The Adventures of Akbar

[Illustrated]

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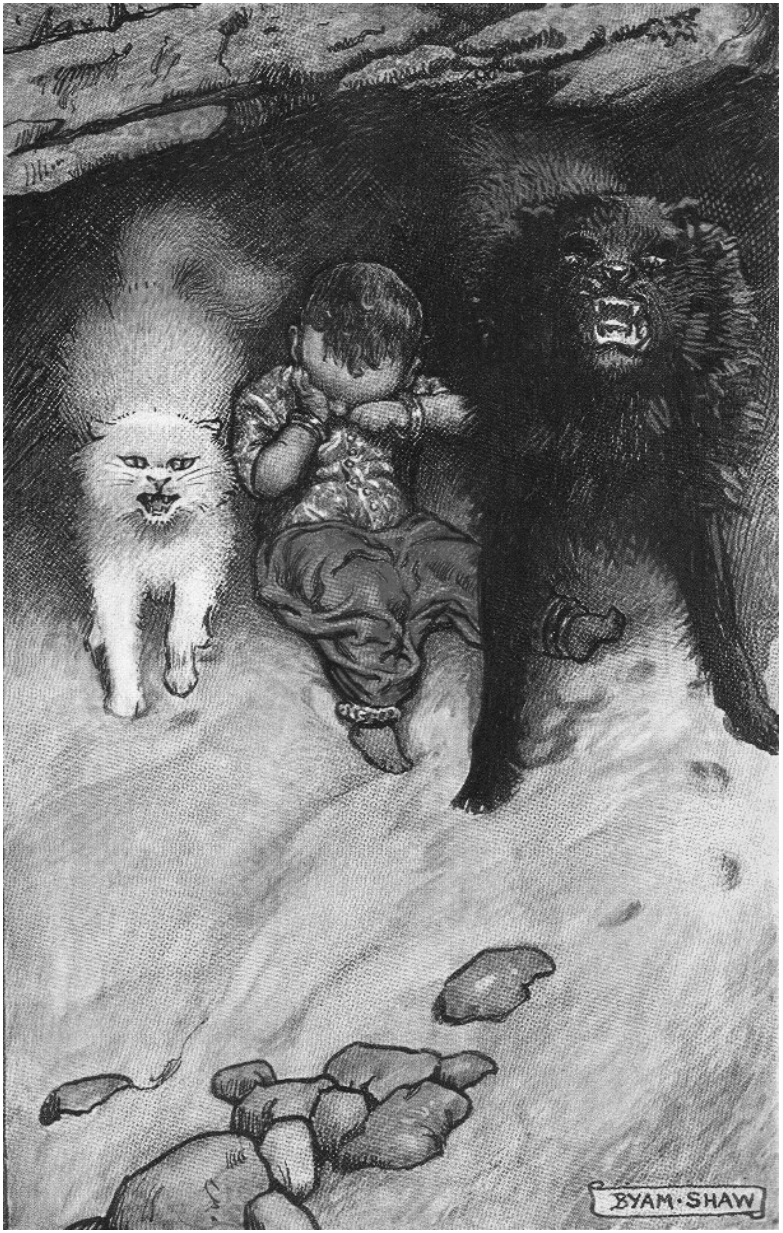
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BYAM·SHAW

A DEDICATION

Often when the house lay silent in the heat

My thoughts would be so full of you, my sweet,

That dreaming half—I seemed to hear once more

Your little fingers fluttering at the door,

The pitter patter of your childish feet

In joyous rhythm cross the echoing floor.

Then small, soft hands would nestle into mine,

And warm soft arms around my neck would twine,

As soft and warm the dream child on my knees,

Cuddling so close in clear young voice would tease

And tease and tease in mimicked glad young whine

For "Just one little story if you please."

So half in jest and half in earnest, too,
Mostly I think to dream my dreaming true,
I'd conjure up long tales of lands afar
And days gone by that yet remembered are;
Shaping my stories with this end in view
To gain the verdict "Tell some more, Mamma."

For I was happy when I had beguiled
Into my life the spirit of a child.
Thus one by one the weary hours flew
And page by page a little volume grew,
So—that my dreams with truth be reconciled,
Take it, my darling, it was writ for you.

April, 1875

Long years have sped since that poor book was penned.

