FLORA ANNIE WEBSTER STEEL

KING-ERRANT

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EAN 8596547332671

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

This is not a novel, neither is it a history. It is the life-story of a man, taken from his own memoirs.

"*Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, gentleman, apothecary, ploughboy, thief*."

So runs the jingle.

The hero of this book might have claimed as many personalities in himself, for Zahir-ud-din Mahomed commonly called Babar, Emperor of India, the first of the dynasty which we mis-name the Great Moghuls, was at one and the same time poet, painter, soldier, athlete, gentleman, musician, beggar and King.

He lived the most adventurous life a man ever lived, in the end of the fifteenth, the beginning of the sixteenth centuries; and he kept a record of it.

On this record I have worked. Reading between the lines often, at times supplying details that must have occurred, doing my best to present, without flaw, the lovable, versatile, volatile soul which wrote down its virtues and its vices, its successes and its failures with equally unsparing truth, and equally invariable sense of honour and humour.

The incident of the crystal bowl, and the details of Babar's subsequent marriage to Mahâm (the woman who was to be to him what Ayesha was to Mahomed), are purely imaginary. I found it necessary to supply some explanation of the curious coincidence in time of this undoubted marriage with the pitifully brief romance of little Cousin

Ma'asuma; for Babar was above all things affectionate. I trust my imagining fits in with the general tone of my hero's life.

If not, he will forgive me, I am sure. He forgave so many in life that he will not grudge forgiveness in death, to his most ardent admirer.

F. A. Steel.

BOOK I

Table of Contents

SEED TIME

1493 to 1504

Table of Contents

KING-ERRANT

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

".... for I know
How far high failure overleaps the bounds
Of low successes--"
Lewis Morris.

The fortified town of Andijân lay hot in the spring sunshine. Outside the citadel, in the clover meadows which stretched from its gate to the Black-river (a tributary to the swift Jaxartes which flows through the kingdom of Ferghâna) a group of boys and men were playing leap-frog.

"An *ushruffi* he falls," cried one watching the leaper.

"A *dirrhm* he doesn't!" retorted another who had a broad, frank, good-natured face.

"There! He's done! I said so," continued the first not without satisfaction, for he was rival for championship.

"Not he!" asserted the second gleefully as the stumble was overborne by an extra effort. "Trust him and his luck! He wins! Babar wins!"

And Nevian foster-brother's voice was the loudest in acclaim as the frog-like figure with wide-spread legs, after successfully backing the long row of bent slaves arranged--with due regard to difficulty--adown the meadow-path, finally overtopped the last and with a "*hull-lul-la la!*" of triumph subsided incontinently into the white clover. And there it lay on its back gazing at the blue sky cheerfully.

It was that of rather a lanky boy; to western eyes a well-grown one of at least fifteen, with a promise of six feet and more of manhood in its long, loose-jointed limbs. But Babar, heir-apparent to this little kingdom of Ferghâna was only in his twelfth year. His face, nevertheless, was extraordinarily intent, with an intentness beyond his years, as he lay silent among the clover; for something had come between him and his game, between him and the work-a-day world. Something that came to him often with the sight of a wide

stretch of blue sky, a narrow stretch of blue river, or even with the sight of a flower upon that river's brim.

How glorious! How splendid it was--this world in which he, forsooth, played leap-frog! The clover on which he lay, how sweet it smelt, how soft it was! It was just like a mantle of lambskin, covered as it was, till you could hardly see a speck of green, with its white, furry blobs of blossom.

A lambskin mantle!--that was a good description!

And the sky was like the turquoises that folk brought down from the higher hills in the summer when they were not weaving the purple cloth, which somehow always got mixed up in his mind with the pale blue. Why both recalled the multi-coloured tulips on the mountain slopes was a puzzle, except that one beauty recalled another. At that rate, however, memory in Ferghâna would be unending, for though it was, as everyone knew, situated on the extreme boundary of the habitable world, it was abundantly pleasant!

The lad's amber-tinted hazel eyes darkened as he ran over in his mind the excellencies of his native valley hidden away at the back of the Pamirs.

