FLORA ANNIE WEBSTER STEEL

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SHUB'RÂT

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The church-gong hung from the level branch of a spreading *sirus* tree, whence the slight breeze of dawn, rustling the dry pods of a past summer and stirring the large soft puff-blossoms of the present, seemed to gather up a faint whisper and a fainter perfume to be upborne into space--further and further and further--by the swelling sound-waves of the gong as it vibrated to old Deen Mahomed's skilful stroke.

More like a funeral knell, this, calling the dead to forgetfulness, than a cheerful summons of the living to give thanks for life, for creation and preservation. You could hear each mellow note quiver into silence, before--loud and full with a sort of hollow boom--the great disc of bronze shook once more to its own resounding noise; seeming in its agitation to feel the strangeness of the task more than the striker; though, to say sooth, few things in earth or heaven were more incongruous than this church chime and the man who rang it. For Deen Mahomed, as his name implies, was of the faith of Islâm; fierce-featured, hawk-eyed, with the nameless look of his race; a look suiting the curved sword

he wore, in virtue of his office as watchman, better than the brass badge slung over his shoulder proclaiming him to be a member of the Indian Church Establishment--that alien Church in an alien land.

And yet the old man's figure fitted close with the building he guarded; for despite the new title of St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, the church remained outwardly what it had been built to be--a Mahomedan tomb. Its white dome and corner cupolas rose familiarly into the blue sky beyond the *sirus* trees, where, even at this early hour, a hint of coming heat was to be seen in a certain pallidness and hardness. Within, beneath that central dome, encircled now by pious Christian texts, lay buried a champion of another God, whose name, interlaced into a thousand delicate traceries, still formed the decoration of each architrave, each screen; lay buried, let us hope, beyond sight or sound of what went on above his helplessness.

How this change had come about is of no moment to the story. Such things have been, nay, are, in India, seeming in truth more fantastic when set down in pen and ink than they do when seen in the warm clasp of that Indian sunlight which shines down indifferently on so many a strange anomaly of caste, and creed, and custom. Most likely when the wave of evangelical fervour reached the East to prepare the way for the Great Sacrifice of purification by blood and fire which came to native and alien alike in the horrors and wonders of "Fifty-seven," some pious bureaucrat had felt a certain militant satisfaction in handing over a heathen edifice to Christian uses. Such things have their sentimental side; and this tomb had been--like many another--Crown

property, and so had become ours by right of conquest. No one else, at any rate, had laid claim to it, except, in some vague, mysterious way, old Deen Mahomed, and he only to its guardianship as being "the dust of the feet of the descendants of *Huzrut-Ameerulla-moomeereen-ulli-Moortáza*, the Holy." In other words, an inheritor of the saints in light.

Now this sort of title is one not likely to find favour in alien eyes. Despite this, Deen Mahomed remained guardian of the Church of St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, thanks to that ineradicable sense--one may almost say common sense--of justice which dies hard in the Englishman of all creeds. The only difference to the old man--at least so the authorities assumed--being that he wore a sword, a badge, chimed the church-gong, and received the munificent sum of five rupees a month for performing these trivial duties; which latter fact naturally put the very idea of discontent beyond the pale of practical politics. Apparently Deen Mahomed was of this opinion also; at least he never hinted at objection.

Even now, as he stood unmovable save for one slowly swinging arm, there was neither dislike nor approval on the fierce, yet indifferent face looking out at the white glare of the tomb beyond the *sirus* shade, at the worshippers--laden with Bibles and Prayer-books--passing up the steps, crossing the plinth and so disappearing within, and at the long line of vehicles--from the Commissioner's barouche to the clerk's *palki*--seeking the shade to await their owners' return when the service should be over. Not so wearisome a task as might be imagined, since the big bazaar was near for refreshment or recreation; so near, in fact, that any solemn

pause was apt to give prominence to the twanging of unmentionable *sutaras* or bursts of unmistakable laughter. For, as ill-luck would have it, not only the bazaar, but the very worst quarter of it, lay just behind the fringe of date palms which gave such local colour to the sketches of the church which the Chaplain's wife drew for their friends at home. And yet, in a way, this close propinquity to the atrocious evils of heathendom had its charm for the little colony of the elect who lived beside the Chaplain. In the still evenings, when the scent of the oranges which were blossoming madly in the watered gardens round the houses filled the air, the inhabitants would sit out among the fast-fading English flowers, and shake their heads in sorrowful yet satisfied sympathy with their own position as exiles in that invisible Sodom and Gomorrah. Invisible, because St. John's-in-the-Wilderness rose between them and it, shutting out everything save the impartial sky, whence the sunshine poured down alike on Christian and heathen, just and unjust. Thus the visible church was to them as the invisible one; a veil between them and the people.

