

Hawk of the Hills

by

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Chapter 1

TO A MAN standing in the gorge below, the man clinging to the sloping cliff would have been invisible, hidden from sight by the jutting ledges that looked like irregular stone steps from a distance. From a distance, also, the rugged wall looked easy to climb; but there were heart-breaking spaces between those ledges--stretches of treacherous shale, and steep pitches where clawing fingers and groping toes scarcely found a grip.

One misstep, one handhold lost and the climber would have pitched backward in a headlong, rolling fall three hundred feet to the rocky canyon bed. But the man on the cliff was Francis Xavier Gordon, and it was not his destiny to dash out his brains on the floor of a Himalayan gorge.

He was reaching the end of his climb. The rim of the wall was only a few feet above him, but the intervening space was the most dangerous he had yet covered. He paused to shake the sweat from his eyes, drew a deep breath through his nostrils, and once more matched eye and muscle against the brute treachery of the gigantic barrier. Faint yells welled up from below, vibrant with hate and edged with blood lust. He did not look down. His upper lip lifted in a silent snarl, as a panther might snarl at the sound of his hunters' voices. That was all. His fingers clawed at the stone until blood oozed from under his broken nails. Rivulets of gravel started beneath his boots and streamed down the ledges. He was almost there--but under his toe a jutting stone began to give way. With an explosive expansion of energy that brought a tortured gasp from him, he lunged upward, just as his foothold tore from the soil that had held it. For one sickening instant he felt eternity yawn beneath him--then his upflung fingers hooked over the rim of the crest. For an instant he hung there, suspended, while pebbles and stones went rattling down the face of the cliff in a miniature avalanche. Then with a powerful knotting and contracting of iron biceps, he lifted his weight and an instant later climbed over the rim and stared down.

He could make out nothing in the gorge below, beyond the glimpse of a tangle of thickets. The jutting ledges obstructed the view from above as well as from below. But he knew his pursuers were ranging those thickets down there, the men whose knives were still reeking with the blood of his friends. He heard their voices, edged with the hysteria of murder, dwindling westward. They were following a blind lead and a false trail.

Gordon stood up on the rim of the gigantic wall, the one atom of visible life among

monstrous pillars and abutments of stone; they rose on all sides, dwarfing him, brown insensible giants shouldering the sky. But Gordon gave no thought to the somber magnificence of his surroundings, or of his own comparative insignificance.

Scenery, however awesome, is but a background for the human drama in its varying phases. Gordon's soul was a maelstrom of wrath, and the distant, dwindling shout below him drove crimson waves of murder surging through his brain. He drew from his boot the long knife he had placed there when he began his desperate climb. Half-dried blood stained the sharp steel, and the sight of it gave him a fierce satisfaction. There were dead men back there in the valley into which the gorge ran, and not all of them were Gordon's Afridi friends. Some were Orakzai, the henchmen of the traitor Afdal Khan--the treacherous dogs who had sat down in seeming amity with Yusef Shah, the Afridi chief, his three headmen and his American ally, and who had turned the friendly conference suddenly into a holocaust of murder.

Gordon's shirt was in ribbons, revealing a shallow sword cut across the thick muscles of his breast, from which blood oozed slowly. His black hair was plastered with sweat, the scabbards at his hips empty. He might have been a statue on the cliffs, he stood so motionless, except for the steady rise and fall of his arching chest as he breathed deep through expanded nostrils. In his black eyes grew a flame like fire on deep black water. His body grew rigid; muscles swelled in knotted cords on his arms, and the veins of his temples stood out.

Treachery and murder! He was still bewildered, seeking a motive. His actions until this moment had been largely instinctive, reflexes responding to peril and the threat of destruction. The episode had been so unexpected--so totally lacking in apparent reason. One moment a hum of friendly conversation, men sitting cross-legged about a fire while tea boiled and meat roasted; the next instant knives sinking home, guns crashing, men falling in the smoke--Afridi men; his friends, struck down about him, with their rifles laid aside, their knives in their scabbards.

Only his steel-trap coordination had saved him--that instant, primitive reaction to danger that is not dependent upon reason or any logical thought process. Even before his conscious mind grasped what was happening, Gordon was on his feet with both guns blazing. And then there was no time for consecutive thinking, nothing but desperate hand-to-hand-fighting, and flight on foot--a long run and a hard climb. But for the thicket-choked mouth of a narrow gorge they would have had him, in spite of everything.

Now, temporarily safe, he could pause and apply reasoning to the problem of why Afdal Khan, chief of the Khoruk Orakzai, plotted thus foully to slay the four chiefs of his neighbors, the Afridis of Kurram, and their feringhi friend. But no motive presented itself. The massacre seemed utterly wanton and reasonless. At the moment Gordon did not greatly care. It was enough to know that his friends were dead, and to know who had killed them.

Another tier of rock rose some yards behind him, broken by a narrow, twisting cleft. Into

this he moved. He did not expect to meet an enemy; they would all be down there in the gorge, beating up the thickets for him; but he carried the long knife in his hand, just in case.

It was purely an instinctive gesture, like the unsheathing of a panther's claws. His dark face was like iron; his black eyes burned redly; as he strode along the narrow defile he was more dangerous than any wounded panther. An urge painful in its intensity beat at his brain like a hammer that would not ease; revenge! revenge! revenge! All the depths of his being responded to the reverberation. The thin veneer of civilization had been swept away by a red tidal wave. Gordon had gone back a million years into the red dawn of man's beginning; he was as starkly primitive as the colossal stones that rose about him.

Ahead of him the defile twisted about a jutting shoulder to come, as he knew, out upon a winding mountain path. That path would lead him out of the country of his enemies, and he had no reason to expect to meet any of them upon it. So it was a shocking surprise to him when he rounded the granite shoulder and came face to face with a tall man who lolled against a rock, with a pistol in his hand.

That pistol was leveled at the American's breast.

Gordon stood motionless, a dozen feet separating the two men. Beyond the tall man stood a finely caparisoned Kabuli stallion, tied to a tamarisk.

"Ali Bahadur!" muttered Gordon, the red flame in his black eyes.

"Aye!" Ali Bahadur was clad in Pathan elegance. His boots were stitched with gilt thread, his turban was of rose-colored silk, and his girdled khalat was gaudily striped. He was a handsome man, with an aquiline face and dark, alert eyes, which just now were lighted with cruel triumph. He laughed mockingly.

"I was not mistaken, El Borak. When you fled into the thicket-choked mouth of the gorge, I did not follow you as the others did. They ran headlong into the copse, on foot, bawling like bulls. Not I. I did not think you would flee on down the gorge until my men cornered you. I believed that as soon as you got out of their sight you would climb the wall, though no man has ever climbed it before. I knew you would climb out on this side, for not even Shaitan the Damned could scale those sheer precipices on the other side of the gorge.

"So I galloped back up the valley to where, a mile north of the spot where we camped, another gorge opens and runs westward. This path leads up out of that gorge and crosses the ridge and here turns southwesterly--as I knew you knew. My steed is swift! I knew this point was the only one at which you could reach this trail, and when I arrived, there were no boot prints in the dust to tell me you had reached it and passed on ahead of me. Nay, hardly had I paused when I heard stones rattling down the cliff, so I dismounted and awaited your coming! For only through that cleft could you reach the path."

"You came alone," said Gordon, never taking his eyes from the Orakzai. "You have more guts than I thought."

"I knew you had no guns," answered Ali Bahadur. "I saw you empty them and throw them away and draw your knife as you fought your way through my warriors. Courage? Any fool can have courage. I have wits, which is better."

"You talk like a Persian," muttered Gordon. He was caught fairly, his scabbards empty, his knife arm hanging at his side. He knew Ali would shoot at the slightest motion.

"My brother Afdal Khan will praise me when I bring him your head!" taunted the Orakzai. His Oriental vanity could not resist making a grandiose gesture out of his triumph. Like many of his race, swaggering dramatics were his weakness; if he had simply hidden behind a rock and shot Gordon when he first appeared, Ali Bahadur might be alive today.

"Why did Afdal Khan invite us to a feast and then murder my friends?" Gordon demanded. "There has been peace between the clans for years."

"My brother has ambitions," answered Ali Bahadur. "The Afridis stood in his way, though they knew it not. Why should my brother waste men in a long war to remove them? Only a fool gives warning before he strikes."

"And only a dog turns traitor," retorted Gordon.

"The salt had not been eaten," reminded Ali. "The men of Kurram were fools, and thou with them!" He was enjoying his triumph to the utmost, prolonging the scene as greatly as he dared. He knew he should have shot already.

There was a tense readiness about Gordon's posture that made his flesh crawl, and Gordon's eyes were red flame when the sun struck them. But it gluted Ali's vanity deliriously to know that El Borak, the grimmest fighter in all the North, was in his power--held at pistol muzzle, poised on the brink of Jehannum into which he would topple at the pressure of a finger on the trigger. Ali Bahadur knew Gordon's deadly quickness, how he could spring and kill in the flicker of an eyelid.

But no human thews could cross the intervening yards quicker than lead spitting from a pistol muzzle. And at the first hint of movement, Ali would bring the gratifying scene to a sudden close.

Gordon opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it. The suspicious Pathan was instantly tense. Gordon's eyes flickered past him, then back instantly, and fixed on his face with an increased intensity. To all appearances Gordon had seen something behind Ali-- something he did not wish Ali to see, and was doing all in his power to conceal the fact that he had seen something, to keep Ali from turning his head. And turn his head Ali did; he did it involuntarily, in spite of himself. He had not completed the motion before

he sensed the trick and jerked his head back, firing as he did so, even as he caught the blur that was the lightninglike motion of Gordon's right arm.

Motion and shot were practically simultaneous. Ali went to his knees as if struck by sudden paralysis, and flopped over on his side. Gurgling and choking he struggled to his elbows, eyes starting from his head, lips drawn back in a ghastly grin, his chin held up by the hilt of Gordon's knife that jutted from his throat. With a dying effort he lifted the pistol with both hands, trying to cock it with fumbling thumbs. Then blood gushed from his blue lips and the pistol slipped from his hands. His fingers clawed briefly at the earth, then spread and stiffened, and his head sank down on his extended arms.

Gordon had not moved from his tracks. Blood oozed slowly from a round blue hole in his left shoulder. He did not seem to be aware of the wound. Not until Ali Bahadur's brief, spasmodic twitchings had ceased did he move. He snarled, the thick, blood-glutted snarl of a jungle cat, and spat toward the prostrate Orakzai.

He made no move to recover the knife he had thrown with such deadly force and aim, nor did he pick up the smoking pistol. He strode to the stallion which snorted and trembled at the reek of spilt blood, untied him and swung into the gilt-stitched saddle.

As he reined away up the winding hill path he turned in the saddle and shook his fist in the direction of his enemies--a threat and a ferocious promise; the game had just begun; the first blood had been shed in a feud that was to litter the hills with charred villages and the bodies of dead men, and trouble the dreams of kings and viceroys.

Chapter 2

GEOFFREY WILLOUGHBY SHIFTED himself in his saddle and glanced at the gaunt ridges and bare stone crags that rose about him, mentally comparing the members of his escort with the features of the landscape.

Physical environment inescapably molded its inhabitants. With one exception his companions were as sullen, hard, barbarous and somber as the huge brown rocks that frowned about them. The one exception was Suleiman, a Punjabi Moslem, ostensibly his servant, actually a valuable member of the English secret service.

Willoughby himself was not a member of that service. His status was unique; he was one of those ubiquitous Englishmen who steadily build the empire, moving obscurely behind the scenes, and letting other men take the credit--men in bemedaled uniforms, or loud-voiced men with top hats and titles.

Few knew just what Willoughby's commission was, or what niche he filled in the official structure; but the epitome of the man and his career was once embodied in the request of a harried deputy commissioner: "Hell on the border; send Willoughby!" Because of his unadvertised activities, troops did not march and cannons did not boom on more

occasions than the general public ever realized. So it was not really surprising--except to those die-hards who refuse to believe that maintaining peace on the Afghan Border is fundamentally different from keeping order in Trafalgar Square--that Willoughby should be riding forth in the company of hairy cutthroats to arbitrate a bloody hill feud at the request of an Oriental despot.

Willoughby was of medium height and stockily, almost chubbily, built, though there were unexpected muscles under his ruddy skin. His hair was taffy-colored, his eyes blue, wide and deceptively ingenuous. He wore civilian khakis and a huge sun helmet. If he was armed the fact was not apparent. His frank, faintly freckled face was not unpleasant, but it displayed little evidence of the razor-sharp brain that worked behind it.

