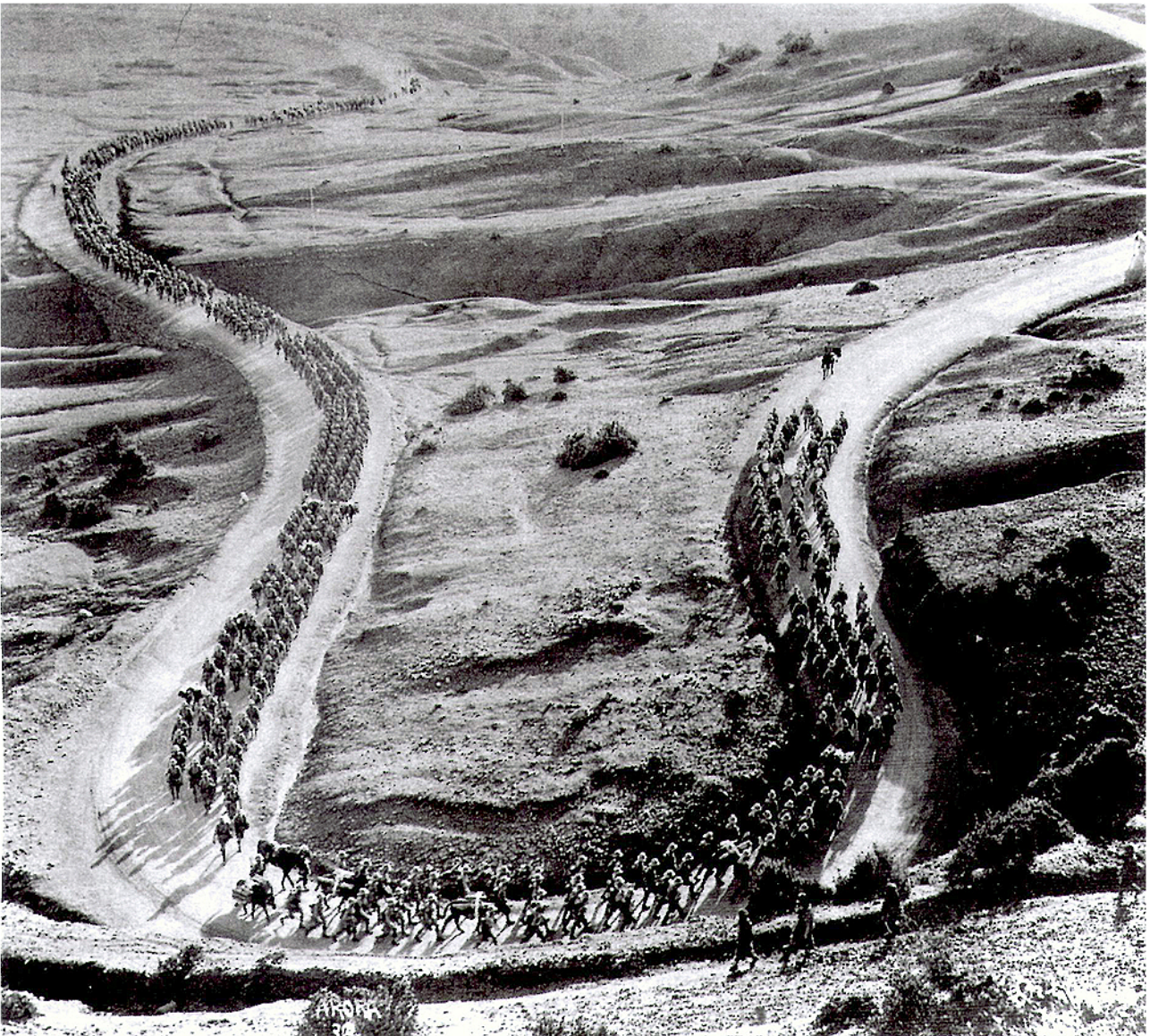


The King's Gora-Wallahs



Don MacNaughton

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*This book is dedicated to:
All British soldiers who,
In the 1920's and 1930's
Trooped east by sea for service in the 'shiny'.*

*Men known to the
Indian native population as
'Gora-Wallahs'.*



CHAPTER 1

*There's little in my lifetime left,
In the race I'm well behind.
Still the memory of my younger days,
So strong, so sweet, so kind.*

David Kerr

Scant attention was paid to the two old men as they slowly paced their way upwards out of the bowels of the Waterloo underground system to the train platforms above. Little attention was paid to them because they were just two elderly men, like thousands of others who had reached the twilight period of their lives, where the younger London travellers around them looked and thought nothing – they were just two old men. Yet if the sharp glances had lingered a few seconds longer, perhaps they would have noted that both, not accepting their age as a shroud, instead seemed to wear it with dignified pride as if distinguished dress. Perhaps also some, but only some, might have noticed a hint of a military air in their posture and manner. If so, they would not have been wrong; both were ex-army, having between them served over sixty years with the Colours.

The younger but taller, Joe Penton, was seventy-eight, his hair un-thinned, silver white, with a trimmed matching moustache. Wearing a coat of thick, sand coloured camel-hair, in his right hand was a walking stick, used to ease the stride of his right leg, that years earlier, broken at the thigh by a Japanese bayonet thrust, was now affected by a touch of arthritis. Ben Tysall, his companion, aged eighty, walked with faint sagging of the shoulders, made more prominent by hands buried in his overcoat pocket but his back was held straight. Hidden by a grey plaid trilby was a casualty of the years, his once coal black hair gone, only a speckled, granite-toned lower fringe remaining.

It was almost ten o'clock on a mild Saturday evening in October 1982 and the two gentlemen were returning from what was for them a memorable occasion, the sixtieth anniversary of the sailing for India of the 2nd Battalion the Queen's Light Infantry. Memorable, because this was the last time it would be held. Every two or three years for the last twenty Lieutenant-General Sir Miles Holt-Bate would arrange for a formal regimental reunion dinner to be provided in one of the messes at the Duke of York's Territorial Army Centre, standing at the Chelsea end of the King's Road, London. Now it was being brought to an end for the most obvious reason. After sixty years, of the two thousand or so men who served with the 2nd QLI in India during the mid-1920's who qualified to attend, only seventeen had sat at that night's dinner. Of those hundreds of others who could not appear, most had been excused through fatal Indian service sickness, Pathan bullets, or later by Hitler's and Hirohito's bullets, mines and shells. It was for these who died as much as for the living that the reunion was launched. For, at the close of the meal, when General Holt-Bate bid everyone rise to their feet for the three loyal toasts: to Queen, Regiment and absent friends, it was the last that brought the diners' memories of distantly remembered brown, smiling boyish faces, framed in hot, dusty, sun blinding plains.

Of the two Joe had remained in the army longest: thirty-seven years, four of which he spent fighting the Japanese, first up out of Burma, then with the 14th Army back down again. He had finished in 1957 holding a quartermaster's commission as a lieutenant-colonel. Shortly after, during Ministry of Defence economy cut-backs, the Regiment was amalgamated, then in the 1960's amalgamated again. Today, the bones of what is left can be found somewhere in the framework of what is now the Light Division.

Ben left the army much earlier, in 1946. On the outbreak of World War II he was the

Regimental Sergeant Major of the 1st Battalion, who were sent to France during the War's phoney first nine months. Wounded during the retreat back to Dunkirk, on recovery he was appointed RSM of the depot, where his age kept him for the duration of the war.

Catching the tube from Sloane Square the two old soldiers left Chelsea for Waterloo where both were to board the last train for Edenbridge, Kent. Joe had a bungalow there where he lived alone. A widower for the last seven years, he and his wife had spent many pleasant days there where for some time Joe had kept himself active as a local councillor. Ben, accepting the other's invitation to spend the night, would travel back to the Midlands on Sunday afternoon. Setting up a garage and taxi business in 1948, on retiring, he now lived outside Derby with his granddaughter and her husband, for he too was a widower. In the narrow tunnel way leading up to the bank of steep escalators that would carry them to the station above, the two men exchanged light conversation unhindered by the dull hollow echoes from their footsteps. This changed, with the sound coming down towards them of thunderous running and foul swearing. Suddenly upon them was a body of hurrying football supporters, skinheads mostly, wearing braces attached to short-legged jeans, football club caps or scarves and weaponish-looking boots.

Ben Tysall, on the outside, seeing the mass of youths approaching, tried to drop back behind his friend to allow them free passage. Arrogantly ill-mannered with drink and numbers they shouldered past brushing Ben aside, one jabbing out with a straight arm to push him away. Ben, never in his life accepting violence meekly, struck out with a back-hander catching the youth on the ear with the heel of his hand.

"Imbecilic yob", dismissed Tysall, placing his hand back in his coat pocket to continue walking.

The skinhead who had received the cuff spun about holding his ear. Judging not the justification of the old man's retaliation or the cowardliness of his own actions, the young thug charged at Ben with kicks and punches, screaming abuse.

"See ya, ya decrepit old fart!"

The first blow struck Tysall on the back of the neck. Turning, the second smashed his eye glasses to the ground, embedding splinters in his right eye first. With kicks being aimed at his crotch the old soldier stayed on his feet, doggedly but feebly returning punch for punch, then with the courage of the pack he was set upon and beaten to the ground by four or five gleeful skin headed creatures screaming foul abuse.

The speed of the action caught Joe totally unprepared. One moment his companion dropped back behind him, the next he turned to face a howling mob set on kicking his friend, now at his feet, to death. With an anguished bellow he lunged forward striking blows with his cane, beating back the mob to stand legs astride his fallen mate. Momentarily they recoiled, as much in shock of Penton's crazed appearance as from the sting of his stick. For crazed Joe was, so sudden and atrocious was the assault and so similar to a past attack on them, that he, in a raging trauma, was in mind and vision sped back in time, fighting that enemy and not these modern street savages around him.

Dusk on a Frontier hillside – it was Ben down this time – he defending him. The tribesmen in their ragged, grime-grey soiled dress were on them, jabbing and cutting with their curved bladed *tulwars*. Scraggy men with beak noses, unkempt beards and dirt tarnished turbans, they closed in. Again Penton smelled the stomach turning defilement of decayed, layered, unwashed body stench, amassed from goat droppings, wood and dung smoke, camel urine and a hundred other excreted wastes picked up while asleep on village earth. Wild eyed, he stood swinging his walking stick as if a rifle butt, his burning vow: they would not take his mate alive. Screaming almost forgotten eastern curses "Bug jow! Behnchod! Bug jow!" They, in his delusion, were also howling a Pathan battle cry: "Halla! Halla!"

Defending to his front, Penton never saw the brute who stepped up behind to plunge the blade of a knife into the base of his back. Sagging, he dropped his guard and was punched in the mouth. As his knees gave way a razor carpet knife sliced a thin, deep instantly bloody line from left forehead to jaw bone. Collapsed on top of Ben Tysall, a further attack with boots was delivered to his face and head. Then for several seconds the tunnel vibrated with victory whoops, cries and the echoing of fleeing boot steps.

Breaking the silence that followed came the click-clicking of a woman's high heeled shoes approaching from the tunnel's rail end. At first she believed them to be just a couple of passed-out drunks. Then she saw the blood, the little rivulets that joined to search for a way downward over the dirty cement floor and with a choked inwards gasp she stepped back, the sight of Joe Penton's gouged face almost causing her to faint.

--oOo--

The nearby St Thomas's hospital was where the two battered old gentlemen were taken to repair and recover, just another couple of victims thrown up on an average Saturday night in central London. Dealt with first by casualty reception, they were X-rayed, operated on for glass splinters in an eye, the knife wound and cuts stitched. In Joe Penton's case this meant thirty-seven to his facial slash alone. For the next four days they were kept in intensive care under sedation to spare them the pain accompanying consciousness.

On the fifth morning Penton, recovering from a second operation to ascertain mending to a kidney and intestines, stared at the ceiling with one eye, the one nearest the stitched slash. The other, swollen closed from repeated kicks, was an ugly distortion of dark purple and red flesh. He passed over an hour that way repeatedly closing the eye to rest it, slowly getting to grips with his memory as the effects of the operation's anaesthetic wore off.

"How is Ben?" were the first words from Joe Penton's lips on hearing someone walk past the foot of his bed.

"Oh, so we have decided to come back to the land of the living!" replied the black ward sister, who upon being asked, stopped to peer inquisitively into Joe's one good eye.

"I asked, how is Ben?" repeated Penton.

"Now, would that be Mister Tysall, Mister Penton?" answered the sister in a Caribbean accent, her voice a lilt going up and down as if on musical scales, presenting Joe with a question of her own.

"Yes, Ben Tysall, how is he?" pressed the old man once more.

"In better shape than you, Mister Penton" was the woman's quick return, "Now rest, keep quiet, the Doctor will be around soon".

As the ward sister took his wrist for a pulse check Joe again fell asleep.

By the end of the week both men were moved to a ward, confined to bed, unable to make contact and still far too ill to be allowed even to sit up. Here at least they were able to have visitors. Ben Tysall's granddaughter and her husband spent half an hour with him but she in the end left in tears. Penton's own granddaughter, his second eldest, came alone one evening, but on seeing him, collapsed on his chest to sob for most of her stay. She was his favourite because she reminded him so of his wife and Joe did his best to joke and comfort, stroking her hair.

Nine days after the assault, in the early hours of Monday morning, Joe Penton eased his bed clothes back, laboriously pushing himself upright to work his legs off the mattress and himself into a sitting position. Pausing to let the dizziness subside, he studied the glass panelled cubical three beds away. There the young duty night nurse was intent on writing a letter to her boyfriend. Preparing for his next move Joe took hold of the drip tube where it was fitted to a needle permanently fixed into a blood vein and taped to his left forearm. With

a sharp tug he disconnected it, then clutching his bed, placed his feet on the floor to work his unsteady way around it. His neighbour, able to move about the ward with the aid of aluminium crutches, left these each night resting against a chair. Penton, taking one to use as a prop, painstakingly worked his way down the ward. Clinging first to a chair then pivoting on the crutch to grasp a table end, he slowly, with repeated stops for breath, navigated his way from bed to bed.

Halting at each of these he would study the occupant's face with his one good eye until he was sure it wasn't whom he was seeking. Then with a whispered sigh of recognition he shunted his body towards a bedside chair, guiding himself on wavering limbs into its rest. With a forehead speckled with tiny pearls of sweat, he slouched for a full minute to let the swirl and nausea confusing his mind subside and calm his accelerated heart beat. Reaching out to hold one of Ben Tysall's hands he gazed at his friend's stubbled unshaven face. From what he could see, which was just the lower half, he was in bad shape, swollen and scabbed. His eyes and head were tightly bandaged. What Penton didn't know was, under this, Tysall had a fractured skull, one eye blind from glass splinters, the other closed by puffy flesh and beneath the bed linen, ruptured organs. Adjusting his grip on Tysall's hand, Penton settled back in the chair in prelude to a vigil in the company of a man whose comradeship he valued more than his own life. Unexpectedly, the hand he held gave his own an exploratory press.

"That..... that you, Joe?"

Tysall's voice came slowly and artificially through a broken, wired-shut jaw.

"Yes, it's me," answered Penton just above a whisper, not wanting to alert the night nurse to the fact that he had gone walkabout.

"You alright?" asked Ben, his head motionless, only the lips moving.

"Like a Hindu temple gong," growled Penton dryly, "the only thing easing the pain is seeing you and knowing you must be hurting more".

This brought a gurgled chuckle followed by a pledge from the bedded man.

"Last time I get you into a fight, promise".

"When did I last hear that?" replied Penton with a half smile, his eye remaining closed.

"Ya! Ya!, remember the All India Football Cup?" Tysall's humour bubbling with the question.

"I remember the All India Football Cup," answered Penton in a deliberate tone, "why is it you always picked ten to one odds?"

Both laughed to themselves for a moment, squeezing the other's hand.

"Remember that march back through that bloody monsoon?" prompted Penton, continuing their drift back to youthful days.

"And the bloody CO on his bloody horse," confirmed Ben.

There followed a pause as memories wandered, broken first by the older man.

"Joe, remember Leela?"

"Of course" Penton affectionately answered as, softly, Tysall added simply, but in a manner that hung with emotion:

"I loved her Joe, I loved her so much."

Heedless of their injuries, disregarding the fact that they were wasting strength vitally needed to knit muscle fibre and hold together tissues that with the ease of parting cobwebs would begin to haemorrhage, they continued to jog, test and verify one another's memory of people, events, but above all places, the names of which were once as common to every English schoolboy as his own town streets: Lucknow, Meerut, Poona, Peshawar, Khyber, Waziristan. Also others requiring close scanning of large scale maps - Bannu, Landi Kotal, Landi Khana, Wana, Rasmak, all at one time of great significance to those who governed India and more so to those who defended it. These and many, many other frontier outposts of the British Empire still remained living history, although shut in the memories of grey

unnoticed men like Joe Penton and Ben Tysall.

Gradually their reminiscences dwindled as did the speed of reply, Tysall's voice weakening, the hesitation between speech longer, until it was only Penton setting the questions. Then on asking, "That loose-wallah shot in the lines at Ferozepore, who shot him, Pani Waters or was it Bert Collins?"

From the man in bed no sound came, silent and serene he lay. Penton gave the hand he held a gentle squeeze. Tense with foreboding he waited for just the faintest of acknowledgements but none came. Penton, with head bowed, his eyes closed sank in his chair. As tears Joe knew nothing of trickled from his one good eye, his fingers took hold of Tysall's with a determined grip, the two wrinkled, thinly fleshed hands bonding.

His mind now at peace, his whole being perched on the edge of enchanted oblivion, Penton willingly let himself tumble over its abyss to fly to a land that had once made him plead and cry for release from its heats and depravities. But also, also to a land that noosed a man's soul with a silken cord, entwining each new sight and sound in retention, remaining in later years as fresh and clear as its first day of experiencing. Willingly enslaved, those hostages, would, in the stillness of a summer evening or the warmth of a winter room, hear again the rhythmical grind of the bullock cart, smell the sweetness of wild jasmine and see the kite hawks circle in slothful loops above a furnace dry plain.

High over a jewel blue ocean he soared, through the sentinel swallows stationed well seaward. At the boundary where the lands tart, pungent scent forewarned of its closeness, he sucked in the familiar breath.

"I've returned," he almost cried. "I've returned."

At its palm fringed shore he climbed above the coastal Ghats, over the cane and millet crop fields of the Deccan plateau, to green wooded hills and thick foreshadowing jungle. This gave way for many miles to withered land, once sprouting, and now dehydrated life gravely awaiting the monsoon rains. Now border green appeared along the banks of the Ganges, the life and mother of India. Soon the land raised again, a foretoken of the nearness of the mighty Himalayas, and for Penton his goal.

To his right the tea plantations of Darjeeling, in terraced meadows, tottering on the hilly slopes. Before him a pine-shaded foothill ridge with bungalows dotted among them and there the larger mission hospital. Following the miniature rail line to its western terminus, where the tracks began their zigzag drop to the plain, he settled from flight below the trees, alone except for the presence of a young girl with straight blond hair, in a pale dress patterned with tiny flowered lilacs.

"A kiss?" she was saying, "a kiss for saving my life? I'll not pay a forfeit for that."

Then she tripped away to the edge of a sloping glade to turn about. Beyond was a broad valley that plunged downwards five thousand feet to a river, silver thread in size. Way off in the distance were purple mountains, their crowns all smothered in grey banks of rain filled murk, except for one protruding out to catch the sun's full blaze, its snowy greatness floating as an island on cotton white clouds. Separate from all else, this, the grandeur that was Mount Everest. Flanking the glade were evergreen Rhododendrons, bloomed in reds and pinks, again the fragrance of pine and wild roses adding to the delight of the moment.

Standing with arms at her sides, the girl, with a challenging smile, set her terms:

"A kiss as a forfeit I'll not give you, Joe Penton. What I will do is give it as a gift in gratitude. But you will have to come and claim it!"

As her arms swung out from her body, palms opening to beckon, the smile faded to one of languor, filled with enticement.

"Come Joe, claim your reward."

This time he did not rush, not like the first time – there was no need. They were here together once again and this time, this time they would not part. Spreading his own arms,

with an unhurried lightness of pace, he began to approach.
“I’m coming Rose, I’m coming.”

CHAPTER 2

*The adventurer is an outlaw.
Adventure must start with
running away from home.*

William Bolitho

The last item Joe Penton picked up to stow in his small hand-case, was his father's present, given to him the evening before. Lifting the sparkling brass safety razor from its small wooden container box, he admired the instrument's newness, then replacing it, closed the little lid, securing the locking catch. The present was a combined gift marking two occasions: his eighteenth birthday and his departure from home. Joe was off to join the army.

Born in the next bedroom but one, he had grown up in this house, a house on his father's four hundred acre tenant farm. The home and farm, owned by a Lord, whose family claim dated back to William the Conqueror, was only one of several such holdings on the estate. Both building and land came together as a farm more than a century earlier, when the crops taken then were mostly root and cereal. However, this being the county of Kent, gradually the fields around had filled with fruit orchards and hops, understandable, for each was a sure, profitable crop. But Joe's father didn't hold with this canopying of the land. As a young tenant farmer newly married, he added no more trees or high poled framework to his holding, he considered himself as his forefathers had, a custodian of the soil and concentrated on rye, barley, wheat, vetches, swedes and turnips, rotating each field through a four year cycle, keeping the earth nutritious and productive.

Leaving his bedroom, Joe descended the stairs to say his first goodbye. His mother was in the wash-yard behind the kitchen, taking a linen sheet, just hand washed on a scrubbing board, from a large, soap-filled copper basin. She was in the process of wringing it through a hand mangle with wooden rollers, before rinsing it in a tub of cold water.

"We're all ready for the off, then?" she asked, looking up on hearing his metal heeled boots scraping on the flag-stones.

"In a moment," answered Joe uneasily, finding the ceremony of a formal goodbye uncomfortable.

His mother, aware of this, immediately defrosted the air with a smile. Drying her hands on her house-work apron she brushed a lock of speckled grey hair back into place. Taking an arm she walked him through the house, reminding him that from time to time a letter would be appreciated. At the gate they said their farewells with a hug and kisses on cheeks, tears kept in check. His mother, a farmer's wife with daily chores of her own, did not linger over his departure; a minute to wave her son down the farm lane then it was back to the washing. Now past nine o'clock in the morning, with breakfast at six, she had already remade the beds, swept and tidied all rooms, cleaned and rekindled two fire grates. Then after the washing there was Mrs Hilton the carter's wife with the week old baby to visit and bread to be baked, all before midday.

The third time Joe turned to wave, his mother was gone.

To his left, within the huge brick and timbered barn with its weathered grey thatched roof, was where Joe had first realised he would have to find himself another life other than one on this farm. It was at the annual harvest supper held each September, given as a banquet by his father, to show his gratitude to the farm's workforce for their service throughout the past year. With the barn cleared, tables were laid and oil lamps hung from beams to give light in the windowless chamber. At the top table his father sat with George Peters, his foreman and

James, his elder brother. Down the arms of this U-shaped dining formation, tucking into legs of ham, roasts of beef, pork and lamb, were the rest of the farm staff: carters; dairymen; water-keepers; groom-gardener; farm hands; game keeper; his under keepers who managed the ferrets and young sons who worked for the farm, subordinate to their fathers. It was when the foreman got up to reply to his father's seasonal speech, that Joe first ascertained a fact bearing directly upon his future. In previous years he would have begun by addressing a thank you on behalf of all the farm workers to his father, the 'governor', but this time he also included 'young master James'. James was twenty and had attended agricultural school. This simple act of innocent politeness, at first to Joe, seemed nothing but in following days it kept springing back to mind, until its significance flowered the fruit of truth. James was to be the heir and on his father's relinquishing tenancy of the farm, it was to him that it would, no doubt, first be offered. By Michaelmas, the farmers' New Year, only a few weeks later, Joe had made up his mind, his life's purpose could not lie with this farm and set his fate, he would leave before the spring.

A short distance on, where the leafless plum trees that lined the farm lane ended, were the dairy cow sheds. In the yard old Tom Fern, the head dairyman, was loading the farm's horse drawn wagon with the previous evening's and that morning's milk. From the dairy cool-room he and two of his milkers were lifting the silver metal churns from the loading platform into the well of the wagon. Nelson and Wellington, the team, stood still and silent, only occasionally dipping their heads or looking about with bored resignation. Seven days a week these two trudged down to the train station with their cargo for shipment up to London. The dairy was the one concern on the farm that Joe's father had expanded. Milk was a profitable trade even before the war; it had provided income when some field crops had not.

Raising an arm, Joe called to the grey bearded man jinking his milk containers into a neat pack.

"Tom! I'm just up to the West Hill rick to say goodbye to the Governor. But I'll not cause you to be late".

Thus confirming his lift to the train station.

"There's no need to rush, Master Joe. I be waiting at gate when thee done," answered the dairyman, endorsing his reply with a wave of a bony hand.

A ten minute hike brought Joe to the farm's main centre of work for that day. On the brow of a round topped field a gang of men under the watchful eye of his father were threshing a corn rick of barley. The thresher was powered by a steam engine and the two men who ran it had left their beds at four that morning to have the engine ready in place for the commencement of work at seven. It was a dry, cold morning in early March 1922 and late for threshing, but with the sudden jump in the price of feed stocks Joe's father, rather than market the grain, intended its use to supplement the dairy's cow feed.

Threshing was a team job that could not be interrupted. Once begun, the whole procedure must, for the economics of labour, flow with the rhythm of a carousel. As the sheaves were forked up to a man on the thresher, their binding string was cut and the headed stalks fed into the machine. Below, others gathered the grain and built a separate rick from the rebounded chaff. So Joe had picked his moment to call - it was half past nine now and the team was just breaking for their lunch.

For five minutes this group of comrades, because he, since a lad, had shared their work, plied him with good-natured ribbing and well wishes, their faces and clothes caked in grain dust, for threshing was a filthy chore, having to work constantly smothered in its powdery soot.

"You gie' the NCO's no back lip!"

"And jist mind what they say. Doan't want the caper they cause thee for not.

This from two grinning ex-soldiers, survivors of the Great War.

His father, before mounting the pony-drawn trap he used to tour the farm, took Joe's hand, wishing him God's good fortune with the army. Then with a click of his tongue to the horse, he sped off to fulfil an inspection appointment, accompanying his head water-keeper over one of the down river meadows.

Their parting, as with his mother, was not one edged with emotion. His presence by them would be missed, as he of theirs but his parents were of seasoned farming stock and well recognised the logic behind Joe's leaving. A tenant farm could not be halved nor was it in his father's power to do so; Joe was merely treading a path already well travelled in past centuries by countless younger sons. Turning his face from the receding outline of pony and trap as his father trotted the rig into the field's first dip; he waved a last cheerio to the team of threshers eating their cold lunch.

For some moments the youth, on walking away, struggled with the comprehension of his action, but on seeing Tom Fern hunched on the dairy wagon waiting at the farm's boundary gate, he broke into a trot, all doubt vanished.

--oOo--

Joe Penton had never been to London and for this reason he set his mind some months earlier on enlisting there. So with an open, expectant mind he walked out of a South London station to stand to one side of the entrance appraising sight and sound. The street, broad by his estimate, was bustling before him in contrasting motions. Motor cars and lorries weaved hurriedly around slower horse-drawn hansom cabs and teams of tall noble shires hitched to brewers' drays. Brightly painted motor powered omnibuses competed with brown and white track bound trolley buses for the fares of passengers standing at curb sides. Engrossed as he was in the hurly-burly of movement, rattle and grinding of traffic, what struck Penton most vividly was the grime.

Coal, in unlimited abundance, was the country's fuel and had been for numerous decades, but unfortunately its widespread use had a price: The day, dull and cool in the farm lands of Kent, was here thick with artificial haze, the air itself so odious with acrid fumes Penton could taste the atmosphere to the same degree as he could smell it, which, to a visitor, was not a difficulty. Surrounding him were street after street of high buildings, business as well as domestic, and should have stood out in rusty, house-brick red, edged with pleasant, light coloured sandstone or ash white marble facing. Instead, every surface was coated in black soot that lay like a funeral shroud draping the entire city. The cause was not a mystery. Jutting above every roof were uncountable chimneys crowned with tall, slender decorative pots that oozed constant ribbons of blue grey smoke.

Fetching a leaf of paper from his coat pocket, Joe studied a rough street sketch given him by one of the farm-hands, who knew where the nearest army recruiting office was. At his elbow a man in his late twenties, one-armed and with an eye patch, sold papers, the headlines of all proclaiming the previous day's joyous event of the royal wedding between Princess Mary and Viscount Lascelles. Joe fleetingly considered confirming his direction with this man but then thought better. Obviously marked by disfiguring tokens of the Kaiser's War this was not a person from whom to request information about joining the army.

Setting off, he walked along the main street. Up on the walls of some of the buildings were advertising bill boards praising the attractions of teas, whiskeys, tobaccos, gravy stocks and many other commodities. Halting on one corner he again checked his sketch. Down the cobbled side street a horse-drawn coal wagon was being slowly led by a young boy. In front a man, clothes, face and hands stained with coal-dust, paced lagging steps while calling up at the tall tenements: "Coal! Coal!" As Joe watched a woman appeared, pushing a coin into his hand. Tipping his cap to her, the man hoisted a coal bag from the wagon onto his back, before

following the woman into one of the buildings.

Penton found the recruitment office twenty minutes later, after first interrupting his search to have a light lunch at a tea shop. The cost: tuppence for a hot bun and a penny for tea.

Next to a branch office of the Abbey Wood Building Society, he spied a soldier standing on doorway steps. Beside the steps was a framed poster extolling the joys of enlistment.

"I've come to join," announced Penton politely. "Who do I see?"

"Army's full up. Try the navy, Portsmouth, suggest you take the train." replied the soldier sharp and crisp, looking high over Penton's head.

Joe, shocked speechless, could only gawk.

The soldier, in black boots, high puttees, khaki trousers, jacket, peaked cap and red sash angled across his chest, stood hands behind his back, rocking on heels, eyes engrossed in something across the street. Joe, his heart sunk to his feet, froze with indecision to the spot while the soldier, waxed moustache, hair sheared so close none was visible below the cap, totally ignored the youth. With his plans in ruins Joe turned about, shoulders sagging, to walk away.

"Here now, lad, let's not be too hasty with the feet. Perhaps we can find something to suit your talent," called the soldier. "You weren't planning on being a jockey, were you?"

"Jockey?" echoed Penton, mystified.

"Cavalry, my cocker, Cavalry," deciphered the man in uniform.

"No, No, mister! It was my county Regiment I had my heart set on. The Queen's Own Royal West Kent's," replied Penton, his hopes perking up.

"It's sergeant my boy, not mister," pointed out the recruiter, bringing his hands from behind his back to lay a finger on three stripes on his sleeve. In the other hand was a board with a sheet of paper clipped to it. This he began to consult.

"Let's see now". He began running a finger down the paper.

"Kents? Kents? - nay luck, lad - no-one required - have to be the Queen's Light Infantry - How you fancy them?"

"Yes, that'll do fine." Joe leaped from the depth of his despair like a trout to a fly hook.

"Well come along in then, and we'll deal with the formalities," suggested the sergeant.

Inside, business was done in a broad hallway from two desks at the far end, office doors were spaced along one side, a row of chairs along the other. Asked his age and a few other simple questions Joe was handed a shilling coin, told to sign his name, then ordered to take a chair and wait. He picked one unoccupied, next to a dark, square shouldered man in a rolled woollen cap and a heavy sea jacket. His face was weather beaten but Joe put his age at not much older than himself.

"Smoke?" offered the stranger holding out a packet of Churchman's Tenor cigarettes.

"Ben Tysall," he introduced himself, after lighting one for himself. Penton declined while making his own name known.

"What mob you given?" he asked exhaling his first breath of smoke.

"Oh..... Queens'" Joe struggled, unable to remember.

"Queen's Light Infantry," helped Tysall with a smile. "Ya! Me too. I asked for my old Regiment but then let him convince me I'd be better off signing for the Queen's."

Joe, bracing up at hearing Tysall say he had done previous service, was forestalled in learning more by him leaning forward to beckon a tall, skinny, red haired youth to him. He, leaving one of the desks, was on his way out, crestfallen.

"What's the misery, Bluey, get yourself turned down?"

"Eh.... Oh.... Ya! Right and proper too" replied the youngster bitterly.

"Why, what's your affliction?" pressed Ben.

"Age." confessed the youth sheepishly, "Got caught unexpected like, when the bloke asked me how old I was, told him the truth, fifteen."

Ben, forearms on knees, hands cupping his cigarette, his voice low but firm, gave a gentle order: "Get about, march straight back to the same fella' and tell him you're eighteen".

The red haired youth didn't move, still doubtful.

"No hawing," encouraged Tysall, "besides, what's to lose? Now back you go".

With a half sigh the young man raised his head to step about and present himself in front of the same desk as before.

The sergeant sat there, a different man to the one who enrolled Penton, watched his second arrival.

"Well, fellow me lad, what's it this time?"

"Please sir, I'm eighteen," lied the youth with all the conviction of a mouse.

"Grandly stated my boy." congratulated the sergeant, thrusting out both arms, a coin in one hand an ink pen in the other. Here's your King's shilling, sign your name."

Shortly after, the three newly enlisted recruits were approached by a third sergeant and told that they, under his escort, would now journey across to another part of the city for a medical and if passed, be sworn in. Joe, following Tysall, who was carrying a drawstring kit bag over one shoulder, out of the main door, tripped suddenly on the first step on overhearing the conversation between a youth on the street and his recruiting sergeant, again studying the shops opposite from his steps.

"Looking to join the Queen's Light Infantry" said the youth.

"You've no chance there, my hopeful friend, how about the Royal West Kent's? We've a vacancy or two with them."

It seemed at least one recruiting sergeant had found a way of spicing the tedium of his daily task.

Boarding a tram, they were taken to and led down into a tube station. The underground rail system that ran like a gigantic rabbit warren below the heart of one of the world's largest metropolises was for Joe Penton a remarkable revelation. The deep descent, the crowded platforms, the rush of air preceding the tube train's arrival that had both men and women steadying their hats, and the quickness of the journey, left him only taking in half of what had gone on. Emerging again into the blunted city light the little party found their destination to be the Whitehall recruitment centre near New Scotland Yard. Fed along with others that singly and in similar small groups kept replenishing lingering queues, they spent the next two hours waiting, waiting naked on benches holding their clothes in their laps, to be medically examined, waiting, to swear four to a bible an oath of allegiance to King and country and finally, waiting. It was during this last pause that a conversation concerning those such as Penton and Tysall, who had completed their final joining procedure, was overheard. With thirty or so others, all sitting on benches either side of a corridor, an officer, shiny high boots, holding leather gloves and a leather bound swagger stick, announced that the time was at hand for their moving on.

"Sergeant-Major," he addressed another upright, moustached soldier who accompanied him into the hallway; "we must make an effort to get some of these people away before tea time."

"Very good, sir," answered the sergeant-major, "I'll form them up into railway station parties and despatch them."

Very soon after the sergeant-major returned with a small knot of sergeants.

"Now listen in all of you. It's time you gentlemen were elsewhere". The sergeant-major's voice, raising two or three decibels captured and held everyone's attention.

"When I read your name out, stand up and be prepared to follow after one of my sergeants."

From a sheet of paper he called out five names before handing it to a sergeant with a cryptic: "Royal Fusiliers, Hounslow and East Surrey, Kingston".

Waiting for that party to leave he began calling names again, finishing with another hand-over of paper to a second sergeant. "King's Royal Rifles, Winchester".

On Penton and Tysall with two others being called to their feet, the sergeant-major's directive to their sergeant escort was: "QLI, Harwich".

After a tram ride to Liverpool Street station, the four were guided to a London North Eastern train's second class compartment which under the watchful gaze of the sergeant and on his insistence was locked by the train guard. With duty done, their arrival at Harwich assured, he left them to their confined journey.

Amid a chorus of neighbouring whistle toots, witches' hisses of steam and grinding metal wheels, their own engine, snatching its carriages in impatient jerks, began the scheduled journey to the Essex port. As with all travellers setting out on an odyssey of discovery, close association loosened tongues. After exchanging names questions were asked by and of all four. Penton covered his life history in a few sentences. Farming was not a topic that invited probing. Likewise, Tommy Gilbert, a short, slight framed lad not yet eighteen and looking a lot younger. Pallid, with hair a weak blond the colour of ripened wheat, he grew up in Peckham where at twelve years of age he took the labour education test, passed it and secured a job at Hamilton Gardens as a junior grounds man. Having had enough after six years, he had enlisted three days earlier at the Whitechapel Road recruiting office but on failing his first medical for being underweight, he was kept at the upstairs Whitehall sleeping quarters, being fattened on sausages, bread and milk.

Sid Firth, eighteen, stocky with dark hair combed straight back, a broad neck and thick waist, his face blemished with spots and pitted from a childhood illness, also kept his life history brief. From Bethnal Green, he had worked for the last two years for a firm of furniture repairers. What he didn't divulge was that his father, a drunkard, had remarried after the death of his wife. The stepmother, a widow with a family of her own, which she cared for at Sid's expense, provided him with the final spur to get away.

Fortunately, after relating the dullness of their rise to adulthood these three were able to listen the miles away through Ben Tysall's lively escapades. At fourteen he had lied his way into the army, spending almost two years in the trenches. On de-mobilisation he took to the sea as a deckhand only to sign off his ship in Australia, where he spent the next three years as a stockman on a cattle station. His return to the old country was an act of escape brought on by a pistol waving husband whose wife had been more than liberal with her affections. Ben, working his passage to Liverpool on a wool cargo steamer, had picked up a coaster on its way round to the Thames, arriving in the Pool of London that morning where he took his pay. Joining the army only hours later was an impulse and in order to secure immediate lodgings.

Recounting this period of his life in open conversation was something Ben could do with ease but there was a dark childhood he kept secret, allowing very few throughout his life to know of it. Born in a Manchester slum to a fatherless family, his mother earned money working in a textile mill and taking whatever a constantly changing stream of men friends might give her. From this she fed, clothed and paid rent on a single room for herself and three children. Then one night, out indulging her two weaknesses, gin and a new man, she didn't return and never did. Faced with starvation and eviction the elder sister, aged fifteen, drifted into prostitution to pay for food and retain the shelter of their one room. Ben never forgot those months, he only ten and his six year old younger sister huddled on the hall landing while the older sister accommodated men she had accosted in pub doorways. This life, in which he and the younger child were also reduced to begging in the street from passers-by, ended with the now pregnant eldest daughter's arrest.

Separated from his sisters Ben found himself in a brutally run orphanage until the age of twelve. At that point the war began to draw men away from most semi-skilled employment, which gained him his release. For two years he worked as a butcher's mate, his wages so eaten

away in payment for his meals and lodgings, a small dim, stuffy room above the butcher's shop, that he rarely had enough for a hot currant bun at night. Finally, fed up with the long working hours, of wearing others' cast off clothes and with the ill-tempered behaviour of his employer, after a bitterly cold December night in 1916 that had kept him awake throughout, Ben ran off to join the army.

At Harwich station forbearance was required. When the guard did turn up to unlock them, it was in the company of a stout, khaki uniformed private soldier in a leather jerkin.

"There we are Sandy, all present and correct," affirmed the guard.

"My, don't these red arses ever get different? – same 'ellish innocent faces." Not expecting an answer he turned away with a motion for them to follow. But his old soldier's comment did prompt a reply from Ben Tysall:

"OK lads, pick up your gear and tag along with that geyser with the big belly and mouth to match".

The stout soldier heard this but only half looked back over his shoulder, before pointing at a cluster of crates and jute gunny bags.

"Right, grab a'hold of them here quartermaster's stores and put them aboard the transport."

Looking in the direction of the soldier's nod, Ben saw what he recognised as an army GS wagon hitched to a team of horses. Manhandling the goods in three trips they were stowed in the cargo well, then with the four new arrivals sitting on top, they set off, the wagon's steel rimmed wheels grating on the cobble stones, the horse shoes tapping out a metallic hornpipe.

Because of the overcast the evening twilight was racing to full darkness, but not so that Ben didn't realise where they were headed. Well outside the town on what used to be a broad rolling pasture, was a large hutted encampment. He remembered it as the camp to where he in 1919 returned from France, for de-mobilisation. Then it held several thousand men eager to discard their uniforms and return home. Unfortunately demob took time and because of that the camp was in turmoil. After four years of war and obeying life or death orders, fundamental discipline was contemptuously flouted. Gangs of men roamed the camp mobbing, wrecking, and complying with no orders other than their final one of: collect demob suit, rail fare home and sign off.

At that time, with so many leaving, small batches of young recruits were also arriving. They, targets for the mobs, who would charge drunkenly into their accommodation turning beds over and threatening them, were so desperately needed for the army of occupation in Germany that the training staff would fit them out with uniforms, take them out for the odd stroll around the local lanes, then without so much as firing a rifle, ship them off to police the occupied Hun.

Entering the main gate a painted sign with a regimental crest could just be read in the fading light: Training Depot, the Queen's Light Infantry. After being made to unload the freight at the quartermaster's stores, a corporal took charge of them, issuing bedding, eating utensils and an enamel mug and plate. Taken to one of the huts occupied by twenty beds and ten other men, some of whom were like themselves in civilian dress, all eating off tabled forms, they were told by one of the uniformed eaters to claim a bed. He, without a jacket, showing braces over a collarless grey shirt, introduced himself as the hut lance-corporal, also chasing a man off to collect a late helping of grub and tea, both arriving in pails.

After eating and washing their plates and mugs in a washroom sparsely equipped with tin wash bowls on slate slab decking, water from cold caps, and open drains, the corporal gave the late arrivals their introductory chat. He warned that next morning their civilian clothes would be taken off them, an issue of army kit given and that all was to be cleaned, hung on pegs above their beds, and placed on display or out of sight in a kit box. Next he gave a hurried demonstration of how to arrange the bed for sleeping.

This was in two halves, an iron frame with interwoven metal struts and pushed one into the

other to gain more space during the day. Once assembled, the mattress was laid out: three coconut-hair filled hassock type cushion pads, referred to as biscuits. The sheets, yellowish, were starch stiff, giving the sensation when used, of slumbering in a paper bag, while the blankets wreaked a musky smell from neglect in storage. With 'bedding in' completed, the lance-corporal left these latest additions to the regiment to their own entertainment, giving light warning of when they would be next required.

"Mind you sleep like angels tonight, tomorrow will be a perishing busy one."

"Here, Joe, let's you and me have a nose around" suggested Tysall, springing off the bed he had just made.

Outside, Ben navigated through the camp area as if he was seeking something out. The huts, wooden with slate roofs were pathway-ed between with wooden duckboards. Where there were none, walking boots and winter rain had combined to manufacture mud, but only in the occupied portion of the huttings, which was about a tenth of the buildings. The remainder, once a city of troops, now lay derelict through inattention and indifference, the oncoming knee high spring grass soon to turn each hut into an island.

"Yup, here's the one," said Ben, bringing both to a halt.

Treading between the disused ghostly buildings Joe found himself making out in the evening dark nothing more of significance than two rows of concrete foundation supports, interspaced among half overgrown blackened timbers.

"Here's what?" he asked.

"Headquarters hut," answered Ben, showing a smile. "Or what's left of it. I burned it down in 'nineteen. Well!!! Me and about two hundred others. Just back from France and the camp RSM told us to parade for a route march. So felony bent, the boys and I put him straight about that little game. Didn't have an office pretty quick!"

Nostalgia quenched, Ben now set his goal on finding a drink. This he would like to have been a pint of brown ale but had to suffice with a mug of tea and a cake at the Church of England Institute hut.

Returning to their billet, the night air, turned chilly, drove them both to close initially around the iron coal stove in the centre of the room. Activity elsewhere centred mostly on brushing, polishing or squaring up by those who had drawn their issue of kit. At one end of the hut though, a card school was in progress, being played off the top of a wooden soldier box near their beds. Both Joe and Ben, with nothing better on show, sat back watching the hands being played. The game was poker with five people taking part, one, Tommy Gilbert, who was not having much luck. In fact he had never gambled before and had only reluctantly joined in on the insistence of the two men who were winning. Tommy had begun the game with eight shillings and five pence, all the money he had. On the box lid in front of him remained only two and nine.

"That's another to me," sounded a burly youth with pale skin, his dark hair parted in the middle. Triumphant he laid his winning hand down to rake the small cluster of coins towards himself, leaving a penny behind. "There's me in. Come along now! Dub up! Dub up!"

The others added their own penny to the centre of the box, staking their claim to cards for the next hand, except Gilbert, he hesitated.

"Come on, chum" urged another of the players, a mate of the first, tall with long arms, rust blond hair, his face lengthy with a square jaw. These two were the ones doing all the winning.

"I don't know." pondered Tommy, "I think I've had enough".

"Ere, you don't want to do that," advised the darker one, flashing a smile but not from the eyes.

"Luck takes funny twists, pull out now and you could miss a couple of winning hands."

"Aye, that's the way of it. Keep your seat and make a fortune," added the taller.

Not enthusiastically Gilbert played the next hand and again lost. Unprepared to risk more of his meagre wealth he began to pick up his few remaining coins, making an apology for not getting the hang of the game and having to withdraw.

"Nay! Nay! Chum, you're too hasty". The darker player placing a hand on Gilbert's shoulder restrained him as he made to get up.

"No! No! I can't afford to lose any more," replied Tommy, pleading.

"Look now, you'll start on a winning run I can feel it coming. Now sit down". The hand forced Gilbert back onto the bedside.

"The lad said he's had enough," raised an authoritative voice, clear and raw.

In dead silence all heads turned to Ben Tysall resting back on his bed, one elbow propping him up, both hands clasped.

"Who asked you to stick your paddle in?" questioned the dark youth, his words vinegary.

"It's not good practice to start out in life in the army by fleecing blokes at cards who well might be watching your back in a tussle where bayonets are flashin' about."

"Fleecing?" the word was spoken by the card player as if a sharp question.

"That's a fact. Haven't seen a hand go to anyone but you and your mate since I been sat here" pointed out Ben dryly. The dark player rose to his feet challenging, "Don't much like being called a cheat".

Tysall as if with glee leapt to his feet to draw with one toe, an imaginary line across the hut floor. "If that's a serious thought chum, then step across this line and we'll settle the error".

At this the taller of the two also stood. "Let's give him his go, Danny".

"So we want to play in pairs do we?" defied Ben with a wolfish grin and a voice that sounded almost happy, "well if that's the dance then me old mate here will be more than delighted to square the empty corner."

Joe Penton who had sat and watched the drama unfold found Tysall's indicating hand centering on his chest. Face shocked blank, the Kent farming lad didn't reply but his mind raced. He hadn't known this young man with the northern accent and Australian slang for more than eight hours. Now here he was presenting him with an invitation to a fight. Not answering he stood up, turning away to strip his blazer jacket, this so he could swallow the lump from his throat and set his face. Then he turned about with what he hoped was his hardest look, to remove his tie and in a business like way, rolled up his sleeves just as he had seen volunteers from the crowd do at the country fairs boxing booths.

"Come along, beauty; put your toe on the mark".

Ben, standing on his line, swept a hand over his black wavy hair before spitting into both, then waited, his fists turning circles at his waist.

"Go on, Danny, give him a good biffing," encouraged the tall card player.

Danny stepping forward, squared up to Tysall with a boxing stance. For several seconds neither made an attack, then Danny lashed out with a right swing. Ben, skipping back, waited as he twisted to recover, planting two low punches, a left to the ribs and a right in the solar plexus then as arms instinctively dropped, set a cracking straight right into a side jaw. Danny, his head snapping back, sprawled sideways and down, out unconscious.

"OK chum, your turn next. What they call you?" Tysall not taking a breath beckoned the tall, rust blond youth forward.

"Been answering to Ginger most me life". The reply was gruff and his look, after a slow observance of his unconscious partner, smouldered revenge.

"Well, this here is Joe Penton," introduced Tysall, slapping Joe on the shoulder as he stepped up to the mark.

Penton had never engaged in a real fist fight in his life. He and his brother had often shadow boxed in the hay loft of the barn but a bare knuckle brawl, never. Facing up to each

other, Joe his fists high before him in the traditional style, Ginger's down at his waist swinging back and forth, both waited for the other to make the first thrust. This very soon was Penton, face firm but his sky grey eyes betraying foreboding. His swing to the other's head rounded short of its target with Ginger jerking his upper body back before instinctively countering with a punch to Joe's own head. Landing on the bare boarding floor between two cots, he felt pain and a nauseous sickness and didn't like it. On his knees regaining himself he tossed his head to clear the blond hair from his eyes, looking up at an opponent strutting with the assurance of a farmyard cock. Bounding to his feet, Penton flew at him throwing repeated wild punches. It was no longer a dispute settling boxing bout, just a melee of thrown fists and tangled arms.

At five foot eleven Joe was still the shorter man, Ginger being two or three inches taller and he had the longer reach, but Penton was the stronger and he was mad. Punches struck and received gave each his turn on the floor, sometimes together. This rest though, was brief, for a crowd had gathered around cheering encouraging, readily assisting both combatants to their feet again. Its conclusion when arriving was swift and instant.

"Hell's pit you lot!" The hut lance-corporal, off for a short visit to a pub below the camp had returned, his shout bringing stillness to the room.

"Leave you unwatched for five minutes and you're knocking the starch out of each other".

"Not that at all, Corporal," declared Ben Tysall with earnest conviction. "An exhibition of boxing prowess. It's just that Joe and Ginger here, being a bit weak on the fundamental skills looked a might un-gentlemanly".

"That a fact?" doubted the lance-corporal, spying loose cards on the floor. "Well next time the urge manifests we will do it like gentlemen, down at the gymnasium, with proper gloves on."

Then instructing Penton and Ginger to shake hands, he hurried them off to the ablutions to wash away blood.

"Now the rest of you," he commanded turning on the room, "get tidied away and into your beds. The duty bugler will be blowing lights out shortly and tomorrow morning I'll expect you all up before bird twitch".

Long after the bugler's notes had faded and the room darkened, Joe Penton lay awake reflecting on the day and its bruising conclusion. If at home, he would have ended the day, climbing the stairs to his room with an evening glass of the farm's dairy milk, heated by his mother. Instead here he lay, carefully resting the back of his head on a sack hard pillow, his face discoloured and throbbing with pain.

CHAPTER 3

*Beware of all enterprises
That require new clothes.*

Henry David Thoreau

“Battalion, a---tten---shun!”

Regimental Sergeant Major John Rickman, standing rigidly to attention, his eyes hidden beneath the broad brim of his Wolseley topee swept left and right hunting out movement among the nine hundred men ranked by companies before him. Detecting not a flutter he turned sharply about to report to the adjutant that the battalion was present and correct. At this, given a, “Very good Mister Rickman. The battalion may stand easy,” he again twisted about his upper body, not altering one degree off the vertical.

“Battalion --- stand at --- ease.” As nine hundred iron shod boots crashed as one, the echo of it sounding off ships' sides and coughing back from shed interiors, stiffly fixed limbs answered a second command to relax. “Stand easy”.

Joe Penton, stationed in the front rank of 6 Platoon, B Company stretched his back as his head turned, taking in the surroundings. It was nearing noon on a sombre October day and he was standing before a drab, rust speckled troop-ship on a Southampton wharf; the 2nd Battalion the Queen's Light Infantry was about embark for India.

Throughout the whole of their six months training no secret was made of the fact that every member of Penton's recruit platoon were earmarked for the 1st Battalion stationed at Jersey in the Channel Isles and shortly to return to Catterick Camp. Not until the very last minute, just after returning from their ten days leave on completing recruit training did they find their destination changed to the 2nd Battalion at Aldershot, under orders for India.

The Queen's Light Infantry began life in 1759 as the Queen's Regiment of Volunteers, raised among county towns and villages south of King's Lynn by a local squire. The reason, once again: war with France. In earning their first battle honour, capturing from the French, the island of Belleisle, this gained for them the distinction of incorporating a fleur de lys in their regimental cap badge.

On the conclusion of the Great War and the mass disbandment that followed, the QLI, as did the rest of the army, wiped most of their emergency formed battalions off their rolls, most that is but not as many as the government would have liked. On the cessation of hostilities with the Central European powers, containment of Bolshevik Russia, occupation of the conquered and the troubles in Ireland all called for enormous drafts of soldiers. In the Queen's case they had provided one battalion for occupation duties in Turkey, another fighting Reds on the Russo-Persian border before being withdrawn to Egypt and the 2nd Battalion based at Dublin Castle confronting the IRA. Now, after four years of stop-gapping, the army was at last slimming down to an acceptable post-war establishment of two battalions to each infantry regiment, one being held in residence at home, while the second drew a posting somewhere among Britain's worldwide Colonial Empire.

In the case of the QLI this meant further reductions, and retirement. On Ireland's winning self rule from Britain, the 2nd Battalion was returned to Aldershot, there to await reinforcement drafts prior to its posting to India. Hence the reason Joe Penton was standing on a Southampton dockside waiting to board an ocean going troopship. Soon the order came and so, with the band and bugles in their dress greens with black plumed shakos and black

belts, playing military airs, the swooping seagulls adding rasping lyrics, nine hundred men shouldered their kit, slung rifles and filed aboard.

Free to wander around the troops' rear half of the ship, a knot of 6 platoon with nothing better to do watched as the officers and married dependants of the battalion filtered aboard their forward half of the ship.

"Here, Jeff", spoke up Noshier Slyfield to his mate Jeff Gleeson, a bony, loose limbed man with a narrow face, both old 2nd Battalion members who had spent the last two years in pursuit of the IRA, "listen to this". Noshier, black hair, broad eyebrows, a darkish skin and built like a boxer, began to quote from a newspaper he purchased for a penny on de-training earlier: "Mister Philip Cosgrave, uncle of the chairman of the Irish Provisional Government was shot dead in a Dublin bar on Sunday night as he fought with four robbers armed with revolvers".

"I'm laugin' in church," snorted Gleeson. "Let's see if they can take it now like they been spooning it out."

Joe Penton wasn't listening. He hunched over the rail, having spied a teenage girl, slim and blond, boarding. She was helping an older woman with two young boys, as RSM Rickman followed, each one clutching an article of baggage. From Penton's overhead vantage, admiring the girl, he surmised this to be the RSM's family and daughter. He was partially correct. The woman was his wife and the boys his sons, but the girl was his niece, Rose.

John Rickman and his brother, both married, joined the QLI at the outbreak of war in August 1914. Part of Kitchener's new army, with the 7th Battalion as sergeants in 1916, they were in the first day's assault that launched the Battle of the Somme. That evening as the commanding officer struggled to reform the handful of survivors gathered in a sunken, shell fire bracketed road, he caught Rickman's arm, shouting in his ear "You are now the battalion RSM."

His brother died in that tragic blunder called a battle, leaving a wife and young daughter. Then in the influenza epidemic of 1918 the wife was also taken, resulting in Rose's adoption as a claimed dependant. In this manner they had been living as a family for four years. With the Armistice, as a regimental sergeant-major, John Rickman decided it would be more to his advantage to remain in the army but because of others more senior than he with the same intention, he had to drop down in rank, only this year regaining once again the promotion to RSM.

Rose, on finishing her schooling and now at sixteen with no other relations to take her, was accompanying her adopted family into an uncertain service environment on the Indian sub-continent, but the situation did not disturb her, she was looking forward to it with growing relish.

--oOo--

"So this is the dreaded Bay of Biscay," commented Sid Firth on the third day of the voyage, staring across a flat, tedious expanse of ash green water. The stories of the Bay's temper had been repeated and worried over for several days past. Now nearing its extreme edge, with Gibraltar just around the corner, they had crossed with hardly a puff of wind to upset their course.

From among the group of men around Sid no reply came, until Jeff Gleeson, sitting on the deck behind, took the unlit pipe from between his lips and began tapping the bowl on one of his rubber pumps.

"You just mind your good fortune," he recommended. "In thirteen I came across her in the old *Astara* on my way out to Egypt and the sea was so fearsome four of my old crushes were

sent up the loop so bad they had to be taken off at Malta, bound in rope, screaming like demented banshees”.

The 2nd QLI were sailing east 'trooping'; something the nation's soldiers had done since the late seventeenth century and by this time perfected to a smooth drill. Beginning on the 1st of October and ending on the 31st March, thus avoiding travelling and arriving in the hot weather, fleets of ships scurried back and forth, to and from Hong Kong, Singapore, Bombay, Aden, through the Mediterranean, all commencing or terminating at one of Britain's coastal ports.

Unhappily, it was found that they were not to idle the cruise away. There were emergency drills with cork life jackets, and many jobs to do, such as washing up and spud bashing in the galley, cleaning ship for officers' rounds, fire picket, or even standing sentry in dark narrow companionways and hidden little rooms in the deep cramped reaches of the ship. Games were organised: boxing, tug-of-war or physical training, but the slope of the deck made most of these impracticable. For the ship, suffering either a fault in design or a war wound, sailed with a permanent slope, tilting five degrees to starboard.

Mid-journey for the 2nd QLI's was Port Said, at the northern end of the Suez Canal, for their destination was Bombay. Securing to a wharf, one end piled high with coal, small vessels surrounded the ship, disgorging natives hawking jewellery trinkets, footwear, clothes, fruits and other commercial items of possible interest to sea travellers. So too appeared naked and near naked boys who dived from the ship's deck for coins. If the coin was silver the lad would plunge from the ship's high rigging to redeem the sinking coin, and then swim beneath the ship to surface on its opposite side.

Both trading and sport came to an end when the families slipped ashore to shop in the town, while the soldiers filed off for a march. Once gone the crew sealed all ventilation and entrances for refuelling to begin. Throwing open the bunker covers, two gangways were positioned from the wharf, setting in motion a steady single file of ebony black coolies, both men and women. Up one gangway they came with a shallow basket of coal balanced on their heads tipping it down a hopper, before continuing the cycle down the second to collect another.

Returning, the passengers found the ship coated in coal dust and, despite the discomforting heat, having to be sealed in for the remainder of the day and night, for coaling by hand was a long filthy job. The next morning as the ship set off down the 'sweet water', the crew got busy hosing the black film off its superstructure.

Entering the sweltering heat of the Red Sea a rumour began circulating that everyone aboard was to exchange ships in mid sea. Dismissed as originating from some outlandish prankster, none-the-less two days later, in a plate smooth, sapphire blue sea under a sky that matched, rendezvous was made with another vessel. Four funnels and larger, it was tatty in appearance, years overdue for painting. It leaked even more rust than their own. The name on the bow read Green Hunter but underneath a coating of paint had failed to hide its original German name. This was just one of many ships Britain had seized as reparation from Germany on the conclusion of the war. Manoeuvring then stopping, gangways were run across and lashed. Over these for some hours trooped all passengers taking with them baggage, rations and stores. Then cutting itself loose their original ship turned about at full speed in answer to some emergency call, its five degree list conveying the illusion of wounded distress, while their new ship pointed its bow out into the Arabian Sea and towards Bombay.

Already aboard this new transportation were other passengers, who warned the new arrivals not to take up occupation in the cabins, for they were infested with rats.

This, being quite true, had most of the passengers living day and night on the upper decks, seeking shade on the port side during the sun's hottest periods and sleeping anywhere space

could be found when it declined at night. Due to the plague of rodents, segregation was dispensed with. In the evenings families and soldiers gathered, intermingling in securing bed spaces. But before sleep a cabaret singsong took place. For music they had a three piece band: accordion, harmonica and banjo all played by their soldier owners. The women danced and the men sang, murdering tune after tune, throats well oiled with Dutch lager collected at Port Said and brought from the other ship when they transferred. Peter and Simon Rickman, John Rickman's sons, accumulated a small fortune taking the bottles back for the penny return. At one point, as the men were blasting out 'Danny Boy' with much gusto, a corporal's Irish wife rushed up and stopped the band, re-starting them and singing the lyrics in their legitimate rapturous lilting form. This so mesmerised her audience that their accompaniment was subdued to a mass silent sway.

On conclusion, to snap everyone out of this maudlinism, Rose Rickman took the stage to sing and dance rag-time tunes even her aunt Harriet didn't know she knew and the men loved it, cheering and joining in the songs.

"We'll be docking tomorrow," commented Jeff Gleeson the next morning to Joe Penton.

"How you tell?" asked Joe quizzically.

"See them?" Jeff had taken his empty pipe from between his teeth to point at specks in the sky, "Them's swallows. T'evening they'll be down here zoomin' around the ship. Them's nest in India them's do. And tomorrow we'll nest there ar'selves".

CHAPTER 4

*Bombay has a lower death rate than London.
If we do not take care, Bombay will outstrip us in the sanitary race.
People will be ordered for the benefit of their health to Bombay.*

Florence Nightingale, 1860

On the day the shoreline of India was sighted by those on the Green Hunter another vessel was preparing to make that very same journey. A Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company liner, steam raised the contents of coal bunkers craving to be consumed in the stokers' furnaces, was about to free itself of Tilbury Docks, its port of departure, down the Thames Estuary and out into the English Channel.

"All ashore that's going ashore!"

The white coated steward, tapping a bronze gong to emphasize his warning, passed quickly along the deck, for being on the river side of the ship there were few passengers to heed him. The dockside of the boat was the focal point of the moment; cheering travellers lined the railings throwing paper streamers at parting friends and relatives on the madly waving quayside below. One man taking no part in this joy and sadness of departure, content instead with the view of Gravesend across the river was Robert Christie. Smoking a cigarette below a lifeboat hanging from its davits, he watched the river traffic: steamers; sea going cargo ships and crimson sailed Thames barges, all on course into or out of the heart of London's commercial dockland.

Black haired, clean shaven with hazel brown eyes, his height of over six feet gave the impression of slimness, an illusion that had cost a number of opponents on school and university rugby fields painful bruises. Handsome, at twenty seven, his staid maturity advanced others' guesses at his age by three or four years. This was not unique to him alone; the war had thrown up an entire breed of such men. At university on the outbreak of war he had enlisted right away, spending four years on the Western Front, finishing with the acting rank of major. The year that followed, like so many others scared and wanting to forget, he took off from life: parties; girls; late nights, drinking; drinking; drinking. At last, coming to terms with the stupidity and death of the previous four years, he resumed his university studies. These were in the main centred on India and Indian languages, for that country had been Christie's birthplace and his intention was to return there on securing an appointment in the Indian Civil Service. On completing university and passing the ICS examination he was allowed to use his probation year taking further Indian language courses. Now with his life's career full in his sights he was setting sail for a place he considered much more than a province of the Empire, to him it was home.

Entering the lounge he took a seat at an empty table. There were plenty of those, for although the ship had started to move, most passengers were still by the railings. At the end of his first whiskey and water this all changed, the room filling with sea travellers, the men in blazers and cravats or plus fours and autumn jackets, the women in tweed or sleeved chiffon dresses.

Two young army officers, both 2nd lieutenants, their faces showing a merry eagerness to sample the full delights of a sea voyage, hovered nearby looking for a free table.

"I say!" "The tables all seem to be full. Would you mind if we shared yours?" asked one politely.

"Not at all," replied Robert, standing to extend his hand.

"Robert Christie, Indian Civil Service".

The first officer, introducing himself as Miles Holt-Bate, had blond straight hair, blue eyes,

and was slightly built with a rosy complexion and bubbly- nature. Both men, in their early twenties, were of the same medium height but the second, Hugh Durand, was of stronger build. On him, tight black hair matched dark eyes, and a wide, youthful but strongly lined face. They, on their way to India to join their regiments, had graduated several months beforehand from the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst.

Over drinks the three men speculated on the type of voyage ahead, on what they might expect on arrival, and commenting on the latest news of the day - Mustapha Kemal's next military move in Turkey, and now that Bonar Law had formally taken over leadership of the Conservative Party, when a general election might be held.

A half-hour after getting under way, the Thames pilot in full control on the bridge, Christie observed a woman striding confidently into the lounge. Fifty-ish, skin complexion yellowed from years of constant sun, her greying hair was set in a pre-war style complementing her clothing, hat, shoes, long dress and overcoat, all also pre-war, her umbrella and handbag looking even older. Halting near their table, her five foot four inches radiating stateliness, she reviewed the room and all within with the intensity of a sweeping lighthouse beam.

From a table near the bar, a clutch of men, jacketless and tie-less with ruby faces, hailed the woman, one standing to offer his chair: "Emma! Emma!"

Declining with a wave of her umbrella, she instead turned on the nearer three asking: "Gentlemen, may I join you?"

"By all means please do. Your presence will add charm to the table," replied Holt-Bate. All three sprang to their feet, Christie crushing his cigarette in an ashtray.

Removing her gloves she introduced herself as Emma Schofield, shaking hands as each stated his own name. The hand she would not release until her mind had run it through her memory.

"Durand? Durand?" she sifted, "any relation to Brigadier William Durand?"

"Major-General retired, now, and yes, my father," replied Hugh.

"Holt-Bate?" repeated Emma thinking hard, "You've no connections with India?"

"None whatsoever," grinned the blond officer. "Family's in textiles and filthy rich. I'm escaping east to get away from it all!"

"Christie?" Robert's name was repeated back to him by the woman, whose eyes suddenly became cold with admiration. "Sir Nathaniel Christie, would he be ---?"

"My grandfather," interrupted Christie.

"You have friends aboard?" asked Durand, nodding towards the party of red-faced men as the four made to sit down.

"Those! Gracious no," dismissed Emma, flipping a hand. "Planters, tea and indigo from Assam and Bengal. And don't you get involved with them, not unless you drink like a drain and can afford a whacking great booze bill for squaring at Ballard Pier".

For an hour, until the luncheon gong sounded, the two young officers, replenishing the woman's port and lemon, fired questions at her. With good reason, for Emma Schofield had spent thirty years in India. As a young wife she and her doctor husband left a Dorset village for the turbulence of a mission hospital and school on the North-West Frontier. Penniless but happily in love with each other and in their work, they shared the heartache and reward of trying to medically care for and educate the fiery, temperamental Pathan tribesmen.

Mentioning her husband's death after only five years of marriage, she quickly hurried on to tell of the mission's expansion, establishing branches in several locations throughout northern India and her own struggle to qualify as a doctor. She was now returning after a summer in England lecturing in church halls and speaking at garden parties, pushing her fund raising begging bowl under the noses of the rich and not so rich.

Robert also joined in the dialogue keeping his questions to the woman simple and conversational, for she was known to him, but only as the legend. Her husband had not just

died he was ambushed and shot dead one morning while riding on the outskirts of Tank by a young Bhittanni tribesman. Fired up by fanatical mullahs, seeking immortality in the gardens of paradise, he slew this unsuspecting and unarmed Christian infidel. Escaping to his home village the murderer avoided government punishment, but so revered was the doctor for the life healing he had administered, asking no payment, that the tribal *jirga* actually sat in council debating the forfeit of his life. This was no sham, his life only being spared by an elder brother's offering to stand as guardian over the widow. And there, so far as Christie knew, he was still, sleeping each night at Emma's bedroom door.

Christie was unaware, as he withheld his knowledge of the woman's history, that she was also keeping silent of his. Before the turn of the century she had met both Robert's father Charles and his grandfather, then in his late eighties, and retired to a garden bungalow on the foothill slopes north of Dehra Dun. Sir Nathaniel Christie gained his knighthood through a lifetime of dedicated service in India, first as a young officer with the Honourable Company's army, then transferring to the civil branch as a district magistrate and on the British Government taking over the administration of India from the East Indian Company, rising to high court judge.

"So this is the Christie grandson," thought Emma to herself, as she studied Robert's relaxed, handsome face whenever he took up the conversation with his pleasant, assured manner. As she watched him she wondered if he knew the story of his grandfather's and father's involvement in the Sepoy Mutiny sixty five years earlier and of how near it had come for him to have never existed. In any normal period of time it would have been classed as a remarkable story, but coming out of that bloody upheaval called the Indian Mutiny it ranked as just another tale from the rebellion. "Yes, he must know," decided Emma, "he must know..."

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Nathaniel Christie, picking up a Wesson Levatt pistol from the bedroom dresser, checked the rounds in its cylinder drum before pushing it out of sight in his trouser waistband under his white, lightweight frock-coat. It was May 1857 and the district magistrate was just off to his courthouse for the morning session. The time approaching seven o'clock, on the bungalow veranda his wife and two eldest children, a boy aged four and a girl, three, were just finishing their breakfast. Their month old baby Charles was still asleep indoors watched over by Bina, the children's *ayah*. Soon Munnilal the *tatti-wallah* would be securing *khas-khas tatti* reed frames in the open windows and doorways to exclude the burning summer heat. During its peak hours water was splashed on the outer surfaces to keep the bungalow's interior at a bearable temperature. Smiling cheerfully, with a hug for the children and a kiss for his wife, warning her he would be back for luncheon, he walked out into the bungalow's carriageway where Mangat his *syce*, held Khan, his saddled horse. Mounting, with a wave to his family, Christie rode out into the tree lined Mall of the small civil lines, off to his morning's work.

Coming to India in 1845 at eighteen with a commission in a regiment of Bengal Infantry, secured for him by his father, Nathaniel, after seven years, was coaxed from the army to take up a magistrate's appointment. Having no hesitation in doing so he first took home leave, where he met and married Agnes, his wife. After five months aboard a masted steamship, Agnes arrived in Calcutta heavily pregnant, to face a six hundred mile journey by bullock cart, on which, beneath a shading tamarind tree somewhere north of Chatra, she gave birth to her first son.

Their destination, Nathaniel's posting was Mauna, a town one hundred miles west of Allahabad. Not large, it had only a small European cantonment consisting of lower-middle company officials, retired officers and ex-employees. Stationed there also was a regiment of

Bengal native infantry and a squadron of irregular cavalry whose officers provided a much appreciated liveliness to the year's social events.

Carrying a pistol to his work was a habit adopted just in the last week, since for several days, wild bazaar rumours had been spreading of rebellion and massacre among stations north and along the Ganges's basin, down to the gates of Calcutta itself. Disturbing as it sounded, there had not yet arrived any firm confirmation of these alarms, but then the mail coach was three days overdue. The unease had first begun with foolish stories which were treated as wild bazaar *gup*, for most were too outlandish to be believed: Pig and cow bone dust was being used to pollute food and water and their bloods mixed in salt and sold to both Hindus and Muslims, destroying their caste as the first step in forcing them to become Christian. Another, that leather rupees were soon to replace silver ones. When these dreads were repeated to Christie in hushed tones by those natives he associated with in his day-to-day magisterial business he would laugh it to scorn. Not through an over-confident attitude, for these fables were worrying; he, like all the British were deploying their most effective defence, a brave front. One section not concerned were the British officers of the native troops, they swore to the loyalty of their men, convinced that if fighting did come it would be in putting down the rebellion of others, not their own.

This was, sadly, a confidence to be proved wrong. In previous decades the soldier sepoy of John Company's army had a high standing in his village. Now through a number of unwise government legislations this was unwittingly being eroded. There were also unfounded tales of soon having to become Christians, allowances being reduced when serving away from home provinces, of being transported across the black water sea, destroying their caste, and the one that really inflamed fears, pig and cow fat was being used in the manufacture of the new greased rifle cartridge shortly to be issued. Of this last, the recipe had not altered. A mixture of beeswax and linseed oil. But how to prove that to a man in deadly fear of his caste being violated?

Also about the land was a populace bent on stirring unrest and feeding the sepoys' misgivings. The English had been beaten by the Afghans fifteen years earlier and in the Crimean War, only just ended, they swore that the British Army was all but wiped out. The time of the white faces in India was near; soon the rivers would run with their blood. To give body to these threats, single, baked *chappaties* were being delivered from village to village with instructions that the headman send it on. Receiving no explanation, its meaning was veiled, which left a sinister feeling of foreboding and expectant calamity. Unknown to Christie the *chappati* had already passed through his district, the whisper was being repeated everywhere: The day of the sahib is over.

Also unknown to him, rebellion and massacre was rampant in Bengal. At Meerut on the 10th of May, three regiments, the 11th and 20th Infantry and 3rd Cavalry mutinied, killing many white officers and civilians including children. Rushing off to Delhi they were joined by three more regiments with others also flocking to them, igniting hostilities that were to last for three years. As word spread out through northern India native regiment after native regiment mutinied. At Mauna, where as yet there was no railway or telegraph line, the word of rebellion had come, but not to the British in authority; the first messenger had that night gone to the sepoy lines.

Cantering to the end of the dirt surfaced Mall, Christie turned into a street that was the British Raj's authoritative administrative centre of the town. Along the Mall he noted the scarcity of native workers, cantonment-employed grounds men and sweepers for clearing away the cow dung. Approaching his court building, the emptiness of this area now gave an air of unease. At this time on any session day the street outside would be filled with up to a hundred people, witnesses for cases of criminal acts and petty misdemeanour and petitioners and their witnesses seeking settlement of a dispute. Today though, the magistrate's eyes took

in only one person across the street, the town postal clerk, a retired British army sergeant, married to a Hindu woman, who stood bewildered in his office doorway. Even at the gaol building next to the court there was no life, which was worrying, for a jailer normally stood guard in the shade of its veranda.

With a wave of his riding crop to the postal clerk, who acknowledged with a jerky lift of one arm, the magistrate guided his horse to the back of the courthouse where he dismounted. Usually, before Khan halted, two grooms were on hand to lead him into the open thatched roofed stable but today Christie had to tie his own horse. The court building he found for the first time silently vacant, only high in the eaves was there any sound: sparrows chirping and darting, not yet subdued by the day's advancing heat. On entering, his Indian court clerk, sitting stiffly at his desk, rose to his feet, a courtesy he never failed to extend to his magistrate.

"It appears there is a festive holiday I am not aware of". Christie's comment to his clerk was intended to make light of this strange state of affairs.

An elderly man, the clerk responded in a grave tone.

"There is no festival, Magistrate Sahib. The people are frightened, there is to be trouble - bloodshed."

"Nonsense, Subhash" dismissed Christie, "from whom? Why?"

"You must leave, sahib," stated the clerk without giving a reply to Christie's questions, "All white faces are to die".

"Subhash, it seems you and the town have been taken in by this outlandish bazaar gup.

We are in no danger here; the Army is too near to hand".

Hoping this would reassure his clerk, Christie turned to walk to the front of the court building but was halted and forced to turn about by the clerk's chilling reply.

"I have worked for Government for forty years, fifteen years as babu in this court. I too am in danger by coming to the Raj's court. Perhaps my death here will spare my family. Go, Magistrate Sahib, take your wife and children. Run! Hide!"

Christie marched quickly outside, the street still deserted. He hurried to the gaol. There he could find no-one, the jailers gone, and all cell doors flung open. Then clearly from the direction of the infantry lines ragged musket firing sounded. Rushing to the door he still found the street empty, and then in a moment a lone rider galloped into sight from the direction of the shooting. Seeing Christie, now in the street, he violently reined his horse to a halt. It was Major Francis, the second-in-command of the native infantry regiment, hatless, in his right hand a blood streaked sabre.

"Get to the cantonment, Mister Christie!" he shouted. "The sepoys have risen. Heathen scum butchered the Colonel had to cut my way out - warn everyone. I'm going to the cavalry lines - if Stewart's squadron remains loyal we stand a chance. If not - we're all for damnation!"

Minutes later with Khan at full gallop up the Mall, passing fleeing terror-stricken servants, Christie saw horsemen racing away. The yellow coats of the riders identifying them as belonging to the irregular cavalry. At his bungalow he hauled Khan to a halt, leaping down to rush across to a near naked body laying in the carriage drive.

"Agnes! Agnes!" he cried, flinging himself to his knees, clutching at his wife's lifeless form. Her face, body and limbs lacerated with sword cuts, she, first repeatedly raped, had been run through the heart and her stomach cut open before being dragged from the bungalow.

Horror-stricken, he wailed, tears of grief running from his eyes. Then leaping up he frantically rushed into the house in search of his children. Everything that could be was smashed or broken, the baby cot empty, but the framework cut to pieces, the bed clothes smeared with blood. The two eldest children he found outside the back garden playhouse he

had built for them. On being discovered hiding there, they had been dragged out whimpering then dismembered with sabre slashes. Shrieking with hysterical anguish he collapsed to the ground, his mind crippled with grief. In this manner he remained until the nearby sound of musket fire triggered a screaming hunger for revenge. Charging to his gateway, pistol in hand, he saw an open carriage thundering towards him driven by a retired major. In the back his elderly wife comforted another woman in her arms, her clothes bloodied.

"Nathaniel!" screamed the major, "your family - run man! Run!"

"They're dead! They're dead!" screamed back Christie. "Into the carriage man, quickly - we must bolt. It's cut and run or die", the major beseeched Christie, clear as to their only hope of survival.

"No! No! I'll not leave them," cried Christie.

"Then I'll leave you to God or the devil, for you'll see one or the other this day".

With that the major departed, whipping his team into a gallop.

In moments another rider thundered into view from the town. He too reined to a halt.

"Nat! The native troops are everywhere, burning and slaughtering. Get your family and flee, the only hope is to take flight". This was Lieutenant Hancock, a detached officer on settlement survey duty.

"Dead! They're dead!" said Christie through clenched teeth. Then seeing a ragged body of red coated men spill into the Mall, he, aiming his pistol, advanced towards them. Firing his rounds away he stood awaiting the musket armed mutineers' reappearance from cover, prepared to die fighting bare handed.

"Mount, Nat! Mount! You'll not gain revenge at these odds."

At his side he suddenly found Khan, his reins held by Hancock.

Climbing into the saddle the two men raced away from Mauna, firing still to be heard, slender shafts of smoke from burning bungalows snaking skywards.

Throughout the next six months, with the world stunned by the reports of mass butchery of the white population of Bengal and elsewhere, the few British troops and those native sepoys remaining loyal, spread along the Ganges, fought back as best they could. Their one major and all important success: the recapture of Delhi Fort. Not until reinforcements were despatched from England and other reaches of the Empire could the carnage at places like Allahabad, Meerut and Cawnpore be avenged.

During this interim period Nathaniel Christie, with no other thought but that of revenge, threw his lot in with a group of men who formed a band of moss-troopers. They, like he, were made redundant by the rebellion, many also like him with scores to settle. Officers of mutineered regiments, white merchants, government teachers, church clerks, loyal Indian officers and sepoys raging to redeem the shame brought upon their regiments, railway officials and telegraph operators, all falling in together as a bush militia. Mounted on whatever horses were available their weapons were an assortment of carbines, sabres, shotguns, lances, pistols, whatever could be acquired which suited the individual. Christie armed himself with his pistol and a hog spear, a hunting tool that proved most effective in slaying men from horseback.

Forty three troopers, they patrolled through the summer and monsoon months in the saddle every day. The warrant given them: to keep the byways south of the Grand Trunk Road free of *dacoity* and rogue bands of mutineers set on plunder. To fulfil this task the group of moss-troopers operated from a mobile camp; quarter mastered by a pastor whose family had all been massacred, and staffed by a dozen native Christian band boys whose regiment had orphaned them by killing their officers and marching off to Delhi. The camp, set up for a day or a week, would be the central point from whence they patrolled. Any robber bands or mutineers run to ground and not killed were taken as prisoners to the nearest army detachment.

There they would be tried by an army court-martial and if found guilty of being a mutineer or plundering the land, they would be hanged, or in most instances, blown from a gun. With backs to the muzzle the native's arms would be lashed by ropes secured to the wheels. On the firing of the powder charge, the torso would disintegrate, legs sagging to the ground, arms flying away on their ropes, the head always popping in the air like a cork.

Action for Christie's band was at times furious and deadly, but only in small ways. A sighting sparked breakneck pursuits across dusty plains or rain flooded jungle trails, ending in capture, or if their quarry turned to fight, wounds and deaths. Their first major engagement in which substantial casualties were suffered occurred on a moist morning at a remote village beside a cart track twenty miles east of Banda.

Into the arms of their night picket staggered a young Muslim cultivator, bare foot, turbanless, with just a loin cloth for covering, his back wounded by a sword cut. Incoherent with terror, the one grain of fact learned from his babbling was that his village appeared to have undergone an attack. Minutes later, the farmer's wound having been bandaged; he was taken along riding up behind one of the troopers. Tracking south, the horsemen rode for the first five miles at a canter before slowing to a trot. Then on coming upon corpses on the cart-track the pace slowed to a walk. As the dead became more frequent the guide began to talk loudly, indicating he was afraid to go on. Therefore, being of no further use, he was pushed from his mount's hindquarters. It was becoming light and on emerging from a thick forest a village of mud walled huts came into view.

Captain Hobday, who had narrowly escaped with his life from Jhansi when the 14th Cavalry turned against their officers, and who was now their agreed commander, halted the troop of horses. Perhaps half a mile distant, the village was surrounded by crop fields, root vegetables and barley. Crisscrossing the fields were narrow irrigation ditches fed from an earth banked water tank to the north of the village. This itself comprised about forty huts with a number of pens and straw roofed pole frameworks for sheltering stock. Hobday, to await better light and yet maintain the cover of the remaining darkness, led off around the edge of the forest to the western side of the fields. Even here they passed bodies: men, old women and children, evidently caught before reaching the forest's shelter. Hushed, they made their way, the only sound, the creak of leather and light jingle of saddlery metal.

Formed into a single line the troopers sat facing the village and the whisper of morning light beyond. With no proof that the raiders of the village were still present, Hobday was not prepared to enter it until confirmation one way or the other was forthcoming. Motionless, they sat listening to the forest around them awaken: a jungle cock, a peafowl and the howl of a jackal disturbed from feasting on a corpse. But from the village no sound, which was uncommon, for at this hour the village pariah dogs should have been calling to each other.

Deciding it was no longer safe to wait, since the morning light would soon uncover their presence, Captain Hobday nudged his horse into a walk. On that signal the whole rank moved with him. Having covered a third of the distance to the hutment, somewhere in the village a horse neighed, to be answered by one of their own green mounts. At that, caution was discarded, horses spurred to a canter, trotting across the crop fields and over irrigation ditches. Swinging around a tall clump of bamboo, Christie could see the village layout clearly before him. Surrounding the ashes of fires from the night before, clusters of men lay asleep, until one, on hearing the thudding of a horse's hooves on a hard earth pathway, leaped up to shout a warning. They, in tattered uniforms, were a body of renegade mutineers taken to pillaging, who, after attacking and butchering the village, had remained to rape the women and drink *darro*, the village alcoholic brew.

Awakening to find charging horsemen all but upon them, they either ran or stood. One, before Christie, held up a musket with a bayonet sword ready. The magistrate brought his spear down and with Khan at a dead run, he leaned low over his horse's neck letting the point

drop. In a blink the native soldier, with a cry, vanished below Khan's hooves, Christie sweeping his spear up behind to recover, aiming forward, the point blooded. Again he used it this time into the back of a red coated figure running between two huts. Then again into the back of someone trying to reach the cover of a patch of sugar cane. Turning his horse he galloped back into the village to find single combat taking place everywhere.

Mutineers asleep in the huts were spilling out into the earthen yards with weapons in hand. One trooper stood dismounted at a doorway sabring all who came out. Another left his horse to hunt in the darkness of a hut with his shotgun. Christie rode to the assistance of a railway plate man, on horse, but surrounded by mutineers. Dragged down, he was bayoneted repeatedly, Christie, reining his horse, fired his pistol into the group, despatching them or driving them off. Then again he raced through the village, spearing, and out into the field, riding down as many of those he could before they reached the forest's edge.

Of the forty two troopers who charged that morning one lost a hand, three received wounds they later died of and six killed were buried before midday. The force they engaged was over two hundred strong, near a hundred of whom they killed, thirty one wounded being dispatched on the spot, while nineteen, who surrendered, were hung.

The following June, a year into putting down the rebellion, Captain Hobday and his band passed through Mauna. On halting for the day Christie made his way through the town to the cantonment. Passing the court building he found it standing but derelict. At his bungalow, a burnt shell, he looked about, not really knowing for what. In the back garden he found three graves, one large, two small. With some relief his mind was to a large degree now at rest. Someone, or so he could surmise, had provided most of his murdered family the dignity of a burial.

Returning to the front of the bungalow grounds, Christie sat down on the steps of his former home. Khan, still saddled, water skin slung under his belly, carbine, bedding and saddlebags on his flanks, wandered into the shade of a banyan tree. At the gate a Hindu woman, barefoot, in a plain calico sari, carrying a year old baby on one hip, entered the bungalow grounds. Christie, in soiled dress, worn boots, with a year old beard and weeks of dirt, paid no attention to her until she halted before him to hold out the sun blackened baby. "Magistrate, Sahib," she said, "Son, Charles Sahib".

It was his *ayah*, Bina, and she was returning his baby son, kept alive secretly, and fed by suckling the breasts of other native women with young babies.

