The Potter's Thumb, Vol. 1

Flora Annie Webster Steel

Table of Contents

The Potter's Thumb, Vol. 1 ..... **1**
Flora Annie Webster Steel 2
CHAPTER I 3
CHAPTER II 10
CHAPTER III 16
CHAPTER IV 20
CHAPTER V 26
CHAPTER VI 31
CHAPTER VII 37
CHAPTER VIII 44
CHAPTER IX 49
CHAPTER X 53

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- CHAPTER I
- CHAPTER II
- CHAPTER III
- CHAPTER IV
- CHAPTER V
- CHAPTER VI
- CHAPTER VII
- CHAPTER VIII
- CHAPTER IX
- CHAPTER X

CHAPTER I

"**TIS** only the potter's thumb, Huzoor.'

As she raised the parti−coloured rag covering the child's body, the noonday sun streamed down upon a pitiful sight. Yet her eyes, despite the motherhood which lay in them, accepted it, as the sun did, calmly. Emotion, such as it was, being reserved for the couple of Englishmen who stood by: and even there curiosity and repulsion froze the surface of pity, especially in the younger of the two faces.

In good sooth, not a pleasant sight for mankind, to whom sickness does not as a rule bring that quick interest born of a desire to aid which it does to most women. The brown skin was fair with the pallor of disease, and the fine, sparse, black hair showed the contour of the skull. The unnatural hollows of the temples emphasised the unnatural prominence of the closed eyelids, round whose ragged margin of clogged lashes the flies settled in clusters. Below this death's−head was an over−large body, where, despite its full curves, each rib stood sharply defined, and whence the thin limbs angled themselves in spidery fashion.

'The potter's thumb?' echoed Dan Fitzgerald interrogatively. He was a tall man, broad in the shoulders, lean in the flank, and extraordinarily handsome; yet the most noticeable quality in the face looking down at the very ordinary woman squatting upon a very ordinary dust−heap, was not its beauty, but its vitality. 'Is that a disease?' he added, almost sharply.

She gave the native cluck of emphatic denial. 'No! Huzoor. The child dies because it does not drink milk properly; yet is it the potter's thumb in the beginning. Lo! many are born so in this place. The doctor−sahib who put the *tikka* on the arms for smallpox said Hodinuggur was too old for birth—that it was a graveyard. I know not. Only this is true; many are born with this; many die of it.'

'Die of the potter's thumb—what potter?'

Her broad face broadened still more into a smile. 'The Huzoor doth not understand! Lo! when the potter works on the clay, his hand slips sometimes in the moulding. It leaves a furrow, so,'—her brown finger, set with tarnished silver rings, traced a girdle round the baby's naked breast—'then in the firing the pot cracks. Cracks like these,'—here the finger pointed to the sherds among which she sate,—'so when children are born as this one, we say 'tis the potter's thumb. Sometimes there is a mark,'—again the finger softly followed the line it had traced before—'this one had it clear when he came; sometimes none can see it, but 'tis there all the same, all the same. The potter's thumb has slipped; the pot will crack in the firing.'

Her voice took a cadence as if accustomed to the words.

'What **is** she saying?' interrupted George Keene impatiently. He was a middle−sized lad of twenty or thereabouts, powerfully made, with grey eyes and white teeth gleaming in an aquiline, sunburnt face.

'Something ghastly,' replied Dan. 'It always is so, you'll find, my dear boy, when you dip below the indifferent calm of these people. It's like deciphering a tombstone. But come on. We are due already at the World, the Flesh, and the Devil's.' Then he paused, gave a short laugh, and flung out his hands in an impulsive gesture. 'By the Powers!' he went on, his face seeming to kindle with the fuel of his own fancy, 'it's gruesome entirely. This heap of dust they call Hodinuggur, as they call thousands of such human ant−hills all over India; for wherever when you dig, the bricks grow bigger and bigger till, **hocus pocus**! they vanish in the dust from which God made man—**that** is Hodinuggur; the old city, it means. What city? who knows! Then in the corner of this particular one a survival'—his eager hand pointed to the pile of buildings before them—'not of those old days, for no Moghul in India dates beyond Timoor, and these people are Moghuls; but of that Mohammedan civilisation which overwhelmed the older one, just as we in our turn are overwhelming the Moghul—who in the meantime bullies the people by virtue of an Englishman's signature on a piece of parchment—'

'But I suppose we found the Diwan in possession when we annexed—' began George stolidly.

Dan scorned the interruption and the common−sense. 'Oh, 'tis queer, looked at any way. A mound of sherds and dust higher than the gateway of the palace. I'll go bail that reed hut yonder on the top is higher than old Zubr−ul−Zamân's tower. He lives up there winter and summer, does the old Diwan, looking out over his world and the strength of it—that's what his name means, you know. His son, Khush−hâl Beg, lives in the next storey. A Jack Falstaff of a man—that s why I call him the Flesh. Then Dalel, the Devil, roams about seeking whom he may devour.'

'A charming trio; and what part have I to play in the drama?' asked George with a laugh.

'St. George, of course.'

The lad laughed louder. 'So I am in baptism. George for short. Born on the saint's day—father a parson—fire away, old chap—don't let me pull Pegasus.'

'Sure! my dear boy, and aren't you sent to fight them all? Sent into this wilderness of a place to be tempted—'

'Oh, don't talk rot, Fitzgerald! I suppose you mean about the sluice−gate; but it's sheer folly.'

'Is it? My two last subordinates didn't find it so. Perhaps the potter's thumb had slipped over their honesty. So the authorities gave me you—a real white man—and said it was my last chance. Think of that now, my boy, and be careful.'

George Keene frowned perceptibly.

'That's a fine old gateway,' he said, to change the subject. As they approached it a flock of iridescent pigeons rocketed from the dark niches to circle and flash against the sky. It was a great square block of a building cut through by one high arch of shadow, and showing the length of the tunnel in the smallness of the sunlit arch beyond. On the worn brick causeway, as they entered, half in the sunshine, half in shade, lay the scattered petals of a pomegranate blossom which some passer−by had flung aside.

'By Jove, what a colour!' said Fitzgerald; 'like drops of blood.'

George Keene frowned again. 'If I had your diseased imagination I'd engage lodgings in Bedlam. Seriously, I mean it. Fellows like you are get rid of it in words—all froth and fuss; but if that sort of thing ever got a real grip on me—Hullo! what's that?' He flushed through his tan in sheer vexation at his own start. From the deep recesses, which on either side of the causeway lost themselves in shadow, came a clash as of silver bells, and something through the arches showed white yet shadowy; something of exceeding grace, salaaming to the *sahib−logue*; something sending the scent of jasmine flowers into the hot air.

'That is Chấndni,' said Dan, passing on regardless of the salutation, 'she generally sits here.'

George, imitating his companion, felt the thrill still in his veins. 'Chấndni!' he echoed, 'that means silvery, doesn't it?'

'Moonshine also. They call her Chấndni−rất or Moonlit−night as a rule. If tales be true, there is a good deal of the night about her. She and Dalel—but here he comes, innocently, from a side door. The Devil loves moonshiny nights.'

The figure approaching them was not outwardly of diabolic mould, being altogether too insignificant. The oval face was barely shadowed by a thin beard curling in an oiled tuft on either side of the retreating chin, and the only Mephistophelian feature was the narrow line of moustache waxed upwards towards the eyes. The dress was nondescript to absurdity. A biretta−shaped Moghul cap, heavy with church embroidery, sate jauntily on the long greasy hair; a blue velvet shooting−coat, cut in Western fashion, was worn over baggy, white cotton drawers, and these again were tucked away into sportsmanlike leather gaiters, ending in striped socks and patent leather highlows. Such was Mirza Dalel Beg, the Diwan's grandson. Behind him came lesser bloods of the same type: one with a falcon on his wrist; all with curious eyes for George Keene, the new−comer.

'Hullo, Dalel sahib!' cried Dan in English. 'Keene, let me introduce you in form to his Highness.'

The Mirza thrust out a small, cold, clammy hand; but thereinafter relapsed into such absolute inaction, that George found no little difficulty in finishing the ceremony.

'Aha, I see!' said his Highness jerkily, in a voice many tones too low for his chest measurement. 'Glad to see you, Keene. You shoot, I lend you gun or rifle. You hawk, we go hawk together. You hunt, you use my crocks. Come, see my stable.'

Dan's eyebrows went up expressively. 'Don't tempt him to−day, Mirza sahib,' he interrupted gravely. 'We are already due at the State audience with your grandfather. Aren't you to be there as heir−presumptive?'

Dalel crackled with a high−toned laugh which did not match his voice. 'Bosh! My gov'nor is there in swagger dress. He likes. I am different. Good−bye, Keene. You must come often, and we will go shoot, hunt, polo, billiard, and be jolly. Ta, ta! I go to stables.'

The two Englishmen walked on in silence for a while. Then George Keene looked at his companion with a queer smile.

'So, that's the Devil?—that—that heterogeneous bounder—'

'Heterogeneous bounder is good—parlous good,' replied Dan, still gravely; 'but here is our reception party, so, for heaven's sake, look dignified, and don't shake hands, mind, unless they offer to do so. They know their own rank, you see; you don't know yours.'

The lad, as he obeyed orders, felt that he knew very little of anything in India; the fact being evident in the surprise with which he noted the squalid appearance of all things, save the ruinous masonry; even of the state−room where, on a cane−bottomed chair, set on a filthy striped carpet, a mountain of flesh awaited them. It did not need his companion's whisper to make him understand that this must be the heir−apparent Khush−hâl Beg, for the fat man, coming forward to the appointed stripe—thus far and no further—held out his hand.

'The Huzoor is young,' he wheezed in a stately dignified voice. 'But youth is a great gift. With it even the desert need not be dull. 'Tis only as we grow older—' He paused and crossed his hands over his fat stomach with a sigh, as if to him the only consolation for age lay there. Dan shot one of his almost articulate looks at his companion as they passed on to a narrow stone stair where there was barely room for single−file order up the steep steps. Up and up it went seemingly in the thickness of the wall, with little loopholes sending a faint light at the turns; up and up, breathlessly, till the party emerged on the roof of the Diwan's tower, where, in a pavilion set round with arched arcades, they found the old man himself, backed by a semi−circle of shabby retainers, whose gay clothes showed tawdry in the pitiless sunlight.