He jogged along as placidly as if he were ambling down a lane in his native Suffolk, and he was more at ease than the ruffians who accompanied him--four wild-looking, ragged tribesmen under the command of a patriarch whose stately carriage and gray-shot pointed beard did not conceal the innate savagery reflected in his truculent visage. Baber Ali, uncle of Afdal Khan, was old, but his back was straight as a trooper's, and his gaunt frame was wolfishly hard. He was his nephew's right-hand man, possessing all Afdal Khan's ferocity, but little of his subtlety and cunning.

They were following a trail that looped down a steep slope which fell away for a thousand feet into a labyrinth of gorges. In a valley a mile to the south, Willoughby sighted a huddle of charred and blackened ruins.

"A village, Baber?" he asked.

Baber snarled like an old wolf.

"Aye! That was Khuttak! El Borak and his devils burned it and slew every man able to bear arms."

Willoughby looked with new interest. It was such things as that he had come to stop, and it was El Borak he was now riding to see.

"El Borak is a son of Shaitan," growled old Baber.

"Not a village of Afdal Khan's remains unburned save only Khoruk itself. And of the outlying towers, only my sangar remains, which lies between this spot and Khoruk. Now he has seized the cavern called Akbar's Castle, and that is in Orakzai territory. By Allah, for an hour we have been riding in country claimed by us Orakzai, but now it has become a no man's land, a border strewn with corpses and burned villages, where no man's life is safe. At any moment we may be fired upon."

"Gordon has given his word," reminded Willoughby.

"His word is not wind," admitted the old ruffian grudgingly.

They had dropped down from the heights and were traversing a narrow plateau that broke into a series of gorges at the other end. Willoughby thought of the letter in his pocket, which had come to him by devious ways. He had memorized it, recognizing its dramatic value as a historical document.

Geoffrey Willoughby,

Ghazrael Fort:

If you want to parley, come to Shaitan's Minaret, alone. Let your escort stop outside the mouth of the gorge. They won't be molested, but if any Orakzai follows you into the gorge, he'll be shot.

Francis X. Gordon.

Concise and to the point. Parley, eh? The man had assumed the role of a general carrying on a regular war, and left no doubt that he considered Willoughby, not a disinterested arbiter, but a diplomat working in the interests of the opposing side.

"We should be near the Gorge of the Minaret," said Willoughby.

Baber Ali pointed. "There is its mouth."

"Await me here."

Suleiman dismounted and eased his steed's girths. The Pathans climbed down uneasily, hugging their rifles and scanning the escarpments. Somewhere down that winding gorge Gordon was lurking with his vengeful warriors. The Orakzai were afraid. They were miles from Khoruk, in the midst of a region that had become a bloody debatable ground through slaughter on both sides. They instinctively looked toward the southwest where, miles away, lay the crag-built village of Kurram.

Baber twisted his beard and gnawed the corner of his lip. He seemed devoured by an inward fire of anger and suspicion which would not let him rest.

"You will go forward from this point alone, sahib?"

Willoughby nodded, gathering up his reins.

"He will kill you!"

"I think not."

Willoughby knew very well that Baber Ali would never have thus placed himself within Gordon's reach unless he placed full confidence in the American's promise of safety.

"Then make the dog agree to a truce!" snarled Baber, his savage arrogance submerging his grudging civility. "By Allah, this feud is a thorn in the side of Afdal Khan--and of me!"

"We'll see." Willoughby nudged his mount with his heels and jogged on down the gorge, not an impressive figure at all as he slumped carelessly in his saddle, his cork helmet bobbing with each step of the horse. Behind him the Pathans watched eagerly until he passed out of sight around a bend of the canyon.

Willoughby's tranquillity was partly, though not altogether, assumed. He was not afraid, nor was he excited. But he would have been more than human had not the anticipation of meeting El Borak stirred his imagination to a certain extent and roused speculations.

The name of El Borak was woven in the tales told in all the caravanserais and bazaars from Teheran to Bombay. For three years rumors had drifted down the Khyber of intrigues and grim battles fought among the lonely hills, where a hard-eyed white man was hewing out a place of power among the wild tribesmen.

The British had not cared to interfere until this latest stone cast by Gordon into the pool of Afghan politics threatened to spread ripples that might lap at the doors of foreign palaces. Hence Willoughby, jogging down the winding Gorge of the Minaret. Queer sort of renegade, Willoughby reflected. Most white men who went native were despised by the people among whom they cast their lot. But even Gordon's enemies respected him, and it did not seem to be on account of his celebrated fighting ability alone. Gordon, Willoughby vaguely understood, had grown up on the southwestern frontier of the United States, and had a formidable reputation as a gun fanner before he ever drifted East.

Willoughby had covered a mile from the mouth of the gorge before he rounded a bend in the rocky wall and saw the Minaret looming up before him--a tall, tapering spirelike crag, detached, except at the base, from the canyon wall. No one was in sight. Willoughby tied his horse in the shade of the cliff and walked toward the base of the Minaret where he halted and stood gently fanning himself with his helmet, and idly wondering how many rifles were aimed at him from vantage points invisible to himself. Abruptly Gordon was before him.

It was a startling experience, even to a man whose nerves were under as perfect control as Willoughby's. The Englishman indeed stopped fanning himself and stood motionless, holding the helmet lifted. There had been no sound, not even the crunch of rubble under a boot heel to warn him. One instant the space before him was empty, the next it was filled by a figure vibrant with dynamic life. Boulders strewn at the foot of the wall offered plenty of cover for a stealthy advance, but the miracle of that advance--to Willoughby, who had never fought Yaqui Indians in their own country--was the silence with which Gordon had accomplished it.

"You're Willoughby, of course." The Southern accent was faint, but unmistakable.

Willoughby nodded, absorbed in his scrutiny of the man before him. Gordon was not a large man, but he was remarkably compact, with a squareness of shoulders and a thickness of chest that reflected unusual strength and vitality. Willoughby noted the black butts of the heavy pistols jutting from his hips, the knife hilt projecting from his right boot. He sought the hard bronzed face in vain for marks of weakness or degeneracy. There was a gleam in the black eyes such as Willoughby had never before seen in any man of the so-called civilized races.

No, this man was no degenerate; his plunging into native feuds and brawls indicated no retrogression. It was simply the response of a primitive nature seeking its most natural environment. Willoughby felt that the man before him must look exactly as an untamed, precivilization Anglo-Saxon must have looked some ten thousand years before.

"I'm Willoughby," he said. "Glad you found it convenient to meet me. Shall we sit down in the shade?"

"No. There's no need of taking up that much time. Word came to me that you were at Ghazrael, trying to get in touch with me. I sent you my answer by a Tajik trader. You got it, or you wouldn't be here. All right; here I am. Tell me what you've got to say and I'll answer you."

Willoughby discarded the plan he had partly formulated. The sort of diplomacy he'd had in mind wouldn't work here. This man was no dull bully, with a dominance acquired by brute strength alone, nor was he a self-seeking adventurer of the politician type, lying and bluffing his way through. He could not be bought off, nor frightened by a bluff. He was as real and vital and dangerous as a panther, though Willoughby felt no personal fear.

"All right, Gordon," he answered candidly. "My say is soon said. I'm here at the request of the Amir, and the Raj. I came to Fort Ghazrael to try to get in touch with you, as you know. My companion Suleiman helped. An escort of Orakzai met me at Ghazrael, to conduct me to Khoruk, but when I got your letter I saw no reason to go to Khoruk. They're waiting at the mouth of the gorge to conduct me back to Ghazrael when my job's done. I've talked with Afdal Khan only once, at Ghazrael. He's ready for peace. In fact it was at his request that the Amir sent me out here to try to settle this feud between you and him."

"It's none of the Amir's business," retorted Gordon. "Since when did he begin interfering with tribal feuds?"

"In this case one of the parties appealed to him," answered Willoughby. "Then the feud affects him personally. It's needless for me to remind you that one of the main caravan roads from Persia traverses this region, and since the feud began, the caravans avoid it and turn up into Turkestan. The trade that ordinarily passes through Kabul, by which the Amir acquires much rich revenue, is being deflected out of his territory."

"And he's dickering with the Russians to get it back." Gordon laughed mirthlessly. "He's tried to keep that secret, because English guns are all that keep him on his throne. But the Russians are offering him a lot of tempting bait, and he's playing with fire--and the British are afraid he'll scorch his fingers--and theirs!"

Willoughby blinked. Still, he might have known that Gordon would know the inside of Afghan politics at least as well as himself.

"But Afdal Khan has expressed himself, both to the Amir and to me, as desiring to end this feud," argued Willoughby. "He swears he's been acting on the defensive all along. If you don't agree to at least a truce the Amir will take a hand himself. As soon as I return to Kabul and tell him you refuse to submit to arbitration, he'll declare you an outlaw, and every ruffian in the hills will be whetting his knife for your head. Be reasonable, man. Doubtless you feel you had provocation for your attacks on Afdal Khan. But you've done enough damage. Forget what's passed--"

"Forget!"

Willoughby involuntarily stepped back as the pupils of Gordon's eyes contracted like those of an angry leopard.

"Forget!" he repeated thickly. "You ask me to forget the blood of my friends! You've heard only one side of this thing. Not that I give a damn what you think, but you'll hear my side, for once. Afdal Khan has friends at court. I haven't. I don't want any."

So a wild Highland chief might have cast his defiance in the teeth of the king's emissary, thought Willoughby, fascinated by the play of passion in the dark face before him.

"Afdal Khan invited my friends to a feast and cut them down in cold blood--Yusef Shah, and this three chiefs--all sworn friends of mine, do you understand? And you ask me to forget them, as you might ask me to throw aside a worn-out scabbard! And why? So the Amir can grab his taxes off the fat Persian traders; so the Russians won't have a chance to inveigle him into some treaty the British wouldn't approve of; so the English can keep their claws sunk in on this side of the border, too!

"Well, here's my answer: You and the Amir and the Raj can all go to hell together. Go back to Amir and tell him to put a price on my head. Let him send his Uzbek guards to help the Orakzai--and as many Russians and Britishers and whatever else he's able to get. This feud will end when I kill Afdal Khan. Not before."

"You're sacrificing the welfare of the many to avenge the blood of the few," protested Willoughby.

"Who says I am? Afdal Khan? He's the Amir's worst enemy, if the Amir only knew it, getting him embroiled in a war that's none of his business. In another month I'll have Afdal Khan's head, and the caravans will pass freely over this road again. If Afdal Khan

should win-- Why did this feud begin in the first place? I'll tell you! Afdal wants full control of the wells in this region, wells which command the caravan route, and which have been in the hands of the Afridis for centuries. Let him get possession of them and he'll fleece the merchants before they ever get to Kabul. Yes, and turn the trade permanently into Russian territory."

"He wouldn't dare--"

"He dares anything. He's got backing you don't even guess. Ask him how it is that his men are all armed with Russian rifles! Hell! Afdal's howling for help because I've taken Akbar's Castle and he can't dislodge me. He asked you to make me agree to give up the Castle, didn't he? Yes, I thought so. And if I were fool enough to do it, he'd ambush me and my men as we marched back to Kurram. You'd hardly have time to get back to Kabul before a rider would be at your heels to tell the Amir how I'd treacherously attacked Afdal Khan and been killed in self-defense, and how Afdal had been forced to attack and burn Kurram! He's trying to gain by outside intervention what he's lost in battle, and to catch me off my guard and murder me as he did Yusef Shah. He's making monkeys out of the Amir and you. And you want me to let him make a monkey out of me--and a corpse too--just because a little dirty trade is being deflected from Kabul!"

"You needn't feel so hostile to the British--" Willoughby began.

"I don't; nor to the Persians, nor the Russians, either. I just want all hands to attend to their own business and leave mine alone."

"But this blood-feud madness isn't the proper thing for a white man," pleaded Willoughby. "You're not an Afghan. You're an Englishman, by descent, at least--"

"I'm Highland Scotch and black Irish by descent," grunted Gordon. "That's got nothing to do with it. I've had my say. Go back and tell the Amir the feud will end --when I've killed Afal Khan."

And turning on his heel he vanished as noiselessly as he had appeared.

