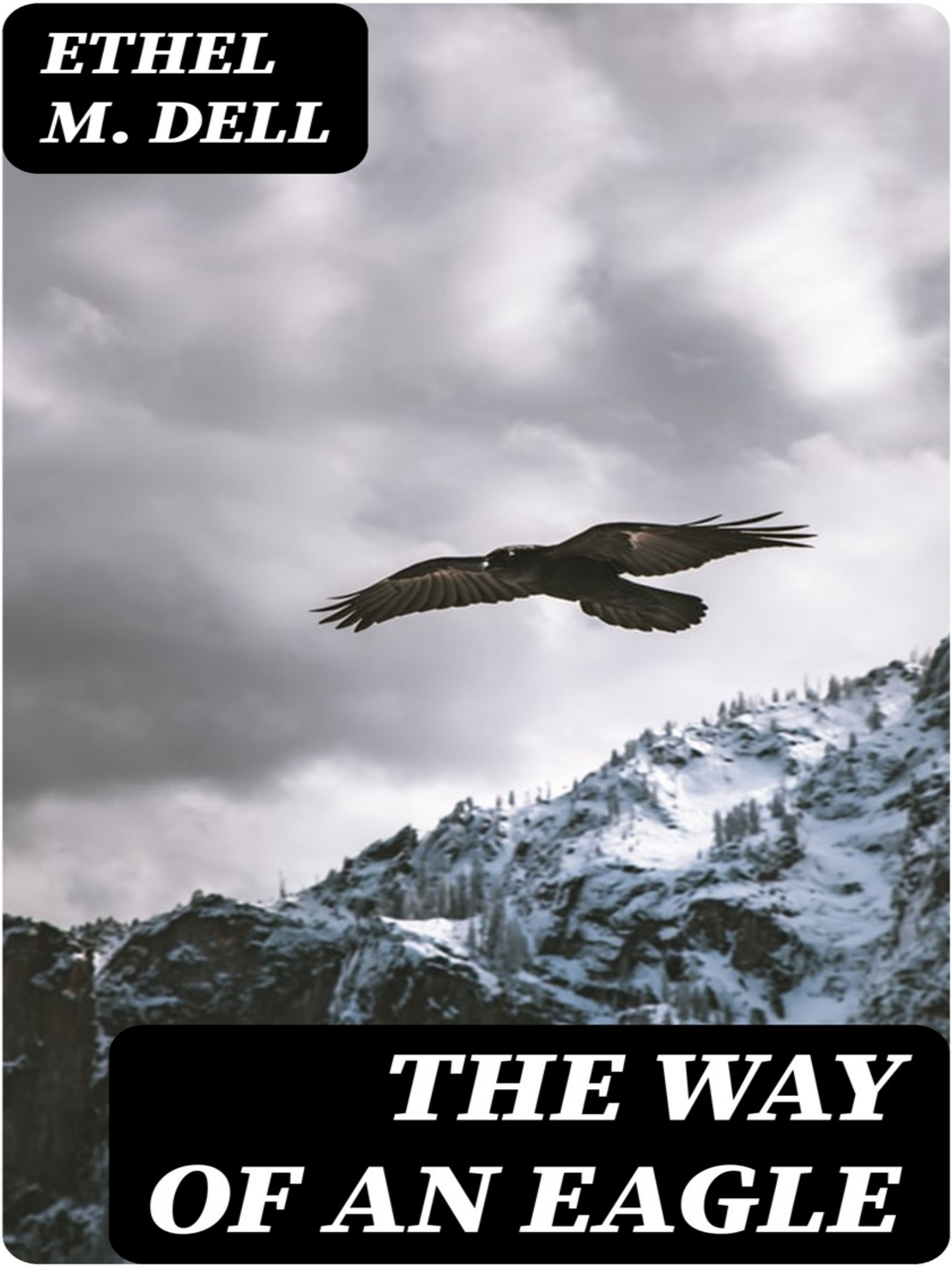
ETHEL M. DELL



THE WAY OF AN EAGLE

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The Way of an Eagle

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"There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not:

The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid."

Proverbs xxx, 18-19.

THE WAY OF AN EAGLE

PART I

CHAPTER I

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THE TRUST

The long clatter of an irregular volley of musketry rattled warningly from the naked mountain ridges; over a great grey shoulder of rock the sun sank in a splendid opal glow; from very near at hand came the clatter of tin cups and the sound of a subdued British laugh. And in the room of the Brigadier-General a man lifted his head from his hands and stared upwards with unseeing, fixed eyes.

