

The Story of Sonny Sahib eBook

The Story of Sonny Sahib

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CHAPTER I

'Ayah,' the doctor-sahib said in the vernacular, standing beside the bed, 'the fever of the mistress is like fire. Without doubt it cannot go on thus, but all that is in your hand to do you have done. It is necessary now only to be very watchful. And it will be to dress the mistress, and to make everything ready for a journey. Two hours later all the sahib-folk go from this place in boats, by the river, to Allahabad. I will send an ox-cart to take the mistress and the baby and you to the bathing ghat.'

'Jeldi karo!' he added, which meant 'Quickly do!'—a thing people say a great many times a day in India.

The ayah looked at him stupidly. She was terribly frightened; she had never been so frightened before. Her eyes wandered from the doctor's face to the ruined south wall of the hut, where the sun of July, when it happens to shine on the plains of India, was beating fiercely upon the mud floor. That ruin had happened only an hour ago, with a terrible noise just outside, such a near and terrible noise that she, Tooni, had scrambled under the bed the mistress was lying on, and had hidden there until the doctor-sahib came and pulled her forth by the foot, and called her a poor sort of person. Then Tooni had lain down at the doctor-sahib's feet, and tried to place one of them upon her head, and said that indeed she was not a worthless one, but that she was very old and she feared the guns; so many of the sahibs had died from the guns! She, Tooni, did not wish to die from a gun, and would the Presence, in the great mercy of his heart, tell her whether there would be any more shooting? There would be no more shooting, the Presence had said; and then he had given her a bottle and directions, and the news about going down the river in a boat. Tooni's mind did not even record the directions, but it managed to retain the words about going away in a boat, and as she stood twisting the bottle round and round in the folds of her ragged red petticoat it made a desperate effort to extract their meaning.

'There will be no more shooting,' said the doctor again, 'and there is a man outside with a goat. He will give you two pounds of milk for the baby for five rupees.'

'Rupia! I have not even one!' said the ayah, looking toward the bed; 'the captain-sahib has not come these thirty days as he promised. The colonel-sahib has sent the food. The memsahib is for three days without a pice.'

'I'll pay,' said the doctor shortly, and turned hurriedly to go. Other huts were crying out for him; he could hear the voice of some of them through their mud partitions. As he passed out he caught a glimpse of himself in a little square looking-glass that hung on a nail on the wall, and it made him start nervously and then smile grimly. He saw the face of a man who had not slept three hours in as many days and nights—a haggard, unshaven



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face, drawn as much with the pain of others as with its own weariness. His hair stood up in long tufts, his eyes had black circles under them. He wore neither coat nor waistcoat, and his regimental trousers were tied round the waist by a bit of rope. On the sleeve of his collarless shirt were three dark dry splashes; he noticed them as he raised his arm to put on his pith helmet. The words did not reach his lips, but his heart cried out within him for a boy of the 32nd.

The ayah caught up her brass cooking-pot and followed him. Since the doctor-sahib was to pay, the doctor-sahib would arrange that good measure should be given in the matter of the milk. And upon second thought the doctor-sahib decided that precautions were necessary. He told the man with the goat, therefore, that when the ayah received two pounds of milk she would pay him the five rupees. As he put the money into Tooni's hand she stayed him gently.

'We are to go without, beyond the walls, to the ghat?' she asked in her own tongue.

'Yes,' said the doctor, 'in two hours. I have spoken.'

'Hazur![1] the Nana Sahib—'

[1] 'Honoured one.'

'The Nana Sahib has written it. Bus!'[1] the doctor replied impatiently. Put the memsahib into her clothes. Pack everything there is, and hasten. Do you understand, foolish one?'

[1] 'Enough.'

'Very good said the ayah submissively, and watched the doctor out of sight. Then she insisted—holding the rupees, she could insist—that the goat-keeper should bring his goat into the hut to milk it; there was more safety, Tooni thought, in the hut. While he milked it Tooni sat upon the ground, hugging her knees, and thought.

The memsahib had said nothing all this time, had known nothing. For two days the memsahib had been, as Tooni would have said, without sense—had lain on the bed in the corner quietly staring at the wall, where the looking-glass hung, making no sign except when she heard the Nana Sahib's guns. Then she sat up straight, and laughed very prettily and sweetly. It was the salute, she thought in her fever; the Viceroy was coming; there would be all sorts of gay doings in the station. When the shell exploded that tore up the wall of the hut, she asked Tooni for her new blue silk with the flounces, the one that had been just sent out from England, and her kid slippers with the rosettes. Tooni, wiping away her helpless tears with the edge of her head covering, had said, 'Na, memsahib, na!' and stroked the hot hand that pointed, and then the mistress had



forgotten again. As to the little pink baby, three days old, it blinked and throve and slept as if it had been born in its father's house to luxury and rejoicing.

Tooni questioned the goat-keeper; but he had seen three sahibs killed that morning, and was stupid with fear. He did not even know of the Nana Sahib's order that the English were to be allowed to go away in boats; and this was remarkable, because he lived in the bazar outside, and in the bazar people generally know what is going to happen long before the sahibs who live in the tall white houses do. Tooni had only her own reflections.



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There would be no more shooting, and the Nana Sahib would let them all go away in boats; that was good khaber—good news. Tooni wondered, as she put the baby's clothes together in one bundle, and her own few possessions together in another, whether it was to be believed. The Nana Sahib so hated the English; had not the guns spoken of his hate these twenty-one days? Inside the walls many had died, but outside the walls might not all die? The doctor had said that the Nana Sahib had written it; but why should the Nana Sahib write the truth? The Great Lord Sahib, the Viceroy, had sent no soldiers to compel him. Nevertheless, Tooni packed what there was to pack, and soothed the baby with a little goat's milk and water, and dressed her mistress as well as she was able, according to the doctor's directions. Then she went out to where old Abdul, the table-waiter, her husband, crouched under a wall, and told him all that she knew and feared. But Abdul, having heard no guns for nearly an hour and a half, was inclined to be very brave, and said that without doubt they should all get safely to Allahabad; and there, when the memsahib was better, they would find the captain-sahib again, and he would give them many rupees backsheesh for being faithful to her.

'The memsahib will never be better,' said Tooni, sorrowfully; 'her rice is finished in the earth. The memsahib will die.'

She agreed to go to the ghat, though, and went back into the hut to wait for the ox-cart while Abdul cooked a meal on the powder-blackened ground with the last of the millet, and gave thanks to Allah.

There was no room for Tooni to ride when they started. She walked alongside carrying the baby and its little bundle of clothes. There was nothing else to carry, and that was fortunate, for the cart in which the memsahib lay was too full of sick and wounded to hold anything more. In Tooni's pocket a little black book swung to and fro; it was the memsahib's book; and in the beginning of the firing, before the fever came, Tooni had seen the memsahib reading it long and often. They had not been killed in consequence, Tooni thought; there must be a protecting charm in the little black book; so she slipped it into her pocket. They left the looking-glass behind.

The ox-cart passed out creaking, in its turn, beyond the earthworks of the English encampment into the city, where the mutinous natives stood in sullen curious groups to watch the train go by. A hundred yards through the narrow streets, choked with the smell of gunpowder and populous with vultures, and Abdul heard a quick voice in his ear. When he turned, none were speaking, but he recognised in the crowd the lowering indifferent face of a sepoy he knew—one of the Nana Sahib's servants. Saying nothing, he fell back for Tooni and laid his hand upon her arm. And when the cart creaked out of the town into the crowded, dusty road that led down to the ghat, neither Abdul nor Tooni were in the riotous crowd that pressed along with it. They had taken refuge in the outer bazar, and Sonny Sahib, sound asleep and well hidden, had taken refuge with them.



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As to Sonny Sahib's mother, she was neither shot in the boats with the soldiers that believed the written word of the Nana Sahib, nor stabbed with the women and children who went back to the palace afterwards. She died quietly in the oxcart before it reached the ghat, and the pity of it was that Sonny Sahib's father, the captain, himself in hospital four hundred miles from Cawnpore, never knew.

There is a marble angel in Cawnpore now, standing in a very quiet garden, and shut off even from the trees and the flowers by an enclosing wall. The angel looks always down, down, and such an awful, pitiful sorrow stands there with her that nobody cares to try to touch it with words. People only come and look and go silently away, wondering what time can have for the healing of such a wound as this. There is an inscription—

Sacred to the perpetual memory of A large company of Christian people, chiefly women and children, who near this Spot were cruelly murdered by the followers of the Rebel Nana DHUNDU part of BITHUR, and Cast, the dying with the dead, into the well below, on the XVTH day of July MDCCCLVII.'

And afterward Sonny Sahib's father believed that all he could learn while he lived about the fate of his wife and his little son was written there. But he never knew.

CHAPTER II

Tooni and Abdul heard the terrible news of Cawnpore six months later. They had gone back to their own country, and it was far from Cawnpore—hundreds and hundreds of miles across a white sandy desert, grown with prickles and studded with rocks—high up in the north of Rajputana. In the State of Chita and the town of Rubbulgurh there was no fighting, because there were no Sahibs. The English had not yet come to teach the Maharajah how to govern his estate and spend his revenues. That is to say, there was no justice to speak of, and a great deal of cholera, and by no means three meals a day for everybody, or even two. But nobody was discontented with troubles that came from the gods and the Maharajah, and talk of greased cartridges would not have been understood. Thinking of this, Abdul often said to Tooni, his wife; 'The service of the sahib is good and profitable, but in old age peace is better, even though we are compelled to pay many rupees to the tax-gatherers of the Maharajah.' Tooni always agreed, and when the khaber came that all the memsahibs and the children had been killed by the sepoys, she agreed weeping. They were always so kind and gentle, the memsahibs, and the little ones, the babalok—the babalok! Surely



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the sepoy had become like the tiger-folk. Then she picked up Sonny Sahib and held him tighter than he liked. She had crooned with patient smiles over many of the babalok in her day, but from beginning to end, never a baba like this. So strong he was, he could make old Abdul cry out, pulling at his beard, so sweet-tempered and healthy that he would sleep just where he was put down, like other babies of Rubbulgurh. Tooni grieved deeply that she could not give him a bottle, and a coral, and a perambulator, and often wondered that he consented to thrive without these things, but the fact remains that he did. He even allowed himself to be oiled all over occasionally for the good of his health, which was forbearing in a British baby. And always when Abdul shook his finger at him and said—

'Gorah pah howdah, hathi pah *Jeen!*
Jeldi bag-gia, Warren HasTEEN!'[1]

he laughed and crowed as if he quite understood the joke.

