

THE MACE OF MAHMOUD.

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(Mahmoud, the Idol-breaker, third Sultan of the Ghuznevid dynasty, who flourished about 1020, made the first permanent Mussulman conquests in India, plundering its temples and destroying their idols in twelve victorious campaigns.)

Into the Indian city
Rode, with his chivalry,
Mahmoud, the Idol-breaker,
The Sultan of Ghuznee.

The battle's roar was silent,
And bowed in blood and shame,
India beheld the Crescent
And heard the Prophet's name.

On to the mighty temple,
In the city's central space,
Rode the Sultan, swiftly, sternly,
Swinging his iron mace.

Under its roofs of sandal,
Its golden porticoes,
Idols huge and misshapen
Were ranged in endless rows.

And over the great altar,
A nightmare carved in wood,
Half crocodile, half tiger,
The chiefest image stood.

The Sultan spurred his charger
In through the silver door;
Its hoofs beat sparks of jewels
Up from the ivory floor.

And the priests brought forth a treasure
Such as man did ne'er behold—
Caskets of flashing jewels,
And heaps of burning gold.

"Take it, O, mighty Sultan—
The treasure all is thine,
But spare to us yon image,
The glory of our shrine."

And the councillors and warriors
In Mahmoud's train that were,
All murmured to the Sultan:
"Take, and the idol spare!"

But the Sultan answered sternly:
"There is no God but one;
Mahmoud is his Prophet;
His mission shall be done!"

And in his stirrups rising,
He swung his mighty mace,
And smote the giant image
Down from the altar place.

It fell with a crash like thunder
Upon the ivory floor,
And, falling, burst asunder,
And so disclosed a store—

A wealth of gold and jewels
To which the ransom brought
By the priests to buy its safety
Appeared in value naught.

Since Mahmoud died have gone by
Nearly nine hundred years,
But still the conqueror's story
Lives in the people's ears.

And still when one is tempted
To swerve from being just,
And finds strength his temptation
To spurn into the dust.

And wins a richer guerdon
Because it was withstood,
They say that "he has struck with
The mace of King Mahmoud."

NINA.

(Concluded.)

England once more! The fat Professor, his lessons and his rooms had been left behind, and Kitty found herself established much more to her satisfaction than had been her lot in Germany. Their friend had taken lodgings for the two girls in a respectable locality of London; and thither they went, one, at least, fully appreciating the respect paid by their landlady to the tall, well-dressed young ladies who, being English, yet conversed freely with each other in a foreign tongue. Kitty felt they had climbed another round of the ladder, and she viewed complacently the extended prospect. It was nothing to what she hoped to attain; but it was substantial in the meantime. When, the very first evening, their friend appeared, bringing with him a younger and handsomer man, and, in spite of weariness, Nina sang and charmed them both—when supper followed, the old landlady pre-iding, as it had been arranged she was always to do, and much jesting and laughter prevailed, Kitty felt that now indeed they were tasting the sweets of life.

The gentlemen seemed as if they, too, enjoyed this evening. The girls that had sailed away three years before, aged respectively fifteen and sixteen, were now eighteen and nineteen. Dress and education had worked wonders in their appearance. True, Kitty was still inclined to decorate her hair with a string of beads when she could find them, and ribbons of bright color were a constant temptation to her; but Nina cared for no adorning of her person, and in her work forgot to do more than dress with simplicity. It was to her specially that the strangers turned, and both found it difficult to turn their eyes from the great, lustrous orbs, the depths of which seemed past finding out.

"What do you think of my protégée?" George Harris asked, coolly, as the two men pursued their way homeward somewhere about the midnight hour.

"She is a splendid creature, neither more nor less! What a pair of eyes she has!"

"She has fine eyes"—in a critical tone.

Then George Harris' praise of her ceased. When his companion continued to rave about her hair, her voice, the sensation she would make, he was absolutely quiet, and only made one mental note: he would take this young man no more to visit the sisters. Who could know the ending? They might fall in love with each other and marry, and all his projects would fall to the ground.

In the meantime the girls stood at their window, looking down on the quiet, lamplit streets. "Well, Nina, it is worth something now. Isn't your toil almost repaid? Why, you are a lady already! They treat you like a queen."