It was a square building recessed and buttressed to a hexagon. The Chaplain, however, preferred to call it a St. Andrew's cross, and perhaps he was right. Perhaps again Deen Mahomed and his cult had really had as little to say to its form as the Chaplain; such responsibility being reserved to the primeval *sraddha*, or four-pointed death-offering. Be that as it may, there was a coolness between the new parson and his watchman, owing to the former declaring it to be a scandal that the latter should hold such office in a Christian place of worship, when he was not even an

inquirer! Certainly he was not. He neither inquired of others nor tolerated inquiry from them. He slept on the plinth of nights, chimed the gong by day, and kept the rest of his life to himself. That was all.

Not one of the congregation filing into the church that morning knew more of him than this. So he stood indifferently waiting for the first note of the harmonium to tell him his task was over; listening for it to pulsate out into the sunshine, and, blending with the last note of the gong, go forth upon the endless waves of ether. Go forth hand-in-hand, plaintiff and defendant; a quaint couple seeking extinction, or perhaps the Great White Throne against which the ripple of life beats in vain.

The note came this morning as on other mornings, and Deen Mahomed turned, indifferent as ever, to his house. It was a mud and thatch hovel clinging to one side of a miniature tomb, half in ruins, which some follower of the saint had built within the shadow of his master's grave. It stood just opposite the flight of steps up which a late worshipper or two was hurrying, glad, even at that early hour, to escape from the glare of sunlight. Yet on the warm dust before the hovel a child of four or five sat contentedly making a garden, while the coachman of a smart barouche and pair drawn up close by looked down with interest on the process. 'Twas God Almighty, says Bacon, who first planted a garden; but ever since the task has had a strange charm for man, and even Deen Mahomed paused with a smile for the little watered plots and pretended paths.

"Thou hast encroached on thy neighbour's land to-day, Rahmut," he said, "and gone into the roadway. Lo! the *Sirkar*

will make thee pay revenue, little robber."

"Trust them for that," put in the coachman quickly; then he chuckled. "But the boy grows; yea! he grows to take *his father's place*."

The old man frowned, yet laid his hand gently on the child's head, as he said evasively: "Have a care, Rahmut, whilst I am gone, and water thy rose, or 'twill die in this heat."

He pointed to a drooping white rosebud which the little boy had stuck in his centre bed.

"Ay," replied the coachman, "'tis hot indeed for the time of year."

"As hot a *Shub'rât* as I remember. God send the night be cool and bring peace."

"God send it may," echoed the coachman piously, his evil-looking face showing the worse for his unction. "God send all get their deserts on this the great Night of Record."

He made the remark without a quiver, oblivious, apparently, of a long series of petty thefts against his master's grain, and many another peccadillo of the past year. But then, though every faithful Mahomedan believes that on *Shub'rât* God comes to earth with all the saints in glory, there, in the presence of the Dead, to write his Record for the coming year upon the foreheads of the Living, things had a knack of going on after this judgment much as they did before; especially in regard to such trivial offences as the theft of grain from a horse.

"God send they may," re-echoed the old man, suddenly, fiercely. The words seemed to cut like a knife; yet once more he laid his hand upon the child's head almost in caress.

"Have a care, child, for thy self and thy rose. Thou didst not pick it, sure, from the *sahib's* garden?" he added hastily.

Rahmut threw up a handful of dry dust and spread his little skinny arms in gay denial.

"Lo! *nâna!* what a thought! I begged it of the *padre's baba*. He comes ever to the assemblage with flowers, and the white *mem*, his mother, bade him give it to me and that too--she brought it in her bag of books."

He pointed with pride to some strips of torn white paper stuck in the sand as walls to the garden. Then his tone changed to tears. "Oh, *nâna! nâna!* thou hast spoilt it!--thou hast spoilt it!" For the old man in sudden fury had swept the remains of the offending tract from their foundations, crushed them to a ball, and flung it across the sunshiny roadway to the plinth, where it skimmed along the smooth surface to roll finally to the very door of the church.

