THE AIR PATROL

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A Story of the North-west Frontier

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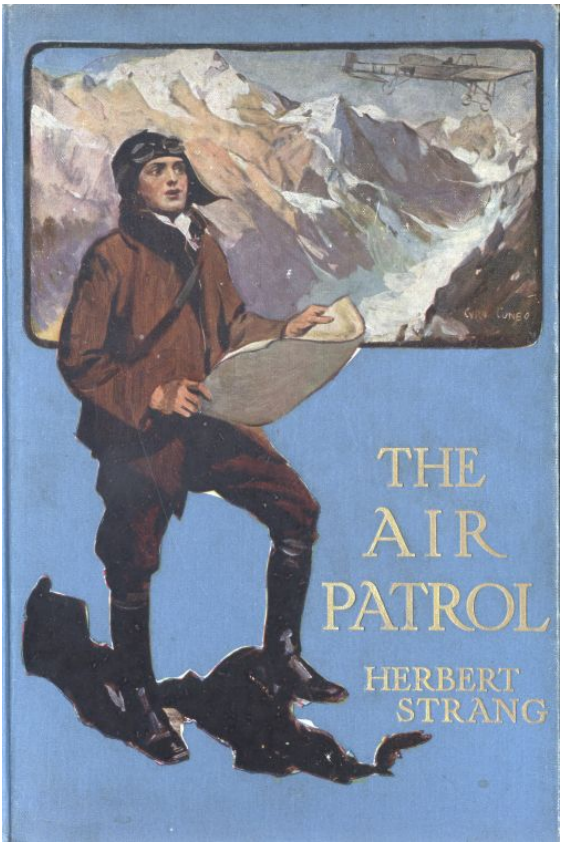
A STORY
OF THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER

BY



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HERBERT STRANG

ILLUSTRATED BY CYRUS CUNEO

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PREFACE

It needs no gift of prophecy to foretell that in the not distant future the fate of empires will be decided neither on land nor on the sea, but in the air. We have already reached a stage in the evolution of the aeroplane and airship at which a slight superiority in aircraft may turn the scale in battle. Our imperial destinies may hinge upon the early or later recognition of the importance of a large, well-equipped, and well-manned aerial fleet.

In *The Air Scout* I endeavoured to illustrate the part which an air-service may play in a combined naval and military campaign. The scene of the present story is laid among the vast mountain ranges of Northern India, where the issue of a great war may depend upon the aerial equipment of the opposing armies.

Some two thousand years ago a handful of devoted Greeks held the narrow pass of Thermopylae against the myriad host of Xerxes, in the noble effort to save their country from the Persian yoke. The following pages tell the story of a new–and a more fortunate–Thermopylae, an episode in a great struggle for the mastery of India. I am among those who believe that the spirit which animated

the Spartan heroes of old burns in our British youth to-day. Only opportunity and a great occasion are needed to evoke it to glorious use.

HERBERT STRANG.

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INTRODUCTORY

A summer afternoon was dwindling to night over a wild solitude among the borderlands of Northern India. The sun had already left the deep spacious valley, wherein, as the light waned, the greens changed to browns, the browns deepened to black, and the broad silver band that denoted a stream flowing along the bottom was dulled to the hue of lead. On the west, the harsh and rugged features of the mountains, towering to incalculable heights, were softened by the increasing shade; while the snowy summits, flushed by the declining rays, were scarcely distinguishable from the roseate clouds. Away to the east, where the sunlight still lingered, the huge mountain barrier showed every gradation of tone, from the greenish-black of the pine forest at the foot, through varieties of purple and grey, to the mingled pink and gold of the topmost crests. Every knob and fissure on the scarred face was defined and accentuated, until, as the curtain of shadow stole gradually higher, outlines were blurred, and the warm tints faded into drabs and greys.

Along the front of the mountains on the west there was a road–a track, rather, which might have seemed to the fancy to be desperately clinging to the rugged surface, lest it were hurled into the precipitous valley beneath. It followed every jut and indentation of the rock, here broadening, narrowing there until it was no more than a shelf; with twists and bends so abrupt and frequent that it would have been hard to find a stretch of fifty yards that could have been called straight.

Three horsemen were riding slowly northward along this mountain road, picking their way heedfully over its inequalities, edging nearer to the wall of rock on their left hand as they came to spots where a false step would have carried them into the abyss. To a distant observer it would have appeared as though they were moving without support on the very face of the mountain. They wore European garments, and the briefest inspection of their features would have suf-

ficed to tell that they were Englishmen. Behind them, at some little distance, rode eight or ten bearded men of swarthy hue, whose turbans, tunics, and long boots proclaimed them as sowars of a regiment of Border cavalry. Still farther behind, in a long straggling line, came a caravan of laden mules, each in charge of a half-naked Astori. The tail of this singular procession, perhaps a mile behind the head, consisted of two native troopers like those who preceded them.

It was now nearly dark. Presently the three Englishmen halted, and the eldest of them, turning in his saddle, addressed a few words in Urdu to the dafadar of the sowars behind. The riders, English and native alike, dismounted, and led their horses up a slight ascent to the left, halting again when they reached a stretch of level ground which the leader had marked as a suitable camping place. A thin rill trickled musically down at the edge of this convenient plateau, forming a small quagmire in its passage across the track, and plunging over the brink to merge in the broader stream, now obliterated by the night, hundreds of feet below. The three Englishmen tethered their horses to some young pines that bounded the level space, then sat themselves upon a neighbouring rock, lit their pipes, and looked on in silence as the dusky troopers removed their saddle-bags and stood in patient expectancy.

By and by the head of the mule train appeared along the winding track. They came up one by one, and now the evening stillness was broken as the muleteers stripped their loads from the weary beasts, and with shrill and voluble chatter spread about the impedimenta of the camp. Quickly a tent was pitched, cooking pots were set up; and the Englishmen felt that comfortable glow which envelops travellers at the near prospect of supper after a long and toilsome march. The meal was almost ready when the end of the caravan arrived, and the two rearmost sowars rejoined their comrades, with no other sound than a guttural grunt of satisfaction.

The Englishmen were eating their food, too hungry and fatigued to talk, when one of them, looking southward along the track, suddenly pointed to a figure approaching on foot, scarcely discernible in the fast-gathering darkness. On this lonely road, which they had ridden the whole day long without meeting a single human being, the appearance of the stranger had for them something of the curious interest which one passing ship has for another in the ocean solitudes. They watched the figure as it grew more distinct–a tall gaunt man, naked save for a strip of cloth about his loins, long hair flowing wild over his shoulders, no staff in his hand, neither pack nor wallet upon his back. There was something weird and fascinating about this solitary figure, as it stalked on rapidly with long even stride, the head turning neither to left nor right. The newly-pitched camp was fully in his view, but the pedestrian gave it no heed. He came below it on the track, but neither altered his pace nor looked up when one of the muleteers

shouted a salutation. Even when the eldest of the Englishmen, in the tone of one accustomed to be obeyed, challenged him sharply in the native tongue, and demanded whither he was going, the man did not turn his head or slacken speed, but merely lifted his lean right arm and pointed ahead, where the path disappeared in the gloom.

"What is your business?" asked the Englishman again.

And the reply came faintly back from the man, who had already passed by, and spoke without checking his step.

"I AM A SHARPENER OF SWORDS!"

And he vanished into the night.

CHAPTER THE FIRST
THE RUINED REST-HOUSE

The travellers proceeded with their meal almost in silence.

The two younger men had felt subdued and chastened ever since they had left Rawal Pindi, some days before. Major Endicott was too good a fellow to insist on the disapproval with which he regarded their company, but they were conscious of being on sufferance, which was the more irksome because of the whole-hearted admiration they were ready to lavish upon him. His mission was a delicate one,–one which, to any but a political officer of the frontier, would have appeared not a little hazardous; and he felt that it was gratuitously complicated by the journey of two young civilians through so wild a region at this particular time. A tribe in one of the valleys west of the mountain road, some three days' march from the spot on which the travellers were now encamped, had been giving trouble of late. It had always been troublesome. Only once had it been visited by a white man, Major Endicott himself; yet, accompanied by no more than a dozen troopers, he was venturing alone among these wild hill-men, to demand the payment of a fine in expiation of a recent raid upon their neighbours, and security for their future good behaviour. The alternative was an expedition in force, and Major Endicott had preferred to take whatever personal risks a visit might involve, rather than recommend a hill campaign, with all its difficulties and its heavy cost in money and men.

But he did not relish the accidental responsibility cast upon him by the presence of these two young Englishmen, little more than lads, who had no con-

cern in his business, and were indeed strangers to the country. He regarded it as a very unfortunate coincidence that they arrived in Rawal Pindi at the moment of his setting out, and that the road they proposed to follow in their further journey northward would be for several days the same as his own. They were travelling at their own risk; it was no part of his duty to safeguard them; but he could do no less than suggest that they should accompany him over so much of the road as was common to their party and his. Privately he wished them at Halifax.

His attitude was after all more political than personal. Great changes had recently occurred in the politics of Central Asia. The fall of the Manchu dynasty and the establishment of a Republic in China had resulted in the secession of the princes of Mongolia. They had first placed themselves under the protection of Russia, only to find that they had exchanged King Log for King Stork. Russia had sufficiently recovered from the staggering effects of the Japanese war to recommence her forward movement in Asia, which for long had seemed as gradual and as irresistible as the encroachment of the tide upon a sandy beach. The Mongols soon came to loggerheads with their adopted protector, and were beginning to experience the same process of assimilation that had in previous generations been the fate of Bokhara and Western Turkestan. A sudden conflagration in which Russia became involved in Europe, together with the rise to power of a prince of exceptional ambition and capacity, gave the Mongols an opportunity of striking for complete independence, of which they were not slow to take advantage. The advance of a Russian army of 20,000 men was checked near Urga for want of supplies from the north. With an Austro-German army threatening Moscow and St. Petersburg, the Russian government recalled the greater part of their Eastern forces, leaving the Mongolian expedition to extricate itself as best it could. It might still have proved equal to the strain but for a Mussulman rising, which, after long smouldering, now broke into flame in the conquered Khanates eastward of the Caspian. The revolt spread with the rapidity of a prairie fire from Khiva to Tashkend, paralysing any efforts that might have been made to relieve the army destined for Mongolia. A raid of many thousands of Tartars who cut the railway at Irkutsk turned the check into a retreat. The first sign of wavering brought against the Russians every man who possessed a pony and a rifle from the Great Wall of China to the Altai mountains. Under this pressure the retreat became a rout, and the rout a slaughter. Within a year Mongolia became the most powerful of the Central Asian States, and with the guns and equipment of the annihilated Russian army as a nucleus, the Mongol Napoleon set about building up a new empire extending from the shrunken frontiers of the Chinese Republic to the shores of the Caspian. Five years had sufficed to transform the political aspect of Central Asia. Russia, exhausted by a three years' struggle with her western neighbours, was powerless to stem the flood of Mongol conquest.

For the moment the tide had apparently spent itself on the eastern border of Asiatic Turkey, and the mountain chain dividing Persia. There had been a lull for more than a year, during which the world wondered with no little apprehension what would happen next. Some thought that the Mongol prince who had inspired this recrudescence of the Tartar spirit might now be content to consolidate his empire. Others looked for a new movement still more stupendous, for there were not wanting many in Europe who trembled at the name of Ubacha Khan as their forefathers in bygone centuries had trembled at the names of Genghis Khan and Timur.

Little wonder, then, that Major Endicott was perturbed at the thought of two young Englishmen journeying to the fringe of the vast territory in the breasts of whose peoples were stirring aspirations after a greatness which their forefathers had enjoyed, and which was celebrated in stories handed down by long tradition, and in songs that were still sung at village festivals and country fairs.

Robert and Lawrence Appleton, aged nineteen and eighteen respectively, were the sons of the retired lieutenant-governor of an Indian presidency. The elder had just entered Sandhurst, the younger was on the point of competing for a scholarship at Oxford, when the sudden death of their father put a summary check upon their careers. He had enjoyed a good pension, but his investments having proved unfortunate, when his pension died with him they found themselves almost without means. The army for Robert, the Indian Civil Service for Lawrence, were now equally out of the question, and they saw themselves faced with no brighter prospects than clerkships or junior masterships presented, when a letter from their uncle Harry in Asia came like a ray of sunlight in the gloom.

Their uncle had been something of a rolling stone. He had left home when a mere youth, and for many years his family had wholly lost sight of him. Gossip said that he had made and lost several fortunes in remote parts of the globe before he finally "struck oil," literally as well as figuratively, in Mexico. One day he turned up unexpectedly at the headquarters of his brother, the lieutenant-governor, told him that he had "made his pile" and retired from business, and now wanted to amuse himself. Sir George did what he could for him, but Harry soon wearied of the mild excitements of Indian social life, had his fill of tiger shooting and pig-sticking, and looked about for some other means of employing his time.

Happening to learn that it was a difficult matter to get permission to cross the north-west frontier, with characteristic obstinacy he set his mind on overcoming official reluctance. It was a period of some restlessness among the frontier tribes; and the government of India, never very willing to grant permits to non-official travellers, however good their credentials, refused his application, although his brother's influence was employed in his behalf. This was enough

for a man of Harry Appleton's adventurous temperament and independent spirit. Resolving to crack the nut himself, he suddenly left India, disappeared for many months, and then emerged, to the no small embarrassment of the Russians, on the border at Wakhan. He had slipped across the Persian frontier, and before the Russians were aware of his presence, was half-way to the Pamirs. Then he had disappeared for a time into Afghan territory, exploring districts in which it was believed that no other white man had ever set foot, and, much to the wonderment of his friends, coming out alive. When he was again heard of, he had entered British territory far up in the Chitral country, laden with shooting trophies in the shape of many heads of ibex and *Ovis poli*, the large long-horned sheep characteristic of the hill country. His intention was to return to civilisation by way of Gilgit and Kashmir, but he was held up for a time at Gilgit while telegrams passed between the local officials and the government at Simla. There had always been something a little ridiculous, perhaps, in the government's barring the Gilgit road against the use to which roads are commonly and suitably put–travel and trade. The government had only two courses open to them: to turn him back over the Pamirs under escort, or to allow him to pass. It was the latter alternative which they wisely adopted.

Pluming himself not a little on his victory over red tape, as he considered it, Harry Appleton returned to London and remained there for two or three years, interesting himself in all sorts of fantastic schemes which were alike in two respects: they cost much money, and they failed. His friends learnt by and by without surprise that he had lost the greater part of his Mexican fortune, and when they heard that he had suddenly left London again, to retrieve his fortunes by mining in the Hindu Kush, they regarded it as only one more of "poor old Harry's" crack-brained adventures, and wondered what would be the end of it all. It was consequently a cause of some wonder when, after his brother's death, he invited his nephews to join him in the mountain wilds, promising them a fair income to begin with, and possible wealth later on. Why on earth a man should have gone to the Hindu Kush to mine for copper, which could only be brought to market over hundreds of miles of difficult and dangerous country, was a question that puzzled even those who were prepared for almost any sign of insanity in "poor old Harry."

These were the circumstances which had made the two Appletons travelling companions of Major Endicott in this eventful summer.

So far the journey had been without incident. The caravan marched from dawn to dark every day, and the two Appletons found even the rugged majesty of the mountains pall upon them. The pleasantest hours were those spent in camp, when the heat and burden of the day were past. In social circles Major Endicott was regarded as something of a stick; ladies said he had "no conversation"; but in

the silent evenings about the camp fire the lads hung upon his lips as he related, in slow sentences, punctuated by puffs from his pipe, some of the incidents of his career. They conceived an admiration not far short of hero-worship for this quiet soldier, who knew so much, and had done so much, though his own achievements were never the prime subject of his discourse.

To relieve the monotony of the journey, the two lads sometimes ventured to stray from the track, knowing that the speed of their sturdy hill ponies would enable them soon to catch up the rest of the slow-moving caravan. For these divagations the opportunities were few, unless they should turn themselves into mountaineers, and scale on foot the precipices on either side. But now and then there was a break in the hills to right or left, where a small mountain stream joined the larger river that flowed through the valley, above which the road pursued its winding course. The Major had warned them not to wander far on these occasions, and his warnings became more peremptory as they approached the quarter in which he feared that trouble might be brewing. But high-spirited youth is impatient of control, and the two lads were inclined to make light of the sober caution of their elder.

Two days after they had encamped on the mountain side, as already related, they were tempted to try what appeared to be a kind of track leading up into the hills to the east. Taking advantage of a momentary preoccupation of Major Endicott with the sowars, they turned their ponies into this track, and began to scramble up. The gradient was steep, and the path rose higher and higher above the road they had left, but for some distance did not greatly diverge from it. At times they could see it winding away northward beneath them, although it was concealed from them for long stretches by the contour of the ground, and was sometimes difficult to distinguish from the hillside itself.

The track appeared to lead nowhere, and after following it toilsomely for nearly an hour, they began to think it was time to return.

"I hate going back the same way," said Lawrence. "Can't we manage to cut straight down, Bob?"

"Rather risky, don't you think?" replied his brother. "This track goes up and up; there's no path down that I can see, and we don't want to risk our ponies' knees. We could do it on foot."

"Well, look here; we ought to be able to get a good view of the ground between us and the road from that rock yonder. Just hold the ponies, will you, while I go and take a squint?"

He slipped from the saddle, placed the bridle in Bob's hand, and scrambled up the side of a high rock jutting out from the path. As he expected, when he reached the top he found the country beneath clearly mapped out. He could follow the course of the road for some distance in each direction, except where

it was hidden by crags and promontories. At the moment the caravan was out of sight. Between him and the road the ground was much broken, showing many narrow seams, and falling away at places into sheer precipices. It was evident that any attempt to descend here on horseback was bound to end in disaster.

As he cast his eye northward, he suddenly became aware of a group of motionless figures about a mile away, between him and the road. Impelled by some instinct of caution, perhaps acquired during his training in the school cadets, he moved stealthily behind a jutting spur of the rock, and examined the group through his field-glass. He counted fourteen hill-men on horseback. There was no movement among them, and their attitude, with their heads towards the road, suggested patient expectation. They were too far away for him to determine accurately the configuration of the ground, but it appeared to him that they were gathered in a slight hollow about a quarter of a mile east of the road. And as he moved his glass over the intervening space, he caught sight of a small building which had hitherto escaped his notice, so like was it in colour to the rocky ground surrounding it. In general shape it reminded him of the little wayside shelters which, called dak bungalows in India, were known beyond the borders as rest-houses. But this building was apparently fallen into disuse. It was roofless, and much of the stonework of the walls was broken away.

While Lawrence was still examining the ruins and the group behind, he heard the rapid clatter of a horse's hoofs on the hard rock below. At first he could not see the horseman, who, however, presently emerged into view from behind a shoulder of rock to his right, and discovered himself as a hill-man galloping northward. Having come abreast of the rest-house, he wheeled to the right, quitted the road, and made straight for the hollow in which the group of fourteen was waiting. On joining them, he appeared to give them a message; they closed about him, and after a brief consultation they all dismounted, tethered their horses to some stunted trees at the edge of the hollow, and then moved quickly towards the rest-house. All except one entered the ruins; the one went a little distance from them, and took up a position behind a rock from which presumably he could look up the road. It was as if he was waiting to signal some one's approach.

The observer now shut his glass, clambered down from the rock, and hurried back to his companion.

"Well?" said Bob. "You've been long enough."

"Don't speak so loud. Every sound carries in these hills."

In a whisper he went on to tell what he had seen.

"Looks fishy, eh?" said Bob. "We must warn the Major. Can we do it in time?"

"Come on," said Lawrence shortly.

THE AMBUSH AT THE REST HOUSE

THE AMBUSH AT THE REST HOUSE

He remounted, and the two began to make their way back along the path, slowly at first, lest they should be heard, but more rapidly as they increased their distance from the rest-house. They had not ridden far when they caught sight, through a gap in the rocks, of a portion of the caravan. They were still a long way from the spot where the hill-track left the road; the head of the caravan would have drawn much nearer to the rest-house before they could overtake it, if they kept on their present course. To give warning by a shout would but alarm the hill-men. They could save time only by hazarding a direct descent. Turning sharply off the track, they began to scramble down the hillside, trusting themselves to their sure-footed ponies. In their excitement they gave no thought to the risks they ran, and only became partially aware of them when, reaching the road, they were met by Major Endicott, who had for some minutes been watching their venturesome feat with growing wrath and indignation.

"You young fools!" he cried. "Of all the idiotic, asinine, torn-fool tricks I ever saw—-"

"But, sir—-" Lawrence interrupted.

"I thank my stars I shall soon be rid of you," the Major went on unheeding; "you'll take no warning, listen to no advice, and will either break your necks or be potted by hill-men before I get quit of you."

"Really, sir, it's no joke," said Bob as soon as he could get a word in. "There's a nice little crowd ahead waiting to get an easy shot at you."

"*What's* this?" demanded the Major.

"Oh, I just happened to spy a gang of armed hill-men sneaking into a half-ruined rest-house a mile or so ahead," said Lawrence. "We came down to warn you; it's a pity we didn't think of our necks."

"Just describe them to me, will you?" said Major Endicott, now the cool, alert soldier again.

"I couldn't see them very well, but they seemed all alike, big fellows with black beards, dressed in dark-brown, with skin hats of some sort. I counted fifteen altogether. One is on the look-out, the rest are hiding in the ruins."

"You didn't see a larger body anywhere, nor single scouts in the hills?"

"Neither."

"And how far ahead?"

"Well, about a mile as the crow flies from where I caught sight of them; we've come back a mile or more, and what with the windings of the road, I should say they're something over two miles away."

The Major had halted; the sowars sat their horses motionless a few yards behind; the mule-train was still straggling on far in the rear. The march was now resumed, Major Endicott pondering in silence the news brought him. He had no doubt that the men whom the lads had seen belonged to the tribe he was on his

way to visit. His coming was almost certainly known to them, for news spreads through the hills almost as quickly as if it were flashed by telegraph. The fact that the ambuscade–such it clearly was–was so small seemed to show that the tribe as a whole was not in arms; but, as the Major well knew, many a frontier war had been precipitated by a few hot-heads, who had forced the hand of their community by some impetuous action. He foresaw trouble, but he was not the man to be diverted from his purpose by such a difficulty as this. Having set out to pacify the tribe, he meant to complete his journey; but obviously the news brought him was not to be disregarded.

He decided that he must see for himself the nature of the ambuscade, but it was necessary to act in such a way as to awaken no suspicion among the tribesmen, if, as was possible, there were watchers on the hillside. Ordering the sowars to continue their march slowly, the Major rode back with the Appletons and his native orderly until he reached the first mules of the caravan. In obedience to his command, one of the muleteers loosed the girths of the animal he led, and let the baggage it carried slip down a gentle slope at the roadside. This brought the caravan to a halt, and the wondering Astoris were instructed to go very leisurely about the work of recovering and restrapping the load. Then with Lawrence and the orderly he galloped back to the spot where the hill-track branched from the road, and turning into this, hastened on until he reached the rock whence the lad had made his observations. There taking a swift glance at the rest-house below, he came to a sudden resolution.

"If anything happens to me," he said to Lawrence, "ride back as fast as you can, and make the best of your way up the road with the caravan until you reach the nearest fort."

"But what are you going to do, sir?" asked Lawrence rather anxiously.

The Major did not reply, but spoke a few words in Urdu to the orderly. Then, leaving his horse with the two, he began to clamber down rapidly, yet with caution, in the direction of the rest-house. His course was tortuous, as much to avoid obstacles as to escape observation from the ruins, or by the man on the look-out close at hand. Every now and then he vanished from sight, and Lawrence watched nervously for his reappearance. He could not guess the Major's intentions, and it seemed to him that, foolhardy as his own exploit had been in riding down the hillside, the soldier's action in approaching alone the scene of the ambush was stark madness. When, after a long interval during which the Major had been lost to view, he suddenly emerged within a few yards of the rest-house, Lawrence caught his breath. Probably the situation was far more trying to him who watched than to the man who was apparently taking his life in his hand.

The Major was drawing near to the ruined building by a path somewhat

northward of the spot from which the hill-men had entered it. Lawrence saw at once that his approach was covered from them, and from the watcher on the south side, by what remained of the north wall of the building. Tingling with curiosity and apprehension mingled, he beheld the tall soldierly figure move swiftly towards the gap which had once been the doorway, enter, and disappear.

"Good heavens! what is he about?" he thought.

He looked round at the orderly, but the man's dusky face was devoid of any expression; only his eyes gleamed as they stared fixedly at the opening by which the Major had entered.

To Lawrence the minutes seemed to lengthen into hours. He saw the lookout, a moment or two after the Major's disappearance, turn round suddenly, and hasten into the building. For some time nothing happened. There was neither sight nor sound to indicate that the building was anything more than what it seemed–an unoccupied and deserted ruin. Lawrence became more and more nervous. Major Endicott was not the man to utter a warning lightly; he had clearly anticipated a possible danger; and the tension became distressing as the lad waited and waited, expecting every moment to hear a shot, or a cry of fierce anger or savage exultation.

"What is he doing?" he asked of the orderly.

The man simply murmured "Sahib!" deprecatingly, without turning his eyes from the rest-house.

The suspense was becoming unendurable when suddenly, after what was perhaps ten minutes, but seemed as many hours, the Major's tall form reappeared in the broken doorway. The orderly's impassivity gave way for the first time; he uttered a single grunt of satisfaction. Lawrence felt unutterably relieved, yet puzzled, for by the Major's side stood one of the hill-men, and as they came out into the open they were followed by all the rest; he counted them as they filed out; the number was fifteen in all.

The Major signalled with his hand, and the two watchers, guessing at his meaning, rode on a little way until they came to the spot where he had begun his descent. Dismounting, and leading the horses carefully, they picked their way, the orderly leading, down the steep and rugged hillside. When they came to the foot, and joined the party, the Major turned to the man who had come first out of the ruins with him, and with a slight smile addressed him in a strange tongue. The man drew himself up, clicked his heels together, and saluted Lawrence in military style, murmuring:

"Salaam, sahib."

Then the whole party mounted their horses, and made their way at a walk-

ing pace up the road towards the caravan.

CHAPTER THE SECOND
BEYOND THE PALE

Of all the strange scenes which the Appletons had witnessed since their arrival in India, none was more surprising than the immediate sequel of the ambuscade. The hill-men rode in high good-temper behind their intended victims; and when they met the sowars, their leader exchanged laughing greetings with the dafadar, and the two parties became one. For the rest of that day they marched together, and at fall of night they formed a common encampment, the troopers acting as hosts towards the hill-men, and exerting themselves to entertain them.

To the Appletons it was all very mysterious. Lawrence had put a question or two to Major Endicott as they marched; but finding him strangely uncommunicative, deferred further enquiry to the hour after supper, when he was most often in the mood to talk. Even then the young fellows' curiosity was rather piqued than satisfied.

"That man Nagdu, the leader of the hill-men, was a sergeant of yours, you say, sir?" said Lawrence.

"Yes, years ago he was a dafadar in my troop."

"But he was laying an ambush for you!"

"He is paid by the government to guard the road."

"Oh!"

"Didn't know it was you, perhaps, until he saw you," suggested Bob.

"He *was* rather surprised to see me," said the Major, and a slow smile gathered upon his face, and passed.

"My heart was in my mouth when I saw you go alone into the rest-house," said Lawrence. "And I couldn't get a word out of your man."

"Pretty close, isn't he?" said the Major. "But look here, my lads, I called you a couple of young fools a while ago. I take that back, for without you I shouldn't have had the opportunity of enjoying the surprise of Nagdu and his crew. All the same, you *were* fools, you know," he added reflectively.

While this conversation was proceeding beneath the extended flap of the tent, another, of quite a different tenor, was going on at the nearest camp fire, fifty yards away. There Ganda Singh the dafadar and his old comrade Nagdu

were seated, gazing into the glow, with their rifles across their knees.

"Hai! Ennicott Sahib is truly a very great man," said Nagdu. "We were there in the little house, with our guns on the wall, looking up the road, when there came a soft voice behind us. 'Twas like cold water trickling down my back, O Ganda. And when I turned and saw the huzur's two eyes like little bits of blue steel, I felt my soul shrivel up inside me: that is true, old friend. 'You are keeping good watch upon the road, Nagdu,' said he, and I shivered, and my voice was like a woman's when I said my salaam."

"Keeping watch upon the road!" repeated the dafadar with a sly look at the other. "Do you know, Nagdu, if any harm had come to the sahib-ji I would have put a bullet there, and there."

He touched the man's neck and breast.

"Hai! what harm could come to the huzur?" said Nagdu protestingly. "He is heaven-born, and knows. 'Keeping good watch upon the road,' he said, and when I stammered out my 'Salaam, sahib,' he went on: 'It is well. There are rascals about. I go to hold a talk with your people on that very matter, and 'tis good luck I met you, for you can take me to your village.' And I said the huzur's face was like the sun shining upon the hills, for by that time my soul was come to me again, and after a little talk we came out. Hai! Truly is Ennicott Sahib a very great man."

"Ay, he knows the heart of you hill-men. You have a little heart, Nagdu; the huzur's is a very great one. His word is a sword."

"And his eyes are like fires that burn. Is there anything he does not know? He did not see us go into the little house: we were quiet as mice in the corn; yet he knew we were there—-"

"Keeping watch on the road," said Ganda Singh with a low chuckle. "You are indeed a mouse, Nagdu; would you measure yourself against a lion?"

Nagdu protested that he had no such thought, and then turned the conversation into an easier channel.

Next day on the march Lawrence Appleton found an opportunity of having a little private talk with Ganda Singh, who knew just enough English to make himself understood. Lawrence asked point-blank whether the hill-men had been lying in wait for the party, intending to fire upon them from their ambush. The dafadar neither denied nor affirmed, but contented himself with retailing the substance of what Nagdu had told him. Putting two and two together, the Appletons arrived at a very fair estimate of what had actually taken place. They realised that the hill-men, who would have shot down the Major without ruth if they had been unseen behind a wall, had been completely cowed when he appeared alone in their midst. Nagdu was a bold fellow, and had proved his mettle in many a border fray; but the habit of discipline and the impression made upon

him by the Englishman's dominant personality had acted like a cold douche upon his purpose. It was the victory of a stronger nature over a weaker; and the lads formed a new idea of the Major's personal influence, and the unerring instinct with which he had probed the character of the natives.

That day the caravan came to the parting of the ways. Major Endicott's road struck off westward among the hills; the Appletons had still several days' northward march before them. The lads, if they had consulted their own tastes, would very willingly have gone with the Major; but they knew it was out of the question. They thanked him warmly for allowing them to accompany him so far.

"That's all right," said he. "Look me up if you ever come south. By the way, I've told off three sowars to see you to the frontier: there I dare say your uncle will meet you."

"But you can't spare them, sir," said Bob. "You've few enough all told."

"We aren't a fighting force, my boy. If it comes to a scrap we shan't stand the ghost of a chance, and the fewer there are of us the better. Keep to the track. My salaams to your uncle. Good-bye!"

The Appletons watched the Major and his party until the sowars who brought up the rear were out of sight: then they turned their faces once more to the north, feeling somewhat depressed. Their own portion of the caravan consisted of only five or six mules, whose loads were for the most part goods for their uncle. For two days they climbed higher into the rugged mountains that encompassed them on every side. In the day-time it was hot, though the heights were crowned with snow: but the nights were bitterly cold; icy blasts swept through the gorges, causing the lads to desert even their camp fires for the snugger blankets. They could not help wondering, with a certain misgiving, what the winter in these heights was like, if such wintry conditions could exist in the summer.

On the morning of the third day after leaving Major Endicott they were met at the British frontier by two stalwart and well-mounted Sikhs, who had been sent by their uncle to conduct them over the remaining stages of their journey; and the Major's three sowars returned to overtake their master. That night they had only just got into camp when they experienced for the first time the full rigours of a mountain storm. Dense clouds rolled down from the heights, enveloping them in a drenching icy mist. A cutting wind sprang up, and soon a hurricane of sleet and snow burst upon them, with lightning and thunder, and other rumblings which, as they learnt from their guides, were caused by avalanches and landslips among the mountains. All next day they were storm-bound, remaining rolled up in their blankets in the tent, and feeling more low-spirited than ever. On the following morning, however, the sun rose in a cloudless sky, and they set off again through a narrow pass dangerous at any time, but doubly dangerous now that the track

was almost obliterated by snow-drifts. They felt a pang of commiseration for the scantily clad coolies who trudged along barefoot in snow and slush by their mules; but the men were cheerful, laughing and singing as they marched, and the Appletons envied their hardiness and vigour.

Leaving the Pamirs on their right, they threaded their way through the mountains towards what had once been the Russo-Afghan frontier. Slowly, steadily they marched on for three days, the track leading gradually downwards. Then one morning, soon after they had left camp, they saw in the far distance two horsemen riding slowly towards them.

"The huzur, sahib!" said one of the guides.

The lads lifted their glasses, and were then able to discern that the one of the two riders who wore a grey suit and a solah helmet was their uncle himself. They hastened on in front of their party, and in a quarter of an hour uncle and nephews met.

"How do?" cried Harry Appleton, gripping them in turn by the hand. "You've grown since I saw you last: I should hardly have known you."

"You look the same as ever," said Bob.

"Wait till you see me with my hat off. Hair doesn't grow on brains, they say. But I'm glad to see you, boys: you are looking uncommonly fit too. Have you had a pleasant journey?"

"Pretty good, bar a snowstorm. Major Endicott came with us best part of the way. He's gone to interview a troublesome tribe. He sent his salaams to you, Uncle."

"Much obliged to him. He thinks I'm mad, you know. Don't look it, do I?"

The boys laughed. Their uncle was a sturdy man, rather under middle height, hard and muscular, his brown face half covered with a thick moustache and beard turning slightly grey. His blue eyes were bright and piercing, with an expression of alertness and humour. He certainly did not look mad.

"Your caravan is rather smaller than I expected to see," he went on, as the mules came straggling up.

"Their loads are mostly your stuff," said Lawrence. "We've only brought a couple of bags apiece."

"Very sensible of you. I was afraid you might bring out a lot of rubbish, and wished I'd sent you a caution. But I needn't have worried, evidently."

"Well, there are one or two things coming after us," said Bob, with a shade of misgiving. "We sent them ahead by slow steamer, and as they hadn't arrived when we reached Bombay, we thought we'd better come on."

"Humph!" their uncle grunted. "It'll be a month before my next consignment comes up, so it's to be hoped you're not in a hurry for your stuff. I suppose there's not much of it. What is it?"

"There's my cricket-bag, and a couple of tennis rackets, and a set of golfing sticks," said Lawrence.

"You didn't happen to bring turf too, I suppose?" said their uncle with twinkling eyes. "The ground hereabout is all bunkers. Anything else useful?"

"There's my aeroplane," said Bob.

"Your what?"

"A monoplane. I was going into the flying corps, you know, if–

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mr. Appleton. "It must have been very disappointing, my boy, but you must cheer up. But an aeroplane!"

"It's very light and portable–perhaps a couple of mule loads at the most."

"I wasn't thinking of the mules," replied his uncle dryly. "An aeroplane in these hills will be just about as useful as a Dreadnought in a millpond. You didn't realise that the Hindu Kush is not exactly like the South Downs. Well, it can't be helped now. Anything else?"

"Nothing of any importance," said Bob, feeling a little dashed. He had looked forward to many hours of flying in his spare time, and it was rather dispiriting to find that the expense of shipping his aeroplane was to be wasted.

"Well, we'll get on," said Mr. Appleton. "With good luck we shall reach the mine before dark. You won't be sorry, I expect, to spend the night under a roof again."

They rode on, the track running generally to the north-north-west. About an hour after they started, their uncle pointed to a narrow cleft in the hills on their left hand.

"You see that path?" he said. "It runs into Afghan country. About six months after I started operations the mine was raided by a horde of ruffians who came that way."

"I say!" cried Bob. "What happened?"

"Luckily I had been put on my guard against an attack from that quarter by one of my Pathan miners. I had twelve hours' grace, and when the raiders arrived they found they'd got a tougher nut to crack than they expected. They only made one serious rush. We beat 'em off, and they moved some distance up the valley, sniped us for a day or two, and then cleared out. We've had no trouble of that sort since, though they've played highwaymen once or twice with my caravans, and in one case got a certain amount of loot. Among other things they collared a boiler that I was bringing up at huge expense from India. I don't suppose they knew what it was, but for the sake of the metal they tried to carry it through the difficult pass into their own valley. But it proved too cumbersome, as you might expect, and they had to leave it. I found it some time afterwards when shooting in the pass, at the bottom of a deep nullah, where it had rolled from the track above. It took me nearly a fortnight to recover it and bring it home, but I was

glad to get it at the price."

"Things aren't all beer and skittles, then," said Bob.

"Oh, there's a little excitement sometimes, but we are well placed, as you will see, and I fancy nothing short of a regular train of artillery could do us much damage."

What the boys heard from Mr. Appleton during that march whetted their curiosity to get their first view of his mine, but they were disappointed, for twilight fell while they were still some distance from it. In the gathering dusk they saw a number of distant lights, which their uncle explained were the camp fires of the miners. The red glow, growing larger as they proceeded, lent a romantic touch to the night. The fires were somewhat below them; and, viewed from the high ground from which they were approaching, the settlement appeared to be situated in a huge cleft between two steep mountain barriers. They could just see, swirling along the bottom, a torrential stream, which their uncle told them was unusually high just now, being swollen in summer by the melted snow from the mountains. It was, he said, a tributary to one of the headwaters of the Oxus.

They had just arrived at the outskirts of the settlement when the silence of the evening was suddenly broken by a great hubbub, and they saw a number of dark figures hurrying towards one of the camp fires. In a moment the open space was filled with a shouting swaying crowd; but before the boys had time to realise what was happening, or even to ask a question, their uncle urged his tired horse towards the scene, and dashing into the midst of the crowd, scattered the men to right and left. When the boys galloped up behind him, they found him sternly questioning one or two of the men in their own tongue. They returned sullen answers, whereupon he addressed them in tones of rebuke, concluding with a sharp word of command at which they turned away towards a number of huts ranged in rows beyond the camp fires.

"What is it all about, Uncle?" asked Lawrence.

"We'll see in the morning. It's too late now. Slip off your horses; I'll call a fellow to take charge of them."

A man came up in answer to his call, and led the horses towards the stables beyond the huts. Then Mr. Appleton gave a loud hail, and led his nephews to the left.

"Look after your feet," he said, taking a small electric lamp from his pocket.

They now saw that they were at the edge of the ravine. Below them they heard the gurgle and rush of the river. A few steps cut in the side of the chasm led down to a narrow platform, and upon this the three stood waiting. Mr. Appleton's call was answered from the opposite side, and immediately afterwards the boys heard a creaking sound, as though a machine of some sort were being wound up. Then a dark mass appeared to detach itself from the wall of rock

across the gap, and descend towards them.

"My drawbridge," said their uncle.

It sank slowly and with much groaning and squeaking until the nearer end rested on the edge of the platform where they stood. They stepped upon it, followed by the Sikhs who had acted as their guides, and in a few strides came to the other side.

"Welcome to the Appleton mine," said Mr. Appleton. "And now for supper. Our menu isn't elaborate, but if you're as sharp set as I am you won't be dainty. Come along!"

CHAPTER THE THIRD
MR. APPLETON'S MINE

Mr. Appleton led the way across a sort of yard, littered with mining debris, towards a building in the upper part of which lights were burning. To the left sheds and a chimney stack loomed up in the darkness, scarcely distinguishable against the background of rock. They passed through a gate, and found themselves in a less cumbered enclosure, at the farther corner of which stood the illuminated building. This proved to be a compact square edifice, the lower storey of stone, the upper of wood. The door stood open, and in the entrance appeared a grave turbaned servant, who salaamed as the boys went in.

"Chunda Beg, my khansaman," said Mr. Appleton. "Come upstairs and see your room. We haven't over much space, but we've done our best to make you comfortable."

The boys followed their uncle to the upper floor, which was one large apartment divided into three by matchboard partitions carried up to within a foot or two of the ceiling. In the first room, the dining-room, they saw a table laid for supper. Passing through this they entered Mr. Appleton's bedroom, a small chamber furnished only with a narrow camp bed, a chair, a towel-horse, a tin basin on a stand, a chest of drawers, and a zinc bath; a Persian rug lay on the floor at one side of the bed. Beyond the further partition, which had evidently been newly erected, was the boys' bedroom, about the same size as their uncle's, similarly furnished, but with two camp beds separated by the width of a Persian rug.

"No luxuries, you see," said Mr. Appleton, "but I think you'll find it cosy. I

believe there's a looking-glass somewhere on the premises if you want to shave. That's a thing I haven't done for many years; Chunda Beg gives me a trimming every now and then when I'm getting too shaggy. As a follower of the Prophet, he wouldn't cut his own beard for a pension. He'll send you up some hot water and soap, and when you've had a wash, come in to supper."

The menu was not so scanty as Mr. Appleton had led the boys to believe. There was a roast joint that tasted three parts mutton and one part venison–the flesh of an ibex shot by Mr. Appleton himself. The vegetables were mushrooms, onions and lotus beans; the sweets a rice pudding and stewed peaches; and the beverage a kind of elderberry wine diluted with hot water.

"You've got a good cook, Uncle," said Lawrence, when the khansaman had brought coffee. "We haven't had so good a meal since we left Rawal Pindi."

"Well, Shan Tai does his best. He's a Chinaman, of course. We grow our own vegetables in a patch of ground down the valley. In fact, we do most things ourselves. The gas is acetylene, made on the spot. Most of the furniture in your room is home-made, as I dare say you noticed. We're what you may call self-contained."

"What rooms have you got below?" asked Bob.

"We use the ground floor only for stores. In the dark you didn't see, I suppose, that the walls are loopholed. The stone's very thick, and in that little trouble I told you about we found them a capital fortification. The kitchen is outside; the servants have their own out-houses. The cook is Chinese, as I said; the khansaman is a Pathan; there are one or two other fellows whose nationality is an unknown quantity. Chunda Beg is a treasure, as grave as a judge, and as resourceful as a Jack-tar. You'll take most interest, I expect, in my storekeeper, Ditta Lal, a Bengali–what's commonly called a Babu. I wager you haven't spoken to him for more than two minutes before he tells you he is a B.A. of Calcutta University, and he'll tell you the same thing ten times a day until he chokes."

"Why should he choke?" asked Lawrence.

"Because he's getting so disgustingly fat. I really mustn't raise his screw–he calls it emoluments–any more. When he first came to me he was thin and weedy like many of his kind; but he made himself extremely useful, and I've increased his pay rather often. You'd be surprised at the result if you could compare him as he is with what he was. Upon my word, with every rise he swells visibly. I shouldn't like to say what his waist measurement is now. I told him the other day that I really couldn't raise him any more, for fear it proved fatal, and he smiled in my face and said, 'Ah, sahib, God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' which you won't beat for a piece of delightful inconsequence."

Talking thus, Mr. Appleton interested and amused the boys for an hour or two until it was time to turn in. The night was cold; but snuggled under thick

blankets they slept like tops, and did not waken until the khansaman entered with water for their morning tub.

At breakfast Mr. Appleton announced that his first business for the day was the holding of a durbar to enquire into the scuffle of the night before.

"My discipline is as easy as possible," he said; "there are few rules, but I see that they are obeyed. The men represent some of the most unruly tribes of the frontier, but they know I mean what I say, and on the whole I've had very little trouble with them. Of course they get good pay; that's the first condition of good work and contentment."

"The second is good holidays," said Lawrence with a smile.

"Ah, you've just left school!" said his uncle. "But the men haven't anything to complain of on that score. They get holidays all the winter. We stop work for four or five months. What with snowstorms and the river frozen hard we could scarcely exist here in the winter months, so the men go off to their homes and no doubt play the heavy swell among their people, and I betake myself to Bokhara, or pay a round of visits among my Chinese friends, or go on a hunting trip, returning in the spring. But there's the bugle; come and see me in my part of unpaid magistrate. Then I'll take you over the place."

On leaving the house, the boys saw a number of men filing through the gate between two ranks of tall bearded Sikhs armed with rifles. Those who came first were of the Mongolian type, with broad, flat, yellowish faces, wide noses and narrow eyes. What little clothing they wore was ragged and stained a deep indigo blue. These men, numbering about eighty, formed a group on the left-hand side. After them entered more than a score of swarthy black-haired fellows of more symmetrical shape and more powerful physique, their features more sharply cut, some of them having almost a Jewish cast of countenance. Their garments were marked with streaks and stains of yellowish-green. Mr. Appleton explained that they were for the most part Pathans from the Afghan border; but they included also several Punjabis, a couple of Baluchis, three or four Chitralis, and a sprinkling of men of Hunza and Nagar. They formed up on the right-hand side.

At the door of an outhouse on the same side stood a very fat man whom the boys easily recognized as the Bengali storekeeper. His podgy olive cheeks were almost concealed by a bushy growth of black hair, and the loose white garment he wore, encircled with a sash of brilliant red, emphasised the vast unwieldiness of his bulk.

When all were assembled, the gate was shut, and Mr. Appleton, standing before his door, called for Gur Buksh. One of the armed Sikhs stepped forward, a tall, finely-proportioned, grey-bearded man, who, as the boys afterwards learnt, had been a havildar in a native Border regiment of the British army, and had seen

considerable service on the frontier. He stood at attention, saluted, and gravely awaited the sahib's questions. The young Appletons looked on with curiosity, wishing that they could understand the conversation that ensued. Lawrence made up his mind to devote his spare time to a study of the native languages.

After Gur Buksh had made his report, Mr. Appleton called up two other men, one from each of the groups. The first was a young Kalmuck, whose yellow face would have been absolutely expressionless but for a keen look in his restless eyes. The other was a big hook-nosed Pathan, with strong, determined features and fierce low brows from beneath which his coal-black eyes flashed with truculence. The Kalmuck, answering to the name of Nurla Bai, gave brief and almost sullen answers to his master's questions; Muhammad Din, the Pathan, on the contrary, spoke at length, fiercely and volubly, with much play of features and hands. Having heard them both, Mr. Appleton made a measured speech in fine magisterial manner, and then dismissed them. At the close of his speech the boys noticed that the two culprits threw swift glances at them, the Kalmuck's eyes narrowing, and giving no clue to his thoughts, while the Pathan's indicated keen interest and searching enquiry. The whole company marched out of the gate, and the silence which they had hitherto preserved gave way to excited talk as they went off to their work.

"So much for that," said Mr. Appleton. "It appears that, taking advantage of my absence, the Kalmuck fellow, Nurla Bai, got into the Pathan section of the mine works, against my express orders. Muhammad Din stood up for law, rather zealously, and it would have come to a free fight if Gur Buksh hadn't stepped in. At night, when they knock off work, both parties cross the drawbridge to their huts on the other side, and the quarrel was just breaking out again when we had the good luck to come up. Nurla was clearly in the wrong, and I fined him a week's pay."

"He took it well," said Bob. "The fellow's face was like a mask."

"He was not so much unmoved as you think," said Mr. Appleton. "I know the fellow pretty well, and I could tell by the look of him that he was perfectly furious. I find my system answers very well. I punish all breaches of the regulations with fines, which are pooled and distributed every month among the men who haven't offended. Most of the men are quite keen to get these additions to their pay; in fact, I've known some of the rascals try to egg on a simple-minded mate to commit some slight misdemeanour, so that he'll lose his pay for their benefit. They're queer fish.... Good-morning, Ditta Lal."

The Bengali, who had been hovering about, gradually drawing nearer to his master, and casting sheep's eyes at the two young strangers, now waddled up, his face one broad smile.

"Good-morning, sir: good-morning, young gents," he said in a breathless

wheeze. "'Full many a glorious morning have I seen, flatter the mountain tops with sovran eye,'–pat quotation from sweet Swan of Avon, whose sonnets I got up, with notes, for final exam, for B.A. degree, Calcutta University. Lovely morning, sir."

Mr. Appleton's eyes twinkled as he introduced his nephews, who were looking at the Babu as at some strange specimen.

"You'll find several mule loads of stuff we ordered on the other side, Ditta Lal," said Mr. Appleton.

"They shall be attended to instanter, sir. And I shall esteem it signal honour on fitting occasion to act as guide, philosopher and friend to young gents, show them my stores; in fact, do them proud, and all that."

He bowed, puffed, and waddled away. The boys laughed when his back was turned.

"What a treasure!" said Lawrence. "Our old school porter at Rugton was pretty big about, but this fellow would make two of him. What a rag the chaps would have if we could transport him!"

"I can't spare him. He's an abiding joy. But come, let me take you round."

The next hour was spent in going over the not very extensive settlement. The boys found that the portion on the west side of the gorge was divided into three. The first contained Mr. Appleton's dwelling-house, the engine-house and stores, and a set of small stamps, together with sheds for assaying, and a number of huts occupied by the personal native servants and the Sikh garrison. The dwelling-house was built in an angle of the cliff, which rose sheer behind it. Between house and cliff, however, was a space of about three yards filled with heavy beams, which were all loopholed. The whole of the enclosure in which the house stood was surrounded by a bank of earth about six feet high, formed of "tailings" from the mine. This bank was broken only in two places, one for the gate leading into the second enclosure or compound, the second for the drawbridge connecting with the east side of the gorge.

The second compound was somewhat smaller than the first. Here were to be seen barrows, trucks, and other implements; a line of rails led into a cave-like opening in the hillside, which, Mr. Appleton explained, was the entrance to a vein or lode sloping upwards into the heart of the mountain.

"It was lucky I hadn't to sink shafts," he said, "considering the difficulty of bringing mining appliances to this remote region."

"What led you to pitch here?" asked Bob.

"Well, you may call it accident, or you may put it down to my being possessed of a roving eye. I was hunting hereabout some years ago, and caught sight of what seemed to be an outcrop of copper ore. I poked about rather carefully, and collected a number of samples of this and other ores, which I had tested by

a capital fellow in Peshawar. His assays confirmed my suspicions, and I thought I couldn't do better than try my luck."

"Who does the place belong to?" asked Lawrence. "Do you pay rent?"

Mr. Appleton smiled.

"I'm afraid I'm a squatter," he said, "not unlike the ancestors of some people I could name nearer home. The natives, I believe, used to pay tribute to the Amir, and also to the Chinese emperor–a little gold dust (where they got it I don't know)–a dog or two, and a basket of apricots: some trivial thing like that; and as the people are nomads, their suzerains, I dare say, thought they were lucky to get anything. Then the Russians came along, and among other unconsidered trifles snapped up this little no-man's land. They had a small military post a couple of marches across the hills to the north. This was raided by the Afghans when they got news of the Russian smash-up in Mongolia. The Mongols turned out the Afghans; then the post was destroyed by another Afghan raid; and since then nobody has troubled about it. It would puzzle even an international jurist in a Scotch university to decide who is the rightful sovereign of this tract of hill country; and meanwhile I'm on the spot, and I'll stay here and get on with my work until I'm turned out.

"This gallery here is worked by the Kalmucks: you saw some of them at the stamping presses as you came up. The slope makes it easy to dig the ore out, and also drains what little water there is: there's only a trickle, as you see. Come into the next compound."

He unlocked the door in the stout fence, and led the boys into a third enclosure, like the second, and having another line of rails leading into a gallery.

"This is the Pathan section," said Mr. Appleton. "There are not quite half as many Pathans as Kalmucks."

"I suppose you keep them apart for fear of ructions," said Bob.

"Partly," said Mr. Appleton, smiling a little as he added: "But there's another reason; I'll tell you that later. We are not treating the ore from this gallery at present. Look here."

He led them to the further fence, in which there was a gap, and bade them look down. They saw a heap of greenish rock lying in a deep saucer-shaped hollow between the yard and the river below. A line of rails ran from the mouth of the gallery to the gap, and while the three men stood there a couple of Pathans emerged from the hill, pushing a laden truck before them. On arriving at the fence they tilted up the truck, and the contents fell crashing upon the heap beneath.

"Now we'll go over the bridge and have a look at the miners' quarters on the other side," said Mr. Appleton. "I have to inspect them frequently: I'm magistrate, sanitary inspector, a regular Jack of all trades."

"Why did those two miners look at us so curiously when you were jawing them?" said Lawrence.

"I had just told them who you were, my nephews and the new superintendents. You've got to earn your living, you know. Bob will be responsible for the Pathans, and you for the Kalmucks. Of course you've a lot to learn."

"They looked as if they didn't much like their new bosses," said Bob.

"I daresay; but you'll be a comfort to me. I'm not troubled with nerves, but at times, I confess, I have felt what the old ladies call lonesome for want of a white man to talk to. The Babu is all very well, but now and again he worries me. When I'm tired and bothered he'll expound a knotty passage of Browning or some other incomprehensible poet; and when I should enjoy a little stimulating conversation, he 'havers,' as the Scotch say, in a mixture of high falutin' and outrageous slang. Now that you are here I've no doubt he'll be nothing but the joy I find him in my cheerful moods. I'm very glad of your company, boys."

CHAPTER THE FOURTH
THE AEROPLANE ARRIVES

During the next three weeks the younger Appletons were fully occupied in studying the working of the mine. Dressed in calico overalls they penetrated into the torch-lit galleries and watched the miners at their work. They saw the process of crushing the ore, but Mr. Appleton's operations went little further, for owing to his distance from civilisation and the limited space at his disposal, he left the final stages of purification to be performed in India. The boys were rather curious to know why the colours of the stains upon the clothing of the two bands of miners differed, but they forbore to question their uncle, guessing that he would tell them all in good time, and would meanwhile be pleased by their showing patience. In this they were right. Mr. Appleton had no wish to keep any secrets from them; he was only waiting until he had learnt something of the characters of the two young fellows, whom he had not seen for several years, and at no time had had many opportunities of studying.

They both soon showed their bents. In the evenings, when work was done, there was little to occupy them. Mr. Appleton's books were few; they were mainly books on mining and grammars and dictionaries of the local dialects. Robert seized on the former; Lawrence devoted himself to the latter; and their

uncle was very well pleased, for each of these studies would prove useful. Their recreations were for the present confined to an occasional game of chess or cards, a still rarer shooting expedition in the hills, and the reading of the rather dilapidated magazines which had come at odd times from India and home. Lawrence missed his cricket, and Bob his golf; but in spite of what Mr. Appleton had said about the impossibility of using the aeroplane when it should arrive, they both looked forward privately to trying their wings by and by.

Lawrence soon became popular with the natives. He had a turn for languages, and managed to pick up quickly a little Turki and scraps of the other tongues spoken by the very mixed crowd that constituted the mining staff. Robert had not the same quickness in learning languages, but he made himself useful on the engineering side. He had been accustomed to spend part of his holidays in the engine shops of the father of one of his schoolfellows, and found his experience valuable. Once, for instance, when there was a breakdown of the somewhat crazy engine that worked the stamping presses, he was able to make the necessary repairs more quickly than Mr. Appleton himself, or the regular engine man, could have done. Mr. Appleton was a very good prospector and an all-round man in general, but he had no particular gift in the direction of mechanics, while the engine man had picked up from his master all he knew. He was a Gurkha, a short, compact little fellow, of hard muscles and a very quick intelligence. His race is more accustomed to military service than to machinery, and Fazl, as this man was named, had never seen a steam engine before he came to the mine. Mr. Appleton had found him wandering half starved in Turkestan two seasons before, and out of sheer kindness of heart put him on as cleaner. Some time after, the Mohammedan Bengali who had hitherto driven the engine asked leave to go home and bury his grandmother, and Fazl was promoted to his place. The Bengali, of course, never returned, and Fazl was still engine man.

One evening after supper Mr. Appleton said–

"Don't get your books yet, boys; I want to show you something."

He placed a Bunsen burner on the table, and brought a blowpipe and a piece of charcoal from a cupboard. Then he took from his pocket a small lump of ore, which he laid on the charcoal with a little powdered carbonate of soda, and proceeded to treat in the Bunsen flame. The boys watched his experiment curiously. After a time they saw a bright bead form itself on the surface of the ore. Mr. Appleton laid down the blowpipe.

"What do you make of that?" he said.

"Is it tin?" asked Robert.

"Well, I have known school-boys call it 'tin' in the shape of sixpenny bits. It is silver. Now I'll let you into my secret. The ore obtained from the farther gallery, and dumped down into that very convenient cavity, contains almost pure silver;

there's method in my madness, you see. Nobody knows it but yourselves; though I can't say what some of the men may suspect. I don't attempt to work it for the simple reason that I don't want the news to get about. If it became generally known that I have struck silver, somebody might put in a claim to this neglected region, and I should either have to decamp or be in constant fear of attack. As it is, I think I am pretty secure; and when I have got a sufficient quantity of the ore I shall close down, dismiss the men, and carry the stuff to India."

"But isn't there silver also in the other gallery?" asked Bob.

