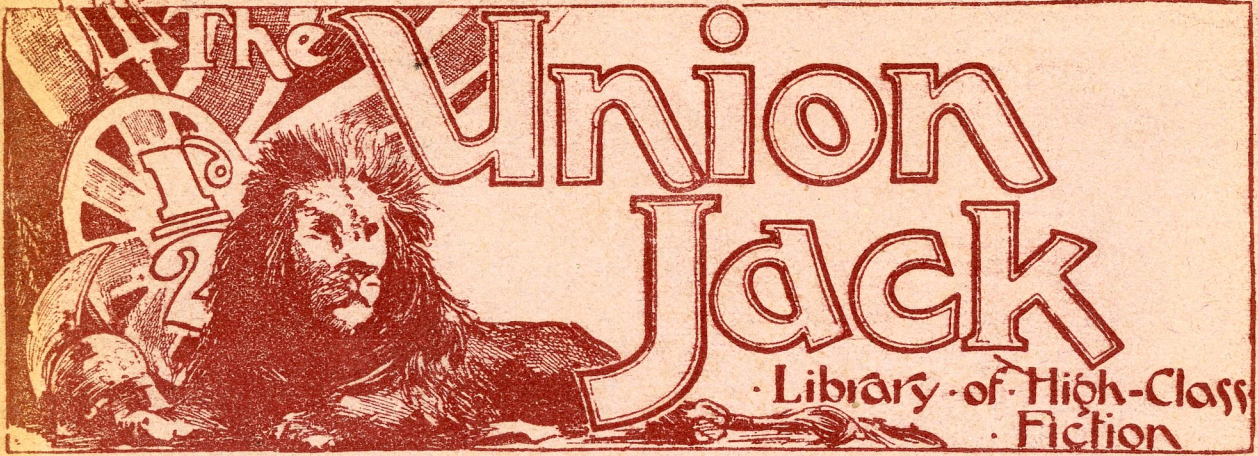
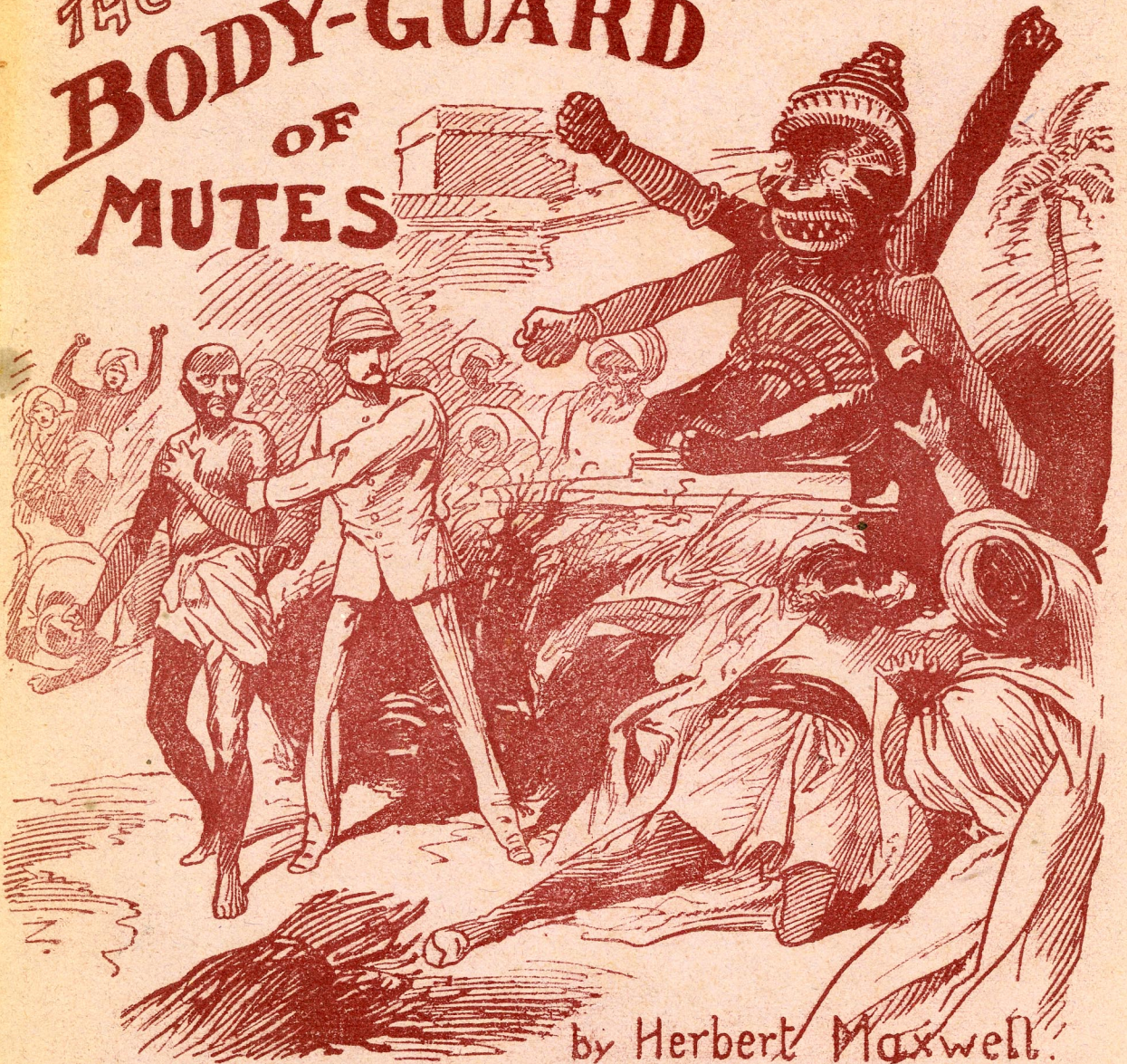


A FATHER WRITES: "8, Shelley Avenue, East Ham.—Dear Sir,—I am greatly pleased with the tales you publish in the 'UNION JACK.' I have one son, and your paper is the only one I allow him to read.—Yours, C. ARNOLD."



THE BODY-GUARD OF MUTES

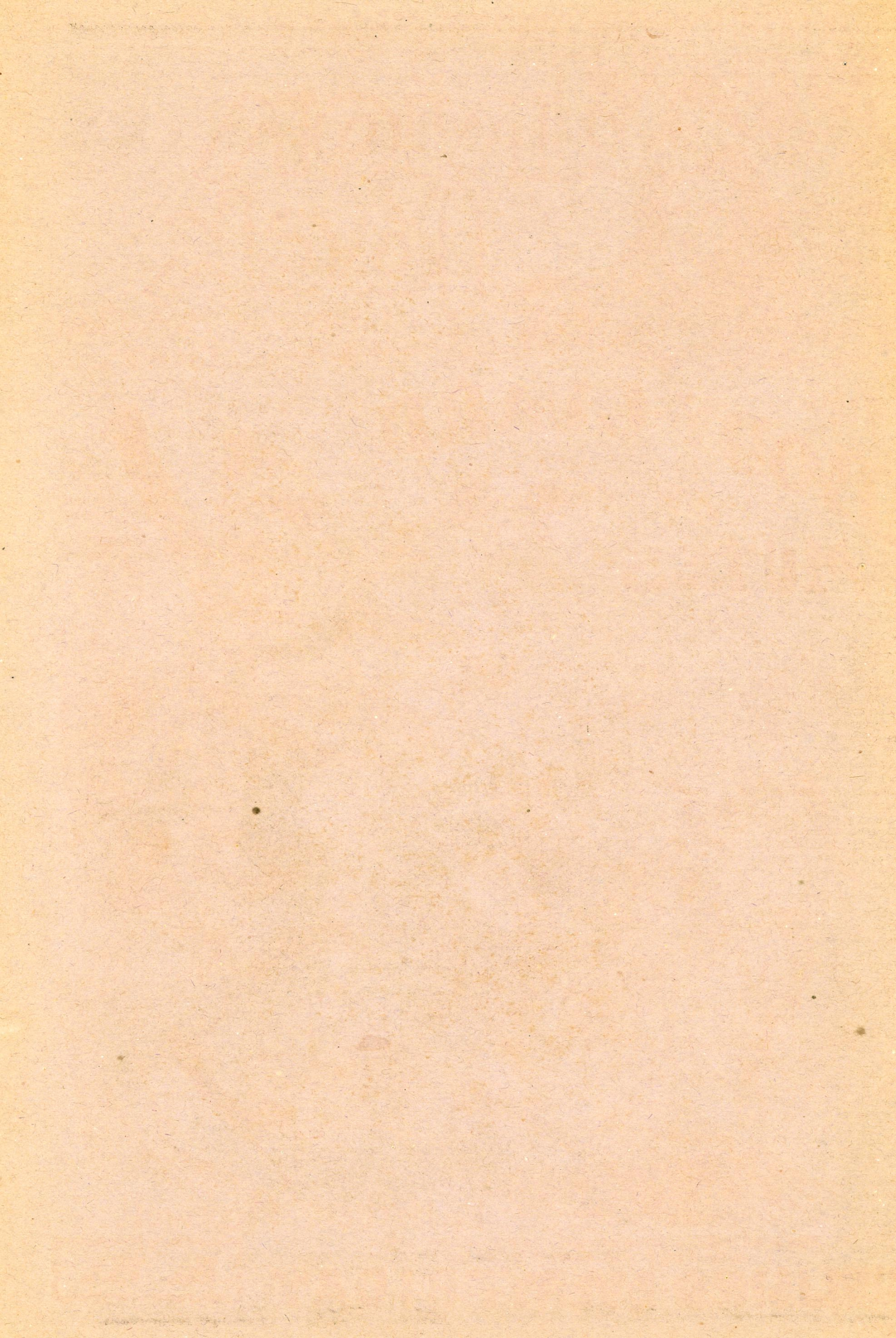


by Herbert Maxwell.

The head nodded threateningly, and the four great arms waved and whirled in the air.

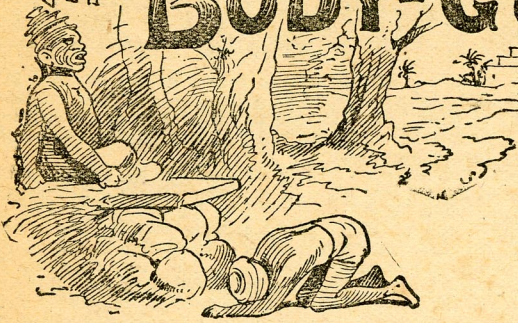
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THE BODY-GUARD OF MUTES

BY HERBERT MAXWELL



CHAPTER I.

THE SACRED GROVE OF THE DEATH-GOD—LAWRENCE TRISTRAM'S DEFIANCE—A PHENOMENON—MEDITATIONS.

"Thank goodness!" murmured Lawrence Tristram to himself as he rode through a grove of giant oak-trees, "this is the last time these splendid trees will be adorned with such horrible memorials of human cruelty."

It was, indeed, a spot of terrifying aspect, and known in the native tongue of Ghazni as "the Place of the Skulls." Every branch and every bough had its own particular ornament of a decapitated human head.

In the very centre of the grove, leaning against the oldest and most majestic of the oaks, stood, or rather sat, a huge wooden fetish, or idol, the divinity in honour of whom these human sacrifices were offered. In front of this grim and distorted figure, which had two heads and four arms, a great heap of stones had been piled up, on the top of which was laid a large slab of solid granite, which constituted the actual sacrificial altar on which the victims were slain.

In front of this grim deity Lawrence Tristram reined up his horse, and gazed at it. The figure inspired him with loathing, a feeling with which was intermingled a strange sensation of dread and superstitious awe.

Conscious of the fascination which the weird image exercised over himself, Lawrence was not surprised to find that his native servant, Selim, had dismounted from his horse, and was lying prostrate in silent adoration before the deity, not daring even to raise his eyes to those diabolical features, which had been carved with such wonderful art to symbolise everything that was horrible in the way of destruction, devastation, and death.

But on a sudden Lawrence's indignation was aroused by the spectacle of his faithful follower, bowed in abject humility before this carved and painted block. He shook off the strange spell that had laid hold of him. Anger and disgust took the place of veneration and dread in his mind, and he called loudly to Selim to rise from the ground and mount his horse.

"Up, up! Selim!" he cried; "and don't waste your prayers upon that wooden log!"

Selim arose with alacrity, but took care to keep his eyes averted from the face of the image.

This careful precaution seemed to exasperate the indignant feelings of the Englishman.

"Selim," he asked, "do you really think that miserable stock yonder can influence you for good or ill in the smallest degree?"

"Sahib!" replied the servant, "speak not so loud in the grove of the grim God of Death. If you will talk of these matters, let us ride far from here before we discuss them."

Lawrence Tristram laughed aloud, as he asked:

"And why not here?"

"Because it is not safe."

"What do you fear?"

"The vengeance of the gods."

"Selim, you are sensible and intelligent in most things, listen! If I fire my revolver at the Death-god, what do you think will come of it?"

"Sahib, you will destroy yourself and me!" was the reply. "But if," persisted Lawrence, "the only person destroyed proves to be the god himself, what then?"

But Selim was too much overwhelmed by the Englishman's audacious proposal to be able to answer, and, with feelings of the deepest apprehension and dismay, watched the other raise and aim his revolver.

Suddenly the pupils of his eyes dilated with horror, and he fell to the ground in abject terror. For he saw the four great arms of the idol waving violently in the air; fire gleamed from the eyes, and the huge head bent forward with a lowering look of menace.

For all the world it seemed as if the figure were about to rise from his pedestal, and crush his deriders with a sweep of those massive arms.

Lawrence was startled by the idol's sudden change from inertness to movement and activity. But only for a moment.



"You cur!" he said, "bid those cutthroats stand back, or I blow your brains out."

He was too well-versed in the juggling arts of Eastern priestcraft for the phenomenon to make more than a momentary impression upon him.

The only effect it had was to cause him to lay down his revolver and take up his rifle instead.

"Well, my friend," he said quietly, "you look very formidable. We'll just see whether you are proof against a good Lee-Metford bullet."

With that he raised his repeating-rifle, and fired point-blank at the waist of the figure.

Thrice he pulled the trigger, and three bullets crashed into the complicated mechanism secreted in the interior of the idol. The front panel of the woodwork was shot away, disclosing to view a mass of springs, wheels, chains, and balances, thrown into a chaotic state of jumble and disarray. The mighty arms were whirled violently round for a second or two at lightning speed, and then stopped dead as the mechanism ran itself down. Almost at the same moment a human cry of pain was heard; a dusky figure, wearing a large white turban, emerged from the back of the idol; the words: "Curse you!" were hissed, rather than spoken; a javelin glanced in the sunlight, and sank quivering into a tree at Lawrence's back; and the dusky figure darted into the wood, and was speedily lost in its dark recesses.