"No tears, child--no tears, I say," came in a fierce order. "If thou wouldst not have me beat thee, no tears. Thou shalt not even play with such things, thou shalt not touch them. I, the dust from the feet of the saints, say it."

So, leaving the child whimpering, he turned to the hovel, muttering to himself. Rujjub, the coachman, nodded to the next on the rank.

"The elephant escaped through the door and his tail stuck in the keyhole," he said, with a sneer. "*Meean fakeer-ji* will not have his grandson touch the *Ungeel* (Evangel), and chimes the church-gong himself. But, in truth, he loves the old tomb--God smite those who defile it--as he loves the boy. God smite those who sent the boy's father over the Black

Water to fight the infidel in China. Lo! even *Jehad* (holy war) is accursed with such leaders."

"Bah! Rujjub," retorted his fellow cheerfully. "'Tis so sometimes without fault. 'He climbed the camel to get out of the way, and still the dog bit him,' say the wise. The *Meean* is half-crazed, all know that. And as for thee! Did thy master pay as fair as mine we should have less zeal from some folk, should we not, brothers? A fist full of rupees brings peace, since there is no clapping with one palm!"

A chuckle ran round the squatting grooms at this home-thrust at Rujjub the grumbler--Rujjub the agitator. The sweet high voices of English women singing a missionary hymn came floating out through the open doors. A hovering kite, far in the blue, swooped suddenly, startling the green and gold parrots--inlaid like a mosaic pattern on the white dome--to screaming flight for shelter towards the *sirus* trees. Little Rahmut, forgetting his tears, built fresh walls of sand to his garden and watered the fading rosebud anew.

Then a sort of murmurous silence, born of the measured cadence of one voice from within and the lazy, listless gossiping without, settled down over the glare and the shade. Only from the hut came no sound at all. No sound even from the little tomb where the old watchman knelt, his hands on his knees in the attitude of prayer, his keen eyes staring straight into the soft darkness--for the only entrance was so small that the crouching figure blocked out the day. But darkness or light were alike to Deen Mahomed, lost as he was to the present in a dull memory and hope. Perhaps, when, years before, he had first begun to hold his service in defiance of that other worship, he may have put up some

definite petition. Now there was none. Only the cry so seldom heard by human ears, yet whose echoes so often resound like thunder through the world--

How long, O lord! how long?

So he knelt, paralysed by the very perplexity of his own prayer, until a louder burst from the harmonium and a sudden hubbub among the carriages warned him that the service was over. He rose indifferently, and came out into the sunlight. It lay now like a yellow glaze over the white stucco of St. John's-in-the-Wilderness, over the gaily dressed congregation hurrying to escape from it in their cool homes, over Rujjub whipping his horses viciously, obedient to a sharp order from the Englishman who had just handed a delicate woman into the carriage, over Rahmut's garden with its white rosebud. And then----!

The whole thing was past in a moment. A plunge--a swerve! a little naked imp making a dive before those prancing feet with an eager, childish cry; then a shriek from the pale-faced lady standing up in the barouche, a small figure, crushed and bleeding, in an old man's arms, and a shout seeming to fill the air.

"Rahmut! Ah, mercy of the Most High! Justice! Justice!"

"Don't look, my dear," said an English voice; "please remember that you--you had better drive home. It was the child's own fault. Doctor, hadn't we better drive home?"

"Yes, yes. Drive home, dear lady!" said another English voice in hurried approach to the scene. "You are not fit. Now then, good people, stand back, please. Carmichael, make those niggers stand back. I must see the boy."

It was easy enough to ensure compliance so far as the pale faces, made paler by shocked sympathy, went; easier still to enforce it from the darker ones accustomed to obey orders given in that foreign accent. But how about the old man standing like a stag at bay, clutching the child to his breast, and backing towards his hut with a loud, fierce cry?

"Touch him not! Touch him not! Touch him not!"

"We are only driving him crazy," said the Doctor aside, "and I doubt if it is much good. I saw the wheel pass right over the chest. Let him be----"

"But it seems so cruel, so unchristian," protested the Parson.

The Doctor smiled oddly.