None read the pages. Therefore at the end

Of this world's life I dedicate to two

Small boys—her sons—whose question'ng eyes of blue

Tell me that dreams of childhood never end

This book. So take it boys—'twas writ for you.

1911

PREFACE

THIS book is written for all little lads and lasses, but especially for the former, since it is the true—*quite* true—story of a little lad who lived to be, perhaps, the greatest king this world has ever seen.

It is a strange, wild tale this of the adventures of Prince Akbar among the snowy mountains between Kandahâr and Kâbul, and though the names may be a bit of a puzzle at first, as they will have to be learned by and bye in geography and history lessons, it might be as well to get familiar with them in a storybook; though, indeed, as everybody in it except Roy the Râjput, Meroo the cook boy; Tumbu, the dog; and Down, the cat (and these four *may* have been true, you know, though they have not been remembered) really lived, I don't know whether this book oughtn't to be considered real history, and therefore

A LESSON BOOK

Anyhow, I hope you won't find it dull.

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FAREWELL

Bismillah Al-la-hu Akbar!

THESE queer-looking,queer-sounding words, which in Arabic mean "thanks be to God," were shrilled out at the very top of Head-nurse's voice. Had she been in a room they would have filled it and echoed back from the walls; for she was a big, deep-chested woman. But she was only in a tent; a small tent, which had been pitched in a hurry in an out-of-the-way valley among the low hills that lead from the wide plains of India to Afghanistan. For Head-nurse's master and mistress, King Humâyon and Queen Humeeda, with their thirteen months' old little son, Prince Akbar, were flying for their lives before their enemies. And these enemies were led by Humâyon's own brothers, Prince Kumran, Askurry and Hindal. It is a long story, and a sad story, too, how Humâyon, so brave, so clever, so courteous, fell into misfortune by his own fault, and had to fly from his beautiful palaces at Delhi and wander for years, pursued like a hare, amid the sandy deserts and pathless plains of Western India. And now, as a last resource, his followers dwindled to a mere handful,

he was making a desperate effort to escape over the Persian border and claim protection at the hands of Persia's King.

So the poor tent was ragged and out at elbows, for all that it was made of costly Kashmir shawls, and that its poles were silver-gilt.

But Head-nurse's "Thanks be to God!" came from a full heart.

"What is it? What *is* it?" called an anxious voice from behind the curtain which divided the tent in two.

"What?" echoed Head-nurse in high glee. "Only this: His Imperial Highness, Prince Akbar, the Admired-of-the-World, the Source-of-Dignity, the Most-Magnificent-Person-of-the-Period—" She went on, after her wont, rolling out all the titles that belonged of right to the little Prince, until the soft, anxious voice lost patience and called again, "Have done—have done; what is it? Heaven save he hath not been in danger."

Head-nurse, stopped in her flow of fine words, sniffed contemptuously. "Danger! with me to guard him? No! 'Tis that the High-in-Pomp hath cut his first real back tooth! He can eat meat! He has come to man's estate! He is no longer dependent upon milk

diet." Here she gave a withering glance at the gentle looking woman who was Baby Akbar's wet-nurse, who, truth to tell, was looking just a little sad at the thought that her nursling would soon leave her consoling arms.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the voice from within, "say you so?" And the next instant the curtain parted, and there was Queen Humeeda, Baby Akbar's mother, all smiling and eager.

Now, if you want to know what she was like, you must just think of your own dearest dear mummie. At least that was what she seemed to little Prince Akbar, who, at the sight of her, held out his little fat arms and crowed, "Amma! Amma!" Now, this, you will observe, is only English "Ma-Ma" arranged differently; from which you may guess that English and Indian children are really very much alike.

And Queen Humeeda took the child and kissed him and hugged him just as any English mother would have done. Head-nurse, however, was not a bit satisfied with this display of affection. That would have been the portion of any ordinary child, and Baby Akbar was more than that: he was the heir apparent to the throne of India! If he had only been in the palaces that belonged to him, instead of in a

miserable tent, there would have been ceremonials and festivities and fireworks over this cutting of a tooth! Aye! *Certainly* fireworks. But how could one keep up court etiquette when royalty was flying for its life? Impossible! Why, even her determination that, come what might, a royal umbrella must be held over the blessed infant during their perilous journeys had very nearly led to his being captured!

