interior, the twittering of the swallows that had built their nests there in the spring, the murmur of the stream, all these melted her heart

to tears and relieved it of the weight of sadness that oppressed it. She lay on the margin of the stream and saw, as through a mist, her tears drop into the water.

Suddenly she heard the sound of a step too heavy to be that of Sakina. She raised her head and uttered a cry of terror.

Before her was a man covered with mud and blood. A tiger's skin, the head of which framed his face, fell from his shoulders to the ground.

Sultanetta's first cry had been one of terror; her second was a cry of joy.

Through the dust and mud and blood with which he was stained, and beneath the tiger's skin, she had recognised Ammalat. Then, forgetful of all else, she rose to her feet, and, springing quickly towards him, threw herself into his arms in a rapture of amorous joy.

Ammalat, in his turn, uttered a cry; his mouth, like a bee, fastened on the girl's rosy lips. They understood one another without a word.

The young man, transported beyond himself, cried—

"You love me, then, Sultanetta?"

Abashed at her boldness, blushing beneath her lover's kiss, the girl withdrew her lips from Ammalat's, and pushed him gently from her.

Then, in a trembling voice, and preparing to release her from his arms, Ammalat asked—

"You do not love me?"

"Allah defend me!" said the innocent girl, lowering her eyelids, but not her eyes. "Love! what is that dreadful word you have uttered?"

"The sweetest word in all creation, Sultanetta. The sun is love; the spring is love; the flowers are love."

"Ammalat," said the girl, "a year ago a woman without her veil, and all covered with blood, rushed with fearful shrieks out of her house and fell at my feet in the dust of the street. She was pursued by a man with a dagger in his hand. I escaped to the Castle, but the woman seemed to follow me there. I lay awake for a long time that night thinking that I heard her cries, and again, in the darkness, I seemed to see her covered with blood and sinking on the ground. When I asked why this unhappy woman had been killed, and what crime she had committed that her murderer was not punished, this was the answer I received: 'She loved a man——'"

"Oh, dear child, it was not because she loved that she was killed."

"Then why?"

"Because she had betrayed the man who loved her."

"Betrayed? What means that word? I do not understand it, Ammalat."

"God grant you never may."

Then, pouring all the tenderness of his heart into the intonation of his voice, he continued—

"You love me, Sultanetta, do you not?"

"I believe so," said the girl.

"Well, do you think you could ever feel for another what you feel for me?"

"Never!" cried Sultanetta, vehemently.

"That, you see, would be to betray me——"

Sultanetta looked at Ammalat with those eyes peculiar to Eastern women, with which poets have discovered that nothing but the eye of the gazelle can be compared.

"Oh, Ammalat," she said, "if you knew what I have suffered during these four days that I have not seen you! When my father or my brothers go away, I shed tears as I bid them good-bye. I bade you good-bye without tears, it is true, but I have wept ever since. Listen, Ammalat; I have found out one thing, and I want to tell it you. It is that I cannot live without you."

"And not only could I not live without you," said the young man, "but I am even ready to die for you, my beloved, ready to sacrifice not only my life, but my soul for your sake."

A sound of footsteps was heard; it was Sakina returning, with her hands filled with blackberries.

She uttered a cry of alarm on seeing the young man; then, recognising him, she exclaimed—

"Oh! Prince, you are not dead, then?"

These words reminded Sultanetta that others besides herself were uneasy about Ammalat, that her father was waiting impatiently for news, and that there was an unhappy prisoner whose life depended upon Ammalat's return.

On the way back the young Beg related to Sultanetta the story of his encounter with the tiger.

With respect to the earlier details Nephtali had told the exact truth.

This is what had happened afterwards—

Ammalat had fired at the very moment the tiger knocked Nephtali down, his shot breaking the animal's lower jaw.

Instantly the tiger abandoned Nephtali, and dashed towards Ammalat, who waited for the animal pistol in hand, and, springing to one side, fired on him at close range.

The bullet entered the eye, and penetrated thence to the brain.

Overcome with the pain, the animal began to leap up in the air, and roll over and over on the ground, blinded and maddened.

Ammalat threw away his pistol, seized his gun by the barrel, went up to the tiger, and dealt him a terrific blow on the head, which shivered the weapon in pieces.

The animal appeared to acknowledge his defeat, and began to make off. One of his fore paws had been broken by Nephtali's bullet, his jaw was hanging down, and one eye was protruding from its socket.

But, wounded as he was, his pace was swifter than Ammalat's.

Ammalat hurried after him, reloading his pistol as he went.

From time to time he came across places where the tiger had stopped and fallen. At these spots the ground, soaked with blood, was torn, the grass rooted up, the bushes torn to shreds.

Occasionally he caught sight of the animal dragging itself along with difficulty, crawling rather than running; then he would quicken his own pace, but, directly the tiger saw himself pursued, he made a vigorous effort, and gained on the hunter once more. The pursuit lasted without pause or truce for the whole day.

Night came, and Ammalat was obliged to stop, having lost the tiger's track in the darkness. He had thrown behind him his *bourka*, *papak*, *tchouka*—everything that could impede him in his course; the only clothing that remained was his shirt and trousers; the only weapons, his dagger and pistol.

He awoke in the morning, frozen with cold, and half dead with hunger.

As soon as the light allowed he searched for the tiger's track, and was not long in finding it.

This time, however, the tiger, despairing of escaping by flight, not only waited for him, but even came crawling to meet him.

The ferocious animal could no longer either stand or spring; loss of blood had exhausted its strength.

Ammalat spared him half of the distance, but stopped when within ten yards of him.

One of the tiger's eyes was torn out, the other blazed like a live coal. Ammalat, who with his pistol could bring down a coin in mid-air, placed his bullet, as exactly as if he had done it with his hand, in the other eye.

The animal made one spring, and fell upon its back, stretched out his three terrible paws in a last agony—the fourth was broken—stiffened its body, uttered a last roar, and expired.

Ammalat rushed upon the dead beast; this time it was the man who, in the agonies of hunger, seemed to be bent on devouring the tiger. He severed an artery in the neck with his dagger, and sucked the blood as it flowed.

Then he opened the breast, and devoured a portion of the heart, which was still warm. (The Arabs of Algeria, when they kill a lion, make their children eat its heart raw, to render them brave; similarly the Greeks eat the hearts of eagles.) Next, with his dagger, he stripped the animal, and threw its skin over his shoulders.

Not until then did he look around him; the morning was rainy, a thick fog was beginning to spread over the mountain; he could not see ten yards before him.

He sat down on a rock and waited.

The day wore away, and night came; he heard the sound of the flight of eagles returning to their eyries amid the clouds.

By firing his pistol on dried leaves sprinkled with powder, he succeeded in lighting a fire.

His supper consisted of a piece of tiger's heart grilled on the ashes.

Then, turning the fur inwards, he rolled himself up in the tiger's skin, and went to sleep.

He was aroused by the first rays of the sun; he knew that Khunsack lay to the East, so he set off in that direction.

On reaching the outskirts of the wood he perceived the white houses of Khunsack among the rocks.

He was parched with thirst, but the tiger had no more blood with which he might quench his craving, and Ammalat recollected the pure spring flowing through the Chapel.

He climbed down by the most direct path he could find amid the rocks and precipices, holding on to tufts of grass,

roots of trees, and projecting edges of rocks, till finally he reached the valley.

Swift as a thirsty deer, he made straight for the Chapel.

But, on entering it, he saw a woman, heard a cry, and recognised Sultanetta.

Then he forgot everything, hunger, thirst, weariness—everything except his love.

Thanks and glory to God!

As Ammalat uttered the last words of his narrative, they reached the nearest houses of Khunsack.

The shouts of those who saw them first spread through all the village with the speed of a train of gunpowder.

The whole population rushed from their houses, and formed an escort for the two young people.

The shouts of "Ammalat-Beg! Ammalat-Beg!" startled Ackmeth-Khan in the retirement of his harem.

He reached the top of the Castle stairway at the same moment Ammalat and Sultanetta were ascending the first steps.

Spite of his endeavours to remain grave and calm, as befits every good Mussulman in the presence of sorrow or of joy, he held out his arms towards Ammalat.

As though there were something that needed to be forgiven, Sultanetta threw herself at the same moment as her lover upon her father's breast, who clasped them both in the same embrace, and welcomed both with the same kiss.

"We have done Nephtali an injustice, father," said Sultanetta; "everything happened just as he told us."

The Khan ordered the prisoner to be set at liberty.

Then he ordered an ox and six sheep to be killed, so that Ammalat's return might be celebrated by the whole village.

When Ammalat had told him the whole story, which he had already related to Sultanetta, Ackmeth summoned Nephtali before him.

"Nephtali," he said, "justice has been rendered to you. If you wish to stay with me, you shall be the chief of my *noukers*."

"Thank you, Khan Ackmeth," replied the young man. "I am a Tchetchen, and not an Avar. I came here to kill the tiger which had eaten your sheep; the tiger is dead. I have no further business here. Farewell, Khan Ackmeth."

He went up to Ammalat, and held out his hand.

"Farewell, comrade; for life and death!"

Then, bowing to Sultanetta—

"Shine on to all eternity, star of the morning!"

And he walked out with a proud gait, like a king leaving his throne-room.

Ackmeth waited until the door was closed.

"And now, Ammalat-Beg," said he, "you are doubly welcome. After the tiger, the lion. To-morrow we march against the Russians."

"Allah!" said Sultanetta, sadly. "More dangers! more deaths! When will blood cease to flow in our mountains?"

"When the mountain-streams shall pour down in milk into the valleys, and when the sugar-cane shall grow on the summit of Elbruz," said Ackmeth-Khan, with a smile.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT a glorious sight is the roaring *Terek* in the cavern of the *Darial!* There, like a genie borrowing his strength from the heavens it wrestles with Nature. Now it gleams amid the rocks, flashing and keen as a sword piercing a wall of granite; now it dashes along, dark and foaming, battering down in its course enormous rocks which it hurries away in its headlong stream. On dark nights when the belated traveller, wrapped in his *bourka*, passes along the precipitous path that overhangs the stream, no horrors the most fantastic imagination may conjure up can ever equal the reality of the dread surroundings. Torrents, swollen by the rains, thunder with a hollow roar beneath his feet, or fall from the summits of the rocks which overhang his head, and threaten to overwhelm him at each instant. Suddenly a flash of lightning rends the clouds, and the traveller beholds with dismay only the dark mist surrounding him, and beneath him a dreadful precipice. Rocks everywhere; before him, behind him, beside him, the furious *Terek*, leaping from rock to rock, and churning a sea of froth. Its racing waves, tossed and tormented like spirits

in hell, eddy at the bottom of the ravine with a deafening din, resembling, in the dark abyss, a horde of spectres hunted by the Archangel's sword. Great stones plunge down the course of the torrent with a horrid groaning. Dazzled by the flash of the lightning, the traveller is suddenly plunged into an ocean of darkness; then in its turn the thunder growls, shaking the rocks with the noise as of a very cascade of mountains rolling one upon the other. The echo of earth replies to the artillery of the sky, lightning-flash is succeeded by darkness; again thunder, and again the crash of a world of mountains. And as though the whole chain of the Caucasus, from *Taman* to the *Apcheron*, were shaking its granite shoulders, down rolls a shower of stones, bounding and rebounding in their headlong course. Your terrified horse stops, recoils, curvets and rears. His mane, flying in the wind, lashes your face; a spirit passes by, plaintive as the souls of dead men. You shudder, and the sweat starts upon your brow; your heart shrinks within you, and, spite of yourself, there rises to your lips the prayer which your mother taught you when you were a child.

And yet, with what charm and sweetness does morning, with her rosy brow and azure feet, visit this same cavern, through which the *Terek* roars? The clouds, driven before the wind, lift from the earth and cling to the corners of the overhanging ice pinnacles; above them a band of light outlines the Eastern mountains. The rocks gleam, silvered by the rain-drops, and the *Terek*, ever gloomy and fierce and foaming, rolls over its rocks, as though seeking an ampler bed in which to find rest and peace.

There is one thing, however, which the Caucasus lacks, namely, rivers or lakes in which these giants of creation may gaze at their own reflection. The *Terek*, winding beneath the precipices, resembles a brook or, at most, a mountain torrent; but, below Vladikavkas, where it enters the valley, it scatters abroad the stones carried down by it from the mountains, and flows in a wide, unimpeded channel, with the same swiftness still, but less noisily, as though it were resting and taking breath, fatigued with the painfulness of its earlier efforts. At length, having cleared the headland of the little *Kabardah*, it turns, like a pious Mussulman, towards the East, and, overflowing its two banks, ever at war with one another, hurries across the steppes to fall into the Caspian beyond Kisslar.

But, before reaching this well-earned repose, it has already been laid under contribution, and, like a sturdy workman, has turned a number of enormous mill-wheels. On its right bank, between the woods and the mountains, are settled the scattered tribes of the Aoubs and the Kabardians, to whom we may give the general name of Tcherkesses in common with the Tchetchens, situated lower down the valley and nearer to the sea. These Aoubs are nominally subjugated, but only nominally; in reality, they are bands of brigands who make a double profit, first by their friendship with the Russians, and, secondly, by brigandage carried on in the mountains. Enjoying free access everywhere, they warn their compatriots of the movements of the soldiers, the strength of the garrisons, the condition of the fortresses; they conceal them in their houses when they go on expeditions, share in, or purchase their booty when they return, supply them with Russian salt and powder, and often take part themselves in their raids. The worst of all this is, that the hostile Mountaineers, since they wear the same costume as those who have made their submission, cross the *Terek* unchallenged, approach travellers without being recognised, and, if they are the stronger party, attack them, while, if they are inferior in numbers, they pass by with a salute, laying their hands on their hearts.

Such is the customary behaviour of the tribes that have submitted. It must be admitted in their defence that their position in face of their terrible neighbours forces them almost involuntarily to this duplicity. Knowing that the Russians, checked by the obstacle which the river presents, can never arrive in time to protect them against the Mountaineers, they are forced to lend a helping hand to their compatriots; yet, at the same time, they pretend to be the friends of the Russians, before whom they tremble. Each tribesman feels inclined in the morning to make a comrade of a Russian, and, in the evening, to take a Mountaineer for his guide.

As for the left bank of the *Terek*, it is covered with rich *stanitzas* belonging to

the Cossacks of the frontier. Between these *stanitzas* lie ordinary villages. The Cossacks differ from the Mountaineers only in not having the head shaved; but, with this sole exception, their weapons, dress, and ways are identical. It is a fine sight to see them come to blows with the Mountaineers. It is not a fight, strictly speaking; but rather a tournament, in which each man wishes to display the superiority of his strength or courage. Two Cossacks will boldly charge four Mountaineers, and, in such proportion, will always come off victorious. They all speak Tartar, they are all acquainted with the Mountaineers, sometimes even related to them through the wives whom they have carried off from among them; yet, in the field, they are mortal foes. Although the Cossacks are strictly forbidden to cross the *Terek*, yet the boldest among them swim the river, either for their own pleasure, or in pursuit of business. The Mountaineers, when night falls, do the same, and lie in the grass, creep through the bushes, and suddenly bar the road of the traveller, whom they take prisoner and hold for ransom, if he offers no resistance, but kill on the spot, if he tries to defend himself.

Sometimes the more adventurous will hide for two or three days in the vineyards near the villages, waiting the opportunity to strike a blow. For this reason the Cossack of the frontier never stirs from home unarmed, never walks a yard without his trusty dagger, never goes into the fields without his musket. He ploughs, sows, and harrows his land, gun in hand. This is why the Mountaineers avoid the *stanitzas*, and usually pillage the ordinary villages, or boldly make forays into the interior of the neighbouring districts.

In such cases fighting is unavoidable, and the bravest horsemen take part in it with eagerness, in order to win for themselves a name, which they prize more than anything else, more even than booty.

During the autumn of 1819, the time at which the events we relate took place, Kabardians and Tchetchens alike, inspirited by the absence of General Skrinokof, had mustered to the number of fifteen hundred men, in order to pillage some villages situated beyond the *Terek*, capture prisoners, and carry off flocks and herds.

Their leader was the Kabardian Prince, Djemboulat. Ammalat-Beg, who had conveyed to the latter a letter from Ackmeth-Khan, had been very well received by him, and would have been appointed to the command of a division had there been any order and any regular troops among these bands. His horse and his individual bravery assign to each man his position in the combat. At the outset they take some pains to arrange how they will initiate the movement, and engage the enemy; but, later on, all order and control vanishes, and the fighting is conducted as chance may determine.

After warning the neighbouring Princes, who were to take part in the expedition, Djemboulat indicated the rendezvous, and, at a given signal, shouts were heard in every village of "*Guaray! Guaray!*" that is, "To arms! To arms!" and in a few hours the Kabardian and Tchetchen horsemen came flocking in from all quarters.

Fearing treachery, no one, except the Chief, knew either where they would pass the night, or at what point they would cross the river. Splitting up into small bands, the Mountaineers made for the submitted villages, and there waited for the darkness. The villagers welcomed their compatriots with joyous demonstrations of every kind, but the suspicious Djemboulat did not trust blindly to their apparent friendliness. He posted sentinels in every direction, announcing to the inhabitants that any one who attempted, on any pretext whatsoever, to cross the lines, would be put to the sword without mercy. Most of the horsemen lodged in the houses of their relations and friends; but Djemboulat and Ammalat remained in the open air, lying in front of a fire, during the time required for resting their horses.

Djemboulat thought about the Russians and the fight in which he was about to engage; but Ammalat's thoughts were far from the battle-field. They took eagles' wings, and soared over the mountains of Avaria, and his heart, forced to remain far from the woman he loved, was heavy with grief. The sound of the *balalaïka* of the mountains, accompanied by a monotonous chant, diverted his sadness, and he listened involuntarily to its strains.

A Kabardian was singing this rude old ballad—

"Lo! on Kasbek's snowy peaks,
Like the eagles, storm-clouds lower,
While below, the sun's red streaks
Smile on home and field and flower.

"Horsemen, rime-decked, wild with fears,
Dash from out the dazzling glow;
Allah! 'tis our Mountaineers
Flying from a ruthless foe.

"Russian bloodhounds track their prey,
Faster, friends, and higher fly;
Death pursues your steps to-day,
Courage, friends! ye can but die.

"Far aloft the fortress looms,
There your haven, there your rest!
There the flower of sweet Hope blooms,
Courage, comrades! do your best.

"Valour droops, betrayed by Fate,
Horse and rider fail for breath;
Plain on mountain wreaks its hate,
Naught is left but shame and death.

"Kneels a Mullah,—high above,
Like a ray of golden light,
Prayers mount on wings of love,
Chasing all the gloom of night.

"Praise to God!—His prophet true
Bids the wood your fortress be,
Bids it come and shelter you;
Holy prophet, praise to thee!"

"Yes, once upon a time it was so," said Djemboulat, with a smile. "Our fathers believed in prayer, and God hearkened to them; but nowadays, my friend, our bravery is our best defence, our sword our surest prayer. Listen, Ammalat," he continued, stroking his moustaches, "I do not conceal from you that this affair will be a warm one. The Colonel has assembled his regiment. But where is it? How many men has he? That is what I do not know, and what none of us knows."

"So much the better!" said Ammalat, calmly; "the more Russians there are, the easier it will be to hit them."

"Yes, but the harder it will be to carry off the booty."

"Booty matters little to me, who want vengeance, and seek for glory!"

"Glory is all very well when it lays golden eggs, Ammalat. It is disgraceful to display empty hands before your wife's eyes. Winter is near; we must, if we are to regale our friends, lay in provisions at the expense of the Russians. Choose your place beforehand, Ammalat; march in the van, or stay by me with the *abrecks*."

"I shall be found where danger is; but what is the oath of the *abrecks?*"

"Each has his own; but this is the oath of the most gallant of them all. They swear to expose themselves during a longer or shorter period to all perils; to give no quarter to their foe; to pardon no injury, not even from a friend, not even from a brother; to take everything that it suits them to take, wherever they may see it. Having once taken this oath, the man who has sworn it may slay, plunder, steal, without being punished; he is fulfilling his oath. *Abrecks* of this kind are bad friends, but good enemies."

"And," inquired Ammalat, to whom as a dweller in the plain the customs of the Mountaineers were unknown, "what can induce them to make such oaths?"

"Some take them from excess of daring, others from excess of poverty; others again, because they are a prey to some grief. Look, for example, at that Kabardian yonder, polishing his musket, that has been rusted by the evening mist; well, he has been an *abreck* for five years, because his mistress died of the small-pox. For these five years it were better to have had a tiger for your friend than him for your companion. He has been wounded three times already, and each wound only excites instead of calming him."

"Strange custom! And how after such a life do the *abrecks* go back to domestic life?"

"It is quite simple; the past is past. The *abreck* forgets it, and the neighbours are careful not to remind him of it. When released from his oath he becomes gentle as a lamb. But it is quite dark now; the *Terek* is covered with mist; the hour is come."

Djemboulat whistled, and his whistle was at once repeated all along the line of the encampment. In less than five minutes every man was on horseback. After deliberating on the most advantageous point at which to cross the *Terek*, the little band went down noiselessly towards the river bank. Ammalat admired the perfect quiet, observed not merely by the riders, but even by the horses, not one of whom neighed during the march. Each horse, as he set his foot to the ground, seemed to be afraid of displacing a stone, and so giving the alarm to the enemy. Soon they reached the edge of the river. The water was shallow, and a tongue of land, half sand and half stones, extended towards the opposite bank. The whole

troop might have crossed almost dry-shod at that particular point by taking double the time; but half of the horsemen ascended higher up the river, in order to ford it by swimming, and so to conceal from the Russians the principal place of crossing. Those who had confidence in their horses jumped straight off the bank into the water, while others tied leather bladders to their steeds; the swiftness of the current carried them down stream, but they succeeded in reaching the other bank, and scrambling ashore where they could. A thick fog seemed to have spread itself around with the express object of concealing their movements.

The reader should be informed that along the whole of the right bank of the *Terek* exists a line called the "sentry line." On every hill along this line is a Cossack post. If you go by in the day-time, you will see on each eminence a long pole with a barrel on top of it. This barrel is filled with straw and ready to be lighted at the first cry of alarm. To this pole a horse ready saddled is always fastened, while the sentry lies upon the ground close beside him.

At night the sentries are doubled.

Despising, however, all these precautions, the Mountaineers, wrapped in their *bourkas*, slip past the sentinels in the fog and darkness like water through a sieve.

This procedure was now adopted. Some of the "submitted" Mountaineers who knew exactly the whereabouts of the Cossack posts, placed themselves at the head of each band and guided them across the line.

At one point only was blood shed; and it was Djemboulat himself who directed the blow.