"That doesn't alter the fact. You're no good here; no more am I. Here, you *chuprassie!* Run like the devil to the dispensary, and tell Faiz Khân he's wanted. If he is out, one of the Mahomedan dressers--a Mahomedan, mind you--and he is to report to me. Come along, Parson. The kindest thing we can do is to go away. It's humiliating, but true."

Apparently it was so, for a sort of passive resignation came to the straining arms as the dark faces crowded round once more with plain, unhesitating, unvarnished comments.

"Lo! he is dead for sure. Well, it is the Lord's will, and he hath found freedom. See you, he wanted his flower, the foolish one."

"'Twas the horses did it," said another. "They are evil-begotten beasts. Rujjub hath said so often."

"Ai! *burri'bât!* All things are ill-begotten to one ill-begot, and Rujjub's beasts know he stints their stomachs-full," put in a third. "When I drove them in Tytler *sahib's* stable they

were true born (*i.e.* gentle) as the *sahib* was himself. Then he took pension and went home to *Wilâyet*, and I have a new master who only keeps a *phitton* (phaeton). It is undignified; but, there, 'tis fate, nought else."

But Deen Mahomed, sitting with the dead child in his arms, was not thinking of Rujjub or his horses, of *phittons* or barouches, not even of chariots of fire--in a way not even of Rahmut himself--but simply of a tract and a child's tears--those last tears which were to be a last memory for ever and ever. Yet even this thought brought no definite emotion, only a dull wonder why such things should be. A wonder so vague, so dull that when Faiz Deen arrived to give the verdict of death, the old man, yielding readily to the inevitable, echoed the truism that it was God's will.

What else, indeed, could it be to the fierce old fanatic with his creed of *kismet?*

That same evening he lingered awhile in the big bazaar on his way homewards from the sandy stretch of desert land beyond the city walls, where he had left a new anthill of a grave among the cluster belonging to his people; lingered not for pleasure but for business, since the events of the day had made it necessary that he should spend yet a few more annas from the five rupees he gained by wearing a sword, a badge, and chiming the church-gong. For it was *Shub'rât*; the night--the one night of all the long year--when the souls of the dead are permitted to visit the ancestral home. Therefore little Rahmut, so lately numbered amongst the cloud of witnesses, must not be neglected; he must find his portion like the others--a Benjamin's portion of good things such as children love.

It was already dark, but even there in the bazaar the little lamps of the dead shone from many a house, giving an unwonted radiance to the big brass platters of the sweetstuff shop where the old man paused to haggle over full weight and measure; since even in feasting the dead, the living must look after themselves. A strange sight this. The noisy bazaar, more full of stir than usual, since many a thrifty soul had put off marketing till the last. Overhead, the myriad-hued stars which, in these foggy climes, come back to memory as an integral part of the Indian night, and, beneath them, the little twinkling lamps set out in rows. Thousands of them--so much was certain from the pale suffused light showing like a dim aurora above the piled shadow of the city. On every side the same soft radiance, save towards St. John's-in-the-Wilderness rising dark beyond the fringe of palm trees. This Feast of All Souls was not for it, and to the crass ignorance of those who lived in the garden-circled houses behind it the twinkling lights set for the dead were but a sign of some new wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah, or, at best, of some heathen rite over which to shake the head regretfully.

So in front of the cavernous shop, visible by the glow, the old watchman fumbled beneath his badge with reluctant hand, for a few pence, listening the while to Rujjub's account of the morning's tragedy given in the balcony above where the latter was lounging away his leisure among heavy perfumes and tinkling jewels. One of the hearers looked down over the wooden railing, and nodded cheerfully at the chief mourner.

"It is God's will, father; no one was to blame."

"To blame," echoed Rujjub, with a thick laugh, for he was in the first loquacity of semi-intoxication and still full of resentment. "The *sahibs* say I was to blame. It is their way. But they will learn better. It is our blame if we do this and that. My brother's blame that he would not fight over the seas and get killed like Rahmut's father. 'Tis our blame for everything except for our rupees and our women--the *sahibs* can stomach them."

Some one laughed, a gay laugh chiming to the tinkle of jewels.

"*Wâh!* thou mayst laugh now, Nargeeza!" continued the man's voice savagely; "thou knowest not what virtue means----"

"'AH, brother, thou hast a hole in thy tail, said the sieve to the needle,'" quoted the other voice amid a louder titter and tinkle. Rujjub swore under his breath.

