THE DESECRATED BONES AND OTHER STORIES

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BY

MUHAMMAD HABIB

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To
RAIHANA TYABJI

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I

MORE than six hundred years ago, there lived in the village of B—, in the North Indian Province of Oudh, a renowned warrior, named Malik Hizabruddin. In an age when the profession of arms was the glory of man, he was looked upon as one of the world's elect. He had won his laurels early. Though barely thirty years of age, he commanded a thousand horse in the emperor's army, and was the proud owner of many smiling villages and broad acres of fertile land. His success had not been due to anybody's favour. He had won his land and his command in the army through his own boundless energy and dashing courage. His strength was prodigious. He had been through half a dozen distant and perilous campaigns without meeting his equal in skill and strength. He was entirely devoid of the feeling of fear; for fear arises from the consciousness of inferiority, and this he had never experienced.

The personality of our hero did full justice to his reputation. His arms were long and powerful, an indication of Tartar extraction. Constant exercise and careful diet had made his muscular frame the wonder of an age that knew the value of physical development. His broad forehead matched well with his thick eyebrows and curly locks. There was a keenness and a spirit of defiance in his large blue eyes, while his bushy brown beard hid the lines of ferocity that curled round the borders of his mouth. For Hizabruddin, in spite of his manly courage, was at heart a cruel man, who never hesitated to trample on the weak and the helpless. There was a spirit of brutality in him, born of his military courage; and not only brutality, but also something much worse—godlessness. He was not what you would call an immoral man. His youth, in fact, had been singularly pure. He was religious — mechanically religious — and sought to please the Being he called his God, in the same way as he had pleased the being he called his emperor, by the punctilious performance of appointed duties. But if the

name of God was often on his lips, the fear of God had never been in his heart. He fasted and prayed because everybody did so. The world was no mystery to him. He saw what was before his eyes and never suspected that anything lay beyond. His sympathies were as bounded as his intelligence. Left an orphan at the tender age of ten, the long, though successful, struggle amongst hard-hearted men had hardened his heart also. His outlook on life was essentially selfish. He thought of no one but himself. And so, after he had paid to the Lord all that was His due — the formal prayer, the regular fast and the fixed percentage of charity dispensed through ostentatious channels — his worldly ambition remained unchecked by any feeling of charity or love. In these circumstances Hizabruddin's character quickly degenerated. He felt himself superior to others, and resolved to take full advantage of his superiority. His speech was often foul. He swore overmuch. His haughty contempt towards weaker men knew neither restraint nor bounds. And so, along with the respect, or rather fear, with

which his neighbours regarded him, there went a feeling of dislike. He was a man to be avoided at all costs. But Hizabruddin cared naught for their love or their hate. The isolation which surrounded him only provoked him to greater ferocity when any of them fell into his clutches. His critics dared not speak the truth, but Hizabruddin's broad acres had been wrung from a poor and toiling peasantry. Many a hard-working farmer had been tortured or murdered in cold blood so that the lord of the land might possess himself of the soil. His dark deeds sent a shiver through the countryside. But none protested. The power of the ferocious Malik held them down like a nightmare. They knew he would stop at nothing to gain his ends.

Malik Hizabruddin's only two friends in the world were his wife, Zubaida Khanum, and her brother, Fakhruddin. The latter was a quiet, retiring, unostentatious scholar, whom the Malik thoroughly despised. But Zubaida Khanum was a woman whom even her husband could not regard with contempt. A girl of twenty-three, slenderly

built and always ill, there was something in her gentle movements and speech, in her sweet and unpretentious looks, that inspired everybody's devotion. Neither education nor training had done much for her. Her virtues were the expression of her inborn good nature. She loved everything she came across, and everything she came across seemed to return her affection. She fed the sparrows that built their nests in the cornice of her roof, and the little birds would sit on her shoulders and pick the corn from her hands. She loved the beggar-woman who came to ask her for a few crumbs of bread, the lean and hungry dogs which moved drowsily up and down the village paths, and the leaner and hungrier peasants whom her husband's cruelty had sent wandering from door to door. She dispensed her charity with a bountiful hand, and her husband found, much to his annoyance, that his barns and his coffers became empty as soon as they were filled. Her sympathy for all living creatures knew no limits, and even included her brutal and ferocious husband in its all-enclosing fold. She

trembled at his misdeeds, but, thoroughly as she detested her husband's ways, she did not dislike him. The faculty of hatred had not been given to her by nature. Besides, there was much in Hizabruddin's young and manly appearance to recommend him to any woman's eyes. His record in the army had been the very best and he was one of the most trusted Imperial officers. His habits were abstemious; he never drank; hard-heartedness and cruelty were the only faults that even slander could attribute to him. So Zubaida had made up her mind to wean her husband from his one besetting sin. But her efforts were futile. It was now five years since their marriage, and he had grown no better. He tolerated his wife; he even respected her; but none the less he went his own way, and God remained a mere name to the man who had never known the limits of his strength.

Providence had extended a gentle hand to lift him out of the pit—the gentle hand of a patient, loving and smiling woman—and he had failed to grasp it. A different sort of experience awaited him now.

II

It was an April evening. A little before dusk Hizabruddin mounted his charger and went to inspect a field, about a mile from his village, which he had ordered to be ploughed. It had lain fallow for several years, but now its turn was come. The Malik was far from being in the sweetest of tempers. He had spent the morning in looking over his accounts, and found that his wife's charity, besides finishing all his last year's income, had landed him in considerable debt. To Zubaida Khanum he dared say nothing, for he knew the reply he would get. So he had to vent his wrath on someone else. A report came to him that the labourers on the new field had idled away the whole day. He mounted and went to the spot.

The labours had indeed been idling. Hizabruddin, relying on the efficacy of his kicks and blows, paid them nothing for their work, and they on their part did as little as possible. Three of them had been sent to work in the morning, but a few furrows were all they had

accomplished. And now two of them sat on a small mound, while the third stood before them demonstrating with a long stick the feats he had seen performed by a juggler at a recent marriage-feast. All three roared with laughter.

Upon this happy assembly Hizabruddin came down like a thunderbolt, cursing and swearing. 'You rascals!' he shouted, as he and his horse emerged from the nearest thicket, 'I will not let you go home till the whole field is ploughed, though you may have to work without supper the whole night through.'

The labourers flew to their work. They knew their master and his ways. Argument or dispute would have brought things more tangible than mere words on their silly heads. Work was now as quick as it could be. One man goaded the oxen to full speed at the plough. The other two repaired the fence with feverish haste. Hizabruddin went on cursing for a time; then he stopped. The men were making rapid amends for their sloth. The field was small and the work would be over in a couple of hours. He could not go on

scolding for ever those who were too humble to retort. But he was always a man of his word, and he carried out every threat to the letter. So he tied his horse to the root of a large banyan tree near by, and, taking his seat on the mound formerly occupied by the labourers, grimly watched them perform their appointed task.

The sun waxed large as it sank across the western horizon to its nightly rest. The weird Indian twilight enveloped the landscape, and the lights from the neighbouring villages could be seen through the surrounding groves. Then the moon rose, a large red ball which emitted more and more light as it climbed higher and higher. But Hizabruddin cared naught for twilight or moonlight. He was interested in seeing his work done.

Suddenly something arrested his attention. The man behind the plough had stopped. 'Tired! You swine!' he shouted, 'I will hack your bones to pieces if you stop before the field is ploughed.'

'I am not tired, master. But there is something here—a human skeleton,

a grave.' The labourer shook from head to foot.

'Plough it over, plough it over,' Hizabruddin thundered; 'aren't there enough graveyards in the country, that every silly ass should come to rest in my fields? Plough it over, and ask the wretch to go and lie somewhere else.' But the poor labourer had been seized by a fit of trembling. He saw the grinning skeleton look at him through its empty sockets. He even fancied he had seen it move. Hizabruddin's curses were unavailing. The man had simply lost all control over his hands and feet. The other two labourers had also moved to their companion's side, and one of them ventured to say something about the sanctity of graves. But respect for the dead is incomprehensible to those who have not yet learnt the respect due to human life. Hizabruddin was wild with rage. He crossed the field in a few strides, dealt one sharp blow to the man behind the plough, who reeled and fell, and ordered the other two to attend to their duty at the fence. Then with characteristic courage, he pulled the skeleton by its skull out of

its earthy covering, and, dragging it across the furrowed field, laid it at the foot of the mound. His daring act had a magnetic effect. The labourers seemed to take heart again. A few gentle kicks roused the fallen man, and he went on again with his ploughing. The presence of a greater sinner restored his shattered nerves. The other two at the fence rightly thought themselves free of all moral culpability in the ghastly affair. And Hizabruddin, the men being reduced to due submission, returned to his seat at the mound, where the skeleton lay at his feet.

It was a small skeleton, and had probably not been there long. At least all the bones were intact. Only two of the ribs had been cut through—not fractured—for the surface at the point where the smaller pieces had been separated was smooth. The man had apparently died of a mortal wound in the breast, but Hizabruddin did not care to inquire into the cause of his death.

Nevertheless, he looked at the skeleton wonderingly. 'Whose could it be?' He prided himself on his memory for faces. 'But who,' thought he, 'would

be able to recognize the skeletons of his acquaintances?' With a slight twist and a jerk he separated the skull and held it before his eyes. The blind and empty sockets made their pathetic appeal to him and expressed their immense longing for peace and rest. But Hizabruddin's keen eyes never caught the inner meaning of things. He threw the skull high up in the moonlight and caught it as it fell. Then, with a volley of curses at his labourers, he kicked away the skull and skeleton into the nearest bush. By now the men had finished their work. Hizabruddin examined the field and the fence. Then he mounted his tall charger, and rode back home in the chequered moonlight and shadow of the mango trees.

III

It was a July evening. It had drizzled all day, but towards the evening the sky cleared and a cool, refreshing wind began to blow. Hizabruddin brought his stool out and sat before his large mud house, combing and oiling his bushy beard. Soon visitors began to drop in.

First came his brother-in-law, Fakhruddin, the scholar. The Malik offered him the oil and comb as from one bearded man to another. Fakhruddin accepted the present with formal thanks. He was the only man who visited Hizabruddin for the sake of his company. The others only called on business. But this time Fakhruddin also had a favour to ask. First he talked at random about the affairs of the village and the state of the crops. Then he came to the point. A poor widow, dwelling at the other end of the village, had fallen ill of smallpox. Would Hizabruddin allow his wife to go and visit her? 'No,' was the firm reply, 'the disease is contagious and I cannot tolerate the idea of my wife associating with low-caste widows.'

'But she will go, none the less.'

'Then she can. And please bother me no more. Such things must at least be done without my consent. Do you understand?'

Fakhruddin understood. He walked quietly to his sister's apartments and asked her to prepare for the little journey. Within a few minutes the

small procession was marching out of Hizabruddin's gate. At the head rode Fakhruddin on a little pony; then came Zubaida in a covered litter, with her old maid walking by her side; behind marched six stout men armed with swords and bamboo sticks. It was Hizabruddin's categorical command that his wife should never go out without these paraphernalia of her social rank.

But Hizabruddin was too busy to watch the procession. It was his day for administering justice, and suitors had thronged around him. He was the head of the judicial district. All complainants dissatisfied with the decision of the five jurors of their village came to him; if dissatisfied with his decision also, they could go to the Emperor. He held twenty-four villages under his judicial sway.

Malik Hizabruddin was an ideal judge according to the ideas of his country and his age. No one could be more impartial where his personal interest was not concerned. He feared neither the weak nor the strong. He took no bribes. His strong hand

crushed all malefactors, high and low, with equal ease. His judicial duties were many. The village policemen brought all thieves and meaner criminals before him, while the Malik himself waylaid and captured *thugs* and highway-robbers of the more dangerous sort. He fined and flogged drunkards who broke the imperial law of prohibition, fixed the rent of land and the wages of labour, supervised the administration of charities and the teaching at the village schools, and decided all cases of contract, divorce and inheritance. No lawyers appeared before him. He asked for no fee or stamp duty. His justice was free—to be had for the asking, like Nature's air and Nature's water. Plaintiffs sat on the right side of his stool, defendants on the left. He asked the former what wrong they had suffered, he inquired of the latter why they had committed the wrong; then both sides produced witnesses to confirm their statements, and the Malik came to a decision then and there. He never postponed a case to be inquired into six months hence. Hizabruddin's love of justice and fair play between

man and man—himself alone excepted—was his great redeeming feature, and it sufficed to secure his salvation. 'After all, he prevents more wrongs than he commits,' the more charitable of his neighbours remarked.

During the last week wrongdoers had been more active than usual, and the throng of suitors before Hizabruddin was exceptionally large. But it was not his habit to put off for the morrow what justice demanded should be done to-day. So he went on, heedless of the late hour. A little before midnight the last of the suitors left him. His wife had not yet returned, but he was hungry and tired, and shouted for his dinner.

The dinner, which had been waiting, was duly brought. But Zubaida's maid, an old woman of sixty-five, trembled as she laid the cloth.

'What is the matter? Who has wronged you?' Hizabruddin inquired, forgetting that his weekly session of justice was over.

'Nothing much,' she said, reassured at the Malik's words and the sight of his muscular frame, 'the woman with the smallpox is past all hope. Your wife

said she would return as soon as possible, and sent me back to attend to your dinner. As I passed the field which you have ploughed this year and planted with onions, I saw a stranger at the other end of the field pulling out the little plants. Even as I looked at him, he collected what he had plucked and went and sat on a little mound. Then with a twist and a jerk he separated one little onion from its slender stalk, threw it high into the moonlight and caught it as it fell. I shouted to him to tell me who he was and why he plucked my master's onions. But the stranger only growled, and it was such a hideous, ferocious growl that my heart sank within me. Then he turned towards me furiously. He was a small, dark man, with a grey beard and a red mark on his breast. I fled in fear. What else could a poor woman do? My knees shook under me, and I fell many times before I reached the protection of your house. It is for you, master, to free us from the thieves that infest the country.'

The old servant had often faltered and broken down while telling her story, but Hizabruddin's quick ears

caught the hint in her last sentence. That very evening he had had report of a band of some weak-kneed robbers who lived by poaching on fruit-trees and farms. Here was one of them. Hizabruddin would catch him unsuspected and then the truth about the whole gang would be out. He quickly slung on to his belt his sword and sheaf of arrows, and with a bow in the left hand and a spear in the right started for the hunt.

'May I call for your horse?' asked the maid as she saw him leave.

'No,' he replied, 'Malik Hizabruddin on foot is equal to ten men on horseback. Besides, the clatter of the horse's hoofs will scare him away. I'll go as I am.'

A mysterious and malicious smile curled round the old woman's lips as she gazed at the Malik's receding form. Then she turned back and disappeared in the darkness behind the gate.

IV

The stranger was still busy with his curious recreation. He threw the onions high into the air and caught them as they fell. Hizabruddin, anxious

lest his prey should escape, approached stealthily from behind. The moonlight fell slantingly on the stranger's back. The latter from where he sat could not see Hizabruddin, but Hizabruddin carefully noted all he saw of the stranger. Such points would come in handy if the thief escaped and had to be identified later.

He was, as the maid asserted, a small-statured man with a thick grey beard. He wore a dress of dirty white, but what sort of dress it was Hizabruddin could not exactly make out. The man's head was bare and his neck looked very dark in contrast with the white moonlight over his clothes. He was very lean. His arms seemed to have withered. His tight-fitting coat showed the ribs in his fleshless sides. 'He has taken to theft on account of starvation, or he has been overworked and underfed in his old age,' Hizabruddin thought. By now he was less than twelve paces from the stranger, who could not possibly escape him.

'Who are you that sit here?' Hizabruddin shouted. 'Who are you?'

The stranger mechanically turned towards the voice.

'You know him,' something seemed to say in Hizabruddin's ear.

The face which confronted Hizabruddin would have paralysed a weaker man. It was an old man's face—a face full of deep anguish and pain. There were spots of blood over its forehead and cheeks; a thin streak of blood came out of its mouth and trickled down the grey beard. On the man's left side, just over the heart, was a ghastly dagger-wound, which had cut through two of his ribs, and out of this wound a stream of blood was driven by his pulsating heart. His arms fell helplessly at his sides, the right hand still grasping the onions. His mouth was open and so were his eyes; but the eyeballs had rolled up and only the white could be seen between the eyelids. He neither spoke nor stirred, but sat there in grim silence, facing Hizabruddin and the moonlight.

It was a sight to give one pause, but Hizabruddin paused not. Instinctively he recognized in this strange being a mortal foe; and, levelling his spear, threw it with full force at the man's heart. Then he stopped to think over what he had done.

In front of him was the small mound, half a yard high, on which he had sat when supervising the ploughing of his field. On the other side lay a heap of onion-plants that the stranger had plucked and gathered. Beyond them was his Tartar spear. He had thrown it with tremendous force, and it had sunk to half its length in the soft ground. But where was the stranger? It may have been a trick of the moonlight, but Hizabruddin had seen his unerring missile pass through the wound over the stranger's heart and out the other side; and the stranger's unsubstantial body had parted like thin air and disappeared, even as a cloud of smoke is lost in the wind and you cannot see where it has gone.

Hizabruddin deliberately stepped across the mound and over the onions. He pulled his spear out of the ground, wiped away the earth sticking to it, and made sure that its fine point had not been injured. His iron nerves were as firm as ever.

But what had happened? Who was the stranger, and where had he gone? Hizabruddin grew pensive. He leaned

on his spear and was soon involved in a long train of thought. Just then a dark cloud floated overhead and nearly hid the moon.

Yes; who was the stranger and where had he gone? Hizabruddin's memory began to work rapidly. He went over the long list of faces he had seen, and soon fell upon the correct one.

Karam Narain, the old farmer! A strange feeling came over him at the thought. It was the first time in his life he had experienced fear. He shivered and trembled; his heart beat louder and louder.

Karam Narain had been a farmer in Hizabruddin's village. He was old and affectionate and kindly. Everybody loved him. The children were fond of him, for he was ever busy in devising games for the older ones, and making toys for the younger. The housewives were fond of him, for he never grudged a helping hand to a neighbour in need. He had outlived his wife, children and all other relations, and the love which his soft, kind heart had had for them he transferred to his brother-farmers and their offspring. At first he had plenty

of land, but as he grew older he could not cultivate it all by himself. So he gave it away to the stout young sons of his brother-farmers, and it pleased his kindly heart to see them guide the plough and wield the axe with a strength he himself was never to regain. For his own support he kept only two small but very fertile fields, which yielded a little corn without taxing overmuch his feeble and failing strength; and in the weakness of his old age he received from others the love and protection he had offered to them while he was strong. The stout young men of the village adored him as their own father. They were no cowards, and would have died to the last man before anyone could injure old Karam Narain by word or deed. But ten years ago Karam Narain had disappeared. He went on a distant pilgrimage and never returned. It was surmised that he had died from the effects of the journey, somewhere on the way. Not for a moment did anyone suspect that the poor man had been murdered. Hizabruddin alone knew the truth.