[1] 'Howdahs on horses, on elephants *Jeen!* He ran away quickly did Warren HasTEEN!'

'*Jeen*' means 'saddles,' but nobody could make that rhyme! Popular incident of an English retreat in Hastings' time.

Tooni had no children of her own, and wondered how long it would be before she and Abdul must go again to Cawnpore to find the baby's father. There need be no hurry, Tooni thought, as Sonny Sahib played with the big silver hoops in her ears, and tried to kick himself over her shoulder. Abdul calculated the number of rupees that would be a suitable reward for taking care of a baby for six months, found it considerable, and said they ought to start at once. Then other news came—gathering terror from mouth to mouth as it crossed Rajputana—and Abdul told his wife one evening, after she had put Sonny Sahib to sleep with a hymn to Israfil, that a million of English soldiers had come upon Cawnpore, and in their hundredfold revenge had left neither Mussulman nor Hindoo alive in the city—also that the Great Lord Sahib had ordered the head of every kala admi, every black man, to be taken to build a bridge across the Ganges with, so that hereafter his people might leave Cawnpore by another way. Then Abdul also became of the opinion that there need be no haste in going.

Sonny Sahib grew out of the arms and necks of his long embroidered night dresses and day dresses almost immediately, and then there was a difficulty, which Tooni surmounted by cutting the waists off entirely and gathering the skirts round the baby's neck with a drawing string, making holes in the sides for his arms to come through. Tooni bought him herself a little blue and gold Mussulman cap in the bazar. The captain-sahib would be angry, but then the captain-sahib was very far away, killed



perhaps, and Tooni thought the blue and gold cap wonderfully becoming to Sonny Sahib. All day long he played and crept in this under the sacred peepul-tree in the middle of the village among brown-skinned babies who wore no clothes at all—only a string of beads round their fat little waists—and who sometimes sat down in silence and made a solemn effort to comprehend him.



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In quite a short time—in Rubbulgurh, where there is no winter, two years is a very little while—Sonny Sahib grew too big for even this adaptation of his garments; and then Tooni took him to Sheik Uddin, the village tailor, and gave Sheik Uddin long and careful directions about making clothes for him. The old man listened to her for an hour, and wagged his beard, and said that he quite understood; it should be as she wished. But Sheik Uddin had never seen any English people, and did not understand at all. He accepted Tooni's theories, but he measured and cut according to his own. Sheik Uddin could not afford to suffer in his reputation for the foolish notions of a woman. So he made Sonny Sahib a pair of narrow striped calico trousers, and a long tight-fitting little coat with large bunches of pink roses on it, in what was the perfectly correct fashion for Mahomedan little boys of Rubbulgurh and Rajputana generally. Tooni paid Sheik Uddin tenpence, and admired her purchase very much. She dressed Sonny Sahib in it doubtfully, however, with misgivings as to what his father would say. Certainly it was good cloth, of a pretty colour, and well made, but even to Tooni, Sonny Sahib looked queer. Abdul had no opinion, except about the price. He grumbled at that, but then he had grumbled steadily for two years, yet whenever Tooni proposed that they should go and find the captain-sahib, had said no, it was far, and he was an old man. Tooni should go when he was dead.

Besides, Abdul liked to hear the little fellow call him 'Bap,' which meant 'Father,' and to feel his old brown finger clasped by small pink and white ones, as he and Sonny Sahib toddled into the bazar together. He liked to hear Sonny Sahib's laugh, too; it was quite a different laugh from any other boy's in Rubbulgurh, and it came oftener. He was a merry little fellow, blue-eyed, with very yellow wavy hair, exactly, Tooni often thought, like his mother's.

CHAPTER III

It was a grief to Tooni, who could not understand it; but Sonny Sahib perversely refused to talk in his own tongue. She did all she could to help him. When he was a year old she cut an almond in two, and gave half to Sonny Sahib and half to the green parrot that swung all day in a cage in the door of the hut and had a fine gift of conversation; if anything would make the baby talk properly that would. Later on she taught him all the English words she remembered herself, which were three, 'bruss' and 'wass' and 'isstockin', her limited but very useful vocabulary as lady's-maid. He learned them very well, but he continued to know only three, and he did not use them very often, which Tooni found strange. Tooni thought the baba should have inherited his mother's language with his blue eyes and his white skin. Meanwhile, Sonny Sahib, playing every morning and evening under the peepul-tree, learned to talk in the tongue of the little brown boys who played there too.



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When Sonny Sahib was four he could drive the big black hairy buffaloes home from the village outskirts to be milked. Abdul walked beside him, but Sonny Sahib did all the shouting and the beating with a bit of stick, which the buffaloes must have privately smiled at when they felt it on their muddy flanks, that is if a buffalo ever smiles, which one cannot help thinking doubtful. Sonny Sahib liked buffalo milk, and had it every day for his dinner with chupatties, and sometimes, for a treat, a bit of roast kid. Chupatties are like pancakes with everything that is nice left out of them, and were very popular in Rubbulgurh. Sonny Sahib thought nothing in the world could be better, except the roast kid. On days of festival Abdul always gave him a pice to buy sweetmeats with, and he drove a hard bargain with either Wahid Khan or Sheik Luteef, who were rival dealers. Sonny Sahib always got more of the sticky brown balls of sugar and butter and coconut for his pice than any of the other boys. Wahid Khan and Sheik Luteef both thought it brought them luck to sell to him. But afterwards Sonny Sahib invariably divided his purchase with whoever happened to be his bosom friend at the time—the daughter of Ram Dass, the blacksmith, or the son of Chundaputty, the beater of brass—in which he differed altogether from the other boys, and which made it fair perhaps.

At six Sonny Sahib began to find the other boys unsatisfactory in a number of ways. He was tired of making patterns in the dust with marigolds for one thing. He wanted to pretend. It was his birthright to pretend, in a large active way, and he couldn't carry it out. The other boys didn't care about making believe soldiers, and running and hiding and shouting and beating Sonny Sahib's tom-tom, which made a splendid drum. They liked beating the tom-tom, but they always wanted to sit round in a ring and listen to it, which Sonny Sahib thought very poor kind of fun indeed. They wouldn't even pretend to be elephants, or horses, or buffaloes. Sonny Sahib had to represent them all himself; and it is no wonder that with a whole menagerie, as it were, upon his shoulders, he grew a little tired sometimes. Also he was the only boy in Rubbulgurh who cared to climb a tree that had no fruit on it, or would venture beyond the lower branches even for mangoes or tamarinds. And one day when he found a weaver-bird's nest in a bush with three white eggs in it, a splendid nest, stock-full of the fireflies that light the little hen at night, he showed it privately first to Hurry Ghose, and then to Sumpsi Din, and lastly to Budhoo, the sweeper's son; and not one of them could he coax to carry off a single egg in company with him. Sonny Sahib recognised the force of public opinion, and left the weaver-bird to her house-keeping in peace, but he felt privately injured by it.

Certainly the other boys could tell wonderful stories—stories of princesses and fairies and demons—Sumpsi Din's were the best—that made Sonny Sahib's blue eyes widen in the dark, when they all sat together on a charpoy by the door of the hut, and the stars glimmered through the tamarind-trees. A charpoy is a bed, and everybody in Rubbulgurh puts one outside, for sociability, in the evening. Not much of a bed, only four short rickety legs held together with knotted string, but it answers very well.



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Sonny Sahib didn't seem to know any stories—he could only tell the old one about the fighting Abdul saw over and over again—but it was the single thing they could do better than he did. On the whole he began to prefer the society of Abdul's black and white goats, which bore a strong resemblance to Abdul himself, by the way, and had more of the spirit of adventure. It was the goat, for example, that taught Sonny Sahib to walk on the extreme edge of the housetop and not tumble over. In time they became great friends, Sonny Sahib and the goat, and always, when it was not too hot, they slept together.

Then two things happened. First, Abdul died, and Sonny Sahib became acquainted with grief, both according to his own nature and according to the law of Mahomed. Then, after he and Tooni had mourned sincerely with very little to eat for nine days, there clattered one day a horseman through the village at such a pace that everybody ran out to see. And he was worth seeing, that horseman, in a blue turban as big as a little tub, a yellow coat, red trousers with gold lace on them, and long boots that stuck out far on either side; and an embroidered saddle and a tasselled bridle, and a pink-nosed white charger that stepped and pranced in the bazar so that Ram Dass himself had to get out of the way. It ought to be said that the horseman's clothes did not fit him very well, that his saddle girth was helped out by a bit of rope, and that his charger was rather tender on his near fore-foot; but these are not things that would be noticed in Rubbulgurh, being lost in the general splendour of his appearance.

Sonny Sahib ran after the horseman with all the other boys, until, to everybody's astonishment, he stopped with tremendous prancings at Tooni's mud doorstep, where she sat to watch him go by. Then Sonny Sahib slipped away. He was afraid—he did not know of what. He ran half a mile beyond the village, and helped Sumpsu Din keep the parrots out of his father's millet crop all day long. Nor did he say a word to Sumpsu Din about it, for fear he should be persuaded to go back again. Instead, he let Sumpsu Din sleep for long hours at a time face-downwards on his arm in the sun, which was what Sumpsu Din liked best in the world, while he, Sonny Sahib, clapped his hands a hundred times at the little green thieves, abusing them roundly, and wondering always at the back of his head why so splendid a horseman should have stopped at his particular doorstep. So it was not until the evening, when he came back very hungry, hoping the horseman would be gone, that he heard Tooni's wonderful news. Before she gave him water or oil, or even a chupatty, Tooni told him, holding his hand in hers.

'The Maharajah has sent for you, O noonday kite; where have you been in the sun? The Maharajah has sent for you, lotus-eyed one, and I, though I am grown too old for journeys, must go also to the palace of the Maharajah! Oh, it is very far, and I know not what he desires, the Maharajah! My heart is split in two, little Sahib! This khabar is the cat's moon to me. I will never sleep again!'



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Then for some reason the fear went out of Sonny Sahib. 'Am I not going with you, Tooni-ji?' said he, which was his way of saying 'dear Tooni.' 'There is no cause for fear. And will it not be very beautiful, the palace of the Maharajah? Sumpsi Din says that it is built of gold and silver. And now I should like six chupatties, and some milk and some fried brinjal, like yesterday's, only more, Tooni-ji.'