"Steady, boy, steady!" said Lawrence, patting the neck of the splendid Arab horse he rode, whose sudden swerve alone had saved his rider from being pierced by the flying spear.

With some little difficulty, Lawrence reduced his mettlesome steed to a state of composure, and then dismounted. Selim had by this time regained his feet.

The "whirr" of the javelin, and the sound of a human voice, had dispelled the illusion of his being in the presence of a supernatural being. He had raised his head, and perceived that the great Death-god was, to all intents and purposes, disembowelled. This was a shocking indignity. But if the god didn't resent it, well, then, he couldn't be much of a god.

So argued Selim with himself, and of a sudden caught sight of the flying figure with the white turban. Instantly he started to give chase.

"Selim! Selim!" shouted Lawrence.

But not until he had repeated the cry a dozen times, in a more and more peremptory tone, did his faithful follower see fit to relinquish the pursuit and return to the oak-grove.

"Shall the dog escape with his life?" remonstrated Selim.

"Why not? He has not taken either yours or mine!" retorted Lawrence.

"But he attempted your life, sahib!" objected Selim.

"That's nothing. He's been in some danger himself. Look here! there is blood. One of my bullets must have struck him."

"So much the better, the juggling knave!" returned Selim scornfully.

"And what do you think of the Death-god now?" continued Lawrence.

"I think he is dead."

"But he never was alive!"

"Truly, it is as you say," replied Selim simply.

Having established this fact in Selim's mind to his entire satisfaction, Lawrence gave the word to mount and away. Both he and Selim had still far to ride before nightfall; and at the end of his journey awaited him an interview with the Sultan of Ghazni, who would expect a report of his mission immediately on his arrival.

The incident we have just described made Lawrence Tristram thoughtful, and as he rode along the meditative mood settled deeper and deeper upon him.

A crowd of anxious thoughts and doubts coursed through his brain.

Would he ever be able to rejoin his old comrades of the 17th Royal Lancers?

Would his mission to civilise and Europeanise the native state of Ghazni end in success or failure?

Could he hope to accomplish and establish firmly the various reforms he had originated?

To each and all these questions, which he asked himself so anxiously, he could only return as answer a doubtful and hesitating "Perhaps."

As captain of the Sultan's Bodyguard, he occupied a position of great responsibility, and of large emoluments; but all this he felt was poor compensation for a long term of exile in the East, for separation from the friends and comrades of his regiment and for the loss of his right to wear the Queen's uniform.

Having arrived at this point in his reflections, he took a well-worn letter from his pocket, and began to read it. It ran as follows:

"My dear Lawrence,—There is great news for you. Colonel Blake has resigned. If, as in all probability will be the case, Jackson is appointed in his place, we mean to have the whole question of your 'cashiering' re-opened and investigated. Jackson is very friendly to you.

"In the meantime, excellent reports of your work at Ghazni have come to hand, and old Sir William Cautley, the deputy-governor, was loud in your praise at mess the other night.

"So keep your pecker up, old boy, and think sometimes of your old chum and affectionate friend, HUBERT STANLEY."

Whenever Lawrence felt a little bit down in the mouth, he got out this letter and read it; and its effect was always cheering.

So on this condition having folded it and returned it to his pocket, he felt himself in a happier and more contented frame of mind. He was able to review all the circumstances of his dismissal from the Service with comparative equanimity, which briefly were these:

He had obtained a fortnight's leave to go big-game shooting, and had pushed forward with such speed into the hill country, that he found himself at the end of four days in a wild, unexplored region. Here, after enjoying excellent sport for a week, his party were attacked by a band of hill-robbers. He and Selim alone made a stand in their own defence. The rest of his native servants surrendered at once. But their retreat in the direction of home was cut off. They were forced to take to the hills; whence, after being hunted about day and night for weeks together and after innumerable hair-breadth escapes, they eventually made their way back to the headquarters of the regiment, three months after Lawrence's leave had expired.

The Colonel—the "Blake" referred to in Stanley's letter—was a stern martinet. He considered Lawrence's excuses unsatisfactory. "If the officers were allowed to overstay their leave with impunity," he argued, "how could the men fairly be punished for similar offences? To overlook the matter would be subversive of all discipline."

An unfavourable account of the matter was submitted to the authorities. A substitute for Lawrence—who was supposed to be dead—had already been appointed. And the upshot was, after countless letters, inquiries, applications, and so forth had been written, made or received, Lawrence Tristram was cashiered, in other words, he ceased to be a lieutenant in her Majesty's 17th Lancers, and was dismissed the Service.

Then it was that the offer of the appointment to be captain of the Sultan's Bodyguard was made him, and he accepted it, rather because it gave him an opportunity of hiding his chagrin and vexation in an out-of-the-way part of the world, than because it offered him a prospect of congenial employment.

In Ghazni, then, he had been for something like six months at the period when our story opens.

He was in high favour with the Sultan, who was a man of enlightened views, and anxious to confer upon his subjects the benefits of Western civilisation.

Much had been done, but much remained to do.

Fetish worship and the offering up of human sacrifices were the first things to be suppressed.

And these evils, urged by Lawrence, the Sultan was now bent upon sweeping away.

Naturally enough, the favour with which he was looked upon at Court made him many enemies, the chief amongst whom were the priests, to say nothing of the Prince of Moïdore, the heir-apparent—a crafty and vicious youth, deeply jealous of the Englishman's influence with his father, the Sultan.

CHAPTER II.

THE AUDIENCE—SELIM'S WARNING—AN INVITATION—THE PRINCE OF MOÏDORE—A SUBTERRANEAN STOREHOUSE.

Lawrence reached the Sultan's capital without encountering any noteworthy incident, and made his report to the monarch upon his mission, which had been to inform the principal chiefs and emirs throughout the kingdom of the Sultan's determination to suppress the practice of human sacrifice in his dominions.

"And how did they receive my commands?" asked the Sultan.

"Some with approval, some with sullenness; but all promised compliance," was Lawrence's reply.

"That is well. They dare not disobey," remarked the Sultan, his brow darkening.

"None would dare to oppose your Majesty's will," said the Prince of Moïdore, who was present at the audience; "and I think," he added, "the promptitude and despatch with which the 'Sirdar' Lawrence Tristram has accomplished his difficult mission reflects the highest credit upon his tact, eloquence, and discretion."

As he uttered this compliment, the Prince bowed courteously towards the Englishman, who returned the bow with punctilious politeness, knowing full well all the time that the Prince was one of those whose secret enmity constituted his gravest danger, and that all professions and overtures of friendship were alike false, deceptive, and treacherous.

The audience over, Lawrence retired to his private

apartments, attended by the faithful Selim, where the latter waited on him while he partook of some refreshment.

As soon as the meal was finished, Selim spoke:

"There is great excitement in the city to-night, sahib."

"In connection with to-morrow's ceremony, I suppose," replied Lawrence, taking a cheroot which Selim offered him.

"Yes, sahib. And I fear you did wrong in not allowing me to kill the priest who lay concealed in the body of the great idol."

"How so, Selim?"

"Because this priest has spread the story of your sacrilegious act, as he calls it, everywhere; and the minds of the people are inflamed against you on account of it."

"It will not be the first time they have clamoured against me," replied Lawrence easily.

"True, sahib; but the priests are strong and powerful."

"Ay, but the Sultan is more strong and more powerful; and so I care not a fig for the priests and their seditious murmurs."

Selim, having conveyed this warning to his master, made his salaam, and was on the point of retiring, when Lawrence called him back.

"Selim," he said, "have the men of the bodyguard heard of this incident?"

"They have heard it, sahib. I myself told them everything as it happened."

"And what did they think about it?"

"They laughed when I told them of the Death-god, whose inside consisted of springs and levers and wheels, and at the priest who was routed out of his hiding-place by the sahib's bullets."

"They are to be trusted?"

"Every man of them!" replied Selim heartily. "They are proud to have as their captain a man who is so brave and fearless as you are, sahib."

"It is well, Selim; thank you. I shall go the rounds myself to-night, and see the men on guard, and, perhaps, afterwards visit those off duty in their barracks."

Selim salaamed once more, and withdrew, leaving Lawrence stretched upon the rich and costly cushions of a sumptuous Eastern divan, enjoying his cheroot, and thinking calmly over what Selim had told him.

Now before Lawrence had smoked out his cheroot, Selim—who, as the Englishman's confidential servant, occupied the ante-room—again entered, bearing a letter.

"Whom is it from?"

"It was brought by one of the servants of the Prince of Moidore."

Lawrence rose to his feet, and read the missive, the contents of which were these:

"If the Sirdar Tristram is sufficiently rested after his journey to care to examine the treasures of the Sultan's treasure-chamber, the Prince of Moidore, who intends to amuse himself for an hour there, will be honoured by having the sirdar's company."

Lawrence was much surprised.

To be invited to visit the Sultan's treasure-chamber was a compliment never before paid him, and one which was usually reserved for such high personages as grand viziers, ambassadors, or the foreign princes, who were from time to time guests at the Sultan's Court.

Yet Lawrence had often felt a desire, or rather an interested curiosity, to view the fabulous wealth that report said was stored in the treasure-vaults of the palace, and now that the opportunity had come he seized it with alacrity.

"Tell his Highness I will attend him to the treasure-chamber immediately."

Selim gave the message, and then returned to help his master make certain necessary changes in his clothes.

"I may not be able to visit the guard after all, Selim. I confide entirely in your watchfulness and care."

"I will be watchful, sahib."

"What is that for, Selim?" asked Lawrence, as his servant, having completed his attire, first loaded and then handed him his revolver.

"The treasure-chamber contains other things besides gold and silver and precious stones!" replied Selim oracularly.

"What do you mean?"

"Some who have visited the treasures have never returned," continued Selim.

"If you have a warning to give me, speak plainly."

"The vaults below contain dungeons, chains, and instruments of torture. The Prince of Moidore has not always been your friend, sahib."

The force of this last remark struck Lawrence. He took the revolver without more ado, and concealed it in the broad girdle, which Court etiquette prescribed for him to wear in the Eastern fashion round his waist on State occasions, and forthwith proceeded to the Prince's apartments.

The Prince of Moidore was the Sultan of Ghazni's only son, and therefore heir-apparent to the throne.

By way of preparing and fitting him for the high destiny to which he was called, his father had given him the government of one of the principal districts of his kingdom—viz., the province of Moidore. Here he enjoyed the exercise of supreme and unlimited power, chastened and corrected only by the advice and counsel of the well-tried and experienced ministers by which his father had taken care he should be surrounded.

The experiment of placing the Prince in charge of so important a government had not been a successful one.

He early developed headstrong and vicious propensities, which the restraint imposed upon him by the presence of sage and elderly advisers was powerless to check. Grave disorders arose in the government. The people were discontented and rebellious. The large sums of money raised by tribute and taxes in the province were not expended in useful public works for the benefit of the Prince's subjects, but lavished by him upon greedy and worthless favourites, and frittered away in large donations and bribes to the soldiers under his command, whom he spared no pains to bind to his own interests, and detach from loyalty to his father.

These abuses in his realm were a long time in reaching the Sultan's ears, and when he did learn them, the information only came to him in a softened and modified form.

The ministers who should have spoken out plainly were afraid to do so. They knew the Sultan to be a fond father and a stern ruler, and they feared lest the misconduct of the son should be visited with punishment upon their own heads.

Thus it was that the Prince, although actually plotting rebellion against his father, was invited to Ghazni, where the Sultan, in private, administered a very mild rebuke to him, and in public welcomed him with every mark of affection and honour. Immediately on his arrival, the Prince found that his projects of treason at Court were much interfered with by the presence of the influential Englishman who served his father so faithfully.

He therefore set to work to destroy him.

The proposal to suppress the practice of human-sacrifice, and, in fact, bring about a change of religion in the country, offered a promising opportunity.

He knew the measure would be a most unpopular one, and therefore exerted himself to get Lawrence appointed to convey and explain the proposed change to the powerful emirs and lords of the kingdom, calculating that he—Lawrence—would in this way raise up a host of bitter enemies against himself.

Lawrence's mission had, however, been successful, much to the Prince's chagrin, who, disguising his feelings, resolved to work the Englishman's destruction under the guise of affection and friendship. Hence his invitation to visit the treasure-vaults of the palace, whither we must immediately accompany him.

"Sirdar Tristram!" exclaimed the Prince of Moidore, as he led the way to the treasure-chamber, "I esteem it a privilege to be able by this mark of favour to evince to you how much I value your worth."

"Your Highness is very good," replied Lawrence.

"These vaults have never before been visited by any white man. You will be the first to explore their hidden treasures."

Lawrence expressed his appreciation of the compliment paid him, and the whole party, consisting, besides themselves, of twelve armed guards, six of whom walked before, and six behind them, proceeded in silence.

Never had Lawrence in all his life been in such a labyrinth of passages and corridors as that in which he now found himself.

It seemed marvellous to him that the guards should be able to track their way with unerring accuracy through so many tortuous and devious windings. Yet they pursued their path unflatteringly, without a word spoken, without a sign of hesitation. The iron doors which they met at intervals were opened by the leading guards, and closed and locked again noiselessly by those behind them. Both parties carried flaming torches, which cast a lurid light upon the rugged walls of the passages or tunnels—evidently hewn out of the solid rock—through which they were passing.

"The Sultans of Ghazni," thought Lawrence, "have known well how to contrive a secure treasure-house for their riches." And presently he addressed a remark to that effect to the Prince.

"Yes," replied the latter, "they have; and," he added a moment later, "they have taken care to provide themselves with guards who will not betray the secrets of these vast subterranean storehouses."

"Your guards are doubtless loyal and faithful," replied Lawrence, not understanding the drift of the Prince's remark.

"You misunderstand me," returned the Prince.

"Will your Highness explain?"

"These men around us are deaf-mutes."

"Deaf and dumb," continued the Prince; "to such alone do the Sultans of Ghazni entrust the keeping of their treasures."

"But surely it is difficult," suggested Lawrence, "to find men thus incapacitated in sufficient numbers to—"

"Not at all," returned the Prince.

"But I never heard there were many people born deaf and dumb in the kingdom," objected Lawrence.

"There are not many born!" said the other, with a laugh.

"You don't mean—" began Lawrence, shuddering.

"That is precisely what I do mean!" answered the Prince, with matter-of-fact coolness; "their tongues are cut out when they are children. They are then isolated, and, as they are never spoken to, and only communicated with by signs, they soon lose the sense of hearing as well as the gift of speech. Never were there guards whose loyalty is so absolutely assured as these."

"For instance," continued the Prince, eyeing Lawrence narrowly the while, "if I were to raise my hand, and make them a sign to strangle you, they would do so without an instant's delay."