Hizabruddin was then a pushing

young man, but not very important. He had set his heart on Karam Narain's precious little fields, but the old man would not part with the support of his declining years for a third of their real price, which was all that Hizabruddin could afford to pay. He solved the difficulty by a crime. Karam Narain started on the pilgrimage. Hizabruddin tracked him. It was summer, and to avoid the blazing heat of the sun the old man, who intended no harm to anyone and expected none, had decided to walk in the cool night and rest during the day. He had hardly gone a few miles when Hizabruddin saw his chance. The path lay through a thick grove, and Hizabruddin, concealing himself behind the trunk of a tree, stabbed the old man as he passed. Karam Narain's death was instantaneous. But a curious fever overtook Hizabruddin at the moment. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he wound the dead body in a blanket, tied it to the saddle in front of him, and, trotting a few miles, buried it in a fallow field. In the hurry and anxiety of the moment he even forgot the spot of his victim's grave. The rest was easy.

When Karam Narain failed to return by the next season, Hizabruddin prevailed on the village headman to let him have the two fields for a very small sum. They were to be given back to the old man when he returned, but Hizabruddin knew that he would not return.

Strange and fearful thoughts passed through Hizabruddin's mind as he stood leaning on his spear before the mound, his face bent downwards, his eyes fixed vacantly on the onions. The face of the murdered man often haunts the criminal, but Hizabruddin's nerves had always been normal and steady. Never during all those years had he once felt the slightest remorse for Karam Narain's death. The very memory of the deed had hardly ever crossed his mind. But this new experience shook him terribly. It upset the plain and intelligible interpretation of the world around him, on which he had based his ambitions and his hopes, and he knew not where he stood. He possessed brute force and understood its working; and he would have courageously suffered whatever superior brute force could inflict; it would have caused him pain but not mental anxiety or un-

happiness. But here was something altogether incalculable. All his previous ideas were being scattered to the winds and no new scheme of life and law could in an instant be formed in his mind. Dimly a consciousness of his evil life—an evil life persisted in for years—arose in his mind. The heads of half a dozen murdered men lay before him; he saw the wounds of his lashes on the bodies of his labourers; he saw the thin, emaciated frames of the tenants he had evicted, wandering with their weeping sons and daughters for a few crumbs of bread from one stingy householder to another. Dimly also he felt the existence of some compensating virtues—his administration of justice, his services to the State, his prayers and his fasts. And Zubaida Khanum — Hizabruddin's palpitating heart began to beat less quickly at the very thought of her. She had done much to compensate for his wickedness, and she would be a plea for his salvation. His devoted wife would not grudge him a share of the virtuous deeds she had laid by for the life beyond, that life which had been a mere word to him and to her an article of implicit and

trusting faith. But then Karam Narain returned, and against him Hizabruddin felt himself to be hopelessly, irretrievably in the wrong. For full ten years the murdered man had slept in peaceful quiet, and then, not knowing what he did, Hizabruddin had dragged him out of his resting-place and sent his ghost wandering. 'It will pester me now all my life,' he thought, and his face took on an air of stern defiance. His reformation was not yet complete. He had no idea of suffering for his sins. He could not find it in his heart to forgive the man he had wronged.

He could not, however, stand there reasoning with himself all through the night. It was time to return home. Hizabruddin clenched his fists and tightened the muscles of his arms. He still felt himself as strong as ever. He lifted his spear and made a move to depart. But at that moment he heard the sound of someone walking over dry leaves, and, looking in that direction, he saw that which froze his blood and petrified him where he stood.

The dark cloud overhead had drifted to the distant horizon, and the moon-

light fell straight on Hizabruddin's face. In front of him, some forty or fifty paces beyond the mound, stood the old banyan tree to which he had once tied his horse, and under the shadow of which he had walked on tiptoe when trying to approach the unsuspecting stranger. But who was it again trampling on those dry leaves?

Even as Hizabruddin looked in that direction a strange figure emerged from the shadow of the banyan tree into the full moonlight in front. It was a horrible, fearful figure, shaped like a man but twice his size. It wore no dress, but a mass of curly black hair growing all over the body gave it a ferocious appearance and sharply distinguished its outline against the green leaves behind its back. Hizabruddin's heart sank within him when he saw that the creature cast no shadow. It was stout and muscular. In its left hand it held a human skull; and a stream of weird red light seemed to rush at Hizabruddin from the monster's bloodshot eyes.

The monster stared at Hizabruddin, and Hizabruddin helplessly stared back at the monster. The fierce glance of

the creature held him spellbound. He could not turn away his eyes. He was unable to think or move. So for a while they stood face to face.

Then with slow and deliberate steps the monster began to move forward. Hizabruddin saw it approach nearer and nearer, till it came and stood on the other side of the mound. Then for a moment it turned its gaze away from Hizabruddin to the skull in its right hand, which it threw up into the moonlight and caught as it fell.

Hizabruddin's overstrained nerves gave way as soon as the monster turned its gaze. He became unconscious and fell down with a thud, crushing the onion-plants in his fall.

V

His swoon could not have lasted very long, for when he next opened his eyes all things were exactly as he had last seen them. The black cloud was still on the distant horizon and the moon was almost where it had stood before. Only the monster had disappeared, and the discovery hastened Hizabruddin's

returning consciousness. He raised himself on one hand and rubbed his eyes. Then he jumped to his feet, picked up his fallen bow and spear, and started for home. But first he stooped down to see if the monster had left a footprint on the ground. There was none.

Hizabruddin intended to walk back slowly home to keep up his failing courage, but soon found himself running at full speed. His feverish fancy saw Karam Narain, with his bleeding mouth and wounded breast, sitting on every mound. Out of every shadow the fierce monster he had just seen emerged before his deceptive eyes. Nevertheless he rushed on, jumping over mounds and across ditches, for he was like one hunted by many devils.

'Catch him! Catch him! Don't let the thief escape this time,' cried a man whom Hizabruddin, hurrying by his cottage, had aroused from his midnight sleep. It was the labourer whom he had compelled to plough up Karam Narain's grave.

At last the outskirts of the village were reached, and Hizabruddin slackened his pace. There were houses on either

side of the lane, and, though at this hour all was silent, the nearness of human beings brought him strength. From the opposite direction someone came singing a well-known Persian song, and Hizabruddin at once recognized the familiar tones of his brother-in-law, Fakhruddin.

'I have just seen Zubaida home. I would have asked you to accompany me on my moonlight stroll,' he said, as Hizabruddin approached him, 'but I find you have not yet had your dinner.'

'And I am quite tired too,' replied Hizabruddin. 'Besides, I advise you not to go out, at least not along the road towards my onion-field. A strange new animal has appeared there tonight. It walks on two legs. It is something like a bear.' Hizabruddin, without confessing his experiences and his weakness, thought it necessary to keep his brother-in-law away from the haunted spot.

'You don't mean to say so,' Fakhruddin replied. 'Something like a bear! How is it possible? It must have been like this.'

And instead of Fakhruddin there stood before him the ferocious monster he had

seen by the side of his onion-field—the monster with the tall, dark figure, curly hair, and red, glowing eyes.

What did this mean? Hizabruddin stopped not to think what it meant. It seemed to him the darkest treachery that his brother-in-law should assume the monster's shape. But his previous experience had taught him one elementary lesson. He knew the magnetic spell of the monster's eyes. Instinctively he felt that it would be all over with him if he looked at the fearful creature even once. It was unsubstantial: it cast no shadow, left no footprints, and perhaps could do him no physical harm. Had he not been left uninjured after the first swoon? The creature's influence over him, which radiated from its glowing, red eyes, was mental only.

He covered his face with his hands, turned away from his erstwhile brother-in-law, and fled. The doors of the houses on either side shook and trembled as Hizabruddin's heavy steps fell in rapid succession over the brick-paved lane. The light sleepers woke up to inquire what was the matter; the heavy sleepers yawned in their sleep. But

Hizabruddin cared not about their sleeping or waking. He was flying for dear life, and would not stop to consider other people's little conveniences. Finally, his own large mud house appeared on his right hand. He rushed through the garden in front and hurled himself in mad fury against the gate. It was closed and locked.

'I am opening it in an instant, master,' the old maid cried from within. Hizabruddin heard her turn the key in the lock inside, and the doors flew open. 'Zubaida Khanum has just returned. She has sent her men to go and search for you, and asked me to sit here and open the gate. She is up in her room.'

'Very well,' said Hizabruddin, 'you go at once and send someone to the *Qazi*. Ask him to come immediately with his holy *Quran*.'

The old maid had passed some ten steps beyond the gate when she turned back to ask a question.

'What happened to the thief, master? Did you catch him?'

'No! He had fled by the time I reached the place. We will see to him in the morning.' Hizabruddin stood

clutching the two doors with either hand.

'But he was not a thief, and he did not fly, master.' The old maid's bent back seemed to straighten and her stature grew as she spoke. 'He was something else. And did you not see there a creature like this?'

And instead of the maid, the monster for the third time stood before him, its eyes glowing red, and its body covered with curly black hair.

A terrible curse burst from Hizabruddin's lips. He slammed and bolted the doors right in the monster's face. He had reached his house and was resolved not to be bearded in his own den. Besides, Zubaida, his guardian angel, was near. For five years her influence had been his protection. She would not fail him now.

He rushed across the courtyard, up the creaking staircase, and right into his wife's chamber.

It was a carefully decorated room, with two doors on the northern side and a small window in the southern wall. Hizabruddin had spent on it all the knowledge of the fine arts he had gathered in the imperial palaces of

Delhi. The chestnut wood of the roof had been carved into the finest foliage that the expert artisans of Delhi could execute. The walls had been plastered and painted to look like inlaid marble. The floor, in conformity with ancient Indian custom, had little furniture, but was tastefully covered with two carpets, the lower one covering the whole and the upper one only the centre of the floor. Near the western wall stood Zubaida's spinning-loom. On the opposite side was a large bed with silver legs; it was the only dowry her poor parents had been able to afford.

Zubaida sat patiently turning the handle of the loom and watching the thread that drew itself out of the ball of cotton-wool in her left hand. There was a homely atmosphere about the buzzing wheel. It had often lulled Hizabruddin to sleep.

She smiled quietly as he entered. 'I was wondering where you had gone. I sent all my six men after you in case you should need their help. But I knew no harm would overtake my bold and courageous husband. Only it was late and your dinner was waiting.'

Hizabruddin had seated himself on the bed with his feet dangling below. The moonlight experiences out there had shaken him terribly, but in the quiet homeliness of his wife's chamber his self-confidence in a measure returned. He was trying to pull himself together. Still, in the dim light of the small lamp near the loom, Zubaida could see that he was dreadfully pale. His hands shook nervously. There was a tremor in his voice.

'What is the matter? You are not well. I have never seen you like this before.'

He motioned her to shut the door. Then she came and sat on the carpeted floor near his feet. Hizabruddin looked nervously on all sides to make sure the ghost was not hiding in any corner. Then he looked at his consort—it was a tender, affectionate look. She said nothing, but smiled back cheerfully.

'But why are you not looking well? Shall I order the dinner? You must be hungry, and so am I.'

He asked her not to move. He could not bear her to leave him for an instant. 'No, the dinner can wait a little longer.

I have had a strange experience tonight.'

'Oh? Is that what makes you pale? Do tell me what happened. I have a right to your confidence.'

Hizabruddin leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees and his two hands clasped together between them. Zubaida looked at him with inquisitive wonder. Then he started his story. He told her of the maid's information, of the wounded man on the mound at whom he had hurled his spear, and of the huge figure that had stepped out from under the banyan tree, at whose feet he had fallen unconscious. Something, however, he cleverly tried to hide—his murder of Karam Narain, the extraordinary resemblance of the stranger on the mound to the murdered man, and the curious way in which Fakhruddin and the maid had assumed the form of the ghost. He often broke down in the course of the narrative. His experience was fresh and his words recalled it too vividly. His tongue was parched.

For a little while an absolute silence reigned. Zubaida, with her face bent

downwards, was apparently busy in making head or tail out of the story. Hizabruddin was immersed in a hitherto unexpressed thought.

'Do you think,' he broke in rather irrelevantly, 'that God ever forgives a murder?'

'Why not? Only the criminal must pay the penalty. You see, sins against Himself God forgives on proper repentance and a change of heart. But sins against our poor fellow-creatures cannot be forgiven thus. For them we must suffer, not only mentally but also physically. If we have injured anyone, we must undergo an equivalent punishment; if we have murdered anyone, we must die. Believe me, there is no purification except through suffering, but after due suffering we are purified. Our sins are washed away and we become like new-born babes. So all sins are forgiven; but a punishment has been allotted for every sin, and it overtakes us sooner or later. In the mercy of God there is always hope for His creatures. Only the Divine judgment must be fulfilled.'

Zubaida's eyes sparkled with hope

and joy as she spoke. Had she guessed the untold part of his story? Was she advising him to give himself up to justice? He nervously tried to take his wife's hand in his own, but Zubaida had got up and was moving towards the door.

'But I have not murdered him,' he said within himself, knowing his words to be a lie.

'I'll just order dinner,' she said; 'it will strengthen your shattered nerves. And don't be afraid. By the time the first ray of the sun strikes the earth you will have quite recovered.'

She had hardly walked four paces from him when she turned back. 'It is really very strange, the things you have seen;'—Hizabruddin trembled to find that Zubaida cast no shadow: he recollected how cleverly her hand had tried to avoid his grasp—'there are more beings in the world than we imagine,'—she seemed to grow taller and broader as she spoke—'but as to the figure that stepped out of the shadow into the moonlight, tell me, was it not something like this?'

And instead of Zubaida's thin and

slender form there stood before him the same monster, with red, glowing eyes and curly hair, a spear and a skull in either hand. Hizabruddin tried to cover his eyes and face. It was too late. He was caught in the magnetic spell of those bloodshot eyes and had lost all control over his limbs. He stared at the monster and the monster stared at him in return. But after a while the unsubstantial form began to disappear; first the body lost its colour and dissolved into thin air, and gradually Hizabruddin began to see the wall behind it. But still the red eyes continued to glow, and he was unable to turn away from their gaze. Finally the red eyes also disappeared. Hizabruddin fell back unconscious.

VI

Zubaida returned home in the early hours of the morning with her brother, her maid and her six footmen. The old woman with the smallpox was considerably better. On going up to her room she found her husband lying on the bed in a high state of fever, his eyes

wide open as if returning somebody's stare. He was unable to answer any questions. His talk was incoherent and delirious. 'Karam Narain! The monster! I don't fear either of you. Come out of the shadow, and I will see what you dare. I do not fear those cursed eyes of yours. Bring me my bow. I will shoot both of them. I will . . . No! I have not done it, I assure you all . . . Karam Narain! Karam Narain! Can't you forgive? why do you look at me like that? You had not long to live, anyway, curse you!'

Zubaida could make nothing out of her husband's illness, but she suspected much. Her first fear was that her husband in his delirious ravings would give the truth of his life away. So she sent her brother to call the village physician, and, after ordering the servants from the room, went downstairs to investigate what had happened. It was little she could discover. The cook had waited for the master's dinner, but an overpowering drowsiness had seized him and he had fallen asleep. He was sure that Malik had not had his

dinner; the plates and other articles in the kitchen were undisturbed. The watchman had seen Hizabruddin go out after the court session, but then he too had fallen asleep. Nothing more could be discerned. Zubaida concluded that her husband on going out had been frightened by something or other, and had returned in delirium and high fever. The thoughts kept down by his strong nerves had now overpowered him. But his own lips alone could tell the whole story.

She came back to the room where her husband lay. He was still feverish, but his delirium had disappeared. She sat down on the floor by his bedside, and, taking up one of his hands, rested her cheek on its broad brown palm. It was not so hot as before. She felt his pulse; his fever was subsiding. She looked at his face; it was deadly pale. She brought the small lamp from the other corner of the room and surveyed him carefully; his eyes were closed, his breath came rapidly and hard. His fists were clenched and there was a look of defiance in his face, the look she had often seen him wear as he marched out of his house on his

warlike campaigns. But even as she surveyed him, his facial muscles relaxed and he shivered from head to foot. The defiant look disappeared, and his face took on an appearance of extreme anguish, of utter helplessness, like one overborne by superior might, longing for sympathy but utterly forlorn. He was unconscious, but Zubaida seemed to know instinctively the influences moulding her husband's mind. He was a changed man. He had now a consciousness of his own weakness; and with weakness would come humility, love and tolerance for beings weak like himself. The august and hard-hearted husband whom she respected had disappeared. A weak and helpless creature lay in his place. Now there would be no distance between them, for the suffering husband stood in want of the sympathy his wife had offered him for years. A strange feeling — like the fondness of a mother for her ailing child —came over Zubaida as she looked at his unconscious form. Instinctively she felt he was going to die: the reformation had come too rapidly and he would not survive the shock. Instinctively

also she felt that there, at the threshold of death, she had found the consummation of her love. Nothing could part them now.

She rose to her knees beside her dying husband and placed her face on his breast, her moist eyes full of fast-falling tears. Her love had found expression.

The broad brown palm tapped her gently on the head as Hizabruddin opened his eyes. 'I had a strange dream,' he said, reassured by the fond love expressed in her smile. 'I dreamt that you, too, had turned into the strange monster I saw near the banyan tree.' A couple of tears glistened in his eyes. Then more tears came. For the first time in his life he wept.

Zubaida quickly grasped his meaning. He had been frightened by some apparition during his nocturnal excursion. But it was not an ordinary fright. His whole being had become unhinged. She guessed at the bitter pangs for the past, which, unknown to himself, had been gnawing at his heart. The shock, which had reclaimed him from his old ways, had also set the seal of death on his forehead. He was a doomed man. His memory

would not let him live. For the present, however, Zubaida had to keep the ghost out of his mind.

She opened the door and the windows. The flood of morning light rushed into the room; and wafted on the fresh breeze came the *muezzin's* call for prayer, the call that five times in the day declares that God alone is great. Hizabruddin brightened at the light and its message. His pulse became normal and his fever disappeared. He was bright and cheerful, and thought he had recovered. But Zubaida was under no delusion. She knew that it was the recovery that often precedes death.

