

But his tactics had their effect. The battering at the gate ceased, and for some time there was a dead silence. We were so intent upon the gate that we did not remark that a band of some twenty or thirty, that we had driven back into the day, had gradually disappeared. They had sneaked round to the south side of the fort, and passing under the shelter of the wall, had joined their comrades. A thin, blue wreath of smoke, which curled up over the architrave of the gate, showed what was their plan. They had lit a fire, and in a few moments the dry timber would be burned through. We were utterly without defence against this new enemy. The pile of stones which we had raised to strengthen the doors from within prevented us from throwing water upon them; the overhanging architrave protected the fire from above. It blazed brighter and more brightly, and louder and more incessantly across the crevice of the tablin, now mad with the hope of revenge and plunder, who nourished it with fresh fuel on either side, in perfect safety.

"We can do nothing here," said Masoom. "Come down all of you, and help me to make a barricade at the entrance of the courtyard."

"Make it on the stair-head—make it on the stair-head," cried Masoom. "My wife, my sister—"

"I shall be defended to the last drop of my blood," whispered the Colonel. "Trust me. Draw down those boards and cases—the ladies' beds—everything you can move. Put away your arms for the moment. We should have thought of this before, but it cannot be helped."

There are some men one obeys instantly, and whose energy is catching, such a one was Masoom. In a very short time we had raised a respectable barricade on the spot where the narrow yard led into the vestibule of the house.

"But look here! We must fill up this gap," cried Masoom. "Bring that tub, quick! There's room for a man to pass."

"A man has to pass," replied Masoom, "quietly, passing out as he spoke. 'No get your arms, but don't let them come back. Then blaze away as quick as you can. Never mind reloading; keep them back two minutes, and then save yourselves. Let them go by no means. Fire and retreat. Max, give your revolver to Crake (he can use it with his left hand) and take his rifle. Good. Remember my words. Fire, and retreat to the ladies' room.'"

So saying, he crept along the wall toward the now smouldering gate, and was lost to our sight.

The shouts outside, sounded wilder than ever, but we were half-blinded by a shower of sparks. The doors had fallen in! A shriek of triumph, a rush, and Masoom was with us again, almost in the midst of the enemy, who were thrown back, and named together by the unexpected obstacle.

"Now, then, give it them. Fire! Keep them at bay for two minutes. Fire—quick, quick! The shot falls. Bravo! Well done! Well done! Well done! Keep them back for one minute more. Is that your last shot, Masoom? Now, follow me; stoop, so that they may not see us. Well done all!"

In those few moments we had fired sixteen shots and four charges of slugs, points blank into a crowd of some twenty fanatics. They reeled and retreated, and amid the smoke and confusion could not see that the barricade was left undefended. Thoroughly cowed in the midst of their expected triumph, they stood crowded together in the doorway of the narrow courtyard, the most, almost every man of whom was more or less wounded, pressing those behind into the fire, which still blazed furiously at the gate, and the latter struggling on to avoid the flames. Under the feet of this dense, heaving, and cowering mass the slow march of our mine, and just as we reached the ladies' room it exploded.

A roar of a hundred-pounder fired at one's ear, a muffled rumble and crash, a few screams, and then silence!

At first I thought that the whole house was coming down, and indeed a portion of the roof fell close to where we stood, trying to remember poor Masoom and Kate, who had fallen. Our sudden rush into their presence led them to think that all was lost, and the explosion which followed was too much even for their brave spirits. Poor girls! they had behaved nobly throughout, and we had had little time to comfort and uphold them.

How long we were thus engaged I know not. I was aroused by Masoom, who had left us soon after the mine exploded—coming back into the room. I started up and missed my rifle.

"You need not trouble yourself to load again, Masoom," I said. "The walls of the court have fallen. Not one man escaped. It's a horrible sight—horrible, but—"

"Good God, Masoom! are you hit?"

"Yes; but Masoom! a second shot stabbed me in the back at the fire, and I'm bleeding more than I am good for me. It won't do for me," (pointing to Kate) "to see me as I am. Jules can do it all. Tell her to save—save—that you yourself are safe." With a smile, "and she will soon be well."

To be continued.

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