



**Among the
Panthans**

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When Jack Chetwynd dropped into the Bundar Cafe at Delhi one scorching afternoon in September of last year and informed me that we were ordered off to the Punjaub, I could have shouted for joy. I did not do it, though, for I well knew how scornfully Jack would regard any such demonstration. I merely nodded my head, lazily, and went on reading the *Post* with as much calmness as if such news was a mere every day affair.

“Yes, my boy,” went on Jack, dropping into a chair and ordering a lemon squash, “we are going to have some fun. You know those rascally Pathans killed two or three of our fellows near the frontier station at Oghi some time ago, so an expedition is going up to give them a drubbing for it. It’s a deuce of a country, they say, that Black Mountain region, and these Pathans are terrible fellows, too; fight like tigers. Plenty of chance for glory there, Charlie; so prepare yourself!”

Jack stopped for breath, and buried his mustache in the icy goblet.

“And so the Rifles are really ordered off, are they?” I said, eagerly. “It’s high time. I’ve been here nearly a year now, and the worst enemy I’ve seen yet was a rascally wild boar. Do you know how soon we start?”

“About the first of October, I believe,” Jack replied. “And now come take a hand at billiards. You will have time enough to discuss the Black Mountain tribes between this and the first.”

Jack’s information proved correct. The Seventh Rifles, on whose regimental records I was entered as Lieutenant Charles Bentley, was included in the expeditionary forces, while Jack, whose regiment was still up in Sikkim, and likely to spend the winter there, was transferred to ours. The hasty preparations, the long dusty ride northward, the forced marches under a broiling Indian sun, all passed by with panoramic sequency. To facilitate success the expedition was separated into four divisions, which were to move in different directions. Our column, which was the fourth, marched up the banks of the Indus, right into the heart of the enemy’s country, and early one morning we found ourselves in front of Katkai, a fortified town far up on a sloping mountain spur.

The enemy’s outposts on the plain were taken after a brief skirmish, and we

advanced on the town itself. The morning sun shone on our burnished arms as we marched over the plain, and the regimental drums rattled merrily among the hills. Within the town all seemed quiet, but suddenly a confused mass swept out from under the walls, gathering shape and form as it came on, until we could distinguish the faces of the men and see the sunshine flashing on their brazen shields.

The drums ceased, orders were calmly given, and the line of battle formed across the plain, a fearful array of bristling bayonets and snow white helmets, flanked by pieces of artillery. The enemy came on in a dense horde, as if they would overpower us by sheer force of numbers. We could see plainly their swarthy faces, their eyes glittering under their little cotton skull caps, their tangled beards, their clinched teeth shining out from their curling black mustaches. It was a band of reckless Ghazi fanatics, clad only in their loose white tunics and brandishing curved swords and shields of carved brass.

Fiercely and with terrible cries they came on, rushing straight into the jaws of death until they could almost grasp our outstretched bayonets. Poor deluded fools! A stream of flame and smoke volleyed along the line. The artillery thundered into their dense, tangled ranks, and down they went before the pitiless rain of bullets, struggling, shrieking, and hurling themselves almost at our feet. Another volley, and we swept over them with lowered bayonets. The carnage was brief, but terrible, and in five minutes all was over, not a man remaining alive.

In the excitement I hardly realized what was going on. When the column formed again, I was holding my sword firmly in one hand and wiping the perspiration off my face with the other. Close beside me was Jack. His face was black with powder and his sword was stained red.

“That was hot work, Charlie!” he cried. “Jove, but those were terrible fellows. And now for Katkai!”

The head of the column, a regiment of Punjaub infantry, had previous to this made a detour along the mountain and had gained a slight elevation to the right of the town. Already the rattle of musketry was echoing along the hills.

At this moment Captain Buller came up, lashing his horse to a gallop.

“Chetwynd,” he cried, “take a small detachment and two pieces of artillery; go

up that ravine yonder and gain the slope of the town. Reserve your fire until the attack becomes general,” and, with a hasty wave of the hand, he dashed off to the front.

Jack quickly buckled up his sword. “Come on, Charlie. You will accompany me,” he said.

There was pressing need of haste. We could hear the drums beating up in front, and on the walls of the town people were gathering. Jack selected two dozen, good men, and two Gardiner guns, with their artillerists, and wheeling out of line, we moved off toward the hills on the left.

All was quiet when we entered the mouth of the ravine, but in a few moments the firing began again quite briskly. The gulch was sprinkled with loose stones, large and small, and the slopes were thickly grown with pine trees. We pushed on rapidly, the horses pulling well at the heavy guns, until the ascent was half overcome and we were nearing the summit of the ridge. The top was comparatively open, and our orders were to move along the slope and take up our position within gunshot of the town.