'Now that you are well, you will tell me how all this came about. And if you love me, you will hide nothing. You have no dearer friend.'

In slow and pathetic tones he told her the whole of the night's adventure. At times he was too weak to continue, and recuperated his strength by occasional pauses. But though he still thought Zubaida had turned into the monster only in his dream, he confessed everything, even his murder of Karam Narain. The consciousness of sin had

imbued him with an overpowering desire to swim through the rivers of suffering before him to the fairer realms beyond. Out of his new virtue there arose in him a fresher courage, with a superb contempt for all lies and shams. God, Truth, Immortality — they were realities to him now, realities grounded on his consciousness of weakness, his consciousness of ignorance, his will and determination to live a better life in the realm beyond the grave.

But still the moonlight's tricks puzzled him. 'What is the meaning of all this? What is its import?' he asked her.

'How can I tell you? What do I know? The man who played with human skulls killed the man who played with onions; and then attempted a second murder on seeing the latter's ghost. So the Almighty, in His mercy, sent the monster as a punishment. You would be like that—she shuddered as she spoke — if you died unrepentant. And everything you saw turned into the monster. We see according to the nature of our own eyes. There are no ghosts; there is no life; there is no

death — she looked through her tearful eyes at the road of lonely widowhood that stretched in front of her—we are but phantom-figures moved according to the will of an all-embracing Thought. I know no more.' Her throat was choked.

'But what can I do to compensate for my sins?' It was the first time he had consulted her on a matter of importance.

'Give it ——' There was a knock at the door. 'Come in, whoever it is.' Fakhruddin entered with the physician. 'Quick, brother,' she cried, 'write me out a will; no, a deed by which my husband gives away all his lands to those, or to the heirs of those, who had the lands before him. His house and his money go to the poor of the village. He forgives his debtors what they owe him.'

Hizabruddin did not show the slightest resentment at his wife's dictating away his last penny. He felt only too painfully that the demands of justice were even yet unsatisfied.

Fakhruddin sat down and drew up the desired document. Then, after it had been duly signed, he looked at the

physician significantly, and the two departed to hand it over to the *Qazi*. They knew it was all over with the patient, but the deed, signed by him in ignorance of his approaching end, would be valid. His wife had totally disinherited herself by her own act.

Zubaida had thrown a veil over her face and withdrawn to the further corner of the room as the physician entered. 'You told me last night,' Hizabruddin asked her, as she approached him once more, 'you told me there was no compensation for murder but death. Should I give myself up to the law?' He was still unconscious of the nearness of his death.

'You need not,' she replied; 'Divine justice has passed its final judgment where human justice was slack. I should not hide from you any longer that your end has come.' She covered her face with her hands to avoid the last look of despair she expected in his eyes. But Hizabruddin was as calm and cheerful as ever.

'It is good news. Life would be nothing but a prolonged misery to me now, and I long for rest. Thank God! It

will be all over in a few minutes—life, its struggles and its disappointments. Look!' he continued, turning his face towards the east, 'Look! The sun is risen and your prophecy has come true. The first ray of the rising sun has cured me of the fever of life. But I do not like leaving you, now that I have at last learnt to love. What will you do? How will you live?' He clasped his hands in agony at the future that awaited her.

'As the bee lives, that fertilizes the flowers from which she gathers her honey. I will live by honest work.'

When Fakhruddin returned from the *Qazi*, he found his sister standing by the bed of her dead husband. She held a small bundle in her hand. Her eyes were full of tears. 'He is gone and I cannot live here any longer. You will look to his funeral.' She raised the sheet from his face and looked at it silently for a while. Then with an effort she pulled herself away, rushed across the room before her brother could stop her, and ran down the stairs. Prolonged search failed to discover where she had gone.

VII

Some two years after the events above narrated, Fakhruddin, out for his morning ride, was passing through one of the poorest streets of Delhi. His love of cultured society had brought him to the great capital, which many causes had combined to make the intellectual centre of the East. He had attached himself to one of the most prominent academies, and was on the high road to preferment.

Nevertheless, on that particular morning he felt gloomy. He was still a bachelor; his loneliness haunted him and the memory of old days came back again. Life appeared to him so meaningless, so utterly devoid of significance and purpose. The reins fell loosely over his horse's neck as it moved down the street at the leisurely pace he desired. Why he came to that street he could not say. His horse had just happened to turn that way. He hardly cared where he was going.

It was a narrow street in the suburbs of the great city, peopled by the working-classes — the classes for whom the

morning brought its message of hard and continuous work and the evening its reward of insufficient wages and insufficient diet. And yet they dragged on their cheerless existence from day to day and year to year, oblivious of the signs of enjoyment around them. Their ignorance and their piety, their faith in a world beyond where the poor would reap the reward of their sufferings, reconciled them to life. Rows of badly thatched mud houses stood on either side of the street; into these their humble occupants crept for their nightly rest when the daily round of work was over. Before one of these huts, rather worse than the others, a small hut consisting of one room without any window, its mud walls half washed away by the rain, a small group of white-dressed men had gathered.

'What is the matter?' Fakhruddin inquired as he passed.

'Nothing very important,' an old man with a milk-white beard answered, as he rose from his seat on the ground and leaned on his staff. 'An unknown woman used to live in this house. Last night she died. She lived by selling

fish. Early in the morning she bought the fish from the fishermen by the river-side; all day she sold them in the city; in the evening she returned and cooked her food. This is all we know of her. She had no relations, no acquaintances, no friends. She must have come from a respectable family, for she always went about veiled and no man or woman ever saw her face. But of the country she hailed from we know as little as of the realm to which she has gone.' The old man's eyes were moist with tears.

'I too once had a daughter,' he continued with an effort, 'a sweet and loving daughter, and unknown to me she must have died somewhere like this. But we are ready for her funeral prayer. Stop and pray for her soul, kind stranger, and then pass on to your business.'

Fakhruddin alighted and walked down to the hut, the little group parting to make way for him. It was a small low-built room, hardly three yards in length. There was an earthen fireplace in one corner, and by the side of it, on a rough blanket spread on the moist earth, lay the dead woman. Near her feet, wound

in an old silk handkerchief, had been deposited all her earthly belongings.

Fakhruddin was frightened at the sight of the silk handkerchief. He opened the bundle with trembling fingers, and the first thing that met his eyes was an old silver ring, with the sign of the rose upon it. It had been his mother's. With a shriek he turned towards the corpse and lifted the sheet from the dead woman's face. It was Zubaida.

SPECTRE AND SKELETON

SPECTRE AND SKELETON

I

THERE was one thing about Hanif which had always pained me. He trampled on the time-honoured customs of our country too rudely. Nevertheless, I could not help respecting his fighting courage. Another man would have soon succumbed to the odium, the social persecution and the constant and embittered hostility of those around him, under which Hanif had laboured for three long years. I had heard many scandals about him but never credited them, for no one can ever be an honest idealist without scandalizing society at large. 'But he is now sinking under the burden,' I thought, as I walked to his room in the most unhealthy quarter of the city. 'It is a case of socially-permitted murder. Face to face with death, how does he feel?'

Within a few minutes I was in the consumptive's chamber. His sunken cheeks and smiling lips answered my unasked question.

Hanif turned towards the door as he heard me enter. A strange gleam of joy suffused his face; it had obviously been caused by my appearance. He propped himself on his right elbow; his right sleeve fell down, displaying his fleshless forearm. 'I am glad you have come. I was so anxious to see you. We have not met for over two years. I have always believed,' he continued, without even giving me time to inquire after his health, 'that if we have in God's broad world just one human soul, one being on whose love and perfect sympathy, in spite of all misfortunes, we can confidently rely, it will be enough to reconcile us to all the vicissitudes of life. But how different were our surroundings when we met last. I was not then a starving pauper. Disease and death lose half their terror if poverty is not added to them—poverty, and fear for the future of those who survive.'

I understood what he meant, and wished to ask a few questions about his wife, whom I had never seen. But through his sleepless nights and uneasy days Hanif had been pondering over a question which no man living can answer.

His pent-up thoughts wanted an outlet, and he would not stop to let me speak. 'What do you think?' he continued, 'are our human relations—the relations of father and son, brother and sister, husband and wife—the *essence* or the *accidents* of our souls? I will explain what I mean. If the soul is immortal—if it lives and persists beyond the grave—does the relation in which it stands to other immortal souls persist also? Or does death put an end to our love and our hatreds and our hopes?'

I must have looked very stupid and blank. I was a doctor fresh from college. My business lay with the living; the etiquette of my profession assigns the dead man to the priest.

'Mehran! Mehran!' Hanif cried, 'come here. There is a friend of mine I wish you to meet.' I heard the noise of approaching footsteps in the other room.

Hanif sat up in his bed and burst out into a loud and hollow laugh—the laugh of a dying man at his dying hope. 'It would be a sight for the angels,' he exclaimed, 'if husbands and wives, who plague each other to death here, were

allowed to carry their warfare and bitterness into the regions beyond the grave.'

We were silent for a few minutes. The hollow laugh had unnerved me. Hanif breathed hard; he had been tired by the exertion; through his thin and threadbare *kurta* I could see the ribs swelling and sinking in his sides.

'I would give anything to know,' he continued, with a thin smile on his thin lips, 'if Mehran will be my wife in Paradise or Hell, whichever be the place we are destined for; with her everything would be bearable.

'Well, I am glad you have come. I am perplexed about the future. I have been poor for a long time. Some weeks back I spent the last *pie* I had, and people are not ready to lend to a poor and dying consumptive. But what will become of Mehran? You will look after her, won't you?' There was a mute appeal in his eyes; he clasped his hands together as if in prayer. 'If you promise to do so, I will die happy.'

My medical degree was all that I possessed in this world. How could I undertake to look after a young widow?

How would people take it, especially my own conservative family? But these problems lay in the future. For the moment I summoned up my courage. 'Yes,' I replied, 'you may rely on my performing the duty you have assigned to me, loyally and faithfully.' I was surprised at my own determination.

'I can't reconcile myself to the idea of her marrying again'—there was once more the same mute appeal in his eyes—'but that is for you two to decide. The dead can send no orders to the living. My life has been such a wreck.' He looked at the wall before him as if all his past life were pictured there—his youthful aspirations and his shattered hopes. 'What a tragedy life is!' he went on. 'The new-born babe smiles happily at the light before it; everything is gay and joyous. But we are disillusioned as we grow. There is meanness, there is selfishness, there is widespread starvation and want. Our nature shrinks. Youth brings the first shocks, and the happiest of us succumb to them. Others live on, finding life a heavy and meaningless burden. Next old age comes; weakness

of sight, weakness of limb, incapacity to work and earn. The world considers our existence futile. Then death and the worm. The worm! The worm!' he exclaimed several times; 'how it eats into our flesh and the flesh rots and stinks! But we are immortal and care not. For years and years we lie in our air-tight chambers—each of us a grinning skeleton — the hollow sockets of our eyes looking up helplessly towards the light and air we have left above. But at last our sockets are filled with earth, the roof crashes and dust is mixed with dust again.' He fell back worn out and exhausted. Our conversation was at an end.

I had hardly noticed Mehran enter the room. She had been sitting quietly on the bed near her husband's feet, but on seeing him fall back she moved towards his pillow, and, placing his head in her lap, motioned me to depart. In the supreme moment of their life they wished to be alone.

On stepping out of the room, I turned back to close the door and my eyes fell on the pair. Mehran, a girl of twenty in the full bloom of her youth, was

looking affectionately, kindly, understandingly, into her husband's eyes, and drops of tears trickled down her cheeks. Hanif had raised his two fleshless arms, and, winding them round her neck, returned her intelligent look with a vacant stare. It was the picture of death clasping life. 'I will never, never leave you,' I heard, or imagined I heard, her say, 'and in another world we will meet and be happy again.'

After a few hours I returned with a winding-sheet and some friends to perform the funeral rites. Hanif was dead.

II

Mehran's antecedents were shrouded in a mist. If she had parents, brothers, sisters, society, so inquisitive about the affairs of the unfortunate, had failed to discover them. Somewhere or other Hanif had met and married her. The rest was inevitable. His family had straightway disowned him. People who had never been guilty of one generous act in all their life, thought they could point the finger at the unrepentant

sinner in justification of their own ways. And when he died, poor and forsaken, they held him up as an example of the punishment that follows sin. What sin? Nobody cared to inquire.

For myself, I had applauded Hanif's brave deed when I heard of it. He had a childish faith in democracy and equality, and imagined that, if the tyranny of caste and custom were thrown aside, India would become a paradise. He saw no reason for despising an innocent girl because she was of low birth. He was intensely religious, and really thought that men and women should live together as brothers and sisters—and this, I know to my cost, Indo-Muslim society will never tolerate. Custom is our god.

I soon found myself in Hanif's shoes. The hounds of persecution were on my trail. What harm I had done to anybody by promising to look after a dying friend's widow they did not care to inquire. The moralists had expected to see Mehran begging in the streets: that anybody should stand between her and starvation appeared to them an intolerable crime. There was but one

way out of the muddle. We got married, left our town, and settled in the city of ——, where no one knew us.

My profession has always been my chief interest in life. Within a few months I had made my mark and was looked upon as a rising star. I had no friends and no critics; I was an outsider and my relations with my fellow-citizens were purely on a business footing. I received no guests, and seldom, if ever, went out to dine. Nevertheless, my domestic life promised to be a happy one. It is true, love had not smiled on our marriage. Mehran had consented to it simply to get out of an impossible situation, and probably regarded it as a sort of treason to the memory of her dead husband. But the mere fact of association sometimes begets affection in human hearts. We were two outcasts thrown exclusively into one another's company, and from necessity, if not from choice, took a liking to each other. And then the woman's devotion to her home! Mehran developed a romantic love for the little bungalow I had purchased in the suburbs. She was active from morning to night, looking after

everything, great and small—the instruments of my consulting-room, our orchard by the roadside, and above all the little parlour on the second storey, where we sat chatting after dinner. There was something extremely touching in her tenderness, in the extreme care with which she looked after everything that tended to my comfort and happiness. We had left our hard life behind; in the future everything looked rosy and promising.

But sometimes when the sky is fair and the traveller starts on the day's journey with presumptuous pride, a few dark spots slide unobserved into the distant horizon; and, even as he trudges confidently along, the black mass gathers overhead, and before he is conscious of any danger the sky is overcast, the light of day is changed into the darkness of night; flashes of lightning illuminate and mock his groping efforts to find the path that leads to the distant inn, while in his ears the rumbling thunder rings the knell of his joyous hopes. So it was in my case.

Mehran had always perplexed me. There are some people who smile and

smile, and to all outward view are happy and contented; and yet for some reason, which you cannot state either to yourself or to others, you know that the smiling lips betray the tortured heart and the sparkling eyes derive their tragic glitter from a soul that is surrounded by insufferable gloom. Mehran was one of the inscrutable. Our relations had at first been distant and formal, and remained on that footing for a few months after our marriage. But even when we had become quite intimate, there was a sphere of her life, or rather of her thought, I could never penetrate. She was sometimes grave, but never melancholy. I often questioned her about her musings, and my question brought a smile to her lips. But she never answered me straight, perhaps because she had no answer to give. I simply state these reflections of mine. They may, or may not, explain the events that followed.

III

What an inexplicable phenomenon sleep is! Why do we sleep at all? Is

sleep a condition of unconsciousness or of continuous but forgotten dreams? Why do we remember some dreams and forget others? What is the relation of our dream-life to our waking-life? All sorts of questions perplexed me as I sometimes lay listening to Mehran's mutterings in her sleep. I studied her words scientifically, but no effort on my part could read any significance into the words that seemed meaningless only in conjunction. The disease grew on her; but was it a disease at all? Very often she would wake up and walk about the room, talking incoherently and trying to open the door, which I always locked before going to sleep. Some strange power seemed to beckon her into the open air. I never disturbed her while she was walking or talking in her sleep. But was it a sleep or a trance? I thought the best I could do was to wait and see.

One night I forgot to close the door, and Mehran succeeded in reaching the open air. It must have been past the hour of midnight. I was absorbed in an important case, and sat at my bedroom table consulting my medical books.

Mehran was sleeping on a bed by the side of my table. 'Yes! yes!'—the words awakened me from my thoughts as I saw Mehran snatch a blanket and rush out of the room. I got up and followed her, even as a ghost might follow another ghost. She leapt down the stairs; I descended on tiptoe. It was a dark winter night, and I could not see three feet ahead. But an unerring instinct seemed to direct her steps.

About ten yards from the high wall that separated our orchard from the public street, there was a small bench under a *nim* tree, where Mehran and I used to have our tea together when lack of patients allowed me to spend an idle evening at home. I was surprised to find her moving directly towards the bench. 'What will she do there?' I thought, as she disappeared in the darkness beneath the thick branches of the old tree. Had I gone further, she would have heard my footsteps; so I decided to await her return. She would have to come back by the footpath by which she had gone. The wall barred all further progress. I hid myself behind a high hedge in silent expecta-

tion. From where I sat I could see nothing of her, but my ears were on the alert and caught every sound.

I heard Mehran's mutterings, which I had often heard, but this time there was a curious ring about them — the ring of her voice when offering an explanation for something that had gone wrong, only with an earnestness and zeal I had never known her display before. Was she talking to someone? She had hardly finished her speech when another voice seemed to answer in strange accents — accents like a dog cracking a piece of bone. My heart began to beat instantly. Was it a secret meeting? Who was the person with that cracking voice? Then Mehran spoke once more, and the cracking voice replied again. 'Go! Go!' Mehran cried, as she rushed by me with the blanket round her shoulders. I did not follow her back to the house. I was interested in the possessor of the voice, whose footsteps receded in the opposite direction. They were curious footsteps —like the striking of a walking-stick on the ground followed by the fall of a few dry and heavy twigs.

On returning to my room I found Mehran fast asleep. The lamp shed a genial light over the books and papers, which lay open as I had left them. I rubbed my eyes. Had I really gone out, or was it only a dream I had dreamt while dozing over my books? Everything was homely, comfortable, quiet. Still, I remembered the cracking voice and the strange footsteps. Was my reason failing me? How could I doubt my wife's fidelity? I looked at Mehran and she seemed to smile. I felt quite happy and went on with my work.

On waking up next morning I found things absolutely normal. Mehran, affectionate and lively as usual, was ready with the breakfast. I took up my list of patients and went on my rounds as if nothing had happened.

IV

Still the memory of Mehran's midnight visitor troubled me. She had not to my knowledge ever received a letter by post. The only persons she seemed to know in the world were her maidservants and myself. Yet who could be the person

involved? Not that I ever doubted her fidelity. But still we mortals are plagued by a mental disease that impels us to seek for an explanation of all that happens.