On reaching the farther side of the *Terek* Djemboulat had ordered Ammalat to climb the sloping bank, approach as close as possible to the picket, count how many men it consisted of, and strike his steel against a stone as many times as there were men.

Ammalat took a circuitous route and disappeared in the darkness.

Meanwhile, Djemboulat crawled like a snake over the slope of the hill.

The Cossack was asleep. He thought he heard a faint sound come from the direction of the water, and he glanced uneasily towards the river.

Djemboulat was not more than three yards from him, lying flat on his stomach behind a bush.

"Confound the ducks!" murmured the Cossack, who had come from the banks of the Don to those of the *Terek;* "even at night-time they are all awake, flying abroad and sporting in the water like the fairies of Kiev."

At this moment Ammalat had reached a point from which he overlooked the hillock.

There were two Cossacks: one was asleep, rolled up in his *bourka*, the other was presumably awake.

Ammalat rapped twice with his steel against a stone.

The sound and the sparks attracted the Cossack's attention.

"Halloa!" he cried, "what's that? Wolves perhaps; their jaws snap and their eyes shine."

He turned round to look closer; and at that instant he seemed to perceive a man's form in the darkness.

He opened his mouth to cry "To arms!" but the sound died on his lips; Djemboulat's dagger had been buried to the hilt in his breast. The man fell without uttering a groan.

The other Cossack did not even wake, and passed doubtless from sleep to death.

The pole was pulled up and thrown, with the barrel, into the river.

Thus a gap had been made through which the greater part of the troop passed and flung themselves upon the surrounding country.

The incursion was effected and was completely successful. All the peasants who attempted to resist were killed on the spot. The others hid themselves or ran away. Many prisoners, both men and women, were taken.

The Kabardians entered the houses and seized all they found, carrying off whatever was portable, but not burning the villages or devastating the fields and vineyards.

"Why should we meddle with the gifts of God and the labour of man?" they said. "To act thus is to do the work of brigands and not of noble Mountaineers."

In one hour all was over for the inhabitants for three leagues round.

But all was not over for the plunderers.

The cry "To arms!" had resounded ail along the line· the alarm had been

given by a shepherd, who had been killed it is true, but too late.

A large circle had been formed round the horses scattered over the plain to graze at liberty, and the horsemen who formed the circle had driven all the animals to one point.

At the head of the herd a Tchetchen placed himself, mounted on an excellent horse which he urged to a gallop.

All the horses neighed, lifted their tails. shook their manes in the wind, and set off after the Tchetchen, who directed the whole band towards the *Terek*, passed between two sentry-posts and rode into the river.

All the other horses jumped in after him. You saw them pass like shadows, you heard the splash they made as they leapt into the water, but that was all!

CHAPTER VII

AT sunrise the fog dispersed and revealed a magnificent though terrible spectacle.

An immense band of horsemen was returning to the mountain dragging in its train the prisoners, some tied to the stirrups, some to the saddles, others to the tails of the horses. All alike had their hands securely bound together. Tears and groans of despair mingled with the shouts of triumph.

Encumbered by the booty and retarded by the pace of the cattle, the marauders advanced slowly towards the *Terek*. The Princes, Nobles, and Chiefs of the troop of horsemen galloped gaily at the head and on the flanks of the procession.

But the Cossacks of the frontier began to appear in the distance, advancing from all directions, sheltering behind trees and thickets.

The Tchetchen spread out in skirmishing order, and the fight began, the report of firearms spitting and crackling on all sides.

Those in the van made all haste to drive the cattle forward and force them to swim the river.

But, in the rear, clouds of dust could be seen rising. It was the storm advancing.

Six hundred Mountaineers with Djemboulat and Ammalat at their head checked their horses and faced the enemy, in order to give the others time to get across the river.

In disorderly fashion and with wild shouts they dashed to meet the Cossacks; but not a gun was unslung from their shoulders, not a sabre gleamed in their hands. It is the habit of the Tchetchens not to use their firearms until the last moment.

It was only when they arrived within twenty yards of the Cossacks that they brought their guns to their shoulders and fired, then threw their weapons over their shoulders and drew their sabres.

But, after replying to them with a brisk musketry fire, the Cossacks wheeled round and retreated.

Carried away by the eagerness of battle the Mountaineers dashed off in pursuit of them, the retreating Cossacks luring them on towards a wood.

In this wood were concealed the infantry of the forty-third regiment.

Forming in square, they lowered their bayonets and opened fire on the Tchetchens.

In vain did the latter leap from their horses and try to force their way into the forest, so as to fall upon the rear and flanks of the Russians.

The artillery was brought into play and the roar of its deep voice was now heard.

Kotzaref, the terror of the Tchetchens and the man of all others most renowned among them for his bravery, was in command of the Russian troops,—a fact which at once placed the success of the Russians beyond dispute.

Three successive salvos of artillery dispersed the Mountaineers, who now resumed their course towards the river.

But on the bank of the *Terek* was concealed another battery of guns, enfilading the whole breadth of the river; and this second battery now began to fire.

The grape ploughed and tore through the mass of fugitives.

At each volley a number of horses, mortally wounded, rolled over into the river, carrying their riders under water and drowning them.

It was a terrible sight, too, to see the prisoners who were tied to these horses and unable to escape, exposed, like their captors, to the Russian fire.

The *Terek*, red with blood, received

friends and foes alike within its cold embrace, carrying down its stream the bodies of men and animals, bearing all alike, the living and the dead, towards the sea.

Remaining in the rear to protect the retreat, and striving like lions against the hostile infantry, Djemboulat and Ammalat, with about a hundred horsemen, guard the passage, charging the Russian foot-soldiers when they approach too near, dashing upon the Cossacks, then returning to their comrades and encouraging them by voice and gesture, the last to throw themselves into the *Terek* and cross to the other side.

Arrived at the opposite bank, they leap from their horses, and, musket in hand, prepare to contest the passage with the Russians, who, crowded together on the bank, seem about to cross the river in their turn.

But, meanwhile, at about a mile below the place where the fight was raging, a considerable body of Cossacks had crossed the *Terek*, and had spread out between the river and the mountain.

Their presence was entirely unperceived until their shouts of triumph and exultation resounded in the rear of the Tchetchens.

The destruction of the Mountaineers was now inevitable.

Ammalat glanced round and took in the situation.

"Well, Djemboulat," said he, "all is over, and our fate is decided. You must please yourself; but, as for me, the Russians shall never take me alive; better to die by a bullet than by a rope."

"And do you think," said Djemboulat, "that these hands of mine were made for chains? Allah forbid! The Russians may take my body; but my soul, never!"

Then, remounting his horse, and rising in his stirrups, he shouted—

"Fortune deserts us, my brothers; but the steel remains. Let us sell our lives dearly to the Infidels. The victor is not he who gains the battle, but he who gains the glory, and glory is his who prefers death to captivity."

"Let us die, let us die!" cried all the Mountaineers in chorus.

"And let our good steeds die with us," said Djemboulat, "and, after their death, serve us for a rampart."

And leaping from the saddle he drew his dagger, and lead the way by burying it in his horse's throat. One and all, the Mountaineers followed his example, hurling a challenge of defiance at the Russians.

A vast circle of dead horses surrounded the Tchetchen warriors.

Then each man lay down behind his horse, with his musket levelled ready to fire.

The Cossacks, seeing the desperate defence the Mountaineers were preparing to make, paused in doubt, hesitating to attack men driven to desperation.

Then, amid the silence, rose the voice of a Tchetchen, singing his death-chant.

His voice was firm, resonant, and penetrating, and the Russians could hear every syllable of the dirge—

"Glory on us, upon our foes be shame;
Come life, come death, but no dishonoured name!"

The same words were repeated in chorus—

"Glory on us, upon our foes be shame;
Come life, come death, but no dishonoured name!"

Then the single voice resumed—

"Maidens, weep; be now your part
To guard fair mem'ry's flower;
Dying for his land, each heart
Will dream of Love's soft hour.
Young or old, with face to foe,
They may not wake who sleep;
Oh! maidens, in your faithful hearts
Their memory fragrant keep.
Ah! weary, silent-footed hours
That day by day go by,
King Death has called his chosen flowers
Unto Eternity!

"Nay! weep not, maidens, since from far
Your sisters sweet, the Houris, come,
With snow-white wings and shining eyes
That glisten like the morning star,
To lead us to our happy home
In Paradise.

"Watch not, wait not, mother mine,
But sleep and dream of me.
The hand is cold that lay in thine,
I die—but think of thee.

"Seek not, hope not, life is o'er,
My beating heart at rest,
Broken, as is my trusty sword,
I fell—I gave my best!

CHORUS.

"Glory on us, upon our foes be shame;
Come life, come death, but no dishonoured name!

VOICE.

"Shed no tears, then, mother mine!
'Twas thou in giving life
Woke in my heart the wish of thine;
To fall in noble strife—

Fearing naught, no deed to rue,
Thy sweet blessing o'er me,
Keeping faithful, brave and true,
So worthy of thee!
No traitor's lie, no broken vow,
Has soiled the lips of love.
Hark! white-robed spirits call me now
To my bright home above.

"Brothers, let us kneel and pray,
For time is fleeting fast,
Sun or cloud of life's short day,
Alas! too quickly past.
Childhood pure—a rosy dawn
Of smiles and budding flowers;
Manhood's day succeeding morn,
Then night and sunless hours!

"We passed on the wings of sunless night
Beneath a blood-red sky,
One flash, one gleam of evening light
To meet each closing eye.
Ah! winds, waft a whisper from those who fell,
And lie in yon lonely spot,
That the women we loved on earth so well
Forget us not.

CHORUS.

"Glory on us, upon our foes be shame;
Come life, come death, but no dishonoured name!"

Impressed by the grandeur of the spectacle before their eyes, the Cossacks and the infantry listened in reverent silence to this death-song of twelve hundred brave warriors.

At last, the signal was given, and a terrific cheer rang through the Russian ranks.

The Tchetchens replied by a death-like silence. But, at the moment when the Russians were within twenty yards of them, they rose to their feet, each sighting his man, and at the word "Fire!" given by Djemboulat and Ammalat, a ring of flame surrounded the defenders.

Then, smashing his musket in pieces, each man uttered his war-cry, drawing his sabre with his right hand, and his dagger with his left.

Thrice did the Russians approach the murderous barrier, and thrice they were repulsed.

For the fourth time they gathered for a supreme effort; for ten minutes more was to be seen the semblance of a huge snake, writhing in multitudinous coils, its scales represented by flashing swords and gleaming daggers.

At last the gigantic reptile was hacked into two or three fragments. The conflict grew more terrible still; the struggle became a hand-to-hand one. Torrents of blood flowed, mingled with the curses and groans of the dying.

The *abrecks* had bound themselves to one another by their girdles to avoid getting separated in the combat. No one asked for quarter, and no one gave it. The Russian bayonets bore down all before them.

A small group still remained together, fighting to the last.

In its centre, Djemboulat and Ammalat strove like two Titans.

The Russians recoiled momentarily before this desperate defence, and left a gap.

"Forward!" cried Djemboulat, assuming the offensive for the last time. "Forward, Ammalat! Death is deliverance."

But Ammalat-Beg could not hear this last appeal of the Tchetchen Chief. A blow from the butt of a rifle had stretched him senseless on the ground, already piled high with the dead, and deluged with blood.

CHAPTER VIII

COLONEL VERKOVSKY TO HIS FIANCÉE, MARIE N——, AT SMOLENSK.

Derbend, October 7, 1819.

TWO months! A short enough time in the ordinary circumstances of life; but for me, my beloved Marie, the two months which have just elapsed seem like two centuries. It is two centuries, then, and not two months since I received your dear letter.

Since that time the moon has twice made the circuit of the earth.

My past I recall with happiness, my future I look forward to with hope; but, far from you and without news of you, the present is a blank. The Cossack appears, returning from the post, and holding a letter in his hand. I make a dart to seize it and recognise your writing. I break the seal and kiss the lines traced by your adored hand; I devour the thoughts dictated by your pure heart; I am happy; I am transported from earth to heaven! But scarcely have I closed the letter ere my mind is already filled with disquieting thoughts. Its contents are satisfactory, doubtless; but it speaks of what is past, and that state of things perhaps exists no longer. Is she well,

she for whom I would give my life? Does she love me as much to-day as she did yesterday? Will the happy time never come when we shall be reunited to part no more? when there shall be neither separation nor distance between us? when the expressions of our love shall not grow cool in passing from heart to paper? Will not the letters themselves grow cold before that time arrives? Will not the flame burning in her heart gradually die down?

Forgive me all these misgivings, my love; they are the fruits that grow upon the soil of absence. When my heart is near yours I have perfect confidence; when absent from you I am filled with doubts. You bid me give you an insight into my life, to tell you how I am employed, what is going on around me in this little vortex of which I am the centre; what I think about, and how I occupy myself day by day, minute by minute. To do so is to pass once more through all the anguish which I have just described. Cruel tormentor that you are, who wish me not only to be unhappy, but that I should analyse my unhappiness and sound the depths of my sufferings!

But, since you will have it so, I obey. My life is like the track of a chain upon the sand. My tiresome duties, if they do not distract my mind, help at least to pass away the time. I am plunged into a fearful climate which no constitution can withstand, into social surroundings which suffocate me. I cannot find among my colleagues one who can understand me, or among the Asiatics a single person who can share my sentiments. All my surroundings are so wild that I bruise myself against everything I touch, and so confined that I seem to breathe the atmosphere of a prison. You may sooner draw fire from ice than a spark of pleasure from this cursed country.

I send you a detailed description of my last week. It is the most interesting and the most eventful of any I have yet spent in the Town with the Iron Gates.

I remember having written to you that we were returning, with the Governor-General of the Caucasus, from an expedition against Akoutchka. We were completely successful; Shah-Ali-Khan has fled to Persia. We burned a dozen villages, together with all the hay and wheat, carried off the enemy's sheep, which we put on spits and roasted. Finally, the snow having forced the inhabitants to descend from their rocky fastnesses, they came in and delivered up hostages; after which we returned to the fortress of Bournaïa. There our division had to disband for the winter, and my regiment came back into quarters at Derbend.

Next day the General was to take leave of us in order to commence a second expedition on the frontier line, and there was consequently a great gathering of people wishing to bid farewell to their much-loved Chief. Alexis-Petrovitch left his tent and came to us. Who does not know his features, if not by actual sight, at any rate from paintings? I hardly think there is any other face in the world so expressive as his.

A poet has written of him—

"Fly, Tchetchen! never yet in vain
Has waked that spirit high;
His word goes forth, like thunder blast,
'We go,'—none questions why,
None seeks his counsel, aid or love,
Theirs but to fight or die.
Wounds, fire and death around him play;
Ambushed within his eyes,
Where grim thought flashes fierce and strong,
The fate of Kingdoms lies.
And where his finger points the blood-stained way,
Men follow blindly—perish—or obey."

And the poet has not said a word too much. You should see his coolness in the field, his easy deportment on his reception days! Sometimes he sprinkles the Asiatics with the showers of his flowery speech, full of imagery as a Persian poem; sometimes he confounds, disconcerts, and crushes them with a word. In vain do these masters of cunning endeavour to conceal their most secret intentions in the depths of their hearts, his eye pursues them there; a week, a month, a year beforehand he will tell them what they are planning to do. It is amusing to see how these men with their sick consciences turn red and pale by turns, as he tortures them with his penetrating gaze; and how, with that same gaze, he recognises merit wherever he finds it, and rewards it with a smile. just as, with a word that goes straight to the heart, he recompenses courage and devotion.

God grant to every brave soldier the glory and good fortune of serving under such a Chief!

It is curious to watch him in his relations with his brother officers. It is an

object lesson for the observer. Every man who is distinguished for his bravery, his intelligence, or any other special merit, has freedom of access to him, and may make himself at home in his house. There all distinction of rank, all etiquette, is dropped. Every one may say what is in his mind, and do what he pleases. Alexis Petrovitch chats and laughs with every one in the most friendly way, and instructs them as a brother might do.

Last Tuesday we were in camp. It was during tea-time, and his aide-de-camp had been reading to him Napoleon's campaign in Italy—that poem, as he calls it, of the military art. Expressions of wonder, opinions, and arguments were being advanced all round him. The great Commander who had crossed the Alps in the wake of Hannibal and Charlemagne would have been satisfied with the remarks and even with the criticisms of the man who had for so long disputed with him the possession of the Grand Redoubt of Borodino. After tea, when the reading was over, we passed to gymnastic exercises, running and jumping over ropes and ditches, and making trials of strength of various kinds; the company was brilliant, and the view magnificent. The camp was near Tarky, and overlooked by the fortress of Bournaïa. The sun was setting behind the fortress. At the foot of the rock was the Prince's Palace, and on its most precipitous slope lay the town. Eastwards stretched the immense plain, and beyond the plain the blue carpet of the Caspian. Tartar *Begs*, Tchetchian Princes, Cossacks from all the rivers of Russia, hostages from the mountain districts, regimental officers, with all their mingled uniforms, *tchouskas*, and coats of mail, presented a most striking and picturesque spectacle. Singers, dancers, and musicians formed separate groups, while the soldiers with their shakos tilted affectedly on one side, took their share in the festivities some hundred yards below.

The conversation turned upon the temper of the different daggers of the Caucasus. Each praised his own as being of the best workmanship. Captain Betovitch, who had a blade bought in the village of Andrev and mounted at Kouba, declared that he could cut through three roubles placed on top of each other.

Wagers were made, and the three roubles placed upon a log, and Betovitch, left-handed as he is, pierced them through.

At this moment a frightened buffalo rushed in among the musicians, scattering them in all directions, to the great amusement of the spectators. Every one rushed off, avoiding the buffalo by jumping to one side with shouts that excited him still further.

The maddened animal made for the group where General Yermolof was standing. The officers drew their sabres and daggers, and stood in front of the Lieutenant-Governor; but the latter, pushing them all aside, drew his sword and placed himself in the animal's path.

The buffalo, judging doubtless that he had met with a worthy adversary, rushed upon him.

With the activity of a much younger man, the General sprang aside, raising his arm at the same moment; then came, as it were, a flash of lightning, and, as the buffalo's head, severed at a blow, fell at the General's feet, the body was borne forward by its impetus for three or four yards and then fell, torrents of blood gushing from the neck.

The spectators one and all raised loud shouts of astonishment and admiration, while the group of officers gathered round the General, examining the head and body of the animal.

"Your Excellency has a powerful sabre there," said Captain Betovitch.

"Worthy to be mated with your dagger, Captain," answered the General, presenting his sabre to him.

The Captain hesitated to accept it.

"Take it, take it, it is yours," said Yermolof. And he gave him, just as though it were an ordinary one, the sword of which the blade alone had cost three or four hundred roubles, and the hilt of which was worth at least as much, if merely for the weight of the silver.

This prodigious feat of strength was still being discussed when an officer of the Cossacks of the frontier, who had come from Colonel Kotzaref, was announced to the Governor-General.

The officer was introduced, and presented a despatch.

"You will allow me, gentlemen?" said the General, just as though he had been in the company of his equals in rank.

There you have an example of a remarkable trait in this man; he is for ever raising you to his own level, without descending to yours.

As you may imagine, the permission was readily accorded to him. He read the despatch, and appeared to comment on it in low tones of approval.

At last he said aloud—

"Gentlemen, I have good news for you; the St. George's cross has been bestowed on one of our brave officers."

They gathered round him with eager curiosity.

"Well, it appears that Kotzaref has exterminated some twelve or fifteen hundred brigands. The bandits had crossed the Terek and plundered a village; but Kotzaref overtook them and surrounded them. He sends me five prisoners, all that remain of the entire band."

Then, turning to the Cossack officer, he added—

"Just bring these fellows to me. I wager that there are some faces I know among the rascals."

The prisoners were brought before him. On seeing them, a cloud crossed his face, and his brows contracted.

"Scoundrels!" he said to them. "This is the third time you have been caught, and twice you have been released, after swearing you would abandon your plundering trade. What is it you want? Lands,—you have them; flocks,—you have them; security,—am I not here to insure it to you? Take them away and hang them. They shall choose themselves one among their number whom you may release, after he has witnessed the execution, so that he may go and tell what he has seen to his comrades."

Four of the men were led away; the fifth remained. He was a Tartar Beg. We had not noticed him until then, all our attention having been taken up by his companions.

He was a young man of about three-and-twenty, wonderfully handsome, and as graceful in figure as the Apollo Belvidere.

He waited his turn, standing in a most elegant attitude of regal haughtiness. When the General's eye rested on him, he bowed, and then resumed his former attitude.

On his face you might read that complete resignation to his fate which is one of the virtues of the Mussulmans.

Yermolof bestowed on him a glance full of anger and menace, yet not a muscle of the prisoner's face moved, nor did he even lower his eyes.

"Ammalat-Beg," said the General at last, after a silence of a minute or so which had seemed long even to those who were only interested by motives of curiosity in what was passing—"Ammalat-Beg, do you remember that you are a Russian subject, and that you live under Russian laws?"

"I have not forgotten it," answered Ammalat; "and, had those laws protected my rights, I should not be brought before you as a criminal to-day."

"You are both unfair and ungrateful," replied the General. "Your father and yourself have fought against the Russians. If that had happened under the rule of the ancestors of those Caliphs from whom you claim descent, your family would no longer be in existence. But our Emperor is so lenient, that, instead of hanging you, he has entrusted you with the office of government. How have you rewarded him for his kindness?—by open revolt. But even that is not your greatest crime. You have received one of the enemies of Russia into your house; you allowed a Russian officer and two soldiers to be stabbed to death in your presence. Even then, had you said you were sorry for it, I would have pardoned you in consideration of your youth and of your national customs; but no, you escaped to the mountains, and, in company with Ackmeth-Khan, attacked a Russian outpost. Lastly, you become one of Djemboulat's officers, and go with him to pillage the lands of your former friends. I need not tell you, need I, what fate awaits you?"

"No, for I know it already. I shall be shot," replied Ammalat, quietly.

"Not so; death by the bullet is a more honourable death than you deserve, and I shall not allow it," answered Yermolof, angrily. "No, you shall swing by a rope from the shafts of a cart."

"It is precisely the same thing, unless perhaps it is a quicker death," replied Ammalat. "Only I have a favour to ask, namely, that, since I am condemned beforehand, you will not take the trouble to try me. The trial would not take long, I am well aware. Still it must necessarily cause some delay."

"Your favour is granted," answered the General. Then, turning to his aides-de-camp, he continued—

"Take him away, and let it be done to-morrow morning."

Ammalat was removed.

The fate of this young man, so proud, so calm and resigned, had moved everybody's sympathy. Universal pity was felt for him, all the more deep as it was well known that it was impossible to save him, since it was necessary to make an example, and Yermolof never went back upon his decisions. Nobody therefore ventured to intercede for the unhappy young man.