Jack and I were in the lead, and with us was a young fellow, Melton Forbes by name, who had accompanied the expedition as correspondent for an Allahabad paper, and had begged to make one of Jack’s party. The first gun was close behind us, and as we struggled out from a tangled thicket of young pines that blocked our passage, Jack stopped and turned around.

“Confound it,” he exclaimed. “They are losing a wheel back there!”

Sure enough, the convoy had halted a few paces away and were grouped around the gun. The men in charge of our piece hurried back to assist. Suddenly, at this critical moment, a savage yell rang out from the upper slope of the ravine, and the red fire leaped from the pines as a murderous volley was poured into our little detachment. Two or three of the men fell, and as the remaining brave fellows rapidly wheeled into line, down from the forest poured a swarm of black wretches armed with guns and swords, and fairly overwhelmed them. It was plain that they had overlooked us.

“The gun! Quick! quick!” cried Jack, wildly.

The horses had no space to turn. With two strokes of his saber Jack severed the

traces, and we threw ourselves on the axle. But the wheels were clogged up with heavy stones, and our efforts were all in vain. We could not move it an inch. Jack was desperate.

“Come on,” he cried, grasping his sword. “Let the gun go,” and then he suddenly stepped back. “Too late!” he added, despairingly. “We are cut off.”

Even as he Spoke we heard the rumble of the other gun as the panic stricken horses dashed down the ravine, and the desultory shots fired by our retreating comrades. Then came close at hand a triumphant shout, and half a dozen bullets whistled over our heads. We knew we were discovered.

Our first impulse was to advance, but a glimpse through the pines quickly dispelled that intention. The savages, were coming up the ravine, and formidable fellows they were, clad in skins and bearing long barreled guns, spears and swords. Even as we hesitated another yell rang out, and a volley of shots was fired.

Jack staggered back, and hastily clapped his hand to his left arm.

“I’m hit,” he said. “No time to stop now. Run for your life.”

We dashed at full speed up the ravine, abandoning the horses, for they would have been useless on such ground. We dodged among the trees, and leaped over huge boulders, while the angry cries still rang out behind us, and occasional shots flew over our heads. On reaching the summit we hesitated. Off to the right lay Katkai, and the incessant firing and clouds of smoke showed that the attack had begun. But below us on the slope we could see strange figures moving. Flight in that direction was madness. We should be overtaken and cut down in an instant. Directly in front yawned a deep black gorge, while mountain after mountain rose in the distance until lost in the haze. One brief second we wavered, panting, breathless, and then, as the blood curdling cries rang out again, fearfully close at hand, we plunged into the gloomy shadows of the gorge.

How we kept up that mad flight for life will always be a mystery to me. Our bloodthirsty foes pressed us closely. They seemed to have scattered, for their answering cries echoed for a while from both sides of the gorge, while we dashed straight on, blindly rushing through the dense forest, at every step fleeing farther from friends and safety.

We leaped recklessly over great masses of stones, we climbed hills and crossed narrow valleys, and dashed through raging mountain torrents, and still we heard the shouts of our pursuers. But they were growing fainter and less frequent, and at last, as we turned aside into a ravine that was almost shut in by mountain walls, Jack threw himself heavily to the ground in the shadow of a great rock, and, panting for breath, we dropped down beside him.

How long we lay there I do not know. Several hours must have passed, and Jack, whose arm was beginning to pain him, waked up, and, startled by the lateness of the hour, roughly put an end to our sleep. We crept a little way up the ravine, and sat down under a pine tree to discuss the situation. First, however, we carefully bandaged up Jack's arm in a big handkerchief. It was a flesh wound, above the elbow, but it seemed badly inflamed already.

That morning while marching up the ravine, I had relieved a soldier of his rifle and cartridge belt, so that he might assist in pushing the guns. So, very fortunately, I found myself armed. Melton had a rifle, while Jack carried only his sword. We were thus not entirely defenseless.

Now then," said Jack, "for the present I think we are safe. Are there any rations in the crowd?"

"There are," answered Melton, "I am happy to say," and, unstrapping a light knapsack from his back, he poured the contents out on the ground. They comprised a notebook and pencils, a drinking cup, a knife, a pipe and tobacco, matches, and actually a packet of biscuit and a can of potted beef, as bright and shiny as the day it was purchased.

"Good," exclaimed Jack. "Now then, for water, and we'll be fixed."

I hastily ran down to the ravine and filled my helmet with the little stream at the bottom. Then we started in on our simple repast, dipping water from the helmet with Melton's cup. The remains were carefully packed away in the knapsack, and Jack coolly proceeded to fill and light Melton's pipe.

"Well," he said, abruptly, "we are cut off from Katkai, that's certain. And here we are, three fugitives lost in the enemy's country, and only two of us armed. That's certain, too. Now, then, you know by this time what these Pathans are; or at least, I do," and he patted his arm ruefully. "There is but one thing to do. We must go straight on and try to reach one of the other columns. You know the

Black Mountain district is not very large, and striking off due north we ought to reach General Chauner's column. It can't be far from us now. But then recollect the country is aroused, and these bloodthirsty fiends are prowling about on every hill, watching in ambush for our troops. But we'll brace up and hope for the best. All that's necessary is caution. It's getting near sundown now, and up the slope beyond us I see likely shelter. Suppose we go up there and find quarters for the night."