Willoughby started after him helplessly. Damn it all, he'd handled this matter like an amateur! Reviewing his arguments he felt like kicking himself; but any arguments seemed puerile against the primitive determination of El Borak. Debating with him was like arguing with a wind, or a flood, or a forest fire, or some other elemental fact. The man didn't fit into any ordered classification; he was as untamed as any barbarian who trod the Himalayas, yet there was nothing rudimentary or underdeveloped about his mentality.

Well, there was nothing to do at present but return to Fort Ghazrael and send a rider to Kabul, reporting failure. But the game was not played out. Willoughby's own stubborn determination was roused. The affair began to take on a personal aspect utterly lacking in most of his campaigns; he began to look upon it not only as a diplomatic problem, but

also as a contest of wits between Gordon and himself. As he mounted his horse and headed back up the gorge, he swore he would terminate that feud, and that it would be terminated his way, and not Gordon's.

There was probably much truth in Gordon's assertions. Of course, he and the Amir had heard only Afdal Khan's side of the matter; and of course, Afdal Khan was a rogue. But he could not believe that the chief's ambitions were as sweeping and sinister as Gordon maintained. He could not believe they embraced more than a seizing of local power in this isolated hill district. Petty exactions on the caravans, now levied by the Afridis; that was all.

Anyway, Gordon had no business allowing his private wishes to interfere with official aims, which, faulty as they might be, nevertheless had the welfare of the people in view. Willoughby would never have let his personal feelings stand in the way of policy, and he considered that to do so was reprehensible in others. It was Gordon's duty to forget the murder of his friends--again Willoughby experienced that sensation of helplessness. Gordon would never do that. To expect him to violate his instinct was as sensible as expecting a hungry wolf to turn away from raw meat.

Willoughby had returned up the gorge as leisurely as he had ridden down it. Now he emerged from the mouth and saw Suleiman and the Pathans standing in a tense group, staring eagerly at him. Baber Ali's eyes burned like a wolf's. Willoughby felt a slight shock of surprise as he met the fierce intensity of the old chief's eyes. Why should Baber so savagely desire the success of his emissary? The Orakzai had been getting the worst of the war, but they were not whipped, by any means. Was there, after all, something behind the visible surface--some deep-laid obscure element or plot that involved Willoughby's mission? Was there truth in Gordon's accusations of foreign entanglements and veiled motives?

Babar took three steps forward, and his beard quivered with his eagerness.

"Well?" His voice was harsh as the rasp of a sword against its scabbard. "Will the dog make peace?"

Willoughby shook his head. "He swears the feud will end only when he has slain Afdal Khan."

"Thou hast failed!"

The passion in Baber's voice startled Willoughby. For an instant he thought the chief would draw his long knife and leap upon him. Then Baber Ali deliberately turned his back on the Englishman and strode to his horse. Freeing it with a savage jerk he swung into the saddle and galloped away without a backward glance. And he did not take the trail Willoughby must follow on his return to Fort Ghazrael; he rode north, in the direction of Khoruk. The implication was unmistakable; he was abandoning Willoughby to his own resources, repudiating all responsibility for him.

Suleiman bent his head as he fumbled at his mount's girths, to hide the tinge of gray that crept under his brown skin. Willoughby turned from staring after the departing chief, to see the eyes of the four tribesmen fixed unwinkingly upon him--hard, murky eyes from under shocks of tangled hair.

He felt a slight chill crawl down his spine. These men were savages, hardly above the mental level of wild beasts. They would act unthinkingly, blindly following the instincts implanted in them and their kind throughout long centuries of merciless Himalayan existence. Their instincts were to murder and plunder all men not of their own clan. He was an alien. The protection spread over him and his companion by their chief had been removed.

By turning his back and riding away as he had, Baber Ali had tacitly given permission for the ferighi to be slain. Baber Ali was himself far more of a savage than was Afdal Khan; he was governed by his untamed emotions, and prone to do childish and horrible things in moments of passion. Infuriated by Willoughby's failure to bring about a truce, it was characteristic of him to vent his rage and disappointment on the Englishman.

Willoughby calmly reviewed the situation in the time he took to gather up his reins. He could never get back to Ghazrael without an escort. If he and Suleiman tried to ride away from these ruffians, they would undoubtedly be shot in the back. There was nothing else to do but try and bluff it out. They had been given their orders to escort him to the Gorge of the Minaret and back again to Fort Ghazrael. Those orders had not been revoked in actual words. The tribesmen might hesitate to act on their own initiative, without positive orders.

He glanced at the low-hanging sun, nudged his horse.

"Let's be on our way. We have far to ride."

He pushed straight at the cluster of men who divided sullenly to let him through. Suleiman followed him. Neither looked to right nor left, nor showed by any sign that they expected the men to do other than follow them. Silently the Pathans swung upon their horses and trailed after them, rifle butts resting on thighs, muzzles pointing upward.

Willoughby slouched in his saddle, jogging easily along. He did not look back, but he felt four pairs of beady eyes fixed on his broad back in sullen indecision. His matter-of-fact manner baffled them, exerted a certain dominance over their slow minds. But he knew that if either he or Suleiman showed the slightest sign of fear or doubt, they would be shot down instantly. He whistled tunelessly between his teeth, whimsically feeling as if he were riding along the edge of a volcano which might erupt at any instant.

They pushed eastward, following trails that wandered down into valleys and up over rugged slants. The sun dipped behind a thousand-foot ridge and the valleys were filled with purple shadows. They reached the spot where, as they passed it earlier in the day,

Baber Ali had indicated that they would camp that night.

There was a well there. The Pathans drew rein without orders from Willoughby. He would rather have pushed on, but to argue would have roused suspicions of fear on his part.

The well stood near a cliff, on a broad shelf flanked by steep slopes and ravine-cut walls. The horses were unsaddled, and Suleiman spread Willoughby's blanket rolls at the foot of the wall. The Pathans, stealthy and silent as wild things, began gathering dead tamarisk for a fire. Willoughby sat down on a rock near a cleft in the wall, and began tracing a likeness of Gordon in a small notebook, straining his eyes in the last of the twilight. He had a knack in that line, and the habit had proved valuable in the past, in the matter of uncovering disguises and identifying wanted men.

He believed that his calm acceptance of obedience as a matter of course had reduced the Pathans to a state of uncertainty, if not actual awe. As long as they were uncertain, they would not attack him.

The men moved about the small camp, performing various duties. Suleiman bent over the tiny fire, and on the other side of it a Pathan was unpacking a bundle of food. Another tribesman approached the fire from behind the Punjabi, bringing more wood.

Some instinct caused Willoughby to look up, just as the Pathan with the arm load of wood came up behind Suleiman. The Punjabi had not heard the man's approach; he did not look around. His first intimation that there was any one behind him was when the tribesman drew a knife and sank it between his shoulders.

It was done too quickly for Willoughby to shout a warning. He caught the glint of the firelight on the blade as it was driven into Suleiman's back. The Punjabi cried out and fell to his knees, and the man on the other side of the fire snatched a flint-lock pistol from among his rags and shot him through the body. Suleiman drew his revolver and fired once, and the tribesman fell into the fire, shot through the head.

Suleiman slipped down in a pool of his own blood, and lay still.

It all happened while Willoughby was springing to his feet. He was unarmed. He stood frozen for an instant, helpless. One of the men picked up a rifle and fired at him point-blank. He heard the bullet smash on a rock behind him. Stung out of his paralysis he turned and sprang into the cleft of the wall. An instant later he was running as fleetly down the narrow gap as his build would allow, his heels winged by the wild howls of triumph behind him.

Willoughby would have cursed himself as he ran, could he have spared the breath. The sudden attack had been brutish, blundering, without plan or premeditation. The tribesman had unexpectedly found himself behind Suleiman and had reacted to his natural instincts. Willoughby realized that if he had had a revolver he could probably have defeated the

attack, at least upon his own life. He had never needed one before; had always believed diplomacy a better weapon than a firearm. But twice today diplomacy had failed miserably. All the faults and weaknesses of his system seemed to be coming to light at once. He had made a pretty hash of this business from the start.

But he had an idea that he would soon be beyond self-censure or official blame. Those bloodthirsty yells, drawing nearer behind him, assured him of that.

Suddenly Willoughby was afraid, horribly afraid. His tongue seemed frozen to his palate and a clammy sweat beaded his skin. He ran on down the dark defile like a man running in a nightmare, his ears straining for the expected sound of sandaled feet pattering behind him, the skin between his shoulders crawling in expectation of a plunging knife. It was dark. He caromed into boulders, tripped over loose stones, tearing the skin of his hands on the shale.

Abruptly he was out of the defile, and a knife-edge ridge loomed ahead of him like the steep roof of a house, black against the blue-black star-dotted sky. He struggled up it, his breath coming in racking gasps. He knew they were close behind him, although he could see nothing in the dark.

But keen eyes saw his dim bulk outlined against the stars when he crawled over the crest. Tongues of red flame licked in the darkness below him; reports banged flatly against the rocky walls. Frantically he hauled himself over and rolled down the slope on the other side. But not all the way. Almost immediately he brought up against something hard yet yielding. Vaguely, half blind from sweat and exhaustion, he saw a figure looming over him, some object lifted in menace outlined against the stars. He threw up an arm but it did not check the swinging rifle stock. Fire burst in glittering sparks about him, and he did not hear the crackling of the rifles that ran along the crest of the ridge.

Chapter 3

IT WAS THE smashing reverberation of gunfire, reechoing between narrow walls, which first impressed itself on Willoughby's sluggish reviving consciousness. Then he was aware of his throbbing head. Lifting a hand to it, he discovered it had been efficiently bandaged. He was lying on what felt like a sheepskin coat, and he felt bare, cold rock under it. He struggled to his elbows and shook his head violently, setting his teeth against the shooting pain that resulted.

He lay in darkness, yet, some yards away, a white curtain shimmered dazzlingly before him. He swore and batted his eyes, and as his blurred sight cleared, things about him assumed their proper aspect. He was in a cave, and that white curtain was the mouth, with moonlight streaming across it. He started to rise and a rough hand grabbed him and jerked him down again, just as a rifle cracked somewhere outside and a bullet whined into the cave and smacked viciously on the stone wall.

"Keep down, sahib!" growled a voice in Pashtu. The Englishman was aware of men in the cave with him. Their eyes shone in the dark as they turned their heads toward him.

His groggy brain was functioning now, and he could understand what he saw. The cave was not a large one, and it opened upon a narrow plateau, bathed in vivid moonlight and flanked by rugged slopes. For about a hundred yards before the cave mouth the plain lay level and almost bare of rocks, but beyond that it was strewn with boulders and cut by gullies. And from those boulders and ravines white puffs bloomed from time to time, accompanied by sharp reports. Lead smacked and splattered about the entrance and whined venomously into the cavern. Somewhere a man was breathing in panting gasps that told Willoughby he was badly wounded. The moon hung at such an angle that it drove a white bar down the middle of the cave for some fifteen feet; and death lurked in that narrow strip, for the men in the cave.

They lay close to the walls on either side, hidden from the view of the besiegers and partially sheltered by broken rocks. They were not returning the fire. They lay still, hugging their rifles, the whites of their eyes gleaming in the darkness as they turned their heads from time to time.

Willoughby was about to speak, when on the plain outside a kalpak was poked cautiously around one end of a boulder. There was no response from the cave. The defenders knew that in all probability that sheepskin cap was stuck on a gun muzzle instead of a human head.

"Do you see the dog, sahib?" whispered a voice in the gloom, and Willoughby started as the answer came. For though it was framed in almost accentless Pashtu, it was the voice of a white man--the unmistakable voice of Francis Xavier Gordon.

"I see him. He's peeking around the other end of that boulder--trying to get a better shot at us, while his mate distracts our attention with that hat. See? Close to the ground, there--just about a hand's breadth of his head. Ready? All right--now!"

Six rifles cracked in a stuttering detonation, and instantly, a white-clad figure rolled from behind the boulder, flopped convulsively and lay still, a sprawl of twisted limbs in the moonlight. That, considered Willoughby, was damned good shooting, if no more than one of the six bullets hit the exposed head. The men in the cave had phosphorus rubbed in their sights, and they were not wasting ammunition.

The success of the fusillade was answered by a chorus of wrathful yells from outside, and a storm of lead burst against the cave. Plenty of it found its way inside, and hot metal splashing from a glancing slug stung Willoughby's arm through the sleeve. But the marksmen were aiming too high to do any damage, unwilling as they were to expose themselves to the fire from the cavern. Gordon's men were grimly silent; they neither wasted lead on unseen enemies, not indulged in the jeers and taunts so dear to the Afghan fighting man.