The gathering dispersed.

I noticed that the General on entering his quarters looked sad. I, who know his disposition so well, said to myself that perhaps he was vexed because nobody had tried to dispute his sentence.

I determined that I would make the attempt myself, and went to his tent ten minutes after he had entered it.

He was alone, sitting with his elbow resting on the table, on which lay a report he had begun to the Emperor.

Alexis Petrovitch has, as you know, a strong predilection for me. I am one of his most intimate friends, so he was not surprised at seeing me. On the contrary, he seemed to be expecting me, for he smiled and remarked—

"André Ivanovitch, I believe you have a grudge against me. Usually, you rush in upon me as if you were marching against a battery; but, to-day, you walk as if you were treading on eggs, like the 'Mignon' of your favourite poet, Goethe. I would wager that you have come to ask me to pardon Ammalat."

"In truth, Excellency, you have guessed rightly," I answered.

"Sit down, and let us talk the matter over." Then, after a moment's silence, he continued—

"I know that it is said of me that I regard men's lives as a mere plaything, and that the blood of all these Mountaineers is no more precious in my eyes than a drop of water falling from their mountains. The most cruel of conquerors conceal their cruelty beneath an appearance of gentleness; I, on the other hand, have acquired an undeserved reputation for being pitiless. My name must protect our frontiers more securely than mountains and fortresses. All these Asiatics must learn that my word is as inflexible as death. You may convince Europeans, touch them by your kindness, win them over by forgiveness, but never Asiatics. To show them forgiveness is worse than weak, it is criminal; that is why I treat them without pity. I am cruel from kindness; nothing but the continual keeping in sight of punishment can secure the Russians from destruction, and put a stop to treachery among the Mussulmans. Among all these people who make a pretence of submission, there is not one but nurses his anger, and hatches schemes of vengeance. My predecessors have said, and my successors will say, the same.

"Each time there was a question of sentencing to death, I wished with all my heart to pardon; I had the strongest desire to be lenient; but judge for yourself. The situation is what it is; how can I alter it? Then come tears and lamentations for the unhappy victim. Humbug! all humbug, my dear fellow! There is the law, and it must be carried out. Men's lives are entrusted to my care, I am bound to protect them. I never speak in this way, it is true; I never shed these imaginary tears; yet, every time I sign a death-warrant, my heart bleeds."

Alexis Petrovitch was visibly affected. He got up, walked round his tent several times, then sat down again, and continued—

"Well, never did the necessity for punishment appear to me more cruel than to-day. Any one who has lived among Asiatics as long as I have will pay no more regard to a handsome face than he would to a letter of recommendation. Yet, I assure you, the face, the figure, the voice, the appearance of this Ammalat have impressed me forcibly. I pity him."

"A kind heart is better than sound judgment, General," I said; "and you are well endowed, for you possess both."

"The heart of a public man, my dear friend, must bow before his good judgment. I am well aware that it is in my power to pardon Ammalat; the matter rests with me; but I am also aware that I ought to punish him. Daghestan swarms with enemies; Tarky, but partially conquered, is ready to rise at the first breath of insurrection that blows from the mountains. We are bound to put a stop to all this by severity, and show the Tartars that everything, even pity, must yield in the face of the laws of Russia. If I pardon Ammalat there will be but one cry: 'Yermolof is afraid of the Prince!'"

"Yes," I replied, "but since we have arrived at the point that we are not to

follow the impulses of the heart, but to discuss and estimate results, do you not think, General, that the gratitude of Ammalat's family might exercise a great influence upon the district?"

"The Prince, my dear Colonel, is an Asiatic, like all the rest," interrupted Yermolof, "and he will be delighted that the claimant to his dominions should no longer exist. No, in this whole affair, I take no account whatever of his relatives."

Seeing that the General was showing signs of hesitation, I insisted yet more urgently, and said—

"Extend my term of service for as long as you please; give me no leave this year, and pardon this young man at my request. He is young, and Russia may yet find in him a brave and loyal servant. I will take the responsibility on my own shoulders."

Alexis Petrovitch shook his head.

"Listen!" said he. "It is a sad thing to have to say, but I make the remark as a philosopher, and not as incriminating God or Providence. Kind deeds of this kind that I have done before have seldom turned out well; and you must know they have not been frequent."

"Try the experiment once more in this case, General, and give us your word that, should it turn out badly, it shall be the last."

"Very well, be it so. As it is your wish, I pardon him; and all the more readily, as I was only waiting for a request such as yours to excuse me in my own eyes. I pardon him, and unconditionally. It is not my way to haggle about details when I have yielded the main point. Only remember one thing; you have said that you will be responsible for him."

"Entirely. I take him under my charge, and answer for him with my life, General."

"Never depend on him, and remember the old fable of the viper, which the compassionate traveller warmed in his bosom. Oh, these Asiatics! you will know them some day, Verkovsky; God grant that you may not gain the knowledge at your own expense."

I was so pleased, that, instead of answering the General, or so much as thanking him, I ran off to the tent where Ammalat was confined.

Three sentinels surrounded him; the tent was lighted by a lantern hung from the tent-pole. I went in; but Ammalat was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear me. I approached near enough to touch him. He was lying stretched on his *bourka*, and was weeping.

I was not surprised; it is not a cheerful thing to die at the age of twenty-three.

I was pleased to see his tears; they showed me the value of the pardon which I was bringing.

"Ammalat," I said in Tartar, "Allah is great, and the Sirdar is kind; he gives you your life."

The young man sprang to his feet; he tried to speak, but his emotion was so great that it was some time before he could utter a word.

"My life?" he cried. "He gives me my life?"

Then he added, with a bitter smile—

"I understand; to do a man slowly to death in a gloomy prison, or perhaps, to send him, habituated as he is to the warm Eastern sun, to languish amid the snows and darkness; to bury him alive, to separate him from his kinsmen, his friends, his mistress; to cut him off from speech with his fellows, to forbid him to complain even to himself—that is what is called giving him life, that is the best mercy shown to the condemned. If that is the mercy he extends to me, tell him that I do not desire it."

"You mistake, Ammalat," I replied. "The pardon is absolute, without conditions, without restrictions. You will remain master of your property, your actions, your wishes. Here is your sword; the General gives it back to you in the confidence that you will draw it in the future only to fight for the Russians. You will live with me until this unhappy affair is forgotten, and I will treat you as a friend, as a brother.

Such an offer was new to an Asiatic. He looked at me, and two great tears started from his eyes.

"The Russians have conquered me in every way!" he cried. "Forgive me, Colonel, for having thought so unworthily of you. From this moment I become the loyal servant of the Emperor of Russia, my heart and my sword are his. Oh, my sword! my sword!" he added, contemplating the blade lovingly; "may my tears wash out the Russian blood and the Tartar naphtha!* When and how can

* The Tartars give a blackish tinge to the blades of their swords and daggers by steeping them in naphtha.

I show my gratitude to you for my life and liberty?"

I am sure, my dear Marie, that you will keep one of your sweetest kisses for me for my conduct in this matter. Indeed, in acting as I have done, I thought only of you. I said to myself, "Marie will be pleased; Marie will reward me." But when shall I receive that reward, my adored one? Your mourning must last for more than nine months longer, as the General has refused me leave, reminding me that I gave it up of my own accord when I asked him for Ammalat's life.

The fact is, my presence is necessary to the regiment. Winter barracks have to be built, and, if I go away, all the work will be stopped. So I am remaining; but oh, my poor heart!

We have been three days at Derbend. Ammalat is with me. He does not speak. He becomes more gloomy and wild every day, but he only interests me the more. He talks Russian well, but only by rote. I am teaching him the alphabet; he has grasped it wonderfully quickly. I hope to make a pupil of him that will do me credit.

CHAPTER IX

THE REFLECTIONS OF AMMALAT-BEG, TRANSLATED FROM THE TARTAR *

EITHER I have been asleep up till now, or I am dreaming to-day. Behold a new world, called the world of thought. A grand, magnificent, splendid world, which for long has been unknown to me, like the Milky Way, which they say is composed of millions of stars. I seem to be climbing the mountain of knowledge amid fog and darkness; but the day is breaking and the fog dispersing. At each step my horizon grows wider and clearer. At each step I breathe more freely. I gaze at the sun and am obliged to drop my eyes; but the clouds are already beneath my feet. Cursed clouds! ye prevent me looking from the earth to the sky, or from the sky to the earth.

How comes it that those simple questions Why? and How? never presented themselves to my mind? The whole universe, with all its good and all its evil, was reflected in my soul, as in the sea or in a mirror, but my soul knew no more of it than does the mirror or the sea. I remembered a good many facts, but of what use were they? The falcon does not understand why the hood is put over its eyes; nor the horse why it should be shod. No more do I understand why there are mountains here, and plains there; here eternal snows, there oceans of burning sands. Why must we have tempests and earthquakes? And man, the most wonderful of all creatures that issued from the Creator's hand, it had never entered my head to follow his mysterious path from the cradle to the grave. I confess that, up till now, I had looked at books and at life with the same eyes; at books, without understanding their meaning, at life, without understanding its purpose. But Verkovsky is removing the bandage from my eyes and dispersing the mists from my mind; under his guidance, I try my sprouting wings, like the young swallow with the mother bird. The distance and the height still amaze, but no longer terrify me. In time I shall soar like the eagle in the dazzling blue of the skies.

And yet after all, am I any happier since Verkovsky's tuition has taught me to think?

Formerly I was as pleased as a child with a horse, or a sword, or a gun, but now that I have learnt the superiority of mind over matter, I care for none of the things which I desired in times past. There was a time when I took myself seriously and thought myself somebody; now, I am convinced of one thing at least, namely, that I am nothing at all. I looked back no farther than to my grandfather; all previous existence was shrouded with a dark veil. It was a region of night, peopled with characters borrowed from tales and legends. My horizon was the Caucasus; but, at least, I slept peacefully in that darkness. I hoped one day to become famous in Daghestan; the mountains were the pedestal which I had chosen for my statue; and now, as I become wiser, I learn from books that history long ere my day has peopled the stage which I had selected as my own with nations that struggled gloriously, with heroes whose

* These fragments were found in the room Ammalat-Beg had occupied in Colonel Verkovsky's house.

names have roused the echoes of Daghestan and of all the world, while I was ignorant of the very names of these nations, and knew not that these heroes had ever existed. Where are these nations? where these heroes, buried in the obscurity of the past, forgotten in the dust of centuries? I thought that the world belonged to the Tartars, and lo! by a mere glance at a map, I discover that they occupy a tiny spot on a tiny globe; that they are poor savages as compared with the civilisation of Europe; that no one thinks, or knows, or cares to know, about them. No, we are all mere worms! Kings, heroes, and great men are glow-worms, that is the whole difference.

By Mahomet! it was well worth the trouble of fatiguing my brain to arrive at such a result!

To what purpose is it to know that the forces of Nature and the laws that govern her, when I am unable to regulate my own mind? I can subdue the Ocean, and I cannot control my tears. I can divert the lightning from my roof, but I cannot banish grief from my mind. I was unhappy enough already, when I had only my own feelings to beset my mind, and now, in addition, troubles swoop down upon me as my falcons do upon those poor birds whom I now begin to pity, a thing which it never before entered my head to do. The sick man gains little by learning the nature of his malady, if he learns at the same time that it is incurable, and I suffer doubly since I have learned to analyse my suffering.

Yet no, I am unjust. My studies beguile the tedium of those hours of separation which seem long as winter nights; the acquisition of the faculty of transcribing my thoughts—that is to say, of fixing on paper the fancies of my imagination—has increased the powers of my brain and of my heart.

Of my heart or of my pride; I hardly know which. Nay! it is of my heart; for some day, when I see Sultanetta again, I shall show her these pages, in which her name occurs again and again, oftener than that of Allah in the Koran. "Here are the memoirs cherished by my heart," I shall say to her: "on such a day I thought of you in such a way; on such a night I dreamed of you in such a manner. By the lines, you may count my tears; by the words, my sighs.

"Perhaps we shall laugh together over these days when I suffered so much; but shall I be able to remember the past when I am with you, my adored Sultanetta? No, everything before me and around me will grow dim, and the only bright space will be that within the circle of the rays shed from your eyes. At the sight of that light my heart will melt in my bosom. To be oblivious of myself when by your side is sweeter than to make the whole world resound with my name.

"So you see it is not that my pride has increased. I read these tales of love, these descriptions of women, these passions of men, only to find that not one of these heroines of romance possesses beauty of body, or soul, or heart, compared with my Sultanetta, and that I myself have no moral resemblance to these men whose histories I read. I envy them their intelligence, their knowledge, their amiability, but not their love. How sluggish and cold is the most ardent of their loves; merely a ray of the moon playing upon ice. No, I cannot believe that the men whose love shows itself in this fashion ever did veritably love.

"One thing, my beloved, I must confess; it is, that I ask myself in vain the meaning of friendship. I know not how to answer. I have a friend in Verkovsky, an affectionate, sincere, and kind friend. I feel that I do not respond to his friendship as I should do, and I blame myself for it; but it is not in my power to do otherwise. My heart has no room in it but for Sultanetta, harbours no other sentiment but that of love."

No, I do not wish to read any more; I do not understand what he tells me. Clearly, I was not meant to climb the ladder of knowledge. My breath fails me at the first step, I lose myself at the first difficulties, I tangle the string instead of unrolling it. I drag and tear at it. The Colonel encourages me to make progress. But what is it that hinders my progress? Alas! it is that which makes both the happiness and unhappiness of my life—namely, love. Everywhere and in everything I see and hear Sultanetta, and often I see and hear nothing but her. To forget her for a single moment would seem to me a crime. Even if I would, I could no more do so than I could stop my heart from beating. Can I live without air? Sultanetta is my light, my air, my life, my soul!

My hand trembles, my heart beats. If I were writing with my blood, it would burn the paper. "Do you not know, Sultanetta, that you are killing me? Your image pursues me everywhere. The recollection of your beauty is more fatal to me than that beauty itself. The thought that this treasure of love which I have pressed between my arms is lost to me for ever, throws me into despair and madness. My mind is at sea, my heart is broken. I recall each feature of your face, each expression of your countenance, each movement of your arm, each attitude of your figure, your foot, that seal of love, your lips, like an open pomegranate, your shoulders, a mine of marble! The mere remembrance of your voice makes my soul vibrate like the string of an instrument that is ready to snap. And your kiss, that kiss in which I seemed to drink at the fountain of life, falls upon me again at night like dewdrops of flame. Oh! for one more kiss like that in the Chapel, only one, Sultanetta, and then to die!"

* * * * *

We have seen that Colonel Verkovsky had noticed Ammalat's sadness, and more, that he had guessed at its cause.

In the wish to distract his thoughts, he got up a boar-hunt, a favourite amusement with the *Begs* of Daghestan.

Twenty *Begs* with their attendants, each anxious to distinguish himself, arrived on the Colonel's invitation.

The month of December was beginning to cover the peaks of the mountains of Daghestan with snow. The swollen Caspian, unnavigable during winter, beat wildly against the walls of the Town with the Iron Gates. The flapping noise made by the bustards with their wings was heard through the fog; gloom and sadness pervaded everything. A fine rain which fell every evening seemed to be tears shed by the weather in regret for the glorious days now past. The old men loitered in the market-places, enveloped to the nose in their pelisses and *bourkas*.

But these days, so miserable for other people, are an ideal time for the hunters.

Hardly had the sun risen on the other side of the sea, and the Mullahs summoned the people to prayer, when the Colonel and his guests, including Ammalat, reached the northern gate of Derbend, literally swimming in mud.

They followed the road leading to Tarky, not a very picturesque one; here and there were some fields of madder, then came immense Tartar cemeteries, where the tombstones were so crowded that they resembled a forest of vine-props; a few vineyards; and lastly, the sea, which at that season, instead of brilliantly reflecting the sky, looked like an enormous basin with an incessant steam rising from it. Huge masses of rock, detached from their foundation by the force of the water, had rolled down on both sides of the road, and been allowed to remain there in a disorder which indicated the indifference of men to the cataclysms of Nature.

The beaters were already at their posts.

The Colonel on his arrival sounded three shrill and prolonged notes on his silver-mounted horn, to which the beaters replied by a shout, betokening that they were ready.

The hunters placed themselves in line, some on foot and some on horseback; and the drive began. Soon the boars made their appearance, and the first cracks of the muskets were heard.

The forests of Daghestan swarm with these animals, and although the Tartars, considering them as unclean, hold it a sin even to touch them, yet they are accustomed to organise great hunts for their pursuit. These hunts are a test both of skill in shooting and of courage, for the pace of the boar is exceedingly rapid, and the animal, especially the mountain-boar, almost always turns upon his pursuer when wounded.

The line of sportsmen, consisting of some thirty gunners, covered a wide extent of ground. The boldest of them, and the surest shots, chose the most lonely spots, so as not to share with any one else the glory of success.

Colonel Verkovsky, relying on his nerve and skill, chose one of these places, at some distance within the forest, and quite separated from the rest of the party. Leaning against an oak-tree, in the middle of a sort of glade which afforded the hunter, and the boar as well, complete liberty of action, he awaited the event, which in this country, where animals remain as wild as nature and man, is almost always a hand-to-hand struggle. Shots were heard to right and left of him; occasionally the Colonel saw through the copses or the thickets a boar

flash past like lightning. At last he heard a low noise of crashing bushes, and saw an enormous old boar making straight for him.

The Colonel fired, but the bullet glanced on the bony skull of the animal's angular head. The boar, however, momentarily stunned by the violence of the blow, remained quivering where he stood, neither advancing nor retreating. The Colonel, thinking him to be wounded more severely than he was, stepped out of his concealment towards the boar. The animal, which had not known exactly whence the shot had come, now saw his adversary, and charged him with his bristles erect and grinding his great jaws together.

Verkovsky had a second barrel to fire, so he waited.

At four yards' distance he pulled the trigger, but only the priming flashed.

What happened next passed as quick as thought. He felt a violent shock, and was hurled to the ground; but in the act of rolling over, with that admirable coolness which he owed to his tried courage, he drew his dagger—one of the best blades in Daghestan. The boar impaled himself upon it, but the violence of his rush dragged the weapon out of the Colonel's hands.

The boar had received a terrible wound; however, by his bloodshot eyes and the foam that dropped from his mouth, the Colonel could see that he had plenty of strength and spirit left.

The Colonel, lying defenceless on the ground, and feeling, by a sharp pain in the thigh, that he was already wounded, realised that he was lost.

"Help, hunters!" he cried, though with little hope of being heard.

Even had the hunters heard, and been been within a hundred yards, they could not have reached the spot in time.

Suddenly was heard the sound of a horse galloping; a hunter was apparently following on the track of the boar.

The report of a musket rang out, and the Colonel heard a sharp, whizzing sound, followed by the dull thud made by a bullet when striking a soft substance.

At the same moment a mountain seemed to be lifted from his chest; the boar had abandoned him for a fresh adversary.

Verkovsky raised himself on his elbow; a mist seemed to float before his eyes, but through this mist he saw a horseman who, instead of running from the boar, or merely waiting for him, threw himself from his horse; whereupon man and animal rushed at one another, and rolled over together.

For an instant they formed an extraordinary group, which no painter could have depicted.

It seemed, however, to the Colonel that the man continued to strike with his dagger even after the animal was already dead.

Presently the infuriated striker stood up, covered with blood, foam, and mud.

It was Ammalat-Beg.

The boar's head, completely severed from the body, lay near him.

The Colonel sprang up, and, though bleeding from two wounds, ran to the young man with open arms, thanking him for having saved his life.

"Do not thank me," said Ammalat, as he kicked away the head of the boar with the iron heel of his boot, "do not thank me. I have not saved you; say rather I have avenged myself. Ah, you accursed, unclean brute!" continued the young man, trampling the boar beneath his feet as though it could still feel and hear. "Not content with killing my friend, the *Beg* of Tavannant, you refused, coward that you were, to charge at me when I shouted to you that I had killed your father, and stabbed your mother, but continued your course, to rip up my benefactor, the man to whom I owe my life. Oh, you accursed, unclean beast!"

"You owe me nothing now, Ammalat, and we may cry quits," continued the Colonel; "and, unclean brute though he be, I hope we shall be revenged upon him by giving him tit for tat; we will apply to him the Tartar penalty of the *lex talionis*. He has struck with his teeth; we will eat him with our teeth. I hope you will, on this occasion, forfeit your scruples and eat your share."

"I would eat my share of a *man*, if he had killed my friend," answered the infuriated hunter, "much more the flesh of an animal, were it ten times forbidden."

"And, to season this forbidden flesh, Ammalat, we will wash it down with forbidden liquor."

"As you will, Colonel; better to wash my burning heart with wine than with holy water, since the latter brings it no relief."

Then, laying both hands on his breast as though he wished to stay his heart from beating, he uttered a deep groan.

The drive was over, for the present at least.

The Colonel gave three blasts on his horn, and a moment later the beaters and the sportsmen gathered round him.

The Colonel related in a few words what had taken place; then, pointing to the boar with his head severed from the body, he turned to Ammalat and said—

"A fine stroke, and a brave one!"

"It is the vengeance of an Asiatic, and that is always mortal!"

"My friend," said the Colonel, "you have seen what the vengeance of a Russian and a Christian was. Let it be a lesson to you!"

And both set out homewards.

Ammalat seemed absent-minded. Sometimes he did not reply to Verkovsky's questions, sometimes he answered quite at random. He rode beside him, glancing in every direction, as though he were expecting some one, and even forgot to ask the Colonel if his wounds were causing him pain.

Verkovsky imagined that Ammalat, as a keen sportsman, was absorbed in thinking of the hunt, and, being in a hurry to get home and put his wounded thigh under the surgeon's care, went off at a gallop, leaving Ammalat to his dreams.

The young man went on until he had turned the angle of a hill, and then, thinking himself to be alone, he rose in his stirrups and looked round him.

Suddenly at the bottom of a ravine appeared a horseman with his garments all torn by the thorny bushes which grow on all the slopes of the Caucasus. This horseman advanced straight to Ammalat.

A simultaneous cry broke from both of them—

"*Aleikoum salam!*"

And, jumping from their horses, they rushed into one another's arms.

"So you are here, Nephtali! You have seen her, have spoken to her? Oh, I see by your face that you bring good news."

And, quickly throwing off his jacket embroidered with gold, he presented it to Nephtali saying—

"Here, take it, messenger of happiness.* Is she alive? Is she well? Does she love me as she did of old?"

"By Mahomet, you must give me time to breathe. You ask me so many questions, and I have so many things to tell you, that they are all crowded up together, like women who have mislaid their slippers at the door of the Mosque."

"Well, then, let us take them one by one. You got my letter?"