"I don't feel very different then, Kitty. I must have been a lady all along, although I don't know it, for I am sure I am not changed. It is just I when all is over."

"Of course it's just we; but we have got the fine things now, and it's we that sit at the window and look out and listen to them singing in the streets, instead of being out in the cold."

"We shall always bring them in, Kitty; shan't we?"

"Like the little thing you ran out to in Leipzig who stole the professor's boots!" Kitty laughed long and loud at the recollection. "Well, come, let us go to bed and dream about it all."

When they did retire, their dreams were different. Kitty's mind was full of stages and brilliantly-lit theatres, and her sister dressed in velvet and jewels; but Nina was dreaming of a possible scene in the little parlor they had just left, when, the glitter and excitement over, she would stand humbly proud before her kind friend and listen to his congratulations. Not in gold would lie her reward. Her kingdom lay in a purer, holier region as yet unknown to the sleeper at her side.

Day followed day, and Nina was harder at work than ever. From morning till night George Harris was in the little parlor, asking her to study this, to try that, and his pupil found all her pleasure in obeying him. He corrected, he praised, he suggested, and occasionally he brought friends to hear her powers.

"But when am I to make my debut?" she asked one day, smiling. "Am I not ready yet?"

"Very soon, if you like," he answered; and her quick ear caught a tone of nervousness in his voice.

"When?" she asked, with a sudden bound of her heart.

"On the eighteenth there is to be a concert given at an aristocratic little town some distance from London. I have got it arranged that you may sing there—that is, only if you wish, of course."

"Then I shall try." But, even as she answered, she was conscious of an unaccountable nervousness for the first time sweeping over her heart and terrifying her.

"If you have any doubts of your ability—"

"But I must begin some time."

"You accept the proposal, then?"

"Yes, with pleasure"—trying to master her weakness. "What am I to sing?"

It was impossible not to notice that, now that the moment was come, George Harris was growing excited. He was visibly restless. He chose one thing, got her to sing it, declared it exquisite, then wondered if another did not better show the qualities of her voice. When he left, they were as far as ever from a decision.

When Kitty joined her sister, she found her with a strange light in her eyes.

"Is anything—has anything happened?"

"No, nothing—only I am to sing on the eighteenth."

Kitty took in her meaning, and even her cheek paled.

"This is the tenth," was all she answered.

Few words passed between the sisters during the following eight days. Every night it seemed to Kitty that the light had grown stronger in her sister's eye. It looked like the concentration of a purpose till it had grown a passion of determination.

To both it was a trying time. To Kitty it was the turning-point of whether the fairy-land she believed in and longed after was to be theirs or not; and she held her breath, as it were, in these days of suspense. To Nina it was her entrance too to a different fairy-land, and sometimes her will cried, "It must, it shall be mine!" Then, with a sudden horror, fear swept down upon her soul, and seemed to quench her very life. So it was with the sisters when the morning of the eighteenth dawned.

It proved a snowy morning. Kitty, wrapped up ready for the journey, stood in the window-recess watching the flakes fall, and talking in her usual rapid style to George Harris. The cab was due in ten minutes; but Nina was still in her room. Kitty had made a brief rally to-day, now that the time was so nearly approaching, and from very contradictory, "talked nineteen to the dozen" to her silent pale-faced companion. Presently she was surveying their friend from top to toe, and mentally admiring the long comfortable-looking ulster that enveloped him.

"Do you know this, Mr. Harris? The longer I know you, the younger you grow."

He seemed pleased with the compliment. The strained expression on his face relaxed, and he smiled.

"Then I must have seemed very ancient to begin with?"

Kitty shrugged her shoulders after the Continental fashion.

"Well, to be candid, I did think you were a sort of father—a professor, you know, seems something old and reverend."

"I was a professor of music at thirty. That is four years ago; I am thirty-four now. I dare say, though, that sounds rather old to eighteen."

"Not so old as thirty-one was to fifteen!" she answered, laughing. "I shall come by-and-by to thank you quite youthful."

The door opened, and Nina entered. Both turned to meet her.