"Pleasant, this," thought Lawrence, as with a great effort he preserved his composure, and returned the Prince's gaze with a steady look. He even succeeded in disguising his feelings so far as to give vent to a careless laugh. But his hand stole to his revolver, and he loosened his girdle, so as to have the weapon available for instant use.

CHAPTER III.

THE TREASURE—THE PRINCE'S PROPOSAL—THE ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION—LOST IN THE LABYRINTH—OBLIVION.

"Here we are!" cried the Prince, as the guards flung open the last door, and placed the flaming flambeaux in iron brackets, let into the wall for the purpose of holding them.

Lawrence stepped into the chamber, and the large iron door clanged to behind him.

Never in his wildest flights of fancy had Lawrence imagined such a scene as now met his bewildered eyes.

Piled up in open chests, heaped high upon huge trays, was a mass of gems and precious stones, in comparison with which the treasures even of a Monte Christo must seem poor and beggarly.

Great sacks of coined gold and silver lay scattered about in indescribable confusion.

The walls were lined with broad shelves, upon which reposed the richest products of the looms of India, China, and Persia, in stintless and inexhaustible array.

Standing upon small tables were innumerable objects of exquisite workmanship, wrought in the most costly of materials, and designed both for ornament and use; all of them masterpieces of art, and every one of them attesting the labour of a lifetime.

Such were the treasures which the Sultans of Ghazni had collected during centuries of tyranny and rapine, and such was the scene suddenly presented to Lawrence's vision—a scene which was rendered all the more striking by the flickering flames of the torches, which, falling upon the precious stones, caused them to glitter and shimmer and sparkle like a blinding galaxy of brilliant stars, while the deep gloom which enveloped the remote extremities of the chamber, heightening the illumination by contrast, cast a weird element of mystery over all.

Lawrence stood stock-still, bewildered and amazed by the spectacle.

"Sirdar Tristram!" cried the Prince, "come and touch and handle them. They are real! See for yourself!"

The mute attendants had withdrawn from view, and the Prince and the Englishman were to all intents and purposes alone.

Lawrence advanced, and the Prince, plunging his hands into the gems on the nearest tray, took them up and let them fall back again through his fingers, a glittering, dazzling cascade of rubies, emeralds, and diamonds.

"Say, sirdar!" continued he in a rapture of enthusiasm, "what would a man not do to be put into possession of these, to have them all for his own, to see them and touch them and handle them and play with them every hour of the day, if he had a mind so to do?"

"They will all be your Highness's some day," replied Lawrence quietly, the first impression wrought upon him by his surroundings gradually passing away.

"Ay, but when—when?" exclaimed the other derisively.

"Your father is an old man, Prince," answered Lawrence; "and, in the ordinary course of nature, it cannot be many years before you succeed to all his wealth and power."

"Years! years!" veritably shrieked the Prince; "say rather centuries. Give me these things now, while I'm young—now, now, now!"

In the ecstasy of hysterical excitement he clutched Lawrence greedily by the arm, and, looking up into his face, spoke in a whisper that was almost inaudible:

"Sirdar, you can do much; you enjoy my father's absolute confidence, do you not?"

"I believe what your Highness says is correct," replied Lawrence coldly.

"It is true—I know it is true!" continued the other; and then, plunging his disengaged hand into the mass of gems, he added: "You cannot be indifferent to things like these! They are yours almost for the asking, on one condition."

"I fail to understand your Highness," murmured Lawrence, although a faint perception of what all this was leading to began to dawn upon him.

"If I were Sultan to-morrow, all these should be yours to-morrow night," said the Prince in the same low, rapt voice.

"But your Highness cannot be Sultan to-morrow!"

"Oh, yes, yes, I might be, if—if—"

"Prince! Prince!" interrupted Lawrence, anxious to prevent the treasonable utterance he knew was coming.

"If," continued the other unheeding—"if you would help me. If you would but stand aside—I ask you to take no actual part in the violence—with your guards, before to-morrow I should be sitting in my father's seat, and he would be no more!"

"Prince," said Lawrence, quietly disengaging his arm from the other's grasp, "you forget! I'm an Englishman!"

"You refuse, then, riches, wealth, honours?" exclaimed the Prince, gazing with a dazed look at Lawrence.

"I refuse them when they are only to be obtained by dishonour, treachery, and crime!" replied Lawrence firmly.

The dazed look slowly died out of the Prince's face, and in place of it there came an expression of mingled hate and fear.

"Sirdar Tristram, I would have bought your aid if I could!" he hissed. "The city is in revolt. My agents are everywhere. The palace is even now surrounded. Your guards, supposing they fight in your absence, which is unlikely, must be overpowered. I can accomplish my purpose without you. Yet I ask you once again, will you help me?"

"No!" replied Lawrence, loudly and emphatically.

"Then your doom be on your own head!"

As he pronounced these words, the Prince clapped his hands, and the dozen mute-attendants, with drawn swords in their hands, darted from the gloomy recess into which they had retired, and sprang towards Lawrence.

But the latter had expected what was going to happen, and was not unprepared. He leapt to the Prince's side, and, seizing him by the nape of the neck, held the revolver to his head.

"You cur!" he cried; "bid those cut-throats stand back, or I'll blow your brains out!"

The promptitude and boldness of Lawrence's sudden move completely cowed and paralysed the mean and subtle Prince. He grovelled for mercy, and, while he begged for his life in abject tones, he gesticulated wildly to his attendant guards to stand back.

This slowly and reluctantly they did, making harsh, guttural sounds the while, which seemed to imply that they would have preferred infinitely to carry out their master's first order than his second.

Lawrence was safe for the moment, and he seemed to have the Prince at his mercy, and to be able to make his own terms with him. The first and most important matter was to get safely out of the subterranean vault.

"Do you know your way out of this labyrinth?" he demanded of the cringing creature at his side.

"Yes."

"Then get the keys, and dismiss these assassins."

After some little delay this was done. The keys were brought, and laid down where Lawrence could see them, and the mutes filed out one by one, scowling upon the Englishman, and plainly evincing by their guttural and inarticulate cries with what pleasure they would have torn his heart from his body.

"Now, you miserable traitor!" said Lawrence, "promise me on oath that you will leave Ghazni to-morrow and return to Moidore. Promise me that you will cease your unnatural and murderous designs against your father, and that you will do what you can to remedy the mischief you have already done."

"I promise."

"Now, swear to me that you will guide me faithfully and truly from these vaults into the palace again."

"I swear."

"Provided you do these things I will never breathe a word of what has taken place here. If you falter, or hesitate, or attempt to play me false, I will kill you with as little compunction as I would a viper!"

The Prince of Moidore swore by everything he held sacred that he would well and truly carry out all he had undertaken to do, and besought the Englishman once more not to betray him to his father; and when Lawrence gave him the required assurance, the Prince overwhelmed him with fulsome expressions of gratitude and indebtedness.

"At least accept some of these gems," said the latter, "in token of the new bond that now unites us."

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in to-morrow's "PLUCK."

"Are not these treasures your father's?" asked Lawrence sternly.

"Yes—but——"

"Then how can you bestow upon me what does not belong to you? Lead on!"

The Prince, abashed by the failure of this final attempt to corrupt the Englishman, walked meekly in front of him towards the door of exit, with the bunch of keys in his hand. Lawrence followed close at his heels, carrying his revolver and one of the lighted torches.

The Prince made his way through the tortuous maze of passages unerringly, and Lawrence could not help wondering how many dark deeds of crime he must have been cognisant of in those dim vaults, to make him so familiar with their ramifications and windings.

Now some of the locks were so stiff that the Prince's puny strength could scarcely turn the key in them, and more than once Lawrence had to lend him a hand. And at length, when, as the Englishman reckoned, they had accomplished about half their journey, they reached a door which no exertions of the Prince could open.

Lawrence tried, but the lock defied all efforts of one hand. He found himself compelled to use two.

"Hold this."

He handed the torch to the Prince, and thrust his revolver into his girdle.

The bolts resisted all his strength for just a moment, and then shot back into their sockets with a rattling, jingling sound, which was caught up and repeated from end to end of the echoing vault.

At the same moment the treacherous Prince threw down the torch, and stamped it out.

"Stand still, or I fire!" shouted Lawrence.

There was no answer, save the patter of fast-retreating feet. Lawrence fired down the passage.

The reverberation magnified the report into a roar like rolling thunder, amidst which all sounds of the Prince's footsteps were drowned and lost.

Lawrence was alone and in the dark.

But he had the keys; and he knew half the distance had been traversed, and he pushed forward boldly but cautiously.

Alas! he soon found the difficulties he had to cope with were well-nigh insuperable.

Groping along the wall, he found turnings on either hand.

Which was he to take? The right or left? Or was he to go straight on?

He determined on the latter course, and, after a tedious groping of his way for five minutes, found all further progress in that direction barred by a brick wall.

He turned and retraced his steps, and, trusting to chance, took the left turning. After much fumbling, he found a key to fit the lock of the door which immediately confronted him.

He opened it, and proceeded, only to find himself precipitated down a flight of stone steps which opened at his feet.

Dazed and bleeding, he picked himself up, and marched on.

He passed many side turnings, and presently reached another door. None of the keys on the bunch seemed to fit the lock, so he was forced to return once more and start anew.

On he went through the ramifications of this huge labyrinth, now stumbling up steps, now reeling down them, having lost all knowledge of his bearings, and occasionally stopping to listen, then speeding onward with the feverish but delusive hope that the next door opened would restore him to the light of day, until, at length, worn and weary, faint and weak, he staggered into the treasure-chamber itself, whence he had started in company with the Prince some hours previously.

The torches left burning were just flickering out.

He caught one glimpse of the untold millions of treasure with which he was surrounded, and then from sheer exhaustion fell fainting and senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NIGHT ALARM—THE SULTAN'S RAGE—THE PRINCE'S CUNNING—SELIM TO THE RESCUE—THE REBELS CRUSHED—LAWRENCE'S DISAPPEARANCE.

While the incidents we have just described were taking

place underground, matters of serious moment were occurring in and around the palace itself.

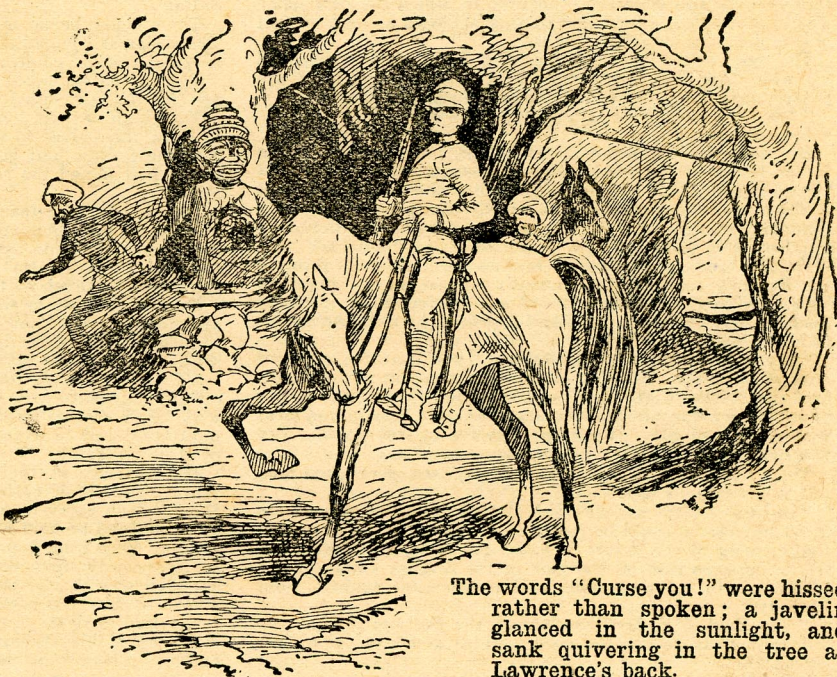
As the reader now knows, the Prince of Moidore had, by means of his agents, stirred up the populace to revolt against the Sultan, working upon the people's notorious hostility to the Sultan's proposed measure of suppressing human sacrifices.

The report was industriously spread amongst the population that the Prince sided with them in their opposition to the measure, and that if he were seated on his father's throne, no attempt would be made to change or interfere with the ancient religion of the kingdom.

It is needless to say that the priests supported the treasonable projects of the Prince to a man, seeing in the proposed alteration the loss of all their influence, or that they became his most active agents in spreading the spirit of disaffection and revolt, and promoting in every possible way the conspiracy against the Sultan.

The plan, as arranged, was to attack and storm the palace during the night, kill the Sultan, proclaim the Prince of Moidore monarch in his place, and then issue a decree rescinding the objectionable edict. Upon which, it was confidently felt, the popular ferment would immediately subside, and things go on as before, with the sole exception of a new Sultan being substituted for the old one.

The only difficulty in the conspirators' path seemed to be the opposition likely to be offered by the Sultan's bodyguard, under the command of the English sirdar. If the latter were



The words "Curse you!" were hissed rather than spoken; a javelin glanced in the sunlight, and sank quivering in the tree at Lawrence's back.

able to make good the defence of the palace for a few days, the conspirators' plans would be spoilt. For the delay would give the Sultan time to recall to the capital a portion of his army, who would certainly come to his rescue if he were alive. While, if he were dead, they would in all probability quietly acquiesce in the existing condition of affairs.

To meet this difficulty, the Prince undertook to bribe the Englishman to make no resistance, or, failing that, to get him assassinated.

How well the Prince tried to fulfil his share of the programme the reader is fully aware.

At midnight the attack upon the palace was made, and the Sultan awoke to hear the shouts and cries of the howling mob outside, and the ring and clash of arms of his men within, defending the entrances against the assailants. Thanks to Selim's watchfulness and care, the whole of the bodyguard had been kept under arms, and, therefore, repelled the first assault with ease. In consequence, the mob were beaten back with great slaughter, for they had advanced tumultuously, and without discipline, relying upon the Prince's assurance that they would meet with no resistance from within.

Under the shock of defeat, the leaders of the mob were at a loss to know how to proceed, and instantly loud cries for "the Prince of Moidore" and "the new Sultan" were raised, which, being caught up by the mass of the people, were echoed by hundreds of voices, and so, borne along above the din of the tumult, reached the Sultan's ears with ominous distinctness.

NEXT
WEEK,

"THE BOVIANDERS,"

By
Scrope Haggerston.

"Hurrah for the Prince of Moidore!"

"Long live the new Sultan!"

"Death to the Prince's father!"

These cries—so pregnant with treachery and sedition—caused the Sultan's face, dark-complexioned as it was, to turn pale.

He summoned his own personal attendants round him, and then despatched a messenger to bring his son into his presence.

In the meantime, the attack had been renewed, and the clang and clash of arms revealed alike the impetuosity of the attack and the stubbornness of the defence.