"No. The two metals, so far as I can discover, lie in parallel vertical streaks, with a band of quartz between them, and the men who are working at the copper know nothing of the silver a few feet away. You see now the reason why I keep the Kalmucks and the Pathans apart. The Kalmucks work the copper; they belong more or less to the neighbourhood; but the Pathans come from far distant parts, and if they should discover that their ore is silver, they are not at all so likely as the Kalmucks to bring unwelcome visitors upon me. I confess I was a little uneasy when I heard the explanation of that scrimmage we happened upon as we rode down. I wondered whether Nurla Bai's presence in the Pathan section was due to some suspicion of the truth. But he has given no more trouble, and I hope that I was wrong."

"He's a sulky beggar," said Lawrence. "I can't get a word out of him, and I don't like those ugly eyes of his."

"I'm watching him," said Mr. Appleton. "He works well, and has a great influence with the other Kalmucks. He's certainly far and away more intelligent, and he has brought in a good many labourers. In fact, I had to put a stop to his recruiting. I wanted to keep the Kalmucks pretty equal in number to the Pathans, but, as you see, they already outnumber them by more than two to one. One great nuisance is their possession of firearms. I tried to induce them to hand them over when I engaged them, but in these regions the hillmen are as tenacious of their guns as our sailors are of their knives. Without my police Pathans and Kalmucks would be at each other's throats."

A few days after this conversation, the caravan which the boys had for some time been expecting arrived. It was larger than that which had accompanied them, and Mr. Appleton threw up his hands with a dismay that was not wholly feigned when he saw how many additional mules had been required for the transport of the aeroplane.

"You said two or three," he remarked to Bob as the laden beasts defiled along the path; "but I'm sure there are seven or eight more than my stuff needed."

"I expect it's the petrol," said Bob humbly.

"You didn't mention petrol."

"No; but of course we couldn't work the engine without it, and I left word

to send up a good quantity. I didn't suppose you had any on the spot."

"And wasn't there a single sensible creature to tell you that you can't go skylarking with an aeroplane in the Hindu Kush? Whoever sold you the petrol must have laughed in his sleeve."

"He seemed uncommon glad to sell it, anyway," said Bob, a trifle nettled.

"Of course he was. There are no end of sharks always on the watch for a griffin. He sold the petrol, and he sold you. And the expense of it! D'you know how much it costs to bring a mule from India here?"

"You can dock it out of my screw," growled Bob.

"And money absolutely flung away. You have seen for yourself that there's no level space hereabout for running off. And even supposing you could use the thing, it would be madness to do so. You'd be bound to come to grief; all flying men do sooner or later, and at the best you might find yourself landed thirty or forty miles away, with nothing but peaks and precipices between you and home. There are no repairing shops to fall back upon; no garages 'open day and night,' or anything of that sort. In short—-"

"Don't rub it in, Uncle," said Lawrence. "The thing's here now, and we've got to make the best of it. Come on, Bob; let's go and look after the unloading; those fellows are sure to smash something."

The mules were led across the drawbridge to the west side of the gorge, and the separate parts of the machine were stacked near the dwelling house until a new shed could be constructed.

"What on earth we're to do with the petrol I don't know," said Mr. Appleton. "We daren't have it within reach of the native workmen. They're as careless as they are inquisitive, and we don't want a flare up."

"Isn't there room for the cans in the dynamite shed?" asked Lawrence.

The explosive was kept in a specially devised cache. The space between the house and the cliff was boarded in. A doorway led from the house into this space, which was divided by a partition, in which another door opened into a kind of strong room excavated in the hill side. There was room for the cans beside the boxes of dynamite.

"I shan't sleep at night now that we've got two explosives at our doors," said Mr. Appleton.

"Why didn't you store the stuff farther from the house?" asked Bob.

"Well, as a matter of fact wherever it was stored in the neighbourhood of the mine the result would be pretty much the same if it exploded. The best chance of safety was to have it under lock and key where nobody could get at it but myself. In for a penny, in for a pound. Trundle your cans through: if I'm not a false prophet they'll stay there until doomsday untouched."

When the boys entered the dark chamber between the house and the cliff,

following Mr. Appleton, who carried an electric lamp, Bob uttered a sudden exclamation.

"I say, hanged if there isn't a machine gun!"

He pointed to a corner of the room, where the muzzle of the gun protruded from a nest of boxes.

"A very neat little machine," said Mr. Appleton. "I got it as a precaution against a second raid, and the difficulty of smuggling it through turned my surviving hairs grey. It came in parts among some engine fittings; the invoices are very interesting! A clear case of gun running, of course; but there was no other way; the government would never have allowed it to pass complete. Nobody here knows of it but you; I put it together myself; and if you know anything about such things, Bob, I'll be glad if you'll overhaul it one of these days, and see if my amateurish efforts have been successful. Some of those boxes contain ammunition: smuggled in as dynamite. Now stack your cans, and when you've finished bring me the key. I'll have duplicates cut for you."

Later in the day the boys had a consultation.

"It's no good putting the aeroplane together until we've found a starting-place," said Lawrence.

"I know. I've looked all about, and can't find one. It's pretty rotten, and the old man is so ratty about it that I almost wish we'd never brought the thing."

"Oh, he'll come round. I bet you what you like that he'll be as keen as mustard if we can only get the thing going. We'll go out exploring; we're sure to hit on some place by and by."

They spent the spare time of two or three days in ranging up and down stream in search of a suitable starting-place. Every morning at breakfast Mr. Appleton dropped some quizzing remark that sorely tried Bob's temper. "How's the white elephant?" he would say; or "When is the ascent to take place?" Meanwhile the dismembered aeroplane lay under tarpaulin at the side of the house, and the Babu irritated Bob by kind enquiries.

"Will tender plant suffer, sir?" he asked one morning, when a sprinkling of snow lay upon the ground.

"What do you mean?" said Bob.

"Packages were marked 'fragile with care,' sir, and having been myself once fragile, delicate infant, sir, I have fellow feeling, that makes me wondrous kind."

"Well, be kind enough to shut up," said Bob.

At length, after much searching, they discovered a spot which, so far as space was concerned, promised the solution of their difficulty. About a hundred yards up stream, at a somewhat higher level than the ledge upon which the mine buildings were situated, there was a similar ledge of about the same extent and on the same side of the gorge. But it was very difficult of access. It could not

be approached from the mine, owing to the sheer wall of cliff that separated the two ledges. Nor could it be gained by bridging the river, for not only was the stream at this point much broader than lower down, but there was no rock in mid-channel that would serve as support. After a good deal of cogitation, Bob hit upon a plan which he determined to attempt.

On the way up, their caravan had crossed a stream by means of a bridge constructed on the cantilever principle, as is common in that country. It occurred to Bob that there was a possibility of constructing a walk along the face of the cliff on the same principle.

"It will be a series of bridges made of overlapping planks," he said to Lawrence when explaining his idea. "There's plenty of timber in the shed."

"Which Uncle won't allow to be used."

"I'll talk him over."

"But I don't see how you're going to manage it. There are no supports."

"They are easily managed. All we've got to do to is drive beams into the rock, say twenty feet apart."

"Exactly; but how are you going to make holes in the rock? There's nothing to stand on, and we can't rig up scaffolding from the bottom of the river."

"I think we can do it all the same. What we have to do is to go to the extreme edge of the ledge of the silver mine, bore a couple of holes in the rock level with our heads, and drive in poles strong enough to support a swinging platform. You've seen house painters use them on house fronts at home. We can extend that with some planks, and so reach a position where similar holes can be bored a little farther away, and so on until we reach the farther ledge. A couple of stout miners on the platform can easily bore the holes, level with it, that we require for the larger beams, and when they are placed it will be a comparatively simple matter to lay planks upon them, and carry our cantilever walk the whole way. We can use the upper poles too: connect them by a rope, which we can cling to as we push the parts of the machine along on trolleys."

"It will take a very long time," said Lawrence dubiously.

"Not so long as you think if we can only persuade the old man to let us have a couple of men to work at it continuously. I'll tackle him to-night after supper when he's comfortably settled with a cigar."

Mr. Appleton happened to be in a very amiable mood when Bob broached the subject, and though he uttered doleful warnings and foretold broken limbs, and declared that he washed his hands of all responsibility, he told the boys that they might do as they pleased. Next day they invited volunteers from among the Kalmuck miners, and were somewhat surprised when Nurla Bai was the first to offer his services, explaining that he was an expert in carpentry. Taking this as a sign of grace, Bob engaged the man, and told him to choose his own assistant.

Nurla at once suggested a dwarfish man named Tchigin, a thick-set, muscular fellow with a huge head covered with jet-black hair. Mr. Appleton called him Black Jack. They began work, and Bob was well pleased with their industry and skill. Before night there was a row of half-a-dozen of the smaller poles in position, and all was ready for the drilling of the larger hole for the first of the stout beams that were to support the wooden path.

On the subsequent days, with the number of workers increased to six, the work was carried on even more rapidly. The greatest difficulty encountered was a bend in the cliff a few yards before it opened out on to the ledge on which the aeroplane was to be put together. It cost a good deal of labour to shape the planks to the curve, and to fix the beams; and the boys regarded it as a further disadvantage that the ledge would be out of sight from the mine. Not that they could suppose that the aeroplane, when set up in its hangar there, would be in any danger of molestation, for the only approach was from the Pathan compound, and Mr. Appleton thought that the Pathans might be trusted. But they would have preferred that their flying machine should always be in sight. However, there came a time when they were very thankful for the projecting corner of the cliff which had given them so much extra toil.

Their proceedings naturally caused a good deal of curiosity and excitement among the miners and the domestic staff. No one was more deeply interested than Ditta Lal, who numbered among his many accomplishments a smattering of theoretical engineering picked up in the course of his studies at Calcutta University. He talked very learnedly of strains and stresses, and often laid before the boys scraps of paper on which he had worked out magnificent calculations and drawn elaborate diagrams for their guidance. This amused them at first, but it became rather exasperating as the work progressed. He had a formula for everything; taught them exactly, to the fraction of an inch, how far the timbers should project from the ends of those supporting them, and what strain each portion of the structure could bear. As the successive bridges were completed, he proved, as he supposed, the accuracy of his calculations by venturing his own portly person upon them, at first with some timidity, but with more and more confidence as time went on. Mr. Appleton, on the other hand, watched the work from the security of the compound until it passed from sight round the shoulder of the cliff.

"You're a heap braver than I am," he said once to Ditta Lal. "I wouldn't trust myself on the thing for a pension, and you're heavier by three or four stone."

"Ah, sir, conscience makes cowards of us all," replied the Babu; "by which I understand immortal bard to mean, ignorance makes you funky. With my knowledge of science, imbibed from fostering breast of Alma Mater, Calcutta University–of which, as you are aware, I have honour to be B.A.–I know to a

T exact weight planks will support, all worked out by stunning formulæ, sir. Knowledge is power, sir."

"Well, if you quote proverbs at me, I'll give you one: 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'"

"A thousand pardons, sir, and with due respect, you have made a bloomer: misquotation, sir. Divine bard wrote: 'A little *learning* is a dangerous thing;' and I understand him to mean, if even a *little* learning in a man is dangerous to critic who tries to bowl him out, how much more dangerous is a fat lot!"

Mr. Appleton found it necessary at this point to break away, and Ditta Lal's further exposition was lost.

One evening, when the work of the bridge makers was nearing completion, the accepted explanation of Pope's line was brought home to the Babu by a rather unpleasant experience. He had walked along the finished portion of the pathway, which consisted of two lines of stout and broad planks supported by the cantilevers, these resting on the thick beams firmly embedded in the rock. The workmen on their swinging platform, Nurla Bai and Black Jack, had just laid the planks forming one bridge section across the gap, and were about to knock off work for the day. Ditta Lal was so eager to prove the soundness of his calculations, and demonstrate the valuable share he believed himself to have had in this engineering feat, that he took it into his head to walk across the planks to the other side. He had sufficient caution to hold on to the rope which had been carried along the smaller poles just above the level of his head.

"Hi, Ditta Lal! Come back!" shouted Bob from behind him. "The planks aren't nailed down yet."

The Babu halted and looked round with an air of pained astonishment.

"Sir," he said, "it is as safe as eggs. Planks are held firm by my own avoirdupois. I have worked it out."

Still holding the rope with one hand, with the other he drew from his pocket a sheet of paper on which he had made his last calculation.

"The weight which these planks will tolerate," he continued, "is eleven hundred and eighty-six pounds fifteen point eight ounces gross. My weight is two hundred and forty-four pounds and a fraction nett, by which I mean my own corpus without togs. Q.E.D. Suppose I jump, even then energy I develop is innocuous. I demonstrate the quod."

He replaced the paper in his pocket, took the rope in both hands, and lifting his feet, to the boys' horror came down ponderously on the planks. The result was alarming. One of the planks was jerked off the beams on which it rested, and fell with a splash into the swirling river below. The other turned up on its edge; Ditta Lal sought to keep his footing, but his feet slid off, the plank fell, and he was left hanging on the rope alone, which sagged deeply under the tremendous

strain.

The boys shivered as they saw the portly man dangling over the river. They expected every moment that the rope would break and plunge him into the depths, carrying with him the workmen on their platform below. It seemed impossible to give him any aid, for a gap of sixteen feet, now unbridged, separated them from him. But luckily there was lying near them a plank intended for use farther on. They caught it up, and pushed it within reach of the workmen, who hastily threw it across the gap in such a way that the Babu could just reach it with his knees.

The description of his appearance which the boys afterwards gave made their uncle laugh heartily.

"His face was positively green," said Lawrence, "and his eyes were rolling like the eyes of a giant in one of those moving magic lantern slides. He was yelling at the top of his voice–invoking strange gods by the sound of it. When he felt the plank beneath his knees he began to shuffle along sideways, but away from us instead of towards us; he was in such an awful state of funk that he didn't know which way he was going. When he got to the beam he threw his legs across it and sat there shaking, with the rope under his arms. We couldn't get him to budge even when we had laid another plank across, so that the way back was perfectly safe. He looked just like a 'varsity stroke pumped out at the end of a race–bar the complexion, of course. We tried to persuade him to get up and walk back, but he did nothing but shake his head and moan. He wouldn't speak for a bit; at last he said that he must wait till morning light. 'Buck up!' I said: 'make an effort!' but he only rolled his eyes and groaned and sighed. You can't do anything with a chump like that."

Ditta Lal indeed refused all entreaties, and kept his perch through the cold night. Lawrence sent him a bowl of soup, but he declined to unwreathe his arms from the rope. Only when, early next day, the planks had been firmly nailed to their supports did he allow himself to be wheeled in a trolley–for his limbs were numbed and useless–back to the mine. For the rest of the day he was not seen. For a week he avoided the boys, and made no more calculations except the elementary addition and subtraction of his store book-keeping.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH
THE LIGHT IN THE GALLERY

The cliff pathway being at last completed, the boys cleared the farther ledge of accidental obstructions, and so formed a fairly smooth surface about sixty yards in length by half as many in breadth. While the workmen were erecting a shed at one end of the space, the boys themselves carried over the parts of the aeroplane, and set about putting them together, with the assistance of Fazl the Gurkha. It was a monoplane of a recent type, with a length of thirty feet and a span of forty-three, the area of the main planes being about three hundred and fifty feet. The fabric-covered fuselage was of approximately stream-line form, deep enough forward to accommodate the pilot so that only his head protruded above the cockpit. This was arranged to seat two, the pilot in front, the passenger in his rear. The elevator was of fixed monoplane design, with rotating ailerons. The engine, a four-cylinder machine of 100 h.p., being of the water-cooled variety, a radiator was necessary: this was incorporated with the lower sloping front of the body. Bob had provided himself with a second carburetter, so that paraffin could be used if petrol ran short. The landing chassis was composed of oval section steel tubes, which ran together at two apexes. At each of these, on a universal bearing, was a laminated spring split into two arms at the rear, with a rubber-tyred wheel between them. The forepart of the spring was attached by an elastic rubber shackle to the top of the chassis, and a similar attachment connected the single wheel with the rear-part of the machine. The material employed in the construction of the machine was mainly wood, which was more easily repairable than steel. Its total weight was about 1000 lbs. and its maximum speed seventy miles an hour in still air.

It was a great day at the mine when the young airmen essayed their first flight. Mr. Appleton had looked forward to it with a nervousness he did his best to conceal. He had ceased to joke about the matter, and wore a grave and thoughtful look during the week in which the boys made their final preparations. Their enthusiastic discussion of details at meal-times and in the evening set his nerves on edge; but he was too wise to let his nephews see how they were distressing him, and they did not know until long afterwards how nearly he had come to an absolute prohibition from using their machine. Only as they left him, to try their wings, did he venture on a word of caution.

"I say, you fellows, you'll be careful, you know," he said.

"Of course, Uncle," said Bob. "I've got my certificate, remember."

"And Ditta Lal had his calculations!" he muttered.

"Well, they gave him a night out," said Lawrence, quite unconscious how his light answer jarred upon his uncle.

They walked along the path and disappeared from sight. It was an hour before they were seen again. Then from round the shoulder of the cliff there suddenly came into view a thing resembling a monstrous grasshopper in flight,

and through the air sounded a low grinding hum. The servants rushed into the compound; the miners at work in the open uttered a shrill cry, which brought their comrades in a flock from the galleries; and they stood at gaze as the strange machine wheeled into the gorge, and flew, skimming the river, until it was lost to sight.

"Marvellous achievement, sir," said Ditta Lal at Mr. Appleton's elbow.

Mr. Appleton did not answer: there was a look of anxiety upon his face.

"I perceive, sir," said the Babu, "that your countenance is sicklied o'er with pale cast of apprehension. Nothing is here for tears; in short, there is nothing to be afraid of; I have worked it out. Engine makes 1500 revolutions per minute: propeller geared down to 750: ascensional velocity, by my calculations—-"

"Your calculations be hanged!" cried Mr. Appleton, whose wonted urbanity gave way under the strain of Ditta Lal's loquacity. "Get out!"

Ditta Lal looked hurt, but tried to smile. It was an hour before the aeroplane reappeared, and another hour before the boys rejoined their uncle.

"We made a splendid flight," said Bob, who was in the highest spirits. "Everything worked perfectly. You must come for a trip yourself, Uncle."

"No, thank you. I am vastly relieved to see you back safe and sound. The Babu has begun calculating again, and got on my nerves."

"Calculating, is he?" said Lawrence. "I should have thought he had had enough of that. I wonder if we can cure him."

He called to Ditta Lal, who was standing at the door of his store-shed.

"What weight do you suppose the aeroplane will carry?" he asked.

"I do not suppose, sir," replied the Babu. "I have worked it out. Permit me to express jubilation at successful trip, sir. You ask about weight." He drew a paper from his pocket. "Here are correct figures. You can carry fifteen hundred and eighty-six pounds six ounces, with four decimals of no account."

"What do you scale, Bob?" asked Lawrence.

"Twelve stone two."

"I'm eleven stone eight: together we make about three hundred and thirty pounds. Ditta Lal, *there's just room for you*!"

For a moment the Babu looked puzzled. Then he said:

"It is human to err, sir. I must have made trifling error in my additions. I revise my calculations."

And he went away, evidently determined to discover either that the aeroplane would not support so great a load as he had calculated, or that his own weight considerably exceeded twelve hundred pounds.

A daily flight became part of the boys' programme. They did not tell their uncle of the difficulties they had to contend with, but these were real enough. To start from and alight on so narrow a platform as the ledge furnished was in

itself a severe test of airmanship; but the problems of actual flight were still more serious. The gorge was so narrow that it gave them little room for evolutions. There were only one or two spots, either up or down stream, at which they could turn with safety; and when the wind came in sudden gusts down the mountain side the act of turning, even in these comparatively open spaces, was attended with much danger. They could only avoid the peril by ascending to altitudes which as yet Bob was unwilling to attempt. But a few weeks' practice developed in them a kind of instinct for dodging the risks to which the circumscribed space rendered them liable; and though they had one or two lucky escapes they met with no real mishap.

All this time they got a good deal of quiet amusement out of their uncle's attitude. At first he affected to regard the aeroplane as a plaything, and a somewhat dangerous plaything, much as an elderly person watching a child playing with fireworks expects him sooner or later to burn his fingers. In the early days of their flying he was indeed genuinely nervous, and tried by means of hints and warnings to wean them from their sport. But as time passed, and none of his fears were realised, they perceived that he was becoming less uneasy and more and more interested. One day he actually accompanied them to the shed, which he had never yet visited, and watched them as they drew the aeroplane out on to the ledge, made a methodical inspection of the engine, and prepared for their flight.

"A neat piece of mechanism," he said. "Much stronger than it looks from a distance."

Lawrence surreptitiously winked at Bob.

"Yes, it's strong enough," said Bob, smiling as he continued his task of cleaning one of the cylinders.

"What load can you carry?" asked Mr. Appleton presently. "I don't trust the Babu's calculations."

"A thousand pounds or more," replied Lawrence, who was examining the gearing of the propeller.

"You've only two seats," Mr. Appleton went on, after an interval of silence. "Some machines will carry three, I suppose."

"Oh yes," answered Bob. "We could easily rig up a third seat. Pity you dislike the thing so much, Uncle."

Mr. Appleton did not reply. When the boys got into their places, he did not warn them to be careful, as his habit was, but bade them good-bye as unconcernedly as if they had been going for a short train journey.

"He's fishing for an invitation," said Lawrence to his brother as they rose into the air. "Bet you what you like we have him with us within a week."

But the period proved to be even shorter. Before leaving the aeroplane that

evening, they spent an hour or two in making a third seat. Two days later, when Mr. Appleton again crossed to their ledge to see them fly off, he noticed the addition.

"Who's your second passenger?" he asked.

"Gur Buksh said that he'd like to try a flight," replied Bob: "but knowing how much you disapprove of the machine, he hasn't ventured to ask your permission yet."

"Humph! I don't think I can allow that–at any rate, until I have tried it myself."

"You don't mean it, Uncle!"

"Well, having an hour to spare, I think perhaps–I've a very open mind, you know."

"Come *on*, sir!" cried Lawrence, slapping him on the back. "That's sporting, upon my word."

"Don't fly away with me," said Mr. Appleton, as he got into his place. "One hour: no more."

But when they were soaring northward down the river, and came to where the valley broadened out into the plains of Turkestan, Mr. Appleton forgot altogether about his time limit. The old adventurous spirit was still strong in him; after the first few minutes he was quite at his ease, and even when Bob "banked" the machine in wheeling round, or when a sudden gust swept through a rent in the mountain and made the aeroplane heel over slightly, he showed no nervousness. The flight lasted two hours, and as they walked back along the pathway, Mr. Appleton said–

"If the country were only flatter, I might be tempted to go in for flying myself. It's most exhilarating. But I'm afraid I'd never be much good at it. I fancy it ought to be learnt young, like golf."

After that both Mr. Appleton and Gur Buksh were occasional passengers with the boys. One day, as Lawrence was watching from the compound the flight of Bob accompanied by the Sikh, Ditta Lal came to his side.

"I am consumed with envy, sir," he said: "envy, eldest born of hell, as blind poet sings."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"Why, sir, that unlettered Sikh learns secrets of empyrean hidden from me, B.A. of Calcutta University."

"Well, we'll take you, any time you like."

"Alas, sir! I am, through no fault of my own, fat and scant of breath, and rapid transit through rarefied atmosphere would blow me out–I mean, put disastrous strain upon my panting lungs."

"D'you know, Babu, I think you're a funk."

"I repel charge with honest indignation, sir. I am bold as a lion, king of beasts–on terra firma, sir."

They had been using the aeroplane for about a fortnight when a convoy of provisions arrived. The leader of the caravan brought news which gave interesting material for discussion at the supper-table, and which was talked over with scarcely less eagerness among the natives. The man reported that he had had great difficulty in getting through. Apparently an embargo had been laid on all food stuffs. Armed and mounted men were flocking south-west from all parts of Mongolia, and the talk of the country was that another great movement against Russia was in preparation.

"They'll have a tougher job this time," said Mr. Appleton, in the quiet hour before bedtime. "It was easy enough to lop off one of the extremities of the empire, but they'll find things more difficult as they near the European border, if that's what they are aiming at. I don't know whether you know anything about history—-"

"I know Napoleon's campaigns, not much else," said Bob.

"Well, you can take it from me, then, that when the Mongols were at their strongest they couldn't keep a permanent footing in European Russia. But there's such a lot of them, all mounted, too, that there's just a chance they may sweep across the southern plains as their forefathers did. Russia is in a bad way; they know that, of course. This long war with Germany has broken her credit; she's seething with unrest and rebellion; Finland's in revolt at last, and I shouldn't wonder if the Poles make a move now: they wouldn't before, because they don't love the Germans. It'll be rather curious if the Mongols do cut a slice out of the bloated monster."

A night or two after this, when the caravan had departed, Bob awoke in the small hours, and feeling rather thirsty, got up for a drink. The day had been very hot, and before returning to bed he sat at the open window to inhale the fresh cool breeze that blew along the gorge. Everything was very still. All that he could hear was the gurgling of the stream, now swollen to its full extent by the melted snow from the mountains; and the occasional whinny of a horse from the sheds that served as stables on the other side.

He had sat thus for a few minutes drinking in the beauty of the night when his eye was caught by a faint glow in the distance. It seemed to be near the entrance of the Pathan gallery, his own section of the mine. The glow flickered; it was not strong enough to light up the surroundings.

"That's very curious," he thought, and was on the point of awaking Lawrence, when it occurred to him that he would look rather foolish if it proved to be nothing but a colony of glow-worms. He knew nothing of natural history, or he would not have suspected the possibility of finding glowworms in such a

spot. But he was sufficiently curious to feel that he must find out the cause of the light. He could not leave the house without passing through his uncle's room, and unwilling to disturb the household, he made up his mind to climb out of the window, which was at no great distance above the ground. The timbers of the upper part of the house were rough; and a practised climber would find no difficulty in descending by availing himself of their inequalities until he reached the stone part and could drop.

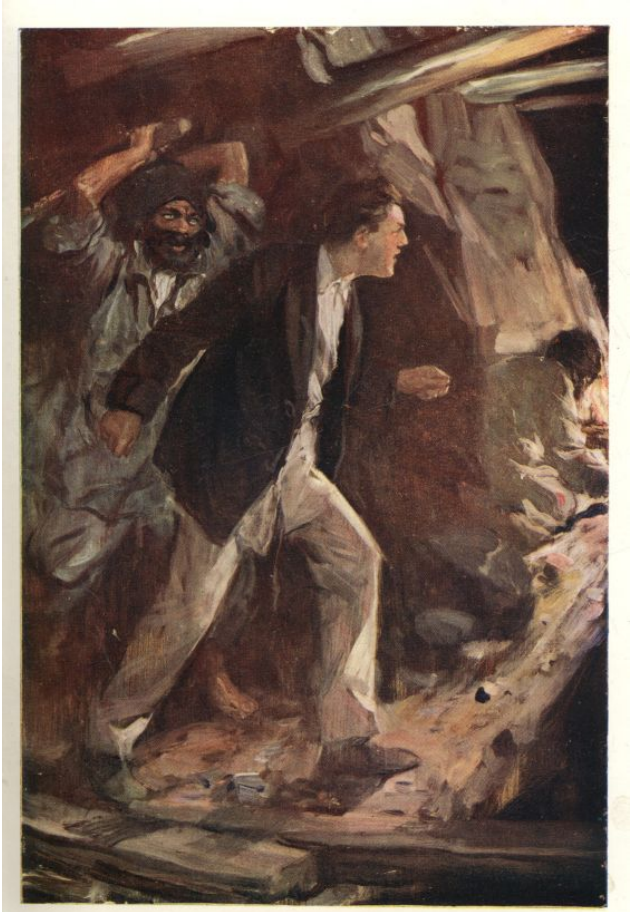
He pulled on his socks, thrust his arms into his smoking jacket, and clambered out. The sound he made in reaching the ground was so faint that it did not disturb the doorkeeper, slumbering Indian fashion on the threshold thirty feet away. Crossing the compound on tiptoe, he came to the fence, and regretted that he had not thought to bring his key of the gate: there was nothing for it but to scale the obstacle. This he did, and crossed the Kalmuck section in the same way, moving very quietly, for he did not wish to attract the attention of the sentry on duty at the drawbridge or to rouse the settlement.

From the time of his dropping from the window until he had crossed the second fence and stood in the Pathan section, the glow had been hidden from him. It now revealed itself as originating in the mine gallery. The glow was diffused through the opening, though the source of light was not visible. No one had any business there after the bugle had sounded the time for ceasing work. Thinking that perhaps the Pathan foreman, Muhammad Din, had forgotten to extinguish one of the torches that were employed for lighting the miners at their work, Bob was about to cross the ground and enter the gallery without precaution. But he was checked by the thought that the explanation might not be so simple. He threw a glance round the compound. All was dark and quiet. Then he stole across to the mouth of the gallery, and after a moment's pause entered it.

Some little distance from the entrance a torch was burning in its socket on the wall. Nobody was in sight. If there was indeed a trespasser in the mine, he was either behind one of the beams supporting the roof, or farther down the gallery. This was straight from the opening up to the torch, which was so placed as to light a further stretch that bent a little inwards. Bob went along carefully, looking behind every beam and into every recess, but without discovering an intruder.

Having come level with the torch, he stopped, and glancing round the curving wall, was surprised to see another light about twenty paces ahead. It was burning but dimly; the ventilating apparatus was not at work; but the illumination was sufficient to reveal the figure of a man bending to the floor, engaged apparently in gathering small fragments of rock. Bob could not identify the man, whose back was towards him. Whatever his object was, there was something suspicious in his having chosen the dead of night for carrying it out; and Bob at

once made up his mind to steal upon the man, seize him, and haul him before Mr. Appleton. He crept forward; there were only about a dozen paces between the two. But while he was in the very act of making his leap, he was conscious of a rush of feet behind him. Next moment he was struck by a heavy object, and fell on his face to the floor of the gallery. His head hit the hard rock; there was one instant of intense pain, and then his senses forsook him.



THE ATTACK IN THE GALLERY

THE ATTACK IN THE GALLERY

CHAPTER THE SIXTH
NURLA BAI DISAPPEARS

Bob never knew how long he lay unconscious on the floor of the gallery. When he came to himself he was in darkness: only the smoky atmosphere remained to bear witness to the reality of the torches. He rose dizzily to his feet, feeling sick and giddy as the result both of his blow and of the close air, and groped his way slowly to the entrance. There the cool breeze somewhat revived him; but he found it difficult to make his way past the obstacles which had given him no trouble before. To scale the fences cost much labour, and he was near fainting by the time he reached the house. Having no key with him, he had to waken the darwan who lay wrapped in rugs on his mat before the door. The man was much surprised to see him, but said nothing as he gave him admittance. Bob crept upstairs quietly; his uncle's door was open, and he managed to cross the room without waking him. Then he dropped on to his bed and nudged his brother.

"You're a juggins," said Lawrence rather unfeelingly, when he had heard the story. "That's the sort of thing they do in the school stories, when the bold bad bully climbs down the gutterpipe and sneaks off to the pub to play cards and swill swipes. But I say, you're not hurt, old man?"

"The whack on the head rather crumpled me up," replied Bob.

Lawrence was out of bed in a trice, lit his candle, and bent over his brother.

"There's a bump as big as a duck's egg," he said. "Jolly lucky your head's hard, old chap! Turn over, and I'll bathe it."

In getting the water-can he stumbled over his boots, making a slight noise.

"It's time you fellows were asleep, came a muffled voice through the door. Mr. Appleton had awoke, and fancied that the boys had not yet settled down for the night.

"Shall we tell him?" said Lawrence.

"I meant to wait till morning, but as he's awake–yes, I think we had better."

Lawrence opened his uncle's door.

"I say, Uncle," he said, "Bob fancied he heard burglars and went prowling without a knuckle-duster—-"

"Go to bed," growled Mr. Appleton, only half awake.

"It'll keep till morning, but I think you had better hear it now. I'll tell you through the doorway while I bathe Bob's head."

"What's wrong with his head?"

When Lawrence explained how Bob had seen a glow from the window, in the Pathan section of the mine, Mr. Appleton sat up, now thoroughly awakened.

He listened to the rest of the story in silence. At its conclusion he said:

"Just cut downstairs and tell that fellow at the door to hold his tongue about it. Why on earth didn't you wake me at once, Bob, instead of playing that schoolboy trick?"

"I didn't want to disturb you."

"That's all very well, though you wouldn't have hurt an old campaigner like me. You ought to have told me at once, and then we might have caught the rascal. I'm afraid there's trouble ahead, and I've a shrewd suspicion who's at the bottom of it. You didn't recognize the man in the gallery?"

"No; his back was towards me."

"What's it mean, Uncle?" asked Lawrence, returning.

"It means that some one–Nurla Bai, I fancy–suspects that I've found silver, or at any rate something better than copper. You remember how he'd been trespassing on the night you came. But how did he get across? You saw all the men off the premises at bugle call, Bob?"

"Yes."

"Then he's either in league with the sentry, or caught him napping, though I don't understand how Gur Buksh and his men could have slept through the groaning and creaking of the drawbridge."

"Perhaps it wasn't Nurla at all, but some one on this side," suggested Lawrence.

"I don't believe it for a moment. The Sikhs are perfectly trustworthy; the servants too; and the Babu, though as inquisitive as a monkey, is quite honest and knows nothing about ores–though I daresay he wouldn't own it. Look here! we must say nothing whatever about this matter. To refer to it publicly would only stir up unrest among the workmen, and might lead to disturbances between the Pathans and the Kalmucks. Each set would accuse the other. We must keep quiet for a day or two, and watch. You had better not show up to-morrow, Bob. To see you with your head bandaged would set every one talking."

"I shall be all right in the morning," said Bob.

"I hope so. By the way, you were struck from behind, you say?"

"Yes: there are evidently two men in it."

"So much the better. There'll be two quaking in their shoes, and we may be able to spot signs of guilt in their manner. Keep your eye on Nurla and Black Jack, who follows him like a shadow. You made the darwan understand he's not to talk, Lawrence?"

"He won't say a word, I'm sure."

"Then get to bed. I see you've bandaged Bob's head in a workmanlike way. Where did you learn that?"

"Ambulance work in the school cadet corps, Uncle."

"Ah! They manage things better than when I was young. Good-night, boys."

Bob found himself much better in the morning, and declined his uncle's suggestion that he should remain in bed. But his wound was too painful to allow of his wearing a hat, and his appearance bareheaded, and with a strip of sticking plaster on his neck just behind his ear, caused many curious eyes to be turned towards him. Only the Babu made any reference to it. Inquisitiveness was his failing, and he could never keep his tongue still.

"I perceive, sir," he said, "that you are not in your usual salubrity. Your countenance is pale, and I opine from patch upon your neck that all is not O.K. Pardon me, have you abraded the cuticle?"

Bob looked at him.

"Because, sir," the Babu continued with great deference, "I have in my store sticky plaster, powdered alum, gold-beater's skin, sweet olive oil, cold cream scented with roses, all things warranted to make epidermis blooming and good as new. Item and in addition, perhaps a little cooling draught may reduce inflammability and—-"

"Oh, shut up!" said Bob, and the Babu went away smiling but sorrowful.

The three Englishmen went about their usual occupations as if nothing had occurred. They watched the workmen narrowly for signs of guilt, but could detect nothing. The Pathans were frankly curious and sympathetic; the faces of the Kalmucks were as expressionless as they always appear to Europeans. Nurla Bai, who was the special object of Mr. Appleton's attention, was inscrutable: there was no change in his demeanour.

Convinced that his assailant had in some way crossed the river in the darkness of the previous night, Bob was at a loss to guess how he had accomplished the feat. In the interval at mid-day, when the men had trooped across the drawbridge for their meal, he suggested to Lawrence that they should walk along the pathway to the ledge on which they kept the aeroplane, and see if there were some fordable place which had escaped their uncle's notice. On the way they examined every foot of the cliff below them. It rose sheer from the bed of the river, so steep and smooth as to afford no foothold for man or beast. Even if the river had been swum or forded, it would have been impossible for any one to climb up to the level platform on which the mine works were situated. Nor could the most hardy and adventurous stranger have approached from above, for the slope was too steep to give foothold to a mountain sheep. In the other direction, down-stream, access was equally impossible, and for a time both the boys felt thoroughly baffled.

At length, however, Lawrence made a discovery. In retracing his steps towards the plank pathway he climbed out upon a huge buttress of rock that

projected some feet into the river.

"Take care!" cried Bob, feeling some alarm at the risk his brother was running.

"All right, old man," returned Lawrence. "It's rather a fine view down the gorge from here. You'd better try it yourself when your head's mended."

He picked his way carefully over the somewhat uneven rock, and had gone three parts of the way round its circumference when he suddenly stood fixed, staring at something in front and a little below him.

"By George!" he ejaculated in an undertone. Then he lay flat on the summit of the rock, wriggled forward to the edge, until his head projected, and peered downwards.

"What is it?" asked Bob from his position several yards in the rear.

Lawrence did not answer until he had crawled backward and once more stood erect.

"I've solved the puzzle," he said. "The fellows have got courage at any rate, and must be as agile as monkeys. There's a rope hanging down from the last beam,–down the cliff into the water."

"A rope!"

"Yes, one of our stoutest, cleverly stained so that it's hardly distinguishable from the rock itself. I caught sight of something swaying, and it took me a few seconds to be sure what it was. Whoever it was that knocked you on the head–Tchigin very likely–he must have climbed the rope, twisted himself up on to the planks, and so got to the mine. It's a trick I shouldn't care to attempt."

"But how on earth did he get to the rope from the other side? He couldn't have forded, and the strongest swimmer couldn't get across with the torrent rushing down at something like eight miles an hour."

"That wants thinking out. Meanwhile we'd better get back. If we were seen here we might put somebody on the alert."

"Yes. I tell you what: we'll cross the bridge and stroll up the other side; perhaps we may get a clue there."

They walked back without hurry along the planks, spent some little time in their respective sections of the mine, and then, taking their shot guns, crossed the bridge and walked up the narrow road as they had done many times before when shooting.

"I've been trying to work it out," said Bob as they went. "If I wanted to make for a particular spot on the other side, I should plunge in a good way higher up–you know, where the stream widens and isn't quite so swift. Then I should strike diagonally across and trust the current to carry me where I wanted to go."

"It would sweep you past. You couldn't be sure of hitting the rope."

"I don't know. We'll see when we get opposite it."

They sauntered on side by side, giving no signs of the carefulness with which they were examining the base of the cliff on the farther side. The bank beneath the road on which they were walking was not precipitous like the opposite cliff. Here and there the rocks shelved down to the water's edge, but there was no continuous perpendicular barrier.

Their course brought them presently opposite the buttress by which hung the rope. They did not pause, but as they strolled on Bob said–

"You see that in the angle formed by that buttress and the cliff there's a sort of backwater: not exactly a backwater, of course, but the force of the current is much diminished there. If a swimmer got to that point, he could make headway against the stream."

"That's just where the rope hangs. Did you see it?"

"No; I only took a passing glimpse. We'll turn in a few minutes and take a better look going back."

They went on. Lawrence shot a ptarmigan which would give colour to the ostensible object of their walk. Then they turned and retraced their steps. As they passed the buttress Bob looked carefully for the rope, and could just discern it by its slight motion against the background of rock.

"You might pass a dozen times and never notice it," he said.

Facing in the same direction as the current they were now able to take a more comprehensive view of the gorge.

"Where would you make your plunge if you wanted to swim across?" asked Bob.

Lawrence looked along the bank.

"There!" he said after a little, indicating a rock a few feet below and beyond them, that jutted out into the river.

"Well, let's go and take a look from there."

They left the track, climbed on to the rock, and sat down there with their knees up, flinging pebbles aimlessly into the water.

"I think you're right," said Bob. "Allowing for the strength of the current it's just about here that I should take the plunge. The oblique distance between this and the rope would make the diagonal–parallelogram of forces, you know."

"I don't suppose Nurla knows anything about that," said Lawrence with a smile. "But look here: don't these bushes look as if they'd been disturbed recently?"

He nodded his head towards some scrubby bushes at their right hand.

"You'd think so, certainly," said Bob. "Still, we may be wrong. I remember old Colonel Fanshawe warning us against the danger of seeing what we wanted to see."

After sitting a few minutes longer, keeping up the appearance of aimless-

ness by careless tossing of pebbles into the water, they rose and resumed their walk. But just at this moment Lawrence caught sight of a dark object among the bushes that grew sparsely on the hillside above the track, twenty yards away. At the distance, partially concealed by the foliage, the nature of the object was not apparent; but Lawrence clambered up by means of the bushes, and discovered a long coil of thin strong cord, lying between two inflated water-skins. He left them where they were, and returned to the track.

"It's clear as daylight," said Bob, when he had heard his report. "The fellow fastened the cord to the rock and held on to it when he took the water. He supported himself on the skins, and when he got to the other side, attached cord and skins to the dangling rope. When he came back, he hauled himself hand over hand against the stream, and pulled in the cord after him. That cord will, metaphorically speaking, hang the fellow, but he's clever enough to have deserved a better fate."

They returned slowly to the compound, well pleased with the result of their investigations.

A few minutes after they had gone, a small figure rose from among the bushes within a few yards of the spot where the cord was placed. Clambering up the hillside, and screening himself as much as possible behind clumps of vegetation, and by the natural inequalities of the ground, the little man made his way rapidly in the same direction as the Englishmen, and descended unseen among the huts of the Kalmuck miners. His narrow little eyes were gleaming with excitement. The men were just returning to work. The Pathans had already crossed the drawbridge; the Kalmucks were crossing. Black Jack pushed his way into the throng, apparently in a great hurry. He overtook Nurla Bai at the entrance to the mine gallery, and together they disappeared.

The boys lost no time in communicating their discoveries to Mr. Appleton.

"This is getting warm," he said. "We can do nothing yet. Act as though nothing had happened: to-night we'll talk things over. You're sure none of the men suspect you?"

"There's no sign of it," said Lawrence. "They saw us go, and come back with a bird: a very ordinary thing, that. I flatter myself that a Scotland Yard detective wouldn't have guessed from our manner that there was any other object in our walk."

The day passed like every other day. At sundown the bugle's note drew the men from their work. They returned to their several quarters, and after their evening meal settled down to their games of chance or skill.

After supper, when pipes were lit, Mr. Appleton returned to the subject.

"I haven't a doubt that Nurla is the man," he said. "You remember his industry when you were building your bridges. The scoundrel's motive is clear.

The question is, what is he after? It can't be mere inquisitiveness. He suspects that the Pathans are mining something more valuable than copper, and if he can prove it, he'll sell his knowledge, I suspect, and we shall have trouble. I only hope that your appearance last night disturbed him before he had had time to get any samples."

"If it didn't?" said Bob.

"He'll probably try again. The fact that he hasn't absconded seems to show that he isn't satisfied. If he had got enough for his purpose he would have been over the hills before this. We must keep a strict watch, and if we catch him making any further attempt of the same kind it's the sack at once."

"Wouldn't it be best to sack him now?" Lawrence suggested.

"I'm rather loth to act without definite proof. We should make an enemy of the fellow needlessly, and he has such influence with the Kalmucks that he might call them all out."

"Would that matter? The silver's the thing," said Lawrence.

"Not at all. If I went on mining without them it would be a clear proof that I could afford to leave their gallery unworked, and there'd be trouble all the same. There'll probably be trouble anyhow, but I'd rather keep the Kalmucks working quietly as long as possible. Meantime we'll take precautions. I'll put a Sikh in the Pathan section to keep guard through the night, and withdraw him before dawn, so that nobody is any the wiser."

Early next morning, a few minutes after the bugle had sounded réveille, the Englishmen were disturbed in their dressing by the sound of a great uproar from across the river. They flung on their coats and hurried out. The drawbridge had not been lowered; half an hour would elapse before the bugle called the men to work. But at the farther end the Pathan miners had assembled, and were gesticulating in much excitement, shouting lustily for the huzur. Mr. Appleton ordered the drawbridge to be let down, and hastened across to meet the men.

For some time he found it impossible to gather anything definite from their frenzied clamour. Then, singling out one man as a spokesman, and bidding the rest be silent, he heard a startling story. Muhammad Din, the Pathan foreman, had been discovered in his hut with a knife in his throat. Mr. Appleton had a great liking for the man–a rough uncouth fellow, but an excellent workman and very popular with the men of his race. He at once gave orders that Muhammad should be carried across the bridge to the house, and announced that he would hold an inquiry after breakfast.

In knocking about the world he had picked up a knowledge of rough and ready surgery and medicine, and had more than once treated sick men. A short examination showed that the wound in the unconscious Pathan's throat was serious, though not necessarily mortal, and he set to work at once to cleanse it with

antiseptic lotion and to bind it up. While he was still in the midst of this task, more surprising news was brought from the other side.

Quarrels between the Pathans and the Kalmucks had been so frequent in the early days of the settlement that Mr. Appleton had had to devise a plan for minimizing the risk of such outbreaks. The quarters of the two parties were separated by a neutral zone nearly a hundred yards in breadth, which they were strictly forbidden to cross. They used it in common only when going to and from their work, and then at different times, the Pathans leaving first and returning last. If a Pathan wished to go down the river, he had to climb the hillside and come down to the track beyond the Kalmuck camp. If a Kalmuck wished to go up the river, he had to make a similar circuit. The stables were placed in the neutral zone.

When the attack on Muhammad was discovered, and the Pathans rushed to the drawbridge, the Kalmucks were aroused by the din, and flocked to the fence marking the boundary line. But they were unaware of what had happened until their turn came to cross the bridge and they heard the story from the Sikh on duty. A few minutes afterwards, however, it was discovered that neither Nurla Bai nor his dwarf henchman was among their party. No sooner was this reported than the head stableman rushed excitedly across the bridge, to announce that the ponies on which the two boys had ridden to the mine had disappeared. These successive discoveries threw the whole community into a state of seething agitation. Instead of going to their work, the men gathered in groups, discussing the strange thing that had happened to their foreman. Already the Pathans were shouting accusations of Nurla Bai across their fence, and Gur Buksh with his armed squad stood ready to intervene if the wild passions of the miners led from recrimination to blows.

Mr. Appleton did not allow these events to interrupt his ministrations to the injured Pathan. When Muhammad, with his wound well dressed, had recovered consciousness, and was laid in one of the outhouses belonging to the domestic staff, Mr. Appleton and the boys returned to their rooms to finish dressing and breakfast.

"It's all as plain as a pikestaff now," said the elder man. "Nurla has got all he wanted; he must have guessed that he was suspected, and very wisely decamped. And he paid off his old grudge against Muhammad before he left. He's got your ponies too. That's what they call robbery with violence, I think."

"What shall you do, Uncle?" asked Lawrence.

"Go after him, of course. I couldn't otherwise hold the Pathans for an hour. They know I'm just, and as good as my word. If I tell them that Nurla shall be caught and punished they'll believe me and remain as quiet as Gur Buksh can keep them. Otherwise they'd desert in a body and hunt the hills themselves."

"Nurla's got a good start: it won't be easy to catch him," said Lawrence.
"You forget Bob's aeroplane, my boy," said Mr. Appleton.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH
NURLA AT BAY

If Mr. Appleton had wished to atone for the coldness of his former attitude to airmanship, he could scarcely have shown more eagerness to make use of the aeroplane in hunting down the fugitive malefactor. He was blind to the difficulties. To guard against a disappointment, Bob ventured to point out the disadvantages under which the pursuit would be conducted–the few landing-places and fewer starting-places which the rugged country offered; the ease with which the men, even if discovered, might conceal themselves in some woody ravine or some inaccessible cleft in the mountain side: the likelihood of their escaping notice altogether. There was every chance indeed that they would be espied, if at all, upon some tract of country where to make a descent would be impossible; and before the pursuers could reach a suitable spot, there would be plenty of time for the men to alter their direction and elude the most careful search. The one point in favour of the pursuit was that Nurla was accompanied by Black Jack: it would not be so easy for two as for one to escape notice.

Mr. Appleton ignored all Bob's well-meant hints of failure, and was only anxious to be off. He summoned the Pathans and explained to them what he was about to do, warning them against misbehaviour in his absence. He gave instructions to Gur Buksh to maintain strict discipline, and flattered the Kalmucks into good temper by assuring them of his belief in their loyalty. Then, having arranged that a small party of Pathans should ride northwards down the track, he hurried after the boys, who had already gone to prepare the aeroplane for flight.

He had no doubt that Nurla had fled northward, in the direction of his own people. For at least forty miles the fugitives would be obliged to keep pretty closely to the valley, for, as far as Mr. Appleton and any of his people knew, there was no practicable way over the hills for horses. After that the country began to open out: the river broadened and was fordable in several places, and the fugitives would have the choice of several routes, either to the right or the left. It was therefore necessary to overtake them and hold them up while they were

still in this forty-mile stretch of rugged river valley. Mr. Appleton's idea was to fly ahead of them as soon as they had been sighted, land at the first convenient spot, and hold them in check until the mounted party had had time to come up. It was impossible to tell how many hours' start the men had had; but even if they had left the settlement soon after dark their progress along the rough and dangerous track must have been slow, and it seemed hardly likely that they could reach the open country before the swift-flying aeroplane overtook them.

The boys rapidly overhauled the engine and tested the steering and controlling gear. Bob felt a trifle anxious when he noticed how rapidly the clouds were racing before the wind, which blew from the west. Flying in the valley, the aeroplane would be protected from the full lateral force of the wind by the high mountain barrier on each side. But there was considerable danger of encountering gusts and eddies sweeping through clefts and gorges here and there, and it was impossible to calculate at what precise angle the aeroplane might be struck by a sudden blast. However, the conditions were no worse than they had already been in some of his practice trips, and he only felt a little additional nervousness because Mr. Appleton had never yet accompanied him except in absolutely calm weather.

Just as they were preparing to start it occurred to Mr. Appleton that some unforeseen contingency might prolong their absence from the mine.

"Run back," he said to Lawrence, "and tell some of the men to bring over enough food for a couple of days and two or three skins of water, in case we don't get a chance to draw some from the river. You had better tell the Pathans, too, to take food in their saddle-bags. It's just as well to be prepared for emergencies."

All arrangements having been made, they took their places. Chunda Beg and the Babu were among the men who had walked to the ledge to witness and assist in the start.

"I wish good luck and safe return," said the Babu impressively. "As for that villain of deepest dye, I approve of strongest measures. There is varied choice of punishments–pistol, rope, et cetera: the best, in my humble opinion, is to let him dangle from rope until death comes as merciless release."

"If you don't skip, Babu," said Bob, "you'll be caught by our wings, and either be carried up to the heavens or dashed over the edge into the river."

Ditta Lal instantly picked up his skirts and fled, not halting until he reached a safe distance. There he watched the ascent of the aeroplane until it disappeared round a bend in the gorge. Then he returned to the compound, following Chunda Beg, to whose back he discoursed on the velocity of the wind, the native iniquity of the Kalmuck race, and the various tortures to which Nurla Bai might conscientiously be put when he was captured.

Bob steered the machine along the middle of the valley, keeping low in

order to avoid the wind. On either side rose the lofty mountain barrier, here overhanging the river, there receding; at some spots an almost perpendicular wall, at others broken into peaks and parapets, with deep hollows in which a scanty vegetation struggled for existence on a thin soil. Now the valley narrowed so that there seemed barely space for the aeroplane to pass: now it widened into a series of rocky terraces, seamed by fissures in every direction. The track on the right bank followed the winding course of the river for many miles, then dipped to a ford and reappeared on the left. Some miles farther on it recrossed the river by a crazy bridge of rope, and continued along the right bank past the foothills and out into an extensive plateau.

Bob as usual acted as pilot. By flying pretty close upon the river he not only avoided danger from gusts, but enabled his companions to keep a sharp observation upon the ground. Here and there, where this wound behind the rocks between the bank and the hillside, he left the river, planed a little higher, and steered a course exactly over the track. The recent invention of planes which could be lengthened or shortened at will rendered it possible to travel at more varied speed than had formerly been the case, and when he was several miles from the mine he reduced speed to the minimum. Even then, however, the aeroplane moved so swiftly that there was some danger of the watchers passing their quarry without perceiving them. This was not likely where the track was closely hemmed in between river and hillside. The risk was greatest where the latter receded from the course of the stream, leaving large areas of rough country, sometimes covered with bush, in which the fugitives could without much difficulty hide out of sight of any one not passing immediately above them.

The ford at which the track crossed the river was about twenty miles from the mine. Coming to that point without having seen the fugitives, Bob followed the track along the left bank. Here the open spaces became more frequent, and it would have been impossible to examine the ground thoroughly without circling. For the present Bob hesitated to do this, feeling that it was more important to keep to the track for so long a distance as the fugitives might have covered had they started at the earliest likely moment, twelve hours before. Another twelve miles brought him to the rope bridge, where he again crossed the river, and so continued until, ten miles farther, the foothills were reached, and the country began to open out.

It was obvious to all three occupants of the aeroplane that the only means of thoroughly searching the comparatively open country at which they had now arrived was to rise to a greater height and sail about in widening circles. Bob therefore adjusted his elevator; and as the machine swept round, the other two peered over on opposite sides, using their glasses to scan the ground beneath. The fugitives being presumably mounted on the stolen ponies could hardly be

otherwise than conspicuous; and when, after more than half an hour's careful observation, nothing had been seen of them, the pursuers came to the conclusion that the men could not yet have quitted the valley. This was a very reasonable inference, considering that they had covered in less than an hour a distance of nearly fifty miles, which the fugitives, even on horseback, must take many hours to traverse. The natural conclusion was that the horsemen, warned by the whirring of the propeller, if not by the actual sight of the aeroplane, had taken shelter in one of the more rugged or more thickly wooded places until the pursuers had passed. There was nothing for it but to turn back and hunt up the valley again.

The aeroplane was crossing the plateau obliquely towards the opening of the gorge when Lawrence suddenly caught sight of a number of round objects resembling bee-hives, clustered in a secluded dell. He pointed them out to Mr. Appleton, who examined them through his glass.

"They are akois," he said: "the portable huts used by the nomad tribes in these parts, made of a circular wooden framework covered with felt. But I've never before seen so many in a group."

As they looked, the intervals between the akois became filled with a dense crowd of men, who stood gazing up in astonishment at the strange machine flying high above their heads. The airmen had no particular interest in wheeling about to make a careful inspection of the camp, for it was inconceivable that Nurla and his man had come so far and joined their compatriots, if such these people were. They had soon left it far behind, and descending gradually as they neared the gorge, they re-entered this at an altitude of not more than a hundred feet above the river to renew their search.

Bob found it by no means easy to follow a course that would enable his passengers to obtain a clear view of the more rugged portions of the valley. Here and there, at the wider parts, he was able to wheel round and cover wide areas; but in the narrow stretches he was forced to fly straight ahead without the possibility of turning, unless he should rise to a great height. This would involve a loss of time which could be ill afforded. Once or twice, in attempting to circle, he almost shaved the rocky sides; and deciding that such attempts were too dangerous, he concluded that he had better leave certain parts imperfectly explored rather than risk injury to the aeroplane. He compromised matters by steering a serpentine course, thus covering as much as possible of the ground on both sides of the river.

The aeroplane was approaching the rope bridge when Mr. Appleton suddenly called out that he saw two men on horseback on the track beyond. In another moment he recognized them through his glass as the men of whom they were in pursuit. They were nearly a mile distant, entering a stretch of the gorge

that was particularly rugged, and no doubt afforded plenty of cover. It had been prearranged that as soon as the men were sighted Bob should make a descent as near as possible ahead of them–that is, down-stream–but it was no surprise to Bob–indeed, it was only according to the ill-luck that seems to rule on such occasions–that no suitable landing place offered itself.

He remembered, however, that in flying downstream he had noticed, two or three miles above the bridge, a place where the valley widened sufficiently to allow the aeroplane to circle. He decided to fly direct to this spot, turn, follow the men, outstrip them, and land at a spot some distance down-stream, where a landing had seemed feasible. Lawrence suggested that he or his uncle should take a flying shot at the men as they passed above them, but Mr. Appleton would not consent.

"Punishment before trial won't do," he said.

By this time the fugitives had disappeared behind a sort of parapet of rock just above the bridge, which spanned the river at a height of twenty or thirty feet. On first sighting them, Bob had caused the aeroplane to descend until it was almost level with the bridge. As they came to it, Mr. Appleton rose in his seat behind the pilot, to see, if he could, the precise spot in which the fugitives had concealed themselves. He had just done so, and was leaning slightly to the right, when there came in rapid succession the crack, crack of two rifles. And then Lawrence, in the third seat, was horrified to see his uncle pitch forward, lose his grip on the stay he was clutching, and fall headlong into the river. It all happened so instantaneously that the boy had no time even to reach forward. He sprang up, almost over-balancing himself, but before he could stretch out his hand Mr. Appleton was whirling in mid-air.

At the moment of the accident Bob was made aware that something had happened by the lurch which the sudden loss of weight caused the aeroplane to give. A cry from Lawrence apprised him of the nature of the accident. For a few moments both the boys were dazed by the shock of their uncle's disappearance, so sudden, so unexpected, so terrifying. Bob had instinctively moved his controlling lever to counter-act the lurch. As soon as he knew what had happened, instinct again prompted him to bring the aeroplane round; but reason coming to his aid, he corrected the movement just in time to avoid dashing the plane against the rocky barrier on his left hand.