Christie, reaching out to take his son, stood holding him, disbelieving his fortune, and then he pulled the child to him and wept.

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"Thirteen years, Robert?"

Robert Christie, not sure if Emma Schofield's words were a statement or question replied:

"I beg your pardon?"

"Since last in India," clarified the woman at his side.

"Oh! Yes," replied Christie elaborating on the reason.

"1909 - I was fourteen. Grandfather had died, father through illness was forced to take early retirement from the service, so we returned home to live in Surrey.

"Find it strange after growing up in India?" she asked. "Yes, very," replied Christie simply.

"Well, you'll not find India changed," assured the woman. "Perhaps a few more automobiles in the streets but this land and its people have hardly advanced many steps

beyond what it was a thousand years ago. Here we still march to the pace of the bullock cart.”

It was early morning of the last day of the voyage and in the distance just above the horizon was a hazy but visible line of hills. This was the Deccan Ghats, below which and not yet in view was the coastline of India and the city of Bombay. Emma and Robert were taking the morning air in accepted pre-breakfast attire, kimono and dressing gown, moving about the promenade deck, one step ahead of a boatswain's mate supervising a team of deckhands who were hosing down the wooden surface.

What Emma Schofield said was near enough correct. The only real advancement that in population had been estimated in 1920 to be over three hundred million. This was vastly more than what there was in the country when English seagoing merchants first arrived to exercise the Honourable East India Company's trade charter, bestowed by Elizabeth the First. It was from this modest concession that Britain was able to turn India into the jewel of the Empire. Seeing off all other competitors; Dutch, French and Portuguese, by trade, treaty and musket the East India Company, John Company, took commercial, civil and military control of three fifths of the country. The remainder, mainly Princely States, were, under a close, watchful eye, granted freedom to administer their own domestic affairs. Which meant that, disregarding Burma, a commercial business concern, even though run by a Board of Control headed by a Cabinet Minister, was in sole charge of the triangular shaped eastern sub-continent almost fifteen hundred miles in depth from corner to corner.

Of course in the mid-nineteenth century, following the Sepoy Mutiny, this all changed. The British Government took over responsibility for the country but on this handover very little was altered. The systems used to run the country were too successful or traditional to amend, those in office, now earning a government salary, found they had merely swapped coats. Road, rail and vast irrigation projects were continued or embarked upon, not just to facilitate yield of export goods and speed the movement of them to ports, they were built for the overall betterment of the country. As for the average Indian, ninety percent of who were rural tillers of the soil, life remained relatively the same. A slave to the monsoon, where its failure could mean famine, or to keep his holding, a lifetime bound to a money lender, he or his family could at any moment fall victim to plague, cholera, leprosy or a hundred other fatal or crippling diseases, which served to illustrate the fact that Britain had not taken over a harmonious land of milk and honey. The truth was quite the opposite: India was a multitude of contradictions, most of which tipped her steeply towards base poverty.

Late in the afternoon with the liner's rails thronged with eager spectators, the ship rounded Colaba Point into Bombay Harbour. Durand and Christie were standing with Emma who was pointing out the landmarks.

“Malabar Hill,” she said pointing to the high ground covered with trees and fine houses beyond the docks. “Gateway to India, ugly thing really.” Her uncomplimentary comment was directed at a huge, lone, square structure with a massive archway. Built to be a landmark of some note, its isolation gave it a castle keep appearance.

Turning inside Oyster Rock and Middle Ground, two small islands with six inch gun batteries mounted on them, the liner swung to manoeuvre alongside Ballard Pier. The decks were full now, most people dressed in Indian travelling clothes, topees for the men, light pith helmets or broad brimmed sun hats for the women, all in light coloured and lightweight garments. On the pier gangs of coolies stood ready to shift the passengers' baggage: suitcases, wardrobe trunks and wicker travelling chests, while above on the ship a deck officer was bellowing orders to the crew through a megaphone.

“God!” said Hugh, sniffing the air, “I had forgotten how the country ponged.”

Although he had been born in India his mother had taken him home to England at the age of five for proper schooling.

Robert Christie sucked the air into his lungs, a mixture of stale urine, animal dung, body

sweat and betel nut juice, breathing it out with a silent sigh of long awaited ecstasy. "I'm home! I'm home!"

"Oh damn! I forgot it was Friday," commented Emma, annoyed.

"Friday?" enquired Hugh.

"Southampton Mail Boat," explained the doctor crisply, nodding to a smaller ship already tied up with teams of coolies off-loading mail sacks. They, taken to a distribution hall overlooking the harbour, would be sorted for destinations throughout India by two thousand sorters drafted in from other government departments all over Bombay. "The Mail Trains will not leave now until the postal people have cleared themselves away and that will mean near enough midnight".

Robert produced a pocket watch, opening the cover. It was five o'clock.

Now was the moment of parting. Over the past three weeks the four who met that first day had become firm friends, even though Miles had strayed a little, he was in love, fallen for a trim little trawler of the 'Fishing Fleet', that is, one of the many young girls travelling to India for the winter months to visit family or friends. Such was the imbalance of men to women that it was unkindly suggested that their only reason for travelling was to snare a husband. Unkind also was the term used to describe those who make the trip back unwed: 'returned empties'.

Parting, with loving whispers, tears and kisses, Holt-Bate joined the other three. On the quayside both he and Hugh were taken in hand by the military responsible for despatching all newly arrived officers to their assigned station, in their case Deolali, a transit and holding camp up on the Deccan Plains. This was where Miles' battalion, the 2nd QLI was, awaiting the word to proceed to its permanent station. Hugh was also joining this battalion but unlike Miles, the QLI was not his regiment. He was due to serve with the recently formed 13th Frontier Force Rifles but like all British infantry subalterns attached to Indian regiments, he first had to spend a year's probationary period with a British regiment.

In a flurry of handshakes and promises to write they were off, leaving Robert and Emma on their own. Now was the moment Christie had been living for since he was sixteen, when he decided that he wanted no other vocation but to follow his father and grandfather into the Indian Civil Service. The war had forestalled him by five years but now he would learn where in India he was to begin his work: the name of his first district. Accompanied by Emma after clearing customs, for there was no rush to her train, Christie entered the shipping agent's office to ask for a telegram that should have been awaiting him. Handed a buff envelope he removed the paper sheet inside. "What train shall I be catching?" he thought, "Madras Mail, Calcutta Mail...?"

On reading, Robert's heart sank. There were only three words to the message: 'Report Secretariat, Delhi'.

He was not to have a district posting among the villages and the people where he wished most to go, instead he was being sent to the centre of Indian government to an office.

"Bugger!" he cursed.

"Never mind, Robert," cheered Emma, taking his arm after hearing his explanation, "It's both you and I for the Frontier Mail, but first you'll take me to dinner, followed by a modest bottle of Cockburn '97".

CHAPTER 5

Welcome misfortune, if thou comest alone.

John Ray

Drowsily, Joe Penton's eyes opened to stare up at a wooden beam and roof tiles above his bed area that were now as familiar to him as his own fingers. After a moment he let his head roll sideways to check the hour, not from a time piece but by judging the angle of sunlight and shadow that fingered into the room from unprotected gaps around the high unglazed windows. It wasn't quite time to rise from the battalions enforced afternoon rest, almost, but not quite. Enclosed in his mosquito-net Joe's eyes turned back to fall on his possessions at the foot of his bed. On a wall shelf and pegs, hung or neatly folded were his greatcoat, with its black buttons, pack, webbing, haversack, and topees. In deciding to climb from his bed, Penton wasted no thought on why he had awoken, it could have resulted from any of a dozen causes: the heat, a fly penetrating his netting, the duty bugler blowing a summoning call, or more than likely the irritation from his prickly heat rash. Naked except for a towel across his stomach to prevent catching a chill from the currents of air wafted down from the *punkah*, he swung out from under the mosquito-net to dress in grey shirt, shorts and a pair of sandals. Picking up an enamel mug from his kit box he headed for an exit onto the bungalow's veranda, careful to keep his footsteps light.

In India the soldiers' accommodation was no longer billets or huts but bungalows, a universal name for almost all living quarters in the country. High ceilinged to create as much coolness as possible, the roofs were extended and sloped down over open verandas to give the maximum shading from sunlight to the room beyond. The bungalows occupied by 2nd QLI in this camp, or lines, were all the same. One for each platoon of forty men, it was in two halves, twenty to each, with in the middle a third room used jointly by both halves as a lecture and dining-room. The bungalows of these lines, built when Queen Victoria was still young, were spaced wide apart to catch all available breezes and to prevent the lines being wiped out by what was believed in those days to be clouds of cholera infected gases.

On the veranda Joe turned away from the glare reflected from the baked ground, it was late mid-afternoon in May and the sun's power only beginning to diminish. Removing the lid of an earthenware *chattie* he dipped his mug in, drawing it out filled with cool water. Drinking his fill, he threw the remainder onto the ground causing a puff of dust. A few minutes however and its wetness would be gone. In the shade of the veranda a native lay, a rope running from one foot up into a hole leading to the bungalow ceiling. This was one of the room's *punkah-wallahs*, employed to propel the large cloth *punkah* frames that swung back and forth stirring the inner bungalow's atmosphere with breaths of air.

"Kisch! Punkah-wallah! Kisch!" barked Penton sharply. The native, fallen asleep, awoke to jerk his leg twice before settling to a slower rhythm.

"Char-wallah! Come here, ya lazy bastard," called Joe to a white bearded native, also on the veranda sitting in the shade.

Penton's voice was not harsh nor was he cursing the man.

He was making a request in a firm but friendly tone in a manner accepted by both parties as the only one to adopt. The native, dressed in turban and loincloth, came across to Joe carrying with him a copper kettle attached to a metal stand containing smouldering charcoal. This was the bungalow's tea boy employed by a camp contractor who, under the quartermaster, provided all the battalion's luxuries, from tin whistles to hired cars. Just to cater for the needs of this one battalion a small force was required, for each had his own special realm.

Besides the *char-wallah*, there was the *dhobi-wallah*, a laundry man who would beat the clothes on river stones, ironing uniforms by spitting rice starch onto them so that at the finish they stood like cardboard. Their numbers were swollen by the *connor-wallah*, who sold bread rolls, the *under-wallah* who sold eggs, the *muckin-wallah* who sold butter, the *cheeni-wallah* who sold sweets, and others. One Joe found he could do without was the *napi*. He would come around before reveille and shave the men before they awoke. Joe thought this good value for eight annas a week but on waking one morning, he discovered the *napi* shaving everyone from the same charcoal heated pot of water.

"Bug jhow! ya old bugger!" ordered Penton of the *char-wallah* who had leaned too close while filling his mug, breathing the stink of betel nut juice into his face.

"Yes, soldier Sahib. Right away, very quick," chuckled the old man shuffling back to his shade.

This betel nut was to the natives what tobacco was to Europeans. Bad enough the smell but they were forever spitting it onto the ground, leaving foul purple splats. If caught by a soldier doing this in the lines it was sure to mean a kick.

Squinting his eyes as he sipped the tea Joe looked out beyond the lines to the plains shimmering in the heat haze. Flat with scrub bush and few trees, it stretched to a rib of broken hills thirty miles away on the horizon. Two miles distant a fort stood, dun coloured with high battlements. At one time it was a Mogul fort but was now guarded by a section from the battalion; its use today was as the site of a radio relay link from England through to Calcutta and Madras. This was handy from the battalion's point of view, for rather than having to wait for the football results to be printed in the Lahore published Civil and Military Gazette, the battalion duty clerk would instead cycle down to the fort on Saturday evening and collect the scores, radioed in Morse from Aldershot, from the signal detachment's duty signaller. Out on the plain also were a number of circular stone towers. One Sunday afternoon shortly after arriving in the station, Joe, Ben Tysall and Sid Firth, investigated one of these. Fifteen feet high with a metal grill they found a corpse on top being eaten by the vultures and kite hawks. This, it seems, was how one religious sect of the local population disposed of its dead. Beneath the grill were the larger bones, too heavy for the carrion feeders to fly off with.

Re-entering the bungalow, Penton noted that some of the figures under their mosquito-nets were showing signs of being awake, most scratching their prickly heat rash. Passing the rifle rack, Tommy Gilbert, the day's bungalow orderly, was just throwing his net back to stand up.

"Oi, give us a sip," he asked of Penton, holding out his hand to the tea mug.

"Do I look like some bloody Maharaja? Get your own," replied Penton in friendly but mocking refusal.

Gilbert's job, which lasted for twenty four hours, was quite an important one, guarding the room's rifles and ammunition. Both were prized items high on the list of any *loose-wallahs*, India's thieves. Each day one man was appointed to sit and sleep by the rifle rack, its keys chained around his waist, playing endless push-ha'penny with other bored men on the push-ha'penny board marked out on the lid of the rifle ammunition box.

Joe, sitting on his cot, drank a mouthful of tea. In the bed opposite the man there rolled onto his back.

"Ben, when you gonna climb out from under that mozzie net and join the rest of us in life's gay adventure?"

"Tysall, opening his eyes, stared sleepily through the mesh screening before replying:

"Maybe when some greenie, not in the army five minutes, offers me some of that char he's drinkin".

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The 2nd Battalion the Queen's Light Infantry now had under its belt almost eight months Indian service and were beginning to feel like old hands. At Bombay, the battalion entrained, to travel through the night away from the coast climbing five thousand feet up over the ghats to Deolali camp, on the Deccan Plain. 'Doolally'; as the British Army knew it, was a transit camp with a bad reputation, a place claimed to send men mad. There was truth in this, because it was the camp where all soldiers who were 'time expired' were sent to await shipment home. The trouble was, a man could wait up to six months if he arrived outside the trooping season. With nothing to do and nowhere to go, for Deolali was a remote place, soldiers who had served their time with an unblemished record could and often did fly off the handle. This was not blamed on the army or its transit operational method but always put down to catching the 'Doolalli tap'.

Here, Miles Holt-Bate and Hugh Durand caught them up. Miles was given command of 6 Platoon B Company, while Hugh took command of a platoon in D Company. They had very little time to settle in, for next day the battalion paraded at the rail station for transport to their first posting. Also gathered at the station were two hundred sullen artillerymen, which, awaiting orders to join their regiments, had been ignored for over two months. The next day they hijacked the first train arriving which went in a northerly direction.

For two days the 2nd Queen's trundled across India, frequently stopping for no reason, which they learned was normal; troop trains were of low priority. Most of the men aboard gazed out with detached interest at the passing country and the people in it. They were just backward farmers tilling the earth with half-starved work beasts, dirty deformed beggars who pleaded with outstretched hands at rail stops, or lazy work-shy wretches occupying any shade going. Rare were the eyes that looked and saw a nation's history, culture and beauty, or realised the significance of a fort crowned hill from which a Mahratta war lord once ruled his fiefdom. Few would have recognised the devoted loyalty between mahout and elephant as they bathed together at the river's edge, or perhaps experienced the skip of a heart beat on sighting a file of *sari* clad women, veiled in the evening's bronze glow as they returned with water pots on their heads from the village well.

The countryside, in autumn's full green growth after the monsoon, changed the further north they travelled. Then on the afternoon of the second day after passing through a rocky hill range, they travelled on another thirty miles across a dust dry plain to halt beside a small patch of concrete. There the men detrained onto the rail side dirt - the concrete platform was for offloading the officers' horses. This stop was not the local rail station, that was the town another two miles further on. Here was where troops bound for or leaving the garrison lines boarded or left their train.

Jhendara in the northern half of the Central Provinces was not a large town with its ten thousand inhabitants; it was a backwater, where the railroad now ended. It used to travel on to the border of a native princely state but during the war its rails and sleepers were taken up and re-assembled somewhere south of Baghdad. The garrison, only one battalion strong, was listed as a third class station, the lowest category and was rumoured in some quarters to be a punishment posting.

Falling in by companies, leaving a baggage party and animal handlers to bring along the battalion's stores and belongings, the 2nd Queen's Light Infantry set off to march to the lines, a mile from the rail stop. With the band leading, followed by the commanding officer, the only man mounted, they swung down the road, their pace in step with the music. Drawn up on the parade square was a battalion of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, which 2nd Queen's were relieving.

With the colours uncased the Beds and Herts presented arms and the Light Infantry gave an eyes right to that regiment's own colours as they passed. Wheeling left, then left again, the Queen's halted to face the other regiment who, as their own band struck up, sloped arms then

turned and marched off, also wheeling and passing along the new battalion's front. Having formed twos it was now the Queen's turn to present arms while the Beds and Herts gave them an eyes right, their commanding officer also mounted, causing his sword to flash as it swept to the dip.

Ordering arms and standing at ease the men of the battalion stood sheltering from the sun under their solar topees, while the music of the other regiment's band faded as they marched away to board the train 2nd QLI had just left. Awaiting the order to dismiss could not come quickly enough. It was the first week in November, late autumn for most of India and the temperature was ninety two degrees.

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By four o'clock everyone in Joe Penton's bungalow were up and shouting for the *char-wallah*. Entering barefoot, for no native was allowed in the bungalow in footwear, he hurried from bed to bed singing a little ditty between each:

“Sixteen annas one rupee,
Seventeen annas one buckshee, Charr-r-waallahh!
Hubble bubble, Queen Victoria bloody fine bloke.
Sixteen years you had my daughter.
Now you go to Blighty sahib.
Hubble bubble, Queen Victoria bloody fine bloke”.

At five o'clock the tea meal was served, collected by the men in their enamel plates and eaten in their platoon common room. Afterwards it was sports. This was how the army in India fought boredom, filling every spare moment of the day the climate permitted with games. Football, hockey, boxing, cross-country running, anything physical that involved a challenge and tested the troops with a competitive skill. The benefit of this to the army was a universal fitness; route marches to the British soldier in India were a doddle.

With the sun only a few degrees off the horizon the lines were alive with figures dashing around kicking one kind of ball or smacking others with sticks. It being summer although the lines looked as though crowded with men, only half the battalion was in station. A and C Company, along with the Signals Group and the band, plus all the battalion's wives and children were in a hill station for the hot season. They had been there since early April but in June, B, D Company and the rest of Headquarters Wing were to change over with them. Of course the women and children remained away from the oven hot plains the whole season, but the battalion had its station commitments and managed this by operating in two halves. Everyone in the summer had to have a break at one time from its heat, which wasn't just unbearable, it ranked as intolerable, causing madness, suicide and death. India took two dead from the battalion within a week of arriving at Jhendara then averaged one a month until the summer when it jumped to one a week. Malaria, sand-fly fever, sunstroke or depression, the latter resulting in a rifle muzzle being placed in the mouth, all adding fresh headstones to the century old church graveyard. In one month B Company buried five of theirs and were getting so familiar with the band's solemn marches to the graveyard and the rag-time tunes returning, they were able to hum them to themselves. Sadly, two others who died were young children of one of their sergeants.

Joe Penton, taking a break at half-time from the football match the platoon was playing, to give someone else a go, sat with Jeff Gleeson on a low mud brick wall bordering the playing pitch. Almost sundown now, the duty drummer at the battalion HQ bungalow was preparing to lower the battalion flag, as the duty bugler on the veranda wetted his mouthpiece in readiness to blow retreat. Out on the plain a number of native women, collecting cow dung, were on their way, full baskets on their heads, back to the village to pat them into cakes for

drying on hut walls for use as winter cooking fuel. Joe watched them in the light of a fast shrinking milk-blue sky as over the plain all birds with the power of flight suddenly took to the air. Under him the wall gently quivered.

"That's queer," voiced Gleeson.

Joe agreed, standing to look at the wall, and then dismissing it, sat down again. Around the lines every bird that had perched in trees or on bungalows now was winging hurried tracks through the sky. Only moments passed before the wall shivered again but sharply and violently, triggering both Penton and Gleeson to leap up.

"Ups a daisy!" exclaimed Gleeson, snatching the ever present pipe from his mouth.

Around them the trees shook and the bungalows shuddered, a tile sprang loose from theirs and crashed to the ground, bringing Gilbert rushing to the doorway. As bungalow orderly, it was a serious offence to leave the building without being properly relieved, so the doorway was the limit of his investigation as to what was happening. Further down the wall Danny Short and Ginger Langdon, the two card players who had fought Penton and Tysall at Harwich, stopped their game of tennis with tin plates, also puzzled by the unexplained shaking, but most of the field games continued.

Then from the western hills a muffled rumble was heard, as if a train was approaching through a tunnel. Penton, studying the plain, could see no reason for the sound, missing the fact that all the funeral towers had disappeared, until for no apparent reason the line of women dung collectors toppled over, their baskets flying. The sound, rising to a roar, now froze all play, everyone looking west for the source of this deafening and frightening noise. Then at ground level something was seen, a ripple travelling at the speed of sound rushed into the lines. Waves, the size of those found arriving on most summer beaches sped through the camp pitching men on their faces, rupturing tree roots, causing them to cant at odd angles. The wall beside Penton broke up into pieces. The bungalows, shaken as if a rat in a terrier's jaws came apart, the brick mortar turning to powder, released the bricks, which collapsed in heaps, the bungalow roofs dropping straight onto the rubble.

In stunned dismay, men climbed to their feet looking about, their faces as one, set in shocked disbelief and there was not a sound. Moments before the men's ears had been bombarded with the din of a thousand thunder claps, now there was nothing to give the clouds of drifting brick dust a meaning. This void lasted only a few brief seconds, and then pandemonium flooded the scene. Men calling out to mates they believed buried rushed to the mounds of rubble, tearing away at jumbled timbers, tiles and bricks.

Tommy Gilbert was helped shaking to his feet. Through sheer nimbleness of foot, propelled by shock and fear, he only just cleared the veranda to stumble out onto the heaving earth as the bungalow crashed down.

"Jesus, Joe! What happened? What happened?" he babbled.

Penton, speechless, couldn't reply, but only looked about him in bewilderment; there wasn't a building left standing in the lines.

Through this a saddled but rider-less horse charged, neighing and throwing its head in terror. It was the mount of Lieutenant-Colonel Claude Gilfillan, the battalion commanding officer. The colonel was afoot now after he and his horse had been tripped to the ground by a roadway that suddenly lashed up at them while on their way from his bungalow to the officers' mess. Three minutes earlier, Miles Holt-Bate and Hugh Durand were in the middle of a tennis match when both without warning found themselves helpless on their backs being pitched about like skiffs in a sea storm. On regaining their feet they found the once flat surfaced clay court as raised and broken as a ploughed field. Around them the mess building and all the bachelor bungalows lay in rubble. From underneath these ruins and their enclosing clouds of dust, voices, both native as well as English called for help.

At the battalion headquarters orderly-room RSM Rickman was frantically pulling away

tiles and timbers from the debris of its remains. On the first tremor he rose from his office desk where he was working in conjunction with the adjutant, in the next office, to join the duty bugler on the veranda. This act of curiosity surely saved his life, for both were thrown down to the ground when the main surge of the earthquake arrived, for there was no doubt that an earthquake it was. In a few minutes an opening was ripped away from the shattered tiles and crossbeams above the adjutant's office, but Rickman, the sixteen year old bugler and fifteen year old drummer were too late, he was dead, crushed by the rubble that pinned him to his desk.

Only one unit of the battalion recognised the forewarning tremors for what they were: the Vickers Machine Gun Group. Under a new scheme introduced to British Regiments in India, all battalions now took on strength an Indian machine-gun platoon. These were Dogra, who many mistook for Sikhs but were Hindu hill men and shorter in height than most Sikhs. On the first quiver of ground, the cry went up, "Earthquake! Earthquake!" emptying bungalows and stampeding the men towards the mule stables to lead their beloved animals at a run into the adjoining corral.

Rose Rickman, now the sun's ferocity was all but done, pedalled her bicycle into the bungalow grounds of the only friend she had left on the station, who had not retreated to the hills. She, also seventeen, was the daughter of the District's Sub-Sanitary Commissioner. Along the drive she rode to dismount at the veranda steps, allowing her bicycle to drop onto the burnt lawn grass to one side. On the forward edge of the veranda the *mali* was watering a bank of earthenware pots containing plants, the only vestige of greenery not dried to dust by the summer heat.

"Good afternoon, Ravi", called Rose to the native gardener as she hurried up the steps. Giving a cheerful reply, his smile followed her across the veranda.

At the doorway she paused to call out, announcing her arrival.

"Miriam!"

The bungalow was one of the largest in the small civil cantonment. Brightly whitewashed to reflect the sun's rays, the grounds, now dried and dead, were in winter brightly flowered and green. In one corner was a tennis court where Miriam and Rose played constantly. Now she had come to say goodbye because Miriam's father was, belatedly, taking his family to the hills.

"Here, Rose, come in!" called her friend's -familiar voice from the back rooms.

Before Rose could reply a gentle tremor rocked the house. Puzzled, she looked about her before entering; half believing she had imagined it. Everything seemed to be normal, but for no apparent reason the *mali*, heaving away his watering skin, was running off across the grounds. Stepping into the inner house, Rose, skirting the wicker furniture, made for a doorway on the far side of the living room, but before reaching it the house shuddered violently, causing a stuffed tiger's head to fall from one wall. In seconds the movement subsided, leaving the two girls, in fright, calling each other's name.

Rushing to the doorway Rose found Miriam just emerging from a bedroom into the hallway.

"Rose, what is it? What is it?" she called out, alarm on her face and in her voice. For a muffled roar was coming towards them across the early evening air.

Rose, unable to summon words, had the question answered by her friend's mother appearing at the far end of the hallway.

"Earthquake!" she screamed, "quickly, Miriam, out of the house. Run! Run!"

Even as she shouted it was too late. The mother was lifted by a two foot ground wave and thrown backwards. The daughter a fraction later was carried upwards by this same wave to be pole-axed by a wooden spar dropping from the roof. Rose, seeing this as if in a slow motion dream, was also taken into the air, then hurtled to a floor that continued to ripple, rocking her

up and down, while all around bricks and timbers were falling against her, encasing her body. Just as quickly as it began it now stopped, leaving Rose gasping for breath in a low imprisoning space filled with brick dust.

Panic stricken and choking for air, she began to call out weakly, “Miriam! Miriam!”

CHAPTER 6

*All that is born is doomed to die;
Whatever dies shall live again.*

Krishna

Lieutenant-Colonel Gilfillan, forty five years old and a regular army officer since eighteen, was not the Duke of Wellington. A major at the beginning of the Great War, he briefly commanded a brigade in the final months of that conflict but like so many others, at its finish, was obliged because of surplus of rank to drop back again to lieutenant colonel. When given command of the 2nd Battalion he knew full well, unless the senior army officer list suddenly suffered a mass epidemic of anthrax that his pension prospects could raise no higher than that of colonel. With that fully understood and underlined by virtual banishment to the dreary desolation of Jhendara he was settled in mind and spirit to serving out his final years of military service fulfilling the needs of routine duty. This however did not mean to say that he was inept. In the war he had had to face up to a number of memorable challenges and disasters in both attack and retreat and appreciated in the instant that he saw the ruins of his lines that the consequences of those events were to apply here in their fullest severity.

Running to the gate of the officers' mess, awkward for him in riding boots and because of his weight, for the colonel was a man with a rounded figure, he slowed to catch his breath, striding up to what had been the front entrance.

"Mister Holt-Bate!" he called out to Miles as he ran from one side of the ruins to the other. Dressed in tennis whites he carried a piece of wooden planking.

"Colonel, sir," replied the subaltern, looking sideways to his commanding officer, clutching the length of wood.

"Find for me all the officers. I want to speak to them here, now". The colonel's request was measured.

"Yes sir! Right away, sir! But first, sir, it's Major Fletcher. He's trapped under a beam".

Miles, thinking his explanation was enough, made to dash off.

"Holt-Bate!" bellowed the colonel, freezing the younger man in his tracks. "Damn your eyes, youngster, I said fetch me the officers. Now do it".

In ten minutes seven of his officers, sweaty, dirty with dust, most wild eyed and angry at being interrupted in their rescue attempts of brother officers, stood before him. Gilfillan, his topee lost, held himself erect, calmly tapping his riding crop against a boot top. These men, his junior commanders, were in shock and he knew his first priority was to provide for them a stable base upon which they themselves could rely.

"Gentlemen," he began, "fate has dealt us a hand of calamitous proportions. Our first concern is rescue of the trapped but with properly organised rescue parties, not by desperate individual action."

The colonel paused to look at each officer before continuing.

"It's almost dark now; we've lost the light, so we will be working through the night, which will hinder our efforts."

He then addressed himself to a tall, shirtless man.

"Major Stockman, take two officers, get down to the men's lines, parade everyone, split them up into parties. Some you retain on rescue work, others you send out into the cantonment and civil line to search for anyone trapped. You must also get armed patrols out around the perimeter as fast as you can. Earmark one of your officers for that duty and that duty only. As soon as the loose-wallahs get wind of what's happened, they'll be down on us like vultures. Also arms, every rifle, Lewis-gun, pistol and round of ammunition must be

recovered and accounted for. This means you will have to put a guard on the quartermaster's ammunition stores. The dead...."

Colonel Gilfillan again paused to search out another officer. "Lieutenant Tolhurst. They will be of your concern. They must be put below ground with all speed. Find a large pit and make that your graveyard. We'll see them properly buried at a later date. For transport use the GS wagons. Find Subedar Nath. He and his machine-gunners will provide the haulage animals for them".

Again, the CO stopped but only to pick out an officer.

"Mister Durand. Hot foot it across to the fort. If it has not been done already, I want the outside world informed of our bother here. Get a message off to Delhi or whoever's listening. Tell them we have been struck by a major 'quake and need aid desperately."

Another halt to look among the faces.

"The adjutant, do we know his whereabouts?"

"He wasn't in the mess, I believe he went to his office sir" answered one of the junior officers.

"Right" responded the colonel with a burst that was almost a shout. "Mister Holt-Bates"

"Sir!" barked back Miles coming to attention.

"You will, for the present take on the office of adjutant. Between us we will co-ordinate all our actions from here". Gilfillan pointed to the ground at his feet. "This spot here is now my headquarters – from this minute – right here. Any questions?"

"The injured, Colonel," asked Major Stockman, "Where do we send them for treatment?"

"The colonel thought for a moment before making a decision, "Here, to the mess grounds. We have more trees for shade than elsewhere in the lines, and tomorrow that will be vital."

"Gentlemen!" He then began in conclusion of his orders,

"We're bared hip and thigh but above all else remember, you are the King's Officers. Go and do your duty."

--oOo--

With the arrival of dawn's light, the labours of everyone charged with a task became no less arduous. The men, searching among the rubble for bodies, injured and weapons. Frustrated sergeants, trying to account for the soldiers of their platoons. Officers, with ever mounting burdens and limited means with which to deal with them. Every need was frustrated by the one disheartening fact that everything desperately wanted was buried under rubble and had to be clawed out: Tents to shelter the injured, shovels to bury the dead, food to give the sleepless men a breakfast. Worst of all, the wells that provided water for the cantonment were found to have collapsed. This Hugh Durand discovered while returning with more bad news; the fort's east battlement which housed the radio equipment had broken away and fallen forty feet into a dry nullah adjacent to it, killing most of the signals detachment and shattering their equipment. On his own initiative Durand had made his way to the railway, planning to follow it into the town. There at the station he hoped to get his CO's message of warning out on the telegraph line.

Ever since dusk, flames from the direction of the town had lit up the horizon, tainting the night air with falling ash and the smell of smoke. Now approaching the outskirts, the young officer found out just how badly the town was damaged. Keeping to the rail line, intent on following it to the station, the screams and wailing were his first warning of what was in store, which was heightened as the structural damage and the burning became more visible to him. Durand, fixing his mind on the sole aim of getting through to the station, tried to ignore the people and their forlorn behaviour around him. But they, consumed with despair, would

not allow him to pass.

He was a *sahib* and a white *sahib* could perform miracles. A man rushed up to him falling on his face, beseeching his help. A woman, her face a tortured mask of agony and pleading stood clasping her hands together in homage to a man who was at that moment an emissary of the god she was begging salvation of for her buried and burning family. Uttering hollow words and promises in Urdu, the officer still dressed in dirty tennis whites endeavoured to push on, only to find the track blocked with fallen buildings. Accepting defeat, he turned about, beating away outstretched hands, to report back to his colonel.

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By full light everyone trapped but still alive in the lines bungalows had been pulled out, some badly injured. The dead once retrieved were taken to a shallow monsoon ditch and mantled with a protecting layer of sand. The casualties, from dislocated bones to crushed limbs, were centred first at the officers' mess where the battalion medical officer, dug out of the ruins himself around midnight, administered as best he could. There was a small hospital on the station, originally to give the resident battalion medical facilities, then later a second wing was added which afforded the same amenity to their wives and children and those Europeans living in the civil cantonment. Lamentably it too lay in broken pieces but fortunately burying few patients and staff, for with most civilians in the hills its complement was at skeleton strength. This also applied to the bungalows of the married families and those throughout the civil cantonment: most were empty, kept clean and tidy ready for re-occupation by the household servants, the bulk of whom were found to have run away. The reason for the absence of fires among these remains was pure chance of time. There was no electric lighting in Jhendara, which relied chiefly on oil and hurricane lamps. If the earthquake had struck half an hour later, when these were lit, the odds were that every heap of rubble in the cantonment would have become a bonfire. The main cause for the town's burning was because unlike the bungalows which had the kitchen in a separate out-building; the Indian town dwellers had their cooking fires in their houses.

As the morning lengthened the force of the sun intensified, bearing down on a rag-tag, mishmash of men, sweating and cursing as they struggled at their task. Some were still searching ruins for bodies and weapons, others dealt with the injured and dead. One party was directed by the CO to erect recovered tentage as a medical aid station, another he had labouring desperately to re-establish a working water supply.

Thrown around the boundary of the cantonment was a picket line of sentries whose main purpose was to see off any would be looters. These men detailed to guard the fringes were only those who had rescued for themselves a fitting dress of uniform, for the CO did not want his men to be seen outside the lines in anything less. They were the symbol of Pax Britannica and to the native population, especially at this moment; they were at all cost to give the impression of dauntless fortitude.

Two of these, Joe Penton and Ben Tysall, assigned to patrol a section of the civil lines, were taking a break. It was getting on to midday with the temperature due to touch one hundred and twenty degrees, so neither could be criticised for standing their guard under the shade of a mango tree in front of a destroyed bungalow. Although apparently turned out correctly nearly everything they wore was salvaged from others. Stumbling about all night in search of bodies and weapons, wearing only football kit with hard leather bars on the soles of their boots, come the morning, they were ordered to dress themselves in any kit recovered and prepare for guard duty. Ben thought he had found and was possibly wearing his own puttees and hose tops, while Joe could claim ownership of his heavy Wolseley topee – the rest of his

kit was under a hillock of bricks. Even the rifles they carried belonged to another platoon.

"I'm going for a toot around," said Tysall hitching his rifle by the sling over his shoulder.

"Coming?"

"Too hot. I'll stay here and watch out for any officers snooping around", declined Penton.

With his back to the broad tree trunk Joe sat looking out on the plain and at the collapsed buildings to his flanks. He noticed that vultures were keeping watch perched in trees, maintaining a ghoulish vigil. These mounds of rubble contained the means of a meal, which they were half hopeful would be exposed for them. Penton could be forgiven for not joining his friend poking around in the half demolished out-buildings; the air was super heated and lead heavy. Only now and again would the atmosphere stir as heat manufactured dirt devils whirled on eccentric courses out of the searing plain and across the cantonment.

Unable to resist, Penton's head rolled back, his topee resting against the tree trunk. He was tired; working throughout the night with no sleep was taking its toll. Slowly his eyelids drooped, but each time his mind attempted to drift off into slumber it was plucked from oblivion by a dim, dream-like cry. At first believing it to be imaginary, Joe's head finally came forward, his eyes reluctantly opening to look about. The stillness of the air allowed this call to come unhindered but muffled as if in a house from several rooms away.

Standing, Penton looked around. Repeatedly, but with long pauses the voice was calling for help and it was coming from the remains of the bungalow. Walking forward he cocked one ear stopping beside a lady's bicycle to shout;

"Who's there? Where are you?"

For a second he listened in silence. Then the call came again.

"Help! Help!"

"I hear you. Where are you?" shouted back Penton, advancing to the very edge of the damage.

"Oh help me, please! Help me!" cried the voice again, that of a girl.

"Ben! Ben! Give us a hand. There's somebody underneath the bungalow".

By the time Tysall joined him Joe was burrowing under part of a tiled roof that, keeping its shape, allowed him to crawl under. Coming back out he dropped off his topee, handing Ben his rifle.

"Keep an eye on my bandook for me, there's an English bidi down amongst all this. Gonna see if I can get to her."

The moment he entered the confined space Penton began to perspire from every pore. It was hard to see and every movement raised choking dust.

"I'm coming to you, miss. Keep calling to me!"

"Oh thank God! Bless you!" answered the girl.

Feeling his way forward on hands and knees Joe covered about ten feet before being forced to crawl. There in pitch blackness he gingerly felt with his fingers, making a tunnel forward by removing and placing to one side dozens of bricks. Picking his route from the sound of the girl's voice, after another few yards he seemed to come into a low chamber. Stretching about with his hands he found he could lift his head but not get onto his knees. Moving deeper, the girl no longer having to shout was now able to talk to him.

In a few minutes Joe was up to her and she was sobbing.

"Oh thank you, thank you!"

"No bother, love. I'll have you out of here in a jiffy," replied Joe with a cockiness he was none too sure of.

Telling her what he was about to do, Penton began feeling around the girl and the debris enclosing her. In so doing and asking the girl what limbs she could move, he found she was pinned beneath a plank trapping one leg and both arms under her body. Working blind he explained that it looked as if the best way to free her was to remove the bricks from under her

body.

"What's your name?" she asked soon after he began.

"Private Joseph Penton," he replied in joking formality.

"What's yours?"

"Rose, Rose Rickman," she answered.

"Lumme, that's one for the book!" exclaimed Joe. "We got an RSM called Rickman".

"Yes, I know, he's my uncle," informed Rose, so pleased to be involved in a conversation.

"Well that's it for me then. If I can't get you out of this, I'll have to stay down here with you. My life wouldn't be worth a wooden rupee if I left you here."

Joe, knowing well who she was and endeavouring to make a joke of her plight, sparked from Rose instead a fearful request.

"Oh, Joe, you wouldn't leave me? Please don't leave me".

"Here, what you take me for? Think I just come down here to pick daisies?" reassured the soldier, realising the girl was bravely fighting off overwhelming panic.

To calm her, Joe, as he worked, began to tell her the story of his life. The farm, his folks, his brother, the people who worked for his father on the farm and what they did in each of the seasons. Continually he talked, giving her no opportunity to think of impending dangers, pausing only to call out to Ben Tysall that he was 'OK' and to explain to Rose how he was getting on. Carefully he would remove and place aside each brick so as to minimise the stirring of dust. This was proving the worst of their discomfort for it had a choking effect on both. The heat was also appalling, drenching each in sweat, causing Joe to wonder how the girl had survived so many hours entombed.

Working each broken brick away was not easy, since every one that had to be removed to free the girl; three had to be shifted to get at it. The reason Rose was so firmly trapped was also what had saved her life: the plank above balanced on rubble providing a protective roof. After hours, or so it seemed to Joe, she was finally able to lower herself into the hollow space he had created beneath her and with sobs of joy crawl out from under.

Told to keep a hold of one of his boots, inch by inch he led the way on his belly back up the tunnel he had made. Emerging to be greeted by Ben laughing at his foul, begrimed appearance, Joe turned about to assist the girl out. Helped to her feet but collapsing into the two men's arms she could not suppress a laugh.

"Oh, Joe, do I look in as bad a state as you?"

The truth was she was far worse. Hair caked with dust and grit, her dress filthy and torn, arms and legs scratched, some cuts drawing blood. Half carried across to the shade of the mango tree, she rested for a moment before asking for water.

"Got better than that, my darling" grinned Ben, producing bottles of lemonade he found in one of the out-buildings.

"Stuff's warm as Hades but better than our canteen pani," apologised Tysall pushing down the glass marble in one of the bottle's neck to free it for drinking before handing it to the girl.

"Joe," she began some minutes later, "You saved my life.

I'll never be able to repay you."

"I know a way," replied Joe drawing on his second bottle of lemonade.

"How?" quickly asked Rose.

"By teaching me some of those rag-time dance steps you did on the ship coming out from Blighty."

Despite the dirt and sweat streaks, the girl's face instantly formed the cutest smile Joe could ever remember seeing.

"Is that all, Private Joseph Penton? Is that all?" she replied, holding the smile for just a few moments before being overcome by a fit of uncontrollable sobbing.

In the late afternoon with the sun bending towards the horizon, signalling its intention to introduce a truce, if only to replenish its lava hot rays for the next day, Jhendara's first rescuer arrived. Miles Holt-Bate, relieved of his adjutant's duties was now the officer in charge of the northern perimeter guard. Commanding thirty men who patrolled a two mile line he had established his headquarters in an abandoned hut beside a track which ran north across the plain.

"Visitor coming, sir!"

The young officer, responding to his corporal's call, rose from the stool that was his sole furnishing and joined the NCO outside the hut. Down the track, distorted by simmering heat haze, a rider on a camel was approaching. Since midday a trickle of refugees had left the town up this track but until now no-one had come the other way.

It took ten minutes for the rider and animal to arrive opposite Holt-Bate's hut. As they halted, a young woolly coated offspring of the older beast, following behind, wandered across to a roadside thorny bush and began to munch its leaves. The rider, sitting on the mount with two leather baggage cases strapped one on each side, wore a topee and skirt. In a soiled uniform Miles had salvaged from his bungalow ruins, he stepped forward to explain to this person that entry to the town was restricted.

"If you have business in the town, you may not be allowed to enter. Jhendara has suffered an earthquake and is for the present sealed off".

"Miles, you young poodle-faker, you'll not bar me from the town. I do have business there and that business is the saving of life".

As the rider spoke she was unwrapping a travel tarnished protective cotton scarf, from around her lower face.

"Emma! Emma Schofield!" exclaimed Holt-Bate in disbelief. "Where in blazes have you popped from?"

"Raurdia, twenty miles and a bit north of here. I was visiting one of our Missions there and learned of your tragedy here from a number of frightened souls who began arriving in the small hours of this morning," explained the doctor, shaking dust from her scarf.

"Great snakes, Emma, do you mean to say you've just ridden through this heat for over twenty miles?" asked the young subaltern, struggling to comprehend meeting again his ship-board companion here in the middle of India, under these circumstances.

"Most surely I have, Miles," confirmed the woman light-heartedly, before pressing the officer for information that would get her started on the purpose of her journey. "Who is in charge here and where can he be found?"

"That will be the colonel," replied Holt-Bate, "He had set himself up at what was the officers' Mess but I believe he has moved from there to the Anglican Church."

"Where is that?" asked Emma.

"Not hard to find," answered Miles pointing behind. "It's the only structure in the cantonment still standing."

"Splendid, Miles, thank you!" acknowledged the doctor. "I must get on and report to him quickly. No doubt there will be mountains of work for me."

Then lowering the umbrella, her sole means of shade, she tapped the loins of her camel with it, restarting the animal by following that up with the command: "Hoy! Hoy!"

"Sorry to dash, Miles. We'll get together at a later date" promised the woman, shouting over her shoulder. The younger camel, snatching a last morsel of leaves, trotted after its mother.

Holt-Bate watching the woman depart on her biblical mount, remembered his most vivid memory of her. It had been during the ship's fancy dress evening, when she had entertained everyone, dressed in top hat and tails, to a riotous performance twirling a cane while strutting up and down singing 'Burlington Bertie'.

Just as the officer had said, Emma found no trouble in locating the church: its spire, although less than whole, did stand out in full view above the trees of the cantonment. Solidly built of stone brought in years earlier, it was one of only two types of construction that had withstood the earth shocks, the other was the wood and wicker huts, all else had tumbled down. At odd intervals minor tremors still occurred, causing worry that a second major shock could happen and because of this the church was not occupied. Its use was that of providing a central landmark easily found and for this reason Lieutenant-Colonel Gilfillan lost no time in moving his headquarters there shortly after dawn.

To one side of the church an emergency camp was set up. Using recovered tentage and stringing up sheets of canvas, shelter was being provided for casualties in need of hospital treatment, a hastily rigged kitchen, as a refuge for homeless survivors from the civilian lines and the centre from which Colonel Gilfillan was directing all rescue work. Ordering her camel to lie down, Emma dismounted, tying the reins to a bush. As she strode off to find someone in authority the younger camel nuzzled at its mother's belly in search of milk, but the mother remained squatting in the dirt roadway.

Around the area men in parties worked at a dozen different jobs, most in a hotchpotch of clothing. At the rear of the church a well was found that could still provide water and from this a queue of mules under the Dogras machine-gunners were filling containers of water for distribution. Asking a soldier for the colonel's whereabouts, Emma was directed to a tree under which four men stood, another sitting at a desk of boards mounted on bricks.

"Colonel Gilfillan?" asked Emma of the sitting man.

"I am Colonel Gilfillan, madam" answered a heavy set man with a walrus moustache, standing near the tree.

"Very good, Colonel," replied Emma stepping closer to introduce herself and offer her services. "I am Doctor Schofield. I've just ridden down from Raurdia where I have a Mission. I'm here to assist as best I can with the injured".

"My soul, madam!" exclaimed Gilfillan in genuine surprise. "You're the first help we have had from the outside. Do they realise out there what's happened here?"

"By now, yes!" assured the woman. "When I left early this morning the Assistant Magistrate was dispatching a messenger to the telegraph and rail station at Ampur".

"Hmm! Hmm! Good. Good." Muttered the colonel in subdued satisfaction turning half about to tap his boot with the riding crop he held.

All day he had struggled to suppress his anger at the total failure of communications. With no radio or telegraph link his only alternative was by messenger across the plain. On being informed by 2nd Lieutenant Durand that the rail line was badly distorted and its roadway crumbled he dismissed it as being of any use, sending Durand and a corporal off soon after dawn on horseback to follow the railway with orders to find help beyond the hills. It was from these hills that Jhendara at last had an indication that the outside world was aware they may be in some difficulty.

Just before noon a heliograph message came flashing to them in Morse asking if all was well. Spotted and read, those in the cantonment could only stand helpless as the speck repeatedly flashed for another hour. If their heliograph equipment had not been deep beneath the rubble of the signals store and if the dust and heat haze had gone away for ten minutes - maybe, just maybe, a reply could have been sent and seen. Instead, all that could be done was to appoint someone to watch and record the incoming messages.

"Colonel, if you could provide me with a guide to your centre of operations in the town I

would be most grateful.”

Gilfillan pulled back from his worries and looked at the woman.

“At present, madam, there is no such thing”.

“Good God, Colonel! Do you mean to say that they have not received one stick of aid from you?”

Emma, pointing towards the rising smoke from the town made no attempt to soften her rebuke.

“Doctor Schofield,” replied Gilfillan, “I am quite aware of what has not been done. The reason for this is the simple fact that we here are only just now climbing off our knees.”

“I can see that,” snapped back Emma, again pointing towards the town. “But that is the point of greater devastation and is where your rescue attempts should be concentrated”.

“It is not as elementary as that,” replied Colonel Gilfillan keeping his voice low and levelled. “Only now am I able to gather a large enough force to give any sort of realistic support to the survivors of the town.”

“Fiddlesticks, Colonel! Fiddlesticks!” dismissed the woman. “To have sent one man with a spade would be doing more good than sending no-one.”

“Damn it, woman!” exploded Gilfillan. “I will not be rebuked by some female poultice-wallah telling me what my priorities are. What men I can spare I will be moving into the town tomorrow at dawn and not one dashed moment sooner. If you think one person can do so much, then I suggest, with my full permission, you scoot along and try”.

“That, Colonel,” announced Emma, drawing herself up to her full height before turning about and storming off, “was and is my sole intention.”

For a full minute after Colonel Gilfillan paced up and down, repeatedly striking his boot top with his riding crop. Then stopping he addressed one of the standing officers: “Lieutenant Joyce, track down Major Stockman. Tell him our plan for providing rescue assistance in the town. I’m bringing it forward by several hours. Inform him to move his men at dusk”.

The colonel had spent most of the day formulating plans and gathering tools for this operation but had set aside a period of sleep for his men so they would arrive to the task refreshed. However, Emma Schofield's biting comments, larded with points of truth, pricked his soldier's honour. They were not ready, the move was premature but the woman was right, swiftness of action was the key factor.

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“Hold the basket still, lass. I don't expect you to look, just don't faint on me”.

Rose Rickman, sucking in a sharp gasp of air, held a wicker basket under the mangled and infected arm of a fourteen year-old Hindu boy. Rendered unconscious with chloroform by Emma Schofield, the doctor was now poised with a scalpel in her hand to amputate the limb. On trying to concentrate on the boy's face Rose caught, from the corner of her eye, the red gash of the doctor's bold cutting of the flesh of his upper arm. Then reaching for a surgical saw, the grind and scrape of whose blade very nearly caused her to pass out. In just seconds there was a weight in the basket and Emma was telling her to hurry out of the horse stable being used as their hospital and dispose of the severed arm.

It was the afternoon of the third day of the earthquake and Rose was no longer in the cantonment.

After her rescue by Penton and Tysall she had joined them in a vain search for Miriam and her mother. After an hour she was persuaded to give this up and accompany Ben to the Anglican Church. On arriving there, pushing her bicycle, she found her uncle directing a party of men erecting a tent. Approaching him she was only able to utter two words: “Uncle John!”

John Rickman spun around to stare for a second in” stunned disbelief. For two hours,

gripped in bitter grief, he had clawed through the remains of his married accommodation bungalow where he believed his niece to be buried, cursing himself for not making her accompany Harriet and his two boys to the hills. Now here in front of him was the girl caked in grime, almost unrecognisable, whom he had given up for dead.

“Rose! Oh Rose, darling!” The regimental sergeant major almost wept as he wrapped her in his arms.

Seeing her provided with a basin of water to wash and a sparse meal of corned beef and biscuits, she was then left. Whereupon a delayed reaction of shock took hold of her. This was how Emma Schofield found her, collapsed against a tree in the early evening heat, overcome with fits of shaking.

“Now what's wrong with you, child?” asked Emma, on her way back to her camel after the confrontation with Colonel Gilfillan.

“I was b-buried, all n-night,” stuttered Rose.

“Were you? Really!” commented the doctor in an unimpressed tone. “Well you're not doing yourself or anyone else any good sitting there with your hands hidden in your armpits. Come girl, I've work for you”.

Rose, still shaking, meekly drew herself up and followed the woman. Collecting her bicycle she pushed it along in the woman's footsteps only mounting it to keep up with Emma as she rode away on her camel.

For half an hour she struggled along behind, over the broken road surface that led to the town. At its outskirts they began passing through refugees from the burning ruins. In family groups or as lone figures they squatted beneath trees, or around shrines and fallen temples. Some worked at wells, endeavouring to draw water but most wandered aimlessly or sat with bleak stares awaiting fortune's next step. The only life that functioned as normal were the cows, sacred animals who meandered where they wished or lay in their favourite shade chewing their cud.

Skirting the damage, Emma led Rose along narrow tracks and irrigation stream beds in a half-circle around the town. She well understood the native population's attitude to a disaster of this size - that of fatalism - it was accepted by them as the work of their angry Gods. But she also knew that somewhere among the devastation there would be people fighting against all the odds to repair, feed and save life. Coming upon the rim of a *nullah*, the same one that part of the old fort fell into, which ran for several miles from south to north, Emma followed it. At the eastern edge of the town an iron bridge crossed the *nullah* to a suburb of houses, shops and further out parched farm land begging the arrival of monsoon rains. Miraculously, the bridge and these buildings stood undamaged. The epicentre of the earthquake being to the west, it appeared that the shockwaves had died against a geological fault below the *nullah*, sparing everything east of it.

Crossing the bridge they joined a small trickle of people leaving from the town, some carrying dead and injured on litters or in their arms, others conveying goods on their backs or in oxen carts. These Emma suspected were very likely looters.

Exercising a well trained sense for locating such things, Emma steered her mount around the back of a street of buildings. To the rear of one of the houses was a low walled courtyard that appeared to enclose a stable, empty of animals. In the grounds surrounding this was a number of trees that were giving shade to some hundreds of people. Huddled together, spirits lost, a melancholy gathering of both sexes of all ages, waiting in hope that someone would come forward and offer the means of salvaging their lives. Dismounting, Emma Schofield tied her camel to a gate, leaving it and the offspring to gaze about with that animal's hereditary simple-minded expression.

“What's your name, dear?” she asked of the girl.

“Well, Rose,” she ordered, on being told, “leave your bicycle here and come with me”.

Entering the courtyard, it appeared to have become a casualty collection centre. There were injured everywhere, lying on the ground, sitting against the courtyard wall and squatting in the open. Only a few who were lying down had *charpoy's*, the Indian cot, the rest were lucky if they had a reed mat under them. Throughout the courtyard resounded cries of sorrow and grief from distressed relatives of the injured and wails of pain from the injured themselves. Along part of one wall was an open wood frame stable with a straw roof. Beneath this was what looked to be a surgery or aid station dealing with a long queue of people seeking medical attention. Marching to the head of this, Emma found one man, a Eurasian in his early forties wearing European dress bandaging a Hindu woman's arm with a strip of bed sheet. Sitting on a stool, he had beside him a table scattered with bottles of pills, ointments and medicines and an untidy pile of improvised bandages.

"Doctor, I am Doctor Emma Schofield of the Livingstone Missions," introduced the woman, in the same breath offering her assistance: "can I be of service here?"

Releasing the bandage the man leaped to his feet to grasp Emma's right hand in both of his, pumping it. "Oh, Doctor, you are the answer to my prayers."

Overjoyed with Emma's arrival, the dark skinned Anglo Indian explained why:

"Doctor, I am Timothy Hillier and I am not a doctor, just a pharmacist and I am pleased, so very pleased to see you."

"Mister Hillier, who else do you have working with you and how many have had medical training?" asked the doctor sternly.

"There is no one else," admitted Hillier. "In the town we had a modest hospital and clinic but I've been unable to trace any of the staff. In desperation I began here to administer basic nursing."

"Well, it's a start and you have done splendidly," congratulated Emma before outlining in an authoritative manner her immediate intentions. "But now you and I must begin turning these grounds into an emergency hospital. I have brought with me a small quantity of medical supplies, inadequate for our needs here but it will be something with which we will be able to establish ourselves."

"Rose, child," called Emma in a hurry to get things moving, "bring in those two small cabin cases from my beast.

You'll have to press-gang some of the able-bodied but be quick, there's a lot to do".

Rose had followed the woman through the yard but unlike Emma, who seemed oblivious to everything around them, she looked and was numbed by the sights and sounds. The heart rendering cries, the anguished expressions and reaching arms with accompanying grief-stricken pleas in Urdu, Hindi and broken English. Combined with this was the sickening sight of bloody, crushed limbs and still bodies clouded with swarms of flies. From the foul stench which wafted around them some of these still forms were clearly dead. Rose, seventeen years of age, her chest tightening like a drum skin, stood frozen by the horror of it all but her mind was crying: "Run! Run!"

Emma had to repeat her request to the girl before she went to the camel. At the animal she found un-strapping the cases simple, but they were heavy. Approaching a family group under the nearest tree she had to ask for their help several times before a youth rose from among them to assist her in carrying the cabin cases to Emma.

Through the night she worked always to the orders of Emma Schofield. She said: "Water child! We need water." And Rose went off and found a well, then organised a posse of women to bring it in pots and tins to the hospital. In this same manner, a fire for boiling water was established in a corner of the yard, a pit dug for depositing human remains and bodies taken out into the fields for burial if Muslim and burning if Hindu. Emma had requested the finding of more *charpoy's* for the patients to lie on but Rose was unsuccessful in this, having to make do with reed matting instead.

To get all this done Rose had begun by asking for help using the limited few words of Urdu she had picked up, then when this produced scant response, pleading with individuals. Finally, disgusted at the lacklustre attitude of these people towards co-operating in tackling this calamity visited upon them, she began to shout and stamp her feet. This did the trick. After that all her requests began as arm waving, shouted commands.

Now, eighteen hours later Rose stood over the pit she had, had dug, tipping the fly coated arm into it. Right away a *Harijan*, an Untouchable, dressed in a turban and loincloth, one of two who saw to the duties of the pit, threw a light covering of sandy soil over the mutilated, severed arm. This was the first time Emma had asked for the girl's assistance during operations, using her mainly as an overseer ensuring that jobs got done. The Anglo-Indian pharmacist had collapsed with exhaustion and there was no one else Emma trusted.

On re-entering the stable shelter the doctor beckoned to her.

"Rose, give this boy another wee whiff of chloroform. He's coming around and I'm not quite finished."

The doctor, her hands red with blood, pointed to a metal tin and gauze face mask.

Placing the basket down, she, under Emma's instructions unscrewed the small metal cap and began to pour this fluid over the mask placed over the youth's face.

"Steady, Rose, steady!" cautioned the doctor as the boy's moaning fell silent. "Just a few drops at a time. We must stretch the chloroform as far as possible".

Concentrating on the flow, the girl didn't notice the uniformed figure enter the stable until he gruffly spoke her name. "Rose!"

It was John Rickman, and he was angry. His niece, whom he had given up for dead, after turning up alive yesterday evening had just as suddenly disappeared. He found her again after being told of her whereabouts by one of his sergeants. The latter, in charge of a squad of men sweeping through the grounds in search of looters, was recognised by Rose and was asked to inform the RSM of her safe whereabouts.

"Oh, Uncle John, I'm so gla---" began Rose jubilantly, relieved.

But she was cut short by the man speaking in icy tones, his face masked with dark displeasure.

"Do you have any idea how many hours we wasted last night searching for you? Why on earth did you take it into your head to disappear like that? I was frightened rigid you may have been kidnapped or worse".

Rose, confronted by a man she had never seen so angry, demanding justifiable explanations for her unexplained departure, could not at first find the words to reply, but that proved unnecessary; Emma answered for her:

"Regimental Sergeant Major", she began, not raising her eyes from her work but noticing the crest on Richman's wrist. "I am Doctor Schofield, and it was I who abducted your niece. It was wrong of me and please do accept my apology for that".

John Rickman didn't reply looking away to draw in a deep breath of air.

"In the situation we are facing at this present moment someone with a reliable mind and a willing pair of hands is priceless," continued Emma, still not looking up. "Here in this compound are patients who, if it wasn't for the work of your niece, would surely be dead. As it is they now have a chance."

The RSM remained silent, and then in a more tempered voice he asked "Is there anything you need, pigeon?" Rose was safe and this he could see was not the time or place to tick her off.

"No! No!" replied Rose, thankful to see her uncle's anger had diminished, adding wistfully: "Perhaps a clean dress?"

"RSM, what news is there of help?" asked Emma, switching the dialogue towards a more urgent matter.

"There has been none," was John Rickman's deliberately measured reply. "We remain more or less marooned. One of our officers, sent by the colonel along the railway to the west made contact with a civil reconnaissance party but there's no help expected from that direction. The hill passes are blocked and the train line buckled.

"The devil's chosen well his playground for making mischief!" muttered Emma aloud before halting her work to look up, addressing Rickman with a frank request. "RSM, I know there are other emergency centres like this of ours but I would be most appreciative if you could pass on my appeal to your colonel for any assistance he may be able to direct our way. Especially food and medical supplies, we are desperately short of both".

John Rickman's face was stern but his eyes betrayed a feeling of unease. "Doctor, you are the only one providing medical facilities here".

"But the town has a civil structure, judiciary, public works, police..." Emma began to point out in an astounded, high pitched voice but was interrupted by the warrant officer.

"Most are summering in the hills. Those not are buried or injured. Many were having an early drink at the Gymkhana Club in the cantonment when it collapsed. Our medical officer is doing his best to organise an aid post at the north of the town but we only have a few hundred troops and a handful of police here in the town and most of those are deployed in maintaining law and order, less than half are involved in rescue work."

"My gracious," uttered the doctor, "I didn't dream the situation was so grave".

"Colonel Gilfillan is of the opinion that it can only get worse" added Rickman.

"No doubt," agreed Emma, bowing her head to resume her task of bandaging the amputated limb, adding in a matter-of-fact tone, "Now you will be taking your niece?"

"Doctor Schofield!!!" protested Rose.

"You've done enough, child," praised Emma. "Besides, the colonel is right. With so many unburied dead about we will shortly be facing epidemics we may not be able to control: Dysentery, Typhoid, and Cholera."

"But you'll be staying?" Rose put the statement to the doctor as a question.

"Yes! At least until sufficient assistance arrives."

"Then I'm staying with you". Rose's tone was determined.

"But child you should see yourself," began Emma in an attempt to persuade the girl to withdraw to a safer location.

"You're exhausted, you need rest, a meal and a good clean up".

The doctor, of course, was right. There were dark circles around her eyes and sweat salt blotches on her face. For protection from the sun a tarnished scarf covered her head and shoulders, the dress was the same one she had worn while buried under the bungalow.

"No Doctor Schofield. I won't go until you do," defied Rose.

"The doctor's quite right, pigeon, you need a rest," joined in the RSM.

This only heightened the girl's determination to stay.

"Uncle John, I'm not going to leave. I'm needed here and as long as the injured keep coming, I'm remaining."

John Rickman made no reply, looking at Emma for support but she was concentrating on her bandaging. Stepping near he put one arm around his niece, kissing her cheek. "I'll see about getting a change of clothes sent", then turning, he left.

"Rose, dear, you can put the lid back on the chloroform," said Emma, signalling to two of the patient's relatives to come forward and carry him to a shaded rest area in the compound.

"Oh! Yes, yes, doctor," replied the girl, recovering from her outburst.

"Emma! Child!" smiled the doctor, wiping her hands, "Please call me Emma".

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In the afternoon of the third day a dust column was seen approaching from the east following the route of the removed railway line. This turned out to be eleven motor lorries filled with relief supplies dispatched from the neighbouring princely state. Later an aeroplane flew over, dropped a message, circled for ten minutes, and then flew off west back the way it came. Before dark a mixed party of military and government officials rode in on horseback from the north. They were followed by a battalion of the Royal Irish Fusiliers marching in just after midnight. They were the vanguard, for close on their heels came an Indian battalion, of the 8th Punjab Regiment acting as an escort to a two mile long baggage train consisting of army GS wagons and carts drawn by mules, bullocks and camels.

Over the next week activity around Jhendara was constant, motor and animal traffic churning the dirt roads around the town into powdery tracks, inches deep in dust. Then villages also sprang up housing the army of rescuers as well as the homeless inhabitants who hung on in the vicinity. Of these there were not too many. The majority of the town's people remained where the earthquake trapped them, the lucky ones crushed to death or choking on the brick dust. Others died burned alive or just gave out, awaiting rescue that never came. Regardless of these deaths the community's numbers did swell; vultures in their hundreds descending on Jhendara.

As for the companies of the Queen's Light Infantry, their posting in a back water of the Central Provinces was at an end. Ten days after the town and station received its death blow, Colonel Gilfillan marched the survivors north to join the other half of his battalion. The army had other stations and it would not be hard for them to accommodate these displaced waifs. This indeed proved true, one was found for them in less than a month, the only drawback being that the Queen's new neighbours welcomed them as game to a hunter.

CHAPTER 7

*Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie.*

Robert Louis Stevenson

Finishing off the last memo on his list of correspondence for the day, Robert Christie pressed a sheet of blotting paper over the ink. He did this with some care to ensure his hands did not touch his writing - the sweat would have smudged his work. Above his office desk, hanging from the room's high ceiling, was an electric powered fan. This fan was intended to cool the room but this was Delhi in June, high summer, the best it could manage was to swirl the torpid air, more a hindrance really, for every sheet of paper on his desk was weighted down to stop them taking flight in the fan's wash.

Ever since late March Christie had worked in semi-darkness with his woven-grass window blinds permanently down. His office faced south, receiving the sun's full glare throughout the day, creating for him a work environment during these hot months that was not far short of insufferable. To avoid the worst of the day it was common practice for Secretariat employees to begin their day early and finish around noon. It was now well into the afternoon and Christie was working late because he had overslept, wrapped in the arms of a woman.

On arriving in Delhi he was offered accommodation sharing a *chummary*, a bachelor's bungalow, with three other young men of the service. Delhi was the administrative headquarters of the Indian Civil Service, with a large military staff presence and the centre of numerous other governmental departments and it was not surprising that during the winter months this was where a sizable number of the girls from the 'fishing fleet' dropped their nets. With most doors open to them their life was a whirl of entertainment: the sports and gymkhana clubs, tea dances, dinner parties and balls, hopefully ending the season lucky enough to attend the Viceroy's Ball. All this ended in March when the girls had either been proposed to or had set sail for England as 'returned empties'. Christie had spent the winter enjoying the female company while at the same time avoiding capture, for as Emma Schofield had pointed out to him on the ship, he was a member of the Indian Civil Service, the 'heaven born' and to a young bride worth a thousand pounds a year, dead or alive.

The reason for his lateness was to do with British customs in India. Most of European Delhi spent the summer up in the coolness of a number of Himalayan hill stations, leaving behind a skeleton staff of junior officials to administer the country. Christie being one of these and his three room-mates gone, two to the hills for a week and the other to England on leave, he met on the previous evening a Eurasian girl who returned with him to the bungalow for drinks and to listen to gramophone records, leaping at Christie's invitation to spend the night. These girls were mainly on the hunt for a European husband and began their stalk soon after the 'fishing fleet' left. But if the gentleman made it clear he was not seeking marriage most were happy to settle for a summer of romantic encounter, for they were most attractive and willing partners.

Tidying his desk in preparing to leave, Christie was forestalled by a tap on the door.

"Come in", he called, rising to put away some papers in a drawer.

One of the department's *chaprissi's* or orderlies entered, closed the door and remained still. Dressed in white with a scarlet cummerbund, he stood silently to attention.

"Yes, Malik?" asked Christie.

"Sahib. Under-Secretary Hunt sahib is requesting your presence".

“Very good, Malik. I'll be right along” said Christie politely to the grey bearded ex-Sikh Regiment havildar.

Leaving his office, Christie followed the corridor's turnings north to the shaded wing of the building, grateful for the noticeable drop of a few degrees. Seeing him coming, the under-secretary's own Indian secretary stood up to knock on a large, dark-wood door before opening it to step inside and introduce Christie's arrival.

“Please come in, Mister Christie,” requested the secretary. “The Under-Secretary will see you now”.

With the door closing behind him Robert crossed the spacious high ceilinged office to stand before a broad mahogany desk. Seated at this was a man in his late fifties, with thinning grey hair, wearing an open collared white shirt, who interrupted his writing to look up.

“Ah, Christie, good! It was advantageous of you not to dally,” welcomed the under-secretary who, with all other seniors summering in the hills, was in charge of the department.

Unexpectedly this was followed by a cordial question: “Tell me, have you found Delhi an agreeable billet?” “Yes, Sir. Quite!” lied the younger man, knowing it best not to voice dissatisfaction at one's postings to those of higher rank.

“Hmmm, really,” replied the under-secretary, smiling briefly before reaching for a slip of paper on his desk.

“That doesn't tally with the corridor gup I've been hearing, but if true I've bad news for you: One of our chaps, Peterson, the Sub-District Officer in Ranhar District, has broken his leg quite badly and with the monsoon about to break and no local replacement handy, I'm sending you along to act as his legs until he gets back on his own”.

Christie's heart leaped with glee but this he kept hidden behind a set expression and the simplicity of his reply:

“Very good, sir”.

“Very good indeed,” shot back Hunt with a sceptic snort before speeding Robert out of his office, saying:

“I want you in Ranhar tomorrow morning, so that means you leave Delhi tonight”. The under-secretary held out the slip of paper. “Take this to finances. They will see to your rail fare and expenses. You will be away for, I should say, six weeks so I will see that all your pending work is done by others. Just leave everything and buzz along sharpish. Any questions?”

Christie, on taking his leave of the under-secretary, all but raced back to his office. On one wall was a map of India which showed the position of each district throughout the country. Tracing a finger across the paper landscape he found Ranhar two hundred miles north-west of Delhi in the Punjab Province, bordering the eastern side of Hissar District.

Catching up from his desk some writing instruments and some stationery he pushed these into a leather briefcase and with not a twinge of regret hastened from his office to present his slip of paper to the finance clerk. Then he left the building. His status too junior to merit official transport, Christie waved up a *tonga*, a two-wheeled horse-drawn carriage. At his shared *chummery* he spent an hour rushing around packing a suitcase and grip, filling a cabin trunk to be sent on after him, briefing Mangat, the house bearer on the circumstances of his sudden departure and scribbling notes for his other house chums.

Wildly eager to reach his new appointment as swiftly as possible, Christie, all but immune to the stifling late afternoon heat, arrived at the railway station determined to board the first available train. Obligated to endure a fifty minute wait the impatient government employee spent this time pacing a few yards up and down in front of his luggage. Around him the platform was awash with travellers and those whose livelihood depended on them. There were some Europeans but the majority were Indians. In one's, two's or as whole families they sat or lay asleep. Of the men awake many spent their wait smoking clay pipes or

cigarettes. Covering the surface of the platform they rested on was a painter's palette of amber betel splats. When Christie's train arrived the station burst into life. People climbed off and on, most Indians carrying tin travelling boxes. Sellers of magazines, fruits, cakes and betel nuts scurried back and forth offering their wares from shallow baskets. Water-sellers with skins of water on their hips cried out that the water they had was suitable for either Muslim or Hindu: "Mussulman pani! Hindi pani!"

On boarding the train, Christie stowed away his luggage and bedding roll then settled into a first class compartment. With all seats taken up someone sensibly suggested a block of ice be purchased to assist cooling of the carriage, a wise forethought, for with the windows closed and shuttered to keep out dust and the engine's hot ash, the compartment's air remained a smothering heat well into the evening. At midnight Christie left the train at a minor station to catch another, a change that required two hour's wait. On dismounting the platform bustled with movement but as soon as the train had left, like a disturbed hive the bustlers settled to sleep covering all the platform and spilling out onto the ground all around. To maintain the dignity of the British Raj, Christie spent his wait standing.

The next leg of the journey to his headquarters town, Chamblapur, was a slow crawl with long stops at small stations eventually delivering the new assistant sub-district officer at his destination tired-eyed and in want of a shave. It was eight o'clock on another sun drenched morning. Climbing from the carriage he stood beside his luggage. The platform was plain concrete but the station had better than expected facilities: an overhead roof, a waiting room, a lavatory, a station attendant and a combined telegraph and post office. There were only a handful of people on the platform, none of them European. A small, unsmiling man wearing a topee, eyeglasses, a European suit jacket, with an open-collared shirt and a *dhoti* loincloth, with sandaled feet approached to introduce himself in a sing-song *chee-chee* accent.

"Mister Christie, I am Navin Row Kavi. I am town school teacher and representative to District Board. I must not only welcome you to Chamblapur but perform a distressing duty as well!"

An umbrella he had used to shade from the sun he then closed, Christie noticing that the tail of his shirt hung out covering the back of his upper bare legs.

"How do you do?" Christie extended his hand in accepting the greeting, which was shaken by the sad faced teacher as he explained his distressing duty.

"It is with a heavy heart that I must regretfully inform you that Sub-District Officer Peterson has died".

"Died?" repeated Christie, stunned.

"His injury was worse than first understood. He died yesterday" explained Row Kavi

"But I believed he had only broken a leg?" voiced Robert in disbelief.

"This is correct. The cause was the fall from a horse. He complained of headaches which to everyone's shame were not taken seriously. He was a much loved official and will be missed". Row Kavi finished, holding out a telegram envelope, "We have informed Delhi - this is their reply - It is for you".

The message on the Indo-European Telegraph Company headed paper was brief, it read: 'Regret death of Peterson. Assume post. Confirmation will follow. Hunt'.

"I am to take over as Sub-District Officer," he announced in a cheerless voice. Christie had craved an independent post, but not at the price of a man's life.

"Then I will take you now to your bungalow," said the teacher in an apologetic voice. "There is no other Englishman in the town and sahib Peterson is yet to be laid to rest. Sadly your first function as Sub-District Officer will be that of performing a Christian burial."

He pointed to Christie's luggage with his umbrella and a turbaned native stepped forward to carry it away. This man was also the driver of the carriage that drove them through the town and out across a mile of cultivated farming land up onto a low plateau. Turning off the

dirt roadway they entered the gravel drive of a tile roofed bungalow. There was a garden and a wide grass lawn but both were wasted to dust by the summer's scorching sun. The only plant-life still flowering and green was in earthen pots lining the drive, mandatory adornments to all British residences. Below the veranda stood a line of Indians, all males. On the veranda itself a Hindu woman waited for Christie to alight from the carriage before descending its three steps.

Navin introduced the woman as Srilata Chawla, housekeeper, which puzzled Christie, for he knew of no household that employed a native woman housekeeper; the manager of the house staff was always the bearer and male.

"Welcome, sahib" greeted the woman pressing both her hands together and bowing her head in the Hindu fashion of *namaste*. Christie acknowledged this by doffing his topee and nodding, noting the attractiveness of the *sari* clad woman and placing her age at near that of his own.

In an assured manner she guided him along the line of men, introducing the bungalow workforce, who were paid for by the ICS. There was a *bobajee* the cook, a *mali* the gardener, a *syce* the groom, a *mehtar* or sweeper who did the dirty jobs and others who each performed a traditional and clearly defined job. With but a brief hesitation in which the woman discreetly suggested how the ceremony of Peterson's burial be conducted, Srilata led Christie around the back of the bungalow. Following a pathway past the stables she halted him at a *godown* or store shed, where four bare foot men in soiled garb stood waiting. On the woman giving them a short command they entered the *godown* to emerge moments later carrying a plain, box wood coffin.

The Indian climate was never kind to the dead; as Christie fell in to follow the party a familiar odour, escaping from the coffin, entered his nostrils. It was a stench he had experienced many times in France during the war; Peterson not dead a day had already begun to rot. Behind the bungalow the small cortege made its way towards a modest, tree enclosed graveyard. Here Christie would later discover graves dating back three centuries, two of them Peterson's preceding sub district officers. At the grave-side a bible was handed to him by Srilata. On a bookmark slip of paper was written a prayer and a burial recital which ended: 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. Srilata's providence drew from Christie an inward sigh of relief, for his burial service knowledge was somewhat hazy.

With the coffin lowered into a prepared grave, Christie read a passage from the bible, mentioning with reverence Peterson's devotion to duty and the sadness of his untimely death and finishing off with the burial recital. As a final gesture he bent to clutch a handful of soil, allowing this to trickle through his fingers onto the coffin below. Believing his task of reverence completed, he turned his head to look at Srilata, expecting her to lead them off back to the bungalow. Standing to one side and just behind she did not see him. Erect, head held high, she stared out across the plateau with eyes veiled with tears that overflowed and streamed down her cheeks.

Only she had stood near the grave-side with Christie, the rest of the household staff hung back, witnesses but not participants in this Christian ceremony. Christie, holding the bible in one hand, placed his other arm around her and guided the grief stricken woman away from the graveside.

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As the blowing of a whistle sounded from out of the darkness Joe Penton gave his puttee wrapped lower legs a last scratch to ease the itching there before falling in once more on the

metalled road; the 2nd Queen's Light Infantry were on the march to their new station. It was a pre-dawn morning in July 1923 and the battalion, marching only at night, had over the last nine days already covered more than two hundred miles. After the calamity of Jhendara, Lieutenant-Colonel Gilfillan, ordered north into the United Provinces, gathered his command together at Meerut to re-group, re-equip and await the word to move to another post. When this came it was greeted with mixed emotions, for their new duty was to be as part of the brigade garrison at Landi Kotal in the Khyber Pass. Being one of the most dangerous positions on the North-West Frontier, wives and families were not allowed to accompany the married men of the battalion, which was greeted by the latter with extreme displeasure. The young and single, however, welcomed the news with delight, for this could mean doing battle with the villainous Pathan.

When having to march during the ruthless heat of the summer months the British Army always, where possible, did so in the coolness of the night, a most sensible move, for if attempted by day the battalion would have crumpled to its knees in the first few hours. This road along which they marched was the Grand Trunk Road, built by the British in the middle of the last century. It ran for almost fifteen hundred miles from the outskirts of Calcutta to Peshawar at the foot of the Khyber Pass. Roughly following most of its distance the line of an old Mogul Empire bullock track, it was on completion an engineering miracle of the day, linked by bridges that were nothing short of constructional wonders.

Penton, freeing his mind of distant thoughts, glanced over his shoulder, the moon had set and he was looking east for a sign of dawn. Cheered by a smudge of pale colour he shifted his rifle sling higher on his shoulder.

"Dawn soon," he said, hoping to spark a conversation from someone. When marching at night with everyone pacing out the rhythm of the step talking was done in spasms, most people cocooned in thought. No one sang and smoking was not allowed except by pipe.

"You in a hurry for another bashing from old lall singh?" asked Sid Firth scoffingly, in reference to the sun's rising.

"Just thought I'd mention we are once again on the threshold of a new day," replied Joe mischievously, smiling at Sid marching beside him.

"Well, let's do our best to keep it from the flies," piped up Tommy Gilbert behind Penton.

"Maybe then the little bleeders will let us get some kip today".

For some moments this raised gruff laughter from the platoon ranks but it soon subsided, giving way to the ever constant crump, crump sound of marching, metal heeled boots. For nine to ten hours each night this was forever with them, the signature of a battalion on the march. Drowning out most other country night noises, muffling the bark of the Punjab wild dogs, the yelp of night hunting jackals and silencing the hoof plods and ratchet creaks of the bullock walking his circle round the Persian water wheel. Shortly after the sun appeared the battalion reached that day's staging camp. These camps varied in quality from stoutly built bungalows to a handful of amenity huts in a shady grove of trees.

From the start of their trek the battalion operated to a summer marching routine.

After breakfast the men slept or more often, because of the heat and flies, dozed fitfully. In the late afternoon they were roused and fed, then in preparation to moving off on the next leg the camp was cleaned and the transport and pack animals readied. Then as the sun hung, amber red, only minutes from fleeing beneath the horizon, leaving a land it had baked to a crisp, the 2nd Queen's paraded in their column formation and turning into the sunset, marched west.

Pace by pace, mile by mile, they journeyed, first out of the United Provinces and across the Punjab, then west and north, west and north, with the shrines and temples of the Hindus becoming fewer and Muslim mosques increasing. Not that it was noticed by the English soldier, but the architecture of the older historic buildings was also changing to a

predominance of Persian and Mogul, an inheritance from India's invading settlers. Past Lahore they marched, Gujranwala and Rawalpindi, crossing into the North-West Frontier Province over the bridge at Attock, a wild place where the mighty Indus, in winter broad and thundering as it raced southwards was in this drought season shrunken and sluggish. At Peshawar, the provincial capital where the Grand Trunk Road ended, the battalion paused for the standard day stopover, but one march further on at Jamrud Fort they halted for forty-eight hours. The march pattern over the final few miles was to change: no-one dared penetrate the Khyber Pass by night, the last two days of this twenty-five day slog was to be done in daylight.

Setting off at dawn the rising sun lit the hills before them, highlighting their prominence and perils, as if giving fair warning that among her rocky crags and cliffs death was the visitor's constant companion. Armies had perished here, garrisons had been massacred; no force - from Alexander the Great to the present day - had passed through these hills without suffering fatal attacks. The danger was not an occurrence born out of territorial defence by a population loyally guarding their sovereign domain, for the Pathan tribesman possessed not one grain of national allegiance. His motivation was greed, the Pathan was first and foremost a robber: he slew for plunder.

The road from the plain was seen by the infantry to enter the hills but no opening that could be called a pass was visible. Then they began to climb up, twisting and turning along the sides of hill slopes on a road cut out and constructed to take motor vehicles. Running parallel but mainly in the lower areas of the pass was a second, older road. Not much more than a track, it was used by the many camel caravans that transported their trading goods out of Persia and Afghanistan into India, then back again. There was also a narrow gauge railway line under construction but the route differed considerably to theirs and was only seldom glimpsed.

At the end of the first day the battalion halted for the night sheltering under the protection of Ali Masjid, a fort built high above the road. In the morning they again set off passing through a narrow gorge hardly twenty feet wide. Guarded by hill pickets and occupied blockhouses sited along the route, their destination was reached in the late afternoon. Cresting a high saddle Joe Penton and the rest of 6 Platoon found below them the pass broadening out from three to five miles across. Taking up most of this levelled area was the station, two miles square. The centre piece was a fort three hundred by one hundred and fifty yards, with towers and a main gate.

A mile from the camp the band at the head of the battalion began to play. Sloping their rifles onto the left shoulder the men's right arms stiffened, swinging shoulder high, the body adopting a swagger. They had marched almost five hundred miles and now they were to enter their new station giving the impression it was scarcely five.

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Struggling to alight from the cramped rail carriage with her luggage, Rose Rickman hardly had time to draw breath and look about before she was caught in a hugging embrace from a woman wearing a familiar, jaunty, time-worn topee.

"Welcome, Rose! Indeed, welcome". It was Emma Schofield.

"Oh Emma, thank you", responded Rose smiling as she removed her newly purchased ladies' pith helmet to kiss the doctor's sun weathered cheek.

"Train journeys can be such an annoyance. I do hope yours wasn't too much of a discomfort?" enquired the older woman with concern.

"It did go on for rather a long time," confessed the girl. "But oh, Emma, I'm so pleased to

see you”.

Rather a long time was an understatement. Rose had set out from her Aunt Harriet's hill station quarter two and a half days earlier. Travelling by train from Moradabad to Rawalpindi, then on to Mari on the banks of the Indus. There she crossed the river by ferry boat to Kalabagh where she boarded a small-scale train running on a narrow gauge rail line. Her journey just ended was at Gambila, a station twenty-five miles south of Bannu in the North-West Frontier Province.

“Welcome, child, let's get you to the Mission and into a bath straight away,” offered Emma with sound sense, turning to introduce a tall grey bearded Pathan gentleman wearing a light, thigh length coat, baggy trousers, a blue turban and leather sandals.

“Rose, I would like you to meet Zarif Khan. He has been my household major-domo for over twenty-five years”.

“How do you do?” smiled Rose.

“Salaam alaikam,” replied Zarif dipping his head to *salaam* - a hand from chest to forehead before shaking the hand the girl offered.

His gesture Rose noted was not servile or cringing as found in the south, while his eyes, dark and steady, looked into hers as if those of a tamed beast of prey. Taking her luggage and bedding roll from her, to carry it as though his arms were empty, the two women followed this man of noble bearing in dusty sandals to the front of the station. At an open topped pre-war Napier car, much in need of paint, maintenance and above all youth, he stopped to deposit the luggage. Then with Emma taking charge of the steering wheel he cranked the starting handle to bring the engine to life.

West they drove out of the town area and away from the railway across a broad valley towards a line of khaki and grey hills shimmering in the afternoon sunlight. It was August. The Frontier was receiving its annual sprinkling of summer rains but between the showers, which could be gaps of days, the sun flamed through. Not, though, with the intensity of the south. Rose in fact found it cooler. On either side of the rutted and bumpy cart track they were driving the country was a plain of yellowish grass. Bearing to the left the road led them towards a village of towered houses two miles distant at the mouth of a smaller valley winding back into a ridge of hills.

“There we are, my dear”, shouted Emma above the noise of the car's engine. “That's Sadeka”.

Rose, her heartbeat momentarily increasing, raised her head to peer over the cracked and discoloured glass windscreen. This hamlet of sun-bleached stone houses and whitewashed bungalows was to be the first training centre for her future career. She had set her heart on becoming a nurse.

While working under Emma Schofield throughout the disaster of Jhendara, Rose's admiration of the doctor's untiring devotion to the sick and injured took firm root. So much so that reflecting on her eventual prospects here in India, living with her uncle and aunt, she decided a break with them must be made. On that resolution being made, she asked Emma for advice on how she could receive nursing training. The doctor, after an hour's heart to heart talk, agreed to help the girl secure a training vacancy at one of the larger mission hospitals, but only if she would first attend a short apprenticeship with her at the Sadeka Mission and depending upon her being given permission to do so by her two guardians. Rejoining her uncle and aunt, Rose placed her hopes and Emma's terms to them. Harriet, after an hour's talk and a day's sober thought agreed but John Rickman, on finding Sadeka on the map, threw a blue fit. Four years earlier a war had been fought just two days walk from the mission. It wasn't until the day before he left with the battalion for the Khyber Pass that John, under pressure from the two women, reluctantly gave his blessing to Rose's plans.

Just short of the village Emma turned off the track down another in far better repair lined

with young, shady trees. This, a quarter of a mile long, was the mission's drive. It terminated at a tidy sprawl of buildings surrounded on three sides by treed gardens, fruit orchards and vegetable plots. Beyond, hidden at the bottom of a shallow *nullah*, a river ran past. Halting the car in front of a bungalow fronted with a mud brick wall enclosing a lawn, just again beginning to sprout green after the dryness of summer, a posse of laughing children, crying out to Emma, surrounded them.