CHAPTER IV

The palace of the Maharajah at Lalpore was not exactly built of gold and silver; but if it had been, Sonny Sahib could hardly have thought it a finer place. It had a wall all round it, even on the side where the river ran, and inside the wall were courts and gardens with fountains and roses in them, divided by other walls, and pillared verandahs, where little green lizards ran about in the sun, and a great many stables, where the Maharajah's horses pawed and champed to be let out and ridden. The palace itself was a whole story higher than the stables, and consisted of a wilderness of little halls with grated windows. It smelt rather too strong of attar of roses in there—the Maharajah was fond of attar of roses—but the decorations on the whitewashed walls, in red and yellow, were very wonderful indeed. The courtyards and the verandahs were full of people, soldiers, syces, merchants with their packs, sweetmeat sellers, barbers; only the gardens were empty. Sonny Sahib thought that if he lived in the palace he would stay always in the gardens, watching the red-spotted fish in the fountains, and gathering the roses; but the people who did live there seemed to prefer smoking long bubbling pipes in company, or disputing over their bargains, or sleeping by the hour in the shade of the courtyard walls. There were no women anywhere; but if Sonny Sahib had possessed the ears or the eyes of the country, he might have heard many swishings and patterings and whisperings behind curtained doors, and have seen many fingers on the curtains' edge and eyes at the barred windows as he went by.

This was the palace, and the palace was the crown of Lalpore, which was built on the top of a hill, and could lock itself in behind walls ten feet thick all round, if an enemy came that way.

The Maharajah was to receive them in one of the pillared verandahs, one that looked out over the river, where there was a single great ivory chair, with a red satin cushion, and a large piece of carpet in front of it, and nothing else. It was the only chair in the palace, probably the only chair in all the Maharajah's State of Chita, and as Sonny Sahib had never seen a chair before he found it very interesting. He and Tooni inspected it from a respectful distance, and then withdrew to the very farthest corner of the verandah to wait for the Maharajah. A long time they waited, and yet Tooni would not sit down. What might not the Maharajah do if he came and found

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them disrespectfully seated in his audience hall! Patiently she stood, first on one foot and then on the other, with her lips all puckered up and her eyes on the floor, thinking of things that would be polite enough to say to a Maharajah. They were so troublesome to think of, that she could not attend to what Sonny Sahib said at all, even when he asked her for the sixth time how you made a peacock with blue glass eyes, like the one on each arm of His Highness's chair. Sonny Sahib grew quite tired of watching the mud-turtle that was paddling about in a pool of the shallow river among the yellow sands down below, and of counting the camels that were wading across it, carrying their packs and their masters; and yet the Maharajah did not come.

'Tooni,' he said presently, 'without doubt I must sit down,' and down he sat plumply, with his back against the wall, and his two small legs, in their very best striped cotton trousers, stretched out in front of him.

As a matter of fact the Maharajah was asleep, and had forgotten all about Sonny Sahib in the hall of audience. It was Moti^[1] who reminded him, whispering in his ear until he awoke. Moti was the little Maharajah, and that was his pet name. Moti was privileged to remind his father of things.

[1] A pearl.

So Moti and the Maharajah went down to the audience hall together, and there they found Sonny Sahib asleep too, which was not wonderful, considering that the Maharajah had kept him waiting two hours and a quarter. Perhaps this occurred to His Highness, and prevented him from being angry. At all events, as Sonny Sahib scrambled to his feet in response to a terrified tug from Tooni, he did not look very angry.

Sonny Sahib saw a little lean old man, with soft sunken black eyes, and a face like a withered potato. He wore a crimson velvet smoking-cap upon his head, and was buttoned up to the chin in a long tight coat of blue and yellow brocade. Above the collar and below the sleeves of the coat showed the neck and cuffs of an English linen shirt, which were crumpled and not particularly clean. The cuffs were so big that the Maharajah's thin little brown fingers were almost lost in them. The blue and yellow brocaded coat was buttoned up with emeralds, but the Maharajah shuffled along in a pair of old carpet slippers, which to Sonny Sahib were the most remarkable features of his attire. So much occupied, indeed, was Sonny Sahib in looking at the Maharajah's slippers, that he quite forgot to make his salaam. As for Tooni, she was lying flat at their Highnesses' feet, talking indistinctly into the marble floor.

The little Highness was much pleasanter to look at than his father. He had large dark eyes and soft light-brown cheeks, and he was all dressed in pink satin, with a little

jewelled cap, and his long black hair tied up in a hard knot at the back of his neck. The little Highness looked at Sonny Sahib curiously, and then tugged at his father's sleeve.



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'Let him come with me now, immediately,' said the little Maharajah; 'he has a face of gold.'

The Maharajah sat down, not in his chair—he did not greatly like sitting in his chair—but on the carpet.

'Whence do you come?' said he to Tooni.

'Protector of the poor, from Rubbulgurh.'

'Where your Highness sent to for us,' added Sonny Sahib. 'Tooni, why do you pinch me?'

His Highness looked disconcerted for a moment. As a matter of fact he had known all that Tooni or Sonny Sahib could tell him about themselves for three years, but he considered it more dignified to appear as if he knew nothing.

'This is a child of the mlechas,' said the Maharajah, which was not a very polite way of saying that he was English.

'Protector of the poor, yes.'

'Account to me for him. How old is he?'

'Seven years, great King.'

'And two months, Tooni-ji. Your Highness, may I sit down?'

'As old as the Folly.'^[1]

[1] Native term for the Mutiny.

'He came of the Folly, Hazur. His mother died by the sepoys in Cawnpore, his father—also,' said Tooni, for she feared to be blamed for not having found Sonny Sahib's father. As she told the story once again to the Maharajah, adding many things that Sonny Sahib had never heard before, he became so much interested that he stood on one foot for five minutes at a time, and quite forgot to ask His Highness again if he might sit down.

The Maharajah heard her to the end without a word or a change of expression. When she had finished, 'My soldiers were not there,' he said thoughtfully, and with a shade of regret, which was not, I fear, at the thought of any good they might have done. Then he seemed to reflect, while Tooni stood before him with her hands joined together at the finger-tips and her head bowed.



'Then, without permission, you brought this child of outcasts into my State,' said he at last. 'That was an offence.'

Tooni struck her forehead with her hand.

'Your Highness is my father and my mother!' she sobbed, 'I could not leave it to the jackals.'

'You are a wretched Mussulman, the daughter of cow-killers, and you may have known no better—'

'Your Highness!' remarked Sonny Sahib, with respectful indignation, 'Adam had two sons, one was buried and one was burned—'

'Choop!' said the Maharajah crossly. You might almost guess that 'Choop' meant 'Be quiet!'

'But it was an offence,' he continued.

'Protector of the poor, I meant no harm.'

'That is true talk. And you shall receive no harm. But you must leave the boy with me. I want him to play games with my son, to amuse my son. For thirty days my son has asked this of me, and ten days ago his mother died—so he must have it.'

Tooni salaamed humbly. 'If the boy finds favour in Your Highness's eyes it is very good,' she said simply, and turned to go.



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'Stop,' said the Maharajah. 'I will do justice in this matter. I desire the boy, but I have brought his price. Where is it, Moti-ji?'

The little Maharajah laughed with delight, and drew from behind him a jingling bag.

'It is one hundred and fifty rupees,' said the Maharajah. 'Give it to the woman, Moti.' And the child held it out to her.

Tooni looked at the bag, and then at Sonny Sahib, salaamed and hesitated. It was a provision for the rest of her life, as lives go in Rajputana.

'Is it not enough!' asked the Maharajah irritably, while the little prince's face fell.

'Your Highness,' stammered Tooni, 'it is great riches—may roses be to your mouth! But I have a desire—rather than the money—'

'What is your desire?' cried the little prince. 'Say it. In a breath my father will allow it. I want the gold-faced one to come and play.'

The Maharajah nodded, and this time Tooni lay down at the feet of the little prince.

'It is,' said she, 'that—I am a widow and old—that I also may live in the farthest corner within the courtyard walls, with the boy.'

The Maharajah slipped the bag quickly into the pocket of his blue and yellow coat.

'It is a strange preference,' he said, 'but the Mussulmans have no minds. It may be.'

Tooni kissed his feet, and Sonny Sahib nodded approval at him. Somehow, Sonny Sahib never could be taught good Rajput manners.

'The boy is well grown,' said the Maharajah, turning upon his heel. 'What is his name?'

'Protector of the poor,' answered Tooni, quivering with delight, 'his name is Sonny Sahib.'

Perhaps nobody has told you why the English are called Sahibs in India. It is because they rule there.

The Maharajah's face went all into a pucker of angry wrinkles, and his eyes shone like little coals.

'What talk is that?' he said angrily. 'His great-grandfather was a monkey! There is only one master here. Pig's daughter, his name is Sunni!'

Tooni did not dare to say a word, and even the little prince was silent.



'Look you,' said the old man to Sonny Sahib. 'Follow my son, the Maharajah, into the courtyard, and there do his pleasure. Do you understand? *Follow him!*'

CHAPTER V

'Sunni,' said Moti, as the two boys rode through the gates of the courtyard a year later, 'a man of your race has come here, and my father has permitted him to remain. My father has given him the old empty jail to live in, behind the monkey temple. They say many curious things are in his house. Let us ride past it.'

In his whole life Sunni had never heard such an interesting piece of news before—even Tooni's, about the Maharajah's horseman, was nothing to this. 'Why is he come?' he asked, putting his little red Arab into a trot.



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'To bring your gods to the Rajputs.'

'I have no gods,' declared Sunni. 'Kali is so ugly—I have no heart for her. Ganesh makes me laugh, with his elephant's head; and Tooni says that Allah is not my God.'

'Tooni says,' Sunni went on reflectively, 'that my God is in her little black book. But I have never seen him.'

Perhaps this Englishman will show him to you,' suggested Moti.

'But His Highness, your father, will he allow strange gods to be brought to the people?'

'No,' said Moti, 'the people will not look at them. Every one has been warned. But the stranger is to remain, that he may teach me English. I do not wish to learn English—or anything. It is always so hot when the pundit comes. But my father wishes it.'

A pundit is a wise old man who generally has a long white beard, and thinks nothing in the world is so enjoyable as Sanskrit or Arabic. Sunni, too, found it hot when the pundit came. But an English pundit—

'Moti-ji,' said Sunni, laying his arm around the little prince's neck as they rode together, 'do you love me?'