Despite this recollection, as she listened impatiently to the cooings and gurglings, she turned over in her mind what she could do to commemorate the occasion. And when pretty Queen Humeeda (thinking of her husband, the king, who, with his few followers, had ridden off to see if a neighboring chief would help them) said, "This will be joyful news wherewith to cheer my lord on his return," Head-nurse's irritation found voice.

"That is all very well," she cried. "So it would be to any common father of any common child, Your Royal Highness! This one is the Admired-of-the-Whole-World, the Source-of-Dignity, the Most-Magnificent-Person-of-the-Period——"

And she went on rolling out queer guttural Arabic titles till Foster-mother implored her to be silent or

she would frighten the child. Could she not see the look on the darling's face?

For Baby Akbar was indeed listening to something with his little finger up to command attention. But it was not to Head-nurse's thunderings, but to the first long, low growl of a coming storm that outside the miserable tent was turning the distant hills to purple and darkening the fast-fading daylight.

"Frighten?" echoed Head-nurse in derision. "The son of Humâyon the heroic, the grandson of Baber the brave could never be frightened at anything!"

And in truth the little lad was not a bit afraid, even when a distant flash of lightning glimmered through the dusk.

"Heavens!" cried gentle Queen Humeeda, "his Majesty will be drenched to the skin ere he returns." She was a brave woman, but the long, long strain of daily, hourly danger was beginning to tell on her health, and the knowledge that even this coming storm was against them brought the tears to her eyes.

"Nay! Nay! my royal mistress," fussed Head-nurse, who, in spite of her love of pomp, was a kind-hearted, good woman, "this must not be on such an auspicious day. It must be celebrated otherwise, and for all we are so poor, we can yet have ceremonial.

When the child was born were we not in direst danger? Such danger that all his royal father could do in honor of the glad event was to break a musk-bag before his faithful followers as sign that the birth of an heir to empire would diffuse itself like perfume through the whole world? Even so now, and if I cannot devise some ceremony, then am I no Head-nurse!"

So saying she began to bustle around, and ere long even poor, unhappy Queen Humeeda began to take an interest in the proceedings.

A mule trunk, after being ransacked for useful odds and ends, was put in a corner and covered with a worn satin quilt. This must do for a throne. And a strip of red muslin wound about the little gold-embroidered skull cap Baby Akbar wore must, with the heron's plume from his father's state turban, make a monarch of the child.

In truth he looked very dignified indeed, standing on the mule trunk, his little legs very wide apart, his little crimson silk trousers very baggy, his little green brocade waistcoat buttoned tight over his little fat body, and, trailing from his shoulders in great stiff folds, his father's state cloth-of-gold coatee embroidered with seed pearls.

So, as he always wore great gold bracelets on his little fat arms, and great gold jingling anklets fringing his little fat feet, he looked very royal indeed. Very royal and large and calm, for he was a grave baby with big, dark, piercing eyes and a decided chin.

"He is as like his grandfather as two splits of a pea!" cried Head-nurse in rapture, and then she went to the tent door and shrilled out:

"Slaves! Quick! Come and perform your lowly salute on the occasion of the cutting of a back tooth belonging to the Heir-to-Empire, the Most——"

She cut short her string of titles, for a crash of thunder overhead warned her she had best be speedy before the rain soaked through the worn tent.

"Quick, slaves!" she added; "keep us not waiting all day. Enter and prostrate yourselves on the ground with due reverence! Quick! Quick!"

She need not have been in such a hurry, for it did not take long for the "slaves," as she called them, to perform their lowly salaam by touching the very ground with their foreheads. There were but three of them—Old Faithful, the trooper; Roy, the Râjput boy; and Meroo, the scullion; the rest were away with their master, King Humâyon.

Old Faithful, however, tall, lank, grey-bearded, brought enough devotion for half a dozen followers. He had served with little Akbar's grandfather, Babar the brave, and when he saw the child standing so fair and square, he gave almost a sharp cry of remembrance and delight. And when he stood up after his prostration, in soldier fashion he held out the hilt of his old sword for the baby to touch in token that its service was accepted. Queen Humeeda, who stood beside her little son, guided his fat fingers to the sword; but at the very moment a vivid flash of lightning made her give a shriek and cover her face with her hands. But little Prince Akbar having got a hold of the hilt, would not let go. And to Old Faithful's huge delight he pulled and pulled till the sword came out of the scabbard.