"Memsahib Doktor! Memsahib Doktor!"

Affectionately patting heads she shooed them all away into the custody of a slim Pathan girl in a European dress. Emma introduced her to Rose as Saroj, someone also in the early stages of a nursing career.

"This is my abode," informed Emma, leading Rose into the bungalow where Zarif had taken her luggage. "Its bachelor quarters of the worst kind so you will have to accept a spot of cussedness here and there. I'm putting you in the spare bedroom for the time you're here. Now let's get you into a bath then I'll show you around the workings."

After a cup of tea and in a fresh dress, Rose was taken on a tour of the mission, which revealed itself to the girl as a community. Besides the hospital there was an Anglican church, a small orphanage, a school, *godown* storage buildings and huddled accommodation for the native workers. In one of the two hospital wards, one for women, the other for men, Rose asked where all the patients came from, for she could not believe that the light population of the surrounding country justified such a generous institute, set as it was like an oasis.

"From everywhere," answered Emma opening her hands. "Thirty years ago I and my husband were hard pushed to validate the setting up of a clinic, now they come to us from all parts of the Frontier. We administer to all tribes and clans, even those from across the border in Afghanistan, some travelling for days with the most horrendous of injuries."

On one of the hospital verandas the doctor stopped to speak to a woman in tribal dress whose face was bandaged.

"Regretfully, you will no doubt see others like her while here on the Frontier," warned Emma as they moved away.

"Her husband, believing she had been unfaithful, cut off her nose."

"Oh, God!" gasped Rose shivering with a stab of shock. "It was the husband who brought her here," continued the older woman. "Seems she was guiltless. Husband begged us to restore her beauty."

After sunset Emma held a small supper party in which she invited her two other doctors, a Bengali Muslim and a Eurasian Christian, both young men. Also invited were the middle-aged Anglican missionary and his wife who between them managed the church and orphanage. This casual gathering was intended as an informal opportunity for Rose to get to know the key members of the mission. After enjoying the conversation and full of questions that for her could not be answered quickly enough, she, despite her eagerness to hear all accounts relating to Sadeka, could not conceal her tiredness. On Rose's third yawn Emma took her hand and led her off to bed. The journey, fatiguing and too long, had drawn from her all resistance to slumber.

Doubtless it was because of this early retirement, combined with the unfamiliar bed and coolness of the Frontier night that awoke her in the morning's early hours. Fully wakeful she lay for almost an hour listening to the bark and howl of prowling night animals. Then, restless, she rose to slip on a robe with the intention of going out onto the veranda. Opening her bedroom door she stepped barefoot into the hallway, not noticing the dark form at rest in Emma's bedroom doorway until Zarif Khan's head and shoulders rocked forward.

"Oh!" gasped Rose, startled, but her cry was muted. Then recognising the man she quickly gave an apology believing she had disturbed his sleep.

"I'm sorry, Zarif, please forgive me," she whispered, fleeing elf-like through the large

archway entrance to the dual parlour dining room and across it out onto the veranda.

The moon had set but the stars from a cloud cleansed sable sky lit the landscape as if from a million candle flames. To savour the charm of this nocturnal plain and ponder the significance of the high towered village houses, showing slate grey in the star-light, Rose settled into a wicker chair. Beguiled by the soft silence, the girl at first did not notice two turbaned figures stealthily approach the front gate.

Startled and apprehensive, not knowing if she was in danger of reacting foolishly to stories of Frontier abduction and murder, Rose was on the point of calling out to the two intruders, when she became aware of someone standing beside her. Looking up, her surprise turned to relief as she recognised in profile the outline of Zarif Khan's hawk-like face... Without a word he left the veranda to walk out to the strangers. Holding a short conversation with them he again in silence returned and entered the bungalow. Rose stood now, left to the sidelines in the role of curious spectator. However, this changed as soon as Emma appeared, followed by Zarif.

"Rose, child, get dressed. Then join me at the clinic medical room. You may as well have your Frontier baptism now as later". The doctor had not paused as she, dressing-gown clad~hurried past towards the gate.

Entering the clinic Rose found light given from three lamps lit and placed by Zarif. In a chair a young Pathan tribesman sat being examined by Emma. Stripped of his upper garments the doctor looked first at a gash of cut flesh oozing blood on his right side, then more extensively at a wound midway between his left shoulder and neck. The second Pathan, a much older man, stood back in the room's shadows keeping watch through a window. All inquiries of the injured man by the doctor were being conducted in the local language which she also used to give Zarif an order, sending him out of the room.

"Rose," she said in English, "Take that bowl and fill it with water from a chattie you will find just outside the door".

The girl complying returned to be told to put on an apron and stand ready to assist in dressing the wounds. As Emma added an antiseptic solution to the water Rose had fetched, Zarif returned with a basin of hot water. They worked without pausing for over an hour, the flesh of the side wound being stitched into place without putting the patient under with chloroform, which had Rose admiring how the man bore this without so much as flinching. As for her, after the horrors of Jhendara this was tame indeed but throughout her stomach periodically heaved, brought on by foul but inescapable whiffs of the man's bodily stench.

With the side wound stitched and dressed and the shoulder wound bandaged with the arm secured across his chest, Rose assumed that the young tribesman would be settled down in a ward bed. But after being assisted to dress by the second Pathan, and apparently under no protest from Emma, the two, delivering short but earnest thank you's or farewells, slipped out and away into what was left of the night's darkness.

Rose withheld her question as to who the two men were until breakfast.

"Now - fugitives," replied Emma placing her teacup in its saucer but retaining hold of the handle, staring for a few seconds into the cup before looking up into the girl's eyes.

"They are father and son. Until yesterday morning they were farmers with an older son, his wife, a sister and mother. This family is involved in badi, that's a blood feud with another family from another clan. Yesterday at dawn the men of this other family attacked their home as the two of last night were driving their sheep flock out into the hills. Hearing the shooting they rushed back to find their house taken. They did try to rescue the women but were outnumbered. The younger one managed to kill one of the other side, but you saw the price he paid for it, a sword cut and a bullet through the shoulder".

"What of the rest of the family? What happened to them?" asked Rose, awed by the story and the calmness with which Emma related it.

“The other son is assuredly dead. As for the women the best that could be expected is for them to accept slavery and servitude. If not – “Emma again looked down at her cup - “A cut throat”.

“And the two from last night?” pressed the young girl.

“The father, cursed for the rest of his days on a mission of revenge. The son, at best a cripple, with a useless arm, for his left collar-bone was shattered. But I suspect he will die. That shoulder would have needed two months here in hospital to heal properly. As it is, infection is bound to set in”.

The doctor again sipped her tea.

“How are they to defend themselves? They had no arms,” asked Rose, her mind now filled with wildly mixed thoughts.

“Oh, they have weapons. Every Pathan has a rifle,” assured Emma. “They know I won't have them on the Mission grounds. Would have hidden them before coming in”.

“That's awful! Awful!” exclaimed Rose, her feelings in turmoil.

“There's far worse happens here on the Frontier and it is all because of that accursed blood feud”, stated Emma, venomously. “Most of those we patch up only sally off to seek revenge. Adding yet more patients to our wards. It's unending – unless one family or clan succeeds in exterminating the other”.

The doctor, gathering breath pushed her teacup and saucer away before continuing in a low, firmer voice.

“Child, the girl you met yesterday - Saroj”, Rose nodded her head in acknowledgement, “well, twelve years ago she and a ten year old brother were brought to us by their mother desperately in search of sanctuary. The father and his brother, the last of the family's able bodied men had just been killed as a result of badi. The mother begged for our protection for her son, who was now the sole male survivor. We granted her plea accepting the children into the orphanage school while the mother was given employment in one of the households. This worked well for a few years until the mother one day took her children across to the bazaar in the village. It was on the date that once a month the tribesmen come from the hills to attend the horse market. There the family was recognised by a man in feud with them and without mercy he stabbed the boy to death. Of course it was murder but no one would dare come forward to identify the killer for fear of themselves becoming caught up in badi. So some months later, again at the horse market, the mother stalked her son's murderer and with a pistol belonging to her husband, whom she had concealed from us, she shot and killed the murderer. This time there were plenty of witnesses, for the assassin was from a feared clan, resulting in the mother going to trial for murder, of which she was found guilty. Fortunately the judge was aware of the circumstances and sentenced her not to hang but to life imprisonment”.

“And where is she now?” asked Rose with a mixture of sorrow and anger.

“The Andaman Islands, serving out her sentence at the Port Blair convict settlement,” replied Emma in a tone of resignation. Then looking hard into Rose's eyes she began to tap the table with a stiff finger as she spoke.

“Now you will be working a lot with Saroj. You will find she's quite shy and formal but this has a lot to do with what has happened to her family. So don't be put off by her lack of smiles, she's awfully bright and quick to learn practical things and is a treasure with the children.”

Emma paused before giving Rose the nearest thing to a direct order: “She speaks English better than anyone else from the tribes here, so you must learn from her our local dialect. To the north, above the Khyber it is Pukhtu and spoken with a guttural accent but here in the south it is called Pushtu and spoken with a softer modulation.”

“It's rather important I learn the language as quickly as I can”. Rose was agreeing, not

asking a question.

“Yes, my dear, without it you will be as useless as a ship without a rudder,” confirmed Emma.

Rose Rickman drank the remainder of her tea in silence, thinking hard on what the future here on the Frontier held for her. In six weeks time she was to celebrate her eighteenth birthday.

CHAPTER 8

By the sin of the sack of Chitor.

Rajput Patriotic Oath

Sitting in his saddle eased and relaxed, Robert Christie rode out of the streets of Chamblapur onto the road leading to his bungalow on the high ground above the town. It had just gone noon on a bright, warm, February winter's day and the sub district officer was returning for lunch. Well into the latter half of his first year administering to his portion of Ranhar District, he rose each morning eager for the work of the day and the mixture of challenges and joy that it brought. Restricted in his movements over the summer monsoon months, as soon as they ended he was out 'touring', visiting farms and villages, settling wrangles over land matters, checking field boundaries and the types of crops sown, sitting under a village tree listening to petitions from land owners and cultivators and inspecting the buildings and works of government services, schools, police offices, village sanitation, wells, hospitals and such. Although it was arduous work demanding long hours moving from place to place, sitting in judgement of disputes, settling grievances and validating the accounts of crop yield and tax collection, he had never been happier. After the stifling confinement of a Delhi Secretariat office this was as if a release to paradise, this was the India of his youth, the India he so passionately loved.

On the road ahead Christie, seeing a six year old schoolboy also on his way home for a meal, urged his mount to a canter. The boy hearing the hoof-beats turned while continuing to walk, but seeing the Englishman he stopped, smiling broadly.

"Hello, Mister Christie," he called waving one hand.

"Good afternoon, David," replied Robert halting his horse. "And what have we learned at our school today?"

"Much, Mister Christie," was the boy's joyful reply. "The spelling of words and the adding of numbers".

"Well, come up here with me and we will hurry you home to tell your mother."

Christie reaching down with his right arm took hold of the young boy who, clutching the rider's shoulder, allowed himself to be swung up astride the horse behind its saddle.

David except for his white shirt and khaki trousers looked to be Indian, with dark skin and jet black hair, but his eyes were blue. He was Eurasian or, as they were now being called, Anglo-Indian. His mother was Srilata, Christie's housekeeper and his father, the man he replaced, Harry Peterson. On the evening of Peterson's burial, Robert had sat at his predecessor's desk going through the papers in an effort to gain some knowledge of his suddenly acquired domain. The desk and its contents were neat and well-ordered, which was not the hallmark of a business desk; to Christie it appeared as if someone had combed through and given everything a good tidying.

He suspected Srilata, and if true she had not been thorough enough.

Removing a complete drawer a photo fell from behind. On this was the picture of a young mother holding a baby in her arms. The mother's picture had been taken in that very room and the woman, smiling with contented pride, was Srilata.

The next day his superior, Neil Hubbard, the district officer, arrived after a twenty mile ride in the morning heat to welcome him into his new post. After first paying his respects at the graveside they had a lengthy discussion on matters within the sub-district, individuals he would have to deal with and reports to be forwarded.

When Peterson's possessions were mentioned Christie suggested he purchase these, horses, furnishing and so on, and the money be sent to his next-of-kin. This, according to Hubbard,

was a wife living in England, who, shortly after they married, finding Chamblapur too dreadful to stomach, abandoned her husband and returned to her mother in Berkshire. Srilata he never mentioned until Robert expressed his initial satisfaction with the house staff.

"Yes, you shouldn't have any problems there, Srilata will keep the boys on their toes and the bungalow ship-shape," he affirmed, before thinking it only fair to explain her background.

"She is quite an extraordinary woman. When only a child her father sold her into bondage to pay his debt to a money-lender but she ran off. Somehow she survived for several months in the countryside and in the streets of towns. For a girl this is nothing short of a wonder. Then she was plucked out of it all by an organisation of nuns who ran a school for waifs. I believe the intention was for her to take vows but for whatever reason this didn't come about. She arrived here ten years ago as a maid to the then Sub-District Officer's wife. On his death she returned to England and Peterson, not then married, after taking over, finding her knowledge of English and household management skills too good not to utilise, had no hesitation in establishing her as his housekeeper."

Christie, keeping his curiosity about the photograph found in the desk to himself, ended the subject by saying he was contented with the arrangement and saw no reason for change.

There was every likelihood that he and this child would never have met except for the threat of one of India's fatal virus diseases. One month later, on returning to his bungalow through a monsoon downpour he almost rode into Srilata running towards him. It was dark, the storm noisy, and the woman in some distress would have run blindly past if Christie had not cried out her name.

"Oh, sahib. Forgive me, but I must not stop. There is an emergency". The woman, with no protection, her hair and clothing drenched, was in a high state of agitation.

"What emergency?" asked Christie.

"It is nothing to do with the bungalow," quickly assured the woman. "But I must hurry. Your bath water is ready and supper...."

"Srilata!" interrupted the horseman with an authoritative tone. "What emergency?"

"There is a child in the farm village. A messenger has just arrived to tell me he has been bitten by a dog that may be infected with rabies." The woman's explanation was given in a fraught, nervous manner.

"Child? What child?" asked Christie, a little annoyed Srilata had not added more.

Then noting her nervous actions as she hesitated in her reply, he remembered the photograph.

"Come up," ordered Christie, reaching down to take her arm.

"No! No, sahib!" The woman tried to resist his offer of mounting his horse but the rider was too strong, pulling the woman up behind his saddle.

The village was on the plateau a mile east of Christie's bungalow just off a main cart track. Along this they rode, the horse spurred to a speed that safely minimised risk to its footing. At a mud brick house in the village Srilata dropped from the animal's back to run inside. Following, the sub district officer exchanged greetings with the members of the household as she knelt to examine a dog bite to the calf of a young boy and simultaneously, to console the child. Although no longer bleeding the wound was a tear and in need of stitching.

"Where is the dog?" asked Christie of the head of the family, a Hindu with a snow white beard and mahogany brown skin.

"Ran off, sahib. It was not a village dog," he replied. "Rabies?" quizzed Christie.

The answer was an uncertain shrug and a slow shake of the head.

Approaching the *charpoy* the boy lay on; Christie winked and smiled at him before kneeling beside Srilata to have a closer look at the wound. The youth did not respond, watching the man with an expectant stare.

"The boy will need medical attention," advised Christie.

"Doctors are expensive, sahib".

Srilata was not refusing payment but wistfully stating a fact.

"Not a doctor, the boy needs treatment in a hospital. He could very likely be infected with rabies." Christie's voice was a whisper, shielding his words from the youngster's ears.

"Hospital!" exclaimed the woman in a voice hushed, but shocked. "Sahib, the nearest is Rathna. It is nine miles!"

"Then it's there he must go," announced Christie, tying a handkerchief around the wound.

"What's your name, son?" he asked, taking off his rain cape.

"David," answered Srilata, standing to repeat it as if with pride. "His name is David".

"Well, David, I want you to put this on. We must go a long way together in the rain and I wouldn't want you to get damp."

"Ma?" uttered the boy, looking with an expression of doubt at Srilata, his eyes in the flickering light of the oil-wick flame seeking assurance.

"Go with the sahib, David," soothed the woman whom the youngster had just called mother.

Lifting him into his arms Christie carried the boy outside to sit him sideways on his horse to the front of the saddle.

"Hold tight, David lad," said Robert on mounting, projecting a cheerful tone. "You and I are about to have the swiftest ride of our lives".

After a month's stay in the hospital under observation for suspected rabies infection, the cost undertaken by Christie, David returned to Chamblapur. Not, however, to the village family where Srilata had discreetly placed him, mistakenly believing he would present an embarrassment to Christie. For it was on the latter's insistence that her son should live with her in the two room hut among the servants' quarters that was her accommodation.

Before reining his horse to a halt in front of the bungalow, Srilata, who was awaiting Christie's arrival, left the veranda to help her son down from the mount.

"Now thank the sahib for giving you the ride," she prompted her son.

"Thank you, Mister Christie," he called before dashing away around the bungalow to his mother's hut.

"Sahib, you must not allow David to call you Mister Christie, he is only a small boy". The woman's request was almost a scold.

"Yes, of course, you're quite correct," he replied in a teasing voice. "I'll speak to him about calling me Robert".

As the bungalow *syce* led his horse away to the stables Christie mounted the steps, leaving Srilata to follow shaking her head. Giving his *topee* to her before she went inside, he sat himself at a small wicker table in the shade of the veranda. In moments she returned to lie before him on a teak platter the recently delivered mail, behind her followed the servant bringing a tumbler of cooled milk. Sipping his pre-meal drink he sorted through the letters, pausing over a personal one that caught his eye, which he then opened first. It was from Miles Holt-Bate inviting him to attend as his companion a few days' entertainment as guests at a Rajput maharaja's princely state.

This offer was a return invitation from Miles for the Christmas camp which Christie had held. December in Northern India was the coolest part of the year and ideal for camping, and Christmas the best of occasions for doing so. As well as Miles taking leave from the 2 Queen's at Landi Kotal, Hugh Durand was also able to engineer a week away from the Frontier Force Rifles, the Indian regiment he had recently joined. Other guests included four of Christie's colleagues from Delhi, who brought with them three of the more adventurous girls from the season's 'fishing fleet'.

In the letter Miles explained that the invitation was offered to him by the heir apparent to the state throne. He and the crown prince had become inseparable friends while attending a

public school together in England during the war years. Christie had never set foot in this princely state but as he read the name waves of emotion welled up in his mind. Looking up, he stared south beyond the railway line and the district border two miles beyond that. There in the haze of midday sun was the beginning of the Great Indian Desert that made up a major part of the nation of Rajputana. Somewhere within that vast expanse lay Jaswara, a princely kingdom of parched desert, bush covered hills and jungle valleys, peopled by a warrior race of tall, lean men with sharp, angular features and the eyes of hunting wolves. Christie knew of these things for he, some years earlier, had been granted a special honour: he had commanded this state's soldiers in battle. On his orders they held trenches under a rain of exploding shells, stood their post during bitter, freezing, snow covered nights, and charged through mud and barbed wire to a certain death that for them was preferable to dishonour.

--oOo--

With a pack on his back carrying a bedding valise, 2nd Lieutenant Robert Christie threaded his way through the heavy military traffic congestion a small French town. It was late October in 1914 and the nineteen-year-old newly commissioned officer was searching for the unit to which he was being seconded.

The troops around him were not British; they were regiments belonging to the Ferozepore Brigade of the Lahore Division, one of two that made up the Indian Corps. Dispatched from India only weeks after the outbreak of war, on arrival at Marseilles they spent a short period in light training and reorganising before being rushed north. The German army after flooding across Belgium and northern France had been blocked at a bloody cost to each side just short of Paris and the Channel ports. Now they were embarking on a second all out push in an attempt to knock France out of the war before the onset of winter. Because of this every reserve, both French and British, was being thrown in. The Indian corps was the last of these and with the allied front crumbling their intervention would be the last card played.

Stopping a captain of the Connaught Rangers, the brigade's British battalion, Christie, after saluting and introducing himself asked the whereabouts of the battalion strong regiment he was to join. He was directed to a girls' school not far away where he found the regiment, the 9th Bhopal Infantry. On the sentry at the gate saluting his arrival Christie was met and escorted by a havildar or sergeant into the main building and soon found himself in the presence of Lieutenant Colonel Dobbie, the commanding officer.

"You are indeed welcome Mister Christie, but we are an infantry regiment. What on earth am I expected to do with an officer of Engineers?" was a point the colonel first raised.

This question Christie had also been asking himself throughout the three days it had taken him to journey from Chatham, over the Channel and across northern France to this town called Wizernes.

"I believe, sir," began the subaltern, putting forward his theory, "That someone has spotted in my documents that I speak Urdu, Hindi and Raj and decided to post me where these languages could be put to some use".

"Likely, most very likely", agreed Dobbie thoughtfully, his voice matter-of-fact, head bowed.

To Christie the colonel did not look at all well. An assumption that in following days proved all too correct. "Raj, you say?" he asked looking up.

"Yes, sir," replied the young man, "I was born in India. My ayah was Rajput. She taught me the dialect".

In truth she had taught him much more, not just the language but also the country's history

and folklore.

“Perhaps that chap who sent you had second sight after all,” began the colonel, lighting on to a use for the young officer. “The Maharaja of Jaswara has sent a company of his Imperial Guard for service with the Corps. They are Rajput and commanded by their own officers. Division has attached them to my regiment but I'm in some doubt as to their soldierly skills. They arrived yesterday and I placed with them Lieutenant Parsons, a good officer, from my Brahmins Company to act as liaison, but I think I'll send you along as well to lend a dash of support”.

Taken to this State Imperial Force Company's headquarters, Christie was introduced to the company commander and his other two officers by Julian Parsons, a cheerful officer with red hair and freckles. The company commander, Major Harmukh Singh - most warrior Rajputs were named Singh - was a dapper man of medium height with a neatly cleft beard. He warmly welcomed the young Englishman to his command, smiling broadly as they shook hands, but this charm was deceptive, the Major showed over the next week that he expected unfailing obedience to all his orders. That evening a young sowar, an Imperial private soldier, presented himself to Christie. Lall Singh, reporting as his servant, was just seventeen; his cheeks yet to sprout a full beard.

The next evening the Corps was ordered to the front.

The 9th Bhopals marched out of Wizernes in escort to the brigade baggage train, the French cheering them from their doorways and windows. Christie spent the night hours in the company of Havildar-Major Piyan Singh, the Company Sergeant Major. This not only gave him the opportunity of exercising his rusty Rajput but he was also able to learn much about the soldiers' homes and backgrounds, the lands of Jaswara State and the palaces of the royal family who only three months ago they had guarded.

On the following day the rest of the brigade: Connaught Rangers; 57th Wilde's Rifles and 129th Baluchis went into the line in relief of the 2nd British Cavalry Division who in desperation had been thrown in to fight as infantry. The 9th Bhopal was held back for the next five days in Divisional reserve until suddenly they were put on French buses and rushed through the night to Neuve-Chapelle. The Germans, after a successful attack, were flooding through a breach in the line. It took all the next day for the regiment to struggle forward to the fighting area of the breach but at last they reached the village of Rouge-Croix where Colonel Dobbie received the order to attack towards Neuve-Chapelle. In deploying his five companies, number 2 Company on the left with number 1 behind them, number 3 on the right with number 4 behind them and the Jaswara company in rear as reserve, he was unable to signal the advance to begin until well after dark.

Struggling over dykes, hedges and barbed wire, Christie soon began to sweat. He was dressed in his British service uniform with a heavy greatcoat, ideal for cold and wet autumn weather but not during battle. It was the reverse with the Indian troops: they were wearing their light summer khaki drill, with turban and polished leather ammunition cross belt. Ahead the lead companies were stumbling into and dealing with pockets of the enemy. By midnight the regiment had reached the forward British trenches, finding elements of the Royal West Kents still holding out. All through the early morning hours the Germans mounted attacks, the last at dawn. During the advance the other companies had become intermingled and drifted to the flanks while the Jaswara Company found themselves occupying trenches more or less intact. All during the counter attacks Harmukh Singh had fought these off from an advanced trench with his right half company. Christie, to the rear in reserve with the left half company watching as the dawn counter attack came in, was shocked to see the Imperial troops scramble from the forward trench in retreat. Unknown to him Julian Parsons was dead and Harmukh Singh just then killed. Deprived of leadership the sowars were falling back.

Christie, fearless with the exuberance of youth, ran towards them holding his arm up as a

command for them to stop, crying at the top of his voice an old Rajasthan proverb taught to him by his *ayah*: “A wall may give way, a Rajput stands fast”.

Pulling his pistol from its leather holster he charged through them as they faltered then they, turning about, hurried after the young Englishman to re-occupy the forward trench.

At noon the order came for the 9th to attack and capture Neuve-Chapelle. With all other officers of the company dead or wounded its command now fell to nineteen year old Robert Christie, a task for which he was not qualified.

In his first year at university he had like many others joined the local territorial unit as a private soldier. There he learned to salute and march and fire a rifle, but not much else. On the outbreak of war he applied for a commission in the Engineers and had only just finished his officer's training, a course where the fundamentals of mounting an attack into the face of twentieth century fire power was less than fully covered. The signal to attack was the ending of the British artillery fire. As these pathetic missiles propelled by archaic black powder charges ceased, Christie, armed with a bayonet tipped rifle, leaped to the top of the trench and with his rifle in one hand above his head, turned to shout the only Rajasthan oath his *ayah* had taught him, but a patriotic one: “By the sin of the sack of Chitor”.

From childhood every Rajput knew its meaning, and as if a monstrous echo it roared back at Christie from the throats of his sowars as he turned to lead them.

At first they made good progress sweeping the Germans out of their defences, then they were forced to go to ground by the enemy's artillery and machine-guns. Late in the afternoon the first counter attack was thrown at them and beaten off, as was the second and third, but with the rest of the regiment to his left and right beginning to fall back and ammunition dwindling, Christie had no choice but to order his men to do likewise. With darkness close this very nearly turned into a rout, the enemy followed closely and were only kept at bay by controlled bounds from one defence to the next.

Scattered about this ground they retreated over were the regiment's dead and wounded, Sikh's, Muslim's, Brahmins and Rajputs. Just forward of the trenches they first held that morning Christie came upon Piyan Singh. Wounded in the hip and unable to walk, he was crawling to the rear. Discarding his rifle the subaltern lifted the havildar-major onto his shoulders and began to carry him. In the closing gloom and over this broken ground control of the retreat was at last lost to him, his company as well as the others breaking up into small groups.

Intent in his struggle to get his havildar-major to a location of safety, Robert was not aware that except for Lall Singh, who had not been further than ten feet from his officer since the battle began he was alone. Not until from behind him the servant fired his rifle as he cried a warning: “Sahib! The enemy!”

They were in an old sunken trench and turning about he could see three German soldiers, their spiked helmets outlined in the twilight sky on the trench lip behind. One, shot by Lall, had dropped to his knees, but the other two leaped into the trench to close on his servant. The first fired his rifle on the run then lunged at Lall with his bayonet. The young sowar parried the thrust to fork his own bayonet into the German's chest but as he did so the third German shot him through both thighs. Lall dropped sideways trying to extract his bayonet from the second German's chest. Christie, who had lost his balance on turning around and collapsed under Piyan Singh, desperately fought his way to his feet while clawing his 45 Webley pistol from its holster. As the third German drove his bayonet at Lall on the ground the teenage Rajput deflected the blade by clutching at it with his hands. In that instant, Christie's first heavy lead bullet struck the German in the chest, the force of it propelling him backward, the second round ripping into his throat before he toppled backwards into the oily mud of the trench.

Dragging the dead body of the second German off his servant, the officer examined his

injuries. Both hands were lacerated and bleeding badly, but worse, because of the bullet wounds to his thighs he could not walk, but he was not crushed by the fact.

"Sahib, you go with the Havildar-Major. I will crawl." His young voice honest and brave.

"No, Lall Singh", forbade Christie, "You remain here. I will return."

Under the weight of Piyan Singh Christie struggled rearwards across the treacherous ground over which the regiment had begun their first attack twenty-four hours earlier. Losing his footing because of the dark and falling down an embankment into a roadway he found himself among a large portion of the remnants of his company. Regaining his feet, breathless and dripping in sweat he first glanced about. The sowars were huddled in groups or collapsed on the ground, not all wounded. The men were exhausted - they had not eaten or slept for two days.

As Christie knelt beside Piyan Singh, another soldier was already crouching over him.

"He is alive, sahib," he said.

"Thank God," croaked Christie as he coughed up phlegm from his throat and spat, then asking, "Who are you?"

The soldier bolted to attention before answering. "Havildar Jetmal Singh, left half company, sahib".

"Havildar," began Christie removing his coat to place it over Piyan Singh, "the battle is not over. I must go back out onto the battlefield, but while I'm away you must organise our defences - see to the wounded - send a runner to Regimental Headquarters and tell them we are desperately short of ammunition. We will defend this road through the night - tell them that as well. Now get the men spread out along the banking - and send out a forward picket - we must have warning of an attack."

As Robert paused for breath, frantically searching his mind for scraps of battle hints from his vague Territorial Army training, the havildar spoke out, his voice an urgent plea.

"Sahib, please remain. These things you ask - I am my sovereign's palace guard - I..."

"Are you Rajput?" barked Christie in a flash of anger.

"Sahib!" shouted the Havildar, bracing to attention as if struck by an electric shock, stung by the officer questioning his manhood.

"My servant is wounded on the battlefield. I will not leave him there," explained Christie sharply, feeling he owed the Havildar at least that explanation for leaving him with so much to do. Then drawing his Webley pistol, his hat long lost, he scrambled back up the banking.

It was dark now and he found it hard to keep his direction but finally wet and covered with mud he slid down into the old trench. Discarding caution he called his servant's name and received a faint reply from further along. It a cloudy night with no moon or stars he was blind in the pit of the trench, and only just stopped from walking on Lall Singh by a voice rising up from its inky base:

"I am here, Lieutenant Sahib."

"You are safe now, Lall Singh," said Robert in encouragement. "We'll not be putting you in a warrior's pyre just yet".

At first they attempted to walk, with Christie holding his servant up, but Lall's legs kept giving away. So once again he had to hoist a man up on his back and carry him through the treachery of shell cratered fields and the obstacles of hedges, barbed wire and ditches. The two journeys that night were for Christie hell on earth, this one worst of all. Repeatedly falling, it became harder and harder to lift Lall onto his back and continue. Every muscle in his body screamed with fatigue, his mind almost insensible with unending pain, his legs towards the end unable to support the burden, time and again collapsing him to his knees. On reaching the company position where Lall was taken from him he fell to his hands and knees and remained there unable to speak for many minutes.

No attack was mounted against them that night, nor did one fall on that section of the front

for some time. The 9th Bhopal Infantry had achieved their goal, they had thrown themselves at an enemy flooding through a breach in the line and stopped them in their tracks. The price they paid though was dear: the regiment had lost a quarter of its fighting strength, over three hundred men. The Jaswara Imperial Company alone had begun the battle with one hundred and eighty men. At the morning count Christie found it reduced to one hundred and ten.

Clinging to this track on the outskirts of the hamlet of Pont Logy until relieved, when they marched out for a short rest and to re-group, the regiment withdrew under the command of Captain Jamieson. So appalling was the officer casualty rate from this one day of battle that he was the most senior officer left fit enough to command.

On completion of the reorganisation of the regiment Christie was given command of the Jaswara Imperial Company, they would accept no other. He held this all through the winter months leading them into the shell-fire infernos of two other battles at Festubert and Givenchy. Then in April he was wounded at the second battle of Ypres when a shell demolished his bunker. With a splinter lodged in his back he was carried from the fighting by two of his sowars, one Lall Singh, who had returned from hospital to again become his servant. This injury terminated Christie's involvement with these rugged warriors from India's northern desert lands. During his recovery the 9th Bhopal Infantry had left France to fight the Turks in Mesopotamia and the Royal Corps of Engineers, discovering one of their officers had been mislaid for a number of months, claimed him back.

Ahead lay another three and a half years of war but never again was he to fly in the face of death at the front of a headlong assault, contemptuous of its outcome. Battle wise, he was no longer ignorant of danger, treating small arms fire and artillery shells with the respect owed them. This did not however mean that he now avoided danger beneath the coward's cloak, because the years ahead placed him and his sappers for long periods in the front lines, repairing trench damage and at night out in no-man's land replacing barbed wire. It was work like this that gained for him two Mentions in Dispatches and by clinging with half a company of his sappers to a bridge during the German onslaught in March 1918, the winning of the Military Cross.

In the summer he was again wounded and at the close of war was convalescing in a hospital on the Sussex coast. He was twenty three years old, a Major, and decorated by his country, but when reflecting on his war, the most vivid memory for him was of the answering cry of a hundred bearded, lean dark men with mud coated khaki uniforms and eyes afire as they swept to his side, their shouts drowning the battle's noise.

“By the sin of the sack of Chitor”.

CHAPTER 9

Sweet is revenge – especially to women

Lord Byron.

Caught up in the carnival atmosphere that was the hallmark of an Indian railway station, Robert Christie scanned the crowded platform for Miles Holt-Bate. He had accepted the young officer's invitation to visit Jaswara and they were supposed to be joining up here for the last leg of the journey, at this station that served a town in Rajputana just across the border from British India.

"Hi Ho, Bob!" called a voice. It was Miles, waving, his upper body protruding from a railway carriage window.

"I hope you've saved a place in there for me, Miles?" demanded Christie good-naturedly, reaching up to shake the younger man's hand.

"Oceans of room dear chap, come aboard," replied Miles airily.

The train belonged to that state's railway service, the first class carriages kept in spotless condition, its livery of orange, blue and white shining as new.

Dismissing the Indian porter who stowed away his bedding roll and luggage, Christie hung his topee on a hat hook, and then dropped onto the green leather upholstered seating opposite Miles. Above their heads were two pairs of folded back bunk cots, giving the travellers in the compartment sleeping accommodation.

"Right, Miles," began Christie, seeking an up-date on Holt-Bate's most recent adventures. "Which Khyber maiden's heart have you broken this month?"

Of course Christie was joking, for no European would get within shouting distance of a tribeswoman before finding a Pathan blade at his throat. As it was he didn't have a lot to tell about Landi Kotal, for their movements there were restricted and the work routine, instead he turned the conversation towards his connection with the royal household of Jaswara.

Becoming close school friends with Prince Sadul at Winchester College during the war years, and as it was almost impossible to guarantee safe passage because of the submarine threat to and from India, Miles, rather than have his friend spend his holiday periods in some dreary official residence, obtained permission from his family to have the prince stay with them as a house guest on their Lancashire estate. There was also a sister, a year younger. She too was acquiring a British education and from time to time spent part of her holidays with the Holt-Bates, but not all, for she also had a similar arrangement with her own school friends. After Winchester Sadul went on to university at Oxford, whereas Miles took himself off to Sandhurst for a career in the army. This was not the direction his father had envisaged. He had hoped that after attending university Miles would take a leading position in the family textiles business, but his son was a rebel. Besides, in 1915 his favourite teacher had gone off to fight in the war, volunteering when he didn't have to, and was killed at the Front a year later. It was that which set Miles' heart on a military career.

Sadul was not the heir to the throne of Jaswara by birth, Miles informed Christie; he was the Maharaja's nephew. His wife the Maharani did not bear him children from their marriage, depriving them of direct heirs. This for the Maharaja could easily have been overcome by taking a second wife, but his love for the Maharani was greater than his devotion to the continuance of his own royal line. Sadul's father was his younger brother, and appointed by him as *Dewan*, the state's chief minister. This was not an out of the ordinary arrangement, it guaranteed security of the monarchy, thwarted those with a dubious claim to the throne – and satisfied the British, who in the past had annexed with avarice haste any Indian ruled state whose dynasty had dried up and who could not produce a legitimate substitute.

On this train the two men travelled in some style, there were only four of them occupying the compartment and there was a dining car. Then the next morning everything changed when they transferred to a narrow gauge system. They were in Jaswara now, not the most up-to-date state of the Rajputana Agency, a legacy of past rulers. It was not until the present Maharaja, Indar Singh took over from his deceased father that the state began to adopt and utilise modern practices and innovations: railways, electricity, the telephone, irrigation and well drilling. The latter was desperately needed, for Jaswara was a land of large tracts of desert waste and arid hills.

The journey soon became uncomfortable - with no glass in the windows, sand and dust blew through and around the reed blinds. The journey also lasted all day due to stops at every village station they came to. The only diversion this gave Christie was the opportunity of observing the people in some detail. A handsome race, they were to be sure, mostly of the warrior caste, Kshatriya's, a kingly order, the sons and followers of princes who claimed descendantsy from Kutcha and Lava, the sons of the god Rama. It was they who for centuries held at bay the invaders of northern India: Persian, Tartar, Afghan and Turk, preserving the Hindu religion and their own pure Aryan blood. Not until the sixteenth century did they suffer defeat, at the hand of the Moguls under Akbar the Great, who forced them into these parched lands of Rajputana where their clans carved out kingdoms.

Towards evening the country changed from bone dry desert to cultivation, first crops of cotton and *bajra* millet then, on nearing richer soil irrigated by canal waters, maize, wheat and sugar cane. At Udaigarh, the state capital and location of the winter palace, a court official met the two guests. First confirming their identity by diplomatically asking to see Miles' gold edged papier-mâché invitation card, they were shown out to a car and driven for thirty minutes away from the city along a metalled road. The district around became flat and in the distance a fort was seen mounting on a bank of rock, its battlements turning pink in the mellow light of the setting sun. On arriving at this fort they found the grounds all around the rock base planted with trees and green with gardens and sports fields. A portion of one large field facing a lake was covered by a small village of tents, ranged in streets.

Access to the fort was up a short incline and through an arched stone gateway, the car halting in a spacious courtyard. Before the two guests could climb from the automobile, a young, handsome, clean shaven Indian in a light western suit strode rapidly from a wide marbled entrance, flanked by two sentries of the Imperial Guard with lances at their sides.

"Inches, old chap! Inches!" he called, smiling broadly.

"Sadder's, you beggar," howled back Miles, leaping with one bound from the car.

Opening his door Christie joined the two embracing men, waiting to be introduced.

"Sadul," said Miles extending an arm towards him, "this is Robert Christie, a very good friend who's with the ICS".

Exchanging greetings while shaking hands, Sadul broke off to stop the smartly robed servants from removing their luggage from the car, directing the driver elsewhere.

"The apartments here are filled with my uncle's more distinguished guests which means you commoners are to reside in the bazaar".

"Bazaar?" echoed Miles, puzzled.

"Down in the tents," explained Sadul with a grin. "Come, I'll take you along, it's only a short stroll. There you can have a bath, then come up for drinks and some supper."

"This is a charmingly sited winter palace, your Highness", commented Christie as they descended steps overlooking the grounds.

"Not, I'm afraid, the winter palace, Robert. That you missed seeing back in Udaigarh. This is my uncle's hunting lodge," corrected Sadul, adding politely, "And please, Robert, do call me Sadul, I'm not the Maharaja yet".

"Tell me, Sadul", asked Holt-Bate cheekily. "When are you going to give up our

corrupting habit of shaving and grow a beaver like the rest of your countrymen”.

“That, Miles my dear fellow will be the day I become the Maharaja,” winked Sadul.

“I say, Miles, what's become of our old friend Fatty Frank?” asked their host as they reached the base of the steps.

“Penrose,” replied Miles, his school day memories jogged. “Blowed if I know. His male parentage was a judge, so he must have gone into the law business. No doubt now spends his time kicking some poor sod of a clerk up the backside.”

“School bully,” explained Sadul to Robert.

“Yes, but I and Sadder's had his measure,” proudly boasted Miles, “The creature was as dumb as an ox. When he came after us one would kick and punch him from behind. Then when he turned around the other would leap in and do the same”.

Christie had not expected much of his tented accommodation but he misjudged Rajput hospitality. At the entrance of his personal tent waited a servant, appointed for the length of his stay. The front half of this spacious lodging was an open lounge, Persian carpeted and furnished with soft chairs and a divan that allowed the occupants to look out over the lake through sheer gauze netting. The other two rooms were a bathroom with porcelain wash basin and a large bath and a bedroom with a bed of almost double size. Compared to the contents of his sub-district bungalow this was stately indeed.

The next morning he was woken an hour before sunrise by his servant bringing with him hot shaving water and tea. In the tent lines he, Miles and the other guests boarded a fleet of cars to be driven ten miles through the morning's dawning to the first event of their four day invitation. Dressed in riding togs they arrived at a cluster of marquees with a large number of horses tethered in stable lines behind. The sport this day was to be a boar hunt.

Making short work of a standing buffet breakfast, the guests gathered around an elevated display board showing their names, the teams of four who would hunt together and the ground locations where they would await sightings. There they were joined by a man named Bremness whom they had met the evening before. Bremness was employed by the state to extend its irrigation system.

“Good morning!” sang Bremness cheerfully. He was in his fifties, with sandy grey hair and an overweight build, his reddish brown skin showing the effects of many years in the Indian sun. “I see we are to make up a heat.”

Robert recognised the word as signifying a hunting team.

While waiting for their mounts to be brought to them the hog hunters stood in their heats talking, the rays of a new born sun glinting on upheld spear tips. With the talk of past hunt encounters drifting around them, Christie's heat was approached by a young Indian woman. In topee, white silk blouse, riding jodhpurs and gleaming amber riding boots, she walked up with a confident, assured air.

“Hello Kishna. My! My! Good morning”. Holt-Bate's greeting was half friendly surprise at again meeting Sadul's sister and half admiration at how attractive she had become.

“Hello, Miles,” she said, taking his hand as he doffed his topee. Only her eyes indicated pleasure at seeing him. “I'm sorry we didn't meet last night. I was entertaining some of the Maharani's guests.”

“Oh, Kishna,” said Miles almost interrupting, remembering Christie. “I would like you to meet a friend, Robert Christie. He's with the Civil Service.”

“How do you do?” she asked as Robert touched his topee, giving a polite bow of the head. For him her eyes did not smile.

Immediately she turned to the senior member of the party to make a request.

“Mister Bremness, I see by the position board you are one short in your heat. Would you have any objection if I joined you as the fourth spear?” she delivered her words to Bremness but then looked to each man in turn as if giving each a chance to lodge a veto.

“Delighted, your Highness,” replied Bremness heartily.

“Splendid, gentlemen”, she thanked them, “I’ll collect my mount and join you”.

“Ah, now and that was very crafty of the Princess,” commented Bremness as she walked away to the horse lines. Then nodding let the others in on his suspicion. “We have drawn Tree Point which is where she came within a whisker of bagging a great black brute of a beast last year.”

Tree Point was on the slope of a hill which gave the heat three advantages: shade, cover behind scrub bush and height from which to view the ground. This ground was a broad plain of cactus, sapless bush and dried water courses. Soon after taking up their position a faint whistle blast was heard across the still morning air, followed by distant shouts and the clatter of metal instruments.

“That’s the beat begun,” announced Bremness.

“It will be hours before anything is driven our way,” added Kishna in a flat tone.

In spite of this knowledge the four dutifully sat their mounts. Then as the sun climbed higher and the horses began to fidget, the woman was the first to swing from her saddle. Leaning her spear against the tree trunk she sat with her back to a small rock but still gripping the reins. The next to climb down was Bremness, followed soon after by Christie. Miles remained on his horse, eager not to miss the chance of a hot pursuit. He had hunted boar only at Christie’s Christmas camp and found it exhilarating, but although a good horseman he had not managed to claim a kill. Still, he maintained a vision of presenting a mounted head to his officers’ mess for hanging in the billiards room.

Christie appeared to sit on the first shaded rock to hand but he had chosen his seat with some tact, giving himself a side view of the young woman without making it obvious he was doing so. Strikingly attractive with pale brown skin she rested with her back straight, legs tucked up and crossed. Ungallantly, he pictured her in his mind as the goddess Kali who with her many arms, a necklace of skulls and a waist girded by a serpent, thrived on blood.

“Tell me, Mister Christie, what is your job with the Civil Service?”

The question from the woman caught Robert off balance, his mind in the middle of wickedly distorting her features.

“Oh, the job has many facets, your Highness,” he began to explain, “I settle disputes, inspect government facilities and projects, assess crop yield...”

“Do you have a title?” Her interruption verged on impoliteness but with fair cause: he was not answering her question.

“Sub-District Officer,” he stated.

“Ah!” she exclaimed in a gentle voice, “You are a Collector”.

“Yes, in some districts we go by that term,” Christie admitted with hidden irritation. It was a name he disliked.

“And where is this District you administer?” she asked. “Chamblapur. In Ranhar District,” he replied.

“And have you been there long?” she enquired further.

“Less than a year,” he answered.

“So, India must be a strange place to you after England and four years at which university?” again asking a question.

“Cambridge,” he replied simply. She was assuming him to be a mere rookie with little experience of the country and he didn’t feel obliged to improve her opinion of him with an ingratiating explanation of his and his family’s history. Instead he went on the offensive: “Yes, they are dissimilar, but of course you know this. You spent several years in England, I’m told”.

“My schooling,” she confirmed.

“Well, if I may say. It appears you did not waste the opportunity. Your English is

faultless," he complimented.

Kishna did not respond to this, perhaps thinking Christie's intention was to flatter.

"Have you a wife, Collector?" she asked using the title he hated.

"No! Sub-District Officers are far too poor to wed. And you, may I ask. Is there a husband in the offing?" he countered.

She almost smiled at this.

"No. Two suitors have been proposed but I've rejected both".

"Your father's selections?" assumed Christie.

"No! My uncle's, the Maharaja's", she replied, not seeming to mind his curiosity.

"You had good reason to dismiss then?" pressed Robert.

"They were box-wallahs." Her head rose and her voice hardened. "Rich merchants, but none-the-less, box-wallahs. I am Rajput, Collector, of the Kshattriya Caste, we are of a kingly order and soldiers. When I marry it will be to a warrior."

"Pig! Pig!" alerted Miles from his saddle perch, pointing with his hog spear.

Springing to remount, the other three scanned the rapidly heating mid-morning countryside. Way in the distance three black dots could be seen running along the lip of a dry *nullah*.

"Sounder!" called Bremness, "Sow and two squeakers".

"The boar is smart, he is keeping hidden," commented Kishna.

Then a larger black dot emerged, sprinting after the sounder who had turned into the plain. The heat stationed nearby, seeing the boar appear, for only the male pig was hunted, charged from cover. For some distance the pursuit was hot, and gaining on the boar, which suddenly turned back causing the horses to jumble about trying to turn. That was the end of that, the boar escaping into thick cactus leaving the riders to trot back to their waiting point.

After that brief disturbance the plain again became lifeless, the riders at Tree Point settling back in their saddles. No-one made a move to dismount because at last the beat was drawing nearer. Still a long way off it was moving from the left across their front. Annoyingly there was a wait of another hour before anything else happened and then it was only a shout and the far off sighting of a rider at full gallop. Yet this was the beginning. As the beat drove all before it game was seen fleeing. Two jackals and a cheetah were spotted from Tree Point as heats, stationed to their left, seeing a boar out of cover sprinted to the hunt.

It was well after midday before a chance came their way.

"Ghosts alive. Look at the size of that devil!" All eyes turned to where Miles was staring while at the same time crouching in their saddles.

A large black boar had trotted out from some bushes less than a quarter of a mile away and was keeping close to a banking as he moved into the ground below them.

"He is not yet in our sector, Mister Bremness," whispered Kishna. "He is still in the territory of the heat to our left but they can't have seen him".

Christie watched this tank of an animal on stumpy legs and felt sorrow for it. In his sub-district hardly a month went by that he was not called upon by farmers to cull with his horse and spear boars who were damaging their crops. In doing so he found them brave tenacious beasts and respected them for it, but he had to kill, it was his duty to the farmers. This on the other hand was for sport, a reason he didn't care much for.

"Keep going, my beauty, keep going," muttered Bremness. Then, "that's it, he's in our yard".

Another minute's wait until it left the banking then they were off. With the clicking of hooves on stone and a whinny from Miles' horse the boar was alerted to danger but he didn't instantly bolt, first looking to see the direction of its approach. Coming down the slope the riders clearly saw the animal run across a piece of open ground then turn right, going out of sight behind a clump of bush. Bremness and Miles swung their horses hard to the right

believing they would come upon him trying to angle away the other side of the bush. Robert, in the rear, was for a moment astounded as the princess took a completely opposite direction to the left. Then he remembered what Bremness had said about her the year before. Intrigued, he followed as she dashed through low brush wood; all the time falling behind, for his stable mount was no match against her grey thoroughbred Arabian mare. Suddenly she dropped from sight into a wide but dry water course showing Christie that his hunch was correct after all. At the lip edge of this shallow *nullah* he looked down to see Kishna cutting behind in hot pursuit of the boar. It, knowing the country, had first run one way, then plunging into the *nullah* in the opposite direction, believing this would baffle his pursuers.

Boars were heavy animals on squat legs. However, over short distances they were as swift as a horse but they winded quickly and when this happened most would turn and fight. When this one did the woman was ready for it, not however the horse. Under the mare charged the boar thrashing its eye-tooth tusks at the horse's legs. Nimbly the mount leaped into the air as Kishna drove her spear downwards, striking the boar's rear flank. The horse, unable to place its hooves below its body, fell, throwing her rider forward out of the saddle, the boar running off, a broken spear point embedded in its flesh.

Christie, taking this all in as he galloped up was out of his saddle and on the ground between the woman and the boar before his horse had halted. The wounded pig, running blindly into a flood washed recess with no exit, had now turned to escape.

"Damn it woman, stay behind me, the brute's about to charge". Aware the princess had regained her feet Christie gave his order without looking around, his spear held like a bayoneted rifle.

"Hold your thrust!" she commanded. "I wounded the animal and it is I who must finish him".

Intent on keeping himself between her and the wounded boar he did not hear the woman's words nor sense that she had remounted. As the boar came on at a trot only then did he hear scuffling behind him.

"For God's sake, woman, will you stay bloody still?" he shouted, not taking his eyes off the boar. Metal black with prickly hair bristles and a blunt snout, his shouting triggered it into breaking into a rush. Bearing down on Christie, at a distance of some ten feet it veered sharply away, its eyes red rimmed with hate, snorting, and thrusting its yellowed tusks in the air. As spear and man swung round facing up to the departing beast, Kishna spurred her mount up beside him and reaching from the saddle snatched the spear from his grip. Proudly defiant she looked down, her dark eyes burning in emphasis to her words:

"I am not woman, Collector. I am Rajput of royal blood and we always finish our quarry."

With an abrupt command in Raj to the mare, which sprang to the gallop, Kishna raced after the boar. Topee lost, her pinned hair unfolding to stream behind, she sat straight in the saddle, spear balanced in one hand showing not a hint of movement as if a part of the Arabian beneath her.

"No, not Kali I think," thought Christie to himself, reappraising his mythical comparison. "She is Durga, goddess of war".

Waving Bremness and Holt-Bate on after the princess, the boar not completely losing them, Robert looked to recovering his horse.

A few minutes later he rejoined the rest of the heat as they stood admiring the killed boar.

"You must forgive my impolite outburst, your Highness. My better manners were overcome by a worry for your safety." As Christie made this short apology for his sharp commands to her while facing the wounded boar, he returned her lost topee.

"Your English gallantry robbed you of the prize, Collector. A warrior would have stayed in the saddle and attacked the boar". Flushed with her triumph she did not comprehend that

her remark bordered on scorn.

Moving to the dead animal, that lay flat on its belly, Christie knelt to stroke its head.

“Colossal specimen, what, Bob?” commented Miles.

“Did he die well?” asked Christie rising to grip the broken cane shaft, directing his question to Kishna as he wrenched the broken spearhead from the animal's flank.

“Predictable,” she replied. “He charged with spirit”.

The slaying of this boar terminated further involvement by them in the hunt. A party was called for to carry the trophy back to the marshalling camp, arriving an hour later with a camel drawn cart. Soon after they were found by a havildar of the court guard riding up to report to Princess Kishna that the beaters were stood down, as the hunt was reaching its conclusion. His message acknowledged and he dismissed, the havildar turned to ride off, passing Christie who was sitting on a stone a short distance away holding his horse's reins. On being approached by the havildar the Englishman stood, for although now with a full Rajput beard he recognised the soldier. On his tunic breast among his France and Mesopotamia campaign ribbons was the Indian Distinguished Service Medal, awarded to him for gallantry in killing two Germans and saving his officer's life.

“Congratulations on your promotion, Havildar Lall Singh”, called Christie.

The horseman reined in his mount to stare with stunned surprise at this Englishman who hailed him by name, his topee casting a shadow over the face obscuring recognition.

“May I return your crest?” offered Robert, taking from his shirt pocket Lall Singh's regimental badge, that nine years earlier was pressed into his hand by his tearful servant as he lay wounded at a battlefield aid post. This brass crest of two peacocks with the Imperial States Forces old title on it 'Jaswara Legion' he held out as he walked forward.

“Christie, sahib!” exclaimed Lall in stark astonishment. Leaping from his saddle he ran a few steps then, catching himself he stopped to attention, saluting.

The Englishman replied by touching his topee, then extending his hand took Lall's in handshake while gripping his shoulder with the other.

“The years have been too long, my friend,” said Christie warmly.

“Sahib! Sahib!” replied the Rajput, his voice laden with emotion. “Not one day since we parted have my thoughts not been with you”.

“Your badge,” Christie held out his hand.

“No, sahib” refused the havildar, “It is a small part of me that I wish you to keep.”

“Thank you, Lall Singh,” accepted the ex-officer, cupping the crest in his fist. “It is the only memento of the war I cherish”.

Princess Kishna, engrossed in the loading of her prize onto the cart, did not see this exchange of greetings between Christie and one of her uncle's palace havildars. However, back at the marshalling camp she did catch sight of something that had her, for a moment, puzzled.

Standing in front of her boar as it hung with four others, she glimpsed Christie in conversation with a group of the Imperial Guard standing together at one end of the horse lines. At that moment another sowar riding in from the plain, came crashing to a halt with dust flying and leaped from his horse to salute the Englishman. Before she could see more someone stepped in front of her, excitedly asking her to once more relate the tale of how she bagged the largest kill of the day.

--oOo--

The evening was given over to a formal dinner held in the fortress, the interior draped

with broadcloth of Rajput colours: whites, blues, orange, yellows and greens. In the reception hall Christie and Holt-Bate talked in company with Bremness and his wife, a pleasant, forthright Yorkshire woman.

"Are either of you going on to Meerut for the Kadir Cup?" she asked Robert and Miles while discussing the day's hunt.

"Many in this room are," she informed them on being told they were not. "This hunt of the Maharaja's is an annual event and renowned as a warm up to the Meerut meet".

This fact was confirmed by Sadul who arrived at that moment, dazzlingly handsome in silken coat and trousers, a sterile white turban concealing the tops of his ears.

"Will the Maharaja be leading a team from the court this year?" asked Bremness.

"Most certainly," confirmed the prince. "He would sooner miss entry to paradise than the hog-hunting at Meerut".

"And your sister will be among them?" assumed Christie.

"I can assure you not, Robert," replied Sadul with some emphasis. "She is far from my uncle's favourite child, too headstrong and full of European habits. Besides she has rejected two of his candidates as suitors."

"Ah! Here is the beautiful huntress of the day now," announced Miles as Kishna approached through the crowded hall to join their small circle.

"Thank you, Miles," she replied, in response to his compliment. "Good evening everyone, Collector."

The princess singling Christie out for an individual greeting that was toned as if she was asking a question, stared for a moment at the miniature medals on his dinner jacket. Smiling, he inclined his head before turning to take from a tray held by a waiter a glass of champagne, which he offered to her. She took the glass by the stem, pressing her fingers hard into his. With the conversation turning to the dinner Miles found himself surprised to learn the men and women, as was the custom, would be dining separately. This was because the Maharani lived in semi-strict *purdah*, secluded from public view. Occupying the women's apartments, the *zenana*, which were by no means a harem, she would on occasions such as these entertain the female guests. For instance, during that day, while the men were out pig sticking, she played hostess for the morning's round of tennis and croquet, and in the afternoon, bridge.

While the talk was of this Christie's eyes would casually stray to the princess. This was not the warrior demon he had spent the day with, as Miles had noted on her arrival. Wearing a crimson *sari* with silver trim in an unorthodox style, around the shoulders instead of over the head, this allowed her long ebony hair to show its sheen as it draped her back. Beneath the silk her shoulders, upper arms and breasts were clothed in a waist jacket of silver material that acted as a bodice. The skirt of the *sari* contoured tightly the curvatures of her waist, hips and lower limbs. But it was her face that attracted Christie's eyes most: Smooth, flawless skin, dark spirited eyes and lips that begged another's caress. Everywhere free of makeup, the only added adornment were two small silver earrings, she was admired by him as a golden Aphrodite at his side.

The appraisal did not mean that the Englishman had become infatuated; she was a degree too prickly to capture his desire.

Finishing his champagne and not wishing to hold an empty glass he looked about for a waiter but with none near he walked across to a small flower stand. Setting his glass down he was held from returning on hearing the faint melody of a song being sung. Attracted, he traced the source of this lilting Rajastan melody to a salon off an adjoining hall. The room's electric lights were concealed, exposing only a warm glow behind and to the sides of the makers of the music.

The singer was a woman of perhaps thirty, who sat with legs tucked up, body straight, draped in a robe of finest muslin that spread around her as a gown. Her voice a lofty

soprano, she sang with her head turning from side to side, the dark, lustful eyes examining her arms as if things newly born, extending them out and back again in a flowing motion. The song was of a prince's love for a common girl and was both sad and romantic. The tune she maintained by elevating multiple tones stacking one atop the other in a shrill voice, draining the very air around her.

The musical accompaniment was provided by two elderly turbaned men with peppery grey beards. One beat a small drum with two thin sticks, the other played a *sitar*. The audience was only a dozen or so, all Indian, some of the men in European dinner jackets, all the women in their traditional dress. Entranced, Christie selected a cushion near the door the only seating in the room and sat to listen and watch.

When the songstress finished, then began a second ballad, Christie's concentration was disturbed by someone joining the pleasurable entertainment on another cushion at his side.

"This is a village folk-song, Collector" whispered Princess Kishna. On sitting, her *sari* hem rode up revealing a tiny bell on a gold anklet.

"Yes, I know," he replied, "I have a confession to make. I speak Raj rather well but the singer's movements I only vaguely understand."

"Then I will try to explain the simpler ones without distracting your enjoyment," she offered.

Over the next few songs she enlightened the Englishman on the meaning of the bobbing back and forth of the head, the spreading of the fingers and the widening and closing of the eyes. Before a fourth song finished they were interrupted by Sadul and Miles bending down from behind to whisper in a low pitch that Robert was wanted elsewhere, urgently.

"I say, Bob, you are the most awful rotter," reprimanded Holt-Bate amiably once out in the chamber-hall. "Why didn't you tell us you were some sort of national hero here?"

"The Maharaja is demanding to see you, Robert" added Sadul in explanation. "We were summoned by him and I was about to introduce Miles when the Colonel of the Palace Regiment came up and whispered in his ear. Well I never saw him like it. He exploded, shouting, "Chitor Christie! Here!"

The prince broke off to confirm a point: "That is you, Robert?"

"Well!" uttered Christie, not certain.

"Did you command the State Company at Neuve-Chapelle?" pressed Sadul.

"At the end, in its first battle, yes," he confessed, still bewildered.

"Well, you are Chitor Christie," informed Sadul. "For the rest of the war our soldiers took it up as their battle cry. You should have said something, old chap. I and Miles are up to our necks in it now. My heir apparent ship's not looking all that assured. You've been our guest for twenty-four hours without him knowing and he's furious!"

"Sadul, I'm ever so sorry. I didn't think..."

"Never mind, Robert, we had best hurry. We shouldn't..." "Flaming blazes, he's coming to you." Sadul, staying Christie's apology, and taking the Englishman's arm to hurry him along, was stopped agape as the Maharaja, his father and the colonel of the guard entered the chamber-hall.

Garbed in elegant silver embroidered white knee length coat and trousers with a gemmed aigrette centred on his turban, he strode with an upright, determined pace. Christie, straightening himself, held his eyes to the Maharaja's. The latter, a tall man, had a face fuller than the average Rajput, and his beard, mostly black, was in places streaked with white.

"Your Highness, with your permission I beg to introduce Mister Robert Christie of the British Indian Civil Service". Sadul's introduction was made in Raj, a tongue the Maharaja preferred to English.

"Are you the Lieutenant Robert Christie who commanded my contingent of troops in France during the early months of the war?" asked the Maharaja, his black eyes fixed on

Christie's face.

The Englishman had not completed his bow of respect before the question was asked.

"Yes, your Highness," replied Christie, also in Raj. "I was the recipient of that honour".

Robert tried to match the cold hardness of the other man's eyes but his will to do so evaporated as the Maharaja, bubbling with elation, seized him in a Rajput embrace.

"Welcome! At last welcome, to Jaswara. My palace guard are abuzz with the news of your arrival. Are you being well looked after?"

On release Christie again bowed his head thanking the Maharaja for his words.

"Yes your Highness, at all times. At the moment Princess Kishna is obligingly attending to my needs as a most charming escort!"

Christie turned to indicate to the young woman but the Maharaja ignored her presence, directing instead a peeved reproach at the Englishman.

"But you are here unannounced. Why is this? You should have informed my Chief Minister of your desire to come. Your stay would have been a State invitation."

"My failing to do so your highness I must attribute to a Rajput virtue I share, modesty. And the belief that my association with your State Forces was one of a young officer trying to do his best". Christie's reply was based on how he felt then and still did.

"Best, indeed," threw back the Maharaja. "Mister Christie, your commanding of my troops in battle is legendary among them".

"Your Highness, the command of them I always felt eluded me, for as you are aware it is unnecessary to command brave men, I merely led." Again, this was his belief then, as now.

The Maharaja's eyes began to dance across the surface of Christie's face in admiration.

"That is not the opinion of my Sowars. Your acts of bravery are the ones most repeated at their camp fires. And that is something for which you have never been awarded recognition".

Before Christie could reply the Maharaja had reached up and removed the jewelled aigrette from his turban.

"Well, by the sons of the gods Kutcha and Lava you will receive recognition of it now. Lieutenant Robert Christie, for deeds of gallantry while in command of my troops detached for service with his Royal Highness the King, I present you with this deserved treasure of State."

Thunderstruck Christie looked down at the diamond and ruby clustered brooch being held out to him. Perhaps this was an impulsive gesture but if so he could only believe it was one born from national pride and given as a tribute to the soldiers he had led. Robert could well understand this of the Maharaja, for it was he who on volunteering his Imperial State troops at the outbreak of war but forbidden by the Viceroy himself to go in command of them, had provided each sowar with a flask of holy Ganges water for use as purification against loss of caste after crossing the black water to France. The Englishman knew he had to reject the aigrette, Delhi would never allow him to keep possession, but that was not the basis of his rejection. Seeming to grow with every word his reply to the Maharaja's offer was as he had always felt but never before voiced: "Your Highness. I feel I must refuse your gracious gift. For if I took it, I would be doubly rewarded. You see, I have led your Jaswara Legion in battle. For that honour in itself, there is no greater reward."

Now it was the Maharaja who stood thunderstruck. For a moment he stared at Christie, then looking to the *Dewan* announced to him a change to the evening.

"Brother, during the banquet you will find there are affairs of state that must draw you away. Mister Christie will take your chair."

With a smile he then took a pace forward, circling an arm around Christie's shoulder.

"Come, Robert, if you will not accept my token of gratitude, then tonight you will sit beside me as my guest of honour."

Princess Kishna did not follow the others as they left to dine, she with the rest of the

women would be attending the Maharani's dinner party in another wing of the fortress. Yet she did not hasten off, lingering to watch, intrigued, the tall dark Englishman, who was turning out to be much more than he at first seemed.

--oOo--

With March near the nights were warming which, aided by his thoughts of the many happenings of the day, contributed to Christie's not being able to sleep. Instead he sat slumped in the lounge divan watching the stars and moonlight reflecting from the lake's water. The banquet was for him, to begin with, a near career disaster. The Maharaja had sat him at the top table on his right, between himself and the Viceroy's appointed Regent. The latter being new to the office and speaking Raj only sparsely the Maharaja presented Christie to the Regent as his brother's stand-in interpreter. As a plausible excuse, in terms of holding water this left him clutching a very leaky bucket. A lot of cold glances were directed his way from the lower tables, for at an affair of this consequence table seniority was a matter of valued prestige.

At first Christie found it very embarrassing, for he sensed this was also the case with the Regent. Only after making a clean breast of the Maharaja's hastily awarded honour to him did the Regent become more relaxed, relating in a gruff but sensitive voice that he had lost a son at the siege of Kutal-Amara in 1916 serving as an officer with the 66th Punjabis.

Later all his stuffiness was swept away on learning that Robert was the grandson of Nathaniel Christie, whose acquaintance he had made when first coming to India forty years earlier. For the remainder of the meal, between translations for the Maharaja, Robert and the Regent enjoyed an animated conversation. Mostly of India in the content of Britain's future role and of Christie's hopes and intentions bound within that role. Afterwards, they and the women rejoined in the main hall where a band was playing European and American dance music. This allowed Robert to return to his small group for more informal chit chat and to relieve the pressure on Miles, who was repeatedly being called upon to satisfy Meg Bremness's thirst for dancing.

During one rest break while collecting a glass of punch for Meg Princess Kishna appeared at his side.

"Collector, will you dance with me?" she asked. Her voice sultry and not at all recognisable as the panther on horseback he spent the day with.

"I should be dancing on your toes, Collector, instead of the floor," she commented, as they began to waltz to the music.

"Oh, and how so?" asked Christie suppressing the desire to smile.

"You are a deceitful bounder," she replied. "You led me to believe you were not something you are, - a warrior."

"Were? Your Highness, Were? I'm a district administrator now," emphasized the Englishman.

"But you played with me today. I mocked you for protecting my life like a young son would his mother. Then earlier tonight we meet and you have decorations on your dinner jacket." She nodded at the row of miniature military medals he wore on his left breast. "I could have gleefully slapped your face!"

"If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" he replied to this.

"Quoting Shakespeare will not heal my wounds, Collector. I give you fair warning, be on your guard." Her voice teased, but she did not smile.

“So, because of my charade I am to be prey to your hunt?” ventured Christie, mildly amused.

“Yes, that could well be”, she hinted with a roguish toss of her head.

“A hog spear in my back, I dare say?” he joked.

“Or perhaps a knife to your throat as you sleep?” proposed the princess.

“I’ll not believe that,” dismissed Robert, “You are a disciple of shikar and a believer in the fairness of the hunt.”

“Don’t be so certain, Collector. Don’t be so certain,” she taunted.

It was this dance that featured most in keeping him awake in the early morning hours. The warm, velvety texture of her hands and arms and the protruding lower lip that was too tantalisingly moist.

With a shiver Christie woke, he had slipped into a doze and with only a bath towel around his waist was feeling the lowering of temperature brought with the small hours. About to rise and return to bed he stopped, his ears had caught a faint musical sound. At first startling him, a dark figure moved nimble footed from the tent shadows to the netting hanging at his lounge entrance. In the light of the stars and a waning moon he could see it was a woman in a red *sari* and as she pushed the netting aside to enter he recognised the tinkling of the anklet bell.

“Have you come to place the knife to my throat, your Highness?” he asked, rising from the divan.

“No, not a knife, Collector” replied Princess Kishna, dropping a fold of her *sari* that she had used as both head scarf and veil.

“Then you have misplaced yourself,” cautioned Christie.

“No, Collector, I have come as an obligation,” assured the woman, her voice tinged with implication. “Earlier you refused a gift of gratitude from my uncle. Now I present to you another gift of gratitude, one on behalf of the Royal Court and subjects of Jaswara. A gift befitting a warrior.”

“A gift at this hour?” questioned Robert, wary as to her intentions.

“Yes, Collector. As a Rajput Princess I offer you my only possession. I give - myself”.

As she spoke Kishna dropped the *sari*’s outer garment, beneath which she wore nothing. Standing naked, the light of moon and stars turning her golden body the colour of copper, only two areas on this Venus form omitted to glisten: her tresses, outlining her graceful head and neck and the small black triangle of coarse sister hair nestling at the join of her thighs.

Robbed of speech by this unveiling, Christie stood rooted in hungering admiration as the naked princess stepped away from her discarded wrap, walking towards him with the slow, sensuous stride of a beckoned concubine.

“You will not reject this reward so willingly given, will you, Collector?” Her words were sultry pleas as she slipped her arms around his body, pressing her porcelain firm breasts into his chest, the nipples prodding his flesh like the tips of tiny fingers. With six inches separating their height, she rose up on her toes to brush a cheek and an ear with feather touch kisses.

Christie, aware he was a guest of the State and who, as a junior member of the Indian Civil Service, should have been avoiding any scandal this night might bring by rejecting his visitor’s carnal offering, felt his resolve crumbling under the assault from the princess’s lips. Lowering his head he took and held her lips with his own, while with one hand, casting the towel from his waist. For some minutes they were moulded, locked in a kiss, their arms wrapped, bodies pressed and rotating in a search to fill each other’s folds and recesses. Breaking from the kiss he lifted her into his arms to carry the warm, clinging creature of desire to his bed. Laying her beneath the mosquito netting, he crouched above, savouring the sexual aura that she emitted with every groan and sigh and turn of her body. With this kindling his own uncontrollable lust, he slowly lowered his head to encircle the crown of an

apple hard breast with his lips.

Three times during those pre-dawn hours they made love, the first two with unrestrained, frenzied hunger, wildly fulfilling crazed, erotic needs. Between they kept their passions inflamed by tracing each other's bodies with kisses and incitements of the tongue. The third occasion, with their wanton thirst quenched, Christie rocked his hips in a slow thrusting rhythm maintaining the pleasure of their mating on clouds of dreamy erotica. Braced above he studied Kishna's face as she, enraptured in a sexual trance arched her chin upwards, while with closed eyes, she rocked her head slowly from side to side.

"No, Princess," whispered her lover, wishing she would hear and understand, "you are neither Kali the eater of human flesh, nor Durga the fighter of battles. You are Sakti, the custodian of sexuality."

CHAPTER 10

*Slowly and sadly we laid him down,
From the field of his fame fresh and gory;
We carved not a line, and we raised not a stone,
But we left him alone with his glory.*

Charles Wolfe

Giving over to a yawn that caused him to roll his head, Joe Penton recovered concentration in the job entrusted him, after first changing his slung rifle from one shoulder to the other. In the dawn light Joe looked out from the battlements of the Border fort of Landi Kotal across the garrison lines; he was once again on sentry duty. In the east down the Khyber towards India the stars were being dimmed by the onset of morning but there was still ample brilliance from those above and towards Afghanistan for him to see out as far as the perimeter wire. Out there was a guard occupying dugouts who could prowl along the wire bound trenches and who were furnished three times a night with tea.

Joe's envious thoughts of tea were banished by the sight of the enemy. Not a band of Pathan cut-throats or a squadron of Russian Red Army cavalry thundering out of the Afghan plains, this was a more dangerous foe, the duty officer on his nightly visit of the sentries. Alone he marched from the battalion lines, up Whitehall, making for the fort's closed main gate. All the roads in the garrison had names such as the Strand, Victoria Street and Trafalgar Square. Being in the tower above this Joe snatched up a pebble from a small pile in one corner of the floor and leaning over the stone parapet dropped it in warning to the gate sentry below. That done he could only wait and listen to see if his silent alarm had forewarned. Moments later his concern was eased as below he heard Tommy Gilbert's left boot crash to attention and the slap of hands striking his rifle stock as he paid the officer the correct compliment.

When the lieutenant retraced his steps it was to the shrill accompaniment of the mullah of the village across the valley calling his faithful to their first prayers of the new day. It was cock-crow now and Penton was beginning to make out shapes beyond the shadows: the two twin peaks of Big and Little Ben a mile to the east and the dragon backed ridge beyond that ran south to the border crossing at Landi Kana. Although two miles away, at this crossing was stationed the third battalion of the Landi Kotal Brigade, Ghurkhas, while sharing with them the defences in their other half of the main garrison was the 4th Battalion of the 5th Mahratta Light Infantry.

At night all movement outside the wire ceased, with the sentries under orders to shoot anyone seen near the perimeter. Should this happen there were a small number of two storey blockhouses sited on high points outside the garrison's boundaries who always found reason to join in. One, manned for spells of a week at a time by the Queen's, took their hate out on the battalion latrine four hundred yards outside the camp wire, riddling its corrugated metal covering with rifle fire.

With the first streaks of light the garrison began to awake, bugle calls were sounded and men emerged to do their morning ablutions. Across the valley out of the clusters of fortified houses, the tribesmen were also on the move, armed men were escorting the women away to their daily toil in well nigh infertile fields. These ill-dressed protectors were not indulging in showy bravado; those who lived on the Frontier had more enemies than friends. On a number of days since the Queen's had arrived rifle shots were heard echoing out of surrounding valleys as one clan or another fought to steal women or recover those previously carried off.

Now it was the garrison's turn to move. It was Tuesday and the whole Khyber route was to be secured. For centuries, *kafilahs*, camel caravans, had carried trade goods from Persia through Afghanistan into India and back again. Their lot, while negotiating the Pass, was to be constantly set upon, robbed and murdered. So now the British in their turn took on the responsibility of providing safe conduct through the thirty-three mile length of the ambush plagued Khyber Valley. Twice a week its whole route was picketed: on Tuesday when the caravans travelled east out of Afghanistan and on Friday when the camel traffic rambled back west out of India.

Joe Penton, nearing the end of his guard duty, watched silently as the battalion marched briskly out through the perimeter gate and eastward down the Pass on their way to occupying key heights on either side of the dual roadways.

--oOo--

After taking a leisurely breakfast Miles Holt-Bate moved from the officers' mess dining-room to the lounge in search of reading material. B Company was providing the battalion's camp guards while the other companies were out on protective picket duty for the down traffic *kafilah*, leaving him without employment for the day.

"Good morning, sir," said Miles politely, making his entrance known to the only other occupant in the room.

"Morning, Holt-Bate", jovially replied Captain Russell McQuaid, the quartermaster. Commissioned after twenty-three years working his way up through the ranks to regimental sergeant major, he was to all the young officers of the mess a father figure.

Choosing a chair opposite the captain, Miles, taking a package of cheroots from a pocket, first offered them to McQuaid.

"Most kind, young fellow, but no, they're not my brand", he declined, after cocking his head to read the label.

Selecting one himself, Miles lit it then easing back in the chair revelled for a moment in the bouquet of the cigar before tilting his head back to release the smoke towards the ceiling. McQuaid looking across laid aside his recently arrived three week old London newspaper to make a comment:

"That smoke of yours, Holt-Bate," he began, stroking his full bushy moustache with the back of a finger, "it has a rather exceptional innovation for moulding the leaf in a way that is compact, yet still allows the smoker ample ventilation to draw".

As Miles turned an inquisitive ear to this, the captain explained more:

"Yes, I have it on good authority that the manufacturer, a Calcutta firm, employs ladies of extraordinarily obese proportions to sit in hot rooms and roll the leaf on their sweaty flesh. The secret ingredient, I'm told, is to be found discharging from the pores".

"Excuse me, Mister Holt-Bate, sir. The adjutant has called you to his office." The mess steward had to repeat this message twice before Miles, leaving his cigar, rose sickly faced to collect his topee from the entrance hall.

"Stand at ease, Mister Holt-Bate," said the adjutant looking up from his desk as Miles concluded his salute.

"Your trip tomorrow down to Peshawar to collect the weekly pay has been cancelled," announced the adjutant coming straight to the point.

"Oh! Dashed bad news that, sir. I was looking forward to a spot of civilisation," replied Miles expressing his disappointment.

"Buck up, Miles, you've not lost your jaunt. The battalion can't afford to miss a week's wages. I want you in our duty automobile and on your way to Peshawar within the hour,"

added the adjutant.

"Wizard, sir. I'll be off right away," confirmed the lieutenant, not even attempting to conceal his pleasure at the news.

"Mind, that auto is in superb working order, so you will have no unforeseen breakdowns that necessitate an overnight stay. I want you back this afternoon. You'll be needed tomorrow; we're picketing the road again," warned the adjutant.

"On a Wednesday, sir?" questioned Miles.

"Yes," answered the captain with emphasis in his reply.

"A convoy of arms and munitions is being sent through, bound for the Afghan army".

"From us, sir?" asked Holt-Bate.

"No, everything purchased from the French and arriving in the nick of time, it appears" elaborated the adjutant with a personal comment: "The Amir looks to have a revolt on his hands in the Khost Valley. Tried to introduce education for women. Suicide, sheer suicide."

Leaving the adjutant shaking his head Miles hurried from the battalion headquarters. On the track just outside the perimeter wire shaggy camels burdened with articles of trade, led by hardened, grimy robed men armed with rifles and with humourless faces were passing; the *kafilah* was in full stride for the plains of India.

--oOo--

"Alright, Sergeant Radley, this will do. Halt the men, fall them out, then have them follow me". Giving these orders to his platoon sergeant, Miles Holt-Bate moved to the edge of the road to choose a route uphill.

On complying, Wilf Radley, 6 Platoon's stocky but muscular platoon sergeant embellished the latter part of his officer's command in a colourful fashion:

"Look sharp now, you lumps of sun-baked crow bait. Up that hill after Mister Holt-Bates and I want to see you doing it in leaps and bounds, just like that wonderful gentleman from the moving pictures, Mister Douglas Fairbanks".

"Mary Pickford, more like," mumbled Noshier Slyfield to Jeff Gleeson, as he hoisted the platoon's Lewis machine-gun onto one shoulder.

"Gleeson in need of an interpretation, Slyfield?" called across the sharp-eyed sergeant.

"Cheery inspiration, Sergeant," shouted back a smiling Slyfield beginning his upward climb.

It was early morning and the battalion was mounting another road picketing operation. Moving out from Landi Kotal down the Pass towards India, as the head of the column came abreast of a picket point, a platoon would peel off and climb up that feature which overlooked and dominated the road below. The drill was one perfected from years of conflict with the renegade Pathan. Ever watchful for a weakness in the British guard, neglect or relaxation of hard learned Frontier ways almost always resulted in bloody punishment at the hands of the hill tribesmen.

On this occasion 6 Platoon had drawn the short straw. To reach their vantage point a long, toiling climb was made up to the highest position on the battalion's sector. There was no rest or hanging about either; once on the hill everyone pushed themselves upward making the best possible speed. To show sluggishness or careless immobility on the Border was an invitation to be attacked.

Reaching their post the first man forward was Noshier Slyfield, his Lewis-gun suspended from his shoulders on a sling was held pointing and ready. With riflemen spreading out to his flanks, the position was cleared and secured. Now with the day yet young the men settled

down to wait and watch and remain alert.

Five hundred feet below some of the platoon could see the roadway but most looked out over a few yards of boulders before the view dropped away to leave them staring at the opposite hillside. Positioned in a defensive circle, they lay in cover a few yards apart, keeping low to avoid being the prize in a tribesman's rifle-sights. They were on the shoulder of a spur that ran off a much higher peak and for those like Joe Penton facing up it, an area to watch, for should an attack come at them, downhill was the obvious direction to launch it.

As Joe scanned the sun pounded, broken rocks to his front, although alert to any sign of movement, he was not for the moment on this bare hill. It was early June and he was home in Kent helping with the hay-making on the farm's Slow Bell pasture. A soldier for over two years and most of that here in India, it was a rare day indeed that his thoughts did not drift to the meadows and crop fields of his family farm where he used to watch bees seeking sweetness from the flowers. Even now on this barren Afghan Border hillside he could close his eyes and catch the coarse scent of a recently ploughed field, or see the kitchen door rain-butt as it overflowed in a spring shower. At the thought of water Joe examined the ground around himself. The sun was well up and its heat was becoming uncomfortable. To offset thirst he selected a smooth-ish pebble the size of a bean, placing it under his tongue. Like everyone else he had a full water bottle on his hip but like everyone else it would not be sampled. No matter how hot or thirsty the men on picket became they would not drink, it was a point of regimental honour to return to camp with the water bottles untouched.

The 2nd Queen's Light Infantry was close to the end of its one year tour of duty at Landi Kotal, another month and a bit and they would be on the march down country to a new station. Penton, as had most of the men, expected their stay to be far more exciting, with numerous engagements with the Pathan. Disappointingly for many, except for long range sniping and harmless pot shots, this didn't occur. Instead the area seemed at peace, no raiding parties stormed the wire nor were marauding bands seen skulking in the hills. Even the local tribesmen seemed to gaze upon the British troops as would a hunting lioness viewing prey too far distant to warrant pursuit. Memories of the Khyber taken back to Blighty by these soldiers was apparently to be that of cold nights spent around coal-burning billet stoves, boring picket duty in heat and frost, endless sweltering nights on guard with rifles chained to their wrists and days filled with playing sports. Most, though, liked their stay, the hills were cool and healthier than the Indian plains, but living behind wire all the time gave a feeling of imprisonment; the battalion was looking forward to being somewhere else.

By noon, with no shade except for their topees, the sun had them at its mercy, blazing down with full force. Unable to escape the heat, restricted in seeking a more comfortable position without burning bare flesh on hot rocks, the men's concentration was at its weakest. While wiping sweat from his temples with one hand Joe's attention was caught by his section commander, Lance-Corporal Ben Tysall, throwing a small stone his way. Also prone on the ground just ten yards off, he was silently pointing across to the far hillside half a mile away. Joe, peering from under the overhanging brim of his topee, studied the steep slope of broken rock. A hawk, not seen to arrive, was climbing towards the hill's peak on busied wing beats. In this midday heat it must have had a good reason for taking flight. For a full minute Penton's eyes searched among the rocks for a clue but with no movement or sign that someone was hiding in the cover of the rocks, he looked back at Tysall to shake his head.

Ben had held his rank of lance-corporal for a year now, ever since the earthquake at Jhendara. The platoon had dug one of their lance-corporals out of the collapsed bungalow with two badly crushed legs, injuries from which a week later he died. Tysall was put forward to fill this vacancy and, with over two year's war service, Mister Holt-Bate had no hesitation in giving his approval. Ben took the stripe because it meant more money and he wouldn't have to stand anymore sentry duties.

Promotion had also come Holt-Bate's way: he was no longer a second lieutenant, now sporting two pips on his shoulders instead of one. Being made a full lieutenant didn't inflate Miles as it did some. He still remained the commander of 6 Platoon and the money to him was insignificant, he was a rich man, thanks to an endowment left him by a grandmother. Thus financially secure without having to depend on a junior officer's income, he was able to carry on his career in a relatively flamboyant manner, using the army to enjoy the hospitality and wonders of India.

"Any sign of the blighters, sir?" asked Sergeant Radley.

"No, not a whisker," replied Miles, lowering his purchased Swiss binoculars. Focussing on the furthest view he had of the road's Indian approach route it had remained as empty as ever.

The brief given to the officers on the previous evening fixed the completion of this day's picketing at early afternoon; it was now nearing three o'clock. Unknown to them the hold-up was the result of cold feet on the part of the drivers hired by the French arms firm to deliver their vehicles and cargo to the Afghan Army, who were waiting at the border crossing. The Khyber Pass for these drivers, even guarded, was just too fearsome a challenge; they would not budge beyond Peshawar.

As an alternative plan the Afghan Army drivers were taken by lorry from Landi Kana through the Pass to pick up the convoy at Peshawar. Of course, all this took time and the Afghans, unfamiliar with the vehicles and road, drove slowly. Added to this were two breakdowns that had to be repaired, for under no circumstances could arms and ammunition be left abandoned in Pathan territory.

Wilf Radley, with a glance up at the sun to check its location, reached into his haversack for his lunch. He hadn't eaten the bread and meat sandwich earlier so as not to aggravate his thirst, but now with the day dragging on hunger had got the better of him. 6 Platoon's sergeant, when the battalion first arrived in India, had acquired for himself a unique distinction, for very soon after reaching Jhendara he found himself married.

While on embarkation leave he had stayed with his sister and her husband. Also living with them was a sister of the husband, a woman in her mid-twenties, widowed as a bride near the end of the war. Nature being what it is these two struck up a more than friendly relationship, resulting in Radley receiving a letter from her on arrival in India, informing him that, wanted or not, fatherhood would be his about the first week in May. Until that moment Wilf had no mind to marry, being content with his single army service, but he also knew what his duty was: armed with the letter he put in a request to the commanding officer to marry. On this being granted his bride-to-be had her passage to India paid for. At Bombay she was met by Radley who rushed her across to the Anglican Church where they were married on the spot, witnessed by two complete strangers, hired by Wilf off the street for five rupees each. It was not exactly a bride's dream wedding but with only two hours between the ship docking and their train for Jhendara leaving, and Radley under orders from Colonel Gilfillan that he and his lady were to report wed, this left little scope for the frills of cupids and arrowed hearts.