"Keep straight ahead!" shouted Lawrence in terror.

But before the words were out of his mouth the danger of a fatal smash was avoided. The aeroplane flew at full speed up-stream. In a few minutes it would reach the wider space where turning was possible. Only then could the direction of its flight be reversed, and the fate of Mr. Appleton be ascertained.

In their anxiety for their uncle, both the boys had now forgotten the very

existence of the Kalmuck miscreants. It did not occur to them that in repassing the same spot on their flight down-stream they might be in danger from the same concealed marksmen. As the aeroplane turned, Lawrence called to his brother to descend still lower, so that they might the more easily see their uncle's body if he were still floating in the stream.

"If I see him, I'll dive in," he said. "You go on, land where you can, and come back to my help."

With his eyes fixed on the water below he was unconscious of anything but the swirling flood, and the intense strain of searching the surface as the aeroplane flashed by. Neither Bob nor Lawrence noticed the movements of the two Kalmucks. They, as soon as they had fired their shots, vaulted into the saddles of the horses that stood beneath a tall rock, and dashed at headlong speed along the track towards the bridge. The horses, urged by their riders, and terrified by the increasing sound of the aeroplane rushing swiftly behind them, took the bits in their teeth and galloped on, completely beyond control. They wheeled on to the bridge. At this moment the aeroplane was only about two hundred yards behind them, and Bob was intending to pass under the bridge. But the weight of the horses was too much for the frail and clumsy structure. It broke in the middle, and horses and riders plunged into the river. Bob had just time to move his elevator and skim over the confused mass of bridge, horses and men.

Only for a moment was Lawrence's attention diverted from his quest. Hitherto he had fixed his eyes from a rapidly diminishing distance upon the spot where his uncle had fallen, and the river beyond. Now he had passed the spot itself, and in a few seconds covered the whole distance down which, even allowing for the speed of the current, the body could have been carried. There was no sign of it, and Lawrence felt with horror and despair that the shot had been only too well aimed–that Mr. Appleton had been killed outright, or so grievously wounded as to be unable to keep himself afloat. He could not endure the suspense and uncertainty.

"I am going in," he cried. "Come back for me."

To make a clean dive from the narrow seat of an aeroplane flying at the rate of thirty miles an hour was impossible. It was a dangerous feat to attempt at all, but Lawrence did not think of that. He fell rather than plunged, at the imminent risk of striking a half-submerged rock in mid-stream. The shock of hitting the water after a haphazard fall of thirty feet was so great that for a time, even after he had risen to the surface, he was too much dazed to be able to distinguish his surroundings. With the instinct of a practised swimmer he trod water until his senses returned to him. Then he saw that he was far below the ruined bridge, and being rapidly carried down-stream. The aeroplane was out of sight. Neither man nor beast was visible on either bank. The Kalmucks must have clambered up

the bank and taken to flight. He realized that if his uncle was still in the river he must have overtaken him before the dive was made. It was necessary to husband his strength, and either try to swim against the stream, or make his way to some rock on one side or the other, whence he could watch the current as it flowed past him.

He turned, and for some time breasted the stream until he descried a rocky shelf at the base of the right bank which would prove at once a resting place and a convenient watch post. Nearly exhausted, he dragged himself on to it, and crouched there, intent upon every billow and eddy of the swollen river. Fed by the mountain snows, it flowed on with turbulent tide. The water was bitterly cold, and Lawrence shivered as he waited there minute after minute, hoping, yet dreading, to see his uncle's form rolling past.

Presently he heard the hum of the returning aeroplane. Bob shouted as he sped by, but what he said was indistinguishable. Lawrence felt more and more despairing until with a gleam of hope he wondered whether his uncle had swum to one bank or the other and climbed to safety. He looked at the bank behind him. It was steep, almost perpendicular, but marked by fissures that promised to give him foothold. With teeth chattering and limbs trembling with cold he essayed to clamber up. At another time he would have found the feat easy enough: now he was amazed at the tax it put upon him. Every now and then he stopped, clung on with his hands, and turned his head to glance again at the stream. At last, on gaining the top, he looked along the track in both directions. Nobody was in sight. The aeroplane had again disappeared from view. Hesitating a moment he began to walk up the track. A new fear assailed him: what if the aeroplane had met with an accident! What if the engine had failed, or the pilot had been too venturesome, and in attempting to wheel in too narrow a space had crashed against the rock! Shivering as much from anxiety as from cold, he felt a glow of extravagant delight when he heard a cheery shout, and Bob came hasting towards him from round the corner of a jutting rock.

"Any sign of him?" asked Bob anxiously as he met his brother.

"No. What can have become of him?"

"I fear the worst: but even if–if he is drowned he must come up some time. We had better walk up and down for a bit."

"Where's the machine?"

"A few yards above the bridge. It was a risky thing, coming down there, but I thought I'd venture, and luckily didn't come to grief."

"Let us get our field-glasses. We can then examine every crevice in the other bank. We can't get to the other side and examine this. By the way, how did you get across?"

"One of the ropes that formed the hand-rails of the bridge is uninjured. It

sags a bit, but it's just taut enough to swing over by."

For some time they marched up and down, above and below the spot where their uncle had fallen. Bob stripped to his shirt, and swam along with the current below the track, searching every cranny into which he thought the body might have been carried. No discovery rewarded his care except a primitive fishing net, the meshes of which had caught upon the jagged edges of a rock.

"Do you think the Kalmucks got hold of him?" said Lawrence when they again met.

"Upon my word, I had almost forgotten them. They may have done so. It's clear that they got out of the river, and their horses, too. I didn't see them as I flew up. What more can we do?"

"I don't know. I'm dead beat. I can't help thinking that the Kalmucks must have captured him, alive or dead. When we have rested we had better get our rifles and go and meet the Pathans. They ought to be near by this time. With them hunting on horseback and ourselves in the aeroplane we can scour the country. But we must tell our men; it's no good starting without them."

"I think you're right. We'll get something to eat, and by the time you've had a rest, no doubt the men will arrive."

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH
THE EDGE OF THE STORM

They swung themselves across the river hand over hand on the rope. On returning to the aeroplane Bob opened a box of sardines and took out of a biscuit tin some of the flat bread-cakes baked by the Chinese cook. But neither he nor Lawrence had any appetite. After a few minutes Lawrence got up.

"It's no good," he said. "I can't eat, and I can't rest. It would be different if we knew for certain that the old man was gone; it's the uncertainty that's so wearing. Do you see anything of the Pathans?"

Bob took his field-glass and went to the edge of the track, whence he had a scarcely interrupted view of a mile or more of the valley.

"No, they're not in sight," he said after a minute or two. "Shall we go and meet them?"

"I'm more inclined to go down-stream, on the off-chance that we may find something."

"All right. Better take our rifles, perhaps."

"Why? Nurla has got clean away by this time, whether Uncle is with him or not. You may be sure he wouldn't wait about."

"Well, we'll take our revolvers; it's just as well to have something handy. For all we know he may be resting behind some rock."

"With a rifle! Revolvers wouldn't be much use against that."

"Nor would rifles, now you mention it. He'd pot us before we saw him if he wanted to. All the same, we'll take our revolvers."

They swarmed across by the rope, gained the farther bank, and walked slowly down the track, scanning the rocky recesses as narrowly as before. They had scarcely any hope of finding their uncle's body; but while it remained undiscovered they were ready to search again and again. It was now near midday, and the sun beat fiercely upon them. For a time they were unconscious of the heat in the intentness of their occupation, and the foreboding anxiety that filled their minds; so that they had walked much farther than they supposed when they became alive to the fatigue induced by exertion in such a temperature. Then, wiping their perspiring brows, they sank down to rest on a flattish boulder overhanging the stream.

"We must give it up," said Bob wearily. "Unless Nurla has got him he's either at the bottom of the river, or else washed down miles by this time."

"I don't care about caving in altogether," said Lawrence. "It would be some satisfaction–a mournful one–to recover his body and give him decent burial."

"Poor old man! He wouldn't care a bit about that. What's more to the point is to hunt down the blackguards who killed him. That's what I propose to do as soon as our men come up. Some of them are sure to know the country, and with them on horseback and ourselves in the aeroplane, I'd take long odds that we find Nurla in time."

As they talked, they kept their eyes on the river, more from the habit engendered during the previous few hours than with any strong hope of their search being rewarded. Presently Lawrence, following with his eyes the foaming ripples as they swirled down-stream, caught sight of something that caused him to spring to his feet with a sudden ejaculation and lift the field-glass to his eyes.

"What is it?" asked Bob, rising also.

Lawrence handed him the glass. Far away he saw, rounding a bend in the track, a party of horsemen marching slowly in single file towards them. Their costume proclaimed them as Kalmucks, and though they were too far distant for their features to be distinguished, the shape of the foremost seemed to be that of the dwarf, Black Jack.

The watchers suddenly remembered the encampment over which they had flown earlier in the day. The same thought flashed simultaneously through their

minds: the stealthy proceedings of Nurla in the mine and his subsequent disappearance had not, then, been prompted by an indefinite hope of gain; they had been deliberately planned, either in the knowledge of the proximity of a body of his fellow countrymen, or even in concert with them. There could hardly be a doubt that, as once before, an attempt was to be made to dispossess Mr. Appleton of his mine.

The boys stood watching only for a moment or two; then they dropped down, feeling instinctively that it behoved them to keep out of sight. But brief though their gaze had been, it was long enough to assure them that the approaching party was a numerous one. They counted a dozen men; others were coming round the bend, and they were strung out along the track. Every man had a firearm of some sort, a carbine, or a rifle, or a long musket like the Afghan jazail.

For the moment even the fate of their uncle was obliterated from the boys' minds by this astonishing discovery. They realized that their own lives and the safety of the mine were in danger. Hitherto their anxious thoughts had been fixed on one object alone; now they saw themselves faced with a much more complicated problem.

"We must get back," said Bob, insensibly lowering his tone of voice. "We can do nothing at present for Uncle. We must at least return to the aeroplane and wait to see what happens. I'm pretty sure I'm right: those fellows are being led by the dwarf–and Nurla too, I suspect–to the mine. Luckily we've plenty of time to fly back in the aeroplane and give warning."

"What then? If all those men we saw in the encampment are coming along, we haven't half enough men to prevent anything they like to do."

"I don't care about that. Uncle beat off an attack once, and if those fellows want the mine, by Jove! they shall have a fight for it."

"You're talking through your hat," said Lawrence, whose tastes and temperament were quite unmilitary, and who did not know his brother, perhaps, as well as might have been expected.

"Well, we'll get back, at any rate," rejoined Bob, ignoring the accusation. "And, if possible, without being seen."

They got up, and set off up-stream at a run, keeping as near as possible to the left-hand side of the track in order to escape observation. Only now did they discover how far they had come. The bridge was quite out of sight. They had not timed their walk, and had no means of knowing how many yards or even miles they had to cover before they should reach the aeroplane. The distance was in fact more than two miles, and the Kalmucks were only three-quarters of a mile behind them. The roughness of the track lessened the horsemen's advantage in being mounted; but the boys feared that, if they had been seen, the Kalmucks, pressing on the small, hardy ponies, accustomed to rough country, might overtake them

before they had time to make good their escape across the river.

They were not long left in doubt whether they had been seen and were being pursued. They had been bounding along a straight stretch of the track, perhaps half a mile in length. Before they gained the farther end of it they heard the shrill shouts of the Kalmucks rising above the droning bass of the river. As they turned the corner, and passed out of sight, the sharp crack of rifles followed them; but the pursuers had not dismounted to take aim and had fired a thought too late. The only effect of the shots was to make the boys increase their speed, for they knew that the ponies must rapidly gain on them over the straight and fairly level portion of the track which they had just left. They pushed on gamely, hugging the cliffside as closely as possible, but being forced sometimes to diverge towards the river by the nature of the path. They looked anxiously ahead for a sight of the ruined bridge, and felt the shock of dismay, when, catching a partial glimpse of it at last, they found that they had still at least a mile to go.

The pursuers began to close in upon them. A scattered volley proved that they had again been seen. The Kalmucks were firing and loading as they rode–a mere waste of ammunition, as it might have seemed, but for an instant proof that these warriors of the steppes were no mean marksmen, even in full career. Bob's cap was struck from his head, and he discovered only by the blood trickling down his neck that he had been wounded. Lawrence, glancing over his shoulder, saw that it would be quite impossible to reach the bridge before the pursuers came up with them.

"We can't do it!" he gasped.

Bob said nothing. His mouth hardened, and he looked intently ahead. At a few yards' distance a jutting rock encroached upon the track, rendering it only just wide enough for a horseman to pass. On rounding it he halted.

"Down on the ground!" he panted. "Out with your revolver! There's nothing else for it."

They threw themselves down with their faces to the enemy, and covering themselves as well as they could with the corner of the rock, they held their revolvers ready to fire at the foremost of their pursuers.

"Wait till they are within a few yards of us," said Bob. "No good wasting shots at long range. They are bound to go slow."

They waited in breathless excitement. Lawrence the pacific was now as warlike as Bob himself. The enemy drew nearer. The narrowing of the track caused them to reduce their pace from a gallop to a trot, then to a walk. In the ardour of the chase their order had been changed; Black Jack was no longer in front.

The boys had just had time to pull themselves together when the first man came within range.

"Now!" said Bob, springing to his feet.

Showing themselves on the narrow path between the rock and the brink of the river they emptied four barrels rapidly, almost pointblank at the horsemen. The first two men dropped; the others, taken utterly aback, reined up, but were thrown into a huddled mass by the men pressing on behind. There was a moment's pause–a pause emphasized by cries of pain and fear, and the shrill screams of horses. Then the confused throng began to wheel about.

"Hold your fire!" whispered Bob, at the same moment emptying his two remaining barrels into the medley. Another man fell. It was enough. Reckless of everything but his own safety, each man urged his steed back along the track, and in a few moments all had passed out of sight.

"We win the first trick," said Bob, glancing at his brother. "Why, you're as pale as a ghost!"

"So are you," returned Lawrence.

"Well, it's our first experience of war, so I'm not surprised. But we must cut it. For one thing, my revolver's empty, and I've no more cartridges here. For another, those fellows will come back as soon as they've got over their surprise, and even if they funk a frontal attack, I dare say they can manage to clamber round somehow and turn our flank. Our only chance is to make a break for the bridge and get over if we can before they're fit to come on."

They started at once, and ran up the track, taking much comfort from the knowledge that the projecting rock would for some distance conceal them from the enemy. But after a few hundred yards the track both ascended and wound slightly to the right, bringing them once more into full view. They had no sooner reached this point than loud shouts behind them announced that the pursuit had been resumed. They glanced back, then ahead, measuring with their eyes the gaps that separated them from safety on the one hand, and capture on the other. A couple of bullets whistled over their heads, but the firing ceased, and they guessed that the enemy were confident of being able to overtake them. Such assurance was misplaced. The track in this part of the ravine, the scene of the morning's disaster, was particularly rugged, and gave no advantage to the mounted men. Moreover, there were at intervals isolated rocks behind which the boys could have posted themselves as they had already done, and the Kalmucks approached these heedfully, reining up until assured that they had no similar ambuscade to fear.

"Lucky they don't know we've only two shots between us," said Bob as he sprinted along by his brother's side. "A good spurt and we're home."

They were both good runners, though their want of training showed itself in a certain shortness of wind. They gained the bridge, saw at a glance that the pursuers were still several hundred yards away, and seizing the rope began to

A CHECK IN THE PURSUIT

A CHECK IN THE PURSUIT

swing themselves hand over hand across the stream. At their previous crossings they had exercised some little caution, in case the rope should break under their weight. Now, however, they put everything to the hazard, realizing that to fall into the stream would be no worse than to be caught.

The Kalmucks had been informed by Nurla of the destruction of the bridge, and had anticipated an easy capture. When they saw the boys swinging themselves across they gave utterance to renewed shouts; some flung themselves from their horses and ran forward to swarm over in the same way: others reined up and once more began to fire. The fugitives were still some few feet from the farther side, and momentarily expected to be hit, when there was a sudden diversion in their favour. They heard shouts in the opposite direction, from beyond the rocks on the other side of the clear space on which the aeroplane rested. Immediately afterwards several rifle shots rang out. For a second they halted in their progress, in the fear that they were the targets of another hostile band. But next instant it flashed into Bob's mind that the volley must have been fired by their own Pathans, whose arrival they had long expected.

"Come on, Law," he cried. "We're all right now."

With three more heaves he was upon the bank. He turned to assist his brother; then both scurried across the open space, past the aeroplane, and dashed into safety behind the screen of rocks, where they were received with shouts of delight by the five stalwart Pathans who lay there in a line with their rifles at their shoulders.

For the moment they were not aware of the effect of the volley. It had brought the Kalmucks to a sudden check. One of those who were scrambling across the rope dropped into the river; the rest swung themselves round and struggled frantically in the opposite direction. Two or three of those who had halted on the track were wounded; and their comrades, realizing that they were helpless against marksmen under cover, wheeled round and made a hurried flight down the river, not drawing rein until they had passed the intervening rocks and were themselves protected. Those who had followed the boys sprang to their saddles and galloped away; but one of them was winged before he had ridden many yards. He fell from his pony, which dashed on in pursuit of the rest and was soon lost to sight, the man rising and limping after.

The Pathans chuckled as they rose to their feet.

"That was well done," said one of them, named Fyz Ali. "But where is the huzur?"

He turned to the boys, who, feeling thoroughly exhausted by the stress and strain of this eventful morning, had flung themselves down, and lay at full length with their heads resting on their arms.

At the man's words Lawrence looked up. He had learnt enough of the

Pathan patois to understand and to make himself understood, though he could not yet sustain a lengthy conversation. In a few words, haltingly, he explained what had happened to his uncle. The Pathans threw up their hands in consternation, invoking the name of Allah and pouring out a torrent of curses upon Nurla Bai and the Kalmucks. Mr. Appleton was very popular among them, and the news of his loss, and of the escape of the assassin, filled them with dismay and rage.

"Beyond doubt the huzur is dead," said Fyz Ali, pulling at his beard. "Allah is great! The huzur could not live, falling wounded into the swift water. He sank like a stone, and lies at the bottom. We shall cast dust upon our heads for our father."

"You were just in time to save us," said Lawrence.

"Allah be praised! We were riding down, and came to the wonderful machine, and when we saw that the bridge was broken we knew that we must wait until the huzur returned. Therefore we got off our horses and were resting and eating when we heard shots afar off, and believed the huzur was doing justice upon Nurla Bai. But looking down the stream we perceived the sahibs running, and the accursed Kalmucks after them, and I said we must hide behind the rocks and fire when the time came. And by the mercy of Allah we were able to save the sahibs, and our hearts are glad; but our joy is turned to grief by this heavy news. Our light is become darkness, and we are as little children."

Lawrence then told in detail, as well as he could, the events of the morning. When he spoke of the encampment on the plateau, Fyz Ali at once agreed that Nurla Bai must have known of the proximity of his fellow countrymen, and that an attack upon the mine was clearly intended.

"What are we to do, sahib?" he asked.

Before Lawrence could reply, the air was rent by the crackle of rifles, and a shower of bullets hissed overhead, some pattering upon the rocks. Some of the Pathans had incautiously shown themselves, and the enemy had opened fire from their position down the river. They instantly ducked under cover, and gathered in a group about their young masters, to consult on their course of action.

"How many Kalmucks did you see?" asked Lawrence.

"We did not count them, sahib," said Fyz Ali, "but there must have been nearly thirty. There are not so many now," he added with a grim chuckle.

"And we number seven all told!" said Lawrence. "Look after the men while I talk to my brother."

"We're in a hole," said Bob. "The fellows aren't great marksmen, but we can't move the aeroplane while they command the space in front. They're only about a quarter of a mile away, and with a score of rifles they couldn't help hitting us."

"What was your idea?"

"To get aloft and fly down-stream to reconnoitre. I should like to know whether the rest of them are coming up from the camp. But that's out of the question."

"We're safe for the present, anyhow. They can't cross while we command the bridge."

"That's true. I wonder whether they can climb the hills, and get at us from above. You might ask Fyz Ali whether he knows of a path."

The Pathan consulted with his companions. One of them said that he knew of a rough path a mile lower down the river, which led by a tortuous and difficult course over the hills; but it involved a round of nearly ten miles, and the march would take at least five hours.

"By that time it will be dark," said Bob. "It's something to know that we are safe till then, and it gives us time to think out a plan. The one thing that's clear at present is that we must get back to the mine."

"And Uncle?"

"We can do absolutely nothing more. In spite of what Fyz Ali said, I can't help thinking that he may be still alive. If he were drowned, his body must have come up."

"And the Kalmucks would kill him if they found him."

"I'm not so sure. He'd be a valuable hostage. They might bring him up to the mine, and make our surrender a condition of his release."

"With all my heart I hope it is so. But suppose they haven't got him?"

"We must get back to the mine and do our best to hold it. That's what he'd wish us to do. But look here, old chap, we've eaten next to nothing. It's no good letting ourselves down. Ask Fyz Ali to give us some of his tommy; we can't get our own; and when we've had a feed we'll decide what's to be done."

CHAPTER THE NINTH
A FLIGHT BY NIGHT

The afternoon wore away. For some time there was complete silence except for the gurgling hum of the river, and the low tones of the Pathans as they talked gloomily among themselves. It occurred to Bob that the enemy, finding themselves so completely at a check, might have retreated, to advance again when

they should guess that want of food had driven the Englishmen's party back to the mine. But on putting it to the test he found that he was mistaken. He practised the old device of drawing the enemy's fire by means of dummy targets. Two of the Pathans hoisted their turbans on their rifles until they showed just above the rocks. The instant result was a volley from downstream, and one of the turbans on being lowered was found to have several holes drilled in it.

"They don't mean to let us off," said Bob. "I've made up my mind what we must do. When it's dark we'll creep out, you and I, and start the engine. We'll toss who shall fly back to the mine—-"

"No, that's your job," said Lawrence. "You can manage the machine better than I."

"Just as you please. Well, I'll go then, and have a talk with old Gur Buksh. You'll stay here and keep watch on the enemy. By their sticking on it looks as if they might try to rush the position in the night: but as they can't get across except as we did, by the rope, you ought to be able to spoil that little game. I'll tell the havildar all about it, and get him to make quiet preparations for an attack. Then I'll fly back. I'll go on down-stream and take a good look at things. The enemy may have sheered off by the morning: in that case we can have another look for Uncle, and then return to the mine. If they've been reinforced from the camp, and look as if they are coming on, we can get back all the same. They'll have to repair the bridge before they can bring their horses over, and the Pathans will be miles towards home before that can be done."

"Don't you think it would be better to bring down some more men and prevent them from repairing the bridge? We could then stave off an attack on the mine–perhaps prevent it altogether."

"Too far from our base, my boy. There's that path over the hills the men know of. We mustn't run the risk of having our rear turned. But I'll send down some reinforcements. Of course without the bridge the enemy can't possibly cross until they reach the ford miles up-stream; but they may be good at mountain climbing, and judging by their pertinacity so far they won't shirk the journey. They've got time on their side: there's no hurry: they know that we're boxed at the mine, and when they get there they've only got to sit tight and intercept our regular convoys of provisions to starve us out in a month or so. Things look pretty black, and our only chance is to strengthen our position and give them so hot a reception that they'll get tired of it."

"There's one thing Uncle ought to have done. He ought to have rigged up a wireless installation, so that we could summon help in an emergency like this."

"My dear chap, what would be the good? We could only get help from India, and they wouldn't send an expedition out on behalf of an obstinate crack-brained adventurer, as they regard him, who's no business here at all. Poor old

Uncle, when he settled here, knew very well that he'd taken his life in his hands, and had only himself to rely on. We've got to do everything ourselves."

"Couldn't you fly southward, and see if Major Endicott is within reach?"

"He's back in Rawal Pindi long ago. No, we can't expect any help. By George! I thought I'd lost all chance of seeing some fighting; but it looks now as if I'm to get a good deal more than I should have got if I'd come out with a commission."

"You seem quite cheerful at the prospect. You're a born soldier, Bob."

"And we'll make you one before we've done with you, old man. It's all clear, isn't it?"

"So far as I'm concerned. But there's one thing you don't appear to have thought of: how are you going to alight on our ledge in the dark?"

"Is there no moon to-night?"

"Not till very late, I think; and in any case we get more shadow than shine in the valley, unless the moon happens to be sailing directly above."

"You're right. I hadn't given it a thought. It will be a ticklish job. Owing to that bend the lights in the compound will be invisible from beyond the ledge. But it's got to be done somehow; I'm glad you mentioned it, because I don't think it would have occurred to me, and now I can try to meet the difficulty."

"You won't start back till daylight, I suppose."

"No. If I find the coast clear when I've had a look down the river I shall come back and drop here. If there are only a few of them we'll wait for our reinforcements and then see if we can't drive them off: that will give us another chance of searching for Uncle. On the other hand, supposing a lot more have come up from the encampment–too many for us to tackle–I'll show a red flag, and that'll be the signal for making tracks at once. There's one thing I'd recommend. Get the Pathans to take their horses a little further up-stream out of range. We don't want them to be hit. It's a pity there's no herbage for the beasts to feed on, their bags will be empty by the morning. Still, they'll be back at the mine by midday to-morrow, all being well."

Dusk fell early upon the river. It was gloomy below even while the mountain tops were still glistening in the glow of sunset, and the sky was bright. At last, when the keenest-sighted of the little party could see scarcely two hundred yards down the track on the opposite bank of the stream, Bob decided that it was time to move. He ordered three of the Pathans to creep cautiously out to the end of the bridge, and lie down behind some flat rocks there, keeping a sharp look-out for the appearance of the enemy. They gained their post without attracting attention.

"By the way," said Bob, as he prepared to walk with Lawrence into the open space on which the aeroplane lay, "you'll have to set a guard at the bridge end

all night. Let the men take it in turns, two at a time. They're not used to doing sentry-go: I'm afraid you'll have to be with them yourself. If I'd thought of it before you might have got some sleep this afternoon. You mustn't let the enemy rush you."

"All right, I'll manage to keep awake. Hadn't we better try to clear some of these stones away? Otherwise you won't get a very good run off."

"Yes, but we can't wait to clear the ground properly. Every minute increases the risk of not getting away safely."

With the remaining two Pathans the boys moved quickly into the open space, and carefully lifted the larger fragments of rock from a straight stretch of about fifty yards. They were still engaged in this when the Pathans at the bridge end opened fire. Their comrades instantly joined them, and for some minutes the five men fired briskly across the river. The sentries had discovered a number of the enemy creeping stealthily along the track. Their fire was immediately answered, and bullets began to whistle around, striking the rocks with a dull thud. In the gloom both sides were firing almost at random. The Pathans, crouching behind the rocks, escaped injury, and it was unlikely that they themselves had done much damage among the enemy; but their fire had checked the advance, and by the time that the Englishmen had sufficiently cleared the course for the aeroplane the firing ceased.

"I hope you won't be bothered with them any more," said Bob as he got into his seat.

He took his bearings. The aeroplane was facing down-stream. He would have to rise many hundreds of feet before it would be safe to turn.

"They may fire at you and hit you before you're out of range," said Lawrence.

"I must take my chance. Of course they'll see me against the sky if they look up; but it will take them a few seconds at any rate to collect themselves, and I shall be going so fast that I fancy they won't hit me if they try. Here: take your rifle and cartridges. You'll keep strict watch? Look for me in the morning. So long!"

He started the engine: Lawrence stood clear, and the aeroplane darted forward obliquely towards the river. In a second or two it was completely lost to sight, so dense had the darkness become. But in a few seconds more it could be seen like a shadow against the sky, a quarter of a mile down the river and several hundred feet above. There were faint shouts in the distance. The enemy's attention must have been attracted, first by the hum, then by the sight of the strange machine as it soared higher and higher. But there was no sound of firing, and Lawrence breathed freely when he knew that his brother had escaped this first danger. A few minutes later he saw the aeroplane at a great height, sailing rapidly

towards the mine.

On running off, Bob adjusted his elevator for the steepest possible ascent in a direct line; the gorge was too narrow to allow of a spiral ascent. He felt that he was starting on a race with the darkness. He had never attempted a flight by night in these regions, and he hoped by rising high to use the last radiance of sunset in shaping his course. Within about half an hour he should arrive at the mine. But he was a good deal more concerned than he had allowed Lawrence to see, at the problem which would face him at the end of his flight. The situation of the mine would be revealed by the camp fires of the labourers on the right bank, and the lights about the various outhouses on the left. But there were no lights on the landing platform beyond, and this, together with all the lower part of the gorge, was already blotted out by the darkness. It would be impossible, however gently he should glide down, to hit the exact position of the platform; and to attempt a landing at random would be madness.

Bob felt much worried as he flew on in the fading light, with an immense black abyss beneath him. The approach of the aeroplane would certainly be heard at the mine, but probably no one would be quick-witted enough to understand his difficulty. It might never occur to them that the darkness would render a landing impossible. Bob suspected that not even Ditta Lal, B.A. of Calcutta University though he was, would be alive to the position. Puzzle as he might, he could not hit upon any solution of the problem, and at length ceased to think about it, hoping that chance or some lucky inspiration, some circumstance that he had not taken into account, would point the way in due time.

The night was calm and windless, and the engine worked well, so that his mind was not harassed by any anxiety about the aeroplane. His body was less comfortable. The air was bitterly cold; he had put on his thick wadded coat and gloves, but his hands were numbed, and more than once he rubbed his nose to prevent it from freezing. He was glad to think that his journey was to be a short one. A little more than half an hour after he started, he discerned the lights of the settlement far away twinkling like glowworms at the bottom of a ditch. He waited a few minutes to make sure of his bearings, then began a gradual descent, looking about him warily as he sank lower in order to avoid grazing a jutting crag where the gorge narrowed. The lights became more distinct: he was able to separate those on his left, in the miners' quarters, from those on the right, in the dwelling houses and the quarters of the garrison. Presently he could just distinguish, in the diffused glow, the river flowing between, and he steered directly for this, so as to pass over the drawbridge. Having shut off the engine for the descent, his approach had probably escaped notice hitherto; but he started it again as soon as he came within thirty or forty feet of the bridge; the sound was immediately heard, and within a minute the whole settlement was aroused.

The miners poured from their huts; all the Sikhs of the garrison turned out; the servants left their outhouses, talking shrilly; and even the Babu, who, as he often did, had retired to rest at sundown, was wakened by the noise, and rolling out of bed, threw on a warm dressing-gown of European cut, and toddled out to welcome his master and tender any advice that the occasion seemed to call for.

Meanwhile Bob had flown past, utterly bewildered, and not a little alarmed. He knew the gorge well, but never having before made a trip through it by night, he was in a state of nervous terror lest he should lose his bearings and come to grief. The darkness was intense, redeemed from solid black only by a very faint reflection from the water. It was quite impossible to see the landing platform as he sped past, but when he arrived at the first spot at which turning was possible, he had a dim hope that, flying in the opposite direction, he might be able to see the platform in the diffused light of the camp-fires, in spite of the bend of the gorge. But in this he was disappointed. Not only were most of the lights intercepted by the bulging cliff, but all of them, being below its level, gave no illumination at all for the surface on which the descent must be made.

Bob flew back again, over the bridge, and into the blackness beyond. The men cheered enthusiastically as he passed; even the Kalmucks, though they supposed that Nurla Bai had been caught, were moved to a certain admiration. Bob got no comfort from the cheers. His hands were so numb that he could scarcely control his levers, and he had the frightful feeling that he must continue to sail up and down indefinitely, like a swallow that has strayed into a church, and flies swiftly back and forth until it becomes dizzy and dashes itself against the wall. He had to go nearly seven miles before he durst turn again. On coming to the bridge, he shouted at the top of his voice, asking that some one would take a light to the platform. But his words were unheard amid the din, and the crowd on the banks, taking his cry for a greeting, responded with even louder cheers.

Again he flew on up-stream, a second time he came to the wheeling place, and was nerving himself to attempt a landing without guidance in the dark when, as the machine came round, he saw a sudden burst of flame in the distance at a spot where no light had been before. It brightened moment by moment, and he thrilled with relief as he discerned, to the left of the blaze, the dim outlines of the shed in which he was accustomed to keep his tools and other accessories. Some one, perhaps the Babu, he thought, had had the presence of mind to guess at his dilemma. He steered straight for the light, which he now distinguished as a large fire kindled on the rocky buttress projecting into the stream. It illuminated the whole of the landing place, and he knew that by once more passing down and up, and ascending to a sufficient height, he could time his downward glide so as to come gently to rest at the desired spot. Twenty minutes later he tottered from his seat on to the platform, almost to fall into the arms of little Fazl, the Gurkha.

"Salaam, sahib," said the man. "I knew the trouble. The sahib is very tired."

"Dead beat, and half frozen," said Bob. "You must help me back to the compound; my legs are stiff."

Fazl assisted him along the cantilever pathway, midway in which they met several of the garrison who were coming, somewhat late, to assist in the landing. At the end of the pathway, in the compound, there was a group consisting of Ditta Lal, Chunda Beg, Gur Buksh and one or two more, who stepped forward to welcome Bob; but when they noticed his worn features and stiff movements, and the absence of Mr. Appleton and Lawrence, the words of congratulation died on their lips.

"Where is the huzur?" asked one.

"Is all well, sahib?" said Chunda Beg.

"Sir, has fortune proved unkind?" murmured the Babu.

"Go to the house; I will tell you all there," said Bob. "Havildar, silence those noisy ruffians on the other side. Tell them nothing. Chunda Beg, get me some brandy: I am half dead. All of you, don't talk. I want Gur Buksh, and you, Ditta Lal, to come to the house in a quarter of an hour. I shall be all right then, and I've a great deal to say to you. You, Fazl, go back to the aeroplane, give it a thorough cleaning, and fill the tanks. Thanks for your thoughtfulness in lighting the fire."

"Ah, sir, he stole a march on me," said the Babu. "If I had not been lapped in slumber, inspiration would have made me busy. But Fazl did very well–very well, that is, for a man without a degree, hall-mark of acumen, sir."

CHAPTER THE TENTH
A FATEFUL DISCOVERY

It was an oddly assorted conclave that met in Mr. Appleton's dining-room a little later. Bob had had a hot bath and a large bowl of coffee, which, Chunda Beg–not partial to stimulants–assured him, would do him more good than brandy. He sat now muffled in his dressing-gown in an armchair before the stove, his legs and feet swathed in blankets. On one side stood the tall dignified old Sikh Gur Buksh, straight as a dart, his face grave, his hands clasped upon the hilt of his sword, whose point was on the floor. Between Bob and the havildar sat Ditta Lal, who had requested permission to seat himself, on the ground that he was one of those "who fardels bear."

"In other words, sir," he said, "I turn scale at eighteen stone, and too much standing on pins is one of many causes of varicosity according to little homoeopathic vade-mecum."

Bob was apt to be impulsive, but he had determined to give no information on his side until he had learnt how things had gone at the mine during the day. He asked Gur Buksh to report.

"I have done what the huzur said, sahib," declared the havildar in deep measured tones. "No work has been done to-day. We have kept the Pathans and the Kalmucks apart. They have reviled each other; blood has been hot, and I feared they would use their guns upon each other; but some of my men have patrolled the ground between them, and kept the peace."

"You have done well," said Bob; "though if the men had been kept at work they could not have got into mischief."

Gur Buksh pointed out, however, that it would not have been safe to allow the miners to cross the bridge. They would certainly have come into collision, and with guns, picks and hammers in their possession they could have overwhelmed the little garrison if it had come to fighting at close quarters.

"Very well," said Bob. "Now I have grave news for you. We overtook Nurla Bai and his man nearly fifty miles down the river. As we flew over them one of them fired and hit the Burra Sahib, who fell into the stream."

"Hai! hai!" ejaculated the Babu. Gur Buksh was mute.

"We wheeled round as soon as we could, to look for the Burra Sahib. We could not find him. Either he was mortally wounded and sank to the bottom" (the Babu groaned), "or he was washed down and fell into the hands of the enemy, for the two ruffians had joined a band of Kalmucks who had come up from an encampment we had previously seen on the plateau some miles farther on. We came down and landed the aeroplane just above the bridge, and walked a long way down the track. We saw no sign of the Burra Sahib, and were chased by the Kalmucks on horseback, and only escaped because the Pathans had arrived in our absence, and opened fire from an ambush behind the rocks. They could not cross, because the bridge was broken by Nurla Bai and Tchigin galloping across it; my brother and I had to swing ourselves over the river by the single rope that was left uninjured."

"Hai! Wonders will never cease!" murmured the Babu.

Bob related the incidents of the afternoon, and explained the impossibility of removing the aeroplane until nightfall, and the arrangements he had made with Lawrence.

"We cannot help believing that the Kalmucks intend to attack the mine," he said in conclusion. "To-morrow morning I shall fly back, and send all the Pathans to join their mates. If I should find that the enemy have gone, we shall

renew the search for the Burra Sahib. If they are a band we can tackle, we shall drive them off, or at any rate hold our ground there. But if, as I fear, they are but an advanced guard of the larger force we saw at the encampment, we can do nothing but return here and defend ourselves."

There was silence. Ditta Lal had for some time ceased to make any sound; if Bob had not been so much preoccupied with his thoughts he would have noticed that the Babu was looking exceedingly uneasy. Gur Buksh stood like a statue.

"Now what are we to do, havildar?" said Bob. "Can we defend the mine?"

"We can but try, sahib."

"As soon as it is light I want you to do all you can to strengthen the position. The northern wall must be fortified. There are plenty of empty provision bags in your stores, I believe, Babu?"

Ditta Lal started, and looked at his questioner vacantly.

"Pardon, sir, my mind was busy with great problems, and I did not catch what fell from your lips."

"I asked if you had plenty of empty bags in your storehouse."

"Heaps; a regular lot of them, sir."

"You must fill them with earth, havildar, and pile them against the wall. Make an embrasure in the middle for the machine gun."

"What, sir?" said the Babu, surprised.

"I forgot: you did not know about it. In the little chamber behind the house there is a machine gun, with plenty of ammunition. We will get it out in the morning."

"It is good, sahib," said the havildar.

"You knew about it?" said Bob, catching a curious expression on the Sikh's countenance.

"I knew about it, sahib. I saw the parts unpacked."

"And locked your knowledge in your silent bosom," said the Babu, with an aggrieved look. "That was cruelty to animals, sir. With knowledge of so ingenious a weapon of defence we should all have slept more securely in our beds."

"All this must be done as quietly as possible," continued Bob, ignoring the Babu's indignant protest. "We must try not to let the Kalmucks on the other side know that anything out of the ordinary is going on."

"That will not be easy, sahib," said the havildar.

"Perhaps not, but you must do the best you can. I said just now that I would send all the Pathans down the river, but you will want some of them to work. Will they be loyal?"

"The huzur is their father, sahib. They will fight for him and for you. To them the Kalmucks are sons of pigs."

"How is Muhammad, by the way?"

"His wound is healing; he will be well to-morrow–well enough to fight the Kalmucks."

"I will see him in the morning. I am rather troubled as to what to do with the Kalmuck miners. They will side with their countrymen if they come up in force, and every man extra will add to our difficulties."

"The sahib should send them away," said Gur Buksh.

"But we can't send them down-stream until my brother comes back, and that's their natural way. They won't go without their arms, and Lawrence Sahib and the Pathans might be attacked then on both sides; and they would certainly refuse to go in the opposite direction, away from their homes."

"Permit me to interpose, sir," said Ditta Lal, who had for some time taken no part in the discussion. "I have suggestion for cutting Gordian knot. Many years ago, sir, my uncle, member of celebrated Hunza Nagar expeditionary force, made proposal which, if taken at the flood, would have led to fortune. British force would have triumphed over dastardly foes, and many valuable lives would have been saved to honour and glory of king and country."

"Cut it short, Babu," said Bob. "What is your proposal?"

"Perpend, sir. Our friend and comrade Gur Buksh will cross bridge–or better Shan Tai–gather Kalmucks about him, and offer to beguile tedium of inaction by great feast, Chinese delicacies, stews and all that, regular blow out. While he engages Kalmucks in this artless conversation, make mouths water galore, one of noble garrison steals behind their backs into huts, inserts dynamite and fuse into walls, and retires with careful slowness, as if nothing was up, and he were merely strolling for constitutional. Then in midst of jollification huts all blow up like one o'clock, and scoundrels wallow in their gore."

"That was your uncle's suggestion, was it?" said Bob.

"That was it, sir, and my respected uncle was hurt in inmost soul when advice was contumeliously rejected. Such was his military ardour that he had made profound study of all books extant on art of war and duty of soldiers, and he assured me with tears welling out of dove-like eyes that nowhere did he find regulation forbidding adoption of artful dodge."

"Well, you'd better follow his example–only weep quietly."

"My word is this, sahib," said Gur Buksh. "Wait until Lawrence Sahib is back; then send the Kalmucks away. They will join their friends; who can resist Fate? we must fight them all. And I say too, sahib, send some of the Pathans this night to join Lawrence Sahib. They will go with great gladness of heart."

"That's a good idea. They will get to him before I start in the morning. But how can we get them off without making the Kalmucks suspicious? Some one would have to cross the bridge to give them orders. The bridge can't be let down

without a good deal of noise, and that would certainly bring them out to see what was going on."

The havildar thought for a minute, then suggested that Bob in his company should pay a visit of inspection to each of the camps. Mr. Appleton had several times done this at night, and if Bob were to make his inspection as formal in appearance as possible, nothing would be so likely to lull their suspicions. To this proposal Bob agreed. He dressed quickly, and in a few minutes left the house, with the havildar marching behind.

They visited the Kalmuck camp first, going from hut to hut, in which the men were engaged in various games. Some of them looked up in stolid silence as the sahib glanced round, uttered a word or two, and passed on. Others were sufficiently curious to ask what was happening down the river, and why the huzur had not returned. Bob fenced with their questions, and when he left them felt that he had only heightened their curiosity, even though he had given no sign that anything was amiss. Then, to keep up the pretence, he went to the stables, finally crossing to the Pathan camp, where he found a still more eager curiosity. Calling out the man who was next in authority to the wounded Muhammad, he told him quietly what he wished him to do, without informing him of the disappearance of Mr. Appleton. The man was delighted with the opportunity of leading a night march against the hated Kalmucks. A sudden and secret raid is the breath of life to a Pathan. He selected a dozen men to accompany him. Gur Buksh, without attracting attention, supplied them with arms, better than their own, from the mine armoury; and before nine o'clock they left their camp stealthily, making their way in single file up the hill path that skirted the Kalmuck quarters.

Bob and the havildar returned to their own side of the gorge and waited anxiously to assure themselves that the movement was not detected by the Kalmucks. The place at which the Pathans must descend to join the track was something less than two hundred yards north of the Kalmuck camp, and if one of them chanced to set a stone rolling, or struck his rifle against the rock, the sound would almost certainly be heard below. But not a click disturbed the stillness; no sound was added to the rustle of the river; and after waiting at the end of the drawbridge for about half an hour, Bob concluded that the men had reached the track safely, and returned with the havildar to the house.

There they remained for an hour discussing the measures which the havildar was to take next day. Ditta Lal had retired to his own quarters, to pass, it is to be feared, a very uneasy night: he was bold only when the odds were heavily on his side. Presently Fazl came to the house to report that he had cleaned the engine, replenished the tanks with petrol and lubricating oil, and examined all the gear. A thought struck Bob.

"I shall fly down-stream again as soon as it is light," he said. "Are you

willing to come with me?"

"The sahib orders," said the man, smiling with pleasure.

"Then get Shan Tai to give you two or three baskets of food and take them to the ledge. Meet me there as soon as there's any light in the sky. Bring your kukuri."

Fazl smiled again. No Gurkha goes abroad without his national weapon, half bill-hook, and half falchion. He departed, salaaming cheerfully.

"He'll be useful in looking after the machine if I'm otherwise engaged," thought Bob, as he went wearily to his room, to snatch a few hours' rest before he set off again. "Poor old Lawrie!" he said to himself. "I'm afraid he's desperately cold."

In the hurry of departure he had forgotten to hand out the wadded coat which Lawrence, like himself, wore when flying. Whether the little party at the bridge were disturbed by the enemy or not, he feared that his brother must pass a very uncomfortable night.

Up before daybreak, Bob, after a hurried breakfast, paid the promised visit to Muhammad, to whom, however, he told nothing. If the man was to be of any use in the fighting that might be in store, it was necessary that he should recover his strength, and such recovery would only be retarded by excitement. Then Bob supplied himself with plenty of cartridges, borrowed a red handkerchief from Chunda Beg, and made his way along the path to the aeroplane platform. Fazl was already there: everything was in order: and as soon as the grey light of dawn began to creep over the hill-tops, the two men got into their places, and with a hum and swish the aeroplane set forth on its flight down-stream.

Bob's experience of the previous night was reversed. Then, the curtain of shade had rolled up from the valley, ever higher, until sky and earth were mingled in one blackness. Now, the dark crept gradually downward, every minute uncovering a few more feet of the barren hill-sides. But during the brief flight from the mine the depths of the valley were scarcely penetrated by the feeble rays of morning, and it was not until the aeroplane came to the neighbourhood of the bridge that the river and the track upon its bank were distinguishable. Bob knew not what he might have passed during that forty minutes. Once, when he judged that about two-thirds of the flight was completed, he thought he heard a shout from below, and guessed that the Pathans, marching down the track, had caught the sound of his propeller, and had called to let him know that all was well.

The twilight had banished darkness from the bottom of the valley by the time he came in sight of the bridge. He looked anxiously down for his brother's party, and was on the point of shifting the elevator so as to drop a little nearer earth when he saw puffs of smoke just beyond the bend in the left bank, and im-

mediately afterwards heard the crack of rifles. Evidently the enemy were still in position. Reversing his movement, so as to rise instead of falling, and avoid the fate that had overtaken his uncle, he glanced down at the rocks near the bridge head, and saw grouped there a number of figures among whom he thought he recognized Lawrence. At the same moment a vociferous cheer reached him through the throbbing hum of the engine, and the greeting relieved him of anxiety about his brother.

Rising as quickly as possible, he held on his course, and in half a minute flew directly over the Kalmucks, and came in sight of the reach of the river beyond the bend. As he searched the banks, running the gauntlet of a fusillade, he was conscious of a feeling of dismay. For a full mile the river bank appeared to have been turned into a Kalmuck encampment. At irregular intervals above and below the winding track, the hill-side was dotted with tents and akois. Advantage seemed to have been taken of every square yard of level space to erect these portable shelters, which could be put up and taken down within a few minutes. It was clear that he had to reckon, not merely with the small party who had pursued him up-stream, but with a much larger number who had come up from the distant encampment during the previous afternoon and night. Horses were grouped wherever there was standing room for them. On the track and about the tents men were gathered, all gazing up into the sky, some taking shots at the aeroplane as it flew over them. It was flying swiftly, however, and with a vertical as well as a horizontal movement, so that even a practised sportsman, accustomed to shoot birds on the wing, could scarcely have hit his mark. Bob heard two or three bullets whistle past, but none struck the aeroplane or either of its occupants. Having seen so much, he determined to pursue his reconnaissance down the valley; it would be worth while to see if the camp on the plateau had been struck, for he would then be sure that the mine was indeed the objective of this force, and as he flew back be able, perhaps, to estimate its size. For the next few miles only a few straggling horsemen were visible, riding slowly up-stream. Then for a mile or two the track was bare, and he suspected that the men he had last seen were the rear of the enemy's force. Still flying on, he came at length to the place where the valley broadened, and finally to the plateau which had been the limit of his flight on the day before. Here he swept round several times in ever widening circles, carefully scanning the ground. The camp had completely disappeared. Thinking that in so wide an area the small object which the encampment would present at so great a depth might escape his notice, he wheeled again and again, until he assured himself that no trace of it was discoverable. Then he was setting his course to return to the valley, looking southward to pick up his bearings, when there was a sudden shout from the Gurkha. He glanced round: the man was pointing excitedly to the north-west.

Slowing down a little, but without altering his course, Bob looked in the same direction. The country was now bathed in sunlight; the air was clear; but he could perceive nothing to account for his companion's excitement. He had faith enough in the man's intelligence, however, to wheel round once more, and steer away from the valley.

"What is it, Fazl?" he asked.

"Tents, sahib; many tents, like flowers in a field."

It was at least a minute before Bob's less keen eyes were able to confirm the man's strange announcement. Then he recognized that a huge brown patch, which he might well have mistaken for an outcrop of rock, or some other natural feature of the landscape, was in reality an aggregation of nomad tents, similar to those which he had passed on the hill-side behind.

If he had felt dismay at the sight of the force assembled in the valley, his feeling now bordered on stupefaction. His brain was in a whirl. The misdeeds of Nurla Bai were as a pebble cast into a pond. The spreading circles had embraced a troop of Kalmuck horsemen, then a regiment, finally what appeared to be an army. The motive had developed from the spite and revenge of a single man to the greed of a company, and now–to what? Surely the inhabitants of this vast array of tents were not assembled for the puny purpose of snapping up a solitary silver mine. What design had brought them to this remote and barren tract in a desolate land?

These were questions to which Bob was utterly unable to guess at the answers. His surprise and alarm did but increase as he approached the scene. Around a point where a small tributary joined the river from the south-east, extended a large bare space several miles in area. Of this open tract a portion that must have been at least a square mile in area, bounded on one side by the left bank of the tributary and on the other by the right bank of the river, was dotted with a series of encampments, arranged in regular order, and looking in the distance not unlike a kind of chess-board. Counting them as he drew nearer, Bob found that there were twenty of these separate camps. As he approached the nearest, he tried to number the rows of tents, and the individual tents in each row. But his pace was too swift and his mind too bewildered to allow of an exact reckoning. His impression was that there were twenty rows of tents about ten deep. The tents were apparently small; if he were not deceived by the distance, none of them could harbour more than five or six men. But as his eye ranged over the whole encampment, and he made a rapid calculation, he came to the staggering conclusion that the total force there on the ground beneath him could

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not be far short of twenty thousand men.

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH
THE FIGHT AT THE BRIDGE

In the first moments of this amazing discovery, Bob's mind was confused by the multiplicity of his sensations and imaginings. There were several problems all clamouring at once for solution: his uncle's fate, the plight of Lawrence, the future of the mine. But he soon realized that no good result would come of aimless conjectures; "One thing at a time, and concentrate your attention" had been the motto dinned into him by one of his schoolmasters. The one insistent thing now was to learn all that he could about this encampment–too large to be a fortuitous gathering of nomads, too regular to be other than military in its organization.

Bob flew straight for the camp, and when he came above its centre he began to circle round and round with the object of getting a clear and orderly idea of its nature. Observation from the great height to which he had risen was not easy, and the necessity of keeping part of his attention upon the aeroplane was a drawback. Naturally he could not entrust the machine to Fazl, who was making his first flight. On the other hand the Gurkha, who was wholly without nervousness, could devote himself entirely to the task of observing. Thus, combining what Fazl reported with what he was himself able to see, Bob obtained in the course of twenty minutes a pretty good notion of the disposition of the camp and the various movements that were going on.

To the north, a large body of horsemen, who were exercising when he first caught sight of them, came to a halt, and were evidently intent on watching the flying machine. Still farther northward, long trains of primitive ox wagons were lumbering towards the camp, with a caravan of camels here and there. Attached to the body of cavalry on the plain there were no fewer than six batteries of field artillery. There was no regular road into or out of this solitary region, but from the appearance of the ground it was clear that the army had reached its present position from the north-west. There was a narrower and fainter track leading from the camp in the direction of the valley–no doubt the route followed by the men now posted on the river bank.

It was inevitable that the sight of the aeroplane, wheeling over the encampment in regular circles, should arouse lively curiosity and excitement among the

throngs of men below. Its appearance was greeted at first with shouts either of surprise or alarm. Bob had twice made the circuit before any action was taken: apparently the spectators had not made up their minds as to the nature of this strange visitor, or were waiting for orders. But as he began to circle for the third time a change came over the scene. His systematic movements forced upon the men the notion that he was scouting, spying upon them; and as soon as this was realized they came to the conclusion that he was an enemy who must be dealt with. At first there were a few scattered shots; then regular volleys; at last an almost continuous crackle of musketry. By this time Bob had discovered all that was possible from his altitude, and feeling that nothing was to be gained by running risks, he decided to swing round and head for the valley.

The marksmanship of the enemy's riflemen had not been such as to alarm him hitherto; but it was a different matter when, soon after he turned, the aeroplane became the target of one of the field batteries. Hearing the deeper crack of two of the guns, he instantly steered to the left, to gain a minute's grace while the guns were being trained in the new direction. No third shot was fired; the gunners evidently recognized that the odds were all against their hitting him. At the same time a troop of horse who had started at a gallop in pursuit reined up; since the guns were ineffectual it was not worth while chasing him on the chance of a sudden mishap bringing him to the ground.

Another five minutes brought him to the entrance of the valley. He still maintained a great height until he had passed over the encampment on the lull-side; then, instructing Fazl to wave the red handkerchief as they flew over the bridge, he executed a steep vol plané down to the neighbourhood of the rocks held by Lawrence and the Pathans. It went altogether against the grain to skim over the open space without landing; but he knew that he could not have done so without becoming the mark for hundreds of bullets. No other course was open to him than to adhere to the plan already arranged with Lawrence, and sweep on up the gorge towards the mine.

Another cheer greeted him from the little party below. All, then, was still well with them. Accepting the signal of the red flag, Lawrence would now withdraw his men, and hasten up the track as swiftly as possible. No doubt he would get a mount behind one of the Pathans. That pursuit by the enemy would be doubly difficult Bob recognized when he noticed–what had escaped his observation as he flew down-stream–that the handrail of the bridge had now disappeared. There was no means of crossing the river at this point. He supposed that Lawrence, during the night, had taken the precaution to cut the rope. This was reassuring; it seemed to show that Lawrence, though without military training and, as he himself had said, without military instincts, yet was possessed of readiness and common sense, qualities of much value both to soldiers and civilians.

At the same time Bob was rather loth to leave his brother to deal with the enemy alone, in case they managed in some unimaginable way to cross the river. He felt tempted to land somewhere within a few miles of the bridge, and return on foot to take command of the party. But on second thoughts this seemed to him a short-sighted policy. Though he could not conceive that this army corps was directed against the Appleton mine, the situation clearly demanded that he should return and assist in completing the havildar's arrangements for the defence. The capture of the mine might be regarded by the enemy as a trifling exploit by the way. It was particularly important that the large force of Kalmuck miners should be disposed of. They, if they realized the position, held the key of the situation. There was little doubt that with a sudden rush they could scatter the few Pathans now left at the mine, in the teeth of the Sikh garrison. They would then be able to cut off the retreat of Lawrence and his party, trapped between the Kalmuck miners and their countrymen advancing up the valley. It was imperative, then, that he should get back to the mine as quickly as possible, and his uneasiness at leaving Lawrence was partially removed when, a dozen miles from the bridge, he met the party of Pathans whom he had dispatched overnight. Yet, if he could have foreseen the events of the next few hours, he would have cast to the winds all questions of policy, and risked a descent.

As he flew over the bridge, there had been nothing, except the broken rope, to indicate that any change had taken place in the situation since he left the spot on the previous evening. But Lawrence, during the hours of darkness, had in fact passed through the most exciting experience of his life.

When Bob sailed away up the gorge, and as soon as the humming of his propeller could no longer be heard, Lawrence began to carry out his instructions for the night. He felt no little anxiety; indeed, it was a trying position for a lad who found himself, for the first time in his life, faced with difficulties and dangers for which he had had no preparation. But after all, it is character that tells. Lawrence was naturally cool and level-headed; he had been known at school as a "sticker" at cricket; he could wear out half-a-dozen bowlers. His school had taught him lessons of self-reliance, and though he had never been very enthusiastic in the cadet corps, he had won the mark of efficiency, could shoot straight, and had learnt to think quickly and act with promptitude. So, in spite of a natural nervousness, he saw quite clearly what he had to do, and had grit enough to make up his mind to do it.

He stationed two men behind the rocks near the bridge head, ordering them to fire if they saw the least sign of an attempt to cross. They were to be relieved every two hours. Mindful of Bob's advice, he determined to keep watch all night himself: there was no one to relieve him. Very soon, as night settled deep upon the valley, he began to feel the cold, and thought regretfully of the thick coat lying

on his seat in the aeroplane. After the fatigues and wearing anxieties of the day he was not in a condition to face the added strain of a long vigil in the freezing air. He had great difficulty in keeping awake, and when one of the Pathans lent him a saddle cloth in which to wrap himself, he soon discarded it, lest the deceitful warmth should overcome his watchfulness.