There was an impotent, crushed look about him as of one nearing the end of his strength. The lips under the heavy grey moustache moved a little as though they formed soundless words. He drew his breath once or twice sharply through his teeth. Finally, with a curious groping movement he reached out and struck a small hand-gong on the table in front of him.

The door slid open instantly and an Indian soldier stood in the opening. The Brigadier stared full at him for several seconds as if he saw nothing, his lips still moving secretly, silently. Then suddenly, with a stiff gesture, he spoke.

"Ask the major sahib and the two captain sahibs to come to me here."

The Indian saluted and vanished like a swift-moving shadow.

The Brigadier sank back into his chair, his head drooped forward, his hands clenched. There was tragedy, hopeless and absolute, in every line of him.

There came the careless clatter of spurred heels and loosely-slung swords in the passage outside of the half-closed door, the sound of a stumble, a short ejaculation, and again a smothered laugh.

"Confound you Grange! Why can't you keep your feet to yourself, you ungainly Triton, and give us poor minnows a chance?"

The Brigadier sat upright with a jerk. It was growing rapidly dark.

"Come in, all of you," he said. "I have something to say. As well to shut the door, Ratcliffe, though it is not a council of war."

"There being nothing left to discuss, sir," returned the voice that had laughed. "It is just a simple case of sitting tight now till Bassett comes round the corner."

The Brigadier glanced up at the speaker and caught the last glow of the fading sunset reflected on his face. It was a clean-shaven face that should have possessed a fair skin, but by reason of unfavourable circumstances it was burnt to a deep yellow-brown. The features were pinched and wrinkled—they might have belonged to a very old man; but the eyes that smiled down into the Brigadier's were shrewd, bright, monkey-like. They expressed a cheeriness almost grotesque. The two men whom he had followed into the

room stood silent among the shadows. The gloom was such as could be felt.

Suddenly, in short, painful tones the Brigadier began to speak.

"Sit down," he said. "I have sent for you to ask one among you to undertake for me a certain service which must be accomplished, but which I—" he paused and again audibly caught his breath between his teeth—"which I—am unable to execute for myself."

An instant's silence followed the halting speech. Then the young officer who stood against the door stepped briskly forward.

"What's the job, sir? I'll wager my evening skilly I carry it through."

One of the men in the shadows moved, and spoke in a repressive tone.

"Shut up, Nick! This is no mess-room joke."

Nick made a sharp, half-contemptuous gesture. "A joke only ceases to be a joke when there is no one left to laugh, sir," he said. "We haven't come to that at present."

He stood in front of the Brigadier for a moment—an insignificant figure but for the perpetual suggestion of simmering activity that pervaded him; then stepped behind the commanding officer's chair, and there took up his stand without further words.

The Brigadier paid no attention to him. His mind was fixed upon one subject only. Moreover, no one ever took Nick Ratcliffe seriously. It seemed a moral impossibility.

"It is quite plain to me," he said heavily at length, "that the time has come to face the situation. I do not speak for

the discouragement of you brave fellows. I know that I can rely upon each one of you to do your duty to the utmost. But we are bound to look at things as they are, and so prepare for the inevitable. I for one am firmly convinced that General Bassett cannot possibly reach us in time."

He paused, but no one spoke. The man behind him was leaning forward, listening intently.

He went on with an effort. "We are a mere handful. We have dwindled to four white men among a host of dark. Relief is not even within a remote distance of us, and we are already bordering upon starvation. We may hold out for three days more. And then"—his breath came suddenly short, but he forced himself to continue—"I have to think of my child. She will be in your hands. I know you will all defend her to the last ounce of your strength; but which of you"—a terrible gasping checked his utterance for many labouring seconds; he put his hand over his eyes—"which of you," he whispered at last, his words barely audible, "will have the strength to—shoot her before your own last moment comes?"

The question quivered through the quiet room as if wrung from the twitching lips by sheer torture. It went out in silence—a dreadful, lasting silence in which the souls of men, stripped naked of human convention, stood confronting the first primaeval instinct of human chivalry.

It continued through many terrible seconds—that silence, and through it no one moved, no one seemed to breathe. It was as if a spell had been cast upon the handful of Englishmen gathered there in the deepening darkness.

The Brigadier sat bowed and motionless at the table, his head sunk in his hands.