The Prince had escaped from the subterranean vaults by a secret passage known only to his father and himself, and at once made his way to his own apartments.

Here he waited in fear and trembling for the outbreak of the tumult, which he knew must betray his treasonable practices against his father, and which now, he had good grounds for believing, would prove abortive and unsuccessful, because he had just seen the entire bodyguard under arms, alert and watchful at their different posts.

What could he do?

How could he separate himself from the conspirators, and evade the punishment that would inevitably fall to their lot?

There seemed no answer to this question. He was hopelessly compromised, and while enduring an agony of suspense, those shouts and cries arose outside, in which his own name was intermingled, affording damning evidence against himself of complicity in the rebels' plans.

The very extremity and despair of his position sharpened his wits. An idea occurred to him. For a moment it appeared unavailing. Gradually it took form and shape.

"Yes," he murmured to himself; "there is a bare chance—a bare chance. I'll try it!"

He instantly summoned an attendant, and despatched him to the leader of the rebels, with a message to the effect that "the English sirdar had declared against the Sultan, and that if the attack were pushed with vigour, the guards under his command would retire under pretence of being overborne by numbers, and leave the mob in possession of the field."

He had scarcely despatched his message, when he received the Sultan's command to instantly appear in his presence. This was what he had expected and feared, and, inwardly quaking, but outwardly calm and collected, he stood before his father.

"My son!" demanded the Sultan, "you hear the seditious cries of the mob. Can you explain the meaning of the shouts for 'the Prince of Moidore' and 'the new Sultan'? Is this your return for my forbearance in the past? Speak, and clear yourself if you can. If not, prepare for instant death. For you shall have no mercy, nor can you expect any."

The Prince, with horror in his countenance, prostrated himself at his father's feet.

"O, best of fathers!" he cried, "think not so ill of your son as to suppose he could be guilty of such a crime. I know not the meaning of the shouts in which my name is mingled, unless it be some ruse on the part of the English sirdar to entangle me in his own plots and conspiracies against your Majesty."

"The English sirdar!" exclaimed the Sultan; "what can you mean? Is he not the most faithful and loyal of all my servants?"

"Certainly, I have always deemed him so," returned the Prince, "nor would anything have induced me to think otherwise of him, had not he himself an hour or two ago——"

The Prince spoke with affected reluctance, and then stopped abruptly.

"Son, son!" said the Sultan sternly, "seek not to cover your own guilt by accusing the Englishman, whom I have always known as a good and true upholder of my interests. If you have anything to say to implicate him in this sedition, speak out boldly. If not, forbear; for you should rue it though you were trebly my son."

"My father!" replied the crafty Prince, "I can merely speak as I know. But I would rather confront this man face to face, and say what I have to say in his hearing. I pray your Majesty, let the English sirdar be summoned."

"Son, you say well!" exclaimed the Sultan, anxious to be convinced of his son's innocence, even against his better reason; "the Englishman shall be sent for."

While the messenger despatched for the purpose was absent, a profound and painful silence reigned in the apartment, the Prince of Moidore insisting upon maintaining his prostrate attitude, although urged by his father to rise from the ground. A burst of shouting from the combatants reached them from time to time; but the efforts of the assailants seemed in a great measure to have subsided.

"Well," said the Sultan, when the messenger returned, "where is the sirdar?"

"He is not in his apartments, sire; nor does anyone know where he is. It is reported that he was last seen with his Highness, the Prince of Moidore."

The Sultan's face darkened, and he looked frowningly on his son, who, without waiting to be questioned, immediately said:

"It is true what this man says. I invited the sirdar to my apartments this evening after the audience, and proposed, in his honour, that he should visit with me the Royal treasure-chamber. But he excused himself on the plea that he had much to do, and at the same time let fall certain dark hints that I might be Sultan sooner than I expected, if I would be guided by him. I treated the matter as a joke, and he retired somewhat confused. Nor should I have thought of it again seriously, had not this rebel attack upon the palace in my name forced it upon my recollection."

"By all the gods!" exclaimed the Sultan furiously, "if this Englishman has done this, he deserves to die a thousand deaths. Rise, my son, from the ground; you have acted well under great temptation."

The words had scarcely fallen from the Sultan's lips, when a tremendous outburst of cheering arose from the ranks of the insurgents, evidently presaging a renewed and more vigorous onset. Above the din and tumult these cries were clearly heard:

"Hurrah for the English sirdar!"

"The palace is won! the Englishman is on our side!"

"Long live the sirdar and his men!"

"Hurrah for the Englishman! Down with the tyrant Sultan!"

There could be no mistaking the meaning of these shouts. The sirdar had joined the rebels. The Prince's accusation had received instant confirmation.

The Sultan embraced his son tenderly, and begged forgiveness for his momentary suspicion.

Then both of them hurried forth to the scene of the fighting, to show themselves to the guard, and to assure their loyalty. For the Sultan had good grounds for dreading that, if the sirdar had joined the rebels, many of his men might do the same.

But the Sultan's fears on this point were speedily allayed, mainly by the voice and bearing of Selim, who, jealous for his master's honour, was fighting like a fury, and shouting the while: "Kill them! Kill the liars! The sirdar is true to the Sultan! Death to the lying rebels!"

Selim's enthusiasm was quickly communicated to the men around him, who knew that he enjoyed his master's intimate confidence, and were disposed to trust his knowledge of his master's sentiments rather than the rebels'.

So, after wavering for just a moment, when the shout connecting Lawrence with the rebels was first heard, they fought with blind valour, as if to prove that their loyalty was still untainted, and to avenge the slur cast upon the good name of their sirdar.

The presence of the Sultan, who now appeared in their ranks, raised their enthusiasm to fever-heat. They beat back the rebels in every direction. There was no holding them in. They scorned to fight any longer on the mere defensive, and, sallying forth from opposite wings of the palace, they swooped simultaneously upon both flanks of the mob, and hewed and cut their way through the scattering mass, until there was not a rebel within half a mile of the palace, save those that were lying dead or dying on the ground.

So ended this attempt to overthrow the Sultan of Ghazni and set up his son in his place. Everybody connected with the conspiracy, except the arch-offender, paid a bitter penalty for their participation in it. The priests, as being the prime movers in the rebellion, were slain, tortured, or banished in hundreds. The decree for the suppression of human sacrifices was promulgated on the following day, and the ceremony of hacking to pieces the idol of the great Death-god was duly performed in the presence of the Sultan and the Prince of Moidore.

The latter proceeded next morning from the capital to resume the government of his own province. The reconciliation between him and his father was complete and absolute, and the Sultan escorted him part of the way on his journey, loading him with presents, and showering upon him every imaginable mark of his goodwill and affectionate regard.

Selim, in virtue of his great services in defending the Sultan's palace against the rebels, was appointed sirdar of the bodyguard in place of the Englishman, Lawrence Tristram, of whom no traces, alive or dead, could be found. And the Sultan caused a letter to be written to the English Government, informing them of his treason and probable death.

But there was one person who never wavered in his refusal to believe that Lawrence was guilty of the crime of treason laid to his charge, and that person was Selim.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY—THE HORSE-LITTER—THE PRINCE OF MOIDORE MAKES AN OFFER—THE FAKIR'S IMPORTUNITY—A WHIZZING OBJECT.

Three days after the Prince's departure, the capital of

Chazni had resumed its normal state of order and quiet, and Selim on that day besought a private audience of the Sultan. What passed between them we are not prepared to state; but the immediate result of the conference was that the Sultan, Selim, and a company of the guards proceeded to the treasure-vaults, and made an exhaustive search throughout their entire extent. Apparently they did not find what they were in search of, and Selim and the Sultan returned to the private apartments and resumed their conversation. It lasted long, and was conducted with great heat and passion on the part of the Sultan, who, in dismissing Selim, said:

"I give you a week in which to prove your case. Take what measures you like; you shall have every assistance. But if you fail, remember you pay the penalty of your temerity with your head!"

"I ask no other terms," replied Selim, as he made his salaam and withdrew.

Within half an hour Selim, in company with two attendants, had ridden out of the city on the mysterious mission he had set himself.

It was somewhat curious, too, that the Sultan, on the very same day, caused it to be known that he meant to pass the next seven days in strict retirement. That no one, except his vizier and his personal attendants, would be admitted to his presence. That this order was made by the desire of the Sultan's physicians, who prescribed for him complete rest and quiet after the excitement of the last few days.

The story now returns to the Prince of Moidore, who was performing his journey with every appearance of haste. The cavalcade was a large one. For besides the large guard of mutes, who formed the principal part of his escort, he was accompanied by several ladies of his harem, necessitating the presence of a number of eunuchs and female attendants, expressly charged with the duty of watching over them and waiting upon them. The ladies of the harem were carried in horse-litters, the curtains of which, according to Eastern custom, were kept carefully drawn. The Prince's travelling company was further increased by a score or so of priests, who joined him beyond the city, whose prayer to be allowed to return with him to Moidore he graciously acceded to.

The Prince was riding in the centre of his company; behind him were some half-dozen of his mute-guards, and at his side rode a priest, with whom he was chatting freely.

"Ah, your Highness has a brilliant future before you," the priest was saying. "By the desecration of the idols, your father, the Sultan, has horrified his subjects, and has become accursed in their eyes. Act promptly, strike with vigour, and you will win the lasting favour of the gods, and the undying gratitude of your people."

The weak and superstitious Prince was not proof against such arguments and blandishments as these. He assented to everything the priest said, who presently continued:

"Your Highness did well to save the life of this English sirdar. He is completely in your hands, and is just the instrument you want to achieve your purpose with. You will now find him devoted to your interests, body and soul."

"Do you think so?" responded the other; "you know I have seen him on two occasions since we left the capital, and on both he maintained a disdainful silence to all I said."

"I know it," answered the priest; "but that cannot last. Let him once understand that he has been branded as a traitor by the Sultan, that he has been outlawed, and that a price is set upon his head, and his sense of the injustice done him by the Sultan will change his loyalty into remorseless hatred and enmity. I repeat, when he understands all this, he will then be yours, body and soul."

"Shall we put him to the trial now?" asked the Prince, who was greatly impressed by this reasoning.

"It would be well. He will then have time to think your words over. For when we reach Moidore we shall have to act, with him or without him."

The Prince gave certain orders to two of his men, in consequence of which one of the horse-litters was separated from the others, and allowed to fall behind. Then, letting the main part of his cavalcade pass on, the Prince and his party rode back and joined this particular litter.

The curtains were drawn back, and the pale features of the missing English sirdar, Lawrence Tristram, were disclosed to view.

He had been found lying insensible by the Prince and his mutes, when they made a second visit to the vaults for the special purpose of killing him, and concealing his body. But at the last moment a change in the proposed plan was made, for it appeared probable that the sirdar might be more useful to the Prince alive than dead, now that he had fallen into disfavour with the Sultan. His life was therefore spared for the moment, and he was smuggled out of the city in a woman's litter.

The horse was stopped. The party gathered round. And the priest began a long harangue to Lawrence, pointing out

to him that he had everything to gain and nothing to lose by throwing in his lot with the Prince of Moidore. It is needless to add that Lawrence received his arguments in contemptuous silence.

The Prince, exasperated by the failure of his spokesman to make any impression on Lawrence, took up the conversation himself.

"Englishman," he said, "are you bent upon self-destruction? Don't you see I have it in my power to torture and slay you, or save your life, as I think fit?"

But Lawrence maintained his attitude of listless indifference. "Are you mad? Have you no spark of manhood about you? I offer you revenge—revenge upon the Sultan, who has stripped you of all your dignities, and proclaimed you a traitor!"

But Lawrence closed his eyes, as if he did not hear.

This was too much for the self-control of the Prince. He rode close up to the litter, and, bending forward, struck the reclining Englishman a smart blow across the face with his riding-whip.

"You cur! you unspeakable coward!" cried Lawrence, stung out of his determined silence by the insult.

"Aha! So you have found your tongue at last, you dog!" said the priest, preparing to repeat the blow in his own account; "this is but a simple taste of what you'll get if you persist in your stubbornness."

And he delivered another stinging cut on Lawrence's cheek.

The latter, bound and shackled as he was, started up in the litter, prepared to hurl defiance at his tormentors, and dare them to do their worst, when he was interrupted by the voice of a wandering fakir, who had approached the group unnoticed, and who at once began demanding alms with such whining persistence, that general attention was perforce diverted from the prisoner to himself.

"A thousand blessings upon the lucky chance which has thrown me across your Highness's path!" cried the fakir, in a loud and impetuous voice. "Relieve the necessities of one of Allah's meaneast servants, for be assured that happiness in this world and eternal bliss in the next will be your portion. For the love of Heaven, do not refuse, most noble Prince, whose praises all men are singing, and who art so soon to be Sultan."

Before the Prince had time to attend to his petition, the sturdy beggar had pushed his way into the very centre of the group, and, talking all the while, without an instant's cessation, got between the litter and the priest, and deftly passed a small piece of paper into Lawrence's lap.

The fakir never stopped his whining supplications, which he interlarded with profuse and extravagant compliments to the Prince, and this gave Lawrence time to fall back into a recumbent posture, and under shelter of the half-drawn curtains read the writing on the paper:

"Be of good cheer! Help is at hand!"

It was a message of comfort and hope; but whence or how such aid could come, Lawrence had not the faintest conception. The Prince by this time had thrown the beggar a piece of money, who, picking it up, invoked a last blessing on the head of the donor, and retired without more ado; although it was afterwards noticed that he remained close to the cavalcade, following it at a little distance.

Not knowing how to get rid of the tell-tale piece of paper, Lawrence was forced to swallow it, and he had barely done so before the curtains were again pulled aside, and the Prince once more addressed him.