Melton jumped up and tightened his belt.

"Your suggestions are good, Jack, he said, "and Charlie here agrees with us, I know. Come on then, and we'll find a snug hiding place among the rocks."

We started up the hill. It was a wearisome climb in our tired condition. As we were picking our way over the loose, slippery stones an unfortunate thing happened, which, though trifling enough in itself, brought us into such deadly peril as even yet causes beads of sweat to stand on my forehead when I think of it.

Melton was behind me. I stepped on a loose stone. It turned over and rolled, and, in leaping aside to avoid it, Melton slipped and fell. His rifle struck the rocks, and the concussion discharged it. The report echoed among the mountains with startling reverberations, and then came a death-like stillness.

We looked at each other without a word. Instinctively we realized the gravity of this accident. Then we gloomily continued our climb. Soon we emerged from the shadow of the trees and confronted a massive wall of rock that towered hundreds of feet overhead and extended as far as the eye could reach up and down the valley. An open space, from twenty to thirty feet in breadth, ran along between the base of the cliff and the edge of the forest. Off to our right lay a bit of higher ground, thickly strewn with loose stones, and, strangely enough, just here was a depression in the face of the rock, a sort of natural chamber roughly hollowed out. It was an admirable spot for defense.

Jack went up and began to roll the stones together, forgetting his wounded arm. "Get to work now," he said, "and build a parapet around this cavern. We may have desperate need of it before morning."

Stones were plentiful, and in half an hour we had constructed a solid wall, three feet high, that completely inclosed the entrance to our place of refuge. Then, too

uneasy to sleep, we sat with our backs against the cliff and watched the sun going down. Night comes quickly in the Punjab, and the towering wall of rock across the valley, its jagged summit boldly outlined against the crimson glow of the sky, faded swiftly into the gloom, and the forest, sloping far below us, was only a shadowy depth.

Suddenly, far, far across the mountains came a low, dull boom. Jack started up eagerly.

“It’s the gun fire at sunset!” he cried. “One of our columns has encamped. That came from the north, too. It must be Chauner’s division.”

What an awful sense of isolation and of loneliness came over us when we heard that distant signal! It only added tenfold to the misery and horror of the situation. We sat a long while in silence; and then as night fell, the animals of the forest began to stir themselves. A troop of jackals barked away down the valley, but a distant roar quickly scared them into silence. From the top of the cliff away above our heads came a long, mournful howl, perhaps some prowling panther welcoming the arrival of the night. With the darkness came, too, a sudden chilling cold, that seemed to penetrate our very bones. Blankets we had none. To light a fire would be madness. So we huddled together under the cliff in the vain hope of warming each other.

Cold as it was, I think we began to doze a little, snatching brief intervals of sleep. From one of these half lucid periods I awoke suddenly. In the dim light I saw Jack standing near me.

“I can’t sleep,” he said. “My arm feels as if it were on fire. I’m going down into the ravine to dip it in the cold water. I think that will do it good.”

“What!” I said in amazement. “Climb down there over the rocks in the darkness! It’s madness, Jack. You don’t know what may happen to you.”

He only laughed.

“Keep a close outlook while I’m gone,” he said. “I’ll be back in half an hour,” and in spite of our entreaties and remonstrances ♦ for Melton, now awake, protested more vigorously than I ♦ he stepped over the parapet and entered the forest.

“The reckless fellow!” said Melton. “Such daring I never heard of. And, by Jove, with only his sword, too. I’ll call him back,” and walking over to the edge of the forest he cried, “Jack, Jack!” several times.

But no reply followed, and he came back. Eastward, behind the narrow horizon of the pine crested mountain spurs, an almost imperceptible glow prophesied the rising-of the moon. For a long while after Jack’s departure we sat down behind the barrier, vaguely gazing at the streak of light and watching for it to grow larger. Half an hour passed, and then an hour, and Jack had not returned.

Melton got up and looked at his watch. It was ten o’clock.



“Two hours since Jack left,” he said, and his voice trembled a little. “And, by the way, Charlie, do you notice how quiet it is? The animals have all become silent. I have not heard a leopard or a panther for an hour. As for those wretched jackals and foxes, the approach of the larger animals has petrified them into silence. But what is wrong with the large beasts, Charlie?” and he dropped his voice to a whisper. “I believe there is something worse than leopards or panthers down in the ravine.”

“Impossible,” I replied, though Melton’s words had given me a cold chill. “Do you suppose those savages are in the habit of prowling about at night?”