Moti caught Sunni's hand as it dropped over his shoulder. 'You know that in my heart there is only my father's face and yours, Sahib's son,' he said.

'Will you do one thing, then, for love of me?' asked Sunni eagerly. 'Will you ask of the Maharajah, your father, that I also may learn English from the stranger?'

'No,' said Moti mischievously, 'because it is already spoken, Sunni-ji. I said that I would not learn unless you also were compelled to learn, so that the time should not be lost between us. Now let us gallop very fast past the jail, lest the Englishman should think we wish to see him. He is to be brought to me to-morrow at sundown.'

The Englishman at that moment was unpacking his books and his bottles, and thinking about how he could best begin the work he had come to Lalpore to do. He was a medical missionary, and as they had every variety of disease in Lalpore, and the population was entirely heathen, we may think it likely that he had too much on his mind to run to the window to see such very young royalty ride by.

'Sunni-ji,' said Moti that afternoon in the garden, 'I am very tired of talking of this Englishman.'

'I could talk of him for nine moons,' said Sunni; and then something occurred which changed the subject as completely as even the little prince could desire. This was a



garden for the pleasure of the ladies of the court; they never came out in it, but their apartments looked down upon it, and a very high wall screened it from the rest of the world. The Maharajah and Moti and Sunni were the only people who might ever walk there. As the boys turned at the end of a path directly under the gratings, they heard a soft voice say 'Moti!'

'That is Matiya,' said the little prince. 'I do not like Matiya. What is it, Matiya?'



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'It is not Matiya,' said the voice quickly, 'it is Tarra. Here is a gift from the heart of Tarra, little parrot, a gift for you, and a gift for the Sahib's son; also a sweet cake, but the cake is for Moti.'

'I am sure it was Matiya,' said Moti, running to pick the packet out of the rose-bush it had fallen into; 'but Matiya was never kind before.'

The packet held a necklace and an armlet. The necklace was of little pearls and big amethysts strung upon fine wire, three rows of pearls, and then an amethyst, and was very lovely. The armlet was of gold, with small rubies and turquoises set in a pattern. The boys looked at them more or less indifferently. They had seen so many jewels.

'Matiya—if you think it was Matiya—makes pretty gifts,' said Sunni, 'and the Maharajah will keep your necklace for you for ever in an iron box. But this armlet will get broken just as the other two armlets that were given to me have got broken. I cannot wear armlets and play polo, and I would rather play polo.'

'That is because you were clumsy,' Moti answered. Moti was peevish that afternoon. The Maharajah had refused him a gun, and he particularly wanted a gun, not to shoot anything, but to frighten the crows with and perhaps the coolie-folk. To console himself Moti had eaten twice as many sweetmeats as were good for him, and was in a bad temper accordingly.

'Now they are certainly of Tarra, these jewels,' exclaimed Sunni, 'I remember that necklace upon her neck, for every time Tarra has kissed me, that fifth stone which has been broken in the cutting has scratched my face.'

'In one word,' said Moti imperiously, 'it was the voice of Matiya. And this perplexes me, for Matiya, hating my mother, hates me also, I think.'

'Why did she hate your mother?' asked Sunni.

'How stupid you are to-day! You have heard the story two hundred times! Because she thought that she should have been chosen to be queen instead of my mother. It is true that she was more beautiful, but my mother was a pundita. And she was not chosen. She is only second in the palace. And she has no children, while my mother was the mother of a king.'

'No,' said Sunni, 'I never heard that before, Moti.'

'But I say you have! Two hundred times! And look, O thoughtless one, you have gone between me and the sun, so that even now your shadow falls upon my sugar-cake—my cake stuffed with almonds, which is the kind I most love, and therefore I cannot eat it. There,' cried Moti, contemptuously, 'take it yourself and eat it— you have no caste to break.'



For a minute Sunni was as angry as possible. Then he reflected that it was silly to be angry with a person who was not very well.

'Listen, Moti,' he said, 'that was indeed a fault. I should have walked to the north. But I will not eat your cake—let us give it to the red and gold fishes in the fountain.'

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'Some of it,' said Moti, appeased, 'and some to my new little monkey—my talking monkey.'

The fishes darted up for the crumbs greedily, but the monkey was not as grateful for her share as she ought to have been. She took it, smelt it, wiped it vigorously on the ground, smelt it again, and chattered angrily at the boys; then she went nimbly hand over hand to the very top of the banyan-tree she lived in; and then she deliberately broke it into little pieces and pelted the givers with them.

'She is not hungry to-day,' said Moti. 'Let us take out the falcons.'

Next morning the Maharajah was very much annoyed by the intelligence that all the little red-spotted fishes were floating flabby and flat and dead among the lily pads of the fountain—there were few things except Moti that the Maharajah loved better than his little red-spotted fishes. He wanted very particularly to know why they should have died in this unanimous and apparently preconcerted way. The gods had probably killed them by lightning, but the Maharajah wanted to know. So he sent for the Englishman, who did not mind touching a dead thing, and the Englishman told him that the little red-spotted fishes had undoubtedly been poisoned. Moti was listening when the doctor said this.

'It could not have been the cake,' said Moti.

But when all was looked into, including one of the little fishes, Dr. Roberts found that it undoubtedly had been the cake. Scraps of it were still lying about the banyan-tree to help him to this conclusion, and the monkey chattered as if she could give evidence, too, if anybody would listen. But she gave evidence enough in not eating it. Everybody, that is, everybody in Rajputana, knows that you can never poison a monkey. The little prince maintained that the voice he heard was the voice of Matiya, yet every one recognised the jewels to be Tarra's. There was nothing else to go upon, and the Maharajah decided that it was impossible to tell which of the two had wickedly tried to poison his eldest son. He arranged, however, that they should both disappear—he could not possibly risk a mistake in the matter. And I wish that had been the greatest of the Maharajah's injustices. When the truth came out, later, that it was undoubtedly Matiya, the Maharajah said that he had always been a good deal of that opinion, and built a beautiful domed white marble tomb, partly in memory of Tarra and partly, I fear, to commemorate his own sagacity, which may seem, under the circumstances, a little odd.

The really curious thing was, however, that out of it all came honour and glory for Sunni. For what, asked the Maharajah, had prevented the poisoning of his son? What but the shadow of Sunni, which fell upon the cake, so that Moti could not eat it! Therefore, without doubt, Sunni had saved the life of a king; and he could ask nothing that should not be granted to him; he should stand always near the throne. Sunni felt

very proud and important, he did not know exactly why; but he could not think of anything he wanted, except to learn his own language from the Englishman.



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'Oh, foolish bargainer!' cried Moti, 'when you know that has been given already!'

CHAPTER VI

Dr. Roberts, who lived, by the Maharajah's kind permission, in the jail behind the monkey temple, soon found himself in rather an awkward dilemma. Not in regard to the monkeys. They were certainly troublesome. They stole his biscuits, and made holes in his roof, and tore up the reports he wrote for the S.P.C.K. in England. Dr. Roberts made allowance for the monkeys, however. He had come to take away their sacred character, and nobody could expect them to like it. If you had asked Dr. Roberts what his difficulty was he would have shown you Sonny Sahib. The discovery was so wonderful that he had made. He had found a yellow-haired, blue-eyed English boy in a walled palace of Rajputana, five hundred miles from any one of his race. The boy was happy, healthy, and well content. That much the Maharajah had pointed out to him; that much he could see for himself. Beyond that the Maharajah had discouraged Dr. Roberts' interest. The boy's name was Sunni, he had no other name, he had come 'under the protection' of the Maharajah when he was very young; and that was all His Highness could be induced to say. Any more pointed inquiries he was entirely unable to understand. There seemed to be no one else who knew. Tooni could have told him, but Tooni was under orders that she did not dare to disobey. In the bazar two or three conflicting stories, equally wonderful, were told of Sunni; but none that Dr. Roberts could believe. In the end he found out about Sunni from Sunni himself, who had never forgotten one word of what Tooni told the Maharajah. Sunni mentioned also, with considerable pride, that he had known three English words for a long time—'wass' and 'bruss' and 'isstockin'.

Then Dr. Roberts, with his heart full of the awful grief of the Mutiny, and thinking how gladly this waif and stray would be received by somebody, hurried to the Maharajah, and begged that the boy might be given back to his own people, that he, Dr. Roberts, might take him back to his own people at his personal risk and expense; that inquiries might at least be set on foot to find his relatives.

'Yes,' said the Maharajah, 'but not yet, ee-Wobbis. The boy will be well here for a year, and you shall teach him. At the end of that time we will speak again of this matter.'

Dr. Roberts was not satisfied. He asked the Maharajah at all events to allow Sunni to live with him in his empty jail, but His Highness refused absolutely.

'And look you, ee-Wobbis,' said he, 'I have promised the Viceroy in Calcutta that you shall be safe in my country, and you shall be safe, though I never asked you to come here. But if any khaber goes to Calcutta about this boy, and if there is the least confusion regarding him, your mouth shall be stopped, and you shall not talk any more

to my people. For my part, I do not like your medicines, and you have not yet cured Proteb Singh of his short leg; he goes as lame as ever!



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This was Dr. Roberts' difficulty; his mouth would be stopped. He did not doubt the Maharajah. If he wrote to Calcutta that a Rajput prince still held a hostage from the Mutiny, and made a disturbance, there would be an end to the work he had begun under the shadow of the palace wall. And the work was prospering so well! The people were listening now, Dr. Roberts thought, and certainly he had been able to relieve a great deal of their physical misery. Would he be justified in writing to Calcutta? Dr. Roberts thought about it very long and very seriously. In the end he believed that he would not be justified, at least until the year was over of which the Maharajah spoke. Then if His Highness did not keep his promise, Dr. Roberts would see about it.

So the year went by; the months when the sun blazed straight across the sky overhead, and everybody slept at noonday—the months when a gray sheet of rain hung from the clouds for days together, and the months when all the Maharajah's dominions were full of splendid yellow lights and pleasant winds—when the teak wood trees dropped their big dusty leaves, and the nights were sharply cold, and Rajputana pretended that it was winter. Dr. Roberts and Sunni were very well then, but Moti shrivelled up and coughed the day through, and the Maharajah, when he went out to drive, wrapped himself up in Cashmere shawls, head and ears and all.

The boys learnt as much English as could possibly be expected of them; Sunni learnt more, because Dr. Roberts made it a point that he should. Besides, he became a great friend of Dr. Roberts, who began by begging that Sunni might be allowed to ride with him, then to drive with him, and finally to spend two or three days at a time with him. Sunni had more to learn than Moti had. He had a good many things to forget, too, which gave him almost as much trouble.