"Evidently, or I should not be here. Yes, I received your letter, and, by your desire, set out for Khunsack. I went there so quietly and silently that I did not disturb a bird from its sleep on my road. Ackmeth-Khan is well. He was at home. He made many inquiries about you, shook his head and asked, 'Doesn't he want a spindle to wind the silk at Derbend?' The Khan's wife, who looks upon you already as her son-in-law" (here Ammalat sighed and looked at the sky), "sends you a thousand compliments and nearly as many little pies. I have brought you the compliments, but I threw the little pies away, as the jolting of my horse had shaken them into pap."

"Let the devil eat them! And—Sultanetta?"

"Sultanetta, my brother," said Nephtali, whose turn it now was to sigh. "Sultanetta is as beautiful as the sky studded with stars. And this sky, cloudy and dark at first, became bright directly I pronounced your name and said that I came from you. She almost threw herself upon my neck. I poured out a whole bagful of tender messages from you, and told her you were dying for love of her."

"And what did she answer?"

"Nothing; she began to weep."

"Kind heart! Dear heart! And what message does she send me?"

"Ask me rather what she does *not* send, and I shall have sooner finished. She bids me tell you that, since your departure, she has known no happiness, not even in her dreams. That her heart is buried beneath the snow, and that your presence only will melt this snow like the sun in May. Had I stopped there till she had finished all she had to say to you and uttered all her longings, we should never have met, my dear Ammalat, until we were grey-headed men. Yet she almost drove me away, because she thought I was not starting quickly enough,

* A Tartar custom, which consists in making a present, usually of giving a coat, to any one who brings good news. In this way the author received the *nicham*, for having announced to the Bey of Tunis his cousin's arrival at Marseilles.

and wished you to know immediately all that she was suffering."

"Adorable creature!" cried Ammalat, addressing Sultanetta as though she could hear him. "Oh, you can never never know what happiness it is for me to be with you, what martyrdom it is for me not to see you!"

"By Allah, I seem to hear her speaking, for that is exactly what she says about you, Ammalat. 'Oh, if he could only come,' she sobbed; 'were it only for a day, an hour, a moment!'"

"Oh, if I could but see her, and then die!"

"No, Ammalat, you must see her and live. There is nothing like a sight of her for making you wish to live; her very glance makes the blood course twice as quick as before."

"You told her why I cannot accomplish the dearest wish of my heart?"

"I told her so many things, that, if you had heard them, you would have taken me for the poet of the Shah of Persia. The poor girl exhausted all her tears when she heard them."

"You ought not to have filled her with despair, Nephtali. Perhaps what cannot be now, may become possible later. To banish hope from a woman's heart is to banish love. The woman who has no hope left does not love for long."

"You talk wildly, Ammalat; hope, on the contrary, is with lovers an endless skein. In cold blood, you hardly believe what you see with your eyes; but, if you are in love, you believe in everything, even in phantoms. Listen, Sultanetta is certain that, even if you were in your grave, you would come out of it to see her."

"The grave and Derbend are all one, as far as I am concerned, Nephtali. My body is at Derbend, my soul at Khunsack."

"And your mind, where is that, Ammalat? Running about the country, I think. You are not so badly off with the Colonel—for a man who was going to have been hanged six months ago! No; you are free and happy, loved like a brother, treated like a lover. Sultanetta is beautiful, I grant you; but Verkovsky is kind, and you can surely sacrifice a little of your love to friendship."

"And am I not doing so, Nephtali? But you little know how much it costs me. It seems to me that the friendship I give to Verkovsky is a piece torn out of my heart. Friendship is a good thing, Nephtali, but it does not take the place of love."

Nephtali sighed.

"Have you never spoken of Sultanetta to the Colonel?" he asked.

"No, I have never dared to do so, though I have wanted to a hundred times; but the words are checked on my tongue. Directly I open my lips the name of Sultanetta seems to bar the passage. He is so considerate that I have scruples about annoying him with my folly; so kind that I fear to tire his patience. Just fancy, Nephtali, he is in love with a woman with whom he was brought up. He would have married her, but, in the year 1814, at the time of the war with France, he was thought to have been killed. The woman who for three years had struggled to keep her heart true to Verkovsky, yielded when she thought him dead, and married another man. In 1815 Verkovsky returned, and found his Marianne married. What do you think I should have done in his place? I should have plunged my dagger into her perjured heart; I should have carried her off, to possess her, were it but for an hour. But no; he knew that his rival was a man of honour, as they say; he was cold-blooded enough to remain his friend, and he saw his old love again without stabbing the pair of them."

"A man of an uncommon character, and one who would prove a trusty friend," said Nephtali.

"Yes, but what an icy lover! and, circumspect as he was, the husband became jealous. What did Verkovsky do? Came on military service to the Caucasus. By good fortune, or bad if you like, the husband is dead. Now, you would suppose, Verkovsky will saddle his horse, jump up and ride away. Not a bit of it. The Governor tells him his presence is necessary here, and here he remains—not for a week, a month, three months, but for a year, an age, an eternity! As for his love, he feeds it on paper every week, on the day when the post goes. No, Nephtali, you see that a man of that sort, good as he is, would never understand my love. There is too great a difference in years, and, above all, in sentiments between us; and all this chills my friendship for him, and prevents my being really sincere."

"You are a strange person," said Nephtali, with a certain sadness. "You do not love Verkovsky just because he is beyond all others deserving of love and respect."

"Who told you I did not love him?" cried Ammalat, with almost a shudder. "No, no, on the contrary, I am bound to love him as my benefactor, as the man who saved my life. Oh! I love everybody since I have known Sultanetta. I would like to cover the earth with flowers, to make of the world an immense garden."

"To love everybody, Ammalat, is to love nobody."

"You are wrong, Nephtali. Were the whole world to drink at the cup of my love, that cup would still be full," said Ammalat, with a smile.

"That's what it is to see a beautiful girl without her veil, and then afterwards to see nothing but veils and eyebrows. You require a cage to make you sing, like the nightingale in the valley of Aourmes."

"What is the valley of Aourmes?" asked Ammalat.

"In the spring it is the kingdom of roses, in autumn it is the kingdom of grapes," answered Nephtali.

And, as a body of returning hunters were coming towards them, the two friends, leading their horses by the bridles, plunged into the thickest part of the forest.

CHAPTER X

COLONEL VERKOVSKY TO HIS FIANCÉE.

Derbend, April, 1820.

COME to me, dear Marie, heart of my heart, come to me, and admire with me a lovely night in Daghestan. Derbend reposes peacefully upon its flowery carpet, like a dark lava block fallen from the summit of the Caucasus; the scent of almond-trees is wafted to me on the wind; the nightingale sings in the thickets behind the fortress. Everything is bursting into life; everything breathes love. Nature, blushing like a modest bride, is shrouded in a veil of mists. These mists exactly resemble another sea floating above the great Caspian lake. The lower sea throbs like an embossed cuirass rising and falling with the breathing of a manly breast, while the upper sea glides with silvery swell, illumined by the full moon, which hangs suspended in the heavens like a golden lamp, round which gleam the stars as bright as diamonds strewn on an azure ground. Each moment the moon's fitful rays change the aspect—I will not say of the landscape, for endless mists and boundless sea do not constitute a landscape—but of a horizon which you might imagine to be the threshold of the realm of phantoms, the empire of dreams.

You cannot imagine, my beloved one, what sad, and yet at the same time what sweet emotions the sound and the sight of the sea arouse in me. I think at once of the eternity of our souls and the infinity of our love. This love is within me and all around me. It is the one grand and immortal sentiment which man can possess. It is its own ocean. Its flame warms me in the winter of melancholy; its light guides me in the night of doubt; then I can love without weeping, I can look forward without fear. You smile at my fancy, my heart's sister; this mournful language surprises you. But to whom should I tell all my thoughts, if not to you? You know that I am a sort of lantern, and that by the light of the flame burning in my heart all my feelings are reflected in my countenance, and since you, too, will read me with your heart rather than with your mind, I am happy. At any rate, should any passages in my letters remain obscure, your happy lover will explain them to you in the month of August next. I grow excited at the thought of the moment when I shall see you again; I count the hours which separate us, and the miles which lie between us. You will come in June to the waters of the Caucasus, and then there will be nothing between us but a few snowy peaks of the granite mountain-chain. How near we shall be to one another, my love, and yet how far! How many years of my life would I give to hasten the happy hour of our meeting! Our souls have been so long betrothed! Why then have they been parted asunder till now?

Our friend Ammalat still conceals himself from me. I do not blame him. I know how difficult, nay, how impossible it is to change the habits imbibed with a mother's milk and one's native air. The

Persian despotism has left in the hearts of the Tartars of the Caucasus the basest passions; the most cowardly tricks find welcome there. Could it be otherwise in a system of government based on the exchange of a great tyranny for a petty one, where the justice even of a judicial sentence is a rarity, where power means merely the right to carry on brigandage with impunity?

"Do with me, master, as you will; but let me do as I will with my inferiors.'

There is Asiatic government in a word.

Hence it comes that each man, finding himself between two foes, the man who oppresses him and the man whom he oppresses, is accustomed to conceal his thoughts as closely as his money; that each man practises deceit in the presence of the strong to procure strength thereby, in the presence of the rich to obtain some ransom by oppression or denunciation. Hence it comes, in short, that the Tartar of Daghestan will not speak a word, nor take a step, nor give a cucumber, but with the hope of receiving in his turn an equivalent. A bully towards the man who is neither strong nor powerful, he bends before power, cringes before wealth. He will load you with caresses, will give you his children, his house, his soul, in order to keep his money. And if he shows you any attention, be sure that some calculating motive lies concealed beneath. In business matters, the question of a farthing stops him; it is difficult to imagine how far this people's lust of gain will lead them. The character of the Armenians is even lower and more vile, yet I believe the Tartars are more treacherous and grasping. It is clear that Ammalat, with such examples before him from his childhood, must have been influenced by them; although he has preserved in his nobleness a great contempt for all that is low and mean, still he has inherited from nature an artful disposition, as an indispensable weapon against his enemies, open or secret. Among Asiatics, the ties of relationship, so sacred with ourselves, do not exist; among them, the son is the slave of his father, the brother, the enemy of his brother. They put no trust in their neighbour, because their religion has forgotten to tell them to love their neighbour as themselves. The jealousy with which their wives or their mistresses inspire them stifles all less overmastering sentiments. Among them friendship does not exist. The child reared by a mother who is a slave, knowing nothing of a father's caresses, and choked by the Arabic alphabet, dissimulates even with children of his own age. From the day that he cuts his first tooth, he thinks of nothing but himself; the moment his moustache sprouts, all doors and all hearts are closed to him. Husbands regard him with uneasiness and drive him off like a wild beast, and in the eyes of Mohammedanism the earliest movements of his heart and the first promptings of nature are already regarded as a crime. He must let nothing of what is going on within him be seen by his nearest relation or his best friend. If he weeps, he must hold his *bachlik* over his eyes and weep in solitude and silence!

All this I have said, my love, that you may not condemn Ammalat. Asiatic manners are so different from our own that they require constant commentary to make them intelligible. This explains why, although he has been living with me for nearly a year and a half, I had never heard the name of the woman he loved, though he understood quite well that it was not from motives of curiosity that I wished to learn the secret of his heart.

At last, however, one day he told me everything. This is how it came about.

We had gone for a ride, Ammalat and I, beyond the town. We had taken the road leading to the mountains, and as we went further and climbed higher, we found ourselves unexpectedly close to the village of Kemmek, through which runs the famous wall which protected Persia against the incursions of the nations who inhabited the northern plains of the Caucasus. The chronicles of Derbend assert that this wall was built by a certain Isfendyar. Hence the tradition which attributes this work to Alexander the Great, who, however, never really reached these parts. In all probability it was Noushirvan who discovered it, restored it, and placed sentries upon it.

Subsequently it was restored on several occasions, and finally, for want of repair, fell into the condition in which we see it to-day. This wall is said to have extended from the Caspian to the Black Sea across the entire Caucasus, having iron gates at its extremity, at Derbend that is, and iron gates at its centre, that is to say, at Darial. You may see its traces in the

mountains wherever you can follow them; it is only amid the precipices and the ravines that they are lost. No remains of the wall, however, have been discovered between the Black Sea and Mingrelia, notwithstanding all the researches that have been made. I looked with great interest at this wall flanked with towers, and admired the greatness of the ancients, even in their follies, a greatness which the Orientals of to-day cannot equal. The wonders of Babylon, Lake Moeris, the pyramids of the Pharaohs, the great barrier of China, this wall reared in the wildest spots, on the summits of the loftiest rocks and in the deepest abysses—all these testify to the giant will and unlimited power of the monarchs of bygone days. Neither lapse of time nor shock of earthquake have been able to destroy the work of man, and the foot of centuries has been unable te obliterate the relics of the intrepid builders of antiquity.

I confess that this sight inspired me with thoughts both proud and solemn. I looked down upon the traces left by Peter the Great, the founder of a new empire. I pictured him to myself bestriding the ruins of that Asiatic power from the midst of which, dragging her forward with his powerful hand, he pushed Russia on towards Europe. How brightly must his lightning glance have flashed from the Caucasus! What thoughts must have surged in his mind! How proudly must his breast have heaved! The mighty future of his country unfolded itself before his gaze, boundless as the horizon. In the vast mirror of the Caspian he saw reflected the coming grandeur of Russia sown by his own hand, watered by the sweat of blood. He aimed not at mere brutal conquests, as these barbarians do, but strove to promote the welfare of the human race. Astrakhan, Derbend, Baku, these are the links of the chain wherewith he planned to surround the Caucasus, uniting the commerce of Russia with that of India.

God of the North! thou whom Nature created to flatter human vanity, and, at the same time, to make it despair of ever attaining to thy height, thy giant shadow rears itself before me, and the cataract of ages breaks into spray at thy feet!

I rode on thoughtful and silent.

This wall of the Caucasus is built on the northern side of blocks of hewn stone, cut square, and embedded between narrower stones which are longer than they are broad. The Greeks called this the Pelasgic style. In many places the battlements still exist; but trees that have seeded and grown up between the interstices have separated the stones by the slow but irresistible leverage of their roots, and have gradually crumbled away those parts of the wall that have sheltered these oaken serpents in their bosom. The eagle peacefully builds its nest in the towers once filled with soldiers, and on the paths untrodden for ages lie the bones of wild goats carried thither by jackals.

At several points I lost all trace of the wall, but would presently see it reappear further on amid the stones and bushes.

After following it thus for about two miles, we arrived at a gate, and passed from the northern to the southern side beneath an archway overgrown with grass and roots.

We had scarcely ridden twenty yards when we came upon six armed Mountaineers lying in shade beside their horses, which were cropping the grass.

I now recognised the mistake I had made in riding so far from Derbend without an escort.

It was impossible to escape, on account of the rocks and thickets. On the other hand, it was risky for the two of us to attack six men. Nevertheless I drew my pistol from the holsters, but Ammalat, taking in the situation at a glance, replaced his weapon in its sheath, and said in a low tone—

"Do not touch your pistol or we are lost, but keep your eye on me, and do as you see me do."

The brigands had observed us; they got up quickly and seized their guns, though one of the band still remained carelessly stretched on the turf.

This man raised his head, looked at us, and signed to his companions. Instantly we were surrounded, and one of the Mountaineers seized hold of my horse by the bridle. There was only one path before us, and in the middle of this path the Lesghian Chief was lying.

"I beg you to dismount, my dear guests," said he, with a smile.

I hesitated. Ammalat motioned me to remain in the saddle, but jumped down himself, which appeared to satisfy the Lesghian Chief.

Ammalat went up to him. "Good day, my friend," said he. "I did not expect to see you to-day; upon my word, I thought

the devil had made mince-meat of you long ago."

"You jump at conclusions, Ammalat-Beg," said the bandit, frowning. "Before such a thing as that happens, I hope to give some corpses of Russians and Tartars like yourself to the eagles to devour."

"How goes your hunting?" asked Ammalat, as quietly as though he had not heard.

"Badly; the Russians hide themselves like cowards."

I trembled; but I saw fastened upon me at the same moment the Mountaineer's glance full of hatred, and Ammalat's gentle and calm look.

"I have only taken," continued the Lesghian, "some cattle and a dozen horses belonging to the regiment, and I was expecting this very day to have to return empty-handed. But Allah is great, and sends me a rich *Beg* and a Russian Colonel."

My heart seemed to stand still within me as I heard these words.

"Don't sell your falcon when it is up in the clouds," said Ammalat, laughing, "but wait till it has come back to your hand."

The brigand grasped his gun, and eyed us sternly.

"Ammalat," said he, "you are caught, fairly caught; do not think to escape me, either you or your companion. But, perhaps," he added, laughing, "you count on defending yourself?"

"Come now, Chemardant! Do you take us for madmen, that we should want to fight two against six? We like money well enough, but we value our lives more than we do money. We are caught, and we will pay, provided always you are not too exacting. You know very well that I am an orphan, and the Colonel has no kinsmen either."

"You have neither father nor mother, but you have your father's inheritance."

"I have nothing at all, since I am the prisoner of the Russians."

"If you are a prisoner, why don't you take this opportunity to escape? I will set you free."

"That is the only man who can set me free," said Ammalat, pointing to me. "I have given him my parole, and until he restores it to me, I will follow him wherever he chooses to lead me. The word of a Mahometan is invisible as a hair from a woman's head, but it is strong as a chain of iron."

"If you have no money, we will put up with sheep; a word to Sophyr-Ali, who has stayed behind to guard your house, will arrange the matter. But never talk to me of your Colonel's poverty; I know there is not a soldier in his regiment but would sell the last button on his uniform to buy him back. At any rate, we will see. Allah, keep me! I am no Jew."

"Be reasonable, Chemardant," resumed the young Tartar, "and we will not dream either of defending ourselves or escaping."

"I believe you, and prefer that the matter should end thus without powder and lead."

Then he continued, with a mocking look—

"How fine you have grown, Ammalat! What a horse! what a gun! Come, show me your dagger. It was made at Kouba!"

"No, at Kisslar," answered Ammalat.

Then, drawing the weapon from its sheath, he observed—

"You must not look at the hilt, but at the blade, which is a marvel of workmanship. On one side you see the maker's name; read it for yourself, 'Ali Ousta Kasanisky.'"

Ammalat held his *kandjar* up to the bandit, who tried to decipher the inscription engraved on the blade.

He threw me a swift glance, which made me shudder.

Suddenly the dagger gleamed like a lightning flash, and disappeared to the hilt in the Lesghian's heart.

I had guessed what would happen. I snatched my pistol from the holster, and shot the Mountaineer who was holding my horse through the head.

The four others, on seeing their comrades fall, took to their heels, while Ammalat coolly set to work plundering the dead.

"My friend," said I, shaking my head, "I don't know if I ought to praise you for what you have just done. Trickery is always trickery, that is to say, a mean and miserable proceeding, even against an enemy."

He looked at me in astonishment.

"You are a strange man, Colonel! Why, this bandit has done terrible mischief to the Russians. Do you know that he would have drawn our blood from us drop by drop for the sake of gold?"

"It is true, Ammalat," I said; "yet to lie, to call him your friend, to talk to him amicably, and then suddenly to plunge

your dagger into his heart! Could we not have begun as we have ended?"

"No, Colonel, no, we could not. If I had not gone up to the Chief, and spoken to him as a comrade, they would have killed us at the first movement we made. I know these Mountaineers well. They are brave, but only in presence of their leader. So we had to begin with him. Directly he was dead, you saw how they took to their heels!"

I shook my head again.

This Asiatic dissimulation, though I owed my life to it, did not please me.

As for Ammalat, after appropriating the Leader's weapons, he went to take those of the Lesghian whom I had shot down with my pistol.

To my great astonishment, the poor wretch was not dead. I had moved my horse away from him when I saw him fall.

He uttered some words, which sounded to me like a prayer.

Ammalat went up to him, and his astonishment was greater than my own when he recognised in the wounded man, through whose cheeks the bullet had passed, one of Ackmeth-Khan's attendants.

"How do you come to be in the company of these Lesghian brigands?" he asked him.

"The devil tempted me. Khan Ackmeth sent me to the village of Kemmek with a letter for Ibrahim, the doctor, in which he urged him to come with all speed to Khunsack. I met with Chemardant, and he said, 'Come along with me; I am going where there is money to be got;' and I followed him."

"You say you were sent for Ibrahim, the doctor?" asked Ammalat, quickly.

"Yes."

"Why, who is ill at Khunsack?"

"The Khan's daughter, Sultanetta."

"Sultanetta ill?" cried Ammalat.

"Here is the letter to the doctor," said the *nouker*, handing Ammalat a small silver case containing a paper.

Ammalat turned pale as death; he trembled as he unfolded the paper, and, as he read it, ejaculated in hardly articulate tones—

"She eats nothing!—she has not slept for three nights!—she is delirious; her life is in danger, you must save her!"

"My God!" cried Ammalat, "and here am I, laughing and enjoying myself, while the soul of my soul is at death's door! May all the curses of Allah fall upon me, but may she recover! Oh! my beautiful love, rose of Avaria, you droop and wither! Death calls you, and says, 'Come!' and, even while you summon me to your help, you are forced to obey his summons! Colonel, Colonel," he cried, seizing my hand, "in God's name grant me a sacred request, the only one I shall ever ask you; let me see her but once, for the last time."

"Whom do you wish to see, Ammalat?"

"Sultanetta, my soul's soul, the apple of my eye, the flame of my life; Sultanetta, the daughter of the Khan of Avaria. She is ill, dying, dead perhaps. While I utter these words, she is dead, and I have not received her last glance, her last sigh. Oh! why does not the sun fall in fiery fragments on my head? Why does not the earth open and swallow me up?"

And he fell on my breast, choked by tears that would not fall, shaking with sobs, but unable to utter a single word.

This was not the moment to reproach him for his long concealment; but the question was, whether I ought to let a prisoner return, if only for a day, to one of Russia's greatest enemies?

There are situations in life in the presence of which all social conventions, all political considerations, disappear, and Ammalat was confronted with such a crisis.

I resolved to grant his request, let the result be what it might.

I clasped him to my arms; our tears flowed together.

"My friend," I said to him, "go whither your heart calls you; God grant that you may carry, where you are going, health and ease of mind! I wish you a safe journey, Ammalat!"

"Farewell, my benefactor," he cried; "farewell, perhaps for ever! If God takes Sultanetta from me, he will rob me of life at the same time. Farewell, and may Allah protect you!"

And he went off at a gallop, descending the mountain with the speed of a falling boulder that plunges down into the valley. As for the wounded man, I placed him in the saddle, and, leading my horse by the bridle, conveyed him to Derbend.

Thus we discovered the truth; Ammalat is in love.

