Red Thread of Honour, The.

By Doyle, Sir Francis Hastings Charles .

Told to the Author by the late Sir James Napier

Eleven men of England

A breast-work charged in vain;

Eleven men of England

Lie stripped, and gashed, and slain.

Slain; but of foes that guarded

Their rock-built fortress well,

Some twenty had been mastered,

When the last soldier fell.

Whilst Napier piloted his wondrous way

Across the sand-waves of the desert sea,

Then flashed at once, on each fierce clan, dismay,

Lord of their wild Truckee.

These missed the glen to which their steps were bent,

Mistook a mandate, from afar half heard,

And, in that glorious error, calmy went

To death without a word.

The robber-chief mused deeply,

Above those daring dead;

`Bring here,' at length he shouted,

`Bring quick, the battle thread.

Let Eblis blast for ever

Their souls, if Allah will:

But WE must keep unbroken

The old rules of the Hill.

`Before the Ghiznee tiger

Leapt forth to burn and slay;

Before the holy Phrophet

Taught our grim tribes to pray;

Before Secundra's lances

Pierced through each Indian glen;

The mountain laws of honour

Were framed for fearless men.

`Still, when a chief dies bravely,

We bind with green one wrist -

Green for the brave; for heroes,

ONE crimson thread we twist.

Say ye, O gallant hillmen,

For these, whose life has fled,

Which is the fitting colour,

The green one, or the red?'

`Our brethren, laid in honoured graves, may wear

Their green reward,' each noble savage said:

`To these, whom hawks and hungry wolves shall tear,

Who dares deny the red?'

Thus conquering hate, and stedfast to the right,

Fresh from the heart that haughty verdict came;

Beneath a waning moon each spectral height

Rolled back its loud acclaim.

Once more the chief gazed keenly

Down on those daring dead;

From his good sword their hearts' blood

Crept to that crimson thread.

Once more he cried, `The judgment,

Good friends is wise and true;

But, though the red be given,

Have we not more to do?

`These were not stirred by anger,

Nor yet by lust made bold;

Renown they thought above them,

Nor did they look for gold.

To them their leader's signal

Was as the voice of God:

Unmoved, and uncomplaining,

The path it showed they trod.

`As, without sound or struggle,

The stars unhurrying march,

Where Allah's finger guides them,

Through yonder purple arch,

These Franks, sublimely silent,

Without a quickened breath,

Went, in the strength of duty,

Straight to their goal of death.

`If I were now to ask you

To name our bravest man,

Ye all at once would answer

They called him Mehrab Khan.

He sleeps among his fathers,

Dear to our native land,

With the bright mark he bled for

Firm round his faithful hand.

`The songs they sing of Roostum

Fill all the past with light;

If truth be in their music,

He was a noble knight.

But were those heroes living,

And strong for battle still,

Would Mehrab Khan or Roostum

Have climbed, like these, the Hill?'

And they replied, `Though Mehrab Khan was brave,

As chief, he chose himself what risks to run;

Prince Roostum lied, his forfeit life to save,

Which these had never done.'

`Enough!' he shouted fiercely;

`Doomed though they be to hell,

Bind fast the crimson trophy

Round BOTH wrists -bind it well.

Who knows but that great Allah

May grudge such matchless men,

With none so decked in heaven,

To the fiends' flaming den?'

Then all those gallant robbers

Shouted a stern `Amen!'

They raised the slaughtered sergeant,

They raised his mangled ten.

And when we found their bodies

Left bleaching in the wind,

Around BOTH wrists in glory

That crimson thread was twined.

Then Napier's knightly heart, touched to the core,

Run, like an echo, to that knightly deed,

He bade its memory live for evermore,

That those who run may read.