One night I returned rather late from my rounds, and Mehran and I had just sat down for a little friendly chat when I was informed by my servant that an old village woman had come to see me. 'She seems quite worn out and broken,' he said, 'and pathetically appeals for your immediate assistance.'

'What do you want?' I asked the trembling creature that stood in tattered clothes before my door.

'I have a young daughter, Doctor Sahib,' she replied, 'and every now and then some strange *thing* seems to take possession of her. She was engaged, but he died before the marriage, and now, they say, he comes to claim her. You are a great doctor. Surely you will be able to drive him off.'

I had often heard of ghosts taking possession of young village women, but had always thought it baseless gossip, and, like a faithful student of science, had dismissed the inexplicable as unreal.

'Nonsense!' I retorted. 'Your daugh-

ter must be shamming. Perhaps you do not give her enough to eat. It is too late. Come to me tomorrow.'

I looked at her rags and despaired of my usual fees. But it was not easy to avoid the old woman's request. She fell on the ground, and, clasping my knees, broke into prolonged and bitter sobs. I am not avaricious where the poor are concerned, though it is not at all pleasant to be deprived of the payment due for one's work. I ordered my carriage and started at once.

The patient, a girl of nineteen in robust health, sat talking continually to the people around her. There was a marked combative and malicious spirit in her tone. She referred to herself in the third person singular; it was her dead betrothed who seemed to be talking with her lips and tongue. I examined her pulse; it was perfectly normal. I asked her mother if she could point out any symptoms of a real disease, but she could not name any. This was perplexing. I started cross-examining the patient herself.

'How is your sleep?' I inquired. 'Can you digest the food you eat?'

The girl broke out into a bitter and sarcastic laugh. 'Look at the doctor,' was the answer, 'he thinks she is ill. He imagines he can drive me off with medicines and pills.' The people around also joined in the laugh. I was nonplussed.

'What is your name? Where do you live?' It was apparently her dead betrothed I was talking to.

'My name is Shanker. I live on the meadow adjoining your house. I have often seen you.'

'Will this young woman survive?' I inquired.

'Not if I can help it,' was the callous reply. 'I want her to die so that she may live on the meadow with me. She was engaged to me once. It is so dull living without her.'

'But if you love her,' I argued, 'you must wish her health and happiness.'

A bitter, ironical smile curled about the girl's lips. 'We kill the thing we love,' came the answer. 'We kill because we love—it is love that kills. Even now your wife is sitting by the side of her visitor, and you go about trying to drive off the lovers of other women.'

A fever seized me at these words. Did Shanker know of my wife having gone to the orchard seat? I recollected in a hurry that the *nim* tree above the seat was within sight of the meadow on which Shanker said he lived. His keener eyes might have seen the man I had been unable to distinguish in the dark. But of anything like logical reasoning I must have been incapable in the strained condition of my nerves. I shoved my instruments into my handbag, and, running back to my carriage, ordered the coachman to drive home as fast as he could. 'Whip the horses till they die,' I shouted.

Half a mile from the house I stopped the carriage, and, ordering it to wait where it was, proceeded silently on foot, my hand involuntarily grasping the revolver in my pocket. It must have been past two in the morning. The moon was sinking slowly on my left, and its lateral rays seemed to people the trees and bushes with innumerable phantoms. I barely knew what I was doing, but memory, or perhaps the promptings of a fixed idea, carried me to the seat under the *nim* tree. The pale moonlight was

blending into the night, but a few lingering beams were still playing upon the scene. My heart beat less loudly—the seat was empty. I sat down on the bench and lighted a cigarette to calm my nerves. After all, my wife was in the house. 'What a fool I have been,' I thought, 'to doubt my wife at the prompting of a malicious spirit that apparently wanted to get me out of its way.' My eyes fell on the parlour window; the lamp was burning and its rays brought me a soothing message of wife and home. But why was Mehran up at that hour of the night? I moved on tiptoe towards the house. From the bottom of the stair I could hear Mehran's mutterings; on climbing up a few steps I caught the accents of the cracking voice. He was there.

I peeped from the corner of the closed window into the room. Mehran was sitting on an easy chair with her back towards me. On the chair opposite to her was her midnight visitor—a grinning skeleton. *He* was leaning back comfortably, his left cheek-bone resting on the palm of his left hand and his hollow eyes staring fixedly at my wife's

face. His bones shone white. I shall never forget the rows of his ribs. He seemed to be quite at home.

A strange nausea overpowered me. I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall. When after a few seconds I peeped again into the room *he* had disappeared.

With unsteady and faltering steps I walked into the parlour. Mehran was fast asleep. I shook her with my trembling hands. She jumped up with a start, and winding her arms round my waist looked into my eyes with a happy, smiling and blissful face. 'I have been waiting for you all this time,' she smiled; 'I did not like going to my rest while you were busy with your work. Just now I seemed to have dozed a little. But what in the world made you shake me so terribly? Are you not feeling well?' She pressed my palpitating temple to her steadily beating heart. 'Come, I will make you a cup of tea, or, better still, I will sing you to sleep. You must be fearfully tired after your work.'

I could not make up my mind to speak of the skeleton. Mehran had

obviously been asleep. Was he the creature of my own feverish imagination? Was she aware that I had seen *him* staring at her with his hollow eyes? Had she any idea of what she said and did during her sleep?

A few months later I had a more bitter experience.

V

I hate moonlight—a light for spectres, and walking shadows, and ghosts, that lose their form when the darkness of night envelops them in its mantle of invisible black. But sometimes, when the moon is full and a refreshing cool breeze blows over the landscape, as I sink down to rest after the labours of a hot summer day, forgetting ghosts and goblins and the worries of the morrow, I can almost reconcile myself to the existence of its spectre-creating light.

Well, it was on such a moonlit night that I returned after attending a cholera patient in a distant quarter of the city. Mehran was sleeping on her bed on the open roof near our parlour, about twenty steps from the staircase. She looked

extremely beautiful, as the full moon shone on her face. Her bosom rose and fell gently; her sleeping lips seemed to smile. She had placed her hand on her eyes to prevent the moon from piercing through their transparent lids.

I lighted a cigarette, placed the ash-tray between myself and Mehran, and, half reclining on my elbow, fell into incoherent musings. With grateful tears in my eyes I thanked Providence for blessing an outcast like me with a successful professional career—I wondered how astronomers calculated the weight of the moon—I wished that men instead of plaguing each other to death would live together in undisturbed peace, comforted by brotherly affection—I watched the rise of my cigarette-smoke, and thought how its molecules would be scattered in the atmosphere never to unite again.

Suddenly my heart jumped and began to beat loudly and fast. I was seized with a tremor from head to foot, and my hair seemed to stand up on my head. My ears had heard something fearful. What it was I could not remember, but the faculties of my mind seemed concentrated

on the repetition of a weirdly familiar sound. The point of a big heavy bone seemed to strike against the brick floor, and it was followed by the fall of a few lighter bones. There could be no doubt about it. I heard it again and again.

And the sound seemed to rise higher and come nearer. The skeleton was climbing up the stair.

I tried to get up, but something seemed to petrify my limbs and they refused to move. In my desperation, I tried to call my servants, but my voice was choked in my throat. My heart beat faster and faster; my will was paralysed but my senses were on the alert, and my eyes were fixed to the spot where the staircase joined the roof.

I listened in helpless expectation to the sound of his approaching footsteps. Then, bit by bit, his form appeared. First his grey skull, smooth and shining, rose above the edge of the roof, and I marked the zigzag line where the skull-bones had dovetailed into one another; then the blind sockets, dark and fearsome in contrast with the moonlight that shone on his bones; then the half-cut nose, and below it the two rows of

grinning teeth; next the parallel ribs, one by one, and the vertebræ and the plates of the hips; and, last of all, the heels and toes that had caused the blood-curdling sound.

On reaching the roof the skeleton stopped and looked around. His hollow eyes saw me and Mehran, and he began to walk towards us, his arms dangling by his sides. Step by step he came nearer; I wished something could have stopped his advance, but my mental power had left me completely, and I felt like a victim deprived even of the will to loathe its doom. 'How does he walk without his muscles?' I wondered.

Near Mehran's foot the skeleton knelt on one knee—I could not help noticing a touch of melancholy in his stiff and formal movements—and, placing the palms of his hands on the edge of the bed, sank his four large front teeth into her right toe. Then he got up quietly, and, with his arms folded on his fleshless breast, stood gazing at Mehran. And Mehran seemed to smile in return.

A hollow cry—the last appeal of a forlorn hope—burst from my lips on seeing the skeleton's large ugly teeth

dripping with my wife's blood, and the spell that held me in its toils disappeared. I jumped up with a desperate effort, and the skeleton was no more. I shook Mehran, once, twice, thrice. 'What is it?' she asked, crouching nearer and nearer to me. I took her hand and placed it on her injured toe. She gazed long and thoughtfully on her hand smeared with her own blood. 'I know; I understand,' she said, and fell back on the bed in a swoon.

VI

No effort of mine could stop Mehran's blood flowing from her toe. For two hours I laboured over it, but all my medicines failed me. 'There must be little of it by now,' I thought, when the red drops at last ceased to come out. All the time she was unconscious, and her temperature was high. When in hopeless desperation I shook her by the shoulders, she would open her eyes, unwillingly and with great effort, and quickly, with a satisfied happy smile, close them again. 'He is drawing out my blood,' she said incoherently, once.

About midday her temperature fell to below normal, her pulse became steady and she opened her eyes. 'I am feeling very weak,' she said; 'raise me up on my pillow. I would like to tell you something.'

Her talk was somewhat disjointed, and she often paused for want of breath. 'I have always been thinking and dreaming of him, and thrice he has come to see me. I did not tell you of it for fear that you would be angry. First, he came to the house at midnight — something told me I would find him sitting on the orchard seat if I went there. Yes, he was there, but it was dark and I could not see him well. But after we had talked a little I grew afraid of your anger, in case you should come to know. "Go! go!" I cried, and rushed back home.

'Once more he came at midnight straight into my parlour. I cannot tell you how beautiful he looked, his face beaming with joy, calm, composed, like a youthful bridegroom come to take away his lawful bride. His cheeks were rosy. His lips wore that soft and enchanting smile for which I forsook my people and my home. He had out-

lived the sorrows of our human existence, and was now among the blest. We talked quietly and happily. "When will you come to me?" he said. "How shall I come before my hour?" I answered. "Then," he said, "I will await your arrival. It will not be long." He looked at a corner of the window, shivered as if from fear, and went away.

'Last night he—Hanif—came again. He came and knelt by my bed and kissed my feet. And he looked at me with his soft and enchanting smile, that had had power to draw me away from my people and my home. I knew my hour was come.'

Again the happy, satisfied smile illuminated her bloodless face. 'One thing,' she continued, 'often troubled me. Whom should I love—you or him? He knew the thought was troubling me. "The living belong to the living," he said to me in our parlour, "and the dead belong to the dead. You must love him while you live."'

We passed a happy day together—it was the happiest day in my life. Mehran, weak from loss of blood and mental strain, leaned on her pillow and

kept brushing my hair backwards with the palm of her hand. A strange delusion seemed to possess us both; the past became the future, and we lived through it again. We talked of the happy days we had spent together, and recalled the details of every incident. It seemed like the beginning of a new honeymoon; only by instinctive aversion neither of us mentioned the time that was to come, and we cast it out of our minds. Towards the evening she died.

Seven days have passed since Mehran's death — seven days of fear and worry and pain. How shall I live? Whom shall I live for? An ugly mass of clotted mud covers the remains of Mehran's form. And the skeleton haunts me; it peeps at me from every dark corner of my lonesome house; I hear the sound of its weirdly familiar footsteps; I see it grin with my wife's blood dripping from its ugly teeth. It will haunt me. It will kill me even as it has killed her. But let these pages of mine survive to inform the world of my doom. I am deserted, forsaken, alone. With me, at last, the hopeless tragedy shall end.

N.B.—These pages were written by me a few days after my wife's death, some fifteen years ago. I must have then been under a strange nervous tension, but I prefer to leave this autobiographical piece as it stands. The skeleton never haunted me after Mehran's death. Time has healed the sorrows and dulled the aspirations of my youth. Nor have I been really untrue to my first wife's memory, for 'the living belong to the living, even as the dead belong to the dead'. And the hands of my little children water the jessamines round Mehran's grave.

THE SPIDER'S WEB

A TALE OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

THE SPIDER'S WEB

I

HIMMAT KHAN trembled as his Arab charger galloped on the moonlit road from Koil to Bulandshohr. Curious fires were dancing on the level plain around him; at times the road before him seemed ablaze; then, as he approached, the fire would retire to a distant grove, or it would travel along with him at a safe distance to his right or left. And his mind was ill at ease.

But, as nothing happened, Himmat Khan's courage seemed to return. His horse, tired and out of breath, fell into an easy trot. The moon began to decline towards the west; and the calm, cool night, and the gentle rustling of the leaves in the breeze that blew softly over the even plain, had a soothing effect on his storm-tossed soul. But, even as his lips smiled at the slumbering landscape around him, his large eyes glowed under his thick eyebrows with a haughty, malignant pride, and he looked eagerly and wistfully around him for

any signs of that superhuman power, which had driven him, a frightened and hunted animal, away from the abodes of men. Above him was his God, in whom he seemed to seek no refuge; below him his mother-earth, into whose bosom he did not wish to descend; and around him the web of the blood-sucking spider whom he felt he could not elude. His conscience worried him; it was the first time it had ventured to do so, and the experience was novel.

Suddenly, a hundred paces in front of him, a white apparition stepped into the moonlight from the shadow of the *jamun* tree by the roadside. Himmat Khan's horse instinctively pricked up its ears and charged; instinctively also Himmat levelled his lance at the apparition's breast and struck with full force, expecting it to pass through the empty air that had assumed this strange form to frighten him. The sequel was surprising.

Quick as had been Himmat's movements, his senses had been no less quick. He was surprised to feel his lance touch something solid — touch it and pierce it through; and then, along with

the consolation that he was face to face with a merely human being, came a bitter pang of regret at his senseless deed, and his lance slipped from his unnerved hands as his horse rushed past the victim, who had fallen to the ground with an unresisting groan.

Himmat wheeled his horse round and alighted near the feet of the dying traveller. He was a very old man. His long, white beard seemed whiter in the moonlight; his teeth were clenched and his lips compressed, as with increasing weakness he struggled against the pain that racked his feeble body. The spear had pierced through the centre of his breast; he wriggled on the ground, helplessly, purposelessly; his arms and feet shot forth in all directions, his fists opened and closed, and his elbows rubbed against the ground in the vain attempt to get up, to lie down, to do something that would ease his pain. At a distance from him lay the staff that had been the support of his weak knees, and his long white cloak had become dirty with the dust of the road.

Himmat Khan planted his left foot on the old man's breast, and pulled out his

lance. 'It will ease his pain,' he thought, and quite rightly. The best thing for the dying is to hasten their death. Gently and softly a stream of blood welled out of the old man's breast after Himmat's retreating lance, and his consciousness returned. He raised himself on his elbows and looked around. He saw the mortal wound on his breast and the armed warrior at his feet. There was a strange look in his eyes—not of anger or resentment or hate, but of a certain calm conviction, even of contentment, that the unfeared, unlonged-for end had come and found him not unprepared; and the suggestion of a happy smile played about his lips—the happiness of a traveller who, after a weary journey, nears the inn where he is sure of a happy reception. Perhaps, somewhere deep in his heart there was also a touching remembrance of those he would see no more, for Himmat thought he could discern a melancholy glance in his eyes, as for a moment he looked at the moon and the stars and the landscape around him. Then an overpowering weakness numbed his limbs, a darkness covered his eyes, and with a

slow, painful movement he laid down his head on the ground to die.

'What harm have I done you, gentle stranger?' His last words came out softly and slowly, as drops of blood trickled down the corners of his mouth. 'God forgive us all! God forgive us all!' And with this last prayer for his murderer the pious old man passed into realms unknown.

'God forgive us all!' The words rang in Himmat's ears with a strange, paternal touch. Curious was their melody and wonderful their soothing effect on his unhappy but rebellious soul. 'God forgive us all!' His throat was choked, but his heart kept repeating the words with an insistent rhythm.

But many showers are required to fertilize the absolutely parched soil, and many knocks are needed to soften the overhardened heart. And the human mind often jumps from opposite to opposite. The old man's prayer brought the memory of other words to his ears. They were distinct, clearly pronounced words—calm with the conviction of an overpowering might, clear

with the vision of an unavoidable doom. Slowly and deliberately they followed each other, every word carefully weighed and measured, with accents and modulations that indicated a will that could not be baulked of its purpose, of a decision that human obstacles could not resist.

'What is the law of justice? What is the law of the Testament? What is the law of the Quran? "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a murder for a murder." Throughout the towns and villages of Hindustan justice shall be done. This is my will, and the powers of Hell cannot prevail against it.'

Himmat's heart leaped in his side. His knees shook with fear; his hands trembled; and, desperate and unsteady, he jumped on to his horse and galloped away. Still, amidst the clatter of his horse's hoofs and the rustling of the *jamun* leaves, the slow and measured words followed him, and sank deeper and deeper into his mind. 'Throughout the towns and villages of Hindustan justice shall be done. This is my will, and the powers of Hell cannot prevail against it.'

Hell itself seemed painfully remote from this earth. But Himmat galloped onward and onward. There was nothing else he could do.

II

Little Halima, the favourite child of the village of Khairpur and the granddaughter of its living saint, had come out wrapped in a green *orhni* to play with her dolls with the other village girls, when, as the first ray of the rising sun kissed the roof of her grandfather's huge mud gate, a gigantic man on a gigantic horse pulled up before her.

'Whom do you want?' the little girl of eight asked boldly, unabashed.

Himmat Khan looked wistfully all round. Would some kindly roof give him a day's rest? He remained silent, trying to hide his trepidation and nervousness; and, not knowing what to do, he again and again wiped the perspiration from his face.

'You are such a big man. Why are you afraid to speak? Whom do you want?'

'I am a weary traveller, little child.

Will your father let me rest in his house for a day?'

'Yes, he will,' Halima replied quite definitely. 'We are always pleased to entertain strangers. My grandfather is a great saint. He has gone on a pilgrimage, but my father will be glad to see you.'