Suddenly there was a quiet movement behind him, and the spell was broken. Ratcliffe stepped deliberately forward and spoke.

"General," he said quietly, "if you will put your daughter in my care, I swear to you, so help me God, that no harm of any sort shall touch her."

There was no hint of emotion in his voice, albeit the words were strong; but it had a curious effect upon those who heard it. The Brigadier raised his head sharply, and peered at him; and the other two officers started as men suddenly stumbling at an unexpected obstacle in a familiar road.

One of them, Major Marshall, spoke, briefly and irritably, with a touch of contempt. His nerves were on edge in that atmosphere of despair.

"You, Nick!" he said. "You are about the least reliable man in the garrison. You can't be trusted to take even reasonable care of yourself. Heaven only knows how it is you weren't killed long ago. It was thanks to no discretion on your part. You don't know the meaning of the word."

Nick did not answer, did not so much as seem to hear. He was standing before the Brigadier. His eyes gleamed in his alert face—two weird pin-points of light.

"She will be safe with me," he said, in a tone that held not the smallest shade of uncertainty.

But the Brigadier did not speak. He still searched young Ratcliffe's face as a man who views through field-glasses a region distant and unexplored.

After a moment the officer who had remained silent throughout came forward a step and spoke. He was a magnificent man with the physique of a Hercules. He had remained on his feet, impassive but observant, from the moment of his entrance. His voice had that soft quality peculiar to some big men.

"I am ready to sell my life for Miss Roscoe's safety, sir," he said.

Nick Ratcliffe jerked his shoulders expressively, but said nothing. He was waiting for the General to speak. As the latter rose slowly, with evident effort, from his chair, he thrust out a hand, as if almost instinctively offering help to one in sore need.

General Roscoe grasped it and spoke at last. He had regained his self-command. "Let me understand you, Ratcliffe," he said. "You suggest that I should place my daughter in your charge. But I must know first how far you are prepared to go to ensure her safety."

He was answered instantly, with an unflinching promptitude he had scarcely expected.

"I am prepared to go to the uttermost limit, sir," said Nicholas Ratcliffe, his fingers closing like springs upon the hand that gripped his, "if there is a limit. That is to say, I am ready to go through hell for her. I am a straight shot, a cool shot, a dead shot. Will you trust me?"

His voice throbbed with sudden feeling. General Roscoe was watching him closely. "Can I trust you, Nick?" he said.

There was an instant's silence, and the two men in the background were aware that something passed between

them—a look or a rapid sign—which they did not witness. Then reckless and debonair came Nick's voice.

"I don't know, sir. But if I am untrustworthy, may I die to-night!"

General Roscoe laid his free hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"Is it so, Nick?" he said, and uttered a heavy sigh. "Well—so be it then. I trust you."

"That settles it, sir," said Nick cheerily. "The job is mine."

He turned round with a certain arrogance of bearing, and walked to the door. But there he stopped, looking back through the darkness at the dim figures he had left.

"Perhaps you will tell Miss Roscoe that you have appointed me deputy-governor," he said. "And tell her not to be frightened, sir. Say I'm not such a bogey as I look, and that she will be perfectly safe with me." His tone was half-serious, half-jocular. He wrenched open the door not waiting for a reply.

"I must go back to the guns," he said, and the next moment was gone, striding carelessly down the passage, and whistling a music-hall ballad as he went.

CHAPTER II

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A SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER

In the centre of the little frontier fort there was a room which one and all of its defenders regarded as sacred. It was an insignificant chamber, narrow as a prison cell and almost as bare; but it was the safest place in the fort. In it General Roscoe's daughter—the only white woman in the garrison—had dwelt safely since the beginning of that dreadful siege.

Strictly forbidden by her father to stir from her refuge without his express permission, she had dragged out the long days in close captivity, living in the midst of nerve-shattering tumult but taking no part therein. She was little more than a child, and accustomed to render implicit obedience to the father she idolised, or she had scarcely been persuaded to submit to this rigorous seclusion. It would perhaps have been better for her physically and even mentally to have gone out and seen the horrors which were being daily enacted all around her. She had at first pleaded for at least a limited freedom, urging that she might take her part in caring for the wounded. But her father had refused this request with such decision that she had never repeated it. And so she had seen nothing while hearing much, lying through many sleepless nights with nerves

strung to a pitch of torture far more terrible than any bodily exhaustion, and vivid imagination ever at work upon pictures more ghastly than even the ghastly reality which she was not allowed to see.