At five o'clock, with still no sign of the convoy, Miles had become mildly annoyed at their length of stay on the hill. By seven he was seething. He and another officer had been invited that evening across to the Mahratta officer's mess for a hand of bridge and were now going to be late. By eight his mood had changed completely. Forgotten was the invitation to cards, the thoughts on his mind at this point were about the preparations for him and his platoon to spend a night on the hill. If the convoy didn't pass through them by dusk they and the rest of the battalion would be forced to remain static, for to move in the dark in the Khyber was to court disaster.

Under the supervision of Sergeant Radley he set the Lewis gun section to work building a

stone sangar. If they were to be stranded the platoon would shelter the night in defence behind a circle of piled stone. With time now critical Holt-Bate repeatedly raised his binoculars to search the roadway below and was rewarded by the appearance of the convoy. With two British machine-gun mounted armoured cars leading, the head of the column drove into view moving at what the lieutenant considered was a snail's pace.

Ever so slowly it wound past, twenty-two lorries and six escorting armoured cars, one lorry being towed by an armoured car. Once out of sight Holt-Bate focussed his binoculars on the area of the road even more intently. The battalion would be withdrawing in reverse order from India back towards them and with the sun sinking behind the snow capped Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan he watched for an indication that would tell him whether he was to leave or stay.

"Sergeant Radley, stop the men working," he called out. "Prepare to move down to the road".

Miles had caught sight of the forward companies marching back towards him. Now it was just a case of waiting for them to pass through the remaining protecting picketing before they themselves would be called down to rejoin at the tail of the column. Miles no longer consulted his pocket watch for the time. This he judged by glancing about the sky. To the east the colour had turned from a royal blue to a dark grey, some high stratosphere clouds tainting pink.

"There goes 7 Platoon, sir," called out Sergeant Radley, pointing to a hill down the valley.

"Seen, Sergeant Radley. Warn the men we'll be next," called back Miles as he quickly trained his binoculars on a cluster of soldiers scampering with all speed down from their picket station.

He now fixed his attention to the road, searching for the rear control detachment and the all important signaller who would relay the message telling them to move down. As 7 Platoon reached the road and took over the role of rear guard, Miles spotted a man carrying a large red flag, this denoted the tail of the column. On coming abreast of 6 Platoon the figures on the road were obscured by a shoulder of rock overhanging a bend. At that point the whole column stopped. Unknown to Miles another lorry had broken down, an overheated engine that called for a second armoured car taking on the job of towing. With seconds racing into minutes 6 Platoon's commander began showing his impatience, standing up to scour the road below with his binoculars then lowering them, turning around to examine with hasty glances his platoon defences and the rocky hill slopes around them.

"We're cutting this perishin' fine, sir," commented Wilf Radley coming to his side.

"Not by bloody half," agreed Miles.

Then on the road at last, movement again.

"Here we go! Here we go!" warned the officer in an anticipatory tone, his binoculars rooted to the strip of road where the rear control would come into view.

With darkness gaining the upper hand over daylight the lower level of the Pass was in spreading gloom causing a restriction of sight that increased rapidly with the added cloaking of mountain shadows. Only thanks to Holt-Bate's binoculars was 6 Platoon able to pick out the control party and even then the flag's colour was indistinct. Miles eyes flicked from one figure to the other expecting to find the signaller pausing to begin waving his blue and white semaphore flags spelling out three Morse letters, RTR, return to road. Following them as they moved further and further up the valley his concentration was broken by an amazed curse from Radley:

"Christ, they've missed us. Look, sir. There's 5 Platoon lickey splittin' it for the road".

Looking in the direction of his sergeant's pointing finger the officer could just make out in

the fading light a line of men dashing from a picket position off a hill half a mile up the valley.

“Well, that's damned untidy of them,” commented Miles nonchalantly, before dealing with the situation with the seriousness needed. “We'll remain until 5 Platoon reach the road. One of us has to protect the other down. But once they are free of the hill I want us off here in record time.”

“Very good, sir,” replied Radley turning to alert the section commanders.

Joe Penton, responding to Ben Tysall's call to move, spat the pebble from his mouth with relief. The day had been long, hot, and the waiting galling. Now up and on his feet, the wretchedness of this forgotten, he ran like everyone else. In the lead was Sergeant Radley with 3 Section, followed by 1 Section and the Lewis Section, Ben Tysall's 2 Section with Mister Holt-Bate bringing up the rear.

There was no hanging about. On the word being given to leave 6 Platoon rose as one and raced off. The downhill journey like the ascent was where the most danger from attack lay, and the best counter to this was speed. Tactics went out of the window; all that mattered was that no one should lag behind or injure themselves in a fall. At the half-way point the platoon entered thick murky shadow cast by higher surrounding hills. Darkness was only minutes away. On the Frontier, night did not creep stealthily down; it descended with a full, all enveloping rush.

Entering this gloom 2 Section split in half passing either side of a spike toothed crop of rock. A hundred feet in length, erosion had carved out cavities and bays in which benefiting from the closing twilight, were ideal for concealment. Initially the Pathan tribesmen who stormed from these hides fell soundlessly upon the three lead men of 2 Section who were passing on the north side of this feature. The first two were struck down with blade blows, hardly knowing they had been set upon. Tommy Gilbert was less fortunate; he had an instant's full sight of three bearded, bedraggled cloaked tribesmen surging towards him. In defence Tommy hardly had time to raise his rifle before one had thrust a large bladed knife into his intestines, cutting upwards, severing his webbed belt at the buckle. With the second attacker snatching his rifle away and the third stripping the ammunition pouches from his body, Tommy was left to collapse screaming to the ground.

A few yards behind, Joe Penton had a fleeting moment longer to react. Levelling his rifle at two fearsome men in grimy, colourless turbans, he flicked the cut-off plate of his Shorts Lee-Enfield rifle open, but before he could cock his bolt and feed a round into the chamber for firing, one had swung a blow with his curved *tulwar*, striking Joe on his right shoulder. The force of the blow knocked him to his knees, the blade slicing a deep gash the length of his upper arm. With the right useless he released his left hand from the rifle stock letting it fall, to grapple with the second attacker who stabbed downwards at him with a knife. Blocking the thrust with his forearm the blade tip deflected, piercing his flesh above the collar bone. The tribesman's pungent body stink Joe would only recall afterwards.

Ben Tysall, 2 Section's last man leaving the picket location, had not liked at all coming away so late and with an old soldier's intuition had fixed his bayonet to his rifle. At full tilt he rounded a blister of broken rock to come upon Penton struggling under a Pathan bent on plunging a knife into his chest. With Tommy Gilbert's screams resounding throughout the hill's evening calm Ben snapped a round into his chamber, aimed it point blank and fired into the face of a *tulwar* armed Pathan about to slash it downwards onto Joe Penton's exposed neck. Without faltering Ben lunged forward and down. Joe, grappling for his life, had managed to roll atop of the attacker with the knife, a position which, except for Tysall's bullet would have cost him his head, removed by a razor sharp *tulwar*. Instead the man below him, ceasing to struggle, screamed in his face with pain and terror as Tysall's seventeen inch bayonet blade sank into and through his breast.

"Up, Joe lad! Get up," cried Tysall silencing the Pathan's scream as he stamped a hob-nailed boot onto his mouth in wrenching the bayonet free.

Penton, his right arm disabled, kicked with his boots and pushed with his left hand at the tribesman Ben had shot and who now lay collapsed across him.

All around them war cries were being yelled, echoing back from surrounding hills and out of valleys. The Pathans had sprung a silent ambush using swords and knives only, but with Tommy Gilbert's scream and Ben's rifle shot there was no need to suppress their jubilation in the expectancy of committing more murder; they now loudly yelled their battle cries.

Ben fired twice more at crazed wild men who tried to close on him, then reaching down with one hand pulled Joe to his feet.

"My bandook! My bandook" cried Penton, making to recover his rifle.

"Leave it! Leave it! Run!" shouted Tysall hauling the younger man away and behind him to gain space in swinging his rifle up and firing again at a figure skulking in close cover.

"Scamper Joe! Scamper!" screamed the lance-corporal over his shoulder backing towards Penton as he cocked his rifle bolt feeding another round into the chamber.

Joe stumbled a few yards then turned to make sure his mate was following. Tysall, firing his fifth and last round turned to flee. The Shorts Lee-Enfield had a magazine which held ten rounds but the spring could not be trusted, resulting in only five being loaded each time.

North they ran along the side of the hill away from the road over boulders and squeezing between narrow rock gaps, their metal soled boots clattering on the hard surfaces. After five minutes Tysall called a halt to listen for pursuit and reload his rifle.

"I gotta go back, Ben," said Penton in breathless gasps, pulling his bayonet from his scabbard, as they sheltered back to back at the base of a large rock. "My bandook - I can't lose it - not to those heathen bleeders."

"Kiss it goodbye, mate," advised Tysall, feeding a clip of five rounds into the magazine of his rifle. "By this time tomorrow some tar arse, hookworm riddled Pathan will have bought himself a new wife with it".

Joe sagged against the rock as his knees began to shake, a reaction brought about by shock. He only minutes earlier was gripped in fear as he fought for his life but the emotion he felt now was anger; anger at having lost his rifle and anger at being taken so completely by surprise.

Tommy Gilbert, left alone and still screaming, scrambled to his feet clutching a mess of bloody, protruding intestines and stomach contents, and staggered aimlessly away seeking help. Covering no more than thirty yards he collapsed unconscious.

Lieutenant Holt-Bate, rear man of 2 Section's left hand half section, finding himself alarmed to real danger by Gilbert's scream and Tysall's rifle shot, could not halt himself until his downhill momentum had carried him another ten yards. Snatching his pistol out of its leather holster, he stood looking at the cliff of ragged rock to his right.

"Down here, sir," called Sid Firth below him. "There's a way around here".

Miles, hurrying past, ordered two other men near at hand to follow him.

At the head of the platoon Wilf Radley grabbed at a rock to anchor himself.

"Stop! Fix bayonets" he bellowed. "Back! Back! Get back up".

Rounding the base of the obstructing rock formation Holt-Bate could see no sign of his men who had come that side of the rocks, nor so much as a glimpse of those who had shouted Pathan battle cries. Moving cautiously up through the rocks, with Sid Firth keeping a wary eye on the dark cave-like bays on their right, Danny Short was the first to discover one of the missing section.

"Sir! Sir!" he called out crouching over a body.

"It's Veevers, sir," he said as Miles approached.

"Alive?" asked Miles, kneeling to lift an eyelid of a man with among other wounds, his

throat cut. Short, nervously watching out for any sign of those who had done the hellish act, did not answer.

"Sir!" hollered Ginger Langdon. "Here's Mitchelhill". "How is he?" called back Miles standing, one hand now stained with blood.

"A deader, sir," came the reply. "Carved up like something out'a butcher's window".

"But they were just in front of me - alive - a minute ago they were alive," screamed the officer's own voice within him.

"Mister Holt-Bate, sir".

Miles turned to find Wilf Radley leading the main body of the platoon in a scrambling run back up the hill.

"Spread out lads and keep a keen eye mind you," he ordered before joining his officer to stand looking around, sucking in deep breaths of air.

"Veevers and Mitchelhill are dead, Sergeant Radley. Rifles and ammunition's gone and Corporal Tysall and one or two others from 2 Section seem to be missing". Miles didn't give his sergeant this information as an intended situation briefing; it was blurted out as an explanation of the horror around him.

"We'll have a sharpish look around for the missing, sir. But we can't linger about. It's near dark. We'll have to carry the dead and get down to the road as fast as bleedin' monkeys". Radley wasn't taking charge, he could see his young officer was struggling with the shock of losing men under his command and was in need of being reminded of his duties to the rest.

"Right! Right Sergeant Radley!" responded Miles. "You see to the bodies, I'll organise a search for the missing."

This search proved fruitless because of course two of the missing, Tysall and Penton, were nowhere near. Half a mile to the north, at the base of the hill, Ben was tearing his shirt into strips to bandage Joe's injuries, wounds which were exposed to the bone and becoming more painful by the minute.

Tommy Gilbert also lay undiscovered, temporarily insensible where he collapsed, in a narrow gap between two rocks. Undiscovered that is, by 6 Platoon, but not by the Pathan women who, on their men's victorious return to the villages, flocked out in a band, retracing their steps up into the hills to the scene of the earlier ambush. Dragging Gilbert to a suitable spot they first stripped him naked before cutting away his genitals, then severing his fingers and toes, they entertained themselves by slicing strips of flesh from the soles of his feet. Mercifully his barbarous torture ended in drowning as the women took it in turns to urinate in his mouth. Their final enjoyment was to expertly flay the skin intact from his body and carry it away with them in triumph as a trophy.

Joe Penton, lapsing into fits of unconsciousness induced by loss of blood, heard Gilbert's screams in a state of foggy unreality but Ben Tysall had no such sedative relief. He could only grip his rifle as he crouched on guard and curse the harrowing screams that echoed and re-echoed off the Khyber hills.

The next morning the Queen's, after spending the night in a defensive position on the road, re-occupied the hills. B Company, sent up to where 6 Platoon had suffered their ambush, swept through the rocks scouring the ground for those missing. The bloody, butchered carcass that was what remained of Tommy Gilbert was wrapped in rubber ground sheets and carried off for burial at Landi Kotal.

Before dawn Ben Tysall had pulled a groggy Joe Penton to his feet and, guiding him along the edge of a valley bottom, found for them a more defensible concealment. Ben was well aware that two British soldiers and only one of them armed, lost like fugitives in the Khyber were to the local tribesmen no more than game to be hunted down, killed and robbed. With this dictating his moves, he was loath to leave their hiding place in daylight but Penton's wound continued to weep blood and by noon he was verging on delirium.

“Come on, my old clobber”, encouraged Ben, brushing the flies from Joe's wounds before helping him to his feet. Then taking Joe's good left arm, still gripping his bayonet, he steered his mate along the fringe of a valley. Disorientated but choosing his route from the sun, Tysall, keeping in cover where he could, navigated in what he hoped was the direction of the road. Resting below the lip of a dried shallow *nullah* he tried unsuccessfully to make Joe drink water from his canteen. The wounded man was thirsting for liquid but every time his corporal put the spout to his lips he would brush it away, spitting the water out. Despite his mind being in a dream, Joe's subconscious still held him duty bound in refusing the contents of his canteen.

Preparing to move on, Tysall heard faint sounds from across the valley. Cautiously peering above the rim of the *nullah* he saw, a quarter of a mile distant, a line of pack animals crossing the mouth of his valley. Overcome with relief and elation he half dragged Joe up and out of the *nullah* and began to pull him at a stumbling run towards the pack train escorted by khaki uniformed soldiers.

“Come on, Joe lad, give it all you got,” coaxed Ben through gritted teeth, “We're safe! Almost safe! Rescued by the bloody gunners, God love 'em”.

On the caravan track being used by a mountain battery of artillery to march up the Khyber, an officer, on foot as were his men, called a halt. From out of an adjoining valley came two men, one with a rifle clutching the second who was repeatedly falling down, and shouting at them in English. A hundred yards from the track the lieutenant and two of his Punjabi Mussulmans gunners intercepted the two fugitives as they emerged from perilous country.

With Penton slumping to the ground, Ben Tysall came to attention and saluted. By the time he had explained who they were to this first officer, a second with quick, energetic strides joined them.

“Who have we here, Bertie?” he asked, taking a pipe from his mouth. A Major, the Battery Commander.

“Two infantry chaps, sir. Survived an ambush. Been on the run,” replied the lieutenant.

“Hmm! Queen's Light Infantry, eh?” commented the major with a glance at the metal badge fixed to the cloth *pugri* on the side of Tysall's topee, which showed a fleur-de-lis and the letters QLI above a Light Infantry bugle.

“Your mate here, Corporal,” said the major, kneeling to inspect Penton's wounds, his body and uniform encrusted with dried blood. “He seems to have come out the worst of a bad encounter”.

“He's in sparklin' shape compared with the two Pathan geezers who fancied their luck, sir,” assured Tysall, tapping his blood streaked bayonet.

“Good show,” said the major scratching a cheek with the stem of his pipe, his eyes showing faint admiration, before turning to give his junior officer a set of instructions:

“Bertie, send one of your chaps to fetch my horse, then see this wounded fellow is mounted”. Then turning to Tysall; “We set a cracking pace but you're Light Infantry; if you've still got your legs about you, we'll have you into Landi Kotal in just over the hour.”

Penton was taken to the small hospital inside Landi Kotal fort where after his wounds were cleaned he had an x-ray. This magical contraption, showering sparks every which way, showed his shoulder to be broken in three places. A week later, with his strength back and wounds knitting, Joe was sent south for special attention. First to a military hospital at Rawalpindi, then high into the Darjeeling hills for therapeutic convalescence.

In the officers' mess that evening Miles Holt-Bate sat intentionally alone. He had repeated his story of the ambush dozens of times in the last twenty-four hours and was thoroughly sickened at heart with it. Time after time he reproached himself for not preventing it happening. It was his fault for not pre-selecting a different route down. It was his fault for not

making the safer decision to remain on the hill overnight.

“Not drinking, Miles?”

The lieutenant looked up to find Captain McQuaid standing beside him, a glass in each hand, one a double whiskey, the other a full tumbler of brandy.

“Oh, no sir. Don't feel much in the mood,” replied Miles.

“Well you should, to celebrate,” suggested the quartermaster, sitting into the chair opposite. “I've had a chinwag with that political officer chummy. His informants tell him those beggars didn't get off Scot free. It seems out in one of the villages' burial grounds there's three more banners flying to keep the evil spirits away from the graves of a trio of new entries to paradise. It appears your Corporal Tysall evened up the score some.”

Holt-Bate who was dejectedly staring at the floor, looked up to find McQuaid holding out the tumbler of brandy. Taking it, Miles raised the glass in salute: “Corporal Tysall,” he toasted, then drained the glass in one gulp.

CHAPTER 11

Beauty without virtue is a flower without perfume.

French Proverb

Placing his pen beside the inkwell on his desk, Robert Christie sat back in his chair, for a moment taking a break from the tray of correspondence and reports that was forever in need of his attention and never totally disposed of. It was approaching the end of June and summer, with its boiler room atmosphere was wringing the last wisp of vapour from Ranhar District before the monsoon broke. With the time gone five in the afternoon Srilata had directed Madar, the bungalow *tatti-wallah*, to remove the *khas-khas* frames from the doors and windows. Without the cooling damp air passing into the room Madar's task included throwing cups of water on the outer frames - the temperature began to rise but this was compensated for by no longer having to breathe its dank, musty odour.

Rising from his desk the sub-district officer walked out into the shading of his veranda. The garden, except for the square of green grass on the lawn where he slept each night, watered by Anil the *mali*, was a wasteland of dust and shrivelled vegetation. Looking beyond, down off the ridge to Chamblapur town, Christie endured the pain to his eyes, staring through the reflecting sunlight, because he had seen an unusual sight: trailing a ribbon of dust, an automobile had stopped at the railway station. Intrigued by the machine's arrival he stood and watched as a couple of minutes later it continued on, turning towards his ridge.

As it disappeared below into dead ground Christie puzzled over the route chosen, the road passing his bungalow led to nowhere of significance - villages and crop-land but then, with a swirl of slowly settling dust the car swept in through his front gate, to brake in a sliding crunch of gravel. This automobile was a type he had never seen before, a touring car with an open top and rounded body. The driver, the only person aboard, swung open a door and leaped out. Dressed in topee, blouse and jodhpurs, goggles were removed from eyes and a muslin scarf, used to keep dust out of nose and mouth, unwrapped to reveal familiar features.

"Collector," called Princess Kishna. "You have a visitor. Come! Greet me."

"What do you think of the motor?" she asked, as he joined her at the car.

"Very audacious for these parts," commented Christie, keeping his amazement at her un-warned of arrival in check.

"It's Sadul's - a Chenard-Walcker - won Le Mans last year - I borrowed it", informed Kishna off-handed, throwing her scarf, goggles and topee into the car.

"Have you driven far?" asked the Englishman.

"Pankar. Left this morning," she answered.

"Jaswara! The summer capital!" exclaimed Christie. "That's almost three hundred miles!"

The woman just waved a hand.

"Let's get into the shade of the veranda," he suggested. "I'm sure you're in need of a cool drink".

On sitting - Kishna, slumping, with her legs straight out Srilata, who had watched the newcomer's arrival from inside the bungalow, appeared soundlessly on bare feet and presented herself.

"Ah, Srilata. We have a guest, Princess Kishna, who is very hot and thirsty," he informed her. "Could you bring us two glasses of your special, please?"

As she turned away to comply, Kishna's eyes followed the woman's appealing, winsome figure.

"She is your mistress, Collector," she stated accusingly.

This slander Robert strongly denied, while almost gagging on his chuckle. "She is the bungalow khansahah and her duties go no further than that".

"Housekeeper! Ha!" scoffed the princess.

Christie found this amusing. Although he had no idea why the princess should suddenly land on his doorstep, for whatever the reason she had not expected to find him being looked after by someone as fair as Srilata. Four months earlier, at Udaigarh, after their night of love, she had acted towards him for the rest of his stay as if it had never happened, not once allowing herself to be caught alone in his presence let alone give Christie the opportunity of expressing his desire, once more to sample her sensual pleasures.

"Your family?" he asked, hoping to discover why the princess had driven so far into British India, "are they well?"

"Oh, yes, everyone is doing splendidly. The Court has moved to the summer palace on Mount Abu," she replied, "everyone but my father, he has stayed behind at Pankar. Matters of state with him have always taken priority over his comfort or leisure".

"Thank you, Srilata," said Christie, as his housekeeper offered each a large glass of fruit juice from a tray.

"You'll like this, Princess. Mango and lime juice, quite refreshing", said her host.

"Ummm--- delicious," agreed Kishna, taking a sip. "And ice, Collector. Where do you obtain ice, here, in summer?"

"I've been afraid to ask," replied Christie with an impish expression. "But as you see Srilata is not just a piece of decorative furniture. She, I'm sure if asked, could produce manna from heaven". Kishna taking another sip of her drink laid her head back to savour its cool taste.

"Collector, you have a menagerie in your ceiling," she commented calmly, her eyes, having rested on the hessian cloth inside the bungalow's main room, spread beneath the ceiling to stop flakes from falling down, had seen something scurry across its netting.

"Oh, nothing to bother about. Small snakes, lizards and the odd bat from time to time," dismissed Christie.

For several seconds the woman enjoyed her drink in silence. Her legs still at full length.

"Your revenge, you know, was quite complete," began the Englishman, his words prompted by long glances at the woman, knowing what rapturous delights lay hidden below the coverings of her dust-coated clothing.

"Pardon?" she asked.

"At Udaigarh the night you came to me," he explained, "You allowed me entry to paradise, then shunned me. Each night I lay awake hoping for you to return. On leaving I felt as a Don Jose to your Carmen".

"I am not a harlot, Collector," began Kishna softly, drawing her legs up, cupping the glass in both hands. "I have only had two other lovers, both young, the first in England".

Pausing, her eyes came up to hold his.

"You refused the Maharaja's award in tribute to your brave leadership of his soldiers. He holds you in the highest of regards, as you know. You have done what he so wished to do: To lead the Jaswara Legion in battle. I gave myself to you in payment for a Rajput State's debt of honour".

"Of the two offers, I shall be eternally thankful for having had the courage to refuse the first," disclosed Christie truthfully, breaking the silence that followed.

"Collector, I have a favour to ask". Kishna looked first at her glass, then up at him. "Will you have me as a house guest?"

"Yes! Of course! But this is a sub-district officer's bungalow" pointed out Christie awkwardly.

"What you see is what I have. It is far from posh, at night I sleep there on a charpoy on the

lawn”.

“Then so shall I”, replied Kishna, glancing to where he pointed.

“Is there to be hanky-panky between us?” asked Robert jokingly, while dearly hoping that there would be, “because if so, I'm not sure how the servants would take to that”.

“Hanky-panky! Hanky-panky!” laughed Kishna. “No, Collector, there will be no hanky-panky”.

“Pity,” said Christie, continuing the joke before asking, “Will you stay long?”

“A few days,” replied the young woman becoming serious. “I have come because I'm in need of time to think. The Maharaja has proposed another suitor.”

“A warrior?” asked Robert, matching her sombre tone.

“We have met. He is a nice boy,” answered Kishna in her own way. “He's the son of a Clan Chief.”

Christie expected to hear more but his dark, alluring, but travel soiled guest sat as if dreaming.

“Srilata, we have a house guest. Princess Kishna will be staying”, he informed his housekeeper as she came to replenish their glasses. “Please arrange an early bath for her. We will take supper about eight.”

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The next morning as was his practice Christie was up before the sun. As a sub-district officer he had a jurisdiction that required constant, year round tending to. With him rose Kishna, for on being told by Robert that, although his guest, his time for entertaining her was limited, she insisted only on being allowed to fall in with his routine. The pair had a light breakfast of coffee and scrambled eggs whilst the *syce* saddled and readied Christie's two horses in the drive. His first obligation of the day was to settle a dispute between two farmers at a village five miles to the south east, then on another two miles to a town court building where he would be sitting in judgement on matters of minor litigation and affrays. Able to pass small sentences and award substantial fines, his powers of ‘Judgey’ were limited, he could, if so wishing, review the rulings of his *tansildars*, subordinate magistrates, whereas serious crimes such as robbery or murder were dealt with by a Sessions Judge.

Kishna did offer the use of her automobile but Christie declined. On horseback he could hear the sounds of the land, see the crops as they grew and ripened and most important of all, be accessible to the people. The junior members of the Indian Civil Service ran rural India and in but a very few instances were held in high regard by those they served, a fact attributable to the background of those recruited to the service. Public school and university educated, they were brought up to play a fair game and to trust men at their word. Dignity, honesty, incorruptibility, as officers of a smoothly run ship, these were the criteria by which they functioned. From the point of view of village India, ninety percent of the population, they were the straw which bound the brick clay that was their land.

The latter point was made evident to Kishna a few miles into their ride. At a junction of the cart-track they were following where a pathway crossed, a barefoot farmer in turban and loincloth, squatting on his haunches, stood up to give the sub-district officer courteous greetings. Politely returning his best wishes for the day, also in Urdu, Christie continued to walk his horse but reined in when the farmer inquired the destination of his journey and offered to advise a shorter route. Stepping down, he sat with the man for some minutes listening to the directions and asking how fruitful the gods' rewards for his labours were. This was no more than idle chit-chat masking the real reason why the Indian had intercepted the sahib.

The farmer had a worry on his mind, a fact Christie realised the moment he attempted to

gain favour with him by offering him directions. Knowing the man would not state his dilemma straight out it was left to the Englishman to bring the matter into the open.

"My good friend," he began, "I can see you have a difficulty troubling you. Tell me, what is it?"

The farmer, overjoyed, admitted this to be true, explaining that if the sahib would come to the place of his *mauga* he would see immediately what the problem was. Leading his horse he followed the man past two fields to a dry irrigation ditch, which the farmer pointed at. This was the nub of his *mauga*, his problem, but by just looking Christie could not fathom the man's predicament and had to ask further questions. Eventually it emerged that a neighbouring farmer had diverted the flow of water from the supply which he shared, which was drawn from the local well in a large hide bag lifted by oxen. Making a mental note to hand this on to the *tahsilar* the subordinate magistrate responsible for the village, he assured the farmer that his difficulty would be resolved, then, remounting, he and Kishna resumed their travel.

This was an occurrence that had repeated itself so often that with Christie it was almost a drill. Nevertheless, each time treating the grievance with sincerity, he would always do his utmost to see the affair properly concluded, for he was the Sub-District Officer, the Honoured Sahib, and if they could not approach him for just such assistance, whom could they turn to?

Another twenty minutes' ride and they came to the location of Christie's first official business of the day. On the outskirts of a village a party of men were awaiting him by the side of the road, in the shade of a cypress tree. A dispute had arisen over the ownership of a portion of land between two fields. Normally Christie would have dealt with this when he toured in the cool months after the monsoon but on both parties' requesting the matter to be settled earlier so that a crop could be sowed by the newly established owner, whoever he was to be, he had arranged for this morning's meeting.

Climbing from their horses Christie was met first by the village headman who lowered and folded his shading umbrella as a mark of respect to his sub-district officer. With the horses taken charge of by two baggy-trousered men, a *charpoy* was produced for him to sit on, screened from the sun by branches above. The headman at this point introduced the *patwari*, the village accountant who kept a record of the land survey and details of who owned each field, who worked it and the crop it produced. So ledgered, there was no doubt as to who was accountable for paying the land tax, a system handed down to the British from the days of the Mogul Empire. Called *zamindari*, it was a method of collecting taxes from the peasant farmers that was so successful, it was generally agreed that, if it had not already existed, then the British themselves would have had to invent it.

After examining the large scale survey map of the disputed property and reading the land documents, recorded in Sanskrit, Christie was introduced to the two parties in the wrangle: Two *zamindars*, owners of land who had fields that adjoined each other. One *zamindar* employed a *ryot* or cultivator to tend his fields. This *ryot* had begun planting on a small wedge of marsh which he recovered by building a bank around. The second *zamindar* discovering this and believing the marshland to be his, took the matter to the village headman. However as land settlement was chiefly the responsibility of the 'Collector Sahib' the complaint very soon worked its way up the chain and on to Christie's desk.

On listening to the two *zamindars* and the *ryot* presenting their reasons for claiming ownership, the Englishman asked to be taken to the property in question. By relating the surveyed map to the fields bordering the marsh and confirming with the *patwari* that the documents were all correct, Christie gave his ruling. The plot of reclaimed marshland, no larger than a good sized room, clearly fell within the boundary of the second *zamindar's* holdings, but the first *zamindar* and the *ryot* were to be paid compensation for creating an

addition to the second *zamindar's* lands.

Next stop on the morning's programme for the sub-district officer was one requiring him to sit in judgement of misdeeds. Entering one of the more humble townships in his district, Christie was repeatedly respectfully greeted, Muslims salaaming and Hindus pressing their hands together, a bullock cart driver climbing from his vehicle as he passed. On each side of the earth stamped street, under reed roofed verandas, at least one person from each household was supporting Mahatma Gandhi's policy of boycotting foreign cotton manufactured goods by spinning their own cotton on a hand operated spinning wheel.

The court building, made of mud brick, was low roofed and quite small and it being summer; the proceedings were to take place on the veranda. Waiting around its fringe were those with suits to bring or defend and those accused of petty crimes, here to disprove their guilt. With them were assembled witnesses and, should more be needed, in front of the court building was a tamarind tree, under which for the right fee, many others could be recruited.

Christie came to this court building only on rare visits, when he had to carry out a regular check of the magistrate's records, or an inspection of the court. Unfortunately, the magistrate was at present ill, so to relieve the backlog of civil suits and petty crimes Christie had given over this morning to sit in his place. As he entered the building to discuss the list of cases with the court reader, Kishna walked across the open square to a clump of jack trees where a group of women sat.

Exchanging *namaste* with them she introduced herself, explaining that she was a house guest of the Sahib Collector and asked to join them in the shade.

"House guest, Begum?" spoke up a black toothed crone in a tart, but comic voice. "There is a man who visits a widow in our street every week, but she does not call him her house guest".

"Ah, mataji! That is because the Honoured Sahib is too genteel to tell everyone I am his strumpet," retorted Kishna.

With the women bending double, shrieking with laughter, she seated herself among them.

It was not until eleven o'clock before Christie finished with all the proceedings and the day's temperature approaching its highest point. At the horses Kishna joined him, surprising the man by clutching his arm, but instead of directing her eyes to him, turned her head towards a cluster of seated women who burst into roars of laughter.

"What is this about?" he asked.

"I'll enlighten you one day," she promised; a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

"Tell me, Collector, what action did you take in the Hiralal Chopra case?" asked Kishna as they rode from the town.

"You mean the man who claimed someone intentionally drove a bullock cart up and down his tomato patch?" replied Christie, having had to sift the name through his mind. "I dismissed the complaint. It was just too far-fetched to believe. The bullock cart driver was only passing through and had no reason to commit such an act of malice".

"You made the correct decision," assured the Princess.

"You believe so?" replied Christie.

"Yes," she began in explanation of her question, "the farmer was away. The cart bullocks wandered into the tomatoes to eat while the driver was having hanky-panky with the farmer's wife".

"How do you know this?" asked Christie, more than just curious.

"The wife told me," answered Kishna turning to smile.

They sheltered from the hot hours of the day in a government Post House, a *dak* bungalow near the town, taking a meal before siesta'ing on *charpoy*s in separate rooms below swaying *punkah* fans. At five, after a long cool drink served by the *dak* caretaker they returned to Chamblapur taking a different turning so Christie could check on the rate of progress of the

jheel, an earth banked reservoir, that when completed would fill in the monsoon months and its flow, controlled by sluice gates, would give a village's farmers the benefit of taking from their fields two crops a season instead of one. This was a project begun by Peterson, his predecessor and in memorial to him Christie was determined to see it finished.

Returning to the bungalow at seven Srilata worked the servants doubly hard to provide two fillings of bath water. It was not until now that Christie became alive to the primitiveness of his domestic living style. The bathroom furniture was a galvanized metal hip bath, emptied through a hole in the floor by which snakes occasionally entered. His toilet, a commode, was removed after each use and disposed of by having to call the bungalow dome, the Untouchable sweeper. With Kishna as a guest he found this, to a small extent, embarrassing but with flush toilets and sewage facilities almost none existent outside the country's larger cities; he was obliged to accept these sanitary arrangements.

Supper was at eight, an occasion for which Christie always dressed, a farcical act considering that he was always alone but as the *Sahib*, the Sub-District Officer, it was his duty to himself, the servants and the Service, to maintain traditional standards. After supper he would normally have read reports and correspondence, so it made a most agreeable change to have an attractive woman who could hold his interest with pleasurable conversation, joining him over coffee and brandy. This was taken on the lawn where they remained until about eleven, returning then to the house to change before retiring for the night. As they changed the servants arranged their beds on the lawn, two mosquito net draped *charpoys*, placed a discreet distance apart, with the legs standing in saucers of water to deter the ants. At night it was impossible to sleep in the bungalow, the heat absorbed during the day continued to flame from the building's walls after sunset with the ferocity of a factory furnace.

And so over days that turned into two weeks the pattern of Kishna's stay was set, accompanying her host on his excursions of duty around the district, then in the evening providing for him social companionship. Christie's one worry on this was perhaps Srilata may react to her presence with a measure of green-eyed intolerance. This unease proved unfounded, for two reasons. The first, Kishna remained at all times a guest, never taking liberties with or imposing herself upon the servants, and the second, her son David. When Christie had no reason to ride out, Kishna would take the young boy to and from his school in her car, also sitting with him on the veranda in the late afternoons helping with his homework. So captivating was her manner that she even enticed Srilata into the automobile to accompany her shopping at the Rathna bazaar. This kindness was returned by Srilata inviting Kishna into the kitchen hut just behind the bungalow, to show her how the *bobajee* prepared and cooked their meals. This was an act that first appeared a minor courtesy, until Robert revealed to her that he had only gained entry himself on two occasions.

In the late afternoon on a day when Christie was carrying out a round-robin inspection of a police station and two schools, they once again swung away from the main track so that he could assess the work on the *jheel* project. Following a track that rounded a stand of bamboo the riders found two *ryots* looking in a direction from which was coming moans and drawn out cries. On asking why they were not investigating the source of this anguish, one raised his arm to point at a collection of dwellings with thatched roofs and woven reed walls that were the homes of a community of Untouchables.

"Harijan woman, sahib. Her man ran off there," he replied.

Spurring his horse Christie rode to the field edge where he dismounted and hurried at a brisk jog to see what aid was possible needed.

On a pathway, loosely clothed in soiled cotton wraps lay a young girl, hardly into her teens, her face torn with pain, glistening with sweat. It was obvious, even to the Englishman who had never witnessed this before that, from the girl's enlarged abdomen and the sounds

that she was in labour, with childbirth close at hand.

Throughout India the Untouchables were a social class that was akin to slavery. In a society that functioned by operating a harsh, uncompromising caste system, the Untouchables were not even a caste themselves - to the others they were unclean creatures, fit only to burn the dead, clean for others and scavenge decomposing animal carcasses from the land, which, as the small hand cart on the path with parts of a butchered goat showed, the pregnant girl had been assisting in doing.

Feeling utterly helpless, Christie stood over the girl wanting to help but ignorant as to how. He was about to kneel and give sympathetic encouragement, when a voice behind took charge.

"Take her head in your lap, Robert," ordered Kishna. "She must have something to grip".

Taken aback, he did as the woman told him, lifting the girl's shoulders to rest her head on his thigh. Whimpering clutched him, one hand on his ankle, the other gripping a shirt sleeve. Christie barely noticed the girl taking hold of him; he was watching Kishna with a mixture of astonishment and fascination. She had sunk to her knees lifting the fold of the girl's skirt, easing her legs further apart to examine the vagina. With those gentle touches the Rajput Princess had violated her caste; she was now, in the eyes of all Hindus, tainted and in disgrace.

"She is very near, I can see the head," said Kishna taking a handkerchief from a pocket to place it on one side. Removing her topee she unwrapped from it a silk scarf that had hung as protection for her neck from the sun.

The girl, feeling the baby begin to move down, instinctively drew her knees up forcing her legs apart, an overwhelming sensation to push down taking hold.

"Good, little mother," encouraged Kishna, rolling the cuffs of her shirt-sleeves back. "Push! Push with all your might."

For three or four minutes this went on, the girl groaning in pain gripping Christie while repeatedly straining. Then at last the head, facing down, freed itself into the open.

"Splendid, little one, your child is coming. Now bear down! Bear down!" implored Kishna as the head turned to face one thigh, whereupon she began wiping its nose and mouth with her handkerchief to clear away fluid. Forcing down with all her strength the young mother pushed first one shoulder into view then the other. Grasping this upper portion of the baby, Kishna delivered the infant into the world, placing it on her scarf that she had laid on the mother's abdomen. On the young girl falling limp with exhaustion the lips of the newborn baby, as it began to breath, turned from blue to pink and then open to cry.

"Robert, do you have a knife?" The question, catching Christie off guard, had him fumbling in the wrong pocket before producing a pen-knife.

Taking the umbilical cord in the fingers of one hand she folded it over, cutting at the bend. Tying a knot in that attached to the baby, with the other Kishna gently eased the placenta from the mother, casting this afterbirth aside.

"Be proud, brave mother, you have a son," complimented the princess, enfolding the baby in her silk scarf to hand it into the girl's waiting arms.

"I'm so grateful, memsahib. You have been so kind," thanked the mother weakly, beginning to regain her senses.

Seeing a number of figures around a horse-drawn cart running from the hutted village, Christie lifted the new mother and her baby into his arms to carry her out to the track. Engulfed in tearful praise from the youthful father and his family, Christie and Kishna remained to watch as they with joyous relief returned to their village. Beside the track a rill trickled from a large earth-banked tank of water. Going to this Kishna rinsed bloodstains from her hands.

"What you did just now was most brave," said Christie. "Delivering a baby is not

generally a problem. I have seen it done several times in our state clinics,” dismissed the woman.

“I wasn't referring to the birth,” replied Christie, his meaning veiled.

“Oh! You mean my defilement?” replied Kishna, her head rising, the words slow and deliberate.

Christie answered with a silent nod.

“Loss of caste, I believe, is very much a state of mind,” she informed him, wiping her hands on her jodhpurs trouser legs. “I see no need to forsake my soul because of it”.

“Princess, you are the most remarkable woman I have ever known.” It had taken Robert a long moment to reply.

“Collector!” responded Kishna bursting into fits of chuckling, “you English. An American would have swept me into his arms. A Frenchman would have seduced me with velvet verse of amorous flattery. But you! You! Remarkable! Oh, Collector”.

Abruptly her amusement died away; perhaps his face had shown a hint of discomfort with her words.

“On consideration,” continued Kishna making amends with the tone of her voice, “I've never been called remarkable before”.

As the landscape turned into a mellow crimson the princess interrupted their return to halt beside a small lake. Dismounting she walked down to the stall where *chiraghs* were sold. Set back from the lake edge was a Hindu shrine depicting *Lakshmi*, the goddess of fortune. *Chiraghs* were clay saucers holding a cotton wick in oil. These were floated on the lake to reveal fortunes: to retain buoyancy meant good fortune; to sink meant bad.

Christie sat in his saddle holding Kishna's horse as she crouched at the shore to launch her saucer. A warm breeze from behind her safely saw the little flame out past the growth of shallow water lotus pads. Then his eyes were distracted by a flock of flamingos, blood red in the sunset, taking flight from the reeds on the far lakeside. Looking back, the saucer of light had sunk and his companion was walking back.

Kishna had not given a reason for her stop to test the good will of the goddess *Lakshmi* but he did suspect why.

I've been your guest too long Collector,” she told him, on taking her horse's reins, “tomorrow I will leave”.

--oOo--

Before five the next morning she was saying goodbye to Srilata at the foot of the veranda steps. From somewhere David produced a garland of flowers, standing on tiptoe to place them around her neck.

“Will you come again?” asked Robert as he saw her to the car.

“I've enjoyed my holiday with you, and this place,” she replied, avoiding his question, “especially young David. It was just the tonic I needed.”

“You must come after the monsoon,” he pressed, hoping for a positive response.

“You have shown your appreciation of my visit,” she replied, fingering the garland, still not answering. “I feel I should be leaving something to remind you of my stay.”

“You provided the District with a new baby. That surely is gift enough,” pointed out Christie giving up on a firm answer from her. “Besides,” he continued, “I have already a token of yours, which I treasure.”

Kishna taking up the driver's seat of the car looked as he opened his cigarette case, gingerly picking out a single stem of straw.

“You left this beneath my bed in the tent the night you led me through the garden of delights.”

The princess looked and knew it must be the same straw she had concealed behind her ear and dropped under the bed when he first laid her below the mosquito-net. As a Rajput woman of noble birth this traditional gesture of sleeping on nothing but a bed of straw was something she had retained since childhood.

“I must go, Collector.” Ignoring his admission she bade him farewell, holding out her hand to shake his. “We will meet again.”

Even as the car sped out of the drive his heart was filling with solitude. Before her arrival he craved for nothing, the job fulfilled his desires. Now, in just a few seconds he was already missing her company, on their rides, her presence across his dinner table and their conversations after sunset on the lawn. But above all he would miss the mornings, when she would arise from the *charpoy* to stand in the fading star light, her nightdress a poor shield to the graceful form it embraced.

CHAPTER 12

*No bending knee will call
thee Caesar now.*

William Shakespeare

During the hot summer months the garrisons of the North West Frontier, as was the custom, sent most of their troops up into the cooler northern hills. Of course, because this was the Frontier, not all could be so fortunate. As one battalion left for its much deserved respite from the suffocating heat of the Indus Plains, a company from another battalion would occupy their lines, safeguarding them while they were away.

On the city outskirts south of Peshawra was a small encampment surrounding a compound normally garrisoned by a full regiment but because it was the hot season they, the Royal Norfolks, were taking Himalayan mountain air. The reason this encampment was home to a thousand men for most of the year was because of the two rows of brick walled and iron-doored bunkers in the centre of the complex; They contained the garrison's war readiness ammunition stocks. Circling the battalion lines was a tall double fence of barbed wire with another, even taller inner fence that enclosed the ammunition compound itself. Just inside the outer fence a trench was dug and patrolled, while at each corner were positioned squat, roofed sandbag sangars. At the main entrance into the lines was a guardroom watching over the twin gates providing the only means of entry into the camp. Opposite this – a hundred yards – was the entrance to the ammunition compound. There, too, was a gate with its own sentry and a similar but smaller guard hut.

On a humid, early August evening Lieutenant Hugh Durand, accompanied by a tall havildar from his company, presented himself at this gate awaiting entry. He was the duty officer of the day and was on his inspection tour after the blowing of 'lights out'.

Finishing his year's probation with the 2nd Queen's Light Infantry he had joined the regiment of his choice on graduating from Sandhurst, the 13th Frontier Force Rifles. The 7th Battalion, his, was not a single class battalion but a mix made up of companies drawn from different warrior classes and religious castes. 1 and 2 Companies were Pathans recruited from the tribes of the Swat Valley, while 4 Company were Sikhs from the western Punjab. 3 Company, Durand's were Jats, farmers and herders whose home was the southern banks of the Indus, to the north of Rajputana. On joining the battalion he had hoped for one of the Pathan Companies but on approaching the end of his first year with the Jats he now considered himself fortunate in being one of their officers. By religion confirmed vegetarians, they were of stolid character, uncomplaining and dutiful, loyal men, easy to command.

The compound gate was opened by one of his platoon members, for it was his company that provided that day's guard; they and the Sikhs were taking it in daily turns to provide the camp guard, while the Pathans watched over their own lines in the Peshawar Military Cantonment a few miles to the north.

Marching to the guard hut that provided rest accommodation for the compound sentries, the naik or corporal in charge of them already had those off-duty formed up outside, calling them to attention and saluting. After inspecting the men and their guard hut he and the havildar, Des Ram, set off around the bunkers to verify all were locked and secure.

The constant monitoring of arms and ammunition went far beyond that of a routine chore. Here on the Frontier both were highly prized articles; to the Border Pathan they went further in importance than wealth. A rifle to a tribesman was much more significant than to a European. A European would use it for sport whereas for a tribesman it was his means of survival, his protection and the instrument with which he could kill his enemies and plunder their possessions. In his eyes the sin of killing someone for arms or ammunition was immaterial and the risk to his own life, in taking same from others, more than worth the gamble. Hence the basis for no less than two companies guarding the compound, not to ward off an armed assault however, that was scoffed at. No, the Pathan was an artful thief and had to be deterred by numbers.

The reason the British so airily dismissed the possibility of an attack on the Peshawar garrison was because this had not been attempted for many years. The garrison was far too strong, with reinforcements only a few hours away by rail and should an uprising of any significance occur, their Border political officers would give ample forewarning. The latter was sound enough reasoning, except that on the Border safe assumptions were apt to prove themselves anything but.

There were two borders on the North-West Frontier, that between India and Afghanistan and a second, lying back from the first, on the Indian side known as the Administrative Boundary. Britain governed only up to this Administrative Border, between the two the Pathan tribes and clans lived their lives much the same as they had for centuries. In principle Delhi exercised rule of law over them but in practice they ran or miss-ran their own affairs, only submitting to British directives when visited by a brigade sized column of troops.

In recent months, on the Afghan side of the Border, the Amir had endeavoured to introduce education for women. In a country run according to strict Muslim teachings this provoked anger leading to - in the Khost Valley - rebellion. The Amir, in putting this down, had several of the ring leaders executed. However, one calling himself the Faqir of Matun, accompanied by three of his sons and a band of about twenty loyal followers escaped across the Border into the tribal lands. Highly fanatical, he tried to raise the clans in *Jihad*, holy war against the Amir.

This appeal to religious fervour gained few recruits for him from the wily Pathan so; on reaching the homeland of the Afridi's he changed his approach, directing his call to the women. They in turn rounded on their men, calling them cowards and threatening not to sleep with them again until they had proved their manhood by returning with their rifles used and knives bloodied. The Faqir also added an inducement. He had brought with him from Afghanistan a number of packhorses carrying explosives and when he made it known that he knew where rifles and ammunition were in abundance and that with his explosives he would take possession of these, his force began to grow. Sweeping east down the Tirah Valley, by the time he had crossed the Administrative Border he had gathered behind him over two thousand men.

Such a large formation of hostiles should have been spotted well before reaching Peshawar but if nothing, the Pathan was cunning, and knew how important concealment was. Moving in darkness they reached the city's outskirts in one night, hiding the following day in undergrowth and the labyrinth of dry *nullahs* to its west.

As Lieutenant Durand did his rounds of the ammunition bunkers in company with Des Ram, the duty havildar, at the camp's main gate Sepoy Girdhala watched two men appear from the camp bazaar hutments a hundred and fifty yards in front of the gate, one leading a packhorse that carried two large bundles. From his sentry tower above the inner gate he took them by their dress, to be Afghan traders. At the outer gate, ten feet high and solidly made of heavy wood, two sentries would stand during the working day, but at night this was closed and the men withdrawn. Below him, Har Lal, a second guard, stood behind the inner gate,

also closed and bolted but not as high or as stout as the outer one. Either side of these two gates the dual, thickly woven barbed wire suspended on sturdy pickets extended around the camp area.

"Saramashel Soldier of the sahibs," called out one of the Afghans as they halted at the wire to one side of the outer gate.

"Loe shah," responded the sentry curtly, his rifle up and held ready. The two visitors appeared to possess no weapons, but this was the Border.

"Kwan mashe?" came back a further enquiry to the sentry's well being.

"What is your business at the King soldier's gate?" asked the sepoy impolitely, ending the formality of greeting that could rattle on for some minutes.

The reply was a tale of travelling a great distance with rich wares deserving of sale only to warriors in the service of the British. Paying no heed to the over indulged flattery, Girdhala dismissed them away with a blunt suggestion that they returned in daylight when the camp was awake. As one man delivered a laboured thank you, the other turned their pack animal around, going out of sight behind the main gate. Although fifteen feet up in the sentry tower, it was set back from the first gate by a good twenty yards and shielded both man and horse from sight. When they did come again into view both were hurrying away towards the bazaar. The other Afghan just as quickly following, backing off from the fence flipping a hasty *salaam*, his frozen smile of the last few minutes evaporating.

Disinterested, Girdhala watched the party leave, then he noticed a strap trailing from the packhorse; one of the bundles was missing.

"Har Lal," he called down to the sentry below. "Hurry! Bring the Havildar commander. Those flesh eaters from beyond the Border have left something behind".

With his comrade running to the guardroom, Girdhala looked towards the bazaar. The two men and their horse were just entering the bazaars main but narrow, darkened street. Almost immediately the edges of the whole hutment seemed to come to life with movement. A vital two seconds was lost to him as his eyes and mind, unbelieving at first, registered this as a mass of stealthily advancing figures. Before he could react to the fact he was thrown backwards by a blast that fragmented the outer gate, scattering a shower of splintered debris over the guardroom. Scrambling up, his body bruised, reasoning displaced by shock, he saw a tide of ragged garbed men in blue turbans rushing out of the bazaar towards him. Raising his rifle to shoot, his finger never gripped the trigger. From a hundred points hidden in the night, concealed riflemen fired first, their bullets peppering the guard tower, anyone of a dozen rounds ending the life of the young sepoy.

Inside the compound Hugh Durand and Des Ram responded at first with astonishment, heads turning in spasmodic jerks, words uttered half completed. The first clear thought that sprang to the officer's mind was that one of the bunkers had blown, but when this was followed by a volley of small arms fire both men bolted back to the compound guard hut.

Emerging from the bunker area that masked their sight the two men were confronted by the striking drama of a full blooded battle. Only minutes earlier they had passed through a location of the camp that was peaceful and ordered a picture of standard military routine. Now the night's stillness was shattered by rifle fire, screams and tribal war cries. Outside the wire wild men were advancing in little bounds towards the main gate. At the outer gate itself, the remains of which had been flung open, only a small portion of its wood still clinging to hinges, more attackers flocked. At the guardroom the guard were spilling out, taking up firing positions on the veranda or around the edges of the building. One lay motionless midway between the guardroom and the inner gate, it was the havildar guard commander. The compound guard was also retaliating, the naik screaming orders at his men, to take up firing positions around the guard hut and behind a bank of ground just in front. The gate sentry was lying in cover at his post. He was not firing because his weapon was ineffective at

that range. The expected enemy at night were *loose-wallahs* and the weapon given to the duty guards was a single shot Martini-Henry firing a shotgun cartridge, their rifles, having been secured, chained to racks in the guard hut.

Bending double as they ran, the duty officer and the havildar raced for the guard hut. Pistol drawn Durand dropped beside the naik congratulating him on his swift deployment of the guard, while desperately struggling to formulate a course of action that would stall or even beat off this attack. Being unarmed the havildar had thrown himself onto the guard hut landing, rolling in the open door to grab up the gate sentry's rifle. Joining them at that moment, coming at a run, were the two prowler guards who had been patrolling the bunkers, giving the force scattered around the guard hut a strength of fourteen. Only the tower sentry overlooking the ammunition bunkers remained out of the fighting.

Any thoughts of offensive action on the officer's part was swept from his mind as a second explosion disintegrated the inner gate.

Before the dust had cleared tribesmen were filtering under the covering fire of others through the camp's breach. The main obstacle to their unrestricted flooding through, was the handful of sepoy at the gate guardroom who heroically refused to retreat. But their ability to resist was inhibited by fire directed at them from several angles and now with the tribesmen closing on them through the blown gate they were being forced to retreat, dragging their wounded with them, back inside the guardroom.

Seeing this Durand shouted orders to those around him to concentrate their fire on keeping the Pathans from rushing in and capturing the guardroom. By undertaking that aim they themselves became the source of immediate danger to the enemy, drawing fire that cracked in the air above them, kicking up splashes of sand and dust from the ground around.

"Aimed shots only. Don't shoot until you're sure of hitting a target!" shouted the officer in Urdu, the bridging language used between British officers and their men. The order was given with good reason; the guard had been issued with only twenty rounds per man.

At the compound gate the sentry, stranded and feeling useless, began to crawl back towards the guard hut. Hugh, noticing him move, shouted a warning to remain in the safer cover of the gate frame.

"Sepoy Kanahiya! Stay! Stay!"

The sentry not hearing above the din of rifle fire continued to crawl.

Net Ram, the naik, with a frustrated curse, on running out of ammunition called to his officer that he was going back into the guard hut to fetch more from the emergency supply kept in a locked metal box sunk in concrete in the guard hut floor. With a bound he flung himself up the steps only to be pitched forward dead in the doorway by a bullet through the back of his neck. Des Ram without hesitation jumped up to scramble and claw his way across the ground and into the hut, tumbling over the naik's body. Safely in, he then dragged the dead Net Ram across the floor to the sunken box, for the key was chained around his waist.

Hugh Durand, holding himself close to the ground, raised his head only fleetingly, monitoring with bitter anger the enemy's growing dominance of the situation. To his front they were boldly closing around the guardroom, some bounding up to shoot through the door and windows. Outside the wire more and more tribesmen who had hung back around the bazaar began sprinting towards the ruptured gates. Sentries stationed around the perimeter trench and in the corner sangars engaged them but these dozen or so rifles were no more than an annoyance to them.

On giving an anxious glance in the direction of Kanahiya Durand turned sick with outrage. The Sepoy, motionless with wounds, was being used as target practice. In a fury the officer, disregarding his own safety, charged headlong to the rescue of his sepoy. Emptying his pistol in wild ineffective, random shots he reached the wounded Sepoy unscathed by bullets that tore through the air around him. Only when grasping the wounded man's webbing

shoulder strap did he feel a sting in his pistol arm. Dragging the Sepoy to safety Durand suddenly felt nakedly exposed, he was a British officer, a *sardar sahib*, the killing of him would be an event recounted around future tribal camp fires with boisterous delight for years to come. Now a second bullet found him, ripping through the corner of his mouth, peeling back a bloody leaf of flesh from his cheek. But still he held fast to the sepoy, reaching at last the fold of ground below the guard hut where most of the guard were in defence. There in the last yard of his rescue bid he took a third, disabling bullet in the hip, which knocked him to the ground, but he refused to release his grip on Kanahiya until both had been pulled to safety by others of the guard.

Despite the pain Durand pushed himself up, attempting to give orders, only to find his words garbled by a blood filled mouth torn open at one corner. However, these orders were rendered superfluous, for at that moment the officer and his small detachment were thrust into the role of spectators.

Coming into view in the camp lines beyond the high bunker walls that first hid them, was the battalion's Sikh company. In the lead, pistol in hand, shirt sleeved and hatless was the company commander, Major Hearsey. The Sikhs were a tall, handsome race, the men conscious of their appearance to the point of vanity, but for the moment this took second place. Flying from their beds to snatch up rifles, they rushed into battle turban-less, half dressed and in most cases barefoot. Dashing to fire positions around the quartermaster's *godowns*, among the GS wagon park and below the camp water tower, they began bringing fire to bear on the tribesmen besieging the main gate guardroom.

The hill Pathan may never have sat in on a battle appreciation lecture, but being a raider he instinctively knew when to strike and when to run. In darts and bounds the ragged, sandal shod invaders from the tribal borderlands began flitting away. The semblance of an ordered withdrawal turned to a rout as one, two, and then three Lewis guns, positioned in the perimeter trench began firing burst after burst at anything that moved between the fence and the bazaar. Seeing their centuries-old enemy, the Pathan in flight, there was no holding the Sikhs. Roaring their war cry "Sat sri Akal!" they swept forward firing on the move, many with securing *kangh* combs lost, their long manes of black hair flowing behind them.

On retaking the main gate, pursuit was extended as far as the bazaar where looting and rape had been suffered by a number of Hindu family shop owners. But as for the rest of the night, defending the compound as their priority, the Jats and Sikhs were confined to doubled guards and platoon size patrols around the camp perimeter and through the bazaar. Casualties for the battalion were six wounded and five killed, while of the attackers twenty-one bodies were recovered.

As for the remainder of these raiders from the Tirah uplands, they came for rifles and cartridges and, although checked in their planned thievery, they were now here in force and Peshawar abounded with other sources of booty.

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Ten miles east of Peshawar on the Grand Trunk Road, making their way back into the heart of northern India, the 2nd Queen's Light Infantry were on the march. Completing their year at Landi Kotal they had come out of the Khyber three days earlier and were now into the second leg of their night marches. This routine would not last the full journey to their new station at Ravlapore in the United Provinces, forty miles north-west of Lucknow, for by the end of the month they would be overtaken by the monsoon, which would have them switching to daylight marching. This could hardly be regarded as a reward since most of that time would be spent sodden from downpours of rain.

At the head of the battalion were three men on horseback: the second-in-command, the

adjutant and the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Claude Gilfillan. In command of the 2nd QLI for over two years his departure was only a few miles off. The morning halt for the battalion was to be the garrison station of Nowshera and there awaiting him, God willing, and with a modicum of effort from the Indian railway system, would be his wife. On promotion to full Colonel, following favourable reports on the way he commanded the battalion during the disaster at Jhendara and his year at Landi Kotal, he and his wife were to spend a month holidaying around the lakes and vales of Kashmir before taking up his new posting at the staff college in Quetta.

Major Spears the second-in-command would be taking the battalion on to Ravlapore where a new commanding officer was awaiting them. By now there was lines *gup*, doing the rounds of the companies, that at Nowshera they would be boarding a train for the remainder of the journey, but the soldiers weren't putting much credit to this, most bets were on a long march.

Near midnight the encompassing silence of the Grand Trunk Road, the dull rhythm of a thousand marching boots, was joined by the high pitched blare of an automobile horn. Racing past the marching troops, its headlamps illuminating the faces of the men as they turned to watch it speed by, it skidded to a halt beside the colonel's party, causing their mounts to shy away.

"Damn your bones mister! Have a care for the horses", boomed Gilfillan struggling with the reins to keep his horse under control.

The driver, the only occupant, a young headquarters signals lieutenant, with an expression of alarm, dispensed with any thought of a salute to stand up in the car and shout: "Sir! The Afridi are up!"

A lesser man might have asked the young officer to explain his outburst, identify himself, his source of information and then to explain what was expected of him.

Claude Gilfillan, without demur, turned to his second-in command;

"Major Spears, turn the column about. I want Light Infantry bayonets in Peshawar by sun up".

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Noon the following day found 6 Platoon in a static role protecting a track junction to the west of the city. Even though summer was almost at an end over half the garrison was still away in the hills. With a city, a large military cantonment and a Royal Air Force airfield to protect, there was no force left with which to go on the offensive.

The orders given to Miles Holt-Bate for his platoon was that they were to keep all marauding bands of Afridi out of the farm villages and city suburbs behind them. Putting his rifle sections out along a cart track facing west, Miles held his Lewis-gun section back in a cluster of trees where they could cover the track junction. All around were crop fields, the one to their south containing a high stand of maize. West beyond these fields there were fruit orchards and beyond that, where cultivation ended, the land was broken and scarred with dry *nullahs*.

With the sun at its warmest, Miles, from his platoon headquarters, a tree beside the track leading back into Peshawar, found himself about to be visited. Coming from the city a party of soldiers leading mules were filing out of the baked mud brick village to his rear. Well before they arrived Holt-Bates recognised them as their Dogras machine-gun platoon. Stepping onto the track he waited for Subedar Dalip Nath to approach.

"Miles, old man. You're not A Company per chance?" asked the Indian officer, the question posed uncertainly.

"Not here, Guns, and couldn't tell you where to find them," answered the Englishman,

using the machine-gun officer's nick-name.

"I was afraid as much," mused the Subedar. "Ran into the Adjutant outside the Kabuli gate - said the CO wanted me with A Company and directed us this way".

On racing back to Peshawar the mules and baggage wagons were left to follow on as the rifle companies rapid marched without a rest halt, for the city.

"I've never put much trust in old Cunliffe's ability to point in a straight line", sympathised Miles, breaking into a smile. Over the many months they had served together the two men had become firm friends. The Dogras, as opposed to most other warrior classes were mainly beardless, short, hillmen from the Himalayan foothills north of the Punjab. Their religious faith was Hindu and they were considered by the British, to be the gentlemen of the warrior races.

"Will you suffer my company for a few minutes, Miles, while I give the mules a break?" asked the Subedar, straightening the loose hairs of his thin but long moustache that stuck out across his cheeks.

"By all means," agreed the Englishman. "I've no refreshments but you're welcome to share the shade of my tree".

Giving a command to his platoon havildar to offload the - mules, Dalip Nath followed Miles off the track.

Forward of them the rifle sections lay along the other track facing west. Their orders were to watch out for the enemy, but it was hot, they were tired, and very hungry. With no prospect of relief from any of these problems in the near future the men's alertness was not one hundred percent. Ben Tysall, looking to his left and right, checking his men who had settled into the dry ditch area beside the track, could see they were slack in their watching but accepted this. To his left was Sid Firth chewing a straw, the only man on that side with his head up, looking. The other two, Short and Langdon, appeared more asleep than awake. To his right was Ken Hall, from Preston, a thin youth with unnaturally wide shoulders. Next to him was Pani Waters, someone who always seemed to have a smile on his face. He was nicknamed Pani because that was the Urdu word for water. Beyond him lay Bert Collins, a large, brawny youngster who was finding it hard to squeeze his bulk into the ditch. Both Waters and Collins were recent replacements to Ben's section to fill the gaps left by those killed in the Khyber Pass.

The last man on Tysall's right was Tim 'Jock' Cressey, a Scotsman from the Scottish coal fields. He had followed his father and grandfather down the mine since a boy of fourteen, until, one day, he was working on his back chipping at a seam of coal in a space only fifteen inches high. Stopping his picking he lay for half an hour staring at the rock only three inches above his eyes while his mind repeated to itself over and over again: "What the hell am I doing here?" At the end of his shift Tim went home, packed a grip and started walking south. At Nottingham, cold and hungry he joined the army, asking for as his regiment the Highland Light Infantry, but the recruiting sergeant, mishearing him, wrote down Queen's Light Infantry instead.

"Ben!"

Tysall's head turned sharply back to Sid Firth. He had taken the straw from his mouth and was pointing with it towards the maize field to the south of them. Approaching it at an oblique angle from the nullahs through the orchard was a party of men in a loose formation, moving in a skulking manner from tree to tree. As the left hand section, with the maize field obstructing the sight of the rest of the platoon, only he, Sid and Short and Langdon were in a position to see these men making for the maize.

With their heads low, both Tysall and Firth watched in silence until they had all made the cover of the tall corn stalks.

"Them's Afridi and no fearin'," called Firth in a low voice.

"Too true there," agreed Tysall, continuing with an order to Sid: "Get back and find Mister Holt-Bate, I'll keep a dekho on them bleeders in the corn".

Returning twenty minutes later with him, on hands and knees, came Holt-Bate, Sergeant Radley and Subedar Dalip Nath.

"And you're sure they're Afridi?" questioned Miles after Tysall confirmed that the infiltrators had not left the maize.

"Dead sure, sir. Everyone of them smelly baskets had a blue turban".

"Yes? Well... What to do? What to do?" acknowledged the platoon commander voicing his thoughts.

"We could go in and flush 'em out, sir," suggested Sergeant Radley.

"No good, Sergeant Radley," explained the officer. "As we went in one side they would only nip out the other. And the field is too big to surround."

"Miles, may I borrow your binoculars?" asked Nath, who had been scanning the fields to their north with a machine-gunner's eye for ground.

"Miles, do you see that bank where the ground dips?" pointed out the Subedar, handing back the glasses after verifying what he could just glimpse with the naked eye. "Now, if you could spare me just half an hour I could place two of my Vickers there, and if your men could beat through the corn, my chaps would catch those woolly hillmen as they broke cover".

"That's murderous, Guns, bloody murderous," congratulated Miles. "Let's do it."

"One point," warned the Subedar, "don't come out beyond the maize yourselves. My gunners will be firing at everything on two legs that comes into view."

Sending Sergeant Radley back to remain with the Lewis-gun Section, Miles briefed the section commanders on his plan of action, then waited for the machine-gunners to take up their position. From the track, the rifle sections watched as the Dogras gunners, carrying their weapon parts and ammunition by hand, made their way in a wide detour to approach the bank from the north. Seeing through his binoculars the guns assembled, Holt-Bate led his platoon down the track until they were abreast of the maize.

This was a good hundred yards from the track across an open field and as Miles noted, could be a bit difficult to reach. Facing the crop in extended line the officer, in the centre, dropped his arm to begin the advance. Bayonets fixed, rifles at the port they stepped out onto the open ground. If the Pathan should be on the eastern edge of the corn it could become uncomfortable but Holt-Bate was banking on the theory that the tribesmen were using the maize to hide up in, awaiting dark, which would conceal their creeping into the city. Reaching the crop safely, the line checked for the space of a few heart beats then as Miles blew a long loud blast on his whistle, it plunged in.

Most entered with throats dry and bodies damp with sweat, a sign of their apprehension of imminent injury or death. But countering that was an eagerness to get at the Pathan. These men had carried two of their mates off a Khyber hill who had been cut to shreds by these people and had gazed upon the mound of fly covered flesh that had once been Tommy Gilbert. The corn stalks, eight feet tall and closely grown, had to be forced apart, the rifle and bayonet held vertically so as not to obstruct passage. The soldier's topee, wide on the head, was dragged off, or to rid themselves of its nuisance, allowed to fall away. They had not penetrated far when a cheer broke from their throats. A burst of Vickers machine-gun fire rattled out, signalling that the plan was working. The tribesmen, hearing the whistle blast, were making a bid to escape. Ben Tysall had counted sixteen figures crossing into the corn field. Now eleven of those were running like rabbits, dodging from tree to tree in a life or death game of hide and seek with the Dogras machine-guns.

Of the other five, three, seeing what awaited them should they follow the others through

the orchard, turned south remaining in the shelter of the maize. Two, crashing their way through the stalks, broke free of the crop and made their getaway. The third, losing direction, ran at an angle deeper into the field causing him to cross in front of the platoon's two extreme left hand men, Short and Langdon. Danny Short, hearing the noise as he forced his way through the corn stalks, stopped to bring his rifle down, going onto one knee hoping to see more. What he did glimpse ten feet in front was a flash of dirty cloth.

"Ginger, get that bleeder!" he shouted to his mate after firing a shot that he knew had missed, unable to swing his trapped rifle fast enough.

Langdon, whipping his rifle down, fired instinctively as he suddenly found a bearded and scared, hawk-nosed face appearing through the barrier of stalks. The man dropped from Ginger's sight but as the soldier followed through, a bullet disintegrating a corn husk passed under his left arm. Swiping with his rifle and bayonet at the growth in his way he found the Pathan trying to crawl away. Working a fresh round into the chamber with his rifle bolt he fired into the man's back. As the Pathan slumped face to the ground Danny Short crashed past Langdon to bury his bayonet between the tribesman's shoulder blades.

"That's one for Tommy, ya bastard!" cursed Short between clamped teeth.

Of the two hesitating on the field's fringe, one, young but brave, turned back into the corn. Crouching he waited, vowing to kill a hated infidel. If he was to die he intended that his niche in paradise would first be secured. The man whose path he blocked was big Bert Collins, a target that couldn't be missed, the bullet shattering two ribs on his right side.

"Bugger me! I'm hit!" he cried, dropping to his knees.

The Pathan being still in his teens did not yet possess a modern rifle, his was an old breech loading single shot Snider with the barrel wired to a home made stock. Dropping the rifle he sprang forward, snatching a knife from its sheath at his waist. Tearing at the stalks in his way, trying to get at Collins who had rolled onto one side, he was charged down by Jock Cressey flying at him from one side. Hearing Collins cry out he had turned to help and with his rifle useless in the air released his grip of it to tackle the tribesman bare-handed.

Tumbling to the ground, before Cressey could get hold of the knife arm he took cuts on his left shoulder and neck.

"Ye heathen bos'tard! I'll gut ye! I'll gut ye!" screamed the Scotsman, smashing his fist into the Pathan's grimy face.

Cressey didn't have the other's height but his years in the mines had given him powerful arms. Rolling on top he held the knife hand down while his other gouged the tribesman's eyes. Screaming, he clawed with his other hand at Cressey's which was blinding him. The Scotsman, tearing out one eye moved his hand to the throat and began to squeeze. By the time Collins had struggled to his feet and retrieved his rifle to help, the young Pathan was dead, his bid for paradise unfulfilled.

The last raider from the Hills to hesitate on the crop edge took the decision to take his chances in the orchard. Sprinting with all the speed his sandaled feet could give, he made a headlong run through the fruit trees. Unfortunately for him he left it too late. Behind him Pani Waters, reaching the boundary of the corn field, threw himself down into an aiming position. His bullet struck the Pathan in the back sending him to the ground, his head flying back, both arms flung wide as he sprawled with a thump onto the hard untilled earth.

His death concluded the combined elimination of this ill-fated party of hillmen by Dogras machine-gunners and British riflemen. Of those who attempted to flee through the orchard, Dalip Nath counted only two, possibly three who eluded his Vickers. The remainder lay dead or badly wounded among the fruit trees where over the next half hour they were all dispatched and the bodies gathered to a central point for counting. The first wounded tribesman to be approached had tried to kill the nearest soldier. By setting the stakes of this deadly game even higher, they then paid the price, Holt-Bate giving his men the order to

finish the business off with bullet or bayonet.

Shortly after, seeking an explanation for the sustained use of machine-gun fire, Colonel Gilfillan rode up accompanied by two majors of the garrison headquarters staff.

"You were attacked, Holt-Bate?" queried the colonel from his saddle, after silently counting the line of bodies.

"Well, not exactly, sir," replied Miles, not knowing whether to boast or apologise.

"I want a full written report by this evening," ordered Gilfillan, turning his horse towards Dalip Nath who was leading his section of jubilant machine-gunners in to view the results of their handiwork.

"I thought I had left directions for you to join A Company, Subedar?" quizzed the horseman, stern faced.

"Due to navigational failure on my part Colonel, it appears, as General Napier once said, 'peccavi', I have Sind," answered Nath, quoting a well known message Napier had sent after having, without orders, invaded and annexed for British rule, the Kingdom of Sind.

"Apparently you have, sir" replied the commanding officer forcing back a chuckle, "apparently you have".

For another three days the Afridi skulked around the city looking for weak points that offered the chance of plunder. With the air force putting up search planes the hill men hid in the *nullahs* or with friendly brother Pathans who had long ago settled around the city. At night they would raid, some evading the military guard around the walls and pillaged shops in the city's bazaar. Once a band or clan had acquired all it could carry they would return to the hills. But by the fourth night, empty handed or not, all had elected to go. The arrival of reinforcements from Nowshera, Rawalpindi and other garrisons in any case gave them little choice.

On return to the Tiran a tribal *jirga* was called to attribute blame for the failure of the raid. This was credited categorically to the Faqir of Matun, who had made the promise that he would gain for their young men a wondrous supply of rifles and ammunition and this had not been forthcoming. He was accordingly told by the tribal elders to leave and never again return to the lands of the Afridi.

Embittered, taking his sons and followers, the Faqir left, but one son had died attacking the ammunition camp gate and for that and for his humiliating loss of *izzat*, face, he vowed that one day he would return and that the British would be made to pay.

CHAPTER 13

*Let those love now who never loved before;
Let those who always loved, now love the more.*

Thomas Parnall

With a standpipe and a stopcock key balanced over one shoulder, Joe Penton walked down the steep hill pathway to begin his morning work. At a small box frame set in the ground a queue of native water sellers stood waiting for him to arrive.

"Jai ham!" he called out to all in greeting.

"Jai ham! sahib" they answered, most of them with a cheerful grin.

Placing the stopcock key down Joe fitted the standpipe to a connection inside the box frame then after screwing it tight, took up the stopcock key and turned the water supply on.

"OK, chum, let's fill you up," he said beckoning the first man forward.

This native like the rest had a *mussak*, a goat leather water-skin, and held the open neck under the tap as Penton turned it on. When filled, Joe took from him the quartermaster's voucher slip that each had bought and placed it in his pocket. Every morning for a month he had done this, filling the natives' *mussaks* for them so that they could sell it as drinking water around the English bungalow households. The location was Razar, a hill station west of Darjeeling, just one of many to where the British escaped in the summer, slipping the stifling embrace of Indian's hot weather months. Most of the families had returned to the plains now, for it was October and the monsoon season was nearing an end. By April everyone who could get to the hills had come, remaining until the end of the hot season in July when the monsoon broke. Many rushed back then but quite a few stayed to avoid the torrential rain and damp, unhealthy environment visited upon them by the monsoon.

Joe had spent almost four months away from his battalion now, what with hospitals and his convalescing and he was fed up to his back teeth, he wanted to get back to his mates. The cut to his shoulder received during the attack in the Khyber had healed without worry, although it did leave a frightful scar. It was the broken shoulder bone that gave the most bother, taking ages to knit. Following two months at Labong several miles away, the unit which had him there under their wing left, so he had been transferred here. Now this morning he was booked for an appointment with an army doctor, who, if finding him fit, would be giving him his marching orders back to the 2nd Queen's.

After the last water seller had filled his mussak and gone, balancing it over one hip, Joe shut the water off and disconnected the standpipe.

"God bless me, that's the last time I'll be doing this.

The QM will have to detail someone else for the job tomorrow," thought Joe to himself.

The unit was a signals station permanently based there. In the summer it doubled as a teaching school, taking lessons on Morse code, semaphore and heliograph. Partly to pass the time, over the last month Penton took instruction in all of these. Razar was a typical hill station, everything was either up or down, nothing here was naturally level. The small parade ground, long, narrow, and built by soldier labour over many years, had on one side a high bank wall while the other dropped away sheer for a hundred feet. No roads ran to the bungalows, only footpaths, therefore movement around the station was on foot only, unless there was reason to travel further afield, then it was best to climb up the ridge to the miniature railway that ran along its crown and catch a lift with the train.

On his way back to the stores to return the standpipe and stopcock key, Joe stopped for a moment to watch a line of women tea pickers as they filed down to the tea terraces. Every morning they passed through carrying empty wooden tea boxes with rawhide straps, returning with them filled in the evening.

An hour later Penton, smartly turned out in starched uniform, his boots black and reflecting all light with a sparkle, sat on a mission hospital veranda waiting to be seen by an army doctor. The station, without a hospital of its own, had acquired the limited use of the mission's facilities. Once a fortnight an army doctor would come up from Labong to hold surgery. Twice Joe had failed to convince the medical officer that he was fit to return to the battalion, but today he was confident of passing inspection. Constantly exercising the arm and shoulder he could now put both through any punishing physical manoeuvre without the restriction or pain he had experienced in the past.

Being so far from the signals station Penton, except for his two brief visits, never had reason to spend any length of time at the mission. It was in any case almost entirely staffed by Indian or Anglo-Indian doctors and nurses, which at common soldier level provided scant opportunity of more than a fleeting excuse for contact, which was why he had not before seen the blond nurse at the far end of the veranda who came out of the bungalow to check the comfort of two patients sitting in wicker-work wheelchairs. Exchanging cheerful pleasantries with the two patients, the nurse's glance at Joe became a stare, her smile changing to puzzlement. He continued to watch her until she started to walk towards him, then sitting forward arms on knees he looked at the topee he was holding, allowing it to swing in pendulum fashion. Pretending not to notice, he monitored the nurse's footsteps coming along the veranda, only to be stunned as she addressed him by name.

"Hello, Joe?"

Looking up at a girl whose face shone like an English summer garden, the soldier at first did not recognise who she was, then in a bound he was up.

"Hello, miss" he answered formally.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, "and it's not miss, it's Rose, I'm only a student nurse."

"Oh, right-o then," he replied, before explaining that he was waiting to see the army MO.

"Oh, yes, your wounds," she said.

"You know about them?" asked Joe, surprised.

"Yes! My uncle wrote and told me," she replied.

"The RSM! Told you - about me?" questioned the soldier, even more amazed.

"Oh, in my letters to him I always ask about you," she confessed, "after all, you did save my life".

For several minutes they continued to talk, Joe experiencing feelings of polite respect because of the young woman's uniform and a fascination invoked by her nearness and charm. The uniform, with her waist bound by a trim yellow belt hid none of her figure, shapely with a high firm bosom. Her little nose, small and upturned, was for Joe dead cute, while her eyes of pale blue, almost grey, seemed a storage of merriment.

Along the veranda an Indian nurse, also wearing a yellow belt, approached them.

"Rose," she said in English, "Matron is asking for you".

"Oh! Saroj, thank you", responded the girl before introducing her to Penton. "Saroj, this is a friend from my uncle's regiment, Joe Penton".

"Very pleased to meet you", replied Saroj, inclining her head to give a faint Mona Lisa smile, before turning back down the veranda.

"Saroj and I are in the middle of our training together," explained Rose, after Joe had replied to the girl's greeting.

"Look, I'm buckshee for the rest of the morning – after seeing the saw bones. What

chances of a cuppa char together?" asked Penton, desperate for more of the girl's company.

"I'm working all day I'm afraid. Haven't any free time," refused Rose, she too showing disappointment.

"Rose! Matron was quite insistent you come right away," warned Saroj politely, having walked a few steps away.

"Yes! Right, coming", answered Rose before putting an alternative proposal to the soldier: "We hold a small dance here each week. Its tomorrow night. Can you come?"

"Don't know about that," replied Penton crestfallen, "it all depends on the doc."

"Well I hope you can. I'll look out for you," she called back, skipping with sidesteps after Saroj.

"It was wonderful to see you again, cheerio!"

"Penton," called a Medical Corps corporal, his belt girding a large belly. Standing in a doorway, he pointed over his shoulder. "In here".

"Well, Penton, what's the latest on this shoulder saga of yours?" asked a round-faced captain as he came out from behind his desk to examine the young soldier.

Joe, entering the office to stand to attention, made no effort to salute, instead reached across with his left hand to stroke his right shoulder.

"Grim, sir! Perishin' grim. I must be havin' a relapse. Hurts something fierce."

--o0o--

Delhi in October was a city coming to life. Most Europeans of the business community, military, government departments and shop owners had returned from the hills with the onslaught of the monsoon but now with it slackening, families were also making an appearance in force. From the carriage seat of the *tonga* taking him to the Secretariat, Robert Christie took this all in. Familiar activities centred on familiar surroundings which he remembered from his own first arrival in the city two years earlier. It was a Tuesday morning and responding to a summons he had arrived from Chamblapur the day before, spending the night with his ICS colleagues at his old *chummery*. On reaching the Secretariat Christie made his way through the building to the undersecretary's outer office where, after his presence had been announced, he waited to be shown in.

"Good morning, Christie, sit down," welcomed Hunt, coming out from behind his desk to shake the younger man's hand before indicating he should take a chair.

"Nothing unpleasant occurred on the journey, I trust" enquired Hunt in courteous preliminary to their conversation, returning to sit behind his desk.

"Left in rather a rush, sir, but other than that, no," replied Christie.

"Yes! Well that was unavoidable, I'm afraid," offered the under-secretary, giving the nearest thing to an apology Robert was going to get, before adding: "I take it you are in the dark as to why you have been called?"

"Quite, sir! It's a total mystery to me at the moment," answered the sub-district officer truthfully.

"Yes," replied Hunt, drawing the word out as if pondering Christie's honesty. "Your acquaintance with Sir Anthony Rhymer, how well rooted is this?"

"Sir Anthony Rhymer?" replied Robert, giving himself time to remember the name. "We met at the Maharaja of Jaswara's last February. During a hunting weekend. He's the Regent there".

"And that's your sole connection - a hunting weekend?"

"Yes, sir," confirmed Christie, "We had two or three absorbing conversations. As I remember he had a passionate belief in Britain's continuing involvement in India".

"Well, apparently you have made a greater impression upon him than he has on you" said Hunt.

"He has forwarded a recommendation to the Viceroy that you be considered for posting to the North-West Frontier".

"Sir, I'm amazed!" admitted Robert. "I have no idea what could have prompted him to do that.

However, it is most kind of him".

After saying that he then recollected mentioning to the Regent that he believed the North-West Frontier to be India's Achilles heel and that only the best men in government service should continue to be sent there.

"Would you consider taking up a post there?" asked Hunt, looking straight at Christie.

"Yes, sir. But I'm sure it would take more than one recommendation to convince the Viceroy that I was possibly of the right material." The comment was voiced because of common knowledge throughout the service that anyone picked for the Frontier was of special quality and only selected after first sitting successfully a personal interview with the Viceroy himself.

"Yes, you're right. That's why we forwarded the others on with it," replied Hunt off-handedly, picking up an interview memorandum from his desk.

"Others? What others, sir?" asked the sub-district officer, starting in his chair.

"The First Secretary's for one. Mine for another," answered Hunt in the same matter of fact tone, handing the memorandum across to Christie. "You have an interview with the Viceroy in forty minutes."

--o0o--

Breathing deeply, Joe Penton ran up onto the railway station platform to search with bright, expectant eyes for the girl he was to meet. More a halt than a station, the platform was of plain concrete with no overhead shelter and a ticket office that was a simple hut. Finding only two middle aged European women there before him, with a flutter of disappointment Joe, slowing to a walk, approached the ticket hut to purchase two tickets. Hurrying through his morning detail with the water sellers, Joe had run from the quartermaster's store up onto the ridge top and along it to this rail stop. Last night Rose Rickman was down to work as the night orderly nurse at the mission but even so she and Joe had planned that today they would go up the line for a picnic.

The train they were to catch was a miniature one. Built many years previously, it was intentionally kept small so as not to encroach too heavily upon the limited area of level ground there was to be found on the crown of the ridge.

Hearing a faint whistle down the line Joe's heart skipped a beat. The train was coming and it would be over an hour before it would pass again on its return journey. Walking to the rear of the platform he searched the path leading to the mission for any sign of Rose. With the shrill toot-tooting of the train getting louder he began looking one way then the other as he spun his head first to look down the line then back to the mission pathway. The train was the first to come into sight, chugging towards the platform. Then Rose appeared on the path, straw sunhat in one hand, a picnic basket in the other, struggling to run up the hill.

On seeing her Joe leaped down a set of stone steps and ran along the path to assist her.

"Lummy, Rose, you cut it fine." He was almost laughing as he said it, because of the comic sight of her efforts at haste and his jubilation that she had arrived. Taking the basket in one hand he grasped her now free hand in his other and together they continued to run up to the platform.

The train carriages were so tiny that none were enclosed, only a roof giving shelter. The seats were two long rows placed back to back facing outwards. Into two of these the couple flung themselves just as the toy steam engine began to pull away.

"We have Saroj to thank for this," said Rose, taking the picnic basket to place it on her lap. "Matron kept me behind this morning counting the dhobi linen and she made it up for us."

The ridge they travelled along was not a level run. Like the contours of a dragon's back the rail line had to follow up, over and down a series of dips and rises. Climbing up, the train slowed to a crawl but once over it rushed downwards at such a clip that Rose, squealing at the fun of this, had to hold her hat to stop it from flying off.

Reaching the western rail terminus Rose and Joe left the train. If it had reason, in other words passengers or freight, to make a journey down to the plain, it would begin to do so here, but with no need to descend, the small engine and carriages turned around on a loop of track and began the return trip.