“No,” said Melton, “I don’t believe it is habitual with them; but, “to speak plainly, I do believe that unfortunate discharge of my gun has put them on our track, and at this moment Jack is either dead, or a prisoner in their hands.”

Melton ceased speaking, and at that very instant, as though in direct confirmation of his words, away down in the depths of the ravine, we heard an awful clatter, a ringing melody of sound like the beating of a gong. It echoed from cliff to cliff, rousing the birds from their nests, and then faded slowly and lingeringly away.

“What was that?” I fairly shrieked in terror.

“That,” answered Melton, and his voice was strangely calm and deliberate, “that is as likely as not our death knell. It was a shield  a brazen shield  dropped by accident upon the rocks.”

“What shall we do? What shall we do?” I asked hopelessly.

Melton Forbes was one of those few men who possess the daring and nerve that go to make a successful war correspondent. His voice was cool and collected as he answered calmly: "Fight, of course. "There is no escape. And come to think of it, Charlie, we're not in such an awful bad way after all. We are losing precious time, though. Look to your arms now, for we can't tell what is going to happen."

To a certain extent Melton was correct. Our situation was indeed terrible, but not absolutely hopeless, though of course we had no means of knowing the enemy's strength. Each of us had a Martini-Henry rifle, good for sixteen continuous shots, and our cartridge belts were well filled. These arms, by the way, we had held to in all that pressing flight for life. Under these circumstances, and in command of such a defensible position, we could hope to check an attack for some time; unless, indeed, our little fortress should be overrun by force of numbers, and that, alas! was anything but improbable. These wild tribes of the Punjaub, like the Soudanese Arabs, are fanatics, perhaps fatalists, and their daring is checked by no fear of consequences. That hopeless charge of the Ghazi fanatics had shown us this conclusively.

We added a few more stones to the parapet, and provided three or four loopholes to fire from, and then, giving a last look to our rifles, took our places in silence. The Eastern sky was all aglow now, and of a sudden, over the mountain, rose the disc of the moon, silvery, radiant. It cast its flood of light over all the valley, glancing on our polished rifle barrels and revealing at one point through the trees a distant gleam like burnished silver, as it fell on the rippling stream far down in the ravine.

The silence still continued unbroken. As the moon's full body rose into view. Melton whispered, "I think they have been waiting for this to attack us." A moment later he leaned over, and added, huskily: "If you come out of this all right, Charlie, and I don't, let them know at home, won't you? and I'll do the same by you. Poor Jack! I guess it's all up with him long ago. They could not have given him even a chance to cry for help."

I clasped Melton's hand in silence. I could not speak. Then for a quarter of an hour probably, we sat there motionless. Suddenly Melton lifted his rifle and whispered, sharply, "Get ready, they are coming."

His practiced ear had caught some slight sound. A moment later something

sparkled an instant in the forest ◆ the moon glancing on a shield, perhaps ◆ and then, in the bright radiance, we saw dim figures moving on the verge of the woods. They evidently knew just where we were intrenched.

All was quiet for a while. The parapet had given them a momentary check. Then a dark figure stepped from the shadows, and moved slowly toward us. My finger was already trembling on the trigger when he turned back. He was simply trying to find out if we were sleeping or not. Evidently he believed we were, for after a moment's interval, with great quickness out sprang a dozen or more powerful savages and dashed straight upon the parapet.

We fired together, and at the loud report two of the foremost men dropped, and the rest, wavering for a moment, fled in hopeless confusion as the fusillade from our Martini-Henrys raked through them. Then with a volley of spears that recoiled harmlessly from the cliff, and half a dozen shots that spattered on the parapet, they fell back in ominous silence.

Melton turned his head and looked at me.

“Safe for the present, Charlie. If we can stand it till morning, we'll ◆”

He never finished! On the instant, with a blood curdling yell, a horde of black wretches who had lain in ambush behind the forest, poured out into the open, and swept up the slope in one solid mass, beating their spear heads against their shields.

We poured into their midst a steady fire, but the fusillade of bullets raked through them without the least effect, and then, as we still knelt before our loopholes, and before we could even rise, they swarmed over the parapet and fell upon us.

I heard a cry from Melton, and then a gigantic savage, with his white tunic flapping about his legs, leaped straight upon me from the verge of the wall, and the brazen knobs upon his shield smote me on the forehead.

I grew faint and dizzy. I remember the shock as his great body crushed me to the earth, and then I knew no more.

How long I remained thus I cannot tell. When I opened my eyes, I was lying down beside the ruins of the parapet, with my arms strongly bound. My head

was aching badly. All around me stood our captors discussing something of importance, to judge from their gestures and the animated expression on their faces. The moon was high overhead. I turned slightly, and over in the corner saw Melton, sitting upright and with that same calm expression on his features. His leg above the knee was wrapped in a bloody bandage. Delighted to see him alive, I called him by name; but as soon as I spoke, one of the savages standing near shook his spear at me angrily, making some unintelligible remark, and then I was roughly seized by the collar and dragged to my feet.