The Maharajah found it as difficult as ever to like ee-Wobbis's medicines, but he considered them excellent for Moti's cough, and only complained that his son should be given so little of them. The royal treasury would pay for a whole bottle—why should the little prince get only a spoonful? Nevertheless Dr. Roberts stood well in the estimation of the Maharajah, who arranged that a great many things should be done as the missionary suggested. In one case the Maharajah had the palace well, the oldest palace well, cleaned out—a thing that nobody had ever thought of before; and he was surprised to find what was at the bottom of it. Dr. Roberts advised putting down a few drains too, and making a road from the city of the Maharajah to the great highways that led to the Viceroy's India. The Maharajah laid the drains, and said he would think about the road. Then Dr. Roberts suggested that a hospital would be a good thing, and the Maharajah said he would think about that too.



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Sunni was growing fast; he was too tall and thin for nine years old. Dr. Roberts took anxious care of him, thinking of the unknown grandfather and grandmother in England, and how he could best tell them of this boy of theirs, who read Urdu better than English, and wore embroidered slippers turned squarely up at the toes, and asked such strange questions about his father's God. But when he taxed the Maharajah with his promise, His Highness simply repeated, in somewhat more amiable terms, his answer of the year before. And the work was now prospering more than ever. When once he had got the hospital, Dr. Roberts made up his mind that he would take definite measures; but he would get the hospital first.

CHAPTER VII

I suppose it was about that time that Surji Rao began to consider whether it was after all for the best interests of the State that ee-Wobbis should remain in it. Surji Rao was first Minister to the Maharajah, and a very important person. He had charge of the Treasury, and it was his business to produce every day one hundred fresh rupees to put into it. This was his duty, and whether the harvests had been good and the cattle many, or whether the locusts and the drought had made the people poor, Surji Rao did his duty. If ever he should fail, there hung a large and heavy shoe upon the wall of the Maharajah's apartment, which daily suggested personal chastisement and a possible loss of dignity to Surji Rao.

Dr. Roberts was making serious demands upon the Treasury, and proposed to make others more serious still. Worse than that, he was supplanting Surji Rao in the confidence and affection of the Maharajah. Worse still, he was making a pundit of that outcast boy, who had been already too much favoured in the palace, so that he might very well grow up to be Minister of the Treasury instead of Rasso, son of Surji Rao—a thing unendurable. Surji Rao was the fattest man in the State, so fat that it was said he sat down only twice a day; but he lay awake on sultry nights for so many weeks reflecting upon this, that he grew obviously, almost ostentatiously, thin. To this he added such an extremely dolorous expression of countenance that it was impossible for the Maharajah, out of sheer curiosity, to refrain from asking him what was the matter.

'My father and my mother! I grow poor with thinking that the feet of strangers are in the palace of the King, and what may come of it.'

The Maharajah laughed and put his arm about the shoulders of Surji Rao.

'I will give you a tub of melted butter to grow fat upon again, and two days to eat it, though indeed with less on your bones you were a better Rajput. What should come of it, Surji Rao?'



The Minister sheathed the anger that leapt up behind his eyes in a smile. Then he answered gravely—

'What should come of it but more strangers? Is it not desired to make a road for their guns and their horses? And talk and treaties, and tying of the hand and binding of the foot, until at last that great Jan Larrens[1] himself will ride up to the gate of the city and refuse to go away until Your Highness sends a bag of gold mohurs to the British Raj, as he has done before.'



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[1] John Lawrence, afterwards Lord Lawrence and Viceroy of India.

'I do not think I will make the road,' said the Maharajah reflectively.

'King, you are the wisest of men, and therefore your own best counsellor. It is well decided. But the Rajputs are all sons of one father, and even now there is grief among the chief of them that outcasts should be dwelling in the King's favour.'

'I will not make the road,' said the Maharajah. 'Enough!'

Surji Rao thought it was not quite enough, however, and took various means to obtain more, means that would never be thought of anywhere but in countries where the sun beats upon the plots of Ministers and ferments fanaticism in the heads of the people. He talked to the Rajput chiefs, and persuaded them—they were not difficult to persuade—that Dr. Roberts was an agent and a spy of the English Government at Calcutta, that his medicines were a sham. When it was necessary, Surji Rao said that the medicines were a slow form of poison, but generally he said they were a sham. He persuaded as many of the chiefs as dared, to remonstrate with the Maharajah, and to follow his example of going about looking as if they were upon the brink of some terrible disaster. Surji Rao's wife was a clever woman, and she arranged such a feeling in the Maharajah's zenana, that one day as Dr. Roberts passed along a corridor to His Highness's apartment, a curtain opened swiftly, and some one in the dark behind spat at him. Amongst them they managed to make His Highness extremely uncomfortable. But the old man continued to decline obstinately to send the missionary back.

Then it became obvious to Surji Rao that Dr. Roberts must be disposed of otherwise. He went about that in the same elaborate and ingenious way. His arrangements required time, but there is always plenty of time in Rajputana. He became friendly with Dr. Roberts, and encouraged the hospital. He did not wish in any way to be complicated with his arrangements. Nobody else became friendly. Surji Rao took care of that. And at last one morning a report went like wildfire about the palace and the city that the missionary had killed a sacred bull, set free in honour of Krishna at the birth of a son to Maun Rao, the chief of the Maharajah's generals. Certainly the bull was found slaughtered behind the monkey temple, and certainly Dr. Roberts had beefsteak for breakfast that day. Such a clamour rang through the palace about it that the Maharajah sent for the missionary, partly to inquire into the matter, and partly with a view to protect him.

It was very unsatisfactory—the missionary did not know how the bull came to be killed behind his house, and, in spite of all the Maharajah's hints, would not invent a story to account for it. The Maharajah could have accounted for it fifty times over, if it had happened to him. Besides, Dr. Roberts freely admitted having breakfasted upon beefsteak, and didn't know where it had come from! He rode home through an angry crowd, and nobody at all came for medicines that day.



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Two days later the Rajput general's baby died—could anything else have been expected? The general went straight to the Maharajah to ask for vengeance, but His Highness, knowing why the chief had come, sent word that he was ill—he would see Maun Rao to-morrow. To-morrow he had not recovered, nor even the day after; but in the meantime he had been well enough to send word to Dr. Roberts that if he wished to go away he should have two camels and an escort. Dr. Roberts sent to ask whether Sunni might go with him, but to this the Maharajah replied by an absolute 'No.'

So the missionary stayed.

It was Surji Rao who brought the final word to the Maharajah.

'My father and my mother!' he said, 'it is no longer possible to hold the people back. It is cried abroad that this English hakkim^[1] has given the people powder of pig's feet. Even now they have set upon his house. And to-day is the festival of Krishna. My heart is bursting with grief.'

[1] 'Doctor.'

'If Maun Rao strikes, I can do nothing,' said the Maharajah weakly. 'He thinks the Englishman killed his son. But look you, send Sunni to me. *He saved mine.* And I tell you,' said the Maharajah, looking at Surji Rao fiercely with his sunken black eyes, 'not so much of his blood shall be shed as would stain a moth's wing.'

But Maun Rao struck, and the people being told that the missionary was dead, went home hoping that Krishna had nothing more against them; they had done what they could.

As to Sunni he told his grief to Tooni because it comforted him, and went into mourning for nine days in defiance of public opinion, because he owed it to the memory of a countryman. He began, too, to take long restless rambles beyond the gates, and once he asked Tooni if she knew the road to Calcutta.

'It is fifty thousand miles,' said Tooni, who had an imagination; 'and the woods are full of tigers.'

CHAPTER VIII

The gates of Lalpore were shut, and all about her walls the yellow sandy plains stretched silent and empty. There did not seem to be so much as a pariah dog outside. Some pipal-trees looked over the walls, and a couple of very antiquated cannon looked through them, but nothing stirred. It made a splendid picture at broad noon, the blue sky and the old red-stone city on her little hill, holding up her minarets and the white marble bubbles of her temples, and then the yellow sand drifting up; but one could not



look at it long. Colonel Starr, from the door of his tent, half a mile away, had looked at it pretty steadily for two hours, so steadily that his eyes, red and smarting with the dust of a two hundred mile ride, watered copiously, and made him several degrees more uncomfortable than he had been before.



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I doubt whether any idea of the beauty of Lalpore had a place in the Colonel's mind, it was so full of other considerations. He thought more, probably, of the thickness of its walls than of their colour, and speculated longer upon the position of the arsenal than upon the curves of the temples. Because, in the Colonel's opinion, it had come to look very like fighting. In the opinion of little Lieutenant Pink the fighting should have been over and done with yesterday, and the 17th Midlanders should be 'bagging' the Maharajah's artillery by now. Little Lieutenant Pink was spoiling for the fray. So were the men, most of them. They wanted a change of diet. Thomas Jones, sergeant, entirely expressed the sentiments of his company when he said that somebody ort to pay up for this blessed march, they 'adn't wore the skins off their 'eels fer two 'undred mile to admire the bloomin' scenery. Besides, for Thomas Jones's part, he was tired of living on this yere bloomin' tinned rock, he wanted a bit of fresh roast kid and a Lalpore curry.

Colonel Starr had been sent to 'arrange,' if possible, and to fight if necessary. Perhaps we need not inquire into the arrangements the Government had commissioned Colonel Starr to make. They were arrangements of a kind frequently submitted to the princes of independent States in India when they are troublesome, and their result is that a great many native States are governed by English political residents, while a great many native princes attend parties at Government House in Calcutta. The Maharajah of Chita had been very troublesome indeed. Twice in the year his people had raided peaceful villages under British protection, and now he had killed a missionary. It was quite time to 'arrange' the Maharajah of Chita, and Colonel Starr, with two guns and three hundred troops, had been sent to do it.

His Highness, however, seemed indisposed to further his social prospects in Calcutta and the good of his State. For the twenty-four hours they had been in camp under his walls the Maharajah had taken no more notice of Colonel Starr and his three hundred Midlanders than if they represented so many jungle bushes. To all Colonel Starr's messages, diplomatic, argumentative, threatening, there had come the same unsatisfactory response—the Maharajah of Chita had no word to say to the British Raj. And still the gates were shut, and still only the pipal-trees looked over the wall, and only the cannon looked through.