Yet Dan's whisper of 'the World' provoked no smile in his companion, for there was nothing to smile at in Zubr−ul−Zamân, old and shrunken as he was. So old that those steep stairs cut him off from his kind; so old that his chin lay upon his breast, his palms upon his knees, as though both head and hands were weary of the world. What his heart thought of his ninety and odd years of life none knew. None could even guess, for the simple reason that Zubr−ul−Zamân had never showed that he possessed a heart. Of brains and skill he had no lack even now; but of pity, love, tenderness, only this was certain, that he had never sought them even in others. Yet the English boy had eyes only for that wrinkled, indifferent face, while Dan Fitzgerald, seated on one of the two cane−bottomed chairs set opposite the Diwan's red velvet one, explained in set terms why George came to be seated in the other. Not a pleasant tale altogether, told as it was with official boldness of expression. Briefly, the sluice−gate of the canal had been opened too often, and Government did not intend it to occur again.

When he ceased, the Diwan raised his head slowly, and George felt an odd thrill at his first sight at those luminous dark eyes; a thrill which continued as, at a sign from the old man, the court rhetorician standing surcharged with eloquence at the Diwan's right hand, burst into a stream of polished Persian periods which, hitting the keynote of the empty pavilion, roused a murmurous echo in its arcades. It reminded George of the general confession in his father's church on a week−day when the choir was absent; one certain note followed by faint efforts after repentance. The fancy, indeed, clung closer to facts than his ignorance of the language allowed him to perceive, as the speech dealt chiefly in regrets for the untoward events in the past which had made it incumbent on '*Gee Uff Keene sahib bahâdur*' to languish in the wilderness of Hodinuggur, though doubtless the presence of the said '*Gee Uff Keene sahib bahâdur*' would cause that desert to blossom like a rose, despite the want of water. These reiterations of his own name made George feel a sense of unknown responsibility, as of a baby at its own christening. He looked anxiously at Dan, his sponsor, but the latter was now conversing with the Diwan in the usual explosive sentences followed by the decorous silences due to dignity, while the attendants brought forward divers round brass trays covered with Manchester pocket−handkerchiefs and laid them at the visitors' feet. George's share consisted of three, one containing dried fruits and sugar, one of various rich cloths topped by a coarse white muslin *pugree*, the third conglomerate. A French clock, with Venus Anadyomene in alabaster, some pantomime jewelry, a green glass tumbler, a tin of preserved beetroot, a lacquered tray with the motto 'for a good boy,' and various other odds and ends. Among them a small blue earthenware pot. Was it blue after all, or did a gold shimmer suggest a pattern beneath the glaze? A queer, quaint shape, dumpy, yet graceful. That broad, straight ring around it should have marred its curves but failed to do so; strange! how these people had the knack of running counter to recognised rules, and yet— Here George was recalled to the present by Dan whispering—

'Take it, man! Take it!'

Looking round he saw the latter removing something from a tray, and his own head being full of the blue pot, his hand naturally went out towards it.

'No! no!' continued Dan, in the same voice, 'the *pugree*.'

'But I've got one already!'

The instinctive greed of the reply made his companion smile as he explained that the *pugree* was put there on purpose. But, as he spoke, the Diwan signed to an attendant who stepping forward, transferred the blue pot to the tray of dried fruits.

'It is nothing,' came the courteous voice, setting aside all disclaimers; 'our potter makes them.'

'I did not know they could put such a good glaze on nowadays,' remarked Fitzgerald, yielding the point. 'A first−rate piece of work indeed; does the man live here?'

Khush−hâl Beg turned to the speaker breathlessly. 'He is crazy, Huzoor. The Lord destroyed his reason by an accident. The old wall fell on his house one night and killed his daughter. Since then he lives away, where nought can fall, like the crazy one he is.'

The stress and hurry of the speech were evident, even though the fat man was still suffering from the stairs.

'Thank the Lord! that's over,' said Dan piously, when the last diminishing tail of escort left them with but one orderly to carry the spoil. 'I ought to have warned you about the *pugree*—but there! you might have done worse—the French clock, for instance. Come! let's strike home across the mound. I want to show you a dodge of mine on the canal cut.'

He plunged headlong, after his wont, into professional matters till even George, fresh from college technicalities, could scarcely follow him, and found himself wondering why a man of such vast capacity should have succeeded so indifferently; for Dan Fitzgerald was not a *persona grâta* at headquarters. To be that, a subordinate often has to conceal his own talents, and this man could not even conceal his faults. Some folk are so self−contained that a burden of blame finds no balance on their shoulders; others are so hospitable that they serve as hold−alls both for friends and foes; and there was plenty of room both for praise and blame in Dan Fitzgerald's excitable Celtic nature.

'What's that?' cried George suddenly. With the best intentions his attention had wandered, for everything in that circle of dun−coloured horizon domed with blue was new to him. Dan paused, listening. An odd rhythmic hum came from the highest hut, which was separated from the others by palisades of plaited tiger−grass shining in the afternoon light like a diaper of gold.

'The potter's wheel!' he cried, his face changing indescribably in an instant. 'Come on, Keene, and let us see the man who made your first bribe!'

He gave no time for reply, but turning at right angles through a gap threaded his way past piles of pots and sherds until he ran the sound to earth. Literally to earth—a circle of the solid earth spinning dizzily in front of a man buried to his waist. At least so it seemed at first to George Keene's ignorance of potters and their wheels. A circle, dazzling at its outer edge, clearer at the centre where something beneath a steady curved hand shot up, and bulged; then, as the whirr slackened, sank into a bomb of clay.

'Salaam alaikoom!' came a pleasant voice as the worker sat back in his seat−hole so as to ease his feet. He was a mild−faced old gentleman with nothing remarkable about him save a pair of shifty eyes—the light hazel eyes seen so rarely in a native's face.

'Salaam alaikoom,' returned Dan. 'The little sahib has never seen a wheel worked. Will you show him?'

'Wherefore not, Huzoor? The sahib could come to none better, seeing we of Hodinuggur have spun the wheel of life for years—for ages and ages and ages.'

The words blent with the rising cadence of the wheel as he leant forward to the task again. Faster and faster upon the wheel with a swaying motion. Only the potter's hand poised motionless above the whirring clay which showed—as children say—like a top asleep. Then suddenly came the turn of the potter's thumb, bringing a strange weird life with it. One protean curve after another swelling, sinking, shifting, falling. The eye could scarcely follow their swift birth and death, until the potter, sitting back once more, the slackening wheel disclosed the hollows and bosses.

'The clay is good,' he said, as if deprecating his own skill, 'and it fires well.'

'When the thumb does not slip,' put in Dan quietly. The potter turned to him in sudden interest.

'The Huzoor knows the sayings of the people, that is well; it is not often so. Yea! it slips—thus.' The wheel still span slowly, he shifted his hand almost imperceptibly and a deep furrow scored itself upon the biggest boss. 'So little does it,' he went on, 'a grit clinging to the skin—a wandering thought. It is Fate. Fuzl Elahi, the potter, cannot help it.'

'Fuzl Elahi? Then you are a Mohammedan?'

He shook his head. 'I am as my fathers were. The Moghuls call me so, the Hindus otherwise; but it means the same. By the grace of God, potter of Hodinuggur since time began. Lo! my fathers and my children are in the clay. I dug a grave in the dust for the boy; the girl dug hers for herself. It was deep, Huzoor. I search for it always; in vain, in vain.' The wheel set up its rhythmic hum once more, but the hands lay idle.

'Poor old chap,' said Dan aside, 'I suppose he is thinking of the accident; but by the powers, Keene, it **is** a situation. Seated here on a pinnacle—a crazy irresponsible creator—'

'Ask him if he made the pot, please,' interrupted George brutally. 'If I could get a pair, I'd send them to the *mater*. Those things are always in pairs, you know.'

'Pairs! you intolerable Philistine! A potter's vessel trying to be matched before it's broken in pieces. Think of the tragedy—the humour of it'

'Will you ask, or shall I?'

Fitzgerald grinned maliciously. 'You. I like to hear you stuttering.'

George smiled, rose, and taking the blue pot from the attendant's tray laid it on the potter's wheel.

'Did you make that?' he asked, in English. His meaning was palpable.

'No, Huzoor.'

'If you did not, who did?' he continued, his triumph mixed with anxiety for the future; but the old man's thoughts did duty for an answer.

'Without doubt my fathers made it; since it is an Ayôdhya pot.'

'Ayôdhya,' broke in Dan, 'that means old, Keene; you'll have to send it back. I half suspected it was valuable, from that old fox's look. But he said it was made here, the sinner! Can you make pots like that, oh! Fuzl Elahi?'

The old man smiled. 'None can give the glaze, Huzoor, there is a pattern in it, but none can catch the design. Even I know it not; that is the secret of Ayôdhya.'

'What is he saying? What is Ayôdhya?' asked George irritably.

'Same as Hodi—old; it means here the half−forgotten heroic age. Well, as you can't get a pair, we had best be moving. Salaam! potter−ji, and don't let your thumb slip too often in the future.'

'God send it hath not slipped too often in the past,' he replied, half to himself.

An hour afterwards the two Englishmen sat on the low parapet of the canal bridge looking out over a world−circle of dusty plain, treeless, featureless, save for the shadowy mound of Hodinuggur on one side, and on the other a red brick house dotted causelessly upon the sand. A world−circle split into halves by the great canal, which eastwards towards the invisible hills showed like a bar of silver; westwards towards the invisible sea like a flash of gold, at whose end the last beams of the setting sun hung like the star on a magician's wand.

'**Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink**,' murmured Dan Fitzgerald discontentedly. 'Upon my soul, it must be rough on them watching it all day long, and knowing that if they could only get **you** to open the sluice **they** would get rupees on rupees from the Rajah. That's how it stands, you see. It isn't so much for their own bit of land, but for the bribe. I sometimes wish the overflow cut had been higher up, or lower down, but we had to protect the big embankment against abnormal floods. Confound the thing! what business has it to put hydraulic pressure on us all?'

'Don't feel it much as yet,' said George cheerfully, with his eyes on the palace, which was gaining an unreal beauty from the dust of ages. For the village cattle were homing to the thorn−set folds, and the cloud from their leisurely feet lay in a golden mist between the shadowed plain and the shadowed mound rising against the golden sky. A lingering shaft of light showed the white fretwork of the Diwan's tower clear against the pale purple of the potter's thatch beyond.

'Perhaps not. You will, though. The wilderness plays the dickens with civilisation sometimes.'

'Does it? I don't believe it will with mine. Not that sort. I haven't your imagination, your sensitiveness, your poetical—'

'Pull up,' said Dan, laughing. 'You'll come to my vices soon, and as I've pet names for most of them, I object to have them scientifically classified. But I wish I hadn't to leave you there.' He pointed distastefully to the red parallelogram of a house with the initials of the Public Works Department stamped on each brick like the broad arrow on a convict. 'It isn't fit for a youngster like you. But as it can't be helped, there's the key. For my sake don't let the World, the Flesh, or the Devil wheedle it out of you.'