"An omen! An omen!" cried the old man. "Like his grandfather, he will fight battles ere he be twelve!"

Then there was Roy, the Râjput lad, whom the royal fugitives had found half dead from sunstroke in the wide, sandy Râjputana deserts, and whom, with their customary kindness, they had succoured and befriended, putting him on as a sort of page boy to the little Heir-to-Empire. He was a tall, slim lad for his twelve years, was Roy, with a small, well-set head and a keen, well-cut face. And his eyes! They

were like a deer's—large, brown, soft, but with a flash in them at times.

For the sunstroke which had so nearly killed the lad had left his mind a little confused. As yet he could remember nothing of what had happened to him before it, and could not even recollect who he was, or anything save that his name was Roy. But every now and again he would say something or do something which would make those around him look surprised, and wonder who he could have been to know such things and have such manners.

After him came Meroo, the misshapen cook-boy. He was an odd fellow, all long limbs and broad smiles, who, when his time arrived, shambled forward, cast himself in lowliest reverence full length on the ground and blubbered out his delight—now that the princely baby could really eat—at being able to supply all sorts of toothsome stews full of onions and green ginger, to say nothing of watermelons and sugar cane. These things, strange to say, being to little Indian children very much what chocolate creams and toffee are to English ones.

So far all had gone well, and now there only remained one more salute to be made. But little Adam,

who was Head-nurse's own son, and who had hitherto been Baby Akbar's playmate, refused absolutely to do as he was bid. He was a short, sturdy boy of five, and nothing would induce him to go down on his knees and touch the ground with his forehead. In vain Meroo, the cook-boy, promised him sweets if he would only obey orders; in vain Old Faithful spoke of a ride on his old war-horse, and Roy, who was a most wonderful story-teller, promised him the best of all, Bopuluchi. In vain his mother, losing patience at such a terrible piece of indecorum, rushed at him and cuffed him soundly. He only howled and kicked.

And then suddenly Baby Akbar, who had been listening with a solemn face, brought his little bare foot down on the mule trunk with such a stamp that the golden anklets jingled and jangled, and his little forefinger went up over his head in the real Eastern attitude of royal command.

"Salute, slave, salute," he said with a tremendous dignity. And there was something so comical about the little mite of a child, something so masterful in the tiny figure, something so commanding in the loud, deep-toned baby voice, that every one laughed, and somehow or other Adam forgot his obstinacy and made his obeisance like a good boy.

And then once more pretty Queen Humeeda hugged and kissed her little son, and all the rest applauded him, and made so much of him that he began to think he had done something very fine indeed, and crowed and clapped his hands in delight.

But the merriment did not last long, for there was a clatter of horses and swords outside the tent.

"My husband!" cried Queen Humeeda in a flutter. "What news does my lord bring?"

THE FIRST VICTORY

THE next moment a tall, handsome man entered the tent; but one look at his pale, anxious face was enough to tell those inside that the news was bad. So for an instant there was silence; and in the silence, with a deafening roar and a blinding blaze of blue light, came a terrific crash of thunder followed by a sudden fierce pelt of hail upon the taut tent roof.

It sent a shiver through the listeners. They felt that the storm had broken indeed upon their heads, that danger was close beside them.

Then the King stepped to his wife's side and took her hand, and as he spoke there was a sob in his breath as of an animal who after a long chase finds himself at last driven to bay.

"Come!" he said briefly, "there may yet be a chance for us. My horse, weary though it be, will suffice for thy light weight. In the mountains lies possible safety. Come! There is not a moment to lose."

"But—but the child—" faltered the Queen.

King Humâyon's voice failed him. He could not speak for a moment; but he shook his head.

"I will not leave the child—" began the wretched mother. "My lord! thou canst not have the heart——"

"It is his only chance—" interrupted the poor King, his face full of grief and anger, of bitter, bitter regret—"His only chance of life! In the mountains yonder, with winter snow upon us, lies certain death for one so young. Were we to stay with him here, he would find death with us—for my brother Askurry is close behind us. But if we are gone, God knows, but he might spare the child. Askurry is not all unkind, and the little lad favors my father so much that his blessed memory may be safeguard. God send it so. It is his best chance, his only chance. So come——"

"I cannot! I cannot!" moaned the poor mother distractedly.

