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An Old Frontier Adventure.

To be stuck up on the edge of a mountain plateau, with an apparently impossible descent of nearly eighteen hundred feet in front, with something like a score of savage and bloodthirsty pursuers behind and to the right and left of one, and with only the light of the setting second quarter moon to see by. Such a position would not strike the average man as an enviable one, and yet it was the position in which "Monkey" Macdonald found himself on the occasion of his first and last visit to Khyber Pass.

Macdonald—who had the "Monkey" tacked on, not because of ugliness, for, as a matter of fact, he was a distinctly handsome fellow, but because of his exceptional skill and daring as a climber, alike in forest and on hill, was a native of Skye, and consequently a mountaineer born. It was this consideration that had induced his captain to select him to bear a dispatch to the officer in command of the post below the pass. The captain, with his hundred and fifty men, was going up some way into the Afridi country, to inquire into the sudden disappearance of the belongings of a Hindu trader, and equally sudden death of the trader, and his four servants. Had the outrage taken place off the beaten track it would have been regarded as the outcome of the Hindu's own rashness, and so a thing beyond official remedy, but as it had occurred on the regular route, guaranteed safe by the heavily-subsidised Khyber Rifles (natives) the thing assumed a serious complexion, even among the men of the pass guard themselves. Hence the sending forth of Captain Edwards and his men.

When Mac left his comrades, he had a walk of twenty miles or more before him, but that would have been a trifle to him had he kept to the track, all the more that he would have had the daylight with him during the worst part of the journey. But the winding in and out weariness of the roads up there not being to his taste, he had a consultation with his pocket compass, and then decided to cut across the hills, striking a line likely to bring him out above or nearly above the mouth of the pass.

It was a lovely idea—for a lunatic—and with the fate of the Hindu before him, he ought to have known better. Down on the track below the Khyber Rifles, rupee-inspired, generally kept their fathers and brothers and uncles and cousins well beyond the rifle range, but up in the hills, the beautiful simplicity of the Afridi reasserted itself in yearning for throats to cut and Lee-Metfords to steal—anybody's would do, they had no silly respect of persons about them.

By the time our Highlander had put the first range of hills between himself and the pass trail he had discovered two things, neither of them pleasant. The first one was that the straight line he had calculated on was likely to be as zig-zag as the pass route itself, owing to deep gorges, precipitous cliffs and gloomy valleys—all persisting to lie across his way. The second was that darkness would be upon him before he could get clear of the hills, and what that meant, even he, reckless to rashness as he was, could not help remembering. Night in such a place, with loot-hunting Afridis all about, had in it nothing of a joke; as the sun sank lower and lower to the crest of the savage hills, he began to doubt whether he had not made a mistake.

Doubt became a conviction a few minutes later, when his helmet suddenly flew up into the air as if it had wings, and something whacked against the cliff beside with a noise like a pistol shot, another following immediately after.

"Monkey" Mac might be reckless, but he was no inexperienced griff, and while the echoes of the shots were still rolling about the crags, he had flung his arms about, staggered a pace or two towards a handy hollow between two boulders and fallen therein, the whole impromptu pantomime being so well acted that a distant observer might be excused for thinking he was a dying man.

There was not much dying about him, however, as he made certain preparations for receiving company in that hole, and had the two Afridis, who had let go at him from the farther rocks, but known the real state of affairs, they would have skipped down that slope less joyfully and with more thought of cover.

Crack!

Thin, spiteful, incisive, the Lee-Metford spoke between the boulders, and instantly

the taller of the two hillmen, who was a little in advance, made a frantic clutch at the air with both hands, and pitched forward on his face. So sudden was his fall, that the other was taken unawares, and stumbled over him. Before he could rise the Lee-Metford spat again among the rocks, and the stricken robber collapsed upon the body of his dead companion, clutching at it and pulling it about in his death spasms.

It was a ghastly sight enough, but it woke no compunction in the grim set face on the soldier as he rose and came out of the hollow to recover his helmet. The whistling of the bullets which had so narrowly missed his head only a few minutes back was still in his ears, and did not make for regrets: rather satisfaction that he had been able to return what had been so freely sent.

But the brief encounter, decisively in his favour, though it had ended, was, as he now began to realise, one of the most unlucky things that could have come in his way. The sound of firing could not fail to be heard, and although it might be taken for that attending one of the never-ceasing inter-family fights characteristic of the hill races of India, it must of necessity make those who heard it more alert than usual, if only for news. Besides it did not follow that, because the two he had killed were the only two he had seen of his recent assailants, there were no others present. No, the sooner he got a move on the better.

This decision reached, action did not linger long, and within five minutes he had sped across the rough, but narrow valley, and was climbing up the steep slope on the other side.