'All right,' replied the boy, pocketing the Chubb. 'If you are engaged to be married, go and do it right off. Promotion in due course guaranteed.'

Dan Fitzgerald, looking down at the sliding water, was silent for a minute. 'You've hit the right nail on the head,' he said at last. 'That's why I'm anxious; but by the powers! your work is cut out for you if you are to keep me from getting into hot water.'

'It isn't the water that does it,' muttered George, as they strolled off to dinner, 'it's the spirits.'

That was the truth in more senses than one. George had been living with his superior officer for two months at headquarters, and his cool, clear head had noted the fascination which stimulants of all kinds had for Dan's excitable nature. But he had said nothing, after the manner of men. Therefore it came as a surprise even to himself when that evening something made him say hurriedly—

'Better not, Fitzgerald; you've a long ride before you.'

Dan, his hand on the whisky bottle, paused, surprised in his turn; but George seemed to feel that key in his pocket outline itself against the thumping of his heart.

'Are you afraid I won't leave you any?' asked the elder quickly. 'I'll send you a bottle by post, if that's it. Come! hands off, youngster; don't be a fool! That's enough.'

The angry red was not on his cheek only. It had spread to the boy's, as he stood back in a sudden flare of utterly unexpected dignity.

'Quite enough, Mr. Fitzgerald. I've been your guest for two months, I know; but you are mine now. This is my house, and that's my bottle. I'll trouble you to put it down.'

For an instant it seemed on its way to the speaker's head; then it was pushed aside scornfully; the next Dan held out his hand.

'Thanks. No one has taken that trouble for years. What made you do it?'

But the English boy's shame at his own impulsiveness was on George now, and he laughed uneasily. 'I—I believe it was that confounded key,' he began. Dan's smile was transfiguring.

'God bless the boy!' he cried, with the ring of tears and laughter in his rich brogue. 'So you're the Keeper of the Key of the King's conscience, are you? The saints protect you; for see! your sort don't know mine. We leave off the effort after virtue where you begin, and I spend more solid holiness in refusing a glass of sherry than you do in keeping all the Ten Commandments. Sure the sun's got into my head, and I must be off to the water cure.'

He was out of the room, out of the house, standing on the bridge abutment and stripping as for dear life before George caught him up breathlessly and asked if he were quite mad.

'Not yet!' came the joyous voice. 'I'm going to swim up stream till I'm beat, and come down with the current—an epitome of my life!'

The rapid Indian twilight had fallen into night, but the moon had risen, and the air was warm with the first touch of spring which in Northern India treads close on the heels of the new year. Fitzgerald pausing for a second showed like a white statue on the buttress; then his curved body shot into the shadow with the cry—

'I come, Mother of All!'

Tristram's cry when he sprang to 'the sea's breast as to a mother's where his head night rest,' thought George, watching with the vague anxiety inseparable from the disappearance of life beneath the water. Ah! there he was—safe; turning his head to call out 'Don't wait, please! Tell the syce to have the mare ready for me in half an hour.'

Yet George did wait, watching the arrowy ripple cleaving the steel−grey path which led straight up to the steel−grey sky where the stars hung sparkling. If he thought they were reflected in the still water ahead as they were in the still water below the bridge, Dan must feel as if he was swimming in the ether!

Decidedly, imagination was catching. George Keene was reminded of the fact again as he stood looking over to the mound of Hodinuggur, and listening to the last echo of the horse's hoofs bearing Dan away from the wilderness. There was a light in the Diwan's tower, another in the potter's hut. He wondered vaguely which was really the highest; then, to check such idle thoughts, began on the first duty of youth in a foreign land—home letters.

'Dear father,' he wrote fluently, 'I arrived at Hodinuggur, my headquarters, to−day. It is—'

Half an hour afterwards he tore up the sheet angrily and went to bed.

CHAPTER II

IT was band−night in the public gardens; mail night also; a combination of dancing and picture papers, ensuring a large attendance in the big hall, which had been built, gravely, as a memorial to some departed statesman. But now English girls hurried through its dim corridors to the ladies' dressing−room, intent on changing tennis shoes for dancing slippers. English women took possession of the comfortable nooks between the pillars where there was room for two. English boys lounged about the vestibule, finishing their cigars and waiting for the band to strike up. English men drifted to billiards and whist, or to their own special corner in the reading−room.

A weird−looking place even at noon was the big hall set round with paste and paper mementoes of the semi−historic festivals held beneath its high arched roof; with shields from the Prince of Wales' ball, flags from the Imperial installation, trophies from the welcome given to our soldiers after an arduous campaign. But seen now by the few lamps lit at one end it looked positively ghostly, as if it must be haunted by a thousand memories of dead men, and women, and children who had flitted across the kaleidoscope of Rajpore society. Up in the gallery the native band, after playing 'God save the Queen' to the Aryan brother outside, was tuning up for dance music. And by−and−bye a couple would come waltzing out of the shadows into the bright reflections of the polished floor, and waltz back again. Then three or four couples, perhaps ten or a dozen; not more. Viewed from the other end, where the non−dancers sat in darkness, the scene looked like a dim reflection of something going on in another world.

And outside, under the rising moon, the builders of the hall trooped home to the packed highways and byways of the native city, full, no doubt, of that silent, evergreen wonder at the strange customs of the ruling race which is an integral part of native life; that ruling race which, with all its eccentricities, rules better than even the fabled Vicramiditya himself!

In the far corner of the inner reading−room a girl of about twenty stood looking at the new number of the *Scientific American*, keeping a stern watch the while on the present possessor of the *Saturday Review*. A tennis bat lay on the table beside her, and her workmanlike flannels and tan shoes showed what her occupation had been. For the rest, a well−made, well−balanced girl, looking as if she walked well, rode well, danced well, and took an honest pride in doing so. Her face was chiefly remarkable for a pair of beautifully arched eyebrows, and her best point was undoubtedly the poise of her head with its closely plaited coif of hair.

A sort of snore followed by a thud, told that people were passing in and out through the swing−doors of the outer room. Here, however, as befitted the abode of more serious literature, all was peaceful; almost empty in fact and its only other female occupant was a medical lady deep in the *Lancet*.

'Oh Gordon!' called a voice from the outer room, 'have you seen my daughter?'

'Miss Tweedie is here, sir,' replied the young man addressed. 'She has been for the last five minutes trying to make up her mind whether to go and dance, or brain Dr. Greenfell for keeping the *Saturday* so long.'

'Really, Mr. Gordon!' cried Rose Tweedie aghast 'No indeed not—Dr. Greenfell! I didn't really—I mean I was of course, but I don't now! Oh, it's awfully good of you.' Then as the apologetic little doctor moved away, pausing to say a few words to a tall gray−haired man who was entering, she turned aggressively to the offender: 'Why did you say that, Mr. Gordon?'

'Why, Miss Tweedie? Because you insisted yesterday that women preferred the truth, even when it was rude. And it was true. I suppose, as your father wants you, I have no hope of this dance; and I'm engaged for all the others.'

Rose Tweedie's eyebrows went up. 'How lucky for you! I mean, of course, how unlucky for me.' Then she added in more conciliatory tones, 'I'm not dancing to−night; these shoes won't do.' She thrust out her shapely foot with the careless freedom of a child.

'I can see no fault,' he replied artificially, putting up his eye−glass, 'they appear to me quite perfect.'

'Your knowledge of women doesn't apparently extend to their understandings,' she retorted quickly, her voice, as usual when she was irritated, showing a trace of Scotch accent. 'Oh father! if you want me to come home, I'm ready.'

Colonel Tweedie hesitated. A single glance at him suggested that the late Mrs. Tweedie must have been a women of strong individuality, or else that Rose had reverted to some ancestral type.

'Not, not exactly, my dear. I only—wanted to—er—speak to you.'

'Good−bye, Miss Tweedie,' said Lewis Gordon, taking the hint. 'Oh! by the way, sir, if your daughter will remember I'm a personal assistant, and excuse shop for an instant—Fitzgerald came back to−day from Hodinuggur.'

Rose Tweedie's face lit up. 'Did he say how Mr. Keene liked it?' she asked eagerly.

'I'm afraid not; but he can scarcely be expected to like the desert after—Rajpore. I shouldn't—under the circumstances. That is all, sir; except that he reports everything satisfactory, so far.'

The Colonel gave a little cough; it was his way of starting the official machine inside the social one. 'I hope—for Mr. Fitzgerald's sake it—it—er—may remain so. The past scandals have been a disgrace—er—to the Department.

'Not to him, though,' broke in Rose hotly. 'I think he is quite one of the nicest people I ever met.'

'And what is more, the ablest man we have in our service,' added Lewis Gordon heartily. The girl's face softened at his tone. If he would only speak like that always, instead of simpering and scraping!

'Well, father, what is it?' she asked when he had gone. The other readers had drifted away, and the medical lady looked as if even the last trump would not rouse her from the post−mortem she was perusing, so to all intents and purposes they were alone. Colonel Tweedie gave another little cough; it was an unusual occurrence in private matters, and she repeated her question with quickened interest.

'I want you, my dear, to go and speak to—to Mrs. Boynton. I've—I've asked her to come into camp with us this time.'

'Why?'

Pages full of words would fail to give a better idea of Rose Tweedie's mental outlook than this simple interrogation. Briefly, she must have a reason, good, bad, or indifferent, for everything. Her father, being her father and knowing this, had several ready.

'Dacre's wife isn't strong enough to face the sand, and you must have a chaperon—I mean another lady—you never need a chaperon of course, my dear—but if anything happened;—besides, we shall be very busy, and it will be lonely. I thought it better than leaving you at home. It isn't as if she were quite an outsider. She is Gordon's cousin, and he is my personal—'

'The widow of a cousin, you mean,' she interrupted with emphasis. 'A cousin he scarcely knew; and he never even saw **her** till he returned from furlough last year.'

'Didn't he, my dear?' said the Colonel feebly. 'Still, they are relations. Call each other by their Christian names, and—'

This time a laugh interrupted him; rather a hard laugh for a girl.

'What a number of cousins the Rajpore ladies must have!' she began.

'Not Mrs. Boynton, Rose; not Mrs. Boynton,' protested the Colonel with spirit.

'No, I admit it. She is perfectly lady−like. I don't really dislike her a bit.'

'Dislike! my dear Rose! who could dislike so—so—'

'I admit it again, father. She is charming. I catch myself watching her, just as if I were in love with her like all the nice men are.'

'Really, my dear Rose—'

'Well, dear, why not? She is perfectly sweet. Then she has such tact. Do you know she never allows an ungentlemanly man to fall in love with her? I often wonder how she manages it. It's awfully clever of her.' Rose, standing by the fire, shifted a log with her foot and the sparks flew upwards. 'Of course I would rather have had a girl; but I suppose it wouldn't have done. There! don't worry, dear! Go off to your whist. I'll settle it all.'