She lifted her little hands to help him to alight. He took the girl in his arms and kissed her on the forehead. She patted his cheeks with her soft palms and pulled his thick beard to see how strongly it was fixed to his chin. 'Have you been riding all night? Are you hungry? Where do you come from? But let me go to call my father.'

A little while after she returned, holding her father by the hand. 'This is he,' she said.

Hanif Ali, Halima's father, was commonplace among the commonplace. His obvious lack of all powers of observation put Himmat at his ease, and he was ready with a concocted story.

The girls had withdrawn to their game, and Halima, not without constitutional opposition, was trying to lord it over the others.

'Whose doll will marry my Khan?' Salima inquired.

'Mine,' replied Zaheeran.

'Mine,' replied Zohra.

'My Khan,' Salima decided, 'will first marry one wife and kill her, and then he will marry another.'

'If your Khan kills his wife,' Halima intervened, 'my Emperor will hang your Khan.'

'She is always talking of the Emperor,' Salima answered caustically. 'It seems as if she is going to marry a a prince. Could you tell me if an Emperor is tall or short, fat or lean, white or black? How old is an Emperor? You talk as if you have seen one. All Emperors live in Delhi.'

'I have seen an Emperor,' Halima smiled knowingly. 'You will not believe me, but I have.'

Himmat Khan leaned heavily on Hanif Ali's shoulders. 'You will pardon me, friend,' he apologized, 'but I am too tired to stand.' Hanif recollected that it was his duty to feed a stranger before he asked him for news.

The day passed uneventfully. In the afternoon, as Himmat sat near the gate,

cleaning his sword and sharpening his arrow-heads, four men entered with a cot, overlaid with a white sheet. I twas obviously a bier.

Children are often most communicative to their newest acquaintances. 'My grandfather,' said Halima to Himmat Khan, 'has been murdered by robbers. A peasant brought him on his cart. What are they going to do?' But at that moment her father appeared. 'I never had the good fortune of seeing Sheikh Muizzuddin,' Himmat Khan asked him, 'may I see him now?' Hanif nodded assent.

Himmat lifted up the shroud. It was the face he had seen on the previous night. The features were calm and composed; a benevolent expression played about them; and the lips still seemed to be repeating their prayers. 'God forgive us all!' The blessing came back to Himmat's mind again. 'God forgive us all!'

'How black-dyed must have been the villain who could slay such a peace-loving, harmless soul,' he heard someone say. 'What tortures will be awaiting the murderer in the world beyond!'

'Look at his calm, composed features,' another answered. 'That is how he looked at the murderer. What right have we to hate when he forgives?'

Himmat had only a dim consciousness of what he was doing, but somehow or other the evening passed. The funeral prayers were said, the bier wound its slow way to the cemetery, and late at night Himmat, who during the evening had behaved like everybody else, retired to his restless bed. It was the month of July, but the sky was clear. He lay in the open air beneath the stars. A fever was seizing him; his pulse beat fast and unsteady; his ideas became more and more incoherent. He was only half conscious.

Towards the morning something seemed to rouse him. Was it the sound of Halima crying for her grandfather? 'Would he never come? Why were the murderers not caught and punished? What was the Emperor doing with his large army! No! She would have no excuse; they simply must bring grandfather back.'

Somebody was trying to console her in slow, whispering accents, but as

Halima cried louder the other voice rose also. It rose slowly and steadily, every accent weighed and measured, incisive like the arrow of Destiny, clear as the verdict of Fate. It was the voice Himmat dreaded worse than death.

'Weep not, little Halima,' it went on, 'weep not. Your grandfather is with his God, and will return to you no more. Not my power, not the power of all mankind combined, can bring him back again. Those who cross the sacred portals do not return to tell the tale.'

'Then why did they allow him to be killed?' Halima cried, not fearing the dreadful voice. 'Why is my grandfather's murderer not caught and hanged? Why are murderers allowed to prowl about killing the grandfathers of little children?'

There was a short pause, followed by the sound of a gentle kiss. 'Sweet daughter,' the voice continued, 'the past is beyond recall, but the future—it can be mastered. What is the law of justice? What is the law of the Testament? What is the law of the Quran? "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a murder for a murder."'

The measured voice rose into thunder. 'Throughout the towns and villages of Hindustan justice shall be done. This is my will, and the powers of Hell cannot prevail against it. Thy father's death shall be revenged.'

Halima screamed with terror at the thunders her childish mind could barely understand. The voice died down to a whisper. 'Be calm, my darling; while I am with you human hands can do you no harm.'

'I am always promised and I am always deceived,' Halima answered querulously; 'last year my father promised to get me a doll from Delhi. It will never come. And now you also have promised, and when will you do it? Tell me when!'

'Softly, my love.' The measured voice broke into playful glee. 'He shall be hanged by the neck from a leafless tree, and there he shall remain suspended while the crows peck at his eyes and the vultures eat his flesh. On his clean, bald skull the withered leaves shall fall, and the sun shall dry his bones and the rain shall wash them bare of flesh. No tender fingers will close his dying eyes;

no loving hands will pile the soft earth over his grave; but hungry dogs shall stand below his feet with mouths watering at the bones beyond their reach. And the wind will rock him to and fro, and it will spin him round and round; and thus in glory and pride shall ride the murderer who has ridden away from my justice.'

'But when will it be? When?' Halima asked impatiently.

'Sweet, my child,' replied the voice, 'in an instant. Sit here for a little while, and soon I will return with the head of your grandfather's murderer and roll it at your little feet.'

Himmat heard the sound of approaching footsteps on the other side of the wall. There was not a moment to lose. He must fly, or the hand of Destiny would be at his throat; and his end, which he feared so much, would be swift and short.

Noiselessly, but in utter desperation, he jumped out of bed, and picking up his sword, bow and sheaf of arrows with trembling hands, he fled silently on tiptoe.

The moon was sinking when Himmat

emerged out of Sheikh Muizzuddin's mud gate. The whole landscape was bathed in a dull yellow light. He turned round to see if he was being pursued. Everything was calm and quiet. No hue and cry had been raised. The inmates of the house were sleeping the sleep of the just.

Himmat Khan fled on and on. He left the beaten track, and half walked, half ran, across the ploughed fields. Why? He did not stop to enquire. Where to? He did not care to know. Thorns pierced his bare feet, but he did not feel them. Brambles scratched his face and arms, and they seemed soft as rose-petals. He was feverish and delirious. His thoughts were incoherent and so were his acts.

But when the first light of the morning had illuminated the globe, his common sense seemed to return. He saw the folly of the step he had taken. His flight would be interpreted as a confession of guilt. What would they think of him now, and, especially, what would little Halima think? Why had he left his horse behind? Surely the suspicion of his deed would spread like wild-fire

through the countryside. He could not travel in broad daylight on foot. He was tired and weary and bitter. But tired and weary and bitter feels the hare pursued by the hounds. Nevertheless, has it any alternative but to continue its flight? His condition was desperate, and he looked around to see what could be done.

He was in the centre of a little open ground in a country garden. It was a safe, sequestered spot. The thick ranks of trees all round prevented the outer world from peering into the little orchard. On his right was an enormous banyan tree with its heavy trunk, and its long roots falling from the branches. On the top of it sat two vultures, straining their necks in every direction to see if anything eatable was to be had. Himmat's heart sickened at the sight. He took up his bow and shot. One bird fluttered down to the ground, transfixed by the arrow; its mate flew away. 'Even so are the victims of Destiny,' Himmat reflected, 'deserted by their friends in the hour of trial.' And he climbed to a high branch of the tree to be safe from the sight of men.

What next? Himmat did not bother. The future was odious and loathsome, and he turned away his gaze from what lay in front. The past had still something to give, some moments of contemplation, perhaps of joy, and Himmat, feeling that death was standing before him with jaws wide open, determined to live through his life again.

A year back he had been happy and prosperous. He had money and land, and commanded two thousand men. It was a position many men would envy. But what had brought him hither? Why had he fallen so low? Himmat did not take long to decide.

III

Many women sell themselves. Some sell themselves for short periods, and they are held to be odious and contemptible; others sell themselves (or are sold by their parents) for life, and religion, morality and public opinion consecrate their slavery and their fall. These two types of women Himmat could understand. But there is also a third type of woman, whose behaviour

cannot be brought under any law: women who are neither marketable commodities nor household slaves; for their self-respect makes them too good to be the one, while their independence and incapacity to perform the ordinary duties of life unfit them entirely for being the other. It is an ambitious, imaginative, impulsive type—a type which confuses others because it is ignorant of its own mind, wherein everything is chaotic and uncertain; which often excites the admiration of men because they fail to comprehend it, or wins their equally undeserved contempt if they explain it by the ordinary motives of the low and the commonplace. It is a type which Nature has always produced and Society has always failed to recognize; for the ungovernable can have no place in an organization founded on law. A few, more fortunate than their sisters, have risen to Heaven as saints. The vast majority, broken by a system which ignored them, have strayed, rebelling and toiling, into brothels and slums, or else have been crushed into normal shape and pattern, and yoked and burdened with duties which their nature abhorred.

Now and then a stray specimen has struggled successfully against the enclosing coils—and, as a rule, failed to put the hard-won freedom to any particular use.

It was with a woman of this type that Himmat Khan had come into contact. The consequence was unfortunate.

* * * *

The clouds overhead shone like silver in the light of the setting sun. The green leaves danced gaily in the perfumed breeze. All around was a busy hum of life, joyous in its lease of short and thrilling existence. Himmat Khan alone was sad.

It was the day of his marriage. A year ago to him also life had appeared happy and enjoyable, as, trustful from what it had already given, he leaned on it confidently to yield him more and more; while beneath his feet, ready to swallow him if he took but one false step, lay the lake of burning lava in which armies could have sunk. And he was but a speck of dust in the storm.

A year ago he had stood, trembling and hopeful, before the chamber of his bride, whom he had never seen before. What was she like? How would she

receive him? How would their joint lives fare? Some spiritual force sanctified his heart. His ship had reached its port. A youth of penury and want, followed by twenty years of hard work, war and its hairbreadth escapes, war and its dissolute life; long nights of continuous drinking and worse things; days of incessant toil: now, having climbed the steep hillside, he stood, his place in the sun secure and his position in society beyond question or cavil, at the door of his young bride, anxious, when his hairs were turning grey, to lay his head on her bosom and rest in peace for ever. It was an alluring hope.

He knocked and entered. The bride rose to receive him. For a moment they looked at each other.

Everything about Ayesha suggested repose. The folds of her fine Deogiri silk rose and fell gently over her slowly-heaving bosom, and her long trailing skirt covered half the room. She was plump. Her skin was delicate; her flesh was soft; and there was a bewitching dreaminess in her large brown eyes, that so meaningly longed for a protecting angel—and for nothing else.

For a moment they looked at each other. Then Himmat Khan placed his hands on his bride's shoulders, while she coyly moved forward, and, winding her arms round his muscular body, buried her face in his breast. And there trickled down from her eyes what appeared to Himmat Khan to be two large and causeless tears.

* * * *

So a few days passed. Ayesha was all that the traditional queens of Indian households were intended to be: pious, devoted, cheerful, careful of her duties to her husband, contented with the little kingdom bounded by the four walls of her house and utterly ignorant of the world outside—a world of strife and stress, of high ideals and low motives, of conflicting ambitions and jarring creeds; a world of hard-headed, hard-hearted and selfish men. Himmat Khan also was happy. The tenderness of his young wife recalled to his mind something of the angelic love that had enveloped his cradle, and after years of embittered struggle he seemed to have reached the haven of peace.

But it is vain to seek in external

circumstances the beatitude of which the real source is the human heart. Himmat Khan was too much of a wanderer to be chained down to a single spot. Ayesha's quiet domestic ways soon lost their novelty and became stale and odious. The old demon overpowered him. The promptings of an unquenchable ambition, and the desire to extend his power over some new sphere, urged him on; and he was possessed by an irrepressible impulse to turn away from the woman who was altogether his to something completely novel.

A few days before his marriage a strange woman had come and taken up her residence in a street not far from his house. She had two maidservants, but no relatives. Her style of living was luxurious. Where did she come from? No one knew, but everyone seemed concerned to enquire. Indian society, then as now, recognized a woman only as a member of a family; and, if she left the home in which it had pleased Heaven to place her, she was a social and moral outlaw. Young men of an adventurous turn of mind began

to cast inquisitive looks at the window where Mehran Nisa was often seen without her veil. The circle in which Himmat Khan moved was neither prudish nor moral, and began to take a keen interest in the newcomer. The news soon went round that one of the gang who had knocked at her door had been admitted, and when, after a cordial reception, he was taking leave, Mehran Nisa had requested him to call again. The ice was broken. The new woman became the centre of a throng of high-placed admirers. The old luminaries of the capital were thrown into the shade. Yet a mystery seemed to envelop her whole existence. She seldom spoke of herself, and never admitted anyone into her confidence. Handsome, vivacious and gay, living, to all appearance, merely for the pleasures of the hour, she repelled with a cold and contemptuous sneer everyone who attempted to come nearer than she considered desirable. For somewhere in the depths of her subconscious mind was a second personality, a being formless and void, a being incomprehensible to the intelligence, and unconquerable by the

tactics within the reach of the ordinary man of the day; and it was this second personality of hers which, for good or evil, seemed to direct her steps at all critical moments.

Himmat Khan sank into the mire by slow and gradual steps.

One day, while riding back from Fatehpur Sikri to Agra, the idea crossed his mind that he also might go and call. He dismissed the thought, but it returned again and again; the more he struggled against it, the stronger it grew, till finally it developed into a tyrannical and overpowering obsession. His imagination, revolting against the commonplaces of domestic life, longed for something exciting, and, in the struggle that raged within him, it completely paralysed his will, and he found himself galloping at full speed towards Mehran Nisa's house.

'How fortunate my star is,' she said, as she herself came to open the door, 'that the great Khan comes to my threshold.' The wind blew through her curly locks and her pink wrap of transparent silk, as she stood in the subdued light behind the door; then,

finding the Khan somewhat perplexed, she darted forward with the bewitching grace of an expert dancer, and, taking him by the hand, led him up the stair to her reception room.

No one else was present. Himmat Khan was offered the seat of honour, and leaned comfortably against the large round pillows with which the sitting-rooms of those days were always provided. Mehran Nisa was all hospitality and smiles. There was an undeniable touch of wantonness in her movements, and equally undeniable undertone of sincerity in her speech. She was neither slim nor stout, and, though somewhat short in stature, her limbs were extremely well proportioned. Beautiful she was, though it was not her beauty but her vivacity, a constant flow of sprightly words, accompanied by a gaiety which seemed to enjoy every moment of existence, that made its way to the Khan's heart.

'I should feel grateful if the Khan would condescend to hear a song of mine,' she said, after they had talked for a little while. The musicians were immediately called. Mehran Nisa took

her seat in front of him, arranged her curls gracefully, and to the accompaniment of subdued music began to recite a *ghazal* of Amir Khusrau in an attitude of abandoned wantonness:

Ah! Delhi and its beauties fair—
The curly locks and heaving breast
And graceful feet that lightly dance—
Deprive me of all hope of rest.
And lovers' tears in torrents flow,
Their sighs are published by the winds,
But neither sobs, nor sighs, nor tears,
Bring peace to their o'er-tortured minds.
Yet Khusrau, wandering door to door,
Prays for such love—and more, and more.

A soft, alluring smile curled round the singer's lips, as, with a bewitching immodesty, she moved her bare arms in every direction, and pointed to her curly locks, her half-open breast, and her legs left uncovered up to the knees, in illustration of the poet's verse. Song followed song in a torrent of rising passion. A fierce, uncontrollable emotion took possession of the singer herself. Himmat Khan could see the veins of her temples pulsating with fearful violence, and she shook in every limb. Finally she rose up and began to dance —it was a wild, fearsome dance of capti-

vating, alluring attitudes, invented, perhaps, in those prehistoric times when our ancestors had not learnt to put some check on the artistic expression of their passionate nature. And her songs expressed only too plainly the feeling that inspired her, while the music kept company with her movements and her words.

Himmat Khan's heart caught the contagious rhythm. He looked at the half-dressed and superbly beautiful girl before him, her wild words and suggestive movements, and every drop of his Tartar blood boiled with irrepressible passion in his veins. But he had heard much of her volatile and incalculable nature, and decently kept to his seat.

But just when her passion had reached its height, Mehran Nisa recovered herself all of a sudden. She clasped her hands together, and during a few moments of unbroken silence looked desperately at the roof and the heaven above it. Drops of perspiration flowed down her soft, uncovered limbs. She shivered as if from cold, and, recollecting that she was half-undressed, took up a shawl and wrapped herself from head to foot. The wanton

gracefulness of her movements disappeared along with the wild look of her eyes. She became a different being. Her whole aspect wore the suggestion of an inexpressible pain. Once more she took her seat in front of Himmat Khan, and began a song with an undertone of deep and pathetic sadness. The new emotion overpowered her, like that which had gone before. From song to song the melancholy and pain increased—not the pain of physical torture or the throes of death, but the despairing, helpless cry of a soul doomed to eternal perdition, a soul longing eternally for salvation, but lost. Her eyes were bent on the ground as in prayer, and from them flowed a torrent of unceasing tears. Once more Himmat Khan's heart responded. Devoid as he was of all higher religious emotions, he could not help being moved by the new vision of beauty disclosed before his eyes—a beauty instinct with purity and holiness, which thoughts of evil could never touch, and racked with that deep spiritual suffering which alone can wash off human sins.

But even this mood passed. Slowly

she raised her head, and, looking straight at Himmat Khan with a spiritual, cheerful smile, that spoke of a heart full of joy and peace, she began the famous *ghazal* in which the Persian Hafiz speaks of the inspiration that lifted him above the temptations of his lower self, and, in a single moment of spiritual insight, set him free from repentance and from sin.

The first ray of the coming morn
That breaks the darkness of the night
A message of salvation brings—
A vision of eternal light.

A soothing whisper in my ears
Says, 'Henceforth thou art free from pain,
And fear and sorrow's worthless brood
Shall never trouble thee again.'

My human passions disappear,
Contempt and hatred, anger, strife,
While with my trembling hands I quaff
The wine of Everlasting Life,

And Love infuses me with joy,
And Hope upon his graceful wings
To end the darkness of my thoughts
The message of salvation brings.

Never had Himmat Khan been touched by anything so deeply. Mehran Nisa looked not like a woman of this earth but a *houri* from Paradise,

endowed with a beauty that was not the beauty of the flesh, and inspired by an emotion that was as real as it was chaste and pure. She looked at him, and smiled and smiled, as if the beatitude of her heart would increase all the more when shared by him—as if all she wished to do was to take him by the hand and lead him aright.