The terminus was at the unfashionable end of the ridge. Here were only a few bungalows and a number of railway labourers' shanty huts. These buildings the couple soon left behind as they followed a rambling trail westwards through the tall pines. For an hour they walked until the hillside began to drop away to the north and west, where, feeling the effects of an all night duty, Rose called for a halt.

It was almost two weeks since they had met on the mission veranda, every day of which Joe contrived to journey across and see the girl. Once he had finished his water detail he would report to the QM and ask permission to go for a run or make enquiries about treatment for his shoulder from the hospital staff, or just ask for time off. Not being on station strength and excused unit duties he was normally allowed what he asked. Once at the mission he would hang about until Rose was free. If she was off duty they would sit on the veranda and talk or walk about the grounds. In the evening they would drink tea in the small mission canteen or dance to a wind-up gramophone and on two occasions attended the mission dance. Each night, Joe, lingering until the very last minute, would have to run, at some risk, along the hilly footpaths in the dark in order to be in time for his bungalow bed check.

Selecting the edge of a sloping glade no larger than a back garden they lay down on the grass to rest. Around them from the pines and rhododendron bushes came chirping and birdsong from blue jays, barbets and finches. With the sweet scent of wild roses and the tepid rays of a warm, late October sun inducing drowsiness in limbs, as if enveloped in an invisible silken sheet, they slipped into a doze.

"Oh! Look, Joe. It's Mount Everest," awakening several minutes later, Rose, opening her eyes was confronted with a sight that beforehand had been obscured by distant grey rain clouds.

Roused, Joe opened his eyes to comment on the pyramid point of dazzling virgin whiteness.

"Picture. Pure picture. One to tell grandchildren about."

Rose, inclining her head, looked at the soldier for a few seconds before asking: "Shall we open the basket now and have something to eat?"

Joe also turned his head to gaze at the eyes, cheeks, lips and long golden hair that had in recent nights contributed to numerous hours of lost sleep.

"What I would really like," replied Joe, twisting himself over so that he now lay beside her fingering a sleeve of her lilac patterned dress, "is a kiss."

"A kiss, Joe?" teased the girl giving him a cheeky smile, "why should I give you a kiss?"

"For saving your life, for one," he retorted, feigning dismay at her asking.

"Oh! So now you're expecting to claim a reward, are you?" laughed the girl, climbing to her feet to step back a pace.

"If you like," replied Joe also rising, "consider it a debt to be paid."

"A kiss?" she said, "a kiss for saving my life? I'll not pay a forfeit for that".

Turning with a giggle she fled to the opposite side of the glade where she threw back his demand, countering it with a challenge: "A kiss as a forfeit I'll not give you, Joe Penton. What I will do is give it as a gift in gratitude. But you will have to come and claim it!"

With Rose extending her arms towards him, highlighted in an avenue of sunlight, Joe was rooted for an instant, overwhelmed by the enchantment of the setting and captivated by the girl's child-like portrayal of wantonness.

Flying across the glade, he heard no further taunts, catching Rose as she skipped backwards laughing at his eagerness to reach her.

"Well, are you going to honour your word?" asked Joe, imprisoning the girl in his arms.

"Of course," answered Rose, beaming a tight lipped smile.

Bowing to incline his head, Joe lowered his lips to hers. She, still lingering on the amusing sight of him rushing toward her returned his kiss with merry, upturned lips. Joe, on the other hand, was satisfying a dream come true. Once tasted there was no letting go. Taking breath through his nose he began moving his lips over her own, stealing quivers of ecstasy with slow lingering raids. Rose, having never seriously embraced and kissed a man before, suddenly found Joe's actions triggering something within her. Although she did not recognise the feeling, it was none-the-less desire.

As her lips began to react to his, her arms, held at first at her sides, came up to wrap themselves around the soldier. For minutes it seemed they clung together, neither making a move to release the other's lips. Finally, it was Joe who broke the kiss, but only to move his lips to her ear.

"Rose, I love you", he whispered, the sound a rush of hissed words.

"Oh Joe! Oh Joe!" she replied. This time it was she seeking his lips but in doing so her legs, trembling with new found craving, gave out, collapsing her backward and taking Joe with her.

Being on the ground did nothing to dampen their yearning for each other's embrace; if anything it fuelled their growing lust. Joe's lips had now left Rose's and were hungrily kissing her cheeks and throat. With eyes closed, her mind awash with desirous thoughts she took one of his hands and placed it on a breast. Joe, beginning to squeeze the soft mound through the fabric of her dress rushed his lips back to hers which then began to utter little moans. With the stimulation of Joe's hand driving her to wanton abandonment the young nurse unbuttoned the front of her dress to lift her bodice and replace Joe's hand on her now naked breast.

For half an hour they lay kissing stroking, each advancing the other's inflamed passion, until Rose, taking Joe's head in her hands to lift his lips from her breast, said: "Joe, make love to me".

Making love to a girl was not new to Penton. In the late summer months for the last two years of his farm life, he and his brother used to steal out at night across to adjacent farms where the London hop pickers could be found after work singing and dancing. When it came to learning about sex there was no better teacher than a fun-loving East-end girl.

"Have you done it before?" he asked in answer.

"No!" replied Rose, shaking her head.

"Then I'll not. I don't want to hurt you," he refused, in a tone heavy with compassion.

"Yes, Joe, please. It must happen sometime and I want it to be by you," her appeal verged on begging.

"I can't, Rose. I love you too much to cause you pain."

"Please, Joe, don't refuse me," she whispered between kisses to his forehead, "ever since you pulled me from the bungalow at Jhendara I've dreamed of making love to you. Don't disappoint me now, not now – please."

Joe raised his head to look into her eyes, there was no sign of carnal lust, just the innocent stare of a virgin lover. Slowly his hand reached below her dress and began stroking her thigh.

Losing all sense of time, consumed in the tender sweet passion of their lovemaking, they returned to the mission after dark, the picnic basket untouched. For an hour they sheltered in the shadows of the veranda kissing between pledges of love before Joe once again had to race away to reach the signal station before lights out.

The next morning however he was back, reporting for his fortnightly appointment with the MO. Afterward he searched the hospital looking for Rose, finding her on a ward beside a patient's bed. With her was an older woman, also in a nursing uniform.

"Yes, young man?" demanded the older woman.

"I've been passed fit," announced Joe to Rose, ignoring the woman.

"So, you're leaving?" she guessed, her eyes filling with helpless regret.

"Yes, today," he replied. For the first time since joining he hated the army.

"Young man, I don't allow unescorted private soldiers on my wards. You will have-- ." began the older woman, not used to being ignored, her voice rising with each word. Totally oblivious to her, Joe cut her off with an impassioned plea to the young nurse:

"Rose, being in the army I can't marry until I'm a corporal. If I ask you to marry me, will you wait?"

The couple, she nineteen, he twenty, were ten feet apart, Rose with paper forms in one hand. Dropping these, her face a portrait of joyful astonishment, she walked two steps towards him, then flew into Penton's arms.

"Yes, Joe. Oh! Yes."

CHAPTER 14

*There was two-an'thirty Sergeants,
There was Corp'rals forty-one,
There was just nine hundred rank an' file,
To swear to a touch o' sun.*

Rudyard Kipling

Leaving his desk, Company Sergeant Major Howard Little walked out onto B Company's office bungalow veranda to give his backside a moment's relief from the hard wooden seat of his office chair. It was late morning on a luxuriously warm, sunny November day and the battalion lines, although busied with routine training and camp administration duties, were a picture of serenity. Along the row of company orderly room bungalows there was no one to be seen, only the commanding officer's stick orderly sitting outside the adjutant's office in the battalion headquarters bungalow. To his front the square was empty except for a squad of junior NCO's being drilled by RSM Rickman in one far corner. Beyond the square was the *maidan*, a dusty plain dotted with a goodly number of trees, among which the companies used to train when practising minor tactics.

Little, a tall man, but with narrow shoulders and a bulging waist which gave him a frame more comic music-hall than dashing, did not add grace to a battalion parade his march was a waddle and his halt a sugar plum fairy skip. Even sitting he was not the best of sights, with dark hair parted in the middle, a moustache of only half size, with a quarter inch gap in the middle, the ends waxed and twirled, making it appear as if two mice were about to mate. Distracted from his idle study of the lines by a buzzing, and looking up at the veranda's eaves, he could see where a colony of hornets had built a skull sized nest in one corner.

"Here, lad," he called to Pani Waters who just happened to be passing the veranda front, "get that down."

Pani, halting to attention looked first at the CSM, then at the nest he was pointing to, then back to the CSM. Not saying a word he looked at his feet, bent, picked up a stone and threw it at the nest, which dislodged, crashing down a foot from Little's toes.

Ten seconds later, side by side, both at a dead run and fast approaching the *maidan*, Little yelled at Waters: "What the hell did you do that for?" "Because you told me to, sir," shouted back Waters, beginning to pull ahead.

"But I didn't mean that bloody quick," retorted Little puffing his words like a blacksmith's bellows.

Joe Penton, the CO's stick orderly, watching this from outside the adjutant's office, nearly fell off his chair from laughing at the two men as they raced to outdistance the hornets. For Penton this was a rare moment of hilarity in the month since he returned from Razar. Almost immediately on arrival in the lines he was placed on CO's orders and charged with the loss of a rifle. Of course everyone knew the circumstances involving this loss but a rifle was a top priority, accountable item and if not recovered had to be paid for. Penton's ill luck was in surviving the Pathan ambush. His new commanding officer sympathised with him but as the other three who had lost rifles were dead and could not be held financially responsible, the regiment had to foot the bill. Penton however was alive and therefore had to stand and face the charge of negligent loss of a firearm. The CO, acting as leniently as was possible, settled the matter by fining Penton the cost of the rifle: four pounds three shillings and sixpence.

Although a major blow to his pocket, almost three week's wages, Joe had rolled with the punch, for he had set himself a goal, of earning the rank of corporal, so he and Rose Rickman could wed. As long as he was in the army the only way for the latter to come about was for

him first to gain the rank of corporal. To attain this he gave up most of his past carefree existence.

Every spare moment was spent in making himself a better soldier, studying manuals on drill and duties of a junior NCO. Even his presence in front of the adjutant's office was a result of this burning drive. Every article of kit he owned was cleaned, starched or polished far beyond the accepted standard and because of this he had no trouble winning the honour of stickman.

Each morning the new guard mounted with seven men, but on their inspection one was adjudged by the duty officer to be the most smartly turned out and was then awarded stickman, meaning that he did not have to go on guard, becoming instead the CO's runner for the day and being dismissed at tea time.

--oOo--

For the British soldier in India in the 1920's the one ever present factor dominating his life was *connor*, food. That served at meal times in the cookhouse was as nourishing as could be expected but there was never enough. For the Queen's Light Infantry it was doubly worse, for they did not qualify for county subsistence. There was in operation at the time a system whereby the parent county of a regiment would contribute nine pence a day per man towards his rationing. The Queen's, not having a parent county, received none, hence the constant foraging after *buckshee connor*.

Hunger is a great stimulant for scheming minds, a fact shown by private Ken Hall one evening before pay day. He, Jock Cressey, Pani Waters and Bert Collins were sitting in the platoon bungalow, talking whilst occupied with little chores.

"Who's on tonight?" enquired Bert Collins of Sid Firth, who had just returned from the dry canteen after buying a pack of ten Park Drive cigarettes.

"New bloke," answered Sid, sitting on his cot. "How new?" asked Pani, pausing in darning a sock.

It was always of interest to know who was serving in the canteen; some of the native staff filled tea mugs fuller than others.

"Dead new. Never seen 'im before," replied Firth, opening his cigarettes.

Hall, in the act of unstitching his mattress biscuits, unravelling the coconut fibre that had a tendency to pack down like clay, thought for a minute then asked of Cressey:

"Jock, lad! You still got that suit you had made?"

"Ye. In ma fit'box" he replied.

"Good!" said Hall pushing the coconut fibre back into the biscuit cover. "Dig it out. I'm takin' you all to dinner."

A short time later Hall strolled into the dry canteen wearing a white suit, with white shoes and carrying a folded umbrella, used as a walking stick. Promenading through the room, giving a fixed casual smile to everyone, he approached the service counter. Before reaching this however, he first passed a table occupied by Cressey, Waters and Collins.

"Good evening, sir," echoed the three, springing up to attention.

"Ah, my good fellows," replied Hall. "This is a meet of fair chance".

There followed a short conversation between Hall and the three in which Hall was addressed as 'sir' no less than eighteen times.

Turning to the counter, Hall, raising his umbrella, hailed the canteen-*wallah* behind it.

"Ah, proprietor. A plate of your best fare".

The young Indian, who had watched the goings on with interest, seemed not to understand.

"Char Sahib?" he asked, bewildered by Hall's phraseology.

"No! No! No! My good man. Not before the main course," corrected Hall, spreading his palms to approach the counter.

"Perhaps if I could see the menu?"

"Menu, sahib," replied the native looking puzzled before pointing uncertainly at a painted board behind him.

"Oh! On the wall. How provincial," observed Hall with a condescending smile, as if he had not seen such an arrangement since last holidaying through rural Spain.

Proceeding to order the entire contents of the menu board, he concluded by turning about to ask of the other three: "My friends, would you care to share something with me?"

"We'll 'av' whatev'r you're 'avin' sur," answered Cressey almost bowing.

"Splendid," replied Hall, turning about to slap the counter. "Make that three more of the same again, and bring it across to my friends' table. And bring the bill with you. I don't carry money about me; I'll send my servant across in the morning."

The Indian's expression for the first time changed from wonderment to that of faint suspicion. Noting this, Hall's right hand shot across the counter.

"I'm terribly sorry, dear chap. I haven't introduced myself. Preston-Hall!" he informed the canteen-*wallah* borrowing the name of his birthplace, "Mister Kenneth Preston Hall. And you, sir, are?"

"Kalu Ram, sahib," replied the contractor's employee nervously, taking Hall's hand in return.

"Delighted, Kalu Ram, delighted!" replied Hall warmly. As they finished off a second helping of the menu those around the four, who had sat watching the enactment of a cracking good joke, suddenly began to stand and leave. Sergeant Radley, the battalion orderly sergeant had entered the room on his inspection rounds.

Seeing Hall sitting in unfamiliar white garb, he unhurriedly approached the table.

"And who are we tonight, Hall? The man from the bleedin' Maypole?" he asked, hands behind his back, rocking forward, having made reference to a well known British dairy firm.

"Not at all, Sergeant," he replied, standing up to hook his umbrella handle over a forearm before turning to leave. "But even here in the lines we are entitled to a degree of gentlemanly dignity."

--o0o--

Normally a regiment's routine for the year revolved in a repetitive cycle but there did occur at the latter end of the winter months a rare event which allowed the 2nd Queen's Light Infantry an unscheduled excursion.

With all spare time on a soldier's hands spent on sport it was only natural for him to become keenly interested in the one he played most, whether hockey, boxing, cricket or whatever. The favourite sport played by the troops was of course football, with most supporting their home town league team back in Blighty. In India there was no official football league as such, but each year there was a trophy competed for, the All Indian Cup. Those who could enter for it were all army regiments, both British and Indian and any civilian organisation that had a registered football club. Some of these civilian clubs were quite formidable and as a rule one or another of them always won this cup. Surprisingly though, this year two army regimental teams were to meet in the final: the 2nd QLI being one of them.

The battalion, without much fanfare, had steadily worked its way through the competition beating team after team in this knockout contest. The battalion was cheered each time they won but all knew that sooner or later they would meet one of the powerful civilian teams and

that the Queen's run would be brought to an end. In the quarter final they drew the Bengal Railway team, away, and everyone reckoned that that would be that, but they returned the winners, only though to draw Sporting Howard in the semi-final, at home. This surely had to be the end of the road, everyone assumed, but nevertheless, the whole garrison turned out to support them - and they won.

The commanding officer was naturally ecstatic and the garrison commander so impressed that he made arrangements for the whole battalion to travel to Calcutta by rail to support the team in the final.

They were accommodated in a tented camp on the *maidan* outside the walls of Fort William. This *maidan* was also the venue on which the final was played each year, with stands erected to provide seating for ten thousand spectators. The Queen's opponents, astonishingly, were a rifle regiment stationed in Fort William itself. Now Rifle regiments and Light Infantry were in constant rivalry. Both had the reputation for sharp-shooting and rapidness on the march and upon their meeting feathers tended to fly. In Calcutta there was a brothel district, Lanes, far too pricy for soldiers, although it did have on its fringes bars that sold beer at an affordable price. Into one of these two days before the match strolled Ben Tysall and Joe Penton, looking for cool refreshment. The bar room was over half filled, mostly with riflemen. Choosing to stand by the counter, after taking a deep draught of beer from his glass, Ben addressed a comment to a nearby table of riflemen.

"Drowning our sorrows early are we?"

"Sorrows?" asked the nearest as if taking an interest in neither question nor answer.

"Mmm," answered Tysall, "Over losing the match."

"Oh God, no," moaned Joe to himself, "here we go again".

Ben was about to stir up a fight, Penton had been through it enough times to read the approach: Twice in Harwich, once in Aldershot and twice again at Meerut.

"You think that if you like mate, but you'll find you're in for a rare old twist," scoffed another at the table.

"Well you might do your best," countered Tysall, "but we've seen the soft lot you beat to get here. We ain't been doing any church knee-drill from worry at the prospect of meetin' your bunch."

"You watch," spoke up another at the table, "come day after tomorrow your eleven dandies will find themselves spike bozzled."

"Aye!" piped up another, "kicked into next world for rest of natural".

"Brave lads," complimented Tysall with tongue in cheek, "but you're in for a rum go and no mistake".

"From froggy light infantry?" jeered the nearest man in reference to the French fleur-de-lis on the Queen's badge. "The froggy that could put the frights in me ain't been born."

"Must admit I'm standing puzzled on that one," replied Ben, finishing his glass to give an exaggerated stare at the trouser dress the rifleman wore. One unique to the Rifles, in place of the standard issue khaki shorts, they had instead pantaloons that closed tight just below the knees. "But my suspicions are sproutin' knobs that that's why you wear them bloomer things of yours. If you did shit yourselves no one would notice."

The nearest man was up and at Ben in a flash but he was ready, getting his punch in first. The second to arrive, Penton intercepted with a straight right to the side of his jaw, then it was bedlam. Tables went over; fists were flying and bodies crashing every which way. Pinned against the bar Tysall and Penton were trading punches with six or seven, then out of the melee a gap appeared, made for them by Ginger Langdon and Danny Short.

On a narrow front the four began a slow fighting withdrawal to the door. Joined by three others from C Company who attached themselves as they back pedalled for the entrance, the party was still outnumbered by four to one. Then at the door another six men from their own

5 Platoon arrived. This was a relief but they were still pushed back until everyone was in the street punching, kicking and biting. Minute by minute the fight grew in dimensions as more and more members of the two battalions arrived to join in.

It was no longer a fight now; this had become a street battle spilling into alleys, shops and side streets. Then whistles were heard as red caps began to arrive, which put an end to the battle. A fight was a fight, but time in the clink or a spell on jankers, that was something else. Like sheep before a wolf the men began to scatter, snatching up fallen topees that lay strewn everywhere in the street. If lucky it was one of the right regiment, if luckier still it could be their own.

The next day Joe Penton, in company with Sid Firth, Jeff Gleeson and Noshier Slyfield, decided to spend the morning as tourists, climbing up onto the ramparts of Fort William. Built two centuries earlier when Calcutta was one of Britain's flourishing centres of power in India, the walls were vast, and thickly constructed but nowadays, in places along its crown, fallen into disrepair. Working their way around these it took the party over an hour to walk the entire circumference of the fort. Along the way Sid Firth found an old army order sheet dated 1858, towards the end of the mutiny, that had been pushed into a niche and which informed all troops that indiscriminate shooting of natives from the walls would cease forthwith.

Returning to the tent lines they found the battalion confined to camp, as were the Rifles. Further clashes between the two units were reported, a continuance of the previous day's fighting but this time turning nasty, belt buckles had been used, resulting in a number of bloody wounds to heads and faces.

The next day the cup final ended in the worst possible way. The Queen's scored a goal in the first half and held it for the rest of the match. Then in injury time, the Rifles were awarded a penalty and from it they scored, tying the match one-all which was how it finished, a draw. This meant that a replay had to take place, but the GOC overruled this on the grounds that he was not prepared to tolerate any longer the shaming spectacle of British soldiers battling each other in front of the native population of Calcutta. They were the cornerstone of Pax Britannica and such behaviour was unacceptable.

This however would have left an ugly situation unresolved; there was bad blood between the two regiments that had to be purged. The two commanding officers, asking for an interview with the GOC, put a proposal forward that would decide the contest and dispel the hatred.

The match was replayed behind closed doors on a football pitch inside the walls of Fort William. The only spectators allowed to watch were the members of the two battalions. Under orders that the men were to mix, the pitch was surrounded by alternate platoons of Rifle then Queen's and so on. A powder keg of an idea, thought everyone, but only until the teams ran onto the field.

Mystified, the spectators' silence was deafening. The two teams were all officers of the battalions and not one a football player.

With the two CO's in goal the game kicked off accompanied by not a whisper of encouragement from the fans, most too stunned by the presence on the pitch of these officers to utter a word. This changed dramatically with the second kick of the ball. Football was the working man's sport, beloved and revered by Britain's less educated, from which the other ranks of the army were mainly drawn, whereas the officers, public school bred, were players of hockey, cricket and rugby. When Miles Holt-Bate whacked the ball for all it was worth in the direction of the Rifles' goal it sailed high into the air. Underneath a Rifles major waited with outstretched arms, confused as to what game he was playing. He caught the ball then kicked it out of touch for the line out.

With screams of laughter from the spectators echoing around the walls of the fort this set

the tone of the game. Never before had the men seen their officers, intentionally or unintentionally, playing the clown but today they were in for a real treat. There was no tactical play or marking of opponents, just a gaggle of men rushing after the ball. Officers were miss-kicking and falling on their faces all over the place. The Rifles' CO, bending to field the ball with his hands was stopped in mid reach by an overly-developed waistline, letting the ball roll between his legs and into the net. At the other end the Queen's QM, Russell McQuaid, with the ball kicked behind him stuck out his backside to block it, only to deflect it into his own goal. By this time the spectators, choking with hysterical laughter, were falling into each other's arms.

And so it continued, becoming even more comical as tiredness set in and legs gave out. Finally, with 2nd Lieutenant Andrew Fleming of the Queen's striking the ball from fully thirty yards out and tying the score at sixteen all, the Indian referee blew time. It was five minutes too soon but that didn't matter. The aim had been to remove the bad feeling that had overtaken a football cup final that was held in the same high esteem in India as the FA Cup was in England.

CHAPTER 15

*Open the door of thy heart,
And open thy chamber door,
And my kisses shall teach thy lips.
The love that shall fade no more.*

Baynard Taylor

Awakening, Ben Tysall, feeling under his pillow for his pocket watch, checked the time. It was half an hour before reveille and time for him to get up. After washing and shaving he walked through the lines to the battalion stables. Waiting for him with two horses, one saddled, was Lieutenant Holt Bate's *syce*.

"Charbosh! Ashok," Tysall complimented the *syce* before, mounting the saddled horse and leading the second, he rode out of the lines.

The horses belonged to Holt-Bate. The one he rode was an Australian waler, used by Miles when on parade or for getting about on field exercises, the other was smaller, an Arabian pony he used for playing occasional polo matches. It was summer and the platoon commander was taking six months leave back in England. During his absence he was paying Ben ten rupees a week to exercise his horses each morning and evening.

Keeping the horses at a walk Ben passed around the edge of the cantonment, then in a half circle through a broad strip of cultivation back out onto the *maidan* where he would give his two charges a good run. From his time working in Australia, Ben had learned a lot about horses and enjoyed handling them. The money he was being paid for this was easily earned; he would have done the job for nothing.

Turning onto a farm cart track Ben began looking ahead to where a metalled road crossed. There, partially concealed by the trunks of trees bordering the roadside he could see a girl standing with a bicycle. Every morning she would be waiting for him to pass, never saying anything, just watching the horses. Only this morning she grew bolder, reaching out to stroke the polo pony's flank. Ben, seeing her do this, reined his horse to a halt.

"You like horses?" he asked.

"Oh yes," she replied, "I think they are sweet."

"Well, go on. Give him a good pat, then, he likes that," offered Ben after first laughing at her answer.

The girl was Eurasian, slim, almost petite in build and very pretty. Wearing a topee and a light calf length dress she spoke English with only a hint of the *chee-chee* accent so common among Anglo-Indians and English speaking Indians.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Dancer".

"Dancer. Dancer. Lovely Dancer" cooed the girl, running her hand along his shoulder.

"Do you ride?" asked Ben, watching the girl enjoying stroking the horse's coat.

"Oh, no! I've never been on a horse," she replied, as if apologising.

"Fancy riding him?" asked the soldier.

"Oh! Yes, please." The girl's face lit up at the prospect.

"Right! Tomorrow morning then, I'll bring him out all saddled up and ready to mount," confirmed Tysall.

"Wonderful. That's wonderful" thanked the girl, her smile a joy to brighten any morning.

"But don't come in that get-up. You want trousers or riding pants," shouted Ben over his shoulder as he walked the horses off.

Her name was Leela Mullan, the daughter of an Indian mother and an Irish railway official father. She lived with her family in the railway settlement adjoining the cantonment but had a job working in one of the railway administration offices, to which she cycled each morning.

All through May and into June they would meet on the track junction and ride together out onto the *maidan*, then back again for Leela to collect her bicycle. After the first week the girl was able to on her own, climb into and out of the saddle, something Ben regretted, for her waist was narrow and the flesh beneath her riding shirt soft. Now Tysall was no longer sauntering to the stables. Rushing through his shaving, he would hurry across to the horses, tongue lashing the *syce* if they were not ready.

As the girl became more experienced and confident with the horse she pressed Ben to allow her to be more adventurous. This, one morning led to over-confidence on her part when she coaxed Ben into letting her put Dancer into a canter. Before he knew it this had increased to a gallop and he was having to race after her.

"Leela! Leela! Pull him back," shouted Ben spurring his horse on so as to catch her up.

"No! No!" shouted the girl looking back, captivated by the sheer exhilaration of Dancer's power and speed.

The *maidan* around them was mainly a flat plain but on it a number of trees grew. Leela and her mount were at that moment passing near a broad banyan tree with roots growing down from its limbs. Dancer, seeing a deep pot hole to his front, swerved under the tree's outer boughs, one of the smaller branches striking the girl, causing her to fall from the horse.

Ben came charging up and flew from his mount to the girl's side.

"Leela! Leela! Are you all right?" he cried, dropping to his knees to cradle her head in one arm.

"Yes! Yes, Ben I think so," she replied weakly, her eyes fluttering slowly.

Relieved but angry, Ben lost his temper. "For gawd's sake, Leela, why the bleedin' hell didn't you rein in when I shouted?"

"I'm sorry, Ben. I should have done so. You have every right to be furious with me."

With her topee gone the girl's long dark hair lay bunched over his arm, her eyes like a young maiden's awakening, lips ever so pale in contrast to the smooth but darker surface of her face. Tysall, as if under a spell removed his topee to lower his head, placing his own lips to hers. For half a minute he kissed her before drawing back.

"I'd better get you in the shade," he said, becoming embarrassed by his own boldness, only fleetingly glancing into her eyes.

Leela, not saying a word, only stared.

With effortless ease he picked the almost elfin framed girl up in his arms and carried her under the banyan tree to rest her against one of the limb roots growing downward from a thicker bough.

"Alright?" he asked.

"Ben, why did you kiss me?" she asked in return. Her eyes from the moment of the kiss had not left his.

"Well, I..., You're so..." For the first time in his memory Tysall was lost for words. Then as Leela reached out to take his face in her hands, all attempts at speech were swept away.

Slowly, with a look of angelic yearning, she leaned forward, to place her own lips upon his.

--o0o--

Keeping his body tight to the ground, Hugh Durand's heart leaped as a figure walked into view at one end of the broad valley bottom he was overlooking. A tribesman with a rifle slung over his shoulder, the man moved in an alert manner, but in the open away from any cover offered by boulders or ground. Moments later the reason for this came into sight behind him, the leaders of a flock of sheep. Silently cursing, Durand relaxed, this man was not the man or a member of the gang he was waiting to capture.

Lying in ambush on a hillside deep in tribal territory, Hugh was no longer an officer in the 13th Frontier Force Rifles, the men he commanded scattered in cover around him were members of the South Waziristan Scouts. Not army and not police, they were none-the-less the backbone of law and order along their sector of the Border.

The reason he had cursed was because now almost certainly their, patience in laying in ambush would come to naught. They were given an unconfirmed intelligence report that Abdur Sarwar, an outlaw who sheltered in Mahsud lands, was coming this way with a party of his henchmen to raid across the Administrative Border into British India. Sarwar was a wanted man up and down the Border, a proclaimed offender with a price on his head. He had escaped arrest because he lived in *hamsaya*, as a fugitive who dwelled in the protective shade of a powerful benefactor, in this case, Wahid Anim, the chief of the formidable Garuzi Khel Clan of the Mahsuds.

Durand, looking up to observe the advancing herdsman could see others now, nine of them with a flock of perhaps two hundred sheep. They were making for a spring fed pool of water just below him, in the centre of his ambush. As he watched them, the front man unslung his rifle and held it ready for use. Thinking he or his men had been seen, Hugh looked across to the jemadar whose platoon he was leading, to find him pointing in the opposite direction. Coming into the valley from the other end was another, larger flock of sheep, both herders evidently intent on watering their animals at the spring.

The first herdsman Durand spotted coming into the valley were Mahsuds, the others, at least twenty, were Wazirs. Both tribes, whose lands lay in the territory between the Afghan Border and British India, had for hundreds of years been used to answering to no one for their actions and, as far as they were concerned, still did not. By those who lived around them or in some way had dealings with them, these tribes were known variously as: treacherous; lawless; untrustworthy and dishonourable, all of which was true for they were the most un-neighbourly of neighbours one could be saddled with. The only redeeming virtue they had was their hatred, which turned inwards against their own with the same burning ferocity as they directed outwards.

The two herds were closing on the water now, neither seeming to give way to the other. With the Mahsuds sure to reach the spring first, the leading Wazir raised his rifle and shot dead the front Mahsud. For the next quarter of an hour Durand and the Scouts had a ringside seat at a spirited gunfight between the two parties of herdsman, until the weaker, the Mahsuds, carrying off their dead, wounded and sheep, fled the field. There then followed for them another two hours wait in the hot afternoon sun, while the victors watered their sheep, ate lunch and re-told the battle to each other accompanied by ripples of triumphant laughter.

As their wait began Hugh's eyes caught sight of a flight of geese high in the sky on their way southwards; a sure sign that the summer rains were near and that soon the hot weather would be over. After recovering from the wounds he had received almost a year earlier, Hugh had applied to join the scouts. This was not because he was dissatisfied with his old regiment; the reason was a basic one of finances. Unlike Miles Holt-Bate, he did not enjoy a private income and the pay of a lieutenant, he had found, was not covering his expenses, not that they were large or that he over-indulged himself. The bills incurred were normal mess and duty costs but even they were not being met by what the King paid him and very soon, to

avoid debt, he would have to place himself in the hands of a *banya*, an Indian money lender. To escape this he applied for the Scouts, which meant an increase of pay, with a mess which was less formal, requiring fewer subsidies from its members.

The South Waziristan Scouts were a formation established after the Third Afghanistan War of 1919 when their predecessors, the South Waziristan Militia mutinied or ran off. The founder, Major Guy Russell, began in 1922 by first enlisting a redundant force of the Mohmad Militia, then built on this by recruiting volunteer tribesmen from the border tribes. Noticeably, none came forward from the Wazir or Mahsud tribes.

Durand joined the Scouts just after the New Year, shortly after the arrival of the Scouts' new commandant, Major S.P. Williams, a tall, sinewy framed man whom Hugh met on his joining interview.

"Glad to have you join us," were Williams' opening words to Hugh. "We need men like you up here. The Border's been a shambles for the last half dozen years. Best of the old Border hands went off in 'fourteen and 'eighteen and never came back. Buried, West Africa, Mesopotamia, Palestine, damn good men, hell of a loss to us here."

Once the Wazir herders had watered their stock and rested they returned the way they had come. Remaining hidden until the flock was out of sight, Durand signalled his Scouts to their feet. There may arise an occasion to lay an ambush here in the future, so it was best not to advertise their presence. Here on the Frontier when the Scouts were out on patrol, whether a platoon or company it was called a *gasht* and when on the move referred to as *gashting*. This was the Scouts' most effective tactic, *gashting*, because of their speed of march. At a pace that was almost a run they would move across the broken border country with such swiftness, no time was given to an adversary for ambushes to be prepared, surprise on approaching an objective was almost always theirs, and if pursued when withdrawing, the pace would shake off all but the fittest of tribesmen. Which was what Durand and his Scouts were now doing, *gashting* for home, the safety of the newly built Scout fort at Sararogha, ten miles away on the Jandola Razmak road.

--oOo--

"Not a'gin! I'm sick ta deeth o' these bloody beasties!" Jock Cressey was reacting to once again having to stop so that one of the battalion baggage animals could have its load re-adjusted.

The battalion was on summer manoeuvres fifty miles northeast of Ravlapore and had been in the field for the past fortnight. Also taking part were troops from other garrisons in the UP, United Provinces, Lucknow, Bareilly and Cawnpore. These manoeuvres were held each year at this time, scheduled to finish just prior to the arrival of the monsoon. This year, disastrously, there was a seasonal hiccup. The monsoon arrived three weeks early and had poured from the skies for the last eight days.

Holding up his hand Lance-Corporal Joe Penton signalled those behind to halt. Just ahead of him, Jock Cressey was informing the native camel driver just what he thought of his ability to secure greatcoats and blankets to animals and how quickly he would find himself fuelling a funeral *pyre* if it happened again. The native driver, seeming not to notice, was making his camel kneel down.

Joe, with his rifle slung, as he waited looked around at the saturated countryside then up at the heavens.. There was no hint of a pause in the rain. This stop was a common occurrence and one of the reasons why the detail of baggage escort was detested. Each day a platoon was assigned the job of accompanying the camels who always moved slowly and whose

loads were forever working loose. This meant that they only made the evening camp well after everyone else was settled and the evening meal long gone cold.

Penton had hoped that with his recent promotion the manoeuvres would give him the opportunity to exercise some of the drills and skills he had learned on his junior NCO's cadre, but once the rains broke those hopes went mostly out the window. Constantly wet, with no change of clothing, any enthusiasm for soldiering and field training soon evaporated at all levels. Camp for that night was a caravan way station under leaking straw roofs, being eaten alive by ticks. After breakfast the battalion remained stationary as the CO had been called away. On returning the bugler sounded up for all officers, who were subsequently told to tell their men that the GOC had cancelled the manoeuvres and that the troops were to begin marching back to their stations.

While this was in progress Sergeant-Major Little came around to detail a lance-corporal from each platoon to take some volunteers to the cook wagon and collect a hot meal. Joe Penton, beating back the whole of 6 Platoon, took four men with him, only to find that what awaited them was a piece of dry bread and a spring onion per man.

"That bleeder, Little. He's a right old skate and no error. Bloke with a sense of humour like his should be in the bughouse," commented Noshier Slyfield, picking up the onions.

That day they covered nineteen miles before reaching their night's halt, the sky granite grey and the rain tipping down, and leaving behind on the march their baggage and the contractor's *char-wallahs*. In the first week these *char-wallahs*, with their ox-cart mobile canteen, provided an excellent service with tea, boiled eggs and something like a thick bread-pudding, but with the onslaught of the monsoon even their ability and enterprise was curbed. On looking around there was nowhere to be seen that could be called a camp ground. The road they stood on was raised and free of flooding but off it, the fields were waist deep in water.

The commanding officer, after consulting with the brigadier, who was marching with the rest of the brigade, behind, called the men around him. From the saddle of his horse he put to the battalion two courses of action: "Men! I have spoken with the Brigadier and he has granted, if we wish it, permission to march on through the night. Now remembering. I have a horse to ride; and it's another twenty-six miles to Ravlapore. What do you want to do? Spend the night here, or march on through the night?"

Without hesitation, over nine hundred voices bellowed the reply: "March on! March on!"

After arriving in their lines the next morning, weary and saturated, with the rain showing no sign of letting up, and with the officers fallen out, the company was waiting to be dismissed by Little.

"Right!" the CSM was concluding, "when I give you dismiss get away, strip off, towel yourselves down, then hurry along to the cookhouse. I've ordered up a hot meal for you."

"What? Another bloody spring onion?" came a voice from the ranks.

"Sergeant Radley! Find that man and place him under close arrest," ordered Little, hotly.

It was to gain for Noshier Slyfield seven days restricted privileges but the men entered their bungalows weak with laughter.

--oOo--

Turning into the shaded lane that led up to the Sadeka Mission, Hugh Durand eased his foot off the throttle pedal. He welcomed this blotting out of the sun's rays if only for a few moments. It was a long hot journey from Kandao to Sadeka in an open car and now he slowed to savour the sun's brief screening. Parking his automobile he climbed out to walk towards Emma Schofield's bungalow gate, first side-stepping just a few of the crowd of children who had run up at the unexpected arrival of a motor vehicle.

"Hugh!" called the doctor. Dressed in white, she welcomed him with a wave from the clinic doorway. "Good of you to call. Make yourself comfortable on the veranda. I'll be right across."

"I'll just see about a cup of tea," she said, patting his arm as she gained the veranda a few minutes later to continue through into the bungalow.

"Now then what brings you here this time?" she asked on returning, taking a chair beside him.

"When did you last hear from Robert Christie?" asked Hugh, whose facial expression appeared to betray an ill kept secret.

"Oh, some months ago," replied the doctor, rocking her head back to think for an instant.

"This came yesterday; I believe you'll find it of interest." Durand held out to her an opened letter.

"From Robert! Hmm---" commented Emma to herself glancing at the back of the envelope before taking out the letter to read, pausing to thank her house servant as he placed a tea tray on a table between them.

"Well, upon my soul!" exclaimed the woman. "District Officer. He's coming here as the District Officer!"

"Spot of good news, eh?" declared Durand, taking back the letter.

"Yes, indeed. I'm pleased for him. He'll make a fine DO," replied Emma.

"Oh, yes," agreed Hugh with added caution. "He will be a first class DO, as long as he can keep the Border at arm's distance."

"And how is the Border, Hugh? Are you keeping it at arm's length?" asked Emma pouring tea for them both.

The officer looked at the woman and could not stop himself from grinning. This was the fourth visit Durand had made to the mission since joining the Scouts and each time they found themselves defending opposite points of view. Emma arguing that the Border tribesmen, despite his marauding, murderous ways, did have redeeming qualities, while Hugh held the theory that the only good Pathan not in government service was a dead one.

"You know, I was out on gasht the other day," in answer to her question Durand began to relate a story, "found myself in conversation with a young Afridi from the Tirah, just joined after finishing his training. Couldn't resist telling me it was he who shot me in the mouth at Peshawar last year".

Emma looked at the man sipping his tea, the wound he spoke of now a wide ugly scar running from one corner of his mouth across the cheek. "You're lying, Lieutenant."

"Yes, I am," admitted Hugh, beginning to chuckle.

"Couldn't help myself. Terribly rotten of me. Had to try to win an argument with you some-how."

"Seriously though, Hugh, how is it?" asked Emma sincerely.

"Well, we're at full steam building forts and posts like beavers. We've just completed a new one at Kandao north of Sararogha, on the Razmak road and there's talk of re-occupying the old fort at Chashmal. We put gashts into tribal land at least twice a week and search the villages where we can, but its very much a case of butcher and bolt. The really nasty badmash chaps we would dearly like to apprehend, we hardly get a whisper of.

"Hugh, I've been on this Frontier for over thirty years," announced the doctor philosophically, picking up the teapot. "And the one thing I have learned is that nothing really changes. More tea?"

--oOo--

Leaving the platoon bungalow just as the duty bugler was sounding up the 1400 hours defaulters' call, Ben Tysall headed in a direction that would take him out of the lines. Passing the officers' mess, the battalion band was just completing its last tune. It was Sunday and after church parade they always played for an hour or so on the lawn, entertaining the officers and their ladies. Skirting the stables he quickened his pace, perhaps Leela would be early. Rounding a corner of the track he could see ahead on the junction, just coming into view between the bordering trees, the figure of a girl. Breaking into a relaxed run, Leela's innocent, angelic smile reached out to take hold of him long before they touched.

"Hello, Ben," her voice was a song as her hand took his.

"Leela!" uttered the corporal just before their lips met. It was late October now and the couple had been riding together and meeting for the last six months. The monsoon had hindered them for much of July and August, cancelling their rides and restricting their evening walks. Now, with Mister Holt-Bate returned from England the riding was lost altogether to them. But their evenings now that the cool autumn weather was with them more than compensated for their lost days.

On the two days a week the army relaxed its hold, Thursday and Sunday, the two would go for walks together in and around the Indian village to the west of the cantonment. This became their village. The holy man who sat under the peepul tree reading scriptures was their holy man. The sad-eyed bullock walking in a circle powering a farmer's Persian water-wheel was their bullock. As was the elephant who passed on the roadway with bells tingling from its harness.

It was through this village that, after being three years in the country, Ben was introduced to India. Walking hand in hand, Leela with her soft voice, would point at a person or object and explain who it was or what the object was. The fudge-like bars in the bazaar were unrefined sugar called *gur*. The young boy on the horse so lavishly dressed, preceded by drummers and flute players was a bridegroom on the way to his wedding. The singsong murmur heard when passing a house was Muslim Sanskrit hymn from the Koran.

In Leela's company Ben also became aware of sights and sounds of the countryside which as a soldier, he had not noticed before: the skill of the village potter as he shaped his wares on a stone wheel spun with a stick; the smell of moist earth and ferns; smoke in the evening as it hung above the village; the call of a cuckoo at the end of a rain, as vapour rose from the earth, hovering like miniature banks of cloud only inches off the ground. In Leela's presence everything had beauty and meaning. Even the odour of the villagers' lighting, burning oil wicks floating in saucers, to him no longer smelled; with Leela's hand in his, it became another evening fragrance.

This afternoon it was not their village they were going to. The direction they walked was away from it towards the railway settlement. Repeatedly Leela had asked him to come and meet her family but each time he refused, not wanting to give up a moment alone with her. But this afternoon he was at last to see them and not because of another request from the girl. At the entrance gate there was a plaque set in the wall which read '*Dali-Bag*'.

"It means Dolly's Garden. My father named the bungalow after my mother," explained Leela.

The bungalow was large, with a wide drive and spacious front garden. After the rains the grass was lush and green with the dust of the hot season washed away. At the front of the garden near the wall was a row of *palmyra* palms with green parrots fluttering among the palm branches. Along the drive smaller guava trees grew which, Leela told him, produced pear shaped fruit. On the corners of the veranda, protected with wire mosquito netting, grew climbing plants.

In the hall Leela introduced her mother, a woman with a ready smile, wearing an apple

green *sari*, and with lightly greying hair. She spoke excellent English but with a pronounced Indian accent. On her way to pick flowers from the front garden, she told Leela to take Ben through to the back veranda to meet her father. Rather than lead him straight through, Leela like a child, took him by the hand and began pulling him from room to room. After meeting an older brother and younger sister along the way they paused briefly at a room central to the bungalow.

"This is my mother's puja room," she told him. "It fills the house with a lasting aroma."

The interior of the room was taken up with incense bowls and plants and small shrubs: oleander; rose; jasmine and hortensia. This was the source of the scent that had perfumed the air, filling Tysall's lungs from the moment he had entered the bungalow.

Her father, a slimly built man with reddish blond hair and a wrinkled brow from too much Indian sun, folded a copy of the Calcutta Times as he stood to greet Ben. For some time the three talked how nice the house was, how long Ben had served in the army, the weather. Then Leela left to help her mother in the garden, giving Ben the opportunity of revealing the reason of his request to visit.

"Mister Mullan! I'm sorry we only just met this minute. Sorry because what I'm about to ask is something that shouldn't be comin' from a complete stranger."

Mullan took up a pipe from a table beside him but held it in one hand, not moving to fill it or put it in his mouth.

"Leela and I have been seeing each other for some time now. Nothing improper mind, just enjoying being with each other. The thing is--- well--- I want to see a lot more of her---" Tysall clasping his hands together came forward in his chair as he faltered his words. "I'm asking please, sir, for your permission to marry Leela".

"Ben!" began Mullan lifting off the lid of a small carved bowl to press tobacco into his pipe. "I was afraid that's what you were here for askin'. I'll not be pampering you. You're the last person on this earth I would have picked for Leela".

Mullan interrupted himself to replace the lid of the tobacco bowl. Then looking straight at Tysall he continued.

"You have come to this house to ask me, for my daughter to go and follow the drum."

"I want your permission to marry her, yes." Ben though perhaps Mullan was about to lose his temper. But his next words were soft.

"Do you love the lass?"

Ben, unable to restrain himself, leaped from his chair to walk away a few steps. "Oh God, yes. I can't think of anything but her nowadays."

"What age are you, Ben?" asked Mullan striking a match to light his pipe.

"Twenty-three" replied the corporal, quickly adding, "But the army thinks I am twenty-six."

"So, if marrying you'll be qualifying for the seven shillings marriage allowance," pointed out the Irishman.

"Haven't thought on that," replied Tysall. Which was true, his mind being too filled with romantic dreaming to focus on the expense associated with marriage in barracks.

"And have you thought at all about what sort of life you are letting my daughter in for?" Mullan was puffing his pipe now, blowing the smoke into the air above. "Here with us in the railway community she is Leela Mullan the Anglo-Indian girl. With you in the lines and around the cantonment she becomes a blackie-whites', twelve annas to a rupee, a kutchra butcha".

The words angered Ben, his fists clenching for he knew it to be a fact. He in the past had freely used those same phrases to describe people of mixed race.

"I love her," was Tysall's only response.

"And she? Does Leela return your love?" asked Mullan.

"I reckon," was all Ben could say.

"You've not asked the girl, or mentioned marrying?"

"I wanted the OK from you first," said Tysall, shaking his head and returning to sit on the edge of the chair.

"I'll lay your doubts to rest on that matter," offered the father, cupping his pip in both hands on his lap. "Over the last months Leela has been like a flower in full blossom, brimming with happiness. All beginning with the meeting of you."

"But you're against me asking her to be my wife?" pressed Tysall cautiously.

"Ben, before I joined the railway I, like you, was a gora-wallah, Horse Artillery. I saw what the wives had to endure, bad food, bad quarters, long separations. Is that what you're asking me to sentence my daughter to?"

The corporal couldn't reply to this, sinking back in his chair.

"I can't provide you with an answer until I've spoken to Leela's mother. Can you stay for dinner?" asked Mullan.

"Yes, thank you," replied Ben, wringing his hands nervously, his words heavy, his tone disheartened.

In the back garden a white monkey swung from a tree to frighten a crow into flight.

"Ben," said Mullan, fingering his pipe, "when I do speak to my wife I'll fight your cause for you. That's a promise".

CHAPTER 16

*An ambassador is an honest
Man sent to lie abroad for the
Good of his country.*

Sir Henry Wotton

Manduri District on the North-West Frontier was not large; between Bannu District in the north and Dera Ismail Khan to the south the distance was approximately thirty-five miles. While stretching from the banks of the Indus River in the east to the Administrative Border westward, its width varied from between twenty-five and thirty miles. To get to Janka, the main town in Manduri District, where his headquarters was situated, took Robert Christie the better part of three days by rail, from Chamblapur to Rawalpindi then travelling south down the east bank of the Indus. At Kalabagh he crossed the river to continue south again, this time by narrow gauge railway which took him across the Kurram River east, along a secondary line of track to Janka.

Alighting from the train, a tall Englishman in uniform with a leather swagger stick under one arm walked briskly along the platform towards him.

"I'm Bernard Crawshaw, the District Superintendent of Police," he introduced himself, holding out his hand. "You are, I presume, Robert Christie the incoming District Officer?"

"Quite correct! How do you do?" confirmed Robert, taking the proffered hand.

Crawshaw, deeply tanned with a prominent arched nose, stood with an upright posture, making polite enquiries of the journey before suggesting that the baggage be attended to. He signalled to him a middle-aged, smartly dressed servant in a white uniform with a red turban.

"This is Kazim Baksh, the bungalow khitmagar, your butler, he will see to your baggage."

"Grand!" replied Christie turning to indicate the Indian woman with her son who, disembarking from the train had stood modestly behind the district officer. "This is Srilata Chawla, my housekeeper; she will be taking charge of all domestic matters."

"Just as well you have brought along your own housekeeper," said Crawshaw, as Srilata led Kazim and his party of baggage carriers to the train's goods wagon. "Bullen, the chap whose shoes you are stepping into was told you would be arriving last week. Made arrangements to depart yesterday – so off he pushed - taking his good woman and bearer with him. I'm sorry, old chum, but it's been left to me to see you settled into the job".

The superintendent's account of Bullen's departure was correct enough but from what Crawshaw said it appeared to Christie that he had not been put fully in the picture. He and Bullen had exchanged several letters arranging their handover takeover, agreeing dates and staffing arrangements. When Bullen warned him in this correspondence that he was to be accompanied to his new district by his bearer, a Madrasi of twenty years devoted service, Christie, without hesitation, asked Srilata to continue as his housekeeper on the Frontier.

She reserved her reply, keeping him waiting for two days, holding council on the last evening at Harry Peterson's graveside. Bullen had not just pushed off, as Crawshaw put it. Christie's relief, a young man fresh off the boat, was too unfamiliar with its procedures to be left more or less adrift. This delay was the reason for Christie and Bullen not being able to meet, an occurrence all too common in the service.

The baggage trunks and tea chests that were transferred from the train, gave off a faint aromatic scent, which came from neem and tobacco leaves that were placed among the

clothing and household goods to protect them against the ravishing of white ants. On seeing them securely lashed onto a cart, Srilata, her son, David and Kazim took seats in a horse drawn *ghari*. Following Christie, who had left before them with Crawshaw in his Austin Seven, they weaved their way through the town along streets busy with traffic of draught animals, horses, bullocks and camels. Negotiating bazaars and market squares the outskirts of the town were soon reached, where the surroundings changed from that of stone and mud-brick buildings to fields of apricot orchards.

Janka was on a rim of land that overlooked a ten mile strip of fertile basin country that lay between the Kurram and Indus Rivers. The district officer's bungalow rested on the crown of a spur that ran off this higher ground down to the farm land below. Taking Christie to this, Crawshaw turned off a main road down a long drive bordered by banks of apricot trees. The bungalow, he found, was not at all like the homely abode he left behind in Chamblapur. At the head of the drive was a semi-circular complex of buildings. The bungalow, built of stone and cement was to one side, behind which were servants' quarters and a number of *godowns*. Central to all the residence buildings was the district officer's office bungalow. On the left of the residence were the stables which had attached to the rear of the horse stalls, a flat roofed shed affair that housed the district officer's automobile, a 1922 Humber touring car.

With the arrival of Crawshaw's car, servants and staff began to form themselves in front of the two main buildings. Those belonging to the bungalow itself Christie dismissed, to meet them later in the presence of Srilata, so that introductions to both *sahib* and housekeeper could be made as one. At the office veranda Crawshaw introduced the head *babu* or senior clerk, a bent, white-haired Brahmin Hindu who in turn introduced the junior clerks and office servants. On completion of a tour of the building, Crawshaw, pleading pressing matters of work excused himself, promising to return the following day to present Christie with a full, detailed picture of Manduri's policing.

His departure coincided with the arrival of Srilata and the baggage, which again had the bungalow servants scurrying from within to line the veranda front. After Christie had walked down the line meeting and exchanging words with each one, he then introduced Srilata to them as the bungalow's new *khansahah*.

Once shown around the interior of the bungalow Christie stood for several minutes on the back veranda, spellbound by the view. Beyond the garden he could see across the orchards and the green jigsaw patterned crop fields, watered by the Kurram, to the very banks of the Indus. On hearing the rasp of a motor car horn he made for the front of the bungalow passing on the way David, who, holding his mother's hand was pulling her from light switch to light switch, showing her the wonderment of electric lighting. Reaching the front veranda he found a woman in a battered, woebegone topee climbing from a Napier automobile that matched the topee's age.

"Hi! Robert," hailed Emma Schofield, waving a bottle. "Congratulations on your appointment. The dinner tonight is still on you, but this time I've got the Cockburn's".

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"Skedaddle, boys! Benny's out."

It was four o'clock on a January day and 6 Platoon were just rousing from their afternoon kip. In preparation for an hour's sport before tea, men were putting on PT kit, mosquito nets were being hung back, cot beds pushed in with the three coconut fibre biscuits set up on them as if an armchair.

On Bert Collin's shouted warning men began flying into the air, onto cots, clinging to their

webbed equipment wall hooks. Ginger Langdon had even leaped up and was hanging from the *punkah* frame. The *char-wallah* and the *connor-wallah*, distributing tea and sandwiches to awakened hungry men, fled the room screaming Urdu jibberish.

Slithering at a leisurely, investigative pace along the bungalow floor was a four foot, peppermint green snake. Almost everyone in the platoon had a pet, mostly dogs, but there were also parrots, monkeys, a couple of mongooses, even a two foot lizard and a chicken. Lance-Corporal Grif Griffiths, the Lewis-gun section commander kept a snake. Housed in a basket beside his bed and fed on captured mice purchased from the beastie boys, young odd-job native boys who hung around the lines. No one really knew if it was poisonous or not, nor was anyone about to be the first to find out. With boots and curses flying at it from all angles Grif Griffiths scooped it into his arms to carry it back to the basket.

“Coo lumme, Grif! Ya fat-witted clot. Put a chain on that dud before some poor sod ends up fittin' a casket,” urged Sid Firth, climbing down from his cot.

“Bloody true! That thing gets out in the night it'll send the lot of us loose wool,” added Pani Waters, swinging from the wall to change the record on the platoon Meloto Table Grand gramophone. While the platoon were aloft a record, 'Dark Eyes that Shine', had finished, the disc continuing round and round. Replacing this was Cicely Debenham's 'Lonely soldier', people began rushing for the door with groans of “not again”.

At the platoon football pitch Joe Penton sat on one of the spectator benches, not taking part. He was only just out of hospital after recovering from a bout of malaria. It was on New Year's day when he came down with this, just after the King's Proclamation Parade. He took to shivering half way through and had no memory of taking part with the garrison command in the march-past. He collapsed in the ranks just before dismissal; Howard Little felt his forehead and without hesitation had him taken across the road to the garrison military hospital.

The orderly who took his temperature looked at the thermometer then vanished. After a doctor arrived at his bedside, again taking his temperature, Joe suddenly found himself being sponged down with cold water. Once the delirium was gone he was put on a diet of thin chicken soup, drunk from a cup with a spout.

Despite the illness this should have been a cushy two weeks but Joe was never happier than on the day he left. Below his window was a security room where they kept those infected by rabies. This room was not sound-proof and a patient there, throughout the last three days of his life, howled like an agonised wolf. Then, the night before his discharge another patient, a sergeant dying of syphilis, charged into his ward waving a knife. The disease affecting his brain had sent him crazy. In the middle of a military hospital, with the duty officer, the orderly sergeant and four of the fire picket backing away; it was an Anglo-Indian civilian doctor who stepped forward to talk the deranged man's knife from him.

As some men on the pitch began a pre-match kick-about Ben Tysall and his wife arrived. For these sports the married men of the battalion, accompanied by their wives and families normally attended the afternoon sports, if even just to watch. Dressed in football gear, Ben left Leela to run onto the pitch. Joe seeing the girl alone was about to call her over when another beat him to it.

“Leela, dear, come sit with us,” offered Laura Radley, sitting with her two young daughters. The sergeant's wife had made Leela welcome from the first day of her marriage, being the first to arrive at the Tysall's married quarters bungalow door to see if she was settling in all right.

As the oldest daughter, aged two and a half, climbed onto Leela's lap, Joe walked across to join them.

“Good afternoon, Mrs Radley,” said Joe, stopping beside their bench. “May I join you?”

“Yes, indeed, Corporal Penton,” she replied adding, “not playing?”

"No. I've still got a touch of the pip from my stint in hospital," he answered, sitting down beside Leela.

"Have you heard from Rose?" she asked, as the match began.

"Two letters last week when I left hospital," he replied. It was almost a year and a half since he and Rose had met and fallen in love and in that time they had managed to meet only twice, once for two days during the 1924 Christmas holiday and a year later, just a month ago, when this time she was able to spend five days with Joe. Of the first Christmas they were only able to be together for a few hours. Keeping their intention to marry a secret, Joe could not visit her at the RSM's bungalow so they had to restrict their time together, meeting for walks up and down the cantonment Mall. Because it was not the proper thing to have someone from the ranks courting a member of the regimental sergeant major's household, both were afraid that Rose's Christmas holiday this next time would be spent like the last, in furtive meetings. But Ben and Leela's marriage changed all that. As a rule the married bungalows were out of bounds, but at Christmas time this was set aside, on invitation, allowing Rose and Joe a base in which they could meet, play cards and listen to gramophone records with Leela and Ben, whom they had let in on their plan to marry.

"Will she be able to visit again?" Leela asked him.

"She thinks not until the summer, after finishing her student nursing training," replied Joe.

"Well, that's not too bad. We will be in the hills then," reminded Leela cheerfully.

"Yes, I know but what about after? As a nurse she could go anywhere," pointed out Joe in a downhearted tone.

"Don't be such a frightful wheeze, Joe" reproached Leela good-naturedly. "Very soon you should be a full corporal like Ben, then you can marry."

Just before five o'clock the game ended for tea. Saying cheerio to Ben and Leela, Joe remained at the benches to watch the couple walk off to their bungalow, hand in hand. "How lucky they are". With a sad heart he kept repeating these words over and over to himself and wishing it were he and Rose on their way to spend a night together in each other's arms.

Returning to the platoon bungalow he found the *char-wallah* sitting on the veranda rocking back and forth mumbling the intonations of a lament.

"What's up with you, Sriram, ya old bugger?" enquired Joe.

"Oh, sahib, my heart is sad with grief for you and all the others of my splendid regiment," replied the Indian sorrowfully.

"You've got the tearfuls for us, you old tea robber?

Why?" asked Joe, stopping, expecting to hear something funny.

"Oh, sahib, I have just learned where you are next to be sent," he announced, continuing to rock back and forth.

"Don't try your raggin on me Sriram or ten bob to a brass button you'll be up the pole," warned Penton. "Not even the Colonel Sahib knows that."

"Oh, sahib! On the heads of my children I tell no lies," assured the *char-wallah*, raising his hands in the air.

"Has this new station got a name, then?" pressed Joe, sceptically.

"Oh yes, sahib! Very bad place. Very bad place."

"Come on, bloody char-wallah, out with it," demanded Joe.

"So regretting, sahib. It is Ishak. So regretting. So regretting."

"Ishak? Ishak?" repeated Penton. "Where the bleedin' hell is Ishak?"

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"We go left at the signpost ahead, Robert," warned Hugh Durand as they approached a T-junction.

"Right you are," replied Christie as he turned the wheel of his Humber car, just catching the name, Ishak, on the post sign.

Driving north from Kandao towards Razmak this post was an object of isolation on a stretch of friendless border road.

Since leaving just after breakfast they had encountered the odd lorry driven by one of a new generation of enterprising tribesmen, but mostly the traffic was camel and horse. The road along which they now drove was similar to the one just left, metalled, broad enough for two motor vehicles to pass, but newer. Constructed by the army in the last six months, it was the main line of communication to a recently established military camp in the heart of tribal territory. Being 'road open' day, along this they not only found themselves passing caravan traders from across the Afghan border, Christie had to keep well to his side of the road as a convoy of army supply vehicles came past.

There were three occupants in Christie's car, himself, Hugh and a government appointed official, Khan Amjad Taib Khan, the region's assistant political agent. Amjad was a Khattak Pathan in his late thirties, who lived in and administered his office from a village north-west of Sadeka. The day before, Christie had collected him from his village and together, crossing the Administrative Border they spent the night with Hugh inside the protected walls of the Scout fort at Kandao. The three were on a mission, one which had to be handled with a high level of tact and diplomacy.

The Indian government in seeking a way to end the lawlessness of the Border had set in motion a plan to civilise the Frontier by imposing prosperity. The key was road communication, which would release the tribes from their land locked existence, bringing to secluded valleys and remote villages, trade and commerce. Then, of course, and not for public disclosure, was the government's secondary purpose for building a network of roads throughout the Border, its first, whispered some, to provide the army with ease of movement. The Pathan was traditionally a bandit. For centuries he had lived in his barren hills, existing from year to year on what subsistence his flocks and the sparse hill soil could provide him. In contrast, on the plains below farmers and merchants grew fat and rich on fertile land and from bountiful trade.

The raiding that resulted from this situation, by lean hungry highland wolves on the plump lowland sheep, was something that had been going on long before the British came upon the scene. So long in fact, that it created within the Pathan society a doctrine dignifying theft and robbery; they were not crimes, but crafts. A thief was not someone to be apprehended, but admired. Understandably those on the plains suffering their thievery looked on it in a totally different light. Hence the need for the establishment of a system of motorable roads which would not only go a long way towards taming the wild Pathan, it would also speed the authorities' reaction in pursuit and punishment.

The road they followed terminated at their destination, Ishak, a brigade size camp situated on the edge of Wazir tribal homeland. Installed on a plateau, it was surrounded on three sides by low, bare, broken hills. The camp was rectangular in shape, its perimeter defence a waist high stone wall protected by three tall banks of barbed wire. Having been brought into being only six months earlier, the uniform housing was still row upon row of tents.

Passing through the main gate, where a stone walled guardroom was only half completed, Hugh directed Christie through the lines to the wood-framed headquarters building.

On climbing from their car the three visitors were first greeted by a duty officer, who got no further than learning their names before handing them over to a uniformed man with white collar tabs who hailed him from a side office.

“Alright, Robin, I’ll have them over here. They’re for me.”

“Good morning, Freddy,” greeted Taib Khan, the first to reach the man and shake hands.

“Robert,” introduced Taib Khan, “this is Freddy D’urban.” Christie the last to reach the office and the only one of the party not to have met D’urban before, stepped forward with his hand out.

“How do you do?” said Christie, as his hand was grasped. “I’m sorry we haven’t met earlier than this but I have read every report you wrote over the last two years”.

Frederick D’urban was the area political officer whose function it was to provide liaison between the tribes and government. Uprooted from more congenial surroundings at Kotkai, he now operated from Ishak, a base the army found necessary to establish in order to relieve the Rasmak garrison of some of its workload. It was his duty to be available to the tribesmen, to hear their grievances and grumbles, or explanations and denials when crime was being investigated. With his presence in the hills and villages unacceptable with British bayonets at his back, D’urban was obliged to make his penetrations into tribal country with no other protection than a few local levies acting as guides, and his hosts’ word to honour the customs of hospitality.

Freddie D’urban may not have been the type of man who built empires but it was such as he who kept them.

Over coffee in his office the four men discussed and agreed their joint approach to the negotiations they were soon to take part in: convincing a thousand Wazir tribesmen that a road driven through their lands up to the Afghan Border would be a worthwhile incursion. After first paying a courtesy call on the brigade major and garrison commander, the four walked to the main gate. There they picked up their escort, half a dozen levies from the nearby village. These men, armed with their own rifles and without uniforms, were called *khassadars* and were hired by the army as a road guard on bridges and the like.

After a two mile stroll across the rocky, dwarf scrub covered plateau, they reached the venue for the day’s debate. On the outskirts of a village that straddled the banks of a river where the water had reduced to a trickle, possibly a yard across, they came to a hollow where over a thousand tribesmen sat waiting formed in a semi-circle in front of seating for the government representatives, a dirt fouled carpet draping a plank, the edges of the semi-circle extending around them until they almost touched.

After being greeted by one of the more notable clan chiefs, a welcome that began, “may you never be tired,” and finished several variations later with “may you never be down on your luck,” the parley began. First D’urban stood to clarify the reason for this gathering and to thank them all for coming. Then Taib Khan presented the government’s points, their wish for the road to be built and his forecast as to how beneficial it would be for the clans whose lands it would pass through. Christie also lent weight to this argument, explaining that more *powindahs*, the name given in South Waziristan to caravans, would be drawn by the shorter route through his district to Afghanistan, bringing with them goods for trade and barter from India and Persia.

The overall response to this request was one of - no deal. Many recognised that their seclusion was their defence and for many more, a road scarring their land would be a desecration. One after another the tribesmen leaped up to shout their disapproval of the road project. The Pathans had their loyalties to village, clan and tribe but foremost they were independent individuals each entitled to his say.

Hugh Durand did not speak, his role was that of Scout observer. If the road went through, their area of commitment would be that much more accessible, so he was keenly interested in the outcome. It also gave him a superb opportunity for eyeing up the opposition. This meeting was a formal parley, a *jirgah*, giving those who attended a day’s armistice from *badi*, blood feuds and *kila-band*, one who is under siege in his house by a neighbour. Searching

through the array of gaunt, hook-nosed faces with their dark, vulturous eyes, he spotted wanted men also shielding under this same truce, robbers and raiders. In the front row alone he recognised two wanted for murder.

For over an hour the deliberating went on with questions being asked, points stated, advantages put forward by the government side and disadvantages thrown back. Even Hugh was once compelled to stand as the military representative and reply to a challenge about the old fort at Chashmal: if the road was built, would it be re-occupied? On cautiously mentioning that as a *powindah* staging post a detachment of Scouts would no doubt be stationed there, the wrangling turned to undisguised hostility. Voices were raised, calls of 'No road! No road! Forbidden! Forbidden!' rolled across the river to rebound off the stone houses and defensive towers of the village. For another hour the four from the government side struggled to quieten their mood with explanations, promises and assurances, but with no success. Everywhere rifles were being shaken, with heated, angry shouts assailing them from all angles.

With the mission fast slipping into disarray, Robert Christie took the opportunity, during a moment's hush, to point out one other advantage to the road, as yet not mentioned.

"Of course, because the road would attract larger numbers of *powindahs*, it would mean greater prospects for those with a mind to loot." Passing this comment, Christie looked up to study the skyline as if he had just spied a cloud.

The reaction of his three colleagues was pure theatre.

Hugh Durand, sitting the furthest from him, turned his head slowly to stare at the district officer with an expression of dumbfounded bewilderment. D'urban was also staring but his face was drained white with shocked horror. Taib Khan however sitting next to him, was fighting with a great deal of difficulty to choke back a burst of laughter.

As for the tribesmen they, like D'urban, were also stunned into silence, but only momentarily, until the devil's humour of the comment registered. Then howls of laughter rolled like a wave from the front of the assembly to the back, as Christie's words were repeated through the crowd.

In an instant the hill men's mood changed, gone were the angry cries of 'no road' and 'forbidden'. Instead, a thousand voices roared in chorus: "Build! Build!"

Returning to the garrison cantonment Christie found himself receiving a pat on his back from Amjad.

"Positive stroke of genius, Robert, old chap. A positive stroke of genius.

CHAPTER 17

*When evil is advantageous,
He errs who does rightly.*

Pubilius Syrus

With the train's arrival at Sagar station shouted orders were heard up and down the carriages for everyone to empty out and form up by companies in the goods yard. The men of the battalion who responded to this command dismounted from the train with stiff limbs, but relieved the long journey was at last over. The 2nd Queen's Light Infantry were once again on the move, posted a second time for a year's tour on the 'grim', the North-West Frontier.

Early in April the battalion had left Ravlapore after completing its two year tour and marched up into the hills where they spent the summer. With all wives and families sent on ahead by rail, the men travelled there at night until reaching the foothills, where the routine changed to day marching.

In August the battalion, bidding farewell to the families, who were to stay in the hills while their men served out the next year on the Frontier, boarded a train at Gonda. Travelling second class, six men to a compartment, crammed in with their rifles, equipment and packs, the journey took almost four days. Their toilet was a booth at one end of the carriage: a porcelain slab with foot slots and an open hole to the tracks below. Meals were provided at station stops, the food containers a mass of swarming flies. To pass the time, and take their minds off the heat, their sweating and the sunlight that drilled into the eyes, there was little to do except reading and writing letters, except that is, at the unscheduled halts, when the time was then spent cursing at and beating away the deformed, leprous beggars pleading with outstretched hands at the windows for coins.

Having marched out of the town the battalion was accommodated in a tented camp surrounded by barbed wire. It was still over a hundred miles to Ishak, a distance to be covered on foot. But first there was to be a three day stopover while the battalion, drawing stores, draught animals, wagons, rations and ammunition, re-shuffled itself, allocating responsibilities and positions in the order of march.

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After the long uncomfortable train journey where sleep was achieved in periods of fitful slumber, for that first night at Sagar the men of the Queen's took to their cots to sleep the sleep of the dead.

Bert Collins was not a light sleeper but for some reason he awoke in the small hours of the morning. As he opened his eyes a figure passed by the foot of his bed. Raising his head to see who this was, he was stopped short by the blade of a knife pressed to his throat.

"Nahin, gora-wallah! Chubarraw!" whispered a voice.

Beside his cot, under the mosquito-net next to him, crouched a native.

Throughout the twenty minutes that followed, Collins was held on his cot by the knife, compelled to watch as he and the other nine men of 2 section's tent, were robbed. With the stealth of shadows, six or seven completely naked Pathans their bodies greased with cheetah fat to quell any alarm from dogs, worked their way through the tent stealing its contents: Topees; clothing; boots; packs, even mosquito-nets were stripped from their poles, then the bedding. Bert, his eyes fixed to the cot across from him could hardly believe it as Joe Penton

was enticed with gentle touches, to roll one way then the other as the sheet was removed from beneath him.

When all movement ceased and the knife was taken from his throat, Collins made to get up, only to find the knife back once again. When the same thing happened a second time he gave the effort up until the dawn's light showed him that the *loose-wallahs* of the night had gone.

The theft in itself was humiliation enough, but worse, turning 2 Section into the battalion's laughing stock was, in borrowed uniforms, having to search through the town's bazaar later that day in order to purchase back their belongings.

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In reaching the Frontier, the battalion's first and only real obstacle was the Indus. Camping on its eastern bank, an entire day was given over to the crossing. Using hired native river transportation the men were easily embarked and shipped across but the animals and wagons posed a real headache. There was no pier or jetty, just planks laid from the bank. Horses and mules had to be coaxed up these planks then made to hop into the craft's well. Wagons were emptied and manhandled on board. With the river at this point only five miles wide there were, however, islands to negotiate which stretched each journey to a round trip of four hours.

The battalion's order of movement while on the march across Manduri District remained relaxed until they approached the Administrative Border. From then on full border operational drills were adopted. Advancing along main roads only, the rifle companies provided protection for the force.

As in the Khyber everything hinged on securing the high ground. Each morning movement would begin with platoons occupying the hills either side of the road. As the main body and the transport passed through, they would come down to rejoin as the rear guard. Once another platoon came down to take over that role they would then march forward, passing the slower moving transport until they had reached the head of the column and it was their turn to occupy the next high point. Moving in jerks and stops as did a ski blade across snow, it was slow but gave all round protection and almost always insured safe transit.

While in the hills at their summer station the 2nd Queen's had again changed commanding officers and everyone was waiting expectantly to see how he would fare on the Frontier. Lieutenant-Colonel Derek Stanfield arrived in India freshly promoted, on a ship that had travelled out of the trooping season, in July. With no previous service in the country he needed to rely heavily on the knowledge of others, something he had no hesitation in doing. After crossing the Indus an officer and ten men of the South Waziristan Scouts was picked up as escort and one of the colonel's first acts on meeting was to sit the Scouts officer down in his tent to request over two gin and gingers: "This hill picketing, I'd like you to tell me all there is to know".

One man in the battalion who reserved his judgement of commanding officers for longer than most was Ben Tysall. The reason for this was because of the high standard set by the first he had had, Lieutenant-Colonel Elstob, commanding the 16th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment. Ben was only fourteen but remembered him well, especially his winning of the Victoria Cross, although posthumously, in France in 1918, while defending Manchester Regiment. Holding out against overwhelming odds he was always there to inspire and lead, once in a counter-attack at the head of Ben's own platoon. In his estimation Gilfillan only just came up to scratch, while the last one fell out of the running altogether.

The colonel that was, but not his wife. As the commanding officer's lady it was to her that fell the task of vetting applicants for marriage to men of the junior ranks. In India, with the native women mostly prohibited and working class white girls as rare as unicorns, the CO's wife, in this respect, did not carry an overly full appointment book.

On the day arranged for Molly Palmer to meet Leela Mullan she arrived at the *Dali-Bag* bungalow on foot, insisting on being shown the gardens by Leela and her mother before entering the house for refreshments. Two hours later she left, stopping at the door to kiss Leela on the cheek, saying, "Leela, my child, you are far too enchanting to become a soldier's wife. But I wish you and Corporal Tysall every happiness".

Three weeks later Leela and Ben were married in the Railway Settlement's Catholic church, with Joe Penton as best man.

The departure to the Frontier was for Ben a terrible wrench. Love as an emotion he remembered only dimly from his childhood, with hunger and cold more prominent to mind, and to leave Leela, who with a feather light touch or a single kiss could fill him with elation, was heart-breaking.

It was quite the opposite for Joe Penton; this move was bringing him closer to the one he loved, giving high hopes of occasions to meet. Rose, now a qualified nurse, was serving a year's post training probation at the first mission she had begun work at, a place called Sadeka, here on the Frontier. Although he was concerned for her safety because of the proximity of lawless tribesmen, she repeatedly dispelled his worry in her letters, assuring him that Sadeka was an oasis of neutrality.

--oOo--

"Rose! What is it?" cried Saroj, as Rose Rickman braked Emma Schofield's Napier to a sudden halt.

The two nurses, on an errand to Gambila station collecting mail and packages of freight for the mission, were now returning.

"There's someone lying in the nullah beside the stream," replied Rose, climbing from the car.

The road to Sadeka, still two miles off, at this point ran parallel with the *nullah* that passed the mission. Rose, on glancing over a portion of the bank that had caved into the *nullah* bed, creating a small cutting, had glimpsed a figure prone on the ground. Reaching the edge of the banking she looked down, her suspicions justified. There by the stream lay a man, and he was not just resting - his posture was all wrong. Lying face down, one arm was extended straight forward while the other hung down in the water.

"Saroj! Fetch the medical case from the car," requested Rose, as the other girl joined her.
"There is something wrong, I'm going down."

"Wait," ordered Saroj, catching Rose's arm.

Moving to the very edge of the *nullah* she looked over, her eyes searching the ground both up stream and down before turning back to the car with a warning for her companion.

"Be careful, Rose. Don't touch him until I join you."

To approach, Rose descended down the cutting, wading the ankle deep water, then climbed onto a foot high bank. Standing over the figure she found him to be a youthful Pathan tribesman - almost a boy, she thought. Asleep or unconscious, there was dried blood the length of one arm and on the back of his shaven head. His clothes were the traditional dress of a frontier villager, baggy shirt and trousers with a *chadar* shawl wrapped around his body and *chaplis*, dwarf palm fibre sandals. His turban was missing.

When Saroj arrived Rose felt for a pulse on the wrist of the uninjured arm.

"It is very weak. If you hold his head so that cut doesn't collect dirt from the ground we'll roll him over and have a good look at that arm," said Rose.

As she pulled him onto his back the youth awoke, to begin struggling weakly, crying out delirious curses and threats.

"Keep still, child of a hyena," warned Saroj, locking her fingers on his head to hold it still, "we are here to attend your wounds, so you may safely return to your village."

Her words, spoken harshly, none-the-less worked, the young tribesman fell silent and ceased his struggling.

"Oh, Saroj, he's opened the wound. It's beginning to bleed," exclaimed Rose, on pushing up the shirt sleeve. Then on closer examination of the forearm: "it's a hole, a gun shot."

"We had best bandage his injuries then think about getting him on to the Mission," advised Saroj, resting his head in her lap. This was the Frontier and she had seen many wounds while at the mission and very few were not the result of a gun or knife.

On completion of the bandaging but not daring to move him themselves, it was decided that Saroj would stay with the injured youth while Rose drove on to the mission for help. Before this could be put into effect, with Saroj re-settling to place the boy's head in her lap and Rose closing up the medical case, they were forestalled by the arrival of others.

"Rose!" warned her friend, "Don't try to go to the car".

Puzzled by this request the English girl looked first at Saroj, then in the direction she was staring.

Walking towards them along the down stream bank was a man, an armed Pathan, his rifle slung across his back. A hundred yards from them he stopped where the stream meandered across his path, placing him on the opposite bank.

"What should we do?" asked Rose.

"Call to him. Tell him we need his help with an injured man," advised Saroj.

Calling across to the man in Pushtu, Rose received no reply; he seemed too intent on looking around. Then an arm was raised signalling another ten men into view who appeared hurrying forward to join the first. Remaining spaced apart, two on each side detached themselves to mount the lip of the *nullah*, keeping their heads down. It didn't take much guess work on Rose's part to recognise sentries posting themselves. Joined by a second man, he and the first began to wade the stream towards them.

"Thank him for coming, Rose," prompted Saroj. "Tell him who we are. You do the talking, he will pay more attention to you than I. And smile, always smile."

Halfway to them they were stopped by a whistle from one of the sentries on the road bank, who held up his hands as if steering a car.

As soon as they began to advance again Rose went into a long delivery of thank-you's beginning to regret, with every step they took, ever having spied the wounded youth. Both were tall, forbidding men with the cold flinty stares of those without humour. The first man had pale skin with grey eyes and a light brown, almost reddish beard. The second, his skin dark and beard black, had a wide scar that ran from his forehead over the right eye and down his cheek.

With a smiling face and a stomach turning queasy Rose explained to the two stern men as they looked down on the youth, who was again unconscious, what she would like them to do.

"If you could carry the young man up to our car we will take him into our Mission where his wounds will be cleaned and properly dressed."

"Mission? At Sadeka?" asked the first Pathan looking up from the youth's face still held in Saroj's lap.

"Mem Daktar Schofield?" asked the second, using the native corruption of doctor before Rose could answer the first question.

"Yes, our Mission. Doktor Schofield's Mission hospital," replied Rose.

The first man turned about to wave two others forward.

"There is no need to take this man to hospital; he is one of our party. He fell into this nullah last night and we have been searching for him since. These are his cousins. We will take him home to his village now."

The wounds were at least three days old, but Rose kept silent.

Two young men arrived looking anxious. One, on calling softly, "Salim, we are back," was rebuked sharply by scar face.

All carried slung rifles but also tied to each one's back was their *chadar*, used as a pack, and they were full. As one of the new men stripped his to hand it to the other, it clattered with metal sounds. Lifting the injured youth up he was carried off piggy-back.

Stopping the first two men in making a move to follow, Rose took from the medical case bandages and a small tin of ointment.

"Please take these. He should have the wounds re-dressed every two days." Rose was no longer smiling as she held these out to the Pathan with grey eyes.

Saying not a word of thanks he took the bandages and tin, pushing them into a pouch that hung on one hip.

"Badmash," said Saroj, as the two young women stood together watching the party of men move away upstream.

"Yes!" replied Rose, thankful to see them go, "Villains indeed."

Just how villainous they learned at the mission, when Emma and Zarif Khan greeted them on the bungalow veranda.

"One, grey eyes and brown beard, the other a scar?" verified Emma on being told the story.

"The one with the scar?" asked Zarif Khan drawing a finger down the right side of his face,

"Did it run like so?"

"Yes," confirmed Saroj, "and wide, very wide".

Emma and Zarif looked at each other for a moment, both reading the other's thoughts.

"You have been very lucky," began Emma, addressing the two women in a sober voice, "the man with grey eyes was Abdur Sarwar, the outlaw. He is Mohmand, from north of the Khyber. His ancestors were Greek settlers from Alexander the Great's army. For some reason he was banished by his tribe and now has a price on his head for murder and robbery. He lives under the protection of hamsaya in the Kajuri Valley deep in Mahsud lands. He pays for his keep by raiding and giving a share of his booty to the clan chief".

"The one with the scar," added Zarif, "Feroz-un-Din, an Afghan of Ghilzai tribe. He was paid assassin, now raids with Sarwar."

"Do we tell the police?" asked Rose, "I'm sure they were carrying loot from a raid. And that boy was definitely shot in the arm."

"No!" said Emma, "at least not today, perhaps tomorrow. You could have come to harm. But for some reason they left you unmolested and for that I am prepared to keep silent. He will be caught one day but that day will not be today."

Rose and Saroj, standing beside each other, turned to share a look of dismay and relief, their nearer hands clasping in a tight squeeze.

CHAPTER 18

*Folly is often more cruel
In the consequence than malice
Can be in the intent.*

Marquis of Halifax

Reveille at Ishak, year round, was always six o'clock, shattering the morning silence with four simultaneous bugle calls: three infantry and one artillery. With their notes fading away across the stony plateau the camp sprang to life.

Men, bare to the waist, filed off to wash and shave, tent walls were rolled up and bedding and packs placed outside in straight, orderly rows. The main gate was opened by the guard allowing out the duty platoon to sweep around the camp perimeter. After first bayonet charging the latrine, they worked along the outer edge of the cantonment, poking through the brush and *nullahs* as a discouragement against skulking tribesmen with murderous intent.

Off the Frontier, the day would normally start with a full company muster parade, every man bulled up bright and shiny. Here, though, this was not practical, for the countryside was hostile and the army although not at war, was without doubt on a war footing. To the west of the camp was a level strip of ground used by visiting aircraft as a landing field. Five hundred yards further on, from a low ridge, a round, two storeys, stone built sentry tower, enclosed in barbed wire, overlooked both camp and landing strip. North and east were two others, manned by twenty men each and relieved every two days. Because of these commitments, combined with the camp guard and daily fatigues, the call on manpower, just to secure its boundaries and maintain day to day running, was fairly heavy. On the safer Indian cantonments all menial jobs were done by native labour, such as lifting, carrying and moving things. Here the people who had to do such daily tasks as emptying the tents' night urine bucket into the night-soil cart and see it taken away for disposal, were the troops themselves.

There were a number of Indian contractors on the camp, *char-wallahs*, *napi's* and so on, but only a handful compared to other stations, for this was a besieged cantonment. As well as the wire entanglements circling the camp and the outlying sentinel towers, artillery gun emplacements with 4.7 inch medium field guns were positioned inside the fringes, pointing outward. Granted the enemy were only smelly tribesmen and poorly armed, yet in the past they had defeated armies and perpetuated terror throughout the borders of north-west India.

"Come on, you slabs, grab your stuff and get out here!" called Joe Penton to those of his section still inside their tent. It was after breakfast in late November, with the sun well up and turning the morning air warm. Another 'road open' day and the garrison were out on picket duty.

6 Platoon formed in two ranks on the dirt roadway outside their tent lines. Pani Waters, the last to arrive and having missed breakfast, was wolfing down the remainder of one of the *connor-wallah's* egg wads. Turning to march off, the platoon sloped arms and formed fours before stepping off smartly as if on parade. At the gate this demeanour changed.

Ordered to fallout, the men, fixing bayonets, spilled out through the gate, separating into two groups: One under Miles Holt-Bate peeled away to the left, crossing the main road towards a ridge feature south of the cantonment; the second, under Ben Tysall who, with Wilf Radley on leave visiting his family, was acting platoon sergeant, steered his half towards the same ridge, only further to the right.

The road they crossed was the one Frederick D'urban had negotiated with the Wazir Clans

earlier that year. Construction having started almost immediately, it had not progressed far. To be exact, just over three miles. This slowness was not due to interference from the locals, they in fact, were employed to work on it and looked upon it now as a lucrative source of income. No, the hold-up was at government level where it was stipulated that the funds to build should be found from the province's normal annual public works budget.

Advancing in open skirmish order to the foot of the ridge, Ben Tysall's picket, Joe Penton's 2 Section and Grif Griffiths' Lewis-gun Section began climbing the rocky slope. There were no large boulders which could conceal ambushers, just shale like rock. Few chances were taken though, the sections making their way to the crest in dashes and spurts, one always covering the other. This was a regular picket post, named Snowy Hook, with its own permanent sangar built by those who had first garrisoned Ishak. Ten by fifteen yards in width, its walls were four feet high, sitting on one edge of a cliff that faced south. From this high point the view north was unrestricted back across the plateau to the camp two miles away, standing out as a four-cornered island of tents. To the south the land was a waste of broken, weather eroded hills, while eastwards the ridge they were on extended in line with the road for half a mile. Just where it began to drop away another sangar was positioned, this one occupied by Mister Holt-Bate and the rest of 6 Platoon. It was to the west that Snowy Hook was expected to keep the sharpest look-out. In this direction the road crossed a river, passing a set of low hills on its left before winding away out of sight towards the Afghan border.