'My dear girl—'

She told him calmly that there was no need for gratitude, and Colonel James Tweedie, R.E., head of a great Department, slunk away abashed to the card−room. Rose was very fond of her father, though she understood him perfectly—after the manner of modern children; accepting him reasonably, with all his weaknesses, as the parent Providence had assigned to her. And why, if she would have him, should he not marry Mrs. Boynton? The mother, who had died when Rose was born, had been well remembered; the Colonel was still middle−aged, and when his daughter married might have long years of solitude before him. Would it be fair for her to object? It was another of Rose Tweedie's characteristics that this question came uppermost in her dealings with both friends and

foes. No! it would not be fair; there was no reason against it. None.

So she walked off calmly to the big hall, waiting to see Gwen Boynton's graceful figure, paired with some worthy partner, of course, come swaying out into the ring of light. But she was disappointed; for the very simple reason that the lady she sought was sitting with Lewis Gordon in the most comfortable corner in the whole building.

'Miss Tweedie!' said an eager voice behind her, as she stood instinctively marking the rhythm of the dance with one foot. 'Have you seen Mrs. Boynton? I can't find her anywhere.'

She turned gladly. It was Dan Fitzgerald, representing, as he always did, humanity at its handsomest. 'So you're back! No, Mr. Fitzgerald. She is not dancing, anyhow; but as those are the last bars, that is cold comfort. What a pity! when you came down to the hall on purpose.'

He flushed up like a girl; and she pointed to the gardenia in his button−hole.

'You don't go in for decoration except on state occasions,' she continued, 'and then you weren't at tennis. I always keep a look−out for you there; that back−handed return of yours from the line beats me. I've been trying it with the *chuprassie* bowling at me, but it didn't come off somehow. You must teach me when we are in camp.'

'Of course I will,' replied Dan cheerfully. Lewis Gordon would have simpered and said, 'Delighted, I'm sure.' The remembrance vexed Rose by its very appearance; as if it mattered what Gwen Boynton's cousin said or did. And the vexation accounted for the phrasing of her next words.

'Mr. Keene sent me a message, didn't he? No! How stupid of him! It was about his *Nature*. I was to have it, and he was to let me know what he wanted me to do with it.'

Dan's face, which had showed perplexity, cleared. 'Ah, it's the magazine you're meaning. Sure you puzzled me entirely, for it is not nature you want, Miss Tweedie, though, 'tis true, one can't have too much of a good thing.'

It was a distinct compliment or meant to be one, but Rose listened to it gaily, and five minutes after, despite her shoes, was whirling in and out of the shadows, full of the keen enjoyment which dancing brings to some people.

Lewis Gordon, lounging lazily in his dark corner, noticed her with a certain irritated surprise. It was a more inconsequent, therefore a more womanly action than he expected in a girl who annoyed him by refusing to take either of the two places he assigned to women folk in his Kosmos. There were those of whom wives and mothers could be made discreetly, safely; and those who would be utterly spoilt by the commonplace process. He turned to his cousin feeling no such difficulty in regard to her classification. Yet in the dim light nothing could be seen save the outline of a small head, a huge fur boa, and long curves ending in a bronzed slipper catching the light beyond the shadow in which they sat.

'Shall we not dance?' he asked. 'It is the best waltz of the three. Then I could bring you some coffee and we could rest—on our laurels.'

'No, thanks. I was engaged to Mr. Fitzgerald for the last, and I must give him time to cool down.' The voice was sweet, refined, careless.

'I believe you are afraid of Fitzgerald.'

There was a touch of hauteur in the sweetness now.

'It is the second time this evening you have hinted at that, Lewis. I suppose—being a sort of relation—you know something of that boy and girl entanglement before I married your cousin. Is it so?'

Her unexpected and unusual frankness took him aback into faint excuse.

'There is nothing to apologise about, I assure you,' she went on, regaining her carelessness. 'You may as well know, the facts. I was engaged to Mr. Fitzgerald. We were both babies, and my people disapproved. Then your cousin proposed, and good sense came to us; for we were not suited to each other. *Du reste*, Mr. Fitzgerald and I are still friends, and he is the best dancer in Rajpore.'

There was a pause, before he said quietly, 'Why not be quite frank, Gwen, and say he is in love with you still? Surely that is palpable.'

'Perhaps. But I prefer to leave such questions alone, even with my cousin. Especially since that cousin has done me the honour of telling me many times that he is devoted to me himself.'

He smiled at her deft evasion.

'What is the use of any one being devoted to you, Gwen, if you are going to marry Colonel Tweedie?' he replied half jestingly.

'I did not know I was going to marry him; but I am certainly going to look after Miss Rose Tweedie in camp—if she will have me. Do you think I shall want a new riding−habit, Mr. Gordon?'

'I really cannot help you on that question, Mrs. Boynton.' She leant towards him, so that he could see the laugh pass from her pretty eyes. ' Don't be foolish, Lewis. You have been too good and kind to me for that. You, who know my affairs as well as I know them myself, must see that I have scarcely any choice between marrying again, and going home to live with my mother−in−law, or starving in some horrid poky lodging. How I should hate either! I can't live without money, Lewis. I don't spend much—but it goes somehow. Then my pension as a civilian's widow is but genteel poverty. Clothes are so expensive to begin with; yet even your best friends don't care for you unless you are well dressed.'

The real regret in her tone made him quote a trite saying about beauty unadorned.

'Rubbish!' she interrupted, sinking into her cushions again. 'Beauty is like the blue teapot; you must live up to it. I must marry some one who can afford a well−dressed wife. I must indeed, in common honesty to my future creditors. Personally I should prefer it to the mother−in−law. Besides, if I went home I should never see you again, Lewis. I should not like that—would you?'

If the words in themselves were a direct challenge, they came from the shadow where she sat, so daintily, so airily, that half a dozen replies were possible without trenching on sober affirmation or denial. Yet her hearer hesitated. There must always be a time when a man settles whether or no he shall ask a certain woman to be his wife, and this was not the first time the idea of marrying his cousin had occurred to Lewis Gordon. He was not the head of a Department, but he was in a fair way to become one in the future. He had money of his own, and she liked him in a way. As for her? she was perfection as a companion. As a wife?—

'My dear Gwen! I should hate it,' he said fervently, being certain of so much. But when he had said the words, they sounded too little, or too much, so he took refuge in jest again. '*Faute de mieux* I should prefer the family party; that is to say, if you could induce your future step−daughter, Miss Rose, to bear with my presence.'

The light on the bronze slipper shifted, showing an impatient movement of the pretty foot.

'Impossible, I should say,' came the voice, airy as ever; 'but as you seem to be imitating the barber's fifth brother to−night, why not settle that she should marry? Girls do, sometimes, especially in India.'

As she spoke a couple swooped out into the almost empty circle of polished floor. The waltz, nearing its end, gave them a swinging measure, and those two were dancers indeed. One could not choose but look, until, as the last chord crashed, they stopped as if petrified, to smile at each other, before hurrying away. Lewis Gordon watched them, his hands on his knees, a cynical smile on his face.

'By all means!' he said languidly. 'Suppose we say Dan Fitzgerald, and so get rid of our two *bêtes−noir* at once.'

Mrs. Boynton started from her cushions and gathered her boa together.

'What nonsense we are talking! Stupid nonsense into the bargain—which is intolerable. I am ashamed of myself. Come! let us have some coffee and forget our folly.'

Her companion rose to accompany her with a shrug of his shoulders. 'I beg your pardon, even though I fail to see the enormity of my offence. Fitzgerald, if he were once settled—'

She interrupted him with a gay laugh. 'So you aspire to the barber's office in other ways; would like to *ranger* your friends. When I am duly installed as chaperon I must consult you on matrimonial questions; but not till then, if you please, Lewis. Ah! there is Mrs. Dacre, I haven't seen her for an age; not since I went to Meerut.'

He took his dismissal placidly, as men do in a society where they cannot claim the undivided attention of at least one woman. Besides, Gwen Boynton's chief charm lay in the impossibility of forgetting that—provided she did not wish to do something else—she would be quite as gracious to the person who cut into your place as she had been to you. Furthermore that he was sure to hold as good a hand, and know the game as well as you did; for Mrs. Boynton, as Rose Tweedie had remarked, admitted no inferior players to her table. Seen now in the full light of the coffee−room she showed slight and graceful in the soft grey draperies which she wore as half mourning for the late Mr. Boynton—a perfectly unexceptional man who, on the verge of retirement, had lost all the savings of a long bachelorhood in one unfortunate venture, and had died of the disappointment. Beyond a perfectly lovely mouth and the faultless curves of chin and throat, there was nothing remarkable in her face; nothing at least to account for her remarkable charm. That, however, was indubitable; even Lewis Gordon, sipping his coffee outside the circle which gathered round her quickly, kept his eyes upon her. So he noticed hers turn more than once to

Dan Fitzgerald, who stood at the table waiting to replace Rose Tweedie's tumbler of lemonade. 'She is afraid of him,' he thought. 'I wonder why? Perhaps she hasn't got over her fancy either; that is the only thing I can think of likely to create a difficulty.' Then he went off to button−hole another Secretary about business, and forgot even Gwen Boynton.

Yet, if half an hour afterwards he had by chance wandered into that portion of the gardens devoted to zoology he would have seen something to confirm his suggestion. For the two figures leaning over the iron rail surrounding the ornamental water were those of Mrs. Boynton and Dan Fitzgerald. The moon shone on the water; the clumps of bamboo and plantains on the central island showed softly dark; masses of feathery tamarisk trees and the sweeping curves of a sandhill or two beyond the garden shut out the world. Otherwise it was not a suitable spot for sentimental interviews, by reason of the ducks and geese, whose sleepy gabblings and quackings were apt to come in unsympathetic chorus to lovers' talk, while the adjutants, standing in pairs side by side, their heads under their wings, were over−suggestive of Darby and Joan. The conversation between these two, however, was sufficiently sensible to stand the test of their surroundings.

'It is really absurd,' she said in (for her) quite a querulous voice. 'I accept a pleasant invitation to make himself useful to the Tweedies, who have always been most kind to me,—and my cousin. And why every one should jump to the conclusion that I am going to marry a man who is almost old enough to be my father I cannot imagine. Really the world is too idiotic.'