Its snow-clad hills clipping it on all sides save the west; its running streams; its violets--so sweet, but not piercing-sweet like a rose;--its profusion of fruits! Truly, that way they had over in the township of Marghinân of removing apricot stones and putting in chopped almonds instead was excellent indeed--

"Most Mighty!" came a voice breaking in on his thoughts. "There is news--bad news!"

The voice was breathless, yet full of concern, and Babar sprang to his feet, alert in a second. A messenger stood before him; one who had come far and fast. And in his hand was a blue kerchief; therefore he was a messenger of death.

Death? Incredible in this splendid joyful world! A sudden surge of resentful life-blood seemed to stop the boyish heart with its tumultuous claim for free passage.

"Well?" he asked thickly.

The answer came like a blow; dully, yet with stunning force.

"Your father, O King!"

His father! And he, Babar, was King! In the rush of realisation incredulity came uppermost.

"But how--?"

He stood there bare-headed, unbelieving, while the others crowded round to listen.

It was a simple enough tragedy. Omar-Shaikh, his father had been feeding his tumbler pigeons on the scarp of a precipice which overhung the steep ravine below the fort at Âkhsi. He had been watching them against the blue void, throwing golden grain to make them play their antics, when the ground had given way beneath his feet and he had been precipitated on to the river rocks beneath. That was all. The little group of listeners showed shocked faces, but Babar, even as he heard the tale with dismayed grief, seemed to see the fluttering white wings of the startled pigeons, to see the startled soul amongst them, taking its flight--

Whitherwards?--Gone!... Never to be seen again! Yet how clearly he saw him now ... short, stout, a bushy beard hiding a humorous mouth ... the turban without folds and with such

long ends ... the tunic all over tight ... how often the strings had burst and how angry he had been at consequent childish gigglings ...

A sudden spasm of remorse for idle thoughts sent the son's memory back to his father's kindness ... a good sportsman too, though but a poor shot with the bow ... still with uncommon force in his fists--everyone he had ever hit had gone down before father's....

The last word brought memory of a still dearer tie.

"My mother?" asked the boy swiftly, "my mother? How--"

Then the real meaning of what he had heard came to him. He gave a little short, sharp cry and cast himself face downwards on the sweet-smelling white clover.

And all the joy of splendid life passed from him.

Nevian foster-brother who worshipped him, went over to him and crouched beside him.

"It is God's will, sire," he mumbled mechanically. "Kwâja Kâzi says so, and Kwâja Kâzi is a saint."

But saintship did not interest that young human heart, face to face for the first time with the deprivation of death.

Meanwhile those others, the bearded nobles and broad-faced courtiers who had crowded out at the news, looked at each other in doubt.

What had best be done? The times were troublous. Their new King was over-young. The King of Samarkand, the King of Tashkend, his paternal uncles, were already on the war-path. The former almost within striking distance; and this news of death would hasten, not retard.

In such case, might not refuge in the hills be wise? At any rate till Kâsim-Beg, most faithful of Governors, and Hassan-

Yakoob, wiliest of advisers, could be recalled from the front?

But, while they still cogitated, Babar, who even at that age was not to be handled, rose suddenly, the tear-stains still on his sun-tanned cheeks. His voice, however, was firm.

"To horse, gentlemen!" he cried. "I go to secure my kingdom!"

He was on his lean-necked, goose-rumped Turkhestan mare Zulaikha almost before the words passed his lips, and ere two minutes had sped the low arched gateway of the city echoed and re-echoed to the hoofs of horses, as--the riders low bowed upon their saddles--they swept through in a stream of tails and tassels. So had it echoed many a time to the wild Turkhoman cavalry, since life in those days was one long war and rumour of war.

"My King!" said Shirâm-Taghâi spurring close as Barbar drew rein on the citadel terrace, and laying a detaining hand on his bridle. "That way lies death! Thine uncles mean evil! Come with us to the hills."

For an instant the boy hesitated and his eyes sought the distant blue of the mountains.

There, doubtless, lay safety--but what of that unknown quantity--kingship?