Although the road was unfinished the *powindahs* had begun using what there was of it. By following old tracks and river courses they would pick it up to the west of Ishak, which resulted in the garrison providing picket posts along the route for their protection.

Today the 2nd Queen's were tasked to secure the perimeter picket points overlooking the cantonment. Responsibility for the road was given to a battalion that had arrived just two weeks earlier, the 9th Battalion, 15th Punjab Regiment. From Snowy Hook, Ben Tysall and his picket watched the new unit march out of the camp, passing down the road below them. Once across the river bridge the first picket party peeled off across a space of rocky ground, then up to their hilltop post.

With a pair of issue binoculars Ben watched them take up their position, then after studying the ground around for any suspicious signs, he swept the glasses slowly to his right. Working north he spent a minute or so scanning the village that straddled the riverbank, searching amongst the flat-roofed houses and among the three and four storey high fortified towers for anything out of the ordinary. These towers were not just built to ward off attack from outside desperadoes, they were chiefly for each man's protection should he become caught up in *badi*, a blood feud with his neighbour. For this purpose the windows were narrow firing slits, with round boulders on the edges of the roof to confuse snipers when aiming for human heads.

As the sun rose higher the men settled to wait out the day, some stretching out to nap while others kept watch. There was as yet no sign of any *powindah* activity along the road, which was not unusual. Unlike the *kafilahs* of the Khyber, these caravans never seemed in a hurry and appeared unappreciative of the army's protective cover.

"Ere, Jeff, them blokes on Middlesex! What they up to?"

Jeff Gleeson, resting against the sangar wall with his topee sloped over his eyes, remained still as he replied to Noshier Slyfield.

"Beg pardon?"

"The picket! Look! They been tipped the wink," explained Slyfield.

Pushing back his topee, Gleeson looked out over the sangar. Seven hundred yards away on the first hill the Punjabs had occupied, the detachment there was moving off it, not towards the road, but in the opposite direction, south.

"That be a jolly queer sight," commented Gleeson, "best give Ben the nod".

"Corporal Tysall," he called, raising an arm to beckon the picket commander.

"What's up?" he asked arriving to crouch beside the two old sweats. "Ain't in much of a mood to listen to any grousin".

"Them Punjabs over on Middlesex," began Slyfield, releasing his grip on the Lewis-gun mounted on the sangar wall. "Riding their luck a bit near the edge, what'cha say?"

Ben looked to the far hill, then cursed in disbelief.

"Christ! They've all gone doo'lally!"

In an urgent tone he called Joe Penton.

"Joe, quick, flag up Middlesex. Ask 'em what they're playin' at".

With the battalion suffering a shortage of trained signallers Penton was acting for the day as the picket's replacement. Putting his rifle down he drew two wooden handled flags from his belt. Standing and extending his arms like the hands of a clock he jerked them from one point of a circle to another, repeatedly sending three identifying letters. With no luck; he was signalling to an empty picket post.

"No, good, Ben, they've gone off," stated Penton in frustration.

"What the hell..." voiced Tysall, unable to understand the reason for the Punjabs' abandoning their hilltop.

"Joe, get onto the camp. Tell them what's happened," he ordered his friend. Then turning to Lance-Corporal Griffiths, he said, "Grif, stick to Joe with a pencil and note paper. Garrison are gonna be more puzzled than us as to why them ginks left their post. So we'll be havin' a lot of chit-chat toin' and froin....

He was more than right. For the next fifteen minutes Joe's arms, between reading messages from the camp, were in constant action giving negative replies to heliograph flashes asking questions which were beyond answering.

"There they are," called out Ken Hall, pointing at another hill, the next one on from the punjabs' original picket.

"They becoming real puzzlement! Proper puzzlement!" observed Jeff Gleeson.

Ben Tysall confirming their presence through his binoculars, called across to Penton to inform garrison that the missing picket was now on another hill, four hundred yards further south. The reply, of course, was: "Ask them why they moved?" On contacting the wayward picket, they answered:

"This looked a better hill".

Sending that to the garrison, the helio response came back instantly: "Tell those idiots to return to assigned picket".

After Joe had relayed this in more formal terms, the Punjab signaller began his reply. Utilising Ben's binoculars he began spelling out the letters for Griffiths to write down: "W-I-L-L. New word. C-O-M-P..., Jesus! He's stopped one!"

Through the binoculars Joe had seen the semaphore signaller suddenly tumble to the ground. As he spoke the faint but clear report of a rifle shot was heard.

Tysall, snatching back his binoculars focussed them on the hill crest. The Punjabs had gone to ground, only around the signaller was there movement, two men crouched over him.

"Blow me, didn't take the nigs long to spot them," said Grif Griffiths, pushing pencil and notepaper away to pick up his rifle.

Ben, with the binoculars fixed to his eyes made no reply. Watching the Punjabs as other single shots were heard, he was looking for an indication of where the enemy were shooting from. Quickly scanning the surrounding hills he could see not a hint, which was not surprising as Pathan dress blended naturally into the dun coloured landscape. Turning his glasses back he saw a Punjab take aim with his rifle and fire. Following along the line of sight, Ben began scrutinising every boulder and shadow on a hillside to its east. Back and

forth he traced, up and down, then movement, just the wiggle of a figure behind a rock, but that was all Ben needed.

“Joe, flag up the guns, we want artillery fire. Send our daily recognition flag; I want the gunners to know exactly who's calling for support.”

Back in the cantonment, the battery duty fire control officer was seated at the plotting table enjoying a mug of tea, provided for him by the battery sergeant major, when the telephone linking them with the signal post rang.

“Right you are,” he answered, looking at the BSM, nodding towards the gun line.

The BSM, turning about screamed in the direction of the battery tent lines.

“Take post!” Take post!”

The gunners, on standby but relaxing in their tents, bolted into action, tea mugs spilt, letters flung onto beds, playing cards scattered, they raced out to man their artillery pieces just yards away. As soon as the fire control officer had plotted on his map using range and compass bearings exactly where Ben Tysall wanted him to put his shells, he shouted at the top of his voice down the gun line.

“Number one gun!”

The sergeant of the first gun raised his arm in readiness to receive his firing orders.

The first shell exploded short of the hill and to one side. Ben, however, had expected it to, with the intention of walking the artillery onto his target. To direct that first shot he had used Snowy Hook as the centre of a clock. Now, using that shell as the centre of the clock, he would give the gunners a second target indication order.

“Joe! Two hundred! Eleven o'clock.”

Penton, to give the garrison signallers the best advantage in reading his flags, was standing up on the sangar wall, sky lining himself.

The second round dropped higher on the hill, off target, but near enough for Ben to confidently call out: “Two hundred yards, ten o'clock, fifty yards left, on target, five rounds gun fire.”

From the camp a minute later came a thunderclap as six guns fired in unison, followed moments later by whistled screams in the air above the picket as six shells arced in trajectory over their heads. Around the hillside target area the salvo of shells exploded in a broken line, throwing up dust, black smoke and shattered rock. The two sections on Snowy Hook, as more shells rained down, reacted with whistles and shouts of exhilaration. Ben, with his glasses held to his eyes, was not watching the explosions, but was more concerned as to how the Punjab picket was reacting to the assistance of artillery fire.

Through negligent disregard of standard Frontier drills they had landed themselves in a dangerous situation. Now it was up to them to redeem their pride by extracting their small force intact. Men were seen rising from cover, dashing to a central point. Then leaving a strong rear guard, a party began making its way down, slowly, for some were carrying others.

“Add two hundred yards! Repeat!” cried out Tysall to Joe Penton. Shifting the point of fire higher on the hill to where he had seen a figure run.

At the finish of that second barrage a lull occurred. The attacking enemy were keeping hidden and the Punjabs, off the hill now, had gone out of sight in dead ground lower down. On the road below Snowy Hook the duty standby company from the cantonment, turned out amidst the pandemonium created by repeated bugle calls and shouting NCO's, was racing forward to give support. Along this road also was a line of fifty to sixty stationary camels, a passing *powindah*. When firing began their handlers ran off to take cover and left alone, the animals docilely lay down to await their masters' return.

Following a lull of ten minutes rifle fire again sprang up, muffled, the source unseen.

“Ben, down in the tangi”, shouted out Nosher Slyfield pointing at the river bed.

Into sight from around a bend of the river two sepoy's appeared stealthily, but in quick

spurts, moving from one position of cover to another. Behind them came a larger party carrying their dead or wounded. The Punjabs, rather than return to their original hill picket were endeavouring to make their escape to the road along the river bed. The rearguard, when they came into view, were seen to be falling back in bounds, two rear men firing around the last bend before sprinting away.

They were being pursued and although Ben Tysall could not see a direct target he was not going to sit idly waiting for one to show itself.

“Joe! Send new target, nine hundred, four o'clock, right two hundred.”

In minutes he was moving artillery fire up and down the river bed and back around the bend where he placed several salvoes by estimating the range.

Reaching the bridge, the commander of the standby company, reading Joe Penton's semaphore messages, deployed his platoons.

One he sent down river to join up with the Punjabs. Two others sweeping either bank secured the river's flanks as the Punjabs and the first standby platoon withdrew through them to the bridge. There, with a young English second lieutenant, near to tears, admitting blame for the debacle, two of his Punjabi sepoys had their wounds tended to. A third, the signaller, dead, was laid under a groundsheet on the roadway.

With the danger of being shot seemingly dealt with, the *powindah* drivers had returned to their camels and were again on the move. One Afghan, leading his beast past, cleared his throat loudly before spitting on the road beside the body.

--oOo--

With the sun touching the horizon water fowl on wing, flying low from the west, were not easy to spot. Those that were gave the hunter just a fleeting chance to bag them.

“My bird,” called Robert Christie to his shooting partner as one of these swooped in out of the sun's dull glare and reflected light from the water's surface. Taking aim along the twin barrels of his shotgun, giving what he judged was sufficient lead, he fired once, then twice, missing both times. A third shot caused the duck to tumble in flight, one wing broken.

“Good strike,” complimented Christie, as the bird crashed into the marsh, shot by his partner.

“The bird gave me a better angle,” ventured Princess Kishna politely, as a reason for his poor shooting.

“Princess,” chuckled the Englishman in reply, “it's embarrassing enough being bested by you, but I wish each time you would not add insult to injury by finding a patronising excuse for my bad aim.”

“You would rather I just called you a worthless shot, then, Collector?” replied Kishna with a wicked grin.

Turning, Christie nodded to the native handler to release his retriever dog. With the animal bounding off through the reeds he pushed two fresh cartridges into the chambers of his broken shotgun.

The season was late December, Christmas only a few days off. Robert and Kishna were attending a shooting party organised on his behalf by Amjad Taid Khan on marshland north of his village fed from the waters of the Kurram River. As a seasonal event Christie would have liked to have laid on a Christmas camp as was normally done in most other districts. Unfortunately this was the Frontier; social functions of that nature were out of the question. Instead he confined the scope of his festive endeavours to rides, hunts, outings and in the evenings, long dinner parties. Invitations were sent to a number of friends at Delhi and elsewhere in northern India only for him to receive apologetic refusals in reply, from people accepting closer and safer offers.

Christie was not unduly upset by this, since in his eighteen months as district officer he had made many friends here. They would more than compensate for those unable to attend. Besides, the two with any distance to travel who did accept his invitation were the only ones that mattered to him: Princess Kishna and her brother Sadul. This was not their first visit. Shortly after taking office they had made the journey to spend a few days as house guests and assist him in choosing two riding mounts from the Afghan horse market. The latter proved to be two splendid buys, for being Rajputs, horsemen by tradition and instinct, there were no better judges than Kishna and her brother. Of course invitations from Jaswara were also extended to him, on two occasions as a palace guest of the brother and sister, and one from the Maharaja requesting his honoured presence at a review of his state armed forces.

With the sun just slipping out of sight below the distant hills, a whistle blast brought the day's shoot to an end. Along their stretch of the marsh, shooters, handlers and dogs began making their way towards the cluster of cars parked on a cart track skirting the fenland.

"Ah!" greeted Taid Khan, admiring the shot water fowl carried by the dog handler's son. "You have taken a good bag, Robert."

"Not all by me. Just most of the geese and the larger ducks," replied Christie modestly.

"Don't lie to your host, Collector," rounded Kishna, almost laughing. "Two are his, Amjad. The other seven were brought down by me."

Served black coffee and brandy, the party stood about exchanging tales of difficult shots which either hit or missed, before breaking up. Of the twenty guests most were soon driving home, a few, however, remained: Christie, Sadul, Kishna, Hugh Durand and Neil Osborne, the district deputy superintendent of police, Bernard Crawshaw's number two. Having been asked to stay, they were to be entertained overnight as guests of Taid Khan at his village.

Ghorzandi, as did most villages in close proximity to the Border, had a wall around it. In past years after sunset the gates would be bolted and the walls patrolled. Nowadays with the Frontier receding one gate was always open, guarded by a watchman, who at night slept in the entrance on a *charpoy*. As Taid Khan's two car party slowed to pass through his gate this grey, raw-boned ex-soldier straightened up to salute. The streets were narrow, although the village was large with flat roofed buildings, many two-storey with balconies. Entering a square which had a mosque flanking one complete side, Christie followed Taid Khan's car through a high mud brick-walled gateway.

On the other side was Taid Khan's home, a large single storey house with a spacious, tree planted front garden. To the rear of the house rose a relic of his forefathers, a square three storey tower. Telegraph wires leading into it were an indication that the assistant political agent had transformed the building into his working offices. Stopping their cars the bungalow's *khitmagar* hurried to open his master's door, giving a respectful bow. The door of Christie's Humber was opened for him by the *chokidar*, the bungalow watchman, before he moved off to close the gate, for it was dark and time to latch up and begin his prowling.

After being shown to rooms where they washed themselves using basins of warm water, they changed their clothing, gathering on the veranda for an early evening drink. There Taid Khan introduced his family. His wife, veiled, wore tight trousers covered by a long silk chemise dress buttoned at the side. Devoutly Muslim, she stood behind her children not speaking, inclining her head to the guests when Amjad mentioned her name. After that she and the three children, two boys and a girl all between eight and twelve years of age, left, leaving the head of the house to entertain his guests alone.

Supper was taken at nine consisting of *pilau*, a mutton dish made from the meat of the wild big-tailed sheep and roast water fowl shot that day.

Ending the meal with green spiced tea, they returned to the veranda.

Nearing midnight, with their conversation still in full stride, an interruption occurred. At the gate a voice was heard calling, someone with a convincing reason to be let in, for

moments after, two men were seen running towards the bungalow across the garden, pursued by the *chokidar* who had allowed them entrance.

"It's Nadir Hatif, the son of one of the village elders" said Amjad out loud, more in surprise than to inform.

"Khan, Sahib!" called out the young man with still twenty yards to run, "Dacoits in the village!"

"Dacoits? Where?" demanded the political agent, bolting up from his chair, as did Christie, Durand and Osborne.

"This is Salim Raza, Khan Sahib, his house is near the east gate," explained the breathless youth, pointing with an outstretched arm at the second, older man, "he saw men kill the gate watchman on his charpoy with knives, then run into the village."

"How many?" asked Hugh Durand.

"Ten! Maybe twenty, sahib," replied Salim Raza, nervous and tense after witnessing the murder.

"The Bazaar. They'll go for the Hindu traders," announced Amjad in a calm but dramatic tone.

"The telegraph," reminded Osborne, "we must notify my chaps and the army."

"It will have been cut," replied Amjad, knowing the methods of border robbers. "But of course you must try. Robert, will you take Neil to the telegraph tower room?"

Christie, who, because Sadul and Kishna were unfamiliar with the Pushtu dialect, had stood back acting as interpreter, left them to run with Osborne around the back of the bungalow. With a lamp taken from one of the servants they climbed up into the top tower room only to prove Amjad right; the key was dead.

Returning to the bungalow they found the others arming themselves. Amjad had opened the store-room where the hunting firearms were secured.

"I've sent Nadir Hatif to the mosque to sound the *chigah*," he informed them. "It will take some minutes for armed men to gather in any numbers. So I propose we strike for the bazaar before these vermin butcher the lot. Will you come, Robert?"

"I should be offended that you asked," replied Christie, going to collect his shot-gun.

In doing so he was brought up sharply. Sadul already had his weapon and was filling his dinner jacket's pockets with cartridges.

"Sadul," he began, his voice grave with implication, "you are the heir to the throne. I have a responsibility for your safety."

"Robert, the house of my host is being attacked," replied the Rajput Prince, "would you have me hide in a godown?"

As the five men filed out through the gate, held open by the *chokidar*, across the square the beat of a *chigah* alarm drum began sounding from the mosque. Just as the *chokidar* made to swing the gate shut another armed figure pushed past him. With a cartridge belt draped across her dress, shoes kicked off for ease of movement, Kishna padded silently after the men.

Although night, the stars gave off brilliance sufficient to read print. Keeping in to the sides of the houses, Amjad lead the others first down one street then through a narrow alleyway into another. Christie, the last man, never thought to look behind, they were moving at a rapid pace, almost a run, and he was more watchful to the front than rear. As the street widened a woman's scream was heard, they were nearing the bazaar. Pressing on, slower and more cautiously, the five passed between two low buildings facing each other across the flattened earth street. As Christie drew away a turbaned figure on the roof of one building rose, to take aim at his back. Before he could fire, a double shotgun blast sounded and the figure pitched forward. In the same instant a second figure on the opposite roof fired a shot at the person who first discharged the shotgun.

The five men in the street spun about but only Sadul saw the head and shoulders of the second rifleman on the roof opposite, who had just fired. With a lightning aim his trigger was being squeezed before the butt was in his shoulder. Recovering from the instinctive blink as he shot, the Prince could no longer see the turbaned head.

"On the roof," he called out. "I think I hit one of the beggars."

Christie was well familiar with the confusion of battle and this small engagement was no exception. Pressed against a wall, with shooting from behind, above and within his party resounding the length of the street, he had no time to evaluate what had happened before more rifle fire was directed their way from up ahead. This was answered by the two front men, Hugh and Amjad. Dropping to the ground first one would fire his two barrels, then the other, while the first reloaded.

It was darkest on the edges of the street, where the raiders were making the best use of it, their only giveaway was the flashes of their rifles. Still, even that was more than enough. The shotguns, firing number four pellets at ranges fewer than fifty yards, were finding a target with almost every blast. Not outright kills - they would have to be a lot closer for that. What they were doing was causing multiple wounding. Without realising it they could not have brought a better close-quarter street fighting weapon.

With resistance melting away before them the five government men began leap-frogging into and through the bazaar until there was no longer an enemy shooting at them. Following up as far as the east gate, where the dead watchman still lay, it was clear the raiders had wasted no time in making their escape. Returning to the bazaar they found it filling with armed villagers brandishing swords, *jezails*, muzzle loading long barrelled rifles and a few single shot breech loaders. The Hindu traders were also out of their shops, terror stricken, most of the women wailing.

One man able to speak rationally told them the gang had broken into the shops, then through into the family quarters. To make them tell where their money was hidden, one son was killed in front of his father and another man was tortured to death after first being blinded. Even though driven off they didn't leave empty handed, going with two money boxes of silver rupees, and a captive Hindu girl.

"They must be apprehended before reaching the Administrative Boundary," declared Christie, burning with anger. Then as the district officer he began taking charge: "Neil, stay here with Amjad. Get the village militia organised in searching the streets. And speak to the traders. See if they can provide us with a description of the gang."

"We have to warn the army and the nearest means for that is the police post at Barwand," reminded Osborne, wrapping a handkerchief around a bleeding hand, grazed by a bullet in the fighting.

"Yes! Yes! I know," replied Christie, "I and Hugh will do that. We'll leave straight away by car."

Persuading Sadul to accompany him back to the bungalow so Kishna could see with her own eyes that her brother was safe, the three hastened from the bazaar, retracing their steps back along the street. Nearing the scene where their engagement of the gang first began, they were met by a distraught Nadir Hatif.

"Oh! Christie Sahib! Come! Come! The Khan's guest, she has been shot."

"What? Who? What on earth are you talking about?" demanded the district officer as he continued on.

"Hurry, sahib! Hurry!" called the village elder's son, running on before him and beckoning the three men to hasten their steps.

Ahead, a small group of people opened up for them, to show Princess Kishna seemingly sitting with her back against a wall resting. Head bowed, she held a shotgun across her lap.

"My God! My God!" cried Christie dropping to his knees.

The dress Kishna wore was saturated with blood from a bullet wound to her upper chest below the right shoulder.

“Kishna! Kishna!” wailed Sadul in anguish, throwing himself down beside Christie to take his sister in his arms “Are you alright? Speak to me? Speak to me?”

The Englishman taking a hold of her head tilted it back.

“She's unconscious. Fainted!” From his years in the war he had seen this reaction brought on by gun shot wounds many times and knew why: loss of blood. “We'll take her to the bungalow.”

Amjad's wife, waiting on the veranda, on seeing Kishna being carried, ordered one of her women servants away to bring towels and water. Laying her on a bed in one of the guest rooms, Christie and Sadul remained until the servant returned. Whereupon despite their pleas to remain and assist, they were waved from the room by a determined woman, still veiled, still honouring her vow of silence.

“What the hell was she doing there? What the hell was she doing there?” cried Christie to the ceiling, his jacket stained with Kishna's blood, punching one fist into the other palm.

Sadul, overcome with distress, paced up and down the lounge.

“Robert, I must get off to Barwand and sound the alarm. Every minute is vital to us.” Hugh Durand, seeing Christie emotionally overwhelmed by Princess Kishna's injury, reminded him of his first obligation.

“Yes, Hugh,” replied Christie, taking a key from his pocket and handing it to the Scouts officer. “Go! Take the Humber. I'm sorry, you'll have to go alone. I can't leave Kishna or Sadul. Not now”.

Watching from the drive as Hugh drove through the gate, Amjad returned running across the garden.

“I only just learned of the Princess. How is she?” he asked, breathing heavily through his mouth. One sleeve was tinged red with a spreading blood stain from a wound he chose to ignore.

“She needs a doctor. Your wife is with her bandaging the wound,” informed Christie, crazed with worry although not showing it.

Asking no more Amjad entered the building.

“Sadaka, Robert!” instructed the political agent on returning, “she must go to hospital and the Mission is the closest. Take my car my friend, you can be there in half an hour.”

With Sadul taking charge of the car, Robert collected Kishna from the bed. The bandage of towels and strips of linen was not neat but it was secure.

Through the night they sped, headlamps hardly needed, the lantern like stars lighting the road with a purple luminosity.

In the back Christie watched ahead for turnings he would direct Sadul into, while in his arms he held the one person in all the world who was more precious to him than life itself.

When Kishna had returned to Jaswara after spending those two weeks with him at Chamblapur, he made discreet enquiries regarding her suitor. With relief he learned that she had rejected him, relief because he had fallen in love with her and had remained so. This obsession he knew could never be returned or blessed with the sanctity of marriage, for the Rajput, particularly so the royal houses, were pledged to the purity of the race. He as an Englishman could never be considered as husband to a daughter of a royal house and it would be regarded as an insult should he ever express such a wish. Therefore his love for Kishna was something kept concealed in his heart, until now.

Hugging her close in his arms he brushed her ear with his lips as he began to whisper: “Don't leave us my darling. I know we can never wed but that will never stop me loving you. I may not again experience the joys of your body, which will not matter to me, as long as you live and I can again look into your eyes, smell the fragrance of your hair, walk with you in a

garden and hear your voice call me once again, Collector! Collector!"

Arriving at Sadeka the car headlamps swept across Emma Schofield's gate illuminating the ever vigilant Zarif Khan awaiting them.

"Zarif Khan! We have a woman - shot. Please! Bring the memsahib Doctor?" called Christie urgently.

"Take her to the medical room, Christie Sahib," replied the tall Pathan, turning to spring back towards the bungalow.

"Gracious me, Robert!" exclaimed Emma, removing the chest wound bandage from Kishna as she lay on a treatment table. "What on earth was she doing getting involved in a battle?"

"Because she's Rajput! Bloody Rajput!" Christie's reply was savage, almost a curse upon her bravery.

"Will she live, Doctor? Will she live?" begged Sadul, his words heart-rending, beyond caring about dignity.

"I'll know more once we operate and that won't be until the morning, when it will be safer to do so." As she spoke two nurses came into the room, eyes still heavy with sleep, one native, the other white, both with blue belts around their waists.

"Saroj," she said to the dark girl, "sterilise the instruments, we will examine the wound for bone damage. Rose! Prepare fresh bandages then give me a hand to remove the dressing from the Princess's back."

"And as for you two," began Emma, rounding on the men, "clear out of here. Go across to the bungalow and help yourselves to my brandy."

An hour went by before the doctor joined them, both rising from their chairs on the veranda, standing expectantly.

"The bullet passed through," she began to explain, "it missed the lung but there are bones broken, one shattered with fragments that will have to be removed. That will be done later this morning when we operate."

"How is she? Is she awake?" asked Sadul, unable to restrain his questions.

"Thankfully she is still unconscious. It's the blood loss I'm concerned about more than anything."

"Will she recover?" Christie's question was put bluntly.

"After the operation the fight to mend will be hers alone," replied Emma.

"When can we see her?" asked Sadul.

"Perhaps this evening," replied the doctor. "Until then I don't want either of you within a shout of her."

"In that case I must get back," said Christie, "I have to find out what news there is from the army."

"I'll stay, Robert, if you don't mind?" excused Sadul, turning to Emma, "if that is agreeable with you, Doctor?"

"Yes, of course, Prince Sadul, the bungalow is yours," replied Emma speaking quickly in order to hail Christie as he hurried down the pathway. "Robert! That gang who attacked you at Ghorzandi. It was Sarwar".

"How do you know?" asked Christie, who had stopped in his tracks.

"One of our sweepers has just come across from the village. He said Sarwar was seen crossing the road to the north at last light yesterday."

"Emma," warned the district officer, his face showing a rage the doctor had never seen in him before, "if any of those curs show up here sporting shotgun wounds, I want them. By god I'll see they smell hell for this."

CHAPTER 19

*If man come not to gather
The roses where they stand,
They fade among their foliage;
They cannot seek his hand.*

William Cullen Bryant

Over Christmas at Ishak the brigade commander did endeavour to cut back on garrison commitments and duties, with the view of fostering some form of holiday spirit. His efforts, because of the Ghorzanid raid, were to a large extent spoiled, with his whole force out on picket and carrying out heavy patrolling of the roads. The latter did bring limited success, however. Of the gang seen crossing the Rasmak road north of Kandao, six of them were run to ground by a Scout gasht at a river crossing and captured. Disappointingly, the Hindu girl captive was not with them, raising fears of her death or sale into slavery across the border in Afghanistan.

Christmas day for the garrison, with the officers and senior NCO's waking the men with mugs of gunfire, rum in tea, was the 27th of December. Later they also served the men their Christmas dinner in the company dining tents, the walls hung round with blankets with cotton wool stuck to them, and real butter on the tables.

Following Proclamation Day, on the 2nd of January 1927 they swung back into top gear with a column operation deep into tribal territory. As a means of showing the flag, about every fortnight the border garrisons would mount peaceful reconnaissance raids into lands the tribesmen claimed as theirs. When out on column each garrison had its own title: Razmak was Razcol, Ishak was Iscol and so on. Lasting three to four days it was hard work and dangerous, for although peaceful on the British side, the Pathan considered this incursion of soldiers an opportune occasion, should the column lower its guard, to snipe or ambush. Even so the men loved it; they were out from behind the barbed wire, legs on the move.

Always taking two battalions, leaving one behind to man the cantonment, the infantry on this column was the QLI and a battalion of Gurkhas. They took with them a baggage train of animals, horses, camels and mules, the column supply transport carrying rations, fuel, tents, bedding and ammunition. On the trek they looked a shambolic muddle which was deceiving, for each animal and load had its position in the column and reason for being there. One body of mules that never gave an untidy appearance was the Artillery Pack Battery. Used to transport dismantled artillery pieces, between handlers and mules, there existed a firm bond of loyalty and mutual understanding.

Leaving Ishak, using the leap-frogging picket system as their protective shield, the column initially followed the unfinished road west towards the Afghan Border. After three miles the head of the column turned south across country.

Their goal was to be a Mahsud village with the task of administering punishment. Earlier a Scout gasht passing in the vicinity was ambushed, wounding two, Freddy D'urban, calling a *jezail* of the local clan, adjudging the men of the village to be the culprits, levied against them a fine of fifty serviceable rifles. Given reasonable time to pay but with the fine being ignored the column was on its way to show them the Indian government would not be snubbed.

Camping sites for the night had two priorities, within reach of water and defensible, the

second if need be overriding the first. One officer, normally a lieutenant, was responsible for marking out this site and his word was law. Ideally, placed in open country it would be a square, with rocks thrown up as sangars at each corner. The sides were also defended, either a shallow trench dug or walls built, again from rocks. In the centre, always cramped for space, were laid out the tent lines, gun lines, medical tent, cooking area and animal lines.

On guard with his section in one of the corner sangars, Joe Penton scanned the camp and the hills around. With the last of the two Scout gashts safely in, having during the day provided a patrol screen for the column, the last three pickets were signalled into the camp. It was dusk, cooking fires were being extinguished, men were taking advantage of the short period left to them for visiting the latrine, and the brigadier's orders conference with all senior officers seated on leather panniers discussing the next day's operations, was just breaking up. Soon a bugle would sound, sending everyone to their stand-to alarm positions on the camp perimeters. Then it would grow dark, another cold Frontier winter's night.

After stand-down Joe took his knee length woollen pullover out of his pack to slip it on. Then, feeding the rifle chain through a hole in his blanket, he locked it to his wrist before hunching up against the sangar wall for a few hours sleep until it was his turn on watch. Penton felt good about being out on column again, although this time there was one thing missing: his mate Ben. He was away on official leave seeing his wife, Leela. She was not with the other battalion wives in their hill station; instead she opted to remain with her parents at Ravlapore, a decision taken for the most part because of her pregnancy, the baby being due at the end of March.

Sharing Ben's joy at this news, Joe was himself suffering a spell of depression. As close as Rose was at Sadeka, sixty miles away, a mere skip, their dream of meeting had not yet come about, forcing them to continue their pledges of unfailing love for each other in letters, cherished, kept and re-read many times over.

By mid-morning the next day the offending village was at their mercy. Once the Scouts had posted pickets around it the column moved in, surrounding the whole place. Freddy D'urban then gave the headman a last chance to pay the outstanding fine. It not being forthcoming, the village was evacuated and a detachment of sappers sent in to lay explosive charges inside ten selected houses. Running the detonation wires up onto a hillside where the villagers were placed to watch the result of their arrogant disregard for Indian government authority, as one by one the chosen houses were blown apart. As a gesture of courtesy the village headman was invited to detonate the last building. With the gleeful anticipation of a Pathan tribesman's inbred love of destroying things, he took hold of the plunger handle, and then promptly blew his own house to rubble. Of course, this being the Frontier, where situations were frequently responded to unpredictably, the villagers, far from showing outrage or offering sympathy fell about laughing.

Miles Holt-Bate with his platoon as part of the cordon providing custody of the watching villagers did not partake in their hilarity, nor did many of 6 Platoon. The lieutenant watched these raggedly dressed people as they roared in merriment, his eyes cold with detestation. It was men and women such as these who had killed his own men, mutilating their bodies three years earlier in the Khyber Pass. He had heard Freddy D'urban in the camp the night before refer to the tribesmen as his chaps, as if they were an opposing cricket team. Miles scoffed to himself at this chummy reference, he regarded them in one way and one way only, as contemptible creatures of death.

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“Yes, your Highness, that's good, very good. Now let's try again. Only this time a little

higher”.

Princess Kishna, concealing her pain behind a set expression, once more raised a bent right arm upwards. As the forearm came level with her brow the man monitoring her efforts again gave encouragement.

“You're doing very well. Try to disregard the pain and concentrate on steering the arm above your head.”

The man directing her was the doctor who operated on her bullet wound. Douglas McDowell, a Eurasian, was one of Emma Schofield's colleagues and the nearest thing to a surgeon Sadeka could boast of.

Since her shooting two months had elapsed and she was now, after a month in the hospital, convalescing with Robert Christie at his bungalow. Soon after the event Sadul was summoned home to explain the circumstances of their involvement in the raid and a week later a consultant surgeon sent by the family arrived to examine Kishna and make an assessment of what should be implemented to improve her recovery. This as it turned out was no more than to rubber stamp what had already been done and to agree on future treatment. The wound was healing but Kishna would have to remain at the hospital until well enough to travel.

One reason for Kishna's satisfactory recuperation was due to the devoted attentions of Srilata. The second morning after the raid Christie arrived at his bungalow to find his housekeeper gravely concerned. “I must go to her,” were her first words on being told of the Princess's wounded condition. And so she did, despatched by Christie in the Humber, driven by the bungalow *syce*, who on occasions doubled as the district officer's chauffeur. At Sadeka she camped herself in a chair beside Kishna's bed, ministering to every need. Feeding her when she was strong enough to eat, bathing her with a hand cloth, seeing to her toilet arrangements and assisting the nurses and staff when changing bed linen.

Such was her concern for Kishna's safe recovery that at one stage she and Douglas McDowell had an exchange of words. Two days after the operation, Kishna was overtaken with fever, slipping at times into bouts of delirium. Srilata, without sleep, spent the whole time applying damp towels to Kishna's face and body. It was towards the end when, exhausted and believing not enough was being done to safeguard against the Princess's deteriorating beyond help, that Srilata confronted the doctor. A woman normally capable of keeping her emotions in check, on this occasion overcome by worry for Kishna's wellbeing she raged at the doctor, demanding of him that more treatment be given. His response after a brief flash of angry words, was to guide her onto the veranda where they sat for twenty minutes while McDowell calmed Srilata and assured her there was nothing more they could do except wait for the fever to break. Very shortly afterwards it did, after which he was found more often than not at the Princess's bedside passing the time in conversation with the two women.

“That's excellent! Excellent!” he congratulated. “Rest now.”

With relief Princess Kishna lowered her arm and sat down with an exhalation of breath.

“The arm,” began the doctor in outlining future treatment as she repositioned it back into a cloth sling hung around her neck, “keep it in that sling for at least another fortnight. At Sadeka bullet wounds are as common to us as broken limbs. I have seen how useless some parts of the body become when exercise is not applied during healing. So twice a day you must work the arm and shoulder and not allow them to stiffen.”

As he spoke McDowell was packing up his medical bag in preparation for returning to Sadeka. He had come to Janka once every second day checking on Kishna's return to health. This was to be his last visit, his patient, the next day would be returning to Jaswara.

“Thank you for all you have done, Doctor,” said Kishna, rising to express her gratitude and extending her left hand. “I could not have asked for a finer physician. It is because of

your skills that I am fully on the mend.”

“And the caring hands of Srilata,” reminded McDowell briefly, taking Kishna's hand while nodding at the bungalow housekeeper waiting beside them.

“Yes, of course,” she replied, “goodbye, Doctor.”

Leaving the veranda, McDowell was escorted to Emma Schofield's Napier by Srilata. They would remain in the drive beside the car talking for twenty minutes or more, as they had every day since his visits began.

“Who have you in mind as your replacement housekeeper, Robert?” asked Kishna of Christie as they sat together on the bungalow's back lawn after dinner that evening.

“I wasn't aware I was in need of one,” replied Christie, genuinely mystified by the question.

“Oh, Robert,” giggled the woman, “you really are a sightless unromantic. Haven't you wondered why Douglas McDowell has called here so often?”

“To attend to you,” came the obvious reply.

“Only partly! Only partly!” enlightened the princess. “My recuperation here provided him the added advantage of seeing Srilata.”

“Srilata and McDowell!” pondered Christie. “Well, if it progresses beyond flirtation I wish them well.”

“And you, Princess?” he asked, changing the subject around to her. “Do you have an admirer lurking about the palace?”

“Lurking indeed!” threw back the woman. “I have had enough with suitors.”

“Is that because the Maharaja has exhausted the candidate list or because you have exceeded the suitable age for a bride?” asked Christie, a twinkle of devilment in his eyes.

“Collector! If I were not familiar with the conversational roguery you get up to at times, I would be hurt by those suggestions,” countered Kishna, giving the district officer a feline smile before continuing: “in jest you say those things but in reality they are very near the truth. I have become an embarrassment, almost a shame upon the house.”

“Then why not marry?” asked Christie. “Has the list really dried up?”

Kishna didn't answer for a moment, then tilting her head back spoke to the stars.

“When I was a girl, before going to England, I used to daydream of the prince I would marry. My family, because I was rebellious and would not marry the husband they had chosen, confined me in purdah. And then of course I was rescued by a handsome young man on a satin black stallion.”

“And where did your prince of dreams carry you off to?” asked Christie, good-naturedly.

“A prince's castle,” answered Kishna, ending her tale of fantasy with a matter-of-fact tone, her head coming forward again.

“I'm sure when young we have all fantasized one way or another like that,” consoled Christie, sensing that the woman now felt mildly foolish for admitting to childhood dreams. “I must confess in my own youthful mind I snatched the odd distressed damsel from clutches and cliff tops.”

“Unfortunately the realities of life are not that simple,” replied Kishna.

“You have given up on your Prince charming, then?” teased Christie, smiling.

“I still harbour the thought that perhaps one day someone will come.” Kishna, affecting with this touching notion a whimsical air, lifted her eyes to Christie's. “What do you think, Collector? If you had the choice, would you come?”

Whether the question had serious intent or not, by the sensuous manner with which it was asked, Christie's lips were already forming the reply of, “through hell's gates,” when a broad shaft of light from the bungalow lit up a small area of the lawn around them. David, on an errand for his mother, had switched on a light by which to see. At one end of the rear veranda was a wall box where meat was kept at a cool temperature. Opening this, the boy took out

something wrapped in muslin cloth intended for the next day's meal. Then extinguishing the light he hurried away to his mother in the *bobajee-khana*, bungalow cookhouse.

"If you'll forgive me, Robert, I'll retire. With a long train journey to face tomorrow I would like a good night's rest beforehand," announced Kishna, standing, relieving Christie of the need to reply to her question.

Bidding goodnight to his guest the district officer remained to smoke a last cigarette and reflect on their conversation, giving inward thanks to young David's timely intervention. Over recent weeks Christie had waged a battle with himself, repeatedly challenging his convictions, desires, common sense and moral courage. The outcome of this tortured conflict was his coming to terms with making the only decision that he could live the rest of his life with, one he almost compromised by confessing to Kishna a sentiment extending beyond that of fondness.

Keeping his destination secret, Christie had applied for and received permission to take a week's leave. Which was not a vast amount of time for a holiday but as he had told Sir Anthony Rhymer, the Regent of Jaswara in a letter, his proposed visit was hardly a social event.

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After waiting concealed all day among rocks above the valley, the party of men loosened their *chadars* in preparation for descending from the hills to the village below. In the still spring dusk, blue smoke rose from the houses' evening cooking fires to settle in a haze above the village's roofs and towers. The land was Afghanistan, east of the Maraha River opposite India's North Waziristan Border.

Of the sixteen men who had slung their rifles over their backs or balanced them on one shoulder, all wore Afghan dress. Two though were not Afghans; their disguise was betrayed by the manner of their walk. Reaching the valley floor as night settled, the line of silent men crossed crop fields, passing tall stacks of *bhusa* chopped straw piled either side of the pathway leading to the village mosque.

At the house of the mullah they were greeted by a servant in the courtyard and invited to wash their hands in bowls of water provided. On the completion of this courtesy, three were ushered into the house to be met by the mullah who salaamed with a deep bow

"Peace be on thee, oh warrior of the Faith."

"And on thee be peace," replied a gaunt, bony featured Afghan with a scraggy, pepper grey beard, his eyes permanently narrowed from a daily existence governed by suspicion, intrigue and hate. He was the Faqir of Matun.

After the mullah introduced his sons and the village headman, the Faqir presented the two men with him as friends of the Faith who had journeyed from the far west. These two, both Europeans, one blond the other dark, responded with impeccable Muslim propriety. Once the formalities between guests and host were dispensed with the mullah escorted everyone to a room where cushions and rugs were spread and food set before them.

On completion of the meal the visitors were led through the village to the council ground. Around this village square of flattened earth, open wicked oil lamps were placed, which tainted the motionless air with a rank smell of burning oil. Under a holly oak tree the newly arrived party sat down to face those already gathered. With the oil lamps providing more shadow than light, fifty or more men awaited the talk to begin. They, Afghan Border tribesmen, Zadrans, Tannis, Ghilzais, Durrans, and others, were the representatives of tribes and powerful clans. The first to speak was the mullah, voicing local worries of the British and their road building that would bring merchants and settlers from the Indian heartland up to the very Border itself, from where the influence of the despised British Christians, and

Sikhs and Hindu idol worshippers could spread into their lands from across the Frontier. Outlining the agenda of this *jirgah*, by fuelling fears and enlarging upon rumours, the mullah gave way for the Faqir to stand and address the assembly. His posture stooped, he flung his arms in the air, the *dilaq* patchwork cloak he wore billowing out.

“God is great!” he exclaimed loudly. “Know me, brothers. I am the Faqir of Matun. God is great!”

“God is great!” echoed his audience.

“Warriors of the hills,” he began, “Allah has sent me here on a mission. Soon the hated *feringi* will push their roads up to the Border, leaving your valleys and villages open to invasion from the infidel money lenders and those who burn the souls of their dead on fiery pyres. They must not be allowed to cross and befoul your lands.”

“The talk of the roads across the Border is that they are to provide the *powindahs* with a shorter route, not bring the dark skinned Hindu to our hills,” called a voice from the semicircle of listeners.

“Yes! And when has a white faced *feringi* ever kept his word,” replied the Faqir, seizing on this. “Remember how he comes, *awal roti, bad soti*.” First bread and then the stick.

What followed was a wrangling debate that echoed around the square in the best Pathan tradition, everyone talking at once, arguing and questioning each other, the delegation below the tree exercising no form of control, but simply adding to the exchanges of opinions and dialogue.

At last a voice from the shadows asked a question that allowed the Faqir once again to gain the centre stage. “If there is danger to our lands from outside why has the Amir not signalled an alarm?”

“Amir!” scoffed the Faqir, spitting onto the soil at his feet. “When has Kabul cared about what happens in these hills. They think only of themselves, their women, the warmth of their fires and their bellies. Look not to them for an ally.”

“The *feringi* have many guns, many soldiers. If we are to push them away from our Border, what is to stop them from returning again and again?” asked someone, visualising the escalation of events sparked by a large cross-border raid.

“Once beaten the *feringi* will not be back” replied the Faqir raising a finger, his voice adopting an insidious tone. “In the lands beyond the great Indus the people are crying out to be rid of the white faces. Soon with the help of others they will rebel, slit the foreigners' throats and scatter their bones to the jackals. Then their march to our Borders will be finished, the *feringi* gone forever!”

“Who are these others?” cried a sceptic. “And what is the greatness of their power that they will defeat the *feringi*'s armies.”

“They will be given the same power as we have been given,” replied the Faqir. His words thundering off the surrounding walls as he turned to take two large pouches held out to him by the Europeans. Then holding them up he spilled their gleaming contents to the ground. “Russian gold! For you. And with it and with the blessing of Allah we will strike the enemy a fatal blow. For I, the Faqir of Matun declare *jihad*, a holy war upon the *feringi*. Now brothers! Now is the time for Azrael the angel of death to visit their beds.”

These pledges and statements, intended to incite, would in the weeks to come prove false. Russia had throughout the nineteenth century, with designs on India, continually sent agents and instigators to make mischief along its Afghan Border. With the replacement of the Tsarist government by Lenin's Bolshevik regime, this had for a time ceased. Now in the last year this expansionist policy had experienced a rebirth. In search of provocateurs to further their cause, the Faqir of Matun was found, in hiding, with a price on his head, in caves on the Kotanni Mountains. What made this hunted old man accept the mantle of religious crusader was not the inducement of gold nor their fairytales of the Punjab about to explode in

rebellion and the Mahatma Ghandi movement soon to overthrow the British Indian government. The gold meant nothing and the words he knew to be lies, but to someone embittered and raging for revenge against those who had killed his son, it was as if a gift from the Prophet himself.

At the sight of gold coins cast at their feet, any scepticism among the gathering of tribal chiefs was brushed aside. In heady outbursts of unrestrained fervour they leaped to their feet.

"I have a thousand men sworn to follow!"

"Five hundred await your call!"

"On your word two thousand rifles will spring to your side!"

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From Sir Anthony Rhymer's Regency headquarters to the state winter palace was a pleasant, ten minute drive through the northern outskirts of Udaigarh. It was March, late spring in Jaswara and the morning was well into the day's full heat. Off the roadway flowers and blossoming shrubs were parading their last finery before the summer heat arrived to dry them to powder.

The passenger in Sir Anthony's car, being driven to the winter palace, looked at these as he passed, but Robert Christie's eyes and ears registered neither sight nor sound, his mind in turmoil, fearful that his mission to Jaswara would end in disappointment. Arriving by train earlier, he had gone straight to the Regency where he announced to Sir Anthony the purpose of his visit. Hearing him out, Sir Anthony did not voice disapproval, or attempt to dissuade him. He did, however, catalogue fully each and every insurmountable obstacle standing between him and a successful conclusion to his quest.

Turning into the palace grounds the gate guard presented arms to the familiar car as it drove past. On the field-sized lawn blue peacocks turned to watch the automobile, while squirrels darted between trees. The palace, when first constructed was a fort, which under Mogul rule was enlarged and refurbished in Persian and Turkish styles. Its colour was a dazzle of white and pink that highlighted towers and domes and windowed turrets, all joined by balconies and enclosed, decorative stone verandas. At the main courtyard entrance, after thanking, then dismissing Sir Anthony's chauffeur, Christie was met by the palace *majordomo*.

"The Dewan is expecting you, Christie sahib. If you will follow me, please," he said bowing, before turning to lead the way.

While the upper floors of the palace were bedrooms, apartments and leisure rooms, the lower floor was given over to reception rooms, function halls and offices. At one of these office doors the *majordomo* knocked and when bidden to enter announced the district officer's presence.

Discharging his chief secretary, Kishna's father left his desk to greet Christie. It was a large office with a high roof, the walls inlaid with century old frescoes, its windows filtering the sun's rays with lattice framework.

"It is always a pleasure to see you again, Robert," welcomed the Dewan, holding out his hand to the Englishman.

"And I cherish each visit, your Excellency," replied Christie, inclining his head as he shook the prime minister's hand.

Taller than his older brother, the Maharaja, Narain Singh was also thinner and his upswept cleft beard less traced with grey.

"Sir Anthony's telephone message was that you requested a formal audience, but not too formal, I pray?" ventured the Dewan, escorting Christie across the room, motioning him to sit in one of six lounge chairs positioned around a low, carved wood table.

"Yes! Your Excellency. The nature of my visit is formal. Not officially as a servant of the Indian Civil Service but on my own behalf," began Christie, sitting with a straight back, his white topee held on a forearm. "First, I must submit my most profound apology for placing your daughter, while under my charge, in a locality and in circumstances which very nearly resulted in her death."

"Robert!" replied the prime minister. "As Princess Kishna's father I am greatly touched that you should travel all the way to Jaswara to deliver such a sincere declaration. However, Prince Sadul on his return shortly after, made it amply clear that the blame for my daughter's near fatal shooting was largely due to her own eagerness for the fray. You can't hold yourself accountable for that."

"Never-the-less, your Excellency, it was as a result of accepting my invitation that the Princess's life was put in danger," pointed out Christie, "I do feel the responsibility for blame is mine and mine only."

"Robert, the Chief Commissioner at Peshawar has sent us a detailed report compiled by your own District Police and in it they state that my daughter killed a raider who was about to shoot you. And that my son shot a second raider who, it is alleged, wounded Princess Kishna. Although imminently near a tragedy, my daughter is safe and recovering and despite her somewhat reckless action, she did not dishonour the Royal House of Jaswara. So please, do dispel your guilt, my daughter's wounding was not the result of negligence on your part," urged the Dewan.

"I feel undeserving of your leniency, your Excellency. I shall never consider myself entirely guiltless in the matter," replied Christie.

"Let your mind be at rest, Robert. Neither Prince Sadul nor Princess Kishna attributed to you one morsel of reproach and it is by them that you should measure your discredit," concluded the prime minister moving their discussion on to another topic. "Now, what are these other subjects you wish us to examine?"

"Only one other, your Excellency," clarified the Englishman, his throat drying, a tightness in his stomach he had not experienced since his war years in France. "It is a request which I know I should not ask of you. But one that will not give me rest until it is made. I respectfully ask for your permission to ask Princess Kishna to become my wife."

The prime minister's expression did not alter. Only with his eyes by way of darting them back and forth across Christie's face did he show surprise. Standing, he faced the nearest window, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Robert, you are not a foreigner strange to our ways. You know our customs – our traditions – our codes."

"All too well, sir," confirmed Christie, "which is why I feel as I speak such pain and anguish. For I have insulted you and the Royal family by asking to marry your daughter. In doing so I beg your forgiveness but I find I can no longer restrain my love for her."

"And my daughter. Does she return your love?" asked the Dewan still speaking to the window.

"In all honesty, your Excellency, I do not know," replied Christie truthfully. "We are not lovers. I have never confessed my love to her or to any other and she treats me with no more than sisterly fondness."

"Despite this you believe she would consent to becoming your wife?" questioned the Rajput noble.

"That is my dilemma, sir. Only by asking will I know. And then one way or another, my torment will end." Christie fought to maintain an even tone to his voice, keeping all signs of emotion in check.

"Robert, you know what our Rajput practice is on retaining the purity of our blood line?" asked the Dewan.

"Yes, sir, I am aware," replied Christie.

"In the Royal Houses rather than have our daughters marry impure Princes of other States; we would instead see them wed to commoners. It is a ruling I have never known to be broken." To deliver his last sentence, Narain Singh turned about to fix Christie with a meaningful stare.

"I'm in love with your daughter, your Excellency," was the Englishman's only counter.

"Robert, although I am Kishna's father my appointment is that of officiator of affairs of State. It is the Maharaja himself who presides over court matters and foremost of those is the selection of compatible marriage matches for the heirs to the dynastic line. It is he who decides who Princess Kishna should wed."

"Sir! To date she has refused all suitors proposed to her," reminded Christie, desperate to justify his petition.

"An undisputable fact, Robert," agreed the prime minister. "But do you believe you have the acceptable credentials? Are your horoscopes in harmony, are you of suitable Aryan blood, are you the son of a Rajput Clan?"

Christie, his resolve wavering, knew Narain Singh was not awaiting an answer, his gaze lowering to the chair seat opposite.

For some moments no words passed between the two men, Christie staring dejectedly, the prime minister observing the handsome Englishman who would be forever a part of Jaswara's folklore.

"Robert!" In a tender tone the Dewan's voice broke their silence. "Below these windows is a garden. If you wait there refreshment will be brought to you. I will see the Maharaja. The decision on the issue must be made by him."

Complying, Christie was stopped as he opened the door to leave.

"You realise, Robert," reminded the prime minister, "that there will be no dowry. If the Maharaja grants your plea, she will come to you penniless. All her jewellery is the property of the State."

"To me, your Excellency, to have her is beyond value," replied Christie. "If I had the wealth I would pay the State a king's ransom for her."

Entering the Maharaja's apartment the prime minister found him seated at his desk.

"Ah, my brother!" he began, "the question of Princess Kishna's spinsterhood has again arisen."

The Maharaja's expression became mild puzzlement.

"A suitor has applied for her as his bride," explained the Dewan in a matter of fact manner.

The Maharaja's face instantly changed to that of displeasure angered that preliminary notifications had not been exchanged.

"He is here now, awaiting an answer," further informed his brother.

Straightening in his chair, the Maharaja's hands turned to fists, fury mounting in his eyes.

"He is an Englishman," concluded Narain Singh, watching with concealed amusement as the Maharaja rose from his chair as if a volcano about to erupt.

"You wished to see me, father?" asked Princess Kishna, on opening the Dewan's office door. Wearing a European patterned sky blue muslin dress with a white silk sling supporting her right arm, she stood holding the door handle, awaiting a reply.

"Yes! Yes! Daughter. Come in!" confirmed the prime minister.

"I'm afraid once again the question of your marriage has surfaced," declared her father, placing his writing pen down.

"Marriage!" she snapped, stopping in her tracks. "I thought we were done with selecting suitors for me."

"It is not a matter to be ignored," replied the Dewan. "You are a Princess. You have

passed by ten years your date for marrying. Others would be ashamed; you however seem to revel in it but now it must end. And we did not select him, he selected you”.

“He! Selected me!” exclaimed Kishna, “and the Maharaja allowed this?”

With reservations - yes,” replied her father, “he is poor and lives far away.”

“Ha!” snorted the Princess. “And who is this pauper who expects me to share his beggary?”

“See for yourself, daughter,” suggested the Dewan, pointing to a window. “He is in the garden below, awaiting your answer.”

“Here?” her voice was almost a shout. “He has the effrontery to come here - expecting an instant reply? What's this bold rogue's name?”

“Look for yourself,” advised her father a second time, picking up his pen to pretend to write.

Torn between curiosity and the temptation to storm from the room, curiosity won over pride. As she sauntered in hesitant stages to the window, the Dewan looked up to watch his daughter. Reaching the window she raised on tiptoes to see through the latticing. Below was an Englishman, sat on a terrace wall, beside him a white topee. A servant had just offered him a drink from a tray, which he accepted, placing it untouched on the wall. Watching his daughter's face change from indignant anger to amazement, then rapturous joy was to remain one of the most pleasurable moments of Narain Singh's life.

“It's Robert! It's Robert!” she cried turning to exclaim: “He came! He came!”

As the Dewan left his desk, Kishna ran to embrace him.

“Oh father, thank you! Thank you!” she sobbed, tears of happiness beginning to tumble down her cheeks.

“Thank your uncle, my child,” said her father, hugging his daughter, one hand stroking her hair as she pressed her head to his shoulder. “But in agreeing to your marriage he has stipulated you will not have the sanction of a royal wedding.”

“It's of no great importance,” she replied between sobs.

“As long as I and Robert are together, that is all I ask.”

“Then go to him and tell him,” said her father easing her back to arm's length. “He is suffering the devil's own torment waiting to hear the Maharaja's ruling.”

The princess did not rush straight away to the terraced garden, first bathing her reddened eyes in cool water and waiting for a servant to collect for her a flowered garland.

On the terrace Christie waited like a man in a trance, alternating between sitting against a low wall and pacing up and down, hardly aware he was doing either. Around him, unnoticed, the garden was full of natural beauty and sweet scents. At the fountain a clump of maidenhair grew surrounded by red and orange blossoms. At the walls, above patches of purple heliotrope, blue convolvulus climbed to the balconies. High above him on the palace's tallest point where a flight of white doves soared in wheeling circles, the Imperial standard flew.

“Collector! I'll not forgive you for this. I had to learn of your presence here from the servants.”

Dragged from worried depths, Christie found the last person on earth he wished to see at that moment approaching him through the garden. In her left hand Princess Kishna carried a garland of flowers.

“I do beg your pardon, Princess. I first had to conclude a point of business with your father.”

“Your visit though, it is a surprise,” played Kishna innocently, determined to be taken by him on her terms. “Did you inform anyone here you were coming?”

“Ah! No! I had no time to get off a telegram before leaving,” he lied, before quickly changing the subject, “your injury? There are no complications occurring?”

“None! The exercises are proving their worth. Soon I will dispense with the sling,”

assured Kishna.

As their talk continued Christie began to lose concentration, re-sitting on the wall, repeatedly glancing to the palace entrance, hoping to be summoned.

"Do you love me, Robert?" came a question like a thunder bolt, catching the Englishman completely off balance.

"Good God! You certainly know how to put someone on the spot," replied Christie, buying a few moments' reprieve in answering her sudden, frank question.

"Do you?" she repeated.

"Yes!" he admitted. "I have been secretly in love with you for some time."

"When? When did you fall in love with me? That one night we made love?" Kishna waited as a silence fell between them.

"No!" replied Robert, his eyes staring straight into hers, his voice soft and sincere. "The evening in the field after you had delivered the Harijan baby, when I called you remarkable and you laughed at the word."

"Am I still remarkable, Robert?"

"Yes! Even more so." Christie knew that at this of all times he should not be confessing his suppressed feelings of the past years to Kishna but with her here, so close and so beautiful, his will power was crumbling away.

"Then why have you never told me of this love?" came her next forthright question.

"Damn it, Princess," thundered Christie in a burst of anger pushing himself from the wall to walk a few steps away. "You know. It would have been futile to do so. You are a princess of a royal house of Rajputana, your customs prohibit any form of shared infatuation between us."

Christie suddenly realising he had let the discussion get dangerously out of control, replied bluntly in an attempt to forestall any more questions from this woman he so deeply loved which might put in jeopardy what was, at that moment, being negotiated within the palace.

"I love you," confessed Kishna with the innocent grace of a regal maiden.

The Englishman could not answer his mind a mixture of relief, joy and dread of impending sorrow.

"Robert, ask me to marry you. Now! Please!" Kishna's request was calmly presented although her eyes pleaded.

"No!" rejected the district officer, his anger returned.

"I won't steal you! I won't".

The princess stood silent, watching this man of high principles whose love she had for long reciprocated. Only for her, it had happened on the first day of their meeting.

"I have not asked you to steal me, Robert," replied Kishna, with smothered amusement. "But should it be considered, there is no one here who will stop you. Not the palace guard. Apprehend Chitor Christie? More than likely they would give our elopement a royal escort to the borders of British India."

Again the Englishman could only stand silent.

"Ask me, Robert? It's important. Please ask me?" appealed this dark, alluring, eastern beauty before him, whom he so desperately yearned to wed.

"My darling. Will you marry me?" he heard his voice say. In reply Kishna stepped forward and with her left hand she draped the garland of flowers around his neck.

"Do you know what I have done?" she asked.

Christie, well aware of the significance of the marriage garland, looked up from the ring of flowers on his chest. "You have accepted me."

"Yes, my love." There was a faint triumphant smile on the princess's lips, "I have accepted you."

"It's of no consequence" stated Christie solemnly, "no matter what we may feel for each other I will not debase the courtesies and friendship your family has shown me by taking you for my wife without the Maharaja's permission. I can't! I can't!"

"But he has given it, Robert," announced the princess, filling with pride at Christie's chivalrous stand.

"He--- He has given it?" repeated the Englishman, staring with surprise at the woman, his expression momentarily showing anger. "And you knew? You let me stew here all this time, and you knew?"

Then, as the realisation of what she had said fully dawned on him, his face softened in relief. Stepping forward he gathered her in his arms, tracing his lips over her cheeks and neck.

"You are a vixen," he chided. "I have been experiencing purgatory awaiting that news."

"I'm sorry, Robert," she said in apology, "but I could not come to you as a gift. It had to be a pledge between you and I. One bonded by mutual love."

With gentle motion each sought the other's lips, lingering on the desirous feelings this aroused, bringing to each the memory of a night spent in the heights of unbridled passion.

"I told you I would marry none but a warrior, Collector," whispered his Rajput princess as their lips parted, "and it is none but a warrior I have won."

CHAPTER 20

*Death is the black camel that
kneels before every door.*

Indian Proverb

Pausing for a moment in her writing, Rose Rickman looked up to check on a woman asleep in the bed just a few steps from her. Quiet and resting peacefully for the first time that day, Rose could see her face through the mosquito-net, pale but dry and not, as had been the case, glistening from outbreaks of sweating. Elinor Ratcliffe, a woman in her early thirties, was suffering from a recurrence of malaria fever. Her husband, Oliver, was the District Excise Assistant Commissioner who, unfortunately, was called away at Peshawar. As the family were close friends of Emma Schofield, to nurse Elinor through this bout of illness, Rose offered to come in to Janka from Sadeka so as to administer whatever care was needed until she was satisfactorily recovered.

Although nearing midnight, Rose, sitting at a small desk near the veranda doorway, was using no artificial light to work by, the brilliance of an April full moon gave more than enough illumination by which to read and write. Finishing a letter to Joe Penton she had just begun another to her aunt Harriet. After asking about her two cousins, Peter and Simon, who were both now enlisted in the 2nd QLI's corps of bugles, Rose was interrupted by sounds and movement on the veranda. The family dog, a black Labrador, its neck fur raised and giving a muted growl, had just slunk in a cowed manner past the veranda door.

Leaving her writing, Rose stepped out onto the veranda to investigate. Outside the bungalow, looking to left and right she could neither see nor hear anything suspicious. The night was quiet, the garden still, no shadows moved in the surrounding apricot orchards, the servants' quarters and stables were peaceful and now there was no sign of the dog. Assuring herself that all was well, none-the-less, as a routine precaution, Rose walked down the veranda to look in on the family's only child, Teresa, their five year old daughter. From the veranda window the nurse saw with alarm that the child's bed was empty, the mosquito-net pushed back.

Catching her breath, Rose rushed to the nearest door. In the central hallway she came to a halt with a sigh of relief. Teresa, her brown hair hanging down the back of her white nightdress, stood barefoot at the lounge doorway looking in. As Rose's heartbeat steadied she approached the girl, intending to gather her up for bed. Before reaching the girl, Teresa, as if to explore, slowly walked into the lounge.

"Teresa! What is it sweet? A bad dream? Is that wha---" Rose, entering behind the young child spoke in a whisper as she reached out to catch hold of her, then froze dead in her tracks.

The room was large and extensively furnished, which should have provided darkened areas. However, with the spotlight beam of a full north Indian moon flooding through the windows, this was not the case. The three men in the room made no attempt to conceal themselves - not because in this light there was nowhere to hide - the reason was that they were unafraid. Two stood beside a gun cabinet where rifles and a shotgun were secured by a lock and chain. The third was to one side of Rose, ten feet back from the hall doorway. Except for turbans and loincloths, all three, each holding a knife, were naked.

“Salaam,” said Rose, reaching out to clasp Teresa's shoulders and draw the girl close against her dressing-gown.

“If you have business with the household you will have to return tomorrow. Everyone is asleep.”

Even though she was well aware they were men hell bent on theft, the nurse found herself compelled to say something. That she received no reply did not surprise her or even matter, the important thing was that she spoke to them and remained calm. Also, by speaking in English, she was lessening the chance of reminding the robbers of who she was, for they had met before. One, standing by the gun cabinet was Abdur Sarwar, while the man to the side of her with the recognisable facial scar was Feroz-un-Din.

In reacting to their discovery, Sarwar, raising his knife, simply looked at Feroz-un-Din, pointing with the blade point at the hall doorway. Attracting Rose's attention by clicking his tongue, Feroz-un-Din motioned for her to remain silent by placing a finger to his lips while slipping behind to one side of the doorway, blocking the two Europeans' exit.

“Who are they, Rose?” asked Teresa, looking up over her shoulder at the nurse.

“They are men your father has sent to collect his rifles,” whispered Rose in a comforting voice. “Now, be quiet until they finish. Then we shall both go back to bed.”

As the two men at the gun cabinet returned to the business of stealing, Rose with an arm across Teresa's chest held the girl tight against her. Patting the child's shoulder with her other hand to soothe away doubt, Rose a captive viewer, watched the two Pathan robbers as they worked. In dressing-gown and sandalled slippers, with her blond hair hanging long down her back she believed for the moment that the gang did not, as yet, remember her.

For what seemed a long time, with the room's air beginning to taint with the foul odour of the men's' body stench, the woman and child waited. Once Teresa looked up to whisper Rose's name, only to receive a soft hush from the nurse.

“Rose! What is this? Who are they?” demanded a voice behind. It was Elinor Ratcliffe. In her nightdress, on bare feet, still suffering from fever and distraught at awakening to find intruders in her house, she began raving in a loud voice. Then at the two men by the gun cabinet she shouted: “You! Get away from there. Get awa---uaahh”.

Rose, her head spinning around had no time to shout a warning at her shocked and sick patient to remain silent, but could only witness with sickening horror Feros-un-Din pounce from behind to draw his knife across Elinor's throat. As the woman dropped to the floor, her eyes, opened wide, were now slowly closing, a flood of blood gushing from her slit throat.

Keeping Teresa's face away from the sight Rose backed off to the near wall.

“Mummy! Mummy!” cried the girl fighting Rose's hands, trying to turn and go to her mother.

“It's alright! It's alright Teresa. Your mother can't talk, she's fainted. Be still and be quiet,” whispered Rose, gripping the girl tightly, holding her head so that she could not turn to see her mother collapsed on the stone flag floor, her face lying in a rapidly enlarging pool of blood.

Now fearful for their safety, Rose warily watched and listened to the gang members as they reacted to this ominous escalation of their nights' robbery.

“The servants will have heard. They will raise the alarm,” warned Feros-un-Din.

“Yes,” agreed Sarwar, joining Feros-un-Din to stand over Elinor Ratcliffe's body. “We must leave the rifles.”

Before saying more he looked to Rose and Teresa, his cold predatory eyes assessing their value, loath to depart empty handed. “We will take the woman as hostage. Kill the child.”

“No! Cried Rose clutching Teresa even closer to her. “The child's father has money. He will pay richly for her safe return. Take both of us. I will see she does not cause you any delay.”

Momentarily surprised by Rose's outburst in Pushtu, the three outlaws stared at her in a silence broken by Sarwar gesturing with a flick of his knife towards the veranda door: "Take both."

As Feros-un-Din and the third villain moved towards them, Rose lifted Teresa into her arms. "Now, Teresa we have to go with these men. We will be coming back to your mother and father, so please don't worry. And it is very, very important you be quiet and don't cry out."

"I don't want to, Rose," pleaded the young girl. "I want to stay! I want to stay!"

"Shush, Teresa! Shush my love. We must go. We must," said Rose in a light but firm voice as she responded to the push by Feros-un-Din towards the veranda door.

Crossing the garden they were joined by a fourth figure who took up the rear. At the surrounding wall Teresa was handed over by two of the men, while Rose was bundled over with hands, the back of which, as were their bodies, slick with cheetah fat. Through the orchards they ran, Rose struggling to carry Teresa, her sandal slippers threatening to fly off at every step. Before crossing one of the district's main roads a halt was made in the cover of a clump of barberry bushes. Here a fifth member of the gang awaited them, guarding the others' clothing and rifles.

As they donned their garb, Rose, biting at the lower fabric of her dressing-gown tore off strips of cloth to tie her sandals more securely to her feet. Using the same material she bound Teresa's bare feet as some protection, should she be forced by fatigue to release the girl to the ground. Reaching the bushes, Rose was breathless, her arms aching terribly from carrying the girl, but it was a pain she was prepared to suffer as long as her mind and flesh could endure it, for she believed that the gang members, should Teresa become a hindrance, would kill her with neither compassion nor pity.

Rose was comparatively new to the Frontier, even so she had come to know that the Pathan, despite his lawless, piratical habits, did hold sacredly to a fundamental humanitarian code never to intentionally kill women or children. Abdur Sarwar and his ruthless band, by so coldly taking Elinor Ratcliffe's life had showed they did not consider themselves bound by those ethics. Armed with that knowledge, Rose knew that both her and Teresa's life depended on keeping up with the gang during their flight back to the safety of the tribal territories.

Receiving a painful kick to a thigh, she looked up at a man standing over her.

"Rise. We go."

--oOo--

Very early the next morning Robert Christie was at his desk sorting through telegrams and reports which had arrived with the last postal delivery of the evening before. Chuckling at one telegram from Delhi which read: 'Just heard of your imminent wedding. Congratulations. Am expecting invitation and own elephant to ride in wedding procession. Hunt'. He was about to put it in his desk, when his chief clerk knocked and entered from the outer office.

"Sahib, the Superintendent of Police is just now on the telephone. He wishes to speak to you. A matter of grave urgency."

Halting his car in the Ratcliffe's drive, Christie hurriedly sought out Bernard Crawshaw. Directed to the rear veranda by one of the Sikh police constables stationed on the front entrance, he found the district superintendent looking out over the garden and orchard where some of his uniformed men were searching.

"Bernard," called Christie, alerting the policeman to his arrival.

"Good morning, sir," greeted Crawshaw, turning to walk towards Christie with his hands clasped behind his back, a leather bound swagger stick tucked under one arm.

"No sign of the child and nurse. My chaps are out beating about the brush but we've

turned up not so much as a foot print.”

“Thank God,” replied Christie. “Then there's a chance they could still be alive.”

“Yes,” agreed the policeman, “But if so, then undoubtedly kidnapped.”

“By whom?” asked Christie

“Difficult to say,” replied Crawshaw, shrugging his shoulders, while turning to lead the district officer into the lounge. “The servants discovered the body at first light. They say nothing has been taken, although the gun cabinet looks to have been tampered with.”

Christie examined the cabinet lock then joined Crawshaw who stood beside a pool of blood that had not yet been cleaned up.

“My guess is they were caught in the act by Elinor,” said Crawshaw, “Then one way or another this led to them abandoning robbery for kidnapping.”

“Poor Elinor,” commented Christie earnestly, for he had been a dinner guest here on two occasions.

“There was no struggle,” went on Crawshaw. “Her throat was cut cleanly – she must have fainted at the shock, then died of asphyxiation.”

“Who? Who?” demanded Christie in frustrated anger, his voice echoing off the room's walls.

“If they're from the hills they'll be skulking back that way now,” offered Crawshaw.

“What action have you taken so far, Bernard?” asked Christie, putting aside his personal grief to assume his role as the district officer.

“If the murder and possible kidnapping was committed by tribesmen from beyond the Administrative Boundary, their interception will be a matter for our border posts and the army. Neil Osborne is attending to that side of things. If this filthy business was done by criminals from within the district, our informants will soon give us news of that.”

“Can you think of anything else which could be done?” pressed Christie. “I must get news of this off to Peshawar and I want to inform the Chief Commissioner that we are doing everything possible to find and rescue Miss Rickman and the child.”

“You could ask for an aircraft,” suggested Crawshaw. “A few of those RAF bods up in their machines are worth a regiment of cavalry on the ground.”

“Right!” replied Christie. “I'll bloody well demand them. For the rest of the morning I'll be in my office at the bungalow. If anything new develops telephone or send a messenger.”

“Oh, sir,” spoke up the police superintendent as Christie stepped out onto the veranda. “One other action I've taken. I sent a local chappy who's done work for us before into the town to find out what the bazaar gup is on this. I've found in the past, the lower you go the better the information.”

--oOo--

Once a week at Ishak, just before the guard dismounted, the *khassadars* levies who watched over bridges and other key points on the new road, would present themselves at the garrison for payment of their wages. Not allowed onto the camp armed, they would first have to leave their rifles at the guardroom. The man there responsible for checking them in was the guard lance-corporal.

“Right-o, yah old skate, here's yah chitty,” said Joe Penton as he took the last tribesman's rifle, giving in return a numbered tin disc. The rifles were put in racks with corresponding numbers for the *khassadars* to collect on return of the disc after being paid.

“Gawd,” announced Bert Collins who helped Joe take in the rifles. “Turban to toe-nails them ginks pong worse than a chicken run.”

“From the number of beads and notches them rifles are sporting, Berty my son, I wouldn't be in any hurry to telling 'em that,” warned Penton referring to the symbols signifying the

number of killings each had done.

"And the way they take care of their bandook," he continued, drawing the bolt back on the last rifle handed him, to squint down the dirt obstructed barrel, "it's a wonder the bullets find their way out."

"Corporal Penton," called Sergeant Harry Evans, the guard commander of the night before, who was also B Company's 7 Platoon sergeant. "Just got a buzz. The RSM wants the pleasure of your company so nip along and see him."

"After dismissal parade, Sergeant?" asked Joe handing the tribesman's rifle to Collins.

"No!" replied the sergeant crossing from the doorway to take a chair behind his table desk. "Want's you sharpish, so get on your hoppers."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Joe halting to attention on finding RSM Rickman standing alone, a short distance from the battalion orderly room tent. "You asked to see me, sir?"

"Yes, Corporal Penton," replied the RSM in a sober, almost sad voice, not at all the crisp, forthright response he normally gave.

"It's not to do with you. It's your mate, Corporal Tysall," he continued. "With the Padre away on leave the Commanding Officer wants a close friend near to hand when he speaks to him. Come along, I'll explain as we walk."

Falling into step with Rickman as he moved off they marched through the tent lines and across the football pitch to just short of the camp's low boundary wall. There two men were waiting, Lieutenant-Colonel Stanfield and the adjutant, but not for them. Very closely on their heels Sergeant Major Little arrived as escort to Ben Tysall. As both halted to attention saluting, the colonel returned their salutes, dismissing Little with a, "Thank you, Sergeant-Major, that will be all." Then with a look and a nod to the adjutant the latter also left, taking John Rickman with him.

"Stand easy, Corporal Tysall," said Colonel Stanfield, walking up to address him just a few paces away. "The reason I have asked to see you here is because I have a difficult task to perform, not one that can be dealt with on a normal orderly room parade."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged Tysall as the CO paused.

"We have just received a signal from Ravlapore Garrison Headquarters," began the Colonel, his voice becoming formal his head rising, the eyes looking away. "Your wife gave birth to a daughter yesterday morning."

"A daughter, sir," replied Ben breaking into a smile, his shoulders going back as he rose off his heels. "Thank you very much, sir. That's great news. Just great."

"Corporal Tysall," continued Stanfield, now looking the corporal in the eyes, "tragically... your wife died during the childbirth."

"Sir?" uttered Ben, his face slowly registering shocked dismay.

"I'm sorry, Corporal Tysall," said the colonel.

"Not dead, sir. She can't be dead, sir," pleaded Ben, his voice rising in appeal.

"There is no doubt," replied the colonel. "When the signal came in I had the Adjutant verify it. The confirmation of your wife's death has just arrived – I'm sorry."

"Sir... Sir..." repeated the corporal, trying to think of something to say that would alter this nightmare and somehow allow his wife to remain alive.

"You'll be wanting to see your daughter," interrupted the colonel. "At the first opportunity, on compassionate grounds, I will ensure you are sent away on leave."

With no more to be said the commanding officer walked away, passing Joe, who sprang to attention, saluting.

"Watch over him, Corporal Penton," he ordered, returning the salute. "Talk to him if he wishes it but on no account leave him alone."

"Yes, sir," replied Joe, his saluting arm dropping limp to his side before slowly walking towards Tysall.

When the RSM told him of Leela's death he went numb, his mind engulfed with sorrow for Ben. Only now was he beginning to struggle out of the shock and attempt to think of words of condolence which in some way could lessen the impact the news of this appalling tragedy was having on his friend.

"Ben, I'm sorry," was to begin with all he could think of saying.

Tysall, not replying, was standing as if rooted to the ground, his head down, looking first at one point of ground then another. Then turning to Penton his hands came up as clenched fists.

"Not dead, Joe. She can't be dead."

For Penton the sight of Ben desperate to believe the death of his wife to be untrue was pitiful. He had served with him for over five years and in that time had seen Ben laugh at peril and show bravery in the face of death. This, though, was not the man he knew, but a creature whose face was distorted in pain and anguish, whose voice usually strong and confident, was now reduced to a pathetic, child-like cry for help.

"Sure, Ben. Sure," agreed Penton not wishing to destroy his friend's attempt at self delusion.

"More's the chance them telegraph-wallahs got the message all wrong."

Tysall, looking at him for some seconds, clung to that hope, then swallowing, the torment slowly leaving his face, he looked away. "I loved her, Joe. We were happy. I never imagined anyone could be so gentle and kind."

For another period there was silence between the two men. Joe knowing there was nothing he could say that would ease the hell Ben was going through. And Ben, his mind filling with recent memories of mutual love, joy and laughter that now were never to be repeated. As this realisation filled his mind another emotion began to take hold, strong and overwhelming: one of anger. Throwing his fists into the air he raised his head to rage heavenwards at the one person he believed could have prevented this hideous, unjust act.

"Why her? Yah bastard! She was a flower, a flower. Why didn't yah take me? Why not me? Why her? Yah bastard. Bastard!"

With his fury subsiding he lowered his arms, to gaze for a time out beyond the wire before admitting to himself that there was another who must share the Almighty's guilt.

"I killed her, Joe. I gave her the kid. If we hadn't met... If I had just rode past... If...."

"No, Ben," protested Joe. "Never your fault."

He found himself looking on as Ben sank to his knees, his head bowing as he began to sob. Joe knew now there was nothing more for him to do except wait for his friend to cry it out. Which he did, remaining even as the buglers in the lines behind began to blow assembly. Five minutes later he turned as a voice called his name. Running towards him was newly promoted Lance-Corporal Sid Firth.

"Joe! Sergeant Radley just sent us. Says you're to hot foot it over to the RSM," blurted out Firth, catching his breath.

"OK," replied Penton. "Keep an eye on Ben, though, he's havin' a rum go."

"Sure. What up?" asked Firth.

"Missus just died," answered Penton.

"Effing blazes!" exclaimed Firth, before explaining the reason for the bugle calls. "Can't stay long Joe. Battalion just been turned out on column. Been a kidnapping. Some English bidi and a nipper."

For the second time in just under an hour Joe found himself reporting for an undisclosed reason to the RSM. Again outside the battalion headquarters tent, only this time Rickman was armed with a rifle, a pack on his back, receiving instructions from the adjutant, who was emphasising his instructions with sharp hand gestures. Around the two men preparations for a rapid deployment were in full swing: while some headquarters staff rushed to collect

weapons and ammunition, others were filling panniers with clerical stores in preparation for loading on mules now arriving from the transport lines. Seeing Penton waiting at attention, Rickman excused himself to approach the lance-corporal. Outwardly composed and at ease, only a nervous flickering of his eyes betrayed a concealed fear.

"The kidnapped woman," he said, his voice tense. "We're away on column to try and intercept the gang. It's Rose they've taken, lad."

During the months that had turned into years in which Joe and Rose had kept their love for each other alive, not once had his regimental sergeant major given the faintest indication that he knew of their relationship. Until now all dealings with him had been as that of just another junior NCO in the battalion. Not until now did he let on that he was aware of an infatuation between Penton and his niece.

Dismissed by Rickman, Joe, his mind confused by worry for Rose, ran back to his tent. Collecting his pack, ammunition, webbing and rifle, he fell in on the roadway with the rest of 6 Platoon. Taking his place in the ranks at the head of 2 Section, he was so filled with distress and fear for the safety of Rose; he did not become aware of the man falling in beside him at the head of 1 Section until he spoke.

"Don't fret about Rose, Joe lad," said Ben Tysall checking the action of his rifle bolt, his cheeks marked with half wiped tear stains. "We'll get her back."

--oOo--

On the third morning after the kidnapping, Robert Christie, in his Humber, led a convoy of three cars and a lorry containing a squad of frontier constabulary down the tree lined lane leading to the Sadeka Mission. Once again, to resolve a crisis he was coming to seek the assistance of Emma Schofield.

In the afternoon of the first day after the crime, Bernard Crawshaw's sources had acquired enough scraps of bazaar hearsay and cross confirmation of strong rumours to point with a confident finger at Abdur Sarwar and his gang as the ones responsible. Unhappily, identification and apprehension were two different birds. The country between Janka and the Administrative Border was laced with *nullahs* and broken hills, where a handful of men skilled at concealment would have no trouble in hiding. From the very first hour of the discovery of Elinor Ratcliffe's body, the police and army dispatched patrols to fan out across the district in the hope of blocking the gang's escape. This proved to be more of a drill than a barrier, for the police were confined mainly to roads and villages, while the only army available for use in the district was a regiment of Indian Lancers, whose horses were no good for searching through *nullahs* and rugged hills.

With the arrival of a flight of 'Ninaks', two seater DH 9A bi-planes from Peshawar, Christie moved the search operations headquarters from Janka to the police post at Barwand. Located on the district's main road leading from the Border to the Indus crossings, its principal function was to provide secure storage for the *powindah* traders' rifles, they being forbidden to travel armed into India. With the aircraft using the road outside as an airstrip, Christie based himself there for two days, setting up a command post and organising the erection of accommodation tents, a refuelling point and the facilities for providing meals for his staff and those involved in searching.

Raids resulting in robbery, kidnapping and murder were a daily occurrence along the whole of the North-West Frontier but only once before had the victim been British. So now, as then, the government reacted vigorously, determined not to allow this crime to become a criminal trend. With every soldier, Scout, policeman and *khassadar* on the hunt for the kidnappers, Sir Horatio Bolton, the Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province sent his deputy, Victor Edwardes, to take charge of the pursuit and rescue operation.

While hopefully awaiting news of a successful interception, Edwardes called together a meeting of the civil and military to formulate a plan for, should it be found necessary, extracting Rose and Teresa from the heart of Mahsud tribal lands. At dawn on the third morning with not even a sighting reported, Edwardes, having to assume that kidnappers and kidnapped must be deep across the Administrative Boundary, ordered the agreed plan to be implemented.

Coming onto her bungalow veranda Emma Schofield found three men entering her gate. Two were old friends, Robert Christie and Neil Osborne, the third she had only met the day before, when Robert had collected and taken her to meet this man, who had asked her to play a major part in the plan to rescue Rose and the child.

"Good morning, Deputy Commissioner," she said, leaving her veranda to greet them.

"Good morning, Doctor Schofield," replied Victor Edwardes, doffing his topee.

"I expect you've come to ask me to make that little trip?" pre-empted Emma.

"Regrettably, Doctor, I see no other choice," apologised Edwardes. "With no news at all of the gang's whereabouts we can only surmise that Sarwar and his band of thugs have eluded our patrols and escaped to his bolt-hole in the Kajuri."

"No need for regret," replied Emma, "I make the journey willingly. When do we leave?"

"Right away," came Edwardes' answer.

"Then if I may have a hand? I have some medical supplies and a grip containing fresh clothes for Miss Rickman and the child," explained the doctor.

"I'll be accompanying you, Emma. I'll see it's put in our car," offered Neil Osborne.

"Emma, I'll have to wish you luck now and be gone," Christie excused himself. "I'm to collect Amjad at Ghorzandi shortly and it would be impolite to keep him waiting."

"Of course, Robert. You be away," replied the woman offering her hand. "And good luck to you and Amjad. Between us we should see a happy ending to this deplorable business."

After a hasty luncheon with Taib Khan at his village, he and Christie drove the forty miles to Kandao in just over the hour. Awaiting them there was Hugh Durand with a *gasht* of forty men. They were on their way to relieve the Scout garrison at Chashmal, close to the Afghan Border and would also act as escort to the two government officials.

At the deputy commissioner's conference Amjad had offered to go into Mahsud territory to act as a negotiator to barter for the release of the two captives. As for Christie's part, it was suggested that someone who both Rose and Teresa knew should take up a position as close as possible to the point where it was suspected they were being held, someone of authority who could make rapid and if necessary major decisions. Christie, it was agreed, fitted this need perfectly. *Gashting* was a shock to his system and a challenge to his endurance; however he did keep pace with the rest, arriving at Chashmal just before dark. There he remained to await the coming events, while Amjad immediately struck southwards into the Mahsud's lands.

Of those Christie had left back at the Sadeka Mission, Victor Edwardes, under escort of the lorry-load of frontier constabulary had left straight away after Christie, to set up his operations headquarters at the South Waziristan Scouts HQ at Jandola. Emma and Neil Osborne, with Zarif Khan in accompaniment, followed soon after but to a different destination.

Sararogha was another Scout post on the Razmak road south of Kandao. Here, Emma was to join a second expedition setting out to obtain the release of the two British captives. The man leading it was to be Mullah Mohammad Sharif, a highly respected religious figure on this sector of the Border. Emma was asked to join him and his party as someone both Rose and Teresa would know and trust. She was also probably the only *feringi* who could enter the Kajuri Valley and live. For one, she was a woman - a man would have faced instant death, secondly she spoke Pushtu - their own tongue, and finally, she was the Daktar. Some Mahsud

men and quite a number of women had walked many miles to receive medical attention at her mission hospital.

The mullah, was not, as had been hoped, at Sararogha when they arrived, a delay due to the rounding up of a strong party of loyal followers, whose duty it would be to see them safely into a notorious Mahsud stronghold. It was not until the small hours of the morning that he was driven through the gate by Major Noel Lomas, the Political Agent. Behind their car, crowded into and clinging onto the sides of a solid rubber wheeled Ford truck, was their thirty-strong escort. Emma and Neil Osborne, who had sat up through the night, watched this posse of raggedly garbed, grinning Border cut-throats as they leaped down from the vehicle.

“Awfully sorry for our lateness,” apologised Lomas,” had to do a tour of the villages separating chaps from beds.”

Emma had not met the mullah before, however both knew of each other by reputation.

“Doctor Schofield. You will have to discard your topee for this trip,” advised Mohammad Sharif, upon their introductions by Lomas. The mullah was a man approaching fifty, stockily built, with a long, full beard and dressed in a turban, dark knee-length coat and baggy, ankle tight trousers. “In the Kajuri it is the symbol of the hated feringi.”