"There is no other way, sweetheart!" said the King, "so be brave, little mother, and come for thy son's sake. He will be safer here than with thee. Come! trusting in God's mercy for the child. And come quickly while the darkness of the storm shrouds our going."

Then he looked round on those others—Head-nurse, Wet-nurse, Old Faithful, Roy the Râjput, and Meroo the cook-boy—not much of a bodyguard for the young prince, and yet, since force would be useless, perhaps as good as any other, if they had a head between them. But the nurses were women, Faithful nothing but an old soldier, and the two others were mere boys. Some one else must be left. Who? Then he remembered Foster-father, Foster-mother's husband. He was the man. Solid, sober, clear-headed. So, as Queen Humeeda was being hurriedly wrapped in a shawl by the two weeping nurses, he gave them a few directions. They were to stay where they were, no matter what happened, until Foster-father returned from showing the fugitives a path he knew to the mountains, and then——

King Humâyon could say no more. Only as, after a hurried, tearless, hopeless farewell to his little son, he paused at the tent door to take a last look, his half-fainting wife in his arms, he said suddenly in a sharp, loud voice:

"Remember! In your charge lies the safety of the Heir-to-Empire."

The words sank into the very hearts of those who stood watching the group of hurrying figures making its way rapidly toward the hills.

"Pray Heaven," muttered Old Faithful anxiously, "that they be over the rise before those who follow see them."

So they stood fearfully watching, watching. And Heaven was kind, for though one great blue blaze of lightning showed the fugitives clear against the sky line, when the next came there was nothing but the rugged rocks.

Then for the first time Baby Akbar, who had been silent in his nurses' arms, watching with the rest, lifted up his deep-toned baby voice:

"Daddy, Amma," he said contentedly, "gone up in a 'ky."

Whereupon Foster-mother wept loudly and prayed that good angels might protect her darling.

But Head-nurse was more practical, and set about considering how best that safety might be secured. Who was there who could help? No one of much use, truly, though every one was brimful of devotion and ready to give his or her life for the Heir-to-Empire.

"I will kill the first man who dares—" began Old Faithful.

"Aye! The first! But how about the last, old man?" interrupted Head-nurse. "Force will be of no avail. Askurry hath half an army with him."

"Harm shall only come to the child through my body," wept Foster-mother, whereat Head-nurse laughed scornfully.

"Woman's flesh is a poor shield, fool! God send we find better protection than thy carcass."

"Boo! hoo!" blubbered Meroo the cook-boy. "Lo! Head-nurse! I could kill a whole army by poisoning their suppers."

Head-nurse nodded faint approval. "Now, there is some sense in that, scullion, but what about that they may do supperless? If they should dare——"

"They will not dare," said a clear, sharp voice, and Roy the Râjput lad stepped forward, a light in his great eyes. "My mother used to say, 'Fear not! A king's son is a king's son always, so be that he forgets not kingship.'"

Head-nurse stood puzzled for a second, then she caught the meaning of the lad's words, for she was

a clever, capable woman, and had all a woman's quickness.

"Thou art right, my lad," she said slowly, looking curiously at Roy, from whose face the flash of memory seemed to have passed. "Thou art right. In royalty lies safety. The Heir-to-Empire must receive his enemies as a King! Quick! slaves! Close the tent door and let us bring forth all we have, and make all things as regal as we can. There is no time to lose."

And they did not lose any. The result being that when, quarter of an hour afterward, Prince Askurry, bitterly disappointed at finding that his real quarry, the King and Queen, had escaped, strode with some of his followers into the tent where he was told Baby Akbar was to be found, he paused at the door, first in astonishment and then in amusement.

It was really rather a pretty picture which he saw. To begin with the tent had been lit up with the little rushlight lamps they call in India *chiraghs*—tiny saucers which can be made of mud in which a cotton wick floats in a few drops of oil—and a row of these outlined the mule trunk throne. Then Meroo's misshapen limbs had been hidden under a chain corselet and helmet, so he made quite a respectable fellow