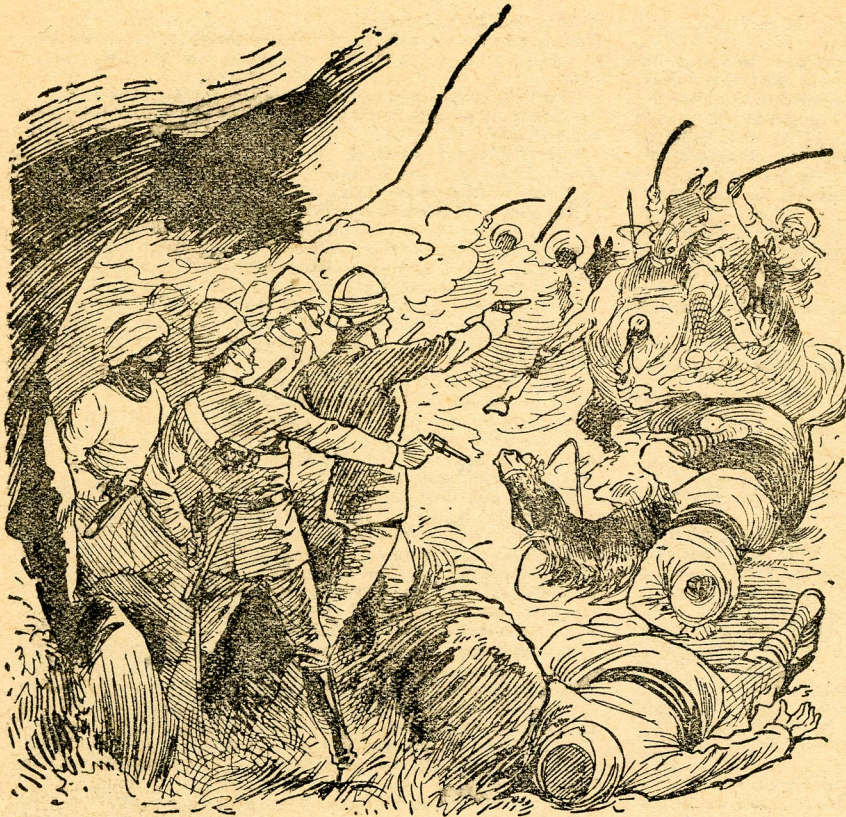
"Sirdar Tristram, you have heard my offer. If by to-morrow morning you are not prepared with a satisfactory answer, I warn you you will be handed over to the tender mercies of my mute-guards, who are adepts at torture, and will know how to prolong your agony till the very last moment of your miserable existence."

"Prince," said Lawrence, "you have offered me vengeance—vengeance is the very thing I crave upon those who have done me wrong. By to-morrow morning the scruples I now feel will have disappeared, and I trust to be able to answer you then as you deserve to be answered."

This reply was unexpected, not to say ambiguous. But it gratified the Prince, who took it to mean that the Englishman would on the morrow swear an oath of loyal service to him, and participate heartily in all his plans.

Nor did the sudden change of mind on Lawrence's part excite his suspicion. He thought it quite natural that the latter should yield to the horrible threats that had been held over him, and should eagerly desire vengeance upon the Sultan. He did not know that when an English officer has pledged himself to lead a devoted service to his Sovereign, the dishonour attaching to treachery has infinitely greater terrors for him than death itself.

The day dragged slowly on, and the cavalcade made good progress towards the city of Moidore. Lawrence passed the time in vainly speculating upon the motives which prompted



The party reserved their fire until the enemy were within fifteen yards of them. Then a crashing volley met the oncoming horsemen.

the kindly fakir to promise him assistance. But he could think of no explanation, no solution of the riddle.

At night the whole party halted and camped. Lawrence's litter was placed at a little distance from the others, and there, with his guards closely round him, he was supplied with the necessary materials for a good evening meal.

His grim attendants ate their food at the same time, and Lawrence could not help contrasting their sinister gloom and silence with the laughing, talking, and story-telling usually associated with a soldiers' bivouac.

As the night deepened, one by one the mutes fell asleep, lying in a circle three deep round the litter, their drawn swords at their sides.

But there was no sleep for Lawrence that night; his mind was too much on the stretch, and he remained restless and uneasy, anxiously expecting some signal which would forecast the promised deliverance.

Hour after hour passed, and then the whining fakir's voice broke the silence, speaking—to Lawrence's intense astonishment—in English.

"Sirdar Tristram, all the camp is asleep. Your guards are deaf as well as dumb. There is no fear of being overheard. I cannot come to you, for fear I might disturb the sleepers. But you must make a dash through them. There are friends and horses close at hand. I will throw you a knife to cut your bonds."

The voice ceased, and an object came whizzing through the curtains of the litter, which proved to be a knife.

Lawrence replied to his unknown friend in a cautious tone, and then set to work to sever the cords that bound his hands and feet. This he did, not without difficulty. But his numbed limbs required stretching and rubbing and it was some considerable time before he was able to declare himself ready.

"I'm coming. Where are you?"

"Here."

Following the direction of the voice, Lawrence dashed through the triple ring of guards. He trod on two of them, and nearly fell. A friendly hand outside gripped his, and he and the fakir ran at breathless speed towards the clump of trees, where the latter told him his friends were waiting.

But they were hotly pursued. The harsh, guttural cries, and weird, inarticulate screams of the mutes had roused the whole camp.

A minute later Lawrence was in the saddle,

"Sirdar Tristram!" said a well-known voice.

"Is that you, Selim?"

"It is, sahib."

CHAPTER VI.

THE ROUTE—A VILLAGE FESTIVAL—SELM'S RETICENCE—THE CEREMONY INTERRUPTED—A PONDEROUS BLOW—THE SOUND OF HORSE-HOOFS.

They had scarcely moved half a dozen steps from the place where they had mounted their horses, when Lawrence asked where the fakir was, and whether he had a horse.

"Ride for your lives, and tarry not! I am in no danger!"

There was no time to argue the point, and Lawrence, Selim, and the two men of the bodyguard who accompanied him, rode off at full speed into the darkness, Selim being slightly in advance to guide and direct them.

"Where are we going? to Ghazni?" asked Lawrence.

"No," said Selim, "to the nearest British territory."

Lawrence acknowledged the wisdom of the route selected. It would certainly take them right through the heart of Moidore; but it would probably put the pursuers off the scent, who would suspect them of taking the Ghazni road, as being the one which would conduct them most speedily beyond the Prince's rule.

When the hue and cry behind them had grown fainter and fainter, the fugitives pulled up to breathe their horses. It was only a momentary halt, in which horses' bits were

ceased, and the foam rinsed from the animals' mouths; but it gave Lawrence the opportunity of inquiring how Selim had discovered his whereabouts.

"I did not discover them, sahib. I did not dream of your being in one of the litters. I was obliged to act with the greatest caution, and could do little more than make inquiries in the villages through which the Prince's cavalcade passed whether there was any Englishman in his train. I need not tell you that my inquiries were all fruitless. I was inclined to give up the search, when the old fakir presented himself before me yesterday morning, told me to be at the particular spot he named at a given hour with a spare horse, when he would place the English sirdar in my hands. All this he has done punctually and accurately, as he promised; but how he succeeded I am wholly at a loss to understand."

Lawrence described his meeting with the old man, and then asked:

"Have you never seen him before, then?"

"Never to my knowledge, sahib."

"Then how did he pick up his information?"

"These wandering fanatics, sahib, have many ways of giving and receiving intelligence unknown to ordinary folks. They are popularly supposed to be half-crazed, and people speak freely in their presence of matters they would not dare to mention before others. That is the only explanation I can give, sahib."

With that explanation Lawrence had to be satisfied.

A few minutes later they were again in the saddle, and, as the morning had now dawned, it was deemed expedient to keep among the hills, as far from the main track as possible, in order to avoid observation.

News travels with mysterious swiftness in the East, and they could never be certain that orders had not been received in the villages through which they would have to pass to intercept and stop them.

They rode on at a round pace for four or five hours, until the heat of the sun, and the necessity of obtaining provisions and fodder for their horses, compelled them to halt.

Lawrence and one of the men remained concealed with the horses in a coppice outside the village, while Selim and the other entered it to make the necessary purchases.

"There must be some fete or festival here," said Lawrence to his companion, as they watched from their hiding-place a

NEXT WEEK, "THE BOVIANDERS,"

continuous stream of country people, all dressed in holiday attire, passing into the village.

"To-day the moon is at the full; it is probably a religious ceremony," was the reply.

"That is one of the days enjoined by the priests for offering human sacrifices, is it not?"

"It is, sahib; but the practice has been forbidden by the Sultan."

Lawrence did not know that the decree to this effect had actually been promulgated, for he was a prisoner at the time. He ejaculated a fervent "Thank Heaven!" and then composed himself to wait for the return of Selim, to hear the nature of the festival then in progress in the village.

"Here they are, sahib!"

Selim and his companion had been highly successful in their errand, and soon all four were busily discussing an excellent meal.

"What is the meaning of this gathering of country people, Selim?" asked Lawrence.

"Eat, sahib, eat, for time presses, and we must be getting on our way," replied he, ignoring the question, which he pretended to have misunderstood.

"Selim, I asked you what the festival was these people were celebrating."

"A simple rustic festival. It is almost time we started."

"Is it a religious ceremony?" persisted Lawrence.

"It may be, sahib; I didn't inquire."

"They are offering the usual human sacrifice," struck in the other man, who had visited the village, and did not appreciate Selim's motive for silence; "we saw the victim bound to the altar, and the priests arranging the faggots."

"Fool! could you not hold your tongue?" exclaimed Selim angrily.

"Nay, Selim, do not be angry with him," interposed Lawrence, "for I asked the question myself. What time is the sacrifice appointed for?"

"Two hours after noon," replied the other man.

"Then we have time to finish our food comfortably," remarked Lawrence, "for we must rescue the victim of this barbarous custom from the priests."

"Sahib! sahib!" cried Selim, in an ecstasy of supplication, "this is what I feared. Do not imperil your safety and ours by embroiling us in a quarrel with these villagers. Think! Every moment is precious. We may be overtaken any time by the Prince's assassins, who must be on our trail by this time. Start, I pray you, instantly, and leave this matter, which you cannot mend, alone!"

"Selim, I respect your faithful devotion to me," replied Lawrence, extending his hand to Selim; "but I should be unworthy of the name of Englishman if I stood by and let such an unhappy wretch meet his fate without an attempt to rescue him."

"Is that your final resolve, sahib?"

"It is, Selim."

"Then let us up and set about it at once, that we may get away the sooner."

After a moment's consultation it was decided to leave the horses where they were, in charge of one of the men, and for the rest to go on foot into the village, and be guided by circumstances as to their future action when they got there.

The hour was well chosen.

The decree prohibiting human sacrifices had been wholly ignored throughout the Prince's government. The priests still practised their inhuman rites publicly and openly, relying upon the protection or the connivance of the Prince, whom they knew favoured their cause, and relied mainly on their support in his treasonable designs against the Sultan.

Lawrence and his two companions pressed through the crowd assembled round the place of sacrifice, and obtained a position in the very front rank.

They saw an idol, the exact representation of the one we described in the opening chapter, a victim lying bound upon the altar, faggots heaped up to consume the body by fire after the slaughter, and a troop of priests passing in processional order round the idol, singing a hymn, or dirge, as a prelude to the act of immolation.

"What does this impious rite mean, which the Sultan of Ghazni has expressly forbidden to be practised throughout his dominions?"

demanding Lawrence boldly, in a loud, clear voice which compelled attention, as he advanced close up to the victim.

The crowd murmured in astonishment, the priests broke off their song abruptly, and the victim, seeing an unexpected chance of escape, cried piteously for help.

"Stranger," said a venerable priest with a long white beard, "you talk big words. Blaspheme not the great Death-god, lest evil fall swiftly upon you! Retire from the sacred circle, and leave us to our devotions."

"Your act is illegal," replied Lawrence firmly; "forbidden by the Sultan himself! Release yonder man, and I will retire."

"Retire quickly, before the Death-god displays his wrath!" cried the priest, impressively raising his hand in the air.

"I care for neither Death-god nor priest!" returned Lawrence boldly, while the spectators of the scene held their breath, in anticipation of some awful manifestation of the Death-god's power.

The juggling machinery was set to work. Fire gleamed from the idol's eyes. The head nodded threateningly, and the four great arms waved and whirled in the air.

Instantly the crowd prostrated themselves in the dust. The priests cried aloud the majesty and power of the deity, while Lawrence, wholly and entirely undaunted, seized the opportunity to rescue the victim.

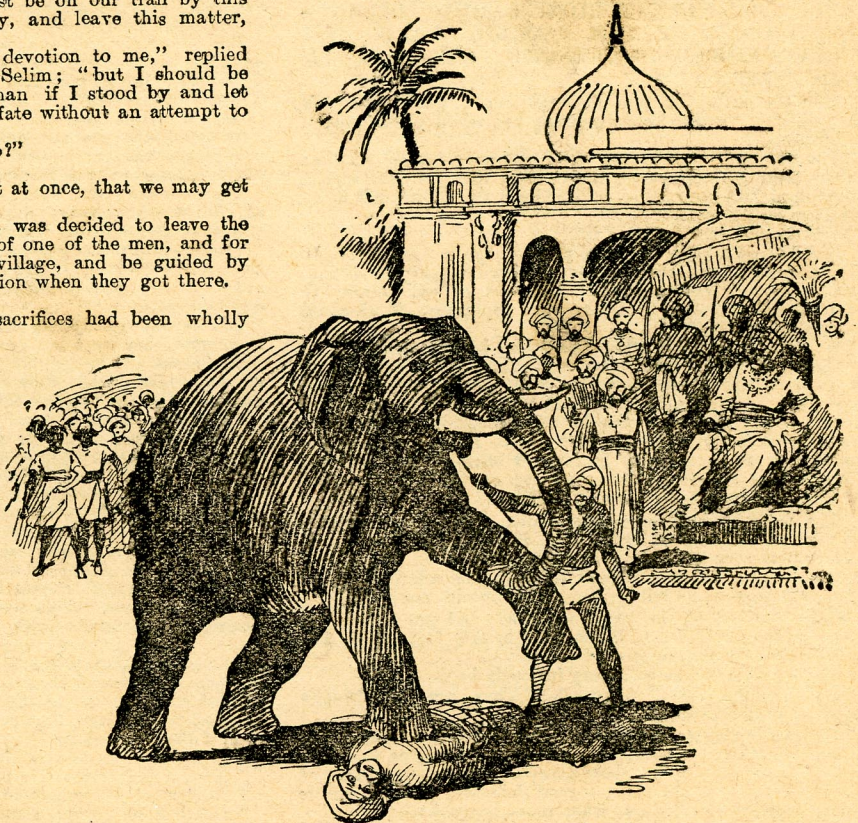
Two quick slashes of his knife released the man, whom Lawrence then dragged from off the sacrificial altar, and set upon his feet.

One of the priests, who had stepped forward to prevent Lawrence's action, was struck upon the head by the revolving arms, and his skull smashed by the ponderous blow.

"Come, Selim, lend a hand!"

One on each side of him, Lawrence and Selim conducted the rescued man through the crowded ranks of the prostrate worshippers. The priests, unnerved by the sudden destruction that had overtaken one of their own number, were for the moment helpless and bewildered. If they had acted promptly, nothing could have saved our friends; but they did not recover their presence of mind until the little party had extricated themselves from the throng.

Then they burst out into a fierce denunciation of the sacrilegious and impious deed wrought by the Englishman, and in terms of passionate fury urged and excited the mob to a swift and bloody vengeance.



The elephant threw the culprit to the ground, and placed its huge forefoot on his chest.