In the bluish glare of the moon the bearded faces of our captors looked terribly harsh and cruel. They were all of immense stature, clad only in cotton tunics and the undressed hides of different animals. Their weapons consisted of curved scimiters, long shafted spears, little round shields of brass, such as all these mountain tribes carry, and long, odd looking guns of native manufacture, for these Pathans readily make firearms and gunpowder. It was a strange thing we had been taken alive, for they rarely show mercy; and, indeed, as I long afterward heard, these same tribes, during the fight at Chela Crag, ran about setting on fire the clothes of our wounded.

I felt sure that we were reserved for torture. The looks of hatred cast upon us admitted of no other construction; and then, too, we had killed half a dozen of their number, and the bodies now lay in a row along the cliff, the object of much mourning and lamentation.

Suddenly the scene changed. Some course of action had been decided upon. The Pathans strapped on their guns and shields, and placing a special guard of a dozen men about each of us, keeping us far apart, they moved along the base of the cliff. In front were borne the bodies of the dead, carried on rude stretchers made of spears and shields. My limbs were aching from head to foot, but they cruelly hurried me on, pricking me with their spear points if I loitered. I could not turn around to see how Melton fared.

In this way we traveled along the cliff for several miles, and after a while the granite walls became low and straggly, and the valley narrowed as we drew near the mouth of the gorge. It was still dark when we climbed down a perilously steep path to the plain, and soon halted on the banks of a narrow river, probably a branch of the Indus.

A cluster of low huts, stood near, and as it began to grow light, people came out

of these, offering milk and pots of honey to our captors, and bearing a dozen or more inflated skins. These the savages straddled, and paddling with their shields, they soon crossed to the other shore. Melton and I, our hands being still confined, were ferried over in this manner. Two or three men would then take all the skins back again, and thus finally all the detachment got safely across.

Shivering in our wet clothes, we resumed the march. We crossed a couple of low mountain spurs, and in less than an hour began to descend into a great plain. The sun was just rising, and as the banks of mist began to float up from the ground and roll away, we could see blue mountain peaks and purple hills towering high in the distance, and at their base, nestled among the foot hills, lay a fortified town, with bastions and buttresses and white walls shining splendidly in the bright sunlight.

I still had some hope of life, for, as we crossed the river, I had looked at each man carefully, and none of them carried Jack's sword. I was sure of this, and it was possible, I told myself, that Jack had escaped, and perhaps was even now bringing us assistance.

As we crossed the plain, people came to meet us from the town ◆ men, women and children ◆ and as they came up to the solemn group in front who bore the dead, they broke first into loud cries of mourning, and very quickly changed them to howls of rage, as they observed us being led captive. In fact, our guards could barely protect us from the violence of the mob. Then, indeed, looking at that sea of ferocious, angry faces, I gave myself up for lost.

As we approached the town, the way led among scattered houses and low barriers built rudely of great stones, and soon the massive walls of the town itself threw their shadow before us. Heralded by a fanfare of trumpets, and the loud tocsin that almost drowned the angry roar of the populace, we marched under the great, gloomy gateways, and came to a halt in a vast open square. The town was apparently not large, and the houses were of a mean character, and built loosely of timber and bamboo. But the encircling wall was of great strength, and I began to think this was the stronghold of these tribes, and a town of which I had heard, called Maidan.

The people had surrounded still yelling and hooting like a pack of fiends, while an earnest discussion seemed to be going on between the leaders. Suddenly the cries ceased and we were led off across the square toward the far end of the

town.

We stopped before a circular building, constructed, in contrast to the other houses, of heavy blocks of stone. A massive door, made from one solid stone, creaked on its hinges, and Melton and I were roughly thrust inside and the door pulled shut. Our arms were still confined. We could distinguish nothing at first in the gloom and darkness, but in a moment this passed off, and by the feeble light that streamed in from a narrow slit in the wall, we saw a man lying on a bundle of straw in the corner. Melton looked in bewilderment for an instant, and then cried joyfully: "It's Jack! It's Jack!"

The man rose with a glad cry and sprang forward. It was indeed Jack. We were delighted to know that he had not been-killed, and yet to me this meeting was a severe shock. I had hoped that he had made good his escape and would ultimately effect our rescue, and now I realized for the first time our full peril on finding him here in the same plight as ourselves. We sat down together on the straw, and Jack eagerly related his adventures.

"After I left you fellows," he said, "I crept slowly down the hill, keeping as closely as possible to the path by which we came up. It must have taken nearly half an hour to reach the bottom in the darkness, but I finally got to the edge of the stream, and just as I was bending over the water, I felt a stunning blow on the head, and before I could collect my senses, I had a gag stuffed in my mouth and my hands were tied.