He had no ideals of it. He had not even been brought up to expect the chiefship. In those days succession was too uncertain for anticipation. But it was something now within his grasp. What if he lost it?

Still the faces around him were anxious and their owners were old; they had experience. And he was so young! How young none knew but himself. As this thought came he felt

inclined to cry out-loud for his mother as in his heart he was crying for her loving care.

Then from the citadel came a running messenger to bid him enter without fear.

"It is a trick, Sire," protested Shirâm-Taghâi. "Safety lies with us."

And others echoed his words; so the lad wavered, uncertain, till an old man seated in the sunshine mumbling to himself, his long white beard wagging the while, spoke chance words that gave him the clue.

"Whatever happens is God's will, as the saints say."

Five minutes afterwards the young King knelt before Khwâja Kâzi, the saint of his family, for his decision. He was a thin ascetic-looking man whose sunken eyes, hollowed by many fasts, hardened by much thought, but softened by the unshed tears of a lonely life, dipped critically into the clear, shadowless youth of the hazel ones and appraised the character of the young face with its fine-lipped mouth that tempered the strong square of the chin. And Khwâja Kâzi knew the inside of the boy as well. He had watched him from birth; and lawyer and judge by profession, had accurately gauged the volatile, versatile vitality which would carry him triumphantly over all the obstacles in the leap-frog race of life. But he saw the dangers ahead also, and he loved the lad as his own soul; as indeed, despite all his faults, most people did love Babar in fortune and misfortune, in sickness and in health.

And the keen observer noticed how firmly the young hand closed over his scimitar-hilt. It was enough for one accustomed to weigh evidence and give verdicts.

"Draw thy sword, my son! and stand firm!"

The decree fell on glad ears. The boy was on his feet in a second and the war-shout of his race rang through the smoke-grimed old hall. Kingship lay before him.

As yet, however, the tragedy of death clouded his outlook. His dead father awaited burial at Âkshi, thirty miles distant; but ere he could start thitherwards many arrangements and new appointments had to be made. The novelty of power carried him far from thought. It was dream-like to be giving orders when but an hour before he had existed solely by the pleasure and permission of his father; as every other son in Moghulistân lived in those quaint old days.

It was dark, therefore, ere he and his galloping party stumbled over the stone causeways leading up to the high-perched citadel at Âkshi. Too late to disturb the women-folk, who, outworn by wailing, had gone to rest. But a little knot of long-robed physicians showed him the dead body of his father, lying ready for the funeral on an open bier in the Audience Hall. Babar had often seen death before, but never in this guise, with watchers and flaring torches and all the insignia of chiefship discarded, before the poor deserted shell of power.

It impressed his emotional nature vividly, and the mystery and the pity of it went with him to the dim royal room--so rough in its ancient royalty--where his father had been wont to sleep, and where the very touch of the royal quilts, surcharged with the personality of the cold dead in whose place he lived, seemed to burn in upon his young body and keep it awake. Not with concern or regret for

things past, but with keen curiosity as to what was going to happen in the future to one Zahir-ud-din Mahomed commonly called Babar.

Lineal descendant of Timur the Earth Trembler; also of the Great Barbarian Ghengis Khan, was he to follow in their footsteps of conquest? Or would he be snuffed out at once by Uncle Ahmed of Samarkand? Wherefore, God knew, since he, Babar, had never done his uncle any harm. On the contrary; if he lived, he would have to marry that uncle's daughter Ayesha.... Here his vagrant thoughts wandered to remembrance of how sick he had been from overeating himself on sweets at the betrothal ceremonies;--that was his very earliest *real* recollection--when he was five years old.

Then there was Uncle Mahmud of Tashkend. Even in the dark the boy's cheek flushed at the mere remembrance of him; equally devoid of courage and modesty, of unbelieving disposition, keeping buffoons and scoundrels about him who enacted their scurvy and disgraceful tricks in the very face of the court, and even at public audiences!--of no outward appearance either, but all rough-hewn and speaking very ill ...

