

THE DIVA'S RUBY

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SYNOPSIS.

Baraka, a Tartar girl, became enamored of a golden bearded stranger who was prospecting and studying herbs in the vicinity of her home in central Asia, and revealed to him the location of a mine of rubies hoping that the stranger would love her in return for her disclosure. They were followed to the cave by the girl's relatives, who blocked up the entrance, and drew off the water supply, leaving the couple to die.

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

The traveler fished up the sack and waded out upon the tiny beach. He looked up rather anxiously, though he could not have seen a head looking down from above if there had been any one there. There was not light enough. He understood also that if the men were going to shoot at him from the height they would wait till it was daylight. Baraka stood still in the water, which was up to her waist, and he paid no attention to her, but sat down to think what he should do. The night was warm, and his clothes would dry on him by degrees. He would have taken them off and spread them out, for he thought no more of Baraka's presence than if she had been a harmless young animal standing there in the pool, but he could not tell what might happen at any moment, and so long as he was dressed and had all his few belongings about him, he felt ready to meet fate.

Baraka saw that he did not heed her, and was thinking. She came up out of the water very slowly, and she modestly loosened her wet garment from her, so that it hung straight when she stood at the end of the beach, as far from the traveler as possible. She, also, sat down to dry herself, and there was silence for a long time.

After half an hour the traveler rose and began to examine the rock, feeling it with his hands wherever there was the least shadow, as high as he could reach, to find if there was any foothold, though he was already sure that there was not.

"There is no way out," Baraka said at last. "I have been here by day. I have seen."

"They will let themselves down from above with ropes, till they are near enough to shoot," the traveler answered.

"No," replied Baraka. "They know that you have a good weapon, and they will not risk their lives. They will leave us here to starve. That is what they will do. It is our portion, and we shall die. It will be easy, for there is water, and when we are hungry we can drink our fill. You will die first. You are not as we are, you cannot live so long without food."

The traveler wondered if she was right, but he said nothing.

"If we had got out with the treasure," continued Baraka, "you would have loved me for it, because you would have been the greatest man in the world through me. But now, because we must die, you hate me. I understand. If you do not kill me you will die first; and when you are dead I shall kiss you many times, till I die also. It will be very easy. I am not afraid."

The man sat quite still and looked at the dark streak by the edge of the pool where the water had wet it when the falling boulder outside had sent in little waves. He could see it distinctly. Again there was silence for a long time. Now and then Baraka loosened her only garment about her as she sat, so that it might dry more quickly; and she quietly wrung out her thick black hair and shook it over her shoulders to dry it, too, and stuck her two silver pins into the sand beside her.

Still the traveler sat with bent head, gazing at the edge of the pool. His hands were quite dry now, and he slowly rubbed the clinging moisture from his revolver. Some men would have been thinking, in such a plight, that if starving were too hard to bear, a bullet would shorten their sufferings in the end; but this man was very full of life, and the love of life, and while he lived he would hope.

He still watched the same dark streak where the sand was wet; he had not realized that he had been so far from it till then, but by looking at it a long time in the starlight his sight had probably grown tired, so that he no longer saw it distinctly. He raised himself a little on his hands and pushed himself down till it was quite clearly visible again, and he looked at the rock opposite and up to the stars again, to rest his eyes. He was not more than a yard from the water now.

The place was very quiet. From far above a slight draught of air descended, warm from the rocks that had been heated all day in the sun. But there was no sound except when Baraka moved a little.

Presently she did not move any more, and when the traveler looked he saw that she was curled up on the sand, as eastern women lie when they sleep, and her head rested on her hand; for her garment was dry now, and she was drowsy after the work and the effort she had made. Besides, since there was no escape from death, and as the man did not love her, she might as well sleep if she could.

