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James Abbott

Excerpt

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Chapter XXVIII.

Uneasiness of the Kuzzauk brothers—Preparations for departure—Departure for Mooraud Ali's tent—Opposition of Kuzzauk chiefs—Yar Muhummud, the carrion crow—Chalk cliffs—Prospects—Dismissal and curse of Yar Muhummud—Salt Marsh—Perplexity—Bivouac—Character of Mooraud Ali—Meeting with him—His physiognomy—His hospitality and courtesy—Who is the first in honour—Virtues of patience—False and true philosophy—Feringee mysteries—Odds and ends—Cots and kettles.

THE arrival of Saleh Muhummud was evidently a cause of uneasiness or anxiety to Ahris Mhatoor. He had, perhaps, made other arrangements for my disposal, or he might fear that his own importance, and his claim upon me as my protector, might be impaired by the circumstance. I sometimes fancied, he had sold me to my enemies, and was now confounded by the prospect of my deliverance. Be this as it may, he stalked about with a fallen countenance. Cherkush Bae was evidently uneasy, but shewed it in a different way. His constant attention to me was unaltered, excepting, perhaps, that he appeared to render it now, more of constraint, or as if he thought it less acceptable than before. I endeavoured to alleviate this feeling, as far as possible, by bestowing much of my attention upon him, and speaking to Saleh Muhummud of the important service, this kind Kuzzauk had rendered me. I also called the brothers to me, and gave Ahris the letter, which I had written on a former occasion, and which made him master

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of all the property he could recover from the Kuzzauks, and deprecated the anger against him of Mooraud Ali and others. I assured him, in front of an assembly of his friends, that I held to the agreement I had made with him and his brother, when my fortunes were at the lowest ebb. That, on his conveying me and my people in safety to Khiva, the aforesaid property became his and his brother's; or, if he preferred it, I would purchase it with gold. That I still desired him and his brother as my escort, whatever arrangements Mooraud Ali might make. That, in short, as the English acknowledge but one God, so have they but one word, and abhor a breach of promise.

That night, I lay down to rest under different feelings. Saleh Muhummud insisted upon sleeping near me, his sabre carefully laid at his side. Ahris' little daughter took up her position on my other side: I fancied, from some kindly feeling, in the prospect of so soon parting from me for ever. She had only once before done so; and then at the risk of my life, I had stretched my head over her's and stolen a kiss as she slept. The looks of Ahris Mhatoor were unusually gloomy, and his countenance, under such circumstances, was portentous. He might, in a fit of desperation have got rid of me, and have fled with the jewels in his possession, to the Russian frontier. Some such idea made me reluctant to the presence of Saleh Muhummud, which was no protection, but would have involved him in my fate. But he would not be denied, and to have told him my doubts, would only have strengthened his determination.

The ensuing morning, the camels and horses were brought, and Ahris Mhatoor assembled all his relatives and friends to hear read, and see delivered to him in my presence, the Turkish letter which gave him right to all property of mine he could recover from the Kuzzauks, upon my safe arrival with him or his brother at Khiva. In this assembly, again appeared a messenger from Hussun Mhatoor, entreating me to come to

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DEPARTURE.

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the tent, to which he was hastening ; and making a thousand protestations and promises. I replied, that if Hussun Mhatoor had any thing to say to me, he must wait upon me ; and that I marvelled, he could not have contrived to do so already, as two of his messengers had reached me. I was much annoyed, to find Ahris urging me to comply with this invitation. My suspicions of him were, in consequence, aroused.

After much delay, owing to a quarrel between Cherkush Bae and some neighbours, the cattle were pronounced to be in readiness, and I took leave of the two families, whose tents I had so long shared. The brawny daughter of Cherkush Bae came and blubbered over me. I kissed the children, and shook hands with the women, and mounting Saleh Muhummud's horse, at his especial desire, started with my four servants, mounted in various ways. The two brothers, and two of their servants, attended. Ahris was in the fidgets, to persuade me to proceed to Hussun Mhatoor's rendezvous. I felt convinced that Hussun must have gained him to his own views. Cherkush said nothing, but walked on, leading one of the camels. He was out of spirits, and the minds of all were more or less saddened; for we were plunging anew into difficulty and danger, without the means of resisting like men, or of making any preparation for overcoming difficulty. All of us, excepting Saleh Muhummud, were unarmed, and I rode with difficulty, from the pain occasioned by the motion of the horse, which brought the ends of the severed bone in constant friction together. Half a dozen children, mounted upon jackasses, had ridden down my whole cavalcade.