He dared not move about, but sat crouched on the ground beside the Pathans with his rifle across his knees, listening for any sign of the approach of the enemy. More than once he had to stir up his companions when they dozed, until he grew tired of it; he would rely on himself, and wake them at the first threatening of danger. But he found it increasingly difficult to resist the soporific influence of the cold, and of the monotonous lullaby sung by the river as it flowed past at the foot of the shelving bank beneath him. Every now and then he got up, stretched himself, and sat down again, not venturing even to slap himself with his arms for fear of putting the enemy on the alert. He gazed up into the sky, and tried to count and to identify the stars, which, in this deep valley, appeared to him, he thought, as they would appear to an observer at the bottom of a well. From time to time he exchanged a few whispered words with his companions, until this resource failed him through their slumberousness. When, at the end of the first two hours, the men were relieved, the circumstances of the change had the effect of rousing him a little; but the second pair were even more sleepy than the first, and he lacked the energy to be continually prodding them.

At length, when, in spite of his utmost efforts, he was nodding with drowsiness, his ear was suddenly caught by a slight sound beneath him. He pulled himself together, and listened intently. There was no repetition of the sound. He began to think that he had been mistaken, or that the sound had been made by some small animal scurrying along the bank. But a few seconds later he heard it again; it was like that of a small stone rolling down the rocky shelf. Now fully awake, he nudged his companions and in a whisper bade them keep quiet and listen. The Pathan passes from profound sleep to complete wakefulness in an instant. They sat erect, all their senses on the alert. For a few moments nothing was heard but the gurgling rush of the river; then with startling suddenness the three watchers were aware that men were scrambling up the slope. They sprang up. Dark shapes were dimly outlined beyond the rocks. The Pathans fired, aiming as it were at shadows. Their shots did not check the rush. In another moment, clubbing their rifles, Lawrence and they were raining blows upon a swarm of figures that seemed to spring out of the black depths beneath them.

Neither Lawrence nor either of the men could afterwards give a lucid account of the confused scramble that ensued. All that they were sure about was that, if they saw a form between them and the river, they hit out at it. It soon became impossible to distinguish friend from foe. In spite of their swift and weighty

strokes the enemy, whose number seemed only to increase, pressed ever more closely upon them.

Lawrence had just brought the butt of his rifle down with a rattling thud upon what he hoped was a Mongol skull, when the weapon was seized, and he felt himself jerked forward. He clung to the barrel tenaciously, but in trying to hold his own in this tug-of-war he lost his footing, let go the rifle perforce, and found himself rolling, or rather jolting, down the bank. Grasping at the sharp knobs of rock, he checked his fall before he came to the water's edge, and lay for an instant to collect himself. It was perhaps a minute since the tussle had begun.

Hitherto the enemy had preserved a remarkable silence. The two Pathans, on the other hand, had raised lusty shouts, calling to their companions by name. Roused by the shots, and urged on by their comrades' cries, the Pathans behind the rocks some little distance up-stream came bounding to the rescue. Lawrence heard scrambling footsteps above him; he was kicked in the side by a man coming hastily down the bank, and the sound of splashes near at hand seemed to show that the enemy, in full retreat, were plunging into the river. Their surprise having failed, they had lost heart. Climbing the bank on all fours, Lawrence found his whole party assembled above. Just as he reached them, the newcomers opened fire upon several figures which they saw swinging themselves over by the rope. At the first shot these men halted, turned, and began frantically to work themselves back towards the farther side. Then Fyz Ali sprang forward on to the tangled debris of the bridge, and with two sweeping strokes of his knife cut the rope in twain. There was a mighty splash, a howl of rage, and then silence.

"What orders, sahib?" said the Pathan. In the short, sharp, confused struggle, the men were unaware of Lawrence's narrow escape, and were no more concerned about him than about themselves. Every one of them bore some mark of the conflict–bruise, abrasion, or knife-cut. Lawrence felt bruised from top to toe. But in the dark no man could see his fellow's wounds, and it would have been thought childish to talk of them.

"We had better stay here for the rest of the night," said Lawrence, in reply to Fyz Ali's question. "You have quite done for the bridge, and it's no use to anybody. But those badmashes got over some other way, and they would do it again if we weren't here to stop them."

"That is true, sahib–if they like to put their fingers into the fire."

"How did they get across? They could hardly swim up against the current."

"Mashallah! Who can say? But we shall know in the morning, sahib."

There was no more dozing that night. The whole party sat nursing their rifles and chatting quietly. Lawrence got the men to relate some of the experiences of their life, and though he could not understand very much of what they said, he recognized that there was a rich mine of anecdote to be drawn upon as

soon as he had sufficient command of their language.

The remaining hours of darkness were undisturbed, and at dawn there was no renewal of hostilities. The daylight gave a clue to the means by which the enemy had crossed the river. At the foot of the rocks south of the bridge, near Lawrence's rifle, lay several inflated water-skins. Fyz Ali guessed that the men had crept along the opposite bank to some distance above the bridge, then taken the water, and supporting themselves on the skins, had steered themselves over.

Lawrence wondered whether the enemy had evacuated their position beyond the bend in the track. Attempts to draw their fire were unsuccessful, and he remained in doubt until the passing of the aeroplane overhead was saluted with a volley. His doubts being now removed, he waited anxiously for Bob's return. His uncle's fate, never for long absent from his mind, made him uneasy as to his brother's chances of escaping scot-free. As time passed, and there was no sign of the aeroplane, he grew more and more restless, imagining all sorts of mishaps that might have occurred. He expected Bob to return within half an hour; it would not take longer to fly to the plateau and back; and his watch having stopped through his immersion on the previous day, he could only guess at the flight of time, with the result that he supposed Bob's absence to have been longer than it really was.

His intense relief when at last he saw the aeroplane in the distant sky, gave way to disquietude again when Bob swooped down towards the bridge within range of the enemy's fire. The fluttering of the red flag was welcome to him, even though he understood it as a sign that the enemy were in considerable force. It was also a signal to retreat to the mine, and he was glad of the chance of stretching his limbs and of soon rejoining his brother. He at once gave orders to the men to return to their horses. They crossed the open space at the double until they gained the shelter of the screen of rocks. No shots followed them. There was no horse for Lawrence, but Fyz Ali assured him that his own mount was capable of bearing a double burden, and he decided to ride behind him until they had got some distance up the track, and then to walk.

He felt that there was no serious risk of pursuit at present. Although the enemy had shown that they could cross the river with the aid of water-skins, they would have great difficulty in bringing their horses over. So he reckoned on getting a long enough start to meet the reinforcements that Bob had promised to send down. Then the combined party, taking advantage of the many defensive positions which the broken ground afforded, could make good their retreat to the

mine even against a more numerous enemy in pursuit.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH
A SKIRMISH ON THE BANK

Lawrence, riding behind Fyz Ali, reflected with rueful amusement on the fate which had made him a sort of soldier in his own despite. "I'm not cut out for this kind of job," he thought. "Bob would be elated at having shivered through a night watch, and beaten off an attack. I don't feel particularly jolly; in fact, I feel thoroughly rotten; and there's more to come, worse luck."

It is said that the greatest commanders have felt depressed rather than exalted after a victory; so that, remembering the hardships and anxieties of the past twenty-four hours, one can sympathize with Lawrence Appleton. It did not occur to him that he had come through his recent ordeal with much credit, and he was quite unaware that the Pathans ahead were discussing him as they rode, summing him up, and deciding that the chota sahib was a first-rate fighting man.

After riding at a trot for about half a mile, Lawrence said:

"Now I'll get off and walk, Fyz Ali. The pony's lagging."

"Not so, sahib," replied the man. "I will walk; the sahib is used to a softer life."

"The more reason why I should harden myself."

"That is true, sahib; but it is foolishness to yoke a calf to an ox-wagon."

By which Lawrence understood that this stalwart man regarded him as still an ungrown boy. He made no more objection; Fyz Ali dismounted, and kept pace with him over the rugged ground to which they had now come.

Thus the little party marched for another mile. They went for the most part in single file, the track only rarely widening so much as to give them room to ride abreast. It was at one of such broader stretches that a sudden demand was made upon Lawrence's quickness and resource. He was riding in front with two of the Pathans; the other two mounted men were a few yards behind, with Fyz Ali on foot between them. Quite suddenly, about two hundred yards ahead, there came into view from round a high rock a band of at least a score of men, marching towards them. Lawrence had been expecting to meet the Pathan reinforcements from the mine, and he might at the first moment have mistaken the strangers but for a savage yell from the men at his side. Then he recognized in a flash that they

were Kalmucks.

Both parties had momentarily halted; each was as much surprised as the other. Then, as Lawrence saw some of the Kalmucks lifting rifles to their shoulders, he became instantly alive to the situation. Without a moment's hesitation he dug his heels into the flanks of his pony, and, shouting to his men to come on, he rode straight at the enemy. It was the psychological moment. The Kalmucks were apparently without a leader; or their leader, if they had one, was a shade less quick-witted than the Englishman. With a spirited captain the warlike Pathans will go anywhere and do anything. Responding to his call with a true mountaineer's yell the men urged their steeds to a gallop, and swooped down upon the still hesitating enemy.

Lawrence could not have decided better if all the circumstances had been known to him. Some of the Kalmucks, after the failure of their night attack, had crossed the river some distance below the bridge, and marching on foot for long hours in the darkness over the difficult and tortuous path through the hills, had turned back along the track to take the defenders in the rear. They were weary: they had no regular leader; and being accustomed to fight on horseback they were demoralized at the sight of mounted Pathans, few as they were, galloping straight at them. With a well-directed volley they might have annihilated the little band; but they let the opportunity slip. A few stood their ground and fired; the rest took flight, and while some scurried up the hill-side, seeking cover in the broken ground, where horses could not well follow them, others turned tail and bolted straight back along the track.

The few shots thus wildly fired missed all the Pathans save one, and he was only scratched. Lawrence and his men pressed their advantage. Two of the Pathans wheeled to the right, and in spite of the steepness of the hill-side and the many natural obstacles, they dashed up in pursuit of the fleeing Kalmucks, cutting down several with their terrible tulwars before they could reach safety. Lawrence rode straight at the men who had fired. He overturned one by the impact of his horse, struck another down with his clubbed rifle, and then led his men after the others, who were running, some up, some down the bank. Two or three Kalmucks sprang into the river; within ten minutes the whole body was completely scattered. Only at the last did one who had climbed to an inaccessible crag on the hill-side and recovered from his panic, take good aim and roll a Pathan from his horse with a mortal wound.

The charge was over; the victory was complete; and Lawrence reined up his panting pony. Not till then did he remember that Fyz Ali was not mounted, and must have been left far behind. What had become of him? Lawrence turned and looked back along the track. He was not in sight.

"Stay here," he said to the Pathans; "I'll go back and look for Fyz Ali."

"Hai, sahib!" said one of the men, "it is foolishness. See, Ayoub is dead. Some of the dogs of Kalmucks are hiding behind the rocks above; they will shoot you even as they shot Ayoub."

"Nonsense: I'm riding Fyz Ali's horse: I can't leave him in the lurch."

He rode back along the track, and after a moment's hesitation one of the Pathans followed him. Warned by the fate of Ayoub they proceeded with caution, scanning the hill-side for signs of the enemy. For half a mile or more they saw neither foe nor friend, except the bodies of those who had fallen in the fray. Then they came in view of a strange procession. At this point the hill-side to the left of the track rose so steeply as to be unscalable. It was here that the Kalmucks, hard pressed, had flung themselves into the river. A few hundred yards ahead they saw two men approaching them, walking slowly backward. One of them was Fyz Ali, the other a Kalmuck. Fyz Ali had the man by the middle, holding him so that he formed a screen against a dozen Kalmucks who were slipping from rock to rock on the hill-side some distance beyond. Evidently they were watching for a chance to take a shot at the Pathan, but were baffled by his ingenious device. By keeping the prisoner constantly between him and them, he rendered it impossible for them to fire without the risk of hitting their own man.

Smiling with appreciation of Fyz Ali's manoeuvre, Lawrence dismounted, and ordered his man to dismount also. Then leading the ponies behind a rock, they knelt down, took aim at the distant Kalmucks, and fired. It was doubtful whether their shots took effect, but they checked the pursuit, and Fyz Ali seized the opportunity to hasten his retreat. Hugging the perpendicular wall, he came nearer and nearer, never loosing his hold of the Kalmuck, nor allowing his own person to be exposed.

The Kalmucks beyond returned Lawrence's fire, but they made no attempt to advance. They were not equal to the desperate venture of leaving their cover among the rocks and running the gauntlet along the open space which Fyz Ali and his prisoner were now traversing. In another two minutes the Pathan had joined his master.

"That was well done," said Lawrence, welcoming him.

Fyz Ali, breathing hard, set his prisoner against the rock, and holding him there with his left hand, drew his tulwar.

"No, no," said Lawrence hastily.

"Why, sahib? He is a Kalmuck," said Fyz Ali, and his eyes glared as he looked round.

"It is not our way," said Lawrence, "to kill prisoners. And he is unarmed."

"But I am not!" growled the Pathan. "Would he not kill me? Did not Nurla Bai try to kill Muhammad, unarmed and sleeping? It will be short, sahib."

"No, I can't allow it. Tie his hands together so that he can do no mischief;

then we'll leave him to his friends."

Fyz Ali muttered between his teeth, but obeyed. He tore off the man's coat; it was dripping wet; the Kalmuck was one of those who had sprung into the river, and he had clambered up the bank in the nick of time to serve the quick-witted Pathan as a screen. With a few strokes of his tulwar Fyz Ali slit the coat into shreds, with which he bound the trembling man's hands together. Then, striking him heavily on the face–the Pathan is not chivalrous towards his enemies–he hauled him to the top of a rock, and left him there.

Lawrence and the two Pathans then hastened back to the place where they had left the others. These had given their dead comrade burial in the river. Then all resumed their march. They looked back whenever they reached a spot where they could get a view of the track behind them, but there was no sign of pursuit.

"They must have come over the hills in the night," said Lawrence, walking beside Fyz Ali, whom he had insisted on remounting. "Where does the hill-path join the track?"

"I know not, sahib," replied the man. "The Kalmucks know the path: it is their country."

"Well, keep your eyes open as we go, and see if you can find it. We may as well know."

They scanned the hill-side narrowly, and about twenty minutes later Lawrence noticed a narrow cleft in the precipice above the track which might possibly be the lower end of the hill-path. He stopped and examined the ground at the entrance, but it was so hard that the skin boots of the Kalmucks could have left no trace on it. Had they been mounted, the hoof marks would have been easily discoverable. Lawrence glanced up the winding cleft. It seemed an unlikely enough passage-way; indeed, at a height of several hundred feet above the track it appeared to come abruptly to an end. Lawrence deliberated for a few moments whether to climb and satisfy himself one way or the other; but decided that he had better not delay.

Ten minutes later they met the reinforcements from the mine. The men had heard firing in the distance and hurried on at full speed. On learning from their comrades of what had happened, they were eager to push on and annihilate the surviving Kalmucks, and one of them, when Lawrence refused to go back, muttered under his breath that the Englishman was afraid. Fyz Ali caught the words, and turned fiercely on the man.

"I'll slit your throat if you talk foolishness, Hosein," he said. "The chota sahib is a man; get that into your silly head. Did he not fight at the bridge? And when we met those Kalmuck pigs, did he not in a twinkling see what was to be done, and ride straight at them, cheering as the sahibs always do? And when I was left behind, he came back for me, though the dogs were hidden among the

rocks and had just killed Ayoub. He is a man, I tell you; mashallah! what he says is good, and what he does is better, and I will cut your hand off if you do not swear to follow wherever he leads."

"Peace, brother," said the man. "How was I to know? His beard is not yet grown. Allah is great! All the sahibs are men, even in the cradle."

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH
THE REVOLT OF THE KALMUCK MINERS

While Lawrence was thus making his first essays in an apprenticeship to soldiering, his brother had found work to do which outran the little military experience he had gained.

After giving Lawrence the signals agreed on, Bob steered straight up the valley. His mind was very busy during the half-hour's flight to the mine. The management of the aeroplane had become so much a matter of habit and instinct that he was able to give a good deal of attention to his thoughts and imaginings. Telling Fazl to keep a good look-out, he sought to grapple with the strange problems so suddenly thrust upon him.

First and greatest of them all was the meaning of the concentration of troops at the mouth of the valley. He dismissed as patently absurd the idea that their objective was his uncle's mine. The gathering of so large a force for so trifling an end would be like employing a steam-hammer to crack a nut. He could not avoid the conclusion that their presence was quite independent of Nurla Bai, though on the other hand Nurla Bai's actions had probably been calculated with the knowledge or suspicion that a body of his countrymen was at hand.

What then was the explanation of the muster? The direction of their march, and the fact that they had thrown forward an advanced guard into the valley itself, seemed to indicate an intention to proceed through the valley to some further goal. What was that goal? He remembered the intelligence that had come in at odd times, of a levy *en masse* of the Mongols, and his uncle's suspicion that the Mongolian prince was meditating an attack on Russia. But this was not the way to Russia. Could it be that Afghanistan was the object of an invasion? Bob's knowledge of the geography of the region was not very extensive, but he knew that, if Afghanistan was their objective, this valley was one of the most toilsome and indirect routes they could have chosen. The passes of the Hindu Kush to the

westward offered few or no obstacles to an invading force; it was by these passes that the Mongolian hordes had always made their inroads, from the earliest times. Not only would the nature of the valley render the advance of a large army extremely arduous and prolonged; if the invaders should traverse it successfully, they would find themselves at what was probably the most intricate and inaccessible portion of the Amir's dominions. It would be like marching from London to Chester through the Welsh mountains, with every difficulty monstrously exaggerated. Wellington's passage of the Pyrenees was a slight operation compared with it.

What other end could they have in view? The valley ran southward, and led ultimately of course to India, but an invasion of India by this route was too ridiculous to be considered seriously. Ambitious as the Mongol prince was, it was scarcely conceivable that he could entertain such a notion, unless he had taken leave of his senses. The twenty thousand men now encamped at the mouth of the valley would need to be multiplied ten or twenty times before there would be the slightest chance of success. There might, in truth, be many more such army corps massed farther northward; but the task of pushing an invading force, adequate to the undertaking, through the narrow gorges of the valley, where for long stretches three horsemen could not ride abreast, with the necessary artillery, ammunition wagons and commissariat, would prove too much for the most consummate military organizer. It would take so long that a defending force on the north-west frontier could cut up the more advanced sections long before the rest could move up to their support. In short, the whole idea was fantastic, and Bob called himself an ass for even thinking of it.

Giving up this question as beyond his conjecture, Bob bent his mind upon the problem that immediately concerned him. This was a sufficiently hard nut to crack. The Kalmucks, whatever their ultimate intention might be, were clearly to be regarded as enemies. On that point their actions were quite conclusive. Whether he owed their aggressiveness to Nurla Bai or not, they were a menace to the mine and its owners. Nurla Bai would certainly take advantage of their proximity to attempt to capture the settlement, and no doubt could command the assistance of as many men as he needed.

It is not surprising that Bob's heart sank with dismay as he reckoned up the puny force he had to pit against such overwhelming numbers. Of all his people, only the handful of Sikhs were trained to war. The Pathans were warriors by nature, but he doubted how far he could rely on their loyalty. At present, it was true, they were deeply incensed against the Kalmucks; but whether they, if called upon, would take definite sides against their racial enemies in face of the enormous odds arrayed against them, was a matter on which there was room for grave doubt. The Kalmuck labourers at the mine were a further complication.

They would certainly make common cause with their own countrymen as soon as these came within striking distance. Alone they out-numbered the Sikhs and Pathans by two to one.

The more Bob thought of all this, the more anxious and depressed he became. He wondered whether it was wise to attempt to stem the human torrent that would soon be pouring up the valley. Would not the better course be to come to terms with the Kalmucks, abandon the mine, and set off with all speed for India? Hitherto, it was true, the enemy had given him no opportunity for negotiating. They had been the aggressors, unprovoked; and his determination hardened when he remembered the fate of Mr. Appleton. But as there was just a possibility that no sort of concert existed between the Kalmuck army and Nurla Bai, the idea of making terms with the former was not wholly negligible.

So far as his immediate duty was concerned, Bob was quite clear in his mind. It was to secure the retreat of Lawrence and his little party. In order to reach the mine they would have to pass the quarters of the Kalmuck miners. The bridge down-stream being broken, Bob could not suppose that Lawrence would be so hotly pursued as to endanger his return. But with temper high among the workers at the mine, some care might be needed to prevent an explosion when the Pathans came up. The first thing to be done was to devise some means by which Lawrence and his men could reach the settlement in safety. Allowing for the difficulties of the track, they could hardly, even though mounted, arrive until late in the afternoon. He had the whole day in which to make his preparations.

Bob did not think out the position as consecutively as his thoughts are presented here. His busy mind flitted from one point to another doubling on itself, as it were. And his reflections were suddenly interrupted by an exclamation from his companion. The Gurkha, having no mental puzzles to work out, had been able to give undivided attention to his master's instructions. As before, his keener eye had detected what Bob, even if less preoccupied, could scarcely have perceived so soon. Far ahead, over the valley, there lay a long dark streak which in a less clear atmosphere than that of this highland region might have been taken for a wisp of cloud. But Fazl made no such mistake.

"Smoke, sahib!" he cried.

The words gave Bob a shiver of apprehension. Was it possible that the mine-buildings were on fire? He felt almost overwhelmed at the thought. With every succeeding second in his swift flight it became more and more likely that this was the explanation. While still many miles distant, he recognized that the smoke must have its origin somewhere at least in the neighbourhood of the mine. Fast as the aeroplane was flying, he wished that for a few minutes he could double its speed. But when at last he opened up the reach of the river bordering the mine, he saw with joy that the smoke was rising, not from the compounds on the right,

but from the miners' quarters on the opposite bank.

A slight breeze was blowing from the north-west, carrying the smoke up the valley. In a few more seconds Bob saw that the conflagration was confined to the Pathan portion of the camp. As he turned a slight bend and had a view of the whole settlement, a hasty glance assured him that there was no sign of injury in the mine compounds. Flying on, he noticed a number of figures in the compounds below, apparently the Sikhs on guard. The Kalmuck camp was deserted; between it and the burning huts of the Pathans, and up the bank of the river, he caught sight of a number of prostrate forms here and there. Then above the whirr of the propeller he heard, far in the distance, the sound of firing. It came from up the river. At that moment Bob felt as a small schoolboy feels when suddenly plunged into a new subject–say the binomial theorem before he has mastered quadratic equations. Here was a fresh problem before the others were solved. But he held on his course, wheeled round at the usual place, and flying back alighted once more on his platform.

"Just see to things while I go on," he said to Fazl.

When he was half-way along the cantilever pathway he caught sight of Ditta Lal waddling towards him at a pace dangerous to a man of apoplectic habit.

"Oh, sir," gasped the Babu as they met, "horrors upon horror's head accumulate. Pelion is heaped on Ossa. Misfortunes come, not as single spies, but in battalions."

"What has happened?" said Bob shortly: he was always impatient of the Babu's determination that no one should forget he was a Calcutta B.A.

And then Ditta Lal, driven to brevity by shortness of breath and the difficulty of keeping pace with Bob's long strides, related the occurrences of the past hour.

Very shortly after Bob had left the mine in his aeroplane, when the domestic staff were at breakfast, and the Sikhs were engaged in carrying out his instructions, a clamour had suddenly broken out on the other side of the river. Looking across, they had seen the whole body of Kalmuck miners rushing tumultuously over the neutral ground into the Pathans' quarters. Before Gur Buksh could order his men to fire, the two parties were inextricably mixed. For a few seconds there had been a wild, fierce conflict; then the Pathans, taken by surprise and hopelessly outnumbered, fled like deer up the track, pursued by the Kalmucks. Some of these paused for a little to fire and plunder the Pathans' huts, then sped after their comrades. By this time Gur Buksh had lined his men up near the drawbridge and ordered them to fire at the Kalmucks. Several of them dropped, and there lay with them on the ground a few of the Pathans who, unable to get away in time, had fallen to their enemies' knives.

Gur Buksh had been ordered not to leave the mine with his men, and true to

his military discipline he had obeyed his instructions to the letter. But Chunda Beg had sent over some of the servants to bring in the wounded men, among whom were several Kalmucks. The former were now being tended in the outhouses; the latter were locked up in one of the sheds. Meanwhile the Pathans and their pursuers had disappeared along the track. Ever since, sounds of firing had been heard intermittently, growing fainter and fainter. It was clear that the Pathans were still in retreat, and also that, in spite of the surprise, some of them at least had managed to snatch up their arms before they ran. By this time they must be several miles away.

"What was the cause of the outbreak?" asked Bob.

Ditta Lal could only suggest that it was due to sudden madness inspired by the Furies. Bob left him, to consult the havildar. He was utterly perplexed. It seemed as though there were electric communication between the Kalmuck miners and their countrymen down-stream, for they could not have heard already of what had happened forty miles away.

It was not merely perplexing, but a staggering blow. Bob had reckoned on employing the Pathans to garrison the mine if resistance should be considered possible, or at least on forming a compact body to accompany his retreat if he should feel it necessary to abandon the place. Apparently they were now hopelessly dispersed, and he could not help thinking that such of them as escaped the guns of their pursuers would hasten up the valley towards their homes. At that moment he almost made up his mind that his only course was to follow them as quickly as he could: the defence of the mine seemed utterly impossible.

Then another element of the situation forced itself upon his tired brain. The Kalmucks, when they had driven the Pathans away, would doubtless return. If they were allowed to get past the mine, Lawrence and his party would be completely cut off. They could scarcely arrive before nightfall; there was ample time for the Kalmucks to hurry back, and force their way past, even though the rifles of the Sikhs might account for some of them. The interception of Lawrence must be prevented at all costs, and in the necessity of devising some means to this end Bob had no leisure to acquaint Gur Buksh with his morning's discovery.

"We must keep the Kalmucks off till Lawrence Sahib is back," he said. "How can we do it?"

"Bring the machine gun to the south wall, sahib," replied the old Sikh.

"Yes; you'll have to make an embrasure. The gun will command the track for half a mile along the straight, and they won't face it. There's another thing, havildar. Send some men over to the other side to bring in all the food they can collect, and any arms they may find. The horses too: there are only three or four left, and we must make shift to keep them on this side. Just set about it at once."

The havildar saluted and withdrew.

Bob lighted a cigarette, and paced up and down, thinking hard. If only Major Endicott or some other experienced soldier were at hand to advise! He felt weighed down by his responsibilities; yet beneath all his anxieties, there was a large reserve of courage and resolution. He watched the Sikhs dragging the machine gun across the compound. Undoubtedly it would check the Kalmucks as they marched back towards the mine. But he wondered whether it would be wise to use it. It would cost many lives; the slaughter of the miners would infuriate their fellow-countrymen, and destroy any chance there might be of making terms with them. Yet there seemed no other means of assuring his brother's safe return.

Following in imagination the pursuit along the river bank, he thought of the Pathans and their fate. He listened for rifle-shots; but the sounds had ceased. By this time, no doubt, the chase had gone beyond hearing. Perhaps it had ceased; perhaps the Pathans were all slaughtered by their more numerous foes; perhaps the Kalmucks were content to have driven them away, and the survivors were trudging a weary march to the borders of their own land. What would their fate be? They had no food: the country was barren: they must surely fall a prey to fatigue, exposure and famine, or to hostile tribes *en route*, long before they could hope for hospitality. This dismal prospect made Bob very uncomfortable. After all, these men were the most loyal and law-abiding of his uncle's workers; it seemed cruel to let them go without lifting a hand to help them. Yet what could he do? No doubt if he were to lead the Sikhs to pursue the Kalmucks in their turn, with their military training, few as they were, they might crush the undisciplined rabble. But he dared not thus leave the mine ungarrisoned. It would be long, indeed, before the Kalmucks could arrive from the north unless the unexpected happened; but so many unexpected and inexplicable things had happened during the last twenty-four hours that he could not take any action that would involve risk either to Lawrence or to the non-combatants at the mine.

As he paced to and fro, watching the Sikhs going quickly about their work, and the servants returning over the drawbridge, laden with what they had gathered from the miners' quarters, it occurred to him suddenly that if only the aeroplane were equipped for war some of his difficulties would be solved. He had intended to qualify for the aerial corps in the British army, but that dream was over: flying had been to him merely a sport. Could he have foreseen the strange circumstances of the last few days, he would have adapted his machine, not merely for pleasure trips and observation, but for actual offence.

One idea leads to another, and next minute Bob was asking himself whether even now he could not make an attempt to turn the aeroplane to military uses. A few bombs dropped among or near the Kalmucks would put an effective check upon their pursuit of the Pathans. He had no bombs; could he improvise some? There was plenty of dynamite in the little recess behind the house. And in

another moment a plan flashed upon his mind. Flinging away the end of his cigarette he hurried to Ditta Lal's store shed.

"Babu, have you got any small empty tins?" he asked, bursting into the room.

Ditta Lal jumped.

"My nerves are in terrible state, sir," he said. "Tins! Yes, to be sure: coffee, preserved pears, condensed milk, sardines–or more correctly, bristlings: tins of all sorts, quite an embarrassment."

"Get me a dozen or two tins with lids: there are several tobacco tins in the house. Fill them nearly to the top with small stones, with a few percussion caps among them: you'll get them from the havildar. Be as quick as you can."

"Pardon me, sir, are you intending to lay a mine, floating or otherwise?"

Bob had not waited for the conclusion of the question, but hurried to the little private store behind the house, from which he returned presently with a quantity of dynamite. The Babu was too slow for him. He sent Chunda Beg and Shan Tai hunting for tins, and as they were prepared according to his directions, he carefully filled them up with dynamite and securely fastened the lids. When he had fifteen ready, he put them into a basket, and carried them himself along the pathway to the aeroplane. Fazl had meanwhile got everything ready for another flight.

"You know what a bomb is, Fazl?" said Bob.

The Gurkha grinned.

"Well, these tins are bombs. Put them just below your seat: take care not to drop one. We are going up the river: give me the tins one by one as I ask for them."

They started. For the first mile or two Bob kept very low over the river, seeing here and there, at long intervals, traces of the fight waged between the Pathans and the Kalmucks–figures lying prone and motionless, others sitting with their backs against the rocks, one or two limping painfully along. Presently he heard the dull cracks of rifles, though as yet he could not see the combatants. As the sounds grew louder, he rose higher: with his explosive cargo on board it was more than ever necessary that he should keep out of range. Experience had already shown him that the aeroplane in full flight was a very difficult object to hit with ordinary weapons; but nothing must be left to chance now.

CHAPTER THE FOURTEENTH

RALLYING THE PATHANS

Six or seven miles above the mine the gorge contracted, leaving a space that barely exceeded twice the breadth of the aeroplane. In his first flights along the river Bob had felt rather nervous in threading this narrow passage. It was here that he found the two parties of miners. He reduced the speed of the aeroplane as much as he could, and at the altitude to which he had now ascended he was able to get a pretty good general view of the position of affairs as he flew over. It was impossible to distinguish details. The figures of the men were like dots on a map. The track and the adjacent ground seemed absolutely flat and level, though Bob knew that it was really much broken, and of constantly varying height. But he made rapid inferences from what he saw, and by the time he had passed over both the parties of combatants he was in no doubt as to his course of action.

What he saw was, up-stream, a small group, stationary, in the narrowest part of the valley: some little distance from them, down-stream, a larger group, also stationary, and a number of scattered individuals, moving southward, looking like flies crawling slowly over a dish, but all in the same direction. The inference he drew from these observations was that the Pathans, having been kept on the run to this point, had taken advantage of the nature of the ground to turn at bay, either in desperation, or to snatch a rest before continuing their retreat: and that the Kalmucks had separated, one party holding the track, the other scaling the hill-side above in order to turn the Pathans' flank. At the moment of his passing over he heard a faint crackle like the rustling of paper, and saw puffs of smoke among each band of combatants. The men were firing briskly, no doubt from behind the shelter of rocks.

It was obvious that there could be but one end to this fight. The Kalmucks were much the more numerous. While the Pathans might very probably repulse a direct attack if their ammunition lasted, they could have no defence against the men creeping round upon their flank. Within a short time they would be surrounded, unless, indeed, they perceived the flanking movement and beat a hasty retreat. Even then they would be in danger of annihilation, for the Kalmucks could rush the position they had evacuated, and from behind the rocks sweep the southward track with their fire. Unless a diversion were almost instantly made, the Pathans were doomed.

By the time that Bob had realized this necessity for intervention he was half a mile south of the position, in a wider stretch of the gorge. He wheeled round, flew back at full speed through the bottle-neck, then wheeled again at the northward end. It seemed to him that the crackling of rifle fire was now

more continuous: the Pathans had in fact taken heart on seeing the machine soaring high above them, and were defending themselves with renewed vigour. The chota sahib was with them! They knew not what he could do for them, but his mere presence gave them hope and courage.

Bob saw that in order to carry out his plan successfully he must descend. He had had no practice in bomb dropping. No amount of theoretical knowledge of the velocity of falling bodies under the action of gravity, or of the curve made by a body moving under both horizontal and vertical forces, could avail him now. There was great risk of the aeroplane or its occupants being hit if the Kalmucks fired at them, but he felt that he must take his chance. Swooping down, and reducing speed at the same time, he steered so as to pass, at the height of a few hundred feet, as exactly as possible over the heads of the party skirmishing up the hill-side.

They were in loose order. At closer quarters Bob was now able to see that they were taking advantage of all the cover furnished by the crags and protuberances of the rocky slope. Steering with one hand, he called to Fazl to give him one of the tins, which he poised in his other hand. He still felt a shrinking from bloodshed, and instead of dropping the bomb in the midst of the Kalmucks, he waited until he had just passed the man nearest to the Pathans, then let it fall. In a few seconds it struck the ground. There was a sharp report, and Fazl, looking back, cried out that the Kalmucks were almost hidden by an immense cloud of dust. The sound of rifle fire ceased, and a strange quiet fell upon the gorge.

"Have they stopped?" asked Bob.

"Yes, sahib. One has gone back: they are talking among the rocks."

"They've got something to talk about," thought Bob.

He felt that this bolt from the blue, falling upon them at such a dramatic moment, must have startled the Kalmucks, and would almost certainly cause them to modify their plans. As miners they would realize the nature of the bomb dropped within a few yards of them, and the danger to which they were exposed when dynamite was rained upon them from the sky. The first bomb might be followed by others, and though it had done them no hurt, its successors might not so fortunately spare them. Bob had no doubt that he could count upon an interval of inaction while they were reckoning up the new situation, and determined to seize the opportunity of communicating with the Pathans. Accordingly he flew southward along the gorge until he reached a spot where the track widened sufficiently to afford a landing-place, and then sank to earth. It was out of sight from both Pathans and Kalmucks.

"Come along with me," he said to Fazl.

He took his revolver and rifle, and hastened back along the track, followed by Fazl with his kukuri. There was still no resumption of the firing. As he walked,

he scanned the hill-side anxiously, but saw no sign of the Kalmucks. Slipping along close to the base of the rocky cliff he presently caught sight of the turbans of two or three of the Pathans, who were peering over the top of a rock two hundred yards away, evidently looking for the return of the aeroplane.

"Can you call to them without letting the Kalmucks hear?" he asked of Fazl.

"I can, sahib."

"Then ask one of them to slip down and meet me."

The Gurkha made a slight clucking in his throat, at which the Pathans lifted their heads and looked eagerly along the path. Then Fazl held up one finger, and beckoned. The heads disappeared, and in a moment two of the Pathans came round the corner of the rock.

"Only one," said Bob.

Fazl made them understand by gestures. One of the men returned, the other came on.

"Allah is great, sahib!" he said in his own tongue as he met Bob. "But why is the sahib on foot? A few more such thunderbolts would send the dogs to Jehannum: have you no more in the wonderful machine?"

Bob wished that he had Lawrence's facility in picking up strange languages. Fortunately Fazl could act as interpreter. He first asked the man if he could explain the sudden outbreak of the Kalmucks. The Pathan thought that no explanation was necessary: it was due to their own vile passions and the presence of Nurla Bai.

"Nurla Bai!" exclaimed Bob. "Is he among them?"

"Of a truth he is, sahib, and his black monkey too."

To Bob this was incomprehensible. Nurla Bai and his man, when last he heard of them, were forty miles and more down-stream. But he had no leisure for guessing: the situation demanded all his thoughts.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"We are going to our homes, sahib," replied the man. "The dogs are too many for us. We did but stop to take a little rest, and kill a few. We cannot go back to the mine: the talk is that the huzur is gone; who will pay us now? We go to our own country, and some day will come back and deal with these children of Shaitan. Not a man of them shall be left alive. But now we can do nothing; it is vain to kick against the goad. If the sahib had more little boxes we might kill them all; but he has none, or he would not be here."

Bob felt himself in a difficulty. He wanted to retain the Pathans; but in their present temper they would not be likely to remain with him if they knew that a huge army was advancing up-stream. On the other hand it would not be fair to withhold that information from them, and bring them back to the mine under false pretences. Reflecting rapidly for a few moments he determined to make a

clean breast of it, but to lead up to the important point as diplomatically as he could.

"Have you any food?" he asked.

"Bismillah, sahib, we are empty as bladders. The dogs fell upon us even as we were filling our pots for the morning meal. We have eaten nothing."

"And what will you do for food on the way home? Is it a smiling country? Does millet grow on the rocks? Will you find grapes on thorn bushes?"

"True, sahib," said the man uneasily: "but there are ibex and other clean animals for our guns."

"You have plenty of ammunition then?"

"Enough to shoot beasts for our food."

"And to shoot the Kalmucks too? If I cannot stop them, and they pursue you, you will have no time to shoot ibex, and no bullets to waste. And you may meet enemies in the hills. You may be caught between two fires, and, outnumbered as you are already, you will be slaughtered like sheep."

The Pathan looked more and more troubled.

"I will go and talk to my brothers," he said. "With many counsellors there is wisdom."

"No, that won't do. You would waste a lot of time, and perhaps wrangle. You must act as head man, and what you and I decide the others will do."

"What does the sahib order?"

"I order nothing. I want you to make up your own mind. Now listen. I see a way to bring you out of your present awkward position, and take you safely back to the mine. You do not know that Lawrence Sahib with Fyz Ali and the rest is in danger."

"Mashallah, sahib, what is this you tell?"

"We were attacked yesterday at the bridge down-stream, and beat off the enemy. Lawrence Sahib had to keep guard all night: he may have been attacked again, but he is now marching back."

"And who was the enemy, sahib? Only Nurla Bai and his monkey left the mine, and they are now among the dogs that have been barking at us beyond."

"The enemy are a large force of Kalmucks, a great army, who are coming up the valley, for what purpose I know not."

"Hai, sahib, but then there is the more need for us to go!"

"Yes, if you are willing to be cowards and faithless. Must I believe that you will sneak off and leave your comrades to face danger alone?"

The man was silent, plucking his beard. Bob offered him a cigarette, which the man accepted mechanically, lighting it at the match with which Bob lit his own.

"Is it a great army, sahib?" he said at length.

"A very great one. Very likely we shall find it impossible to save the mine. It is true that the huzur is gone: Nurla Bai shot him; he fell from the machine into the river, and I have no hope that he is yet alive. But his loss only leaves the more for us to do. We must first save Lawrence Sahib and your friends. When we are all met again, we can decide what is best. Perhaps we shall have to abandon the mine; but then, you see, we shall form one large party, with plenty of provisions and cartridges; and you will have a much better chance of reaching your homes than if you go as you are, hungry, with no food, and little hope of defending yourselves if attacked by enemies in the hills."

The Pathan puffed away gravely.

"There is truth in what the sahib says. He has a very big mind, and sees very far. We Pathans are not cowards, as the sahib knows; Fyz Ali is a good man, and the chota sahib will be a great man when his beard is grown. But how can we go back? As the sahib says, we are but a handful against the pack of dogs yonder, and the sahib has no more little boxes."

"I didn't say so. As a matter of fact, I have several."

"Inshallah!" cried the man joyfully. "Why did not the sahib say so before? If the sahib will go up in his machine, and drop the little boxes upon the heads of the Kalmucks, we will charge home upon them with great fury, and there shall not be left one man alive to tell the tale."

Bob knew that it would be useless to attempt to make the man understand why he could not consent to this wholesale butchery. He merely pointed out that, flying swiftly overhead, he could only drop one or perhaps two bombs that would certainly hit the enemy. The survivors would be goaded to desperation, and before the aeroplane could return and the manoeuvre be repeated, there would be a terrible fight, in which the Pathans, even if successful, would lose heavily.

"What I want to do is to gather all the loyal men safely at the mine," he said. "I do not want to lose one of you. I can do this, I believe, if you obey my orders: otherwise who knows how many of you will be left alive?"

"As the sahib commands," said the Pathan.

"This is what I command. You will remain here with your men while I drive the Kalmucks away. You will not fire upon them unless you are yourselves attacked. Impress that upon the men. When the Kalmucks are out of sight, you may march up towards the mine, but halt if you come in sight of them again."

"I will give the sahib's orders to the men," said the Pathan. "I hope the sahib will drive the dogs away quickly, for we are very hungry."

He salaamed and returned to his companions, who had been keeping one eye on the enemy, the other on the curious scene two hundred yards up-stream. It was indeed a strange position: the two men calmly smoking and discussing their plans, while at no great distance lurked a ferocious band ready to leap to

the attack at any moment. They too had been consulting together, but their imagination was not active enough to lead them to any satisfactory conclusion. The dynamite bomb had been intended to check them: that was evident; and they decided that it would be wise to wait patiently for developments. Nurla Bai was very much annoyed. He had undergone great exertions and endured much fatigue to achieve his object–the slaughter or dispersal of the Pathans; and it was exasperating to find himself at a check just when he had them at his mercy, through the ingenuity of an Englishman and the astounding swiftness of his flying machine. He began to wish that, instead of picking up bits of rock in the gallery on that dark night, he had made his way to the platform and done some vital damage to the aeroplane. Perhaps a lucky shot would bring it down when it again passed over the position. But he hoped there would be no more dynamite bombs.

CHAPTER THE FIFTEENTH
NURLA BAI SLIPS THE NOOSE

And now began the strangest game of chevy chase that was ever played. In a few minutes Bob and the Gurkha were flying northward. As they approached the area upon which the Kalmucks were assembled, Bob steered to the right, so as to cross the position obliquely. Some of the men were in the act of covering the aeroplane with their rifles, when the sight of a bright red object descending from the sky struck them with a sort of paralysis. The coffee tin fell almost midway between them and the Pathans. Dust and splinters of rock flew in all directions, and the Kalmucks, with one consent, scampered along the track towards the mine. Bob listened for rifle-shots; he knew that the Pathans' obedience would be put to a severe test when they saw their enemies in flight. Not a shot was fired.

The Kalmucks did not yet perceive the real object which Bob had in view. After running a short distance, they halted again, unable to decide whether it was safer to advance or retreat. When they saw the aeroplane soaring towards them from the northward, they broke apart, each man striving to find some crevice or nook among the rocks where he might shelter himself. All believed that the Englishman's purpose was slaughter. But when another bomb was dropped on their southward side, not near enough to do them harm, some of them, as they ran, began to suspect the meaning of the device. For three or four miles they were

thus driven down the track. Wherever the gorge was wide enough, Bob wheeled backwards and forwards across it in their rear, swooping down whenever he saw them lagging, with the result that they did not wait for another bomb, but hurried along like a flock of frightened sheep. Once or twice they took shots at the aeroplane, but gave it up when it was patent that their marksmanship was unequal to the feat of hitting the flying target. And all the time the Pathans marched steadily behind them, much amused at the sahib's method of shepherding, but a little chagrined because they were not allowed to assist.

Meanwhile Bob had been thinking out his further proceedings. He must not let the Kalmucks draw too close to the mine. Lawrence could not arrive yet for several hours; it was important that he should come safely home without a collision with the enemy. When, therefore, they had arrived within about two miles of the mine, he decided that it was time to arrest their course. They could no longer be in doubt about the meaning of his signals hitherto–he would give them another. Flying ahead, then wheeling round, he dropped a tin, this time in front of them. At the explosion they halted, and after a brief consultation began to move on. Another bomb, falling in front again, but now a little closer, conveyed its warning; like fog signals on a railway-line, these explosions plainly indicated that the track was not clear. They halted again, and posted themselves behind rocks, facing up-stream, to guard against attack by the Pathans.

How long they would remain stationary Bob could not tell; but he thought he had them sufficiently well in hand to give him time to fly to the mine and act on another idea that had occurred to him. On reaching the house, he ordered Shan Tai to put up in two or three baskets a quantity of food, then scribbled a note bidding Lawrence push forward at his utmost speed. This he placed under the lid of a tin weighted with stones, but free from caps or dynamite. Then telling Gur Buksh to keep a careful watch on the track southward, and fire if the Kalmucks showed themselves at the turn half a mile away, he went back to the aeroplane, carrying the tin, and set off down the river. He was anxious that Lawrence should arrive before dark. In the daylight the dynamite bombs might be relied on to bar the road to the Kalmucks; but they might easily take advantage of the darkness to slip past the mine, if not by the track, at any rate by the hill-path above, and the bombs would lose half their terrors. The possibility of a collision between the Kalmucks and his brother's party filled him with anxiety; for the former, infuriated by their chevying, would wreak their vengeance upon the smaller band coming up-stream.

Bob discovered Lawrence and his men taking a rest about half-way between the mine and the broken bridge. They greeted him with a cheer. He flew for some minutes up- and down-stream in the search for a landing-place, but the track being too narrow here, and the neighbourhood too rugged, he swooped

down, and as he passed over the group, he got Fazl to drop his tin within a few feet of them. The Gurkha uttered a cry of incredulous amazement when he heard the order, but Bob hastily explained that the tin contained only a chit. Too busy himself with steering to watch the result, Bob asked Fazl what had happened, and he reported that the tin, rolling down the bank towards the river, had been retrieved by Lawrence Sahib himself.

Bob flew straight back to the mine, thence over the Kalmucks, who were still halted where he had left them, and beyond them to the Pathans. The country was here much less rugged, but it was some little time before he found a spot where he could alight without risk, nearly half a mile south of the party. On landing, he and Fazl between them carried the baskets of food to the Pathans.

"The sahib is a light to our eyes," said the head man. "The men were becoming restless."

"I dare say. Well, here is some food for them. This will keep up their courage. I am glad to see that they have obeyed my orders, and before long I hope we shall all be safe at the mine."

"Allah be praised!" cried the man. "Food is what we need, and my brothers will delight in the sahib's care."

Indeed, Bob could have hit upon no more effective means of attaching the Pathans to his cause. This evidence of the sahib's thoughtfulness profoundly impressed the men, and as they made ravenous onslaught on their rations they were loud in praise of their young master, whom it was good to serve.

By this time Bob was very tired of his continual journeys up and down the river; his petrol, too, was running low, and it was with a feeling of great relief that he set off on what was to be his last flight for many a day. When Lawrence had returned, Bob meant to hold a serious consultation with him as to the possibility of holding the mine. If it were decided that this was hopeless, he would have to make immediate arrangements for evacuation. The thought of leaving the aeroplane gave him a pang. That he must leave it seemed inevitable, for he felt that his presence would be necessary as leader of the march. He might, indeed, fly miles ahead, alight, and wait for his little force to reach him; but it seemed more important to share his brother's difficulties than to secure the safety of the aeroplane.

After replacing the machine in its shed, he returned to the house and called for dinner. For several hours there was nothing to be done. When he had finished his meal, he lit his pipe and settled himself in an easy chair to think over the position. It was the first opportunity of rest and quiet meditation since Nurla Bai's defection had so fatally disturbed the peaceful life of the settlement. Of his uncle he could now think only as of one irrevocably lost. It was the end of mining in the Hindu Kush. Whatever the immediate future might bring forth,

it was clear that Lawrence and he must seek some other career. And when he reckoned up the chances, he felt more and more doubtful whether either of them would escape from this valley of tragedy with their lives.

Yet Fate had been kind to them, even through the instrumentality of Nurla Bai. But for that man's villainy, there would have been no pursuit down the river, no discovery of the army encamped forty miles away. They would have had no warning of the approach of this great host, and defence and flight would have been equally impossible. Such chances as they had of weathering the storm were due to Nurla Bai.

Bob's thoughts centred on that wily Kalmuck. His presence among the men halted half a mile off was puzzling. Bob did not guess that Nurla Bai and his henchman had been among a band who had crossed the river in the night, and attacked Lawrence and his Pathans. These two men alone of the party had not recrossed when the rest were beaten back. They had slipped up the bank under cover of the darkness, and marched all night along the track. Warned by the sound of horses' hoofs they had hidden until the Pathan reinforcements had passed, then hurried on to the mine. Arriving there at dawn, they had instigated the attack on the Pathans, of whom Nurla Bai had led the pursuit.

The knowledge that the Kalmuck was within half a mile of him suggested to Bob the possibility of capturing him and bringing him to justice. The punishment of the offender would do more than anything else to tighten the bonds between himself and the Pathans. Remembering the Kalmuck prisoners whom Gur Buksh had taken, Bob hit on a plan for getting Nurla Bai into his power. He would send one of them as a herald to the miners, promising to allow them to depart northwards if they would deliver up their arms and hand over Nurla Bai and Black Jack. With the Sikhs on one side of them, and on the other the Pathans, eager for an opportunity to wipe off old scores, they must recognize their helplessness, and probably would be willing to purchase the safety of the whole band at so cheap a price.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, therefore, Bob sent for one of the prisoners, and with Fazl as interpreter, gave him his instructions. If the terms offered were accepted, Nurla Bai and his man were to come to the mine under escort of not more than four of the party, unarmed. The drawbridge was lowered, and raised again after the man had departed on his errand.

Bob waited patiently for the result of this mission. Lawrence ought to arrive about four o'clock, by hard marching. By that time the Kalmucks should have made up their minds. Of course, under Nurla Bai's influence, they might reject his terms, preferring to wait for darkness to give them an opportunity of creeping past without surrendering either their leader or their arms. In either case Lawrence would then be safe, and the doings of the Kalmucks need give

him no further concern. Nurla Bai would escape his deserts, but that could not be helped.

Less than an hour after the envoy's departure, a group of six men were seen approaching the mine from the Kalmucks' encampment. In a few minutes Bob was able to recognize among them Nurla Bai and Black Jack. Somewhat surprised, after all, at their compliance, he congratulated himself on the satisfactory working of his plan. It was not long, however, before he saw that his jubilation was premature. The men were apparently unarmed, but calling Gur Buksh to his side, Bob ordered him as a precautionary measure to place the Sikhs at the inner end of the bridge, and cover the Kalmucks with their rifles, so as to guard against treachery. The whole staff of domestic servants and the few Pathans left at the mine assembled in the compound to watch the proceedings. Bob ordered the Pathans to lay aside their rifles, for their rage against Nurla Bai was such that he could not trust them to refrain from firing on their foe, even though he was unarmed.

The Kalmucks came opposite the bridge. At Bob's command Fazl shouted his instructions across the river. When the drawbridge was lowered, Nurla Bai and his man were to cross. The escort were to return to their companions, and explain that later on, at a signal given by rifle-shots, they were to come forward ten at a time, hand their weapons to the Sikhs stationed at the bridge end to receive them, and pass down the track. The miners made no response, but stood motionless on the farther bank.

At a word from Bob, the bridge-man turned his windlass, and the bridge, with much creaking, began slowly to descend. The end had almost reached the platform on which it rested when, with a suddenness that took everybody by surprise, Nurla Bai and Black Jack dived off the bank into the river, sheltered by the descending bridge. Next moment several rifle-shots rang out; the Sikhs had fired, rather because they felt that they must do something than because there was any real chance of hitting the fugitives. Then they ran along by the wall, to watch for the two men to reappear.

Bob followed them; the crowd of servants and Pathans, shouting with excitement, rushed in the same direction. Ditta Lal waddled breathless in the rear.

At this, the narrowest part of the valley for many miles, the current rushed through the gorge like a mill-race. Nurla Bai had chosen his moment well, reckoning on the rapidity of the stream to bear him out of harm's way. Some seconds passed before a black head was seen bobbing on the surface of the swirling flood a hundred and fifty yards away.

"Don't fire!" shouted Bob.

He was only in the nick of time, for the Sikhs already had their rifles at the shoulder, pointed at the black object in the water. With soldierly obedience

they kept their fingers from the trigger, though they were amazed at the order. Bob was astonished at himself. His command had been almost involuntary; only after he had spoken was he conscious of the motive impelling him. It was a sportsman's admiration for pluck and resourcefulness. Of course the Kalmucks had tricked him, but he was young enough to admire their courage more than he resented their trickery.

In another moment the head had disappeared. It was now too late to change his mind, even if he had wished it.

"They are gone!" screamed the Babu. "Sir, you have allowed them to bunk. Why this fatal hesitation? Why this neglect of precious opportunity? You cast pearls before swine, sir–and by pearls I mean mercy and ruth and all that. They will turn again and rend you. Sir, I repeat—-"

Here Bob cut in. As a rule he was disposed to humour the Babu, whom he found amusing at times, and whom he believed to be well-intentioned. Now, however, he had neither time nor patience to argue, even if any amount of argument could have made the Bengali understand his point of view.

"Get back to your stores," he said sternly, and Ditta Lal, who was always abashed and rendered speechless by a rebuff, shuffled off disconsolately.

Bob was not disposed to let the two Kalmucks escape altogether. No amount of pluck or cleverness could wipe out his recollection of their crimes. To bring them to justice was a duty he owed himself and the Pathans. Less than a minute after they had disappeared he ordered two of the Sikhs to cross the bridge and pursue them along the track.

"Don't shoot them: march them back to the mine," he said. "There I will deal with them."

The men set off to do his bidding. Meanwhile the four miners of Nurla Bai's escort had remained where they stood when their leader took his plunge. They fell back when they saw the Sikhs approaching them, crying out that they had been ignorant of Nurla's intention. Bob saw no reason to doubt them, but as he sent them back to rejoin their fellows up the river he reflected that he had done wisely in arranging to let only a few men pass at a time.

He had little doubt that the two fugitives would be caught. For a distance the stream ran too swiftly for runners on the bank to keep up with it, but farther north, with the widening of the channel, the rate of the current diminished. Then, whether the men continued swimming or climbed up to the track, they would be equally at the mercy of their pursuers. The threat to shoot them could hardly fail to bring about their surrender; while if they trusted to their speed along the track, they would fall into the hands of Lawrence and his party, who must now be very near. He therefore dismissed the crowd, ordered Gur Buksh to keep good watch both up- and down-stream, and returned to the house to snatch a brief nap

until his brother arrived.

It was a few minutes before five when Chunda Beg woke him, and told him that the chota sahib was at hand. He ran down to the bridge, and saw with great thankfulness that Lawrence and all his party were safe. But he was disappointed to notice that, though the two Sikhs were among them, they were without Nurla Bai.

There was great shouting and handshaking among the crowd when the weary men rode over into the compound.

"Jolly glad to see you, old chap," said Bob to his brother. "You look awfully biffed. Chunda Beg has got a good meal ready for you; just cut into the house and have a rest while I dispose of a little matter in hand–then I'll come and tell you what has been going on."

Lawrence was only too glad to rest. He had never in his life felt so utterly tired. The Pathans, too, hardy and capable of long endurance as they were, showed signs of the fatigue of their double march and the fight *en route*. They took their horses into their own section of the mine, and, throwing themselves on the ground, were soon asleep.

Meanwhile Bob was arranging for the passage of the Kalmucks down-stream. He posted half of the Sikhs at the wall, ordering them, without reserve, to fire on the miners if there was any sign of mutiny among them. Then he sent Gur Buksh with the rest to the farther end of the bridge to receive the men's arms as they came up. Just before half-past five the rifle-shot was fired as a signal to the first batch of ten men to approach. Very soon they were seen marching sullenly towards the mine. They had been without food during the day, and hunger is a famous reducing agent. At the bridge they handed over their weapons without demur to the havildar and his Sikhs, and passed on.

Within an hour the whole party had been thus disarmed and sent on their way. When the last of them had disappeared, Bob sent a Sikh to bring in the Pathans who had been waiting with such patience up-stream. Dusk had already fallen over the depths of the valley, and it was dark before the men marched over the bridge amid uproarious greetings from their friends.

Bob felt that he had reason to be satisfied with his day's work. His brother was back; he was surrounded by Pathans of whose loyalty and devotion he was now assured, and he had got rid peacefully of the malcontents whose presence would have been a continual menace. Only one thing disappointed him: the failure of his men to capture Nurla Bai and Black Jack. The Sikhs had pressed rapidly along the track until they met Lawrence and his party; but neither on land nor water had they caught a glimpse of the fugitives. The Kalmucks had already shown surprising resourcefulness; there could be no doubt that they had discovered some hiding-place in the bank or on the hill-side above the track. As a

sportsman, Bob gave them ungrudging admiration: as a soldier he was chagrined, for Nurla Bai not only ought to have received his punishment, but he might have proved a useful hostage in the future.