"So be it, sister! but a day of reckoning will come, and thou be damned for thy dalliance with the infidel. Yea, it will come; it will surely come."

The words echoed through Deen Mahomed's heart and brain as, leaving the shrill squabble with its running accompaniment of titters and tinkles and broad masculine guffaws behind him, he made his way back to his empty hovel.

"Yea, it will come; it will surely come!" What else was possible when God, a justly offended God, was above all? We in the West have not a monopoly in the Tower of Siloam; that belongs to every religion, to none more rightfully than to the Faith of Islâm, which leaves all things in the hand of Providence.

The belief brought a certain fierce patience to the old man as he finished his preparations for the ghostly guests who, on that night alone, could partake of the hospitality of the living. The lamps, mere wicks and oil in little shells of baked clay, were ready luted to their places by mud, outlining the interior of the tomb where Deen Mahomed performed all the rites of his religion; outlining it so strangely, that when they were lit, the old man, kneeling before the white cloth spread upon the floor, looked as if prisoned in a cage of light. There was no darkness then, only that soft radiance reflected from the newly whitewashed walls upon that fair white sheet on which, with calm ceremony, he laid the little earthen platters of food one by one, designating their owners by name.

"This to my grandson, Rahmut, who has found freedom."

That was the last dedication, and the old voice trembled a little, ever so little, as it went on into the formula of faith in one God, speaking through the mouths of his Prophets. Not one prophet tonight but many, for were they not all on earth--Moses and Elias, Jesus and Mahomed--taking part in the Great Assize where those dead ancestors would plead for the living who had inherited their sins, their failures?

Before such a tribunal as that there must be justice--justice for all things just and unjust.

So, half-kneeling, half-sitting, the old Mahomedan waited for the finger of God to write his fate for the coming year upon his forehead--waited, resting against the wall, for the spirits of the dead to come silently, invisibly, to the feast prepared for them. And Rahmut had a Benjamin's portion to console him for those tears--those last tears!

II

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The church-gong was chiming again, and again it was *Shub'rât*. Not for the first time since Deen Mahomed had put little Rahmut's platter of sweets among the Feast of the Dead, for the years had passed since the child had sat in the sunlight planting gardens. How many the old man did not consider; in point of fact it did not matter to his patience. In the end God's club must fall on the unjust; so much was sure to the eye of faith. Something more also, if the signs of the times spoke true. When the bolt fell it would not be from the blue; the mutterings of the storm were loud enough, surely, to be heard even by those alien ears. And yet Deen Mahomed, fanatic and church-chimer, standing on that hot summer evening beneath the *sirus* blossoms smiting the voice from the quavering disc of metal, knew no more than this--that the time was at hand. Whether it was always so, or whether the great Revolt was always pre-arranged, can scarcely at this distance of time be determined. Certain it is that many, like old Deen Mahomed, were simply waiting; waiting for the sign of God to slay and spare not.

Clang!

The mellow note went out into the darkening heat; for the sun was almost at its setting. St. John's-in-the-Wilderness showed all the whiter against the deepening shadows of the sky.

Clang!

Out into the stillness, the silence, as it had gone all these restless, waiting years.

Clang!

Yet again! How long, O Lord, how long?

* * * * *

God and his Prophet! what was that?

A clamour, and above it--familiar beyond mistake--one word, "*Deen! Deen!*" ("The Faith! The Faith!")

Deen? Yes, Deen Mahomed!--A hot breath of wind from the east rustled the dry pods and stirred the perfumed puff-blossoms--a scorching wind from the east whirled the clamour and the cry into the old man's ears--through his brain--through his heart.

"*Deen! Deen! Deen!*"

The disc of metal, unstruck, hung quivering; slower and slower, fainter and fainter, till, like the breath of one who dies in his sleep, the vibration ceased. But the note went alone into eternity, seeking judgment; for the harmonium was mute.

"*Deen! Deen! Deen!*"

The cruellest cry that men have made for themselves!

* * * * *

It had been long dark ere the old man returned; to what he scarcely knew. As he stumbled from sheer fatigue on the steps, and sat down to rest a space, he remembered nothing save that the call had come and that he had obeyed it. He had smitten more than metal, and had smitten remorselessly. A terrible figure this; his old hands trembling with their work; his fierce old eyes ablaze; his garments stained and bloody. Beyond the white pile of the tomb the red flare of burning roof trees told their tale, and every now and again an uproarious outburst of horrid menace, and still more horrid laughter, came to hint that the work was not all complete. Yet overhead the stars shone peacefully as ever; and, above the city, the pale radiance of the death-feasts showed serene.