'You don't lump me in as the world, do you, Gwen?' he answered in a lower tone. 'Surely you make a difference—surely there is some excuse for me, dear? I haven't seen you for six weeks, Gwen; you've been away, remember. And I hurried so for that promised dance, which you forgot. Yes; we'll say you forgot it. Then every one is talking of your going into camp with the Tweedies, wondering at your giving up the pleasures, the society, hinting at some reason—'

'If you can't trust me, Dan, that is an end of everything,' she interrupted sharply. 'No, don't!—please, don't! One never knows who mayn't come this way. Do let us be reasonable, Dan. We are not boy and girl now, to squabble and make it up again. You tell me always that I love you—have always loved you—will never love any one else; and perhaps you are right. Isn't that confidence enough for you?' She tried her utmost to keep an even tone, but something made the unwilling, smile on her lips tremulous.

'It is, dear, and it isn't,' he said, his face showing soft and kindly in the moonlight. 'If I were only as sure of the rest of you as I am that you love me! But it was so, Gwen, in the old days; yet you threw me over. I knew it then, and it made me go to the devil—more or less. For if I had had the pluck to say, "You sha'n't," you would have been happier. I spoilt your life as well as my own by my cowardice. And I'm as bad as ever now, Gwen,—afraid to make you poor. Why don't I speak up, Gwen, instead of giving in to the worst part of you?—instead of waiting for promotion and making you more extravagant by paying the bills?'

'You needn't have reminded me of that!' she cried hotly; 'I'm not likely to forget it.'

He stared at her for an instant in sheer downright incredulity. Then he laid his hand on hers sharply, and with the touch something that was neither dislike nor fear, yet which seemed to alarm her, came to her face.

'Don't say that, Gwen! you don't—you can't mean it. For you know it is all yours—that I'd starve to give you a pleasure. Ah, Gwen! if you would only marry me to−morrow you'd never regret it. Why shouldn't you, dear? There's no fear; look how I've got on since you gave me the hope two years ago when I came to you in your trouble. If I had only had the pluck then to marry you straight away—'

'But it was impossible,' she broke in quickly, as if to lure him from the point. 'What would people have said? It was so soon.'

'What do I care? But now there is no reason—no reason at all. I'll get my promotion all right. Keene is there at Hodinuggur, so nothing can go wrong again. Gwen, why shouldn't you marry me to−morrow?'

'To−morrow!' she echoed faintly; yet for the life of her unable to repress that tremulous smile.

'Yes. Ah! my darling, you don't know what the uncertainty means to a man like I am. You don't know—you don't understand. If I only had you to myself, I would not fear anything. And you wouldn't, either, if I had the chance of teaching you what it means to a woman to have some one between her and the world—some one to hold her fast—some one—'

She shrank now from his increasing emotion.

'Don't! oh, don't! you frighten me. And don't be hurt or angry, dear. I've promised to marry you sometime—I

have indeed. Oh, Dan, how foolish you are!'

She laid her delicately gloved hand on his arm, as he leant over the railings, trying to hide the bitter pain her look had given him; but he only shook his head.

'You can't make me different from what I am,' she went on almost pettishly; 'you can't, indeed.'

'I could, if I had the chance. That is all I ask.'

'And you will have it some day, Dan. Perhaps you are right, and I should be happy. Only, what is the use of talking about it just now? We have settled so many times that nothing can be done until your promotion comes. That will be next year, won't it? if nothing goes wrong at Hodinuggur. Oh, Dan, do cheer up. I have to go out to dinner, and it is getting late; but I'll drop you at the Club, if you like. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings; you know that; but you are so impetuous. Dan, do come! the geese are making such a noise, I can scarcely hear myself speak.'

It was true. Something had disturbed the peace of the pond, for a confused gabbling and quacking filled the air. Dan tried to fight against it for a minute, then with an inward curse gave up the struggle. As they walked back to the carriage Gwen felt grateful to the birds. They had saved the Capitol, for a very little more of Dan's hurt feelings might have made her promise anything. It was her way when brought face to face with pain. To make up for what he had suffered she was very gracious to him as they strolled along the winding walks set with English flowers, and the barred cages where big yellow tiger's eyes gleamed out of the shadows; gleamed quite harmlessly of course. But when she returned that evening to the rooms in the hotel which she occupied during the winter months her mood had changed; for Lewis Gordon had been at the dinner. She went over to her writing−table, took out a bundle of receipted bills and looked at it with a distaste seldom displayed towards such a possession. How foolish, how wrong, how unfair to poor Dan it had been to let him pay; and what a dreadful tie to her, for of course if he did not get his promotion she could not possibly marry him and then the obligation would be unbearable. Gwen, brooding over the situation by the fire, felt aggrieved. She was one of those women who, paradoxical as it may seem, gain the power of exciting passion by their own absolute lack of comprehension as to its first principles. To say she had no heart would have been an unkind calumny. She was really very fond of Dan; more fond of him when he was absent perhaps than when he was present, but she had not the remotest conception of what his love meant to him. So as she sat thinking of him in her seamless dress—Gwen's evening dresses always had a seamless look, and the lace about her fair shoulders always seemed pinned on with cunning little diamond brooches glittering and sparkling—she told herself that it all depended on promotion, and that, in its turn, depended largely on a boy whom she had never seen, who had gone to live in the desert with the sole purpose of forcing her to keep her promise. A queer tie indeed between that branded bungalow set in the sand, and her refined little sitting−room.

And at that moment George, pondering over a cigar in the verandah before turning in, was meditating, not upon the mysterious mound of Hodinuggur, with the light in the Diwan's Tower challenging the feeble flicker in the potter's house, but on something far more mysterious than either—his dinner. That dinner of six courses, compounded out of the desert fowl in various stages of existence, to which his factotum, a man whose imaginative faculty outran his creative power, had given such topsy−turvy yet familiar names. Wherefore? Why was it deemed necessary to feed a sahib on salt−fish concocted out of chicken and anchovy sauce, and then to give dignified support to the fraud by handing round the conventional egg−sauce? George gave up the puzzle and went to bed depressed by the consideration that if Hodinuggur was strange and unkenned to him, he was quite as strange and unkenned to it.

CHAPTER III

CHÂNDNI was standing in her cool recesses of shadow at the farther end of the gateway which adjoined the little strip of bazaar leading past the palace. A bazaar but a few yards long, yet retaining in that small space a specimen of all the vices which in past times had made the Moghuls of Hodinuggur infamous. A couple of young men with uncovered heads were dicing on a string bed thrust under a patched, dyed awning stretched from balcony to balcony. A group of half−a−dozen more were quarrelling vilely over a quail fight beside the liquor−seller's booth, gay in its coloured bottles. Two or three of various ages, heavy with drugs, were sprawling and nodding in the gutters. Just across the street a sutara−player was twanging away, and above him a girl, powdered and painted, bent over the wooden balcony flinging snatches of hideous song on the passers−by, and shrieking with coarse laughter at a naked monstrosity who, as he begged, made capital of his misfortunes. On this girl, with her grease−smirched hair and Brummagem jewelry, Chândni, from her shadows, cast glances of scorn, which she transferred after a time to Dalel Beg, who sat crouched up against a plinth smoking a rank hookah and sipping a 'rajah's peg' of brandy and champagne. He had discarded European dress entirely, and the few clothes he wore smelt horribly of musk.

Against the darkness of the arch behind her the woman's tall figure showed like a white shadow. Not a scrap of colour anywhere save in her stained lips and the pomegranate sprig she twirled idly in her hand. Keeping time with it to the thrum of the sutara; keeping time also with a clash of the silver anklets hidden by the long gauze draperies of her Delhi dress.

'Yea! Dalel!' she said mockingly, and the creamy column of her throat vibrated visibly with her smooth round voice. "Tis over true what the little sahib said of thy coarse attempts. The pack of us are fools. The sahib− logue's drink yonder steals what brains God gave thee; then Meean Khush−hâl was never aught but a big belly, and the Diwan—Heaven keep him for the best of the lot—sits too high. There remains but Chândni the courtesan, and she—'

'Hath failed,' broke in Dalel with a forced explosion of malicious laughter. 'Lo! thou hast not had a civil tongue for others since he flouted thee. Sure the plant must be trampled in the dust ere it blossoms. Have patience, heart's delight.'

He was too weary even in his malice to seek the amusement of watching the rage grow to her face as she stood behind him.

'Whose fault,' she began hotly; then with a louder clash of the anklets ended in a laugh. 'Lo! 'tis past. And what care I? 'Tis naught to me, but if the treasure−chest of Hodinuggur be empty, 'tis good−bye to Chândni. She goes back to Delhi.'

'Nay! nay!' whimpered Dalel with a maudlin shake of the head, as he sought comfort in finishing the tumbler. 'We will succeed yet; but the boy hath no youth in his veins. I know not how to take him as the others. Yet have we done our best—'

'Best,' echoed the woman scornfully. 'Stale old tricks. A gold mohur under his plate at dinner forsooth! That was soon over in a beating for the servant who should have seen it put there. A dish of oranges stuffed with rupees which the same servant, wise man, kept for himself. A gun he would not take! a dinner he would not eat! a horse he would not ride! Even a woman he would not look at. What care I? there be others who will. Stale old tricks indeed! insipid as uncooled water on a summer's day, or that thing yonder'—she pointed to the opposite balcony—'compared to me. Think not I did not see thee ere I came out, oh! Dalel. Not that I care. There be others, and Delhi is but a day's journey.'

'Mayhap the tricks are old,' he muttered in sullen discomfiture. 'Hast new to advise?'

She laughed. 'Not to thee; thou hast not the wit for it. And there is naught new. The crazy potter is right when he saith the world is in the dust. Sure every ploughman knows, that no matter what the surface be, the sand lies under all. Thou hast but to dig deep enough.'

She had moved forward to lean against the plinth. In the action her thin draperies clung to the long curve of her limbs from hip to ankle. Her right hand supported her head, which was thrown back against it, so that the arm framed her face. It was the attitude of the Medea in Pompeian frescoes; the face of a Medea also till the downward glance of her eyes met an upward one from the sutara−player. Then with a flash and a laugh the

pomegranate blossom flew out into the sunlight and fell at the young man's feet. Dalel clutched at her savagely amid a volley of coarse English oaths.

'Let me go, beloved!' she giggled. 'Did I not say the sand lay under all? What! art jealous? jealous of Chândni the courtesan? Wouldst have me Dalelah since thou art Dalel? If that be so, I will put thee in good temper again.'

She snatched at an old banjo hanging on a nail, sank down amid her draperies like a cobra on its coil, and began recklessly to sing 'Ta−ra−ra−boom−de−ay,' while Dalel waggled his head, but half mollified.

'Thou canst not dance it though,' he maundered sleepily. 'Not as 'twas pictured in the pictures at the Jubilee Institute. Thou art no good at all. I will change thee for a half−caste girl. Yet if there be no money in the treasury? Lo! Fate is hard, and I have done my best.'