By the time evening came Colonel Starr was at the end of his patience. He was not, unfortunately, simultaneously at the end of his investigations. He did not yet know the position or the contents of the arsenal, the defensibility of the walls, the water supply, or the number of men under arms in that silent, impassive red city on the hill. The reports of the peasantry had been contradictory, and this ordinary means of ascertaining these things had failed him, while he very particularly required to

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know them, his force being small. The Government had assured Colonel Starr that the Maharajah of Chita would be easy to arrange; that he was a tractable person, and that half the usual number of troops would be ample, which made His Highness's conduct, if anything, more annoying. And Colonel Starr's commissariat, even in respect to 'tinned rock,' had not been supplied with the expectation of besieging Lalpore. The attack would be uncertain, and the Colonel hesitated the more because his instructions had been not to take the place if he could avoid it. So the commanding officer paced his tent, and composed fresh messages to the Maharajah, while Lieutenant Pink wondered in noble disgust whether the expedition was going to end in moonshine after all, and Thomas Jones, sergeant, remarked hourly to his fellow-privates, 'The 17th 'aint come two 'undred miles for this kind of a joke. The bloomin' Maharajer 'ull think we've got a funk on.'

But neither Colonel Starr nor Thomas Jones was acquainted with the reason of the remarkable attitude of Lalpore.

A week before, when the news reached him that the Viceroy was sending three hundred men and two guns to remonstrate with him for his treatment of Dr. Roberts, the Maharajah smiled, thinking of the bravery of his Chitans, the strength of his fortifications, the depth of his walls, and the wheat stored in his city granaries. No one had ever taken Lalpore since the Chitans took it—in all Rajputana there were none so cunning and so brave as the Chitans. As to bravery, greater than Rajput bravery simply did not exist. The Maharajah held a council, and they all sported with the idea of English soldiers coming to Lalpore. Maun Rao begged to go out and meet them to avenge the insult.

'Maharajah,' said he, 'the Chitans are sufficient against the world; why should we speak of three hundred monkeys' grandsons? If the sky fell, our heads would be pillars to protect you!'

And after a long discussion the Maharajah agreed to Maun Rao's proposal. The English could come only one way. A day's march from Lalpore they would be compelled to ford a stream. There the Maharajah's army would meet them, ready, as Maun Rao said in the council, to play at ball with their outcast heads. There was a feast afterwards, and everybody had twice as much opium as usual. In the midst of the revelry they made a great calculation of resources. The Maharajah smiled again as he thought of the temerity of the English in connection with the ten thousand rounds of ammunition that had just come to him on camel back through Afghanistan from Russia—it was a lucky and timely purchase. Surji Rao, Minister of the Treasury, when this was mentioned, did not smile. Surji Rao had bought the cartridges at a very large discount, which did not appear in the bill, and he knew that not even Chitan valour could make more than one in ten of them go off. Therefore, when the Maharajah congratulated Surji Rao upon his

foresight in urging the replenishment of the arsenal at this particular time, Surji Rao found it very difficult to congratulate himself.



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It all came out the day before the one fixed for the expedition. His Highness, being in great spirits, had ordered a shooting competition, and the men were served from the new stores supplied to the State of Chita by Petroff Gortschakin of St. Petersburg. The Maharajah drove out to the ranges to look on, and all his Ministers with him. All, that is, except the Minister of the Treasury, who begged to be excused; he was so very unwell.

Some of the men knelt and clicked and reloaded half a dozen times before they could fire; some were luckier, and fired the first time or the third without reloading. They glanced suspiciously at one another and hesitated, while there grew a shining heap of unexploded cartridges, a foot high, under the Maharajah's very nose. His Highness looked on stupefied for ten minutes, then burst into blazing wrath. Maun Rao rode madly about examining, inquiring, threatening.

'Our cartridges are filled with powdered charcoal,' he cried, smiting one of them between two stones to prove his words. There was an unexpected noise, and the noble General jumped into the air, bereft of the largest half of his curled moustache. That one was not. Then they all went furiously back to the palace. The only other incident of that day which it is worth our while to chronicle is connected with Surji Rao and the big shoe. The big shoe was administered to Surji Rao by a man of low caste, in presence of the entire court and as many of the people of Lalpore as chose to come and look on. It was very thoroughly administered, and afterwards Surji Rao was put formally outside the city gates, and told that the king desired never to look upon his black face again. Which was rubbing it in rather unfairly, as His Highness's own complexion was precisely the same shade. With great promptitude Surji Rao took the road to meet the English and sell his information, but this possibility occurred to the Maharajah soon enough to send men after him to frustrate it.

'There shall be at least enough sound cartridges in his bargain for that,' said His Highness grimly.

The Chitan spirit did not flourish quite so vaingloriously at the council that night, and there was no more talk about the sky falling upon dauntless Chitan heads. The sky had fallen, and the effect was rather quenching than otherwise. The previous stores were counted over, and it was found that the men could not be served with three rounds apiece out of them. When this was announced, nobody thought of doubting the wisdom of the Maharajah's decision to shut up the gates of the city, and trust to the improbability of the English venturing to attack him in such small numbers, not knowing his resources. So that very night, lest any word should go abroad of the strait of the warriors of Chita, the gates were shut. But all the city knew. Moti knew. Sunni knew.



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Two days later, Moti and Sunni heard the English bugles half a mile away. They were playing 'Weel may the keel row!' the regimental march-past, as Colonel Starr's Midlanders did the last half mile to their camping-ground. The boys were in the courtyard among the horses, and Sunni dropped the new silver bit he was looking at, held up his head, and listened. He was the same yellow-haired, blue-eyed Sunni, considerably tanned by the fierce winds of Rajputana; but there came a brightness over his face as he listened, that had not been there since he was a very little boy.

'How beautiful the music is!' said he to Moti.

Moti put his fingers in his ears.

'It is horrible,' he cried. 'It screams and it rushes. How can they be able to make it? I shall tell my father to have it stopped.'

Presently the bugles stopped of themselves, and Moti forgot about them, but the brightness did not go out of Sunni's face, and all day long he went about humming the air of 'Weel may the keel row,' with such variations as might be expected. He grew very thoughtful toward evening, but his eyes shone brighter than any sapphires in the Maharajah's iron boxes. As to an old Mahomedan woman from Rubbulgurh, who cooked her chupatties alone and somewhat despised, she heard the march-past too, and was troubled all day long with the foolish idea that the captain-sahib would presently come in to tea, and would ask her, Tooni, where the memsahib was.

CHAPTER IX

Sunni had his own room in the palace, a little square place with a high white wall and a table and chair in it, which Dr. Roberts had given him. The table held his books, his pen and ink and paper. There was a charpoy in one corner, and under the charpoy a locked box. There were no windows, and the narrow door opened into a passage that ran abruptly into a wall, a few feet farther on. So nobody saw Sunni when he carried his chirag, his little chimneyless, smoking tin lamp, into his room, and set it in a niche on the wall, took off his shoes, and threw himself down on his charpoy at eleven o'clock that night. For a long time he had been listening to the bul-buls, the nightingales, in the garden, and thinking of this moment. Now it had come, and Sunni quivered and throbbed all over with excitement. He lay very still, though, on the watch for footsteps, whispers, breathings in the passage. Four years in the palace had taught Sunni what these things meant. He lay still for more than two hours.

At last, very quietly, Sunni lifted himself up by his elbows, put first one leg, and then the other, out of the charpoy, and got up. More quietly still he drew the locked box from under the bed, took a key from his pocket, and opened it. The key squeaked in the

wood, and Sunni paused again for a long time, listening. Then in the smoky, uncertain light of the chirag flaring in the niche, he took



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from the box three gold bangles, two broken armlets, enamelled in red and blue, and a necklace of pearls with green enamelled pendants. Last, he drew out a little sword with rubies set in the hilt. For an instant Sunni hesitated; the ornaments were nothing, but the sword was his chief possession and his pride. It would be so easy to carry away! He looked at it lovingly for a minute, and laid it with the rest. All these things were his very own, but something told him that he must not take them away. Then he took the long coarse white turban cloth from his head, and wrapped everything skilfully in it. Nothing jangled, and when the parcel was made up it was flat and even. Then Sunni, with his English pen, printed in Urdu:

[Urdu text]

which in English letters would have been spelled 'Maharajah ka wasti,' and which meant simply, 'For the Maharajah,' upon one side of it. Upon the other he wrote in the large round hand that Dr. Roberts had taught him—

'To your Honner, the Maharajah of Chita. Sunni will take your Honner in his hart to his oun country, but the gifs are too heavie.'

Sunni had certainly learned politeness at last among the Rajputs. Then he put the parcel back into the box, softly locked it, and laid the key on the cover.

Still nobody came his way. Sunni took another turban cloth from its nail in the wall, a finely-woven turban cloth, with blue and gold stripes, nine yards long, for festivals. He twisted it carelessly round his neck, and blew out the chirag. Then he slipped softly into the passage, and from that into the close, dark, high-walled corridors that led into the outer courts. He stepped quickly, but carefully; the corridors were full of sleeping servants. Twice he passed a sentinel. The first was stupid with opium, and did not notice him. Mar Singh, the second, was very wide awake.

'Where go you, Sunni-ji?' he asked, inquisitively.

'I go to speak with Tooni about a matter which troubles me so that I cannot sleep,' answered Sunni; 'and afterwards I return to the little south balcony that overlooks the river; it will be cooler there if the wind blows.'

As Sunni went on, the thoughts of the sentinel became immediately fixed upon the necessity of being awake when the sahib's son should pass in again—the sahib's son had the ear of the Maharajah.

The ayah's hut was in the very farthest corner of the courtyard she had begged for, somewhat apart from the others. It was quite dark inside when Sunni pushed open the door, but the old woman, slumbering light, started up from her charpoy with a little cry.



'Choop!' said he in a low, quick tone; and Tooni, recognising his voice, was instantly silent.

Sunni made his way to the side of the bed, and took one of her hands.

'Listen, Tooni,' said he, in the same tone, 'I am come for what is mine. Give it to me.'



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'Sonny Sahib!' quavered the old woman hoarsely, 'what have I to give you? Dil kushi,[1] I have nothing.'

[1] 'Heart's delight.'

'What from fear you have never given up, nor burnt, nor thrown away,' said Sunni, firmly; 'what you said false words to ee-Wobbis about, when you told him it had been stolen from you. My little black book, with my God in it.'

'Hazur! I have it not.'

'Give it to me,' said Sunni.