The remembrance of the Festival and its duties came to the old man's mind in a great pulse of satisfied revenge. The tomb was his again; nay, not his, but the saints, of whose feet he was the dust; those saints who would visit the world that night.

He sat for an instant staring over the way towards his own hovel, then rose slowly, showing in every movement the fatigue of unusual exertion. Well, he had done his part; he had slain, and spared not at all. The others might linger for the sake of greed; as for him, his work was done.

With a fierce sigh of relief he turned and limped towards the church. It was darkness itself within the deep doorway; but the lamps were there, and he had flint and steel. So one by one the lights shone out, revealing the sacrilegious accessories of that past worship. And yet it was not light enough for *Shub'rât*, not even when he had lit the candles

on the altar. Still, that was soon remedied. A journey or two backwards and forwards to his own hovel, and a ring of flickering oil cressets encircled the table where it was his turn, at last, to spread the feast of the dead. So large a feast that there was not room enough for all, and he had to set a square of lights round a white cloth laid upon the floor.

"This to my grandson, Rahmut, on whom be peace for ever and ever."

That, once more, was the last offering; and as the old man's voice merged into the sonorous Arabic formula of faith it trembled not at all, but echoed up into the dome in savage, almost insane triumph and satisfaction.

This was *Shub'rât* indeed--a Night of Record. And there was room and to spare beneath those architraves, which displayed the Great Name again and again in every scrap of tracery, for all the saints in heaven to stand and judge between him and his forefathers for the sin that had been done, the blood that had been spilt--those forefathers who had ridden through the land with that cry of "*Deen! Deen!*" on their lips, and had conquered. As they, the descendants, would conquer now! Yea! let them judge; even Huzrut Isa[1] himself and the blessed Miriam his mother; for there were times when even motherhood must be forgotten. His trembling old hands, strained under the task which will not bear description, rested now on his bent knees; his head was thrown backward against the lectern on which the Bible lay open at the lesson for the day; his face, stern even in its satisfaction, gazed at the twinkling death-lights, among which little Rahmut's platter of sweets showed conspicuous.

Yea! let them come and judge; let them write his fate upon his forehead.

Fatigue, content, the very religious exaltation raising him above the actual reality of what was, and had been, all conspired to bring about a sort of trance, a paralysis, not of action deferred, as in the past, but of deeds accomplished. And so, after a time, with his head still against the lectern, he slept the sleep of exhaustion. Yet, even in his dreams the old familiar war cry fell more than once, like a sigh, from his lips,

"*Deen! Deen!*"

A horrible scene, look at it how you will; but, even in its horror, not altogether base.

From without came a faint recollection of the blood-red glare of fire in the sky, a faint echo of the drunken shouts and beast-like cries of those who had taken advantage of the times to return to their old evil doings. Within, there was nothing save the pale radiance of the twinkling lamps set round the Death-Feast, the old man asleep against the lectern, and silence.

Until, with a whispering, kissing sound, a child's bare feet fell upon the bare stones--a tiny child, still doubtful of its balance, with golden hair shining in the light. A scarlet flush of sleep showed on its cheeks, a stain of deeper scarlet showed on the little white night-gown it wore. Perhaps it had slept through the horrors of the night, perhaps slept on, even when snatched up by mother or nurse in the last wild flight for safety towards a sanctuary. Who knows? Who will ever know half the story of the great Mutiny? But there it

was, sleep still lingering in the wide blue eyes attracted by the flickering lights. On and on, unsteadily, it came, past the old man dreaming of *Jehâd*, past the lights themselves--happily unhurt--to stretch greedy little hands on Rahmut's sweeties. So, with a crow of delight, playing, sucking, playing, in high havoc upon the fair white cloth.

* * * * *

Was it the passing of the spirits coming to judgment which set the candle flames on the altar a-swaying towards the cressets below them, or was it only the rising breeze of midnight? Was it the Finger of Fate, or only the fluttering marker hanging from the Bible above which touched the old man's forehead?