Yes, I understand your objection, dear Marie; but Khan-Ackmeth is the enemy of the Russians. Though pardoned by

the Emperor, he has betrayed us. No friendship is possible between him and Ammalat, unless Ammalat in his turn betrays us, or unless Ackmeth decides to remain neutral.

The first of these alternatives we must not believe possible, the second we cannot hope for.

How would you have had me act? I have suffered so much from love myself, dear Marie! I have shed so many tears on my pillow! I have so often longed for the repose of the dead, the quiet of the grave, to cool my poor heart, that I have no strength when confronted with similar sufferings. Ought I not to pity a young man whom I love tenderly for his foolish attachment? Unhappily, my pity is not a bridge over which he may pass and gain happiness. If he were not loved, perhaps he might have forgotten in time and by slow degrees.

It is true, and I think I hear your sweet voice telling me so, that circumstances may change for them, as they have changed in our case. It cannot be that unhappiness alone should be eternal in the world.

I say nothing, but I suspect—I fear for them, and, who knows! perhaps for ourselves as well.

We are too happy, my beloved Marie! the future smiles upon us, hope sings her sweetest songs.

But the future! it is like the sea, calm to-day, tempestuous to-morrow! and hope is the siren of that sea. Yes, all is ready, doubtless, for our reunion; but are we reunited?

I do not understand why, from time to time, a terrible presentiment pierces my breast like an icy sword. I know not why, but I fear, I fear this separation, seemingly to end so soon, will be for ever.

Oh! my beloved, be assured that all these dreams, these terrors, these sorrows, will disappear the instant I press my hand to your lips, your heart to my heart.

Good-bye, beloved, good-bye!

CHAPTER XI

ON the evening of the same day Ammalat's horse fell under him, never to rise again. He took another mount, and continued his journey without so much as a thought of food or drink. On the next day he saw Khunsack in the distance. It was eleven in the morning, and twenty-four hours from the time he had started.

The nearer he approached his journey's end, the deeper became his anxiety. Should he find his loved one, his Sultanetta, alive or dead?

A shudder ran through his whole frame when at length he caught sight of the towers of the Khan's Palace.

He could see nothing, guess nothing.

"What shall I find in yonder house?" he asked himself, "death or life?"

And he urged on his horse with whip and knees.

A horseman, armed as if for combat, was riding in front of him; another horseman was advancing to meet him from the direction of Khunsack.

When the two horseman drew near enough to recognise one another, both started forward at full gallop.

Were they friends or foes, these two?

Hatred alone flies swift as eagle's wings; they were foes.

As they charged, each drew his sabre; when they met, they struck furiously at one another.

Neither of them uttered a word: the sparks which flew from their *schaskas* spoke for them plainly enough.

Ammalat, whose path they barred, gazed at them in wonder.

The combat was short, sharp, and decisive. The horseman who had come from the same direction as Ammalat fell backwards on his horse's crupper, and thence to the rocky ground.

His skull had been cleft to the eyes.

The victor quietly wiped his sword, and, addressing Ammalat, observed—

"You are welcome; be my witness."

"I have witnessed a man's death," said Ammalat. "In what way can that serve you?"

"The man had insulted me; it is not I who have killed him, but God. Your presence here serves me well, because no one now will be able to say I lay in wait

for him and murdered him. It was a fair fight, was it not?"

"Yes, certainly," replied Ammalat.

"You will testify to that, if need be?"

"Yes, for it is the truth."

"Thank you; that is all I wanted of you. I do not ask your name, for I know it. You are Prince Tarkovsky's nephew."

"But what was your quarrel about?" asked Ammalat. "Were you mortal enemies, that you fought so desperately?"

"We were mortal enemies, as you have said. We had captured twenty sheep together; ten were his, ten mine. He would not give up my share, and killed them all, so that they should do good to no man; then he slandered my wife. The wretch would have done better to curse my father's grave and my mother's name than meddle with the honour of my wife; I made at him with my dagger, but the onlookers separated us. We then agreed that, whenever or wherever we should meet, we would fight to the death. We have met, and he is dead; Allah has defended the just cause—— You are probably on your way to the Khan's at Khunsack?" asked the horseman after a moment's silence.

"Yes," replied Ammalat, making his horse jump over the dead man's body.

"You choose an unfortunate moment, *Beg*," said the horseman, shaking his head.

Ammalat's blood flowed to his heart, and he almost fell from his horse.

"Is there any trouble at Khan Ackmeth's house?" he asked.

"His daughter Sultanetta was very ill."

"And—— She is dead?" cried Ammalat, turning pale.

"Perhaps. When I passed in front of the Palace an hour ago there was much running to and fro, the women were weeping on the steps and in the entrance hall as though the Russians had taken Khunsack. At any rate, you had better hasten, if you wish to see her alive."

But these last words did not reach Ammalat's ears, who had set off at full gallop, and of whom nothing could now be seen but the dust raised by his horse's hoofs. He crossed the hill that still separated him from the village, dashed through the streets, plunged into the courtyard, sprang from his horse, and burst breathless from the staircase into Sultanetta's chamber, upsetting everybody he met, both grooms and maid-servants. Then, without taking any notice of the Khan or his wife, he flung back the curtain and threw himself in an almost unconscious state upon his knees beside Sultanetta's bed.

Ammalat's unexpected arrival brought a cry of surprise from all who were in the room.

On hearing the cry, Sultanetta, pale as death and already almost lifeless, started from the depth of her unconsciousness. Her cheeks burned with a hectic flush. Like the autumn leaf that reddens and falls, there shone in her eyes the last faint sparks of the soul on the eve of extinction. Overcome by weakness, she had lain speechless and motionless for several hours; yet amid all other sounds she had instantly recognised the voice of Ammalat.

Her life, on the point of departure, paused like the trembling flame of a candle that steadies itself just as you think it is going out.

She raised herself on her arm; her eyes sparkled.

"Is it you?" she murmured, holding out her hands towards Ammalat.

"She speaks, she speaks!" cried Ammalat.

All waited in open-mouth suspense and held their breath.

"Allah be praised!" she continued. "Now can I die content and happy."

And she fell back again upon the bed.

This time there was a cry of horror; all thought she was dead.

Ammalat in his despair had seized her in his arms. He heard neither the questions of the Khan nor the reproaches of the Khan's wife.

Force had to be used to tear him from the bed and make him leave the room. His grief, untempered by Christian resignation, was terrible. It was more like a tiger's fell rage than a man's sorrow, as he lay near the door, rolling on the floor, bursting with sobs, now beseeching Allah to save Sultanetta, now accusing heaven and reproaching it as the cause of the illness of her whom he loved.

The very thing that should have killed the patient saved her.

What the skill of the Mountain doctor could not effect, chance accomplished. Some violent shock was needed to arouse the frozen activity of her life, or she would have died, not from the disease,

but from the weakness that followed it, like a lamp that flickers out, not through the violence of the wind, but through mere want of air.

At last her youth gained the mastery. The violent emotion which she had felt stirred the latent life within the dying girl's heart, and after a long and quiet sleep she awoke with a part of the strength she had lost restored, and a feeling of vigour which was quite unexpected.

Her mother was leaning over the bed, waiting until Sultanetta recognised her. Ammalat was concealed behind the hangings of the door, having given his word not to enter, and the Khan stood behind him for fear he should forget his promise.

Sultanetta gave a sigh and let her eyes stray vaguely round her; at last her glance grew steady and concentrated itself upon her mother.

She smiled, then spoke.

"Oh, mother, is it you?" she said. "You don't know how light I feel? Can I have grown wings? How lovely it is to sleep after being awake so long, and to rest after being so tired. How glad the day is! How bright the light! How glorious the sun! The very walls of my room seem to smile. I have been very ill, and for a long, long time, have I not?"

Then she went on with a sigh, after wiping her still damp brow—

"Oh, I have suffered terribly; but now, glory to Allah! I am only weak, and I feel that this weakness will soon pass away. You would think it was a necklace of my pearls running through my veins instead of warm blood. How strange it is! I see all that has passed as through a mist. I dreamt that I was plunging into an icy sea, and yet I was burning with thirst. Then through the mist I saw two stars afar off; but they trembled and grew dim and threatened to disappear. I kept plunging down, dragged by some irresistible force. Suddenly a voice called me by my name, and I felt a hand, stronger than that of death, lifting me out of the cold, dark, gloomy water. Then I saw the face of Ammalat appearing with the first rays of the dawn. All at once the stars burned brighter, and a lightning flash, like a serpent of flame, devoured my heart. Then I think I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more."

Ammalat listened with a beating heart, his cheeks bathed in silent tears, his eyes and his hands raised to heaven, and, as he listened, murmured a prayer of thanksgiving.

As the girl pronounced his name, he made a movement as though to rush into the room.

But Ackmeth-Khan, as deeply moved as himself, and weeping also, said in a low voice—

"To-morrow, to-morrow."

And, in point of fact, Ammalat was allowed next day to see the patient.

Ackmeth himself took him in, thus fulfilling his promise.

"Let every one be happy, since I am happy," he said.

Sultanetta had been forewarned; but her emotion was none the less thrilling when her glance encountered that of Ammalat, whom she loved so deeply and for whom she had waited so long.

The two lovers could not utter a word; but their eyes told each other the feelings of their hearts. On the pale cheeks of both were visible the imprint of grief and the marks of tears. Doubtless the fresh ripe beauty of the girl one loves is full of charm; but the wan paleness that comes of separation is even sweeter to the lover's eyes. A heart of stone melts beneath the tearful glance that, without uttering a reproach, says—

"Now I am happy. I have suffered so much for you and through you."

These simple words made the tears start to Ammalat's eyes; but, remembering that he was not alone, he made an effort to control himself, and raised his head, but his voice refused to obey, and it was with a great effort that he succeeded in saying—

"It is a long, long time since we have seen one another, Sultanetta."

"And we were very nearly never seeing each other again, Ammalat," answered Sultanetta. "We were very nearly being separated for ever."

"For ever!" replied Ammalat, in a tone of reproach. "You could think and believe that, when there exists another world where we may see again those whom we have loved here! Oh, if I had lost the talisman of my happiness, with what contempt would I have cast away that rag which is called life. I should not have struggled long. To be vanquished by death would have meant being united again to you."

"Why, then, did I not die?" said Sultanetta, with a smile. "You paint the other life in such beautiful colours, Ammalat, that it must be far better than this one, and I should like to pass to it as soon as may be."

"Oh, no, no, Sultanetta, do not utter such an impious wish. You must live long and enjoy much happiness——"

He was going to add "and much love," but he stopped.

Gradually the rosiness of health reappeared in the girl's cheeks, warmed as they were by the breath of happiness.

At the end of a week things had resumed their ordinary course, and all went on as it had before Ammalat quitted Khunsack.

Ackmeth questioned Ammalat as to the numbers and disposition of the Russian troops.

The Khan's wife asked him about the style of the ladies' dresses, and each time that Ammalat repeated that the women wore neither trousers nor veils, she invoked the holy name of Allah.

As soon as Ammalat was assured that Sultanetta's health was restored, he began to grow gloomy. Often in the midst of an animated and tender conversation, he would break off, letting his head fall on his breast, and his eyes would fill with tears. Deep sighs seemed to rend his breast. At times he would start up from where he sat as though an electric spark had touched him. His eyes darted flames of anger, and he fondled the hilt of his dagger with a cold smile. Then, as if overcome by some invisible constraint, he groaned and became absorbed in thought, and not even Sultanetta could arouse him from his reverie.

Once, however, when he was in this condition, and the lovers were quite alone, Sultanetta, who was leaning upon his shoulder, said to him—

"You are sad, poor heart; you are tired of being with me."

"Oh, do not utter such a reproach against the man who loves you more than heaven itself," said Ammalat. "But I have already tasted the torments of separation, and I cannot think of it without grief. I would prefer death a hundred times to leaving you again, my beautiful Sultanetta."

"Leaving me! you talk of leaving me! But the moment you speak of separation, it means that you desire it."

"Do not further envenom my wound by such a suspicion. You, Sultanetta, have hitherto known but one experience, to blossom like the rose, and skim like the bird. Hitherto, happy child, your caprice has been your only guide; but I am a man, and I am not a free man. Fate has thrown round my neck a diamond chain, and the end of this chain is held by a man, one who is my friend and benefactor. Duty and gratitude alike recall me to Derbend."

"A chain! a friend! a benefactor! duty! gratitude! Oh, Ammalat! what a number of words you require to conceal your desire to leave me. But had you not given your heart to love, before selling it to friendship? You had no right to promise what no longer belonged to you. Forget Verkovsky, forget your Russian friends and your fine ladies at Derbend; forget war and glory. I detest blood since I have seen yours flow. What is there lacking in our mountains for a peaceful and comfortable life? They will not come to seek you here. My father has plenty of horses and money, and I have plenty of love. You will not go, will you, but you will stay here with me?"

"No, Sultanetta, I cannot, I must not stay. To live and die with you is my chief desire, but all depends on your father. I was on the point of dying an infamous and cruel death for having listened to your father's persuasions. A Russian saved my life. Then how can I now marry the daughter of the implacable foe of the Russians? If your father will let me make his peace with them, Sultanetta, I shall be the happiest of men."

"You know my father," answered Sultanetta, sadly. "Daily his hatred against the Russians grows fiercer, if that be possible, and to that hatred he will sacrifice us both. Add to this that the Colonel has had the bad luck to kill my father's *nouker*, the man he had sent to fetch Ibrahim the doctor."

"Yes, Sultanetta, I regret his death as much as you do, and yet it is owing to that death that I learnt what was passing here, and that I saw you once more. Were that man now alive, Sultanetta, it would be you who would be dead."

"Well, try your luck with my father."

"Do you think I have not already done so? Each time, alas, that I have spoken to Ackmeth-Khan, he has replied, 'Swear

that you will be the foe of the Russians, and then I will listen to you.'"

"Which means that we must give up hope."

The young man drew closer to Sultanetta, and pressed her tightly to his breast.

"Why bid farewell to hope?" he asked. "Are you bound to remain in Avaria?"

"I do not understand you," said the girl, fastening on him a clear and questioning gaze.

"Love me beyond all else, Sultanetta, more than father, mother, or country, and then you will understand me. I cannot live without you, and I am forbidden to live with you. If you love me, Sultanetta——"

"If I love you!" replied the girl, proudly.

"Let us fly, Sultanetta, let us quit Khunsack."

"Fly!" she repeated. "Oh, heavens! the Khan's daughter to fly like a prisoner, like a criminal! The idea is terrible, it is not to be thought of!"

"Don't tell me that, Sultanetta. If the sacrifice is great, my love is greater. Bid me die, and I will die with the utmost contempt for life. Do you wish for more than my life, for my soul? At a word from you, I will cast it into the depths of hell. It is true you are the Khan's daughter, but my uncle, also, wears the crown of a principality. I, too, am a Prince, and worthy of you, Sultanetta, I swear it."

"But, unhappy man, you forget my father's vengeance!"

"He will forget it himself with time; when he sees how much I love you and learns that you are happy, he will forgive us. His heart is not made of stone; our caresses and our tears will soften and melt it. And, then, Sultanetta, happiness will enfold us with her golden wings, and we shall say with pride, 'It is to our determination that we owe our happiness.'"

"I have but little experience," said Sultanetta, shaking her head sadly, "but do you know what my heart tells me? It tells me happiness cannot be won by ingratitude and deceit. Let us wait, since we cannot do otherwise without one of us sacrificing our happiness, and we will see what Allah may be pleased to send us."

"Allah has sent me this thought; he will do no more for us. Have pity on me, Sultanetta; let us fly, unless you wish the hour of marriage to sound the knell over my grave. I have given my word that I will return to Derbend; that promise I must keep, and, above all, I must keep it quickly. But to depart without the hope of seeing you again, with the anguish of knowing that you will one day be the wife of another, is terrible and intolerable. If you will not do it for love, Sultanetta, do it through pity for me. Share my fate, do not expel me from my paradise, do not drive me mad. You know not to what lengths a disappointed passion can drive a heart like mine. I am capable of forgetting everything, of trampling everything under foot—the sanctity of the domestic hearth, your parents' hospitality. I am capable of making the most notorious bandits stand aghast at the report of my bloody deeds, and the angels weep at sight of my crimes. Save me, Sultanetta, from the curses of others, save me from your own contempt. Night has fallen, my horses are swift as the wind; let us fly to beneficent Russia, and there wait until the storm is overpast. For the last time I implore you on my knees, with clasped hands. Shame or glory, life or death, all hangs on a single word from you: 'yes.' or 'no.'

Held back in one direction by girlish alarm and respect for ancestral custom, drawn in the other by the ardour and impetuous eloquence of her lover, Sultanetta was tossed uncertainly on a stormy sea, each wave of which was a passion. At last she rose, and, wiping away the tears that glistened on her long lashes, said with equal pride and determination—

"Do not tempt me, Ammalat; the flame of love, however brilliant it may be, shall never dazzle my eyes. I can still distinguish between right and wrong. It is cowardly to forsake one's family, and to repay with ingratitude all the long care and unstinted tenderness of the parents who have reared us. Well, Ammalat, now you can judge whether I love you or no, though I know well the magnitude of the sacrifice I am making, and of the crime I am committing—for do not disguise from yourself that it is a crime—yet I answer that I consent to fly with you, my beloved, for I place you above all the blessings and all the virtues in the world. I am yours, Ammalat. But understand this, it is not your words that have won me over, it is your heart. Allah has brought it to pass that I should meet you

and love you; let our hearts then be henceforth united for ever, although the bond that unites them be a branch of thorn! All is settled, Ammalat; we have henceforth but one destiny, one heart, one life, one future. Let us go!"

Had the sky itself covered Ammalat with its azure veil, and drawn him near the sun, he could not have felt happier than he did at the moment Sultanetta's lips uttered this consent, so devoted, so complete, so tender.

Everything was instantly arranged for the flight of the two lovers.

Ammalat was to start next evening on a great hunting expedition that was supposed to last for three days; but he would really return the same night. There being no moon, the darkness would favour them. Sultanetta would let herself down from her window by means of two girdles knotted together, and Ammalat would receive her in his arms.

Horses were to be waiting for them in the little Chapel where Sultanetta and Ammalat met after the tiger hunt.

Woe betide the foe who then encounters them and tries to bar their passage!

A kiss sealed this promise, and they parted, fearful and joyful at the same time.

The morrow so longed for arrived. Ammalat paid a visit to his horse, prepared his weapons, then spent the whole day in watching the progress of the sun.

That golden luminary himself seemed to delay in his course, and to be unwilling to quit the warm, bright sky to plunge into the snows of the Caucasus, and Ammalat waited for the night with all a lover's impatience.

Oh! how slowly the sun went down! How this traveller in the sky tarried on his brilliant path, and what a vast interval still remained before Ammalat could gain his desired happiness!

Four o'clock struck; the Mussulman's dinner-hour. They assembled round the carpet for the meal; but Ackmeth-Khan was very gloomy.

His eyes gleamed beneath his contracted brows. At times they rested on his daughter, at times on his guest. Occasionally his features contracted and assumed a mocking expression, which, however, presently gave place to a pale look of displeasure. His questions were abrupt and scoffing, and each incident gave occasion to remorse in Sultanetta's heart, and to apprehension in the mind of Ammalat. As for Sultanetta's mother, as though she foresaw this separation with which she was threatened, she was more tender and attentive than usual, and Sultanetta was more than once on the point of bursting into tears, and throwing herself into her arms.

After dinner Khan Ackmeth called Ammalat into the courtyard. The horses were already saddled for the chase. Four *noukers*, summoned by Ammalat, mingled with those of the Khan.

"Let us go and try my new falcon," said the Khan to Ammalat. "The evening is fine, it is not too hot, and between now and nightfall we may be able to catch a few pheasants or heathcocks."

Ammalat had no choice but to obey; he nodded his head in token of assent, and jumped on his horse.

They rode off side by side; Ammalat wrapped in his thoughts, and the Khan silent. To their left a Mountaineer was climbing up a rocky precipice. To his feet were attached climbing-irons, with which he clung to the projections of the rock, helping himself also with an iron ferule attached to the end of his stick. In front of him was a hat filled with wheat-seed fastened to his girdle. A long Tartar gun was slung across his shoulders.

Ackmeth stopped, and, pointing to the Mountaineer, observed—

"Look at that old man; at the peril of his life he is searching amid the rocks for a small spot of fertile ground in which to sow his wheat. This wheat he harvests with a sweat of blood, and often it is only at the price of wounds and death that he defends his flock from the attacks of men and of wild beasts. His country is poor and barren. Well, Ammalat, ask him why he loves his country so much, why he would not exchange it for a richer one, and he will reply: 'Here I am free; here I owe tribute to no man; these snows guard at once my pride and my independence.' This independence the Russians would rob him of; and you, Ammalat, have become the slave of the Russians."

"Khan," answered the young man, raising his head, "you know very well that I have been conquered, not by the strength of the Russians, but by their kindness. I am not their slave, but their friend."

"Well, all the more shame to you; the Prince's heir seeks a chain of gold!

Ammalat lives at the expense of Colonel Verkovsky!"

"Don't talk like that, Ackmeth. Verkovsky gave me life before he gave me bread and salt. He loves me, and I love him. I say this once for all, and let us speak of it no more."

"There is no friendship possible with Infidels. To fight them when you meet with them, to exterminate them when occasion offers, to deceive them when you can, those are the laws of the Koran, and this the duty of every true follower of the Prophet."

"Khan, do not play with the bones of Mahomet; you are no Mullah to prescribe to me my duty. I know what I have to do as a man of honour, and I will do it. I have within me the consciousness of what is right and what is wrong. Let us talk of other matters."

"It would be better, Ammalat, if you had this consciousness within your heart, and not upon your lips."

Ammalat made an impatient movement.

Ackmeth, however, went on, without taking any notice of this movement, which, however, had by no means escaped his notice.

"For the last time, Ammalat, will you listen to the advice of a friend? Will you give up the Infidels and remain with us?"

"I would have given my life, Khan Ackmeth, for the happiness which you offer me," said the young man, in a tone of conviction, which there was no mistaking; "but I have sworn to return to Derbend, and I will keep my oath."

"That is your last word?"

"My last."

"Then, Ammalat, you must keep your oath as quickly as possible. I have known you, and you have known me, for a long time. We ought not even to try to deceive one another. I will not conceal from you that I cherished the hope of calling you my son; I was delighted that you loved Sultanetta. Your captivity oppressed my heart, your long absence was one of the griefs of my life. At last you came back and found everything here as it was before your departure. Only, you did not bring back your heart. It is vexing, but what is to be done? Ammalat, I will never have a slave of the Russians for my son-in-law."

"Ackmeth-Khan!"