"It was so dark I could see little of my captors, but I supposed they were our pursuers of the morning. It must have been your gun shot, Melton, that got them on our track again. Pretty soon about a dozen of them started off with me down the valley and I knew then that the rest of them were waiting to capture you fellows. We got in here about two hours ago, and I'll be hanged if they have given me a bite to eat yet. My arm seems a little better since I took a cold bath in the river last night. But what is the matter with your leg, Melton? You have it wrapped up."

"It's only a scratch," replied Forbes. "A spear grazed me when they made the assault."

Then we told Jack all about the taking of the fortress, and he listened intently, stroking his chin from time to time. When we finished he seemed lost in thought

for a moment, and then he said slowly: “Well, I’m afraid it’s all up with us. It’s a bad enough sign when they make prisoners of us, instead of spearing us at once. There is something behind all that. But what makes it worse is the shooting of their men. Not that you did wrong in that, for it was a brave defense, and I only wish I had been there with you. But these are the most cruel and revengeful tribes in India, and I’m very much afraid they will have our heads up over the gate of the town before long!”

“What!” I cried in horror.

“Why, yes,” he continued. “Didn’t you see the head impaled over the gateway when you came in? It looked to me like the head of an Englishman; and honestly, “here he lowered his voice, “I verily believe it was the head of Lieutenant Barry, whom these fiends killed near Oghi last June. However, we won’t despair yet. Something may turn up, after all.” And Jack tried to look hopeful.

It was very evident, though, that his view of the matter was the true one. Our situation was desperate.

“If I could only talk to these fellows,” added Jack; “but they don’t know anything about Hindustani. I wish I had learned Persian. That is the groundwork of the languages all these northern tribes speak.”

In the midst of our conversation the door opened, and a native brought in a jug of water and a platter of small, flat cakes. He untied our arms and then went out silently. We devoured the cakes greedily, for fear had not taken away our appetite. They seemed to be made of rice, and tasted very good.

The day dragged on slowly, and no one came near until toward evening. Then we were given another dish of cakes, and left alone for the night. In spite of the cold we rested very well, and were still sleeping when one of the guards brought in our breakfast. We had examined our prison thoroughly. Escape was impossible. The roof was far overhead and the slit in the wall was the only opening. The door was chained on the outside, and seemed to be watched over continually by armed guards.

Nothing occurred during that day. Even in the town all seemed quiet.

In this manner four days passed away, and we were still unharmed. We were

beginning to hope that all would go well yet, for Jack had suggested that possibly they intended to hold us as hostages for the safety of the town, and indeed this appeared very probable.

Early on the morning of the fifth day, as we still lay sleeping, a loud commotion outside woke us up. People were shouting and running to and fro, and we heard arms clashing. Jack stood up erect close to the wall, and, crawling up on his shoulders, I managed to peep out of the embrasure. I could see one corner the square, and here were assembling crowds of natives apparently much excited over something. They were all heavily armed. I hastily jumped down as the chains rattled on the door. It opened slowly, and, instead of our usual attendant, bearing breakfast, in came a swarthy, smooth faced fellow, wearing over his tunic a soldier's jacket and helmet, and actually carrying my Martini-Henry, while over his back was slung my cartridge belt, bristling with loaded shells.

“Soona, Feringhi, soona,” [“Pay attention, you dogs of English, pay attention.”] he said, fiercely, in Hindustani, which was the extent to which Melton's and my knowledge of the language went.

At the familiar sound Jack's eyes sparkled, and he eagerly put several questions to the man. Melton and I watched them with breathless interest. The fellow listened intently for an instant, and then his dark features lit up with an expression that I can never forget. It was the face of a fiend, and he fairly ground his white teeth as he burst out into a torrent of Hindustani. He hissed out each word, rolling his eyes fiercely, and all the time making strange gestures with one hand while with the other he pointed out toward the town. As he proceeded, Jack's face changed, and I saw an expression there that I had never seen on it before.

At first I thought the man had been dispatched to put an end to us by shooting. Then Jack turned around. “It's all up now,” he said, and his voice, though a little husky, was firm and resolute. “This fellow here has come to tell us terrible news. He says this is Maidan, the stronghold of the tribes, as I thought. Katkai fell on the morning of the advance, and Chela Crag was taken yesterday. All the fugitives from those places have arrived here, and even now he says the fourth column is fording the branch of the Indus, and the natives dwelling along the way are fleeing before them. In an hour they will reach the town. They are bringing a battery of artillery, and will proceed to blow the whole place up.

“And now, brace yourselves, boys;” and Jack’s voice trembled. “Under this prison is a mine filled with powder. On the advance of the British the natives will make a brief defense, and then abandon the town, first binding our hands and feet and setting on fire the fuse to the mine. We shall, be left here, like rats in a trap, to be blown to atoms.”