The lad, always unsparing of epithet, painted the portrait with remorseless hand. So his thoughts passed to Mahmûd's sons, his first cousins. He knew them well, but Masaud the eldest was a nincompoop, and as for Baisanghâr? What was there that jarred at times in Baisanghâr? Baisanghâr who was so charming, so elegant, so clever, so sweet-tempered?

Here the lad's mind passed swiftly, without conscious cause, to his own sister, Dearest-One as he always called her; for he was given to caressing nicknames for those he

loved. And he loved none better than the tall, straight girl, five years his senior, who hectored him and petted him by turns. But she ought really to get married; it was nonsense to say you preferred being a sainted Canoness!

Baisanghâr did not say that, though, he, too, refused to marry. He said women were unnecessary evils. Was that true? Not that it mattered, since he, Babar, would have to marry, because he was King ...

King! Would it make him happier, he wondered? Could anyone be happier than he had been in this splendid world? Supposing it was to make him unhappy? Supposing it took the charm from life ...

The idle thoughts went on and on. He felt sleepy, yet he could not sleep. And by and by the glimmering oblong of the unglazed window kept him watching the slow growth of light.

Out on the hills, the still dawn must be stepping softly so as not to waken the world too soon ... soft, sandalled feet among the snow-set flowers....

The mere thought of it was sufficient to rouse him thoroughly. He rose, passed to the window, and thrust his young body into the chill air of dawn. All shadow! A deeper shadow in the valley, a lighter shadow in the encircling hills, and above it all the clear, grey, pellucid shadow of the sky.

Hark! That was the dawn cry of the wild fowl on the marsh and he held his breath to listen like the young Narcissus, while the whole joy of splendid life seemed to fill his world once more. He did not realise--few humans do--that he was but listening for the echo of himself; the self

which came back to him from sights and sounds, that many a better man might have seen and heard unmoved.

So he waited and watched till the eastern sky showed pale primrose, and the unseen sun encarnadined the distant snows, and separated the white morning mists from the blue shadows of the hills.

It was a new day, and yonder over the brow of the road were pennons and lance-points. The tribesmen were coming to bury the dead, to do homage to the living.

It was a busy day, filled up with long-drawn, intricate ceremonial. Bare time for more than one tight clasp of tearless mother and tearless son, while that Dearest-One, his sister, stood by silent, the tear-stains still on her cheeks. But that did not matter; those three understood each other.

And old Isân-daulet, his maternal grandmother, had set emotion aside also, and, stern old disciplinarian as she was, had bidden him--in high staccato phrases which betrayed her effort to keep calm--take his father's place as bravely as he could.

And he did what he could, though it was a strain upon his twelve young years, for the long night had left him feverish and the long day with its need for initiative had outwearied him. So that when at last the ordeal was over, and he was free to seek the women's apartments for rest, his nerves were all a-rack, his pulse fast and irregular.

He found his grandmother alone by the big coal fire. Mother and sister, outwearied also, had gone to bed; the best place, the old lady said oracularly, for sore eyes and broken hearts. And Babar felt it was better so. The company of the stern-featured, soft-hearted old woman of whose

sagacity and clear-sightedness he stood somewhat in awe, would be more bracing than the tears which must come sooner or later.

People said he was like his grandmother. Was he, he wondered, as he lay prone on the sheepskin rug watching the firelight on her fine old face.

"Tell me!" he said suddenly, "the tale of thy youth--of Jaimal and the lover who was slain."

But Isân-daulet, though she smiled, shook her wise old head.

"Nay, child! Such tales do to stir phlegm. They are not meet when the humours are already disturbed."

The boy leaned over on his elbows and looked up at her.

"Like cures like by comparison! 'Twould steady my pulse to know others throbbed. Feel mine, Grandam--how it beats!"

She took the thin, muscular wrist held out to her and appraised it judicially.

"I will give thee a purge the morrow's morn," she said shortly. "That will keep thy head cooler than idle tales; there is nothing for hot boy's blood like a purge."