And still the song of civilisation went on, full of incongruous barbaric intervals. The girl in the balcony retreated in a huff before an accomplishment unknown to her: the quail−fighters laughed at the noise. Only George Keene, wandering about one of the inner courts of the palace, seeking a good spot whence to sketch a certain blue−tiled mosque, found himself unconsciously whistling a refrain, and paused to listen in sickening suspense. Yes, it was! Fitzgerald was right when he said the country was being ruined by culture! What an inconceivable, unthinkable contrast to that great ruined courtyard, its blue tiles decorated in endless writing with the Attributes of God. At least how inconceivable it would have been six weeks ago, when he had first seen the mosque with Dan as his companion. For George Keene was becoming accustomed to being, as it were, depolarised. It would have made him very angry had any one told him that Hodinuggur had already altered his outlook on life, though it could scarcely have failed to do so. To begin with Dalel Beg's occidental follies, grafted on to a sound stock of ancestral vices, made him, as he leered over a billiard cue and tried to induce George to bet, quite a startling study. Not so disturbing, however, as the sober, gentle, inoffensive villagers with the confession, 'It is God's will,' on their patient lips. Content to toil and die, smiling over the fact. Surely, something ailed the terminology of religion if these were Heathen, and certain Western folk in his father's suburban parish were Christians? Then there was the mad potter in whose walled yard George listened to the oddest old−world tales, and the Diwan with whom the lad played chess. To tell truth, he never climbed up for that purpose to the tower without a breathlessness not altogether to be accounted for by the steepness of the stairs. Face to face with the old man, sitting still as a statue before the pieces, George felt himself face to face with something he could not set aside with a sneer. Yet he might have been playing with an automaton for all the interest Zubr−ul−Zamân displayed, while he, on his part, was agonising in anxiety. But once his hand had left the piece, the old man's would rise from his knee, hover over the board for a second, then swoop down unerringly with the murmur, 'My play is played.' And the move generally disposed of all George's deep−laid plans, for the Diwan was a passed master in chess. Yet the lad returned again and again for a beating, being dogged in his turn. He was, in fact, on his way from one when Chândni and the banjo started his thoughts along a familiar channel. Certainly they were an odd people, and somehow it was difficult to write home letters which should at once reflect the truth and give satisfaction to the British public.

Meanwhile Chândni, desisting with Dalel's first reliable snore, threw the banjo aside and reviewed the position. There was no mist of reserve between her and her profession. She had been born to it, as her forebears had been. Her success in it was rather a matter for pride than shame; her only anxiety being the future. Should she linger on as she had been doing in hopes that out of sheer conservatism Dalel Beg would attach her to him permanently by some of the many possible marriages? Or should she risk the life of a go−between in her old age, return to Delhi and amuse herself? The reappearance of the painted girl in the balcony decided her; she would not give way to such creatures as that until the emptiness of the Treasury was indubitable. Yet as she sat rolling the little pellets of opium for her mid−day dose between her sore palms she looked at her lover distastefully. He was no good, and if the sluice−gates were to be open that year she must bestir herself—she and the Diwan. So much was settled before she swallowed the dreamgiver and threw herself full length on the bare string bed set deep in the shadows. Then the silence of noon fell on that sinful slip of bazaar. Even the quails ceased to challenge from their hooded cages, and the sutara−player with the pomegranate blossom stuck in behind his ear had forgotten the giver in sleep. But out in the fields the peasants were at work on their scanty crops, and George Keene as he entered the red brick bungalow paused to listen to a cry which never failed to impress him. The cry of praise to the giver with which the villagers drew water from the wells which stood between them and death. Truly in that wilderness of sand, water was the mother of all things. What wonder if it became the motive power in life? What wonder that,

like the silver sword of the big canal, it cut the world into halves—the people who wanted, and the people who did not want the sluice−gates opened. With a laugh at his own fancy he went in to lunch, wondering this time what form the desert fowl would take: it certainly was the mother of all food! Hodinuggur might have its serious aspects, but on the whole it was farcical as well as tragical, and 'Ta−ra−ra−boom−de−ay' counterbalanced that cry of thanksgiving.

And that same evening, while he was reading the last number of the *Nineteenth Century* in the verandah, Chândni had an interview with the old Diwan on his tower, which, had George been aware of it, would have seemed to him farcical beyond belief, though it was deadly earnest to the actors. She sat at the old man's feet so as to be within earshot of a whisper, since walls, especially in an Indian palace, have ears. That was why the Diwan's chair was set out in the open under the star−gemmed dome of the sky which paled to its circled setting of plain that, seen from the height, seemed in its turn to curve, cup−like, to meet the sky. The decent domino she had worn on her way was cast aside out of sheer coquetry, so that her supple figure, unadorned save for the heavy chaplets of jasmine flowers shrouding the filmy muslin, might stand outlined above the low parapet among the stars. For Chândni was shrewd. The ordinary jewels of her class might have aroused memories in the old man, and she wished to impress him with her individuality.

'Nay, daughter,' he said approvingly, 'I well believe failure was not thy fault. As for thy plan—speak.'

She drew her lips closer to his ear, and laid one hand on his knee, as if to hold his attention.

'Father! all men care for something. He cares not for what he has been given. Let us try others. If they fail, well and good. Now there is one thing such as he favour—God knows why?—but I have seen them myself in the bazaar at Delhi—sahibs who have come over the black water to buy ragged rugs and battered brass pots. Why? Because, forsooth, they are old! The crazy potter would say it was because they remember them. I know not. But this boy pokes about the old things—questions of the old tales.'

Zubr−ul−Zamân nodded approval. 'True, he favoured the Ayôdhya pot; but he returned it.'

Chândni's eyes sparkled, then fell. 'So! that is one thing to begin with. Then he is of those who watch flowers grow and birds build their nests; who paint colour on paper for the love of it. Again, when the fowler fails in all else he baits the snare with pity, and sets a decoy−bird a−fluttering within the net. This boy gives quinine to the old wives, and fish−oil to the babes born with the Potter's thumb−mark.' Her laughter crackled joylessly.

'Words—words,' muttered the old man impatiently. 'What wouldest thou do?'

She drew closer, and the movement sent a wave of perfume from the jasmine chaplets into the air.

'Lend me Azizan for a week, and thou shalt see.'

Scent, so people say, is the most powerful stimulant to bygone memories; perhaps that was the reason why her words brought such a pulse of fierce life to the old face. 'Aziz! Nay! she is of the house.'

'Why not say of the race, father?' retorted Chândni coolly. 'Nay! in such talk as ours truth is best. Thinkest thou I am a fool when I go to dance and sing in the women's quarter? Is it not sixteen years since the potter's daughter disappeared on the night of the great storm,—hath not this fifteen−year−old the potter's eyes—Heaven shield us from them!' Her hand went out in the two−fingered gesture used to avert the evil eye in West as well as East.

Zubr−ul−Zamân scowled at her.

'There be other girls and plenty; take them,' he began. 'Besides, she is betrothed. I will not lose the dower.'

'Wherefore shouldest lose it? I said a week, and Zainub, the duenna, will see to safety. He will but paint her picture.'

The Diwan spat piously. 'And what good will such accursed idol−making do?' he asked more calmly.

"Twill bring the quarry within reach; he lives too far away now. Give me the girl, my lord, else will I know that the Diwan Zubr−ul−Zamân Julâl−i−dowla Mustukkul−i−jung is afraid of the potter's eyes.'

'As thou art, daughter of the bazaars,' he retorted fiercely. 'Shall I set them on thee and thine?'

Chândni essayed an uneasy laugh. 'I will do her no harm,' she muttered sullenly. ' I will not even speak to her if thou wilt. Zainub shall do all.'

Half−an−hour afterwards Chândni, wrapped in her white domino, paused on her way home at the door leading to the women's quarters and knocked. After a while an old woman appeared at the latticed shutter. The courtesan whispered a word or two, the door opened, and the two disappeared down a dark passage. "Tis Chândni come to dance.' The whisper ran through the airless, squalid rooms, causing a flutter among the caged inhabitants. Out of their beds they came, yawning and stretching, to sit squatted in a circle on the bare floor, and watch Chândni give

a spirited imitation of the way the memsahibs waltzed with the sahib−logue. It was not an edifying spectacle, but it afforded infinite satisfaction to the audience. An audience which has to take its world at second−hand, and in the process has grown careless as to abstract truth. The young women tittered, the old ones called Heaven to witness their horror, and then they all sat without winking an eye while the courtesan sang the songs of her profession.

But little Azizan's light eyes saw nothing at which to smile or to cry in either performance. She was young for her years, and very sleepy; besides, she was betrothed to an old man whom she had never seen, because, as all the other girls took care to tell her, she really was too ugly to be kept in the family. And that sort of thing takes the zest from life.

When the entertainment was over, Chândni sat and talked with Zainub, the duenna, until dawn, with that careless disregard of bed−time, which makes it quite impossible to foretell at what hour of the day or night a native of India will be asleep or awake.

But George Keene, over the way in the branded bungalow, was safely tucked up in sheets and blankets, whence nothing short of an earthquake would have roused him.

An earthquake, or else a prescience of the hideous caricature Chândni had been making of the *trois temps* over in the Palace.

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE KEENE was trying to translate the cloth−of−gold sunlight into cadmium yellow, with the result that the blue of the tiles in his sketch grew green, and the opal on the pigeons' breasts as they sidled along the cornice, was dimmed to dust colour.

The courtyard with its blind arcades of Saracenic arches surrounding the mosque, lay bare and empty, as it always did save at the hours of prayer. He looked across it with a dissatisfied expression, noting the intense colour of certain tiles which were mixed up with those more modern ones bearing the Arabic letterings. The former reminded him of the Ayôdhya pot, and set him a−wondering if he should ever have an honest chance of procuring one like his first bribe. The old potter, his authority in such matters, had told him they were still to be found, more or less broken, in the digging of graves, or the sinking of wells. Hitherto, however, he had failed to hear of one. Yet, the possibility remained, since those tiles, which must be centuries older than the *café chantant* sort of proscenium on which they were inlaid, had survived. The latter he saw clearly, now he came to draw it, had been added on to an older building behind; probably a Hindu temple. So, when all was said and done, that figure of a grave and reverend Mohammedan moulvie, which he had intended to put in the foreground, might not have so much right to be there as a priest of Baal. It was a confusing country!

When he looked up again from his work, he gave a start; for a totally unexpected model was squatting on the flags of his foreground. A mere slip of a village girl; and yet was she of the village? More likely a stranger—perhaps one of the southern tribes of whom the potter told tales—since her dress was odd.