Our situation was indeed a terrible one. As Jack told us of it, the native watched him with a fiendish expression of joy, and then made some insulting remark, I imagine, for Jack’s face wore a terrible expression as he wheeled around. We looked on in horror stricken amazement.

I saw a strange look suddenly appear on Jack’s features ♦ a look of satisfaction and cunning which I did not at once understand. Then, like a flash, he raised his arm and pointed, to the window, uttering a loud cry as he did so. The native, thrown off his guard, turned his head, and in that brief instant Jack leaped at him like a tiger, and clutching his throat bore him to the floor, crying out at the same time to us to lend assistance.

We threw ourselves eagerly upon the fellow, and in a brief space of time in spite of his furious struggles, had him gagged and lying in the corner, bound hand and foot with the same bandages that had previously confined our own arms. It was a clever bit of strategy and we each regarded our prisoner with a grim sort of satisfaction. Jack hastily searched him and found a loaded revolver in one of his pockets, evidently plundered from some British officer. This was handed to me, Jack took possession of the rifle and shells, and Melton appropriated the fellow’s sword.

“Now then,” said Jack, examining the rifle to test its condition, “we have a chance ♦ one feeble chance ♦ for life. Shall we take it or not? When they come to look for this dog here, we can force our way out; but the chances are ninety nine in a hundred we shall be cut to pieces before we have gone ten steps. But then, on the other hand, while we may defend this place against entry, we shall only be blown up in the end. We cannot escape from it. What shall we do? Decide quickly.”

“Take the chances,” I cried; “anything but being blown up!”

“I’m with you, Charlie,” said Melton. “We’ll give a good account of ourselves before we go down.”

Jack smiled grimly.

“You have chosen well,” he said, briefly.

In the meantime the commotion outside had subsided and all seemed quiet. Strange to say, no one came near our prison, though for more than an hour we sat before the door, ready to make a dash for life. It was a solemn time and a silent time, too; for each of us was busy with his own thoughts and what those were may be imagined, for I don't think we really expected to come out of it alive, though each of us was determined to sell his life [as dearly] as possible. Our meditations were suddenly rudely broken by a sound that made our hearts leap. In the distance we heard the rattle of musketry, mingled with heavier firing, and then, close at hand, came a fearful report, a great concussion, and we knew a shell had burst in the town.

Of a sudden an uproar arose outside. We heard hurrying steps and angry shouts. I quickly climbed on Melton's back and looked through the opening. Men, women and children were hastening from every direction toward the rear gate of the town, bearing in their mad flight household articles of all kinds, clothing, provisions and babies in arms. Even as I looked, loath to turn my eyes away, a shell plumped down in a corner of the square, tearing a great hole in the earth and scattering its jagged fragments through the crowd.

Jack in desperation pulled me down.

“What madness!” he cried, “when the door may be opened at any instant!” And then he added, despairingly: “They must have forgotten us, and even now the fuse to the mine may be fired;” and up and down the narrow room he strode, raging at his helplessness.

He was very evidently right. The noise had already subsided, and we heard only occasional shouts, while the shells were beginning to fall thickly and the rattle of musketry was becoming continuous and drawling closer. Several times came a hasty clatter of feet as a group rushed past. The British were driving the enemy back through the town.

Suddenly we observed that our prisoner was shaking his head fiercely, as though he wanted to attract our attention. Jack rushed over to him and jerked the gag from his mouth. As soon as he had done this the fellow began to talk loudly, rolling his eyes in fear.

Jack jumped up and wrung his hands. "He says the mine must be fired by this time!" he cried. "We're lost. Nothing can save us!"

At this instant we heard more shouts, a rushing of feet, and three or four shells burst in rapid succession. We rushed to the door, shouting loudly, and beat against the solid stone. All in vain! Our cries only reached the massive walls, and the echoes rang horribly in our ears.

The shells were falling thickly now, apparently bursting all around us, while the thunder of artillery was tremendous. All hope was gone. Under our feet the fuse was burning its way to the powder. Another moment, and . our bodies would be blown high in the air. The thought was maddening.

Again we shouted in a frenzy. We dashed ourselves against the walls. We poured shot after shot through the embrasure, until the room was dense with smoke.

My brain was reeling, I was blind, staggering; then, just as my senses were departing, there was a fearful explosion. The earth trembled, and out of the confusion and the smoke I heard Jack crying, loudly: "A shell has loosened the walls! We're saved! We're saved!"

To me it was like coming back to life again. I thought the mine had blown up, and vaguely wondered why I was not flying through the air.

With a strong effort I collected my senses and staggered forward. In one corner the light was shining through the shattered blocks of stone. They were displaced, and gaped apart in great cracks. We fairly hurled ourselves against them. Made mad with hope we tore our finger nails, we bruised our arms, shoving with almost superhuman strength, until, with a great crash and a cloud of dust, one massive block dropped from its place to the ground. Blinded by the sudden glare of the light, we crept through, almost tearing our clothes from our backs in our frantic haste.