Babar's face showed obstinate yet whimsical. "I will not take it, *nanni*, if thou wilt not tell--so there! And Kings are not to be coerced, see you, by black draughts, as mere boys are. And 'tis the first boon I have asked from thee--*as I am*."

The ring of almost apprehension in the last words was too much for the old woman, who loved the lad as the apple of her eye. She laid her hand caressingly on the boy's hair. It was cut, Florentine fashion, to the ears, and the ends,

outsweeping in a gentle curve were sun-burned browner than the rest of the dark head.

"It is little to tell, sweetheart, save that it shows how even womanhood may confound strength by being resolute. It was not many years after my lord, your grandfather, married me in my father the Khân's tents upon the Steppes. He was a bold, brave man, was my lord, and like all bold, brave ones, he fought sometimes and won, and sometimes he fought and lost. 'No battle is ended save by Death,' remember that, O! Zahir-ud-din Mahomed! And once when he lost, his women--I was one--fell into the hands of Jaimal Shaikh, his enemy. And he--low-bred hound who knew not the first principles of politeness!--did not even keep me for himself!--I was not ill-looking in those days, my child--but sent me to his officer. I, the wife of Yunus Khân, Chagatâi, of the house of Timur the Earth Trembler! Well! the fool came decked as for a bridal with blandishments and perfumes, and I welcomed him. Wherefore not? for the supper was good and he played on the lute passably. But when that was over, and we withdrew smiling to the inner room, my maids locked the door by my orders, stabbed the silly rake to death and flung his be-scented body through the window to the gutter. 'Twas its proper place."

The old voice which had gained strength and fire in the recital, dropped to cold, hard finality.

"And Jaimal Shaikh?" queried Babar unwilling to lose a word.

"He sent for me and I went. 'Why hast thou done this evil thing?' he asked. 'Because thou didst worse,' I answered. 'Because thou sentest me, the wife of a living man, to

another's embrace. Therefore I slew him. Slay me also, if so it pleases thee.'

"But it did not please him. 'Take her to her husband's prison,' he said, 'and leave her there. They are one flesh indeed.' So I stopped with thy grandfather and comforted him until his star rose again. Now, get thee to thy bed, child, and see thou take the draught without demur. Remember 'God is no maker of the promise breaker.' 'Twill make thee feel sick, doubtless; but what matter if the result be good."

Babar made a wry face and laughed. "Thou hast done me more good with thy tale, revered one! Lo! I can see thy would-be lover in the gutter and my esteemed grandmother, all beautiful as a bride, peeking through the lattice for a glimpse of his corpse--"

"Go to thy bed, child," put in the old lady, delighted. "There be more than pictures for thy sight now; so may the Great Maker of Kings guard thee, his creature."

And that night Zahir-ud-din Mahomed commonly called Babar, forgot that he was King in sound, dreamless, boyish sleep.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

"There's a sweet little cherub who sits up aloft To keep watch for the life of Poor Jack!"

In truth, Babar needed such a cherub in the first days of his King-ship, for Kâsim and Hussan, his two advisers, fell foul of one another. The former, bluff, honest, facetious, a pious, faithful, religious Moslem who carefully abstained from forbidden meats and drinks, and whose judgment and talents were uncommonly good though he could neither read nor write, was for the forward policy. Hussan, polished, active, a man of courage who wrote excellent verses and was remarkable for his skill in playing polo and leap-frog, was for diplomacy. And against these latter qualifications even honest Kâsim's ingenuous and elegant vein of wit could not stand.

At least in young Babar's judgment. Old Isân-daulet his grandmother was, however, of a different opinion, and even Dearest-One, his sister, ventured to rally him gently on his choice of Prime-minister.

"What," asked Babar hotly in reply, "is Hussan the worse for playing games? Is a man the worse for doing all things well?"

"Nay! but rather the better--so be it that they be men's things," she replied, going on imperturbably with the embroidery of a new pennon for her brother. It was green and violet, his favourite colours, and she was scrolling a text on it in crinkled gold. As she sat in the sunshine on the flat roof of the citadel, her bare head gleaming brown in the glare of light, her mourning garment of dark blue short in the sleeves and low at the neck showing her wheat-coloured

skin, she was a pretty creature, though her nose was too long, her chin too short for real beauty: that lay in her eyes, amber-tinted like her brother's.