He had been certain of the distance between his feet and the water's edge as he sat; it had been a yard at the

most. But now it was more; he was sure that it was a yard and a half at the least. He rubbed his eyes and looked hard at the dark belt of wet sand, and it was twice as wide as it had been. The water was still running out somewhere, but it was no longer running in, and in an hour or two the pool would be dry. The traveler was something of an engineer, and understood sooner than an ordinary man could have done, that his enemies had intentionally stopped up the narrow entrance through which he had to come, both to make his escape impossible, and to hasten his end by depriving him of water. The fallen boulder alone could not have kept out the overflow of the spring effectually. They must have shoveled down masses of earth, with the plants that grew in it abundantly and filled it with twining threadlike roots, and they must have skillfully forced quantities of the stuff into the openings all round the big stone, making a regular dam against the spring, which would soon run down in the opposite direction. They knew, of course, that Baraka had led him to the place and had gone in with him, for she had left all her outer garments outside, and they meant that she should die also, with her secret. In a week, or a fortnight, or a month, they would come and dig away the dam and pry the boulder aside, and would get in and find the white bones of the two on the sand, after the vultures had picked them clean; and they would take the traveler's good revolver, and his money.

He thought of all these things as he sat there in the dim light, and watched the slow receding of the water-line, and listened to the girl's soft and regular breathing. There was no death in her dream, as she slept away the last hours of the night, though there might not be many more nights for her. He heard her breath, but he did not heed her, for the water was sinking before him, sinking away into the sand, now that it was no longer fed from the opening.

He sat motionless, and his thoughts ran madly from hope to despair and back again to hope. The water was going down, beyond question; if it was merely draining itself through the sand to some subterranean channel, he was lost, but if it was flowing away through any passage like the one by which he had entered, there was still a chance of escape—a very small chance. When death is at the gate the tiniest loophole looks wide enough to crawl through.

The surface of the pool subsided, but there was no loophole; and as the traveler watched, hope sank in his heart, like the water in the hollow of the sand; but Baraka slept on peacefully, curled up on her side like a little wild animal. When the pool was almost dry the traveler crept down to the edge and drank his fill, that he might not begin to thirst sooner than he needed; and just then day dawned suddenly and the warm darkness gave way to a cool light in a few moments.

Immediately, because it was day, Baraka stretched herself on the sand and then sat up; and when she saw what the traveler was doing she also went and drank as much as she could swallow, for she had understood why he was drinking as soon as she saw that the pool was nearly dry. When she could drink no more she looked up at the rocks high overhead, and they were already white and red and yellow in the light of the risen sun; for in that country there is no very long time between dark night and broad day.

Baraka sat down again, on the spot where she had slept, but she said nothing. The man was trying to dig a little hole in the wet sand with his hands, beyond the water that was still left, for perhaps he thought that if he could make a pit on one side, some water would stay in it; but the sand ran together as soon as he moved it; and presently, as he bent over, he felt that he was sinking into it himself, and understood that it was a sort of quicksand that would suck him down. He therefore threw himself flat on his back, stretching out his arms and legs, and making movements as if he were swimming, he worked his way from the dangerous place till he was safe on the firm white beach again. He sat up then and bent his head till his forehead pressed on his hands, and he shut his eyes to keep out the light of day. He had not slept, as Baraka had, but he was not sleepy; perhaps he would not be able to sleep again before the end came. Baraka watched him quietly, for she understood that he despaired of life, and she wondered what he would do; and, besides, he seemed to her the most beautiful man in the world, and she loved him, and she was going to die with him.

It comforted her to think that no other woman could get him now. It was almost worth while to die for that alone; for she could not have borne that another woman should have him since he despised her, and if it had come to pass she would have tried to kill that other. But there was no danger of such a thing now; and he would die first, and she would kiss him many times when he was dead, and then she would die also.

The pool was all gone by this time,



Leaving a Funnel-Shaped Hollow in the Sand.

leaving a funnel-shaped hollow in the sand where it had been. If any water still leaked through from without it lost itself under the sand, and the man and the girl were at the bottom of a great natural well that was quite dry. Baraka looked up, and she saw a vulture sitting in the sun on a pinnacle, 300 feet above her head. He would sit there till she was dead, for he knew what was coming; then he would spread his wings a little and let himself down awkwardly, half-flying and half-scrambling. When he had finished, he would sit and look at her bones and doze, till he was able to fly away.

The hours passed, and the sun rose higher in the sky and struck deeper into the shady well, till he was almost overhead, and there was scarcely any shadow left. It became very hot and stifling, because the passage through which the air had entered with the water was shut up. Then the traveler took off his loose jacket, and opened his flannel shirt at the neck, and turned up his sleeves for coolness, and he crept backwards into the hollow where the ruby mine was, to shelter himself from the sun. But Baraka edged away to the very foot of the cliff, where there remained a belt of shade, even at noon; and as she sat there she took the hem of her one garment in her hands and slowly fanned her little feet. Neither he nor she had spoken for many hours, and she could see that in the recess of the rock he was sitting as before, with his forehead against his hands that were clasped on his knees, in the attitude and bearing of despair.