But suddenly, before she could quite finish her song, the five musicians around her left off playing, and, after looking at each other significantly, hurried out of the room. Mehran Nisa stopped, and began to gaze on the ground in an attitude of stony expectation. Someone was coming. Slowly down the street Himmat Khan heard the sound of approaching footsteps—firm, steady, measured, as if their owner was sure of every inch of the ground he trod. Just at the door the steps stopped, and there were a number of impatient and commanding knocks. Himmat Khan's hand instinctively went to his dagger. Had he been trapped? Mehran Nisa looked at him appealingly. 'Be at peace,' she said, 'I will be back in a little while.' She closed the door as

she went out in a condition of extreme trepidation.

The steady steps mounted the stair. Himmat could hear Mehran Nisa talk with the visitor in an adjoining room. She spoke in whispers of submissive protest. The other voice was commanding, authoritative, final: it spoke in a deep and steady tone, every accent weighed and measured, sometimes rising high, at other times falling low, but always instinct with the feeling of one who was accustomed to have his orders obeyed. Suddenly Himmat's ears caught the suggestion of a short scuffle; something heavy seemed to fall on the ground; and after a few moments came the sound of a loud, hearty and contemptuous laugh. The steady steps were descending the stair.

A little while after Mehran Nisa entered the room. Her hair was disarranged. Her dress was in disorder. On both her smooth and round arms Himmat could see the red marks where five fingers of steel had sunk into her flesh. She gave the impression of one fearfully shaken and torn—and yet exquisitely delighted.

It was the first time Himmat had come near the possessor of the steady footsteps and the measured voice. 'Who is he?' he inquired. 'It does not concern you,' she replied, with intense irritation, 'and in any case he is not likely to come again.' She looked dreamily out of the window, and had made up her mind to talk no more.

Himmat Khan asked leave to go. 'I am greatly obliged,' he said, 'for your wonderful dancing and music and song.' He brought five gold pieces out of his pocket and placed them on the ground near her feet.

Mehran Nisa beamed with joy. 'Please take them back,' she replied, with one of her alluring smiles. 'I do not sing for money. I am not a professional.'

'The present has been too little,' Himmat thought, and he placed his hand in his pocket once more.

'That is not what I meant'—and before Himmat Khan was aware of it, she had taken the money, and, bounding lightly towards him, had placed one hand on his shoulder and with her other was trying to thrust the gold pieces into

his pocket. Himmat strove to prevent her, and in the struggle that followed her face chanced to touch the rough hair of his moustache, and he was conscious of a soft and intentional pressure of her cheeks against his lips as the money jingled down into his pocket.

He took her hand, intending to kiss it as a farewell. 'That is not permitted,' she said, as she snatched her hand away. Nevertheless she came down the stair to see him off. 'Do not fail to come again,' she prayed, and gazed shyly towards the ground, her face suffused with a blush of virgin modesty. 'It will go hard with me if I do not see you. You are so——' A strange sadness choked her throat and she could speak no more.

Himmat Khan looked back after riding a few steps. She was waving her hand to him. 'Come again! Come again!' Her hair and her wrap fluttered in the breeze like the sails of a ship carried hither and thither by contrary winds. Everything about her was sensuous, alluring and darkly suggestive. And it was this picture of a voluptuous girl of twenty-one that Himmat Khan

finally carried back home to haunt him for the rest of his life.

'What is she at?' Himmat Khan asked himself again and again, as he carefully guided his horse through the dark lanes in the starry night. 'Nothing,' a voice seemed to say in his ears, 'absolutely nothing! She is the helpless creature of the mood of the moment, and her life is governed by no inner law.' But Himmat would not listen to the voice, and kept on formulating a number of hypotheses, none of which would explain the case. And he was conscious of a strange feeling of jealousy at the thought of the short scuffle, the dishevelled hair, and the marks of five steel fingers on his loved one's arm.

Ayesha was waiting with the dinner in expectation of her master's arrival. He came in a very surly mood. She talked of the dishes she had cooked—they did not interest him. She talked of the dresses she had prepared—he looked at her with intense disgust and annoyance. 'Why are you angry?' she asked. 'In what way have I displeased you?' 'I am sick of you!' he

shouted. 'Can't you leave me alone? Be off!'

The humble and submissive wife retired to her chamber to moisten her pillow with her tears. It was all so inexplicable. Next morning Himmat Khan again looked at her with contempt and disgust through his sleepless, bloodshot eyes. She dared not enquire, but dimly, half-consciously, she was aware of a change.

The protecting angel had disappeared.

It was a perplexing situation. For several months Himmat Khan saw Mehran Nisa almost every evening, and almost every morning he made up his mind not to see her again. A strange, incomprehensible power paralysed his will. He had stood firm and unshaken in many a field of fierce battle. He had nerves of steel. His frame was gigantic and powerful. People called him the 'second Rustum', and so indeed he considered himself to be. And yet the courage and resolution that supported him in the face of danger was crushed by something working within him. He felt as weak as a child.

Again and again he tried to love his

wife, to recall the joys of the first days after their marriage. It was of no avail. Ayesha repelled him more and more. She was too commonplace, he thought. She knew how to submit, but she had never learnt how to please. And whenever he saw her, he found himself comparing her with the other woman, and always to his wife's discredit. Mehran Nisa's independence of character, her artistic temperament, her very faults, shone brilliant in contrast with the ordinary creature to whom he was tied down for life.

Again and again he tried to drive Mehran Nisa out of his thoughts, but with every effort she sank deeper into his consciousness. Every vision of her returned with alluring repetition before his mental eye—at one time she was gay and romantic, the next moment grave and sober; now talking like a pious mystic, and almost immediately after bursting forth into the songs of a wanton; but intensely captivating in all the changing rhythms of her life. It was a 'fixed idea', a fearful obsession, and against his will and his judgment he found himself hugging the sting-

ing scorpion closer and closer to his breast.

To outward appearance the Khan's project was prospering well. He alone knew the bitter truth.

His advent had driven away the throng of her admirers. They had not bargained for duels and affairs of cold steel, and the Khan, they knew well enough, was not a man to be trifled with. Mehran Nisa was no longer the centre of a social circle, and she did not seem to regret the loss. The steady steps and the measured voice had never returned to mock him with the scorn of superior power. He had her all to himself. And yet he was just where he had been on the first evening of their meeting. Mehran Nisa was definitely and decidedly unapproachable.

What was she at? A few points were clear to his feverish imagination. She did not want his money, and would have regarded him with contempt if he had offered it. Her unselfishness was beyond question. She liked his company even as much as he liked hers, and felt unhappy if he failed to call for a day or two. She loved to gaze at his large

and muscular body, which was the admiration of the wrestling schools; but was resolved that he should approach no nearer. The first kiss was all he seemed destined to enjoy in life. For the rest, he simply dared not. Turn the matter in whatever way he would, his bitter disappointment, the vague hints of others, the strange awe she seemed to inspire in him, all served to convince him painfully of the irreproachable purity of her life. And the conviction drove him to mad frenzy. So cultured, so refined and chaste, and yet not his! It was intolerable. His love could brook no obstacle. The affair was too hot to last long.

'What is she at?' Himmat Khan reflected within himself one morning, as he combed his beard before the mirror. Time had dealt with him tenderly, but under the strain of the last few months he had been ageing fast. His complexion had become sallow and wrinkles were appearing on his face. There was one last hope. 'Perhaps she wants to marry me.' Had she not shown herself unselfish to win his respect, and kept him at a distance to make the final surrender

more charming? He clenched his fist and bit his lips. He would plumb the affair to its depths.

That evening, all unversed in the tricks of the game, he called at Mehran Nisa's house. She was in a joyful mood. 'I have been thinking of you all the day,' said the thoughtless girl, unconsciously playing with living fire. 'Come and sit by my side, and I will make you happy with my music and my song.'

But a heavy weight lay on Himmat Khan's heart. He could not respond to her invitation, and kept walking up and down the room. 'I have come to talk of something serious,' he said with a great effort, inwardly conscious that he had adopted the most tactless mode of putting it; 'of something serious—of marriage.' He could proceed no more.

'Marriage! How delightful!' She was overpowered with joy. She placed her hands on his shoulders and looked straight into his eyes, lovingly, devotedly, with an intense desire to mingle her spirit with his soul for ever and ever. Her wrap had fallen down,

displaying the curls that lay in a charming disorder on her shoulders. 'I will deck myself in all the colours of the rainbow. I shall be charming and adorable. Every morning you will admire the rosy bloom on my cheeks, and every evening I will welcome you home with my alluring smile, and sing you to rest. You will give me enough to live on, for my little money is all spent, and I will look after you tenderly, affectionately, and infuse with joy the innermost springs of your life. And when old age comes—when my hair is grey and my face wrinkled, and my body has lost its lightness of movement and grace—will you not, even then, love me for the thing I have been?'

She had wound her arm round his waist, and with her cheek pressed against his shoulder was looking thoughtfully out of the window. 'No, it is of no use,' she continued, 'dreaming of the impossible. When wives like me fail to please, they are cast away. We have no social standing. No one can tolerate us. Let us, kind friend, be happy in the joy of the passing moment and ask for no more. And my loveliness—

no, call it freedom—it would not outlast the fetters of a caged life. In any case *he* will not permit it, for he has already put the seal of possession on my lips.' She looked at him appealingly, and wiped the tears from her eyes. 'Do not talk of marriage. We are not destined to come any nearer.'

A strange bitterness came over Himmat's heart as he saw the cup dashed from his lips. He looked at her with an intense, vindictive animosity, and a passion that would suffer anything rather than forgo the object of its desire, the object it loathed and yet would not let alone. 'So that is the life you have been leading, so fair without, so foul within. Vile! To suppose that I could not keep you straight, or that I should feel afraid of the rascally lover who came to you with his contemptuous laugh!' The Khan's hand moved instinctively to his dagger.

Mehran Nisa looked straight at him. 'Harsh words ill become the loving heart. A man truly noble does not give way to feelings of resentment or bitterness. Yes, I had nearly become what you have called me. My mother

was a dancing girl, and trained me to her vile, abominable profession. I fled from her and the future she had prepared for me, and have been living here by selling my clothes and pawning my jewels, hoping against hope that something would turn up. It is all so plain and simple. Why hate me for what was never my fault?' Her voice was calm and restrained. 'Nor blame me,' she continued, 'if, instead of the deliverer I longed for, Heaven sends a person of a different kind—a young man to captivate me with his false but enchanting smile, his delicate but powerful frame, his soft and commanding voice. How could I stand against him? I had been taught to obey and please. He had been born to command. All the gifts of art and nature, showered on his selfish heart with a bountiful hand, were brought to conquer a poor and lonely and helpless woman. No, do not blame me for it. It was my misfortune, not my fault. And, the whim of the moment satisfied, he cast me away — like a casual thought that strays into our mind and is then for ever forgotten.'

Himmat shook with rage. 'Before the sun rises,' he thundered, 'I will sever this young coxcomb's head from his body. God's will be done.'

'Do not be presumptuous'—Mehran Nisa clasped her hands in hysterical delight—'he is not vain, and a man without vanity is dangerous. Do not in your haughty pride match yourself against one who holds women in contempt. He is a man of destiny; I pray you, do not cross his path. He walks like a god among the sons of men. How fragrant his breath! How alluring his smile! How enchanting the bitter degradation of his touch and his contemptuous laughter at my feeble strength! I cannot forget it, I simply cannot. If I could only hear once again his soft, generous whisper of love!'

She threw herself on the ground, worn out by the effort, and covered her face with her hands. Himmat Khan was perplexed. 'Will you not give me a reply? Will you not consent?' he asked, forgetting in his feverish anxiety that the weeping, hysterical woman before him was hardly sane.

'Consent to what?' she retorted angrily. 'To be your second wife, your mistress—to be hated, despised, scorned, I and my children after me. Leave me! Leave me! I was never made to play second fiddle to anyone's wife. I will never consent to such a degradation.'

To Himmat everything now seemed clear. Here was the answer to his oft-repeated question. 'It shall be as she wishes,' he thought, as with demoniac fury he rushed down the stair and galloped away. Mehran Nisa soon recovered, and gazed vacantly around. What had she said to drive the Khan away? She was dimly conscious of some vague hints she had thrown out. But she had meant nothing, absolutely nothing. The sound of the galloping hoofs was receding into the distance, and there was no knowing what the Khan in his desperation might not do. She threw herself on her pillow in hopeless despair. 'My mother's curse will accompany me through life,' she wept. 'I should have accepted him.'

* * * *

Ayesha sat dreaming in her chamber, waiting for her husband's return. Yet

the sound of his approaching footsteps brought her no joy. He would be cross, ill-tempered, sullen; and she would retire to moisten her pillows with her tears.

But this night matters took a different turn. There was a violent kick at the door; it flew open. The light was put out, and through the darkness a strange and ferocious form came groping towards her. 'Kill me if you like,' she wished to say, but a powerful hand gripped her jaws and rendered her speechless, and fingers of steel sank into her cheeks. Almost instantly she was thrown on the ground, and a heavy knee pressed painfully against her ribs. Then she felt the point of a sharp instrument pierce the skin above her heart, and slowly, deliberately, sink into her flesh; and the last human sound she ever heard was her husband's demoniac, brutal laughter.

* * * *

Mehran Nisa was still musing over the answer she had given, when Himmat Khan reappeared in her room with Ayesha's body wrapped in a blanket. 'Are you satisfied now?' he asked,

roughly throwing down his burden at her feet.

Mehran Nisa jumped up in surprise. 'What is it?' She unfolded the blanket, and her rival lay stretched on the ground with the dagger still in her heart. She closed the dying girl's eyes and mouth; her body was still warm. She felt the pulse; it was still beating feebly. Something in Ayesha appealed to her sympathy with transcendental force. 'How young and lovely and how early faded!' She rolled back the hair that had fallen on Ayesha's forehead, and kissed the eyelids and cheeks. 'My friend, my sister!' She lay down weeping by the side of the corpse, and hugged it close to her breast. 'My martyred goddess, how beautifully calm you sleep!'

Instinctively her eyes looked up at the perpetrator of the crime. Himmat Khan was standing at her feet with haughty, bloodshot eyes, devouring her with looks of passion and hate. 'Murderous demon!' she cried. 'Is this the fate you have in store for me!' And, trembling from head to foot with fear, she rushed out of the room and down the stairs.

It was all over.

A strange calmness took possession of Himmat Khan. He thought neither of the wife he had slain nor of the woman who had fled from him for ever. It was not the first time he had killed, but it was the first time he had murdered, and all his faculties were concentrated on one single question—how to prevent the consequences of his crime. He wrapped the corpse carefully in its blanket, and, moving in the darkness through the least frequented lanes, he reached a corner of his garden, where he laid it in a shallow grave dug with his dagger; then, pressing the ground even with his bare feet, so that no trace should remain, he rode gallantly through the main entrance and called for his wife. She was not in her chamber. The whole house was searched. She was nowhere to be found. Messengers were sent to her father's house, but she had not gone there. The news was soon on everyone's lips; cynics hinted at an elopement, and it was whispered that the injured husband gave credence to the same story.

After a fortnight Himmat Khan felt

quite safe. Mehran Nisa was the only soul who knew the truth, and she was too much of an accomplice to reveal the secret. He was mistaken.

Himmat Khan's trembling hands grasped the banyan branch with desperate strength as he recollected the last scene of the tragic drama—the approach of the measured footsteps, as he was retiring to rest one night, the short and decisive struggle, the fierce fingers clutching at his throat, the trial and judgment, and, last of all, his hopeless flight from prison and his vain attempt to wriggle out of the spider's web. But it was something more excruciating than the memory of the past or the vague and undefined fear of the future that shook his gigantic frame in every limb. The fateful footsteps were actually resounding in his ears. Was it only the working of his feverish, terror-stricken imagination, or could the worst be true?

He looked nervously at the ground below him, hoping it was all a dream. No! He was there, the man whom he feared more than the angel of death, the spider that had so completely enclosed

him in its meshes. He was there in all his superb, captivating glory, not more than three hundred paces from Himmat Khan's tree.

IV

The day had run its course while Himmat Khan had been dreaming of the past. The sky overhead was clear, but in the western horizon a number of fleecy clouds were playing round the disc of the setting sun in robes of purple and gold. The weird Indian twilight was threatening to cover the landscape for those forty minutes when the powers of evil are most at work, and the birds in the branches were calling each other to rest.

A smartly-dressed young man was walking up and down the open space between the trees. Everything around him suggested the refined, cultured, careless voluptuary. He held a rose by its long stalk in one hand, while the other hand played aimlessly with his spotted silk handkerchief; and his sword, hardly intended for use, hung leisurely from his waist. His beauty was as obvious as his consciousness of

it. He walked as if all nature were mute in admiration, though some misgivings seemed to trouble his inner heart when he looked at his legs bowed inwards by riding, or when he considered the extraordinary length of his muscular arms. Nevertheless, his was an appearance pleasing to the artist's eye. His broad, open and slightly receding forehead was set off by a tightly-rolled turban enriched with pearls and precious stones. His small eyes sparkled brilliantly, his long hair fell in waves on his shoulders; but two curly locks, intentionally left to float about his cheeks, gave to his strong, manly figure, clean-shaven chin and closely-trimmed moustache, a touch of feminine delicacy. His long cloak of purple brocade falling to his knees offered a pleasant contrast to his wheat-coloured skin, while the golden belt round his slender waist imparted a strange agility to every movement of his powerful frame.

Himmat Khan's eyes were helplessly fixed on the young man in fear and terror, and his trembling hands shook the branches of the aged tree. He followed every movement of the hateful

steps which had twice approached him with a message of death, and of the soft hands with their delicate muscles that had so mercilessly clutched at his throat. But the young man seemed ignorant of his broken enemy. Quite different thoughts were in his mind. A joyful smile curled about his lips. A deep and abiding happiness inspired his sparkling eyes, as he looked at the setting sun, glad to be victorious and alive. And so for a while the young man walked up and down, playing with his handkerchief and smelling the rose, while Himmat Khan cautiously watched every motion, afraid that at any moment the blood-sucking spider might spring at its victim. But the spider was cheerfully waiting for a different prey.

Slowly two men approached through the grove and humbly kissed the ground before his feet. 'Have you done what I ordered?' the young man asked, in accents of one accustomed to command.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' they replied, 'the singers in the adjoining garden are waiting to be called. The orders of the Emperor Akbar are obeyed as soon as given.'

'Very well, ask them to wait for my orders, but first bring here that wretched woman who has come from the capital.'