"Man's things! What be man's things?" argued Babar irritably. "Is cousin Baisanghâr no man because he could help thee embroider two years agone?"

The princess held her head very high. It was not nice of her brother to import strange young men into the conversation, and distinctly mean of him to mention that old breach of etiquette. Had she not heard enough of it from her mother, ever since? Luckily grandam Isân-daulet, being desert-born, had not been so shocked, or life would have been unendurable. And as for Baisanghâr! Everyone knew he was not at all a proper young man, though he was so charming, so sweet-tempered, so ...

"Lo! brother!" she said with asperity, checking her vagrant thoughts, "if one fool shook a baby's rattle better than another, he would be wise man to thee. But 'tis not I only who find leap-frog Hussan a smooth-tongued hypocrite. Grandmother has her eye on him."

"Then can no harm happen," said the boy-King cheerfully, rising, however, with suspicious alacrity as if to escape from the subject. In truth he was somewhat afraid of old Isân-daulet though he tried to minimise his awe by asserting that very few of her sex could equal her in sagacity!

Events, however, had marched with great rapidity, and Sultan Ahmed, his uncle, was now with his army but sixteen miles from Andijân.

So something must be settled. Kâsim was for defiance and defence, Hussan for diplomatic and dutiful submission; since the King of Samarkand was, ever, indubitably suzerain-lord of Ferghâna.

"Words against works," quoth honest Kâsim, who loved to be epigrammatic. His experience told him that if you fought fair you failed at times, but in the end you came out top dog in the general scrimmage of claims and clans.

"Nay!" retorted Hussan, "I desire diplomacy, not dare-devil disregard of common precautions."

Babar, however, frowned at both as he sat listening to the council of war or peace. He favoured neither pugnacity nor deceit.

"Look you, gentlemen," he said, frowning. "All admit my Uncle Ahmed to be a fool whom fools lead by the nose; but is that cause why I should treat him foolishly, and so disgrace myself? I will neither fight nor yield till I have made him understand how the matter lies. So, let a scribe be brought and I will indite him a letter."

"No letter ever did any good," grumbled illiterate Kâsim.

"Especially if it be not received nor read," suggested Hussan sardonically. "The King of Samarkand is supreme and may refuse aught but a personal interview."

Kâsim shot furious glances: such talk savoured to him of treason; but Babar only looked gravely from one adviser to the other.

"So be it," he said cheerfully. "If he refuse reception or understanding, then--if so it pleases God--I can defeat him at my leisure. Meanwhile write thus, O scribe!--with all proper titles, compliments and reverences--'I, Zahir-ud-din

Mahomed Babar, rightful heir, and *by acclaim* (underline that, scribe!) of this Kingdom of Ferghâna, do with courtesy and reasonableness point out that it is plain that if you take this country you must place one of your servants in charge of it, since you reign at Samarkand. Now I am at once your servant and your son. Also I have a hereditary right to the government. If therefore you entrust me with this employment, your purpose will be attained in a far more easy and satisfactory way than by fighting and killing a number of people (and horses) needlessly. Wherefore I remain your loyal feudatory Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar.'"

He beamed round on the council for approval of this logical argument, then added hastily, "And, scrivener! put 'Zahir-ud-din Mahomed Babar' large; and 'King of Ferghâna' larger still at the very end. That will show him my intentions."

If it did, the effect was poor: for though the letter was duly engrossed on silk paper sprinkled with rose-essence and gold-dust, enclosed in a brocade bag, and sent to the invading camp at Kâba, the only answer to its irrefutable logic was a further advance of spear-points and pennons to within four miles of the citadel.

Kâsim was jubilant. Jocose and bellicose he routed out armouries for catapults, and kept long files of men busy in passing up stones from the river bed, while forage parties raided the bazaars for provisions.

If there was to be a defence it must be the longest on record, even if it were unsuccessful in the end.