We had not proceeded, many minutes, up the valley, when we met eight Kuzzauk horsemen, four of them chiefs, and *all* my bitter enemies. They saluted me, and said they were come to beg me to meet Hussun Mhatoor at a neighbouring camp, where measures were in progress for the recovery of my pro-

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perty. I replied, that I had made over to Cherkush and Ahris, all recoverable property, and should proceed straight, to the tent of the Yuze Baushee, Mooraud Ali. Finding persuasion vain, they tried intimidation, assuring my people, with menacing gestures, that they would not suffer me to proceed, would seize me, and sell them, etc. etc. etc. One of these chiefs was the cool fellow, who had before threatened to exchange me for Kuzzauk prisoners, at Dahsh Gullah. They placed themselves in our path, and by all possible means endeavoured to obstruct our progress. I every instant expected, they would have proceeded to violence, and had some apprehension that Saleh Mu-hummud, being armed, might resent their insolence. I warned him strictly against this. The scene was very exciting. These men had unlimited power over us, backed as they were by the villain Hussun. How long, their reluctance to any open violence to their king's guest, might last, it was impossible to say; but a feather's weight would have turned the scale: for my return to Khiva must have seemed to them, their certain destruction. They entangled Ahris in long discussions. Several times, he seemed about to yield: but Cherkush pressed resolutely on, and beckoned me to do the same. As we continued, the whole valley turned out to see, to follow, and to throng us. Numbers of them placed themselves in our path, and strove by expostulation and threats, almost by force, to persuade me to follow the path, which branching to the right, led to Hussun's tent. They even instructed the guide to lead us there, and he had actually taken advantage of the divergence of the paths, to act according to instruction, when I discovered the treachery, and altered our course accordingly.

A clump of about thirty horsemen followed, or accompanied us. A man, in a red bonnet, sat with a companion upon a camel, following me, but at some distance. Whenever I turned, he hid his face, which excited my suspicion. I therefore pul-

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led up, and suffered him to pass me. In spite of his efforts to conceal his features, I recognised Yar Muhummud, the man who had wounded me, and had subsequently been most active toward my destruction. The presence of this creature, miserable as he was, boded me no good; but, as others were gradually falling off, and taking the road to Hussun Mhatoor's tent, I hoped he would speedily follow their example. In this I was disappointed. At the foot of the cliffs we were approaching, nearly all the horsemen diverged from our path: but Yar Muhummud continued to haunt me with his hateful presence, like the crow which hovers over the hunted stag, mocking the fleetness, which shall avail him nothing, and abiding coolly the inevitable hour. He kept aloof from me, and dared not meet my glance. It were difficult, perhaps, to describe how hateful and boding was the presence of this man. But give the stag above alluded to, human reason and intelligence, and some faint notion may be drawn. Heaven had sent me, however, an antidote, in the bright, never-doubting, ever-hoping spirit of Saleh Muhummud, which was like a wave of sparkling water dashed upon the care-soiled mirror of my mind.

I constantly summoned him to my side. His very voice was full of hope. He seemed to have been born, under some happier aspect of the heavens; to live in some current, inaccessible to others, where trouble and care were unknown terms. He pointed out to me the course he had taken over the desolate steppe, where the only landmark is an occasional tomb; where man is less than a drop in the ocean: because for that drop there is society, and kindred; whilst man is an outcast, disowned of all he sees.