The strain was such as no human frame could have endured for long. Her strength was beginning to break down under it. The long sleepless nights were more than she could bear. And there came a time when Muriel Roscoe, driven to extremity, sought relief in a remedy from which in her normal senses she would have turned in disgust.

It helped her, but it left its mark upon her—a mark which her father must have noted, had he not been almost wholly occupied with the burden that weighed him down. Morning and evening he visited her, yet failed to read that in her haunted eyes which could not have escaped a clearer vision.

Entering her room two hours after his interview with his officers regarding her, he looked at her searchingly indeed, but without understanding. She lay among cushions on a *charpoy* of bamboo in the light of a shaded lamp. Young and slight and angular, with a pale little face of utter weariness, with great dark eyes that gazed heavily out of the black shadows that ringed them round, such was Muriel Roscoe. Her black hair was simply plaited and gathered up at the neck. It lay in cloudy masses about her temples—wonderful hair, quite lustreless, so abundant that it seemed almost too much for the little head that bore it. She did not rise at her father's entrance. She scarcely raised her eyes.

"So glad you've come, Daddy," she said, in a soft, low voice. "I've been wanting you. It's nearly bedtime, isn't it?"

He went to her, treading lightly. His thoughts had been all of her for the past few hours and in consequence he looked at her more critically than usual. For the first time he was struck by her pallor, her look of deathly weariness. On the table near her lay a plate of boiled rice piled high in a snowy pyramid. He saw that it had not been touched.

"Why, child," he said, a sudden new anxiety at his heart "you have had nothing to eat. You're not ill?"

She roused herself a little, and a very faint colour crept into her white cheeks. "No, dear, only tired—too tired to be hungry," she told him. "That rice is for you."

He sat down beside her with a sound that was almost a groan. "You must eat something, child," he said. "Being penned up here takes away your appetite. But all the same you must eat."

She sat up slowly, and pushed back the heavy hair from her forehead with a sigh.

"Very well, Daddy," she said submissively. "But you must have some too, dear. I couldn't possible eat it all."

Something in his attitude or expression seemed to strike her at this point, and she made a determined effort to shake off her lethargy. A spoon and fork lay by the plate. She handed him the former and kept the latter for herself.

"We'll have a picnic, Daddy." she said, with a wistful little smile. "I told *ayah* always to bring two plates, but she has forgotten. We don't mind, though, do we?"

It was childishly spoken, but the pathos of it went straight to the man's heart. He tasted the rice under her watching eyes and pronounced it very good; then waited for

her to follow his example which she did with a slight shudder.

"Delicious, Daddy, isn't it?" she said. And even he did not guess what courage underlay the words.

They kept up the farce till the pyramid was somewhat reduced; then by mutual consent they suffered their ardour to flag. There was a faint colour in the girl's thin face as she leaned back again. Her eyes were brighter, the lids drooped less.

"I had a dream last night, Daddy," she said, "such a curious dream, and so vivid. I thought I was out on the mountains with some one. I don't know who it was, but it was some one very nice. It seemed to be very near the sunrise, for it was quite bright up above, though it was almost dark where we stood. And, do you know—don't laugh, Daddy, I know it was only a silly dream—when I looked up, I saw that everywhere the mountains were full of horses and chariots of fire. I felt so safe, Daddy, and so happy. I could have cried when I woke up."

She paused. It was rather difficult for her to make conversation for the silent man who sat beside her so gloomy and preoccupied. Save that she loved her father as she loved no one else on earth, she might have felt awed in his presence.

As it was, receiving no response, she turned to look, and the next instant was on her knees beside him, her thin young arms clinging to his neck.

"Daddy, darling, darling!" she whispered, and hid her face against him in sudden, nameless terror.

He clasped her to him, holding her close, that she might not again see his face and the look it wore. She began to tremble, and he tried to soothe her with his hand, but for many seconds he could find no words.

"What is it, Daddy?" she whispered at last, unable to endure the silence longer. "Won't you tell me? I can be very brave. You said so yourself."

"Yes," he said. "You will be a brave girl, I know." His voice quivered and he paused to steady it. "Muriel," he said then, "I don't know if you have ever thought of the end of all this. There will be an end, you know. I have had to face it to-night."

She looked up at him quickly, but he was ready for her. He had banished from his face the awful despair that he carried in his soul.

"When Sir Reginald Bassett comes—" she began uncertainly.