The response was instant and impetuous, and like a flock of vultures they swooped upon the four.

"Quick! in amongst the trees!"

Selim had a revolver, and had provided Lawrence with one also. Both of them carried swords. The other man was armed with a rifle. The rescued native was without weapons of any kind.

"We shall never make good our retreat to the horses, sahib," said Selim.

Lawrence looked behind him, and noticed that a portion of the crowd had been detached from the rest, with the obvious intention of cutting off their retreat.

"Send your man to bring them up," he said.

Selim instantly despatched his follower on the errand, and he and Lawrence were left alone to hold the mob in check until the horses could be brought up.

It was a desperate situation. The revolvers were soon emptied, and they were compelled to rely on their swords alone to check the onset of their innumerable foes. It was the cover afforded by the trees, and that alone, which enabled them to sustain the unequal combat as long as they did.

But at last their sword-arms grew weary, the vigour of their strokes diminished, and the natives, perpetually hounded on to renewed exertion by the priests, drew closer and closer round them in an ever narrowing circle.

"Hark, Selim!" cried Lawrence. "What is that?"

"The sound of horse-hoofs, sahib."

"The Prince of Moldore's guards?"

"I fear so, sahib."

If that were the case, then indeed all was lost.

But at that moment Lawrence was petrified to hear his name called, in a voice which sounded strangely familiar.

"Lawrence Tristram, where are you?"

The shout was repeated twice before Lawrence could rouse himself to reply, for he recognised in the tones the voice of his old chum and comrade Hubert Stanley.

A second or two later the mob were flying in a dozen different directions, as Captain Stanley, in company with six troopers of the 17th Lancers, after firing one volley from their carbines, rode through and through them.

CHAPTER VII.

HUBERT STANLEY—"RIDE, SAHIBS, RIDE!"—
THE CAVE OF THE SACRED SPRING—THE
SURRENDER—LAWRENCE'S WELCOME AT
MOLDORE.

"How on earth did you find me out?" was Lawrence's question, after the first hearty greeting had taken place between the friends.

"The Sultan himself sent a letter to headquarters," replied Hubert Stanley, "informing the Colonel that you had turned traitor, and had been killed in leading a rebellious mob in an assault upon the palace."

"And the Colonel believed it?"

"Not he. We knew the first part of the message must be a lie, and we suspected that you had been the victim of foul play. Hence I was despatched with six of our fellows to inquire into the matter, and save your reputation, if we could not save your life."

"But who told you I was to be found in this village?"

"Curiously enough, while we were riding on our way, some six or seven miles from here, we were met by one of those wandering natives, half priest, half beggar, who informed us that the Sirdar Tristram was in this village, and was likely to soon be in the greatest danger. Before I had time to question him more particularly he hurried off, and we lost him. However, his information was precise enough to act upon, and here we are, just in the nick of time!"

"The fakir again!" ejaculated Selim. "Who on earth is this mysterious being who takes such an interest in my fate?"

There was very little time for speculation on this point, for the trampling of horse-hoofs warned them that a large body of horse had entered the village from the opposite end.

While the rest of the party mounted, and put themselves into a posture of defence, Selim rode briskly forward to find out who the new-comers might be.

Presently he was seen galloping furiously back.

"Ride, sahibs, ride!" he cried. "They are the Prince's guard, a hundred strong."

"But our horses are quite done up," objected Stanley. "If we are overtaken in the open, we shall be done for to a certainty. Isn't there some place here—a cave, or something of that sort—which would make a good defensive position for us to hold until we can find out what these beggars mean?"

The rescued native was now able to do his deliverers a good turn.

"The Cave of the Sacred Spring," he said, "is not a quarter

of a mile away. There is a natural fountain there, and the entrance is narrow."

"The very place!" exclaimed Lawrence. "Shelter and water are just the things we want."

As may be imagined, no time was lost in making a start for this desirable stronghold. The native, zealous and anxious to be of service, raced swiftly ahead, and the little troop clattered after him.

They had scarcely cleared the wood, when that harsh, guttural, dissonant cry, which Lawrence now knew so well, informed them that their pursuers had caught sight of them, and were giving chase.

The enemy seemed to appreciate their motive, and made vehement efforts to overtake them before the cave could be reached.

"We shall do it, Lawrence!"

"Just about, and that's all!"

"The beggars have got muskets," remarked Stanley a moment later, as a couple of balls whistled past their heads uncomfortably near them.

"Confound them, yes! If this cave does not come up to expectations, we shall be in a tight place."

But to their great relief they found the cave answered to the native's description of it exactly. A narrow entrance, a roomy interior, and a stream of clear, cold water gushing from a cleft in the rock.

The horses were picketed in the inmost recess, and the little garrison took up a position at the entrance to await the expected attack.

They were not kept long in suspense.

The enemy's mode of attack was well planned. Half their number dismounted, and kept up a continuous fire upon the cave, while the other half, the fire suddenly ceasing, charged furiously down upon the defenders, with the intention of rushing the entrance by sheer weight of numbers.

It was a critical moment, and nothing but the steadiness of the little band averted what seemed to portend imminent disaster. They reserved their fire until the enemy were within fifteen yards of them.

Then a crashing volley met the advancing horses. Six of the foremost riders were hurled from their saddles. Several of the horses behind them stumbled over the fallen bodies, and in their turn overthrew those following them. The remainder extricated themselves from the mass, and charged right down to the cave's mouth.

But the little garrison had had time to load again, and delivered a withering volley in the very faces of the enemy. Down went horses and men in an indistinguishable heap, and a series of hand-to-hand encounters took place on the very threshold of the cave.

Some of the mutes actually penetrated into the interior, where they were picked off by Lawrence and Hubert Stanley, who had reserved their revolver-fire to meet such a contingency.

Then one combined effort on the part of the little band, and all that was left of the assailants broke and fled.

A loud and thrilling cheer greeted their flight.

The defenders, every one of whom had been wounded, dressed their ranks, bound up their hurts with handkerchiefs and what not, and then, wholly undaunted, faced the foe again to await developments.

But beyond a dropping fire of musketry, which did no harm to anyone, they were left unmolested for the rest of that day.

"It looks like a regular siege," said Lawrence to Hubert, as, some hours later, they cautiously looked out to note the disposition of the enemy's force.

"Upon my word, it does!" replied the latter, as he observed the orderly array of pickets and sentries placed round the cave.

"I wonder whether they mean to starve us out?"

"Perhaps; or wait for reinforcements," was the reply.

"Fortunately, we have enough food for the men's supper, and a small supply of fodder for the horses."

"But to-morrow?" queried Lawrence.

"To-morrow must take care of itself."

Such was the plight of the little party when night fell, and they were compelled to seek the repose they required so urgently. A watch was set, reliefs were arranged for, and so the night passed in constant alarms, but without attack being actually made.

In the morning, when looking out to take stock of their position, they found that some five hundred additional troops had joined the enemy in the course of the night. The cave was invested more closely than ever, and now escape was impossible, even if they desired it.

"It looks a bit serious, doesn't it?" said Hubert.

"Yes; a jolly mess I've brought you into, old chap."

"Nonsense! you've got nothing to reproach yourself with."

"Death if we go out, starvation if we remain here. That is about the sum of it."

"Well, we can make a dash for it; some of us will probably get through."

"Perhaps," said Lawrence gloomily. "At all events, anything is better than remaining in suspense, cooped up here."

"Sahib," said Selim, suddenly interrupting the conversation, "a flag of truce."

"Who's the bearer?"

"The fakir, sahib."

"Our mysterious friend."

"By Jingo, so it is!"

The surprise felt at this intimation had not subsided when the fakir himself entered the cave.

"Well, my friend," said Lawrence, "you still take an interest in my fate?"

"I am Allah's servant," was the enigmatical reply, "and direct my movements as he ordains them."

"And what message have you got for us?"

"I have to offer you your lives on condition that you surrender."

"And after we have surrendered?"

"You will be conducted to the Prince's capital, Moidore, where the charges brought against you will be duly examined."

"By whom?"

"By the Prince of Moidore."

"What! the same man accuser and judge! A fine chance of justice I shall have!"

"Nay, the Prince must needs judge fairly. The Sultan has heard you are alive, and has himself ordered the inquiry. If your innocence is proved you will be reinstated in your office of sirdar."

"Can we rely upon the truth of your words?"

"Behold the Sultan's signet-ring!"

When the fakir produced this token of the Sultan's cognisance of the matter, Lawrence felt his scruples must vanish.

One more question he asked.

"And what is to become of my companions here?"

"They can return whence they came, or journey with you to Moidore."

"Thank you for nothing," interposed Hubert Stanley. "I and my men have not the smallest intention of separating from the Sirdar Tristram until we have seen this business through! And tell me, old man," he went on, "will the Sultan be present at this precious inquiry? For I have a message for him he had best hear before he presumes to lay a finger upon an Englishman."

"The Sultan will be present," replied the fakir, somewhat coldly and haughtily.

"Stay, fakir! Tell us how——"

But the mendicant was gone. He had evidently no wish to submit to further questioning, and Lawrence's curiosity remained unsatisfied.

Immediately afterwards the conditions of the surrender were duly ratified with the leader of the enemy's force. Ample provisions were furnished to the little party, and about midday the journey to the city of Moidore commenced.

We have no intention of giving a detailed account of the march. Happily, it was without accident. The leader of the party kept faith solemnly, and no collision occurred.

On the evening of the second day they reached Moidore, where their arrival was evidently expected.

Large crowds thronged the streets to see the Englishmen, and bodies of the Prince's troops were stationed at intervals along the route.

Apparently by accident, but really by design, the Englishmen got separated in the pushing, jostling throng, and Lawrence presently found himself a dozen yards ahead of the rest of the party.

Hubert Stanley shouted to him to wait.

Lawrence did his best to comply with his friend's directions, but quickly discovered it to be impossible, and although he made every effort to stem the human current that carried him along, he was compelled to desist, and suffer himself to be borne onward.

Thus the gap between him and his friends grew wider. His movements were accelerated, theirs were retarded, until presently all pretence was thrown aside. His weapons were snatched from him, he was pulled from his horse, and hurried off, bound and gagged, through side streets to the palace, where he was thrown into an underground dungeon.

Hubert Stanley and the rest of the party were conducted to the main entrance of the palace, and were honourably received by the Prince's principal officers.

"Where is the Sirdar Tristram?" demanded Stanley.

"He is already being received in private audience."

"By the Sultan?"

"No, by the Prince."

"When is the Sultan expected?"

"The Sultan is not expected!"

A great fear crept over the Englishman's heart that his friend had been tricked and duped. But beyond protesting he was helpless. A large body of troops occupied the courtyard of the palace, and cut off all egress.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EXECUTION DURBAR, AND WHO WAS EXECUTED.

Hubert Stanley passed a miserable night of anxiety. He could hear nothing of Lawrence. He rose betimes in the morning, and found that the same precautions were still in force. Guards were now placed before his own apartments; he himself was virtually a prisoner. In reply to all his indignant questions and expostulations, he received only this evasive answer:

"The Prince will declare his pleasure at noon."

By dint of persistent inquiry, he eventually elicited the further information that the Prince had appointed that hour for the holding of his "execution durbar," a ceremony at which political offenders were publicly executed in the Prince's presence.

Chafing at his powerlessness, and a prey to horrible presentiments, Hubert Stanley passed away the time till noon, when he and Selim—his troopers were not allowed to accompany him—were conducted under close guard to the courtyard of the palace, where they found the Prince seated on a throne of State, surrounded by his officers and bodyguard of mutes. A crowd of spectators occupied the further side of the square, the centre of which was kept clear from intrusion by a line of troops.

All was in readiness for the execution of the prisoners; and Stanley, now fearing the worst for his friend, if not for himself, cursed his folly in trusting the fakir's assurance that the Sultan himself was present in Moidore.

He had barely time to make these reflections when a sudden and spontaneous stir passed over the crowd, followed by a deep hush and absolute stillness. The first prisoner had been brought out, and the spectators were craning their necks to see him.

An officer advanced, and recited in a loud voice the crimes and offences of which the criminal had been proved guilty; and then, turning towards the throne, cried:

"Your judgment, O Prince?"

"Death!" was the answer, spoken in a careless and indifferent tone, but with such distinctness that not a man in the crowd failed to hear it.

Instantly the culprit was seized and bound, and carried into the centre of the square.

Horrible as was the spectacle he anticipated, Hubert Stanley felt himself unable to avert his gaze, but rather compelled by a strange fascination to look at it. Nor could he help wondering what form of execution was to be practised. He could see neither axe, block, nor gibbet. There was no executioner standing with drawn sword ready, and no mute prepared to strangle his victim with a bowstring. How, then, was the death sentence to be executed?

He was not left long in doubt.

An enormous elephant, with its great ears flapping, and its trunk swaying from side to side, walked slowly into the square, conducted by a single attendant.

For just a moment it stood quietly at the side of the prisoner. Then, in obedience to a sign from its conductor, it turned its trunk round the body of the condemned man, threw him to the ground, and placed its huge forefoot upon his chest. There was a stifled cry, which was drowned in the shrill trumpeting of the elephant, a horrible scrunch, and all was over.

"Take away that lump of human clay!" cried the Prince, "and bring forth the next prisoner."

The body was instantly removed, sand was sprinkled over the spot to conceal the bloodstains, and soon all traces of the tragedy had disappeared.

Sickening as the sight was, Hubert Stanley had not lost a single detail of it; but his eyes were now fixed upon the door through which the prisoners were led, with the awful presentiment that he should see Lawrence Tristram issue from its portals as the next victim.

Nor was this presentiment falsified.

Lawrence Tristram was led forth, looking haggard and worn, but walking with a lofty bearing and proud step. There was no sign of fear on his countenance. His mien was that of a man who, secure in his innocence, was resolved to meet his end with fortitude, and die like an Englishman.

He looked round the vast courtyard, and, catching sight of Stanley, smiled, and waved his hand to him in token of farewell. Then he composed himself to listen to the long indictment of treason and rebellion which the officer before referred to began to read aloud.

"Your judgment, O Prince?"

"Death!"

This time there was no listlessness or indifference in the tone in which the Prince pronounced sentence. It was uttered eagerly and unctuously, and pronounced almost before the officer had had time to ask the stereotyped question.

The attendants at once seized and bound the prisoner, and

were leading him towards the elephant, when the assembly was electrified by hearing a voice call out, in a stern and authoritative tone, the single word:

"Hold!"

Everybody heard it. The Prince heard it, and in a passion of fury bade the impudent offender who had dared to interrupt the proceedings be brought before him.

There was a commotion in the crowd as the soldiers hurried amongst them in search of the delinquent, when who should walk into the open space, and boldly avow himself the author of the interruption, but the fakir.