On the top of the ridge he stopped to breathe, and while doing so, looked back. The sun was sinking fast in a cloudless bronze-tinted sky, and though the higher crags and peaks burned redly in the fierce light, yet bluish shadows, deepening to black, were gathering in the valley bottoms.

The scene of the fight was still in view, and the dead men were lying where they had fallen. But on the wilderness of rough rocks, boulders, and gravel drift beyond an animal was swiftly moving. So far as he could make out it was either a wolf or a huge, half-tamed dog, which is, to a stranger, even more dangerous than the wolves themselves.

For a while he watched the beast as it ran in and out over the ground, as if scenting a trail. Finally, it seemed to wind in sight of the bodies, for all at once it stopped its casting about among the stones, and made for them swiftly, taking a line as straight as an arrow.

The watcher no longer questioned what it was. It was an Afghan hound, and the man or men to whom it belonged could not be far off. And even as the thought passed through his mind he sighted them, three in number, at the other side of the stony valley, and looking, at that distance, no bigger than tiny beetles.

The situation was growing ugly, and the Scot knew it; knew, too, that no matter at what risk, he must kill that hound before darkness fell utterly. To fly through the night with that devilish beast tracking him would only insure his being attacked at a considerable disadvantage, and when he could not see to defend himself.

He knelt on one knee, levelled his rifle at the hound, not with any expectation of striking it, for the distance was quite fifteen hundred yards, but with the intention of startling it, and, if possible, attracting its attention to himself. If he could do that the beast's ferocity would do the rest. Once it caught sight of him it would rush headlong without waiting for the men, and get comfortably shot as it came up the open hillside—or, even better still, bayoneted when it got on to the top.

The sound of the shot was like tearing stiff cloth, as he emptied the magazine, and as the cordite made no smoke, only a bluish haze, his vision was not obscured. He saw the hound spring round as the bullets showered about it, one or two tiny puffs of white showing where it had hit some of the softer rocks. Then he sprang up on a flat rock, and danced against the sky-line waving his helmet and rifle.

The plan succeeded, for after remaining motionless for some seconds, the hound broke into a long, swift lunge, and came straight across the valley. Smiling grimly, the soldier re-charged his magazine and fixed his bayonet, the former as a

matter of precaution, the latter for the work immediately in hand. He did not want any more firing than he could help just now, not on account of the men that were behind him, but of others who might be in front.

Very swiftly, though moving with all the unfaltering regularity of a machine, the great, gaunt brute covered the distance, and he was soon speeding up the hill. As it came closer the sight of it might well have made one less stout-hearted shiver—with its huge bulk, its bared fangs, its eyes filled with that red fire, and worst of all that terrifying silence. But worst of all, its terrifying silence. But the soldier's mouth only tightened as he drew a little behind the hill crest, and swung his rifle in the position for the old "shorten arms thrust!" perhaps the deadliest that can be given by the bayonet.

It was swift work. There came a dull pattering of feet, a whistling hiss of hard-drawn breath, and the tanwy bulk of the savage beast shot over the crest and down. A keen glancing flash leapt to meet it as the soldier sprang forward like a spring released and the long, double-edged blade was driven to the rifle muzzle in the hound's chest, killing it instantly. Never was a fight so fiercely begun, so quickly ended.

While wiping the bayonet and returning it to the scabbard, Mac peered over the crest of the hill. The three Afridis had reached and were standing beside the two dead ones, and from their actions and gestures they seemed to be in some perplexity probably as to the whereabouts of the hound. The soldier thought that since they had not heard the firing they would naturally be at a loss to guess what had become of their canine guide; but night was coming on fast now and he had no time to bother over Afridi perplexities, so after another look at that invaluable compass, he resumed his journey, travelling fast and hard, albeit certain that pursuit was now inevitable and that he was in the hottest thing of its sort that he had ever been in his life.

He was not mistaken, for as hour after hour went past, each bringing with it some new difficulty, in the way of descending steep rock faces, scrambling through thickets, skirting nullahs and bogs, wading through, and on one occasion swimming, streams, with his rifle and ammunition balanced on his head, and running over treacherous flats, only faintly seen in the dim moonlight. What with all these he got enough invigorating exercise that night to have shaken a worse liver than his into its proper behaviour for the rest of his life. He did not once hear or see anything of his pursuers for many hours but this did not reassure him to any extent, as their knowledge of the country being so superior to his, they could travel faster than he and so choose their own time for attack. And even had he felt disposed to believe that the chase had been abandoned, or never begun at all, the scattered fires that began to gleam on the hilltops all round would have undecieved him. Yet he kept on with characteristic pluck and coolness, alert always and only stopping to crawl from time to time into noisome holes and corners, to consult the compass by the light of matches, and set his course by the stars.

In this fashion he spent the better part of the night, and only a short time before dawn came out on the edge of the plateau above the precipice where he saw at once that if he could but get down that fearful cliff, his peril would be a thing past and done with. Far, far below, and dotting at intervals, the winding way towards the pass proper, were little bunches of twinkling lights, while at a much greater distance, in the opposite direction, a vastly larger assemblage, massed into one steady, unwinking gleam.