He put his hand on her shoulder. "You will try not to be afraid," he said. "I am going to treat you, as I have treated my officers, with absolute candour. We shall not hold out more than three days more. Sir Reginald Bassett will not be here in time."

He stopped. Muriel uttered not a word. Her face was still upturned, and her eyes had suddenly grown intensely bright, but he read no shrinking in them.

With an effort he forced himself to go on. "I may not be able to protect you when the end comes. I may not even be with you. But—there is one man upon whom you can safely rely whatever happens, who will give himself up to securing your safety alone. He has sworn to me that you shall not be

taken, and I know that he will keep his word. You will be safe with him, Muriel. You may trust him as long as you live. He will not fail you. Perhaps you can guess his name?"

He asked the question with a touch of curiosity in the midst of his tragedy. That upturned, listening face had in it so little of a woman's understanding, so much of the deep wonder of a child.

Her answer was prompt and confident, and albeit her very lips were white, there was a faint hint of satisfaction in her voice as she made it.

"Captain Grange, of course, Daddy."

He started and looked at her narrowly. "No, no!" he said. "Not Grange!
What should make you think of him?"

He saw a look of swift disappointment, almost of consternation, darken her eyes. For the first time her lips quivered uncertainly.

"Who then, Daddy? Not—not Mr. Ratcliffe?"

He bent his head. "Yes, Nick Ratcliffe. I have placed you in his charge. He will take care of you."

"Young Nick Ratcliffe!" she said slowly. "Why, Daddy, he can't even take care of himself yet. Every one says so. Besides,"—a curiously womanly touch crept into her speech—"I don't like him. Only the other day I heard him laugh at something that was terrible—something it makes me sick to think of. Indeed, Daddy, I would far rather have Captain Grange to take care of me. Don't you think he would if you asked him? He is so much bigger and stronger, and—and kinder."

"Ah! I know," her father said. "He seems so to you. But it is nerve that your protector will need, child; and Ratcliffe possesses more nerve than all the rest of the garrison put together. No, it must be Ratcliffe, Muriel. And remember to give him all your trust, all your confidence. For whatever he does will be with my authority—with my—full—approval."

His voice failed suddenly and he rose, turning sharply away from the light. She clung to his arm silently, in a passion of tenderness, though she was far from understanding the suffering those last words revealed. She had never seen him thus moved before.

After a few seconds he turned back to her, and bending kissed her piteous face. She clung closely to him with an agonised longing to keep him with her; but he put her gently from him at last.

"Lie down again, dear," he said, "and get what rest you can. Try not to be frightened at the noise. There is sure to be an assault, but the fort will hold to-night."

He stood a moment, looking down at her. Then again he stooped and kissed her. "Good-bye, my darling," he said huskily, "till we meet again!"

And so hurriedly, as if not trusting himself to remain longer, he left her.

CHAPTER III

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THE VICTIM OF TREACHERY

There came again the running rattle of rifle-firing from the valley below the fort, and Muriel Roscoe, lying on her couch, pressed both hands to her eyes and shivered. It seemed impossible that the end could be so near. She felt as if she had existed for years in this living nightmare of many horrors, had lain down and had slept with that dreadful sound in her ears from the very beginning of things. The life she had led before these ghastly happenings had become so vague a memory that it almost seemed to belong to a previous existence, to an earlier and a happier era. As in a dream she now recalled the vision of her English school-life. It lay not a year behind her, but she felt herself to have changed so fundamentally since those sunny, peaceful days that she seemed to be a different person altogether. The Muriel Roscoe of those days had been a merry, light-hearted personality. She had revelled in games and all outdoor amusements. Moreover, she had been quick to learn, and her lessons had never caused her any trouble. A daring sprite she had been, with a most fertile imagination and a longing for adventure that had never been fully satisfied, possessing withal so tender and loving a heart

that the very bees in the garden had been among her cherished friends. She remembered all the sunny ideals of that golden time and marvelled at herself, forgetting utterly the eager, even passionate, craving that had then been hers for the wider life, the broader knowledge, that lay beyond her reach, forgetting the feverish impatience with which she had longed for the day of her emancipation when she might join her father in the wonderful glowing East which she so often pictured in her dreams. Of her mother she had no memory. She had died at her birth. Her father was all the world to her; and when at last he had travelled home on a brief leave and taken her from her quiet English life to the strange, swift existence of the land of his exile, her soul had overflowed with happiness.

