

was soon apprised by the loud sibilations that hailed me as I touched the lid, that the receptacle was full. Among other arts, I was skilled in all the practical science of the snake-charmer; and, on examination, I found that all the cobra di capello, of which there were three, in addition to the one in the cage, had been deprived of their poisonous fangs. The ape, enraged at my approach, had sprung towards a pillar that stood near, and I was about to return to the easement in order to attempt an escape, when suddenly a pannel in the pillar, no doubt accidentally touched by the animal flew open, and revealed to me a narrow flight of steps, ascending and descending.

"It occurred to me that release might be more facile by this means than from the window, and I hastened to make the trial. I soon abandoned the steps that led upwards, finding that they terminated in a small circular chamber, from which, indeed, the whole inferior range of the subterranean could be viewed from different apertures—those openings being nothing more than the mouths and eyes of the idols. Descending, then, I came to a passage, scarcely wide enough to admit of more than one individual, and involved in complete obscurity. As I hesitated whether to advance or recede, the sound of water fell on my ears, and I pursued my course. A few paces more brought me a twinkling of the light of day, and presently I found myself at the end of the passage, which opened into the thick jungle, through a species of narrow cave or tunnel, whence, from a jutting rock dashed a small cascade.

"I considered that it would be prudent to conceal the mode of my flight from the Brahmins, and, hurrying back to the subterranean, I took the precaution of fixing my guide and the untold lengths of my turban to the bars of the window, imagining that by these stratagems I might succeed in misleading them into the belief that I had effected my escape by the aperture in the roof—though, truly, I knew not whether such a method was really feasible. Completing this, I returned to the passage, and soon found myself at liberty. Sahib, I have passed a day and night in fasting and supplication, I have prayed that some plan might be suggested to me whereby my innocent child's life might be preserved. Alla has sent you upon my path. Will you assist me?"

"I swear it," cried I; "but how?"

"The presence of an European officer with me at the very moment when their atrocious sacrifice is about to be made, may be of use. If not, I am still strong, and the Sahib has pistols. The Brahmins are unarmed."

"But how gain admission to the cell of Nargisi? Rather let me instantly despatch messengers to Captain Crawford, at Chanda, who is, as you perhaps know, the first British officer who has proved the existence of human sacrifices in Hindostan—hitherto believed to be extinct. His authority is great, and he will render us immediate assistance."

"There is no time, Sahib. The oblation will be accomplished to-morrow night; and Chanda is seventy miles hence. There is no time to save her by such slow measures."

"What, then, is your counsel?"

"I am acquainted," said he, "with all the prefratory rites which must be duly performed before the grand sacrifice takes place. At dusk to-morrow evening Nargisi will be conveyed bound hand and foot, to the sacrificial altar. That altar is in front of the fire of perfumed wood, which is kept constantly burning in the underground

temple, where for one hour she will be left alone. Alone said I? No—all those hideous reptiles, and others that I know not of, will be let loose around her. The sight may madden, or may kill her; for she knows not that they are powerless; but from the effects on her, those diabolical worshippers of stones and hideous creatures select one to regulate their proceedings for the coming year. At that moment, let us be there; by the same passage through which I contrived my exit, let us enter. Before the priests approach to perpetrate the deed, Alla may endow us with strength to release her. And then I shall have my revenge!"

"Be it so," cried I; "meanwhile Crawford shall be apprised of our intentions, and send us post-haste. If we perish they shall not escape."

I inquired whether it was not probable that he was under Brahmical surveillance; and, in case his hiding-place was discovered, whether his life was not endangered.

"No," replied he; "that is not to be feared. The Brahmins, of no order, take life, save as an expiatory offering to Kati, at certain seasons and at long intervals. Neither must the victim be aged or impure. Such a sacrifice would bring them evil."

"But the Thugs?" cried I.

"The Thugs are not sound religionists of any sect. No pious Brahmin, conscientious in his faith—no true Moslem, faithful to Alla and the Prophet—ever joins the Phansigars; though the outcasts from all religions and creeds, the ruffian, the thief and murderer, the predisposed by vicious inclinations to cruelty and covetousness, willingly enlist under the fatal banner of the strangling noose. The head Brahmin of the Black Pagoda is a cold-blooded bigot, but he would shrink with horror from associating with the wretches with whom I, also, have mingled. Yet, with strange inconsistency, he scruples not to purchase the assistance of such assassins in the provision of an innocent victim!"