The sight cheered him greatly, if it did nothing else, giving him heart to face the last and most formidable of the night's risks—getting down the cliff. And yet down he must get at any hazard, for to stay where he was meant death, and a death that might come out on him from the dark at any moment. He was wet, tired, and hungry, and the bruises left by numerous falls were beginning to stiffen. The sleep of an hour would have been priceless in its restorative value, and if—but what was the good of thinking about it? If he did not find a way down that cliff at once, he would get a deeper and longer sleep than he at all wanted, he reminded himself, with a sound that was half oath half chuckle.

Lying down on his face, with his head projecting over the edge, he scanned the face of the precipice. The moon was waning low, but its dim, ghostly light was yet sufficient to show him the leading characteristics of the cliff about half-way down—all beyond that being misty darkness. He could just make out that a little to the right of where he lay a narrow ledge began and ran down to where a broad bank of bosses, cracks and projecting splinters sank down, down, down, still

they were lost in the misty depths below. The place seemed as good as any Mac thought, for so far as he could make out, the cliff seemed to stretch out into the night on both sides of him. He had no time to look for another and more promising one, and only hoped that the bosses and splinters might run unbroken to the bottom.

A long, eerie howl, distant, but still plainly heard, came out of the darkness behind him. It was answered by another to the right, and then, after an interval by another from the left, but nearer than the other two. So they had put more hounds on the job! Well, they wouldn't find him there when they arrived.

He rose, slung his rifle, and braced his nerves for the frightful task before him. Bold and skilful though he was it is questionable whether anything but imminent death could have induced him to give himself over to the unseen perils of that terrible descent. But there was no other way, and if the thing was to be done at all it was best not to think about it. So, with an unfaltering deliberation that was eloquent of nerves that was strung to the highest tension, he swung himself over and began his terrible journey.

Much to his relief, he found that the ledge was easily passable, and it was only when he reached that bank of broken rock he came in contact with the real dangers of the descent. Many, very many of the bosses and splinters were badly weathered, the friable stones giving under his hands and feet like rotten wood. Still, the sound knobs were fairly numerous as well, so that by testing them all before trusting his weight upon them, he might reasonably hope to escape disaster from that source. His greatest trouble he found was likely to arise from the breaks, more or less wide, that occurred at intervals in the descending ladder of splinters. Here he had to trust to swarming down the sheer wall-like faces with no better hold than that afforded by the cracks and lesser indentations of the main cliff. Sometimes he had not even that, and had to let himself drop down from one cluster to another, trusting to luck and his own cat-like activity to secure a fresh hold and prevent him from pitching headlong over the blackness below. These did not fail him, but afterwards, when he looked up at that cliff in daylight and saw what he had taken in the way of chances, he felt the hair rise on his head.

Down, down, down, unhalting, unhesitating, he kept on his desperate way until half the way had been accomplished, and then breathless, shaken, and for the moment at least, utterly exhausted, he had to halt. His uniform was torn to rags, his hands and even his face were bleeding from wounds inflicted by contact with the hard rocks, and his throat was like fire from a thirst, a thirst which he could not quench as he had lost his water bottle. But the dawn was not far away, and with it would come better chances he told himself as he half crouched, half lay in a narrow cleft, trying to brace himself for what there was still to do.

All at once there broke through the dead stillness of the night, the confused murmur of voices, and it came from the top of the precipice. His Afridi pursuers had run the trail to its end and would now give it up, since pursuit was now no longer possible.

That was his idea, but it was not theirs. True, neither dogs nor man could hope to get down there, and in all likelihood the son of a burned father had broken his accursed neck in attempting it. Still, there was no reason why they should not send over a few loose boulders, they might hit something.

So they sent them over, and one of the things that one of them, or a splinter of one of them hit, after crashing and tumbling down the cliff, was a patrol of the Khyber Rifles. The result was that in less than two minutes, the said Rifles, having a shrewd idea that the stones did not come down of themselves, resolved to see in turn whether they could not hit something. A volley of twenty shots thrashed along the cliff summit they brought over two of the Afridis and one of the dogs. Mac, pressing forward as far into the sheltering cliff as he could, saw three dark, indistinct objects swirl downwards past him to utter smash at the bottom of the precipice. Then, as the firing ceased and no more rocks came down he gave way to the drowsiness which came over him, and, regardless of his perilous situation, fell asleep.

When he awoke it was broad daylight, and a Gurkha cragsman had climbed nearly to his perch, and with this man's help he was able to complete what remained of the descent, all the more that the lower half was far more practicable than the upper part. A week served to mend the sore places, but it was months before he was able to think of his night-curtained scramble down that frightful rock ladder, without shuddering.