Who knows? Who dares to hazard "Yea" or "Nay" before such a scene as this? Surely, with that blood-red flare in the sky, those blood-red stains on earth, the passion and the pity, the strain and stress of it all need a more impartial judgment than the living can give. So let the child and the old man remain among the lights flickering and flaring before the unseen wind heralding a new day, or the unseen Wisdom beginning a new Future.

* * * * *

Deen Mahomed woke suddenly, the beads of perspiration on his brow, and looked round him fearfully as men do when

roused, by God knows what, from a strange dream. Then, to his bewilderment, came a child's laugh.

Saints in heaven and earth! Was that Rahmut? Had he come back for his own in that guise? Did the *padre-sahibs* speak true when they said the angels had golden hair and pale faces? He crouched forward on his hands like a wild beast about to spring, his eyes fixed in a stupid stare. There, within the ring of holy lights, on the fair white cloth, was a child with outstretched hands full of Rahmut's sweets and a little gurgle of delight in the cry which echoed up into the dome.

"Nanna, *dekho!* (see)--*dekho*, nanna."

It was calling to its nurse, not to the old man; yet, though he had begun to grasp the truth, his heart thrilled strangely to the once familiar sound.

Nâna![2] And it had chosen Rahmut's portion, had claimed the child's place--the child's own place!

What was that? A step behind him--a half-drunken laugh--a dull red flash of a sabre which had already done its work--Rujjub, with a savage yell of satisfaction, steering straight as his legs would carry him to a new victim. But he had reckoned without that unseen figure crouching in the shadow by the lectern; reckoned without the confused clashing and clamour of emotion vibrating in the old man's bosom beneath the stroke of a strange chance; reckoned, it may be, without the Fate written upon the high narrow forehead which held its beliefs fast prisoners.

There was no time for aught save impulse. The devilish face, full of the lust of blood, had passed already. Then came a cry, echoing up into the dome:

"*Deen! Deen! Allah-i-hukk!*"

The old watchman stood, still with that stupid stare, gazing down at the huddled figure on its face which lay before him, so close that the warm blood gurgling from it horridly already touched his bare feet.

What had he done? Why had he done it? To save the child who had claimed the child's place?--To be true?--Well, it was done! and those were voices outside--men coming to pillage the church, no doubt--there was silver in the chest, he knew--that, of course, had been Rujjub's errand, and his comrades would not be far behind--they would find the dying man, and then?--Yea! the die was cast, and, after all, it had been Rahmut's platter! With these thoughts clashing and echoing through heart and soul Deen Mahomed sprang forward, seized the child, stifling its cries with his hand, and disappeared into the darkness. None too soon, for the yell of rage greeting the discovery of the murdered comrade reached him ere he had gained the shelter of the trees. Whither now? Not to his house, for they would search there; search everywhere for those survivors whose work remained as witness to the existence of some foe. Alone he could have faced the pillagers, secure in his past; but with the child--the child struggling so madly? And the last time he had held one in his arms it had lain so still. Oh, Rahmut! Rahmut! mercy of the Most High! Rahmut! Rahmut!

The words fell from his lips in a hoarse whisper as he ran, clinging to the darkest places, conscious of nothing save the one fierce desire to get away to some spot where the child's cries would not be heard--where he would have time to

think--some spot where the work had been done already--where nothing remained for lustful hands!

The thought made him double back into the cool watered gardens about the little group of houses beyond the church. The flames were almost out now, and in one roof, only a few sparks lingered on the remaining rafters. Here would be peace; besides, even if the cries were heard, they might be set down to some wounded thing dreeing its deadly debt of suffering. A minute afterwards he stood in a room, unroofed and reeking yet with the smell of fire, but scarcely disturbed otherwise in its peaceful, orderly arrangements--a room with pictures pasted to the walls and faintly visible by the glare, with toys upon the floor, and a swinging cot whence a child had been snatched. This child, perhaps--who knows? Anyhow it cuddled down from Deen Mahomed's arms into the pillows as if they were familiar.

"Nanna! Nanna!" it sobbed pitifully, "*Hil'ao, hil'ao, neendhi argia*" (swing, swing, sleep has come).

"*So ja'o mera butchcha*" (sleep my child), replied the old man quietly, as his blood-stained hand began its task. The wonder of such task had passed utterly, and had any come to interrupt it he would have given his life calmly for its fulfilment. Why, he did not know. It was Fate. So the old voice, gasping still for breath, settled into a time-honoured lullaby, which has soothed the cradle of most bairns in India, no matter of what race or colour.