The crowd were aghast at his hardihood. The Prince was enraged at the flagrant insult to his authority by one so mean.

"Old man," exclaimed the latter, "are you tired of life that you dare to oppose my will?"

Then, turning to the soldiers who thronged round the fakir, he said:

"Let him be bastinadoed! Let him receive a hundred blows of the cane upon the soles of his feet; and let the sentence be carried out here instantly, in the presence of the people, as a warning to all who presume to dispute my judgment!"

Before the Prince could resume his seat, before the soldiers could even seize the fakir, the latter, with a swift movement of his arms, flung off his disguise and his tattered garments, and stood revealed as the Sultan himself!

The soldiers who had dared to lay hands upon his person shrank back, and prostrated themselves in the dust.

Selim, taking advantage of the panic, leapt down from his seat and rushed to his master's side.

Stanley did the same, although his first act was to cut the cords that bound Lawrence.

A scene of indescribable confusion arose, in the midst of which the entrance of a strong guard of the Sultan's own soldiers passed almost unnoticed.

At last the crowd appreciated the meaning of this startling occurrence, and a shout of welcome rent the air.

"The Sultan—the Sultan!"

When the first burst of recognition had died away a profound stillness fell upon the spectators, for there was that in the Sultan's face that boded ill for somebody—a look of stern anger and unflinching retribution.

The Prince, his son, whose face had turned to a ghastly pallor, now hurried down from the throne to greet his father.

"Welcome, my father! You have arrived in time to see the punishment I mete out to a traitor."

The Sultan gave no answer, but, gazing steadily and wistfully at his son for a moment or two, signed to his guards to seize him.

While this was being done, the unhappy Prince screaming for mercy all the while, the Sultan walked slowly to the throne and sat down.

Then he beckoned to Lawrence, Stanley, and Selim to sit beside him.

As soon as they were seated he arose, and, in clear and solemn tones, addressed the people as follows:

"My people,—The practice of my rule has been to apportion equal justice always to high and low, rich and poor, alike; to traitors the death penalty has been invariably awarded; to my good and loyal subjects the highest offices in my kingdom have ever been open. Shall I, then, shrink from exacting the extreme penalty from my son, my only son, whom I myself have found to be guilty of the crime of treachery in its most heinous form? I dare not; I cannot!"

The Sultan paused for a moment, and the silence, if possible, grew deeper and more intense, as he proceeded:

"I know now the Sirdar Tristram to be the most able and most loyal of all my subjects. My servant Selim first opened my eyes to the wrong I had done him; my own observation has since confirmed the statements he then made.

"For, know all men, I have travelled through this province for many days in the character which you but now saw me lay aside.

"I have learnt that my son was the traitor who fostered the recent rebellion in my capital.

"I know that he meditated the crime of parricide, and that it was by the merest chance I was not slain by his hired assassins.

"And I am certain that he is preparing to wage open war against me.

"I have excused the follies of his youth a dozen times. I have forgiven him scores of offences, for much less than which many a man has lost his head.

"My duty to my honour, my duty to my kingdom and my people forbid me to carry my indulgent clemency any further.

"I sentence him to the death he has himself devised for traitors! Let it be carried out instantly."

Lawrence made a strenuous effort to induce the Sultan to mitigate the sentence.

"Ask anything but that," was the stern reply.

And the sentence was duly carried into effect.

The Prince had fainted long before the Sultan had finished

his address, and was unconscious at the time the elephant fulfilled its horrid duty.

The only part of our task remaining to be fulfilled is to say a word or two about the close of Lawrence's career.

As some compensation for the gross hardships and wrongs he had endured, the Sultan appointed him the Governor of Moïdore, with the title of Prince.

Almost at the same moment he received a notice from the Army headquarters to say that his sentence of dismissal from the Service had been cancelled, and that his commission in his old regiment, the 17th Lancers, had been restored to him.

Which of these appointments gave him most pleasure the reader will, we think, have no difficulty in deciding. It is enough to say that it was only out of respect to the urgent representations of the British authorities, who argued that he would have greater opportunities of doing service to his country as Governor of Moïdore than as a lieutenant in the Army, that he accepted the post offered him by the Sultan.

His rule was firm, enlightened, and humane; and it surprised no one, when the old Sultan died, that Lawrence had been nominated as his successor, a choice which was as heartily ratified by the troops as the people.

A few years ago the Sultan of Ghazni, with the full consent of his subjects, made his kingdom a feudatory fief of our great Indian Empire, since which time the country has made great progress in civilisation and order. Life is secure, the immense natural wealth of the country is being rapidly developed, justice is even-handed, and the people are prosperous and contented. All of which great benefits they know they owe to the gallant young Englishman who rose by dint of sheer merit from the comparatively humble post of lieutenant to the proud position of Sultan of Ghazni.

THE END

LOOK

OUT!

OUR
STARTLING
NEW
FEATURE
IS
COMING!

LOOK

OUT!



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THE FINDING OF THE WAXEN IMAGE.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

THE BLACK SEAL OR THE QUEST OF "ZUB" THE DOG DETECTIVE.

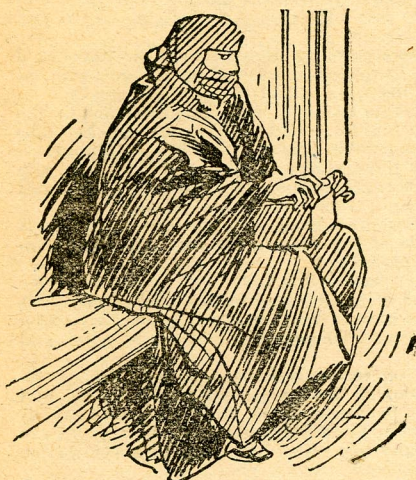
BY STANHOPE SPRIGG,
AUTHOR OF "999," "UNDER SUSPICION," "FETTERS OF GUILT,"

READ

THIS

INTRODUC-

TION.



This story deals with the adventures of Jack Fairfax, one of the most famous of London's private detectives. He is induced in a most mysterious fashion by a young and beautiful girl, named Jessie Norris, to investigate the circumstances of the murder of her sister Viola, who was found early one morning in their home, in an aristocratic square, stabbed to the heart, and quite dead. The principal clues are a great splash of blood on the wall of an adjacent room, and a black seal, or which is clearly traceable the impression of a man's thumb. The police, however, believe Jessie Norris killed her sister, and Jack promises to clear her of all suspicion, and to find the real criminal by the help of Zub, his bloodhound, who had recently tracked down a Whitechapel murderer and some Anarchists who intended to kill the Czar. The extraordinary experiences he encountered at the very outset of his quest are related in the following chapters. Read them carefully, and you will see one of the cruellest mysteries of London laid bare.

CHAPTER IV. (continued).

The presence of this weird seal, indeed, suggested to him there was something more in the crime than vulgar jealousy or revenge. But what could it be?

True to his own particular method, Jack did not waste any other time in trying to supply the answer to this. He, first of all let Zub scent a scarf that had belonged to Viola, and then he led the dog up to the great black seal on the wall, and, at a word, made him stand on his huge hind-legs and carefully smell it, the girl watching his proceedings with ill-disguised amazement and concern.

The dog was well trained. He took in several deep inspirations at a look from his master, and only paused a moment then, just to throw back his long, pendulous ears, and to give vent to that stirring bark, which nobody who had once heard a bloodhound could possibly mistake, before he set off on the trail.

A second later he wheeled about, and tore out of the room, Jack Fairfax close at his heels.

Jessie Norris saw them go in silence; but immediately they disappeared she flung herself into a chair, and again burst into a storm of tears.

Zub led the way without any hesitation down the dark, deserted flight of stairs. His hide, Jack saw by the light of his lantern, was bristling with excitement, and ever and anon he would dart in his eagerness some paces ahead, then recollect his training, and fall back. Once or twice the detective could have sworn that there were footsteps behind him, stealthily following him, and he stopped the dog and listened; but then all seemed

deserted and silent, and he became ashamed of his suspicions, and hurried on.

Curiously enough, however, directly the dog got outside the front door he did not as his master expected he would, make for the public square. He moved round towards the back of the house, and ran impatiently up and down.

"Surely," Jack wondered, "he can't have lost the trail so soon." Yet, five, ten, fifteen minutes were occupied thus; and still the hound gave no sign.

Suddenly, however, something seemed to stir in the shadow of the coachhouse.

A wild-looking, huddled-up figure in black appeared to crawl out of the stable, and then to run with incredible swiftness out of the yard down the street.

Zub caught sight of it, and emitted a low growl.



With one tremendous effort Jack dragged the dog from the iron monster's path. Zub was saved after all.

NEXT
WEEK,

"THE BOVIANDERS."

By
Scrope Haggerston.

Again he ranged round; but this time he took a wider detour, and finally pulled up against the coachhouse, just where the mysterious figure had first of all appeared. There he seemed to strike a stronger scent, for, with a loud bay, he darted off into the street also.

Jack, of course, tore after him immediately; but the dog now was going at a mad rate, and again and again he had to whistle to him, otherwise he would have lost sight of him for good. The wild-looking figure in black, however, seemed to have disappeared like magic. The detective peered into every corner and likely place of concealment, as he pounded on in Zub's wake; but he could not find a trace of the fugitive.

Luckily, the hour was late, and the streets comparatively deserted, and Jack found himself unimpeded in his passage through Cockspur Street and down Northumberland Avenue. Some pedestrians did not notice them. Others concluded that he was late, and was running to catch a train, and so, indeed, it turned out, for the extraordinary part of the adventure then began.

Without a rally, Zub dashed into the Underground Railway station at Charing Cross, just as a train was going westward. Instantly he sprang into a carriage, Jack followed, the door was closed with a crash behind them, and the train steamed out. Wiping the perspiration that poured in streams off his forehead, the detective looked about him. Then he received a terrible shock.

The first object his eyes fell upon was that unkempt, huddled-up figure he had disturbed in the coachhouse.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIGHT IN THE TUNNEL.

For some seconds Jack Fairfax, the detective, sat in that third-class carriage on the Underground Railway, and silently watched the dark, mysterious figure he had tracked from that home of tragedy to which he had been summoned. Zub, the bloodhound, crouched at his feet—crouched with fangs thrown back, and great eyes gleaming, ready at a sign to spring.

In that dim light of the compartment, however, Jack found it difficult to decide whether the person he had followed was a man or a woman. A long black cloak enveloped the figure from top to toe, and the features were hidden in a curious combination of cap and hood, that entirely concealed the face and shape of head.

At first he felt tempted to move across the carriage, and sit opposite this strange-looking creature. Indeed, he cleared his voice, and was about to begin this manoeuvre by asking some harmless, unnecessary question, when a startling incident happened.

Two long, white, nervous-looking hands were thrust out of the depths of the black robe, clutching an oblong box of red mahogany, clamped in heavy bindings of brass.

What could this casket contain? In spite of himself, as it were, he was fascinated by its appearance in such a place and such a circumstance, and he watched it with almost feverish interest. As much as anything, it resembled a case of surgical instruments. Then his quick eyes caught a glimpse of the fingers that held the box.

What cruel, hawklike fingers they were!—fingers that you might readily imagine belonged to one of the old Stranglers of Paris, or of that vile, fanatic sect that terrorised half India at one time—the Thugs who elevated murder to a religion. And yet they were fingers that might, curiously enough, belong to man or woman—taper, lithe, sinuous fingers; but strong, oh! so strong! He could fancy that they, once fixed on a human neck, would never release their hold until they attained their purpose.

These thoughts concerning these hands flashed like lightning through his brain. The next moment he saw that the box in question was being opened. He almost held his breath as he shifted a few inches nearer the figure, and craned his neck to catch the first glimpse of the contents.

Now, whether it was the animal's wonderful instinct that warned him of coming danger or not, Jack never decided; but just at that moment Zub threw back his head, and gave vent to a loud and angry roar.

"Be quiet, you brute!" the detective snapped, fearful lest the figure might take alarm and hide the casket again in the depths of its cloak.

The next moment he heard some sounds—sounds which resembled a creaky glass-stopper being drawn from the neck of a bottle, and almost immediately afterwards the apartment became filled with the heavy oppressive odour of chloroform!

There was a crash, too, as the lid of the box was closed again with a click, and the casket itself hidden in the robe. Then a small medicine bottle seemed to be flung with incredible force right beside the bloodhound, and to smash into a dozen fragments.

With an angry exclamation, Jack sprang to his feet. The

volatile spirit had, however, penetrated to his brain, and he reeled.

As he did so, the figure rose for the first time—rose to its full proportions, dark and vengeful, but inscrutable. Jack could have sworn he heard a laugh—the low, musical laugh of a woman, who had succeeded in some diabolical purpose, and could not forbear to jeer. He rushed towards it; but it was too late.

As it had stood there, towering above him, it had unfastened the door, and, when he moved, it wheeled round, and, with incredible rapidity, flung itself out of the moving train!

Jack for the instant sank on the seat, again overcome by the chloroform, and fear that he should hear horrible shrieks. The rush of air from the outside, however—dark and sulphurous, and smoke-laden as it was—revived him, and Zub, too, who gave one long look at his master, rose, and, before a word could be spoken to him, leaped out of the carriage.

Certain that the dog must have been cruelly mangled by a fall against the side of the tunnel, the detective darted towards the door and peered out.

No, it was not so. In the dim light that poured from the carriages in the rear of the train Jack saw Zub again—Zub with his nose on the ground ranging about, evidently seeking the track of the fugitive. He gave one long sob of relief, and hesitated no further.

Swinging himself on to the footboard of the carriage, he gently closed the door of the compartment behind him, and when the train began to slacken speed, on its entrance to Westminster Bridge Station, he quietly lowered himself on to the track, faced about, and tore off as hard as he could down the tunnel.

There was no doubt about it; the dog's prompt devotion to duty at the critical juncture inspired him. All thought of danger was forgotten, and he was filled with a burning desire to be avenged on that mysterious creature who had tried to drug him, and had then laughed at him.

Pressing his elbows close to his sides, he raced down the narrow path at the side of the line. Away in the distance he caught the noisy rush of an oncoming train, and, realising that trains followed one another on the Underground Railway every ninety seconds, a fresh dread seized him. Suppose the track of the fugitive led Zub towards that engine! Suppose the faithful hound was so keen about the scent that he did not heed its approach?

The bare idea of the possible horror attached to this theory made him increase his pace to one wild, frenzied rush; but so oppressive was the air that surrounded him, that his breath came and went in great laboured, loudly-drawn gasps.

He could not see a yard in front of him. The tunnel was enveloped in darkness, as foul and as black as pitch.

Several times he collided with the wall at the side, and bruised both his head and his hands. Once his feet caught in the metals themselves, and he fell headlong across the sleepers with a thud that left him half senseless.