Milton and I stood in the open air. Jack was missing. Could he have fainted, we wondered? But as we shouted out his name he appeared at the opening, black with powder smoke, bleeding from a dozen places and dragging behind him the almost unconscious body of our prisoner.

"I hated to leave him there to die," he gasped.

A shell burst in front of us. One struck close in the rear, and on all sides were ruined houses and shattered walls.


“Quick! quick! To the gate!” cried Jack, “Get ready to wave your helmet, Charlie!”

Taking advantage of the confusion, our prisoner, whose bonds Jack had cut, darted off and disappeared among the ruins.

“Let him go,” said Jack. “Come on now, quick, and look out for the shells.”

We dashed across the square, straight towards the great gates, which tottered wide on their hinges. Shells flew overhead with a great hissing. Stray bullets pattered around us, and the din of musketry was as incessant as ever. What could it mean? Were some of the enemy still between us and our brave soldiers? Closer and closer we came to the gates, and then, as the opening yawned before us, and we caught a brief glimpse of white helmets and glittering pieces of artillery, straight between the great carved pillars swept in wild confusion the defenders of the town, the remnant of that savage horde that had gone outside the walls to check the advance of the British.

A hundred muzzles were pouring a deadly fire, into their rear, men were falling thickly in the gateway, and, hopeless of making a final defense within the town, they would have rushed out through the rear gates, and fled to the mountains. But at this fateful moment they sighted us.

Twenty yards from the gateway, stood a circular building like a tower, rising some feet beyond the tops of the walls, and provided with narrow loopholes  evidently a watch tower for the town sentinels. The upper stories of this building had been badly shattered by the falling shells, and the doorway was almost choked up by a mass of stones and mortar. It was the only refuge, and without hesitation we plunged into the dark entrance as half a dozen spears fell around us, and a stray bullet raised a cloud of mortar dust.

The lower floor was entered only by the doorway. Not a window pierced the wall. A trap door led to the upper apartment; but the ladder lay in fragments upon the floor, shattered by falling stones from above. To defend the entrance was now our only and last hope, and quick as a flash we wheeled round before the doorway.

With a wild cry, a huge savage darkened the entrance, brandishing a spear. Before he could shout a second time Jack's Martini-Henry spoke, and he plunged all in a heap on the rubbish pile, convulsively biting at the stones. The second one fell before my revolver, sprawling half way across the doorway, and then Jack fired half a dozen times in rapid succession, while, as we leaped aside, a volley of answering shots rebounded from the rear wall.

The smoke rose slowly, and as it lifted in curling wreaths above the entrance, a furious rush was made. The foremost men fell at Jack's fire, but the pressure from behind drove the rest on over the prostrate bodies. "Crack! Crack!" went Jack's rifle, and at every shot down went a man. I shot one fellow three feet within the doorway, and another fell under Melton's sword. The entrance was piled high with bodies, but as fast as they fell fresh men took their places, and rushed on more furiously than ever.

Step by step we were driven back. In desperation Jack clubbed his rifle and swept clear the space in front of him. Melton was keeping at bay half a dozen fellows, and as I looked, a spear entered his side, and with a loud cry he fell backward. A moment more and all would be over. "Fight to the last," I heard Jack cry, as he wiped the blood from his face and then with a loud shout they came on again.

But even as Jack held his rifle high over his head, and just as I, being defenseless, was closing my eyes, a fusillade of musketry rent the air. We heard a storm of cheers, and a fearful uproar arose outside. Our foes hesitated, wavered, and then as Jack reversed his rifle and shot the foremost man, they turned in panic and hurled themselves through the entrance. The smoke lifted, and in the bright sunlight we saw advancing through the gateway, with heavy tread, an infantry column, and as they swept into the square with lowered bayonets, the Pathans fled in hopeless rout and confusion.

We were saved. The shock of the good news actually made us weak and faint. We tenderly took Melton in our arms, and as we staggered out into the open air, bloody, powder stained, and with garments hanging in tatters, cheer after cheer went up and we were surrounded by the eager, sympathizing crowd, who had long since given us up for lost.

Little remains to be told. The mine had actually been fired and even while we stood there, rejoicing over our escape, our recent prison house was blown high in

the air, luckily without injuring any one. The town was then set on fire in a dozen places, and the enemy driven far back into the fastnesses of the mountains. The fall of Maidan was the crowning point of the campaign, and the expedition soon marched out of the Black Mountain region.

Poor Melton was badly wounded, but after a severe struggle came out all right, and eventually went back to his journalistic duties at Allahabad. Jack and I got a six months' furlough and went home.

We shall rejoin our regiment again very shortly, but I for one have no desire to enter on any more Black Mountain expeditions, at least until my nervous system has recuperated, and even the warlike and intrepid Jack Chetwynd does not yearn to renew his acquaintance with the Pathans of the Punjaub.