CHAPTER THE SIXTEENTH
NO THOROUGHFARE

"We seem to have lived an age during the last two days," said Bob on greeting Lawrence again in the dining-room. "'One crowded hour of glorious life,' begad! But why aren't you asleep, young man?"

"I can hardly keep my eyes open, but I shan't sleep till I know where we are. What did your flag mean?"

"Of course, you don't know. It seems stale news to me. There's a whole army corps encamped ten miles beyond the bridge–twenty thousand men at a guess, with field-guns, all complete. I saw hundreds of transport-wagons rolling up, camel caravans too. It's a big thing."

"But what's the game? They don't need an army corps to bag this mine."

"Hanged if I know. It seems clear they intend to march up the valley; it was probably an advanced outpost that we came into conflict with. So far as I know the valley leads only to Afghanistan and–India."

"Those Mongols we have heard about, then, are going to have a slap at Afghanistan?"

"Or India!"

"That's tosh. Twenty thousand men are no good for invading India, and they wouldn't come this way in any case."

"That's just what I said to myself. Of course Afghanistan is much nearer, and they might catch the Amir napping by choosing this unusual road. But after all, what concerns us is our position here."

"Yes. What have you been doing all day?"

"Flying up and down like a swallow–or wasn't it an eagle that dropped something on a Johnny's bald skull–in the classics. I haven't done that exactly, but I've had a little practice in bomb dropping."

He related the manoeuvres by which he had checked the pursuit of the Pathans and driven the Kalmucks down-stream, and the subsequent adventurous flight of Nurla Bai.

"Would you have let them shoot at him?" he asked. "The Babu was mad with me."

"I don't think I would. It wouldn't be cricket, do you think? The Babu wouldn't learn that sort of thing at Calcutta University!"

"Have you had any trouble?"

"Quite enough, I can assure you. In the small hours they tried to cross at the bridge, some of them floating themselves on water-skins. We beat them off at the cost of a few knocks. But some must have got past us over the hills–a mighty big round. We met a crowd of them on foot. Luckily it was all very sudden, and a charge scattered them. We lost one man, but we polished off a lot of them; the Pathans are perfect demons at fighting."

"Well done, old chap! Charging was the very thing. These beggars can't face it. I remember that in the Mutiny our men never charged without success. But what about the future? We've two courses open: to pack up and cut our sticks before the Mongols arrive, or to hang on and make the best defence we can. Candidly, I don't see how we can hold the place with our little lot against such a host."

"What about Thermopylae and Leonidas?"

"Yes, but Xerxes hadn't any artillery. Besides, if I'm not mistaken, Leonidas and his three hundred were cut up, to a man."

"Only because a traitor showed the Persians a way round to their rear. Still, you know best."

"I'll send for old Gur Buksh. He's seen a lot of service, and has a cool head. We're better placed than Leonidas in one respect: traitor or no traitor, we can't be got at from the rear."

When the havildar arrived, Bob put the position to him exactly, omitting no detail, and glossing over none of the difficulties.

"Now, havildar," he said in conclusion, "shall we run, or shall we fight? We ought to have plenty of time to get away. The enemy can't advance in force until they have repaired the bridge, and they'll have to do that thoroughly if they wish to bring their artillery across. It will take them at least a day, probably longer. We can reckon on twenty-four hours' start."

The havildar, a fine soldierly figure, stood in silence before the two lads, pondering deeply.

"The men are very weary, sahib," he said at length. "They could not start before morning. There are not horses for all: the march would be slow, and the journey would be long. We should not be safe for a hundred miles, and if the enemy is so numerous, they would pursue us not only along the track, but over the hills, and outstrip us, and we should not escape."

"And what if we remain here?"

"Who can tell? If we die, we die. But we are safer here, sahib. The enemy cannot haul their guns up the heights opposite. The gorge is narrow; with our gun and our rifles we could prevent them from passing the bend northward–so long as our ammunition lasts."

"And how long will that be? And what provisions have we?"

"There are plenty of cartridges, sahib, and we have those the Kalmucks left behind in their huts. Our provisions would have lasted three weeks for us all; now that the Kalmucks are gone, they will last longer."

"I say, Bob," said Lawrence, "why not block up the track? With a good charge of dynamite we could bring down tons of rock on it, and though that wouldn't block the way for ever against twenty thousand men, it would give them a few days' work to clear it."

"The chota sahib speaks words of wisdom," said Gur Buksh. "The track is narrow where it bends a little to the north–that is the place to do what the sahib says."

"A jolly good notion," said Bob. "We'll set about it to-morrow. Also, havildar, we will strengthen the wall. You have already, I see, lined it with bags of earth, as I ordered. You must throw up behind them a mound of the tailings from the mine. Cover that with earth, and beat it down hard, and we shall have a triple fortification. It won't be very scientific, Lawrie, but it ought to be of some use. Can you think of anything else, havildar?"

"That is all, sahib. Has the sahib told the Pathans what he has told me?"

"Oh yes. The men who were chased by the Kalmucks intended to go home, but I told them everything, and I'm sure they will stick to us. You have arranged the sentries for the night?"

"That is done, sahib."

"Then we'll get to bed, Lawrie. We both want a good sound sleep. Wake us if anything happens, havildar."

But Gur Buksh had not been gone five minutes, and Bob had not yet taken off his boots, when he was struck with a sudden uneasiness.

"I say, Lawrie," he exclaimed, "what if the beggars came up during the night? We couldn't use either the machine-gun or our rifles with any effect in the darkness, and they might easily slip past; not without some loss, of course, but not enough to stagger them."

"But you said yourself just now that it would take them a whole day to repair the bridge. They couldn't get here before morning."

"It would certainly take them a day or longer to make the bridge strong enough to bear their artillery. But we've only the advanced guard to deal with, not the main army, and in two or three hours they could rig up a bridge good enough for themselves and their ponies. They may be only a few hours' march

away. I wish we had a searchlight. We could then light up the track at the bend yonder, and give them such a dose that they wouldn't try it again."

"Why not try a bonfire? Light a big one just on this side of the bend. That would give us enough light."

"A good idea! We'll do it, and to make perfectly sure, we'd better blast the rock at once, and not leave it till the morning. I'll see to it, however; you have a good sleep."

"Not a bit of it. I should fall asleep in two ticks if I had nothing to do, but I'm not going to leave you to bear the brunt of everything. We share and share alike."

"Thanks, old chap. You see to the dynamite and get a wire spliced for the current while I get the bonfire started."

In a few minutes a large fire was blazing on a ledge of rock a few feet south of the bend, and a number of Pathans were drilling holes in the cliff. An hour's work by experienced miners would suffice, Bob thought, to prepare for the charge of dynamite. Meanwhile, in the compound, under Lawrence's direction, other men were splicing together several lengths of the wire used for conveying the current from the small electric battery to the mine galleries. A number of boxes were broken up to provide fuel for the bonfire, which, however, it would be hardly necessary to keep alight when once the track had been blocked up by the fallen rocks.

These operations were all in progress when there was a sudden commotion among the men drilling the rock. After a moment's hesitation, they dropped their tools and scampered at the top of their speed towards the mine. They had barely crossed the bridge, and this had only been raised a few feet from its platform, when there came swiftly round the bend a string of horsemen, galloping two abreast. Gur Buksh was at his post by the machine-gun. In a few moments it was rattling its shot in a rapid stream towards the enemy, and at the same time the Sikhs opened fire with their rifles. A number of the enemy were seen to fall, either upon the track or over the brink into the river, and the horses of the men immediately behind them stumbled over the prone bodies and in one or two cases threw their riders. There were a few moments of confusion. The quiet of the night was broken by cries and groans and the rattle and hiss of shots. Then the stream of horsemen suddenly stopped. Shouts were heard from beyond the bend, but no more of the enemy appearing, Bob ordered his men to cease fire.

Everybody in the mine compound had been so intent on what was happening within the area illuminated by the bonfire that only Bob himself and one or two more had noticed that several of the enemy had got past the critical point before fire was opened. They were now in darkness, but the clatter of their horses' hoofs could be heard on the track just beyond the quarters lately occupied by

GUR BUKSH DEFENDS THE MINE

GUR BUKSH DEFENDS THE MINE

the Pathans. At this sound Bob had much difficulty in preventing his men from blazing away at random at the cliff opposite. To allow it would be merely to waste ammunition, for the enemy were quite invisible; so he peremptorily ordered them to desist after two or three shots had been fired. When quietness was restored, he heard the horsemen retreating up the valley, and soon the sound of their movements died away.

"Lucky we didn't go to bed after all," said Bob to Lawrence. "Is that wire ready?"

"Yes, but the rock isn't drilled yet, is it?"

"We'll soon finish that. The track must be blocked at once, or we may have this going on all night."

He called the miners up, and ordered them to go back to their work.

"Mashallah, sahib, but it is not safe, we shall all be killed," one of them ventured to say.

"Nonsense. They won't come on again."

"But some have got past, sahib. They will come back and shoot us."

"They won't venture within the light of the bonfire, and if they do the Sikhs will shoot them down. Come on: I'll go with you. Give me the dynamite, Lawrence. Fazl, you take the end of the wire. Now then, a few minutes' more work, and we'll tumble a mountain of rock on to the track, and be able to sleep soundly for the rest of the night."

His confident bearing, and the example of his personal leadership, inspired the men with courage. The bridge was again lowered; Bob passed over with Fazl and the miners; Lawrence, Gur Buksh and the Sikhs posted themselves between the bridge head and the southern extremity of the compound to guard against any attack on the part of the men who had gone up the track. They could not number more than a dozen or so at the most, and Bob felt sure that after what had occurred they would not be very ready to approach the spot that had proved so fatal to their comrades.

He ordered the men to move very quietly. On reaching the place where they had flung down their tools, he bade them wait a little. From round the bend came the sound of voices, apparently some distance away. The enemy had not withdrawn altogether: would they have the courage to come on again? The machine-gun was no protection to the working-party, for it could not fire without great risk of hitting them. Bob sent one of the men back to fetch three of the Sikhs; their rifles might at any rate suffice to check a rush long enough for the miners to retreat to the bridge.

As soon as the Sikhs arrived, he ordered the men to resume their drilling, for which the bonfire gave sufficient light. The first sounds attracted the attention of the enemy. They raised their voices, and Bob, grasping his revolver, told the

Sikhs to level their rifles and fire if he gave the word. All were concealed from the enemy by the shoulder of the cliff. The work went on without interference from the enemy beyond, but presently shots began to patter on the rocks from the rifles of those who had passed up the valley. The bonfire was now an inconvenience, and the danger was greater to Bob and the Sikhs, who stood erect, than to the miners stretched on the ground. But it was a risk that must be endured, and Bob spoke a cheery word to the men at his side, and urged the miners to hurry on with their work. Unknown to him, at the first shot Lawrence had led the other Sikhs across the bridge and posted them on the track, to repel the Kalmucks if they should venture nearer to get a better aim.

In a quarter of an hour the drilling was finished. Bob sent the miners back, and himself laid the charge of dynamite. Then he inserted the wire, and retreated with Fazl and the Sikhs.

"Good man!" he said to Lawrence when he reached the bridge. "It's all done. We've only to make the contact."

"Nobody hit?" asked Lawrence anxiously.

"Never a man. I think we'd have done better. Now let's get back. In five minutes we'll have a little earthquake."

They crossed into the compound, the bridge was raised, and Bob sent Fazl into the shed where the battery was kept, to complete the electric circuit. The firing had ceased. Nothing was to be heard but the rushing water. In a few minutes there was a dull, sullen rumble; the ground quivered, and immediately afterwards a terrific crash which echoed and re-echoed along the valley. The bonfire was suddenly obliterated as by an extinguisher.

"Another trick to us!" said Bob gleefully. "And now I think we can go to sleep with an easy mind. They won't get past till they've moved a thousand cartloads of rubbish."

"What about those fellows who got past?"

"We can leave Gur Buksh to deal with them. They can't get into the compound; if they did they'd never get out again. I shouldn't wonder if they're wishing they hadn't been in quite such a hurry. Now, my boy, bed: neither you nor I will need any rocking to-night. It's barely eight o'clock: we ought to get a good twelve hours, and I can do with it all."

They felt a strange pang as they passed through their uncle's room. It was the first time they had entered it since the fatal morning when they set out so cheerfully with him in pursuit of Nurla Bai. Neither spoke of him; his loss touched them now with a poignancy of feeling that would not endure expression. Bob closed the door quietly, as if a sleeper lay within; and both undressed in

silence.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTEENTH
A CRY IN THE NIGHT

"What say you, friend?–how will this matter end?"

Chunda Beg seated himself on the wall, against which the havildar was leaning, peering out into the darkness. His rifle lay across his arms.

"Hai, Chunda, is that you?" replied Gur Buksh, in a low tone. "I thought you were snoring on your charpoy. 'Tis a chill night."

"I slept indeed a little–forty winks, as the sahibs say; then I rose and came out to seek wisdom of thee, O experienced one. How will this matter end, I ask?"

"Who can tell!" said the havildar with a shrug. "The gods know; I know not."

"You do not know; of course I did not suppose you a soothsayer, a man of double sight, though there are such; I have seen them, and heard them foretell things that most certainly came to pass. But they were fakirs, haggard of cheek and eye, and dirty–mashallah! how dirty! What I meant, friend, was that you, being a man of war, and wise in many things, should enlighten my simplicity, and say what is the blossom and fruit of your meditations on these strange happenings."

Gur Buksh did not turn his head, but gazed steadily out across the stream. On each side one of his men was patrolling the wall; the rest of the Sikhs were sleeping under blankets on the ground a few yards away, ready to spring up at a whisper.

"The Bengali says we shall all be cut into little pieces," Chunda Beg went on. "He will make good carving, being very plump."

"The Bengali is the son and grandson of asses," grunted Gur Buksh. "He reads books!"

"The sahibs read books too," suggested the khansaman.

"That is different. They read the wisdom of their own people; the Bengali reads, and imagines he becomes one of them, and talks foolishness."

"That is true. Yet in this case perhaps it is not foolishness. There are many hungry beasts lurking down the track yonder."

"Hyenas!"

"Twenty thousand of them, says Fazl."

"Flat-nosed Kafirs; what are they to us?"

"That is true; they are of very little account. Still, there is a great number of them, and–correct me if I am wrong, havildar–a hundred hyenas are perhaps a match for one lion."

"Look you, khansaman, we have to make every man here believe that he is a lion. I do not deny that we are in a strait place, but what is that? I have been in strait places before. Hai! was I not one of the thirty with a young sahib in the hills, and did we not defend a post against a monstrous rabble of Khels, and drive them off, and strike such fear into the dogs that they slunk away and troubled us no more?"

The havildar's eyes gleamed as he recalled that fight.

"And are our young sahibs even as that one?" said the khansaman. "The huzur–may he sleep well!–was a good man, but these two striplings are very young."

"Hai! but they have red blood in their veins. They are of the race of the Sirkar: they will never yield. Think you of what they have done in these last days. Are they not quick and ready? Are not their eyes keen and their minds swift? They fear nothing, and overlook nothing. Fyz Ali told me how the chota sahib rode back to help him when he was alone and beset by the Kalmucks, and the chota sahib is no man of war. Of a truth, the sahibs know not what fear is. And Bob Sahib carried food to the Pathans up the river; he thinks of their welfare, and they love him. What is to come we know not, but be sure there will be very great doings here."

"Hark, havildar! What is that?"

Chunda Beg sprang off the wall, and bent over it with the havildar, straining his eyes into the darkness. A faint cry reached them from the other side of the ravine. They listened in silence, waiting for a repetition of the sound. In a few seconds they heard it again.

"A trick of the Kalmucks maybe!" murmured Gur Buksh. "Get you swiftly to the house, khansaman, and rouse the sahib. Say nothing but that I wish to speak with him."

The khansaman hurried away. Passing noiselessly into the boys' bedroom, he touched Bob on the shoulder and gave his message. Bob was awake in an instant.

"Tell him I'm coming," he said.

He slipped on his dressing-gown and boots quietly, so as not to disturb Lawrence, and followed the man across the compound. As he reached the havildar's side, the cry was repeated again.

"What are the sahib's orders?" said Gur Buksh.

"Did you hear what he said?" asked Bob.

"No, sahib; it was like the cry of a man for help."

"Are the Kalmucks playing a trick on us? Have you heard anything of them?"

"Nothing, sahib."

"Let down the bridge. We had better see."

"The sahib will without doubt take lamps?"

"Yes, and your men."

The Sikhs had already been awakened. In a few minutes four of them accompanied Bob across the bridge, the first carrying a candle lamp.

The far side of the bridge rested on a platform constructed on a rock in mid-stream. The rock was connected with the farther bank by a short bridge supported on timbers and resembling a rough wooden jetty. Gur Buksh had said that the cry seemed to have come from the end of the bridge, and Bob searched for some time up and down the track for a few yards in each direction, listening again for the sound. It was not repeated. He proceeded to range the space once occupied by the Pathans' huts, but made no discovery. Puzzled, and still half suspecting that the cry had been a ruse to decoy him from the mine, he returned to the bridge, and was about to cross, when the man who held the lamp uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Behold, sahib; here he is!"

He pointed to a man lying across one of the girders sustaining the platform. Only his head could be seen. Bob knelt down and stooped over, asking the Sikh to lower the lamp. He saw a bearded, turbaned man in uniform, with arms and legs twined about the girder.

"He is unconscious," he said. "Lift him up and bring him into the compound."

The Sikhs had some difficulty in raising the man, who, in spite of his unconsciousness, clung tenaciously to the beam. But they got him up at last, and carried him across the bridge and up to the house. Bob waited to see the bridge lowered again, then hurried back.

"Cold water, khansaman," he said as he entered.

The man brought a mug of water, which he set down on the table. Bob wondered why he did not himself hold it to the stranger's lips, until he guessed that caste was probably the obstacle. He himself gave the man drink, and looked at him with curiosity, which became recognition as he opened his eyes. It was Ganda Singh, the dafadar of the sowars who had accompanied Major Endicott on his mission months before.

"Salaam, sahib," said the man faintly, when he saw that Bob had recognized him.

"Feel better now?" said Bob.

Ganda Singh had closed his eyes again. Bob noticed that he was very pale and haggard, as one exhausted after a long march.

"Just get one of the Sikhs to prepare him some food, khansaman," he said. "I suppose you won't do it yourself?"

"He is a Sikh, sahib."

"Well, cut away to one of his own race, then. He's fit for nothing at present."

He considered whether he should wake Lawrence, but decided to let him sleep on until the man was able to explain his presence. He himself was absolutely unconscious of any feeling of fatigue. Ganda Singh's surprising appearance filled him with overmastering excitement.

Reviving after some hot lentil soup had been poured between his lips, the dafadar raised himself slightly from the couch on which he had been laid. Bob noticed a twinge of pain as he moved his arm.

"Wounded?" he said.

"A shot in the shoulder, sahib–very little."

"As you came down the track?"

"No, sahib; before."

He fumbled in his belt, and produced a small piece of paper, folded. This he handed to Bob, who opened it, and read, scrawled on a leaf torn from a pocket-book, the following lines–

"*Get back to India at once. Whole country ablaze.–H. Endicott.*"

"Where is Endicott Sahib?" he asked quickly.

"In the hills towards the Afghan country, sahib."

"Near where we left him? He has not been there all this time?"

"No, sahib; Endicott Sahib went back to Rawal Pindi, and came again."

"And he is well?"

"In body, sahib, wherein I rejoice; but very sick in mind."

"Tell me all about it; slowly, don't distress yourself. Here, let me strip off your coat, gently, and see what's wrong. Wait a little, though; I must fetch Lawrence Sahib."

Loth as he was to disturb his brother's rest, he felt instinctively that the news brought by Ganda Singh was to affect their destinies vitally.

"Wake up, old chap," he said to Lawrence, prodding him. "Slip on your dressing-gown and come into the dining-room."

"Are they attacking?" asked Lawrence sleepily.

"No. Major Endicott has sent Ganda Singh with a message, telling us to clear out. I'm afraid things are looking very serious. Come on!"

Lawrence waited only to plunge his head into a basin of cold water, then followed his brother into the dining-room.

"Salaam, sahib," said Ganda Singh with a smile of friendliness. Like everybody else he had a warm feeling towards the chota sahib.

"Now, dafadar, tell us all about it; take your time."

He bathed and bound up the wounded arm while Ganda Singh talked.

The story told by him filled the boys' cup of anxiety and dismay. He related how Major Endicott, after pacifying the unruly tribe to which Nagdu belonged, had returned slowly to headquarters, visiting on the way several other tribes within his allotted portion of the borderlands. But he had soon been called away again by news of another outbreak, among the very people whom he had just reduced to quietness. Once more he set off, attended as before by his official escort of twelve troopers. This time he had woefully failed to repress their turbulence, which, indeed, swelled into active hostility. One day, attacked by overwhelming numbers, he had been forced to flee for his life. Before the little party got away, it had lost several in killed and wounded, and the Major, refusing to leave the wounded to the tender mercies of the enemy, had lost his chance of making good his escape. He was headed off, and galloped for refuge to a half-ruined hill-tower some little distance west of his route, where he had been since besieged by the tribesmen.

On the second day of the investment he had scribbled the chit in his pocket-book, torn out the leaf, and given it to the dafadar with orders to leave the tower by night and make all speed to Mr. Appleton's mine. Ganda Singh had crept out and stolen away to the rear, but his movements were detected, and he had run the gauntlet of a fusillade. One shot had taken effect, but the wound was slight, and he had pressed on, eluded the enemy's pickets, and after a long round gained the road that led ultimately to the mine. He had carried very little food with him, and was almost exhausted, rather by fatigue than by loss of blood, when, about two miles from the mine, he stumbled upon a small bivouac of ten or a dozen men. Luckily he had heard their horses stamping and champing their bits while still at some distance from them, and was careful to approach them warily. Having no means of telling whether they were friends or foes, he decided to slip past them quietly in the darkness. He could barely drag himself over the last mile, and on reaching the platform, being thoroughly worn out, he stumbled, and only saved himself from falling into the river by clutching at the girder as he fell.

"How long have you been marching?" asked Bob.

"Three days, sahib."

"And how far have you come?"

"Thirty kos,[#] sahib. It was bad marching, but I came as fast as I could."

[#] About forty-five miles.

"It was good of Endicott Sahib to send you, but why? We are far away from the disturbances on the Afghan border."

"Ah yes, sahib, but there is talk of great doings towards the north-west. They say in the bazaars that the Mongols have made friends with the Afghans, and offered to share the plunder with them when they make their raid into the Punjab. It is foolishness, as Endicott Sahib said: but the badmashes will do much evil, and the sahib said that Appleton Sahib ought to know, so that he might escape to India while there is yet time."

"And what about the sahib himself? He will break through, of course?"

"Hai! The sahib will not leave the wounded."

"He can hold out?"

"Who shall say? The sahib has little food, and the water of the well in the tower is foul. The sahib will assuredly fight as long as he has one cartridge left in his revolver; then.... It is written, sahib; but the huzurs know how to die."

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Lawrence. "Can't he send for help?"

"The nearest post is a hundred miles away, sahib. There would not be time. In one day more, or perhaps two, all the food will be gone. No help could come to him for a week–no force strong enough to drive away the dogs that beset him."

"Why did he think we could escape, then?"

"Because the road is still open, sahib. The tribes are not yet moving towards the frontier, and the hill-tower is far to the west of the road. If the sahibs start at once there is just a chance that they may save themselves–as one leaves a house before the flood comes up and washes it away."

The boys felt overwhelmed by this climax to their embarrassments. There was no certainty that they could reach the nearest British post before the tide of invasion had begun to flow. The way might already be blocked by hordes of tribesmen gathering strength for their swoop upon the Punjab–an adventure which, utterly absurd as it seemed, and foredoomed to disaster, would work havoc on the frontier until it was crushed by the might of the Imperial power. They saw themselves shut up as in a trap between the 20,000 men on the north, and the innumerable host which the scent of plunder would attract to the Afghans' banner.

"We shall have to stick it now, in any case," said Bob to Lawrence. "Khansaman, take Ganda Singh to Gur Buksh: he will find him quarters. Then go to bed. I will ring for you if I want you."

When the two men were gone, Bob threw himself into a chair.

"Light up," he said. "There'll be no more sleep for us to-night."

"What a brick the Major is!" said Lawrence. "Poor old chap! He won't cave in without giving those blackguards something to remember, but if things are as bad as Ganda Singh says it's all up with him. Nothing on earth will induce him to leave his men, or he might make a bolt for it. I wonder if it was too late for him to send for help?"

"There's not much doubt of it. A man couldn't get away quietly enough on horseback with the tower surrounded, and it would take him four or five days to foot it. Then they'd have to get together an expeditionary force, and if they've got wind of what's on, they would hesitate to send out a small light-marching force that might be smothered. These political officers are always taking their lives in their hands. The Major's a good sort. I wish to goodness something could be done for him."

"I say! I've a notion. What about the aeroplane?"

"How do you mean?"

"Fly to help him. A few of those bombs of yours would work wonders."

"That's all very well, I dare say a little dynamite would set the besiegers flying in panic; but to bring the Major away is quite another matter. He's in a hill-tower, and if it's like those we saw occasionally as we came north it'll be perched in the worst possible place for the machine to alight."

"We can find that out from Ganda Singh."

"But there's another thing. Suppose it is possible to come down, will there be time to get the Major out and take him on board before the enemy come back? Their panic won't last long when they find they can only be hit from the air."

"It will take some time to discover that, but I foresee the worst difficulty. That's the sowars. As I said, he won't leave them, especially as some are wounded. And the biggest cowards in creation–and the Afghans are not cowards–would recover their courage and their wits long before you could fly to and fro with the sowars as passengers."

"And they'd smash the machine too. It would be an easy target most of the time. I'm afraid it's no go."

They smoked on in silence, gloomily watching the rings and clouds eddying out into the dark through the open window.

"Look here!" exclaimed Bob suddenly.

"I say!" cried Lawrence at the same moment.

"I'm going to try it," Bob continued.

"That's what I was going to say."

"But—-"

"Hold hard! Just listen while I put the case with my usual sweet reasonableness. You're about fed up with patrolling the valley, I should think."

"But—-"

"Let me have my say out: your turn by and by. You're a soldier; I'm not. You're the chap to defend this place, and, as you said, we've got to defend it now. You've a head for strategy and all that sort of thing: I'm a fool at it. If one of us has got to go, I can be best spared."

"You're talking perfect—-"

"I know, but I haven't done yet. I haven't had quite as much practice in the aeroplane as you, but I've had quite enough for this job. And as for shying dynamite bombs, any ass could do that."

"I back you wouldn't find it easy to hit a mark," Bob got in.

"Perhaps not, but when the mark is a crowd of three or four hundred Afghans I ought to be kicked if I couldn't score at least an outer. Seriously, old man, this is my job. I'm not such a fool as to think it'll be pure fun; it's a desperately tough proposition, as the Yanks say; and of course you'd do it better than I could; but we can't both go, and I'm sure you're the right man to stay here. Now have your fling."

"Well, you've put me in a hole with your beastly logic," grumbled Bob. "I can't admit you're right without sort of making myself out to be a sprouting commander-in-chief! My word! It would be a fine thing to get the Major here! He'd take command, and I'd play second fiddle with the greatest pleasure in life. All right: you go, then."

"Thanks, old man. Just ring for Chunda, will you? I must have a talk with Ganda Singh."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You'll go straight back to bed. You'll want all your nerve to-morrow, and after what you've gone through you'll be a limp rag in the morning unless you sleep. Go to bed. I'll arrange everything. You'll find everything ready for you in the morning. I think you had better take Fazl with you: in fact, you must, for you'll have quite enough to do with managing the machine without dropping bombs. Cut off!"

"All right. There's only one thing."

"What's that?"

"I hope to goodness the wind won't be blowing a hurricane in the morning."

CHAPTER THE EIGHTEENTH
THE TOWER IN THE HILLS

There was between four and five hours for making the necessary arrangements. Bob soon had different sets of men working at different jobs. Some he ordered to prepare baskets of food and to fill several water-skins–the want of good water was perhaps Major Endicott's greatest peril. Others he instructed to fill more tins with stones and caps, in readiness for the final charge of dynamite, which he would himself place. While all this was in hand, he had a long talk with Gur Buksh and Ganda Singh, who turned out to be old comrades in arms. They both agreed that if the chota sahib should succeed in dispersing the tribesmen now besieging the tower, and in conveying food and water to the defenders, Endicott Sahib might be trusted to extricate himself and his men from their awkward position. That the dispersal was possible Bob had never doubted; no body of men could hold together under the staggering effect of bombs exploding in their midst. And after his talk with the Sikhs he felt reassured as to the further success of the scheme. Major Endicott was a cool-headed veteran, who would take things into his own hands on Lawrence's arrival, so that the plan would not miscarry through Lawrence's lack of military experience.

On leaving the Sikhs, Bob went along the pathway to the aeroplane platform. He could not trust any one but himself to prepare the machine for the morrow's flight. He spent a couple of hours in thoroughly overhauling it: cleaning the engine, examining every inch of the framework and the stays, oiling all the moving parts. Satisfied that all was in good order, he returned to the house. At this hour it was hardly worth while to go to bed, so he bathed, shaved, and dressed, and then sent for Fazl, to give him instructions.

Lawrence joined him at dawn. They went together to the hut where Ganda Singh lay, and the wounded man, refreshed with food and sleep, was able to explain more clearly now the whereabouts of Major Endicott and the operations of his besiegers.

"You'll tell him, of course, how we are situated here," said Bob, as they walked away together. "All being well I shall expect to see him in two or three days. You'll fly back in advance and tell me?"

"I dare say, but I shan't come until I see him safe on the march. I only hope I shan't be too late."

"I don't think you will be. I gather from what Ganda Singh said that starvation is the greatest danger, but they've got their horses in the last resort. There's no wind luckily; you couldn't have a finer day. By the way, keep a look-out for the Kalmucks who got by last night. Don't drop within range of them."

Rumours of what was afoot had run round the camp. Miners and servants were gathering in the compound to witness the departure of the aeroplane. As the boys walked towards the pathway Ditta Lal joined them. He wore his wonted air of cheerfulness.

"On behalf of establishment, sir, I bid you good luck and au revoir," he said. "Clouds have silver lining, sir. If report is true, we shall soon have felicity to see famous warrior in person; with due respect, and no derogation to present company, full-fledged British officer, when he takes command, will put rosy complexion on deplorable situation."

"Paint everything red, you mean?" said Bob gravely.

"Ruddy hue of health, sir," said the Babu, missing the point. "Representative of august king-emperor, British flag, standard of freedom and all that—-"

"Good-bye," said Lawrence, cutting him short. "Don't trouble to come any farther."

Bob went with him to the aeroplane platform.

"Good luck, old chap," he said, gripping Lawrence hard by the hand. He waited until the aeroplane had run off and soared out of sight, then returned in mingled hope and fear to the mine.

About a dozen miles up the valley Fazl caught sight of a number of men scuttling to cover among the rocks above the track. There was little doubt that these were the Kalmucks, who, finding themselves effectually cut off from their friends to the north, were probably hastening southward in search of provisions. Except for a few wild animals, the neighbourhood of the valley furnished no means of subsistence. There was a small hill-village about thirty miles from the mine, lying back some distance from the right bank. Perhaps the Kalmucks might find hospitality there.

Lawrence hoped that in the course of forty minutes he would come in sight of the hill-tower in which Major Endicott was besieged. From Ganda Singh's description he thought it must be identical with a tower which he had seen in the distance on one of his early trips with Bob up the river. It was a conspicuous object in the hilly landscape, and he had no fear of missing it, considering the immense expanse of country which lay open to observation from the aeroplane.

In spite of the particulars given by Ganda Singh, Lawrence felt that in approaching the tower his first care must be to reconnoitre the position thoroughly. Everything depended on his finding a convenient spot for landing, and this might be very difficult in such hilly country. The appearance of the aeroplane would of course put the enemy on their guard; but they would not know what to expect, and would probably be rather alarmed and mystified than informed. At the same time it would be a herald of hope to Major Endicott, and prepare him to take instant advantage of any diversion which it might effect in his favour.

When Lawrence had been flying for about twenty minutes he became somewhat uneasy at a sudden freshening of the wind, which blew in uncertain gusts from the mountains on his right. Since passing the Kalmucks he had kept fairly close to the river, but when the machine began to rock under these invis-

ible eddies he thought it the safer course to rise to a considerable height. The morning air was so exhilarating, and the view of endless snow-capped heights and pine-clad ravines so superb, that only the intense cold, of which he was now conscious in spite of the summer sun, checked his ascension. On the left stretched the Pamirs, backed by peak after peak of some of the loftiest and most majestic mountains in the world. In front and on the right the Himalaya range merged into the Hindu Kush. Huge masses of cloud rolled up and down the rugged faces of the mountains, causing moment by moment wonderful changes in their aspect. Some of the peaks seemed to have covered themselves with an umbrella of fleecy billowy wool as a shield against the kindling sunbeams.

The enormous scale of this panorama defied perspective and gave a false idea of distance. Lawrence knew that peaks which, clearly limned against the sky, might be thought to be ten or fifteen miles away, were in reality more than a hundred. But for the urgency of his mission, he felt that he would have liked to sail on and on in this empyrean height, exploring regions never trodden by the foot of man.

All the time, Fazl kept a keen eye on the track and the river, winding along hundreds, even thousands, of feet below. The hill-tower lay somewhat to the west of the road which the Appletons had travelled with Major Endicott several months before, and from this road the track leading to the mine branched. The Gurkha knew the country pretty well. Fast as the aeroplane flew, he distinguished without hesitation the junction of the roads, and at his word Lawrence altered his course and, leaving the valley, steered over the hills on his right hand.

Very soon Fazl was able to descry the hill-tower in the far distance. The aeroplane was flying at the rate of at least a mile a minute; but minute after minute passed, and yet the tower seemed little nearer. When at last Lawrence had come close enough to it to be able to distinguish its general features, he saw that it was a single square-built tower of the usual Afghan type, perched on a small hill that rose sharply from the surrounding country. The side nearest him overhung an almost perpendicular declivity. Though solidly constructed in appearance, it was little more than a ruin. The top had partially fallen away, and in the wall facing him there was a long jagged fissure.

While still at some distance, Lawrence heard rifle-shots, though neither he nor Fazl could as yet see any signs of the enemy. He felt his heart thumping. He was still in time, then; for if all was over the firing would have ceased. Planing down in a long glide, he passed over the tower, still at a considerable altitude, and then suddenly caught sight of an encampment in a nullah on the farther side. In the brief moment of his crossing he was not able to get more than a glimpse of it; the nullah was so deep, and the encampment encompassed so closely by shrubs, dwarf pines, and other trees, that he might have missed it altogether but for a

thin column of smoke arising from a fire in the bottom. But his rapid glance was enough for reassurance; the camp would have been struck if the tower was captured; it was clear that the Major was still holding out.

Dropping still lower, he began to sweep round in a circle. Before he reached the nullah again Fazl pointed out to him a number of isolated dots on the rugged surface below, spread over an extensive patch of ground. Some were small, others larger, and as he flew by Fazl explained that they were groups of the enemy, who had posted themselves wherever the nature of the ground gave them cover from the fire of the occupants of the tower. They were disposed in a rough semicircle about the western wall, in which there was a door. The approach on this side was by a steep slope; on the other side the tower was apparently inaccessible.

Between the wall and this semicircle of besiegers were scattered at irregular intervals a number of dark forms.

"Dead!" ejaculated Fazl.

They were evidently the bodies of men who had fallen in attempting to rush the place. Ganda Singh had mentioned that on the day he left the Afghans had made a vigorous assault, but were beaten back with heavy loss.

Bringing the aeroplane round so as to pass again over the encampment, Lawrence noticed a number of horses picketed near the rough huts. The Gurkha cried excitedly that the animals were kicking and straining at their ropes, and men were rushing to hold them. The noise of the engine had thrown them into a state of blind terror. Two or three broke away, and galloped madly up the nullah.

Several shots were fired at the aeroplane. Lawrence was somewhat surprised that the men were not struck with panic, like their horses, at the appearance of this strange booming monster of the air. It did not occur to him until afterwards that rumours of it must have been carried far and wide through the country for months past. Men who had seen it in its flights had described it to their neighbours or to wanderers whom they met in the hills; and although few, perhaps, of these tribesmen now present had actually seen it before, doubtless many of them had heard more or less veracious accounts of it. The frantic terror of the ponies suggested to Lawrence an idea on which he acted immediately. He abandoned his original purpose of making a preliminary reconnaissance of the whole position and then retiring to a distance to work out a plan. To a mounted force there is nothing so demoralizing as the loss of their horses. Lawrence knew this, and in a flash saw also that the Major, if he should escape from the tower, would have little to fear from an enemy pursuing on foot. He resolved therefore to attempt to stampede all the horses, and take advantage of the resulting confusion.

By the time he had come to this determination he was some distance past the nullah. Telling Fazl to drop a bomb among the horses when he again crossed

it, he rose rapidly to a height of about a thousand feet, wheeled round, and swooped down in a long incline towards the camp. He scarcely realized that he was taking his life in his hands as he flew almost within point-blank range. Nor had he calculated on the possible effect of the coming explosion on the aeroplane. When he arrested his downward flight he was so near the ground that the bursting of the bomb set the machine rocking violently, and for a few moments he could scarcely control it. Cool-headed marksmen could then have taken fatal aim at him; but the Afghans were fascinated and paralysed by his headlong descent, and while they were still wondering and dreading what it might portend, the explosion of the bomb within a few yards of them struck them with terror.

Lawrence swept round to observe the effect of this bolt from the blue. A great troop of horses was galloping wildly along the nullah to the west. He caught sight of their forms, black, brown and grey, wherever there were breaks among the trees. Farther up the nullah, where the sides were less steep, the frantic animals were dashing across the country in all directions. Beneath, a few lay motionless on the ground. Loth as he was to destroy or maim the unoffending beasts, he felt that this was not an occasion for half measures: there was too much at stake. In their panic flight it was inevitable that many of the horses must dash themselves to pieces in the ravines and fissures with which the country was seamed. To prevent the rallying of the rest, he set off in pursuit. Sweeping the ground like a shepherd's dog after a flock of sheep, he flew backwards and forwards and from side to side at the heels of the terrified animals. No more bombs were necessary. The whirr of the propeller behind them drove them on at the same mad rush, and in a quarter of an hour there was not a living horse within several miles of the encampment.

On returning towards the tower, Lawrence was surprised to see that the groups of Afghans had disappeared from around it. But as he crossed the nullah there were bursts of smoke from among the trees and the undergrowth, and above the hum of the propeller he heard the characteristic whistle of bullets. Later he discovered that several holes had been drilled in the planes. The firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Crossing the nullah almost at right angles, the aeroplane was visible for only a few seconds to the men hidden in the bottom.

From an embrasure high up in the tower a white handkerchief was fluttering in the breeze. Lawrence wished that he had some means of communicating instantly with the Major; but the attack from which he had just escaped proved that he could not venture to alight, nor could he be of any further service to the little garrison until the nullah had been cleared. It was necessary to drive the men up the ravine in the same direction as he had already driven the horses. There might be more difficulty in this, for the enemy were completely concealed by the trees and undergrowth, so that he could not tell exactly where they were.

The only plan that promised complete success was to fly some distance down the ravine, and then work up it, dropping bombs when he approached the spot where the firing had broken out.

In a few brief sentences he explained his purpose to Fazl. Making a wide sweep he came back to the nullah half a mile to the east; then, reducing speed to the minimum, but keeping at a good altitude, he followed the winding course of the gully. The enemy played into his hands. Another burst of smoke revealed their whereabouts. Fazl instantly dropped a bomb, and turning to watch the effect, cried out that a dense cloud of smoke and dust had arisen from the scene of the explosion. Lawrence wheeled round again, described a wide semicircle, passing immediately above the tower, and, regaining the nullah, repeated the manoeuvre.

This time Fazl reported that he saw men among the trees, running up the ravine. The enemy could scarcely have chosen a less secure shelter. The explosion of a bomb in so constricted a space must be many times more destructive than in the open. But Lawrence had no inclination towards needless slaughter. His object would be achieved if he drove the men away as he had driven the horses. Knowing that they were on the run, he dropped another bomb to speed their flight; then swept round again, and pursued the same tactics as had already proved so effectual. When the enemy reached the less wooded part of the nullah, he found it easy to hover about their rear, and, without the further use of bombs, to impel them to the most desperate exertions by the mere harrying pursuit of the aeroplane.

He was not content until he had driven them many miles up the nullah. Whenever they showed a disposition to break away into the open country to right or left, a swoop of the aeroplane in that direction was sufficient to send them scurrying back. In their haste and panic they did not halt to fire again, and Lawrence was at length satisfied that even if they should recover their nerve and courage, they were too far away to trouble the garrison of the tower for at least a couple of hours.

On nearing the tower, he saw that several figures had emerged from the door at the foot. He glided down to within a few yards of it, and shouted a greeting to Major Endicott, who waved his hand in response. Then he sought for a landing-place. The ground in the immediate vicinity was too broken to allow of a safe descent; but after circling round once or twice, he discovered a space sufficiently flat and open for his purpose about a quarter of a mile away. Alighting there, he left the aeroplane in Fazl's charge, and, feeling very shaky on his legs after the exhausting and nervous work of the past two hours, he walked

back to meet the British officer.

CHAPTER THE NINETEENTH
STALKED

"Masterly cattle-driving," were Major Endicott's first words as Lawrence joined him.

No one would have supposed from the simple words and the natural hand-shake that the meeting marked the end of a tense and perilous situation. Five sowars grouped at the door saluted and gave a shout of welcome.

"I'm jolly glad I'm in time," said Lawrence.

"Jolly good of you to come at all–wholly unexpected. I had quite forgotten that you had brought an aeroplane out."

"I say, are you hungry?"

"We are on our second horse. We had to use our own food for the animals. We are desperately thirsty, though. The well water is putrid."

"I've got plenty of food and water in the aeroplane."

"That's more than I hoped. I'll send the men for it. Horse-flesh isn't bad, but it lacks variety; and thirst is torture."

Having dispatched three of the sowars to fetch the provisions, he said–

"I sent the dafadar on the chance of his finding you. Is all well at the mine?"

"We're in the deuce of a fix, Major. There's a regular army of Kalmucks forty miles north of us."

"Kalmucks! An army of them!" said the Major in surprise.

"Yes. Bob estimates the number at twenty thousand."

The Major knit his brows. The news evidently disturbed him.

"Encamped, you say? Any signs of a movement?"

"They intend marching up the valley. We have had two or three brushes with advanced parties."

"That's very serious." He reflected silently for a little; then, as if rousing himself from a reverie, continued–

"You didn't need my warning, then. Your uncle was already preparing to decamp?"

"Uncle's gone!"

"Not left you young– Why, my dear fellow–you don't mean that he's—-"

Lawrence nodded.

"One of our miners shot him," he said briefly.

"Poor old Harry! That's a good fellow gone. I'm awfully sorry for you young fellows. Is your brother getting ready to come away?"

"Bob is still at the mine. It's in a narrow gorge, and we've blocked up the only path, so they can't get at us for some little time. But what are we to do, Major? You and your men will march for the mine, won't you?"

The Major sank again into a brown study. Lawrence watched his grave face anxiously.

"It's a pity, but I haven't time," he said at length. "I must get south as rapidly as possible. What you tell me confirms the rumours that have been flying about. When I started from Rawal Pindi there was talk of risings in different parts of the country, and as I came north I heard about large movements in Central Asia. I thought they were directed against Russia, but it seems pretty clear that the imbeciles are going to break their heads against us. This flanking movement will give us trouble. I must get back to the nearest post and wire the news to headquarters, and they'll want me; I've made an egregious failure here, but I may still be able to do something among the tribes farther south."

"But it's war now, isn't it? Ganda said you had only a few men. You could hardly fight your way back if the enemy were across the road."

"I've those five men you see there, and two of them are wounded. I started with twelve; six were killed. And I almost wish you hadn't stampeded the enemy's horses quite so thoroughly. The enemy collared all but three of ours. We killed two for food. On foot we are at a terrible disadvantage. The only thing for me to do is to ride off alone, and trust to luck. One man might get through safely where a party would fail. I know the ground thoroughly. The one thing that bothers me is my wounded. I was going to suggest that my men should make tracks for your mine; they might be of use to you; but the two wounded fellows can't stand the march."

"I see a way out of that," said Lawrence at once. "I can take them in the aeroplane and be back in a couple of hours or so. I should have to leave my Gurkha, but he would come along with your men."

"The country's clear between here and the mine, I suppose?"

"Practically; a few Kalmucks got past before we blocked up the path–we blasted the rocks with dynamite. There aren't more than a dozen, certainly."

"Armed?"

"Yes, but I fancy they're without food, and in no condition to tackle your men if they meet. Besides, when I get back I can cover their march: I've several bombs left."

"Dynamite again, as I saw. Your mine is rather useful. I'll remain here,

then, until you get back, and then leave my men to you."

"But, Major, I don't like to think of you riding alone over ninety or a hundred miles of country that may be overrun by the enemy."

"It wouldn't be the first time one of us has tried it and got through safely. Anyway, I see nothing else for it. This news must be got through to Simla, and while I'm alive I mustn't be out of the way."

"I've an idea. Why not march with the men to the mine? Then Bob or I would carry you across country in the aeroplane. You'd lose a day or two to begin with, but after all you'd get to the post quite as soon as on horseback–without any of the dangers."

"Aeroplane *perfectly* safe then?" he said with a quizzical smile.

"Well, we've had no trouble with it yet, and Bob would take you, I dare say; he's better at it than I am."

"It's uncommonly good of you to suggest it. How far is your mine from here?"

"Something over forty miles."

"That means two days' march at least, in such rugged country and on foot. Well, I'll close with you. I should like to take stock of the position at your mine. I might make a suggestion, perhaps; and if you or your brother will be good enough to carry me across country, I shall be grateful, and it'll be useful to Government. How far did you drive those Afghans, by the by?"

"Quite six miles, I should think, so you'll have a good start. Even if they buck up and catch their horses, they won't get back here before me, and I don't believe they'll come back at all. They were pretty thoroughly scared by the bombs."

"Very well, then, we shall have to carry my wounded to the aeroplane. They'll be horribly nervous. Can you strap them in?"

"With their own belts. They'll get over their nervousness in a few minutes; it's easier travelling than by railway."

"I'm glad of that. I was afraid I should be squeamish myself. The rest of us will start as soon as you are off."

The sowars had now returned with the baskets of food, and the whole party sat on the ground, with their rifles across their knees, to what was a sumptuous feast after their recent privations. When they had finished the meal, the two wounded men were carried by their comrades to the aeroplane. Fazl quietly obeyed Lawrence's order to give up his seat, though he was clearly disappointed; and the two passengers having been securely strapped in, Bob started, with a cheery "So long!" to the Major.

"Hai, sahib!" said one of the men, who were overawed by these strange proceedings: "that is a terrible thing."

"A godsend to us," said the Major. He then explained to them his purpose.

One of them brought his horse from the tower, and ten minutes after Lawrence's departure the little party started, the three sowars having strapped on their backs the water-skins and the baskets, with what was left of the provisions. They made their way down the ravine, to avoid observation from any of the Afghans who might be still lurking in the neighbourhood, the Major's intention being to strike across country to the river as soon as they were out of sight of the surroundings of the tower.

Lawrence's mind was so busily occupied with this latest turn of Fortune's wheel that he forgot, on his flight back to the mine, to keep a look-out for the Kalmucks. He would scarcely have seen them, for they heard the hum of the machine from a considerable distance, and, mindful of former happenings, they concealed themselves behind rocks or among bushes without making any attempt to check its flight with their rifles.

About ten miles from the mine Lawrence had a momentary fright. The engine, which had worked with perfect accuracy ever since the first experiments, now suddenly missed fire. Before he had time to think of what he should do if it failed, however, it recovered itself, and gave him no further anxiety. On coming within sight of the platform, he saw with relief that Bob was there to meet him; it was clear that all was well at present. When he alighted he explained the situation of Major Endicott in a few rapid sentences. Bob walked a few yards along the pathway, round the curve, and hallooed to Gur Buksh to send some of the men to him. These carried the wounded sowars to the compound, and presently returned with more baskets of food, which Bob had ordered to be prepared for the Major's party on the march.

"I say, Bob," said Lawrence during the men's absence, "there was a miss-fire a few miles back."

"Whew! it's beginning to play tricks then. We've been very lucky so far. Need you go back?"

"Oh yes! I told the Major I'd return to cover his march."

"Let me have a look at it."

He opened up the engine, examined all its parts, started it.

"It seems to be working all right. I don't see any grit; if there was any it's been got rid of. If it should happen again you had better plane down and wait till the Major reaches you; but I don't think you'll have any trouble."

As Lawrence got into his place, he recollected the bombs that lay beneath the seat that Fazl had occupied.

"Shift those, Bob, will you?" he said. "It will be rather awkward without Fazl if I have to use them. Put them as closely within reach as you can. I shall have to steer with one hand and drop them with the other."

"Probably you won't have to use them at all. The Major and four men will

be more than a match for those Kalmuck fellows, who must be getting famished by this time."

"The Afghans may be in pursuit, though."

"But the mere sight of the aeroplane might be enough for them after what has happened. Still, it's just as well to be prepared. Bluffing sometimes doesn't come off, and the aeroplane is useless for offensive action without the bombs. If you do find the Major fighting a rear-guard action don't be too tender. Strike hard if you strike at all."

"Well, I'll do what I must. Don't expect us before to-morrow night at the earliest. I shall have to come down at times, or the petrol won't last out; and when the Major is within a few miles I'll fly back ahead of him if all's safe. So long!"

Bob watched him out of sight. He felt a little anxious; he would have been alarmed had he known that within five miles of the mine the engine began to give trouble again. Lawrence was in two minds whether to return and have it thoroughly overhauled, or to continue on his course. But he felt that delay might be serious to the Major, and, as before, the engine might soon right itself. He kept straight on. His hopes were flattered when, after a minute or two of fitful explosions, the engine worked normally again.

But he had only flown about half-way to the tower, as he guessed, when the trouble recommenced. Hoping against hope, he continued his flight for a minute or so, until he became convinced that the engine was on the point of breaking down utterly. He had been preparing himself for the possibility, but found himself in a serious difficulty now that the problem actually faced him. The valley at the point which he had reached was broader than at the mine, and not so rocky or broken up as it was in many other parts. But it offered few spots where even the most intrepid and experienced airman would care to risk a descent. The banks of the river were covered with thick scrub and bushes; here and there on the hill-side there were patches of brushwood and small clumps of trees; everywhere the ground was broken. But it was no time for picking and choosing. If he had not begun to plane down by the time the engine finally failed, the chances were that he would be smashed to pieces.

Casting an anxious look on the ground, he decided to make for an open space between two belts of woodland. He could not tell whether it was as level as it seemed; all that he was sure of was that it allowed room for alighting and was free from considerable obstructions.

The problem of descent had so fully occupied him that not until he had actually begun the vol plané did he remember with a thrill of consternation the dynamite bombs at his feet. For a moment his brain seemed paralysed; then, as he realized the full measure of his peril, he braced himself to deal with it. If the

ground proved to be less smooth than it seemed, the shock of alighting might well be severe enough to explode the dynamite. Then, instead of a broken chassis or a wrenched stay, and a few bruises–the slight mishaps that had befallen many an airman–the result would be the complete shattering of the aeroplane and himself. The only way of safety was to jettison the bombs, and he instantly stooped to pick them up one by one and cast them over the side. There followed a series of detonations like pistol-shots much magnified, each louder than the one before. The bombs fell behind the aeroplane as it descended in a gliding swoop, and Lawrence was now beset by a new anxiety: whether, maintaining his control of the machine, he could get rid of the bombs fast enough to escape risk of damage by the explosions as he neared the ground. There would have been little or no danger if he had been flying at speed; but his downward course being at a rather large angle, the closer he came to the ground, the nearer he would be to the scene of the last explosion.

A spectator would have had a poor opinion of the airmanship of the pilot whose machine was descending so unsteadily. To control planes, elevator, and rudder; to keep an eye on the ground; and at the same time to cast the bombs overboard: all these simultaneous tasks put a severe strain upon his nerve, agility, and judgment. He got rid of the last bomb within about thirty feet of the ground, and immediately shifted the elevator to avoid a too sudden landing. It was fortunate that he checked the descent when he did; but he was too near the ground to escape altogether. The force of the explosion set the aeroplane rocking as in a gale of wind. He was enveloped in a cloud of smoke and dust and fragments of rock. For a moment or two he lost control of the machine, and instead of alighting evenly, one side hit the ground first, and it toppled over. Lawrence was flung out. As he rose dizzily to his feet, he thought himself lucky to have escaped with a few bruises and a pain in his left ankle, which had apparently been turned over as he fell.

When he regained his scattered wits he limped to the aeroplane, and looked at it ruefully. At first sight it appeared to be wrecked, but on examining it more closely he was relieved to find that the damage was such as could be repaired with a little care. The left side of the chassis was twisted; some of the stays were broken, and the left-hand plane was badly ripped.

"A narrow squeak," he said to himself. "And now what on earth is to be done?"

He sat down and felt his sprained ankle. It was very tender to the touch, and he realized that he could not set off on foot to meet the Major, but must remain until he arrived. At a guess he had come about twenty-five miles from the mine. The Major could not be nearer than ten miles. He could not expect to see him for three hours at least. The whole prospect was gloomy. The aeroplane could only

be repaired at the mine, and it was quite impossible for the three sowars and Fazl to transport it over twenty-five miles of a narrow and difficult track. It seemed as if the machine must be left where it lay until men could be fetched from the mine to take it to pieces, and that would need Bob's superintendence. The proposed flight to the British post was out of the question, and he knew the Major well enough to be sure that he would revert to his original intention of making the journey on horseback, alone. Altogether it was a desperately vexatious plight.

And then he remembered the Kalmucks, whom for the time he had forgotten. He had seen nothing of them either going or coming, but unless they had struck across the hills, which was unlikely, they must be very near to where he now was. They could not fail to have heard the successive explosions of the bombs, so that they would be on the alert. They might have seen the descent of the aeroplane from their lurking places among the rocks, and if they should guess that he had come to grief, they would have him at their mercy. As soon as his thoughts took this direction Lawrence got up and unstrapped his rifle from the aeroplane. He took his revolver from his pocket; it was uninjured. Then lifting his field-glass he swept the surrounding country for signs of the enemy.

He had to admit to himself that his position could scarcely be worse. The spot on which he had landed was fairly open, but it was surrounded by broken ground that would give ample cover to an enemy. On two sides, up- and down-stream, the clumps of woodland approached to within a hundred yards. Below him, not far away, was the river, lined on both banks with a thick fringe of brushwood and rushes. Above, the hill rose gently for a great distance, but it was very rugged, broken by contorted fissures, through some of which rivulets zigzagged swiftly down to the river. He swept the country again and again with his glass, and took some comfort from the absence of any sign of man; but there were so many places where the Kalmucks might be in hiding that he thought it wise to seek some secluded spot himself, where he would be better able than on the open ground to guard against surprise.

He rose and limped up the slope of the hill. After a little search, he discovered a hollow about forty yards above the aeroplane, from which he could take a bird's-eye view of the ground, and where he had a certain amount of shelter. Thither he carried his rifle, a basket of food and a flask of water, and lay down to wait with what patience he might for the coming of Major Endicott.

It was now midday, and the sun was very hot. For some time he kept a sharp look-out, examining the country every few minutes through his field-glass, and creeping from side to side of the hollow so as to extend and change his view. Presently, however, the great heat and his failure to discover any trace of the enemy caused him to relax his vigilance. He was very tired; whenever he moved, his ankle gave him much pain; and, as at the bridge during his night watch, an

oppressive drowsiness stole upon him, which he found it impossible to shake off. He would nod, recover himself, vow that it should not happen again, and in another minute his head would fall forward, and he opened his eyes bedazed and scarcely realizing where he was. Then once more he raised the glass to his eyes, and gazed around almost mechanically, only to go through the same series of nods and starts again.

Recovering himself after a more prolonged fit of dozing, he rubbed his eyes, pinched himself, and threw a glance around. His sluggish faculties were quickened by the sight of something moving in the thin brushwood at the edge of the northern clump. He quickly lifted his glass and directed it at the spot, but saw nothing suspicious, and supposed that either he had been mistaken, or that the moving object had been some animal which he need not trouble about. But the momentary suspicion banished his drowsiness; now wide awake, he sat with his back against the rock, fixing his eyes on the scene in front of him.

Presently he started. Beyond doubt a figure had run from tree to tree on the hill-side to the right, a little above him. By the time he had levelled his glass on the spot the figure had disappeared. He reached for his rifle, and crouched low in the hollow, peering over its edge. Next moment his attention was again caught by a movement in the clump of wood where he had first noticed it. This time he could see, even with the naked eye, the form of a man bending low. Almost immediately afterwards another half-perceived movement caused him to look towards a spot midway between the wood and the place on the hill-side where he had seen the first form. The top of a skin hat was projecting above a knob of rock there.