It consisted of a reddish purple drapery, more like wool than cotton in texture, with a stitched border in browns and creams such as the desert folk embroider on their camel trap− pings. It was an admirable piece of colouring against that blue background, and he began upon it at once, reckless of the averted face; for he was accustomed to be thus watched furtively from afar, and knew that the least notice would end in instant flight, as of a wild animal. Besides, the faces were apt to be disappointing. This one, however, was not, and his first glimpse of it gave him quite a shock. Without being beautiful, it was most peculiar; a golden brown face, with a long straight nose, and a wide, curved mouth. Golden brown hair under the reddish purple of the veil; golden brown eyes, and a golden brown arm circled with big bronze bracelets stretched out so that the hand rested on—

He gave an irrepressible exclamation and half rose from his seat. Down fell his box and brushes, and over went the dirty water streaming across his hard−won sunshine. He mopped at it hastily with his handkerchief—as hastily as he dared; but when he looked up the girl had gone. He sat down and eyed the spot where she had been suspiciously; not because of her disappearance—there had been time for that—but because he was doubtful of his own eyes in thinking that her hand had rested on an Ayôdhya pot. If so, what a rare chance he had lost; if not, he must be going to have fever, and had better go home and take some quinine. Go home, however, *viâ* the potter's house, and ask that inveterate gossip if he knew anything of an odd−looking child with light eyes—here George gave a low whistle, paused in his packing up of paint−boxes, and looked round again to where the girl had squatted, feeling that it was foolish of him not to have noticed the resemblance before. Doubtless the girl was a relation of some sort, though the old man had always strenuously asserted that he had none living. Perhaps he had meant no male ones; yet, strangely enough, Fuzl Elahi did not seem to share that contempt for girls which all the other natives of George Keene's acquaintance professed. He often talked about his dead daughter, and whenever he talked he became excited and restless; indeed, the fear of thus arousing him made George somewhat reticent in his description of the girl he had seen, which he confined as far as possible to the dress.

'She is not of Hodinuggur, Huzoor,' declared the old man confidently. 'They who wear wool live far to the south. They never leave the hearthstone where their fathers lie buried. 'Tis the old way, Huzoor, and we of this place did it also long ago.' Suddenly his eyes lit up, he let the wheel slacken and clasped his hands closely over the dome of clay in its centre. It shot up under the pressure like a fountain. 'Perhaps the Huzoor hath seen one of the old folk; they come and go, they go and come. I see them often; my fathers and their fathers, but never my daughter. She will not come, she will not come.' As his voice died away the cadence of the wheel recommenced, only to stop with a jar. 'Huzoor! Have **you** seen her? A slip of a girl with a fawn face tinted like a young gazelle's? Not black like these people—but sun colour and brown—all sun colour and brown with little curls on her forehead—'

For the life of him George could not help acknowledging the thrill that ran through him. The man was mad, of course, hopelessly mad; yet if he had seen the girl he could scarcely have given a better description. Perhaps he had seen her, knew all about her, and only pretended ignorance, to serve his own ends; that overweening desire, for instance, to pose as one apart from commonplace humanity, at which George alternately laughed and frowned.

'Your daughter is dead, potter−ji, how can I have seen her?' he said rather brutally; yet what else was there to say with that glaring daylight shining down remorselessly on the squalid reality of the scene? It was an ordinary potter's yard, no more, no less; the kneaded clay on one side of the wheel, the unbaked pots lying on the other. In the outer yard a couple of children were playing in the dust, while their mother sought a satisfactory ring in one of the pile of water−chatties before bringing it with her to haggle and bargain over the price. Overhead a kite or two wheeled in circles, and down the slope, of course, lay the Palace and its inhabitants; very ordinary examples of impoverished native nobility in its worst aspect. So George Keene meant to be brutal, his common−sense demanded it of him. But that evening, as he sat smoking as usual in the verandah, he saw a light flickering about the ruins. So, despite his reticence, the potter was in one of his restless moods, when he would seek for his daughter all night long, returning at dawn with a handful of dust, which he would knead to clay and mould upon his wheel into odd little nine−pins. Sometimes he would bury these in pairs upon the mound—George had seen him doing it—more often he would give them to the village children as toys. George had seen them, too, with sticks for arms and bits of charcoal for eyes, doing duty as dolls. He had laughed at the oddity of it all; but now in the soft darkness the thought sent that thrill through his veins once more. This would never do! He had been too long mooning about Hodinuggur sketching and playing chess. It was time to ride down the canal, bully the workman at the brick−kilns, and have a day or two at the bustard in the desert; so then and there he called to the factotum and gave his orders for breakfast to be ready twenty miles off the next morning. That would settle his nerves.

When he returned, after four days' absence, he set to work rationally to finish his sketch. The cloth−of−gold sunshine was brilliant as ever, the blue tiles glowed, the prismatic pigeons sidled along the cornices. He told himself that Hodinuggur was not such a bad place if you refused to allow imagination—

'The Huzoor gives medicine to the poor,' came a voice behind him. 'Mother is ill; I want quinine.'

It was the girl with the Ayôdhya pot in her hand. George Keene laughed out loud in the satisfaction of his heart at his own wisdom.

'What is the matter with your mother?' he asked judiciously.

'She is sick, I am to get quinine,' repeated the girl. 'I came once before, but the Huzoor jumped up; so I became frightened and ran away. Since then I have come often, but the Huzoor was not here.'

George felt vaguely that he too had run away before something ridiculously commonplace and simple, and in the effort to bolster up his dignity, his tone became pompous and condescending.

'You are not frightened now, I hope?'

The queerest demure look came to her downcast eyes.

'Wherefore should I be afraid? The Huzoor is my father and mother.'

George had heard the saying a hundred times. Even now, incongruous as it was, it pleased him by its flattering recognition of the fact that his benevolence and superiority were undeniable.

'But, unfortunately, I don't carry quinine with me,' he began.

'If the Huzoor were to bring it to−morrow when he comes to put paints on paper, his slave could return and fetch it,' she interrupted readily. He looked at her more sharply, wondering what her age might be. 'Shall I come, Huzoor?' she continued, with a certain anxiety in her grave face.

'What else?' he answered quickly. It would suit him admirably, since he could come armed with rupees wherewith to bribe the Ayôdhya pot from her, and with canvas and oil−colour more suitable to the portrait which, as he looked at her golden brown face and reddish purple draperies, he resolved to have. He would paint her against the dark mound of the ruins rising formless and void upon a sunset sky, and he would call it—

'You had better tell me your name,' he said suddenly, 'then I shall know to whom I have to send the quinine in case you can't come.'

Her white teeth flashed between the long curves of her mouth.

'I am Azizan, Huzoor. I am quite sure to come, and I will bring the pot for the medicine.'

It was almost as if she had divined his intention, he thought, as he watched her pass out through the gateway

behind him. It was a queer chance altogether, all the greater because the name Azizan was familiarly commonplace. Briefly, it happened to be that of his factotum's wife. He had, of course, never seen that estimable female, but he had often heard her addressed in tones of objurgation when delay occurred between the courses, thus—'**Azizan! egg sarse. Azizan! salt fish is not without egg sarse**.' From which George inferred that she was responsible for the kitchen−maid's portion of the Barmecidal feast. The remembrance made him smile as he packed up his colours, resolving to do no more till he could begin in earnest on that most interesting study. He would have thought it still more interesting if he could have seen it slipping into the white domino which old Zainub, the duenna, held ready at the gate, where she had been warding off possible intrusion by the bare truth, that one of her palace ladies was within. For the custom of seclusion renders intrigue absolutely safe, since none dare put the identity of a white−robed figure to the test, or pry into the privacy of a place claimed by a veiled woman.

'Now mind,' scolded Zainub, as they shuffled back to the women's apartments, 'if thou sayest a word of this to the girls thou goest not again; but the old bridegroom comes instead.'

'I will go again,' said the girl gravely, 'I liked it. But the sun made my eyes ache without the veil. Yes! I will go again, amma−jan' (nursie).

To tell the truth, she had small choice. We have all heard of an empire whereon the sun never sets, and where slavery does not exist. Even those who shake their heads over the former statement, applaud the latter. But slavery, unfortunately, is as elusive as liberty, and when not a soul, save those interested in making you obey, is even aware of your existence, individual freedom is apt to be a fraud. This was Azizan's case. Born of an unknown wrong, she might have died of one also, and none been the wiser. The zenana walls which shut her in, shut out the penal code of the alien. If she had chosen to be prudish, the alternative would have been put before her brutally; but she did not choose; for naturally enough, as she said, she liked the masquerade, even if the sun did make her head ache. So she sat all that afternoon under the lattice−window, whence, if you stood on tiptoe, you could see the flags in front of the mosque, and thought of the morrow; naturally, also, since it was a great event to one who had never before set foot beyond the walls of the women's quarter.

Yet George had to wait a long time the next day ere she appeared and squatted down before him confidently. 'It was the black man who came with the Huzoor's things,' she explained quite openly. 'Mother would not let me come while he was here. The Huzoors are quite different; they are our fathers and mothers.'

The repetition of the phrase amused George, and tickled his sense of superiority. It scarcely needed stimulus, for, like most of his race, he was inclined to consider the natives as automata, until personal experience in each case made him admit reluctantly that they were not. So he wondered vain−gloriously what certain politicians at home would say to this candid distrust of the black man, produced the quinine, and then offered Azizan five whole rupees if she would let him draw a picture of her, as he had of the mosque.

'Is that the mosque?' she asked dubiously.

George's reply was full of condescension, which it would not have been had he looked on Azizan in the light of a girl capable, as girls always are, of mischief; for the sketch was accurate to a degree. It ended in an offer of ten rupees for a finished picture of that odd, attractive, yellow−brown face. It was now resting its pointed chin on the tucked−up knees, round which the thin brown arms were clasped; and the smile which lengthened the already long curves of the mouth George set down to sheer greedy delight at an over large bribe, which, to tell truth, he regretted. Half would have been sufficient.

'Then the Huzoor must really think me pretty.'

The words might have been bombs, the sigh of satisfaction accompanying them a thunderclap, from the start they gave to his superiority. So she was nothing more nor less than a girl; rather a pretty girl, too, when she smiled, though not so picturesque as when she was grave.

'I think you will make a pretty picture,' he replied with dignity. 'Come! ten rupees is a lot, you know.'

'I'll sit if the Huzoor thinks me pretty,' persisted Azizan, now quite grave. And her gravity, as she sat with the reddish purple drapery veiling all save the straight column of her throat and the thin brown hands clasping the Ayôdhya pot, appealed so strongly to George Keene's artistic sense, that he would have perjured himself to say she was beautiful as a houri twenty times over if thereby he could have made her sit to him.

She proved an excellent model; perhaps because she had done little else all her life but sit still, with that grave tired look on her face. So still, so lifeless, that he felt aggrieved when, without a word of warning, she rose and

salaamed.

'I must go home now, Huzoor,' she said in answer to his impatient assertion that he had but just begun. 'I will come to−morrow if the Huzoor wishes it.'