Emma, reluctant to be parted from her favourite headgear, took heed of the mullah's caution, accepting the offer of Zarif Khan's *chadar* in exchange.

Awaiting two horses to be saddled, which Emma and the mullah would ride, with the medical cases strapped to another, Neil Osborne watched as Zarif Khan moved to each of the escort. He was personally reminding them of the one overriding priority of their mission, that of returning the daktar safe.

Underlining the consequences should she not, by drawing his hand in a cutting motion across his throat.

CHAPTER 21

*When dealing with the insane,
the best method is
to pretend to be sane.*

Hermann Hesse

With the realisation that the ground was once again sloping downwards, Rose Rickman raised her eyes to look ahead. Before her the three front men were following a goat track down into a long broad valley, through which a river flowed, with green cultivation on its banks. From their high vantage point crossing a saddle of ground between two hills Rose could see several separate villages scattered along the length of the valley. With resignation she lowered her head to stare with pain dulled eyes at the pathway at her feet. The valley had no significance to her, it was just another like all the rest. Beyond it were more mountains, between which were even more valleys to cross.

For three nights and a day now she had been walking, most of that distance, as she was at that minute, carrying Teresa on her back. During the first day they had hidden in hill caves overlooking a section of the Bannu-Pezu road from which vantage point they watched pursuing cavalry and normal road traffic passing. At dusk Rose and Teresa were woken and with the band keeping to the hills, made to walk through the night. At dawn, after crossing the Administrative Border they rested through the day hidden in the shelter of a friendly house. Then, again as the sun set, with their movements masked by darkness, they travelled west into the fading twilight. After the hours of darkness, with the sky beginning to lighten behind them, there was to be no stop this time. They were in safe country now, with no need to hide, so without calling a halt to sleep or even rest for a few hours, they trekked on.

In enduring this extra demand on her stamina, no complain or whimpered cry for rest came from Rose; at this stage she was too far gone to voice a protest.

The first night itself was tiring for her, constantly out of breath, tripping over, while at the same time repeatedly reassuring Teresa that all was well. Because Teresa's feet were only bound in cloth, Rose had carried the young girl on her back for most of the night. Those hours were arduous enough but worse were to come. At the start of the second night Rose's limbs had stiffened, making all effort at walking painful. It was not until after an hour that this left her, only, though, to be replaced by excruciating agony as she strained with all her willpower to keep pace with the men. Teresa, unaware of the danger of becoming a burden, soon showed signs of wearying with the journey, questioning Rose as to why they had to do it and asking to be taken home. At one point when Rose's legs felt as if they would give out, she had to put the girl on the ground to walk. This Teresa did for only a short distance then sat down saying that she had to rest.

Snatching her up before any of the gang had seen this, Rose hoisted the girl onto her back and carried her there for the remainder of the night.

At the village the next morning, Rose, bundled into a hut, collapsed on the dirt floor, her arms and legs trembling uncontrollably, her body racked with searing pain. By the late afternoon, after a long sleep that began with a faint into unconsciousness, her mind, if not her body, had benefited from the rest. Pleading for a decent set of footwear, she was given from somewhere a worn pair of dwarf palm sandals. Her own she fastened to Teresa's feet using strips of cloth. Also given to her was a tattered and dirty *chadar*, which Rose tied around her

shoulders, providing Teresa with a sling to sit in while clinging to her back.

Descending into this new valley, Rose, with only brief halts, had been walking solidly for twenty hours, and without knowing it had covered eighty miles since their kidnapping. The pain she was enduring was excruciating, as if every muscle was being ripped apart. With her vision blurred from exhaustion and sweat running into her eyes, her senses were verging on hallucination.

As she and her kidnappers passed the village's bands of ragged, thickly dirtied children ran out to follow the newcomers. With huge smiles of wonderment, chattering loudly, they pointed at Rose's blond hair. Noticing hardly any of this, her eyes fixed to the trail a few feet ahead of her sandals, she was brought up short by the man in whose footsteps she was following. Turning about he pushed her against a mound of stones heaped to one side of the pathway.

Teresa, who had not walked all the morning, awoke, asking to be allowed down. With the child's weight from her back Rose looked to see why they had paused. At a house entrance on the fringe of a village, Abdur Sarwar and Feros-un-Din were holding an animated, arm waving conversation with three men. Silencing the two villains with an exaggerated swipe in the air, one, the oldest, advanced on Rose.

"You are Sadeka woman?" he demanded, using the name the gang, remembering their earlier meeting, were now calling her by.

"I am Miss Rose Rickman. A nurse employed at the Sadeka Mission, yes." Rose answered, pushing with one hand on the stones to stand upright. Feeble with exhaustion, disorientated, every nerve end in her body emitting pain, her nightdress and torn dressing-gown filthy, face begrimed with sweat and dirt, she stood with her head up to give a forthright reply.

"And the child is from Janka?" he pressed her further, as if to validate identification.

"This is Teresa Ratcliffe, and her home is Janka, from where we have both been kidnapped," confirmed Rose in a frank, though tired voice. His questions answered, the tribesman spun about to resume remonstrating with the gang leaders. The argument only ended when one of the younger men was despatched into the village. At that, Feros-un-Din called to the three men watching over the captives. With a shove in the shoulder from one, Rose, taking Teresa's hand, followed another into the house entrance.

Coming first into a courtyard, they were led to the tower building and up stone steps to a room on the first level. There were no windows, only three narrow rifle slits through which one, throwing a thin shaft of light from the setting sun, revealed the room to be bare, the floor stone. Later, one of the young men provided for the two hostages wool rugs to sleep on. Grubby and foul smelling though they were, they were an improvement on the stone flooring.

After sunset a young girl brought the captives a flask of water and a dish of meat mixed in rice, which they shared. Remaining to sit in a corner she watched the two white strangers, seemingly intrigued by them. After they had finished eating, the native girl rose and again approached them to produce from beneath her robes a ripened pomegranate. Returning to her seat she again, silently watched as Rose broke the fruit into two portions.

Venturing to discover where they were being held, as she sucked the juice from the fruit's seeds, Rose asked the girl the name of the village. At first the girl was reluctant to speak, but by the time they had consumed the pomegranate, Rose had learned all she wished to know: The village was Lakkar, in the heart of the Kajuri Valley. The girl was a daughter of the village headman, Mahmud Na'im Shan. This was his house and it was he and two of his sons whom she had first seen. With the gang occupying the ground floor, Shah was providing shelter for both them and the captives until Abdur Sarwar had either negotiated ransom terms or taken them away for sale into slavery across the Afghan border.

This chilling disclosure Rose kept to herself, explaining instead to Teresa that they would be doing no more walking for the present. Expressing her delight on hearing this, with softly spoken words of reply, she cuddled into Rose's arms. Whereupon, reclining on the evil-smelling rugs, with a soiled *chadar* for covering, they slept till dawn.

--oOo--

There were few outsiders free to enter the Kajuri, a Mahsud stronghold; the clan who occupied it, the Garuzi Khel, preserved its isolation as part of their tradition. No traders came into this valley; whatever the Garuzi Khel needed they purchased elsewhere, or stole. There was a story that a French Jesuit priest once ventured in seeking Muslim converts, and remained, given to the women to be skinned alive.

As the sun dawned on that fourth day of the kidnapping, Taid Khan looked down on the Kajuri, watching smoke rise from the breakfast fires of the villages below. As would be expected of an official of the government the scene was unfamiliar to him, he too had never dared enter before. Today, though, he had what he hoped was a letter of safe conduct, written by the Mullah Mohammad Sharif to the Mullah Qari Kashid, the chief Garuzi Khel mullah in the Kajuri Valley.

With the first streaks of morning light, Amjad had listened, as from the darkened valley bottom a disjointed, overlapping chorus was sounded by each village mullah calling their faithful to the day's first prayer. Now with full daylight the assistant political agent climbed to his feet to start down into the valley. The first Mahsud he crossed paths with was a goat herder with his son, climbing up into the hills to graze their flock. Amjad carried no firearm, which was why the herder left his own rifle slung across his back as the stranger approached.

Salaaming and exchanging greetings, Amjad explained he was an emissary of the Mullah Mohammad Sharif with a letter of introduction for the Mullah Qari Kashid. Holding open the paper sheet with its Sanskrit symbols for the herder to see, he was sure the man would not understand them. Most tribesmen's houses on the Border contained a copy of the holy Koran, but the majority could not actually read. Given the son to guide him, Amjad was taken to the village of Lakkar, passing the headman's house where Rose and Teresa were at that moment dining on a breakfast of goat's milk and rice cakes.

Qari Kashid welcomed Taid Khan in a formal, friendly manner, befitting the customs of Frontier hospitality, keeping hidden his unease at the sudden arrival of this paid *feringi* lackey. Before reading the letter he knew why Amjad had come. Word of exceptional events travel quickly along the Frontier; news of the kidnapping of two white women had reached the Kajuri a day ahead of Sarwar's return.

"The revered Mullah Sharif has asked that I assist you in obtaining the release of two English, a woman and a girl, kidnapped," informed Kashid, setting the letter aside. "How is he expecting me to accomplish this?"

"By calling a council of the Clan so I may speak in warning to all, of the peril which awaits those who co-operate with the kidnappers," replied Taid Khan.

"Do you believe there are Kajuri men who would participate in such a foolish crime?" asked Kashid, as if the idea was outrageous.

"I believe there are those who dwell in the Kajuri who if allowed, will bring down upon the Garuzi Khel an invasion by the British that would drive them from the Kajuri forever," answered the assistant political agent in a sympathetic, almost fearful tone.

"By the soul of the Prophet I know of no-one here who could do this crime you speak of. What would be gained by stealing English women?" The mullah's denial of clan involvement, with spreading hands and an amazed expression added emphasis to a look that was the embodiment of righteous innocence.

“There is one,” proposed Amjad, not fooled by the mullah's theatrics, “one whose wickedness and greed knows no limitations: Abdur Sarwar.”

“That one is not here,” lied Kashid.

“But should he return with the English captives he must be persuaded to release them unharmed,” urged Taid Khan.

“He is not Mahsud,” replied the mullah as if to wash his hands of responsibility for Sarwar's crimes. “It is not we who place the knife in his hand, the rifle to his shoulder.”

“The talk on the Border is that Abdur Sarwar and his followers have the English woman and girl,” submitted Amjad formally. “If this is so they will be brought here to the Kajuri to shelter under your protection. If the British find reason to come and punish, they will punish all. This is why I ask for a jirgah, to warn that this time Sarwar the robber does not return with loot with which to pay for his lodgings but brings instead the hangman's noose.”

“The affairs of Abdur Sarwar are the affairs of Abdur Sarwar,” pointed out the mullah, falling back on the traditional Pathan escape clause by which, no matter to what degree they may have aided or abetted someone in committing a crime, none considered themselves accountable merely for being an accomplice.

This barefaced, haughty claim to automatic disinvolvement would have been an insult anywhere else other than the North West Frontier. Here, however, it had to be accepted, because to these brigands this was a genuinely held belief. In knowing this Taid Khan knew he was facing a dire, tricky situation. Rose and Teresa were the captives of Abdur Sarwar, his booty to be disposed of in the most profitable manner suiting him. Ransom would be the ideal agreeable outcome, although should this not transpire, there were others who would pay to take the white hostages off his hands. To save the woman and child, Amjad had somehow to hold Sarwar on the Indian side of the Border. If the gang opted to cross into Afghanistan to do their dealing there, the chances of recovering the two captives would be very slim indeed. With this foremost in mind Amjad knew the only way he could forestall such a move was by convincing the Garuzi Khel that Abdur Sarwar and his accomplices had returned bringing with them not a prize but a threat to the whole valley, thereby turning them against Sarwar, forcing the bandit to give up his captives unscathed.

“I, oh Mullah, am but the emissary in vanguard of the Mullah Mohammad Sharif,” reminded Taid Khan, applying subtle pressure to his request by indicating towards the letter. “He has written that very shortly he will make the journey here to the Kajuri himself. And I am sure the first questions he will ask are: what assistance have I been given, and what progress has been made in prevailing upon Abdur Sarwar to give up the kidnapped British.”

“Yes,” confirmed the mullah. “Mullah Sharif does state his intention to come but as for the other matters, they will have to be decided upon by the Clan Chief, Wahid Anim. It is not in my power to search out this one Abdur Sarwar or call a jirgah.”

“I am sure that if you used your influence to see these things came about, it would gain great favour with the Mullah Sharif and receive from the British immense and lasting gratitude,” appealed Taid Khan, quickly emphasizing the rewards awaiting those who gave support when asked, for it was apparent that Qari Kashid, without showing so by expression, did not relish being the recipient of Mohammad Sharif's displeasure.

Their discussion was taking place in an ante-room of the mullah's house and now he stood up to leave the assistant political agent in the care of one of his sons, promising to see that the clan chief was made aware of his and the Mullah Sharif's wishes. Served a breakfast of tea, a boiled egg and fresh black bread, Amjad waited through the morning and into the afternoon before being taken to the village council area in the heart of the settlement.

The attendance was not large, a few hundred at most, and of these only the Mullah Kashid was any figure of authority. There were several sub clan chiefs but like the rest they were there with no other interest other than to hear what this government outsider had to say. One

reason for this poor response, even though sanctioned by Wahid Anim, was because of the time honoured Frontier custom of not hurrying to take sides until it was clear who the winner was going to be. Also unknown to Amjad, the moment the gang were given notice of Taid Khan's presence in the village, they abandoned the headman's tower, snatching their two captives away to re-lodge them in the small room of a house which was the dwelling of the brother of one of the gang members. Distrustful even of those who sheltered them, standing at dagger's point against anyone showing signs of offering unasked for assistance; they were determined to retain sole bargaining control of their prisoners.

For over two hours Taid Khan petitioned the gathering, pointing out again and again the folly of Abdur Sarwar's act. And again and again the retort was flung back at him from gaunt faced, ill tempered men garbed in most cases in unkempt rags and tatters: Who was he to tell Abdur Sarwar or anyone else in the Kajuri how booty from raids should be disposed of. For Amjad this was a difficult argument to counter when taking into consideration that raiding among the Frontier tribesmen was looked upon as a legitimate means of income. It was not until the arrival of Wahid Anim that the government side managed a breakthrough, although not from the clan chief himself, for he merely sat listening and observing. His presence however drew others who also watched and listened.

At one stage, turning to look over his shoulder at the spectators loitering near the buildings on the edge of the council area, Amjad caught sight of a man with a heavily scarred face, half hiding himself against a wall.

"Feros-un-Din!" he called out. "Come forward. Speak for your band. Or are you so ashamed of your work that you have to leave it to the warriors of the Garuzi Khel to defend you?"

Feros-un-Din, neither skulking away nor accepting the bidding, stood with glaring eyes.

The silence caused by this challenge was broken by the sole clap of a hand. Having caught Feros-un-Din's attention the clan chief summoned him to join the *jirgah* with a single beckoning of his hand.

Over the hour that followed Feros-un-Din and Taid Khan sparred their way through a contest of questions and answers, while the Mahsuds, who had not once admitted to knowing of the gang's whereabouts, happily joined in. Keeping his questioning tactful, fearing that if they felt threatened the kidnappers would bolt with their hostages, Amjad tried continually to discover the location and health of the two English captives, only once overstepping himself. When a ransom figure of a hundred thousand rupees was proposed by Feros-un-Din, the assistant political agent's reply was to quote in a mocking tone a Pushtu parable about a camel that longed to be a handsome prince.

Before offence at this could take root, a tribesman hastened through the circle of squatting men to bend to Wahid Anim's ear. Springing to his feet the clan chief, a slight man with an intent expression, dismissed the *jirgah* with a sweep of his hand. The mullah Mohammad Sharif, he had been informed, bringing another English woman with him, had crossed the valley threshold.

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Throughout their journey across Mahsud tribal territory, at each village the women, dressed in smocks over broad skirts and brightly patched trousers, would approach Emma Schofield and cry up to her on horseback: "Daktar! Daktar! What is the news of your Sadeka woman and the child?" It was not just those to the east of the Administrative Border who considered the stealing of English women an improper act.

Once into the Kajuri Valley the women who came up to speak, amid babbling children and barking dogs, did not ask, they announced: "The woman and child are here, being held

by Abdur Sarwar, but are well.”

Met by a young mullah, the son of Qari Kashid, the Mullah Sharif's party was taken to his house where the Garuzi Khel mullah greeted his guest with lavish praises of welcome. This warm reception was not, however, accorded to Emma, she was a *feringi* woman who prayed in Christian temples and therefore was not to defile the mullah's home by entering it. Collected by a son of the village headman she was taken to his house and lodged, not in the tower which Rose and Teresa had occupied just that morning, but to his *chauk* room, a room set aside for conducting village business and where travellers were accommodated.

The onset of night precluded any negotiations between the government representatives and the kidnappers. There was, however, for some hours quite a lot going on. Soon Wahid Anim and a number of sub chiefs and clan elders arrived at the Mullah Kashid's house to pay their respects to Mohammad Sharif. Sharif used this opportunity to insist that a full clan *jirgah* be called for in the morning, at the same time suggesting that it would be prudent to keep a watch on the gang's quarters for signs of flight. Complying with these requests, the clan chief was not yet shifting himself off the fence, dangling a leg either side, yes, shifting no, not at this stage.

Much later, escorted by the young mullah, Taid Khan visited Emma, going over for her the occurrences of the day and what was planned for the next. Before he left the doctor gave him the two bundles of clothing for Rose and Teresa in the hope that he could somehow contrive to have them delivered.

Across the village Rose was singing to Teresa, as she had been doing whenever the little girl expressed worry or began to cry. As she sang, Rose, using a piece of her nightgown dampened with water from a saucer-like vessel, sponged the dirt from around Teresa's face. In the doorway one of the gang members sat on guard, the moon casting his shadow across the hard, dirt floor. In the morning she awoke to find two bundles of clothes in the room and was astounded to find on unravelling the larger one, that it contained her clothes and shoes.

The *jirgah* that morning was considerably larger than the one of the previous day, over spilling the council area onto the roof tops of the surrounding buildings. The first to speak was Taid Khan, repeating much of what he had said the day before, only now adding some fresh news brought by Mohammad Sharif. Directing his words at Abdur Sarwar and Feros-un-Din he informed them that two gang members, visiting their homes, had been seized by a Scout patrol during a raid on their village.

The reply from Sarwar to that, shaking his fist in the air, was that this was of little consequence, the English women were to be ransomed, not traded. This prompted murmurs of agreement, with some of the clan voicing support by attacking Britain's Border encroachments.

Allowing the crowd to rattle on in that vein for some minutes, Mohammad Sharif brought them to silence by rising to speak. His stature, unimpressive, short and full at the waist, was not what held the audience's respect, it was his religious standing on the Border. This was the Mullah Mohammad Sharif of the Akoras, who in his youth had himself raided into British India. Then, before he was twenty years of age, he set out on a pilgrimage to Mecca by the overland route, a round journey, taking two years to complete. Returning he became a disciple of the much honoured Mullah Karbogha of the village of Karbogha, under whose teaching and guidance Mohammad himself achieved the eminent privilege of donning the robes of a mullah. During the ensuing years he too rose to become a notable figure on the Frontier. Gifted with a voracious appetite for learning, he became an authoritative scholar on the Koran and the teachings of Islam. This attainment, coupled with formidable oratory skills, earned for him a reputation of high esteem, principally in settling disputes among the feuding border tribes and clans.

“Mahsuds of the Garuzi Khel,” he began, his voice ringing out to the very roof tops, “It is

said in the Koran that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Brothers! It seems there are those here who are neither wise, nor afraid of Allah's wrath."

Allowing time for his words to take seed in the minds of those present, the mullah then slowly raised an arm to point accusingly at the gang leader: "Abdur Sarwar! You and your followers have broken Muslim law. You have degraded the teachings of the Prophet. You slew a woman. By this single act you have spat upon the Holy Koran."

With those opening sentences the Mullah Sharif undermined any local support the gang may have had. In the Kajuri, raiding was a supplement to everyone's means; each had a vested interest in the results of this consultation which could set a precedence for future pickings. Now, however, as the mullah had so dramatically made clear, the topic under discussion was no longer one of settling the question of a kidnapping taboo but that of the breaking of Islamic law.

For Wahid Anim the outcome was no longer in doubt. As Abdur Sarwar struggled to justify the murdering of Elinor Ratcliffe, the clan chief whispered instructions to one of his lieutenants. Minutes later he arrived at the house where Rose and Teresa were being held, giving the two gang members on guard instructions to move their captives. Facing twenty armed men pressing in at the lieutenant's back, there was scant option for them but to comply.

Where Rose and Teresa suddenly found themselves being taken was back to Mahmud N'im Shah's house, not into it however, but to a smaller house on its own, nearby, a *hurja* or village guest-house. Now, Rose noticed, not only had they again changed prison cells, but their captors were also new.

Meanwhile at the *jirgah*, the kidnappers, faced with hostility from all sides began quarrelling among themselves. Believing the moment right Taid Khan stepped in to propose terms of release, which wrangled on for a further hour until an amicable solution, sparing each side's *izzat*, loss of face, had been finalised. No money was to be paid; Rose and Teresa would simply be handed over in exchange for the two gang members arrested at their village earlier.

Writing these terms down as a message to Robert Christie, Taid Khan had it sent in the care of one of the Mullah Sharif's escort to Chashmal. Accompanying him was the son of Mullah Qari Kashid, who would verify the reply to be sent and received back by a relay of heliograph signals from Chashmal to Ishak.

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Being an English-woman and unveiled, Emma Schofield was asked by her host to remain unseen inside the courtyard of his house. Even in complying it was not long before she had a steady stream of visitors. As word spread that the Doktor was at the headman's house, women with injuries or diseases brought themselves and their children to her for treatment.

As she held this hastily convened surgery, sitting on one of the medical boxes with the queue of patients growing, one of Mohammad Sharif's men entered the courtyard, indicating that the doctor should follow him. Taken just a short walk away, Emma was led to a house guarded by other members of the Mullah's escort. From inside she could hear a familiar voice singing a popular music-hall ditty. Looking into the room from the doorway she saw Rose sitting on the frame of a *charpoy* with her back to the door, combing a young girl's hair with a small fork of wood.

"The next time you take yourself off gallivanting about the countryside, Rose Rickman, I'll not come this far to collect you again," chided the doctor, in a voice that almost sounded as though she meant it.

Startled, the young nurse looking around saw no more than a coated figure silhouetted in

the doorway. This however did not stop a smile of joy spreading across her face, for the voice was unmistakable.

“Emma! Oh Emma!” uttered Rose, as she quickly crossed to the older woman, circling her arms around the doctor in an embrace of welcome and relief.

CHAPTER 22

*Where cheetal are plentiful
there is no tiger,
Where tigers are plentiful
there is no cheetal.*

Indian Proverb

Being a good two miles off and hanging limp against its staff, the colours of the flag showing above the walls of Chashmal Scout post were indistinguishable, but to Rose Rickman that British Union Jack was the most wonderful sight in the world. In the safekeeping of her rescuers, she was looking down upon it from a ridge crest, the last natural obstacle before its safety was reached.

Walking beside the horse carrying Emma's medical kit, she turned to ask of the little girl riding the horse: "Can you see the fort, Teresa?"

"Yes," she replied, somewhat tired. "Will daddy be there?"

"No," answered Rose, giving her leg an encouraging squeeze. "Perhaps tomorrow".

The release of the two captives, once terms had been agreed, came quite quickly. Most of the previous day Rose had spent, after re-uniting with Emma, assisting the doctor with her impromptu surgery. Then late that night the two messengers returned from Chashmal with the news that the exchange deal was acceptable and that the two gang members held by the authorities were being set free. Wasting no time, anxious to quit the Kajuri and its volatile inhabitants, the Mullah Sharif brought everyone away at dawn, passing at the valley perimeter the two men for whom Rose and Teresa were exchanged.

Chashmal was a minor fort built before the turn of the century to act as a staging post for *powindahs* crossing out of and into Afghanistan five miles to the west. Garrisoned by a detachment of the old South Waziristan Militia, it had been abandoned in 1919 when threatened by a force of the Afghan army. With the new road due to pass this way it had recently been re-occupied by the Scouts as a forward picket, in advance of the construction. Situated in the centre of a broad, barren, gravel plain, it sat perched with one wall on the edge of a deep *tangi*, or gorge.

On nearing the fort a spontaneous English cheer greeted their arrival. Lining the parapet of the wall above the main gate were British soldiers raising their topees in the air. On the gate's opening a party of three emerged to greet them: Robert Christie; a British major and Hugh Durand in his Scouts uniform. The Mullah, Mohammad Sharif, leading on horseback reined in, as Christie held up an outstretched hand.

"Your Eminence. For this we shall be forever in your debt," said Christie.

Amidst a flurry of greetings, introductions and congratulations the rescue party passed through the gateway of the fort where more English soldiers cheered them. Emma Schofield, until halting to climb from her horse, made her entrance repeatedly nodding to the troops in acknowledgement, occasionally raising an arm. Young Teresa sat on her horse, puzzled by the noisy reception. Rose, on the other hand, was overcome with a fit of blushing because of the sight she thought she must be; captive for almost a week, unable to bathe, her hair was tangled and dirty and her body felt gritty with accumulated grime.

The interior of the fort, over a hundred yards square, was empty in the centre except for

the flag staff and a sunken ammunition bunker. Only against the rear wall were there buildings, offices and living quarters. Around the other three sides, however, were neatly arranged single rows of soldiers' packs and bedding rolls. The reason for these articles being so placed was explained to Rose by the major, who, showing the women to quarters given up by Hugh Durand for their use, halted her on the veranda. A lean man with a thin, sharp edged face, he spoke with a polite, though brisk style.

"Miss Rickman, somehow we have avoided meeting before this, but until just recently I was the Adjutant of the battalion and worked very closely with your uncle, the Regimental Sergeant Major."

Not until that moment did Rose realise why some of the soldiers seemed familiar to her and glanced at the flash and badge on the major's topee. It was a Light Infantry bugle on a green and gold background; the Queen's Light Infantry.

"The battalion passed this way on column," he continued, "But on learning of the delicacy of your position in the Kajuri Valley it was withdrawn. Only my company remained behind here in support of the Scouts, should assistance be needed. Your uncle, in anticipation of your being released in this direction, left for you a letter in my care."

"Oh, this is wonderful, Major Dartnell, thank you," said Rose, as the officer drew a letter from his breast pocket and handed it to her.

"Oh, Major," she called out a moment later, as he was walking off to rejoin the mullah, Taid Khan and Robert Christie, "which company is this?"

"Why, B Company," replied Dartnell, mildly mystified at the question.

"Thank you so much, Major," replied Rose gratefully, holding her uncle's letter while looking around at the soldiers who were hurrying off in answer to the company bugler's midday meal call.

Not seeing the man she was searching for, the nurse turned to the door while opening the letter. Standing just at the entrance she had begun to read, when she was interrupted by someone asking a question:

"All safe, then?"

"Oh yes, Joe Safe! All safe," replied Rose her face lighting with joy as she looked up at the soldier, a rifle slung over his shoulder standing at the far end of the veranda.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," explained Penton mounting the veranda, using its noon shadow to approach the girl. "You were surrounded by the higher-ups. Didn't leave me a look-in until now."

"Joe, I've missed you so much," confessed Rose. "All the time I was held by those kidnappers I thought of you and worried about you, worrying about me."

"You bet I was worried," admitted Joe, continuing to walk towards her while keeping a wary eye out for anyone who may question his presence there.

"Don't come too near, please, Joe," cautioned Rose. "I'm filthy and I smell".

"I couldn't care a monkey's," replied Joe, taking a quick look around before unslinging his rifle to lean it against the wall, "I'm going to kiss you".

"No, Joe! No don't!" pleaded the girl weakly, putting up no resistance as his arms went around her, her own arms taking hold of him as their lips came together.

"Young man! Your name had better be Joe Penton or I'm going to have good cause for taking that girl you're kissing across my knee," warned Emma Schofield who had appeared in the doorway.

Joe, startled, sprang from the embrace but Rose turned smiling, "Yes, Emma. At last, this is my sweetheart."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you. Even though you mean to steal away the best nurse I've ever had," replied the doctor, extending her hand to shake Joe's. "I'm just off to find something to bathe Teresa in and you too, Rose, if it's big enough. Now, if you are planning

on continuing your canoodling I suggest you step inside out of sight.”

Joe, declining the offer, took a pace back and retrieved his rifle.

“Come back later, Joe,” proposed Rose, reluctant to release the soldier's hand. “After I have washed we can sit out here and talk. I'm sure that won't get you into trouble. And bring Ben, I want to hear how Leela is coping with her pregnancy.”

“Rose,” said Penton, again taking her hand, his expression suddenly serious. “Leela died while giving birth to the baby, a girl.”

“Oh, God!” uttered Rose, her face draining of colour. “The baby's OK,” continued Joe, hoping to soften the shock. “She's being looked after by Leela's folks.”

“Oh my God! Oh my God!” exclaimed the young woman, looking wildly about her. “Ben! Where is he?”

The mullah and his escort party were not remaining at Chashmal for long. The purpose of their mission fulfilled, they had delivered the two English women and the child into the safety of the fort, then staying no longer than it took to accept some food and water they would be off on their return to Sararogha. Before this with the sun at its zenith, it was time for the noonday prayer.

Taking their leave of Robert Christie and the British officers, the mullah and Taid Khan joined the other worshippers awaiting them in that portion of the fort's compound set aside for the daily ceremonies of religious homage. The presence of the Mullah Mohammad Sharif was for the Moslem Scouts an occasion and with the Queen's temporarily relieving them of duties they were, together with his escort, waiting for him to commence the prayer.

As the mullah, facing Mecca, cried out for all to join in worship, Rose ran from the verandah in search of Ben Tysall. She found him walking with two lance-corporals, rifles on their shoulders, carrying mess tins, and heading for the soldiers' dinner queue. Seeing her coming towards him Ben stopped, letting Sid Firth and Grif Griffiths walk on.

“Ben! Oh Ben. Leela - I've just heard, I'm sorry. So sorry.” Stopping a few yards from him Rose's look of anguish mirrored the emotion in her voice.

“I'm grateful for you saying so, Rose, my love. If she's listening it'll be much obliged.” Ben, fighting an inner sadness re-awakened with Rose's well intended but unsought for words of pity, replied in a gentle voice, his face solemn.

From across the fort the mullah, his arms raised high, gave out a cry in praise of Allah.

“When Joe and I marry---. I was so looking forward to Oh, Ben.” Rose, so overcome she was unable to express her thoughts, stood fighting back her tears, to no avail, as, lowering her head, she began to weep.

“Don't cry, Rose,” said Ben, approaching to place an arm around her shoulders. “She's gone now, but not completely. She left a part of herself behind. I have a daughter, and her name will be Leela.”

Rose, unable to reply, turned her head into Ben's chest.

Kneeling to the ground, with foreheads touching the earth, a rifle beside each man, a cry of the East rolled throughout the fort from the Islamic worshippers, as the mullah, hands cupped to his ears chanted Koran-i-Sherif verses to the glorification of Allah.

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At sunset, a half hour before dusk, B Company's bugler blew retreat. As the fort flag was lowered, around the inner wall, where the British soldiers stowed their kit and slept, the men stood to attention. On the conclusion of this daily ritual the men began checking their rifles and ammunition pouches, for there at Chashmal the flag lowering ceremony also acted as the

warning to stand-to; the two times of the day most favourable for surprise attack being first and last light. While the forty permanent members of the Scouts garrison took up their normal positions at the main gate and in the fort's four square corner towers, two platoons of the Queen's stationed themselves along the parapet of the wall. The other two platoons were held in readiness as a reserve in the compound below.

On the Indus plains the temperature by April was already uncomfortably high, unlike here in the border hills, where to the north snow could be seen on the crest of Pir Ghal, the tallest mountain in the region and one held sacred by the Pathan. Still, it was hot and a relief when the sun began to sink. Taking full advantage of the cooling of the evening air, as the post stood to, Emma, Rose and Teresa were on the veranda sitting on chairs provided by the officers. As matters stood, although overjoyed at being under the protection of the army, the women were not yet out of the woods.

Being a weakly manned Scout post, the fort did not possess a radio transmitter; Chashmal's only link with the rest of India was by heliograph to Ishak. This was not done directly, for the garrison was over twenty miles away and masked by hills. Their route for sending and receiving messages required a relay point which was a fortified tower built on a hill twelve miles away. Stoutly constructed and surrounded by barbed wire and defended by another detachment of Scouts, it overlooked the present road head of the new road. Using this relay system the safe arrival of Emma and the two kidnap victims was reported to Ishak just moments after they entered the gate, only to be told in reply that the women would have to remain at Chashmal for at least a few days, because the majority of the garrison were off to the north, on column in support of Rascol. B Company, although nearly a hundred and sixty strong, was not a sufficiently large enough force to act as escort across hostile tribal territory. Frustrating though it was, Emma, Rose and Teresa would be guests of the fort until Iscol returned to fetch them.

With the onset of darkness the troops were stood down from their stand-to alert and the fort settled into its night routine, guards took up their positions and sentries began to prowl.

"Good evening, ladies. Have you settled in comfortably?" asked Robert Christie, arriving to stand at the front of the veranda.

"Yes, thank you, Robert. As comfortably as we can," replied Emma, "and all bathed, thanks to Hugh's hip bath."

"Mmm, very fortunate as well," explained Christie, "the water supply here is pumped up from the river at the bottom of the tangi. It's a temperamental apparatus that's forever packing up and even when working gives an insufficient supply for the number of people here at present."

"So our stay here, until collected by the Ishak Column, is to be an austere one," remarked Emma philosophically.

"Most certainly," confirmed the district officer, "victualling alone will see to that. The fort is not stocked with luxuries." Christie, during the brief period of their conversation, was observing Teresa. For a child she had suffered a terrible ordeal, her mother ruthlessly murdered in her presence, then she abducted by the most barbarous of border cut-throats.

"Well, young lady, it looks as if your adventure is to be extended for a little while yet." Christie's comment was an attempt to draw the child into their talk, for she appeared solemn and remote.

Sitting next to Rose, his words had just the opposite effect on the little girl. Without replying she shrank away against the nurse.

"How is Princess Kishna, Mister Christie?" asked Rose, placing a comforting arm around Teresa, focussing attention away from the child and onto herself.

"All but fully recovered now," replied Robert, "something she accredits to her care while at your mission."

"And you are to marry," said Rose with genuine delight. "That's wonderful, really wonderful. I am so thrilled."

With the subject broached Christie found himself answering questions on the subject of his forthcoming marriage arrangements at the Janka Anglican chapel, discreetly omitting the fact that he and Kishna had already taken part in a ceremony of marriage.

On the last evening of his visit to Jaswara when he had asked for Kishna to be allowed to become his wife, members of the palace guard persuaded him to attend a function, celebrating the rapturously received news by these soldiers of the Jaswara legion that Chitor Christie was to marry a daughter of the royal household. Provided with a mount, he was escorted to a secluded village on the outskirts of the winter capital. Entering the courtyard of a large Hindu house with Chinese lanterns hanging along walls and from trees, the Englishman was surrounded by a throng of happy people. From somewhere musicians appeared playing flutes and drums, somersaulting as they led his horse to the main doorway. Before he dismounted his neck was ringed with garlands of flowers.

As Christie was led inside, Lall Singh, his servant in France, leaned close to whisper: "Prince Sadul, who is barred from attending the ceremony by the Maharaja, has seen to all the arrangements himself, sahib."

Now clearly aware of what was to occur Christie was steered down an entrance hall and into a large room. There, flanked by attending women, sat a veiled figure cloaked in a gold embroidered white *sari*. Without being guided Christie took up a position sitting opposite this bride of Rajputan, for he could see beneath the veil the serenely beautiful face of Princess Kishna and willingly submitted himself to the rites of a Hindu marriage.

Understandably because of the early start and long journey from the Kajuri, Teresa fell asleep against Rose. As she took the young girl indoors to see her into bed, Emma explained to Robert why Teresa had not spoken in their company.

"She is still yet to recover from the shock of all this. As you see she looks to Rose every time she feels a need for fondness or protection."

"That's only understandable. Throughout her ordeal, when comfort was needed it would have been Rose's arms that embraced her," replied Christie, extinguishing his cigarette, deliberately creating a pause before continuing: "Emma, Hugh has conjured up a bottle of Madeira from some secret source. He and the other officers were hoping you would join us for a celebration tippie. Regrettably, the invitation cannot be extended to Miss Rickman. It's not snobbishness on their part, just that she is the Regimental Sergeant Major's niece and it would be ill-mannered of them to entertain her without his knowledge."

"Fiddlesticks," retorted the doctor, pointing into the room behind her. "They should be toasting that girl, not acting like stuffed shirts."

"It's more to do with Mess protocol than churlishness on their part," defended Christie politely. "Shall I say you're too tired to attend?"

"Yes, you can," immediately replied Emma then on second thoughts changed her mind, "No! No! I will come. I have a favour to ask of Major Dartnell and if he wishes my company so badly he had better grant it."

Emma was away for only an hour and shortly after she returned Joe Penton marched up to report for a duty.

"Beg pardon, Doctor," he began, vaguely bemused. "This part of the fort's been put out of bounds to us. But the Sergeant-Major says I'm to report to you."

"Yes, Joe, that's correct," confirmed Emma taking hold of Rose's arm. "I've convinced your Major that Rose, after her spell of imprisonment would like to enjoy the freedom of walking around the fort. And you are to act as her escort."

"Emma! What a terrible fibber you are," rebuked Rose, kissing the doctor's cheek. "Thank you."

"Joe, 'don't hang back like that. Walk beside me," coaxed Rose, as the couple crossed the fort compound.

"Best not just now, pet," answered the lance-corporal, conscious of his good fortune in being in the girl's company and fearful of appearing to abuse it. "I'm supposed to be your escort, not some Jim Dandy promenading his lady. Besides, all my mates are givin' us the eye."

"Oh, tut tut," replied Rose, pulling a cheeky face.

Crossing to the wall, Rose led them up the stone step way to a wide parapet. Below, the soldiers of B Company, not on duty, were relaxing in their sleeping areas around the foot of the wall, smoking, chewing the fat in muffled conversation, some in little groups' playing cards. Around the interior, oil lamps were hung, which at this period of the month provided only token lighting, for the moon and stars blazed down with such brilliance it was as if the heavens themselves were electric-lighted.

"Don't go too near the face," warned Joe, catching Rose's arm to hold her back from looking out beyond the wall.

"Oh, yes," obeyed the girl, turning to walk down the wide parapet. "The Frontier at night is so quiet and peaceful I often forget how dangerous it is."

Moving at a stroll they met a Scout prowler sentry coming the opposite way. As they neared there was a marked contrast between Joe's metal shod boots and the silent, palm sandaled footsteps of the Scout.

"For-ye?" said Rose in instinctive greeting as they passed.

"Ho! For-yum!" replied the bearded Scout after first giving Rose a sharp look of surprise.

"You sling the baht," said Penton.

"Pardon?" asked Rose, unfamiliar with the barrack-room slang.

"Speak the lingo," he clarified.

"Enough to get by. But I told you this in my letters. Don't you read anything I write, Joe Penton?" as Rose spoke, with a put-on pouting expression, she moved close to catch hold of the soldier's arms.

Springing back a pace, nervously glancing about, he caused the chain fastened to his wrist and rifle to jangle.

"Goodness," chuckled the nurse. "I wasn't going to seduce you".

"Rose, you know I'm crazy for you. But I'm not going to get caught greasing around the RSM's niece out in the open like this. Look, we're on a stage." Joe, to highlight his concern twirled a finger at the stars and moon.

Rose, making no reply, looking around, began walking first backwards then with sidesteps towards a nearby large, corner sentry turret.

"Pet! I'm told I'm getting my second stripe next month," announced Joe, following. "Do you still fancy marrying?"

Because as soon as that tape's on my arm I wanta' put the notice in."

On one side of the block-like turret, moonlight had cast a shadow. At first not replying, Rose backed into this drawing the soldier with her.

"You are good for a giggle sometimes, Joe," teased Rose, her arms this time going around his waist to prevent his escape. "Of course I still want to marry you. I want to fall asleep at nights wrapped in your arms and wake in the mornings still being held. And I want to have our children, a family, our family. Yes, Joe, I want to be your wife. I want to be your wi---".

Rose, cutting her own words off by placing her lips on Penton's, squeezed herself tight against him. As for resistance to this, there was none. Joe's caution was swept away on a rising flood of passion that had him cursing the rifle chain that restricted his embrace of the girl he so loved.

As they kissed, upon a call from the naik of the Scout guard, the sentries began to answer

up one by one in Pushtu, that all was well.

"The battalion's leaving Ishak in July," began Joe, speaking in a whisper after breaking from their prolonged kiss. Breathless, his lips continuing to peck her ear, cheek and hair as he spoke:

"Our next posting is to be Ferozepore. If you can wait a couple of weeks after getting there for me to tie things up --- we --- we can --- get marr---".

Penton's voice, at first trailing off, stopped altogether.

Rose, with Joe falling silent and feeling him tense, brought her head back to look at him and asked: "Joe, what is it?"

Staring past the wall behind her, his eyes fixed and concentrating on something, he didn't reply.

"Joe, what is it?" she asked a second time, twisting her head to look around.

"Call the sergeant of the guard," ordered Penton pushing Rose out to arms length, while continuing to stare.

"But--- What---," said Rose confused, turning sideways to glance again in the direction Joe was staring, still seeing nothing.

"Do it! Call him," barked Penton his voice impatient, almost angry.

With a high pitched feminine call, Rose's cry in Pushtu for the Scout havildar, shattered the fort's calm.

The first person to respond to this was the sentry whose post was the corner turret. Emerging he said something to Rose.

"Joe, he wants to know what the matter is," she translated.

Still not speaking, the lance-corporal pointed west, into the night towards a far off range of moonlit hills. High on a slope of one hill Rose at last detected something: a dull, yellowish light, as if from a distant, foggy lantern blinking on and off. As she watched, the winking ceased, which triggered Penton into both motion and speech.

"It was a message!" he exclaimed. Quickly moving to the fort's heliograph signalling apparatus permanently mounted on the parapet facing west. "It was heliograph from the relay post at Khwaja Kalai. I'm going to try and acknowledge."

Looking along a sighting aperture, he tried to adjust two dials simultaneously, but was hindered by his rifle chain.

"Here, Rose," he said, holding out his rifle to her, "Catch a hold of my bandook while I line the mirrors up."

"Joe, surely it's not heliograph? Not at night?" questioned the nurse, taking his rifle.

"Lunagraph. We use the moonlight," replied Penton, intent on aligning reflecting moonlight caught by the heliograph mirrors.

"What's the alarm, Miss Rickman?" asked Hugh Durand, arriving just yards ahead of his havildar.

"Signal from Khwaja Kalai, sir," spoke up Penton before Rose could answer.

"Important?" asked Durand sharply.

"Only nabbed a portion of it before they stopped sending, sir," replied Joe standing to attention. "It read - 'tacked by hostiles. Inside wire.'"

"That all?" pressed the Scout officer.

"Yes, sir. I was just about to acknowledge," confirmed Joe, "Shall I continue?"

"Do. And ask them to repeat their message," directed Durand, turning to call down into the fort. "Major Dartnell, Sir."

By the time Cunliffe Dartnell had responded to this summons, most of the Queen's were standing in curious groups looking up at the drama unfolding around the heliograph frame.

With the major there also arrived Miles Holt-Bate, Sergeant Major Little, and Giles

Kingsley, the young second-lieutenant commanding 7 Platoon.

"And you've had no further communication with Khwaja Kalai, is that so?" asked Dartnell of Joe Penton, on being told of the reason why he was called.

"Yes, sir," was Joe's brief reply.

The major, his hands clasped behind his back, was staring westward in silence when suddenly a red flash was seen.

"I say!" exclaimed young Kingsley loudly.

"Quiet," ordered Dartnell, his hands jerking to his sides. After a number of seconds a muffled explosion was heard. "Corporal Penton. That flash. Can you sight a bearing to it with the helio?" asked Dartnell.

Joe bending to take a sighting, straightened almost immediately. "Dead in line with Khwaja Kalai sir,"

"Mister Kingsley," said Dartnell turning to the officer. "Stand your platoon to, they're to double the guard for the rest of the night. And Sergeant-Major, inform the company they are to sleep in their webbing."

--oOo--

Following an uneventful night, the first rays of morning sunlight found the fort at peace, although the mood of those within was one of disquiet. They had lost contact with Khwaja Kalai during the night, their only link with the outside world, should assistance be needed, and the events centred on that loss of contact were disturbing, to say the least.

After breakfast the first move made outside the fort was a standard one, sending a party down to the pump shed at the foot of the *tangi* to pump up the day's supply of water. Taking a can of fuel for the motor, the Scouts normally dispatched ten men. This morning, because of the occurrences of the night before, 6 Platoon went with them in support. One man the platoon left behind was Joe Penton. He, because of his knowledge of signals, along with the two attached signallers from the battalion Signals' Platoon and the Scout signaller, took turns watching through the night in case Khwaja Kalai try to re-establish contact, but no attempt was detected by the soldiers.

Since the fort was therefore effectively cut off and with no way of knowing for how long, sentries on the walls were doubled, with the object of providing more eyes to watch the surrounding country. Major Dartnell had carried out a tour of inspection once that morning, soon after the fort's dawn stand to. Now, just before lunch, he embarked on a second, taking with him Sergeant-Major Little and Hugh Durand. Although this was a Scout fort, with the arrival of B Company, Cunliffe Dartnell as the senior officer took command, with Hugh stepping down to the role of second-in-command.

"Still nothing from KK?" asked the Major of Joe Penton as he broke his walk around the inner ramparts of the fort to pause at the heliograph.

"Not a flicker, sir," replied the lance-corporal, standing to attention.

"Well, it's only to be expected. After that shindig last night they are most likely still sorting themselves out. What you think, Lieutenant Durand?" asked Dartnell, off-handedly.

"Most certainly so, sir," replied Hugh in a confident voice.

With everyone in the fort aware that Khwaja Kalai was attacked last night, then after the explosion, contact with them was lost, it was only guesswork on their part as to what had happened. As dark as this appeared the officers had agreed that they must not show doubt or, as Dartnell summed up to them during his morning briefing: "When unsure, put on a brave face."

Maintaining this pretence of unconcern, the major stepped close to the wall's stone battlement. Pushing his topee back he raised a pair of binoculars hanging around his neck, to

his eyes. While he scanned the foreground and hills to the east, those around him kept a respectful silence, a silence that was suddenly broken by a whistling rush of air and a thud. As Dartnell was flung backwards the whistling continued for a further two full seconds, followed by a single popping sound from way off in the distance.

With the major sprawled on his back, his topee falling off the parapet into the fort, Hugh Durand and Joe Penton dropped down at his side.

"Stand by the guard! Stand by the guard!" shouted Sergeant-Major Little.

With off-duty soldiers grabbing up rifles and equipment to rush to posts, Hugh called out: "Doctor Schofield! Can we have your assistance, please?"

Dartnell, his eyes open but rolling aimlessly, raised his head as if trying to regain his feet. Then with a gush of blood spilling from his mouth, he fell back, his eyes closing.

As well as Emma arriving to kneel over the now dead officer, so too did Miles Holt-Bate, Robert Christie, Giles Kingsley and the other two platoon commanders.

"I'm afraid he's gone, Hugh," confirmed Emma, looking up. Opening his shirt front she had exposed a large entrance wound in the major's chest.

"Dash it all, how did it happen? There was no shot," asked one of the second lieutenants.

"Jezail, one of their long barrelled muskets. Bullet was probably a piece of horseshoe," replied Durand, turning to point eastwards. "Fired from those near hills, most like."

"That's chancing your luck to a damn fine edge," commented Giles Kingsley in disbelief, "They're over a mile away."

"The tribesmen hereabout will know the range to this fort from every concealment to the width of a blade of grass," replied Hugh, looking down at the major's body.

"You had best tell the men what's happened," suggested Christie to Holt-Bate, observing that those present appeared to be in various stages of shock at what had just occurred.

"Sergeant-Major," responded Miles, turning to Little. "Form the Company up. I'll have to address the soldiers. And send a party with a blanket up here to wrap the Major in."

Before any of this could occur a sentry shouted out a warning of the approach of an aircraft. Flying from the east, a single-seater Bristol F2B bi-plane first flew in a wide circle around the fort, then making a low run, the pilot waving his arm, dropped a small package. With that delivered he turned away towards the Afghan border.

Having landed outside the walls, once the packet had been recovered all the officers assembled in one of the offices to assess its contents. The package was a pouch containing three sheets of paper. Placing them out on a desk, Hugh and Miles, standing over the messages, began to read to themselves. Around the room the others waited, the junior officers clearly shaken by Cunliffe Dartnell's death.

"Before proceeding further," interrupted Robert Christie, "can we have it resolved as to who now commands?"

"Yes. Undoubtedly," agreed Miles realising this should have been proposed earlier.

As the only two full lieutenants in the fort the choice was between Durand and himself and depended on who was the senior.

"I was Gazetted April 25th 1924," said Miles to Hugh.

"And I two months later. You command," conceded Durand. Holt-Bate, sitting down in a chair began to read the three items of paper.

"This," he began, holding up one, "is a note from the pilot. He says that Khwaja Kalai is destroyed and he could see several stripped bodies lying in the open."

"Bloody hell!" exclaimed Giles Kingsley. The man standing next to him, Jemedar Ahmed Wakil, an Oraksai from the upper Kurram Valley and Hugh Durand's second-in-command, said nothing, even though he knew his brother to be at Khwaja Kalai.

"And this," went on Holt-Bate, "is a letter from Colonel Stanfield who is apparently in temporary command at Ishak. He writes to the effect that, with Iscol called north assisting

Rascol, the Border tribes have suddenly turned aggressive. The development is attributed to an old antagonist of ours, the Faqir of Matun. It seems the tribesmen around us are in full war paint because the Faqir has gathered a large lashkar to him and with this army is about to invade across the border. The attack on KK last night is considered to be just the start of hostile activity by the locals in anticipation of this army's arrival."

"And his instructions to us?" asked Christie, as Miles placed the second correspondence aside.

"Any decision on our fate has been taken out of his hands," announced Miles, picking up the third sheet of paper.

"We're ordered to evacuate."

As the word evacuate echoed from other lips, Robert Christie came forward to examine the paper.

"What imbecile sanctioned that order?" demanded Hugh.

"The Area Divisional Commander," answered Miles, resting his arms on the desk.

"From his headquarters at Dera Ismail Khan," validated Christie handing back the signed duplicate copy of the orders.

"What does he think the game is here?" seethed Durand, the muscles in his neck tightening. "A stroll across Hyde Park? We have women, a child and sick men in the medical room."

For a quarter of an hour Holt-Bate chaired a discussion evaluating the pros and cons of obeying or disobeying the order. However, this wrangle was ended by the return of the aeroplane. Its pilot dropped another message, one stuffed inside a glove this time, giving strength to the divisional commander's evacuation order.

It read: 'Sighted *lashkar* approaching border. Four to five thousand strong. Should be wiping their sandals on your doormat by first light tomorrow.'

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"Evacuate? Evacuate?" thundered the brigadier who had just arrived at Ishak at the head of a force of reinforcements.

"Yes sir, the order came by aircraft this morning," informed Lieutenant-Colonel Stanfield in a much calmer voice.

"I sent a copy on for delivery by the pilot to Chashmal. I believe Division was put under pressure from Peshawar or even possibly Delhi, to order the abandonment of the post."

"God almighty!" roared the brigadier. "Do those cork brained desk-wallahs realise what they've done here? It's to be hell with the lid off!"

Colonel Stanfield watched this outburst which confirmed for him everything that he had ever been told of the man; Claude Gilfillan in full throated rage was indeed an awesome sight.

Technically, Gilfillan had no claim to a command of troops in India. On completing his attached posting to the Staff College at Quetta and then promoted to brigadier, as a British army officer and not on the Indian army list, any appointment should have been over British troops outside of the Indian army sphere. However, prior to leaving the country he was asked to head a commission studying the feasibility of closing down Ishak and moving the garrison to Wana. With a new road being extended in that direction a reoccupation of the old garrison there seemed a feasible undertaking. As it happened he was at Manzai when the Rose Rickman kidnapping occurred and was asked to take command of a hurriedly assembled body of troops which he was to see concentrated at Ishak. Should a full blown expedition be

mounted into Mahsud country to rescue the captives, Gilfillan was to be in command of a brigade.

With other battalions to follow, he had set off with one and a battery of Indian pack artillery. Arriving at Ishak only minutes earlier he was hastily briefed by Stanfield on the escalation of events: the release of the captives, their move to Chashmal, the attack on and destruction of Khwaja Kalai and of the order for Chashmal to evacuate.

"The Brigadier here was called north in support of Rascol because of this chap the Faqir of Matun," explained Stanfield, the man Gilfillan looked to for clarification of the absurd evacuation order. "His force of several thousand Afghan tribesmen were threatening to launch themselves across the Border towards Datta Khel. Then the crafty beggar stole a march on us, landing up here well to the south, on our doorstep."

With a snort Gilfillan turned away to walk off a few paces along the verandah of the garrison headquarters building. It was late afternoon, the sun not far off setting. His uniform travel stained, he watched the soldiers of the rear pickets entering the camp. The battalion he had brought were Seaforth Highlanders and they marched into the camp bathed in a cherry glow, their kilts, apron covered, swirling to a piper's strains of 'Highland Laddie'.

The Brigadier slowly turned about to face the garrison's key officers, both those in station and those like him, just arrived. "Colonel Stanfield, if you were vacating this Chashmal Fort, which direction would you take?"

"Well---" began the colonel thinking for a moment. "Until last night the obvious choice would have been towards the road head at Khwaja Kalai."

"But the post there is wiped out," said Gilfillan, asking next: "So?"

"Hard to guess sir," answered Stanfield almost shrugging his shoulders. "But we are their nearest haven."

"Well one thing's for sure," the brigadier went on: "they are under orders to come out, therefore they will come out, therefore they will need our support. Colonel! What's your strength here?"

Derek Stanfield, quickly taking stock replied: "Normal garrison odds and sods sir. Drivers, handlers, cooks, signallers and so forth. Colonel Kinsey's regiment of artillery and my own battalion: three Companies, plus machine guns."

"Yes--- Yes---" pondered Gilfillan thoughtfully. "Well I can't see Division approving of me shooting off on column with the garrison left only weakly defended. So we won't tell them."

Taking a deep breath while straightening his shoulders, the brigadier began to warn off his officers for the next day's business.

"Gentlemen! We will march at the crack of dawn. The force will comprise: Colonel Stanfield, your entire battalion; and Major Allison, your Pack Battery will be very much needed. And Colonel MacKenzie, your Highlanders. Will they be fit for another slog?"

"You'll no hold them back Brigadier," forcefully replied Colin MacKenzie, the Seaforth's commanding officer. A tall, powerfully built man with copper blond hair he spoke with a broad highland accent. Who apart from being the colonel of a British battalion, MacKenzie was also the Laird of Kilcoy.

"Colonel Kinsey," continued Gilfillan, with not a hint of an apology, "the defence of Ishak I will be leaving in the hands of you, your gunners and those odds and sods."

Kinsey, a slight man with a thin black moustache, nodded his reply: "No doubt we'll cope, sir."

CHAPTER 23

*Ef you take a sword an' dror it,
An' go stick a feller thru,
Guv'ment ain't to answer for it,
God'll send the bill to you.*

James Russell Lowell

With the sun long set, the upper walls of Chashmal were showing nothing other than normal routine activity; the sentries prowled and periodically answered up that all was well. In the compound below though, it was quite another story. The Queen's and Scouts, using hushed voices to converse and pass commands, were busy at a dozen different tasks. Ammunition was being distributed; blankets were torn into strips and used to bind over metal shod boots. Water bottles were topped up, a pit was being dug to bury the soldiers' packs, bedding rolls and any spare kit. In each platoon a small circle of men was sitting, cleaning and priming hand grenades.

In a room against the north wall, Jock Cressey and others from the company's ranks with mining experience were making an exit hole through the stonework, out onto the edge of the *tangi*. In the ammunition bunker, Robert Christie, asked by Miles to draw on his wartime experience, was devising a delayed initiation device which would destroy any surplus ammunition the soldiers could not carry away.

The decision to obey the order to evacuate was one not easily accepted. Miles Holt-Bate, Robert Christie, Hugh Durand and Ahmed Wakil spent two of the hottest hours of the afternoon in urgent debate on the matter, discussing the feasibilities of their two options. To go would mean running the gauntlet through Pathan dominated country, at the mercy of an enemy who was an expert at sniping and ambush. On the other hand, to stay would be just as perilous. With the Faqir of Matun about to invade the surrounding country this would put Chashmal under siege until a very strong column could fight their way through. To survive a siege would call for a sufficient stock of food, of which there was none. Then there was the question of water. Its supply was not within their control. With the pump captured or destroyed, it was estimated that, by filling every vessel in the fort, this would only provide enough drinking water for three days.

The Bristol pilot had returned later that afternoon to over fly the country about and then dropped another note, telling them that the hills around were alive with tribesmen. Therefore, it was decided to make a run for it. If the garrison could slip away in the night, they just might gain enough of a lead to see them safely into Ishak.

Prior to the evening meal, which was served up in generous double portions, Miles held his orders briefing. Attending were the Scouts and Queen's officers and sergeants, CSM Little, B Company's Company Quartermaster Sergeant Ian Trench, Robert Christie and Emma Schofield. As Holt-Bate outlined to everyone the plan, he, assisted by Durand and Jemedar Wakil, had formulated to affect their escape, Emma found herself watching him with mixed humour and admiration. Was this stern King's officer, so confidently detailing off his subordinate commanders to tasks that, if done wrongly, could cost their lives, really the same young man who on the ship from England had pursued, like an adolescent puppy, the maidens of the 'fishing fleet'.

The plan in itself was a simple one, if they were allowed to slip away undetected. Soon after midnight the Scouts, led by Ahmed Wakil, would be the first to go. Leaving through the

exit hole made in the north wall, they would make their way down the narrow track leading to the pump shed in the *tangi* and secure an assembly point near it. Once in place, the main body of the company would follow: 5, 7 and 8 Platoons escorting the company headquarters personnel, the sick, and the fort's sweepers: six Hindu Untouchables whose job had been that of seeing to general sanitation and the disposal of human waste. Last to leave would be 6 Platoon, now in command of Sergeant Radley. They, as the rear guard, under the charge of Hugh Durand, would remain until Robert Christie had set his devices in the ammunition bunker.

To conceal the fact of Major Dartnell's death his body was buried in a grave dug against the fort wall. There was no formal ceremony, no firing party. At sunset, as the flag was lowered and the bugler blew retreat, he was laid in the ground. At a later date, if possible, the body would be recovered and re-buried with appropriate honours.

With the time approaching ten o'clock Miles and Hugh Durand toured the fort to see for themselves how the preparations for leaving were proceeding. First calling at the workings where his men were breaking through the wall, they found the party stripped to the waist, their sweat covered bodies glistening in the light of a single kerosene lamp by which they worked.

"Are we on schedule for midnight, Company Quartermaster?" asked Miles of CQMS Trench, the man overseeing the digging.

"Yes, sir," he replied, himself standing in the shallow pit in which his party was working to penetrate the wall. Around them what was once the fort's orderly-room was filled with stones and earth spoil. "The building stones gave us a fearful problem. Had to coax them out one at a time so we wouldn't give the game away with noise. We're all but done, though. Be through the surface soil on the other side in a jiffy."

Their next visit was to the ammunition bunker where Robert Christie was putting the final touches to his improvised incendiary device.

"Bob! For a District Officer you have a very creative mind," joked Miles dryly, having found that Christie's answer for getting rid of the surplus ammunition was two candles stood upright among a pile of kerosene soaked rags.

Their last inspection was of the platoons themselves. Walking from one to the other, confirming with the officers and NCOs that all was ready and that everyone knew their role in the withdrawal. As the company commander moved amongst them, the men fell silent, not because of his presence, but because of the sweet lilting tones and haunting melody of the lullaby Rose Rickman was singing to Teresa Ratcliffe as she rocked the child in her arms. With the night warm and moonlit, the men, waiting in this fly speck sized corner of the Empire, listened to Rose's tender lyrics and thought of home and other nights, and other girls who sang.

When the tune ended the silence remained, broken only by a request from a single voice, a telltale lump in the owner's throat: "Sing it again, miss?"

Despite her blushing, Rose complied.

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"Get the point of your bandook out'a my rump," hissed Bert Collins who, on hands and knees was half way through the exit tunnel.

"Well get on your skates, then," hissed back Pani Waters, who at the pit entrance behind him had ducked in, pushing his rifle too far forward.

"You two! Put a sock in it," ordered Joe Penton, also in a hissed whisper. Stationed on the lip of the pit he was seeing his section out of the fort.

2 Section, the last to leave, were being brought down one by one from their sentry posts on the walls. After giving out their routine midnight answering call, Hugh Durand and Wilf Radley collected in each man, sending them straight away to the orderly-room. Moments earlier Robert Christie had reported that the candles were lit and the bunker door bolted and locked. He was now waiting on the orderly-room veranda as Durand and Radley, their boots bound in blanket strips, padded noiselessly across the fort's now empty compound yard.

"Off you go, Bob," said Hugh, Waving the district officer into the room. Then to Danny Short and Ginger Langdon who stood guard with rifles ready: "And you two. Get along."

Before following, the Scout officer scanned the walls of the command he was about to abandon. When the tribesmen beyond failed to hear the call of the sentries answering up at one o'clock they would become suspicious. By two o'clock they would be in no doubt as to what was up. Christie, therefore, had timed the burning of his candles to two hours, hardly ample to make a getaway in the dark but they could gain precious minutes if the Pathans hesitated in their pursuit to loot the fort.

Scrambling through the short tunnel, Joe Penton emerged to find Ben Tysall kneeling over the exit. It was his 1 Section who was providing the guard on that side of the wall. The last two out were Hugh Durand and Wilf Radley, the officer leaving Radley to bring up the rear while he made his way to the front of the waiting platoon. There he found, unexpectedly, one of his Scouts. There had been a change in the plan: the Scouts on their way to taking up a position around the pump shed had seen movement near it. This may possibly have been a prowling night animal, but no chance could be taken. Guiding his men, Ahmed Wakil moved the assembly point further north along the bed of the *tangi*.

The river at the bottom of the gorge was the Takht Toi which flowed from snow-capped Afghan mountains across the Border past Chashmal south-east, eventually joining with the much larger Baddr Toi. The sides of the *tangi* at this point were not as sheer as it was at many other places along its length. Still, as they were led down by the Scout guide, 6 Platoon had to watch their footing. In single file they clung to a goat trail taking them north along the side of a perilously steep, rock strewn slope.

The *tangi* was almost a quarter of a mile across, its eastern side lit up by bright moonlight. Fortunately below the lip on the Chashmal side shadow lent to the garrison's escape a much appreciated camouflage. It was only three hundred feet to the river bed but because of the diverted route it took the platoon almost half an hour. Once down though there was no halt, Holt-Bate ordering the Scouts away in the lead, the rest of the company to follow in single file, treading softly along the stony river bed.

Geared for speed, everyone was stripped of inessential kit, no packs, just haversacks and water-bottles, the heaviest item being their ammunition. As well as a hundred rounds in each man's pouches and all Lewis-gun pans full, everyone carried at least another hundred rounds in cloth bandoliers. The only ones with packs were Trev Arkwright and Roy Lockwood, the two company signallers, and Willy Sale and Pete Hollinghurst, two cooks. They were carrying Emma Schofield's medical stocks.

Keeping to the dark side of the *tangi*, the pace, picking their way in single file, was no more than an amble, which slowed even more as, moving further northwards, upstream, they found the sides narrowing until everyone was wading through ankle deep water at the base of a vertical rock-faced canyon. This route, safe enough now, would be a risky venture during the brief summer rains. The flood water marks twenty to thirty feet above their heads showed that, if caught here with the river in spate, it would mean certain death. After an hour the canyon opened up, with the sides becoming less steep. In the sandy soil at their base thistles grew, while higher up, black in the moonlit, olive coloured *gurgura* bushes had taken root.

Here the Scouts led the way up another precarious track which took the fugitive garrison

out of the *tangi* to the east. By first striking north they had added an extra four miles on their journey to Ishak, which in making their escape was unavoidable. Now what lay ahead for everyone was a twenty mile cross country dash that at one point arced five miles north of Khwaja Kalai.

Just as the tail-enders of 6 Platoon were gaining the crest of the *tangi* a muffled explosion was heard from the direction of Chashmal. "That's put the fat in the fire now Jeff, mate," whispered Noshier Slyfield to Jeff Gleeson as he shifted his Lewis-gun to another shoulder.

Holt-Bate, taking out his pocket-watch to check the time, turned to Robert Christie marching behind him.

"Congratulations Bob. Your time fuse - a bit woolly, but right on time."

"Yes," replied Christie. "Simple and effective. But they'll be after our blood now."

"What was that, Mister Trench?" asked Teresa.

"That was a little surprise we left back at the fort, Teresa darling. And call me Ditchy, like I told you to do," replied the quartermaster sergeant.

Ian Trench, a stocky, bullnecked man with bandy legs, had the girl riding his shoulders.

Through the night they marched without a halt. The sick, one Scout recovering from sand-fly fever and two Queen's men suffering a bout of recurrent malaria, were helped on by two men attached to each. Following seldom used pathways and skirting clear of villages, by sunrise Holt-Bate's command had covered ten more miles and were on target for reaching Ishak well before noon. With the sound of a *chikor* bird's first awakening cry, the morning's light revealed this single line, two hundred strong, passing through a dead landscape of low eroded hills, their boulders bleached white by the sun.

Aided by daylight their marching had gained pace. Hugh Durand's Scouts, still in the lead, began to step out but were held back from full-flighted *gashting* by the slowness of those following them. Behind the Scouts was 2nd Lieutenant Nigel Tillis's 5 Platoon. Then came Holt-Bate and his HQ element, CSM Little, the women, Robert Christie, the sick and sweepers. Behind them again came 7 Platoon, then 8, with 6 Platoon bringing up the tail. It was not a satisfactory formation for moving around tribal territory in broad daylight, there was no picket protection and they were travelling far too slowly. No one was more apprehensive about this than Miles, knowing that he had no alternative. He and his command had exhausted their cunning, from now on fate's hand would be resting on everyone's shoulder.

Crossing one low ridge they followed a trail down into a broad, boulder littered basin. Climbing up the other side, 6 Platoon was well over half way to the crest when a rifle shot sounded, the bullet ricocheting at the heels of Ben Tysall, the column's end man. Flinging himself into the cover of large rocks to one side of the trail he crouched, peering warily back across the basin to the last ridge line they had crossed.

"Any sign of the blighter?" he called over his shoulder to the rest of his section, who, as were everyone not over the crest, off the trail and in cover.

"Not a hair," answered China Yeoman, the nearest to him.

The sun was over the horizon now, giving the British every advantage. With the sun rising at their backs there was not one shadow on the far ridge, every pebble there clearly visible. Despite this there was not the slightest trace of the firer, which was not such a surprise to 6 Platoon. They had seen many times how the Pathan, in his ragged dress, could fade out of sight into his surroundings. On the other hand the sniper was shooting into the full glare of the sun, which Ben might well have thanked for saving his life.

"Pull back! Pull back!" shouted Wilf Radley. "Keep to cover and pull back."

Avoiding the trail, in bounds, from protective rock to protective rock, the platoon began to fall back, uphill, to rejoin the rest of the company. As soon as the men broke cover another shot was fired at them, then another and another. This enemy was not now just a lone sniper,

there were several of them in scattered concealment on the far ridge. Knowing that every time a rifle fired a faint signature of smoke was seen, Joe Penton, pausing between dashes, would glance back each time towards the enemy. With the still morning air ringing with rifle fire and ricochets, he on one occasion took aim and fired at a faint puff of smoke.

His shot was a rare venture from 6 Platoon, who were more intent on leap-frogging back from cover to cover, leaving the return of fire to 8 Platoon. Their platoon commander, 2nd Lieutenant Andrew Laffan, after seeing his own men over the ridge, had deployed two sections to provide covering fire for 6 Platoon.

The last two to dodge and weave their way up onto the safety of the crest were Wilf Radley and Ben Tysall, who found Miles Holt-Bate waiting with orders: "Sergeant Radley, place your platoon on this ridge as a rear guard," he directed, turning his upper body to point across a shallow valley at another ridge half a mile to the north. "The rest of us will be making for that feature there. When you hear the bugler sound the withdrawal I want you to join us at the double. Understood?"

"Right you are, sir," snapped the sergeant turning to shout at his platoon, his voice ragged from lack of breath: "We are to hold here --- as the rear guard --- take up firing positions on the crest --- Corporal Griffiths --- put your Lewis Section on the trail --- 1 Section to their right --- 2 Section on the left --- 3 Section back in reserve --- Now shake a leg. Move!"

As Holt-Bate joined 8 Platoon in hurrying after the rest of the company, Radley's men fanned out along the ridge taking up positions and unravelling their boots of the now unnecessary blanket strips.

"Who be that peg-leggin' with Mister Laffan's bunch?" asked Jeff Gleeson of Noshier Slyfield. With the Lewis-gun team, settling into the shelter of a rock, Gleeson, as he lay beside his mate, had turned on his side to remove a spare ammunition pan from his haversack to then spied a man limping away with 8 Platoon.

"Arthur Tagg," replied Noshier glancing quickly. "Sid's Section. Looks like he took a piece of lead in the leg."

"He'll not be too boat chuffed about that at the minute," commented Gleeson, placing the pan beside the gun.

"Jock! I don't half feel queer," admitted Charlie Robey to Jock Cressey, who was sharing the other side of his boulder.

"Dinna let it cause yer no bother. y'r feel'n no diff'rent from the rest," said the Scotsman encouragingly to the young soldier, who was only a few months out from Blighty.

"Corporal Tysall, anything stirring this end?"

Ben, looking around found Wilf Radley bending low as he approached from behind. Since taking up their position, no further shooting had come their way. The far ridge appearing a picture of calm serenity in the new morning's sunlight. "Nothin' stirrin', Sarg."

"Well, tell your lads to keep their eyes skinned," warned the sergeant as he moved off to check the other flank.

On the opposite side of the trail Radley crawled in beside Joe Penton and received the same reply: nothing could be seen. It was a good six hundred yards away but the angle of the sunlight made it seem a lot closer. Looking back over his shoulder Joe checked the progress of the main body of the company as they progressed across the valley. There was no recognisable formation; in the front the Scouts provided a broken line as advance guard, while the rest followed as a flock.

"Most unwanted, this," said Radley watching the enemy's ridge closely.

"Unwanted?" asked Joe.

"Silence, Corporal Penton. Much rather them pills over there was shootin' at us," replied Radley. "Don't like it when they're not in me sights".

"Gaffer's almost reached the hill, Sergeant," pointed out the lance-corporal, turning to

look once again at the company.

"Aye. Good," replied Radley, snatched a quick glimpse before returning his eyes to the enemy ridge.

"Sergeant Radley!" came a shout from Sid Firth, which was both a summons and an alerting cry.

Wriggling back out of cover, the sergeant ran to his reserve section where Firth was standing up and pointing. Before he reached the lance-corporal, Radley could see the reason for Firth's concern. In the valley a thousand yards to the north-west, heedless to the fact that they were in full view, a body of tribesmen, perhaps a hundred strong, were crossing over to the same ridge that was also the company's objective.

"Only just spotted them geezers the minute, Sarge," said Firth.

"Corporal Griffiths, can you see any movement across the basin?" called out Radley, still watching the band of men away up the valley.

"Not a twitch, Sarg," came back the reply.

"Knew it. Bloody knew it," stormed Wilf. Then turning to see the company was almost onto the ridge themselves, shouted a warning to his platoon. "Right you lot! Get yourselves ready now. We're changing ground."

With the Scouts securing the crown of this new ridge, Lieutenant Holt-Bate stopped just below the crest. Beside him also halted CSM Little and the company bugler, Kip Dunn. Raising his binoculars to his eyes the officer looked back towards the rearguard platoon. Sergeant Radley, whom he could recognise by the way he always held his rifle across his chest, was neither looking towards the enemy nor towards the company, but instead to the north-west. Lowering his glasses Miles himself looked towards the north-west. However, because of the angle he could not see what Radley was watching. Snapping his binoculars back to his eyes, he again returned his gaze to the sergeant, who had not altered his observation to the north-west.

"Sergeant-Major! The withdrawal. Quickly!" he barked. "Right young Dunn. Good and loud now!" passed on Little to the waiting bugler.

The bugle notes that sounded out across the valley were, for Holt-Bate, five minutes earlier than he had intended: 5 Platoon were up and securing the far lip of the ridge, so too was his HQ element and the non-combatants, all catching their breath behind him. 7 and 8 Platoons though, were still struggling up the slope.

Binoculars remaining at his eyes, Miles watched as the bugle call was heard. Suddenly Sergeant Radley sprang into motion, shouting orders and waving an arm. The Lewis Section was the first to leave their position, closely followed by the two on the flanks. The last to get off was the reserve section and none dallied. They were without doubt, departing at a dead run.

"Sir, it's Mister Kingsley."

Miles, lowering his glasses found CSM Little indicating the arrival of 7 Platoon.

"Well done, Giles. We're forming a defensive square until joined by 6 Platoon," he informed the younger officer. "I want your chaps down the ridge manning the western side of the box."

"We don't want to get ourselves caught static, Miles," warned Hugh Durand who had suddenly appeared at his side. "You're not planning to take up residence here, I hope? My Scouts are nervous about being rooted."

"Rest assured we are not," replied the OC. "The moment the rear guard rejoins, we will be off again."

"Good! I'll let them know." Durand made to leave but was stopped by Holt-Bate.

"Hugh! Who are we dealing with here? Is it those skulking beggars from the fort?"

"Not this soon," answered Hugh, "My Jemedar thinks they're local. We're in the heart of

Wazir holdings, Madda Khel and Khidda Khel, deuced mean chappies. We to them are just passing game for the bagging.”

All the time Miles was conversing, his eyes were following 6 Platoon's flight. Periodically he would train his glasses on the ridge they just left and for renewed hostile signs from what he could see of the one beyond. Mainly, though, he monitored the approach of his old platoon. It wasn't until they reached the valley floor that his fears were realised. First one shot resounded through the valley, then at spasmodic intervals others followed.

“Dunn!” snapped Miles to the bugler. “Dash off and warn Mister Kingsley to watch his front. There is enemy closing in along the ridge.”

At reckless speed 6 Platoon was racing to rejoin the company, heedless of the treacherous ground they were running over, for they were in a race. The tribesmen seen to the north-west, had stopped short of the ridge top and then turning along its slope were heading towards the new company position. Out of sight of the company itself, by drawing up just short, they would in effect, with their dominance of the higher ground, block 6 Platoon's path.

With hearts beating wildly they ran downhill, each man's eyes looking ahead for the best route over or around the hazardous, rocky surface that at each step threatened to trip the soldiers up. Even so, regardless of the jeopardy to their footing, men were snatching anxious glances over their left shoulders. At the sound of their bugle recall, the distance separating 6 Platoon from the band of Pathans scrambling eastwards along the ridgeside, was something like eight hundred yards. Now, matching the tribesmen's steps, and on an intercepting course, this range was rapidly decreasing.

With the momentum of their downhill rush, Radley's men did manage to pull slightly ahead. A gain that made no significant difference, for with the angle narrowing, it only meant that the target presented by the light infantry platoon would be their backs and not their sides. The first attempt at this was made as the Lewis-gun Section reached the floor of the valley. A young Wazir, in the van, armed with a single shot Martini Henry, halted to take aim by bracing himself against a boulder.

The bullet, cracking into a rock beside Frank Quinn, one of the Lewis Section, peppered him with tiny stone chippings.

“Keep the feet nimble,” bellowed Wilf Radley as other shots ricocheted among his men.

“Don't give the bastards a sittin' target.”

Across the valley bottom they ran, stumbling in the rough footing, topees falling away heedless of men frantically clambering to regain their feet. Noshier Slyfield, his speed hindered by the weight of his Lewis-gun was being overtaken by those from the rifle sections. Staying at his elbow but not offering to assist in carrying the machine-gun was Jeff Gleeson. The Lewis was Noshier's baby, none carried her but him. Reaching the foot of the ridge, they now began a tiring and deadly climb.

George Garvie, one of Ben Tysall's 1 Section was the first to be hit, the bullet passing through the flesh below his shoulder blade, then shattering the bone in his right forearm.

“Jesus!” he cried out through clenched teeth while falling forward.

“Run with it, George!” exhorted Spud Murphy, pulling his mate to his feet.

Sprawling sideways, 2 Section's Spider Webb, rose to his knees clutching his throat, blood gushing between his fingers, his windpipe severed. Struggling to breathe he was dragged to his feet by Jock Cressey and Charlie Robey.

“Git off yer shanks, Spider lad. Or the scuts'll have yer liver,” beseeched Cressey, slinging his own rifle over his shoulder to grab Webb's.

The tribesmen were halted now; they had come as far along the ridge as they dared. Finding firing positions that were not overlooked by the British already on the ridge, they settled down to picking off 6 Platoon.

Keeping to cover dodging from rock to rock, pausing only long enough to fire snap shots, Radley's platoon fought its way upwards. The distance between the two groups half way up the hill, was about three hundred yards, beyond that the range would begin to extend again. It was at this point that the worst of the casualties were suffered.

Frank Quinn from the Lewis Section was flung to the ground with a bullet that struck his side, splintering two ribs. As Paddy Lynch of 1 Section bent to help him up, Eric Moody from 3 Section stopped beside them to return the fire. On taking aim a bullet struck his rifle deflecting into his chest. Goody Goodwin, also of 3 Section, seeing him collapse, picked him up to balance him across his shoulders, both men's topees spilling to the ground. The way Moody collapsed with his eyes open, sightlessly staring, Goodwin was sure the man was dead. Despite this he endangered his own life by taking on his mate's extra weight, for this was the Frontier and dead or alive, no one was to be left to the vile mercy of the Pathan.

Another now being carried was Spider Webb. He had died while Cressey and Robey laboured to drag him up the hill. With Robey carrying three rifles, the Scotsman, under the weight of Webb, was pulling and clawing his way to the ridge summit.

Ducking from rock to rock, trying to defend themselves with hastily aimed snap shots, 6 Platoon doggedly battled their way in an oblique, upwards withdrawal. As the bulk of the platoon reached the same height on the ridge as their enemy, the tribesmen, rather than come out from around their cover and expose themselves to the rifle sights of the men of the company already on the ridge top, instead concentrated their fire on the platoon's stragglers.

Chalky Gray of 2 Section, the platoon comic who was forever doing Charlie Chaplin impersonations, fell among the rocks with a bullet through one knee.

"Don't pack it in now, Chalky," encouraged Joe Penton, crouching behind a rock to fire a shot. Ejecting the spent cartridge, he looked again to Gray who twice attempted to stand, only to collapse both times. Reaching down with his right hand the section commander pulled the wounded man to an upright position, then bending, losing his topee in the process, he lifted Gray onto his shoulders.

Sid Firth's men, being the rearmost, were now the focus of all the Pathan's fire, the latter now boldly shunning their cover to enjoy a better aim at the last fleeing British. Dashing across an exposed gap between two large rocks Stan Ross was hit above the hip, spinning him to the ground. Tom O'Hanlon and Sandy Saunders following up, took hold of him and under withering fire dragged the wounded man back, O'Hanlon taking a bullet graze across the back of his neck. Noshier Slyfield who had crossed just before was, with Jeff Gleeson, catching his breath. Seeing these others trapped on the far side of the gap, he bravely unslung his Lewis-gun and mounting the front bi-pod legs on the edge of a boulder, began firing bursts at the filthy, turbaned heads, of men who were finding great enjoyment in their murdering deeds.

Wilf Radley with Sid Firth, the very last men, arrived on this scene breathless and wild eyed.

"Pick up Ross and get on before I drink your blood!" bellowed the sergeant. He had detected a slackening in the Pathan's fire, a reprieve provided by Slyfield, who in hot blooded anger was sending burst after burst into the enemy's firing positions.

O'Hanlon and Saunders, each grabbing a shoulder strap of Ross's ammunition pouch webbing, dragged him across the gap.

"My leg! My leg!" he cried out, as his shot leg bounced over the stones.

"Give a pray it's not your bloody head," retorted O'Hanlon, hoisting him onto his back once safely behind cover.

"Right you two. Leave off those godless baskets and cut along. You done us proud." Radley ordered the gun team, who were changing ammunition pans on the Lewis.

Climbing higher they found Ben Tysall and three of his section who had stationed

themselves on a small shelf of rock. At last they were above the Pathans and benefiting from the advantage of height, and were now sniping at them with deliberate, aimed shots.

On the peak of the ridge at the initial sound of shooting, her first thoughts of Joe, Rose Rickman sprang up.

"Rose. I need you here where your duty is," reminded Emma Schofield in a blunt, no nonsense voice which stopped the young woman from taking flight to investigate the shooting.

"Your young man is big enough and ugly enough to look after himself," commented the doctor with dry humour, as Rose reluctantly knelt to continue assisting Emma in bandaging Arthur Tagg's leg wound.

For several minutes, fraught with worry, Rose found herself with nothing to do but listen to the shooting. Then George Garvie stumbled into their aid post, his arm and back bleeding badly. Following close behind him, Frank Quinn walked in holding his side, blood from the wound running from under his grey collarless shirt, saturating his shorts in a dark red stain. Jock Cressey, gritting his teeth, staggered in with the lifeless body of Spider Webb, the Scotsman dropping to his knees with exhaustion after easing his burden to the ground. Emma quickly examining Webb, shook her head at Cressey, moving next to where Goodwin had placed down Eric Moody, once again shaking her head.

"Are they dead, Ditchy?" asked Teresa, who, tucked up between two stool size rocks, had watched the doctor feel for any spark of life within the two soldiers, lying only a few yards from her.

"Aye, Teresa darling. Good King's men, who have done their duty," answered the CQMS, picking her up to place the child on the reverse side of the rocks, away from the corpses.

Intent on bandaging George Garvie's arm, Rose looked up as someone cried out. Chalky Gray being eased off Joe Penton's shoulders had struck his knee wound on the ground.

"Joe!" exclaimed the nurse, in an outburst of relief.

"Don't be none upset, love. We gave as good as we got," winked Joe clapping a hand on Tim Cressey's shoulder. "Come on Jock, back to the Platoon."

"Let's have a look at that neck, Tom," offered Willy Sale, one of the cooks helping with the wounded. O'Hanlon, himself bleeding from the neck, had just delivered Stan Ross to the aid post.

"Bugger off," he said, slapping at Sale's hand as he turned back to join his section.

"Well done, Sergeant Radley," congratulated Holt-Bate, as Wilf, the last man of the platoon, reached the safety of the company's defensive box.

"Many dead, sir?" asked the sergeant, fighting for breath. "One! Maybe two," replied the officer.

"Lucky sir --- you recalled --- us when you did ---. Could have --- lost the whole kit --- kit and caboodle."

"Join your platoon, Sergeant, we're moving off shortly," directed Miles with a crisp command. "I'm holding you as the reserve force. Our line of march will be along the top of this ridge."

During the time 6 Platoon were fighting their way up onto the ridge, Holt-Bate took the decision to continue their flight eastwards along its summit. Higher than the others around them, they could not be fired down upon. Also, according to Hugh, the ridge ran for four miles, the last two like a lone finger pointing out into a plain. This plain they would have to drop down into where, a mile further, was a river, the Faizu, that ran to the north into the Jabbi Toi. The Faizu was at the bottom of a steep *tangi*, with only one crossing point along its ten mile length, which was just beyond where their ridge fell away to the plain.

The method by which Miles envisaged getting there, worked out in conjunction with Hugh Durand, was to walk his force east, maintaining an all-around defensive posture; a

ridiculous tactic, one hard to find in any military manual, but then again there was only one North-West Frontier - few manuals ever applied here. They were a small force in close contact with an unknown number of hostile Pathan tribesmen, who were in a position to attack them from any point of the compass they chose to, or from any number of directions at once. And so, alone in the middle of hostile, warlike tribal territory, burdened with sick, wounded and dead, B Company and Hugh Durand's Scouts Platoon made ready to fight their way out.

The only method by which the wounded could be moved was to carry them. The labour for this was provided by Ben Tysall's 1 Section, detached from the platoon to give whatever help was necessary. The two dead Robert Christie persuaded the sweepers to carry. As non-combatants, they were terrified men. Aware of this, with no other to look to for reassurances as to the day's outcome, the district officer had taken the six men under his wing.