"Stalking, by George!" he said to himself.

His first instinct was to seize his rifle; his second to look around for some way of escape. It was possible that the Kalmucks had not yet discovered him, though the aeroplane was full in their view; and if he could only creep among the shrubs into some deep fissure he might yet elude them. He might even make a dash for it, gain the clump of trees to the south, and push on to meet Major Endicott. The enemy would probably waste some time in searching for him–enough to give him a good start. But he saw at a glance that he could not reach the trees without crossing the open ground in sight of the enemy, and partially crippled as he was he could not hope to outstrip them, even if they did not use in the pursuit the horses which they had had when they slipped past the mine. His only course was to stay where he was, hoping with good luck to remain undiscovered. In the last resort he could do some execution among them with his weapons, though the odds of numbers against him precluded any idea of his being able to keep them off permanently.

At that moment he was more concerned about the fate of the aeroplane

than about his own. It would be of no use to the enemy; they would probably destroy it, and that prospect enraged him. For the first time he felt a real desire to fight and slay, and wondered whether, when the enemy came into the open, he might not pick them off one by one. After all, he thought, his position in the hollow gave him some advantage. They could not take good aim at him, whereas if they attempted to rush him across the open space, he could mark them down almost at his leisure.

His reflections were suddenly cut short by a rifle-shot. A bullet struck the ground unpleasantly near him, and sent up a spurt of earth, some of which struck him. He crouched still lower in the hollow. Escape was now out of the question: he must simply wait and take what opening of defending himself offered.

The shot had been fired from the clump of wood. Immediately afterwards the man on the hill-side stood erect in the attitude of taking aim. Lawrence hastily levelled his rifle and took a rough shot at him, with what effect he could not tell, for his attention was at once called off by a rush of the man in the wood, who dashed forward over several yards towards a patch of bush nearer to the hollow. Lawrence felt that his position was even worse than he had supposed. The enemy had scattered with a definite plan. They meant to work their way gradually towards him under cover, distracting him by firing in turn, until they thought it possible to overwhelm him with a final rush from several sides. He wished he had acted on his first impulse to sprint towards the wood on the south. Was it possible even now to do it? A sudden twinge in his ankle gave him the answer. They had him in a trap.

And then he saw something flickering by a tree up the hill-side. It seemed to be a piece of cloth. Was it a flag of truce? While he was watching it there was a patter of feet behind him. Three men had risen as it were out of the earth southwards of the hollow. Before he could rise they flung themselves upon him. He was dashed to the ground. He made desperate efforts to free himself, writhing, kicking, trying to free one of his hands to use his revolver. But they pinned him down: one snatched his revolver from him, the others held him firmly by the neck and feet, and when his hopeless struggles ceased they whipped off their leather girdles and tied him up so that he was unable to move. Then they turned him on his back, uttering guttural grunts of satisfaction, and he looked up into the malicious faces of Nurla Bai and Black Jack.

CHAPTER THE TWENTIETH

THE KALMUCKS MAKE A PRISONER

THE KALMUCKS MAKE A PRISONER

A FRIEND IN NEED

Even a philosopher, we know, cannot bear the toothache patiently. Every one has at one time or another recognized in himself the unphilosophic tendency to feel irritation at some trivial thing–a speck of mud on one's clean collar, a hair in one's soup. We have all been much more deeply annoyed by a slight blemish or mishap than troubled at a really grave misfortune.

The plight in which Lawrence now found himself was serious enough to justify an access of rage or despair. But it was not his capture or his bonds that inflicted the severest pang upon his self-esteem. It was the sight of Nurla Bai and his dwarfish henchman making free with the sardine sandwiches which Shan Tai had put up for his especial delectation.

When they had bound him, the three Kalmucks glanced around, spied the basket a few feet away, and rushed at it with cries of delight. Lawrence looked on in disgust as they wolfed the eatables–too delicate for their untutored palates, too unsubstantial to appease their ravenous appetite. He felt a thrill of joy when, on the remainder of the party coming up, until there were nine altogether, the new arrivals clamoured for a share, and began to push and snatch just as he had seen a flock of greedy sparrows pecking at one another over a single crust. But though these thieves were falling out, there was no chance of the honest man coming by his own.

The contents of the basket soon disappeared, and the men looked round wolfishly for more. At sight of the aeroplane hope flashed upon them, and with one consent they ran to realize it. Lawrence could no longer see them over the edge of the hollow, but he heard their shouts of glee, the creaking of basket lids, and then the steady smacking of eighteen busy lips as they fell upon the viands provided for Major Endicott and his men. He was very angry. He felt not a touch of sympathy for them in their famishment. To him they were merely gluttons, not starving fellow-creatures.

During their absence he tried to wriggle out of his bonds, but the work had been well done, and he lay still, wondering what was to become of him. They had not killed him: he was suddenly aware of that agreeable fact, though his pleasure in it was damped when he foresaw a possible long captivity. While they gulped and gloated his thoughts ran round a ring. Would they carry him on with them, going southward? Then they would meet Major Endicott, and there would be a fight. If they, fortified by his own food, should get the upper hand, he would still be their helpless prisoner. If they were beaten, it would be consistent with Nurla Bai's ferocious temper to kill him before taking to flight. Either way, his

case would be deplorable.

Presently the men came back to him, still munching and smacking their lips. A villainous crew they looked. Besides Nurla Bai and Black Jack, there were two other miners; the rest, differently and more martially clad, were evidently part of the advancing force. They sat down at the edge of the hollow, chewing the cud of excellent victuals and of sweet exaltation of mind. Lawrence writhed as he realized how completely these ruffians had outwitted him. The men in front of him a while ago had been simply holding his attention, while the others crept upon him from behind. It was humiliating–one more proof, he thought, that he was certainly not cut out for a soldier.

At first the men did nothing but grunt, like pigs that have gorged themselves. Their little eyes rested on their prisoner indolently, as though he were an object of no importance. By and by they began to talk to one another, and then to throw taunting and insolent remarks at him. His knowledge of the niceties of abuse of which their tongue was capable was limited, but he understood enough to make his blood boil. But he discreetly held his peace: he would not flatter them by bandying abuse.

When they had thus enjoyed themselves for a while, Nurla Bai rose, and planted himself within a few feet of Lawrence.

"What is the good of the great hummingbird now?" he said with a sneer. "Those that hunt partridges ought not to make a noise."

It flashed upon Lawrence that the man supposed that the aeroplane had been in pursuit of him. Evidently he was unaware that a party was marching down the track towards the mine. It was just as well to flatter his error. Lawrence made no reply.

"The little tins missed their mark," Nurla Bai went on. "Too much haste spoils the hunt. The hawk has broken its wing, I perceive. Perhaps it can be mended?"

Lawrence reflected that by telling the truth he might gain a little time and save the aeroplane from destruction.

"Yes; it can be mended," he said, "but not here. The damage is slight, but the machine is quite useless as it is."

The Kalmuck sat looking at him, apparently following out a train of thought.

"How long might it take a man to learn how to use the wings?" he said at length.

Lawrence caught the drift of the question.

"Perhaps six months, perhaps a year," he said. "It depends on the man."

Nurla Bai looked disappointed; clearly he had hoped to appropriate the machine, get it mended, and then make instant use of it. He considered for a

little, and then said–

"The hunter is caught in his own toils. You are now as my servant, to do whatsoever I command. It is a change. Give me the mine: I give you the machine."

"That is foolishness. Bob Sahib will never give up the mine."

"We shall see," said the man with a leer. "When he beholds you in my hands, and knows that if he refuses you will be shot, and the machine broken up, I think he will be wise."

At this Lawrence saw a ray of hope in the situation. If they took him back to the mine as a hostage, Major Endicott would discover the abandoned aeroplane and push on with all speed. But he soon discovered that his captors had no intention of abandoning the aeroplane. Nurla Bai no doubt reckoned on the sight of it in his hands having a very potent effect on the other sahib at the mine. After a consultation among themselves, the men went into the wood, and began to fell some of the smaller trees, and to lop branches from the larger. In a short time they had collected a considerable quantity. They carried these down to the river, and set about binding them into a raft with rushes and rods of osier. When this was done, they hauled the aeroplane to it, placed it in the middle, and proceeded to weave a long grass rope, which they attached to the rear of the raft. Then one of the men, carrying a straight sapling, mounted behind the aeroplane, and the whole contrivance was pushed into the stream.

The Kalmucks gave a shout of satisfaction on seeing the raft float down with the current. Two men held the rope to check its speed in the more rapid reaches of the river. The man upon it used his pole to fend it off rocks and snags. The others fetched their horses from the wood in which they had been tethered. On one of these Lawrence was mounted, with his hands still tied. Black Jack rode alongside, firmly grasping the bridle. Thus, when the afternoon was already far advanced, they began the march in the direction of the mine.

Lawrence had not looked on without expostulation at the handling of the aeroplane, but Nurla Bai ignored his protests. When he saw it swaying and jolting on the raft, he expected it to be irretrievably ruined before it had gone many miles on its course. The river, everywhere rapid, became a torrent in the gorges; and at these narrow places Lawrence anticipated that the raft would be whirled and cast about utterly beyond control, driven on one bank or the other, or smashed on some rock in mid-stream. But he discovered that the Kalmucks had been as much alive to the risks as he was himself, and his opinion of Nurla Bai rose. Just before coming to a gorge, they drew the raft to the bank, lifted the aeroplane, and carried it overland until the river broadened again. The man with the pole remained by the raft until his comrades were a long way in advance; then he let it race down the gorge unchecked and followed it along the bank, to find that it had been recovered at the further end.

The party had been marching for about an hour when they were met by three other Kalmucks, tramping wearily up the track on foot. Lawrence recognized them as miners. They had either not been furnished with horses by the advanced guard beyond the mine, or had had their steeds shot under them during the scamper in the darkness. Nurla Bai gave these hungry men a portion of the provisions that were still left, and they turned about and marched with the rest down-stream. The journey was continued until the growing darkness rendered further advance impossible. Mooring the raft to a tree on the bank, the men prepared to camp for the night, on a moss-covered space just above. Lawrence was lifted from the horse; his feet were again tied; and he was laid in the centre of the encampment. The horses were tethered in a copse hard by, and when a fire had been lighted a few yards northward of the bivouac, the men disposed themselves in a wide circle about their prisoner, and devoted themselves to the remnants of the provisions. No one offered Lawrence a share–a lack of courtesy which did not trouble him. No one spoke to him; but there was no charm in their conversation. They scarcely even looked at him; he suffered nothing from their neglect. He wished they would not eat so noisily; and when, having gobbled the last scraps of the food intended for Major Endicott and his party, they sat with their knees up, and chattered across him in their rasping voices, he felt that no one could be said to have a complete experience of the minor troubles of life who had not been an enforced companion of Kalmucks.

A great deal of what they said was incomprehensible to him, but he caught a phrase now and then that interested him in spite of himself. One concerned his uncle. Nurla Bai was apparently relating, for the benefit of the strangers from the north, the doughty deeds he had recently performed. Among them he ranked the shooting of the Englishman who had been his employer. From what he said, Lawrence gathered that the disappearance of Mr. Appleton was as great a disappointment to the miners as to himself. They joked about it, however; Nurla Bai became facetious as he described the consternation of the fishes as they beheld the body of an Englishman, strange monster, sinking into their midst. It was fortunate that Lawrence did not understand the idiomatic beastliness with which the man depicted the gruesome feast then celebrated on the stony bottom of the river.

Another flight of the Kalmuck's fancy afforded him much amusement. Nurla Bai gave rein to his eloquence in picturing the scenes that Delhi was soon to witness: Ubacha Khan sitting in state on the ancient throne of the Moguls, withering with his frown the throng of cowed and shivering Englishmen who grovelled at his feet, and beslobbered them with tears as they pleaded vainly for mercy. Lawrence heard for the first time of the exquisite tortures which Mongol ingenuity could devise for helpless prisoners; and while he was amused at the

picture conjured up of British officers suing a new Mogul emperor for pardon, he was horrified at the mere imagination of the cruelties which these wretches discussed with such gloating inhumanity.

Lying on his back, he could see half the ring of his captors, their squat forms silhouetted against the glow of the camp-fire, their yellow faces blanched by the moonlight now flooding the valley. He raised his eyes to the hills beyond, watching the magical play of the silvery radiance upon the peaks and promontories, making the snow sparkle; searching, as it were, the black crannies and caverns. But he soon found his interest in this wonderful illumination yield to his sense of cold. This region was one of extremes of temperature: the torrid heat of day being succeeded by Arctic cold at night. The Kalmucks did not appear conscious of it; they were inured to the climate; but to Lawrence, compelled to lie motionless, the chilliness became painful, and the warm glow of the camp-fire mocked him tantalizingly.

He was to prove, this night, the contrariness of fate. Twice before, when he had wished above all things to keep awake, drowsiness had overcome him; now, when he would have given anything for the oblivion of sleep, physical discomfort and the burden of his thoughts banished sleep from his eyes. The Kalmucks became less talkative as the night wore on; presently their voices ceased altogether, and they slept. Lawrence preferred their snores to their conversation; they formed a descant to the unvarying ground bass of the river droning below. Every now and then the cry of a night-bird in the mountains added its shrill treble to the harmony.

The moon sank behind the crest of the hills; black darkness stole over the valley; and the untended watch-fire sank lower and lower, until its glow was too faint even to show up the slumbering forms of the Kalmucks. Lawrence might have wondered that they had not set a watch but for his knowledge that they were quite unsuspicious of the enemy higher up the stream, and that his bonds were only too firm. His thoughts flitted to Major Endicott and his little band; where were they now? How did they regard his failure to return to them? Had they, too, encamped for the night? Was there the least possibility that the hours spent in stalking him and in constructing the raft would have given them time to draw so near that with morning light they would come upon the encampment, or overtake the Kalmucks during the ensuing day? And what was to be the final issue of all these strange events? Would he, or Bob, ever come out of the entanglement in which they had been so suddenly involved?

His anxious meditation was broken short by a slight sound behind him. He turned his head–it was the only part of his body that he could move–and stretched his ear towards the spot whence the sound had seemed to come. Perhaps it was one of the Kalmucks stirring in his sleep–rising, possibly, to cast fuel

upon the dying fire. He could see nothing. Twisting his neck until it ached, he tried to pierce the blackness, listening keenly for a repetition of the sound. He heard only the regular snores of the men sleeping nine or ten feet away.

But there seemed to be something moving between him and them–a something darker than the night itself, creeping along the ground. It could not be a wild animal; no ibex, nor even a bear unless pressed by hunger, would have come within the scent of him; there were no tigers or leopards in these regions; could it be a man?–one of his own people? Tingling with a flush of hope, he lay perfectly still, fearful lest even the beating of his heart should betray his excitement to the enemy.

There was a rustling movement near him; it seemed to come nearer; then he shuddered involuntarily as he felt something touch him. It flashed upon him that one of the Kalmucks was going to murder him, and for a moment he had to exercise stern control over his nerves to repress a cry. A cold shiver trickled down his back, and he broke out in a clammy sweat as he felt a rough hand pass over him–over his face, aside to his arms, down to his feet. He durst not utter a sound, hope and fear jostling in his brain.

The hand left him. There was a moment of suspense. Then in his ear breathed a whisper.

"Sahib, lie still!"

He felt the hand again, then a pressure upon his arm–a pressure that increased and diminished in rapid alternation. He throbbed with joy. Some one–was it Fazl?–was sawing at his bonds. The sound made by the knife or sword was scarcely perceptible; yet to his feverish apprehension it seemed loud enough to waken the heaviest sleeper. Soon he was conscious that his arms were free, and he ventured to move them stealthily to ease them of their numbness. The pressure was transferred to his feet, and after some moments of quivering anxiety he felt that these also were released from their bonds. Then cold metal touched his hand, and his eager fingers clasped over a grooved hilt.

"Sahib, a minute to rest, then follow me," whispered the voice.

He could hardly endure the waiting, though he knew it was intended to give him command of his limbs.

"Sahib, now!"

He raised himself on all fours, and began to creep after his deliverer, a black form crawling towards the ring of sleeping Kalmucks.

The Gurkha–for it was he–had almost passed between and beyond the two men who lay stretched towards the track, when a hand shot out and gripped him by the ankle. At the same moment the owner of the hand gave a shout, his companions started up, and Bob leapt to his feet. As soon as he felt the touch upon him, Fazl wriggled like a snake, his right hand groping towards the dark

form beneath him. There was a groan, and he stood free.

A foot or two behind him, Bob came to a halt when he dimly saw the two figures writhing on the ground. When one of them sprang up, he was not sure for the moment whether it was friend or foe. A murmured word reassured him, and he was ready to go on. But his way was blocked. Roused by their comrade's cry, the Kalmucks hurled themselves in a shouting mass across the open space. One of them kicked up the embers of the expiring fire, and a dull glow illuminated the scene. It lent aid to the fugitives, who were themselves in shadow. But for his sprained ankle Lawrence could have sprinted away into the darkness; Fazl might by this time have been out of harm's way, but the little man, perplexed and anxious at his master's dilatoriness, turned to his assistance. Lawrence had been checked by a man who sprang at him from the left. He had no time to swing round and bring into play the right hand clutching Fazl's knife; but, instinctively shooting out his left hand, by good luck he got home upon his opponent's chin. There was little 'body' in the blow, delivered so rapidly and at such close quarters; yet his muscles were hard, and the man staggered and fell in a heap.

At this moment Fazl rushed to his side, in time to engage a group of the enemy who had now got their bearings and were rushing towards him. That moss-carpeted enclosure was the scene of a struggle as extraordinary as it was short. The little Gurkha twirled and twisted, sprang high, bent low, legs and arms gyrating with a rapidity that the eye of a spectator could scarcely have followed. It was as though some infuriated gnome had sprung out of the bowels of the earth, and was executing a fantastic dance among men bewildered by his demoniacal antics. But it was a dance of death. The red glow of the newly rekindled fire flashed upon a terrible kukuri, which whirled in circles, ovals, parabolas, and fifty unnamed curves, carving intricate luminous patterns on the night. Nor were these evolutions purposeless: every stroke of the keen nimble blade was directed by the keener mind of the man wielding it. Here it struck up a knife, there a rifle; now it pierced a shoulder, now grazed a head; so swift in its darting movements that it seemed multiplied into a dozen weapons each barbed with fire.

While the Gurkha was thus in the ecstasy of sword-play, keeping half the party of Kalmucks urgently engaged, Lawrence was in difficulties. The knife given him by Fazl was no doubt sharp and deadly, but it was a weapon to whose use no Englishman is bred, and demanded, though not so much free space as a sword, yet a certain amount of elbow room for its effective employment. Lawrence had only just felled his first assailant when he was himself beset by two or three at once. Half conscious of stinging sensations in arm and thigh he lashed out with left fist and right hand grasping the knife, but lost his footing, stumbled, and fell to the ground with his aggressors on top of him, snarling like wolves. He found himself with his left hand gripping one of them by the throat:

his own right wrist was held as in a vice. Struggling to wrench himself free, he rolled over, dragging the panting enemy with him, their movements carrying them nearer and nearer to the camp-fire; and in a sudden flicker of light he recognized the savage features of Black Jack.

In sheer muscular strength he was no match for the Kalmuck dwarf. Under the crushing pressure of Black Jack's fierce grip his hold on the knife was relaxing: the weapon was slipping from him. His hold upon the man's throat weakened; the Kalmuck was digging his nails into his left arm. As the under dog he was not able to cope with the man pressing him down. The knife dropped to the ground; his wrist was suddenly released; he felt a bony hand at his own throat, and had given himself up for lost, when a wild discordant clamour broke out close by, drowning all other sounds. For an instant Black Jack was perfectly still: then, wrenching himself away, he sprang to his feet and leapt into the darkness.

Lawrence got up more slowly, every muscle and nerve quivering. He had just seen that the space around was empty of living men, when a film seemed to fall upon his eyes. He tottered, and sank fainting upon the ground.

When he reopened his eyes, the flush of morning lay upon the valley. He raised his head.

"That's right," said Major Endicott, stepping from behind him. "How do you feel?"

"Rather groggy, Major," replied Lawrence. "Those fellows struck me, I think."

"A gash or two: nothing to speak of. What bowled you over was hunger and fatigue, I suspect. We've got a few scraps left, which will keep you going until we reach your mine."

"Is Fazl all right?"

"As jolly as a sandboy, though rather dilapidated. It's lucky I carry a case of sticking plaster with me; he's pretty considerably patched–much more than you are. You slept pretty soundly through my amateur surgery."

"And the Kalmucks?"

"Gone elsewhere–all that were left of them. That machine of yours played you false then?"

"Yes, the engine failed, and I had to come down. I was rather bothered with getting rid of my bombs and controlling the thing at the same time, and made a hash of it–sprained my ankle, too. I was waiting for you, and the beggars stalked me. I was a silly ass to let them take me unawares."

"What were they going to do with you?"

"Offer me and the aeroplane in exchange for the mine–as if Bob would listen to any rot like that!

”Well, the aeroplane isn’t worth much now, I suspect, but I fancy Bob might be disposed to think you good value for the mine. However, that’s all off. The aeroplane’s done for, of course?”

”Not a bit of it. We can put it to rights in a day.”

”Warrant it?”

”Yes. Our bargain holds if you’ll risk it. I’m more than sorry this happened, if it’s going to dish your plan, Major.”

”It shan’t do that. Taking risks is part of my job–and yours too, as it happens.”

”I’m jolly glad you came up when you did. In another minute you would have been too late.”

”You’ve got to thank your Gurkha for that. We were marching up pretty briskly–had no trouble from the Afghans–and the Gurkha declared he heard the sound of your bombs far ahead. None of us had heard anything, but the little chap was so positive that I thought we’d be on the safe side and hurry up. Judging by the march we made, the sound must have travelled nearly ten miles–not impossible in this air, I suppose; I confess I was sceptical at first, and only began to feel anxious when you didn’t return within the time stated.

”We came upon the tracks of the aeroplane some miles up; there was litter of all sorts about–scraps of food, broken branches and what not, and I feared you’d smashed yourself and your machine, only we couldn’t find any pieces of it. But we found your rifle and field-glass in a little hollow, and the Gurkha guessed that you had tumbled among the Kalmucks. An hour after dark we caught sight of the camp-fire. The Gurkha volunteered to creep up and reconnoitre, so the rest of us halted, waiting for his report.

”He’s a clever little chap, with a double dose of Gurkha courage. He came back very soon and told me he’d seen you tied up among them, and about the raft and so on. My sowars wanted to rush the place, but it struck me that that might be the end of you. The first instinct of such barbarians would be to knife their prisoner. It was a bit of a quandary–and the Gurkha came out strong again. It was his suggestion that he should creep into the camp and release you before we moved.”

”Plucky little chap!” said Lawrence warmly.

”A treasure! The noise of the scuffle brought us up hot-foot, and the only thing I regret is that, as the Gurkha informed me, the ringleaders, those rascally miners of yours, got away.... Now the sooner we get to your mine the better. You had better sit my horse. As all our food is gone, we shall have a strong motive for hurry, so we ought to get home before night. Of course if you think you can’t stand it we’ll take our time.”

”No: I’m fit enough. Your men will look after the raft?”

He explained the method by which the aeroplane had been taken safely past the gorges, and the Major went off to instruct his men.

Lawrence summoned Fazl, who was resting on a grassy knoll overlooking the river.

"I owe you my life; you're a brave fellow, and I thank you," he said.

Fazl's plastered face broadened in a grin.

"Wah! sahib, the Kalmucks are pigs, and their hearts melt like butter. The sahib's servant is unworthy of praise. It is a small thing to do for the heaven-born."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIRST
THE FRONTIER HOUSE

Some ninety miles southward of the tower in which Major Endicott had been besieged, on the bare summit of a low hill, stood a solitary building of stone, known to the British officers of the borderland as a frontier house. It had no pretentions to architectural excellence, consisting of a square tower, somewhat resembling a truncated chimney-stack, crowned by a small turret on a platform, which looked like a square straight-brimmed Quaker hat. Adjoining the tower was a sloping wall twenty feet high, that formed one side of an enclosure, within which were a number of rudely built huts, set up against the inward side of the wall. Neither tower nor wall had any windows, but in the latter a doorway gave entrance to the interior.

One day Dafadar Narrain Khan was squatting with a few of his sowars on the wall of the enclosure, looking out over the country before him. The building commanded a prospect extending for many miles. Its immediate vicinity was barren, stony ground; one scraggy tree raised its wizened branches at the angle of the wall. A narrow track wound through this wilderness from the doorway down the hill to the plain below, meandering northward among boulders and patches of sparse vegetation until it was lost to sight amid the dark pine-trees that covered the lower slopes of the distant hills. Beyond, as far as the eye could reach, these hills stretched, an endless series of scarps and eminences, cleft by tortuous ravines and breaking away here and there into sheer precipices. In the remote distance, a jagged snow-clad ridge flashed with purple and gold in the rays of the sun. In the opposite direction, southward, the country was rugged but less

hilly. A metalled road wound away into the distance. At regular intervals on one side of it stood tall posts, carrying a telegraph wire that emerged from a hole in the tower wall.

As the troopers sat there chatting, with their rifles in the hollow of their arms, there was a sudden cry from the sentinel posted alone on the top of the tower.

"Hai, dafadar! I see a speck moving in the sky far away," he shouted.

"How far away, Coja?" called the dafadar.

"Seven kos at least," was the reply.

"The speck is in your own eye, my son," cried the dafadar, and the men about him laughed: Coja was always seeing something!

The sentinel shouted a word of expostulation, then was silent, and the others resumed the conversation he had interrupted.

Half an hour passed away. The time came for changing the guard. One of the men rose, sauntered along the wall, disappeared through a narrow opening in the tower, and presently emerged on the summit. Apparently he had a brief altercation with the man he had relieved. In five minutes Coja came from the tower along the wall.

"Wah! you may mock, dafadar," he said; "but I declare by the beard of my father I saw a speck–a black speck moving."

"You have chewed too much betel, Coja," said the dafadar with composure. "I too have seen dancing specks when my stomach was out of order."

"Yes, but do those motes in the eye grow larger? Do they swell from the size of a pinpoint to the size of a little bird, and then to a great one? I thought at first it was peradventure an eagle of the mountains, but, inshallah! no eagle could look so large such a great way off. Is there a bird bigger than an eagle? Speak out of your great knowledge, dafadar."

"There is none, foolish one–none that flies, though I have heard of a great bird that runs upon the ground swifter than the iron horse that runs on rails; the mem-sahibs wear its feathers in their hats."

"Hai! what was this great thing, then? I saw it, and rubbed my eyes, and lo! when I looked again, it wheeled about, and soared away towards the Afghan country, and passed behind a crag yonder, and I saw it no more."

"Wonderful eyes you have, Coja, and a wonderful tongue! Do we not know your tales? What of the tiger with two heads you saw once in a tree? and the elephant that caught you up and put you on his head? and that time when you swallowed a cherry-stone, and leaves began to sprout among your hair? Wah! we know his stories, my children; we know how the lies flow out of his mouth like water from a spring."

"Mashallah! Do I not speak truth?" cried the man indignantly. He was a by-

word for romancing among his fellows, and, like all liars, resented any imputation on his veracity. "There is no wisdom in you. Many a great thing that I have told you you have believed: now when I tell you a little thing, you say 'Wah! he is a liar.'"

"But it was a great thing you saw, Coja-ji–bigger than an eagle, said you, when we know there is nothing bigger than an eagle that flies. Wah! at least when you are on duty, you must resist these promptings of the Evil One, else it will end in Jehannum. And look you, Coja, when your turn for watching comes again, keep your eyes on the ground, my friend; do not look for the stars in daylight."

Highly offended, the man walked away, descended the steps within the wall, and retired to sulk, like Achilles, in his tent.

About an hour later the dafadar and his men, who had scarcely changed their position, were again hailed from the roof.

"A speck on the track, dafadar," cried the sentinel; "moving this way, like a fly crawling, very far off."

"Hai! that is news," said the dafadar, slowly rising to his feet. "A speck on the ground is worth looking at; in the sky it proceeds from overeating." Raising his voice, he called to the sentinel: "Hai, Selim, I come to see."

Followed by several of the troopers, he mounted to the roof, and taking the telescope from Selim's hand, examined the track, tracing it back for miles until he discerned the moving object. So remote was it that even with the telescope he could distinguish it only as a human being: whether shepherd, mendicant, or fakir he could not tell, and a single pedestrian must, he thought, be one of these three.

"Perhaps he is a dak runner from Ennicott Sahib," suggested one of the men. "The sahib went in that direction."

"Wah! a dak runner would run, not crawl," said another. "Let us look through the long glass, dafadar."

The telescope was passed round. No one could as yet identify the figure. They were all keenly interested. For several days they had not seen a solitary man outside the walls, though they had kept unremitting watch, having been instructed to be on the alert to discover any movements of men in that region. The figure approached slowly–too slowly for their impatience. All eyes were riveted upon it, and when Selim with the telescope reported that it was completely clad in khaki uniform and not in shepherd's choga, or the scanty tatters of a mendicant, the troopers' excitement grew.

"Hai! he stops!" cried Selim presently. "He waves a white cloth. It is a signal, dafadar."

Narrain Khan took the telescope and gazed at the figure. He felt a little per-

plexed as to what he ought to do. In time of peace he would not have hesitated to send out a couple of men to discover who the stranger was; but there were rumours of war, and the Captain Sahib had given orders that no man should be allowed to leave the post except under the gravest circumstances. He wondered whether the present case came within his licence. The man was clad in khaki: that was something in his favour. He was waving a white flag: that was reassuring. He had seated himself on a knoll beside the track: perhaps he wanted help.

The dafadar lowered the telescope and turned to his men.

"Go, you two," he said, "ride out on your ponies and see who the stranger is, and what his business. Have a care, lest there are badmashes lurking near. The stranger may be a decoy. Have a care, I say, for when you have ridden down the slope we cannot protect you."

The men descended through the tower, and were presently seen trotting down the track. Every yard of their progress was followed intently by the garrison. Their diminishing forms were lost to the watchers at intervals through the windings of the track and the inequalities of the ground. Presently they were seen, little more than dots, moving side by side along the straight stretch at the farther end of which the solitary stranger could still be discerned.

They approached him, came to a halt, and dismounted. After a minute or two the party separated. Two men proceeded northward along the track, one on horseback, the other on foot. The third man rode in the opposite direction towards the house.

The whole garrison of eighteen men were now mustered, some on the roof, some on the wall, silent, their eyes fixed on the slowly approaching horseman. By and by it was seen that he was not either of the two who had lately ridden down. Then the dafadar, who had the telescope at his eyes, suddenly exclaimed:

"Mashallah! It is Ennicott Sahib!"

Amid a chorus of ejaculations he hurried down to the courtyard, mounted his horse, and galloped down the track to meet the officer. The strangeness of that meeting formed the theme of a discourse to the men of the garrison later in the day.

"When I came near enough to see the face of the huzur," said Narrain Khan, "I beheld that it was the face of a sick man. His left arm hung straight at his side like the broken leg of a sheep. I was on the point of invoking the mercy of Allah upon the huzur–is he not the light of our eyes?–when his great voice sounded in my ears like the voice of a trumpet, and before even I could make my salaam he cried–what think you were the words of the great one?"

"'Water, for I am athirst,'" suggested one man.

"Wah! does the huzur think of himself? You speak as a witless babe."

"'Is all well?'" said another.

"Wah!" cried the dafadar with scorn and indignation. "Could the heaven-born ask so foolish a question knowing that I, Narrain Khan, am in charge of this house? No: the words of the huzur–and they were very strange–were these: 'Hai, dafadar! have you got any paraffin?'"

"Inshallah! what is paraffin to the heaven-born? And what said you, dafadar?"

"I was so astonished that I could but speak out the simple truth. 'Truly, sahib!' said I, 'we have some few tins with which to replenish our lamps.' And then the huzur commanded me to send six men with one large tin, that one man might easily carry, along the track to the foot of the hills yonder, and give it to a sahib they would find reclining there."

"Another sahib! Who is he?"

"And for what purpose the paraffin, dafadar?"

"That I know not. The huzur did not tell me that, but told me that he had already sent to the sahib those two young men I had ordered to meet him. And you saw how, when the huzur dismounted at the gate, he staggered, and caught me to prop him: and when I asked him to lie down and let us see to his hurt, he made that sound with the lips that the sahibs make when they are impatient, as if I had said some foolish thing, and bade me lead him straightway to the clicking-room, and there he is now: you can hear the clicking-devil, like little hammers tapping. Truly I begin to think there are many strange things to tell the Sirkar far away."

"Hai! I did see a speck in the sky," said Coja solemnly.

Major Endicott, though half fainting with pain and exhaustion, had gone straight to the room in which the telegraph instruments were kept, and shut himself in. For nearly an hour he worked at the keys with a rapidity acquired by much practice. Before he had finished, the second instrument at his side was mechanically recording the answers to his message. Having read these off, he staggered to the door and summoned the dafadar.

"Fenton Sahib will be here in three hours," he said. "There will be also the sahib from the hills. Get some food and a bath ready for him, and tell Hosein to come and see to my arm."

Some two hours later the Major was awakened from a profound sleep by a hubbub among the men on the wall. Going out to them, he found them excitedly watching an aeroplane soaring rapidly towards them from the hills. Coja was loudly proclaiming that the flying object proved his truthfulness: no one could any longer deny that he had seen a speck in the sky.

A few minutes after it had been sighted the aeroplane sank to rest on the open space in front of the tower. Loud cries of wonder broke from the men

when there stepped out of it a young sahib, limping slightly, followed by one of the two sowars who had gone out to meet the major. The trooper greeted his comrades with an air of triumph, and swaggered up to them with an ineffable look of importance. They surrounded him, and listened with admiring envy while he detailed his first impressions of flight through the air.

Meanwhile the Major took Lawrence into the officers' room, where he bathed, and ate the lunch Narrain Khan had provided. He had just finished when there was the clatter of hoofs outside, and in a few minutes entered Captain Fenton, who had ridden up with half a dozen sowars from the fort fifteen miles to the south.

"Hullo, major, you look pretty dicky!" said the newcomer, glancing curiously from the major's bandaged arm to Lawrence.

"Yes, I've had a knock. Let me introduce you. Lawrence Appleton–you've heard of Harry Appleton–Captain Fenton."

"I see they've sent us an aeroplane, Endicott," said the captain, shaking hands with Lawrence. "An unexpected gift! I thought all the aeroplanes were scouting Kabul way–all there are; they've got a dozen or so, on paper, and a regiment of airmen, also on paper: most of us believed they weren't born yet! Which way did you come, Mr. Appleton?"

"You'd better sit down and listen, Fenton," the major interposed. "There's a lot to say, and not much time to say it in. We're in for the hottest time since the Mutiny–and if I'm not mistaken, hotter than the Mutiny at its worst: I mean generally, for there won't be any Cawnpores or Lucknows, I hope. You know that the Afghans are up?"

"Yes: we've mobilized along the frontier: they won't get across."

The Major smiled grimly.

"After I'd wired you to come in," he said, "I got into communication with the Chief at Peshawar and the Viceroy at Delhi. The Amir has just fled to Peshawar: Kabul's in the hands of the Mongols."

"By Jove!"

"The cat's out of the bag at last. That huge concentration about Bokhara was not to be launched at Russia after all. I suppose we were too self-assured to twig it–just as in the Mutiny time. Plenty of information, little imagination. But we have it now. There are pretty nearly half a million of the fiercest ruffians in Central Asia marching down on us–almost all mounted, and they're fellows who live on horseback, and are moving with amazing speed. They've cajoled or bought over the best part of the Afghans–silly fools, for if the Mongols beat us they'd swallow Afghanistan for dessert. There are a hundred thousand in and about Kabul."

"It's astonishing that they managed to keep things so quiet. They must

have been intriguing and negotiating for months."

"Again, just as in the Mutiny. I've not heard of chapattis passing round, but they've had their secret signs, without doubt. The one good thing about the present circumstances is that the Afghans are not actually on the march yet. They're probably waiting to see how the cat jumps. Of course we've always relied on them more or less as a buffer against Russia, calculating that they'd hold up the invaders at Herat until we'd had time to line the frontier. Anyway, we can't expect any help from them now, for if they're not actually hand in glove with the Mongols they're neutral, for a time. You said we'd mobilized, didn't you? I've been away a fortnight."

"Yes. With the most tremendous exertions we've got 100,000 men across the frontier, and they're holding the passes. Only just in time, evidently. It ought to have been an easy job: and so it was–on paper. But it's years since the paper scheme was drawn up, and they've been paring down in the usual British way–economizing, they call it. The result is that arrangements for transport and supplies are all at sixes and sevens. They've had to reduce the frontier garrisons to mere skeletons in order to make up the strength of the field army."

"The Chief wired me just now that troops are being pushed up from all parts, but the railways are so horribly congested that it'll be weeks before they're on the spot. I fancy I made him jump with my news."

"You've got something fresh then?"

"There are twenty thousand Kalmucks marching up the Nogi valley."

"The Nogi valley! But I've always understood it's impassable. Isn't that where poor old Harry Appleton has his mine? ... Beg pardon, I'm sure," he added, turning to Lawrence. "I forgot he's a relative of yours."

"My uncle," said Lawrence.

"I'm glad to think it is for the moment impassable," said the major, "owing to the pluck and readiness of Appleton here and his brother. But the Kalmucks traded on our self-confidence. No one would have dreamed that any considerable force would try to push its way up that difficult track; they *are* trying it, and their object, without a doubt, is to cut the communications of the army operating in Afghanistan. If they penetrate to fifty miles this side of the Appleton mine nothing but a whole division can check them. The Chief wired that he can't spare a man at the moment, and said the valley must be held at all costs for a week."

"But man alive, that's impossible! We haven't three hundred men all told within a hundred miles of it. If we rushed them down for all we were worth three hundred couldn't hold off twenty thousand."

"Well no, and you'd never get there. But as it happens the Chief was only acting on something I had told him. It's a long story, and must keep. But the

short of it is that Harry Appleton's two nephews–poor chap! he's gone himself–brought out an aeroplane–the one you saw outside: you might be sure it wasn't a service machine! By the merest accident they happened to see this Kalmuck force encamped, and after some pretty stirring passages which I'll tell you some other time, they blocked up the track just below the mine; it will keep the enemy busy for a while."

"Congratulate you," said the captain to Lawrence. "Not in the service, are you?"

"No."

"He is in training, Fenton," said the major with a smile. "By the help of his aeroplane he got me out of a very tight place, and I went down to the mine to see for myself how the land lay. An accident to the aeroplane kept me there for a day. When it was repaired we made a reconnaissance down the river. Near the mine there was a striking force of about a thousand men–as many as could operate with any effect on so narrow a track. Some thirty miles farther down we saw a couple of field guns being dragged up; and the main body of the enemy was still encamped at the mouth of the valley, waiting for the way to be cleared. It was a masterly notion to dynamite the rock; indeed, as far as I could see, Bob Appleton had left nothing undone to secure his position. Of course it's an uncommonly tight place; very likely nine fellows out of ten–or we'll say eight!–wouldn't have attempted to hold it: but you know the Appleton breed, Fenton: and if they can only stick it out for a week, as the Chief wishes, by George! the Government of India will have reason to say thank you."

"Your arm's paining you, I see," said Captain Fenton, as the major winced.

"Nothing to speak of. It was a bit of rank bad luck. Of course, seeing what the game was, I felt I must wire the Chief at once, and Lawrence offered to bring me here in his aeroplane. We came along swimmingly until we had got about half way: saw nothing of the enemy: and then rather suddenly struck a rabble of about two thousand men marching southward. We came down rather too low, to get a good look at them. They opened fire, and one of their shots tore my arm from shoulder to elbow. If we had made a straight course we shouldn't have met trouble: but naturally I wanted to pick up any information I could. Unluckily in going criss-cross we consumed a good deal of petrol, and when it became necessary to replenish the tank from the reserve cans, we found that they'd been bored with holes during our peppering; one was empty, in the other there were a few spoonfuls at the bottom below the level of the hole. This only lasted a few miles, and then we had to come down, in the hills yonder."

"Rough luck!" said Captain Fenton, turning sympathetically to Lawrence. "You must have felt pretty mad. How did you bring the machine in?"

"I happened to mention when we were talking things over that paraffin

would do at a pinch, and the major said he was pretty sure they would have some here, and insisted on tramping over to get some sent up."

"Well, you see, he's got a game foot," said the major. "Sprained his ankle two days ago. My legs are sound, at any rate. But I was pretty dead beat before I got here, and was glad enough to borrow the mount of one of the men Narrain sent to meet me. He and the other fellow went on to keep Appleton company, and as soon as the paraffin was sent up, the aeroplane came flying in with the sowar on board as a passenger. He was bubbling with delight, and no doubt will be a hero among the men for the rest of his days."

"Mr. Appleton wants to get back to the mine, of course," said the captain.

"Yes: there's enough paraffin for that. How are matters round the fort, Fenton?"

"The tribes are pretty quiet at present. They've held several jirgahs to discuss what line they shall take. That depends on who scores the first point. If we can only convince them that we're not going to knuckle under, I daresay they'll stick to us. But it wouldn't take much to turn the scale on the other side. The crowd that fired at you are marching this way, you said?"

"They'll be hereabouts some time to-morrow, and probably a lot more, for we caught sight of other parties, not so large, threading the valleys to the west. The whole country north-west of us is rising."

"That's bad. I can't hope to keep the tribes about the fort quiet after these thousands come on the scene."

"I must see what I can do."

"You ought to be in hospital. If you had let me know you'd been hit I'd have brought the medico with me."

"Good thing you didn't. He'd have been so disappointed!"

"No operation required, you mean," said Captain Fenton laughing. "He does love his knife."

"And fork!" added the major drily. "He shall have a look at my arm to-morrow. I propose to return with you to the fort. We must blow this place up. You can hold your own there for some time against a good number, and reinforcements will be hurried up as rapidly as possible. Then I must try the velvet glove with the tribesmen. There won't be much time to do anything with them before those men we saw get south; but if you discourage them with hot lead at the fort it will help.... This is all very hard on you, Appleton."

"That's all right," said Lawrence. "I was only wishing I had brought more of our bombs with me. I might have checked those hillmen and given you more time."

"But that would have involved your remaining in this neighbourhood, and you are wanted at the mine. A bomb or two dropped in flying over would have

scattered them for the moment, but they'd have collected again as soon as you were past. I don't know how much paraffin we've got to give you. No: there's better work for you. You'll convey the Chief's message to your brother: hold the gorge for a week at all costs. I'll do my best to get reinforcements through. It's vitally important to keep those Kalmucks in check. The fate of India hangs in the balance."

Preparations were made for the evacuation of the house on the following morning. Having taken on board more than enough paraffin to carry him back to the mine, together with a dozen rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition, Lawrence bade the officers good-bye, and started immediately after breakfast. A few minutes after his departure a dull boom proclaimed that the tower had been blown up and the garrison was on the march for the south.

Major Endicott had advised him to fly high so as to avoid the risk of further accident if he should encounter the enemy. Some ten miles from the tower he caught sight of them: they appeared like an army of ants crawling on the ground. A few shots were fired at him, but he was far out of effective range, and in a few minutes disappeared from their view.

A little uneasy at first as to the staying power of the paraffin, he was soon reassured. In less than an hour he struck the western extremity of the valley, and he flew down it at full speed, maintaining a great altitude in case Nurla Bai and his party should be still on the track or in the hills above.

He had almost reached the mine when he heard sounds of rapid firing. The attack, then, had begun in earnest.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SECOND
DITTA LAL INTERPRETS

During his brother's absence Bob had been energetic in organizing the defence. He threw an entrenchment across the track beneath the shoulder of the cliff, a short distance from the mass of broken rock thrown down by the explosion of dynamite. By this means he hoped to interpose an effective obstacle to the enemy if they, without waiting for the track to be cleared, should attempt to climb round and slip by up the valley. Nurla Bai's swimming feat showed him that the river could be crossed otherwise than by the drawbridge, and the assemblage of any considerable number of men on the southward side might be a serious menace.

True, the enemy could hardly cross in daylight in face of opposition from the wall of the compound; but remembering how Nurla Bai had got over and made his way by the cantilever pathway to the mine, Bob saw that a similar movement might be attempted when the attention of the garrison was held by an attack from down-stream. In that case he would have to dispatch men whom he could ill spare to guard the aeroplane platform and perhaps to destroy the pathway constructed with such toil. As a precautionary measure he stationed three men on the aeroplane platform day and night.

Further, in order not to be at too great a disadvantage in case of a sudden rush in the darkness, he contrived a makeshift searchlight out of a large photographic camera of his uncle's and a reflector of polished tin. He hoped that it would not be necessary to use it often, for the stock of calcium carbide was running low, and he had no other illuminant than acetylene gas and paraffin candles.

When Lawrence alighted on the aeroplane platform, Fazl, one of the three men on guard there, informed him that the enemy had opened a brisk fire at daybreak.

"The sahib cannot get to the house to-day," said the man.

"Why not?"

"Because, sahib, when you once get round the shoulder, the path is in sight of the enemy. They will shoot you. It is necessary to wait for night."

"Nonsense! I can't stay here all day. Let me see for myself."

He went across the platform and along a few yards of the path until he reached the bend. There he peeped cautiously round. He forgot his prime object in the anxiety and concern to which the state of affairs down the river gave rise. Being slightly above the level of the track he was able to take a good view of the position. The enemy had cut a new path along the fallen cliff, and had thrown across it a breastwork about thirty feet long, from loopholes in which they were maintaining a hot fire on the northernmost boundary of the compound. The reply of the garrison was astonishingly feeble; the characteristic rattle of the machine gun was not to be heard, and Lawrence saw the havildar standing inactive by the weapon. Bob was near the wall, smoking a cigarette, and it was apparently only when he gave a distinct order that the men fired. Lawrence guessed that he was husbanding his ammunition, and blessed Major Endicott's forethought in sending a supply which would be so welcome.

Recollecting his purpose, Lawrence scanned the wooden pathway narrowly, to see how far Fazl's advice was justified. For forty or fifty yards it was fully exposed to the enemy's marksmen, but beyond that distance it gained some shelter from the buildings in the compound. If the enemy had not already had their attention drawn to it, there was a chance that, in spite of his weak ankle, he

might dash across the exposed portion before they noticed him. But after a few seconds he saw with great relief that it was possible to lessen still further the risk of being hit. The pathway being a little higher than the track on the opposite side of the river, he might perhaps crawl along it without being discovered. By lying at full length, and hugging the face of the rock, he would get a certain protection from the outside edge of the pathway.

He returned to the platform.

"Has any one crossed from or to the mine since the enemy began firing?" he asked Fazl.

"No, sahib: it was still dark when we came to relieve the night watch, and none has come or gone since."

"Very well: I am going to crawl. Take care you don't show yourselves."

He was rather astonished at his lack of nervousness; but the events of the last few days had in fact exercised a bracing influence upon him. He crawled on all fours as rapidly as possible along the exposed section of the path, rose to his feet on reaching the spot where the buildings gave him cover, and in another few minutes greeted his brother.

"Well done, old chap!" said Bob heartily. "I hardly expected you to get back yesterday, but it's a great relief to see you. You had no trouble?"

"Not with the machine, but we came across a lot of hillmen marching south, and they potted the major in the arm, and riddled the petrol cans, so that I ran short. But they gave me some paraffin at the tower, and it serves surprisingly well. It's lucky we had a second carburetter."

Just then a bullet sang overhead.

"Can you come to the house for a minute or two?" said Lawrence. "I've got a good deal to tell you, and you can't attend to me and the enemy at the same time."

"All right. I'll leave Gur Buksh in charge. They've done us no harm yet–inside at any rate; but I'll give you all the news. Come on!"

Seated in the house, Lawrence repeated the substance of the conversation between Major Endicott and Captain Fenton. Bob listened in amazement.

"By George! it's a big thing," he exclaimed. "No wonder we were puzzled. It's desperately serious, then."

"Yes, and this is the serious part for us. The major wired all about us to headquarters, and the commander-in-chief wired back that we must hold on at all costs for a week. He made no bones about it: simply said it must be done."

"Well, we'll do it!" cried Bob with flashing eyes. "We'll not cave in after a direct order from the commander-in-chief. It's the best thing that could have happened. Some of the men are getting rather shaky, but I'll tell them the Sirkar depends on them–talk about their known valour, and all that: and it'll buck them

up no end."

"Wouldn't the promise of a reward from Government be more effective?"

"I dare say; but it's only a jolly ass who'd give a pledge of that sort for Government. I dare say they mean well, but–no, my boy, it's not safe. We'll rely on moral stimulants. Now look here: this is what I've done—-"

"I see you've thrown up a breastwork on the other side, but so have the enemy, and cut a path too."

"Yes, that's one to them, confound them! I had twenty men behind my breastwork, but when the enemy came round the bend this morning they bolted back in a panic. They'd have done better to stick to it, for two of them were shot in the back and killed outright. I'd left the bridge down under a guard, so that the others got back safely, but their retreat had a bad effect on the rest. They need a tonic."

"The major gave me a dozen rifles and a lot of ammunition: that'll help."

"It will indeed: I've had to be sparing."

"Why didn't the enemy occupy your breastwork?"

"No doubt they would have only I built it at such an angle that it can be enfiladed from our wall. It's a great nuisance that they've managed to get so far as they have. I hoped to be able to check them at the bend much longer–at any rate until they'd brought up the two field guns you told me about. When they arrive we shan't be able to hold the wall. We shall have to take refuge in the galleries."

"That means suffocation."

"Well, we won't think of it. We'll hold on as long as we can. You didn't notice perhaps that I've had a shield of boiler plates set up on top of the parapet. I found we couldn't loophole the embankment, and the men couldn't fire without protection of some kind. This metal shield is better than nothing. It's loopholed. I only allow a few men to fire at the enemy, when there's a chance of their doing some good. But to keep up their spirits I let them all have a turn. They come up in squads, so that every man will have a chance of a shot during the day."

"You haven't used the machine gun? Couldn't you batter their breastwork with it?"

"It would be very much like pelting toy bricks with a pea-shooter. Gur Buksh has orders only to fire if there's a rush. What I fancy will happen is this. At night they'll try to rush our breastwork. If they get it they'll push a trench southward along the track until they're opposite us. What they'll do then about crossing the river I don't know. We've got to delay them as long as possible. I've made a ramshackle sort of searchlight out of Uncle's old camera: it may help us a little in the dark. But I must go out and talk to the men. I wish I were a dab at the lingo. Will you do the spouting?"

"You're in command. Get the Babu to interpret for you: what you say won't lose anything in his mouth."

"It may do him good too. He's getting positively thin with funk. Come along!"

While this conversation was in progress in the house, there had fallen a lull in the firing outside. It was clear that the enemy were not prepared for a rush, and had realized the uselessness of continually sniping at a garrison whom they rarely saw. There could be little doubt that they were waiting either for darkness to cover a dash up the track, or for the arrival of their field guns. Whatever the reason, the respite was welcome. Taking advantage of it, Bob left a small guard at the wall, and assembled the rest in the compound.

Lawrence was struck by the altered appearance of Ditta Lal when he came forward at Bob's summons. His fat cheeks had fallen in; his features spoke eloquently of despair; and his clothes hung loosely where formerly they had closely encased his rotundities.

"I should never have believed that a man could lose so much flesh in so little time," said Lawrence in a low tone.

"Do him good," returned Bob unfeelingly. "Ditta Lal, I'm going to speak to the men, and I want you to translate faithfully what I say–no additions or subtractions."

"I will do my best, sir," said the Babu with unwonted simplicity. "My voice is not strong; I am fading away like a flower."

"For goodness' sake say something to buck him up," whispered Lawrence, "or he'll damp their courage with his lugubrious manner."

"Look here, Babu," said Bob, "Major Endicott is telegraphing for reinforcements. They should be here in a week."

"Can I believe my ears?"

"You can believe me. The Government knows all about us. The commander-in-chief himself has asked us to hold the place for a week, and we're going to do it."

"That's jolly bucking, sir," said the Babu in his usual manner. "The hour brings forth the man. The King-Emperor will dub you knight, or at least baronet, for thus stepping into deadly breach, and—-"

"We're wasting time," Bob interrupted. "Just tell the men what I say."

"Right-o, sir. My voice is recovering wonted rotundity. Fire away!"

Lawrence's eyes twinkled more than once during the Babu's address to the garrison. Bob's words were simple and direct, with no surplusage of rhetoric: Ditta Lal transformed them into an oration.

"Sikhs and Pathans, Rajputs, Gurkhas and Chitralis," he said, "misfortune makes brothers of us all. In a thunderstorm the lion and the ass are friends. The

thunderstorm is about to burst upon us. We have heard the first rumblings; we have seen the lightning flash in the lurid sky; and the huzur having been taken from us by the hand of the Kalmucks, we have lost our chief defence and stay.

"Yet in the blackest night we behold a star of hope. My brother the chota sahib" (the Babu spoke as though translating) "has even now returned from a frontier house where the Sirdar who for one brief day shed the light of his countenance upon us, spoke to the Sirkar along the quivering wire, that carries men's thoughts swifter than speech. The Sirkar far away knows us what we are, and how we, a handful of men, are beset in this narrow valley by a host of evil-doers, in number like the stars of heaven. The Sirkar knows that though we be few, yet are we stout of heart and strong of hand. The lurid storm-cloud does not oppress us, nor does the lightning fire appal our souls. We are not the men to quail before a host of flat-nosed dogs. The order is given that we sharpen our swords and resist to the uttermost, and within a week–such is the word–the Sirkar will send a great army to strengthen our hands and smite the enemy until not one of them is left. I have said that we will do even as the Sirkar has commanded. Will you put me to shame? Will you not rather brace yourselves to the conflict, and oppose yourselves like a wall of adamant to these off-scourings of the plains?"

This was the spirit if not the letter of Bob's appeal, and the whole assembly responded with cheers and passionate ejaculations of loyalty. The Sikhs, some of whom understood English and knew that the Babu had interpolated a good deal, had listened gravely, their inveterate contempt of the unwarlike Bengali yielding to their appreciation of the effect he aimed at. Later on, Ganda Singh spat, and said to Gur Buksh that any one would know the Bengali for a coward, because his words were so big. The more simple miners were as impressible to high-sounding eloquence as any ignorant mob all the world over; and when the Babu, at a word from Lawrence, wound up his speech with the announcement that Major Endicott had sent some service rifles and a large stock of ammunition for their use, they cheered again and again. Those timid ones who had fled from the breastwork earlier in the day shouted the loudest, to ease themselves of their shame.

The Appletons never knew that after the assembly had been dismissed Ditta Lal, in a private audience of some of the Pathans, indulged his fancy in announcements that were quite unauthorised.

"Tidings of our prowess and valour," he said, "will be spoken in the ear of the King-Emperor over the black water, and the august majesty of our great prince will deal bountifully with us and shower his graciousness upon us. He will take the sahibs our masters by the hand and lift them up the steps of his throne, speak them words of comfort and set them on his right hand among his lords; and furthermore, the humblest of us shall be exalted and be bounteously

rewarded. A lakh of rupees will be distributed among those who quit themselves well, and we shall be satisfied with a feast of fat things."

As the brothers returned to the house, Bob said:

"I'm very much inclined to make another attempt to hold our breastwork. It's bad tactics to let the enemy have free course between the bend and the bridge. Probably if I lead a detachment myself the men will follow readily enough."

"I daresay you're right on the point of tactics, but you ought to have a good sleep before you try it. You look very fagged; I suppose you've been up all night."

"Pretty nearly."

"Well, go and lie down. I'll take charge. I had a good night's rest at the frontier house. It's clear the enemy are waiting for their guns, and you ought to be able to get at least six hours' sleep before there's any danger. Of course I'll wake you if they make a move."

"Then I'll take your advice. The trouble will begin at night, and there'll be no chance of sleep then."

Left to himself, Lawrence went round the defences, noting the admirable arrangements Bob had made during his absence. As he looked southward up the river, the sight of the pathway along the face of the cliff suggested the necessity of doing something to protect any one who should pass over the portion exposed to the enemy. If they should succeed in pushing their entrenchments southward beyond the bend, they would be able to pick off any man who passed between the mine and the aeroplane platform, and it was essential that access to the latter should be maintained.

After consultation with Gur Buksh, he hit on a means of giving the pathway the security required. Two rows of planks laid on edge along its outer border would completely screen a man crawling along by the rock wall, even from the sight of an enemy on the bank immediately opposite. He collected a number of men who were expert in handling tools, and sent them to construct this parapet. A few shots were fired at them when they began their work, but they were screened by the planks, and the enemy, having nothing to aim at, soon desisted. To hold the parapet firmly in position, uprights were nailed to the planks at intervals, and screwed down on to the timbers of the pathway.

When the work was done Lawrence felt far more at ease regarding the safety of the aeroplane. The guards on the platform could now be relieved more frequently. They could be reinforced from the mine within a few minutes, or withdrawn without risk.