"Now, Nina, are you well wrapped up? Have you plenty round your throat? For my sake, don't take cold on the way down, and be hoarse at the finish!"

"I couldn't well get more on, unless you just packed me into a box with a few breathing-holes. I don't see how you can make me more secure"—speaking in a hurried tone unlike her usual one, and with an unnatural attempt at a smile.

George Harris went to her side and laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Are you sure you are warm enough?"

"His gentle, almost reverent touch, thrilled her. She colored and paled under it. Surely her nerves were at an unnatural tension, when even this could move her!"

"Thank you; I am very warm."

"Here is the cab!" called Kitty.

"Stay a moment, Nina. If you are not going forward to this with all your heart, we shall stay at home. Nothing is easier than to give it up. What about the last three years? I am repaid already in having given you pleasure. Don't allow yourself to think that you have to do anything but please yourself. Give it up, if it is a trial—for the present at least."

Kitty heard his speech with horror-filling eyes. What if Nina listened? But she need not have feared. The light was burning fiercely in her sister's eyes.

"No, no, I shall not turn back. I shall try to succeed."

But the suggestion had brought up vividly to all three the trial in store for them, and awed even Kitty into her former silence.

Not a word was spoken as they drove through the snow-covered streets. All kept their gaze fixed on the busy thoroughfare. Once Nina, raising her eyes, turned them to the professor, and, discovering his, with a yearning pain in them, fixed on her, she trembled. A wild surmise arose within her as to the possible meaning of that yearning, then she recoiled suddenly at her own daring.

"He is as nervous as I am. If I fail, what will be—What then?"

In answer came a line of one of Bulwer Lytton's plays, which she had heard a few weeks before, and which ever since had not ceased to ring in her ears—"Fail! There's no such word as 'fail'!" And the light burned more steadily in her eyes.

Soon Kitty found herself, for the first time in her life, in a first-class railway carriage; but for once she did not notice her advance in the social scale.

Snow-covered fields, snow-laden hedges, snow-burdened trees, all passed in swift succession, till they stopped at their station, and took their way to a hotel.

It was to be a grand concert. No seats were reserved, because all had been taken at the highest price, and it was expected that the room would be a gay sight. Nor were the managers disappointed. Toward eight o'clock carriage after carriage deposited its contribution of laced and feathered dames at the door of the concert-room, till, as the advertised hour approached, the seats were fully occupied by men and women in evening dress.

Nina stood in the little room set apart for the singers, and gazed with envy in her heart at a stout-jolly looking woman bordering on fifty who was laughing and chatting easily with the manager. With a delightful ease of manner she was rolling and unrolling a piece of music in her hands. Why not! Had she not sung to an applauding public for thirty years, and what, to one who had taken the most difficult passages in opera music to the satisfaction of a crowded theatre, was this small audience, aristocratic and critical as it might think itself? Her position was secure; she could even afford to be careless. More, she could afford to be kind to the girlish creature with the great eyes who looked at her with such envy.

"You are to sing to-night for the first time, I believe?" she said, drawing near to her.

"Yes," answered Nina, unable to say more.

"You must not allow yourself to be nervous. There is nothing to be nervous about. Where did you study?"

"At Leipzig."

"Oh, I was there too, for a winter! Well, you may just remember for your comfort, when you go in to sing to these people, that it is likely that not more than ten of them could tell whether you are singing well or ill—artistically well, I mean, of course. They will know if you sing sweetly."

Kitty mentally thanked her for her words.

"You will incline their favor to you at first by your youth and your prettiness. What? Oh, it is my turn to sing! Well, I wish you no more nervousness than I have—and that is not much. Ta, ta!" And she waved the roll of music in her hand as a parting sign.

They heard her sing. Kitty kept the door ajar, and they could hear the words falling from her lips in ripples of music. At the close of the song there came a long burst of applause that meant nothing less than an *encore*.

There was a hush, and the voice rose again.

"She sings no better than you, Nina," whispered Kitty.

Nina drew a long breath. She had heard her own voice rise and fall with the same clearness

and tunefulness. That very passage she had done to the satisfaction of her cross old German professor.