When the storm subsided to a period of vengeful waiting, Willoughby called in a low voice: "Gordon! Oh, I say there, Gordon!"

An instant later a dim form crawled to his side.

"Coming to at last, Willoughby? Here, take a swig of this."

A whiskey flask was pressed into his hand.

"No, thanks, old chap. I think you have a man who needs it worse than I." Even as he spoke he was aware that he no longer heard the stertorous breathing of the wounded man.

"That was Ahmed Khan," said Gordon. "He's gone; died while they were shooting in here a moment ago. Shot through the body as we were making for this cave."

"That's the Orakzai out there?" asked Willoughby.

"Who else?"

The throbbing in his head irritated the Englishman; his right forearm was painfully bruised, and he was thirsty.

"Let me get this straight, Gordon--am I a prisoner?"

"That depends on the way you look at it. Just now we're all hemmed up in this cave. Sorry about your broken head. But the fellow who hit you didn't know but what you were an Orakzai. It was dark."

"What the devil happened, anyway?" demanded Willoughby. "I remember them killing Suleiman, and chasing me--then I got that clout on the head and went out. I must have been unconscious for hours."

"You were. Six of my men trailed you all the way from the mouth of the Gorge of the Minaret. I didn't trust Baber Ali, though it didn't occur to me that he'd try to kill you. I was well on my way back to Akbar's Castle when one of the men caught up with me and told me that Baber Ali had ridden off in the direction of his sangar and left you with his four tribesmen. I believed they intended murdering you on the road to Ghazrael, and laying it onto me. So I started after you myself.

"When you pitched camp by Jehungir's Well my men were watching from a distance, and I wasn't far away, riding hard to catch up with you before your escort killed you. Naturally I wasn't following the open trail you followed. I was coming up from the south. My men saw the Orakzai kill Suleiman, but they weren't close enough to do anything about it.

"When you ran into the defile with the Orakzai pelting after you, my men lost sight of

you all in the darkness and were trying to locate you when you bumped into them. Khoda Khan knocked you stiff before he recognized you. They fired on the three men who were chasing you, and those fellows took to their heels. I heard the firing, and so did somebody else; we arrived on the scene just about the same time."

"Eh? What's that? Who?"

"Your friend, Baber Ali, with thirty horsemen! We slung you on a horse, and it was a running fight until moonrise. We were trying to get back to Akbar's Castle, but they had fresher horses and they ran us down. They got us hemmed out there on that plain and the only thing we could do was to duck in here and make our stand. So here we are, and out there he is, with thirty men--not including the three ruffians who killed your servant. He shot them in their tracks. I heard the shots and their death howls as we rode for the hills."

"I guess the old villain repented of his temper," said Willoughby. "What a cursed pity he didn't arrive a few minutes earlier. It would have saved Suleiman, poor devil. Thanks for pulling me out of a nasty mess, old fellow. And now, if you don't mind, I'll be going."

"Where?"

"Why, out there! To Ghazrael. First to Baber Ali, naturally. I've got a few things to tell that old devil."

"Willoughby, are you a fool?" Gordon demanded harshly.

"To think you'd let me go? Well, perhaps I am. I'd forgotten that as soon as I return to Kabul, you'll be declared an outlaw, won't you? But you can't keep me here forever, you know--"

"I don't intend to try," answered Gordon with a hint of anger. "If your skull wasn't already cracked I'd feel inclined to bash your head for accusing me of imprisoning you. Shake the cobwebs out of your brain. If you're an example of a British diplomat, Heaven help the empire!"

"Don't you know you'd instantly be filled with lead if you stepped out there? Don't you know that Baber Ali wants your head right now more than he does mine?"

"Why do you think he hasn't sent a man riding a horse to death to tell Afdal Khan he's got El Borak trapped in a cave miles from Akbar's Castle? I'll tell you: Baber Ali doesn't want Afdal to know what a mess he's made of things."

"It was characteristic of the old devil to ride off and leave you to be murdered by his ruffians; but when he cooled off a little, he realized that he'd be held responsible. He must have gotten clear to his sangar before he realized that. Then he took a band of horsemen and came pelting after you to save you, in the interest of his own skin, of course, but he got there too late--too late to keep them from killing Suleiman, and too late to kill you."

"But what--"

"Look at it from his viewpoint, man! If he'd gotten there in time to keep anyone from being killed, it would have been all right. But with Suleiman killed by his men, he dares not leave you alive. He knows the English will hold him responsible for Suleiman's death, if they learn the true circumstances. And he knows what it means to murder a British subject--especially one as important in the secret service as I happen to know Suleiman was. But if he could put you out of the way, he could swear I killed you and Suleiman. Those men out there are all Baber's personal following--hard-bitten old wolves who'll cut any throat and swear any lie he orders. If you go back to Kabul and tell your story, Baber will be in bad with the Amir, the British, and Afdal Khan. So he's determined to shut your mouth, for good and all."

Willoughby was silent for a moment; presently he said frankly: "Gordon, if I didn't have such a high respect for your wits, I'd believe you. It all sounds reasonable and logical. But damn it, man, I don't know whether I'm recognizing logic or simply being twisted up in a web of clever lies. You're too dangerously subtle, Gordon, for me to allow myself to believe anything you say, without proof."

"Proof?" retorted Gordon grimly, "Listen!" Wriggling toward the cave mouth he took shelter behind a broken rock and shouted in Pashtu: "Ohai, Baber Ali!"

The scattered firing ceased instantly, and the moonlit night seemed to hold its breath. Baber Ali's voice came back, edged with suspicion.

"Speak, El Borak! I hearken."

"If I gave you the Englishmen will you let me and my men go in peace?" Gordon called.

"Aye, by the beard of Allah!" came the eager answer.

"But I fear he will return to Kabul and poison the Amir against me!"

"Then kill him and throw his head out," answered Baber Ali with an oath. "By Allah, it is no more than I will do for him, the prying dog!"

In the cave Willoughby murmured: "I apologize, Gordon!"

"Well?" The old Pathan was growing impatient. "Are you playing with me, El Borak? Give me the Englishman!"

"Nay, Baber Ali, I dare not trust your promise," replied Gordon.

A bloodthirsty yell and a burst of frenzied firing marked the conclusion of the brief parley, and Gordon hugged the shelter of the shattered boulders until the spasm subsided.

Then he crawled back to Willoughby.

"You see?"

"I see! It looks like I'm in this thing to the hilt with you! But why Baber Ali should have been so enraged because I failed to arrange a truce--"

"He and Afdal intended taking advantage of any truce you arranged, to trap me, just as I warned you. They were using you as a cat's-paw. They know they're licked, unless they resort to something of the sort."

There followed a period of silence, in which Willoughby was moved to inquire: "What now? Are we to stay here until they starve us out? The moon will set before many hours. They'll rush us in the dark."

"I never walk into a trap I can't get out of," answered Gordon. "I'm just waiting for the moon to dip behind that crag and get its light out of the cave. There's an exit I don't believe the Orakzai know about. Just a narrow crack at the back of the cave. I enlarged it with a hunting knife and rifle barrel before you recovered consciousness. It's big enough for a man to slip through now. It leads out onto a ledge fifty feet above a ravine. Some of the Orakzai may be down there watching the ledge, but I doubt it. From the plain out there it would be a long, hard climb around to the back of the mountain. We'll go down on a rope made of turbans and belts, and head for Akbar's Castle. We'll have to go on foot. It's only a few miles away, but the way we'll have to go is over the mountains, and a devil's own climb."

Slowly the moon moved behind the crag, and the silver sword no longer glimmered along the rocky floor. The men in the cavern could move about without being seen by the men outside, who waited the setting of the moon with the grim patience of gray wolves.

"All right, let's go," muttered Gordon. "Khoda Khan, lead the way. I'll follow when you're all through the cleft. If anything happens to me, take the sahib to Akbar's Castle. Go over the ridges; there may be ambushes already planted in the valleys."

"Give me a gun," requested Willoughby. The rifle of the dead Ahmed Khan was pressed into his hand. He followed the shadowy, all-but-invisible file of Afridis as they glided into the deeper darkness in the recesses of the tunnel-like cavern. Their sandals made no noise on the rocky floor, but the crunch of his boots seemed loud to the Englishman. Behind them Gordon lay near the entrance, and once he fired a shot at the boulders on the plain.

Within fifty feet the cavern floor began to narrow and pitch upward. Above them a star shone in utter blackness, marking the crevice in the rock. It seemed to Willoughby that they mounted the slanting incline for a long way; the firing outside sounded muffled, and the patch of moonlight that was the cave mouth looked small with distance. The pitch became steeper, mounting up until the taller of the Afridis bent their heads to avoid the

rocky roof. An instant later they reached the wall that marked the end of the cavern and glimpsed the sky through the narrow slit.

One by one they squeezed through, Willoughby last. He came out on the ledge in the starlight that overhung a ravine which was a mass of black shadows. Above them the great black crags loomed, shutting off the moonlight; everything on that side of the mountain was in shadow.

His companions clustered at the rim of the shelf as they swiftly and deftly knotted together girdles and unwound turbans to make a rope. One end was tossed over the ledge and man after man went down swiftly and silently, vanishing into the black ravine below. Willoughby helped a stalwart tribesman called Muhammad hold the rope as Khoda Khan went down. Before he went, Khoda Khan thrust his head back through the cleft and whistled softly, a signal to carry only to El Borak's alert ears.

Khoda Khan vanished into the darkness below, and Muhammad signified that he could hold the rope alone while Willoughby descended. Behind them an occasional muffled shot seemed to indicate that the Orakzai were yet unaware that their prey was escaping them.

Willoughby let himself over the ledge, hooked a leg about the rope and went down, considerably slower and more cautiously than the men who had preceded him. Above him the huge Afridi braced his legs and held the rope as firmly as though it were bound to a tree.

Willoughby was halfway down when he heard a murmur of voices on the ledge above which indicated that Gordon had come out of the cave and joined Muhammad. The Englishman looked down and made out the dim figures of the others standing below him on the ravine floor. His feet were a yard above the earth when a rifle cracked in the shadows and a red tongue of flame spat upward. An explosive grunt sounded above him and the rope went slack in his hands. He hit the ground, lost his footing and fell headlong, rolling aside as Muhammad came tumbling down. The giant struck the earth with a thud, wrapped about with the rope he had carried with him in his fall. He never moved after he landed.

Willoughby struggled up, breathless, as his companions charged past him. Knives were flickering in the shadows, dim figures reeling in locked combat. So the Orakzai had known of this possible exit! Men were fighting all around him. Gordon sprang to the rim of the ledge and fired downward without apparent aim, but a man grunted and fell, his rifle striking against Willoughby's boot. A dim, bearded face loomed out of the darkness, snarling like a ghoul. Willoughby caught a swinging tulwar on his rifle barrel, wincing at the jolt that ran through his fingers, and fired full into the beared face.

"El Borak!" howled Khoda Khan, hacking and slashing at something that snarled and gasped like a wild beast.

"Take the sahib and go!" yelled Gordon.

Willoughby realized that the fall of Muhammad with the rope had trapped Gordon on the ledge fifty feet above them.

"Nay!" shrieked Khoda Khan. "We will cast the rope up to thee--"

"Go, blast you!" roared Gordon. "The whole horde will be on your necks any minute! Go!"

The next instant Willoughby was seized under each arm and hustled at a stumbling run down the dark gorge. Men panted on each side of him, and the dripping tulwars in their hands smeared his breeches. He had a vague glimpse of three figures sprawling at the foot of the cliff, one horribly mangled. No one barred their path as they fled; Gordon's Afridis were obeying his command; but they had left their leader behind, and they sobbed curses through their teeth as they ran.

Chapter 4

GORDON WASTED NO TIME. He knew he could not escape from the ledge without a rope, by climbing either up or down, and he did not believe his enemies could reach the ledge from the ravine. He squirmed back through the cleft and ran down the slant of the cavern, expecting any instant to see his besiegers pouring into the moonlit mouth. But it stood empty, and the rifles outside kept up their irregular monotone. Obviously, Baber Ali did not realize that his victims had attempted an escape by the rear. The muffled shots he must surely have heard had imparted no meaning to him, or perhaps he considered they but constituted some trickery of El Borak's. Knowledge that an opponent is full of dangerous ruses is often a handicap, instilling an undue amount of caution.