The men retired and Himmat Khan sighed with relief. It was an assignation, not a criminal hunt. For the moment he was safe. He even developed an interest in the drama enacted before his eyes.

Mehran Nisa entered the imperial presence with a very low bow, and, advancing with cautious boldness, kissed the skirt of the Emperor's cloak. She was dressed in light green, and Himmat Khan, with all his hatred for the woman who had led him to crime, could not help thinking that she had never looked more beautiful. Her face was flushed. The veins of her temples throbbed quickly. Her steps were shaky and her hands trembled. Was it the fear of the Emperor's presence, or the delightful expectation of a second degradation? The wanton touches in her gaudy dress, the effort which she made to display her full figure as the wind blew straight against her face, pressing her dress against her body, and the memory of the words she had used, left Himmat in

no doubt that it was a desperate attempt to entice the man who had so completely conquered her imagination, through all the tricks of her mother's art — the artificial and suggestive gracefulness of her movements and the display of uncovered and alluring flesh.

The Emperor smiled happily. 'How many months have passed since our first meeting!' he said, placing his hands on her shoulders. 'And all this time I have been wishing to see you!'

Mehran Nisa felt elated, and failed to notice the touch of malice in Akbar's smile. She raised both her hands to set right her curls, and instinctively thrust forward her breast.

Himmat Khan closed his eyes in horror. Mehran Nisa was lost in the joy of the moment. She felt the Emperor's breath against her face and the touch of his lips against her cheeks. But then, inexplicably, everything changed. Five fingers of steel seemed to sink into her shoulders, and the Emperor was looking at her with a calm, steely expression. It was not love nor hate, but the intentional suppression of all feeling for a purpose she

could not guess. His sparkling eyes pierced into her very heart and she thought she could read in them an order of death.

'Do you really love me?' He patted her playfully on the cheek and resumed his former gaiety. 'If so, you will have to leave your former lover.'

'I will, I will,' she protested, 'I have done so already.'

'And you will have to speak the truth. The woman who loves her Emperor will not shield a criminal.'

Mehran Nisa looked shyly on the ground. 'I will tell you the whole truth.' And so, with his hands on the woman's shoulders, and some toying and kissing in the dark twilight, the Emperor managed to discover every relevant fact about Ayesha's murder. But her story did not satisfy him. 'Vile wretch!' he said to himself. 'She thinks she can deceive me with a tale from the "Arabian Nights".'

'It is a lie,' he said, in a voice of sternness. 'You are hiding your own part. You were an accomplice in the murder and must be punished for your crime. Speak the truth and I may

forgive you; lie, and you will soon meet your just reward.'

Mehran Nisa trembled at the sentence, backed by such awful power, and at the fierce eyes glaring at her through the darkness.

'Your just reward,' the Emperor continued in his calm and stern accents, 'your just reward is instant death. Vile adventuress! Ambition is a dangerous game for low-born natures. Do you think I will permit vermin like you to plague my country? An innocent woman murdered so that you may become a Khan's wife, and the Khan left to fly alone for his life so that you may entice the Emperor. But no, my answer is the hangman's noose. You will soon know what it means. Your smooth, white neck will be drawn out like a crane's. Your alluring eyes will open wide in a horrible, blank stare. The mouth you have thought too delicate for the kiss of an honest husband will gape in longing for the living breath that has gone out, never to return. The worms will eat into your flesh; they will feed on the soft cheeks with which you have deceived

my honest citizens, and on your false and malicious heart. When pure women die, they are carried to their last resting-place by weeping sons, whom their love and tenderness has reared; and flowers blossom on their graves. But your different life shall have a different end. No tenderness shall close your dying eyes; no weeping friends shall mourn. From the top of the Badaun Gate your decomposing corpse will hang; and, when worms and vultures have had their fill, your grey skeleton will dance in the wind for ever, a lesson to all persons and all times. And voluble tongues will regale the weary traveller with the story of a woman that was false to the end. Out with the truth, vile wretch, or no power on earth shall protect thee from thy fate.'

Himmat Khan had followed with tense nerves this singular interaction of two volatile natures — the one giving way to every passing freak of her nature, the other altering with a deep and conscious purpose.

Mehran Nisa was broken and shattered. The much-adored hero had dis-

appeared, and in his place stood an unrelenting judge, the representative of a society that had never understood her, with his calm and decided verdict. His sentences continued to ring in her ears and paralysed her imagination. Was this what the future had in store—the hangman's noose, the drawn neck, the grinning skeleton within the crumbling corpse? How sweet were the dreams with which she had left her mother's home!

She threw herself on the ground in desperate humility, and tried to kiss the Emperor's feet. 'I am innocent,' she cried. 'Forgive me, I am innocent.' Rough feet pushed her aside.

'I will soon send those who will wring the truth from you with tortures, kicks and lashes, and the excruciating pain of the pincers and the rack.' The Emperor seemed about to leave.

There was but one hope left—a false confession.

'I own it, I own it'—she held fast to his feet with desperate persistence—'I have lived a sinful life. I have deceived. I have murdered. I held Ayesha's hands while her husband plunged the

dagger into her breast. But, Great Emperor! Great Emperor!' she went on crying, 'you are the shadow of God on earth—your justice is like His justice; your mercy should be like His mercy. Forgive a sinful but repentant woman.'

The Emperor looked on unmoved.

'Will you give evidence against the criminal?' he asked. 'That is the condition of my forgiveness.'

'Anything, anything that you may command,' she answered, with a last despairing look. 'Only let a wretched woman live. I am so afraid to die.'

'I do not wish to end your useless life,' he promised, 'but fail not to give the evidence I want.'

'Forgive me. Receive me into your favour again,' she pathetically implored, and fell on the ground in a swoon.

'Certainly,' the Emperor replied, surveying the unconscious woman before him; 'you shall have a place in my harem.' The necessity for diplomacy was over. He could allow his feelings free play. 'How beautiful you are, and how bad.' He shook her arms and shoulders, and pressed her close to his breast. 'I shall have to keep you well

guarded with jealousy and contempt.' There was a ring of ungovernable passion in his voice.

Himmat Khan closed his eyes in hatred and disgust. But a little while after he heard the Emperor calling for two maidservants to come and take the unconscious woman away. 'Send the singers,' he commanded, as the maids retreated with their burden; 'and ask them to arrange the *majlis* with all possible speed.'

The society butterfly had been crushed under the giant's feet—crushed and violated.

* * * *

The ground before Himmat Khan's eyes was soon illuminated with torches and candles. Everything seemed to change at the magical command. The royal canopy was set up in the centre; slaves with drawn swords stood guard on either side; and on the carpeted ground before the Emperor the dancing girls of the capital appeared in rustling silks to display their accomplishments before the greatest critic of the fine arts then living. One batch after another entered the royal presence with a humble

obeisance, and was accorded a gracious nod. The breeze was perfumed with camphor and scent; the graceful feet danced in rythmic accord with the music and the song; there were shouts of approbation and soft, alluring smiles, as gold and silver coins were showered by liberal admirers at the performers' feet.

Himmat Khan's trembling arms grasped the branches with gradually decreasing strength, and his blood-red eyes were helplessly fixed on the young man presiding over the pleasure party. He hated the music and song and the jingling sound of the dancing feet brought to him by the soft and scented breeze. It seemed unearthly, unreal, like the musings of a wandering fancy or the memory of a quickly-forgotten dream. The young Emperor was the only reality. He haunted Himmat Khan's brain like a fixed idea that could neither be driven out nor conquered.

'What is there in this lad, Akbar,' he said to himself, his heart disbelieving every word his lips seemed to pronounce, 'that the Tartars and the Uzbegs tremble at his name, and the peasants of Hindustan regard him as a divine-sent

blessing? A dissipated coxcomb, a votary of wine, woman and song!' But the nerves of his neck twitched at the memory of a deadly grip, and his head began to swim. 'It is all due to the accident of birth. If I had been in his place——' But the effort was futile, the words were unconvincing, and by no exercise of imagination could the hunted criminal deem his enemy a contemptible foe. 'He thinks that by lording it over his concubines he will become a man among men.' No proud words, however, could drive away the terror that was enveloping his soul in a cloud of eternal darkness. How had the unexpected happened—his tribe dispossessed of its lands, his mistress deceived, and he himself a fugitive without hope of shelter or salvation? How had the power of the Lodi, Suri and Sherwani Pathans, once so proud in their unchallenged arrogance, disappeared from the country at the bidding of a young and inexperienced upstart?

It was impossible to hide the bitter truth. Before him, superbly confident in his power to govern, surveying everything as its lord and master, sat the

smiling Emperor, enveloped in clouds of incense. 'Vile blood-sucking spider!' Himmat Khan murmured almost audibly to himself. 'He has spread his web over Hindustan, and enjoys all profit and pleasure that is to be got from the courage of its men and the beauty of its women. Vile blood-sucking spider!'

V

Himmat Khan waited for the last of the pleasure party to disappear before he alighted from his uncomfortable seat. It was a little past midnight. The sky overhead was studded with its twinkling stars, but around him everything seemed dark, dangerous and unfathomable. His limbs were aching with pain. Worry, starvation and want of sleep had deprived him of all his strength. Still something seemed to urge him on. He trod heavily across the fields. He crossed and recrossed the country tracks. Brambles and thorns tore his clothes and pierced his skin. Ultimately, after an hour's wandering, tired and exhausted and having completely lost all recollections of the path

he had planned for his escape, he reached the foot of a very large tree and sat down to rest. A suffocating vapour was rising from the moist ground below his feet. 'It is useless trying to travel now,' he decided. 'I will rise with the first light of dawn, and then it will be easier to find my way. Perhaps a little rest will do me no harm.' He lay down on the open ground, but an unconquerable restlessness possessed him. His brain worked feverishly and his fancy raised up hideous images. At times a large black shadow, without form or outline, would come towards him, threatening to enclose him in its dark and fearsome folds, and he wanted to cry like a child from fear of death. Then the memories of things he had enjoyed—his old friends and their drinking parties, the finely chiselled features of the dancing girls of Delhi, the Sher Shahi Court in its pomp and glory, the neighing of the Arab horses on the morning of battle—would flit across his memory; and, as he stretched his hands towards them, a voice he dared not disbelieve whispered in his ears that life was now beyond his reach, and, while the world

would roll on its path of joy and suffering, for him the record of existence was altogether closed. And again and again the face of the Emperor, with a bitter, contemptuous smile curling about his lips, rose before Himmat Khan's eyes, and the never-to-be-forgotten sentence rang in his ears.

He sprang up and walked to and fro in despair. 'Great God! Great God! Give me the strength to suffer the penalty of my sins, and receive me into Thy fold'—the words burst from his heart in spite of his effort to restrain them. 'This life is intolerable!' He gazed at the stars and clasped his hands in the agony of his heart, while two large tears trickled down his cheeks to his lips. 'I will do it. I will give myself up.' But a shiver passed through his body, and he stepped back as if afraid of something in front. Yes, the image of a skeleton hanging by its neck had been raised up by his feverish mind; its two rows of teeth were clenched together in a revolting smile, and its blind sockets stared at the world it had left behind. Himmat Khan recoiled in terror from this future vision of himself,

and pressed the palms of his hands against his throbbing temples. 'Mercy, my Lord, mercy!' he cried. 'This is more than I have strength to bear.'

He sat down on the ground, torn by the two conflicting impulses. The horrid skeleton danced before his eyes, as the wind rocked it to and fro and whirled it round and round. Death was a thing fearful to contemplate. He could have faced it bravely at the hands of a Rajput or a Moghul warrior, but to die thus, despised, scorned, hanged like a common criminal, required a courage he had never possessed. But was there an alternative? 'Oh! if I had only someone to befriend me in my misfortune,' he wailed, remembering the love that had surrounded him once, 'how strong and different I should have felt. What is there to live for now?'

He was at a loss to explain the change he slowly felt coming over himself. His heart began to beat less loudly; his muscles relaxed. 'Perhaps it is better so,' he muttered to himself, as he stretched his weary limbs to rest and his head fell on something pulpy and soft. Was it moral resignation, or

had two weeks of storm and stress finally deprived him of all physical and mental strength? He struggled hard against the inertia that was overcoming him, but in spite of all his efforts it carried him straight to the realm of the unconscious, wondering at the strange happiness that, for a reason he could not guess, had begun to pacify his over-troubled soul.

He could not say how long he had slept when he heard two voices in the neighbouring grove. The first was a pleasing, familiar, soft and shy female voice, with an undertone of deep affection. The second voice also Himmat Khan had heard before, but he could not remember when. From the general trend of the conversation he concluded that it belonged to a man advanced in years.

'Gentle Father! Generous Saint!' the female voice was appealing. 'Forgive him. He is unhappy, hungry and tired. His strong heart is crushed and broken.'

'Not quite!' the saint replied, in accents stern and severe. 'Salvation lies in the hands of God. It is not for

me, a repentant sinner, to procure forgiveness for others. Suffering alone can wash off the effects of sin. The gates of Heaven are closed to the unpurified heart. Let him meet the consequences of his acts. It will kill his body, but it will save his soul and he will be worthy of you again. This is the law of spiritual life, and there are no variations in the decrees of God.'

The two voices were approaching nearer.

'How hard it is for me to see him *die*,' the woman's protest continued. 'I have looked after him so tenderly. His happiness was my happiness; his sorrow was my sorrow. I cannot bear the idea of the hangman's noose around his neck. If I have forgiven him, generous father, why can you not do the same?'

Sheikh Muizzuddin emerged out of the shadow of the trees, with a veiled woman leaning on his arm.

'It is not a question of forgiveness, my child,' he replied. 'The salvation of the spirit is not a gift for him to receive or me to grant. Others may warn or inspire, but the progress of the

spirit is always through its own individual effort. His heart is hardened. His soul is in revolt against God on high. How can he be forgiven till his heart is changed? Sometimes, when the disease is superficial, the physician cures it with pleasant medicines; if the disease is deeper, he applies the knife; but when the destructive elements have sunk down to the marrow of the bones, the wise physician does not attempt a cure, but welcomes death as the only remedy of such a life. So do not argue with me, dear child, but prevail on him to face the torture that is necessary for his salvation. For him the path of eternal life lies through the hangman's noose. Soften his heart with your tears, strengthen it with your love, and teach him to face manfully the consequences of his unmanly acts. Go to him. He needs your support and you know how to support him.'

Sheikh Muizzuddin disappeared, but the veiled woman came and sat down by Himmat's side. 'How soft and smooth I used to make your bed, and now you lie restless on the damp and unclean ground.' She placed his head in

her lap, and, with her face uncovered, looked at him through her moist, dreamy eyes.

Himmat Khan neither spoke nor stirred. The strange sympathy that lighted up Ayesha's face had inspired him with an unexpected strength. Her skin was as delicate, her flesh as soft, as when she had first come into his vision, but with strength she had never possessed in life and a loveliness that was not of this earth.

'One thing is necessary—that alone will bring you salvation. Will you do it?' She patted his cheeks and Himmat felt her scented breath against his feverish brow. 'Will you do it?' Large warm tears fell from her eyes on his face.

But Himmat's throat was choked.

'Will you not answer?' she asked. 'Will you not come to join me by the only path that remains. Be brave and throw off the weight that oppresses your heart. Come! Come to me, your wife, who awaits your home-coming with forgiveness and love.'

Himmat's mind was made up at last. An old emotion was inspiring him

again. Love and life, he could not do without them—not a love that, at best, is a sublimated passion, but a vision of eternal companionship; not the feeble and humdrum round of ordinary life, but the will to prolong existence into the regions beyond the grave.

'Yes, I will! I will!' he answered, and was surprised at the militant ring of his own voice.

'Softly, softly, my master,' she said, as he showed an intention to rise. 'Sleep softly till the morning. You will need all the strength you possess.' Ayesha continued to whisper soothing words into his ears; a gentle music seemed to play around him; he imagined he could hear the words of an unseen singer's voice; and, thus inspired and calmed, he fell asleep again.

The rising sun was shining full on Himmat Khan's face when he suddenly opened his eyes and jumped up with alacrity, surprised at the landscape around him. Before him was the banyan tree on which he had been hiding the day before; in spite of his wanderings in the night, he had just returned to his starting-point. At his

feet, crushed, mangled, decomposing, lay the vulture on which his head had rested in his sleep. 'How horrid and revolting has my past life been,' he reflected, 'killing and reposing on the bodies of the dead!'

On all sides the dew lay undisturbed. 'Ayesha must have been a dream, but what difference need it make? If I have been prepared to face death at the command of my king, I must pay a greater homage to the laws of my Creator. I have killed and I must die.'

He felt strong and fresh. 'Perhaps I will see her again, when I have atoned for the wrong I have done.' And with a laugh that was ghastly in his own ears, he started on the footpath leading to Sheikh Muizzuddin's house. His steps were shaking, and he was conscious of a certain unsteadiness in his ideas. But his features were firm and determined, and his lips were parted in an unforced smile as he joyfully surveyed the land that was not to hold him for long.

The giant had touched his mother earth.

VI

'Where have you been all yesterday?' Little Halima came running to him as he neared the gate of the saint's house. 'Everybody has been searching for you. Men have gone out on all sides to find where you are. And your horse has not been well; they say it wants to see you.'

She took him by the hand, intending to lead him to her father. 'I will not come, my child, but go and tell the Emperor that I am waiting for permission to kiss his feet.'

Halima looked perplexed. 'The Emperor is asleep,' she said, 'and he will beat me if I wake him up. Besides, he ordered me not to tell anyone that he was here. But I will wake him and run away. He is ever so good. Yesterday he bought me a lot of toys.' And she disappeared, laughing, behind the gate.

'How strange it is,' Himmat Khan mused, 'that Ayesha should come to me in a dream after my dastardly, cruel act! Can she have really forgiven me?'

The Emperor emerged from the gate, leaning on Halima's shoulder with one hand and on his sword with the other.

He had just risen. His hair was uncombed and his face unwashed, but his half-closed eyes sparkled brilliantly at the prospect of adventure.

In the bustle that followed Halima could not exactly explain what had happened. But she felt the Emperor spring from her side with surprising alacrity, she heard the noise of a violent, awful blow—and when she next opened her eyes, Himmat Khan lay unconscious on the ground, and the Emperor, shaking with an unconquerable rage, had planted his right foot on the unconscious man's breast and was regaling his ears with unspeakable abuse.

'Vile wretch!' he shouted, 'you thought of flying from my justice. . . . Unregenerate villain!'