Still he did not give in.

He rose and stumbled on.

Louder and louder grew the rattle of the wheels. Across a great intervening blotch of blackness he caught sight of the flaring lamp of the engine, from the tunnel of which trailed lurid clouds of vapour.

Oh! where was Zub?

The train seemed dashing towards him with the speed of an express.

Jack at last stopped dead-beat with terror, and shouted frantically "Zub! Zub!"

But no answer came.

The rattle of the oncoming train seemed to mock him as though demons rode in the wheels, and sported aloud with his grief. He staggered out of the way of the engine, and, with eyeballs starting from his head, crouched in a manhole in the wall, watching the train drawing nearer and nearer; in such a deafening noise at that he could not think. He could only wait.

Suddenly the light from the lamp on the engine fell athwart the track. It was only some twenty or thirty yards distant then, but it revealed Zub standing in front of it intently sniffing the ground.

With one wild shriek Jack sprang out of his retreat.

He caught the dog by the collar, and, with one tremendous effort, literally swung himself and the dog out of the way of the wheels that thundered past them, leaving them panting and breathless behind a turn in the wall, but uninjured. Zub was saved after all!

CHAPTER VI.

THE FINDING OF THE WAXEN IMAGE.

Luckily, the bend in the tunnel, against which Jack Fairfax and the bloodhound waited until the red glowing tail lights of the train disappeared in the distance was close to a ventilating

shaft. As they crouched close to the wall, a cold, fresh air played about them, and by its aid the detective found that he recovered quickly from the terrible suspense he had suffered since Zub first of all jumped out of the train.

But where was the dark, mysterious figure that leapt out of the carriage before they did? And what association had it with the murder of Viola Norris?

For some moments, indeed, the detective stopped and pondered over the extraordinary series of incidents that had followed his search around the stables of the mysterious house, and, finally, he decided that the best thing he could do was to trust to the bloodhound's sagacity, and follow the dangerous scent he had stumbled on.

"Forward, good dog," he said, bending down, and fastening a small leather strap to Zub's collar, and instantly the animal bayed, and started back to the point where Jack had found him.

He did not remain, however, very long upon the metals—an interval which his master took advantage of to see that his revolver was properly cocked, and to place his dark lantern (alight, but shielded) in a handier position. Barely had the sounds of another oncoming engine echoed through the tunnel than the good dog picked up the scent again, and, with an impatient little growl, he dragged Jack across the track to the other side of the line.

Here they came face to face with a small door in the wall, against which Zub reared himself, and which he shook with evident uneasiness.

At first the detective felt inclined to pause and reconnoitre, fearful lest they might have brought the mysterious stranger to bay, and, that directly the pair of them appeared, the dog might be shot.

But Zub would not wait. His hide began to bristle, and he bayed loudly as again and again he dropped on to his fore-feet, and then dashed madly against the door.

There was no help for it but to go forward, so Jack threw the light of his lantern on the entrance, and to his joy he discovered that the key had been left in the lock outside.

With the aid of this, he dragged open the door, and found before him a long, low, narrow passage, down which he began to creep almost doubled up. The passage, too, got smaller and smaller as they proceeded. At last the detective had to drop to his hands and knees, and crawl through the opening, which was made of brick, and, curiously enough, ascended all the while, but was kept scrupulously clean.

Jack, however, would not let the dog go first for fear something might happen to him. His lantern he had to fix again in his belt, to leave his hands free, in case of some sudden and unexpected attack. But the darkness remained intense. Ah! what was that?

Suddenly the detective's hands closed over something soft and delicate, like a woman's frock. He could have shrieked, so sudden was the shock; but, mastering his agitation, he stretched his fingers farther out, half afraid that he should discover he had in front of him a corpse.

For a moment he could feel nothing save this cloth, but eventually one of his hands came in contact with something cold and rounded, like the face of a girl; and then he touched human hair.

Snatching his lantern, he turned the shield off the glass. At first the rays of light fell on the roof, and he saw that the passage itself had opened out at last, and that he could stand up once again. He struggled to his feet at once, and turned the lantern on to the floor.

As he did so, Zub rushed forward, and pulled the hood away from the head, revealing the image of a girl in wax!

For the moment, indeed, Jack Fairfax was too amazed to move or speak. He could only gaze, dumbfounded by this apparition in his path; but as he looked and looked, something familiar in the features of the model, quarter-sized though it was, started to his brain. He bent down then and scrutinised it more closely than ever, and the awful truth burst upon him.

The image was the image of Viola Norris, the girl who had been so foully done to death in Berkeley Square; and the cloak that had hidden it was the cloak worn by the mysterious figure he had tracked!

What did that weird creature want with a model like that? he wondered. There were plenty of portraits of Viola Norris in existence. He had seen three or four different ones hanging on the walls of the murdered girl's bedroom. A wax model like that was such an uncanny thing to carry under a black robe on the Underground. The mere fact, however, that it had been left proved to him that the fugitive not only knew of his pursuit, but had found that he and Zub were gaining on him. It was a clue, at all events, and the detective carefully wrapped it up and thrust it under his arm, and hurried forward.

All the time he had passed there the bloodhound had been straining at his leash, and low that he set off the dog tore along the passage at a tremendous pace, so that he soon reached a flight of stone steps, which he mounted.

Halfway up, a fresh interruption occurred. Zub came

abruptly to a stop on a landing, where the steps branched off in three different directions. He seemed puzzled, and for fully ten minutes wandered about in a very confused fashion, stopping at last at the top of a flight of stairs, up which they had just come.

"Now, Zub, old man!" cried Jack encouragingly, "this delay, you know, will never do. Every moment just now is precious. Surely the track is not exhausted yet!"

The dog gave a low growl, but would not move, or even raise his head.

Half puzzled and half alarmed, the detective unfastened his lantern, and placed it on the floor, to see whether he could discover any footprints. To his intense surprise he found that the landing at that point was wet.

All at once a suspicion of the truth flashed upon him.

He bent down and dipped his finger in the liquid. Ah! it was as he had expected. The stains on the floor were stains of human blood!

"Confound it!" he muttered savagely to himself, "this creature we are tracking down will be too much for us if we don't mind! He or she, or whoever it be, has read somewhere that human blood spilt on a trail will throw a bloodhound off the scent, and they have probably gashed themselves, with an idea that they will throw Zub wrong."

All the time, too, he was losing most precious moments; and yet, in spite of that, he had to pause and set his wits to work to find some method of putting Zub on the trail again.

Truth to tell, the poor dog's scent was hopelessly spoilt by this ruse. He could only wander round and round, and again set up a piteous little whine.

Luckily, a brilliant idea occurred to his master. Jack led the dog right away from the bloodstains and caressed him for a few moments, and made him, with the aid of a biscuit and a piece of cheese, quite forget his disappointment. Then he showed him the black cloak.

Ah! he was right, too. The cloak had been worn by the fugitive they had tracked with so much persistence, for, with a loud bay, the faithful dog suddenly recovered the scent, and with his great red eyes gleaming, and his tongue protruding, he bounded up the nearest flight of steps and darted into a small enclosure near Scotland Yard Lost Property Office.

Jack unfastened him then, and let him scramble over the railings, certain that in the busy thoroughfares of London the dog would not go too quickly ahead. Then he vaulted over the railings, too, and soon detective and hound were speeding down Victoria Street, hot on the trail of one of the cruellest murderers London has ever known.

It was at that juncture he discovered that the waxen image he carried hidden in the black cloak attracted much unwelcome attention, and at last he paused, and dived into a District Messenger office, where he wrapped up the parcel in brown paper and sealed it, and left the thing there "till called for, to the order of John Fairfax, detective."

Little did he guess at that moment what a magnificent clue he had in that despised model.

Little did he realise that at the critical moment in his quest he would seek the image with trembling, and would not for many, many weary days find it; that when he did get it into his hands again it would solve one of the most trying points he had ever had to settle, and save him in one of his cruellest, bitterest trials!

No, all he cared about was the place Zub was making for; and as the dog pursued his road, on, on, always on, he keenly scrutinised every figure ahead of him, hoping by Zub's means to identify his fellow-passenger on the Underground.

Suddenly his attention was attracted to Zub.

The great bloodhound turned out of the main thoroughfare against a huge brick building, which he entered through a small door set in two larger wooden doors on an arch.

Instantly Jack recollected that this immense place was a barracks, and he speedily quickened his pace.

Wherever could Zub be going next?

He was not long left in doubt. The dog suddenly began to show signs of painful excitement and to bay loudly, as he dashed across the barrack-square.

Against a door in the officers' quarters, painted white, however, he stopped and waited—waited, with gleaming eyes and quivering body, for the arrival of his master.

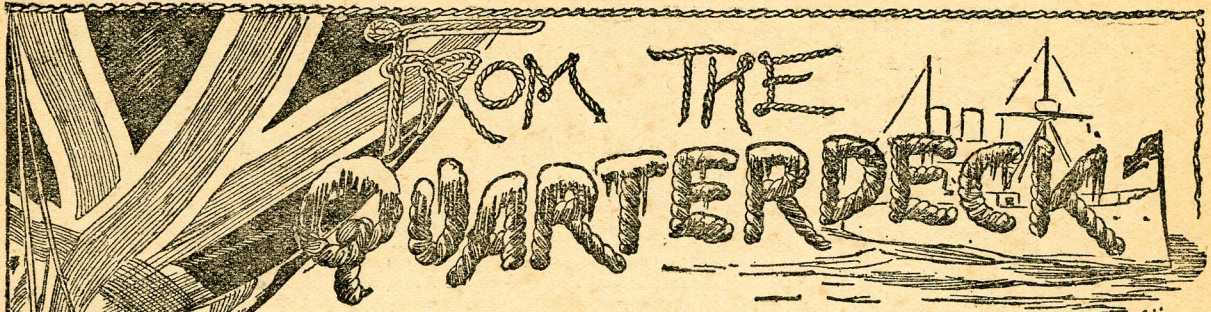
At last Jack, too, reached the point where he stood. Picture the detective's surprise when he saw painted in black letters on the door the name "Captain Mortimer," and he recollected that this same officer was the bosom friend of Lieutenant Edward Glyn, the man who was engaged to the murdered Viola Norris!

"Here is mystery, if you like!" muttered Jack to himself. "I am on the eve of some tremendous discovery here, I'm certain."

He raised his hand and knocked loudly.

A moment later the door opened, and Zub rushed in with a furious snarl.

(To be continued in next week's number.)



By the Skipper of the "UNION JACK."

The Editor will endeavour to answer any questions that may be put to him by readers; but in future every query to receive an answer must have attached to it two of the numbers—146, or whatever it may be—from the cover of the issue for the week in which the reader sends in his question. All letters must bear the full name and address of the writer, and a non-de-plume for publication.

will yarn more readily over the wash-tub than at any other time.

Very soon the decks and ropes will be covered with thick white soapsudes, till it looks as though a snowstorm had just passed over, the bending forms of the shell-backs and the hum of their conversation being the most complete transformation from the ordinary scene on board.

KEEP A WATCHFUL EYE FOR OUR STARTLING NEW FEATURE.

As the numbers thin out, the pump is rigged and manned by willing volunteers, who, relieving one another, soon rinse in copious quantities of sea water the clothing so scantily washed in fresh.

Then the rigging and stays, from masthead to deck, are soon garlanded with garments, tied up with little pieces of string called "stops" (the sailors' clothes-peg), and in an incredibly short time the decks are washed and dried, the fiddle appears, and Jack is soon footing it merrily, with his messmate for a partner, joyous with the gratified feeling that his kit is again clean, and ready for inspection.

The next day, when the clothes are taken down dry, the pudding-roller and the mess-stool are utilised as a mangle, and though the water is scanty and cold, the whiteness and neatness of a sailor's wardrobe does credit to his powers as a laundress.

*Yours sincere friend,
The Skipper*

The Editor's Portrait Album.

I want to get together a gigantic collection of the portraits of UNION JACK readers. How many of you will send your photographs to me? All, I hope. I shall be very pleased indeed to print all the portraits I receive on this page, in turns. Now hurry up, all of you. Who will first see his likeness on this page?

A STARTLING NEW FEATURE STARTS SHORTLY.

"The Black Seal" is booming. Thousands of letters in appreciation of it reach me every week. Will you repay me for giving you an opportunity of reading such a story, by such an author, at such a price, by telling your friends about it?

LOOK OUT FOR OUR NEW FEATURE.

One of the most interesting sights to be witnessed on board a man-of-war is the manner in which the men wash their clothes.

Washing night occurs as a rule twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. After evening inspection, the boatswain's mate pipes, "Serve out washing water," and then follows an immediate scamper—or scuttle, sailors would say—in the direction of the hose from which the water is issued.

IT IS COMING.

The captain of the hold, who is the petty officer in charge of the water, provisions, &c., controls the supply to each mess, and it generally amounts to half a gallon per man. With twenty men in a mess, there are thus ten gallons issued, or about a decent-sized tubful.

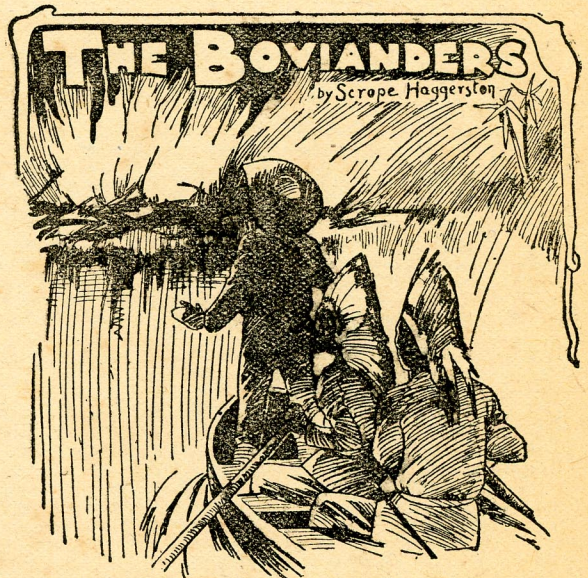
If each man of the twenty has, say, two garments to cleanse, our lady readers will have some idea of the state of the liquid when their task is finished. All hands are crowded into the smallest possible space, and it would be out of the question for every member of a mess to get at the tub at the same time; four and even five batches will, one after the other, use the same water.

OUR NEW FEATURE IS COMING.

Washing night is pretty nearly the only occasion when Jack is allowed any laxity in his dress, and of this privilege he takes the fullest possible advantage. With trousers tucked well up above the knee, and clad only in his flannel or some more gorgeous and wonderful garment, and with a cap of any hue, he is eager for the fray.

Like the member of the other sex when engaged in similar employment, he is very fond of gossip on these occasions, and

**LOOK FOR NEW
OUT OUR FEATURE!**



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