The enemy's continued inactivity confirmed Lawrence in his belief that they were waiting for the field guns. When he saw those being dragged laboriously up the track, he had suggested to Major Endicott to shatter them with a charge of dynamite dropped from the aeroplane. But the Major pointed out

that others would immediately be brought up from the main army. Such an attack would be more effective later, when they were nearer to the mine. Their replacement then would be a matter of much longer time.

It occurred to Lawrence now that it would be well to reconnoitre the enemy's position before Bob attempted to reoccupy his entrenchment, or at any rate to cover his movement by a diversion on the part of the aeroplane. Bob could not leave the mine in daylight without exposing himself to the enemy's fire. If he waited for darkness, he might find himself anticipated by them; and even with the searchlight against them they would have far less to fear from the garrison by night than by day. It would be almost impossible to prevent a sudden determined rush. The enemy would lose a number of men; but they could afford to sacrifice some lives in a successful effort to improve their position. Nothing, however, could be done without consultation with Bob, so Lawrence waited patiently until about four o'clock in the afternoon, the time which he had fixed on for awakening his brother.

Remembering the mishap with Major Endicott up the river, he got Fazl to protect the engine and the petrol cans by slinging a number of iron plates under the chassis of the aeroplane. By means of these he hoped to reduce risk from the enemy's rifles when he should start on his reconnaissance. The Kalmucks northward had had no experience of the dynamite bombs, unless indeed some of those whom Bob had chased down the track were among them. But even without any definite fear of the aeroplane they would recognise it as a means of intelligence to the garrison of the mine, and would certainly be eager to put it out of action.

Bob on being awakened at once agreed to Lawrence's suggestion of a reconnaissance.

"I'd like to go myself," he said, "but we can't both go, and I'd better stick to my job. Take Fazl with you. You may have to bombard them if you find the guns close at hand."

"If I do, that will be your best chance of occupying your breastwork again."

"Undoubtedly. I'll lower the drawbridge and have my party ready; and if I hear any explosions I'll make a rush for it. But let us have a clear understanding. You won't drop any bombs unless you find the guns close at hand, or unless the enemy are up to something that looks threatening. There's very little dynamite left. Besides, at this stage it's no good merely to frighten the enemy. It's war now. I shall take it that your explosions mean serious business."

"All right. In any case I shall be back in an hour."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-THIRD
CAPTURING A GUN

The aeroplane with Lawrence and the Gurkha on board was soon flying down the river, at a much greater height than usual–a wise precaution on Lawrence's part, as was proved in a few moments. Even before it came above the bend it was assailed with a volley, and as it passed Bob was alarmed at the continuous crackle of rifles. It lasted only half a minute, but it was so loud as to smother altogether the hum of the propeller, and he almost repented of having allowed his brother to go when he realised the danger to which he was exposed. He had lost sight of the aeroplane; the fusillade had ceased; and the only indication, and that a negative one, that the machine and its occupants had not been brought to the ground was the absence of clamour beyond the bend. If the enemy had been successful, he thought, surely they would have hailed their triumph with shouts of delight.

Reassured by the comparative silence, he remained behind the parapet, and informed Gur Buksh of his intention to reoccupy the breastwork on the farther bank.

"It is well, sahib," said the veteran quietly.

"Will the men follow me?" asked Bob anxiously.

"To the jaws of the pit, sahib. Where the sahib leads they will follow: even the men who ran away are now eager to wipe out their disgrace."

"Then I will go and form my party. We shall not move until the chota sahib gives a signal."

He found that the havildar had spoken truly. There was no lack of volunteers. He soon arranged his little party of twenty, and posted them in the shelter of the wall until the time should come for letting down the bridge and leading them across it.

The minutes passed very slowly. Lawrence would not think it necessary to push his reconnaissance as far as the enemy's encampment. He might perhaps fly thirty miles, and then return. This would take something less than an hour. If he should discover the field guns within a short distance of the mine, the explosion of his bombs might be expected much earlier.

Half an hour passed. There had been no sound from up stream; no sign of activity among the enemy. Bob began to feel more hopeful. They had apparently met with great obstacles to the passage of the guns. He was momentarily expecting to hear the hum of the returning aeroplane when, with a suddenness that took him all aback, there was a tremendous roar, followed in a second or two by a terrific crash just beyond the Pathan compound. Turning in consternation to discover the cause of it, he saw a great mass of the cliff falling amid a cloud of dust and smoke upon the wooden pathway, and plunging into the river beneath. Such destruction could only be the effect of a shell. Beyond doubt one at least of the field guns had been brought into position behind the enemy's breastwork at the bend.

This fact filled him with as much dismay as amazement. It was not surprising that the enemy had placed their gun without his knowledge. They would, of course, have been careful to mask it until they were ready to open fire. But why had Lawrence or the Gurkha not seen it? Could it be that the aeroplane had been damaged and brought down after all?

While he was in a painful state of anxiety, there was another roar, and a second shell burst on the cliff, just beyond the Pathan gallery. He ran to the northern wall and peered through one of the loopholes. Smoke hung above the enemy's breastwork, but there was not a man to be seen, so that rifle fire was useless. He ordered Gur Buksh to fire the machine gun. The havildar's aim was good; chips of rock flew from the breastwork; and Bob thought he saw the muzzle of a gun disappear. His attention was immediately drawn from it by the sight of the aeroplane flying round the bend, and with the thrill of relief at his brother's safety came the expectation of hearing an explosion and seeing signs of havoc about the breastwork. But the aeroplane flew high over the scene, passed it, and disappeared up the river. There had been no explosion. Why had not Lawrence dropped a bomb?

Hardly had he asked himself this question when a third shell burst from the breastwork. It was better aimed than the other two. Instead of striking the cliff, it hit the northern wall of the compound, carrying away several yards of the metal parapet, scattering jagged fragments of iron and stone in every direction, then flew over the heads of the garrison and plunged into the earthwork at the southern boundary of the compound, within a few yards of the spot where the sortie party were gathered. Bob was almost at his wits' end. No defences could withstand a bombardment at such close quarters. None of the garrison had as yet been wounded, but he could see by their cowering attitude and the terror written upon their faces that their courage had been shocked out of them. Only Gur Buksh and the other Sikhs stood immovable at their posts.

A few minutes after the report of the gun, the aeroplane again came flying

down stream. Lawrence, then, had not landed. Bob was in a maze of bewilderment. But he was suddenly aroused from his stupor by a sharp detonation. It was not the report of a gun. Then there were loud cries and yells from the direction of the enemy, and looking through the loophole he saw a smother of dust above the breastwork. Lawrence had dropped a bomb at last, and again was out of sight.

This was to have been the signal for the sortie; but after what had happened Bob felt that it would be sheer madness to lead his men along a stretch of the track commanded by the field guns. He doubted, indeed, whether their courage would face the task. It was only common prudence to wait for a second signal. He could not see what damage the bomb had done; whether it had only temporarily frightened the enemy. But Lawrence would not hesitate to hurl another bomb among them; and believing that, guns or no guns, they must be demoralized if attacked a second time from the air, Bob hastened across the compound, ordered the bridge to be lowered, and went to the twenty men huddling under cover of the wall.

He allowed no trace of mental perturbation to show itself in his bearing.

"The time has come!" he said quietly to the men. "Lawrence Sahib is driving the enemy away. There are no more shots from their gun, you see. We shall soon hear another explosion; then you will follow me, and in five minutes we shall be masters of our breastwork."

Ganda Singh, who was among the party, translated his words to the men. The cessation of gun fire and Bob's confident manner somewhat restored their courage. They formed up, grasping their weapons nervously, and waited in panting eagerness, mingled with trepidation, for the expected signal.

It seemed a long time in coming. Bob knew that Lawrence had had to fly several miles down stream before he could turn. It came at last. Again sounded the sharp crash; again the air was filled with cries, in which there was no note of triumph: and Bob, with a cheery "Now, my men!" dashed across the bridge with the swarthy mountaineers at his heels. Reaching the other side, they turned to the left and raced across the open space formerly occupied by the miners' huts. Bob was only half conscious that the aeroplane was flying in the opposite direction high above his head. They were met neither by shells nor by bullets, and only when they sank breathless behind the shelter of the breastwork did a few rifle shots patter around them. Then all was quiet again.

Whatever the cause of the astonishing delay on Lawrence's part, his intervention now had been effectual, at any rate for a time. How far effectual? Bob wondered. He got up and looked over the parapet towards the enemy's breastwork a hundred yards away. They had apparently deserted it. Some, no doubt, had been slain by the explosions. Had the survivors fled in panic far away, or were they merely lying low beyond the bend? Then his eye caught what had

LAWRENCE DROPS A BOMB

LAWRENCE DROPS A BOMB

escaped his observation from the greater distance of the compound wall. There were two embrasures a foot or two below the top of the breastwork, contrived by removing some of the loose rocks. But he saw no sign of guns. Perhaps the enemy in their retirement had dragged with them the one which had fired.

He heard the hum of the aeroplane again. Lawrence had still not landed, but was returning, perhaps to observe the extent of his work, perhaps to complete it. He was flying much lower than before. A sudden idea flashed into Bob's mind. The enemy's breastwork was only a hundred yards distant. Why not attempt to rush it under cover of the aeroplane; and if in the hurry of their flight they had left their gun, capture it and bring it to the mine?

His thought had hardly crystallized into a resolution when he heard two explosions in rapid succession, followed by yells and one or two rifle shots. The sound seemed to come from some distance beyond the bend. His mind was made up. He told Ganda Singh his intention, and could scarcely wait while the havildar translated his orders. The men responded with a "Hai! hai!" of delight. Like Bob himself they were worked up to a high pitch of excitement. Their rush had been successful. The risks were forgotten, or remembered only to be scorned. They were twenty against an unknown number, but none counted the odds. "Hai! hai!" they shouted, as their leader leapt round the angle of the entrenchment. They followed close upon him as he dashed over the intervening hundred yards of broken ground. No one faltered. In less than half a minute they were in possession of the enemy's breastwork, and at that instant there was another explosion far down the track.

Bob's glance fell first upon a score of prostrate forms scattered on the ground in the neighbourhood. Then with a thrill of delight he saw two field guns. One had been struck from its carriage, and lay near the brink of the stream. The other had apparently been withdrawn from its embrasure, but abandoned under the demoralizing shock of an explosion. Bob ran to the first. A moment's inspection showed him that it was irretrievably ruined. Calling two of the men, with their aid he toppled it into the river. The other was still workable. Looking around, he spied near the breastwork a number of shells which had escaped destruction by the bombs.

"Can you fire a gun?" he asked Ganda Singh eagerly.

"I am a gunner, sahib."

"Then slew it round. We'll turn it on the enemy."

He had remarked a number of the Kalmucks collected on the track some distance away. As he spoke, bullets began to whistle around, and two of his men were hit. Quickly the gun was turned round. Ganda Singh discovered that it was already loaded, and in another few seconds a shell sang on its deadly flight towards the enemy. They fled, to be pursued by another shell as soon as Ganda

Singh could reload; and with this second shot the track was cleared for half a mile down stream. And then the aeroplane came whirring past overhead.

As he watched it, Bob became aware that the afternoon was drawing towards evening. In an hour the valley would be gloomy, in two hours it would be shrouded in darkness. For the present, while daylight lasted, there was little fear of the enemy attacking. They would not face their own gun backed by the machine gun of the garrison. But he felt that with the fall of night the circumstances would be changed. His feeble searchlight scarcely illuminated the space between the bridge and the bend; beyond the bend it gave no light whatever. In the darkness the enemy might creep up to within a short distance of their captured breastwork and carry it with a determined rush, in spite of the gun. It was true that the narrowness of the track would allow the approach of only a few men abreast; but they could be supported by a constant succession of reinforcements, coming up like waves of the sea until the defenders were worn out. It seemed to Bob the prudent course to withdraw his men and the gun to the mine, and place the latter in position beside the machine gun. However, it was bad tactics to abandon a defensive position before retirement was absolutely necessary, so he decided to remain where he was for a little while longer, in the hope that Lawrence would land and, joining him, explain the actual condition of affairs down stream.

About a quarter of an hour after the aeroplane had passed, Bob saw Lawrence running down the track towards him.

"That's what I hoped you would do," were Lawrence's first words as they met. "Capture the guns, I mean."

"Yes, we've got one: the other's ruined and in the river. But we've had a narrow escape from being battered to pieces. Why didn't you begin bombing before?"

"I'll tell you. We were pretty well peppered, as you saw, when we flew past here down stream. It may have been because that bothered us, and Fazl was hit–I didn't know it at the time–that we didn't see the guns they had dragged up. Or perhaps it was because they are so like the rocks in colour–and we didn't expect they'd be here already. Anyway, we didn't see them, and it makes me mad to think what a squeak you've had. I *ought* to have seen them."

"That's bosh! it's precious difficult to see anything at that speed. But go on."

"We saw the men, of course, but we were soon out of range. The planes are simply riddled."

"Fazl not much hurt, I hope?"

"No: the bullet went through the fleshy part of his arm, and he didn't say a word about it till we landed just now. On our way down we saw several teams

of ponies at different parts of the track, bringing grub up, no doubt; and several bodies of mounted troops on the march; but never a sign of the guns. I flew on till we came to the place where the Major and I saw them: then thinking I must have missed them, I turned back. You may imagine how I felt when, about two miles away, I suppose, I heard the first shot. It's so different from the sound of the machine gun that I couldn't mistake it. I told Fazl to get ready to drop a bomb as soon as we came up to the guns. He did so, but I didn't hear an explosion. He yelled out that it had fallen into the river, but of course we were past before there was time to shy another. I came back as quickly as I could, and my heart was in my mouth when I saw smoke in the compound. Luckily Fazl's next shots were better, and jolly glad I am that we managed to stampede the fellows and give you a chance."

"You were just in time, old man. They did more damage to the cliff than to us, though."

"Yes: the path is simply heaped with rubbish. Coming back it was like scrambling over shingle. But a few hours' work will clear the lot away. Now what's the next thing?"

"As it's getting dusk I propose to withdraw the gun to the mine. But we must hold this breastwork as long as we can, and it occurs to me that if we alter its angle a little we can enfilade it from our own breastwork when it becomes necessary to fall back on that. It will still protect us from attack down stream, owing to the bend."

"Isn't it worth while to block up the track again?"

"It would use up too much dynamite. Our stock is getting appallingly low. We may want it all for bombs. Besides, if we block up the track farther down we shan't see our enemy."

"But I can always scout in the aeroplane."

"You forget that our petrol isn't unlimited. I had a look in the shed this morning, and there isn't much left. The paraffin you brought only replaced what you lost from the leaky cans. We shall have to economize now, and use the aeroplane only when we must."

"Very well then. If you see about altering the breastwork I'll get the gun dragged in. And there are these poor wounded wretches. Their moans are horrible. What can we do for them?"

"We mustn't take them into our compound. We haven't food enough to support prisoners. I have it! We'll send off the Kalmuck prisoners we've got, and tell them that they can bring up a dozen of their friends under flag of truce to carry off their wounded. That'll relieve us of all responsibility. And now let's get to business. We haven't too much time."

These arrangements were duly carried out. While Lawrence escorted the

gun to the mine, Bob set the men to pull down the breastwork, and re-construct it so that it stood almost perpendicular to his own entrenchment a hundred yards up stream. In its new position it would be of very little use to the enemy should they re-capture it, for on whichever side of it they happened to be, they would be swept by the fire of the men posted at the other.

By the time the work was completed darkness had fallen. Then Lawrence dismissed the Kalmuck prisoners as he had suggested, and followed them to the breastwork to have a final consultation with his brother.

"I'll hold on here until midnight," said Bob. "I had a good sleep during the day. Tell Ganda Singh to train the captured gun on the bend; if there's an attack he and Gur Buksh can play on the track and cover our retirement."

"I'm not sure whether it wouldn't be better to bring it out again and place it behind our entrenchments."

"No, that would never do. The searchlight isn't powerful enough to be of much good; and the position might be rushed before the gun could come into play. It's too valuable for us to risk that. It would be a very different matter if we had enough men to hold the breastwork and really dispute the advance of the enemy. We can't do that. If they seriously push their attack we shall have to evacuate the position and bolt for the mine, and the gun would only be a hindrance. Now you get back. Send over some food for us, and then go to bed."

"I shan't take my clothes off. Don't hold on too long, Bob, if they do come up."

"Don't be nervous, young 'un. We've had uncommon good luck so far, and I'm inclined to think the enemy won't be in a hurry to tackle us. Those bombs must have been a horrid surprise to them. We may congratulate ourselves on a good day for the first, anyhow."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FOURTH
A CHECK

The night passed undisturbed. Bob was almost sorry. As the slow hours crept towards midnight, when Lawrence would relieve him, he would have welcomed an opportunity for action. It was bitter cold. He dared not kindle a watch-fire, and so enlighten the enemy about his arrangements. Remembering Lawrence's similar vigil forty miles down, he said to himself: "The kid's a good plucked one.

He'd have made a first-rate soldier, or political officer, or anything. Pity we're both so hard up!"

Suddenly he bethought himself of the mass of ore which had been tumbled into the cavity in the bank just above the Pathan miners' compound. It must weigh many tons, and according to Mr. Appleton's calculations, sixty per cent. of it was pure silver. Bob did not know the market price of the metal, but the quantity that had been mined must represent a considerable sum of money. The exciting incidents of the last few days had kept his thoughts engrossed with strategy and tactics; and the notion that the mine was itself a valuable property, worth defending for its own sake, came almost with a shock of surprise.

"Who is the owner now?" he thought. "Did Uncle leave a will? I suppose we are his heirs, but what's the law of inheritance in these parts?"

And then the recollection of his uncle's recent death caused a revulsion of feeling. It was quite unreasonable to shrink from the thought of benefiting by Mr. Appleton's decease; but affection and high-minded instinct sometimes get the better of reason, and he dismissed the subject, still with a vague hope that his uncle would even yet return to his own.

At midnight Lawrence came with a squad of men to relieve him.

"All's well then?" he said.

"Yes; I haven't heard a murmur."

"Well, cut off and get a sleep. I'm good for a spell till daylight. Shan Tai has given me a splendid feed. We're lucky in our men, Bob. As I was eating I overheard Shan Tai talking with Chunda Beg. 'What you tinkee?' says Shan Tai. They'd evidently been discussing the situation. 'I say not one of the dogs will ever poke his nose within our walls,' said the khansaman. 'When the huzur told me that two boys were coming to live here I was sick in mind. Some of the Feringhi boys call us niggers, and speak to us as if we were mud. Our sahibs are not so. They do not sniff and curse and use us as if we were beasts and not men. What say you, cook man?' 'Say what you say allo lighto,' says Shan Tai. 'Likee young massa plenty muchee. Big lot fightee men come all-same. No can fightee big lot long time.' 'Wah!' says Chunda. 'The two sahibs are worth thousands of those dogs of Kalmucks, and if Allah keeps them alive we shall smite and smite until the Sirkar sends help. Only give them good food, cook man.' 'Makee chow-chow first-chop,' says Shan Tai, and the old chap gave a chuckle. He's a jolly good sort."

Lawrence had said that they were lucky in their men; it did not occur to him that the fragment of conversation he reported showed rather that the men thought themselves lucky in their masters.

The day broke, and still the enemy had made no movement. As soon as it was light Bob had the field gun dragged over the bridge to the breastwork.

Lawrence reported that the enemy had begun to erect a new rampart some distance down the track.

"They surely don't imagine that we're going to take the offensive," he said.

"No. It probably means that they'll snipe at us from behind it. Go and get your breakfast and come back as soon as you can."

Bob considered whether to interfere with the enemy's work, but decided that he had better husband his ammunition. Some two hours later, after Lawrence's return, the enemy began firing across their new breastwork. At the same time a number of them were seen skirmishing along the track, making short rushes from rock to rock. The track itself was only thirty or forty feet wide, straight and comparatively smooth. But the cliff face was very rugged, affording a certain amount of cover. Skirmishing from point to point, where the cliff jutted out or receded, or where single fragments of rock had fallen to the side of the track, the enemy advanced under cover of the fire from their breastwork until they had come about halfway to the position of the defenders. Some scrambled up the cliff here and there for a few yards so as to obtain a better view of the men sheltered by the entrenchment. Bob refused to allow his men to make a general reply to their fire. He knew that they could not approach beyond a certain point, the track being open and the amount of cover diminishing as they drew nearer. Now and then, when one of them advanced too far ahead of his fellows, he permitted the best marksman to try his skill, and two or three of the enemy were hit. One of his own men also, incautiously exposing himself, fell back with a gash in his arm. Except for this, the day passed without casualties, and the relative positions of the two parties were the same.

The garrison were greatly delighted that the end of the second day found the situation unaltered. Only five days of the critical week remained, and some of them already saw themselves at the end of their probation. Bob hinted that they were not yet out of the wood, but he was glad enough to see how high-spirited and confident they were. For his own part, he relaxed nothing of his care and vigilance. He was still on his guard against a night attack, and as an extra precaution, he sent two of the Sikhs to creep in the darkness along the track between the enemy's breastwork and his own, to give instant warning if they should see or hear any signs of movement.

But the peace of the night remained unbroken. During the early part of the next day, even, there was no sniping or skirmishing as before. Bob augured ill of this inactivity. He would have been more at ease if the enemy had pursued their ineffective tactics, and would indeed have welcomed a rush, which he felt himself able to repel. He could not but believe that they were gathering their strength, perhaps waiting for the support of more artillery, and he had an instinctive dread that the next assault would be a much more formidable affair.

Soon after noon his prescience was rudely justified. Suddenly, without any warning, two guns opened fire from the enemy's breastwork. Lawrence at once offered to set off in the aeroplane and repeat his work with the bombs; but Bob would not allow it, partly because of the scarcity of petrol and dynamite, partly from a fear that the enemy, now better prepared, would have detailed a certain number specially to aim at the aeroplane in flight. The airmen might not escape a second time with a slight flesh wound.

The fight resolved itself into a short artillery duel. The enemy's first shell flew high, striking the cliff above the cantilever gangway, and bespattering the sheds and the compounds with fragments of rock. Ganda Singh proved a better marksman. He planted a shell on the enemy's breastwork between the two guns; splinters of rock flew all around, and for a time there was no more firing. Presently, however, it was resumed, apparently from one gun only, and Bob hoped that the other had been put out of action. But in a few minutes both the weapons were at work, and the gunners' practice improved. Two or three shells struck the garrison's barricade, and though no breach was made, part of the parapet was blown away, and splintered rock flew in all directions, dealing severe wounds among the men behind. Ganda Singh worked his gun with imperturbable calm, and Gur Buksh from the compound sent a rain of bullets from the machine gun along the track. Bob saw, however, that he would soon be forced to withdraw the field gun for lack of ammunition. He had only captured twenty rounds with it, and after half these had been expended, with much damage to the enemy's breastwork, he decided that he must reserve the rest for use in the compound, when the enemy should attempt to force a passage round the bend.

Signalling therefore to Gur Buksh to keep up a hot fire, he ordered four of the men to run the field gun back to the mine. The rest he withdrew a few yards from the breastwork, posting them close against the cliff out of the direct course of the enemy's shells, which were now working havoc on his rough defences. But finding it impossible there to observe what the enemy were doing, he ordered two men to run back to the breastwork, lie down until the guns had fired, and then spring up and observe the enemy's movements through the gaps. They soon reported that skirmishers were again cautiously advancing along the track. Presently the bombardment redoubled in vigour, and immediately afterwards the scouts cried out that a large body of the enemy was charging. The guns ceased fire; at the short range the trajectory was so flat that the gunners could scarcely aim at the breastwork without hitting their own men.

"Now, boys!" cried Bob, unconsciously addressing them as if they were Tommies, "after me!"

He led them back to their former position. They spread out along the breastwork and opened fire. Bob saw a mass of two or three hundred Kalmucks

streaming without any sort of order along the track, while the skirmishers who had occupied the rocks above were firing as fast as they could load.

"Take your time!" he cried. "There's no need to hurry."

The first volleys were nevertheless somewhat ragged. The nerves of the Pathans, unaccustomed to the shattering effect of high explosive shells bursting within a few yards of them, were shaken; only Ganda Singh and the three other Sikhs he had with him were calm as disciplined soldiers ought to be. It was their rifles that took toll of the advancing enemy. Several of these dropped; the rest came on yelling fiercely. Bob ordered his men to fire independently. The steadiness of the Sikhs had its effect on the Pathans, who rested their rifles in holes and crevices of the breastwork and took deliberate aim.

The head of the charging column was now within two hundred yards. In spite of increasing losses they still dashed on, and crowds of their countrymen were swarming over the breastwork behind them. Nearer and nearer they drew, but their ranks were thinning fast. When they were about a hundred yards from Bob's entrenchment their leaders wavered. At this many of the men halted, in irresolution; only a few of the bolder spirits, worked up to a pitch of frenzy, pressed on until but fifty yards separated them from their goal. These never returned.

With startling suddenness panic seized those who had faltered. Yelling with rage and despair they turned about and scurried like rabbits to the shelter of their breastwork, pursued by a dropping fire. When the survivors had got more than halfway back, their further retreat was covered by the field guns, and Bob again withdrew his men a little to the rear, well content with his successful stand.

There was no further attack that day. The men were jubilant. When Bob, on being relieved by Lawrence, returned to the mine, he was met at the end of the bridge by Ditta Lal. The Babu's aspect was even more than usually bland.

"I offer fulsome congratulations on sparkling victory, sir," he said. "Perchance you heard the universal shout that burst stentorian from drouthy throats."

"Is that your own?" asked Bob, interrupting.

"My own, sir?" The Babu was puzzled. "I fear I do not fully apprehend meaning of question."

"Why, it sounded like blank verse, and I wondered whether you yourself had been dropping into poetry."

"Delighted, sir," said the Babu with a smile and a bow. "I didn't twig my frail thoughts had run into metric mould. It was unpremeditated art. I am up to snuff now, sir. 'That burst stentorian from drouthy throats'–'pon my dicky, sir, phrase has tone, ring, sonorous rotundity that many professed poetasters would give boots for. However and notwithstanding, long and short of it is I am self-appointed spokesman for all and sundry in offering abject felicitations on

auspicious event."

"Thanks, I'm sure."

They were walking side by side to the house.

"Now, dear sir," the Babu resumed, "when I was at Calcutta University–of which, as you are aware, I have honour and glory to be B.A.–I was wont to shed my light of countenance on football matches, watched young barbarians toe flying sphere. After certain amount of rough and tumble, at blast of whistle all performance ceased for brief interval, during which muddy oafs ingurgitated juice of lemons and all that."

"What are you driving at?" asked Bob in bewilderment.

"Why, sir, that interludium, denominated half-time, has parallel here and now. We are at half-time in this fateful strife. Three days and half of allotted span have expired; and I make bold to suggestion that, for refreshment and buck-up of general company, you issue orders for tamasha."

"What's that?"

"Tamasha, sir, is jollification, kick-up, regular beano–song and dance, et cetera. With your permission, I will undertake herculean labour of organization."

"My good man, you know our proverbs: 'Don't hallo till you're out of the wood'–'Don't count your chickens before they are hatched.' It's true the men have done very well so far, but the stiffest fight often comes in the second half, you know. Possess your soul in patience, Babu. If we come through safely I promise you shall have your tamasha, or whatever you call it, and I tell you what: as you seem to be a bit of a poet, why not spend your time in writing a ballad or something of the sort in anticipation?"

"Happy thought, sir. I have not hitherto built rhyme, lofty or otherwise, but I will do my level best to rise to height of great argument; I will set my eye in fine frenzy rolling, and body forth forms of things unknown at present, but justified by event. I will strike my lyre while it is hot. Good-night, sir, and sweet repose."

He waddled off, bent on a passionate quest for inspiration. Bob looked after him with a tolerant smile.

"Poor chap!" he thought. "Much learning has made him pretty mad. I wonder if we Britishers, when we pick up a smattering of their lore, strike the Hindus in the same way? I only hope his pæan *will* be justified by the event."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-FIFTH

THE FIGHT AT THE BEND

At early morning, after a quiet night, Lawrence sent one of the men back to announce the approach of a flag of truce. Bob hurried at once to the breastwork. Three Kalmucks were advancing along the track, one of them apparently an officer. No others of the enemy were in sight. The envoys halted within a short distance of the entrenchment, and the officer began to speak in a loud shrill voice.

"What does he say?" asked Bob.

"I can't make it out," replied Lawrence. "Do any of you men understand him?"

The men, Sikhs and Pathans, acknowledged that they did not, whereupon Bob made signs to the Kalmuck to wait, and despatched a man to fetch Shan Tai, who as a western Chinaman might be able to act as interpreter.

When the cook arrived, and heard what was required of him, he shouted a few words to the officer, who responded with a speech of some length, very rapidly uttered. The purport of it was to propose terms. He offered the garrison the honours of war if they would surrender the mine and make no further opposition to the passage of the army up the valley. They would be allowed to depart unmolested, with bag and baggage; and the two white men, if they pleased, might return to their own country by way of Central Asia, through the Kalmuck lines.

Bob's reply was made without hesitation. He pointed out that the Kalmucks were the aggressors. Hostilities had not been of his seeking. All that he had desired was to live at peace and pursue his occupation as miner, whereby he gave employment to several score of workmen, including many of the officer's fellow-countrymen.

"We have been wantonly attacked," he said, "without warning and without provocation, and we are resolved to defend the property of the late owner of the mine, who was murdered by a man acting apparently in collusion with the force to which you belong. I reject your terms. But in order to avoid further bloodshed, I am willing to refer the matter to the Sirkar, and will abide by the decision of the Viceroy of the Emperor of India."

The officer had evidently come prepared for a refusal, for he at once put forward a modified proposal. He offered to leave the Englishman undisturbed at the mine if he on his side would refrain from attacking the army as it marched past. Bob saw the dilemma in which he was placed. The question was no longer a personal but an imperial one. Rejection of the offer would imply that he stood as an outpost of the Empire. But his answer was equally clear and emphatic. He declined to make terms of any kind with the enemy. The Kalmuck returned to

his own lines, manifestly chagrined at the failure of his mission.

Bob expected that the rejection of the enemy's proposals would result in a more sustained and vigorous attack, and as soon as the officer had departed he set his men to complete the repairing of the breastwork which Lawrence had begun in the night. Presently the Kalmucks opened fire with rifles and field guns, and throughout the day the bombardment and sniping from the rocks intermittently continued; but there was no further attempt to rush the position. In the intervals Bob had fresh stones brought up for the repair of the breastwork, which had been considerably knocked about. The casualties among the garrison, however, were slight, and at the end of the fourth day Bob felt that he could reasonably congratulate himself on the success of his stand.

But he was still very anxious. Though the enemy had shown surprising sluggishness, he did not flatter himself that they had any idea of abandoning their task. More and more he wondered why they did not attack during the night, when, so far as they knew, the advantage would be wholly with them. For the first time since the commencement of the struggle he failed to sleep well, waking frequently, then dozing off again.

About four o'clock in the morning he was roused by the sound of two rifle shots in quick succession. Springing fully clothed from his bed, he rushed into the compound, called up the detachment whose turn it was to take duty at the breastwork, and led them at the double across the bridge and down the track. By the time he reached the position he found a furious fight in progress. The two scouts whom Lawrence had thrown out to give warning if the enemy moved had heard the tramp of men advancing, fired their rifles as a signal, and run back to join their own party. They were so closely followed by the Kalmucks, whose forms could be dimly seen in the twilight, that Lawrence had been unable to fire at once for fear of hitting the scouts, so that the enemy were within a few yards of the breastwork before they met with any resistance.

Reinforced by Bob's men, the party now opened fire with deadly effect, but the attackers were so numerous that the rush was scarcely checked. There was only time for a second volley before the head of the enemy's column surged up against the breastwork. They had held their fire until they were able to see the dark forms of their adversaries. Then their shots, fired point-blank, laid low several of the Sikhs and Pathans. Supported by the swarms in their rear they began to clamber up the rampart, in the teeth of the bristling bayonets opposed to them. On their side was the advantage of numbers: on the side of the defenders that of position; but Bob recognised in a minute that his men, ply their bayonets as they might, must soon be overwhelmed by sheer weight.

Suddenly a beam of light flashed over and past the scene of the conflict, resting on the track immediately beyond the breastwork, which was crowded with

yelling Kalmucks pressing on to support their comrades. Gur Buksh in the compound had switched on the searchlight. It was not the blinding glare associated with the searchlights of forts and battleships, but it had sufficient illuminating power to show up the disorderly mass of the charging force.

For a moment it made no alteration in the conditions. Bob and his brother, with barely a score of men left to them, were hard pushed to hold the breastwork. Faster than they could hurl the enemy down at the point of the bayonet, others swarmed up. Bob was on the point of shouting an order to retire to his own original breastwork up the track when, above the shouts and yells of the combatants, sounded the characteristic rattle of the machine gun. Instantly he recognised how this might operate in his favour. The gun could not be trained on the men who were actually at grips with him, but in a few seconds it had swept a huge gap in the column advancing in serried ranks along the track, and deprived his immediate assailants of their support.

He at once took advantage of this fortunate diversion. Instead of retiring, he cried to the men to stand firm, and the desperate work at the rampart went on. For some time the Kalmucks there did not know or failed to appreciate what was happening behind them. They still pressed on and up, and but for the timely arrival of another dozen men despatched by Gur Buksh from the mine they might even now have carried the position. The reinforcement turned the scale. Bob called on his men for a final effort, and he and Lawrence flashed their revolvers in the very faces of the crowd. Fired by their example the men thrust and jabbed with redoubled energy, and in a few minutes hurled the last of the assailants back on to the track.

They found themselves in a terrifying quandary. The space between them and their baffled comrades was illuminated by the fatal band of light. The machine gun had ceased to play on the track when it was cleared of the enemy. Now there were forty or fifty men trapped in the dark wedge-like area between the beam of the searchlight and the breastwork. They knew that if any of them dared to attempt a rush back they would be the target for innumerable bullets. One or two did rashly hazard a retreat, but as soon as they encroached upon the luminous band the gun's rattle scarcely gave them warning of the shots that fell among them almost instantaneously. The rest cowered in the darkness, waiting for death.

Bob had to hold his men with a tight rein to prevent them from leaping the breastwork and massacring their despairing foes. He had thought of a better way. Fyz Ali could make himself understood by them. Through his lips Bob told them that if they laid down their arms they might retire, taking their wounded with them. They eagerly accepted the proffered mercy, but shrank from acting on it, until they were assured that a message had been sent to the havildar to refrain

from firing at them. Then, utterly cowed, they handed their weapons over the breastwork, gathered up such of their comrades as were yet alive, and carried them in all haste across the illuminated space and out of sight.

This was an auspicious beginning for the fifth day. It was the greatest triumph that the garrison had as yet achieved, and the men were proportionably elated. The enemy on the other hand were dejected and despondent. For some hours they remained at a distance. In the afternoon, however, they resumed their skirmishing tactics, and under cover of a renewed bombardment crept nearer and nearer to the breastwork. When their field guns had to cease fire for fear of hitting the skirmishers, Bob decided to venture a charge, and led twenty of his best men in a sudden leap over the barricade. The enemy did not wait for the touch of the terrible bayonets. They fired a scattered volley and fled. A lucky shot from Ganda Singh's rifle brought down one of the rearmost, and he rolled down the rocks on to the track. Acting on the unconsidered impulse of the moment Bob sent two of the Sikhs to make him prisoner, and when Lawrence shortly afterwards returned to the compound for his afternoon sleep, he took the wounded man with him, and had his injuries attended to.

He proved to be an officer. Interrogating him through Shan Tai, Lawrence learnt that the general himself was on his way to the mine to make a personal inspection of the position. The Kalmuck, who seemed grateful for the attentions shown him, advised Lawrence to yield. His people's comparative inactivity that day was only preliminary to a crushing blow. "Without your flying machine," he said, "you would by this time have been destroyed. That gave you an advantage. Soon the advantage will be on our side."

"Will the presence of your general do so much for you?" asked Lawrence.

The man refused to say any more; but his manner, and the half-smile upon his face, gave Lawrence an uneasy feeling that the Mongol general must have a trump card to play. He was so much impressed by the officer's hint of a great stroke impending that instead of seeking his bed, he hurried back to inform Bob.

"What can he mean?" he asked.

"I can think of nothing but that the general is bringing up large reinforcements, and means to throw them upon us and carry the position by sheer weight of numbers. He won't care how many lives he chucks away, and everything depends on whether his men's discipline is good enough to stand the racket. I don't know how far these Kalmucks have a contempt for death like the Japanese."

"Don't you think I'd better fly a few miles down the track and see what is going on?"

"But you're tired out. You've been at it since midnight."

"That's all right. I shall sleep easier when I know what we've got to expect."

"Very well then. Don't go far, and keep high."

The appearance of the aeroplane over the track, with Lawrence and Fazl on board, was a signal for the enemy to scurry to cover. Not a shot was fired; their only thought was to escape the terrible bombs which they associated with the flying machine. But Lawrence did not intend to use his bombs. What he saw, or Fazl reported to him, proved that his stock of missiles was insufficient for any greater effect than to retard, for a few hours at the most, the inevitable crisis. Two field guns were in position at the enemy's advanced entrenchment. Near by, men had been engaged in constructing platforms for other guns, until the sight of the aeroplane sent them to cover. Farther down the track, at intervals, five or six similar weapons were being dragged up; to destroy them all, even if he were lucky enough in his aim to do so, would exhaust his stock of bombs, and he felt that he must hold some in reserve for the ultimate defence of the mine.

The track, as far as he could see it, was almost choked with men and animals. The men scattered as well as they could when they saw the aeroplane; some shots were fired at it, harmlessly. It was impossible for Lawrence to guess the magnitude of the reinforcement that was being pushed forward; but it seemed to him that several regiments must have been sent on from the main army. The bodies of mounted men were separated by long convoys of provisions and ammunition, carried on the backs of mules and camels. It almost appeared as if a regular advance of the whole force had begun. The Kalmuck general was clearly confident of his power to break the resistance of the little band that had hitherto withstood his passage.

Lawrence flew as far as the bridge; it seemed useless to go farther. He had seen what he had expected to see: a vast and overwhelming force. But he had obtained no definite clue to the meaning of the captive officer's vague hint of a master stroke. That the enemy had a crushing superiority in numbers he had known all along: there was nothing to indicate that they had anything more than the advantage of numbers still. The presence of their general might act as a stimulus; but the nature of the position precluded any marked change in their mode of operations. It was essentially a position that could be won only by dogged, unfaltering determination: the issue depended on the fighting man, not on the tactician.

Perhaps if Lawrence had continued his flight to the plain on which the main army was encamped, he or Fazl might have noticed one slight change since his former visit in Major Endicott's company. A field telegraph had been laid down, stretching away to the north. This might well have escaped his observation from the great altitude to which he must of necessity have risen. Even if he had seen it, probably it would have suggested nothing more than one of the ordinary accompaniments of an army in the field. Yet that single wire was the clue to the Kalmuck's cryptic warning.

On returning to the mine his report to Bob was necessarily disappointing. It was clear that everything still depended on blocking the enemy's advance. If they could once establish themselves on the southern side of the bend, and bring their guns to bear directly on the compounds, a few hours' bombardment would render the place untenable: it would be the beginning of the end. Against it the garrison were almost helpless. They had only ten rounds of ammunition for the captured field gun; and though the machine gun was in better case, not even the bravest of men–and Gur Buksh was that–could for long work his gun under the deadly fire of a whole park of artillery.

"Is there any possible way of strengthening our breastwork?" asked Lawrence, as with sinking hearts they discussed the situation.

"We can erect a second rampart in the night," suggested Bob. "It would take them a little longer to knock to pieces, and give us time. Every minute gained is valuable. You see, they can't bring their guns into direct line with the mine until they've driven us away, they can't do that without charging, and they can't charge without ceasing fire temporarily."

"Yes, I see that, but with four or five field guns at work they'll soon smash even a double breastwork, and then the way's clear for a charge. I wish I had bombed their guns now."

"You can do it to-morrow morning. I don't want to spend our last dynamite till absolutely the last moment. To-morrow's the seventh day. If the Chief has been able to keep his word we shall be reinforced some time during the day, and then—-"

"You say 'if.' There's a doubt about it, isn't there? I've felt it all along."

"There is, of course. He may not have been able to spare the men. But hang it all! what's the good of looking on the dark side? We've held our own for a week, and even if we're smashed in the end I bet the delay is worth a good deal to India. The loss of time is a serious matter for the enemy. But for us the whole twenty thousand of them would be now on the flank of our army. I can't imagine any force of ours of the same size being checked in this way by a mere handful of men in a gorge. I dare say the reason is that the Kalmucks aren't used to hill fighting. They're best in a cavalry raid; here their horses are only a nuisance, and they're rather slow to adapt themselves to the conditions. But they've had a week to get used to them; and the worst of it is that our fellows, plucky as they are, are pretty nearly worn out."

"Do you think they'll jib if relief doesn't come?"

"What's the good? They'd only be massacred. They'll fight to the last gasp.... I say, I've got an idea. There's plenty of wire knocking about the mine: let's make a couple of wire entanglements and set them up in the night, just beyond the breastwork. If we take care the enemy won't hear us; they certainly

won't see us."

"Wouldn't they notice them when they make their rush?"

"That's possible, of course; but I rather fancy they'll be so hot to get at us that they won't. The wire won't show up much against the background of rock. Anyhow, it's worth trying. Any check would give us the chance to pepper them from the breastwork, and judging by what we've seen already they'll be in a panic that they'll take some time to recover from. Now you must get a sleep, so go back to the mine and tell Gur Buksh to get all the wire he can and set all the men to work; it won't be the first time he's had such a job, you may be sure."

When Lawrence had arranged this with the havildar, and was proceeding to the house, he noticed Ditta Lal walking with an air of dejection about the compound. The Babu's hands were clasped behind his back; his eyes were bent on the ground, or rather on the intervening promontory of his person. He looked up as Lawrence drew near.

"Gigantic undertaking, sir," he said sorrowfully.

"Pretty stiff, certainly," replied Lawrence.

"Stronger word is requisite in this exigent, sir. Such task transcends the topmost rung of art. Without excessive reverence for dictum of bloated antiquity, I hold with him who sings 'born not made.'"

"Well, we can only do our best," said Lawrence, puzzled by the Babu's words.

"What shadows we are, what shadows we pursue!" sighed Ditta Lal. "After mountainous travail I produce splendiferous line; I rack my cranium for colleague or successor; but final word, whose function is to charm attentive ear, eludes, evades, crumps. To wit: 'And batters blackguards with his boisterous bomb!'–line perfect in harmony and melody and all that; but when I run through alphabet for rhyme–*com, dom, fom, gom, hom*, and so on till I come to blank wall at *zom*: not a word, sir, that fulfils mutual demand of sound and sense–not one word."

"What on earth are you gassing about, Babu?" asked Lawrence, who had not heard of his previous conversation with Bob.

"Of what, sir, but task entrusted to unworthy servant by honourable brother, to compose song of victory, ode, epic, or what not, in celebration of happy and glorious achievement about to be consummated! But I will not despair; nil desperandum; as you truly remark, we can but do our best; resources of civilisation as represented by B.A. degree of Calcutta University are not exhausted; something attempted, something done, shall earn my night's repose, of which I shall be jolly and unmistakably glad, for agony of expressing thoughts too deep for tears wrings honest brow, sir."

Lawrence feared that the stress of the situation was making the Babu mad;

but he spoke a sympathetic word, and passed on.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SIXTH
THE DEATH TRAP

There was no alarm from beyond the bend during the night. But in the small hours the sentry at the bridge gave a loud shout, and fired southward up the track. When Lawrence rushed from the house to discover what had happened, he learnt that the sentry had seen a number of dim figures creeping towards the mine. They had now disappeared. Lawrence conjectured that Nurla Bai and his friends, who must now be nearly famished, had been attracted by the sound of guns, and stolen down in the hope of eluding the vigilance of the garrison, and gaining the path that led above their old quarters and descended on the track on the nearer side of the bend. Even if they had got thus far undetected, they could not but have fallen into the hands of the defenders of the breastwork. It was an attempt they were not likely to repeat. There was no chance of their rejoining the Kalmuck army until the defence was broken.

Before morning the doubled breastwork was defended by a strong wire entanglement. Soon after daybreak the enemy began a terrific bombardment from four guns, two of which had been mounted on platforms behind the two which Lawrence had already seen in position. The garrison could make no effective reply, but could only watch their breastwork crumbling away under the shells that pounded it without intermission. The two brothers held their men some distance in the rear, as much under cover as possible, ready to lead them on and occupy the ruin of the entrenchment as soon as the expected charge began.

About ten o'clock they saw Fazl running towards them from the bridge. He had been taking his turn of duty on guard at the aeroplane platform, and the fact that he had left his post seemed ominous. Rushing up to Lawrence, he exclaimed excitedly that he had heard the distant hum of an aeroplane. The boys were incredulous: they themselves were almost deafened by the roar of the guns and the crash of falling masonry. But immediately afterwards, in the interval between the shots, they caught the sound–the continuous throbbing drone, like a gigantic sewing-machine at work. They looked at each other aghast. For a moment or two they were mute: then Bob said:

"You must get aloft at once. It's our only chance. Get above the aeroplane,

and bomb it. There's no time to lose."

Lawrence set off at a run, the Gurkha behind him. He raced across the bridge and on to the cantilever pathway, and had just turned the corner when he heard a tremendous explosion behind him. A few seconds later a large monoplane flashed by, and was soon lost to sight up the valley.

Long practice had given him facility in starting. The aeroplane was ready for flight. Lawrence and the Gurkha leapt to their places, and within two minutes the machine was in the air, flying after the enemy.

This, then, was the meaning of the Kalmuck officer's veiled warning. The enemy had taken a leaf out of the defenders' book. Their airmen, equipped no doubt with bombs much more destructive than Lawrence's home-made missiles, intended to strike at the very heart of the defence, and by rendering the mine premises untenable, clear the way for the advance of the army.

Lawrence was fortunately cool of head and a rapid thinker. After a moment of stupefaction he saw his course clearly. The danger from the air must be met in the air. This could only be done by rising above the enemy's monoplane, and hurling his bombs down upon it. The Kalmuck pilot would be as anxious as he to avoid an actual collision, which must prove disastrous to both the machines. It was wholly a question of manoeuvring for position.

The glimpse he had caught of the hostile aeroplane as it flashed by, suggested that it was a much larger and more powerful machine than his own. If this were indeed the case, he was probably quite outmatched in speed as in armament. But he saw in a moment that the possession of the smaller machine might tend to his own advantage, for he could wheel in narrow parts of the valley where the attempt would prove destructive to the enemy. Moreover, he knew the valley thoroughly; the others, though no doubt vastly superior to him in a military sense, lacked local experience and had everything to learn. Time was on his side.

As soon as he began his flight he knew that he had gained one point. If the enemy had turned at his customary wheeling-place, their aeroplane would already have been in sight. The next suitable spot was several miles farther up the valley, unless indeed they should rise to a much greater height than that at which they had passed. Such an ascension would consume time; it would further make it very difficult for them to drop their bombs with any degree of accuracy. Whether they rose or continued their flight at the same altitude until they reached the wider turning-place, they would not be back for four or five minutes. Lawrence resolved to utilise this breathing space.

He flew on until he reached his usual turning-place, then began to mount in a spiral course. While he was doing this, two considerations flashed through his mind. If, when he met the enemy, he should be still below them, he must

fly on in the opposite direction, for the chance of being hit by a bomb, when the machines were passing at the rate of perhaps a hundred and fifty miles an hour, would be very slight. His only fear in that case was that they would fly straight back to the mine and work havoc there without a possibility of interference. If, on the other hand, he were above them, his best course would be to fly in the same direction, and try to drop his bombs on them. When two express trains are running the same way, it is possible, however great their speed, to cast an object from a carriage of one through an open window of the other.

He was still ascending when Fazl shouted that the enemy's aeroplane was in sight, at a greater height.

"Rifle!" said Lawrence instantly, as he headed up the valley.

The Gurkha fired, as the two machines rushed at terrific speed towards each other. There was no reply, but a few seconds afterwards an explosion in the valley below showed that the enemy had dropped a bomb. It would have been almost a miracle if it had hit the aeroplane in the fraction of a second of the passing. But a second explosion a little later was very perturbing. Unless he could check the enemy, they might sail over the mine again and again, and on the wider target which that presented take surer aim. Luckily they would have to fly several miles down the river before they could again turn, and the few minutes' grace might give him time to ascend still higher, and attain an altitude at which he would have the advantage.

As the machines passed, Lawrence had had time to confirm his impression that the other aeroplane was much larger than his own. He saw too that it was occupied by three men. But these elements of superiority would be to some extent neutralized by the greater handiness of his own machine in navigating the narrow gorges of the valley. The situation demanded a readiness to take risks. The gorge to which Lawrence had now come after passing the enemy was so constricted that in ordinary circumstances he would never have dreamed of attempting a turning movement. But he felt the supreme necessity of wheeling at once, in order to return to the "bay" which he had lately left. There he might do something to protect the mine, if only by diverting the enemy's attack upon himself. He might also have an opportunity of rising to a sufficient height for offensive purposes.

Choosing the widest part of the gorge, he banked his machine up, and clearing the cliff apparently by inches he swept round again to the north. When in half a minute he reached the turning place, the aeroplane was not in sight. But he heard sounds of a fierce struggle beyond. The bombardment had ceased, but the air was filled with the crack of rifles, the rattle of the machine gun, and the shouts of men. He could do nothing to help his brother. There was not even time to fly on and drop a bomb among the enemy: he must utilise every moment in

preparing for the return of the aeroplane. He steered his machine in a series of short spirals, rising as rapidly as possible, watching the valley northward anxiously. As yet its windings concealed the enemy's aeroplane from view. It was an inexpressible relief to him that they had not attempted to turn at the spot where he now was. They had not thought it practicable, or not had the time; probably they had shot by before even the possibility had occurred to them.

He swept round and round in his corkscrew flight, rising gradually until he was more than two thousand feet above the river. His view was now greatly extended, and when the larger aeroplane came in sight from round a bend nearly a mile away, he saw with a flash of hope that it was now lower than his own machine, although somewhat higher than before. Evidently the airmen had foreseen that he might rise in order to avoid their bombs, and sought to forestall him; but his narrow spiral had carried him up to a greater height than their two long inclined planes.

The moment he saw them he started straight to meet them. Nothing could have been better calculated to assist his brother in the desperate struggle on the track. It was as when a charging bull is diverted from the object of his fury by the fluttering of a handkerchief or a newspaper within his range of vision. The Kalmuck airmen recognised that they had an opponent with whom they must seriously reckon; and though perhaps their general, looking on from below, would have bidden them to ignore the aeroplane, and pursue the more important duty of shattering the defences, they no doubt thought that a few minutes' or even hours' further delay would be less disastrous than the destruction of themselves and their machine. When the defenders' aeroplane was out of action, the rest would be easy.

Lawrence had resolved not to imitate the enemy in hurling a bomb while the machines were flashing past in opposite directions. His missiles were too precious for one to be wasted. As the aeroplanes met, he heard two cracks, followed by two metallic thuds on the iron plates below his chassis: the enemy had fired. What effect their shots had he knew not, but neither the engine nor the occupants suffered any injury. He had already commenced a turning movement. Completing his circle, he steered straight after the enemy, who were heading directly up the valley. There had been no explosion on the track or in the mine compounds as they passed: so far his tactics had justified themselves.

But Lawrence had not been more than a few seconds in pursuit before he found that in speed his machine was utterly outclassed. The enemy seemed almost to leave him standing. This was not unexpected; but as soon as he was sure of it he felt that his course of action was clearly marked out. It would be a fatal mistake to give the enemy enough air-room to take advantage of their superiority. If they got plenty of space for manoeuvring they could rise as far above

him as they pleased, and either shatter the aeroplane with a well-placed bomb, or, having two rifles to one, could wait an opening for a shot that would incapacitate himself or Fazl, perhaps both. He must devote all his energy and skill to dodging and deluding the enemy, attacking them if occasion offered, in any case keeping them constantly employed. Their engine must consume a much larger quantity of petrol and lubricant than his. They must have used up a great deal in flying from their starting-place–Tash Kend, he presumed–and it was unlikely that there was any supply with the army at the end of the valley from which they could replenish their tanks. If he could only manoeuvre so as to starve them out of fuel, all their superiorities would be nullified and their usefulness would have vanished.

It was a question now of calculating chances, or rather of guessing–like the children's game when one brings his closed fists from behind his back and asks another to guess which hand holds the concealed object. When the two aeroplanes were out of sight, the occupants of neither could know what the others were doing. They could only make a random shot at the probabilities. Lawrence felt pretty sure that the enemy would seek to rise to a greater altitude than they supposed him to be attaining. He therefore decided to descend at once, and hover in the lower part of the valley. A long vol plané northward brought him within a short distance of the struggle going on at the bend. As he sped by, he ordered Fazl to drop a bomb among the enemy beyond the breastwork, then swooped past, three or four hundred feet above the river, turned at the first possible spot, and flew back to meet the enemy. As he expected, they had risen to a great height. Flying low as he now was, they were probably two thousand feet above him. When they saw him, they at once began to descend; but the machines were rushing in opposite directions so swiftly that the vertical distance between them was lessened by only two or three hundred feet when they met. A few seconds after they had passed, Lawrence heard two explosions, and Fazl reported that the enemy's bombs had fallen, one in the river, the other on the cliff-side. Again they had missed their aim.

Lawrence knew that they could not return within fifteen minutes. While it was important to him that they should waste their petrol, it was equally important that he should husband his, for he had very little left at the shed. It occurred to him that there would be time to alight on the platform, run to the mine to see how things were passing there, and get back in time to fly off before the enemy came in sight. He therefore wheeled round at his usual place, and in less than a minute slid gently on to the ledge. Leaving Fazl to look to the engine, he ran along the pathway, and on turning the corner saw with some astonishment that hostilities had apparently ceased. The breastwork was still manned by Bob and his party: Lawrence almost winced as he noticed how large a number of bod-

ies lay prostrate around them. The enemy were invisible: it seemed certain that their attack had been repulsed.

The mine compounds were deserted, except by Gur Buksh and two other men, whom Lawrence recognised in a moment as Chunda Beg and Shan Tai. These three were reclining against the wall near the machine gun. Every other fighting man had crossed the bridge to bear his part in the holding of the track. Lawrence felt a thrill of pride in the courage and loyalty of the cook and the khansaman, who, house servants as they were, often held in scorn by the warriors, had in this hour of peril given their assistance to the steadfast havildar.

He hurried on to the compound, noting as he passed the havoc wrought by the one bomb from the hostile aeroplane which had hit the mark. Gur Buksh and the others saluted as gravely as if it were the prime of peace.

"What has happened?" asked Lawrence breathlessly.

The havildar related how the appearance of the enemy's aeroplane had been the signal for a more ferocious bombardment than had before taken place. When the breastwork was half ruined by the shells, a swarm of Kalmucks rushed to the attack with yells of anticipated triumph, while the defenders, who had remained in comparative safety some distance away, leapt back to their places at the shattered rampart. The enemy, coming unawares on the wire entanglements, had been thrown into an unwieldy and disordered mass; and after a few minutes of desperate efforts to break through the obstacle, with partial success, they had been so withered by the defenders' fire that flesh and blood could endure no more. They had fled, a confused rabble, to their own entrenchment.

There was no time for Lawrence to hear more, or to discuss with the imperturbable Sikh any measures that might be devised to assist the heroic fighters on the other bank. He knew well that the check could be only temporary, and could not think without distress of the issue of the next attack. Hurrying back to the ledge, he and Fazl got into their places, ready to fly off directly they heard the returning aeroplane. The Gurkha's ears first caught the throbbing drone, and as the machine once more rose into the air, the field guns recommenced to bark and spit.

As soon as Lawrence reached his turning-place he began to climb. In a few moments he caught sight of the enemy's aeroplane skimming round the bend below the mine. It was much lower than before, probably no more than three hundred feet above Lawrence, and as soon as the airmen caught sight of him, they dipped so suddenly as almost to suggest that the machine was beyond control. But Lawrence realised that the descent was intentional. They meant to come as close above him as they could in the half mile between them. He ceased to mount, and steered straight down the valley, hugging the cliff on the left hand. The enemy followed his manoeuvre, edging to their right in order to pass immediately

above him. The two aeroplanes were only about a hundred yards horizontally apart when with a quick movement of his rudder, which threw a hazardous strain upon the planes, Lawrence shot out over the river. Before the enemy could alter their own course he had passed well outside them. Their bombs, dropped hurriedly while the pilot was striving to cope with Lawrence's sudden movement, fell harmlessly into the river.