The old woman raised herself in the bed. 'A sahib's promise is written in gold,' said she; 'promise that the Maharajah shall never know.'

'He shall never know,' said Sunni.

Tooni felt her way to the side of the hut; then her hand fumbled along the top of the wall; it seemed to Sunni for an interminable time. At a certain place she parted the thatch and put her hand into it with a little rustling that Sunni thought might be heard in the very heart of the palace. Then she drew out a small, tight sewn, oilskin bag, that had taken the shape of the book inside it, groped across the hut again, and gave it to Sunni. The boy's hand trembled as he took it, and without a word he slipped into the darkness outside.

Then he stopped short and went back. 'Great thanks to you, Tooni-ji,' he said softly into the darkness of the hut. 'When I find my own country I will come back and take you there too. And while I am gone Moti will love you, Tooni-ji. Peace be to you!'

Mar Singh was still awake when Sunni re-entered the palace. The wind had come, he said. Sleep would rest upon the eyelids of Sunni-ji in the south balcony.

It was a curious little place, the south balcony, really not a balcony at all, but a round-pillared pavilion with a roof that jutted out above the city wall. It hung over a garden too, rather a cramped garden, the wall and the river came so close, and one that had been left a good deal to take care of itself. Some fine pipal-trees grew in it though, one of them towered within three feet of the balcony, while the lower branches overspread the city wall. All day long the green parrakeets flashed in and out of the pipal-trees, screaming and chattering, while the river wound blue among the yellow sands outside the wall; but to-night the only sound in them was the whispering of the leaves as the south wind passed, and both the river and the sands lay silver gray in the starlight. Sunni, lying full length upon the balcony, listened with all his might. From the courtyard, away round to the right where the stables were, came a pony's neigh, and Sunni, as he heard it once—twice—thrice—felt his eyes fill with tears. It was the voice of his pony, of



his 'Dhooplal,' his 'red sunlight,' and, he would never ride Dhooplal again. The south breeze brought no other sound, the palace stretched on either side of him dark and still, a sweet heavy fragrance from a frangipanni-tree in the garden floated up, and that was all. Sunni looked across the river, and saw that a group of palms on the other side was beginning to stand distinctly against the sky. Then he remembered that he must make haste.



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The first thing he did was to unwind his long turban from his neck, and cut it in two. Two-thirds he twisted round his waist, the other he made fast to one of the little red stone pillars of the balcony. It hung straight and black down into the shadows of the pipal-tree. Then, very gradually and cautiously, Sunni slipped over the balcony's edge and let himself down, down, till he reached a branch thick enough to cling to. The turban was none too long, the branches at the top were so slender. Just as he grasped a thick one, clutching it with both arms and legs, and swaying desperately in the dark, he felt a rush of wings across his face, and a great white owl flew out hooting in her panic. The boy almost missed his catch with fear, and the Maharajah, wakeful in his apartments, lost another good hour's sleep through hearing the owl's cry. It was the worst of omens, the Maharajah believed, and sometimes he believed it with less reason.

As quickly as he dared, Sunni let himself down branch by branch till he reached the level of the wall. Presently he stood upon it in the subsiding rustle of the leaves, breathless and trembling.. He seemed to have disturbed every living thing within a hundred yards. A score of bats flew up from the wall crevices, a flying fox struck him on the shoulder, at his feet something black and slender twisted away into a darker place. Sunni stood absolutely still, gradually letting go his hold upon the pipal twigs. Presently everything was as it had been before, except for the little dark motionless figure on the wall; and the south wind was bringing across the long, shrill, mournful howls of the jackals that plundered the refuse of the British camp half a mile away.

Then Sunni lay down flat on the top of the wall, and began to work himself with his hands and feet towards the nearest embrasure. An old cannon stood in this, and threatened with its wide black mouth any foe that should be foolish enough to think of attacking the fort from the river. This venerable piece of ammunition had not been fired for ten years, and would burst to a certainty if it were fired now; but as nobody had ever dreamed of attacking Lalpore from the river that didn't particularly matter. When Sunni reached it, he crouched down in its shadow—the grayness behind the palms was spreading—and took the rest of his turban cloth from his waist. Then he took off his coat, and began to unwind a rope from his body—a rope made up of all sorts of ends, thick and thin, long and short, and pieced out with leather thongs. Sunni was considerably more comfortable when he had divested himself of it. He tied the rope and the turban cloth together, and fastened the rope end to the old gun's wheel. He looked over for a second—no longer—but it was too dark to tell how far down the face of the thirty-foot wall his ragged contrivance hung. It was too dark as well to see whether the water rippled against the wall or not; but Sunni knew that the river was low. As a matter of fact he had only about five feet to drop, and he went very comfortably into a thick bed of wet sand. Nor was anything known of his going in Lalpore until daybreak, when one of the palace sweepers found the end of a blue and gold turban flapping about the south balcony; and Moti, who often went early to tell his dreams to Sunni, brought the Maharajah a parcel.



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CHAPTER X

'What's this?' said Colonel Starr, looking up from his camp table, where he was writing a final message for translation to the Maharajah. The sun was on the point of rising, the air was crisp, and the sky was splendid. Lalpore, on her buttressed slope, sat as proud and as silent as ever; but something like a blue ribbon floated from the south wall over the river.

'What's this?' said Colonel Starr, with the deepest possible astonishment.

'Pris'ner, sir,' answered Thomas Jones, saluting.

'*What?*' said the Colonel. 'Nonsense! Where did you get him?'

'Beg pardon, sir. Peters were on duty, sir, at the second outpost, sir. It were about two hours ago as far as I could judge, sir, not 'avin' the time by me. Peters seed pris'ner a-comin' strite fer the camp across the sands from the river, sir. Peters sings out "Oo goes?" H'AND there been no notiss took, pints, sir.'

'Yes,' interposed Sunni, composedly, in his best English, 'he did. But he did not fire. And that was well, for he might have hit me. I am not broken.'

'Go on, Jones,' said the Colonel. 'This is very queer.'

'Pris'ner were about ten yards off, sir, 'an, as 'e says, Peters *might* 'a hit 'im,' said Sergeant Jones, with solemn humour, 'but afore he'd made up 'is mind to fire, 'e'd come so close Peters saw 'ow small he was, an' therefore didn't, sir.'

'Quite right,' remarked Sunni. 'Peters might have killed me.'

The Colonel nodded. He was looking with absorbed interest into Sunni's eyes. He came out of his instant of abstraction with a start, while Jones went on with respectful volubility.

'Beggin' pardon, sir, Peters says as 'ow 'e were all struck of a heap, sir, at 'earin' the young 'un call out in English, sir, an' bein' so light complected fer a native, sir, an' even lighter in that light, Peters didn't rightly know wot 'e might be firin' at, sir. Peters do be a bit superstitious.'

'Peters took him then, I suppose?' The Colonel smiled ironically.

'Beggin' *your* pardon, sir, it was rather 'im as took Peters. 'E walked strite up to 'im, an' "Ware is the burra[1] sahib?" says 'e. Peters sends 'im into the guard tent to me as 'e passed on his beat, and pris'ner says "*You ain't the burra sahib,*" says he. Then I says



to pris'ner, "You bito[2] an' give an account of yerself," says I. Says 'e quite 'aughty like, "I'll account fer myself to the burra sahib," an' wouldn't take no chaff. But 'e bitoes, an' curls 'isself up in the sand, an' goes sound asleep in no time—an' 'ere 'e is, sir.'

[1] 'Principal.'

[2] 'Sit down on the ground.'

'Also,' corrected Sunni, 'he gave me some coffee. He is a good man. Are you the burra sahib?' he asked the Colonel.

But Colonel Starr was not in a mood to answer questions regarding his dignity. He looked at the queer slender figure before him, in its torn coat of embroidered silk, and its narrow, shapeless, dirty cotton trousers; and especially he looked at the boy's hair and eyes—his wavy yellow hair and his blue eyes.



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'You are not a Rajput, you are an English boy,' he said finally, with amazed conviction.

At another time the Colonel would have been wild with excitement at such a discovery, but for the moment his mind was full of graver things. In an hour he meant to attack Lalpore. He dismissed his kindling enthusiasm, and added simply, 'How came you here?'

'I came by a rope from the palace to the pipal-tree, and thence to the south wall, and thence to the river bed. It was not hard. Knowing the shallows of the river, I arrived quite easily by wading.'

'You come from the fort? Are there any other English there?' The Colonel's voice was quick and eager.

'Not even one! Ee-Wobbis was there, but he is killed.'

'Ah!' said Colonel Starr. 'When was he killed?'

'In the evening on the tenth day of the month. I do not properly know for why. It was not the Maharajah,' added Sunni quickly; 'it was Maun Rao. Ee-Wobbis was my countryman, and I hate Maun Rao.'

The orderly came for the final message that was to be sent to the Maharajah. Colonel Starr told him it would be ready in half an hour.

'Have they given you any breakfast?' he asked.

'No, thank you—not yet,' answered Sunni politely.

The Colonel wrote an order, and gave it to Thomas Jones. 'Be smart,' he added.

Until Thomas Jones returned with some bread and bacon and a bowl of milk, and until Sunni had eaten the bread and drunk the milk, the Colonel looked at the boy as seldom as he could, and said only two words. 'No bacon?' he asked.

Sunni flushed. 'If it is excusable,' said he, 'I do not eat of the pig.'

At which Colonel Starr's face expressed curiosity, amusement, and interest all at once; but he kept silence until Sunni had finished. 'Now,' said he pleasantly, 'listen, my small prisoner. I am sure you have a great deal to tell me about yourself. Very good, I will hear it. I should like to hear it. But not now—there is no time. Since you have taken the trouble to escape from this place, you do not want to go back again, I suppose?'

'I want to go to my own country—with you,' said Sunni. 'I can march.'



The Colonel smiled. It was the smile of a brave man, and kindly. His men knew it as well as they knew his sterner looks. Sunni thought it a beautiful smile.

'You shall go,' he said, 'but we are not quite ready to start yet. Perhaps in a few days, perhaps in a few weeks, we shall be. A good deal depends on what you can tell me.'

Sunni looked straight into the Colonel's eyes, a little puzzled.

'How do they get water in Lalpore?' asked the Colonel, to begin with.

'There are four wells,' said Sunni, 'and two of them have no bottom.'

'H'm! And what is that white building with the round roof that we see from here?'