"Oh, let me finish! Your unexpected arrival, your grief in Sultanetta's chamber, your cries and sobs, and your despair, disclosed to everybody your love and your intentions. You were known throughout Avaria as my daughter's lover; but, now that the bond which united us is broken, all these surmises must be nipped in the bud, you must leave us this instant. Ammalat, we separate as friends still, but we will not see one another again, except as kinsmen. May Allah in his mercy change your heart, and may we see you again as a friend who cannot be severed from us. That is my dearest wish, my most fervent prayer; but, until that hour, farewell!"

And, turning his horse abruptly round, Ackmeth rode off at full gallop without another word.

Had a thunderbolt fallen at Ammalat's feet and opened a chasm beneath him, it would not have astonished and appalled him more than these last words of Ackmeth's had done. He remained motionless, dumfounded, breathless, gazing at horse and rider, who were already nothing more than a cloud of dust.

An hour later, he was still in the same place, and night had fallen—a night as dark and gloomy as the young man's thoughts.

CHAPTER XII

COLONEL VERKOVSKY was with his regiment in the village of Kiaffir-Koumieck,—his duty to check the revolt of Daghestan. Ammalat's tent was next the Colonel's.

Sophyr-Ali, Ammalat's young foster-brother, whose acquaintance we made at the beginning of our story, lay in this tent drinking bumpers of that sparkling wine called the champagne of the Don.

It was Colonel Verkovsky who had sent for this young man from Tarky, hoping that the sight of him and his friendship for Ammalat would distract the latter from his habitual melancholy.

Ammalat had indeed grown more than sad, he was gloomy. Thin, pale, and pensive, he remained in the recesses of his tent, lying on his cushions and smoking. Driven from his paradise like Adam, he had come to join the Colonel once more, and was encamped with his regiment.

Within sight of the mountains to which his thoughts ever turned, but which his feet were forbidden to cross, his mind preyed upon itself; resentment, like a flame but half-extinguished, kindled in his heart at the first word addressed to him. Gall spread through his veins like a slow and irresistible poison. Bitterness was on his lips, hatred in his eyes.

"My word," said Sophyr-Ali, "wine is a capital thing! Mahomet can have tasted only bad wine, to have forbidden it to be drunk. The drops of this liquor are so sweet you might verily think that angels' tears had fallen into the bottle. Take a glass and drink, Ammalat. Your heart will swim on the wine as lightly as a cork. You know what Hafiz, the Persian poet, has said about it."

"I know you weary me, Sophyr-Ali. I bid you spare me your foolish lucubrations, whether you set them down to Hafiz or to Saadi."

"You are very hard on your poor Sophyr-Ali, Ammalat. What would happen if he were as severe towards you? Does he not listen patiently when you talk to him of Sultanetta? Love has turned your brain; with me, it is wine; only my folly has its lucid intervals, the times when I am not drunk. Yours, on the contrary, has none; you are always absorbed in your love. Here's to Sultanetta's health!"

"I have already told you that I forbid you to pronounce her name, especially when you are drunk."

"To the health of the Russians, then!"

Ammalat shrugged his shoulders.

"There," said Sophyr-Ali, who was getting more and more intoxicated, "now you are going to forbid me to drink to the Russians!"

"What have the Russians done for you, that you are so fond of them?"

"What have they done to *you*, that you hate them so?"

"Nothing; but I have seen them at close quarters. They are no better than our Tartars; they are greedy, evil-tongued, and idle. What good have they done all the long time they have ruled here? What laws have they introduced? What education have they disseminated? Verkovsky opened my eyes to the bad qualities of *my* compatriots, and, at the same time, I saw the defects of *his;* and they are the less excusable since they have grown up with good examples before their eyes. But these good examples, they forget them when they come here, and concern themselves only with the filthy appetites of the body."

"Ammalat, Ammalat, I hope that, at least, you will make an exception of Verkovsky."

"Certainly; of him and a few others; but, even in your own opinion, are there many of whom this can be said?"

"Not unless we reckon the angels in heaven as well. No, no, Verkovsky, look you, is a marvel of goodness; you will not even find a Tartar who speaks badly of him. Every one of his soldiers would lay down his life for him. More wine, Abdoul-Amid! Here's to Verkovsky, Ammalat!"

"At this moment I would not drink the health of Mahomet himself?"

"And I say that, if your heart be not as black as Sultanetta's eyes, you will drink Verkovsky's health, Ammalat, were it in the presence of the Mufti of Derbend, and though all the *Imauns* and all the prophets should rise up against you."

"Leave me alone."

"It is not fair, Ammalat. For your sake, I would make the devil drunk with my own blood, while you, shame upon you, refuse to drink a drop of wine for my sake!"

"No, Sophyr-Ali, I will not drink it; and I will not drink it, because I do not wish to drink it; and I do not wish to drink it, because my blood is already hot enough without it."

"All a mere excuse, and a bad excuse, too! It is not the first time we have drunk together, is it? It is not the first time our blood has boiled—the fine blood of the Asiatic race! Give a better reason; be frank. You have a grudge against the Colonel?"

"Well, yes, I have."

"May one know the reason?"

"The reason?"

"Yes."

"For many reasons."

"But in particular?"

"For some time he has begun to pour poison into the honey of his friendship, and now this poison, which he has let fall drop by drop, has gradually filled the cup so that it begins to overflow. I hate friends who are too affectionate; they are good for giving advice, that is to say,

for everything that costs them no trouble and involves them in no danger."

"I understand; he has not allowed you to go back to Avaria, and you cannot forgive him his refusal."

"If you had my heart in your breast, Sophyr-Ali, you would know what a cruel thing this refusal is for me. Ackmeth-Khan, it appears, has relented; he wants to see me, and I cannot go. Oh, Sultanetta, Sultanetta!" cried the young man, wringing his hands in impotent anger.

"I would bid you in your turn put yourself in Verkovsky's place, and tell me candidly if you would not have acted in the same way."

"No. I should have said from the very first: 'Do not count upon me, Ammalat; do not ask me to give you any help.' I do not ask him to help me, but only not to hinder me. No, he places himself between me and the sunshine of my happiness. He does this for friendship's sake, he says; he asks me to hand over to him the guidance of my life. He throws poppy-juice over me to lull me to sleep!"

"What matters the remedy, Ammalat, so long as it cures you?"

"And who asks him to cure me? This divine malady of love, the only malady of which one is glad to die, is my sole happiness, my one joy; if he plucks that from my breast, my heart will follow it."

As Ammalat finished speaking, night had already fallen; yet he was able to perceive that the presence of a stranger at the door of his tent made the darkness more intense.

"Who goes there?" asked Ammalat.

"Are they bringing the wine? my bottle is empty," said Sophyr-Ali.

The shadowy form approached without answering a word.

"Who goes there?" repeated Ammalat, placing his hand on his dagger.

A name, uttered in a tone so low that it fell merely as a breath upon his ear, made Ammalat start.

"Nephtali!"

At the same moment the shadow disappeared, and went out of the tent.

Ammalat sprang to his feet and followed the shadowy form that was barely visible in the darkness.

Sophyr-Ali followed Ammalat.

The night was very dark, the watch-fires had died down, the lines of the sentinels were a long way off.

At last the shadow stopped.

"Is it really you, Nephtali?" asked Ammalat.

"Speak low, Ammalat," answered the latter; "the Russians are no friends of mine."

"Ah," said Ammalat, "you, too, come to reproach me. I thought you had a more gentle message for your brother!"

He held out his hand to him; Nephtali took it and clasped it convulsively.

There was a strangeness in the young Mountaineer's friendship for Ammalat which the latter could not comprehend. You might naturally have supposed the young Tchetchian would find it difficult to feel affection for his rival.

"Speak," continued Ammalat; "what news do you bring? How is Ackmeth-Khan, how is Sultanetta?"

"Ammalat," said Nephtali, "I am sent, not to answer your questions, but to question you. Will you follow me?"

"Where to?"

"Where I am bidden to lead you?"

"For what purpose?"

"You know from whom I come?"

"No."

"The eagle loves the mountain."

Ammalat recognised the favourite expression of Ackmeth-Khan.

"You come from the Khan?" he said.

"Will you follow me, Ammalat?"

"How far?"

"About two miles from here."

"Must we go on foot?"

"Are you allowed to leave the camp on horseback?"

"Yes; only, in order not to arouse suspicion, I ought to tell the Colonel."

"That is to say, you may lengthen your chain, but not unloose it. Tell the Colonel, then."

"Sophyr-Ali, let the Colonel know that we are going for a ride into the country to amuse ourselves. Bring me my gun, and have my horse saddled."

Sophyr-Ali sighed; but found it easier to obey inasmuch as his bottle was empty. After a short interval, the step of two horses was heard.

It was Sophyr-Ali on horseback, leading Ammalat's horse.

"Here," said he, "is your gun. I have renewed the priming; it is in good order, you can make your mind easy."

"And why have you come yourself?"

"Because the Colonel asked me if I

was going with you, and I answered 'yes,' and because, if you were seen going out at this hour without me, it would produce a bad impression."

Ammalat understood the young man's intention; he was unwilling to leave him alone in the darkness with a stranger.

To Sophyr-Ali, even had he heard his name, Nephtali was a stranger.

"May he come with us?" Ammalat asked Nephtali.

"Yes and no."

"Explain yourself."

"Yes, until we leave the camp; no, as far as the meeting-place."

"Come," said Ammalat to Sophyr-Ali, as he jumped upon his horse.

"And you?" he remarked to Nephtali.

"Don't trouble yourself about me, Ammalat; I got into the camp without you, and I will leave it without you."

"Where shall I find you again?"

"You will not find me; it is I who will find you."

And Nephtali disappeared in the darkness as noiselessly as a phantom.

Ammalat and Sophyr-Ali rode side by side to the first sentry, gave the word, and passed on.

The password was communicated every evening to Ammalat by Colonel Verkovsky. This was a delicate attention on the part of the latter, in order that Ammalat should understand that he was merely a prisoner on *parole*.

When they had ridden some twenty yards from the sentry, Ammalat gave a start as a third horseman appeared riding by his side. It was impossible to say where he had come from; he seemed to have sprung out of the ground.

"Halloa, who goes there?" said Sophyr-Ali.

"Silence," said Nephtali.

"Silence," repeated Ammalat.

Sophyr-Ali held his tongue, but grumblingly; he regretted having to leave his second bottle just as it was being brought to him. At each step he abused the darkness, the bushes, the ditches. He coughed and spat, and swore, in the hope of making one of his two companions speak, but all to no purpose; both remained silent.

At last, his horse having stumbled over a stone, he exclaimed—

"May the devil, from whom he seems to me to have come, take our guide! Who knows where he is leading us? He is quite capable of bringing us into some trap."

"There is no danger," answered Ammalat; "he is sent by a friend, and is himself a friend of mine."

"Oh yes, that is true enough! You have made a good many new friends, Ammalat, since we last met. May the new ones be as faithful to you as the old!"

They had left the beaten track, and were now entangled in a sort of plantation of those bushes with stubborn thorns well-known to every one who has travelled in the Caucasus.

"In the name of the prince of spirits," said Sophyr-Ali to his guide, "tell us at once if you have gone into partnership with these bushes in order to tear off the lace from our *tchouskas*. Don't you know any better road? I am neither a snake nor a fox."

Nephtali stopped.

"You have your wish," said he. "You are at your journey's end; stay here and look after the horses."

"And Ammalat?" said Sophyr-Ali.

"Ammalat goes with me."

"Where to?"

"On his own business, apparently."

"Ammalat," cried Sophyr-Ali, "will you go alone with that bandit into the mountains without me?"

"Which means," said Ammalat, dismounting from his horse, "that you don't care about staying here by yourself."

He threw his reins over the other's arm.

"I would a hundred times rather be here by myself than in the company of the rogue who has come to fetch you."

"You will not be alone," said Ammalat, laughing; "I leave you in the pleasant company of the wolves and jackals. . . . There, do you hear them crying? Listen!"

"God grant that to-morrow morning I may not have to rescue your bones from them," said Sophyr-Ali; and with this word they parted.

As he rode away, Ammalat could hear Sophyr-Ali loading his rifle in readiness for any emergency.

Nephtali led Ammalat through the bushes as easily as though it were broad daylight. The Tchetchen seemed to possess the power, granted to certain animals, of seeing as well by night as by day.

After going for about a quarter of a mile through bushes and rocks, the path

began to descend; at last the difficulties became less, and the road began to improve as they reached the entrance of a cave, at the end of which a fire made of branches was burning.

Ackmeth-Khan, his musket laid across his knees, was lying near this fire.

At the sound of the approach of the two young men he raised himself on his *bourka*.

By the rapidity of his action, it was easy to see that he was waiting with impatience.

As he recognised Ammalat, he rose to his feet.

Ammalat threw himself upon his neck.

"I am glad to see you, Ammalat," said the Khan, "and I am weak enough not to conceal my delight. But I hasten to tell you that I have not disturbed you for a trifling interview. Sit down, and let us discuss a very serious matter."

"Serious for me, Khan?"

"For both of us, Ammalat, I was your father's friend, and there was a time when I was yours also."

"Then you are no longer so?"

"No; that our friendship should last for ever depended on yourself. You did not wish it, or rather, it was somebody else who did not wish it."

"Who was that?"

"This fiend Verkovsky."

"You do not know him, Khan."

"It is you who do not know him; but you soon will, I hope. Meanwhile, let us talk of Sultanetta."

Ammalat's heart gave a bound.

"You know that I wished to make her your wife, Ammalat; you have refused the conditions on which I offered her to you. Let us not speak of it again; I conclude that you had thought over the matter fully, as a man ought to do in the important events of life. But you must understand one thing, namely, that she cannot remain unmarried; that would be a disgrace to my house."

Ammalat felt the sweat stand in drops on his forehead.

"Ammalat," continued the Khan, "I have been asked for her hand."

Ammalat felt his knees give way, and his heart seemed almost to cease beating. At last his voice came back to him.

"And who is the daring lover?" he asked.

"The second son of Prince Abdoul-Moussaline. Next to yourself, he is certainly the worthiest of all the mountain Princes to become Sultanetta's husband."

"Next to myself?" said Ammalat. "By Mahomet, you seem to speak of me as if I were dead! Is my memory, then, quite effaced from the heart of my friends?"

"No, Ammalat, your memory is not effaced from my heart; and I told you yourself, a moment ago, that I was pleased to see you. But you must be as frank as I am; I make you the judge in your own cause. What more would you have? What can you ask better? What can we, or ought we, to do? You will not give up the Russians; I can never become their friend."

"Yes, you can. You have but to wish, but to say a word, and all will be forgotten, all will be forgiven. I stake my head on it, and will be answerable for Verkovsky's word; and this course will be the best for your own advantage, for the tranquillity of Avaria, for Sultanetta's happiness and for mine. Oh, I intreat, I implore you on my knees, Ackmeth-Khan, be the Russians' friend, and everything, even your military rank, will be restored to you."

"You answer for the life of others; you who are not even master of your own freedom!"

"Who wants my life, who is anxious about my liberty, when I despise both myself?"

"Who wants your life, child that you are? Do you think the pillow does not turn of itself beneath the head of Prince Tarkovsky, when he reflects that you who are the friend of the Russians are the heir to the principality of Tarky?"

"I have never sought his friendship, and I have never feared him as an enemy."

"Do not fear, Ammalat, yet do not despise him. Are you aware that a messenger has been sent to Yermolof to tell him to kill you as a traitor? Formerly, your father-in-law would have killed you with a kiss, had he been able to do so; but, now that you have sent his daughter back to him, he no longer conceals his hatred, and he will kill you with the bullet or the dagger."

"Under Verkovsky's protection, no one can touch me except an assassin. Allah protect me from such!"

"Listen, Ammalat; I will tell you a fable. A sheep, when pursued by wolves,

took refuge in a kitchen. It found a shelter there, was well housed and fed; it boasted loudly of the attention it received, and had never found itself so comfortable. Three days later it was cooked!

"Ammalat, it is your own story.

"It is time that I should open your eyes. The man whom you call your best friend is the first to betray you. You are surrounded by traitors, Ammalat. My chief desire in summoning you to an interview was to warn you. When I was asked for the hand of Sultanetta, I was given to understand, on the part of the Prince, that I might become the friend of the Russians through him, much more securely than through Ammalat, who is now an object of mistrust even to those who answer for his fidelity. Besides, those who are answerable for you will soon be rid of you. You are got out of the way, and are then no longer to be feared. I have had my suspicions, and I knew more than I suspected. To-day I stopped one of the Prince's followers; he was on an errand to Verkovsky; under what pretext I do not know, nor did I trouble myself to inquire. What does trouble me is that the Prince offers six thousand roubles to the man who kills you. Verkovsky, doubtless, has had no hand in this; but, though he can dictate to the Prince, he cannot dictate to the Russian government. You have been guilty of treason. After taking the oath of fidelity to the Russians, you were found bearing arms against them. Your life has been spared, it is true; but you have to be punished in some way. You will be sent to Siberia."

"Sent to Siberia?" cried Ammalat.

"Listen, and see if I am well informed or no. To-morrow the regiment returns to its old quarters; to-morrow an inquiry, in which there will be a long discussion about you and your fate, will be held in your own house at Bouinaky. They will heap up accusations against you, a number of different charges will be brought together. You will be poisoned by your own bread, Ammalat, and a chain of iron will be placed round your neck, while they promise you mountains of gold."

If Ackmeth-Khan wished to see Ammalat suffer, he had that grim pleasure during the whole time that he was speaking. Each word burnt itself into the young *Beg's* heart like a sharp and red-hot iron; all his faith was destroyed if the half of what the Khan said was true. Several times he wanted to speak, to interrupt, to answer him, but each time the words died upon his lips. The wild beast in Ammalat which, tamed by Verkovsky, had hitherto slept, was gradually aroused by Ackmeth's words; it was already shaking its chain, and little more was wanted to make it burst it.

At last a torrent of threats and curses escaped from the young man's lips.

"Ah, if you are not deceiving me, Ackmeth-Khan, if what you say be true, woe to those who have abused my confidence and stolen my gratitude by false pretences! Let me have proof of what you say, and then for vengeance on them!"

"That is the first word worthy of yourself that you have uttered, Ammalat," said Khan Ackmeth, not even attempting to conceal the delight he felt at the young Prince's anger. "You have lowered your head sufficiently beneath the feet of the Russians. It is time for the eagle to resume his wings and soar above the clouds; you will see your enemies better from that height. Render vengeance for vengeance, death for death!"

"Oh yes," replied Ammalat; "death to the Prince who bargains my life away! Death to Abdoul-Moussaline who lays hands upon my treasure!"

"Yes, death to them, doubtless; but do not lose sight of another enemy whom you are excluding from your vengeance, and who has as fatal an influence upon your destiny as those whom you have just named."

A shudder passed through Ammalat's veins.

"You mean Verkovsky?" said he, involuntarily taking a step backwards. "You are mistaken, Khan; he cannot wish my death, the man who saved me from death, and from such an infamous death."

"To give you an infamous life, Ammalat. And have not you also saved him, once from the tusks of the boar, and again from the dagger of the Lesghians? Balance your accounts strictly, Ammalat, and Verkovsky is your debtor."

"No, no, Ackmeth-Khan," said the young man, striking his breast violently with his hand. "No, there is a voice within which speaks louder than yours, which tells me that I am not, and never

shall be, out of Verkovsky's debt, and that voice is the voice of my conscience."

Ackmeth shrugged his shoulders.

"Your conscience, your conscience!" he muttered. "Look here, Ammalat, I see that without me you can do nothing, not even marry Sultanetta. Well, listen to this.

"From the man who would become my son-in-law the first, the only thing that I require, the thing in exchange for which he will obtain Sultanetta's hand, is the life of Verkovsky. Verkovsky is the head of Daghestan. Let that head fall, and all Daghestan is decapitated. I have twenty thousand men ready to rise at a word from me. I descend with them upon Tarky like an avalanche, and supposing it is you who have earned the hand of Sultanetta, you become Prince, not only of Tarky, but of all Daghestan to boot. Your destiny lies in your own hands as it has never done for any man. Make your choice; either a prison—or at least perpetual exile in Siberia—or happiness with Sultanetta, power with me. However, perhaps I have misjudged you, and you have neither love nor ambition in your breast. And now, farewell! but remember that the first time we meet again it will be as inseparable kinsmen or as mortal foes."

And Ackmeth, rushing out of the cavern, disappeared before Ammalat had time to think of stopping him.

He remained a long time motionless and silent, his head reclining on his breast. At last he raised his head and looked around him, and saw Nephtali waiting for him.

Without saying a word, the young Tchetchen led him back to the spot where Sophyr-Ali was waiting with the two horses. Ammalat silently held out his hand in token of gratitude, and separated from him without even uttering Sultanetta's name.

Then, still silent, he mounted his horse and returned to the camp, and, entering his tent, threw himself upon his bed.

Only when there did he give way, and rolled from side to side with stifled cries and dull groans of anguish.

All the snakes of hell were gnawing at his heart.

CHAPTER XIII

"WILL you hold your tongue, son of a wolf?" said an old woman to her grandchild, who had awaked and was crying in the middle of the night. "Be quiet, or I will send you to sleep in the street."

The old Tartar woman had been Ammalat's nurse. Her house was built near the *Beg's* palace; it had been a present from him to his nurse. We have seen her already at the beginning of this story looking on lovingly at Ammalat's prowess at the games.

This house to which we conduct our readers had only one story, and was surmounted by a terrace like all the Tartar houses; it consisted of two rooms comfortably furnished. The floor was carpeted. In the corners shone chests mounted with iron, on which were feather-beds rolled up with their counterpanes, a token of easy circumstances among the Tartars. On the shelves placed against the wall were arranged tin cups which shone like silver, and which were used for the *pilaf*, or mess of stewed rice. The old woman's expression denoted that chronic bad temper which is the bitter result of a sad and lonely life, and, like the worthy representative of her compatriots that she was, she never ceased muttering and scolding her grandchild in loud angry tones from morning until night.

"Hold your tongue, *Kesse*," she cried at last, "or I will give you to five hundred thousand devils! Do you hear what a noise they are making on the roof, and how they are knocking at the window-panes to get at you?"

The night was dark, the rain was coming down in torrents. It beat against the terrace and the windows, and the wind, rushing down the chimney, sounded like a disconsolate sob accompanying the tears of nature.

The little boy fell quiet, and, opening his large eyes with their dark lashes, listened fearfully to the various noises of the storm.

But presently there was mingled with all these noises a sound more alarming still; spite the late hour of the night—it was nearly three in the morning—some one was knocking at the door. It was now the old woman's turn to be

frightened. An old black dog, her faithful companion, lifted its head and uttered a plaintive howl.

The knocking was repeated, and an unknown voice shouted in angry tones—

"*Atch-Kaninii! Akhirine! Akhirisi!* Now, will you open the door?"