He began to be thirsty now, in the heat. If he had not known that there was no water he could easily have done without it through a long day, but knowledge that there was none, and that he was never to drink again, parched his life and his throat and his tongue till it felt like a dried fig in his mouth. He did not feel hunger, and indeed he had a little food in a wallet he carried; but he could not have eaten without water, and it did not occur to him that Baraka might be hungry. Perhaps, even if he had known that she was, he would not have given her of what he had; he would have kept it for himself. What was the life of a wild girl compared with his? But the vulture was watching him, as well as Baraka, and would not move from its pinnacle till the end, though days might pass.

Baraka was not thirsty yet, because she had drunk her fill in the morning, and was not used to drink often; it was enough that she could look at the man she loved, for the end would come soon enough without thinking about it. All day long the traveler crouched in the hollow of the ruby cave, and Baraka watched him from her place; when it grew dark the vulture on the pinnacle of rock thrust its ugly head under its wing. As soon as Baraka could not see any more she curled herself up on the white sand like a little wild animal and went to sleep, though she was thirsty.

It was dawn when she awoke, and her linen garment was damp with the dew, so that the touch of it refreshed her. The traveler had come out and was lying prone on the sand, his face buried against his arm, as soldiers sleep in a bivouac. She could not tell whether he was asleep or not, but she knew that he could not see her, and



whom she had led to the ruby mines for love's sake.

He would come down till he was within easy range, and then he would wait till he had a fair chance at them, when they were standing still, and she knew that he was a dead shot. The traveler's revolver could never carry as far as the long gun, Baraka was sure, and Saad could come quite near with safety, since he seemed able to climb down the face of a flat rock where there was not foothold for a cat. He was still descending, he was getting very near; if the traveler were not warned he might come out of the cave unsuspectingly and Saad would shoot him. Saad would wish to shoot him first, because of his revolver, and then he would kill Baraka at his leisure. If he fired at her first the traveler would have a chance at him while he was reloading his old gun. She understood why he had not killed her yet, if indeed he wanted to, for it was barely possible that he loved her enough to take her alive.

After hesitating for a few moments, not from fear but in doubt, she gathered herself to spring, and made a dash like an antelope along the sand for the mouth of the cave, for she knew that Saad would not risk wasting his shot on her while she was running. She stopped just under the shelter of the rock and called inward: "Saad is coming down the rock with his gun!" she cried. "Load your weapon!"

When she had given this warning she went out again and stood before the mouth of the cave with her back to it. Saad was on the rock, not 50 feet above the ground, at the other side of the natural wall, but looked as if even he could get no farther down. He was standing with both his heels on a ledge so narrow that more than half the length of his brown feet stood over it; he was leaning back, flat against the sloping cliff, and he had his gun before him, for he was just able to use both his hands without falling. He pointed the gun at her and spoke:

"Where is the man?"

"He is dead," Baraka answered without hesitation.

"Dead? Already?"

"I killed him in his sleep," she said, "and I dragged his body into the cave for fear of the vulture, and buried it in the sand. Be not angry, Saad, though he was my father's guest. Come down hither and I will tell all. Then you shall shoot me or take me home to be your wife, as you will, for I am quite innocent."

She meant to entice him within range of the stranger's weapon.

"There is no foothold whereby to get lower," he answered, but he rested the stock of his gun on the narrow ledge behind him.

"Drag out the man's body, that I may see it."

"I tell you I buried it. I killed him the night before last; I cannot dig him up now."

"Why did you run to the mouth of the cave when you saw me, if the man is dead?"

"Because at first I was afraid you would shoot me from above, therefore I took shelter."

"Why did you come out again, if you were in fear?"

"After I had run in I was ashamed, for I felt sure that you would not kill me without hearing the truth. So I came out to speak with you. Get down, and I will show you the man's grave."

"Have I wings? I cannot come down. It is impossible."

Baraka felt a puff of hot air pass her, just above her right ankle, and at the same instant she heard a sharp report, not very loud, and more like the snapping of a strong but very dry stick than the explosion of firearms. She instinctively sprang to the left, keeping her eyes on Saad.