Amid rounds of applause the favorite stepped into the little back room, the smile still warm upon her face.

"It is a full house and an appreciative audience," she said, fanning herself. "Good gracious, how warm I do get with my exertion! I am far too fat. You, now—I dare say you will come back as cool as a cucumber. You are to sing only once. It is plenty for you to look forward to; but, if you get on well, you will be sorry you have not to go back—you will feel as if you could do much better the second time. Who is on now? That thin little man with a nose like a hawk's? Then your turn comes next. Well, well, keep up your heart. We all had the same to go through."

Kitty liked her for talking; Nina scarcely listened. She was eagerly noting how far forward with his song the dark gentleman was, and occasionally stealing glances at George Harris, who stood with his back to them, talking to the manager.

The song was ended. Applause was being given but scantily. Soon it died away, and, without any smiles brightening his face, the little dark man appeared.

"Now, miss, are you ready? This way, please."

Nina rose, heard George Harris' voice in her ear, but somehow could not make out the words he said—she fancied that they sounded like regret that she had come at all; loudest of all, however, encouraging, urging her on, was an inward voice repeating unceasingly, "Fail! There's no such word as 'fail'!" Then it seemed, without any movement on her part, that she was suddenly brought into the midst of bewildering lights, and a blaze of white and scarlet danced before her eyes, a buzz of voices filled her ears and turned her brain. She had not power now to remember her role.

Kitty, having also caught a glimpse of rows of white and scarlet, and opera-glasses, it seemed to her, endless in number, leveled at the white-faced Nina, clasped her hands tightly and lowered her head to listen. George Harris crossed and recrossed the room with rapid, lengthened strides.

Never in all her life had Kitty passed through such an ordeal as this. Her finger-nails were cutting into the flesh in her efforts to keep still.

How slowly the moments passed. Surely no former pause had been so long as this! Could there be any reason for it?

"Some little delay," said the stout singer, good naturedly.

Kitty clenched her hands more tightly and threw her body forward to listen. Still no further sound than the busy hum of whispers, and now and then a cough.

"A mistake about the music probably. Ah, there—it is set right!"

For the first notes had been struck with a firm hand on the piano, and the hush of expectancy had settled down on the room. Kitty drew a long breath. A minute, and the few bars were played. Now!

No sound—nothing but unbroken silence; then a faint clapping of hands—alas, to encourage, not to applaud!

"Mr. Harris," Kitty gasped, "something has gone wrong!"

George Harris took the hint instantaneously; he had passed Kitty and was on the platform ere her speech was well ended.

There he saw a pitying audience whispering kindly, and applauding encouragingly his pale-faced shrinking protégée. Simply dressed in white muslin, she looked like a bewildered child, her eyes full of pain, as if some dread spirit was haunting her and she was hopelessly seeking relief. Her intelligence returned when her eyes fell upon George Harris.

"Never mind! Come away, Nina. My darling"—in a low, impassioned whisper—"it was cruel to allow you to come!"

She started. A light broke over her face like sunshine after a cloud. A moment's pause; then, in a clear voice, forgetting to whisper, she said:

"I will sing, please. I am ready. I can do it, I think."

Her words reached the ear of the pianist; and, only too glad, he began his work. Instinctively Nina stepped forward from her close proximity to George Harris, thinking for the moment far more of him than of the crowd below her. If it had been a maze before, dispossessing her of all ideas, it was a maze now far under her. The door of her true kingdom had been opened to her, and she only turned her head, as it were, to sing her joy into this. No sooner was the last note of the prelude touched than her voice rose clear and unfaltering, tremulous, indeed, with feeling, but that only enhanced its sweetness. How she sang—sang as she had never sung before, as she would never sing again; for, at this supreme moment of her life, it was relief untold to let all her passion, her old pain and her new joy, swell out in melody!

Kitty heard and was thrilled with the tones of her sister's voice; and when, at the close, the plaudits came in such force that the house rang again, the girl, with a sob of relief, bowed her head and wept.

"Encore! Encore!" was the cry from many a lip.

But George Harris was firm in his remonstrance, and Nina never questioned his mastery. She would have sung on for ever to please the delighted people; but she would rather a