"*Allah bismillah!*" exclaimed the old woman, raising her eyes to heaven, then pushing the dog with her foot, and next trying to quiet the child, who had begun to cry again. "Who is there? who is knocking at this hour of night? What well-disposed man would come in a night like this and make a disturbance at a poor woman's door? Are you the devil? if so, go to my neighbour Kachtkina: it is time to show her the way to hell. But, if you are not the devil himself, be off with you! My son is not at home, if your business should be with him. He is with Ammalat-Beg. As for me, the *Beg* has discharged me from all payments; so you cannot come from him. I owe him neither ducks, nor fowls, nor eggs; he has exempted me from all dues. I have not been his nurse, you see, for nothing."

"Will you open the door, you devil's broomstick?" cried the voice, impatiently, "or I will smash it, so as not to leave so much as a board to make your coffin with."

"Be welcome, be welcome," said the old woman, running to the door and opening it with a trembling hand.

The door turned on its hinges, and a man of small stature, but with a face both stern and handsome, appeared on the threshold.

He was in Tcherkess costume. The water dripped from his hood and white *bourka*. He threw the latter unceremoniously on the bed, and began to unfasten the hood which covered his face. Meanwhile Fatma lighted a candle and stood in front of the new-comer, trembling in every limb. The dog had retreated into a corner with its tail between its legs, while the little boy had taken refuge in the fireplace, which—the fire being never lighted—was rather for ornament than for use.

"Well, Fatma," said the stranger, when he had taken off his hood, "you have grown proud, it seems, and no longer recognise your old friends."

Fatma looked at him with curiosity, and an expression of satisfaction spread over her features; she had recognised Ackmeth-Khan, who had come on this stormy night from Kiaffir-Koumieck to Bouinaky.

"May the sand blind my poor eyes for not recognising their old master!" said the old woman, crossing her hands upon her breast as a token of submission and respect. "To speak truth, Khan, they are dimmed by the tears I have shed for my country, for poor unhappy Avaria. Forgive the unhappy Fatma; she is old, and old age cannot see much at night, except the grave which death is digging for one."

"Come, come, Fatma, you are not so old as all that yet. I remember when I was a boy seeing you as a young girl at Khunsack."

"A strange land ages those who are condemned to live in it," answered Fatma. "Were I in my native mountains, Khan, I should still be fruit worth the picking. But, here, I am but a wretched snowball that has rolled from the mountain slopes into the muddy road. Lie here, Khan; put yourself on this cushion; you will be more comfortable. But how can I entertain my dear guest? Is there anything the Khan would like?"

"The Khan would like you to entertain him with your goodwill, that is all."

"I am in your power, Khan, as you well know; give your orders then, it is for your servant to obey them."

"Listen, Fatma, I have neither time nor words to waste. I will tell you in two words why I am here. Do me a service with your tongue and I will give your teeth a treat. You shall have ten sheep if you do as I tell you, and I will dress you in silk from head to foot, shoes and all."

"Ten sheep and a silk dress! Oh! my good Prince! my dear Khan! No such guest as you has entered my house since I was carried off by these cursed Tartars and married against my will. For a silk dress and ten sheep you may do what you like to me, you may cut off my ears, if you will."

"I don't want your ears, woman; you had better keep them for use. This is the business: Ammalat will come here to-day with the Russian Colonel. You know the Colonel?"

"I should think so, by Allah! our mortal enemy."

"That's the man, and Prince Tarkovsky will be with them. The Colonel is

Ammalat's friend. He is going to make him drink wine and eat pork."

"What! the man who was nursed at my breasts?" cried the old woman, in a horrified tone.

"Yes; if we do not take heed, Ammalat will be a Christian before three days have passed."

"Mahomet forbid!" said the old woman, uplifting her hands to heaven.

"So you see that, to save Ammalat from eternal perdition, we must make him quarrel with his friend Verkovsky."

"Have I anything to do in this matter, Khan? As true as I am your servant and that of Allah, I will do it."

"Yes, listen carefully."

"I will not miss a word, Khan."

The old woman's eyes gleamed with fanatic zeal.

"You must throw yourself at his feet and weep, as if you were following your own son's funeral. There will be no need to borrow tears from your neighbours, for you love Ammalat enough to weep for the loss of his soul. You will tell him that you have overheard a conversation between the Colonel and the Prince; that the latter complained that Ammalat had sent his daughter back, and that he, the Prince, hated Ammalat on account of the Principality, upon which he believes he has a claim. You will say that the Prince besought the Colonel to leave him free to dispose of Ammalat's life."

"And am I to say further that the Colonel consented?"

"No," said Ackmeth, quickly; "he would not believe you. On the contrary, you will say that the Colonel was indignant at the proposal, and answered—— Now listen carefully."

"I am listening and I understand; make your mind easy."

"And that the Colonel answered—'The most I can do for you, Prince, and that only on condition that you vow fidelity to the Russians, is to send him to Siberia.'"

"To Siberia!"

"Come now, repeat what I have just told you."

The old woman had a good memory, and repeated her instructions word for word. But, for greater security, the Khan made her go through them a second time.

"Now," continued Ackmeth, "you may embellish this as much as you like. You are famous for your stories. Do not mumble, but speak clearly, and say that the proof of your assertion is that the Colonel wishes to take Ammalat with him to Georgievsk, so as to separate him from his family and his *noukers*, and from there to send him in chains to the devil."

Ackmeth added to the main story all sorts of details which Fatma sorted in her memory, making the Khan renew his promise of the ten sheep, and, above all, of the silk dress.

The Khan pledged himself, and, as payment on account, gave her a piece of gold, a coin so rarely seen by the Mountaineers that they use them as ornaments.

"Allah!" cried the old woman, clasping the coin in her hand; "may my salt turn into ashes, may I die of hunger, may——"

"That's enough," interrupted Ackmeth. "Don't feed the devil with your oaths, but talk to some purpose. Ammalat, I know, has every confidence in you; don't forget that his happiness is at stake, that in rescuing him from the hands of the Russians you will be rescuing him from perdition. Once he is convinced they mean to send him to Siberia, he will leave his new friends and marry my daughter. Then you will all come to me at Khunsack, to your old country, and you will end your days joyfully in the land where you began them. But be careful, for if you betray us or spoil the business by your chatter, I swear to you in my turn, I who use no oaths, that I will feed the devil with the stew I shall make out of your old hide."

"Be easy, Khan; I am an honest woman, and the devil has no claim to my poor flesh. I will guard the secret as securely as if it were in my dead husband's grave, and convince Ammalat of the truth of my information." *

"Enough, then; and that there may be no question of your doing this, and at the right moment, I think I must put a golden seal on your lips."

And the Khan drew out a second piece of gold, and gave it to Fatma.

"By my head and eyes I am yours!" cried the old woman, seizing the Khan's hand and kissing it.

Then she threw herself on her knees to kiss his feet.

* The Tartar expression is, "I will put my shirt on So-and-So," that is, make him think precisely what I think, and wish what I wish.

Ackmeth withdrew himself contemptuously.

"What a cursed thing is slavery," he muttered, "which, for two pieces of gold, can make a human being crawl like a serpent!"

And he left the hut.

CHAPTER XIV

COLONEL VERKOVSKY TO HIS FIANCÉE.

August, 1822,
In camp, near the village of Kiaffir-Koumieck.

YES, dear Marie, Ammalat is in love. But *how* is he in love? Why, like a madman! Never, even in my most callow youth, did my love for you—that love which was nevertheless my life!—run to such lengths. I burned like a piece of paper lighted by the rays of the sun; but he burns like a ship at sea struck by lightning and lost in the ocean.

You remember how once in the happier days we read Shakespeare's *Othello* together, Marie. Well, only Othello can give you a notion of the tropical fire burning in the veins of our Tartar friend. It is true that, in Ammalat's case, the Tartar is grafted upon a Persian stock.

Now that he has broken the ice, he delights in speaking often and at great length about his Sultanetta, and I like to watch his growing animation as he talks of her. Sometimes he resembles a cataract falling from the summit of a rock, sometimes one of the naphtha springs of Baku; like them, he burns with an inexhaustible flame. At such times his face brightens up, his eyes flash fire. At such moments he is magnificent. I am affected and carried away myself; I open my arms, and receive him to my breast, overwhelmed by his excitement. Then presently he feels ashamed of himself; he does not dare to look at me, but gives me his hand and retires to his own quarters, where, after these outbursts, he spends whole days in silence.

Since his return from Khunsack he has grown gloomier than ever, particularly these last few days.

He has entreated me to allow him to go once more to Khunsack to see his beloved, but I have refused his request. It is for me to guard his honour. With this violence of passion, he would one day or another break his oath, and the ideal I have conceived of my handsome prisoner and his noble heart would be shattered.

I have written all this to Yermolof, and he has directed me to bring him with me to Georgievsk, where he will be himself. There, through Ammalat's mediation, he proposes to conclude some negotiations with Ackmeth-Khan, which may be of the greatest service to Russia, and may render Ammalat happy by bringing about his union with Sultanetta. I shall be very happy, dear Marie, on the day that I secure this young man's happiness. And he, who has no notion of half measures, what gratitude he will express to me! Then, dear Marie, I will make him kneel before you, and will say to him, "Adore *her;* had I not loved Marie, you would not be the husband of Sultanetta,"

Yesterday I received a letter from the Lieutenant-Governor. How kind he is; he has anticipated my wishes. Everything is settled, my love, and I shall join you when you go to take the waters. I shall not know what toil during the day is, or sleep during the night, until the hour when I rest in your arms. What eagle will lend me its wings for my journey? what giant will lend me strength to support my happiness? Verily my heart feels so light I clasp my bosom with both hands to prevent its flying away. If I could but sleep until the moment when I see you, and live but in dreams in which you were present! Yet with all this, my beloved, I awoke to-day as sad as death. I have some gloomy presentiment in my heart. I left my tent and went into Ammalat's. He was still asleep; his face was pale and contracted. There is some feeling of hate in his heart struggling with love. He is angry with me for my refusal; but how I shall be revenged upon him on the day when I have finally secured his happiness, and can say to him—

"Life! I saved your life; but what was life without Sultanetta? Now you shall have Sultanetta too!"

To-day I shall bid a long farewell to my Daghestan mountains, perhaps for ever, who knows? It is strange, my love, what a sad and at the same time what a tender sentiment at once depresses and elevates my heart, when I gaze upon mountains, and sea, and sky.

Oh, dear heart! how happy it makes me to be able to say at last, and with the certainty of a speedy fulfilment, "I shall see you soon!"

CHAPTER XV

THE poison of the lie scorched Ammalat's heart, and coursed through his veins like fire. His old nurse, Fatma, had conscientiously earned her ten sheep, her silk dress, and her two pieces of gold.

The same evening on which Ammalat had arrived at Bouinaky with the Colonel, and the Colonel had had an interview with the Prince, she had repeated with every sort of circumstantial detail all that Ackmeth-Khan had poured into her ear.

At first he was inclined to doubt her story; but how could he suspect that Fatma, his good old nurse whom he loved as a son, was an accomplice of Ackmeth-Khan?

The poisoned arrow had struck deep into his heart. In the first excitement of his anger he wanted to kill the Colonel and the Prince, but his regard for the laws of hospitality prevented this.

He deferred his vengeance till later, in the same way as a man replaces his dagger in the sheath only to draw it out again glittering and deadly.

The day passed thus. The regiment stopped to take two hours' rest, and during this interval Ammalat wrote as follows to Ackmeth-Khan, hoping to ease his heart by committing its feelings to paper:—

"*Midnight.*

"Ackmeth-Khan! Ackmeth-Khan! why have you flashed this light upon my eyes? Do you know that its flame has pierced my very heart? Oh! friendship forgotten! the betrayal, the assassination of a brother; what terrible extremities, and between them but a step—or an abyss!

"I cannot sleep, I cannot think of anything else. I am chained to this one thought, like a criminal to the wall of his dungeon. A sea of blood flows and spreads around me, and, above its dark waves, instead of stars, there is the lurid lightning-flash.

"My soul is like a rock whither resort wild birds by day to rend their prey, and the fiends of hell by night to plan their murderous deeds. Oh, Verkovsky! what have I done to you? why blot out from a Mountaineer's sky his fairest star, freedom? Because I loved you too well perhaps; I sacrificed my love to you. You might have said to me, 'Ammalat, I require your life,' and I would have given it you as simply as you asked it. Like Abraham's son, I would have bowed beneath the knife, and have died forgiving you.

"But to sell my liberty! to rob me of Sultanetta! It is a traitor's deed; and this traitor is yet alive!

"From time to time I see your lovely face, my Sultanetta, like a dove flitting past the smoke of a conflagration. Then why does not the sight delight me as it did formerly? They want to part you from me, my beloved, to give you to another, to marry me to the grave. But it shall not be so; I will return to you by a path of blood. I will accomplish the horrid deed which is imposed on me to win you, and win you I will. Besides your friends, Sultanetta, invite to our wedding the vultures and the ravens. Oh! I know how to make a feast for all the guests. I will give you a rich wedding-present; instead of a velvet cushion I will place beneath my bride's head the heart of him whom I respected, whom I loved almost as much as I loved herself.

"Innocent girl, you will be the cause of a horrid crime! Kind creature, for your sake two friends will butcher one another in an embrace of deadly wrath. For you! but is it indeed for you only?

"Twenty times have I heard Verkovsky say that it was cowardly to rid yourself of your enemy by a gun-shot or a dagger-thrust. These Europeans are strange beings. According to them, when an enemy has crushed your head beneath his foot, has bruised your heart between his hands, you say to him, 'You have dishonoured me; you have stripped bare the tree of my life; you have tarnished the roses of my heart; we will fight one another! If I am more skilful than you, I shall kill you; if you are more skilful than I, you will kill me.' And you present your breast to the bullet or the steel of a traitor.

"These are not our methods, Verkovsky; but it was not enough for you to

chain my hands, you must likewise chain my conscience.

"All in vain! your words are wind!

"I have loaded my gun; it came from my father; my father had it of my grandfather. I have heard tell of many brave deeds done with it. True, no one hitherto has fired it in the night or from an ambuscade. It has ever breathed flame and spat death in open fight, in the sight of all, in the front rank; but it fought against loyal warriors, noble foes; it never had to avenge insult and treachery. But now! Oh! tremble not, my hand! A charge of powder, a leaden bullet, a flash, a sound caught up by the echoes, and all will be over.

"A charge of powder! What a little thing it is! I drop it in the hollow of my hand, and it scarcely covers it, yet it is sufficient to part a man's soul from his body. Cursed be the inventor of the grey powder that places the life of a hero in the hands of a coward, that slays the unarmed foe from afar off, that kills by one murderous glance!

"One shot, then, will loosen all my former ties, and open my path to fresh ones. In the keen air of the mountains, and on Sultanetta's breast, my fainting heart will regain its strength. Like the swallow, I will make my nest in a foreign land, and I will cast away all my past grief as one casts off a garment torn by thorns and brambles.

"But my conscience!

"It once fell out I encountered in the enemy's ranks a man whom I had sworn to kill. I might have put a bullet into him without his knowing whence it came, but I felt ashamed to do the thing. I turned my horse about, and did not fire. And now I would pierce that heart, on which I have reposed, as though it had been my brother's! He deceived me; but was I so unhappy in believing in his friendship, false as it has proved to be?

"Oh! if my tears could but quench my anger, my thirst for vengeance; if they could but buy Sultanetta for me!

"Why does the dawn tarry so long? Let it come! I shall look at the sun without blushing, and endure the glance of Verkovsky without turning pale. My heart is pitiless. Treachery calls for treachery. I am resolved. Here is the day—the last of my life."

But no; it was nothing more than a flash of lightning.

And, by way of giving himself the courage he felt he lacked, Ammalat seized a bottle of wine, which Sophyr-Ali had made them bring him, and emptied it at a draught.

Presently he lay down on his pillow, but to no purpose; he could not sleep. A serpent was gnawing at his heart.

Then he went over to Sophyr-Ali, who was asleep, and shook him roughly.

"Wake up; it is day," he cried.

Sophyr-Ali opened his eyes and looked at Ammalat, yawning.

"Day! yes, on your cheeks; but they reflect the flame of wine, and not the rays of dawn."

"Wake up, I tell you. The dead themselves should rise from their graves to see what I am going to send them."

"What do you say? that I am dead? By Allah! you are going crazy, Ammalat. Let the dead rise if it amuses them, and the forty *Imaums* return to the light of day, if it suits them. For my part, I am alive, I tell you, and I have not had enough sleep. Good night!"

"You are fond of drinking, Sophyr-Ali; I am thirsty this morning, drink with me."

"Ah, that is quite another matter! Now you are getting sensible again. Pour out a glass—pour out a bumper. By Allah! I am always ready for wine and love."

"And for vengeance on an enemy, are you not? Here's to the devil, who transforms friends into mortal foes! Where I go, you will go, Sophyr-Ali, will you not?"

"Ammalat, I have not only drunk wine from the same glass as yourself, but we have both sucked the same breast. I am yours, even though you made your nest on the highest summit of the rock of Khunsack. Let me advise you, however——"

"No advice, Sophyr-Ali; and, above all, no reproaches; it is no time for them."

"You are right. Advice and reproaches alike would be drowned in wine, like flies. It is not the time for either, but for sleep."

"Sleep, say you? There is no more sleep for me. Have you examined the flint of my musket, and is it in good order? Have you renewed the priming, and seen that it is not damp?"

"What is wrong with you, Ammalat?

There is some mystery, some crime, it may be, lurking in your heart. Your eye is feverish, your features pale; your words savour of blood."

"My deeds will be more horrid still, Sophyr-Ali. My Sultanetta is beautiful. Is it a bridal song that sounds in my ear? No, it is the wailing of spirits, the bark of jackals. Howl, wolves! weep, demons! You are tired of waiting. Have patience, you will not wait much longer. More wine, Sophyr-Ali! more wine! and then—blood!"

Ammalat swallowed a second bottle at a gulp, and fell dead drunk upon the bed, stammering some unintelligible words. Sophyr-Ali undressed him, put him to bed, and watched beside him the rest of the night, vainly trying to explain to himself the meaning of what Ammalat had said.

At last, at daybreak, he lay down himself, saying—

"Bah! he was drunk, that was all."

CHAPTER XVI

NEXT morning, before resuming the march, the Captain on duty brought the Colonel the usual report.

After informing him that everything was in good trim in the regiment, he looked round him, and, approaching Verkovsky hesitatingly, asked—

"Sir, may I speak to you?"

"Certainly," answered Verkovsky, absently.

"But about a serious matter, Sir."

"Serious?"

"Yes."

"Speak up, then."

"Are we quite alone?"

Verkovsky in his turn looked round him.

"We are quite alone," said he.

"What I have to say to you, Sir, is serious, most serious."

"I am listening."

"Yesterday, at Bouinaky, a soldier of our regiment overheard a conversation between Ammalat and his nurse. He is a Tartar from Kasan, who understands perfectly the Tartar spoken in the Caucasus. Well, he heard the old Fatma, Ammalat's nurse, telling him that you and the Prince wanted to send him to Siberia. Ammalat was furious. He declared that he had been already warned of this intention by Ackmeth-Khan, but that before it was carried out, he would slay you with his own hand.

"Thinking that he had heard wrongly, or that, if he had heard rightly, you were in danger of death, the Tartar determined to keep an eye upon Ammalat's actions since yesterday.

"In the evening, Ammalat had a conversation with a man unknown, and said, as he dismissed him—

"'Tell the Khan that at sunrise tomorrow all will be over; let him prepare himself, I shall see him soon.'

"Is that all?" asked Verkovsky.

"Do you think that was not quite enough to make those who love you uneasy, Sir? Listen. I have spent my life among Tartars; the man who trusts himself to the best of them is a fool. The brother is not sure of his head from the moment he lays it on his brother's shoulder."

"Jealousy is the cause of Ammalat's bad temper. Cain has left his inheritance to the whole human race—especially to those who live near Ararat. We have no cause of quarrel, Ammalat and I. I have done him nothing but good, and I wish him no harm. Make your mind easy. I believe in your soldier's truthfulness, but not in his knowledge of the Tartar language. I am not so distinguished a man that the Begs and Khans should dream of assassinating me. I know Ammalat very well: he has a violent temper, but a good heart."

"Do not deceive yourself, Sir. Ammalat is an Asiatic; so do not expect from him either the virtues or the vices of a European. Things are not here as they are with us; here, the word conceals the thought, the face masks the soul. A Tartar appears to you on the surface to be an honest man; dig down, and you will find within his heart baseness, anger, and ferocity."

"Your experience has given you the right to think so; but I have no reason for suspecting Ammalat in anything. What would he gain by killing me? I am his only hope. I ought to be dead by daybreak; but the sun is fairly high in the horizon, and, as you see, I am still alive. None the less, I thank you; but do not suspect Ammalat. And now for the road!"

The Captain left him, and presently the drums sounded, and the regiment resumed its march.

The morning was bright and cool. The regiment looked like a long serpent with scales of steel, now winding round the end of the valley, now crawling over the mountain.

Ammalat rode in front, pale and gloomy. He hoped that the noise of the drums would prevent him from hearing the voice of his heart.

The Colonel called him, and said in friendly accents—

"I must scold you, Ammalat; you follow the precepts of Hafiz too literally: wine is a good companion, but a bad master. You have passed a dreadful night, Ammalat."

"Yes, Colonel; a terrible night: Allah grant I may never spend such another. I dreamed a great deal—horrible dreams."

"Ammalat, Ammalat, we must not do what our religion forbids; your conscience is not at ease."

"Happy the man whose conscience has no other enemy but wine."

"Of what conscience do you speak, my dear friend? Each nation, each age, has its conscience; what is regarded as a crime to-day will be lauded to-morrow as a noble act."

"Still, I presume," replied Ammalat, "that dissimulation, vengeance, and murder have never been regarded as virtues."

"I do not say that, though, indeed, we live in a time when success almost always carries its own forgiveness with it. The most conscientious people at the present day do not hesitate to quote and even to act upon the proverb: 'He who desires the end, desires the means.'"

Ammalat gave the Colonel a sidelong glance.

"Traitor!" he murmured. "Your words well befit a traitor."

Then he added in a lower tone, deep down in his chest—

"The time has come."

The Colonel rode on, unsuspectingly, beside the young man. At about five miles from Karakent the Caspian Sea comes suddenly into view.

Verkovsky grew thoughtful.