Halima, totally ignorant of what it meant, rushed to the Emperor's side and kissed his hands. 'Don't kill him,' she appealed; 'he is our guest.' The Emperor pushed her roughly aside. 'Be off, silly girl.' Halima, afraid and disillusioned about the kind-heartedness of her royal patron, retired to a respectable distance.

'Himmat Khan wishes to kiss the

Emperor's hands!' Akbar went on shouting. 'Yes, a prayer for pardon after a multitude of crimes. You rascally Pathan, Hell alone is the place you deserve. Be for ever damned!'

The Emperor's foot sank deeper and deeper into Himmat Khan's breast. A groan of inexpressible pain rose from the unconscious man's lips.

By now a large crowd had collected round them, but it kept at a respectful distance. The Khairpur people, made aware of the Emperor's presence among them, gaped with open mouths. 'Be careful and quiet,' the officers of the imperial retinue warned them; 'there is no knowing what he may not do in his fearful wrath.'

'Take the wretch away,' the Emperor ordered, when his fit had run its course, 'and prepare the witnesses for his trial as soon as he recovers his senses.' And then, with a kick that sent Himmat's huge body rolling like a ball, he turned round with a smile to one of his chamberlains. 'Let the people celebrate in all honour my coming to their town. So long as I am here they shall be fed free from the imperial

kitchen, and those who bring petitions and requests shall not be prevented from approaching me till midday.'

Soon the news went round that the Emperor was there in person to hear the petitions of all. Old women in veils aspiring for pensions of two or three rupees each, mothers wanting dowries for their daughters, young men desirous of entering his service, beggars, cripples, and farmers with lying excuses for their inability to pay the imperial land-tax, surrounded him in an eager and expectant throng. 'A man's reputation long outlasts his life,' Akbar thought, as he made up his mind to leave the request of none ungranted. 'They will remember me and my kindness for years. It is by reputation and credit that my Empire must live.'

'What do you want, mother?' he asked an old woman who, after kissing the ground, had hardly strength to rise again. The trembling woman was dumb with fear.

'Her petition,' said the *debir* (secretary), 'prays that as she is mother of ten daughters——'

'Very well,' the Emperor replied,

without waiting to hear the petition, 'order the *Mir-i-Arz* (Minister of War) to marry them to ten stout soldiers of her caste in the army, and let the mother have a pension of three rupees for herself.' And, without paying any attention to the woman's thanks, he turned to the next petitioner.

Shouts of 'God is great!' 'Long live the Emperor!' rose from the people as, one after another, the petitioners advanced with their requests. A more pleasant smile than had welcomed the dancing girls on the previous night played round Akbar's lips; a deeper joy gladdened his heart. It was his chosen field; he loved to see the favours of God to His creatures dispensed through his imperial hands.

* * * *

Himmat Khan on awakening found himself in a dark and stuffy chamber. His hands and feet were tied. Something heavy seemed to have crushed his ribs. He could not remember what had happened, but he felt terribly shaken, and an acute pain racked his body from head to foot.

After some hours he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. It warned

him of the reality of the situation. He was a prisoner awaiting trial and sentence. Death was near, but he did not mind it. It had lost its terror and appeared disguised as Hope.

Six strong men entered his cell. They lifted up his bed, and carried it to the gate near which the rough and ready court of justice had been prepared. Akbar sat on a *takht*, and his officers stood before him with folded hands. He wore his stern and severe aspect, but for the first time it failed to terrorize Himmat Khan.

A secretary read a long document accusing him of the murder of his wife and of flying from the sentence that had been passed, but he paid scant attention to the secretary's words. They did not interest him, and he was surprised to find his mind noting down small and unimportant matters. A kite was sitting over the gate. The sinking sun seemed larger than usual. Why did the Emperor not get rid of his old, white-bearded secretary, who could barely stand for want of strength and was unable to read clearly owing to failing sight?

'Call the first witness,' the Emperor ordered when the secretary had finished. A veiled woman appeared and kissed the ground. There was no mistaking her movements and the eyes that looked out of the two holes of the veil. It was Mehran Nisa.

'Were you a party to the murder?' the Emperor asked.

'As I pray for Your Majesty's forgiveness,' the trembling woman replied, 'I was. I asked him to kill his wife so that I might marry him. I held her hands while he stabbed her. It was late on a dark night. She was wearing a green dress.' Mehran Nisa began a long and detailed story, but she was breathing hard, her words were disjointed, and she repeatedly contradicted herself, while her trembling knees threatened to give way.

'It is a fabrication, a lie,' Himmat Khan remarked, hardly caring for what he said. 'I did it alone. No one else was present. Can she tell me how I disposed of the body?'

'He took it——' But no more words could come out of her mouth.

Akbar looked sternly at the lying

witness. 'Take the wretched woman away. She is a perjured liar. She swears against him because she does not want him to live.' Mehran Nisa was roughly hurried off by the *durbans*. Himmat Khan looked placidly at her retreating figure. He was not conscious of any feeling of love or resentment.

Other witnesses were called, among them his own servants. He did not mind their giving evidence against him. But when Ayesha's maid came weeping before the Court, he felt he also could weep with her. When she began to relate the many virtues of her mistress, he nodded assent.

'She was all that and more,' he remarked, to the surprise of everyone, when the long catalogue of his wife's accomplishments was finished.

'I do not know how it happened,' the maid continued, 'but my mistress always loved her master. She loved him more than her own life. When he was angry and ill-tempered, she would weep for hours and pray all night that his heart might turn. But her prayer was never granted.'

Himmat Khan's throat was choked

with sorrow at his own deed. Not far from the place he saw a tall and leafless tree with a strong rope hanging from one of its branches. By the side of the tree a sturdy mule grazed in placid content. 'So that will be the method,' he thought, and closed his eyes. 'Thank God it will be soon over.' He wanted to run straight to the tree to hang himself, without losing another moment. Then he imagined himself dead, with Ayesha bending over him with her dreamy eyes. He saw her tears fall upon his face! He felt her scented breath fanning his feverish brow!

The maid's statement was drawing to a close. 'Your Majesty!' she pleaded in tears, 'he has been always good to me. Forgive him, and hang me in his stead. My mistress has gone and shall never return. At least let my master live.'

Akbar's stern features were unmoved. 'Has the prisoner anything to say?' For the first time during the trial he condescended to look at Himmat Khan. There was no mercy in his piercing eyes.

Himmat Khan bent and kissed the ground. 'I am not a prisoner, Your

Majesty,' he said. 'I was not arrested. This morning I came to offer myself up to justice and suffer the sentence passed.'

The Emperor burst forth into a haughty and contemptuous laugh. Himmat Khan felt the old fear creeping over him again.

'Proud and lying to the very end,' was the Emperor's scornful comment. 'You try to fly, and when no means of escape are left you think of yielding to justice. As if fools like you could escape me! I have my eyes everywhere. I knew the road you took. I was here before you. Last evening'—the Emperor turned smiling to one of his courtiers—'I saw a vulture pierced by a warrior's arrow. That warrior was Himmat Khan. Repentance at Death's door! It has no value in the eyes of the Emperor. It has no value in the eyes of God. The time for repentance is past. The time of punishment is come.'

Himmat Khan's inner hope was fearfully shaken. Had he yielded in vain? Was it all a blunder? Eternal tortures! Damnation to the end of time! He longed for the free air of the morning,

and the chance of escape he had thrown away of his own free will. The power that surrounded his body with its innumerable spies now threatened to overpower and terrorize his soul.

'Great Emperor, I have come of my own free choice.' But his words fell on his own ears as strange and unbelievable. 'Last night my wife came to me in a dream and advised me to give me myself up. I have come at her bidding.'

The Emperor's laugh was louder and haughtier. 'Irreclaimable rascal! She served you right. You deceived her when she was living, and she has deceived you after her death. It is a fine revenge. And you trusted her lying words and came. This is the consequence of believing in women. One woman has incited you to murder and the other to suicide. Fools like you do not deserve to live. You threw her body, unwashed, unprayed for, into the nearest hole, and now her unsanctified ghost has deceived you into death. You are insane, mad. Your crimes have upset your brain.'

A mist rose before Himmat Khan's moist eyes. His last hope was dashed.

'Of course, how could my wife forgive me,' he thought, 'it was her ghost that came to me with a deceptive purpose.' He could hear his heart throbbing rapidly and fast. He felt his knees tremble. In front of him were the leafless tree and the silently grazing mule, and all his faculties were concentrated on the last words he was destined to hear on this earth.

'Providence, in its kindness,' the Emperor was telling his secretary, 'has provided a remedy against the defects of nature. I have often observed that, when a man commits too many crimes, his mind becomes darkened, his reason disappears, his judgment plays him false, hallucinations haunt him, and he madly falls into the net spread for him by the ministers of justice. The darker the crime, the greater is the criminal's mental torture. The mere memory of a murder is too much for the human soul to bear; the will to kill is changed into the will to die; the suicidal impulse becomes supreme; and he who began his career by seeking the death of another ends it by aspiring after his own extinction.

'But let us pass to the sentence,' he continued in a different tone. 'I order Himmat Khan to be put to death for the murder of his wife. He has also been the cause of Sheikh Muizzuddin's death, but one punishment is enough for both the crimes. Let the sentence be executed immediately.'

The Emperor's voice rang loud and clear. Away in the eastern horizon the dark clouds thundered assent. For a moment Himmat Khan's heart stood still; then it began to beat with gradually increasing rapidity, till its throbbing excluded every other sound from his ears. He felt himself shaking from head to foot. Life and death, eternity and salvation—all such ideas had disappeared from his mind. The only feeling he was conscious of was an unthinking, animal courage.

A *jallad* brought a piece of cloth to wind round his eyes. 'I do not require it,' he heard himself saying. 'I have courage enough to stare death in the face.' He saw the mule standing before him, and climbed to its back with shaking but determined feet. Towards his right was the Emperor, surveying the

scene with a keen, scientific interest; in front of him the leafless tree seemed to drag the mule to itself by some strange magnetic power.

Step by step the animal advanced. At every step Himmat's heart seemed to redouble its beats. Death was approaching.

Just below the tree the hangman tied the rope round his neck. 'A little more tightly,' he ordered, 'but not too tight.' The animal moved forward, the rope pulled him back by the neck. He felt the saddle slipping from beneath his thighs, as with a rough, unkindly jerk the coils of the rope sank deep into his throat. '*Ya Allah*! Great God!' His heart throbbed within him with the consciousness that he would be soon swinging in the air.

Akbar the Great stood with folded hands before Himmat Khan's hanging corpse. The neck had elongated to an extraordinary degree, so that the body stood with its feet on the ground; the eyes and mouth were wide open, and the hands and feet wriggled in vain for life after the warrior's spirit had fled.

The Emperor surveyed the dead

man's body with the eye of a soldier of experience and genius. 'He was stout and courageous,' he remarked. 'His existence was an honour to the profession of arms. But Providence, in punishment for some pre-natal sin, struck his mind with madness and brought him to this doom.' He looked unmoved at the dead man's white, staring eyes. 'What a mystery death is! No one knows the secret, and those who have discovered it do not return to tell the tale. Only —only'—he leaned heavily on the old secretary's arm—'life is a deeper mystery than death.'

VII

A fortnight after the events just related, a female litter, covered with a deep red cloth, was passing one morning through the main street of Agra on its way to Fatehpur Sikri. Everyone regarded it with a feeling of hostility. 'Look at the wretched woman!' shouted a young man whose military career had been cut short by Himmat Khan's death. 'She incited my master to kill his wife, and, while his hands were yet

dripping with blood, she left him to become the Emperor's mistress. If it was not for her sex, I would have cut off her head like a pumpkin.'

'You are right!' 'You speak the truth, brother!' responded the shopkeepers and the crowd around.

The imperial horsemen in charge of the procession looked at the crowd with benevolent smiles. 'You are right,' they seemed to say, 'but she is under the Emperor's protection and you had better keep at a safe distance.'

Mehran Nisa felt sick within the stuffy litter. She thought the accusations were a lie, but how was she to convince her detractors of the genuineness of her feelings? An external power had whirled her along in the tragic drama. She knew not why it had all happened.

Towards the evening the procession approached the precincts of the imperial palace. Was it memory of the past or expectation of the future that began to raise strange hopes in Mehran Nisa's heart at the sight of the red stone walls? Luxury, refinement, art, her royal lover with his haughty, commanding looks and his exquisitely degrading

touch! The litter was passing through one imperial gate after another. She leaned back on the cushions, and, closing her eyes, began to fill the future with pictures of alluring hope.

'It is time for the Begum Sahib to step out'—a voice awoke her from the reverie—'the Emperor is in the hall of the Court.' She felt an unconquerable nervousness coming over her. The palace of hope was dissolving at the first touch of reality. She covered herself with her veil, and silently followed a well-built negro eunuch, with a black, expressionless face and a well-trimmed, white beard. 'The Emperor is discussing deep religious matters with a Christian priest,' he whispered into her ears. 'We will stand in a corner till he calls us.' And for long she stood by his side with her hands folded on her breast, that was alternately possessed by hope and despair.

The Emperor was walking up and down the court with rapid strides, and old Father Julian Pereira, with his brown, unkempt beard, found it difficult to keep pace with him.

'I like some things in your faith,' the Emperor remarked, after the panting

priest had explained to him as much as he knew of the doctrines of Christianity; 'your idea of non-resistance pleases me. Christ rightly taught that we should injure no living creature. Every pain caused to a sentient being, high or low, is undeniably a sin.'

Father Pereira's weather-beaten face beamed with joy.

'But your idea of a Trinity is clearly wrong. I beseech you, give it up. Two kings cannot live in a kingdom. The existence of three Divine Beings would bring the whole universe to ruin.'

The old priest was shocked at the profane words. His weak knees began to tremble; blood rushed to his face, and he thought lovingly and affectionately of his little Europe, where such boldness would have met with a speedy punishment.

'Do not take it ill, Father Pereira.' The Emperor had no desire to injure the religious susceptibilities of his Christian guest. 'Different peoples have different faiths. For each of us the faith of our own forefathers is the best. It does not matter whether we are Hindus or Mussulmans or Christians;

provided we are true to our faith we shall be saved. You have to live up to your creed and I to mine.'

Father Pereira was even more annoyed at this justification of infidelity.

'I am perplexed and worried by the religious discussions of my people. One calls himself a Hindu and thinks he must hate a Mussulman. Why? We are toys made of the same mother earth; and we will sink into the same earth again. In the course of all eternity a few decades of existence are all we get, and we waste them in hatreds and communal strifes. Why can we not live peacefully together and allow every one to worship his Creator according to his faith.'

'Through Christ we are saved,' Father Pereira remarked, not knowing what else to say. 'Through Christ we are saved.'

'Certainly, Father Pereira, certainly!' Akbar stamped on the ground with impatience. 'Through Christ we are saved, but not through Christ alone. We are saved through all redeemers. The exclusiveness of religions leads to murders and civil wars. Convince the

majority of mankind that they belong to the Devil, and you are sure to find them fighting in his ranks.'

Father Pereira was sorely perplexed. He was afraid of the Emperor's autocratic power, and was nervous lest the hot-headed young heathen's heart should be altogether turned away from the Lord. He kneeled on the ground and kissed the skirt of the Emperor's dress. 'I am an unlettered priest,' he said, 'and if Your Majesty wishes to discuss high religious matters, you should send for some learned doctor of my faith.'

The Emperor smiled benevolently. 'Do not take my words ill, and I shall do as you require. You are a god-fearing man, and as such I respect you. But there are virtuous men in all faiths, and them too the Almighty will receive in His favour. Sectarian religions are the result of accident, of birth. We all follow implicitly the doctrines of our parents, and believe everything they teach. Perhaps it is better so. The value of a garden depends on the variety, not on the similarity, of its flowers. But God is great, omnipotent. We are all emanations of the same Divine

Essence. Everything that exists, exists in Him: His is the beauty of all things beautiful, the wisdom of all things wise. He is the worshipped of every creed, the subject and object of every prayer. To Him alone all things for ever bow. "And the thunder sings His glory with His praise, and the Angels, too, from awe of Him." "He is the First and the Last, the Appearance and the Reality."

'I pray you, Father Pereira, think deeply over the question. God is too great for our minds; let His greatness broaden our minds; it is not for our little minds to limit His greatness. God is forgiving. You cannot compel Him to close the door of salvation on your fellowmen. This pertness, this religious arrogance, this presumption of moral superiority among Hindus, Mussulmans and Christians alike, injures and depraves the soul. There is salvation for us all.'

He took a small diamond from his turban and handed it to Father Pereira. 'It will keep me comfortable all my life,' Father Pereira reflected, as he kissed the Emperor's hand before he withdrew. 'He is a glorious heathen.'

'Abdul Kadir! Abdul Kadir!' The

Emperor saw the eunuch and Mehran Nisa standing in a corner.

Mehran Nisa walked up as gracefully as she could, and bent down to kiss the Emperor's feet. Her eyes were twinkling with joy. She looked at him lovingly, almost intimately, and thought she should feel like a bride.

But the Emperor's mind had been made up. He looked with his hard, stony features at the woman who had ceased to attract him any longer, and ignored the loving message of her eyes. 'Abdul Kadir! place this woman in one of the chambers of the harem and watch her closely. She seems inspired by some criminal impulse. Let none hereafter mention her name to me. Those who disobey my order will do so at the cost of their life.'

Mehran Nisa's heart sank within herself. She looked from the Emperor's stern features to the eunuch's expressionless face. Was this to be the end?

'Go with him,' the Emperor ordered her with a look of intense annoyance, 'and, unfaithful woman, do not come across my path any more.'

She lowered her head and silently

followed the white-bearded negro. At the gate of the harem something seemed to hold her steps. It was awful—crossing that accursed threshold. Behind her was Agra and its alluring freedom; before her the luxury and unhappiness of the most atrocious of Indian brothels; and weakly, very weakly, she wished to go back to her old life again. But five harsh fingers caught hold of her wrist, and she was pulled roughly across. 'Those whom the Emperor has touched,' Abdul Kadir explained, 'are considered too sacred for other people; and even if he should never care to see them again, they must remain here for ever.' With a bang the door behind her was closed and locked. She saw pale women in fine silks walking hither and thither. Every face had its tragic story to tell. A soft, sad music came wafted to her by the breeze, and she imagined that the musician was as broken-hearted as herself. 'I had not prayed for such a life.' She covered her face with her hands and began to weep. 'My love! My darling!' Abdul Kadir whispered in her ears, 'we get not what we pray for, but what we deserve.' And, looking

at the passion that was illuminating the negro's erstwhile expressionless features and his hot, blood-red eyes, she could dimly guess the kind of degradation the future had in store.