Babar himself donned mail and corselet for the first time. But he discarded the latter soon; it made him, he said, feel

like a trussed pheasant, and he preferred the wadded coatee which would turn most scimitar cuts. It made him look burly as he strode round the ramparts, so that the sentries smiled to themselves and felt a glow at the heart remembering how young he was.

The stoutness, resolution, and unanimity of his soldiers and subjects to fight to the last drop of their blood, the last gasp of their life, without yielding, filled the boy with unmixed admiration. It was part of the general splendidness of things which almost dazzled him.

"My younger troops display distinguished courage," he said gravely, and Kâsim hid a smile with difficulty as he replied, "They have youth in their favour, Most Excellent. It is a great gift."

Then he went out and roared over the joke on the ramparts to the sentries' huge delight. When next the young King went his rounds, smiles greeted him everywhere. He was a King to be proud of, and his family was worth fighting for--all of them! Especially the tall, slim figure with close-drawn veil which would often accompany the King at dusk. For Dearest-One was keenly interested in things militant, and was free to come and go, as the Turkhi women were, with due restrictions. And these were few in Babar's clan, which, as Grandmother Isân-daulet would boast, was "desert born."

But, after all, the preparations were unnecessary. The little cherub intervened, rather to the boy's chagrin, though he admitted piously that Providence in its perfect power and wisdom had brought certain events to pass which frustrated the enemies' designs, and made them return whence they

came without success, and heartily repenting them of their attempt.

An exceedingly satisfactory but at the same time a disappointing end to his first chance of a real fine fight; and he watched one reverse after another overtake his foes on the other side of the Black-river with almost sympathetic eyes.

"There is a murrain amongst their horses now," reported the chief farrier one day, "my sister's son who is in service with the Samarkandis crept over last night to beg condiments for Prince Baisanghâr's charger which is down--the same that the Most Excellent gave him three years agone."

"Baisanghâr?" echoed Babar hurriedly. "I knew not that he was--amongst mine enemies!" Then he paused, and reason came to him. "Likely he is with his father of Tashkend who hovers on the edge of invasion, and hath ridden over--there is no harm in that. What didst give the fellow?"

The farrier laughed. "A flea in his ear, Most Clement! A likely story, indeed, that I should help our enemies."

Babar frowned and turned away. "'Twas a good horse, poor beast," he murmured. And afterwards, he went over to the women's quarters, and, as his wont was, retailed the story to those three, Isân-daulet, his mother and Dearest-One. The grim old Turkhoman lady was sympathetic about the horses, as a daughter of the Steppes must needs be, but stern over the necessities of war. His mother, more soft-hearted than ever by reason of her mourning, wept silently. But Dearest-One, was, as ever, a joy.

"I would bastinado the farrier," she said vindictively. "The poor brute; and then think of cousin Baisanghâr. He loved the horse!"

Her beautiful eyes flashed and yet were melting, her long brown fingers gripped her embroidery closer yet more caressingly. Her brother sate and looked at her admiringly, yet with a certain diffidence. Sometimes Dearest-One went beyond him; she seemed to unfold wings and skim away into another world. And when he asked her whither she went, she would smile mysteriously and say:

"Thou wilt unfold thy wings also, some day, O little-big-one, and find a new world for thyself."

There was little leisure now, however, for aught but watch and ward. Any moment of the day or night might bring assault; but the days passed and none came. And then one morning broke and showed a smaller camp than had been on the low lying river bank the night before; there was a bustle, too, about the still-standing tent pegs, and with the first glint of sunlight one Dervish Mahomed Turkhâu rode over the narrow bridge and demanded, on the part of his master, an audience with Hussan. Old Kâsim looked daggers, but there was no objecting. By virtue of his position as Prime-minister Hussan was the man to go, and he went. So out in the Place-of-Festivals beyond the gates, they met and parleyed: thus patching up a sort of peace, as Babar reported contemptuously to his faithful three. He was intensely disgusted and disappointed, while Kâsim looked sorrowfully at his piles of stones.