The signal to start everyone moving was given by Kip Dunn on his bugle: 'advance'. The Scouts led off on a front of about seventy yards the width of the crown of the ridge; stealthily stalking through the miniature mazes created by the rocky crags and tangled boulders. On the flanks, stretched to near enough a hundred yards were 5 and 8 Platoons, 5 on the north, 8 the south. Giles Kingsley's 7 Platoon had the most perilous task of all: bringing up the rear. Even as they rose to begin the retreat random shooting was directed at them from tribesmen who had skulked up onto the ridge to the west.

For a quarter of a mile Holt-Bate and his command made good progress. Although difficult to control, everyone was watching to keep the same pace so that no gaps or bunching occurred, and ground was slowly but surely being covered. Then Miles was called for by Henry Grocock, 8 Platoon's sergeant.

"Here, sir," indicated Andrew Laffan, the platoon commander. Standing on a rock, on the southern rim of the ridge, he was looking back towards the feature they had left for the one they were now on.

"What is it, Andrew?" asked Miles, climbing up beside him.

The 2nd lieutenant, pointing, said only one word: "There."

Raising his glasses the OC focussed them on the far ridge. There, streaming down the track they had followed from the river through most of the night, were some hundreds of raggedly dressed Pathan tribesmen.

"Giles, we must hurry on. We have got to move faster than this." Holt-Bate, with his force about to face a drastic increase in enemy numbers, had sought the man most likely to feel the full weight of their assault first.

"Difficult to move much quicker, sir," replied the 7 Platoon commander, crouched in rocky cover, pistol in hand, directing the movements of his sections with shouted orders and whistle blasts. "Those devils are sniping at us from all angles. It's impossible to make a clean break away from them. We have had to fall back in stages, Section by Section."

"Like it or not, Giles, you are going to have to speed it up. The tribesmen we left back at Chashmal have arrived in some numbers and will be dropping into your lap very shortly. I can't spare you extra men to reinforce you but what I'll do is have 5 and 8's Lewis Sections switched to your flanks, detached under your command."

Ducking away, keeping low behind rock, the OC left the young 2nd lieutenant to conduct what was turning into a fighting withdrawal, while he went to order the regrouping of the two Lewis-guns. With his small command cell, CSM Little and Dunn following, behind them, 7 Platoon's 1 and 3 Sections rose to dodge and weave another bound rearwards.

With all the motion of a caterpillar, this tiny defensive island worked its way westward along the ridge. In an hour they had retired another mile, taking them across the boundary of the plain. Here both sides of the ridge sloped away five hundred feet to a large featureless flatland, ringed with crumbling escarpments. The crown of the ridge, down which they were

stubbornly withdrawing, did not lend itself to rapid manoeuvring. Jagged waist high rock in large clumps caused the retreating soldiers to bunch or suffer injury to limbs by attempting to cross them. Also running along the tip of the ridge was a broken spine. Jutting up at an angle as high as ten feet, in places, for many hundreds of yards, it disappeared completely. Because of this jumbled terrain there was plenty of cover for both sides.

In keeping the enemy at bay, when Giles Kingsley's men made their move to fall back, that was the moment in which the tribesmen sought to make a kill. Unfortunately for them, this moment of vulnerability worked both ways: to stay in contact the Pathan had to follow, and although he enjoyed a reputation of being a deadly shot, so were the Queen's. Each year on their musketry classification they shot for money. By getting a marksman's score they were awarded an extra nine pence a day. To achieve this financial reward the men would spend hours each week dry firing their rifles, disciplining their breathing, steadying their point of aim and enslaving the trigger pressure, making it work for them. 7 Platoon had at this point taken four casualties, one dead and three wounded but there were also dead and wounded Pathans scattered back among the rocks over which B Company had withdrawn.

"Are we managing here satisfactorily, Quartermaster?" enquired Holt-Bate, making a brief stop to check on the casualties, while on his way through to see Hugh Durand.

"We're right enough, sir" replied Trench, who was supervising movement of the wounded. "A few grouzers lettin' fly with the pepper, but they got good call for most part."

"Miles, if we have to keep moving in the manner we have been some of these men will die," confided Emma Schofield, catching the lieutenant's arm, keeping her voice guarded.

"I'm aware of that, Emma," Holt-Bate's eyes were scouring his perimeter lines as he spoke. "The dilemma we face is, if we don't move them, they will also surely die."

One of these was Stan Ross, shot in the hip but suffering internal damage as well, as were two of the 7 Platoon wounded, both having taken bullets in the stomach. There were also others, not as serious, who none-the-less could not move without being carried. Chalky Gray, his rifle tied to his wounded leg with his and others' puttees, was unable even to crawl. All of these men were being submitted to short, painful hauls. In spurts of forty or fifty yards they would be carried to the rear of the Scouts, then as 7 Platoon began to fall back, lifted and moved again.

Having spent a few precious moments giving encouragement to the wounded, the OC was poised to depart for the line of advancing Scouts when the steady cracking of Pathan firing began to increase in volume.

That will be our friends from Chashmal," observed Robert Christie calmly.

"Yes," agreed Miles, "We are now in young Kingsley's hands. Except for 6 Platoon, everything we have is in the shop window."

As he spoke, from the north perimeter line, the men of 5 Platoon suddenly broke into cheering and shouts of joy. All were looking upwards as an RAF two-seater 'Ninak' bi-plane, a dark, foreign object, floating across a breathtakingly blue sky, soared towards them.

"A heartening sight," remarked Christie.

"Yes," agreed Miles, as the aircraft, remaining high up, passed over the ridge, the observer in the rear waving. "At this minute, though, I would much rather have another platoon."

CHAPTER 24

*We aren't no thin red 'eroes,
Nor we aren't no blackguards too,
But single men in barracks,
Most remarkable like you.*

Rudyard Kipling

The post at Khwaja Kalai was a large, two storey tower surrounded by barbed wire. The small garrison that occupied it defended themselves from the upper storey. When attacked they sealed the only entrance by bolting shut an iron trapdoor, which being enclosed in thick stone walls, theoretically made them impregnable against the tribesmen's small arms. The only way the tower could be taken was with artillery or explosives. The Faqir of Matun had no field gun, but he did still possess explosives.

Just before Rose Rickman and Teresa were kidnapped he had selected Chashmal as the objective of his attack into British India. By taking this garrison outpost, he believed the Wazir and Mahsud tribes would not hesitate in flocking to his banner. First, though, he had to lure away the bulk of the force at Ishak. This he did by calling for the Afghan tribes to gather with their arms on the border, north-west of Razmak, prompting that garrison to call for immediate aid from Ishak. Word of the column moving out was sent by one of the Faqir's sons, who then, with the help of local tribesmen, attacked Khwaja Kalai, severing communications between Ishak and Chashmal.

The sight to those in Brigadier Gilfillan's command who had never seen the Pathan's handiwork was a sickening one: the explosive blast to the tower had ripped away a quarter of its wall. The bodies of the defenders were lying over a wide area around the tower, all mutilated. Some, it was obvious, had been tortured to death. The British officer's corpse was found inside the tower, his skin pegged out on the ground at its entrance.

Observing this grisly sight the brigadier turned to the man at his side: "Tell me, D'urban. You're attuned to the workings of these creatures' minds. Just what justification do they make to you when explaining acts of bestiality such as this?"

"The Pathan sees no evil in this barbarism, sir," answered the political officer. "They are like children playing with sharpened toys."

"Children!" replied Gilfillan, snapping the word off. "Well it's time we purged the nursery".

Leaving Ishak at first light it was now mid-morning and with the column securing the destroyed post with picket positions on the high points around, the recovery of the bodies had now begun. On the evening before the brigadier had informed Dera Ishal Khan of his arrival at Ishak and his assuming command of the garrison. Confirming that Chashmal had received its evacuation order and updating the local situation report, he added his intention to take a force to Khwaja Kalai the next morning in order to bring back the Scouts' bodies.

While the majority of the Queen's Light Infantry were stationed out on picket, a company of the Seaforth Highlanders collected in the dead. With the mules of the column resting, now free of their loads, each body was wrapped in a blanket and placed on stretchers in neat rows.

"Aircraft, sir," alerted Captain Quinnell of the garrison artillery regiment, whom Gilfillan had borrowed for the appointment as his brigade major.

In his message of the previous evening, he had requested observation aircraft to scout out

the country around Ishak and to keep track of the evacuating garrison from Chashmal. The aircraft was ordered to land first at Ishak where Lieutenant Colonel Kinsey was under orders from Gilfillan to instruct the airmen that, as soon as they found B Company, they were to find his column and make known to him its whereabouts.

As it swooped low over the damaged tower a small object was flung from the 'Ninak'. On retrieving this, a leather pouch, a Seaforth corporal ran up to hand it to Captain Quinnell.

"Message, sir," said the latter taking a sheet of paper from the pouch to hand it to the brigadier.

As Gilfillan read the note the principle officers of the column stood silent around him.

"They've found the Chashmal garrison," he announced.

Looking up from the paper, his eyes foreboding. "They are five to six miles north of us, being engaged by a force of Pathans and apparently fighting for their lives."

Handing the message back to his acting brigade major, with no preliminary discussion Gilfillan set his command in motion:

"Gentlemen! Get the pack animals loaded," he ordered, extending his arm towards a gap in the hills, "we're going north."

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Dropping to his knees, Robert Christie allowed Spider Webb's body to slide from his shoulders onto the ground. With increasing enemy numbers mauling at the British like a pack of wolves attacking a shepherd defending his flock, their casualties were steadily mounting. There were now six dead at the aid post and twice that number again seriously wounded. Every time the dead and wounded had to be moved, everyone attached to the aid post and most of the walking wounded, such as Arthur Tagg and George Garvie, took hold of somebody and lifted them forward just that little further away from danger.

Rising to a crouch Christie moved among the sweepers who had brought along the other bodies, to give them words of encouragement. Stray bullets from the west were flying all about, whistling through the air as they swirled in flight after ricocheting off rocks. Because of this those being pursued no longer stood upright; everything was done in a crawl or at a crouching run. Dodging through the tangle of rocks, Christie made for the centre of the aid post to see what support he could give to Emma Schofield. The area taken up by the wounded had grown over the last hour. To avoid providing a tightly packed target, the disabled and those responsible for carrying them, which now included most of 6 Platoon, were spread well away from where the doctor and her nurse worked.

Reaching the woman he at first just knelt, watching. Her overcoat now being used to carry one of the wounded, Emma Schofield, her grey hair pinned up in a turn of the century style, blood covering the front of her skirt, was toiling to save the life of a young 5 Platoon soldier. Shot through the side of the face, the bullet having exited under his right ear, he was choking to death on his own blood.

"You're doing a grand show here, Emma," praised Christie, making his presence known.

"Ah! Robert," replied the woman glancing up, more grateful for a free pair of hands than the compliment, "be a good soul and pass me one of those bandages."

As he reached across to a webbed backpack, picking out one of the cloth wads it contained, the district officer heard his name being called:

"Mister Christie, sir."

It was Wilf Radley, summoning him with a waving hand.

"One of Mister Durand's Scout bods, sir," informed the sergeant as Robert joined him, indicating one of Hugh's men crouched beside him. "Ran back here hammer and tongs. Tried to tell me something. No good though, don't sling the baht."

Losing no time, Christie quickly asked the Scout in Pushtu why he came.

"He says Mister Durand sent him to find the OC to ask for reinforcements," translated the district officer.

"He's with Mister Kingsley at the minute, sir," pointed out Radley.

"Well, you and I had better go and see what the crisis is," resolved Christie, waving the Scout into the lead.

"Corporal Tysall," shouted the sergeant. "Look after the Platoon for a minute or two. I'm just off with Mister Christie to do a spot of reconnoitring."

On approaching the Scout's advance line the two Englishmen were made conscious for the first time of the fact that the Scouts had halted and were in cover exchanging shots with an enemy blocking the company's withdrawal. Hugh they found with pistol in hand waiting in shelter beside a crag of rock.

"Some of the beggars have got around us," he informed them. "They're holed up in a pile of rocks right in our path. My chaps are Scouts, not trained for assaulting. I wanted some of Mister Holt-Bate's Queen's to storm the position."

"Well it's a certainty we are not going anywhere until that lot is dislodged," agreed Christie, making a swift appraisal of the tribesmen's strongpoint with a battle drilled Royal Engineer officer's eye. "Miles has his hands full just now with the fighting at the other end. We can't afford to waste time seeking a decision from him. So I suggest you use Sergeant Radley's platoon to bung those devils out, while I find Mister Holt-Bate and inform him as to why we are deploying his reserve."

"Right you are, Robert," complied Durand, slapping Wilf Radley on the shoulder. "Get your Platoon up here fast, Sergeant. Time is not on our side."

"All right 6 Platoon, bring your fighting kit and follow on!" shouted Radley, returning to the aid post. "Mister Durand has a spot of bother up front and we've been selected to help him out." Passing through the aid post Christie delayed himself for only a moment to remove and slip on Spider Webb's ammunition pouches and collect one of the dead soldiers' rifles from Arthur Tagg. Having come to Chashmal with no weapon at all, he had taken possession of Major Dartnell's pistol after that officer's death. Now, on his mission to find Holt-Bate on the fighting line, he armed himself with a rifle, a practice he had adopted during his early days in the Great War.

"Yes! Yes! You've done the right thing, Bob," endorsed Miles when the district officer eventually reached him.

The extent of the position now held by the British, had, because of the loss of control of movement - 7 Platoon being unable to fall back at regular intervals - extended for over three hundred yards. This was causing gaps on the flanks which Miles was striving to close by speeding up the next leg of 7 Platoon's withdrawal. To ease Giles Kingsley's burden, Holt-Bate had sent Jeff Gurrin and Henry Grocock, 5 and 8 Platoons' sergeants, to take charge of their two detached Lewis Sections. Prior to Christie's arrival he had just briefed the two men on what he wanted them to do on the next phase of the withdrawal.

"Dunn! Get forward to Mister Kingsley and tell him he may now pull his men back. The Lewis-guns on the flanks will cover."

The company commander, breaking off his discussion with Christie to dispatch the bugler, turned again to the district officer, giving instructions as to how he wanted the events behind him to be controlled.

"Bob! Get back and give Hugh whatever assistance you can. He must keep our route along this ridge open. I'm needed here. I can't leave Kingsley to fight this battle on his own. As for you, I would appreciate your taking over the responsibility for the wounded. Tell the Quartermaster you are now in command of the aid post."

As he gave Christie these hasty instructions, two soldiers were dragging another towards

them. With rifles in their free hands they were pulling the casualty along on his back by his two shoulder straps, his head bloody, hung back, wobbling, lifeless.

"Take him to the aid post," ordered the lieutenant.

"I'll do that, Miles," spoke up Christie, mindful of the needs of the men back on the firing line.

With the district officer making off back to the aid post, hunched under the weight of the dead soldier, Holt-Bate half stood, intending to join CSM Little behind a separate rock. Taking only one step a bullet struck the pistol holster on his hip, spinning him to the ground.

"Mister Holt-Bate, sir!" shouted Little, springing to his company commander's aid.

The officer had been saved from serious injury because of the bullet glancing off the pistol in its holster, a pistol he was determined not to draw for fear of transmitting to his men a signal of alarm. Lying dazed and bleeding from the forehead having struck a rock, he reached out a hand. "Help me up, Sergeant-Major. The men must not think I have been disabled."

Reaching the aid post Christie placed the dead soldier down beside the man shot in the face, whom Emma, it turned out, had fought unsuccessfully to save. With sightless eyes staring skywards, flies had already settled on his blood smeared face. Before moving on to join Hugh Durand, Christie told Trench that on his return he would be taking command of the aid post. Around them the sweepers were recovering water bottles from the dead to quench the thirst of some of the wounded, who were crying out for water.

By the time he returned to where the Scouts were held up Hugh had already commenced the platoon attack. Dropping beside Ahmed Wakil, the Jemedar pointed out the rear men of the Queen's who were filtering forward through the broken rocks on hands and knees.

"Crikey!" exclaimed Bert Collins with a start, as a bullet struck the rock just above his head. "Windy bastard," taunted Pani Waters following behind him. "You scream when you're hit and not a'for."

"I got a right to squeal," countered Collins, "There's a lot more of me ta hit."

"Chubarrow! you two squalkin' rooster," ordered Joe Penton, their section commander who was moving in front of them. "You save the barbary for those poxy customers up front."

The distance from where the Scouts were halted to the enemy position was approximately two hundred yards. The first one hundred and fifty of that was jumbled rock, similar to a graveyard with tightly packed headstones that had over the years, fallen every which way. The ridge surface for the rest of the distance to the Pathan strong point was stony ground, offering no cover whatsoever. The position the tribesmen were occupying was a small natural rock fort, an island citadel that sat blocking the centre of the ridge.

Durand's plan of attack was a straight-forward one: creep close enough to pitch grenades in, then get among them with cold steel. To keep the enemy heads down while the three rifle sections crept through the rocks, the Lewis Section was sent off to the right-hand rim of the ridge from where they could put down fire. The other three sections picked their way through the rock along three separate courses, Ben Tysall leading his 1 Section on the right, Durand leading Joe Penton's 2 Section in the centre and Sergeant Radley with Sid Firth's 3 Section on the left.

It was very near midday, the sun blazing hot, the stone surfaces blistering to the touch. Crawling on all fours and slipping from rock to rock in the heat was tiring, causing the men to sweat and gasp for breath. At the halfway point automatic fire began to crack out in short bursts from their right.

"Good old Nosh," hissed Danny Short from between clenched teeth.

Reaching the edge of their protective rock entanglement, the three sections spread themselves out in a ragged line, in some places two deep. 6 Platoon's strength on leaving Chashmal had been forty all ranks, now because of dead, wounded and the Lewis Section detached in support, the actual assault force was reduced to twenty six, a number which also

included Hugh Durand and Arthur Tagg, who was back with 3 Section, although limping badly from the bullet wound in his thigh. The enemy they faced, though not knowing it, was a band of about twenty, only half armed with rifles, all young, all intent on the prize of a rifle, or killing an infidel to assure their entry to paradise.

By keeping low the platoon had been able to approach to within forty yards; a good throw for a cricket arm. Accepting a grenade from Joe Penton, Hugh Durand tested the range. Pulling the pin, he waited for the next burst of Lewis fire, then hurled it towards the enemy's rocky bastion. As his upper body was fleetingly exposed for the throw, a bullet sung past his arm. The grenade, just reaching the near edge, struck a large rock, deflecting to the side and down. The explosion, a loud cough, sent up a shower of stones in grey smoke. For a short spell silence followed, this was perhaps something the tribesmen had not bargained on.

"Platoon! Platoon! Get ready to attack!" shouted Durand, aware they had no time to play cat and mouse. "When I call, up, 2 Section will throw grenades while 1 and 3 provide covering fire. Then on my command, charge! We attack. Get ready. Get ready."

As 1 and 3 Sections flicked out their rifles' cut-off plates freeing the magazine rounds, 2 Section reached into haversacks for grenades.

"Prepare to throw," cried out Durand loudly, inducing nine pins to be pulled. "Ready! Ready! Up!"

As arms that were reaching back flung forward and up, men on the right and left took aim and fired. Only eight grenades arched through the air however, the ninth slipped from Ken Hall's grip as he fell backwards, crumpling among the rocks, a bullet through his forehead. The grenade, when it went off, blew away most of his right shoulder. Of the others, three landed short but five sailed into the fringe of the enemy's defence, all exploding over the space of two seconds.

"Now Queen's! Now! Charge!" hollered Hugh Durand springing to his feet, the arm that held his revolver, plunging forward in a high sweep.

Responding to the call, 6 Platoon bolted up, bayonets reflecting flashes of light from the high noon sun. With stomachs knotted, throats dry and choked, their minds blanked to everything except the pile of rocks before them, screaming curses, they flew over the ground hurdling boulders and zigzagging around larger rocks. Ben Tysall rose bellowing a barrack room quip used when expressing dissatisfaction: "Roll on the boat!"

Picked up by others it was roared as a battle cry.

Forty yards at a run was not a great distance, unless throwing yourself across it at an armed enemy. 6 Platoon, on launching themselves into the assault, had no supporting fire from the Lewis-gun or the Scouts, the risk of hitting their own side being too chancy. Their one hope of success in this attack, was in the swiftness of their rush, enabling them to fall upon these tribal killers before they themselves could be cut down.

With twenty yards to go Jack Fenton from 3 Section saw one of the enemy, a dirty cloth on a swarthy head, aiming a rifle at him. In the same instant he saw the rifle being fired he felt the bullet strike his chest, killing him. Another fatally hit was 1 section's Chris Perry, shot through the heart. His mate beside him, Jim Lockie, also went down, doubled over with a bullet in the stomach. Sandy Saunders of 3 Section spun to the ground after taking a shot in his upper right arm. Arthur Tagg, falling behind, gamely struggling on with a stiff legged limp, took a bullet through his left lung that also shattered his spine. Giving a last cry, "Roll on the bloody bo---" he collapsed to the ground, dying.

Then with relief and thirsting for revenge they stormed into the island like feature, hunting the Pathans through a maze of narrow passages and across room size spaces. Joe Penton, stopping himself on the shoulder of a bend, stole a fast look around it, ducking his head back as a rifle was fired at him from only a few feet away. Snapping a shot back, he leapt after the raggedly dressed youth who had turned to flee. Feeding a fresh round into his rifle chamber

he shot the tribesman in the back as he tried to escape down a stone enclosed alley way. Spinning around as his name was shouted out and a shot fired, he found behind him, Ginger Langdon thrusting forward at a tribesman who had rushed out of concealment to his rear, intent on cutting the section commander down with a *tulwar*. Wounding him in the back, Langdon silenced his screams with two forceful bayonet jabs into his side ribs as he floundered on the ground.

Pressing through a narrow gap, Jock Cressey, without warning came face to face with three tribesmen armed with knives and a *tulwar*. Firing point blank at one, another with a scream, his face twisted in a snarl, lunged at him with a knife. Blocking the plunging blade arm by pushing his rifle crossways in front of himself, the third Wazir swung his *tulwar*, severing the Scotsman's left hand at the wrist. As the hand fell to the ground, Charlie Robey shot this tribesman through the mouth. Cressey, to free himself of the second before he could use his knife, kicked out, forcing the Pathan to stumble back. Then still gripping his rifle with his right hand he drew it back, driving the bayonet into the native's torso, carrying forward to pin him to the ground. Three more times he drove the bayonet down, using it like a stake.

"Finish 'im, Charlie lad. Finish 'im," called out the Scotsman to Robey, who had not noticed the first tribesman that Cressey had shot and only wounded, stumbling away in a bid to escape.

"Jesus Christ, Jock! Jesus Christ!" exclaimed Robey after shooting the tribesman twice in the back.

"Stop ye greetin'mun. An git ma lace oot'a ma boot." Sitting, gripping the base of the stump of his left arm with his right hand to stem the gush of blood, he stuck a foot towards the young English soldier.

Ben Tysall entering the rocky complex at a point where moments earlier he had seen a Wazir firing, found it abandoned. Taking a grenade from the haversack hanging on his hip, he pulled the pin and threw it deep into the enemy position. Even as the grenade, its fused detonator sounding with a pop, was still curving through the air, the corporal resumed his pursuit.

Others were also doing the same, for some tribesmen were lying in ambush, around corners and tucked away in hides. The Pathan had the advantage of knowing every twist and turn in this labyrinth so the Queen's were re-dressing their lack of knowledge of ground by bombing their way through. Pani Waters, when preparing the platoon's grenades at Chashmal had primed one with a three second fuse and this he now carried in one hand with the pin out.

"Pani get rid of that damn Mills bomb," urged Bert Collins. "You drop the soddin' thing and we both end up cold meat."

"Shut it," retorted Waters. "You just watch I ain't cleaved open with some nig's tin sword."

With Waters in front the two men were stalking cautiously along a natural passage with openings every ten feet or so. Suddenly at one of these junctions, the muzzle of a rifle appeared, pointing towards them.

"Pani!" shouted Collins, the first to see it, striking the other man's topee as he levelled his rifle and fired.

With the bullet ricocheting away, Pani who just caught a glimpse of the rifle-barrel as it was withdrawn, ran forward to throw his grenade into the alcove the tribesman, taking fright, had retreated back into. Following up the explosion the two soldiers found a bloody heap of flesh and tattered cloth. A young Wazir trapped in this confined space with just one exit, had picked up the short fused grenade to throw back when it exploded, blowing away most of his arm.

Hearing pistol shots on the opposite side of a high hedge of boulders, Ben Tysall and China Yeoman spun with levelled rifles towards an entrance in it. Bursting from this only

feet away, two youthful Pathans, both armed with bloodstained *tulwars*, without hesitation flung themselves at the soldiers. Yeoman, the nearer, fired his rifle from the hip at one who was raising his sword blade to strike, also plunging his bayonet into the tribesman's chest, as the *tulwar* slashed into his shoulder and left forearm, Yeoman was also selected as the target by the second tribesman. With his right arm high, poised to decapitate the Englishman, his section commander drove his bayonet into the tribesman's rib-cage turning the Wazir's cry of triumph to a scream of agony. Carrying on with the momentum of his thrust Tysall shoved his victim to the ground.

"Feel that, ya filthy heathen?" taunted Ben without pity. "That's pure English steel you're tastin'."

"Good show! Bloody good show, Corporal Tysall," congratulated Hugh Durand, appearing through the same gap used by the tribesmen. "Come now, follow me. We must drive them all out."

"They just killed Ward," announced Wilf Radley, who was following close behind the officer.

On through the rock entanglement they pushed, skirmishing from danger point to danger point. Until at last they broke out into the open on the stronghold's eastern side. There on the ground before them were three Pathan bodies. Robert Christie, when the platoon entered the position, had taken six Scouts around to one flank, enabling them to shoot down three of the seven who attempted escape. Older, wiser tribesmen would have fled as soon as 6 Platoon made their assault but these younger ones, with guns, glory and a reputation to earn, stayed far too long.

"Hugh!" called Christie running up with a rifle in one hand. "I have to move the aid post. If you bring your Scouts forward and consolidate with this platoon here, I'll take the Lewis Section and begin the carrying of the wounded."

"Agreed," said Durand. "Off you go. I'll centralise the wounded here."

Wilf Radley retracing his route through the captured position, searching for dead and wounded, met Jock Cressey on his way to rejoin the platoon.

"You get about, fellow-me-lad," ordered the sergeant, taking one look at his bloody stump, the flow of blood being stopped with a bootlace tourniquet. "It's the aid post for you".

Twenty six men had responded to Hugh Durand's call to charge, but only seventeen stood to be counted on the far side of the assault position. Six were dead and three wounded.

"Oh my God, Jock! Oh my God!" exclaimed Rose in shock, on seeing that Cressey had lost a hand. She didn't know the names of many of the company but the Scotsman was one whom Joe had introduced.

"Dinna' fret, Rose lass," calmed Cressey, "it's nay but a flipper. I still got the other."

As the nurse began to bandage the severed wrist, Pete Hollinghurst approached to ask Cressey: "anything you're needing, Jock?"

"Aye, Cooky," replied the Scotsman pushing a leg towards him, "ye can fetch us a bootlace."

Around them, with the return of Robert Christie, the aid post once again began to move its location. Bringing Corporal Griffiths' men with him, he set them right away to carrying the wounded on another leg down the ridge. The sweepers he also dispatched, following behind with some of the dead. Even together the two groups were not capable of transferring the number of dead and wounded that encircled the doctor and her medical party. With casualties increasing steadily those who did the moving would have to do so by shuttling, making two or three trips.

Insisting that Emma go with the first contingent, her professional skill being needed by 6 Platoon's wounded, the district officer again went in search of the company commander.

"How many dead?" asked Miles, on hearing Christie's report of 6 Platoon's successful

attack.

"Four or five, possibly more. I didn't wait for the casualty count."

"Damn, Bob! Damn!" cursed Holt-Bate punching a fist onto a thigh, one side of his face encrusted with dried blood.

The two men were hunched in the cover of a rock, the fire just forward of them sluggish but steady. Both sides were conserving ammunition but the tribesmen's shots were making it dangerous to move about upright along the ridge.

"This is becoming too costly," went on the officer, his voice filled with frustrated anger, "if we can't break off contact, we will have no choice but to stand and fight. Go back Bob. Find Hugh. Tell him we will take up a defence on the end of the ridge. We will decide our next step from there."

"Right, Quartermaster. I'll tidy up here. You get off to where we are being re-established and take charge until I arrive," ordered Christie, returning to the aid post to find all the wounded and most of the dead taken away.

"Right you are, sir," replied Trench, turning to collect Teresa. Sitting alone behind a protective rock she was waiting for the CQMS. With Rose committed to the wounded the young child now entrusted herself to Trench, refusing all other escorts, only moving on when he did.

"Here we go again, young Miss Ratcliffe," declared the burly quartermaster, lifting her to her feet, to shoo the girl before him like a mother hen would one of her chicks. "Hurry now, we have no time to be wasting around anoth..."

A bullet striking Trench on the back of his head, pitched him face forward onto the stony ground, his topee landing at the girl's heels.

Jock Cressey, after the completion of his bandaging by Rose, was just slinging his rifle across his back, when he saw the quartermaster fall. The aid post was almost cleared; Rose had gathered up her bandages and dressings and with Roy Lockwood, one of the signallers was hurrying to see to the carrying off of Stan Ross by two of 6 Platoon's Lewis Section. His hip wound would not stop bleeding and on being moved he was screaming from the pain.

"Ditchy! Ditchy! Get up, Ditchy!"

On Cressey reaching Teresa, he found the girl tugging one of Trench's hands with both of hers. The forlorn sight of the young child trying to pull the fallen man to his feet sent a stab of pity deep into the Scotsman's heart.

"The Quartermaster wills no git up the minute, lassie," said Cressey, clutching the girl around the waist with his handless left arm, while picking up Trench's rifle with his right. "Ye come along with me. Ye can'na stay. He'd no be wanting that."

Knowing his words to be a poor substitute for comfort, Cressey held Teresa tight with his crippled limb while she clung to his neck. Carried off so, Teresa continued to stare at the body of the fallen quartermaster as she sobbed tears of grief on the soldier's shoulder, heartbreakingly crying out, "Ditchy! Ditchy!"

Alerting Christie to the fact that Trench was dead, for a glance at the rupee sized exit hole in the quartermaster's forehead had left Cressey in no doubt, the Scotsman lost no time in hurrying Teresa away from the scene. Passing through the enemy position he and 6 Platoon had captured earlier he found the platoon had now in their turn taken up its defence.

"This'll break those bleeders hearts," called out Sid Firth as the Scotsman, with Teresa still in his arms, made his way through. Collecting in the rifles of the dead tribesmen, Sid was smashing them one by one against a rock.

In deploying his men, Wilf Radley put everyone in a defensive line on the western edge of the captured rocky redoubt. The Lewis Section, the strongest, he placed in the middle, with 2 Section, who had only lost four men, on their left. 1 and 3, down to nine men between them, he stationed together on the right. And then they waited.

Joined by Christie, after passing on Holt-Bate's orders to Hugh Durand, the platoon listened to the shooting ahead of them draw nearer, as the rest of the company fell back. The first of these were glimpsed on the flanks as 8 and 5 Platoons retreated, still guarding against attack from the sides. Then to their front Miles and his party were seen scurrying through the rocks to halt at the edge of the stones where 6 Platoon had begun its attack half an hour earlier.

"Over here, sir," called out Wilf Radley waving his topee at the officer.

"Well done, Sergeant Radley," complimented Holt-Bate, arriving at a run. "You've picked your ground well. And you'll need the advantage. I want you and your men to see the company past and then hold here until I call you back with two loud whistle blasts."

"We'll do that right enough, sir," promised Radley. "Good! Good!" said the OC turning to Christie. "Bob, is Hugh in the picture?"

The district officer confirming this, then went on to explain the difficulties incurred during movement of the aid post, mentioning also Trench's death. Before he could complete everything he had to say, a shout from Dunn interrupted him.

"Seven Platoon, sir."

"Right, Sergeant Radley, we must leave you to it. Now remember, two whistle blasts and back you come." While speaking Holt-Bate braced himself with both hands on a boulder, watching 7 Platoon's retreating group darting back among the rocks. Then with a good luck squeeze to the sergeant's shoulder he left taking Christie with him.

7 Platoon for the first time was falling back at a rolling gait, able to break contact, they were keeping themselves marginally ahead of the pursuing Pathan. Interspersed with rifle shots and the occasional burst of Lewis fire they leap-frogged to, then through 6 Platoon's position. First the injured: two walking wounded, one with a bloody arm, and a second limping with an equally bloody leg. One man, dead, was being carried between two others. Close on their heels came the remainder of the sections. Thinned by the loss of dead and wounded they doubled back, stopping only to cover their mates. Faces streaked with sweat, uniforms patched with dark sweat stains, eyes had taken on the hunted look of animals at bay.

As 7 Platoon passed through 6's position, gallows, humour and jokes were exchanged, but also honest advice: "Just give 'im short burst, Nosh. Don't waste lead on the evil cusses," offered Doug Culverwell, 7 Platoon's Lewis gunner to Slyfield.

"Tell your boys to keep their heads down, Wilf," warned Sergeant Harry Evans, Radley's opposite number.

One of the last was Giles Kingsley their young, beleaguered, but defiant platoon commander. "Don't allow any of your men to become isolated, Sergeant Radley," he cautioned, stopping only long enough to catch a few second's breath.

No sooner was he gone than fleeting glimpses of movement darting between rocks were seen to the platoon's front. Seeking the minutest of targets, the soldiers pressed themselves into the rock and watched over their rifle sights for an over-confident move or a spying enemy head. An unholy alliance this mob of bloodthirsty hill men, Mahsuds and Wazir, sworn enemies, united in their hatred of the British – and their ghoulish craving to kill for rifles and loot.

Danny Short, back to back with Ginger Langdon, sharing the same boulder, was not watching directly to his front, instead he kept behind the rock and looked to the right at an angle. In this manner, keeping a sharp eye, he caught sight of a hand edging around a rock. Taking his bayonet off so it would not give him away by poking out beyond his cover, he laid an aim on the hand. Over sixty yards away the hand left the rock to take hold of a rifle that also came into the aim. Checking his breathing, squeezing the first pressure of his trigger, Short was just about to shoot the hand when the owner's head, black bearded and

hawk-nosed, rocked into his sights.

"That's one bullet that's found its billet," snarled Short over his shoulder to his mate, as he ejected the spent cartridge from his rifle. His target had dropped out of sight, leaving the rock he was sheltering against splattered with red stains.

That opening shot heralded a spate of sniping exchanges that lasted for ten minutes, fortunately causing 6 Platoon only one casualty: Charlie Robey, shot through the cheek. Just as Joe Penton finished off tying a bandage over it, two long whistle blasts were heard to their rear.

"Get ready to withdraw! Get ready to withdraw!" shouted Radley at the top of his voice.

Hearing that command and briefed to do so, Griffiths, Slyfield and Gleeson left straight away with the Lewis-gun, while everyone else got ready to throw a grenade. Believing the tribesmen would have a good idea what the whistle blasts meant, Radley intended to forestall any overly zealous follow up, by giving those of the enemy in the forefront good reason to duck for cover. "Ready! Throw!" bellowed Radley. "Now hoof it! Hoof it!"

As the grenades' explosions sounded out across the ridge, Chalky Gray was staring up into the sky and cursing.

"If that bleedin' kite flier can't get down here and lend a hand, why don't he just piss off?"

"If that was you up there toddling around like some daft shite-hawk you wouldn't be lookin' for a way into this shindy down here either, Chalky, son," responded Frank Quinn, grimacing in pain with the wound in his side.

Gray's comment concerned the 'Ninak' aircraft that on refuelling at Ishak had returned to circle over their heads. Both men, two of the first to be wounded, were at the aid post. Gray, shot in the knee, lay with his rifle strapped to the wounded leg, and had to be carried. Quinn, despite his own wound in the ribs, was using puttees he had taken from the dead to bind Gray's other leg to the wounded one.

"Got a cig, Frank?" asked Gray, clamping his teeth as a spasm of pain shot through his leg.

"Sure! But you don't much go for these canteen stinkers of mine," replied Quinn plucking a pack of Park Drives from a breast pocket.

"At the minute I'll smoke your sock if ya roll paper round it," answered Gray, his eyes closing as he fought off another stab of pain.

All around them the wounded lay, while to one side where the bodies were placed, members of 7 Platoon were searching through the deads' pouches and haversacks for a replenishment of ammunition and grenades.

Rose, on seeing Teresa in the care of Cressey, and Trench nowhere to be seen, broke off from bandaging one of the newly arrived 7 Platoon wounded to spend a few priceless minutes reassuring the child that all would be well.

"So you have someone else taking care of you?" asked Rose, on kneeling in front of the girl, who was sitting in the Scotsman's lap – he with his back against a rock. "Well, Ditchy has other things to do at the moment, I should think."

With Teresa turning her face away, Cressey shaking his head, put a finger to his temple and snapping his thumb down.

"Oh! No!" uttered Rose, turning the child's head towards her. The nurse, her hands and dress stained and blotched from her patients' blood, dabbed a small cloth to her tongue and began to wipe away dried tear marks from the child's face.

"Now no more crying, Teresa," consoled Rose. "Jock here will look after you."

Pulling away from the nurse, the girl locked her arms around the Scotsman's neck, her face turned away from his, appealing almost angrily: "I don't want to know his name."

By this time 6 Platoon was back, falling in behind 7 Platoon, who once again were in the forward line. With 5 and 8 Platoons still holding the flanks, Hugh Durand had dispatched his

Scouts under Ahmed Wakil to secure the tip of the ridge, a distance now of only three hundred yards. Kneeling together he and Robert Christie were receiving fresh orders from Miles.

"Time you moved your people on again, Bob," he addressed Christie. "Use Sergeant Radley's men and shift the wounded first.

"Hugh," he continued turning to the Scout office. "Rejoin your chaps and pick for Bob a suitable location for his aid post. And cast an eye over the ground for me, we may have to stand and fight there."

"Up you come, Chalky lad," declared Bert Collins, taking a grip on Gray's upper body. With Ginger Langdon on his other side and Pani Waters and Danny Short taking his legs, he was lifted to sit on a rifle held by Collins and Langdon. Then with Waters and Short keeping his bound legs off the ground with another rifle, the wounded man, cursing with pain, was carried off to the end of the ridge.

"Here, love, we'll take him now," said Joe Penton to Rose, arriving with Charlie Robey, intending to move Stan Ross.

"He's dead, Joe," stated Rose impassively, brushing away a fly that had settled on Ross's lips. This was the third man brought to the aid post she had watched die.

"We'll take him anyway," replied Penton, dropping to his knees beside her. Gripping the nurse's shoulders he made her look at him.

"You're doing a real atcha job, love," commended Joe, suspecting that, perhaps, her close association with the dead and wounded of the battle was beginning to affect Rose's nerve. "If it wasn't for you and Doc Schofield being here, the wounded would be in a right state. Now, come with me and Charlie, along to where they're settin' up the new aid post."

"I'm alright, Joe," assured the nurse, removing his hands, ashamed of being caught in a rare moment of dispiritedness over a death. "Now you two get off. I'll be right along."

Regaining her feet Rose ran, stooped, to another clump of rocks, where Emma Schofield was attending to the remaining few wounded. Both were the two 7 Platoon men, Gerry Pearton with the arm wound and Tom May. While the doctor finished off binding May's thigh, Rose turned to check Pearton's arm that she had bandaged earlier.

"Why haven't you gone on with the others?" she asked.

"Waiting' for my mate," replied Pearton, nodding at the other soldier on the ground where Emma was kneeling over him.

"Well! We've time to put that arm in a sling, then," proposed Rose, rummaging through the pack she now carried with her everywhere.

"Here, young man, put your finger on this." Emma, tying off the bandage to May's leg, indicated a knot she was fastening.

Once more, as the enemy, following after 6 Platoon, crept up into concealed firing positions, bullets cutting the air just above ground level began to swarm. One, ricocheting from a rock, was heard to sing briefly as it tumbled into the area of the almost vacated aid post, striking with a thud.

"Oh! Merciful heavens!" gasped the doctor, as her upper body was pushed forward over May. Righting herself, she tried to finish off the knot but her hands wouldn't respond, then with a sigh she collapsed across May's legs.

"Jesus!" exclaimed the soldier. "Doc! Doc!"

Pushing her off him, May struggled to lay her in a straight position while looking around for assistance: "Miss Rickman! It's the Doc."

"Emma! Emma!" cried Rose, throwing herself down beside the woman's crumpled form.

"I'm fine, Rose," replied the doctor slowly. "I just had my breath taken away, that's all."

"Where, Emma? Quickly! Where?" demanded the nurse, her voice frantic.

"The back, dear," answered the older woman in a gentle tone.

Eager to help, as tenderly as possible Pearton and May joined Rose in easing the doctor onto her side. Finding blood oozing through the blouse beneath her waistcoat, Rose freed the garment from Emma's skirt, discovering a thumb size entrance hole to one side of her back between her hip and lower ribcage but with no sign of an exit wound.

"You'll be alright, Emma. I won't let you die. I won't."

Overcome with the shock of seeing the woman wounded and fearing it may be fatal, Rose blurted out this determined promise in a voice broken by sobs of dread.

"Rose, child," rebuked the doctor with a hushed scold. "Have you learned nothing? You are disregarding the first rule of nursing. Never show your emotions to the patient."

Emma was held in a sitting position by Tom May, as Rose to stop the bleeding, hurriedly applied dressings to the wound, securing them with a tight bandage around her waist.

"Rose. Inform Douglas he is to take on the supervisory duties for all our Missions. I recommended him to our London board last year as my replacement. They accepted but I've neglected telling him." The doctor's voice was low, almost a whisper.

"I won't, Emma," replied the nurse, getting to grips with her personal feelings. "You will tell him yourself."

"Bloody hell, Rose, shake a leg, it's time you was long gone!" Ben Tysall with several others of 6 Platoon had arrived to remove the remainder of the dead and was genuinely shocked to find her still here.

"Oh Ben! Thank God," replied Rose, just finishing binding the wound. "It's Doctor Schofield, she's been struck down. We need to carry her."

"I'll do that," said Robert Christie, coming up behind the nurse to take charge.

"You two," he ordered May and Pearton. "Escort Miss Rickman to the new aid post."

"I'd rather stay with the Doctor, Mister Christie," protested the young woman.

"You are the Doctor now, Rose. Now get down to that aid post where you're needed." Coming upon the group, to suddenly find Emma injured, his anger that she should suffer because of some Pathan's mindless quest for booty vented itself against the nurse in his shouted refusal.

With the three leaving, Christie slung his rifle across his back.

"I'll carry the Doctor, Corporal. You stay near to hand," he requested of Ben as he knelt to gather the woman into his arms. "I'm going to lift you, Emma. It may be painful, so prepare yourself".

"Robert Zarif Khan," spoke out the doctor, one hand gripping tightly to his shoulder to lend a serious meaning to her words. "Tell him there is to be no badi. I will not have a blood feud instigated in my name."

"There'll be no need of that," replied Christie, stepping off with her in his arms. "You're far too tough a bird".

The last to clear the old aid post, they picked a path through the broken rocks and around the occasional clump of scrub bush. At their arrival in the new aid post, Christie laid Emma down behind the shelter of a boulder. This was just over the rim of the ridge where it sloped away to the plain five hundred feet below. Leaving the doctor in the care of Willy Sale, one of the cooks, he began a check of the other wounded and the location they now occupied.

The dead as well as the wounded were all shielded by the ridge top, well out of the line of fire. The Scouts had taken up a screening line just forward of the rim, while Sergeant Radley was positioning 6 Platoon in a defensive half circle, below and to the flanks of the aid post. Turning to look eastwards Christie could see clearly the Faizu Tangi that ran from south-west to north-east cutting a deep scar across the plain. All along its length its edges were sharp lines, except at one point, where a mile from the foot of their ridge, crumbled banking a few hundred yards in diameter showed its only crossing point for several miles. Just beyond the crossing was a cluster of fragmented hills, an out guard to much higher ones further back.

Drawn to the top of the ridge by an increase in shooting, Christie joined Hugh Durand. Together they watched as Miles brought the rest of the company back. With 7 Platoon skirmishing rearwards in overlapping darts, 5 and 8 Platoons began to move inwards so that no-one was left behind, everyone more or less coming back in one straight line. Carrying or dragging their wounded with them, the three platoons passed through the Scouts, dropping into cover just below the ridge line.

Wasting no time, Holt-Bate called all the officers together to give out his defensive orders, only to be interrupted by Abdullah Tarzi, the Scout havildar shouting in Pushtu.

"He says there's more enemy coming. A lot more enemy," translated Durand.

With Miles leading, the officers scrambled over and around rocks and boulders, following the havildar to the northern side of the ridge top where they could look back to where the plain and escarpment met. There, two miles distant, a mass of figures could be seen spilling onto the plain from the hill slopes.

"It's the Faqir's army," affirmed Holt-Bate, studying the scene through his binoculars. "Four, possibly five thousand and they'll be on us in thirty minutes."

Lowering the glasses he spun about to cast his eyes around the ridge.

"Well we'll not hold them here. We'll be overrun for certain." Then glancing across the plain he caught sight of the one piece of ground where they might stand a chance. "The crossing, it's our only hope. Bob, get back to the aid post. Use Sergeant Radley's men and your sweepers and move all the wounded off this ridge. The dead we'll have to leave."

"Sir---" protested Howard Little.

"I know, Sergeant-Major!" shouted the OC, cutting his CSM off. "It's an order I regret giving. But one I must."

Lowering his voice he turned to Durand: "Hugh, I must ask you and your Scouts to hold this ridge top until the rest of us have reached the plain. Hopefully I'm only asking of you ten minutes.

Can you manage?"

"Ten minutes, yes," replied Durand, in the act of reloading his revolver. "But I wouldn't gamble on much more."

"Right, gentlemen," snapped out Holt-Bate, turning his attention to his three platoon officers: "return to your platoons and let's get to that damn crossing."

Setting the aid post off Christie went to collect Emma Schofield.

"I think she might be dead, sir," pronounced Sale hesitantly, shaking his head. "She's not come round since ya left."

"Well, Mrs Schofield," declared Christie grittily, picking the woman up in his arms, her head and limbs flopping back limply, "alive or dead, I'll not leave you here."

As B Company raced away, Hugh stationed himself in the centre of his thin line of scouts. Fire was hotting up as the Wazirs and Mahsuds closed in along the ridge. Soon they would begin to spread around the flanks, and finding them unprotected could very quickly cut off their line of retreat. As for the time allotted, the officer was not consulting his watch - he looked instead to the base of the ridge. Although five hundred feet in height, the distance to the plain was something like six hundred yards. Only when the first man reached the bottom of the ridge would he order his command to retreat.

Looking in the direction of a cry, he saw one of his men holding his face. In a crouching run the officer responded to help. Finding him with a bullet wound that had shattered a cheek bone and torn away part of an ear, he told the Scout to hold the wound tight with one hand to stanch the bleeding, then dispatched him after the aid post. On returning to his position, he glanced once again to the plain and was rewarded with the sight of several figures emerging onto it.

Signalling for his men to fall back, Hugh stood in a half stoop to see that they were all

obeying. To his left everyone was bounding away down hill. Pivoting to the right he found they were doing the same and was about to flee himself when a bullet struck the side of his waist, destroying one kidney and severing his lower spine.

Still gripping his pistol, the officer fought to regain his feet but found all he could do was push or pull himself along the ground. Alone and facing a grisly death at the hands of brutal tribesmen, Hugh struggled to drag himself up into a sitting position against a rock. Just as searing pain collapsed him onto his back, a man knelt at his side.

“Sahib, you are injured,” said Abdullah Tarzi.

“I have no legs, Havildar,” replied the officer. “I’m unable to walk.”

“I will carry you,” offered the Scout senior NCO.

“No!” refused Durand, “Go! Save yourself.”

The Scout, making no attempt to answer, remained kneeling next to his officer. Lifting his eyes towards the enemy he tensed, assuming a vigilant stance. Before joining the South Waziristan Scouts, Tarzi, an Afridi, had served on the Frontier with the Guides and knew well what Durand’s fate would be.

“For God’s sake, man, I’m crippled. You can’t save me. Now. Go! Go!” beseeched Durand, pounding a fist on the ground.

“Sahib, for fifteen years I have eaten the King’s salt. And now I am ready to die.” The Scout’s words were spoken as if reciting an oath.

Despite the pain, Hugh rose on his elbows, determined that the man beside him should not throw his life away needlessly.

“Havildar Tarzi. I order you to rejoin your Platoon. Jemedar Wakil will be in need of your help. Now leave me. That is an order.” Delivering this final command, Lieutenant Hugh Durand placed the muzzle of his pistol to his temple and squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER 25

*But search the land of living men,
Where will thou find their like again?*

Sir Walter Scott

“Damn it, man, do you lack the simple vestige of a brain? Get out from underfoot!”

The soldier, who had slumped down in Claude Gilfillan’s path to tighten a loose puttee, bolted up and out of his way, stammering an apology. With the column halted in the confines of a narrow *nullah*, to reach its head the brigadier had to shoulder his way through congestion of men and mules.

“Up there, Brigadier, sir,” directed Major Stephen Stark, the Queen’s D Company commander, pointing up to a ledge on the side of a hill that rose above the *nullah*. Standing there, binoculars raised, was Colonel Stanfield. With Alan Quinnell, his acting brigade major in tow, Gilfillan began to climb up to join the Queen’s commander.

The time was approaching one o’clock in the afternoon and the column had been on the march from Khwaja Kalai for the better part of three hours. With no defined route to aid them, the column had struck out on a blind course to the north, only given a true direction to follow when the aircraft returned to circle repeatedly, away in the distance. Using this as their beacon the column, picketing as they went, pushed on across country.

For the last hour they had been following a valley that had then closed in to become a cramped, high sided *nullah* that was almost a miniature *tangi*.

“What have we got, Derek?” asked Gilfillan sharply. Having arrived on the ledge breathing deeply through his exertions. For some time now they had been spurred on by the sound of small arms fire and exploding grenades.

“There, sir, on the hill feature,” pointed Stanfield. Raising his binoculars, the brigadier scanned what was to them a hill top, seeing figures, some carrying others, picking their way down its rock tangled slope.

“Yes, Derek. That’s your people,” announced Gilfillan. From the hill there was no let up in the firing. “There are a number remaining on the hill crest. The Company appears to be executing a fighting withdrawal”.

Having reached the embattled company, their rescue imminent, the brigadier turned his attention to the ground that would dictate how he was to do this. The *nullah* in which his command was waiting led into the Faizu Tangi, being the eastern entrance to its crossing. At the mouth of the *nullah* was a wide bowl that extended to both sides of the *tangi*. Near the rim of the *tangi*, within this bowl, the rock had crumbled away giving access for its crossing down a centuries old camel path that twisted and turned for one hundred feet to an ankle deep stream, then up the other side. The bowl each side of the *tangi* was mostly level ground made up of loose rock and dirty sand patched with wild rose bushes.

On the point of giving orders to his junior commanders who had all assembled on the ledge, Gilfillan was stopped by his brigade major:

“Sir! Look there.”

All eyes turned to where Quinnell was pointing on the plain, north-west of the hill.

“Well, well. Well, well,” muttered Gilfillan to himself after lowering his binoculars. “So,

Faqir of Matun, you've come again."

"Right, gentlemen, this is a turn for the better!" boomed out the column commander in a forceful voice. "We go firm right here. Our priority is to snatch the Chashmal garrison safely away from the enemy and that is what I intend to do."

Gilfillan punched a fist towards the hill a mile across the plain to emphasize the importance of his words before setting his command to battle.

"Colonel Stanfield, put your machine-gun platoon up on the edge of the tangi. Tell them to keep themselves concealed. I wouldn't want our friend the Faqir to be anything less than surprised. The machine-gunnery's target is to be that rabble heading this way. They will only open fire on my signal. That will be me waving my topee. I will be with you on the other side of the tangi, waiting to commence the attack". The brigadier paused briefly to point at the open shelf that was the floor of the basin on their side of the *tangi*.

"Major Allison, have you room to bring your guns into action here on this side, below where the machine-guns will be?" he asked.

"Amplly, sir," replied the battery commander with just a glance at the ground.

"Good," continued the brigadier, "Your target, then, is to be the crown of that hill. And your signal for opening fire will be the same as for the machine-guns. Understood?"

Receiving an affirmative reply, he again directed orders to Derek Stanfield: "Get your companies across the tangi. I want them formed up in two extended lines out of sight in the bowl, two up, one back. You and I are off to fetch dear Cunliffe."

Gilfillan then turned to Colonel MacKenzie to round off his orders: "Colin, you and your battalion will remain here securing our line of retreat"

"Brigadier," appealed the Scot sternly, standing ramrod straight, objecting to his men being left out of the battle. "Ye'll no deny ma Jocks?"

The Seaforths were in the middle of providing the column's pickets, with one company occupying high points at that time. Two, having taken their turn, were at the rear of the column. The fourth company, the next to begin picketing, was below them at the column's head.

"Hmmm---" growled Gilfillan thoughtfully, looking from MacKenzie to the Highlanders in the *nullah* before replying, but not directly to the Scotsman: "Colonel Stanfield, take that forward Seaforth's company under command as your fourth company. They're blocking your route so we had best take them with us."

"Major MacRae," called down MacKenzie stepping to the edge of the ledge. "You and your laddies are attached to Colonel Stanfield. Obey his orders."

Derek Stanfield, hearing this said, also hailed the company commander. "Major MacRae. Take your company across the tangi and form it up in extended line as the left forward company."

In the same breath he called out to the Queen's waiting in rear of the Scots: "Major Stark. Follow along with the Seaforths. You are to take up position as the right forward company."

Given the command to move, spurred on by NCOs' shouts and bellows, what ensued was nothing short of a race. Spilling out of the *nullah*, Highlanders and Light Infantry became intermingled as they sprinted together across the level half bowl and down into the *tangi*. With the mouth of the *nullah* clear, Major Allison's mountain battery was free to follow the infantry out. As each mule was led by its handlers out of the *nullah's* tricky footing, they turned right, man and beast then breaking into a trot.

Each pack battery gun was carried in its parts on eight mules and as these reached a point where the gun line was to form, the command was given: "Halt! Action left." With that, the Punjabi Mussulman gunners flung themselves at the mules, tearing at buckling straps and heaving heavy gun parts off their backs to bunch into a gaggle of apparently uncontrolled confusion. Then, as if at the snap of a finger, there, assembled, with stores, ammunition and

the crew kneeling at their 'take post' positions sat six 3.7 inch howitzers awaiting the order to fire.

On the other side of the *tangi*, the two infantry companies, Seaforths on the left, Queens on the right, were shaking out into extended line. With the basin too confined for each man to space out to a tactical distance they knelt down shoulder to shoulder to fix bayonets.

"Fitzgerald," called Major MacRae to his company piper: "When we step off, 'Blue Bonnets over the Border', if you please. Let's let those heathen devils know who's coming."

Meanwhile, unable to see this activity because of the ten foot high rim of the bowl, B Company, now some three quarters of a mile to Gilfillan's front, was being rejoined by the Scouts platoon. Coming off the ridge slope, Holt-Bate's own platoons, having caught them up, were mixed in among the wounded and were in the process of disentangling themselves.

Sending 7 Platoon on to lead as advance guard, the remainder of Miles' force he formed in a line, protecting the wounded. 6 Platoon on the right, 5 and 8 in the centre with the Scouts as they arrived sent to the left. Keeping their face to the enemy, walking backwards in most cases, the company's pace of march was governed by whatever speed the wounded could manage.

There were now twenty four disabled wounded with the aid post, five of these needing to be carried, the three sick were being towed along by walking wounded: George Garvie pulling the sand-fly fevered Scout, with Pearton and Saunders keeping the two malaria sufferers steered in a correct direction. Chalky Gray was being lifted along by four of the sweepers, while the other two sweepers each had a soldier clinging to them piggy-back fashion. Everywhere wounded helped wounded. Frank Quinn, shot in the ribs, was providing Tom May a shoulder to hold as he limped along on his one good leg. China Yeoman, with his left arm and shoulder heavily bandaged, was using his right arm to assist four others in carrying a man shot in the hip.

Jock Cressey, with Teresa holding tightly to his neck, came up beside Robert Christie to ask: "Sur, if ye understand ma meanin', may I have yer pistol, please?"

Christie, his arms throbbing with tiredness as he carried Emma Schofield clasped to his chest, turned to look at the Scotsman, then at Teresa: "take it," he agreed, again looking to his front.

Cressey, the anaesthetic of shock in losing his hand worn off, with the stump now giving excruciating pain, held the young girl tight with the handleless arm as he took the pistol from Christie's holster.

Pain was a common factor among all the wounded. Each one should have been resting, with most of those being carried and many walking, in desperate need of surgical treatment. Instead, despite torn flesh that continued to bleed and shattered bone grating within injured limbs and torsos aggravating damage even further, those who could, did not shrink from extending an arm in aid of their less mobile comrades.

The company in its retreat, thanks to the Scouts rearguard, had for the moment broken off close contact with the enemy. The majority of those now on the ridge had paused in their pursuit, to strip and mutilate the bodies of the Queen's dead. Others though, were engaging in long range sniping, with their bullets kicking up strike splashes of sand and dust, missiles that were by no means harmless. A corporal from 5 Platoon was killed by one; his body now being dragged along by two of his section.

"Bugger me!" cried Noshier Slyfield, collapsing to the ground, a bullet wound in his right ankle.

"Get 'im up, Jeff," ordered Grif Griffiths, recovering the Lewis-gun.

"Blimey! Don't much fancy ending it all here," stated Slyfield, grimacing with pain as he reached along to feel his ankle.

"So who gave ye a licence to live?" gibed Gleeson, through teeth clenched on his unlit

pipe, as he reversed his rifle to jab the bayonet into the ground. Then, heaving his gunner up onto his shoulders and plucking out the rifle, he carried him off towards the other wounded retreating with the aid post.

Miles, concentrating on the redeployment of his platoons, had left the organising of the Scouts, as they rejoined, individually and in small groups, in the hands of Ahmed Wakil. It was not until he noticed just one man well to the rear of the others, that he realised Hugh was missing. Continuing to retreat with his command, Holt-Bate, walking backwards, shaded his eyes with a raised hand as he slowed his step. Although in possession of a rifle the man, blurred in the sun's midday glare, was for the minute unidentifiable. Then, abruptly, the officer checked to a halt; this very last man had a beard.

His halting bewildered the soldiers nearest him, causing some to falter. Little, ever present at the lieutenant's side and seeing this happening, turned on them angrily: "keep bloody moving. Stop now and it's curtains for the lot of us." Then wheeling on Kip Dunn, the Sergeant-Major waved him away so the three of them wouldn't give an enlarged point of aim to those on the ridge.

Maintaining a steady run the lone figure approached at a nimble pace.

"It's the Scout sergeant, sir," called out Dunn, resting on one knee, his sharp eyes spotting the stripes.

Coming to a halt in front of Holt-Bate he stood without speaking, his chest heaving as he breathed deeply.

"Mister Durand?" asked Miles grim-faced.

In reply, without a word, the Scout NCO pulled a pistol from his belt and handed it to the officer. Miles, also saying nothing took the weapon by grasping it around the chamber, holding it in the palm of his hand.

"Rejoin your platoon, Havildar," ordered Holt-Bate, who remained standing for some moments after he had left, staring at the revolver.

"We're coming adrift of the Company, sir," warned Little, speaking with some urgency.

Miles, showing no indication of hearing, stood staring at the pistol.

"It's us you must see to now, sir. The men are looking to you to get us out of this pickle," expressed the CSM, coming up to the officer's side as he spoke.

"Alright, Sergeant-Major," answered Miles, briefly looking up to the crest of the ridge before turning about to run with the other two.

They were half way to the crossing now and the further they pulled away from the ridge escarpment the more could be seen of the Faqir's army. A force of possibly five thousand, the Faqir had expected twenty thousand, a number he could well have attained if the Russians had fulfilled their promises to provide guns and gold at the gathering point of the tribes, which occurred a week earlier. When neither they nor the gold and arms materialised, the Faqir had to excel himself in his employment of artful deceit and knavery to convince those who did follow that their cause was Allah's cause and their rewards would be bountiful. Many returned to their villages unpersuaded by the old man's religious diatribe and his vow to set the Frontier alight, which was why he chose Chashmal as his first point of attack, to capture it and slaughter the garrison. With the fort now in his hands, all he needed to convince the doubters that he was all conquering were captured rifles and British bodies.

With the company racing off the ridge in great haste, few of the soldiers knew the reason for their headlong retreat. Not until they had reached the plain and formed in close ranks was the reason spread by word of mouth and now, before them, was this mass of enemy flooding into view.

For five hours B Company had conducted a fighting withdrawal and although sustaining severe casualties the men's morale remained high, believing they were in with a chance of getting away from the force opposing them on the ridge. Now, however, facing at a mile's

distance this broad, dense pack of murderous Afghan tribesmen, it was obvious that a stand against them would have to be made. Carrying only a rifle, ammunition, a trekking bag of flour, dates and a flask of water, this vast *lashkar*, screaming the call for attack: "*Halla! Halla!*" surged towards the outnumbered British.

With the sight of them coming, their cry rolling ahead across the plain, the small island of Queen's and Scouts should by rights have been intimidated to the point of terror - should have been, but weren't. Like their forefathers, also hugely outnumbered at Agincourt, Rorke's Drift and Mons, they threw back the enemy's elated cries with challenges and threats of their own.

"Get closer, ya flea-bagged vermin, so I can put lead in yer traps!" hollered Pani Waters.

"Come on! Come on! I'm lookin' ta shove this up yer arses!" shouted Ginger Langdon, raising a bayoneted rifle above his head.

From everywhere along the line, defiance was hurled at the Afghan hoard. Their veins surging with adrenalin, topees lost, faces streaked with sweat, throats dry with thirst, some with bloodied bandages from recent wounds, they retreated step by step, casting aside fear, eager only for the opportunity to extract vengeance for the loss of comrades.

Joe Penton, afraid not for himself but for Rose, turned around to look for her. Seeing Jeff Gleeson carrying Noshier Slyfield towards the party of wounded, she had ran to them and was removing the gunner's boot as they continued to walk.

"Ben!" called Joe to his mate at his side, on turning back to face the enemy: "If we get cornered and I don't make it don't let the bastards get Rose alive."

Behind, in the basin at the crossing, the Queen's two rear companies were almost all across and formed to the rear of D Company and the Highlanders.

"Mister Rickman," called Derek Stanfield to his RSM, who was waiting in company with his adjutant ten yards to the rear. "Give Major Stark my compliments. Tell him I've sent you to accompany him in the attack. I've no use for you here."

"Very good, sir," replied Rickman, who had been suffering the torment of hell's flame, having to listen to the firing, knowing that his niece was somewhere amongst it all.

As the RSM left at a run, Brigadier Gilfillan gave the word to advance: "You may proceed when ready, Colonel."

As the order was passed, the two lead companies of Queen's and Seaforth's scrambled up the banking to push out towards the flanks, forming into an extended line.

In lead of the wounded, the first to see these figures rise into view as if conjured from the bare ground was one of the *Harijan* sweepers in step beside Robert Christie and carrying one of the wounded on his back.

"Sahib! Gora-wallahs!" he all but shrieked in joyous surprise.

The district officer, his mind focussed on keeping his legs moving as he held onto Emma, shook his head and blinked in order to clear some of the stinging sweat that was blurring his eyes, looked to see, at the *tangi* half a mile away, a regimented line of troops advancing towards them. In some disbelief he again blinked and stared. Then with the shrill melody of a Scottish bagpipe drifting towards them across the barren ground, 7 Platoon began to cheer.

On the ledge across the *tangi* Freddy D'urban watched as Claude Gilfillan, gaining the top rim of the basin behind the two lead companies, swung about to wave his topee back and forth above his head. Observing the troops on the plain before him, admiring the first line of three hundred evenly spaced men, their rifles held at the port, stepping out to Highland music, the political officer began to shake his head.

"It may be conventional, sir," he commented to Colonel MacKenzie in a mildly perplexed voice, "But the Brigadier is breaking every Frontier rule for engagement ever laid down."

"Oh, aye," agreed the Scotsman, his head rising as his shoulders came back. "But it's a grand sight."

On B Company's rearguard line, the men, het up and wildly flinging curses at the Faqir army, were impervious to 7 Platoon's cheering, only falling mute when a blast was heard, followed by a whistling rush of air above their heads that ended with an explosion half way up the ridge. Finding their voices again, the rear platoons joined with 7 Platoon in their jubilation. Expressions moments before, stern with determination, were now suffused with delight as the men screamed into each other's faces.

"Flamin' Jesus!" shouted Ben Tysall at Joe on spotting the line of troops advancing on them. "It's the Column. The bastards have come for us!"

There was no let up in the cheering, for just above their heads the air was filled with a continuous cracking sound. This was machine-gun fire being directed over the top of them at the Faqir's army, and everyone knew it. Also, a second ranging artillery shell had now been fired, landing out of sight over the top of the ridge. The fire control officer, happy with this, moments later despatched a salvo of six shells that exploded where the Mahsud and Wazir had earlier been mutilating the Queen's dead.

"Keep retreating! Keep retreating!" shouted Holt-Bate against the din. Despite the dramatic change in fortunes, his one aim was still to extract his men from danger, desperate to avoid any further, needless loss of life.

As they withdrew, the crown of the ridge, receiving the full benefit of the 3.7 inch howitzers' rapid fire, was beginning to erupt as salvo after salvo threw up showers of stone and rock. This rain of shell-fire had completely eliminated hostile fire from the ridge. As far as the tribesmen there were concerned, the game for the day was at an end: those who were able could be seen making their getaway around the sides of the ridge slope.

As for the Faqir's army they were paying the price of going against their own Border code of fighting: that of never being caught in the open, out of cover. So zealous were they to close and fall upon this tiny band of *feringi* and their Scout lackeys, to drain the infidels' blood onto the sand and seize their rifles that they had forsaken the protection of the ridge to charge headlong across this featureless plain. Mercilessly the Queen's Dogras machine-gunners fired burst after burst into the Afghans' packed ranks. The beaten zone for a Vickers machine-gun at twenty-five hundred yards was well spread out and at that range the trajectory of the rounds was such that they were falling like rain, but with devastating effect.

In the first minute, as stream upon stream of bullets were delivered into their midst by the eight Vickers, and men began to fall dead or wounded, the Pathans' first instinct was to get down. This soon proved a fruitless defence against bullets falling from the sky and in their tens, then twenties and then hundreds; they resorted to the only recourse left to them: they took to their heels. Many ran for the shelter of the ridge escarpment, while many more turned to bolt back across the plain, the Dogras machine-gunners tracking both parties until hidden in the rocks, or out of range.

Meanwhile the Chashmal garrison and the forward relieving companies were meeting up amid shouts of glee. As the Seaforths, in their kilts, their stags head badges on their topees and their piper playing, swept past, Tim Cressey found himself close to tears.

"Rose, thank God you're safe."

Rose, still bandaging Slyfield's wounded ankle as he was being carried by Gleeson, turned to find that the man who had caught her arm was RSM Rickman.

"Oh, Uncle John!" she gasped, falling into his embrace. "Come along. I'll take you back." His offer to Rose had the sound of an order.

"No!" refused the nurse drawing back from the man. "I have wounded here."

"Miss Rickman's done a smashing job, sir," piped up Slyfield as he hung across Gleeson's shoulders.

"We have a stretcher party coming up," announced the RSM on pausing to look around at the wounded. "I'll get off and hurry them along."

Once the first line of Highlanders and Queen's had swept beyond his own line of men, Miles turned to greet the commanders of this relieving force.

"Holt-Bate," called out Derek Stanfield as he approached the lieutenant. "Where is Major Dartnell?"

"Dead, sir," replied Miles saluting both his colonel and Brigadier Gilfillan. "He was killed yesterday at Chashmal."

"Who has been in command?" asked Gilfillan.

"I, sir," replied Holt-Bate.

"Hmm! Hmm!" was all the brigadier said before passing a series of orders to Stanfield: "Colonel, stop your men. Turn them about. This is as far as we need go. We'll return to the crossing."

"Sir!" spoke up Miles, his voice free of emotion but his meaning evident: "I've had to leave almost twenty dead up on the ridge. One of them is Lieutenant Durand."

"I'm sorry, Holt-Bate," replied Gilfillan, looking first to the ridge top where artillery shells continued to land but at a slower rate and then to the body strewn plain. "My concern at present is for the living. We will return to collect your dead. That I promise, but not today."

As D Company were brought to a halt and ordered to retrace their steps, one called out to Tom O'Hanlon: "We saved your skins for you there, Tom lad."

"Saved use?" retorted O'Hanlon, his shirt stained with blood from his neck wound. "You clumsy gits got 'ere too soon, 'ad the bleeders right where we wanted 'em".

As both rescuers and rescued fell back, a platoon of the Seaforths brought stretchers out to collect the wounded. With them also came the Queen's and Seaforths' medical officers.

"It's weak, but she has a heartbeat. She's alive," stated the Queen's medical officer, removing a stethoscope from his ears after examining Emma Schofield, Robert Christie having laid her down onto a stretcher.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!" exclaimed Rose Rickman, taking one of Emma's hands to walk along beside the stretcher now being carried by four of the sweepers.

Once everyone was safely across the *tangi*, Gilfillan gave the order turning his command back towards Khwaja Kalai and the road that would return them to Ishak. He had set his mind on saving the evacuating Chashmal garrison from massacre and that is what he intended to see done. As for destroying the Faqir's army, that would be the business of another day.

From its vantage point above the Faqir and his followers, the aircraft that had circled B Company's running fight for so long was forced to leave because of shortage of fuel. Its place though, was shortly taken by two others, who remained over the area of the crossing long after the column had moved off. They confirmed between them that on the plain alone, between a hundred and ten and a hundred and thirty tribesmen's bodies could be counted, giving them a casualty figure that on the lowest estimate would easily become four hundred when taking into account the wounded. They would not be pursuing the column, no matter how fanatically the Faqir raged that they should do so, the two attacking bodies, Wazir, Mahsud and Afghans, content to remain concealed until it was safe enough to return and plunder each other's dead.

Even though they were now carrying casualties, the retreating column made good time. Whilst the rest of the infantry were protecting their movements by picketing, B Company took on the job of stretcher carrying. Reaching Khwaja Kalai after only two hours they were met unexpectedly by reinforcement.

Late in the morning the other two battalions who were to complete Claude Gilfillan's brigade, the 6th Battalion of the 10th Baluch Regiment and the 7th Battalion of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment, arrived at Ishak. Neither giving them the opportunity to rest nor asking for one, Colonel Kinsey set them the task of picketing the road all the way to Khwaja

Kalai. Both battalions were experienced Frontier units and had the route secure two hours ahead of the column's return to the road head.

Anticipating the burden of wounded, Kinsey also sent along five motor lorries, normally used for collecting supplies. Grateful for the gesture, Gilfillan had the seriously wounded placed on board and the vehicles sent off on the return journey to Ishak.

In the well of one truck in which Emma Schofield lay with her head in Rose Rickman's lap, Robert Christie crouched over the injured woman to ensure that her wound was not in contact with the flooring.

"Bote crabbed?" asked one of the six sweepers.

"Yes! Very sick," replied Christie.

With B Company leading, the column was started off before the vehicles began to move. Now with the company pushing to both sides of the road, the trucks began to pass them. With Rose sitting next to the open tailboard, as she was seen by the men of B Company they began to cheer and wave. She acknowledged their compliment by raising a hand while giving a tight lipped smile. Then, furiously, she began to wave and cry out: "Joe! Joe!"

Penton, bareheaded, carrying his rifle slung over one shoulder, was marching with Ben Tysall.

"Rose! Rose!" he also called, waving back. Then he was gone, out of sight, masked by the lorry following behind.

Although Christie's main reason for travelling with the wounded was because of his anxiety for Emma, there was however another: as the senior Indian Civil Servant involved, it was up to him to inform Peshawar of the facts and outcome of this border incident. Sir Horatio would be expecting in the shortest possible space of time nothing less than a full report. As it turned out he didn't have to, not right away, for as the convoy entered Ishak to halt in front of the camp's modestly sized stone built hospital bungalow, the district officer found Victor Edwardes, Noel Lomas and Taid Khan awaiting him.

"Damn! Damn!" swore Edwardes as Emma was lifted off the lorry by the sweepers and placed on the low, flagstone veranda. "If I had known that in asking her to---".

"Sir! If you had not asked her, she would have made the rest of your days intolerable" interrupted Christie, making it clear to the deputy commissioner that Emma had gone willingly as a member of the rescue party and that his own self-blame was unfounded.

The moment Emma was placed down, Rose was at her side examining the bandage for further bleeding. As she checked, a figure knelt beside her, she mistakenly taking it for one of the sweepers, until a large hand reached out to clasp one of Emma's:

"Daktar, she live?" asked Zarif Khan. In his other hand he held the woman's battered topee.

"Oh, Zarif Khan." Rose, so pleased to see the loyal Pathan she took hold of his arm to lay her head on. "We don't know. At the moment we just don't know."

Losing no time the Queen's medical officer went onto one knee on the other side of the stretcher. Lifting one of Emma's eyelids he took a quick look at the eye before addressing Rose:

"Miss Rickman. I know you must be exhausted, but as well as Doctor Schofield, there are several others in immediate need of surgery. I can't rely all that heavily on my claw fingered orderlies during a major operation - a trained nurse would be invaluable to me. Would you agree to assisting?"

"Is there somewhere I can wash up and perhaps change into something other than this?" asked Rose, standing to indicate her blood drenched dress front.

Christie adjourned to the headquarters building with Edwardes, Lomas and Taid Khan, where they took over Freddy D'urban's vacant office, the district officer spending the next hour giving a full account of what led up to and occurred on the retreat from Chashmal.

On hearing of Teresa and Rose's rescue party arriving at Chashmal, Edwardes had set out from Jandola with Oliver Ratcliffe, Teresa's father, to Sararogha, meeting up with Noel Lomas, Zarif Khan and later with Taid Khan, who arrived in the night with Mullah Mohammad Sharif and his men. Hearing of the evacuation order that had been issued without Edwardes' knowledge, arrangements were made to accompany the Baluchis and Frontier Force Regiment on to Ishak.

Soon after the district officer had given his verbal report, they were drawn to the main gate by approaching music. The Queen's band had gone out to meet the returning column and was leading it into the camp. At the entrance the band halted to one side of the road in order to play the column past.

Positioned in front by Claude Gilfillan, their platoons depleted, the Scouts just behind, B Company marched in. With Holt-Bate at their head. Rifles sloped, arms swinging shoulder high, they entered Ishak. Dirty, sweat stained, some bandaged, many hatless but all in step with the music of the band as it played 'Daughter of the Regiment.'

When the company was at last fallen out the day was ending, the tip of the sun's red glow just slipping below the horizon. 6 Platoon, entering their tents, did so in silence, out of respect for those who were missing. No shouts of boisterous relief, or curses, or complaints, or throwing down of kit, just solemn, deliberate movements. When they spoke it was in saddened voices.

"You had best get across to the hospital and have that face seen to," advised Joe Penton.

"Later," replied Charlie Robey. "Them linseed lancers got enough on their plates at the minute."

Joe left it at that to gaze around his section tent. Everyone was sitting on, or standing near their beds. Four were empty. Spider Webb and Ken Hall dead, Chalky Gray and Jock Cressey at the hospital. Of the section, six remained present. Ben's was the same: two dead, two wounded. The Lewis Section escaped most lightly with only two wounded. It was Sid Firth's 3 Section that came off the worst: five dead, one wounded two if Tom O'Hanlon was included.

On someone's death it was customary for his possessions to be sold within the platoon. The items being put up for sale, handed back and re-sold again and again, so as to collect a reasonable amount of money that would be sent to the deceased's next-of-kin in England, or wherever. With the company losing so many, this would not have been feasible, but the sales did take place, for the entire battalion rallied around.

Once the whole force now centred at Ishak was back inside its perimeter wire Brigadier Gilfillan called an orders conference of all senior officers with the intention of starting out for the recent battle area first thing next morning to honour his pledge to Holt-Bate by collecting B Company's dead. The forty-five minutes it took to fully brief everyone on how this was to be carried out, who would be involved and the part they would be expected to play proved wasted time. For at first light the following morning, just as the lead company of the Buluch Battalion was forming up at the main gate in preparation to picketing the road to Khwaja Kalai, a line of camels were seen turning off it towards the encampment. Wrapped in sacking, secured on either side of each camel were the recovered bodies of Hugh Durand and B Company's dead from the previous day. Those leading the camels were local tribesmen, all venomously denying any participation in the fighting; pleading their act of bringing these men's remains to the camp was one of sincere compassion, with the standing bounty award for doing so of minor importance to them.

Early in the morning scouting aircraft found the invaders had withdrawn to Chashmal which they occupied for two days before dispersing on the second night, in tribal and clan parties, back across the border leaving the Wazir and Mahsud alone to await the visit of British punishment columns.

One of the first to decamp was the Faqir himself. Blaming anyone for the bloody repulse except himself – the Russians for not providing the gold with which he could provision his army – the Afghan tribesmen who refrained from joining him – the cowardly clans of Waziristan who hesitated in rising up he skulked away to become once more a fugitive with a price on his head.

Miles Holt-Bate, returning to his tent after visiting the men's lines, closed his eyes with a heavy sigh as he sat on the edge of his bed, head bowed. For most of the last twenty-four hours he had functioned in a continuing state of stress and only now was the tension beginning to drain from him. Picking up Hugh Durand's pistol he had placed on a chair, he held it in his hands, reflecting on the unfairness of fate.

Miles had joined the army as an adventure, not sure he intended to stay the full course. Hugh, on the other hand had been a career officer. At Sandhurst he knew that in order to fulfil his dream of serving in his father's regiment he would have to pass out in the top ten percent of his class, and through hard work, over long, extra hours, that was what he had achieved. Miles, concerning himself more with girls and weekends in London, graduated from the academy in the middle portion of the same class. If anyone had deserved to climb to high rank in the uniform of his King, it had been Hugh Durand.

"Hugh! Christ, Hugh," whispered Miles, as he slowly fell back on the bed, within minutes asleep, his friend's piston clutched to his chest.

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It was very close to midnight when Rose finally left the hospital medical room where most of the operations on the wounded had been carried out. Closing Frank Quinn's wound with stitches, after removing splinters of rib bone, the Queen's doctor had looked up to see Rose's head jerk downwards, her eyes momentarily shutting, then re-opening.

"Bed! Miss Rickman. Right now." The doctor's words were not a suggestion. It was a no nonsense order.

With Quinn the last of the serious casualties to be seen to, Rose put up only a token resistance before handing the sterile bandages she was holding to an orderly. Leaving the operating room, she entered the hospital ward. With just eight beds, it was wholly inadequate for dealing with even light battle casualties; let alone what had just occurred. This handicap was overcome for the moment by annexing a neighbouring tent.

Removing her apron to reveal her dress, a pair of baggy men's trousers and equally baggy shirt given her by one of the orderlies, Rose draped it on a chair. Pushing aside one of the blankets that were hung as curtains around one of the corner beds, the nurse tip-toed up to Emma Schofield's bed. Rose recalled earlier in the evening how she had assisted in removing a bullet from this grand old lady's back. Through the late evening people kept arriving to enquire after the doctor: Robert Christie, Miles Holt-Bate, Victor Edwardes, Taid Khan and numerous soldiers asking after their mates, but of the doctor too. All were given the same reply: that she was satisfactory, and none were allowed to see her.

Claude Gilfillan, one of the last to inquire after her wellbeing, left grumbling under his breath: "Hmm! Hmm!"

Stepping out onto the veranda, Rose began feeling the extent of her tiredness, her limbs aching and her eyes smarting. To one side of the doorway sat Zarif Khan, in vigil, knees drawn up, arms folded.

"She's asleep, Zarif Khan," said Rose as the devoted, gentlemanly Pathan looked up. "You may sleep now. She is no longer in danger and will recover.

There was another, also sitting on the veranda, a soldier, his head resting against one of the narrow stone pillars supporting the veranda roof. Approaching him, Rose found him

asleep, arms hung over knees, head turned against the pillar, his blond hair a silver grey in the moonlight. On dropping to her knees in front of him, he started, his eyes flashing open as his head came erect.

"Hello, Private Joseph Penton," said Rose, addressing the soldier in the exact same way as he had introduced himself four years earlier, after crawling into the rubble of a collapsed bungalow to rescue her.

"Hello, Rose Rickman," he replied softly, reaching out to take her in his arms, his head coming forward to kiss her. "I love you, Rose Rickman. I love you."

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"Oh, sugar!" exclaimed Karen Harper, St Thomas's ward night nurse.

Engrossed in finishing the letter she was writing to her boyfriend, she had misjudged the time, finding on checking the brooch watch pinned to her uniform breast that it was ten minutes past the hour. Regularly during her night duties Karen would, on the hour, tour the ward beds soundlessly ensuring that all was well with her patients. Peeved with herself for breaking her own self-imposed routine, the nurse laid her pen on the letter page and stood up to commence her belated round.

Taking steps that were just a little quicker than customary Karen moved down her ward, eyes switching from bed to bed, verifying each occupant was reposed in peaceful slumber. Then, stopping suddenly at the foot of one that was unoccupied and should not have been, she froze to the spot. Searching with darting glances the room's dimly lit areas for the missing man, who was jeopardising his recovery by removing the drip tube from his arm and leaving his bed, she spied a hunched figure, four beds further up the ward. The nurse practically broke into a run.

"Mister Penton! What on earth do you hope to---?" On bending to admonish the old man, the young woman's harsh, scolding whisper faded as she observed his statuesque pose.

Placing a hand to Joe's neck, below one ear, feeling for a pulse beat, the nurse found his flesh cool to her touch. Alarmed at this sign, Karen was about to hurry away and summon assistance when she caught sight of Penton's hand holding the man's in the bed beside him. Reaching down she took hold of Ben Tysall's wrist.

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" she moaned to herself sadly. Quickly leaving the two men she ran back down along the ward to her office.

Answering the call on his bleeper, Doctor Gerald Page, the hospital's resident duty physician entered the ward at a brisk pace, his white gown open and showing him to be casually dressed in a pullover and corduroy trousers. Karen, standing at a bedside midway down the ward, saw the doctor come in and went to meet him.

As they came towards each other the doctor asked the reason for his being summoned, not by voice, instead by raising his eyebrows as he jutted out his chin.

"I'm afraid it's two, Doctor," informed the nurse turning about to escort Page to the bed area. "They're the two old gentlemen who were attacked in the tube station the other week."

"Now what the hell is this one doing out of bed?" questioned Page in a dispassionate manner, taking a folded stethoscope from his gown pocket and fitting it to his ears before bending to examine Joe Penton.

"Well, he's gone," announced the doctor after positioning the instrument on three different points of Joe's naked chest, listening briefly each time.

"And him as well," confirmed Page straightening, having completed the same procedure with Ben Tysall.

Removing the stethoscope from his ears, he allowed it to hang around his neck as he again

stooped, this time in an effort to separate the two men's hands. Unsuccessful, he gave up the attempt.

"I tried parting them earlier as well, Doctor," disclosed the nurse.

"Yes! Their grip is locked tight as a vice," observed Page, following it with a dry snicker and "one must have dodged off owing the other a drink".

"That's hardly an appropriate comment, Doctor," reproached the young woman. "Those two had hideous injuries and must have been suffering enormous pain. Even so, not once did I hear either of them refer to it. They were two extraordinary old gentlemen, brave, and always cheerful."

"Yes! Of course. No doubt they were. I wonder just how extraordinary?" replied Page, accepting the nurse's ticking-off humbly. With one finger he pushed back eye glasses that had slipped down his nose before turning away to make the arrangements for moving the two deceased. "I'll contact the porters and have them taken down."

Re-buttoning Joe Penton's pyjama front, the young nurse stood back to wish the two men well in their afterlife.

"Good luck to you both. It probably won't be paradise, but wherever you are now, I hope you are at peace."

They were touching words, from someone under no obligation to express them. But she was wrong. They were in paradise. Ben once again under the cooling shade of the banyan tree, his face held in the feather light finger tips of a beautiful Eurasian maiden, as she draws his lips to hers. And Joe, in a sunny glade, high in the Himalayan foothills, asleep in the arms of the girl he had fallen in love with and married, watched over by a distant, noble mountain that had watched over them once before and was preparing to do so again, for all eternity.

THE END