After proceeding about twelve miles, we arrived at the brink of some lofty chalk cliffs, formerly the binding of some strait of the Caspian. Cherkush Bae was very anxious to halt in this spot; but I would not listen to the advice, as it seemed

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to me certain, that we should be pursued during the night by some of Hussun Mhatoor's horse, and that our sole chance of safety lay in reaching, ere morrow, Mooraud Ali's tent. We therefore descended the cliffs, by a path narrow and broken, steep and difficult; where a stumble or a careless step of horse or camel would have launched the rider into eternity. It was a dreary ride, which I shall not soon forget. How different from our last flight, when, nevertheless, death pressed us hard. Then, there was a thrill of triumph in my mind, a consciousness of power and resources, which might be overmastered, but not without the struggle that is dear to the soldier, or the hope of resting in a soldier's grave. Now, I was a cripple, my people were cowed, weak from low diet, mounted upon broken-down nags, unarmed, three in slavery, one an idiot, the others capable of looking on our prospects with only a jaundiced eye.

As to those prospects, only the gay spirit of Saleh Muhumud could have regarded them, with much of hope. My return to Khiva was so certain a sentence of death to Hussun Mhatoor and his whole family, (for the policy of Khaurism lops no branch, but uproots the entire tree) that it seemed incredible, that he should suffer me to reach that capital. The intervening waste of 450 miles, was entirely under his control; and I had already sufficient proof of his means and disposition to cut off my retreat, without himself appearing in the transaction. Since the attack made upon me, he had, (as coadjutors, equally interested as himself in my destruction,) the persons and families of some forty or fifty Kuzzauks. That he was acting in concert with these, the events of that morning had proved. The extreme solicitude of the Kuzzauks that I should again trust my life to him who had betrayed me, could proceed only from the hopes they entertained, that Hussun Mhatoor would, in some way, screen them from the anger of the Khaun.

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The descent of the cliffs, though sufficiently dangerous upon exhausted horses, was accomplished with difficulty, but without accident. I had begun to associate melancholy thoughts, with the sight of cliffs. It was from the cliffs of Mung'h Kishlaur that I first gazed upon the sea, without a sail, and then back upon a desert without provisions, infested by dealers in human flesh. It was at the foot of cliffs of the Caspian, that I met with the first open opposition to my journey; and I had just descended those cliffs, when I was attacked, wounded, and made captive. Since then, the cliffs had seemed the wall of our prison. We never lost sight of them. I even observed as I gazed around me, disjointed masses of rock, resembling the human form, but different in shape and colour from the former. These resembled Hindoo fuqueers; I looked on them only to reflect, how vain are all such portents of evil or of good. How impossible, in fact, it is to pronounce upon any event, excepting by the fruit it produces. Yet, there is a disposition to the marvellous in every clouded mind, and the impulse was often strong, to yield to such delusions.

The continued presence of my cowardly and bitter enemy, Yar Muhummud, was a portent less questionable. At the foot of the cliffs, I drew up my horse, and called Cherkush Bae to my side.

“Cherkush Bae,” I said, “you have more than once saved my life. Are you now in league with my enemies. Do you not know, that Yar Muhummud has ever sought my destruction? Will you throw away the gratitude you have purchased?”

“Yar Muhummud,” he replied “*was* your enemy: but now he seeks to make you forget the wrongs he has done you, by the service he shall render. Some of these camels are *his*.”

“But what is he doing here; does he think I like the sight of him; or is he watching his opportunity to betray me, by bringing some of his family upon us, in the night? You have

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laid me under many obligations, Cherkush. Carry us through the present difficulty, and you will find my promises less than the reward which awaits you."

"Upon the life of my only son, by all that is sacred, I am, and will be true to you. If you like, I will dismiss Yar Muhummud."

"Do so! His presence, here, is not needed."

He accordingly ordered Yar Muhummud to begone, and that Worthy was slowly and reluctantly obeying, when, Ali Muhummud, who, in common with all my suite, had an especial hatred to him for his share in my misfortunes, took this opportunity of being uppermost, to vent upon him some of his pent-up wrath. The torrent poured from his lips, with a violence quite astonishing, aided and eked out by the execrations of Summud Khaun and Nizaum, in pure Persian. It seemed as if all the wrongs Ali had endured, as a slave to cannibals for sixteen long years, were concentrated, and expressed in the bitterness of his vituperation. I tried repeatedly to stem the torrent, but in vain. For, I think there is nothing so unmanly as abuse; so humiliating, as the impotent wrath, which has not sufficient self-dignity for concealment. Yar Muhummud was borne down and alarmed by it. But at length I contrived to make myself heard, and rebuked Ali for taking such old woman's revenge. "All you say may be very true, and Yar Muhummud may deserve it all. But when down, he is too despicable to be worth any man's resentment, and if he gets to-morrow the upper hand, as is not improbable, you will pay the piper."