For a moment he did not move. But he was already dead as he slowly bent forward from the rock, making a deep obeisance with both arms hanging down before him, so that his body shot down perpendicularly to the

sand, where it struck head first, rolled over and lay motionless in a heap. The traveler's was a Mauser pistol that would have killed as surely at 500 yards as 50; and the bullet had gone through the Tartar's brain.

Baraka sprang up the sandy slope and ran along the narrow beach to the body. In an instant she had detached the large brown water-gourd from the thong by which he had hung over Saad's shoulder, and she felt that it was full. Without a thought for herself she hastened back to the mouth of the cave where the traveler was now standing. His face was dripping with perspiration that ran down into his matted golden beard, his eyes were wild, his hands were bleeding.

"Drink!" cried Baraka joyfully, and she gave him the gourd.

He gripped it as a greedy dog snaps at a bit of meat, and pulling out the wooden plug he set the gourd to his lips, with an expression of beatitude. But he was an old traveler and only drank a little, knowing that his life might depend on making the small supply last. A gourd of water was worth more than many rubies just then.

"Are you very thirsty yet?" he asked in a harsh voice.

"No," answered Baraka bravely; "keep it for yourself."

His hand closed round the neck of the gourd and he looked up towards the rocks above. The vulture had come back and was circling slowly down.

"You had better bury the body, while I go on working," said the traveler, turning back into the cave and taking the gourd with him.

Baraka had marked the place where he had tried to dig for water and had almost disappeared in the quicksand. She took from the body the wallet, in which were dates and some half-dry bread, and then dragged and pushed and rolled the dead man from the place where he had fallen. The vulture sat on the lowest ledge where his claws could find a hold, and though he watched her with horrible red eyes while she robbed him of his prey, he did not dare go nearer.

The body sank into the moving sand, and Baraka had to roll herself back to firmer ground in haste to escape being swallowed up with the dead man. The last she saw of him was one brown foot sticking up. It sank slowly out of sight, and then she went to the hollow where the ruby mine was and took up a piece of the broken crust, full of precious stones, and threw it at the vulture as hard as she could. It did not hit him, but he at once tumbled off the ledge into the air, opened his queer, bedraggled wings and struck upwards.

Then Baraka sat down in the shade and slowly brushed away the dry sand that had got into the folds of her linen garment, and looked steadily at the mouth of the cave and tried not to realize that her throat was parched and her lips almost cracking with thirst, and that the traveler had a gourd almost full of water with him. For she loved him, and was willing to die that he might live a little longer; besides, if he succeeded in digging his way out, there would be plenty to drink, and when he was free she was sure that he would love her because she had made him so rich.

The sun rose higher and at last shone down to the bottom of the chasm, and she sat in the narrow strip of shade, where she had passed most of the previous day. She was very thirsty and feverish, and felt tired, and wished she could sleep, but could not. Still the traveler toiled in the darkness, and from time to time she heard sounds from far away as of stones and loose earth falling. He was still working hard, for he was very strong and he was desperate.

Baraka thought that if he was able to dig through the dam the water would run in again, and she watched the sand for hours, but it was drier than ever. The shadow broadened again, and crept up the rock quickly as the afternoon passed.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Look Well to the Kitchen

Writer in Houston Post Comes Forward with Variations on Old Theme of "Feeding the Brute."

There is a great deal in the old saying that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. If he isn't well fed he is going to give trouble. Feed the old brute well and let him smoke in the house and he will be as tame as the family horse, but be careless about his feed and he is apt to swear and cut up like a hally rube. Therefore, it is wise for every girl to look well to her kitchen education. It is true that man is hooked in the parlor, but it is the kitchen that enables you to hold him.

A kitchen is to the home what the engine-room is to a power plant or a

locomotive to a train. If things go wrong in the engine-room, there's the devil to pay. If the locomotive is out of fix, the train must be switched to the siding. If the kitchen is not competently and efficiently conducted the old man will fly off at a tangent and possibly swear where the children can hear him. Moreover, he is apt to find excuses to eat down town where pretty girls with white, fluff-tinged aprons, dimples, ribbons and things do the hash-slaging.—Houston Post.

Would Cut a Spurge.

"H." says the Alfalfa Sage, "I ever become wealthy the first thing I will do will be to purchase the biggest touring car in town, and the second thing will be to purchase two more."