Anyway, Baber Ali had neither rushed the cavern nor sent any appreciable number of men to reinforce the lurkers on the other side of the mountain, for the volume of his firing was undiminished. That meant he did not know of the presence of his men behind the cave. Gordon was inclined to believe that what he had taken for a strategically placed force had been merely a few restless individuals skulking along the ravine, scouting on their own initiative. He had actually seen only three men, had merely assumed the presence of others. The attack, too, had been ill-timed and poorly executed. It had neither trapped them all on the ledge nor in the ravine. The shot that killed Muhammad had doubtless been aimed at himself.

Gordon admitted his mistake; confused in the darkness as to the true state of things, he had ordered instant flight when his companions might safely have lingered long enough to tie a stone to the end of the rope and cast it back up to him. He was neatly trapped and it was largely his own fault.

But he had one advantage: Baber did not know he was alone in the cavern. And there

was every reason to believe that Willoughby would reach Akbar's Castle unpursued. He fired a shot into the plain and settled himself comfortably behind the rocks near the cave mouth, his rifle at his shoulder.

The moonlit plateau showed no evidence of the attackers beyond the puffs of grayish-white smoke that bloomed in woolly whorls from behind the boulders. But there was a tense expectancy in the very air. The moon was visible below the overhanging crag; it rested a red, bent horn on the solid black mass of a mountain wall. In a few moments the plain would be plunged in darkness and then it was inevitable that Baber would rush the cavern.

Yet Baber would know that in the darkness following the setting of the moon the captives might be expected to make a break for liberty. It was certain that he already had a wide cordon spread across the plain, and the line would converge quickly on the cave mouth. The longer Gordon waited after moonset, the harder it would be to slip through the closing semicircle.

He began wrenching bullets out of cartridges with his fingers and teeth and emptying the powder into his rifle barrel, even while he studied the terrain by the last light of the sinking moon. The plateau was roughly fan-shaped, widening rapidly from the cliff-flanked wall in which opened the cave mouth. Perhaps a quarter of a mile across the plain showed the dark mouth of a gorge, in which he knew were tethered the horses of the Orakzai. Probably at least one man was guarding them.

The plain ran level and bare for nearly a hundred yards before the cavern mouth, but some fifty feet away, on the right, there was a deep narrow gully which began abruptly in the midst of the plain and meandered away toward the right-hand cliffs. No shot had been fired from this ravine. If an Orakzai was hidden there he had gone into it while Gordon and his men were at the back of the cavern. It had been too close to the cave for the besiegers to reach it under the guns of the defenders.

As soon as the moon set Gordon intended to emerge and try to work his way across the plain, avoiding the Orakzai as they rushed toward the cave. It would be touch and go, the success depending on accurate timing and a good bit of luck. But there was no other alternative. He would have a chance, once he got among the rocks and gullies. His biggest risk would be that of getting shot as he ran from the cavern, with thirty rifles trained upon the black mouth. And he was providing against that when he filled his rifle barrel to the muzzle with loose powder from the broken cartridges and plugged the muzzle solidly with a huge misshapen slug he found on the cave floor.

He knew as soon as the moon vanished they would come wriggling like snakes from every direction, to cover the last few yards in a desperate rush--they would not fire until they could empty their guns point-blank into the cavern and storm in after their volley with naked steel. But thirty pairs of keen eyes would be fixed on the entrance and a volley would meet any shadowy figure seen darting from it.

The moon sank, plunging the plateau into darkness, relieved but little by the dim light of the stars. Out on the plateau Gordon heard sounds that only razor-keen ears could have caught, much less translated: the scruff of leather on stone, the faint clink of steel, the rattle of a pebble underfoot.

Rising in the black cave mouth he cocked his rifle, and poising himself for an instant, hurled it, butt first, as far to the left as he could throw it. The clash of the steel-shod butt on stone was drowned by a blinding flash of fire and a deafening detonation as the pent-up charge burst the heavy barrel asunder and in the intensified darkness that followed the flash Gordon was out of the cave and racing for the ravine on his right.

No bullet followed him, though rifles banged on the heels of that amazing report. As he had planned, the surprising explosion from an unexpected quarter had confused his enemies, wrenched their attention away from the cave mouth and the dim figure that flitted from it. Men howled with amazement and fired blindly and unreasoningly in the direction of the flash and roar. While they howled and fired, Gordon reached the gully and plunged into it almost without checking his stride--to collide with a shadowy figure which grunted and grappled with him.

In an instant Gordon's hands locked on a hairy throat, stifling the betraying yell. They went down together, and a rifle, useless in such desperate close quarters, fell from the Pathan's hand. Out on the plain pandemonium had burst, but Gordon was occupied with the blood-crazy savage beneath him.

The man was taller and heavier than himself and his sinews were like rawhide strands, but the advantage was with the tigerish white man. As they rolled on the gully floor the Pathan strove in vain with both hands to tear away the fingers that were crushing the life from his corded throat, then still clawing at Gordon's wrist with his left hand, began to grope in his girdle for a knife. Gordon released his throat with his left hand, and with it caught the other's right wrist just as the knife came clear.

The Pathan heaved and bucked like a wild man, straining his wolfish muscles to the utmost, but in vain. He could not free his knife wrist from Gordon's grasp nor tear from his throat the fingers that were binding his neck back until his bearded chin jutted upward. Desperately, he threw himself sidewise, trying to bring his knee up to the American's groin, but his shift in position gave Gordon the leverage he had been seeking.

Instantly El Borak twisted the Pathan's wrist with such savage strength that a bone cracked and the knife fell from the numb fingers. Gordon released the broken wrist, snatched a knife from his own boot and ripped upward--again, again, and yet again.

Not until the convulsive struggles ceased and the body went limp beneath him did Gordon release the hairy throat. He crouched above his victim, listening. The fight had been swift, fierce and silent, enduring only a matter of seconds.

The unexpected explosion had loosed hysteria in the attackers. The Orakzai were rushing

the cave, not in stealth and silence, but yelling so loudly and shooting so wildly they did not seem to realize that no shots were answering them.

Nerves hung on hair triggers can be snapped by an untoward occurrence. The rush of the warriors across the plain sounded like the stampede of cattle. A man bounded up the ravine a few yards from where Gordon crouched, without seeing the American in the pit-like blackness. Howling, cursing, shooting blindly, the hillmen stormed to the cave mouth, too crazy with excitement and confused by the darkness to see the dim figure that glided out of the gully behind them and raced silently away toward the mouth of the distant gorge.

Chapter 5

WILLOUGHBY ALWAYS REMEMBERED that flight over the mountains as a sort of nightmare in which he was hustled along by ragged goblins through black defiles, up tendon-straining slopes and along knife-edge ridges which fell away on either hand into depths that turned him faint with nausea. Protests, exhortations and fervent profanity did not serve to ease the flying pace at which his escort was trundling him, and presently he had no breath for protests. He did not even have time to be grateful that the expected pursuit did not seem to be materializing.

He gasped like a dying fish and tried not to look down. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the Afridis blamed him for Gordon's plight and would gladly have heaved him off a ridge but for their leaders' parting command.

But Willoughby felt that he was just as effectually being killed by overexertion. He had never realized that human beings could traverse such a path--or rather such a pathless track--as he was being dragged over. When the moon sank the going was even harder, but he was grateful, for the abysses they seemed to be continually skirting were but floating gulfs of blackness beneath them, which did not induce the sick giddiness resulting from yawning chasms disclosed by the merciless moonlight.

His respect for Gordon's physical abilities increased to a kind of frantic awe, for he knew the American was known to be superior in stamina and endurance even to these long-legged, barrel-chested, iron-muscled mountaineers who seemed built of some substance that was tireless. Willoughby wished they would tire. They hauled him along with a man at each arm, and one to pull, and another to push when necessary, but even so the exertion was killing him. Sweat bathed him, drenching his garments. His thighs trembled and the calves of his legs were tied into agonizing knots.

He reflected in dizzy fragments that Gordon deserved whatever domination he had achieved over these iron-jawed barbarians. But mostly he did not think at all. His faculties were all occupied in keeping his feet and gulping air. The veins in his temples were nearly bursting and things were swimming in a bloody haze about him when he realized his escort, or captors--or torturers--had slowed to a walk. He voiced an

incoherent croak of gratitude and shaking the sweat out of his dilated eyes, he saw that they were treading a path that ran over a natural rock bridge which spanned a deep gorge. Ahead of him, looming above a cluster of broken peaks, he saw a great black bulk heaving up against the stars like a misshapen castle.

The sharp challenge of a rifleman rang staccato from the other end of the span and was answered by Khoda Khan's bull-like bellow. The path led upon a jutting ledge and half a dozen ragged, bearded specters with rifles in their hands rose from behind a rampart of heaped-up boulders.

Willoughby was in a state of collapse, able only to realize that the killing grind was over. The Afridis half carried, half dragged him within the semicircular rampart and he saw a bronze door standing open and a doorway cut in solid rock that glowed luridly. It required an effort to realize that the glow came from a fire burning somewhere in the cavern into which the doorway led.

This, then, was Akbar's Castle. With each arm across a pair of brawny shoulders Willoughby tottered through the cleft and down a short narrow tunnel, to emerge into a broad natural chamber lighted by smoky torches and a small fire over which tea was brewing and meat cooking. Half a dozen men sat about the fire, and some forty more slept on the stone floor, wrapped in their sheepskin coats. Doorways opened from the huge main chamber, openings of other tunnels or cell-like niches, and at the other end there were stalls occupied by horses, a surprising number of them. Saddles, blanket rolls, bridles and other equipage, with stands of rifles and stacks of ammunition cases, littered the floor near the walls.

The men about the fire rose to their feet looking inquiringly at the Englishman and his escort, and the men on the floor awoke and sat up blinking like ghouls surprised by daylight. A tall broad-shouldered swashbuckler came striding out of the widest doorway opening into the cavern. He paused before the group, towering half a head taller than any other man there, hooked his thumbs in his girdle and glared balefully.

"Who is this feringhi?" he snarled suspiciously. "Where is El Borak?"

Three of the escort backed away apprehensively, but Khoda Khan, held his ground and answered: "This is the sahib Willoughby, whom El Borak met at the Minaret of Shaitan, Yar Ali Khan. We rescued him from Baber Ali, who would have slain him. We were at bay in the cave where Yar Muhammad shot the gray wolf three summers ago. We stole out by a cleft, but the rope fell and left El Borak on a ledge fifty feet above us, and--"

"Allah!" It was a blood-curdling yell from Yar Ali Khan who seemed transformed into a maniac. "Dogs! You left him to die! Accursed ones! Forgotten of God! I'll--"

"He commanded us to bring this Englishman to Akbar's Castle," maintained Khoda Khan doggedly, "We tore our beards and wept, but we obeyed!"

"Allah!" Yar Ali Khan became a whirlwind of energy. He snatched up rifle, bandoleer and bridle. "Bring out the horses and saddle them!" he roared and a score of men scurried. "Hasten! Forty men with me to rescue El Borak! The rest hold the Castle. I leave Khoda Khan in command."

"Leave the devil in command of hell," quoth Khoda Khan profanely. "I ride with you to rescue El Borak--or I empty my rifle into your belly."

His three comrades expressed similar intentions at the top of their voices--after fighting and running all night, they were wild as starving wolves to plunge back into hazard in behalf of their chief.

"Go or stay, I care not!" howled Yar Ali Khan, tearing out a fistful of his beard in his passion. "If Borak is slain I will requite thee, by the prophet's beard and my feet! Allah rot me if I ram not a rifle stock down thy accursed gullets--dogs, jackals, noseless abominations, hasten with the horses!"

"Yar Ali Khan!" It was a yell from beyond the arch whence the tall Afridi had first emerged. "One comes riding hard up the valley!"

Yar Ali Khan yelled bloodthirstily and rushed into the tunnel, brandishing his rifle, with everybody pelting after him except the men detailed to saddle the horses.

Willoughby had been forgotten by the Pathans in the madhouse brewed by Gordon's lieutenant. He limped after them, remembering tales told of this gaunt giant and his berserk rages. The tunnel down which the ragged horde was streaming ran for less than a hundred feet when it widened to a mouth through which the gray light of dawn was stealing. Through this the Afridis were pouring and Willoughby, following them, came out upon a broad ledge a hundred feet wide and fifty deep, like a gallery before a house.