We were now up to our horses' and camels' knees in a salt marsh, which stretches for miles, at the foot of these cliffs, and is about half a mile in breadth. It is a stratum of mud, iced to the thickness of an inch with salt, in a continuous crust. The salt yielded, like brittle ice, to the feet of the cattle, and the mud beneath rendered the passage toilsome and tedious. On

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emerging from this, we ascended by a slope, the steppe covered with wormwood, and shewing here and there a wild flower, the sight of which was a refreshment. Cherkush Bae's assurances gave me something more of confidence : but he urged earnestly, that I should not deviate from the direct route to Khiva, for the sake of visiting Mooraud Ali, whose tent was said to be far away to the right, near a distant cliff. It was evident, that he feared this chief; whether on account of the diminution in his presence, of his own and his brother's importance, I knew not; I was however of opinion, that our only chance lay in securing Mooraud Ali's good offices; for Hussun Mhatoor was to us, what the falcon is to the wounded deer. He could, on the instant, outstrip and destroy us. I therefore persisted.

A new difficulty arose; on meeting another Kuzzauk, we were directed for Mooraud Ali's tent, in the very opposite direction from that first indicated, viz. in the direction of Khiva; and Cherkush Bae advocated the new course, saying, that even should we fail of our object, we should be making head way to the capital, and that he and his brother would protect us, without other aid. This, I knew to be impossible; and as Yar Muhummud, who was now a mile ahead of my cavalcade, had spoken to the second messenger, I gave his word no credence, but followed the first indication. Night fell upon us in this difficulty, and at ten o'clock we found ourselves at a Kuzzauk tent, still many miles from Mooraud Ali. I was therefore obliged to permit a halt, much against my inclination. But the fact was, that in the darkness of the night, with only a general direction, as to the spot where Mooraud Ali had lately been encamped; any farther wandering would surely exhaust the cattle, which had already been ten hours on the road; but would not, as certainly, bring us nearer to our object.

We therefore purchased a sheep of the Kuzzauks: for Ali had, on the idea of being a servant of the Ghosh Beegie of

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Khiva, been allowed to retain the money found upon him ; and Nizaum once more, to his great delight, found himself frying meat for his master ; a process unknown in Kuzzauk land. We slept upon the steppe that night, without alarm, although the previous symptoms had made me reckon upon treachery. And before day-light next morning, I awakened the people, and started once more in search of the Yuze Baushie. Passing a Toorcumun on the road, I enquired the character of Mooraud Ali. He replied,

“He is a sordid and miserly wretch. In his house are many camel loads of bread (as if in England one should say ‘of turtle,’) yet his very daughter, and she, an only daughter, lives in the house of starvation.”

This was the first hint I received, of the bitter enmity subsisting between Mooraud Ali and the Toorcumuns of these parts. It gave me little comfort : for although evidently the speech of an enemy, it was all I knew of the Oozbeg, upon whom I was about to cast myself for protection. After advancing some miles farther, a large cavalcade of horsemen appeared in the distance, advancing toward me. These, I learned, were Mooraud Ali and his retinue. On a nearer approach, I perceived the chief himself, and observed, that nearly all his attendants, amounting to about 150 horsemen, were Kuzzauks.

We met and saluted by shaking hands, without dismounting. He paid a few compliments ; said, that some time ago he had heard, my approach, and had killed a horse and a young camel for my entertainment ; but that, finding I was escorted by his enemy, Hussun Mhatoor, he had abandoned his intention of riding out, to welcome me. That he was only just now apprized, of the evil which had befallen me. That now, I was his guest, and with God’s blessing, my troubles should end.

Accustomed for some time past, to read my fortunes and my fate in the countenances of men, whose language was strange