"They will do for next time," he said finally, cheering himself up with the remembrance that there were many

other claimants to the throne of Ferghâna to be reckoned with besides Sultan Ahmed. And by evening most of the garrison had found solace for their disappointment in overeating themselves, after the disciplined rations which Kâsim-Beg, mindful of the possibility of a long siege, had already ordained; but Babar and his foster-brother Nevian were out all day on their little Turkhoman horses, chasing the white deer and shooting with their bows and arrows at a cock pheasant or two.

They brought home one in the evening which, as the boy boasted, was so fat, that four men could have dined on the stew of it!

"'Twill do for our dinner anyhow," said Babar's mother, and thereinafter she and Isân-daulet bullied cooks and scullions and gently quarrelled with each other for a good two hours over the proper family recipe for making "*ishkânah*."

And afterwards they sat together in an arched sort of balcony vestibule between the women's apartments and the men's rooms and talked happily, yet soberly of the future. Old Isân-daulet indeed, waxed prophetic. "See you, my sons-in-law will come to harm, not good. Ahmed has had to renounce his evil desires. Mahmûd will have to do the same; and let them pray God He send not punishment also." And she pursed up her thin lips and looked as if she knew something.

But the Khânum, Babar's mother, said little; her heart was still sad and she crept away early to her bed, followed after awhile by Isân-daulet, leaving stern injunctions on Dearest-One not to sit up over-long.

So brother and sister were left alone, and she went and sat beside him as he dangled his legs over the parapet of the balcony; for he dearly loved looking down from a height. It was to be a dark night so he could see little even of the roofs below, or the slabs of stone let into the wall at intervals to form a sort of ladder by which a bold man could climb from one to the other. And beyond, all was shadow, darker in some places than others. Besprinkled too with stars: the moving star or two of a lantern in the earth-shadow, but in the sky those changeless, changeful beacons, those twinkling tireless stars, motionless in their constellations, yet ever moving on and on ...

Round what?...

"Look!" he cried suddenly, "the scimitar of the Warrior is sheathed in the hills--my hills!"--

And it was so. Orion shone to the north, setting slowly behind the mighty rampart of shadowed mountains in which the starry sword was already hidden.

They sat silent for a little while, hand in hand, like the children that they were. And then suddenly a noise below them, made Babar swing his legs to the ground and stand firm before his sister.

"Who goes?" he asked and his voice rang through the darkness; but no answer came.

"'Twas a falling stone, methinks," said his sister carelessly; yet even as she spoke she also sprang to her feet, every atom of her, soul and body alert for something, she scarce knew what.

She knew, however, in a second, for a darker shadow showed vaguely at the end of the balcony, vaulted lightly

over the parapet, and a pleasant voice said gaily--

"Mirza Baisanghâr of the House of Timur, cousin to the King of Ferghâna, at your service."

"Baisanghâr!" echoed Babar. "How camest thou?--" then, even in his confusion remembering, as he generally did, *les convenances* for others he added: "Thou hadst best retire, my sister, after making thy appropriate salutation."

So, for one second the girl's eyes straining through the starlight could see her cousin. A charming figure truly! Not dressed, like her brother, in country clothes, but in the silks and satins of the town. A dainty figure too, of middle height and slender make, yet manly withal. The round face, unlike the faces of his cousins, showing Turkhoman descent unmistakably, yet with such indescribable attractiveness.

"May the Peace of the Most High be upon you, my cousin," she said softly and her voice fluttered.

"And may His Peace remain with you, fair lady," he replied gravely, with the finest of Court salutes. That was all; then she withdrew and the shadows hid her going.

"By my soul, Baisanghâr," said Babar joyously, when he had seated himself and his cousin side by side among the cushions, "I am utterly rejoiced to see thee again; though how, or wherefore thou camest--"

Prince Baisanghâr interrupted him with a light laugh. "How, sayest thou? By the roof of course; have I not been in Andijân before? and did I not once climb hitherwards--but of that, no more! Only thou wilt have to set thy masons to work, coz; for by God's truth my foothold was but rotten more than once. Sure I must be born to the bowstring since sudden death will not have me elseways! Yet of all