"And the Pagoda, is it near?"

"Not a mile hence, maharaj! To-morrow evening, an hour before the twilight falls, will you meet me here?"

I agreed, and was leaving him, when with a finger on his lips and a whispered "Khamoosh!—Hush!" he pointed to a conical hillock at no great distance. It was one of those mounds so frequent in Hindostan, which are constructed by the *termites*, or white ants, and which occasionally rise to the height of several feet. Near it I observed a shallow dish, containing milk, an egg, or two, and a bunch of the sacred Tolasse Plant (*Ocimum sanctum*), whose potent aroma I had for some time been conscious of. I was going to enquire into his meaning, in pointing out the ant-hill, which was clearly abandoned by its original fabricators, when, from the apex, erecting its terrible crest, I saw the glittering and gorgeous body of a cobra di capella slowly emerge!

"Begone, sahib azzeh! beloved master," whispered he; "the augury is good! That snake shall be in my possession. I have laid those tempting baits to wile him from his nest; for, by this means, I shall achieve the act which shall, at least avenge my child!"

With a vehement gesture he waved me away; and, in complete ignorance of his meaning, I hastened to my tent, to reflect on the service I had, perhaps, rashly undertaken to perform.

My first step was to write to my friend Crawford, succinctly explaining what had occurred, and demanding his immediate

interference; at the same time relating the promise I had made, and the attempt that was to be put into execution. I had conferred several kindnesses on the Headman of the town near which I was pitched, and I thought that I might count on his services in return, nor was I deceived. He instantly despatched a runner with my letter, who, in the method usual in the East, carries at rapid speed, that with which he is entrusted to the next town or village, where he hands it over to a similar messenger—always in readiness at the official quarters of the Headman—who, in his turn, follows the same process. I wished heartily that Hafez was now with me, nor was I at times, wholly free from apprehensions of the result which might accrue from too implicitly resigning myself to the will of so eccentric an individual as the Fakeer. But neither did I wish to recede from my engagement; and without revealing my intentions to my servants, I simply ordered them to have in readiness a *pal*, or small poleless tent; such as is customary for the wives of travelling natives, as it might be wanted next evening, whilst the worthy Pujari or Headman of the village, who was a Mahomedan, was instructed to place a guard over my tent, where two Mosulmannee were required to await a native lady whom I expected.

The hour at length approached when the Fakeer might begin to look for me; and, true to his appointment, I found him sitting beneath the banyan tree, his long matted hair gathered together under a plain red turban, the simple dress of a Mahomedan traveller covering his meagre frame, and armed with the keen-edged tulwar and krees of one who is prepared to defend himself from the attack of an adversary. Beside him rested the round snake basket, to which pointing, as he proffered a salutation of thanks for my presence, he said, "It sleeps, it is drunk; but by the power of Alla, the high priest of the Pagoda may succeed in awaking it!"

As we proceeded by a narrow path that, skirting the thickest jungle, led gradually downwards till we reached a barren defile stretching between two steep hills, I asked him by what means was it customary to perform the sacrificial rites.

"Sometimes by fire," he replied, "which is the most fearful. The victim is firmly bound to a pile of faggots, and so consumed; but in such cases she is drugged with hashish, or opium. At other times she is strangled by the application of a cord, fabricated of the sacred roots of the pandanus—A third method remains, and it is one which is likely to be employed on the present occasion; for I helped to brew (*Alla mooga maaf kura!*—Alla forgive me!) the bitter draught of death which inebriates whilst it kills! Alas, sahib! there is not a weed that grows around from which I know not how to extract a bane or a balsam! Would that I had quaffed the goblet of martyrdom, ere I had taught the Brahmijn the uses of that fruit which nods now so temptingly over your rock!"

I looked and saw a tree whose dark green branches were studded with beautiful round drupes of a bright orange color. I knew it to be the nux vomica—the deadly nut of which is immersed in a soft white pulp within the brittle rind. I told him how science had taught mankind to wrest a powerful remedy, in the strychnine principle, from this dangerous fruit, and asked him to point out as we proceeded, any other plant employed by the poisoners of the East.

"The roots of the *hunner*," said he,