Around its semicircular rim ran a massive man-made wall, shoulder-high, pierced with loopholes slanting down. There was an arched opening in the wall, closed by a heavy bronze door, and from that door, which now stood open, a row of broad shallow steps niched in solid stone led down to a trail which in turn looped down a three-hundred-foot slope to the floor of a broad valley.

The cliffs in which the cave sat closed the western end of the valley, which opened to the east. Mists hung in the valley and out of them a horseman came flying, growing ghostlike out of the dimness of the dawn--a man on a great white horse, riding like the wind.

Yar Ali Khan glared wildly for an instant, then started forward with a convulsive leap of his whole body, flinging his rifle high above his head.

"El Borak!" he roared.

Electrified by his yell, the men surged to the wall and those saddling the mounts inside

abandoned their task and rushed out onto the ledge. In an instant the wall was lined with tense figures, gripping their rifles and glaring into the white mists rolling beyond the fleeing rider, from which they momentarily expected pursuers to appear.

Willoughby, standing to one side like a spectator of a drama, felt a tingle in his veins at the sight and sound of the wild rejoicing with which these wild men greeted the man who had won their allegiance. Gordon was no bluffing adventurer; he was a real chief of men; and that, Willoughby realized, was going to make his own job that much harder.

No pursuers materialized out of the thinning mists. Gordon urged his mount up the trail, up the broad steps, and as he rode through the gate, bending his head under the arch, the roar of acclaim that went up would have stirred the blood of a king. The Pathans swarmed around him, catching at his hands, his garments, shouting praise to Allah that he was alive and whole. He grinned down at them, swung off and threw his reins to the nearest man, from whom Yar Ali Khan instantly snatched them jealously, with a ferocious glare at the offending warrior.

Willoughby stepped forward. He knew he looked like a scarecrow in his stained and torn garments, but Gordon looked like a butcher, with blood dried on his shirt and smeared on his breeches where he had wiped his hands. But he did not seem to be wounded. He smiled at Willoughby for the first time.

"Tough trip, eh?"

"We've been here only a matter of minutes," Willoughby acknowledged.

"You took a short cut. I came the long way, but I made good time on Baber Ali's horse," said Gordon.

"You mentioned possible ambushes in the valleys--"

"Yes. But on horseback I could take that risk. I was shot at once, but they missed me. It's hard to aim straight in the early-morning mists."

"How did you get away?"

"Waited until the moon went down, then made a break for it. Had to kill a man in the gully before the cave. We were all twisted together when I let him have the knife and that's where this blood came from. I stole Baber's horse while the Orakzai were storming the empty cave. Stampeded the herd down a canyon. Had to shoot the fellow guarding it. Baber'll guess where I went, of course. He'll be after me as quickly as he and his men can catch their horses. I suspect they'll lay siege to the Castle, but they'll only waste their time."

Willoughby stared about him in the growing light of dawn, impressed by the strength of the stronghold. One rifleman could hold the entrance through which he had been brought.

To try to advance along that narrow bridge that spanned the chasm behind the Castle would be suicide for an enemy. And no force on earth could march up the valley on this side and climb that stair in the teeth of Gordon's rifles. The mountain which contained the cave rose up like a huge stone citadel above the surrounding heights. The cliffs which flanked the valley were lower than the fortified ledge; men crawling along them would be exposed to a raking fire from above. Attack could come from no other direction.

"This is really in Afdal Khan's territory," said Gordon. "It used to be a Mogul outpost, as the name implies. It was first fortified by Akbar himself. Afdal Khan held it before I took it. It's my best safeguard for Kurram.

"After the outlying villages were burned on both sides, all my people took refuge in Kurram, just as Afdal's did in Khoruk. To attack Kurram, Afdal would have to pass Akbar's Castle and leave me in his rear. He doesn't dare do that. That's why he wanted a truce--to get me out of the Castle. With me ambushed and killed, or hemmed up in Kurram, he'd be free to strike at Kurram with all his force, without being afraid I'd burn Khoruk behind him or ambush him in my country.

"He's too cautious of his own skin. I've repeatedly challenged him to fight me man to man, but he pays no attention. He hasn't stirred out of Khoruk since the feud started, unless he had at least a hundred men with him--as many as I have in my entire force, counting these here and those guarding the women and children in Kurram."

"You've done a terrible amount of damage with so small a band," said Willoughby.

"Not difficult if you know the country, have men who trust you, and keep moving. Geronimo almost whipped an army with a handful of Apaches, and I was raised in his country. I've simply adopted his tactics. The possession of this Castle was all I needed to assure my ultimate victory. If Afdal had the guts to meet me, the feud would be over. He's the chief; the others just follow him. As it is I may have to wipe out the entire Khoruk clan. But I'll get him."

The dark flame flickered in Gordon's eyes as he spoke, and again Willoughby felt the impact of an inexorable determination, elemental in its foundation. And again he swore mentally that he would end the feud himself, in his own way, with Afdal Khan alive; though how, he had not the faintest idea at present.

Gordon glanced at him closely and advised: "Better get some sleep. If I know Baber Ali, he'll come straight to the Castle after me. He knows he can't take it, but he'll try anyway. He has at least a hundred men who follow him and take orders from nobody else--not even Afdal Khan. After the shooting starts there won't be much chance for sleeping. You look a bit done up."

Willoughby realized the truth of Gordon's comment. Sight of the white streak of dawn stealing over the ash-hued peaks weighted his eyelids with an irresistible drowsiness. He was barely able to stumble into the cave, and the smell of frying mutton exercised no

charm to keep him awake. Somebody steered him to a heap of blankets and he was asleep before he was actually stretched upon them.

Gordon stood looking down at the sleeping man enigmatically and Yar Ali Khan came up as noiselessly and calmly as a gaunt gray wolf; it would have been hard to believe he was the hurricane of emotional upset which had stormed all over the cavern a short hour before.

"Is he a friend, sahib?"

"A better friend than he realizes," was Gordon's grim, cryptic reply. "I think Afdal Khan's friends will come to curse the day Geoffrey Willoughby ever came into the hills."

Chapter 6

AGAIN IT WAS the spiteful cracking of rifles which awakened Willoughby. He sat up, momentarily confused and unable to remember where he was or how he came there. Then he recalled the events of the night; he was in the stronghold of an outlaw chief, and those detonations must mean the siege Gordon had predicted. He was alone in the great cavern, except for the horses munching fodder beyond the bars at the other end. Among them he recognized the big white stallion that had belonged to Baber Ali.

The fire had died to a heap of coals and the daylight that stole through a couple or arches, which were the openings of tunnels connecting with the outer air, was augmented by half a dozen antique-looking bronze lamps.

A pot of mutton stew simmered over the coals and a dish full of chupatties stood near it. Willoughby was aware of a ravenous hunger and he set to without delay. Having eaten his fill and drunk deeply from a huge gourd which hung nearby, full of sweet, cool water, he rose and started toward the tunnel through which he had first entered the Castle.

Near the mouth he almost stumbled over an incongruous object--a large telescope mounted on a tripod, and obviously modern and expensive. A glance out on the ledge showed him only half a dozen warriors sitting against the rampart, their rifles across their knees. He glanced at the ribbon of stone that spanned the deep gorge and shivered as he remembered how he had crossed it in the darkness. It looked scarcely a foot wide in places. He turned back, crossed the cavern and traversed the other tunnel.

He halted in the outer mouth. The wall that rimmed the ledge was lined with Afridis, kneeling or lying at the loopholes. They were not firing. Gordon leaned idly against the bronze door, his head in plain sight of anyone who might be in the valley below. He nodded a greeting as Willoughby advanced and joined him at the door. Again the Englishman found himself a member of a besieged force, but this time the advantage was all with the defenders.

Down in the valley, out of effectual rifle range, a long skirmish line of men was advancing very slowly on foot, firing as they came, and taking advantage of every bit of cover. Farther back, small in the distance, a large herd of horses grazed, watched by men who sat cross-legged in the shade of the cliff. The position of the sun indicated that the day was well along toward the middle of the afternoon.

"I've slept longer than I thought," Willoughby remarked. "How long has this firing been going on?"

"Ever since noon. They're wasting Russian cartridges scandalously. But you slept like a dead man. Baber Ali didn't get here as quickly as I thought he would. He evidently stopped to round up more men. There are at least a hundred down there."

To Willoughby the attack seemed glaringly futile. The men on the ledge were too well protected to suffer from the long-range firing. And before the attackers could get near enough to pick out the loopholes, the bullets of the Afridis would be knocking them over like tenpins. He glimpsed men crawling among the boulders on the cliffs, but they were at the same disadvantage as the men in the valley below--Gordon's rifle-men had a vantage point above them.

"What can Baber Ali hope for?" he asked.

"He's desperate. He knows you're up here with me and he's taking a thousand-to-one chance. But he's wasting his time. I have enough ammunition and food to stand a six-month siege; there's a spring in the cavern."

"Why hasn't Afdal Khan kept you hemmed up here with part of his men while he stormed Kurram with the rest of his force?"

"Because it would take his whole force to storm Kurram; its defenses are almost as strong as these. Then he has a dread of having me at his back. Too big a risk that his men couldn't keep me cooped up. He's got to reduce Akbar's Castle before he can strike at Kurram."

"The devil!" said Willoughby irritably, brought back to his own situation. "I came to arbitrate this feud and now I find myself a prisoner. I've got to get out of here--got to get back to Ghazrael."

"I'm as anxious to get you out as you are to go," answered Gordon. "If you're killed I'm sure to be blamed for it. I don't mind being outlawed for the things I have done, but I don't care to shoulder something I didn't do."

"Couldn't I slip out of here tonight? By way of the bridge--"

"There are men on the other side of the gorge, watching for just such a move. Baber Ali means to close your mouth if human means can do it."

"If Afdal Khan knew what's going on he'd come and drag the old ruffian off my neck," growled Willoughby. "Afdal knows he can't afford to let his clan kill an Englishman. But Baber will take good care Afdal doesn't know, of course. If I could get a letter to him--but of course that's impossible."

"We can try it, though," returned Gordon. "You write the note. Afdal knows your handwriting, doesn't he? Good! Tonight I'll sneak out and take it to his nearest outpost. He keeps a line of patrols among the hills a few miles beyond Jehungir's Well."

"But if I can't slip out, how can you--"

"I can do it all right, alone. No offense, but you Englishmen sound like a herd of longhorn steers at your stealthiest. The Orakzai are among the crags on the other side of the Gorge of Mekram. I won't cross the bridge. My men will let me down a rope ladder into the gorge tonight before moonrise. I'll slip up to the camp of the nearest outpost, wrap the note around a pebble and throw it among them. Being Afdal's men and not Baber's, they'll take it to him. I'll come back the way I went, after moonset. It'll be safe enough."

"But how safe will it be for Afdal Khan when he comes for me?"

"You can tell Afdal Khan he won't be harmed if he plays fair," Gordon answered. "But you'd better make some arrangements so you can see him and know he's there before you trust yourself outside this cave. And there's the pinch, because Afdal won't dare show himself for fear I'd shoot him. He's broken so many pacts himself he can't believe anybody would keep one. Not where his hide is concerned. He trusted me to keep my word in regard to Baber and your escort, but would he trust himself to my promise?"

Willoughby scowled, cramming the bowl of his pipe. "Wait!" he said suddenly. "I saw a big telescope in the cavern, mounted on a tripod--is it in working order?"

"I should say it is. I imported that from Germany, by the way of Turkey and Persia. That's one reason Akbar's Castle has never been surprised. It carries for miles."

"Does Afdal Khan know of it?"

"I'm sure he does."

"Good!"

Seating himself on the ledge, Willoughby drew forth pencil and notebook, propped the latter against his knee, and wrote in his clear concise hand:

AFDAL KHAN: I am at Akbar's Castle, now being besieged by your uncle, Baber Ali. Baber was so unreasonably incensed at my failure to effect a truce that he allowed my

servant Suleiman to be murdered, and now intends murdering me, to stop my mouth.

I don't have to remind you how fatal it would be to the interests of your party for this to occur. I want you to come to Akbar's Castle and get me out of this. Gordon assures me you will not be molested if you play fair, but here is a way by which you need not feel you are taking any chances: Gordon has a large telescope through which I can identify you while you are still out of rifle range. In the Gorge of Mekram, and southwest of the Castle, there is a mass of boulders split off from the right wall and well out of rifle range from the Castle. If you were to come and stand on those boulders, I could identify you easily.