The enemy's turning-place up stream being much nearer the mine than that in the opposite direction, there was no time to alight again and save expenditure of petrol. But there was time to lend aid to the defenders at the breastwork. Lawrence flew on, instructing Fazl to hurl a bomb among the enemy as he passed the bend. Two teams of horses were dragging more field guns up to the rampart. It was among these that Fazl let fall his bomb, and looking back, he shouted gleefully that one of the teams had stampeded and dashed with their gun over the bank into the river, while the other were plunging furiously amid a smother of smoke. At the same time the rattle of the machine gun announced that Gur Buksh was again at work.

Lawrence did not wish to fly six or seven miles down the river to the wide bay in which he was sure the enemy had turned. To wheel round earlier involved some risk, but it was a risk from which his strung-up nerves did not flinch.

About three-fourths of a mile beyond the bend, at the spot where the enemy had established themselves after their first repulse, the gorge curved to the west, and in the cliff-face there was an extensive depression, scooped out as it were by a landslip. He resolved to try his luck there. The margin was perilously narrow, and only a man absolutely familiar with the spot, as he was, and prepared for the turning movement at the very moment of reaching it, could have hoped to wheel in the space.

At the critical point he banked up at a sharp angle, and for one brief moment felt a cold shudder of fear as he recognised the beginning of the sideslip that had brought disaster on so many reckless or unfortunate airmen. But the planes recovered their grip; the machine swung round across the river, having shaved the cliff on the left by an appallingly fine margin; and flew lightly and evenly up stream again.

By this daring feat Lawrence had saved nearly ten miles and the equivalent quantity of petrol. He had also avoided a meeting with the enemy on the north side of the mine, where manoeuvring to dodge them would have been much more difficult. By alighting when they next passed him he would again save while they were expending, and however large their supply had been when they started, it could not much longer stand the drain of continual flight up and down the river. Even now, since entering the valley, they must have travelled a good deal more than a hundred miles; their flight from headquarters might have been

three hundred. No doubt a further supply of fuel and oil had been despatched after them, but it would take a week or more to reach them over such rugged country. If he could only keep them fruitlessly employed until they were forced to leave the gorge through failing petrol, he would gain perhaps just enough time for the garrison to prolong their defence until the expected relief force arrived.

Thought is quicker even than an aeroplane's flight: these hopes, conjectures, volitions flashed through Lawrence's mind in the interval between his venturesome circuit and his arrival at the bend. The bombardment had recommenced. Two guns had been got into position; others were being hauled up the track. A hot rifle fire was opened upon the aeroplane, and both pilot and passenger were struck by fragments of bullets that had splintered on the metal work. Their great speed soon carried them out of further danger, but the bomb which Fazl dropped missed its aim, exploded on the rocky bank instead of on the track, and did little harm.

Lawrence guessed that the Kalmuck airmen would now suppose him to have risen, and would themselves be mounting in order to keep above him. He therefore resolved to keep low. The sequel showed that the enemy had been cunning enough to guess at his guess. When they reappeared, so far from ascending they were descending, yet gradually, so that they might adapt their course to the exigencies of the moment. They were now only two hundred feet above him.

This time he decided not to rush past and continue his flight up stream, but to wheel at the turning-place, and save time and petrol by flying back in their wake to his platform. He realised afterwards that he began his turning movement a trifle too soon, though, as the event proved, his indiscretion served him well. The enemy had not quite met him when he shifted his rudder for circling round the bay. He expected them to flash by as usual at express speed, but to his intense astonishment and alarm he found that instead of continuing on their direct course they had suddenly banked over, and were wheeling above him in the same direction as himself. It was a manoeuvre of extraordinary daring, for the larger aeroplane required a much wider circle than the smaller, and in order to clear the cliffs it had to remain banked up at a dangerously sharp angle.

Lawrence felt himself trapped. He could not fly out at either end of the bay, he thought, without being immediately followed by the enemy, who would then have him at their mercy. Yet he was in equal danger if he remained circling below them, for though their flight was swifter than his, at some moment their machine would be vertically above him, and they would doubtless seize that moment for hurling a bomb. He could not descend without shattering the aeroplane on the banks or plunging into the river. He felt as helpless as a pigeon beneath an eagle.

It was indeed an extraordinary situation: two aeroplanes wheeling round and round in a cup-like hollow, with less than two hundred feet of space between

them. The Kalmucks had not as yet fired or dropped a bomb: Lawrence imagined them gloating over their helpless victim, awaiting a favourable moment for one crushing stroke. The first shot was fired by Fazl; the enemy replied, but instead of keeping up a continuous fire, they ceased after a few shots, which riddled the planes, but hit no vital part. Lawrence wondered at their abstinence, until, following them with his eyes, he had a sudden conviction that they were in difficulties. The machine was banked up to the extreme limit of safety, and it flashed upon him that the enemy, and not himself, were caged. They could not ascend, for, a few hundred feet above them, the cliff on the west side of the stream hung forward in a jagged bluff that came within the circle of their flight. Contact with it would hurl them into the river. Nor could they leave the bay by either of the exits north or south without the risk of colliding with the cliffs, for the space was so narrow, and the speed of the machine so great, that the movements necessary for unbanking and steering could hardly be performed in the fraction of a second between their quitting the bay and running into the straight. It is one thing for a wasp to fly into a bottle, and quite another to fly out again.

The machines had completed several circles before Lawrence had grasped the situation. During this time Fazl had been steadily firing, but the enemy had been silent. Suddenly the Gurkha uttered a shout; one of the Kalmucks fell from the aeroplane, and whirled over and over in the air until he struck the river and disappeared.

"Don't fire again!" cried Lawrence.

He had become conscious that the perpendicular distance between the two planes was rapidly diminishing. The enemy's engine had not failed; their speed was the same; yet it was plain that moment by moment they were drawing nearer to the plane below. If the machines had been ships, Lawrence would have been tempted to believe that the enemy were trying to board; but he knew that a collision would be fatal to both. He was at a loss to explain the strange movement; indeed, he had little time to think of it, for he realised that unless he himself made his escape, his machine would be soon hurled to the bottom by the impact of the larger. He had not found it necessary to bank so much as the Kalmuck pilot. His lesser speed and the greater handiness of his aeroplane enabled him to fly out at the exit without the almost certainty of dashing against the cliff. At his next round he steered straight through the northern gap, and flew back in a flush of wonder and excitement to the platform.

As he expected, the enemy did not follow him. Alighting he rushed to the projecting buttress and gazed up the valley. He could see the doomed aeroplane as it flashed across the opening of the bay. It was still whirling round and round, but falling, falling with ever increasing velocity. He shuddered with horror as he contemplated the inevitable end. He did not witness the actual close of the

tragedy. The aeroplane as it neared the bottom was hidden from him by the rocky banks of the river. But half a minute after he himself stood in trembling safety a tremendous explosion shook the ground, and a cloud of smoke and broken rocks shot high into the air. Then there was a burst of flame, and he knew that all was over.

Overcome with sickness at the terrible end of these gallant airmen, and with nervous exhaustion after his own wearing efforts, he lay flat on the rock to recover his composure. Thinking over the recent scene, he hit upon a conjectural explanation of the uncontrollable descent of the enemy's aeroplane. He supposed that, with the machine so critically banked up in order to navigate the narrow cup, the pilot had been quite unable to make those delicate adjustments of the planes and the elevator that were necessary to counteract the dragging force of gravity. Later on, when he had an opportunity of discussing the matter with his brother, Bob scouted his theory, declaring that while the petrol lasted nothing could have prevented the machine from whirling round and round. But Lawrence stuck to his opinion, and Bob very naturally declared that it was not a matter he would care to put to the test.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-SEVENTH
AD INFIMOS

Just as the ticking of the household clock is unnoticed, but its cessation is immediately remarked; so it was not until the coughing roar of the field guns, which had continued ever since Lawrence last soared over the bend, suddenly ceased, that he was roused to full consciousness of the critical situation at the mine. Springing up, he ran with Fazl along the pathway until he came to a spot where the whole theatre of the combat could be viewed.

The noise of the guns had been followed by a hoarse babel of cries mingled with the crackle of rifles. He was just in time to see a swarm of Kalmucks surge over the breastwork, and Bob with his devoted band rushing up the track to the second rampart a hundred yards away. The machine gun beneath the north wall of the mine was silent; nobody was to be seen in the compound; and Lawrence's heart sank with dread lest the gun had been smashed, and Gur Buksh and his voluntary assistants slain.

In a moment, however, Fazl drew his attention excitedly to three men ly-

ing flat on their faces upon the drawbridge. He recognised them at once as the havildar, Shan Tai and Chunda Beg. But what were they doing? Their arms were moving swiftly this way and that, like the arms of tailors sewing.

"See, sahib!" cried Fazl, lifting his hand and pointing in still more excitement.

And then Lawrence saw that the bridge was no longer a bridge. The end which had rested on the rock in mid stream had been shattered by a shell, and Gur Buksh and his companions were working with might and main to replace the broken portion with rope. Fortunately, prone as they lay, they were for the present concealed from the enemy by the breastwork manned by the diminished garrison; but they would be in full view when they rose to return to the compound. When the time should come for the whole party to beat a final retreat, it would be almost impossible for a single man to escape being shot down.

Lawrence looked down the track. Fighting had ceased. The Kalmucks who had sprung over the breastwork had been recalled. A great number were engaged in repairing and strengthening the rampart, so as to render their gunners secure from enfilading fire. Behind, another crowd was dragging more guns into position, and Lawrence noticed that there were now machine guns as well as field pieces. The fact that Bob's men were not firing seemed to indicate that their ammunition was failing. The captured field gun was now useless for lack of shells; Gur Buksh had very little ammunition for his gun, and in any case he could not return to it until his work on the bridge was finished. It was of vital importance that the retreat to the mine should be kept open. What alarmed Lawrence most of all was his certainty that, even with the bridge repaired, the little band of thirty fighters were practically cut off because they could only cross under the enemy's fire. As soon as the enemy's guns were placed, the second rampart would be knocked to pieces in a few minutes at so short a range. The garrison would be swept up the track, or shot in attempting to regain the mine. The siege would be at an end, for so determined an enemy would doubtless find some means of crossing the river, even if the defenders escaped destruction and cut down the bridge behind them. They might hold out for a little, perhaps, in the dark and narrow galleries; but as soon as the enemy played on these with their artillery, they would be rendered untenable by the deadly fumes. It seemed that before the sun went down the whole place would be in the hands of the Kalmucks, and there would no longer be any impediment to their march.

The one thing needful, to prolong the struggle even for a few hours, was to bring the garrison back into the compound. There were still a few bombs left; by attacking the enemy with these Lawrence thought he might gain just enough time for the retreat. When he had done that he would fly southward to look for the relief force, and if it were in sight, urge it to haste. The mere knowledge that

it was approaching would put heart into the weary garrison, and nerve them for prolonged resistance.

"How much petrol is left?" he asked Fazl.

"Eight or nine gallons, sahib–and a little paraffin also."

This might suffice for a couple of hours' flight; then the aeroplane would be out of action. Anything further that Lawrence could do must then be done at his brother's side.

He told Fazl what he proposed to do.

"I will run across the bridge and let Bob Sahib know," said the Gurkha.

"No; it's too dangerous. Just give a shout to attract his attention, and I will semaphore to him."

A piercing cry rolled across the river. Behind his rampart Bob turned and waved his hand. Lawrence instantly signalled that he had a message to give. At the spot where he stood, while in full view of Bob, he was invisible to the enemy a hundred yards farther north. He began to work his arms in the movements of the flag-signal code. Fazl meanwhile returned to the aeroplane, tested the engine, put on board the whole remaining stock of petrol, together with lubricant and a couple of gallons of paraffin left from the quantity brought from the frontier house, and all the bombs.

The conversation by semaphore took some little time. Bob wanted to know what had become of the enemy's aeroplane. Lawrence replied merely that it was out of action, without giving particulars. Having explained what he proposed to do, and obtained Bob's assent, he returned to the platform, and was soon flying up the river. At the turning-place he saw on the bank below the blackened ruins of the enemy's machine. When he wheeled round and approached the bend, he became the target for the Kalmucks' rifles, and as he had not risen very high the bullets whistled around unpleasantly near. Just before he reached the enemy's breastwork Fazl dropped two bombs; there was a double explosion, and the man reported that they had fallen apparently at the right spot, though the dust and smoke prevented him from seeing the effect.

Lawrence flew on. In spite of the necessity of economizing fuel, he did not again attempt his previous risky turn, but went on until he reached the place where wheeling could be performed without danger. The track was swarming with the enemy. They did not now fire at him; he guessed that these men could hardly distinguish his machine from their own.

On returning towards the bend he saw that the bombs had wrought great havoc there. One at least of the guns was dismounted: the track was strewn with prostrate forms; and near the rampart only a few men could be seen scurrying up the hillside to find shelter among the rocks. Fazl dropped another bomb, aiming as nearly as possible at the guns that were still in position. The further breast-

work was deserted: as Lawrence crossed it the drawbridge was blown up, and a cheer rose from the little garrison now lining the walls of the compound.

Lawrence passed up the valley. It was twenty minutes since he started from the platform. His fuel would last little more than an hour and a half. Going and returning his flight could continue for a bare hundred miles. It was now about four o'clock; in two hours the valley would be dark. If he did not sight the relieving force within less than an hour–that is, within fifty miles–he must return to the mine without the message of hope. Even if he should see it, he reflected that many hours must elapse before it could reach the mine, however much the march was forced. This consideration made him decide to shorten his flight; he must reserve enough petrol to carry the aeroplane once more over the enemy, so that he could use against them the four bombs he had left.

Flying low upon the river, he recognized at every few miles the scenes of the various episodes of this prolonged contest. Here was the wide extension of the gorge where the hapless aeroplane had no doubt made its turns: just beyond was the open country where the Pathans had stood at bay against the Kalmucks; farther south, the scene of his capture by Nurla Bai. With anxious concentration he scanned the track; not a man was in sight. To obtain a wider view he swept up in a long plane, and presently caught sight in the far distance of the hill tower in which Major Endicott had been besieged. This was a clear signal that he must turn in a few minutes.

Just as he was on the point of wheeling round, both he and Fazl simultaneously gave a shout. Rounding a bend of the track, about five miles away, was a column of marching horsemen. The sun flashed upon polished metal. Lawrence lifted his field glass, and after a brief glance through it uttered a second cry: he had recognized the British khaki. In the joy of this discovery he ventured to fly on for another two miles under engine power, then shut off the engine and made a gradual vol plané down to the track, alighting at an open spot about a mile from the head of the advancing force. By this time the whole of the column was in sight. It was very small in comparison with the vast horde against which it was to be pitted; there were not half as many men as he had seen within five miles of the mine, to say nothing of the thousands marching up from the north. But he noticed that it had two field guns, and a mountain battery carried on mules; and if only it could arrive in time, he had little doubt that British arms and pluck and discipline would triumph even over the great host of the enemy.

Leaving the aeroplane under Fazl's care, Lawrence hastened forward towards the column. To his still greater joy he recognised in the officers marching at the head, Major Endicott himself and Captain Fenton. They were trotting forward to meet him. The Major had one arm in a sling.

"All well?" shouted the Major from a distance.

"Hard pressed, but still holding out," replied Lawrence.

There were hearty hand-clasps when they met.

"I was afraid we should be too late–had no end of a job to get this scratch column together," said the Major. "How far are we from the mine?"

"About thirty miles, I think."

"I hoped it was less. We've been marching all day, and the horses can't possibly do thirty miles without a rest. Just tell me how matters stand, will you?"

"When I left, about three-quarters of an hour ago, my brother had just been forced back into the mine."

"Did he leave it, then?" interrupted the Major.

"Oh yes! He has till now held the enemy off some distance down the track. But their artillery was too much for us, and we're now in the last ditch, so to speak. Bob has blown up the bridge, so the enemy can't get across immediately; and my little Gurkha has done a good deal of damage among their guns with bombs; but the track is now open to them; they'll bring more guns up, and be able to pound us at point-blank range. We've lost a good many men; we've only a few rounds of ammunition left for the machine gun, and precious little for the rifles."

"Dynamite?"

"I've got the last of it in four bombs in the aeroplane."

"Can't your men shelter in the galleries from the enemy's bombardment?"

"For a little while, no doubt. But what I'm afraid of is that the enemy will find some means of crossing the river during the night: if they do it's all up. There appears to be a general directing operations, and after being baulked for a week he won't be satisfied until he's made a clean sweep of us."

"It's touch and go, evidently. What do you say, Fenton?"

"We couldn't do thirty miles on this ground in less than six hours if the horses were fresh: and if we push on at once they'll collapse before we're half way there. We must have at least a three hours' rest."

The Major pulled at his moustache meditatively.

"Aren't we near that place where you had your smash, Appleton?" he said suddenly.

"Yes; it's a few miles down."

"Then I'll tell you what I'll do. A lot of these fellows with me are used to work on the Indus. I'll get them to make a big raft like the one your Kalmucks floated the aeroplane on, and send on a dozen in advance. The current will gain us three miles an hour; the men should get to the neighbourhood of the mine about three. If you could manage to meet them and carry them in relays into the mine they'd be of great use. I'll give you some ammunition, too. Fly back at once: the knowledge that we're coming will buck your men up; and the rest of us will

hurry on as soon as possible."

On reaching the aeroplane, the whole force dismounted. Lawrence was introduced to Captain Coats, the army surgeon whom he had heard mentioned in the frontier house. While some of the men placed in the cockpit as many cartridges as it could carry, others went into the wood to cut timber for the raft. Lawrence had some difficulty in starting the engine; but it ran smoothly after a little while, and taking a cheery leave of the officers he started for the north.

He had come within about five miles of the mine when a prolonged miss-fire made it imperative to descend at once. Luckily there was just room for him to alight at the edge of a small wooded tract. He was the more perturbed at the delay because he heard distinctly the dull rumble of artillery fire in the north. Stripping off his coat, he began with Fazl's help to overhaul the engines. Apparently the defect was in the carburetter, but for some little time the precise origin of the mis-fire was undiscoverable. Meanwhile the depths of the valley were already shrouded in dusk, and Lawrence, never having attempted a flight by night, became more and more anxious as time went on, lest he should be overtaken by complete darkness before he regained the platform.

At last the defect was ascertained and remedied. Lawrence had just put on his coat, and Fazl was in the act of replacing the plugs, when there was a sudden volley from the wood near by, and six wild and haggard Kalmucks came towards the aeroplane with a rush. The Gurkha went on calmly with his work: Lawrence snatched up his rifle and fired. One of the attackers fell; the rest dashed on only the more furiously, howling like famished animals. Lawrence fired again; Fazl started the engine; both then sprang to their places, and pressing the throttle Lawrence set the machine gliding forward.

By this time the Kalmucks were within a few yards. Fazl stooped for his rifle, to take a parting shot at them. As he rose he noticed that an extraordinary thing had happened. Just as the aeroplane was lifting, one of the Kalmucks, outstripping the rest, had taken a grip of the chassis, as if attempting to drag it down. He retained his grasp a little too long, and was carried up into the air. Fazl now saw him convulsively drawing himself up to clutch one of the stays of the main plane.

What had happened was hidden from Lawrence by the projecting planes. Fazl made no sound; but there was an odd look upon his face as he quietly slipped a cartridge into the breech of his rifle, took careful aim at one of the four men on the track below, and brought him to the ground.

"Tchigin, sahib," he said.

"Never mind about the Kalmucks," said Lawrence. "Just fill up the tank, will you?"

Fazl laid down his rifle, took a petrol can, and poured its contents into

the tank below the pilot's seat. There was nothing of haste or excitement in his manner. He tipped the can until the last drop was drained, and having set it down, rubbed his hands on his coat. Then he drew his kukuri, and bent over slowly towards the Kalmuck, who was clinging to the stay in grim and speechless terror. Fazl gazed steadily into the man's eyes. He lifted his terrible weapon; there was one swift whizzing stroke through the air; and the lost man fell headlong into the river, three hundred feet below. Fazl wiped his blade.

"What's that?" asked Lawrence, as the aeroplane gave a sudden upward jerk.

"Nurla Bai, sahib."

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-EIGHTH
THE LAST FIGHT

Lawrence landed in the twilight on his platform. All sounds of combat had ceased. His first care was to see exactly how much petrol was left. There was enough for about twenty minutes' flight: then the aeroplane would be doomed to inactivity.

"Look over the machine," he said to Fazl, "and come after me when you have finished. What did you mean about Nurla Bai?"

"He has gone into the river, even as he sent the huzur."

"You shot him? But no: you did not fire. What happened?"

"He came along with us, sahib. He caught the chassis as we rose, and we were gone before he could let go. He clung to the stay. I cut him down."

Lawrence's blood ran cold with horror. In spite of the man's brutalities and crimes, he could not but feel moved by the terrible fate that had befallen the revolted miner. It was well deserved: yet Lawrence wished that Nurla could have met his death in open fight. He said no more to Fazl, but went along the pathway now enwrapt in darkness, to discover what had happened during his absence, and to give the garrison his promise of relief.

The compounds were deserted. No lights were visible. At first he thought that the men must already have taken refuge in the galleries; but as he came to the end of the pathway he saw them all grouped at the rear of the house under the cliff, behind a mound of tailings. They were very silent. Only a sound like a multitudinous sigh broke from them when he drew near.

"Where's my brother?" he asked anxiously, as Gur Buksh saluted.

"Here, sahib: he is hurt."

The group parted, and Lawrence saw Bob with his head and one arm bandaged, reclining in a long chair.

"Nothing very serious, I hope," said Bob with a smile, as Lawrence bent over him. "A bullet in my arm just below the shoulder, and a whack in the skull from a splinter of rock. Any news, old chap!"

"Yes, thank God! Endicott himself is within less than thirty miles, with three or four hundred men, field pieces and mountain batteries. There's a medico with him, so we'll soon put you to rights."

"Tell the men, will you?"

Lawrence gathered the men about him and quickly gave the information. A company of British soldiers would have received it with a ringing cheer: these Asiatics merely murmured praises to Allah, mingled with triumphant execrations of the enemy.

"It'll be as much as we can do to hold out until the Major arrives," said Bob in a low tone. "Is he coming on at once?"

"No, unluckily. His horses were dead beat: he said they must have three or four hours' rest, and I'm afraid he can't be here until four or five o'clock in the morning at the earliest. But he has sent some ammunition, and a dozen men are coming in advance on a raft; they should arrive about three o'clock. I intend to meet them a little way up, and bring them in on the aeroplane. I've just enough petrol left."

"That's good. We're practically helpless here. They've knocked the wall about with their field pieces from the breastwork, and smashed the machine gun. We couldn't hold the wall any longer. The carbide has given out, so that we can't make any more acetylene for the searchlight, and the track's free for them now. I only hope that as they've forced the passage they won't trouble us any more, but go straight ahead in the morning. They little suspect what's in store for them!"

"They may possibly leave us alone, but they're hardly human if they don't try a shot or two at the aeroplane, especially when they discover what has happened to their own."

"What did happen to it, by the way?"

Lawrence described the incidents of the manoeuvring up and down river, and the extraordinary scene at the turning-place. It was then that he and Bob argued about the cause of the final collapse, almost forgetting their actual circumstances in discussing the scientific problem. They were suddenly recalled to realities, however, by sounds from the opposite bank–the ringing clatter of horses' hoofs and the rumble of wheels.

"They're moving their guns up," said Bob. "No doubt they've only been

waiting for the dark. Listen! We shall soon know what they mean to do."

Both chafed at their inability to impose any check upon the movement. Rifle fire from their few men would be ineffective in the darkness; it would moreover be a signal to the gunners to sweep the wall with shell. They were not long in doubt as to the enemy's intentions. The noises ceased. It was clear that the Kalmucks were going to wreak vengeance upon the garrison of the mine before continuing their march up stream. Bob recalled the old military maxim: never leave an enemy in your rear. At dawn they would no doubt open fire from the guns placed exactly opposite the mine, and as soon as they discovered the aeroplane on its platform beyond the shoulder of the cliff they would smash it to atoms.

"I've still a few bombs left," said Lawrence. "I might destroy their guns if I could only see them. Isn't there enough acetylene for ten minutes' light, Bob?"

"Not for one, worse luck. You certainly can't do anything in the dark. There's just one chance, though."

"What's that?"

"You could light a big fire on the buttress yonder. It might show just enough light for the purpose."

"I'll try it. I tell you what: I'll fire the shed itself, with a lot of combustibles inside. We can easily build another afterwards if Endicott gets rid of the enemy."

"We shan't want to do that. If we're alive to-morrow morning we shan't think of staying here any longer."

"Leave the mine, you mean?"

"Yes: take poor old Uncle's silver ore to India and sell it for what it's worth. I don't know how much that will be, but it ought to give us enough money to keep us while we're looking round for some other job: I've had enough of mining. In any case we couldn't stay here. The place would remind us too much of Uncle and all the tragic horrors."

"You're right: though I don't like the idea of caving in. Now I'll get some of the men to carry grease and things to the shed. Can Chunda give me some grub? I'm very hungry."

"We've got all our provisions either here or in the galleries. We were very lucky to have so much; it will last for two or three weeks more."

While Lawrence made his supper, Fyz Ali and three or four other Pathans conveyed to the platform combustibles of all kinds, returning with the ammunition sent by Major Endicott. Then Bob insisted on Lawrence's sleeping for a few hours. About three o'clock in the morning Lawrence returned with Fazl to the aeroplane. They kindled several fires in the shed, leaving the door open. When the flames gave them light enough, they started the engine and flew off up the river, hearing sounds of commotion among the enemy on the track. Never

having flown by night before, Lawrence was rather nervous; but he reached the turning-place safely, wheeled round without mishap, and flew northwards into the stretch of a few hundred yards now illuminated by the blazing shed.

There were four bombs left. Lawrence had instructed Fazl to drop two as they passed over the guns, reserving the other two for use as they returned if they should discover that the first had not been effective. They saw two guns placed on the track just opposite the bridge. The Gurkha, leaning over perilously, let fall two bombs together. There was a terrific crash and a babel of yells; but they could not yet tell what damage had been done. The aeroplane was beyond the illuminated area, and Lawrence had to concentrate his attention on the machine as he flew northwards in the darkness. He felt that he could not risk an attempt to turn until he reached the wide space seven miles down stream, and he was very anxious lest the engine should fail for want of petrol before he could get back. It was quite clear that to bring Major Endicott's advanced party of twelve into the mine was now impossible. By the time the aeroplane should have reached its platform, if it did so, every ounce of fuel would be used up.

For safety's sake he rose to a considerable height. The grey light of dawn was stealing over the summits of the hills. He turned and flew back, watching the engine nervously. As soon as he came to the neighbourhood of the mine, he saw the enemy scuttling away from the track into nooks and crannies in the face of the cliff. The sound of the propeller had been the signal for a general *sauve qui peut.* Fazl dropped his last two bombs opposite the bridge, and then the aeroplane passed into the cloud of smoke drifting up and across the river from the conflagration.

Lawrence saw that the petrol would not last another three minutes. He utilised the expiring power of the engine to rise still higher, so that when it failed he would be at a sufficient altitude to make a long vol plané back to his platform. He had just turned when he detected a lessening of power. The engine began to splutter; then it ceased to work.

It was a terrifying moment. In the darkness he could not read the aneroid that indicated his altitude. He did not know whether the angle of the descent which had already begun would bring him to earth before he reached the platform. Gently, easily as the machine swooped down, it might land him on the track where he would be completely at the mercy of the enemy. He looked anxiously ahead. The flaming shed came in sight, but dimmed by the pall of smoke that lay over the bottom of the gorge. He steered into the smoke towards the platform, but, half blinded by the reek, he missed it, and only by a sudden movement of the lever, that was itself almost disastrous, did he save the machine from dashing against the cliff. Luckily the smoke hid him from the enemy. By another dexterous feat of steering he rounded the bend, and in a few seconds dropped with a

quivering shock upon the fence that separated the Pathans' from the Kalmucks' compound. With every nerve jarring he sprang out of his seat. Fazl followed him, and between them they dragged the aeroplane from its uneasy perch and laid it behind the fence. Even now his chief thought was to protect from the enemy's fire the machine which had served him so well. Only when it was quite invisible to them did he hasten across the compound, scale the second fence in the darkness, and rejoin his brother in the sheltered nook behind the house.

"Just managed it!" he panted, throwing himself down. "The engine failed; I missed the platform, and came down on the fence. The chassis is rather rumpled, but no other damage done. I should have been wild if the machine had come utterly to grief."

"It's more important that you're safe, old boy," said Bob. "Did you succeed?"

"Morning will show. Fazl declares that he hit the guns; I don't know. I wish I could have brought those men of Endicott's in. I dare say they heard me as I passed over the track, and are wondering why I didn't come down for them."

"We can't help it. I only hope the Major himself started in time."

Dawn was stealing down into the valley. Ganda Singh crept on all fours to the wall and peeped over. In a few minutes he returned and reported that there was nothing opposite the bridge but a mass of broken rock and metal. The guns had been destroyed. But the Kalmucks were scattered along the track between the bridge and the bend, crouching behind rocks and entrenchments which they had thrown up during the night. Apparently they were unaware of the descent of the aeroplane, and dreaded another attack by bombs.

It was hardly light when a fierce bombardment broke out from the bend. Shells crashed upon the northern wall, and whistled into the deserted compounds, scattering earth in all directions, and filling the air with noisome fumes.

"We're safe here for the present," said Bob, whose face looked pinched and pale in the light of the morning. "But when they find we don't reply, and there's no other attack from the aeroplane, they'll bring their guns along and pound us from the opposite bank. When it gets too hot we must go into the galleries. Before they can repair the bridge and cross, Endicott ought to be here."

He had scarcely spoken when a shell plumped into the house, and set it on fire. The garrison were enveloped in a mantle of smoke. But as the smoke drifted across the river, the Kalmucks, taking courage from the quiescence of the defenders, rushed forward from their shelters and began to throw a light framework over the torrent between the rock in midstream and the end of the ruined bridge. The sudden cessation of the bombardment gave Bob an inkling of what was to come; next moment loud yells from beyond the river made it clear.

"They're coming at us," he said quietly to Lawrence. "They must have made a bridge. We can't retreat now. You must do your best, old chap."

Though Lawrence begged him to remain on his chair, Bob got up and accompanied the little band as they rushed towards the river wall to meet the storming party. They were no more than thirty; the track swarmed with the enemy. The improvised bridge would not support more than thirty at a time, so that the attackers and the defenders of the wall were equal in point of number; but the Kalmucks had posted many sharpshooters in the rocks above the track, who could fire over their comrades' heads and pick off the garrison manning the wall and the gap where the end of the drawbridge had been.

It was a fierce and terrible struggle hand to hand. The defenders could deal only with the storming party; they had no leisure to attend to the half-concealed marksmen among the rocks. With bayonet, clubbed rifle, sword and miner's pick they sought desperately to stem the attack. Gur Buksh had distributed the Sikhs among the miners to give them steadiness; but the Pathans, inspired by the fury of their own leaders, Fyz Ali and Muhammad Din, needed no encouragement from the disciplined men. Shan Tai and Chunda Beg had thrown themselves into the fray with picks. Of all the little community only Ditta Lai and the Bengali servants remained in the rear; they were physically unfit to bear a part in the great fight. It was much to their credit that, at this crisis in affairs, they did not cower in frantic terror, but toiled hard to raise a rampart of boxes, tins, and bags of earth opposite the mouth of the gallery.

Regardless of the fusillade, Bob and Lawrence went from end to end of the line, cheering the men, rallying them when they showed signs of being forced back by the onrush of the yelling enemy. Again and again the assault was beaten back. At one moment the end of the bridge was heaped high with the men thrust back from the wall. The river received many dead and wounded forms, and bore down some who, though unhurt, had been hurled or jostled off the bridge. But the garrison were dropping man by man. Gur Buksh, conspicuous by his height, fell to a bullet. Ganda Singh fought on, though a bayonet had transfixed his arm. Fyz Ali was shot as he was in the act of bringing the butt of his rifle down upon the head of a big Kalmuck who was forcing his way through the narrow gap into the compound. Bob, fainting from his former hurts, sank down unconscious among his wounded men. As yet unscathed, Lawrence stood in the gap, and the number of prostrate forms in front of him bore witness to his unfaltering vigour. Next to him Fazl, whose low stature rendered him immune from the sniping shots of the enemy, darted forth whenever he saw an opportunity of using his kukuri, and sprang nimbly back before he could be touched.

But Lawrence's heart sank as he saw his devoted little band becoming less and less. He had no reserves. There was no limit to the number that the enemy could throw against him. The crowd on the bridge never diminished. As soon as one man fell his place was taken from behind. From sheer exhaustion the defend-

ers could not stem the torrent many minutes longer. Their arms were aching and numbed almost to the point of paralysis. The frequent alarms and broken rest of seven days and nights were telling on their hardy frames. Lawrence, swinging his rifle like a flail, expected at every stroke that his muscles would refuse to lift the weapon for another. Missing Bob's cheering cries, he gave a rapid glance round, and seeing his brother on the ground, he was just making up his mind that the time had come for a general retreat to the galleries, their last line of defence, when there came the sudden crackle of rifles from a new direction. It was on the right. There was a cheer, very different from the shrill cries of the Kalmucks, and then confused cries all around. The firing from the rocks had ceased. At a second volley the Kalmucks on the bridge halted in surprise and hesitation. Lawrence guessed what had happened. Seizing the moment, he shouted to his men to follow him, and springing from the wall, led them in a fierce rush on to the bridge. They swept the enemy before them, cutting down one, tumbling another into the stream.

On the track a disorderly terrified crowd were rushing past the bridge towards the north, masking the fire of their own guns at the bend. Behind them at a gallop came fifty sowars of the Border force, led by Major Endicott himself. They swept on through the panic-stricken mob, upon whom, as the horsemen passed, the garrison from their post on the bridge opened a withering fire. Major Endicott and his troopers pushed on and on, driving the enemy, some before them, some into the river, some up the rugged hillside. They did not halt until they reached the guns. There were a few minutes of desperate fighting about them; then the gunners were cut down, and the swarms behind were in full flight down the track. At a word from the Major half the sowars leapt from their horses, slewed the guns round, and sent shell after shell among the frenzied crowd until the whole track within sight was clear of living men. And Bob woke to consciousness to hear his brother's voice lead the men in a ringing cheer. The mine was saved; the enemy had been held in check for a week; every man had done his duty.

CHAPTER THE TWENTY-NINTH
REUNION

Major Endicott left his men at the bend, and galloped back to the bridge. Dis-

mounting there, he pressed Lawrence's hand warmly.

"Well played, sir!" he said. "Where's your brother?"

"In the compound, Major. He's all right, I think: that is, he wasn't hit this morning; but he was wounded yesterday, and is rather off colour."

"The doctor will be up in a few minutes. He was just behind me; and Fenton will arrive with the rest of the men and the guns in about an hour. I pushed on ahead when I heard the bombardment."

"Just in time! We couldn't have held out another five minutes."

"I'm glad we managed it," said the Major simply.

"Come and see Bob. They've burnt our house, and we can't make you very comfortable."

"My dear boy, comfort is ruin to a soldier. Ah! here's Coats; he'd better have a look at your brother at once."

The doctor rode up with another score of troopers. These the Major ordered to remain on guard at the bridge, in case the Kalmucks who were still scattered here and there on the track and the hillside should show any disposition to rally. Then the two officers crossed with Lawrence into the compound. Bob had been carried back to his chair by Shan Tai and the khansaman. The doctor made a brief examination of his wounds, got out some lint and lotion, and as he bandaged him declared that he would be quite sound in a few days. Then he went off to attend to the other wounded–almost every man of the little company. Ten had been killed outright; two were so severely injured that recovery was hopeless; the rest would be well sooner or later. Among these were Fyz Ali and Gur Buksh, though the Sikh's arm had to be amputated.

"I was never so glad of anything as I am to hand things over to you, Major," said Bob.

Major Endicott was seated on an upturned box beside his chair, with a biscuit in one hand and a hunk of corned beef in the other.

"Well, you know, I feel rather mean," he said munching. "Capital stuff, this! ... All the credit is yours and Lawrence's, and I shan't fail to say so. It's a thousand pities you are not both in the service. By the way, I saw as I came up that your aeroplane had come to grief, and it was a great relief to see Lawrence safe and sound."

"It wasn't ours," replied Bob, who then related in brief the events of the previous day.

"That's amazing. Then I suppose Lawrence can still use your machine for scouting if necessary?"

"We've no more petrol, unfortunately. What do you intend to do, then?"

"First of all secure our position here as soon as Fenton comes up. We'll make it impossible for the enemy to get round that bend yonder. Then we'll

follow up the runaways and shepherd them out of the valley."

"There's such a lot of them, and you've so few!"

"But they can't extend on this narrow track, and my few will be a match for them. They'll soon give it up as hopeless, and draw off to rejoin their huge army operating in Afghanistan. This week's delay has been our salvation. The Chief is moving up a large force to hold the passes south, and our flank is secure–a handsome feather in your cap, my lad. When I am sure that the valley is clear I shall return to the frontier, and of course you and your men must come too. You won't want to hold on here now that your poor uncle is gone?"

"No: we had already made up our minds to that."

"I don't want to be inquisitive, but–er–have you–in short, what's your financial position, Bob?"

"I don't know. We had very little money, of course; everything in the house is burnt, including Uncle's cheque book, and all his papers. I don't know what he left, but I suppose there'll be no difficulty in proving our title to what there is?"

"None at all, I should think, though I'm not up in law. You've got some ore worked, of course; copper, isn't it? Pity it isn't gold."

"There's better than copper, at all events. There's a heap of unworked ore in a cavity just beyond the compound, and Uncle said it's almost pure silver."

"That's first-rate. I recommend you to set the men to get it up at once. We'll transport it to India somehow or other, and I'm sure I hope it'll make you millionaires."

"Not much chance of that," said Bob with a smile. "But it will give us something to jog along with."

"You must be ready to start almost at once. We marched light; I've food for only two or three days, and short commons at that. This corned beef is very good: any more of it?"

"I'll inquire of my store-keeper. I haven't seen him lately: he wasn't in the fighting line, and I dare say he's alive."

When Captain Fenton with the remainder of the relieving force arrived, the men were set to work after a meal to render the track impassable. It was fortified at the bend with a series of entrenchments and wire entanglements, space being left only for horsemen to pass in single file. Before the enemy had recovered from the shock of their reverse, the position which had given them so much trouble when defended by a mere handful of almost untrained men was rendered ten times more formidable, and held by ten times as many trained troops. On the next day they felt forward with their artillery, but being met by a hail of shells from the mountain batteries, they soon withdrew their guns, and finally turned their backs on the scene of their wasted labours.

Major Endicott followed them down the valley with the greater part of

his force, Lawrence accompanying him on one of the troopers' horses. He took two guns in case they should turn at bay, but they showed the utmost alacrity in retreating, and for many miles only the stragglers of their rearguard were ever in sight. When the pursuers, however, were within a short distance of the scene of Lawrence's little engagement on the way back from the bridge, they noticed a number of Kalmucks marching over the hills to the left. They were no doubt following the path by which the Kalmucks on that occasion had managed to outflank Lawrence's party. There being none of the enemy in sight along the track, Major Endicott deemed it necessary to climb into the hills and pursue the fugitives until he had made sure that no concentration was being attempted.

He left half his party with the guns on the track to continue their march, and began to climb. It was a breakneck path, narrow, tortuous, and at times so steep that the troopers had to dismount and lead their horses carefully. They made slow progress, and when the Major reached a more level stretch and, looking through his field-glass, no longer saw any sign of the enemy, he decided that it would be waste of time and energy to follow any farther.

He had just given the order to retire when the figure of a man suddenly appeared from the entrance of a ravine a few hundred yards ahead, and walked towards the troop, holding his hands above his head. Thinking that he was one of the enemy intending to surrender, the Major waited.

"I know that man," said Lawrence after a few moments. "He's an old Uzbek fellow, who lives quite alone somewhere in these hills, no one knows where. He comes to the mine at long intervals to buy food and ammunition in exchange for the horns and skins of *Ovis poli*. I suppose he's on his way there now."

"Can you understand his lingo?"

"No; my uncle was the only one of us who could talk to him."

The man approached. He was a strange object, the wrinkled skin of his face yellow like old ivory, a ragged white beard hanging almost to his waist. When he came up, he made some sort of salutation to Lawrence, and another to the Major, then muttered the word *kuzur*.

"We all know what that means," said the Major; but he paused, struck by an eager look in Lawrence's eyes as the old man made some pantomimic gestures and pointed in the direction whence he had come. Lawrence sprang from his horse.

"He wants me to go with him, Major," he said hurriedly. "I believe–I hardly dare think it—-"

He did not wait to complete the sentence, but followed the old man, who was already walking back. They came to a narrow ravine, which wound away into the hillside towards the river, always at a steep descent. Passing along it, they came after some minutes to a well-built akoi, around which several skins

lay drying. The man led Lawrence to the entrance, and motioned to him to go in.

The lad's heart was beating tumultuously. He paused a moment at the low opening, shrinking lest what he was about to see were a culminating spectacle of woe. In the middle of the tent there was a fire, the smoke of which passed out through a hole in the dome-shaped roof. Crushing down his agitation, he stepped in, his tread falling noiseless on a floor of thick skin rugs. Just beyond the fire lay the still form of a man. Holding his breath, Lawrence bent down, and looked upon the face of his uncle, asleep.

Though his footsteps had been silent, the fact of his presence seemed to penetrate the consciousness of the sleeping man. He opened his eyes.

"Ah, Lawrence," he said, "what is this I hear about great guns?"

Lawrence could not speak. He clasped his uncle's hand, and felt with a kind of surprise that it was warm as his own.

"Poor old boy! I expect you've had a bad time," Mr. Appleton went on. "But I couldn't let you know that I was all right."

"I can hardly believe it. It seems too good to be true. We'd long ago given you up."

"Long ago! Why, goodness alive! how long have I been here then?"

And then Lawrence remembered that it was only a fortnight since that unlucky pursuit of Nurla Bai.

"It seems an age," he said. "But how splendid it is, Uncle! Bob and everybody will be simply wild with delight. You're not ill, are you?" he asked, noticing that his uncle remained flat on his back.

"I'm never ill, as you know! But old What's-his-name is not much of a surgeon, and I'm helpless with a broken thigh or something of the sort. That rascal Nurla Bai only gave me a flesh wound, which is healed now; but when I fell I came down too heavily on a rock beneath the surface, and smashed myself. The old man happened to be fishing close by—-"

"I remember: we found a fishing net when we were searching for you."

"I was carried within reach of him, and he drew me ashore to a cavern under the cliff. Of course I was senseless, and the old man seems to have been scared out of his wits by the aeroplane, or he would have shown up when you were looking for me. Anyway, he carried me to this place, which appears to be only a few feet above the bank, and here he has looked after me ever since. When I came to myself, I explained what had happened, and asked him to walk up to the mine to tell you that I was alive. He went off, but returned with a story about a whole army marching up, and fighting, and big guns, and what not. So I simply had to make the best of it, though I knew that you must think me dead. Now, what is this all about?"

"I'll tell you everything when I get you home, Uncle. Major Endicott is

here—-"

"Thinks me mad, you know."

"With a lot of troopers, and they must sling up a horse-litter for you. We've got Captain Coats at the mine–an army surgeon, you know; he'll see what's really the matter with you."

"Any other strangers? Billeting is rather expensive. But I'm talking nonsense. Get me out of this as soon as you like. It's a very comfortable hut, but not like home, and I long to see old Chunda Beg's serious phiz, and–yes, hear the Babu's chatter. And I want to know—-"

"Yes, there are heaps of things to explain," Lawrence interrupted. "I'll run and tell the Major."

"And I say, in case I forget it, I promised to give old Stick-in-the-mud a pound of tobacco when I got back. Remind me."

Lawrence hurried out, fearing that weakness had made his uncle rather light-headed. On his acquainting the Major with his amazing discovery, and explaining that the akoi appeared to be very near the river, the order was at once given to return to the track. There they met the other half of the party, who reported that the bridge down stream had collapsed under the hurried flight of the enemy. Their rearguard had evidently elected to try the difficult mountain track rather than risk being caught.

Lawrence went down the track with the Major and two troopers, and were soon met by the old Uzbek, whose name no one knew. He conducted them along a narrow parting in the rocks till they reached his akoi. With his aid a litter of skins was rigged up, and on this Mr. Appleton was carried down to the track. There the litter was slung between two horses, and the rest of the journey to the mine was accomplished slowly indeed, but in comfort.

On the way Major Endicott, at Mr. Appleton's entreaty, gave him a succinct account of what had happened during his absence.

"I wish I'd been there, egad!" he ejaculated, as he heard of his nephews' gallant defence. "But no: they've had a chance to show what stuff they're made of; my assistance would have ruined it. D'you still think I'm mad, Endicott?"

"Well–perhaps a trifle light-headed–owing to your illness, you know," answered the Major in some confusion.

"That's not what I meant," said Mr. Appleton with twinkling eyes. "You thought me chronically mad, fit for Bedlam. Oh! you needn't apologize: all you frontier fellows did. 'Poor old Harry,' you know. 'Only a madman would think of mining in the Hindu Kush!' But where would you have been without the mine, eh? Where would you have been, the whole dashed lot of you, without the mine and my young nephews? I tell you what, sir, my mine has been the saving of India, and don't you forget it."

"We shan't do that, Appleton, I assure you," said the Major, willing to humour him.

"Yes; my mine, and one other thing: Bob's aeroplane. What you want, my dear sir, to keep India safe, is a corps of air patrols, with Bob as boss and Lawrence as second in command. We've got the finest navy in the world: for its size we've got the finest army; and we ought to wake up and get the finest air fleet, and the finest corps of airmen that can be trained. That's my opinion."

There is no need to describe the scenes of wild excitement and jubilation at the mine when Mr. Appleton was carried among his people. The surgeon's report after examination of the fractured limb was a surprise to everybody. He said that the old Uzbek, by skill or good luck, had done just what an experienced surgeon would have done in the absence of proper splints. The fracture was a simple one, the bone was already joining up, and there would be no risk in conveying Mr. Appleton in the horse-litter by easy stages to India.

Preparations for departure were hurried on. With the aid of the troopers, the Pathans put up in a day a temporary shed for the accommodation of the Englishmen. Then they set about hoisting the silver ore from its cavity in the bank of the river to the compound above. The transportation of twenty tons of ore over rough country without suitable vehicles was a matter that gave everybody much concern. It was ultimately decided that as much as possible should be carried by the men and animals, the remainder being left, to be fetched subsequently by a host of carriers whom Fyz Ali undertook to enlist. Every man of the garrison was delighted with the promise of treble pay for the fortnight of Mr. Appleton's absence, and Major Endicott did not despair of extracting a grant from Government in recognition of their services to the Empire.

On the night before the southward march was to be begun, the Englishmen were provided by Shan Tai with a supper on which he lavished all the resources of his art. Corned beef and other tinned comestibles appeared in various disguises, and Mr. Appleton, reclining on his chair, mildly expostulated with the Chinaman for deferring this triumphant exhibition of his skill until the eve of the abandonment of the mine. Healths were drunk in water and coffee, the only beverages available, and the store-sheds having luckily escaped injury, Mr. Appleton was able to offer his guests some excellent cigars.

When all were contentedly smoking, Mr. Appleton said:

"I want to take you men into my confidence, and ask your advice. As you know, I have decided to close down here. I had already decided to do so at the end of this summer: recent events have only anticipated it by a few weeks."

"Congratulations," said Major Endicott. "I suppose you've made your pile."

"A very modest pile. Sixty per cent. of that ore is pure silver, and it will fetch something like £50,000. That of course I shall invest."

"Choose a good security," said the Major.

"No more hair-brained adventures, you mean! Really, Major, you must try to disabuse your mind of the notion that I am mad. Now, I am going to retire. Yesterday was my fifty-third birthday; I have knocked about enough; my tastes are simple: and I've enough to live on apart from the silver.

"You wonder, I dare say, why I brought my nephews out here only a few months before the date I had fixed on for giving up the mine. I'll tell you. I didn't know the boys, and wanted to study them at close quarters, and see for myself what they were good for. I am quite satisfied. The probation they have come through during the last few days would convince any one."

"I should rather think so," said the Major emphatically.

"Well now, what do you advise? What shall I do with them?"

"Let 'em both join the service; I recommend that without hesitation," said the Major.

"Hear! hear!" Captain Fenton ejaculated.

"Would they have you back at Sandhurst, Bob?" asked his uncle.

"No need for that," exclaimed the Major. "The Chief will give him a commission in the Indian army straight away when I've had a talk with him."

"Will that suit you, Bob?"

"I couldn't wish for anything more splendid," said Bob, flushing with pleasure.

"That's settled then. And you, Lawrence?"

"The same for him, of course," said the Major.

"It's uncommonly good of you," said Lawrence, "but–well, I'm not cut out for a soldier."

"Rubbish, sir. I wish all my subalterns were like you."

"What's your notion then?" asked Mr. Appleton.

"Well, Uncle, I was going to Oxford, you know, but I'm afraid I shall be too old for a scholarship next year, and–and it would cost too much without."

Lawrence spoke awkwardly, colouring to the roots of his hair.

"You could manage on £400 a year, I suppose?" said Mr. Appleton, dryly.

"Much less, Uncle. I know a chap who did jolly well on £200, and saved."

"What will you do when you come down? Take a clerkship at thirty shillings a week, or teach little ruffians good cricket and bad Latin on forty?"

"I thought of trying for the Indian Civil, Uncle. I should like it immensely after being out here."

"Stiff exam, isn't it?"

"I can swat, sir."

"I believe you can! Well, I'm going to settle my silver money on Bob and you." [Here there was what the reporters call a "sensation."] "It should bring in £1500 a year even in the safest security. You shall have £400 each until you're twenty-five; after that you'll share the whole lot equally between you. Think I'm mad, Major?"

"I wish you'd bite an old uncle of mine," said the Major with a laugh. "I congratulate you young fellows; you deserve it all."

The boys were overwhelmed with their good luck, and their uncle's generosity. They stammered out their thanks; then, desiring to talk things over quietly between themselves, they got up and went out.

They strolled up and down the compound, looking with the mind's eye into the vista opening so brightly before them, discussing plans with youthful eagerness and optimism, voting their uncle a "trump," a "brick," a "ripping old boy," and employing the hundred and one meaningless phrases with which Englishmen are wont to dissemble their feelings. It is only the bare truth to say that their deepest satisfaction and thankfulness sprang from reunion with their uncle.

Presently Bob noticed, in the gloom, Ditta Lal pacing slowly along by the cliff wall.

"Hallo, Babu!" he called. "Come here. I want to speak to you."

The Bengali drew near, and as he came within the candlelight beaming through the open doorway of the shed, they noticed that he wore a very dejected look.

"I want to thank you," continued Bob. "Chunda Beg told me that while the fight was going on you were heaping up that rampart yonder. It was well thought of; we're indebted to you."

The Babu's face lit up for a moment as he bowed his acknowledgments; but it instantly clouded over again.

"You don't look very happy," said Lawrence. "What's the matter?"

"It is a complicated case, sir," said the Babu mournfully. "Diagnosis easy, but as for remedies that touch the spot, alas! *non est*, or more correctly, *non sunt*."

"What's wrong? Out with it, man," said Bob.

"Imprimis and in first place, sir, I droop in shade of impending calamity–regular sword of Damocles. I learn from esteemed avuncular relative, whose return to wonted haunts fills bitter cup of rejoicing to overflowing and slops, that he abandons commercial avocation, rests on his oars and laurels, and subsides into lassitude of adipose retirement. Every man to his gout, sir; but what is one man's alimentary nourishment is another man's happy dispatch. In short, young sirs, where do I come in?"

"Well, I'll tell you a secret," said Bob. "In recognition of your valuable services, and your willingness to help in all sorts of ways out of your own line, my

uncle is going to make you a present of £50 when you leave his employment."

"Jolly good tip, sir," said the Babu, brightening. "To use vulgar tongue, Burra Sahib is ripping old josser, and no mistakes. But for one harrowing reflection, carking care, sir, and fly in ointment, I should be restored to normal hilarity and cock-a-hoopness."

"Well?"

"You observe, sir, that while honourable superior persons are engaged in temperate carousal and fumigation, there is absence of mafficking and horseplays among small fry; no beer and skittles, sir. That lies like leaden hundred-weight upon my bounding bosom. I attribute it to vacuous cavity in my brain-pan, or possibly erratic convulsions of grey matter. I spoke of organising tamasha, you remember–regular orgy of intellectual fireworks and monkey tricks, the set piece and tour de force of which was to be ode, elegy, or comic song penned by humble and obsequious servant. Would you believe it! Though I have scorned delights and lived laborious days, crowned my noble brow with sopped tea-cloth, imbibed oceans of coffee, black as your hat, and performed other rites enjoined by custom and recollections of stewing for exams–in spite of stupendous and praiseworthy efforts, that monument of literary agility is yet only shapeless block, sir: in short, I haven't done it."

"That's a pity," said Lawrence, repressing a smile. "Inspiration ran short, eh?"

"No, sir, inspiration flows unchecked, a mild pellucid stream. Failure is due to intractable and churlish disposition of English lingo. I write a magnificent and lovely line, to wit–

"The solar luminary winked his bloodshot orb–

and then beat coverts for a rhyme: cui bono and what's the use? How true it is that fine words butter no parsnips! My note-book is chock full of similar felicitous lines, left in single blessedness and mere oblivion for want of an accommodating partner, or, as I may say, eligible parti."

"Why not try blank verse, then?" said Bob.

"Blank verse is like blank cartridge, sir, suitable for reviews and sham-fights–that is to say, for long-winded epics and rigmaroles about nothing in particular; but not for battle pieces, in which you need clink-clank and rum-ti-tum to achieve truly martial effects."

"I should like to see what you've done, though," said Lawrence.

"Well begun is half done, proverb runs; fallacious and tommy rot, sir. I began well; I will exhibit, commending to you beautiful aphorism of some precious and defunct poet now forgotten, namely, 'We may our ends by our beginnings

know.'"

He drew a roll of paper from his pocket, and moving towards the lighted doorway, spread it before their eyes. This is what they read–

ODE

in celebration of gorgeous defence of gorge
by two young English sirs,
who with handful of rude mechanicals,
dauntless breasts
and flying machine, 100 h.p.,
withstood the mights of twenty thousand Mongols.
Written at request of one of aforesaid sirs,
Mr. ROBERT APPLETON, Esquire, etc.,
by
DITTA LAL,
B.A. Calcutta University.

Here the page ended. Lawrence turned over: the back was blank.

"Where's the rest?" he asked.

"There's the rub, sir. The rest is dispersed through many pages of my notebook, high and dry, pearls of poesy, gems of purest ray serene, waiting leisure and a rhyming dictionary to thread them into perfect and resplendent ornament."

"Well, finish it when you have time. You can send it to us, you know."

"Registered, sir. I will do so without failings, and earn the meed of melodious tear or two, if not penny a line."

Rolling up the paper, he returned to his own quarters, followed by eyes mirthful but compassionate.

The campaign in Afghanistan lasted for several months after the check given to the flanking force in the valley. The Mongols having obtained a firm grip of the country around Kabul, it was difficult to dislodge them, though they never succeeded in forcing the passes into India. As the struggle developed, and the British Indian army took the offensive, the Afghans, who had by this time found the Mongols unpleasant guests, and begun to doubt their value as allies, quarrelled with the invaders, and either withdrew into their remotest and least accessible hills, or took sides actively against them. This was the beginning of the

end. The horses which, if the early raids had been successful, would have proved a tremendous asset to the enemy, were in a prolonged check in Afghanistan a serious handicap. It became impossible to feed them. The Mongol host lost its mobility, and found itself pent up in a mountainous region where supplies even for the men failed.

The story of the great retreat cannot be told in these pages. When once the retrograde movement began, every armed man in Afghanistan and Northern Persia hasted like a sleuth-hound in pursuit. Only a fraction of the half-million invaders returned to Tashkend and beyond.

A year or two afterwards, when the invasion was passing into the oblivion which soon swallows up even the greatest events of the hurrying modern world, two of the actors in this little drama had their memories recalled to it by a trifling street scene. Colonel Sir Herbert Endicott and Lieutenant Robert Appleton were walking through the bazaar at Lahore when they met an old fakir striding along. They were struck by his vacant gaze, and the incessant muttering of his lips.

"You heard what he said, Bob?" said the Colonel, as the tall, lean, half-naked figure swung by.

"Yes," replied Bob, who was becoming an expert in the Border dialects. "'I am a sharpener of swords,' wasn't it?"

And his thoughts flew back to that first journey through the hills.

"The poor wretch is clearly mad," said the Colonel. "I fear the sword he sharpened has wounded his own hand. Let's hope it will always be so with rebels and malcontents. There's this good come out of it, at any rate: we have learnt to sharpen our own swords, and not to grudge the expense.... When do you expect your new aeroplane?"

"Pretty soon. It's a ripper, but I shan't like it so well as the old one. Old friends are best."

"Does that hold with aeroplanes as with men, I wonder? Anyhow, I wish you luck with it. Shall we turn?"

THE END

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