Nevertheless, she had not been carried away by the gaieties of this new world. The fascinations of dance and gymkhana had not caught her. The joy of being with her father was too sacred and too precious to be foregone for these lesser pleasures, and she very speedily decided to sacrifice all social entertainments to which he could not accompany her. She rode with him, camped with him, and became his inseparable companion. Undeveloped in many ways, shy in the presence of strangers, she soon forgot her earlier ambition to see the world and all that it contained. Her father's society was to her all-sufficing, and it was no sacrifice to her to withdraw herself from the gay crowd and dwell apart with him.

He had no wish to monopolise her, but it was a relief to him that the constant whirl of pleasure about her attracted her so little. He liked to have her with him, and it soon

became a matter of course that she should accompany him on all his expeditions. She revelled in his tours of inspection. They were so many picnics to her, and she enjoyed them with the zest of a child.

And so it came to pass that she was with him among the hills of the frontier when, like a pent flood suddenly escaping, the storm of rebellion broke and seethed about them, threatening them with total annihilation.

No serious trouble had been anticipated. A certain tract of country had been reported unquiet, and General Roscoe had been ordered to proceed thither on a tour of inspection and also, to a very mild degree, of intimidation. Marching through the district from fort to fort, he had encountered no shadow of opposition. All had gone well. And then, his work over, and all he set out to do satisfactorily accomplished, his face towards India and his back to the mountains, the unexpected had come upon him like a thunderbolt.

Hordes of tribesmen, gathered Heaven knew how or whence, had suddenly burst upon him from the south, had cut off his advance by sheer immensity of numbers, and, hemming him in, had forced him gradually back into the mountain fastnesses through which he had just passed unmolested.

It was a stroke so wholly new, so subtly executed, that it had won success almost before the General had realised the weight of the disaster that had come upon him. He had believed himself at first to be involved in a mere fray with border thieves. But before he reached the fort upon which he found himself obliged to fall back, he knew that he had to cope with a general rising of the tribes, and that the

means at his disposal were as inadequate to stem the rising flood of rebellion as a pebble thrown into a mountain stream to check its flow.

The men under his command, with the exception of a few officers, were all native soldiers, and he soon began to have a strong suspicion that among these he numbered traitors. Nevertheless, he established himself at the fort, determined there to make his stand till relief should arrive.

The telegraph wires were cut, and for a time it seemed that all communication with the outside world was an impossibility. Several runners were sent out, but failed to break through the besieging forces. But at last after many desperate days there came a message from without—a scrap of paper attached to a stone and flung over the wall of the fort at night. News of the disaster had reached Peshawur, and Sir Reginald Bassett, with a hastily collected force, was moving to their assistance.

The news put heart into the garrison, and for a time it seemed that the worst would be averted. But it became gradually evident to General Roscoe that the relieving force could not reach them in time. The water supply had run very low, and the men were already subsisting upon rations that were scarcely sufficient for the maintenance of life. There was sickness among them, and there were also many wounded. The white men were reduced to four, including himself, the native soldiers had begun to desert, and he had been forced at last to face the fact that the end was very near.

All this had Muriel Roscoe come through, physically scathless, mentally torn and battered, and she could not

bring herself to realise that the long-drawn-out misery of the siege could ever be over.

Lying there, tense and motionless, she listened to the shots and yells in the distance with a shuddering sense that it was all a part of her life, of her very being, even. The torture and the misery had so eaten into her soul. Now and then she heard the quick thunder of one of the small guns that armed the fort, and at the sound her pulses leaped and quivered. She knew that the ammunition was running very low. These guns did not often speak now.

Then, during a lull, there came to her the careless humming of a British voice, the free, confident tread of British feet, approaching her door.

She caught her breath as a hand rapped smartly upon the panel. She knew who the visitor was, but she could not bring herself to bid him enter. A sudden awful fear was upon her. She could neither speak nor move. She lay, listening intently, hoping against hope that he would believe her to be sleeping and go away.

The knock was not repeated. Dead silence reigned. And then quickly and decidedly the door opened, and Nick Ratcliffe stood upon the threshold. The light struck full upon his face as he halted—a clever, whimsical face that might mask almost any quality good or bad.

"May I come in, Miss Roscoe?" he asked.

For she had not moved at his appearance. She lay as one dead. But as he spoke she uncovered her face, and terror incarnate stared wildly at him from her starting eyes. He entered without further ceremony, and closed the door behind him. In the shaded lamplight his features seemed to