Naturally, I will not leave the Castle until I know you are present to protect me from your uncle. As soon as I have identified you, I will come down the gorge alone. You can watch me all the way and assure yourself that no treachery is intended. No one but myself will leave the Castle. On your part I do not wish any of your men to advance beyond the boulders and I will not answer for their safety if they should, as I intend to safeguard Gordon in this matter as well as yourself.

GEOFFREY WILLOUGHBY

He handed the letter over for Gordon to read. The American nodded. "That may bring him. I don't know. He's kept out of my sight ever since the feud started."

Then ensued a period of waiting, in which the sun seemed sluggishly to crawl toward the western peaks. Down in the valley and on the cliffs the Orakzai kept up their fruitless firing with a persistency that convinced Willoughby of the truth of Gordon's assertion that ammunition was being supplied them by some European power.

The Afridis were not perturbed. They lounged at ease by the wall, laughed, joked, chewed jerked mutton and fired through the slanting loopholes when the Orakzai crept too close. Three still white-clad forms in the valley and one on the cliffs testified to their accuracy. Willoughby realized that Gordon was right when he said the clan which held Akbar's Castle was certain to win the war eventually. Only a desperate old savage like Baber Ali would waste time and men trying to take it. Yet the Orakzai had originally held it. How Gordon had gained possession of it Willoughby could not imagine.

The sun dipped at last; the Himalayan twilight deepened into black-velvet, star-veined dusk. Gordon rose, a vague figure in the starlight.

"Time for me to be going."

He had laid aside his rifle and buckled a tulwar to his hip. Willoughby followed him into the great cavern, now dim and shadowy in the light of the bronze lamps, and through the narrow tunnel and the bronze door.

Yar Ali Khan, Khoda Khan, and half a dozen others followed them. The light from the

cavern stole through the tunnel, vaguely etching the moving figures of the men. Then the bronze door was closed softly and Willoughby's companions were shapeless blurs in the thick soft darkness around him. The gorge below was a floating river of blackness. The bridge was a dark streak that ran into the unknown and vanished. Not even the keenest eyes of the hills, watching from beyond the gorge, could have even discerned the jut of the ledge under the black bulk of the Castle, much less the movements of the men upon it.

The voices of the men working at the rim of the ledge were lowering the rope ladder--a hundred and fifty feet of it--into the gorge. Gordon's face was a light were lowering the rope ladder--a hundred and fifty feet of it--into the gorge. Gordon's face was a light blur in the darkness. Willoughby groped for his hand and found him already swinging over the rampart onto the ladder, one end of which was made fast to a great iron ring set in the stone of the ledge.

"Gordon, I feel like a bounder, letting you take this risk for me. Suppose some of those devils are down there in the gorge?"

"Not much chance. They don't know we have this way of coming and going. If I can steal a horse, I'll be back in the Castle before dawn. If I can't, and have to make the whole trip there and back on foot, I may have to hide out in the hills tomorrow and get back into the Castle the next night. Don't worry about me. They'll never see me. Yar Ali Khan, watch for a rush before the moon rises."

"Aye, sahib." The bearded giant's undisturbed manner reassured Willoughby.

The next instant Gordon began to melt into the gloom below. Before he had climbed down five rungs the men crouching on the rampart could no longer see him. He made no sound in his descent. Khoda Khan knelt with a hand on the ropes, and as soon as he felt them go slack, he began to haul the ladder up. Willoughby leaned over the edge, straining his ears to catch some sound from below--scruff of leather, rattle of shale--he heard nothing.

Yar Ali Khan muttered, his beard brushing Willoughby's ear: "Nay, sahib, if such ears as yours could hear him, every Orakzai on this side of the mountain would know a man stole down the gorge! You will not hear him--nor will they. There are Lifters of the Khyber who can steal rifles out of the tents of the British soldiers, but they are blundering cattle compared to El Borak. Before dawn a wolf will howl in the gorge, and we will know El Borak has returned and will let down the ladder for him."

But like the others, the huge Afridi leaned over the rampart listening intently for some fifteen minutes after the ladder had been drawn up. Then with a gesture to the others he turned and opened the bronze door a crack. They stole through hurriedly. Somewhere in the blackness across the gorge a rifle cracked flatly and lead spanged a foot or so above the lintel. In spite of the rampart some quick eye among the crags had caught the glow of the opened door. But it was blind shooting. The sentries left on the ledge did not reply.

Back on the ledge that overlooked the valley, Willoughby noted an air of expectancy among the warriors at the loopholes. They were momentarily expecting the attack of which Gordon had warned them.

"How did Gordon ever take Akbar's Castle?" Willoughby asked Khoda Khan, who seemed more ready to answer questions than any of the other taciturn warriors.

The Afridi squatted beside him near the open bronze gate, rifle in hand, the butt resting on the ledge. Over them was the blue-black bowl of the Himalayan night, flecked with clusters of frosty silver.

"He sent Yar Ali Khan with forty horsemen to make a feint at Baber Ali's sangar," answered Khoda Khan promptly. "Thinking to trap us, Afdal drew all his men out of Akbar's Castle except three. Afdal believed three men could hold it against an army, and so they could--against an army. Not against El Borak. While Baber Ali and Afdal were striving to pin Yar Ali Khan and us forty riders between them, and we were leading the dogs a merry chase over the hills, El Borak rode alone down this valley. He came disguised as a Persian trader, with his turban awry and his rich garments dusty and rent. He fled down the valley shouting that thieves had looted his caravan and were pursuing him to take from him his purse of gold and his pouch of jewels.

"The accursed ones left to guard the Castle were greedy, and they saw only a rich and helpless merchant, to be looted. So they bade him take refuge in the cavern and opened the gate to him. He rode into Akbar's Castle crying praise to Allah--with empty hands, but a knife and pistols under his khalat. Then the accursed ones mocked him and set on him to strip him of his riches--by Allah they found they caught a tiger in the guise of a lamb! One he slew with the knife, the other two he shot. Alone he took the stronghold against which armies have thundered in vain! When we forty-one horsemen evaded the Orakzai and doubled back, as it had been planned, lo! the bronze gate was open to us and we were lords of Akbar's Castle! Ha! The forgotten of God charge the stair!"

From the shadows below there welled up the sudden, swift drum of hoofs and Willoughby glimpsed movement in the darkness of the valley. The blurred masses resolved themselves into dim figures racing up the looping trail: At the same time a rattle of rifle fire burst out behind the Castle, from beyond the Gorge of Mekram. The Afridis displayed no excitement. Khoda Khan did not even close the bronze gate. They held their fire until the hoofs of the foremost horses were ringing on the lower steps of the stair. Then a burst of flame crowned the wall, and in its flash Willoughby saw wild bearded faces, horses tossing heads and manes.

In the darkness following the volley there rose screams of agony from men and beasts, mingled with the thrashing and kicking of wounded horses and the grating of shod hoofs on stone as some of the beasts slid backward down the stair. Dead and dying piled in a heaving, agonized mass, and the stairs became a shambles as again and yet again the rippling volleys crashed.

Willoughby wiped a damp brow with a shaking hand, grateful that the hoofbeats were receding down the valley. The gasps and moans and cries which welled up from the ghastly heap at the foot of the stairs sickened him.

"They are fools," said Khoda Khan, levering fresh cartridges into his rifle. "Thrice in past attacks have they charged the stair by darkness, and thrice have we broken them. Baber Ali is a bull rushing blindly to his destruction."

Rifles began to flash and crack down in the valley as the baffled besiegers vented their wrath in blind discharges. Bullets smacked along the wall of the cliff, and Khoda Khan closed the bronze gate.

"Why don't they attack by way of the bridge?" Willoughby wondered.

"Doubtless they did. Did you not hear the shots? But the path is narrow and one man behind the rampart could keep it clear. And there are six men there, all skilled marksmen."

Willoughby nodded, remembering the narrow ribbon of rock flanked on either hand by echoing depths.

"Look, sahib, the moon rises."

Over the eastern peaks a glow began which grew to a soft golden fire against which the peaks stood blackly outlined. Then the moon rose, not the mellow gold globe promised by the forerunning luster, but a gaunt, red, savage moon, of the high Himalayas.

Khoda Khan opened the bronze gate and peered down the stair, grunting softly in gratification. Willoughby, looking over his shoulder, shuddered. The heap at the foot of the stairs was no longer a merciful blur, for the moon outlined it in pitiless detail. Dead horses and dead men lay in a tangled gory mound with rifles and sword blades thrust out of the pile like weeds growing out of a scrap heap. There must have been at least a dozen horses and almost as many men in that shambles.

"A shame to waste good horses thus," muttered Khoda Khan. "Baber Ali is a fool." He closed the gate.

Willoughby leaned back against the wall, drawing a heavy sheepskin coat about him. He felt sick and futile. The men down in the valley must feel the same way, for the firing was falling off, becoming spasmodic. Even Baber Ali must realize the futility of the siege by this time. Willoughby smiled bitterly to himself. He had come to arbitrate a hill feud--and down there men lay dead in heaps. But the game was not yet played out. The thought of Gordon stealing through those black mountains out there somewhere discouraged sleep. Yet he did slumber at last, despite himself.

It was Khoda Khan who shook him awake. Willoughby looked up blinking. Dawn was just whitening the peaks. Only a dozen men squatted at the loopholes. From the cavern stole the reek of coffee and frying meat.

"Your letter has been safely delivered, sahib."

"Eh? What's that? Gordon's returned?"

Willoughby rose stiffly, relieved that Gordon had not suffered on his account. He glanced over the wall. Down the valley the camp of the raiders was veiled by the morning mists, but several strands of smoke oozed toward the sky. He did not look down the stair; he did not wish to see the cold faces of the dead in the white dawn light.

He followed Khoda Khan into the great chamber where some of the warriors were sleeping and some preparing breakfast. The Afridi gestured toward a cell-like niche where a man lay. He had his back to the door, but the black, close-cropped hair and dusty khakis were unmistakable.

"He is weary," said Khoda Khan. "He sleeps."

Willoughby nodded. He had begun to wonder if Gordon ever found it necessary to rest and sleep like ordinary men.

"It were well to go upon the ledge and watch for Afdal Khan," said Khoda Khan. "We have mounted the telescope there, sahib. One shall bring your breakfast to you there. We have no way of knowing when Afdal will come."

Out on the ledge the telescope stood on its tripod, projecting like a cannon over the rampart. He trained it on the mass of boulders down the ravine. The Gorge of Mekram ran from the north to the southwest. The boulders, called the Rocks, were more than a mile of the southwest of the Castle. Just beyond them the gorge bent sharply. A man could reach the Rocks from the southwest without being spied from the Castle, but he could not approach beyond them without being seen. Nor could anyone leave the Castle from that side and approach the Rocks without being seen by anyone hiding there.

The Rocks were simply a litter of huge boulders which had broken off from the canyon wall. Just now, as Willoughby looked, the mist floated about them, making them hazy and indistinct. Yet as he watched them they became more sharply outlined, growing out of the thinning mist. And on the tallest rock there stood a motionless figure. The telescope brought it out in vivid clarity. There was no mistaking that tall, powerful figure. It was Afdal Khan who stood there, watching the Castle with a pair of binoculars.

"He must have got the letter early in the night, or ridden hard to get here this early," muttered Willoughby. "Maybe he was at some spot nearer than Khoruk. Did Gordon say?"

"No, sahib."

"Well, no matter. We won't wake Gordon. No, I won't wait for breakfast. Tell El Borak that I'm grateful for all the trouble he's taken in my behalf and I'll do what I can for him when I get back to Ghazrael. But he'd better decide to let this thing be arbitrated. I'll see that Afdal doesn't try any treachery."

"Yes, sahib."

They tossed the rope ladder into the gorge and it unwound swiftly as it tumbled down and dangled within a foot of the canyon floor. The Afridis showed their heads above the ramparts without hesitation, but when Willoughby mounted the rampart and stood in plain sight, he felt a peculiar crawling between his shoulders.

But no rifle spoke from the crags beyond the gorge. Of course, the sight of Afdal Khan was sufficient guarantee of his safety. Willoughby set a foot in the ladder and went down, refusing to look below him. The ladder tended to swing and spin after he had progressed a few yards and from time to time he had to steady himself with a hand against the cliff wall. But altogether it was not so bad, and presently he heaved a sigh of relief as he felt the rocky floor under his feet. He waved his arms, but the rope was already being drawn up swiftly. He glanced about him. If any bodies had fallen from the bridge in the night battle, they had been removed. He turned and walked down the gorge, toward the appointed rendezvous.