"It is a strange thing, Ammalat," said he. "I cannot look at your gloomy sea, your wild country, teeming with diseases and inhabited by men who are more deadly than any disease, without my heart being wrung and my mind filled with melancholy. I detest war against invisible foes; I detest military duty with comrades who are scarcely ever our friends. I serve my country with affection, my Emperor with fidelity; I have refused all the pleasures which life affords in order to fulfil my military duties; my mind is petrified through inaction, my heart buried in loneliness. I am separated from all, even from my heart's beloved. What reward have I obtained? A secondary command. When will the moment come when I shall throw myself into the arms of my beloved? When will the time come for me, weary of military service, to rest in my home on the banks of the Dnieper? True, I have my furlough in my pocket, and in five days shall be at Georgievsk; but the strange thing is that it seems all in vain. I draw nearer to her, and it ever seems as though there stretched between us the desert of Libya, a sea of ice, an eternity gloomy and boundless as that of death. Oh, my heart, my poor heart!"

Verkovsky ceased speaking, and began to weep.

His horse, feeling the reins slackened, quickened his pace, and Ammalat and the Colonel rode on far in front of the regiment.

Verkovsky was himself creating the opportunity for his murderer.

But, at the sight of his tears, at the choking sound of his sobs, pity glided into Ammalat's heart as a ray of sunshine penetrates a dark cavern.

He observed the grief of the man who had so long been his friend, and said to himself—

"No, it is impossible that a man should carry his dissimulation to such lengths."

But, as though ashamed of his momentary weakness, Verkovsky raised his head, and said, with an effort to smile—

"You must get ready, Ammalat; you are coming with me."

At these fatal words, all lingering trace of kind feeling in Ammalat's heart was destroyed.

The thought of the bargain struck between the Colonel and the Prince recurred to his mind, the prospect of a perpetual exile unfolded itself before him.

"With you?" said he, his lips quivering with anger. "With you to Russia? Why not, if you are going there?"

And he laughed so strangely that it

was more like a man grinding his teeth, and, lashing his horse, he dashed on ahead.

He required time to get his gun ready. Presently he turned his horse, came back towards the Colonel, and passed him; then he began to ride round him in a circle, as an eagle wheels round its prey.

At each turn he grew more deadly pale, more furiously angry; it seemed to him as though a fiend hissed in his ear:—

"Kill! kill! kill!"

Meanwhile the Colonel, entirely unsuspicious, smilingly watched Ammalat's movements in the belief that, according to Asiatic fashion, he wanted him to admire his skill in some feat of arms.

He saw him put his gun to his shoulder, and, thinking that he was continuing his sport, raised his cap from his forehead and shouted—

"Aim at my *fouraska!* I will throw it into the air."

"No, at your heart," said Ammalat. And at ten paces from the Colonel he fired.

The Colonel fell without uttering sound or sigh.

The bullet had pierced his heart, as Ammalat had declared it should.

Ammalat's horse, carried on by its impetus, pulled up short on its hind legs in front of the dead body.

Ammalat jumped to the ground and leaned upon his still smoking gun as though he wished to prove to himself that he was insensible to the dead man's glance, that he was calm in presence of the blood that trickled from the wound. God alone knows what thoughts were passing at that moment through the assassin's mind.

Sophyr-Ali now came up and threw himself on his knees before the corpse. He bent over the Colonel's lips, no breath escaped from them.

"He is dead!" cried Sophyr-Ali, in a terrified voice, looking at Ammalat.

"Is he quite dead?" said the latter, as though awaking from a deep sleep. "Well then, so much the better, for his death means my happiness."

"Your happiness!" cried Sophyr-Ali. "You, the murderer of your benefactor? The day when you shall find happiness henceforth, will be the day when all the world denies God and worships the devil."

"Sophyr-Ali," said Ammalat, sharply, "remember that you are my servant and not my judge."

And, jumping on his horse, he exclaimed—

"Follow me!"

"Let remorse follow you as a spectre, Ammalat; I will not. Do what you will, become what you may, henceforth we are nothing to each other, and I disown you for my brother. Farewell, Cain!"

At this answer from Sophyr-Ali, Ammalat gave a roar like a wild beast, and beckoning to his *noukers* to follow him, he dashed away swift as an arrow into the mountains.

Ten minutes later, the head of the Russian column halted in front of its dead Colonel.

CHAPTER XVII

AMMALAT wandered for three days among the mountains of Daghestan.

Although among the submitted villages, he was in safety, as the Mountaineers, in spite of their submission, reserve all their sympathies for the enemies of Russia.

But, though he was free from danger, he was not free from remorse, and Sophyr-Ali's curse had gripped him as with iron claws. Now that the deed was done, neither his heart nor his mind even attempted to excuse it. He was haunted perpetually by visions of the supreme moment of the murder, when, amid the smoke that enveloped victim and assassin, the Colonel had fallen from his horse. It was an Asiatic who had committed the first crime known to history, who had become the first traitor, and the tradition of eternal remorse took its birth on the borders of Ararat.

But his crime was not ended with the murder; he had still to accomplish a deed more terrible still.

"Don't show yourself at Khunsack without Verkovsky's head," Ackmeth-Khan had said to him, and, as though no extremity of crime could be spared him after his first act, he had now to obtain that head.

Among Orientals the enemy is not regarded as really dead until he has been decapitated; vengeance is complete only when the adversary's head is in the avenger's hands.

Not daring to announce his intention

to his *noukers*, on whose courage in such circumstances he knew he could not reckon, he determined to return across the mountains to Derbend alone.

Although none of these men would have hesitated to perform on the field of battle an act which every Mountaineer looks upon as the necessary completion of the combat, not one would have dared, three days after the combat, to enter a graveyard by night and rifle a tomb.

Yet that was what Ammalat had now to do.

The night was dark when the young man emerged from a cavern hollowed out in the rock about a quarter of a mile from the fortress of Marienkale, which serves as the citadel of Derbend. He tied his horse to a tree overlooking the hill from which Yermolof, when only a Lieutenant, bombarded the town. The Russian cemetery was situated five hundred yards from this hill.

But how in the darkness was he to find the newly made grave of Verkovsky?

The sky was overcast, and the clouds, lowering towards the earth, seemed to weigh heavy upon the mountains, while the wind blowing down the valleys seemed, like some bird of night, to flap its wings against the branches of the trees.

Ammalat shuddered as he set foot in that region of the dead whose repose he had come to disturb. He stopped and listened anxiously.

The sea moaned as it beat on the shore; all about him sounded the howls of the wolves and the jackals whose comrade he had now become. Then suddenly every sound ceased, except the never ceasing, melancholy moan of the wind, that seemed to be the wailing of the spirits of the dead.

How often, on such a night, had he sat and talked with Verkovsky!

That intelligent mind, which on such occasions would explain to him all the mysteries of nature, what had now become of it in that unknown land whither he had hurried it?

He thought how he used to listen to his words as he lay by his side, and now he had come, after robbing his body of life, to steal his head from the grave.

"Human terrors!" murmured Ammalat, as he wiped his brow streaming with moisture. "What place have you in a heart in which nothing human remains? Avaunt ye! What! have I robbed a man of life, and do I now fear to take the head from his corpse, when that head is a valuable treasure for me? Truly, I must be mad! Are not the dead devoid of feeling?"

With a trembling hand he set fire to some dry branches, and by their flickering and transient light began to search for the Colonel's grave. The freshly stirred earth and a cross on which he read the name of Verkovsky indicated the last resting-place of the man whom he had so often called his brother. He pulled up the cross and began to remove the earth.

The task was neither long nor difficult. Interments in the East are made close to the surface of the ground, and Ammalat's dagger soon struck against the top of the coffin.

With a final effort he raised the lid.

He was obliged to take, by the red light of the burning branches, a last look at this body.

It was a terrible punishment, unparalleled by all the tortures that human justice has been able to devise. As Ammalat, paler than the corpse itself, stooped over it, he seemed for an instant to be turned into stone. What had he come to do there? How and why was he there? No pulse of his stricken heart, no fibre of his broken spirit, could have answered the question; a corpse-like odour enveloped him, an exhalation of death obscured his vision.

"Still, I must go through with it!" he muttered, endeavouring to arouse himself from his torpor by the sound of his own voice.

But neither vanity, nor vengeance, nor love, nor any of those feelings the intoxication of which had made him commit his first crime nerved him for the commission of the second. The reason was that the second was worse than a crime, it was an act of sacrilege.

At last, he placed his dagger on the neck which he had to sever, threw the burning branches away from him, so that darkness might hide his infamous work, and, after some vain attempts, he realised with terror that his object was attained.

The head was severed from the body.

He seized it and threw it with an indescribable feeling of anguish and disgust into a bag which he had brought with him for the purpose.

Hitherto he had felt able to control himself; but at this moment, when he

realised that the basest of his two acts had just been accomplished; when that head which he thought he could exchange for his own happiness hung from his arm; when he had to extricate his feet from the soft and yielding earth of the grave in which he had plunged up to his knees; when, in the act of stepping out, his foot slipped on the pebbles, and he fell again into the open trench, as if the corpse, in its turn, refused to let him go;—then all his presence of mind forsook him, and he thought, indeed, he was going mad.

The lighted branches that he had thrown behind him had set fire to the grass burnt dry by the fierce June sun. He had forgotten the cause of the flames; he thought they were the flames of hell.

The spirits of darkness seemed to circle round him, with shouts and laughter. He began himself to shout and laugh, then with a heavy groan, into which his laughter and his shouts melted, he fled from the spot.

He made his way to the place where he had left his horse, and, leaping on the animal's back, urged him across the mountains, heedless of rocks or precipices, thinking each bush that clung to him to be the hand of the corpse which would not let him go; and the cries of the jackals and hyenas to be the last death-rattle of his benefactor, twice slain by him.

On the evening of the second day he reached Khunsack.

Quivering with impatience he sprang from his horse and unfastened the cursed bag from his saddle-bow. He mounted the flight of steps which he knew so well and entered the first apartments.

They were filled with Mountaineers in fighting trim. Some were walking up and down clad in coats of mail, others were talking as they lay side by side upon their *bourkas*.

All spoke in low tones—those, that is to say, who spoke at all, for many maintained a gloomy silence. Their contracted brows and sombre faces indicated that Khunsack lay under the weight of some heavy tidings.

The *noukers* passed to and fro; all knew Ammalat, yet none questioned him or seemed to take the slightest notice of him.

Near the door of Ackmeth's chamber stood Soukay-Khan, his second son, weeping bitterly.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Ammalat, uneasily. "You whom they called the 'child without tears,' you are weeping now?"

Soukay-Khan, without uttering a word, pointed to the door of the chamber.

Ammalat entered.

A terrible spectacle there awaited him.

In the middle of the room, upon a mattress covered with a carpet, lay Ackmeth-Khan, his face already distorted by the near approach of death. From time to time his chest heaved with a painful effort. He had just entered upon that last agonising struggle which awaits man at the entrance to the grave.

His wife and daughter knelt beside him, weeping. His eldest son, Moutzale-Khan, lay motionless at his feet, his head buried in his hands.

A number of women and his favourite *noukers* sat weeping a short way from the dying man.

Ammalat approached the Khan, and standing upright and alone amid all these mourners bowed to the earth with grief, exclaimed—

"Greeting, Khan Ackmeth! I bring you a present that will make a dead man rise. Get ready the marriage-feast; here is Sultanetta's marriage-gift."

And so saying, he tossed the Colonel's head at Ackmeth's feet.

Ammalat's voice seemed to rouse the dying man. He raised himself to see what present the young *Beg* had brought him. The severed head of Verkovsky lay at his feet.

A shudder ran through his whole frame.

"May the man who offers such a spectacle to a dying man eat out his own heart," he cried. Then, raising himself with a last effort and lifting his arms to heaven, he cried: "Allah be my witness, I forgive all my enemies; but you, you, Ammalat, I curse!"

And he fell back dead upon his cushions.

Ackmeth's wife had watched all these proceedings with the deepest terror. But now, seeing her husband lying dead, believing that the sight of Ammalat and his fatal present had perhaps hastened his end, she exclaimed with flashing eyes and pointing to the corpse—

"Messenger of hell! behold your work. But for you, my husband would not have dreamed of rousing Avaria against the Russians; but for you he would be among

us now, well and happy. But, going about among the *Begs* to marshal them in your behalf, he fell from the top of a rock; and you, wretched traitor and murderer, instead of coming to soothe his agony and make his death peaceful, you come like a wild beast to hurl, amid the phantoms that surround a dying man's bed, the terrible reality of a dead man's head! and whose head? your protector's, your friend's, your benefactor's!"

"But it was the Khan's own wish!" cried Ammalat, in amazement.

"Do not accuse the dead; do not stain with useless blood the corpse of one who cannot defend himself," replied the widow, with ever rising anger. "You, who were not afraid to come and ask in marriage a daughter at her father's dying bed, and who hoped to receive a reward from man at the very time you incurred the curse of God. Sacrilegious and infamous wretch! I swear to you, by the grave of my ancestors, by the sword of my sons, by the honour of my daughter, that you shall never be son-in-law nor guest of mine. Leave my house, traitor!"

Ammalat uttered a cry.

"Leave it!" continued the widow; "I have sons whom you may kill by your embrace; a daughter whom you may poison with your glance. Go, hide in the caves and mountains; go! teach the tigers to devour each other. Go! and be assured of one thing, Ammalat-Beg; my door will never be open to a murderer."

Ammalat stood thunderstruck. All his conscience had whispered to him was now repeated in loud and ruthless accents. He knew not where to look. On the floor, Verkovsky's head; on the bed, the corpse of Ackmeth; in front of him, Ackmeth's widow, heaping curses on him. Only the eyes of Sultanetta, swimming with tears, shone on him like two stars gleaming through a cloud.

He went up to her and said—

"I have done all this for your sake, Sultanetta, you know I have; and now I must lose you. If fate will have it so, so it must be; only—only tell me if you, too, hate me, if you, too, despise me."

Sultanetta raised her tearful eyes to him whom she had loved so well; but, seeing Ammalat's face pale and blood-smeared, she hid her eyes with one hand, and, pointing with the other, first to her father's body, and then to the Colonel's head, she said in a firm tone—

"Farewell, Ammalat; I pity you, but I will never be yours."

And, exhausted by the effort, she fell fainting beside her father's body.

Ammalat's native pride surged back with all his life's blood to his heart.

"Ah! so that is the welcome I receive here," he cried, throwing at the two women a glance of contempt; that is how oaths are kept in the house of Ackmeth-Khan! Ah! I am glad, glad, and my eyes see clear at last. I was indeed a fool to rest my happiness on a fickle girl's heart, and I have been very patient, listening to an old woman's curses. Ackmeth-Khan, when he died took with him all the honour and hospitality of his house. Make way! I leave his dishonoured abode."

Casting a glance of defiance at the Khan's sons, the *noukers*, and the horsemen who, having rushed in on hearing the noise, now filled the chamber, he advanced towards them with his hand on the hilt of his dagger, as though inviting them to blows. All, however, made way, shunning rather than fearing him, and not a single word was addressed to him either in the chamber of death or as he passed through the other rooms. On the steps he found his *noukers* waiting, and, at the bottom of the steps, his horse.

He sprang into the saddle without a word, and quitted the palace at full speed, then rode slowly through the streets of Khunsack, and when he reached the heights from which he had seen the Khan's house for the first time, he turned to gaze at it for the last time.

His heart was swelling with bitterness, his eyes were blood-shot; wounded pride tore its talons of steel deep into his breast.

With gloomy anger he threw a last look at the house where he had tasted all the pleasures of life and lost them.

He longed to speak, to utter Sultanetta's name, to give vent to recriminations and curses; but he could not utter a single word, a mountain of lead seemed to have fallen upon him.

Finally, as a last resource, he strove to weep. He thought the dreadful weight that seemed to crush his brain was the burden of unshed tears; he dreamt that a tear, a single tear, would reconcile him to mankind, and intreat God's mercy for him.

"A tear! a tear! one tear!" he cried.

In vain. His eyes were dry and burning

as ever. To weep, a man must love and be loved, while Ammalat, like Satan, hated and was hated.

Days, months, years went by. Whither had Verkovsky's murderer fled? What had become of him?

No man knew. It was reported he was among the Tchetchens, where Nephtali, his sworn brother-in-arms, could not refuse him hospitality. It was said Ackmeth's dying curse had robbed him of everything —beauty, health, even courage. But who could be sure of this? At last, little by little, Ammalat was forgotten, but the memory of his treachery is fresh to this day and alive still in the Caucasus, among Russians and Tartars alike.

EPILOGUE

IN the year 1828 the fortress of Anapa was blockaded both by sea and land by the Russian fleets and forces.

Every morning a fresh battery, opened during the previous night, roared closer to the town.

The Turkish garrison fought bravely, seconded by the Mountaineers, who are ever at feud with the Russians. The latter succeeded eventually in effecting a breach in the south wall of the town, which was gradually battered down by the enemy's guns, but its thickness rendered the task both difficult and slow.

Occasionally, during the mid-day heat especially, a rest of an hour or two was allowed to the smoking guns and the tired artillerymen. During one of these intervals of repose, when the guns were silent and the gunners slept, a rider mounted on a white horse was suddenly lowered from the top of the wall by means of ropes passed underneath his horse's belly.

Scarcely had he touched the ground when the ropes were drawn up to the top of the wall, the horseman cleared the ditch at one bound, urged his horse to a gallop, and passed like a flash of lightning between the batteries and the soldiers. A few shots were fired at him without effect, and he disappeared into the forest. The Russians had scarcely caught a glimpse of him, and did not dream of going in pursuit, and presently in the distraction occasioned by a fresh outburst of the cannonade, the horseman was forgotten.

By the evening the breach had become practicable, and the Russians were preparing to make the assault when they were suddenly attacked by the Mountaineers from the direction of the forest, the Mountaineers being answered from within the walls of Anapa by the terrible war-cry of "*Allah il Allah.*"

But the Russians turned their guns upon these unexpected assailants, and soon dispersed the Mountaineers, who fled, leaving behind on the field of battle their dead and wounded, and retiring with shouts of "Giaours! Giaours! Infidels! Infidels!"

But all along, from the first beginning of the action down to the moment when the field of battle was swept clear by the guns, the Russians had seen in front of them a Circassian mounted on a white charger, who rode furiously backwards and forwards in front of their batteries, paying no heed whatever to the balls or the bullets which were raining round him.

This recklessness of the Mountaineer's, and above all his seeming invulnerability, made the gunners furious. Balls ploughed the ground round him, and scattered the earth beneath his horse's feet. His horse reared and pranced, but the horseman kept the terrified animal from bolting, soothing him with his hand and utterly careless apparently of the dangers which surrounded him on all sides.

"I will have the horse and you shall have twenty-five roubles if you bring that fellow down," said an Artillery Officer to the marksman of his battery.

The marksman looked.

"I have aimed at him three times," said he, "and he must be the devil himself to be sitting there still on his confounded horse. But there, you may load my gun with my own head next shot, if I fail to hit him this time."

And, aiming his gun with most extraordinary care, he took the match from his comrade's hand and fired it himself.

For a moment it was impossible to mark the effect; but presently the smoke dispersed, and the terrified horse could be seen dragging the body of his master, whose foot remained caught in the stirrup.

"He is hit! he is down!" cried the soldiers.

The young Officer raised his cap, made

the sign of the cross, and sprang over the battery to catch the horse, which was a fine animal, bred, as far as one could judge, in Khorassan.

He soon reached the animal, which was running round and round in the same circle, dragging the body of the Mountaineer along with it.

The shot had carried away the arm of the latter close to the shoulder, but he was still breathing.

The officer told off four artillerymen to carry the dying man into his own tent, while he went off himself to fetch the surgeon.

But the surgeon, after examining the terrible wound, declared that amputation of the shoulder was absolutely necessary, and that the patient would die under the operation.

It would be better, then, to let him die quietly from his wound than to inflict a quicker and more painful death.

The surgeon prescribed a cooling drink, the only relief which he could give the patient.

The officer remained alone in his tent by the side of his suffering guest, accompanied by a Tartar interpreter, whom he had summoned in case the dying man, whom it was easy to see was a Chief, should recover consciousness and desire to give some final instructions.

Towards one o'clock in the morning the wounded man grew restless and sighed several times, as though disturbed by some vision.

The Officer rose and held the lantern to the face of the dying man, who had not as yet regained consciousness, and looked at him with more attention than he had hitherto done.

The face was dark and gloomy; deep wrinkles furrowed the brow, disfiguring a face which must have been of great beauty before it had been marred by the dissolute passions of which it retained the mark. In short, it was easy to see that its deadly pallor was due rather to the sorrows of life than to the near approach of death. His breathing grew more and more laboured.

With his one remaining hand he seemed to be trying to drive back some avenging spectre. At last his speech found utterance, and, after some unintelligible words, the Officer and the interpreter succeeded in catching the following—

"Blood! always blood!" he murmured, looking at his remaining hand, the right one. "Why have you put his blood-stained shirt upon me? Was I not swimming in blood already without that? Do not drag me back to life, as you are for doing. Life is hell! the grave is so sweet and cool!" He fainted once more, and the words died upon his lips.

The Officer sent the interpreter for water, dipped his hand in the glass, and shook the drops in the dying man's face.

The latter started, opened his eyes again, shook his head as though to avert the shadow of death which was already enveloping him, and perceived the Captain by the light of the lantern which the interpreter held.

His glance, hitherto vague, became fixed and scared. He stared at the Officer, tried to raise himself on his missing arm, fell back again and raised himself upon the other arm.

His hair stood on end, the sweat ran down his brow, his paleness became livid; his face gradually assumed an expression of profound terror.

"Your name?" said he, with a gasp, and in a voice that was scarcely human. "Who are you? Are you a messenger from the grave? Speak! answer!"

"I am Verkovsky," answered the Officer, quietly.

These three words, apparently so simple, were like the thrust of a dagger through the wounded man's heart. He uttered a cry, shuddered, and fell back upon his pillow.

"The man was probably a great sinner," said the young Officer, sadly, addressing the interpreter.

"Or a great traitor," added the latter. "He must be, or rather must have been, for he is dead, some Russian renegade. I have never heard a Mountaineer speak our language with such purity. Examine his weapons; perhaps we shall find some inscription on them. Sometimes the armourers of Kouba, Andrev, or Koubatchi add to their own name the name of the man for whom they make the weapon."

He drew the dagger from the dead man's girdle, and examined the blade first.

The following inscription was engraved in gold letters upon the burnished steel—

"BE SLOW TO GIVE OFFENCE AND PROMPT TO TAKE VENGEANCE."

The interpreter translated this to the young Officer.

"Yes, it is a maxim of these brigands," said the latter. "My poor brother, the Colonel, fell a victim to one of these wretches."

The young man brushed away a tear.

Then he said to the interpreter—

"Now examine the sheath."

The interpreter unfastened the sheath from the dead man's girdle, and found engraved on it in Tartar characters these words—

"I WAS MADE FOR AMMALAT-BEG."

THE END

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