'That is the mosque of Larulla,' said Sunni, 'but it is no longer of consequence; there is so little Mussulmans in Lalpore. The soldiers hang their guns there now.'



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'Ah! And has the Maharajah many soldiers, and have they good guns— new guns?'

Sunni looked into the Colonel's face with eager pleasure to reply; but there he saw something that made him suddenly close his lips. He had not lived ten years among the Rajputs without learning to read faces, and in Colonel Starr's he saw that all this talk the Colonel desired about Lalpore was not for Lalpore's good. The boy thought for a minute, and tightened his lips, while a little firm line came on each side of his mouth. He only opened them to say, 'Burra sahib, I cannot tell you that.'

'But you must tell me,' said Colonel Starr firmly.

'No,' returned Sunni, 'not that, nor any more informations about the fort.'

The Colonel's face grew stern. He was not accustomed to disobedience.

'Come,' he said; 'out with it, boy. I have no time to waste.' His tone was so serious that Sunni felt a little nervous thrill run all over him.

'No,' said he.

The Colonel tried another way:

'Come, my little chap,' said he gently, 'you are English, are you not?'

Sunni nodded.

Then you must serve the English Queen. She has sent me here to punish the Maharajah for killing the padre-sahib. You must help me.'

'The Maharajah *did not* kill ee-Wobbis,' cried Sunni excitedly. 'I have already once said that. The Maharajah he *like* ee-Wobbis. I am English, but the Maharajah is my father and my mother. I cannot speak against the Maharajah, burra sahib.'

There came a light into the Colonel's eyes which was not kindled by anger. He found himself liking this slip of a ragged urchin with fair hair, who defied him—liking him tremendously. But the crisis was grave; he could not sacrifice his men to a child's scruple; he could not let himself be defied. He took out his watch, and made his face hard.

'Then,' said he coldly, 'you are either the Maharajah's deserter or his spy. If you have deserted, I am disposed to send you back to him, since you are of no use to us. If you are his spy, it is my duty to have you shot. I will give you five minutes to save your skin in.'

'But—but you are my *countryman*, burra sahib!' There was a sob in his voice.



The only possible answer to that was a hug, so it went unanswered. Colonel Starr set himself to think of his Midlanders.

Sunni lifted his blue eyes entreatingly to the Colonel's face, but he had turned it away. He was watching a little brown lizard sunning itself outside the tent door, and wondering how long he could keep his disciplinary expression. You could hear nothing in the tent but the ticking of the watch. Sunni looked down at the lizard too, and so the minutes passed.

Three of them passed. Colonel Starr found himself hoping even more that the boy should stand firm than that he should speak. Colonel Starr began to say softly within himself, 'I am a brute.' The fifth minute was up. 'Will you speak?' asked the Colonel.

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'Burra sahib, no,' said Sunni.

At that instant Lieutenant Pink galloped up to the door of the tent.

'They've come to their senses at last, sir. Six mounted men have just left the north gate, signalling for a parley.'

The Colonel jumped to his feet and gave half a dozen orders without stopping. The last one was to Sunni. 'Stay here,' he said; 'you shall soon go back to your own country.'

The Chitan horsemen had ridden out to announce the coming of the Maharajah, so that the English officer might meet him half-way. They gave the message gravely, and rode slowly back. Half an hour later there arose a great shouting and blowing of trumpets inside the walls, the royal gate was flung open, and the Maharajah appeared, swaying in a blaze of silk and jewels upon an enormous elephant with a painted trunk and trappings fringed in gold and silver. Trumpeters and the crimson flag of Chita went before him; Maun Rao and the other generals rode behind him; at his side sat his bard, his poet laureate, with glowing eyes, speaking constantly into his royal ear the glorious annals of his house. Colonel Starr and his little suite met this wonderful cavalcade a quarter of a mile from the city, and the Maharajah and the Colonel dismounted. Whereupon the magnificent Rajput, in his diamond aigrettes and his silken swathings, and the broad shouldered British officer, in his Queen's red coat, solemnly kissed each other. They exchanged other politenesses, spoke of the health of the Viceroy and of his 'good friend' the Maharajah, and His Highness arranged a durbar to be held in his hall of audience at two that afternoon, when he would hear the desires of the British Raj.

Strangely enough, it occurred to nobody to wonder why the Maharajah had so suddenly changed his mind. To nobody, that is, except Sonny Sahib. He guessed the reason, and sitting all morning in a corner of the Colonel's tent, as he had been told, he thought about it very seriously. Once or twice he had to swallow a lump in his throat to help him to think. The Maharajah's reason was that he supposed that Sonny Sahib had told the English about Lalpore's ammunition; and that, under the circumstances, was enough to bring lumps into anybody's throat.

The Colonel was very busy, and took no notice of him, except to say that he should have some dinner. He heard talk of the Maharajah's visit and of the durbar, and he revolved that too. When the time came, Sunni had concluded that he also must go to the durbar. He said so to Colonel Starr.

'Nonsense!' said the Colonel. 'And yet,' he added reflectively, 'it might be useful to have you there. I daresay you will be safe enough. You are not afraid?'

Sunni said he was not afraid. So they all went, and the Maharajah, rising from his ivory chair, received them with much state and ceremony. He frowned when he saw Sunni,

but said nothing. His Highness felt that he was not in a position to resent anything, and thought bitterly of Petroff Gortschakin.



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The durbar proceeded. Formally, and according to strict precedence, each man spoke. With great amiability Colonel Starr presented the demands of the English Government; with greater amiability the Maharajah and his officers repelled them. But Colonel Starr was firm, and he had the unanswerable argument of three hundred well-armed men and two nine-pounders, which Maun Rao would have to meet with Petroff Gortschakin's cartridges. After duly and sadly reflecting upon this, the Maharajah concluded that he would give up ee-Wobbis's murderers—one of them at any rate—and let himself be arranged, at all events for the present. Afterwards he would say to Maun Rao that it was only for the present. He summoned all his politeness to his aid, and said in the end that such was his admiration for the English Lord Sahib in Calcutta, such his friendship and respect, that he would welcome any one who came to Lalpore in his name.

'Accompanied by a small force,' added Colonel Starr in the vernacular, and the Maharajah also added, while Maun Rao behind him ground his teeth, 'Accompanied by a small force.'

'One word more,' said the Maharajah, 'and the durbar is ended. The opium pledge will appear, and we will drink it with you. From the palm of your hand I will drink, and from the palm of my hand you shall drink; but the lips of the boy who comes with you shall not taste it. The Rajputs do not drink opium with their betrayers.'

Sunni heard, and his face grew crimson.

'Maharajah!' he shouted, 'I did not tell; I did not tell.'

The Maharajah shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

'He is not of our blood; why should he have kept silence?' said the old man.

'But he did keep silence,' said the Colonel, looking straight into the Chitan's sunken eyes. 'I asked him about your men and your ammunition. I commanded him, I threatened him. I give you my word of honour as a soldier that he would say nothing.'

The English in India are always believed. A cry went up from the other Chitans. Moti clapped his hands together, Maun Rao caught the boy up and kissed him.

'Then,' said the Maharajah slowly, 'I love you still, Sunni, and you shall drink the opium with the rest. Your son,' he added to Colonel Starr, 'will bring praise to his father.'

The Colonel smiled. 'I have no children,' said he. 'I wish he were indeed my son.'

'If he is not your son,' asked the Maharajah cunningly, 'why did you bring him to the durbar?'

'Because he wished to come—'



'To say that I did not tell,' said Sunni.

'Call the woman,' ordered His Highness.

She was in the crowd in the courtyard, waiting to see her old master pass again. She came in bent and shaking, with her head-covering over her face. She threw herself at Colonel Starr's feet, and kissed them.

'Captan Sahib!' she quavered, 'Captan Sahib! Mirbani do!'[1]



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[1] 'Give mercy.'

There was absolute silence in the audience hall. A parrakeet flashed through it screaming. The shadows were creeping east over the marble floor; a little sun flamed out on the hilt of Maun Rao's sword. The Colonel stooped over the old woman and raised her up. His face whitened as he looked at her.

'It's Tooni!' he said, hoarsely. And then, in a changed voice, unconscious of the time and place, 'Tooni, what happened to the memsahib?' he asked.

The ayah burst into an incoherent torrent of words and tears. The memsahib was very, very ill, she said. There were not five breaths left in her body. The memsahib had gone in the cart—and the chota baba[1]—the Sonny Sahib—had always had good milk—and she had taken none of the memsahib's ornaments, only her little black book with the charm in it

[1] 'The little baby.'

'That is true talk,' interposed Sunni, 'Tooni's words are all true. Here is the little black book.'

Colonel Starr had the face of a man in a dream, half conscious and trying to wake up. His lips worked as he took the oilskin bag from Sunni, and he looked at it helplessly. Little Lieutenant Pink took it gently from him, slit it down the side with a pocket-knife, and put back into the Colonel's hand the small leather-bound book. On the back of it was printed, in tarnished gold letters, 'Common Prayer.'

It was a very little book, but the Colonel was obliged to hold it with both hands. Even then they trembled so that he could hardly turn to the fly-leaf. His eyes filled as he read there, 'Evelyn Starr from John Starr, December 5th, 1855,' and remembered when he had written that. Still the shadows crept eastward, the mynas chattered in the garden, the scent of the roses came across warm in the sun. The Rajputs looked at him curiously, but no one spoke.

The Colonel's eyes were fixed upon Sunni's face. He made one or two efforts to speak that did not succeed. Then 'And this is the baby,' he said.

'Hazur, ha!'[1] replied Tooni, 'Sonny Sahib hai!'

[1] 'Your Honour, yes. It is Sonny Sahib.'

The Colonel looked at Sunni an instant longer, and the boy smiled into his face. 'Yes,' said he assuredly, with a deep breath, 'it is Sonny Sahib.'



'The woman saw your honour this morning, and the khaber was brought to me then,' remarked the Maharajah complacently.

It was three weeks, after all, before the Maharajah of Chita was satisfactorily arranged. For three weeks Thomas Jones indulged in roast kid and curry every day from Lalpore, and Lieutenant Pink, having no more warlike way of amusing himself, made sanguinary water-colour sketches of the city to send home to the Misses Pink in England. The day came at last when Colonel Starr and Sonny Sahib went to pay their final respects to the Maharajah. With his hand upon his son's shoulder the Colonel turned once more after the last courtesy had been exchanged.

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'Your Highness will remember,' said the English soldier for the pleasure of saying it, 'he did not tell.'

The end