Dawn grew about him, the white mists changing to rosy pink, and swiftly dissipating. He could make out the outlines of the Rocks plainly now, without artificial aid, but he no longer saw Afdal Khan. Doubtless the suspicious chief was watching his approach from some hiding place. He kept listening for distant shots that would indicate Baber Ali was renewing the siege, but he heard none. Doubtless Baber Ali had already received orders from Afdal Khan, and he visualized Afdal's amazement and rage when he learned of his uncle's indiscretions.

He reached the Rocks--a great heap of rugged, irregular stones and broken boulders, towering thirty feet in the air in places.

He halted and called: "Afdal Khan!"

"This way, sahib," a voice answered. "Among the Rocks."

Willoughby advanced between a couple of jagged boulders and came into a sort of natural theater, made by the space inclosed between the overhanging cliff and the mass of detached rocks. Fifty men could have stood there without being crowded, but only one man was in sight--a tall, lusty man in early middle life, in turban and silken khalat. He stood with his head thrown back in unconscious arrogance, a broad tulwar in his hand.

The faint crawling between his shoulders that had accompanied Willoughby all the way

down the gorge, in spite of himself, left him at the sight. When he spoke his voice was casual.

"I'm glad to see you, Afdal Khan."

"And I am glad to see you, sahib!" the Orakzai answered with a chill smile. He thumbed the razor-edge of his tulwar. "You have failed in the mission for which I brought you into these hills--but your death will serve me almost as well."

Had the Rocks burst into a roar about him the surprise would have been no more shocking. Willoughby literally staggered with the impact of the stunning revelation.

"What? My death? Afdal, are you mad?"

"What will the English do to Baber Ali?" demanded the chief.

"They'll demand that he be tried for the murder of Suleiman," answered Willoughby.

"And the Amir would hang him, to placate the British!" Afdal Khan laughed mirthlessly. "But if you were dead, none would ever know! Bah! Do you think I would let my uncle be hanged for slaying that Punjabi dog? Baber was a fool to let his men take the Indian's life. I would have prevented it, had I known. But now it is done and I mean to protect him. El Borak is not so wise as I thought or he would have known that I would never let Baber be punished."

"It means ruin for you if you murder me," reminded Willoughby--through dry lips, for he read the murderous gleam in the Orakzai's eyes.

"Where are the witnesses to accuse me? There is none this side of the Castle save you and I. I have removed my men from the crags near the bridge. I sent them all into the valley--partly because I feared lest one might fire a hasty shot and spoil my plan, partly because I do not trust my own men any farther than I have to. Sometimes a man can be bribed or persuaded to betray even his chief.

"Before dawn I sent men to comb the gorge and these Rocks to make sure no trap had been set for me. Then I came here and sent them away and remained here alone. They do not know why I came. They shall never know. Tonight, when the moon rises, your head will be found in a sack at the foot of the stair that leads down from Akbar's Castle and there will be a hundred men to swear it was thrown down by El Borak.

"And because they will believe it themselves, none can prove them liars. I want them to believe it themselves, because I know how shrewd you English are in discovering lies. I will send your head to Fort Ali Masjid, with fifty men to swear El Borak murdered you. The British will force the Amir to send an army up here, with field pieces, and shell El Borak out of my Castle. Who will believe him if he has the opportunity to say he did not slay you?"

"Gordon was right!" muttered Willoughby helplessly. "You are a treacherous dog. Would you mind telling me just why you forced this feud on him?"

"Not at all, since you will be dead in a few moments, I want control of the wells that dominate the caravan routes. The Russians will pay me a great deal of gold to help them smuggle rifles and ammunition down from Persia and Turkestan, into Afghanistan and Kashmir and India. I will help them, and they will help me. Some day they will make me Amir of Afghanistan."

"Gordon was right," was all Willoughby could say. "The man was right! And this truce you wanted--I suppose it was another trick?"

"Of course! I wanted to get El Borak out of my Castle."

"What a fool I've been," muttered Willoughby.

"Best make your peace with God then berate yourself, sahib," said Afdal Khan, beginning to swing the heavy tulwar to and fro, turning the blade so the edge gleamed in the early light. "There are only you and I and Allah to see--and Allah hates infidels! Steel is silent and sure--one stroke, swift and deadly, and your head will be mine to use as I wish--"

He advanced with the noiseless stride of the hillman. Willoughby set his teeth and clenched his hands until the nails bit into the palms. He knew it was useless to run; the Orakzai would overtake him within half a dozen strides. It was equally futile to leap and grapple with his bare hands, but it was all he could do; death would smite him in mid-leap and there would be a rush of darkness and an end of planning and working and all things hoped for--

"Wait a minute, Afdal Khan!"

The voice was moderately pitched, but if it had been a sudden scream the effect could have been no more startling. Afdal Khan started violently and whirled about. He froze in his tracks and the tulwar slipped from his fingers. His face went ashen and slowly his hands rose above his shoulders. Gordon stood in a cleft of the cleft, and a heavy pistol, held hip-high, menaced the chief's waistline. Gordon's expression was one of faint amusement, but a hot flame leaped and smoldered in his black eyes.

"El Borak!" stammered Afdal Khan dazedly. "El Borak!" Suddenly he cried out like a madman. "You are a ghost--a devil! The Rocks were empty--my men searched them--"

"I was hiding on a ledge on the cliff above their heads," Gordon answered. "I entered the Rocks after they left. Keep your hands away from your girdle, Afdal Khan. I could have shot you any time within the last hour, but I wanted Willoughby to know you for the rogue you are."

"But I saw you in the cave," gasped Willoughby, "asleep in the cave--"

"You saw an Afridi, Ali Shah, in some of my clothes, pretending to be sleeping," answered Gordon, never taking his eyes off Afdal Khan. "I was afraid if you knew I wasn't in the Castle, you'd refuse to meet Afdal, thinking I was up to something. So after I tossed your note into the Orakzai camp, I came back to the Castle while you were asleep, gave my men their orders and hid down the gorge.

"You see I knew Afdal wouldn't let Baber be punished for killing Suleiman. He couldn't if he wanted to. Baber has too many followers in the Khoruk clan. And the only way of keeping the Amir's favor without handing Baber over for trial, would be to shut your mouth. He could always lay it onto me, then. I knew that note would bring him to meet you--and I knew he'd come prepared to kill you."

"He might have killed me," muttered Willoughby.

"I've had a gun trained on him ever since you came within range. If he'd brought men with him, I'd have shot him before you left the Castle. When I saw he meant to wait here alone, I waited for you to find out for yourself what kind of a dog he is. You've been in no danger."

"I thought he arrived early, to have come from Khoruk."

"I knew he wasn't at Khoruk when I left the Castle last night," said Gordon. "I knew when Baber found us safe in the Castle he'd make a clean breast of everything to Afdal--and that Afdal would come to help him. Afdal was camped half a mile back in the hills--surrounded by a mob of fighting men, as usual, and under cover. If I could have got a shot at him then, I wouldn't have bothered to deliver your note. But this is as good a time as any."

Again the flames leaped up the black eyes and sweat beaded Afdal Khan's swarthy skin.

"You're not going to kill him in cold blood?" Willoughby protested.

"No. I'll give him a better chance than he gave Yusef Khan."

Gordon stepped to the silent Pathan, pressed his muzzle against his ribs and drew a knife and revolver from Afdal Khan's girdle. He tossed the weapons up among the rocks and sheathed his own pistol. Then he drew his tulwar with a soft rasp of steel against leather. When he spoke his voice was calm, but Willoughby saw the veins knot and swell on his temples.

"Pick up your blade, Afdal Khan. There is no one here save the Englishman, you, I and Allah--and Allah hates swine!"

Afdal Khan snarled like a trapped panther; he bent his knees, reaching one hand toward the weapon--he crouched there motionless for an instant eyeing Gordon with a wide, blank glare--then all in one motion he snatched up the tulwar and came like a Himalayan hill gust.

Willoughby caught his breath at the blinding ferocity of that onslaught. It seemed to him that Afdal's hand hardly touched the hilt before he was hacking at Gordon's head. But Gordon's head was not there. And Willoughby, expecting to see the American overwhelmed in the storm of steel that played about him began to recall tales he had heard of El Borak's prowess with the heavy, curved Himalayan blade.

Afdal Khan was taller and heavier than Gordon, and he was as quick as a famished wolf. He rained blow on blow with all the strength of his corded arm, and so swiftly Willoughby could follow the strokes only by the incessant clangor of steel on steel. But that flashing tulwar did not connect; each murderous blow rang on Gordon's blade or swished past his head as he shifted. Not that the American fought a running fight. Afdal Khan moved about much more than did Gordon. The Orakzai swayed and bent his body agilely to right and left, leaped in and out, and circled his antagonist, smiting incessantly.

Gordon moved his head frequently to avoid blows, but he seldom shifted his feet except to keep his enemy always in front of him. His stance was as firm as that of a deep-rooted rock, and his blade was never beaten down. Beneath the heaviest blows the Pathan could deal, it opposed an unyielding guard.

The man's wrist and forearm must be made of iron, thought Willoughby, staring in amazement. Afdal Khan beat on El Borak's tulwar like a smith on an anvil, striving to beat the American to his knee by the sheer weight of his attack; cords of muscle stood out on Gordon's wrist as he met the attack. He did not give back a foot. His guard never weakened.

Afdal Khan was panting and perspiration streamed down his dark face. His eyes held the glare of a wild beast. Gordon was not even breathing hard. He seemed utterly unaffected by the tempest beating upon him. And desperation flooded Afdal Khan's face, as he felt his own strength waning beneath his maddened efforts to beat down that iron guard.

"Dog!" he gasped, spat in Gordon's face and lunged in terrifically, staking all on one stroke, and throwing his sword arm far back before he swung his tulwar in an arc that might have felled an oak.

Then Gordon moved and the speed of his shift would have shamed a wounded catamount. Willoughby could not follow his motion--he only saw that Afdal Khan's mighty swipe had cleft only empty air, and Gordon's blade was a blinding flicker in the rising sun. There was a sound as of a cleaver sundering a joint of beef and Afdal Khan staggered. Gordon stepped back with a low laugh, merciless as the ring of flint, and a thread of crimson wandered down the broad blade in his hand.

Afdal Khan's face was livid; he swayed drunkenly on his feet, his eyes dilated; his left hand was pressed to his side, and blood spouted between the fingers; his right arm fought to raise the tulwar that had become an imponderable weight.

"Allah!" he croaked. "Allah--" Suddenly his knees bent and he fell as a tree falls.

Willoughby bent over him in awe.

"Good heavens, he's shorn half asunder! How could a man live even those few seconds, with a wound like that?"

"Hillmen are hard to kill," Gordon answered, shaking the red drops from his blade. The crimson glare had gone out of his eyes; the fire that had for so long burned consumingly in his soul had been quenched at last, though it had been quenched in blood.

"You can go back to Kabul and tell the Amir the feud's over," he said. "The caravans from Persia will soon be passing over the road again."

"What about Baber Ali?"

"He pulled out last night, after his attack on the Castle failed. I saw him riding out of the valley with most of his men. He was sick of the siege. Afdal's men are still in the valley but they'll leg it for Khoruk as soon as they hear what's happened to Afdal. The Amir will make an outlaw out of Baber Ali as soon as you get back to Kabul. I've got no more to fear from the Khoruk clan; they'll be glad to agree to peace."

Willoughby glanced down at the dead man. The feud had ended as Gordon had sworn it would. Gordon had been in the right all along; but it was a new and not too pleasing experience to Willoughby to be used as a pawn in a game--as he himself had used so many men and women.

He laughed wryly. "Confound you, Gordon, you've bamboozled me all the way through! You let me believe that only Baber Ali was besieging us, and that Afdal Khan would protect me against his uncle! You set a trap to catch Afdal Khan, and you used me as bait! I've got an idea that if I hadn't thought of that letter-and-telescope combination, you'd have suggested it yourself."

"I'll give you an escort to Ghazrael when the rest of the Orakzai clear out," offered Gordon.

"Damn it, man, if you hadn't saved my life so often in the past forty-eight hours, I'd be inclined to use bad language! But Afdal Khan was a rogue and deserved what he got. I can't say that I relish your methods, but they're effective! You ought to be in the secret service. A few years at this rate and you'll be Amir of Afghanistan!"

THE END

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