"Oh! crow! Go crow!

Ripe plums are so many.

Baby wants to sleep, you know.

They're two pounds for a penny."

So over and over in a low croon, mechanically he chanted, till the child, losing its fear in the familiar darkness, fell asleep. And then? In a sort of dull way the question had been in Deen Mahomed's mind from the beginning without an answer, for he had gone so far along the road, simply by following close on the Finger of Fate; and now there was no possibility of turning back. For woe or weal he had taken the child's part, he had accepted the responsibility for its life, even to the length of death in others. Not that he cared much for the consequences of the swinging blow he had dealt to Rujjub--he was no true man.

What then? There was no chance of concealing the child. It slept now, but ere long it would waken again, and cry for "Nanna, Nanna." That must be prevented for a time at any rate. The chubby hands still clasped one of Rahmut's sweeties, and the old man stooped to break off a corner, crumble it up with something he took from an inner pocket, and then place it gently within the child's moist, parted lips, which closed upon it instinctively. He gave a sigh of relief. That was better; that would settle the cries for some hours, and before then he must have made over the child to other hands. Yes, that was it. He must somehow run the gauntlet of his comrades, and reach the entrenched position which the infidels--curse them!--had defended against odds such as no man had dreamed of before. It was seven miles to the north, that cantonment which would have been destroyed

but for those renegades from the Faith who had stood by their masters, and that handful of British troops which had refused to accept defeat. Seven miles of jungle and open country alive with armed and reckless sepoys and sowars, to whom a man in mufti was fair game, no matter what the colour of his race, lay between him and that goal, and Deen Mahomed's grim face grew grimmer as he raised the sleeping child, pillows and all, wrapped them in a quilt, and slung the bundle on his back--slung it carefully so as to give air to the child and freedom to his arms. He might need it if they tried to stop him. He gave a questioning glance at the sky as he came out into the garden where the scent of the orange-blossoms drifted with the lingering spirals of smoke. Not more than an hour or two remained before the dawn would be upon them. He must risk detection, then, by the short cut through the bazaar; better that than the certainty of discovery later on in the daylight by those ready for renewed assault upon the entrenchment.

"*Whok'umdar*," challenged the sentry ceremoniously set, as in peaceful times, at the city gate.

"*Allah akbar wa Mahomed rusool*," replied the old man, without a quiver. That was true; he was for God and his Prophet when all was said and done. But this was little Rahmut's guest--*this*. He passed his hand over his forehead in a dazed sort of way.

"*Ari*, look at his *loot*," hiccoughed one of a group in the street; "before God he hath more than his share in the bundle. Stop, friend, and pay toll."

"What my sword hath won my sword keeps," retorted Deen Mahomed fiercely. "Better for thee in Paradise, Allah

Buksh, if thou hadst smitten more and drunk less."

"Let be; let be!" interrupted another. "'Tis Deen Mahomed, the crazy watchman. I'll go bail, he hath no more than he deserves for this day's work. And he is a devil with that sword of his when he is angry. Lo! I saw him at the corner, mind you, where the *sahibs*----"

But Deen Mahomed had passed from earshot. Passed on and on, through dark streets and light ones, challenged jestingly, or in earnest; and through it all a growing doggedness, a growing determination came to him to do this thing, yet still remain, as ever, a guardian of the Faith. This for Rahmut's sake, the other for the sake of the Tomb, because he was the dust of the footsteps of the saints in light.

Out in the open now, with the paling light of dawn behind him and a drunken Hindu trooper riding at him with a cry of "*Râm! Râm!*" So they dared to give an idolatrous cry, those Hindu dogs whose aid had been sought to throw off the yoke--who would soon find it on their own shoulders. A step back, a mighty slash as the horse sped by, maddened by bit and spur, a stumble, a crash, and an old man, with a strange bundle at his back, was hacking insanely at his prostrate foe. No more, "*Râm, Râm*," for him; that last cry had served as the death-farewell of his race and creed.

On again, with a fiercer fire in the eyes, through the great tufts of tiger-grass isolating each poor square of God's earth from the next, and making it impossible to see one's way. On and on swiftly, forcing a path through the swaying stems, whose silvery tasselled spikes above began to glitter in the level beams of the rising sun.