'Of course you must come,' he replied angrily, 'if you are to get the ten rupees. Why can't you stay now?'

Azizan might have said with truth that a hand from the gateway behind the sketcher's back had beckoned to her, but she only smiled mysteriously.

George, left behind in the sunny courtyard, looked at the charcoal smudges on his canvas with mixed feelings. He had the pose; but should he ever succeed in painting the picture which rose before his mind's eye? To most amateurs of real talent, such as he was, there comes some special time when the conviction that here is an opportunity, here an occasion for the best possible work, brings all latent power into action, and makes the effort absorbing. Something of this feeling had already taken possession of George; he began to project a finished picture, and various methods of inducing his sitter to give him more time. Perhaps she had found it dull. Native women, he believed, chattered all day long. So when she came next morning, he asked her if she liked stories, and when she nodded, he began straightway on his recollections of Hans Andersen; choosing out all the melancholy and aggressively sentimental subjects, so as to prevent her from smiling. He succeeded very well so far; Azizan sat gravely in the sunshine listening, but every day she rose to go with just the same sudden alacrity. Then he told her the tale of Cinderella, and the necessity for her leaving the prince's ball before twelve o'clock; but even this did not make Azizan laugh. On the contrary, she looked rather frightened, and asked what the prince said when he found out.

'He told her that he thought her the most beautiful girl in the world, so they lived happy ever after,' replied George carelessly.

It was two nights after this incident that old Zainub the duenna paid a visit to Chândni in her shadowy recesses.

'What is to come of this foolishness?' she asked crossly. "Twas a week at first; now 'tis ten days. She used to give no trouble, and now she sits by the lattice in a fever for the next day. That is the plague of girls; give them but a glimpse outside and they fret to death. So I warned Meean Khush−hâl sixteen years agone, when the mother took refuge with us during her father's absence on the night of the storm; but he listened not when he had the excuse of the wall. Yea, that is the truth, O Chândni! 'tis well thou shouldst know the whole, since thou hast guessed half. Mayhap thou wilt think twice when thou hast heard. Ai! my daughter! I seem to hear her now; I would not pass such another year with this one for all the money thou couldst give. Nor is it safe for me, or for thee, Chândni, with those eyes in the child's head. Let be—'tis no good. Would I had never consented to begin the work! I will do no more.'

'True!' yawned Chândni, lounging on her bed. 'Thou art getting old for the place—it needs a younger woman. I will tell the Diwan so.'

Zainub whimpered. 'If aught were to come of it, 'twould be different; but thou thyself hast but the hope of beguiling him to some unknown snare within the walls.'

'An unknown snare is the deadliest,' laughed the other shrilly. 'What care I for the girl? 'tis something to have him meet a screened inmate of the palace day after day; many things may come of that. If Azizan pines, tell her the wedding is delayed; tell her anything—'

'Tell her!' broke in the old duenna between the whiffs of the hookah whence she sought to draw comfort. 'Sobhân ullah! There is too much telling as it is. **He** tells her—God knows what!—not sensible reasonable things, like the tales of a parrot, about real men and women; but upside−down rigmaroles about beggar−maidens and kings and sighs without kisses. Lo! she hath them pat! But now, because I bid her hold her tongue from teasing me with them when I wished to sleep, she flung out her hands so, quite free like, saying if she might not speak them she would think them, since they were true words. He had told her, and the sahib−logue ever spake the truth.'

Chândni burst into high pitched laughter. 'So! the little Moghulâni learns fast! 'Tis not strange, seeing the blood which runs in her veins. The cross breed hath but given it strength. Lo! if this be as thou sayest, she would not thank thee for stopping her ears with the cotton of decency. Thus, for the eyes' sake, Zainub, thou hadst best let well alone, and give the girl the rein—while thou canst.'

In good sooth the old dame felt the truth of Chândni's words, and knew herself to be between two stools. Either by interference, or non−interference, she ran the risk of Azizan's anger; more, perhaps, by the latter than the

former. So the girl in her odd dress continued to steal out in the fresh mornings—for March had come with its hot glaring noons—to sit between George and the mosque, and to steal back again, obedient to that beckoning hand from the gate; Zainub's authority remaining sufficient for that, backed as it was by an ill−defined fear on the girl's part, lest the fate of Cinderella should befall her before the proper time. There was little conversation between the odd couple; chiefly because Azizan had none, and seemed to know nothing of her neighbours and the village. Her mother? Oh yes! she was better for the quinine. She was a purdah woman, more or less, and lived yonder—this with a wave of the hand palacewards. Yes! she had heard there was a potter, but she had never seen him. Oh, no! they were not related. Her dress? It was very old because they were very poor. Her mother had had it by her; it was very ugly. She would rather have 'Manchester'; but they—that is to say, her mother—would not give it her. The Ayôdhya pot? That was old also. She had asked her mother, and she was willing to sell it. When the Huzoor had finished the picture her mother would come, if she were well enough, and settle the price. If not, the Huzoor might go 'yonder' and speak to her mother. The Huzoors were their fathers and mothers. It was not like a black man. This much, no more, George gleaned during the morning hours which passed so swiftly for them both. He in a novel absorption and pride in the success of his own work. She? It is hard to say. She sat listening, while the pigeons sidled and coo'd, the blue tiles glowed, and the blind arcades shut out all the world save George and his stories. They were of the simplest, most uncompromising nature; partly because his sense of superiority made him stoop, perhaps unnecessarily, to Azizan's level; partly because his knowledge of the language, though long past the stuttering stage, did not extend to niceties of emotion. But loving was loving, hating was hating, when all was said and done. Sometimes the crudity of his own words made the lad smile, as, by the aid of his own complexity, he recognised how entirely they dealt in first principles; and then Azizan would smile too, not from comprehension, but from first principles also. The woman's smile born of the man's.

It was different, however, when he laid down his brush with an elated laugh. 'There! that's done! and you have sat like—like anything. Earned your ten rupees and—Azizan! my dear little girl—what is the matter?'

First principles with a vengeance, and the sunlight turning tears to diamonds as they rolled down those sun−coloured cheeks! He rose, divided between pity and impatience, and stood looking at her almost incredulously. 'Come, don't cry—there's nothing to cry about. Look! how pretty you are in the picture; but it wouldn't have been half so pretty if you hadn't sat so still. I owe you more than the ten rupees, Azizan, and that's a fact. What shall it be—money or jewels? What would you like best?'

She did not answer, and with the same careless superiority he stooped and turned her downcast face to his; he was used to turning it this way or that at his pleasure. But this somehow was different; so was the sun−colour and brown he saw. Sun−colour indeed! He was only one−and−twenty, and the brightness and the glamour which seemed to fall in a moment on everything, as he saw the heart−whole surrender of her eyes, dazed him utterly; only one−and−twenty, and he had never before seen such a look as this that came to him from the sun−coloured face; but it was brown also! Truth is truth. It was not a sense of duty, it was a sense of colour which prevented him from kissing it then and there. So much may be said for him and his morality, that the difference between a brown and a white skin was the outward sign of the vast inward gulf between sentiment and sheer passion. The transition was too abrupt; for the time it shocked his culture, and brought a look to his face before which poor little Azizan gave a cry, and fled, just as she had fled on that first day when George had spilled the dirty water over the sunshine. He had spilled it now with a vengeance, and—over the sunshine of her face, sent shame—needless shame. 'Azizan!' he called after her, his pulses bounding and beating, 'Azizan!'

Then he paused, since she would not; and told himself that there was no need for pursuit. She would come back, for there, as she had left it, lay the Ayôdhya pot. Yes! she must come back. He could scarcely think of her without it clasped in her thin hands; so silent—yet all the time—? He gave a little laugh, tender, half regretful. Dear little Aziz! What a brute, what a fool he had been to bring that look to her face! His brain was in a whirl; he could think of nothing save her shy, confident eyes, and ask himself if, when all was said and done, that world beyond the desert held anything better despite its palaver and pretension? Did it not come back in the end to the old ways, to the first principles? He laughed recklessly at his own thoughts more than once as, scarcely seeing the ground beneath his feet, he made his way homewards to the branded red brick bungalow.

The factotum was standing in the verandah.

'The mem−sahib is waiting for the Huzoor,' he said calmly.

'The mem! what mem?'

'This slave knows not. She came half an hour gone, and said she would await the Huzoor's return.'

'Wait! where?'

The man pointed to the sitting−room. 'In there, Huzoor. She has since fallen asleep in the sahib's arm−chair.'

George stared helplessly at the bamboo−screen which, hanging before the open door, prevented him from seeing inside. Who could it be? Rose Tweedie? The mere thought sent the first blush of the morning to his cheek, by bringing him back with a round turn to civilisation.

'Here! take these things,' he said, thrusting the picture and the pot hastily into the servant's hand; 'and see!—wipe my boots—they are not fit to be seen.'

And as the factotum carefully brushed the dust of Hodinuggur from George's feet, the latter had forgotten everything in wonder as to who the 'mem' could possibly be.

CHAPTER V

A LADY, whom he had never seen before, fast asleep in his arm−chair; **the** arm−chair of bachelor's quarters, which, having served as a deck lounge on the way out, brings a solitary luxury afterwards to the bare sitting−room.

Its present occupant appeared to find it comfortable, for she did not stir. It must be confessed, however, that there was not much to disturb even a light sleeper, for George's entrance was shy, and his surprise sufficient to petrify him for a time. She was dressed in a riding−habit, and a pair of neatly−booted feet rested on the only other chair in the room. Evidently she had made herself quite at home, for a helmet and veil lay with her gloves familiarly beside the cup and saucer set out on the table for the young man's breakfast. Altogether there was an air of easy proprietorship about the figure which lay with throat and cheek sharply outlined against the Turkey red cushions; one hand tucked behind the fair, rumpled hair, the other resting slackly on the knee. It increased George Keene's shyness by making him feel an intruder even in his own room, and without a word he turned, instinctively, to leave it. As he did so a glitter on the floor at his feet made him stoop to find a diamond pin. He stepped aside to lay it out of harm's way on the mantelpiece, and in so doing caught a closer view of the half−averted face.

When he slipped out again into the verandah, he stood with his hands in his pockets and whistled softly; it was a habit of his when taken aback. A most surprising adventure indeed! An Englishwoman—a perfectly beautiful one into the bargain—at Hodinuggur alone! How on earth had she come there? From Rajpore, seventy odd miles of sheer desert to the north, or from the south? The Chief's camp had arranged to cross the sandy strip in that direction, perhaps on its return to look in on Hodinuggur, but that did not account for her being alone.

The factotum having disappeared into the cook−room, George, in order to avoid calling, strolled thither, intent on further information. In so doing he became aware of his groom at work on a strange horse. The Huzoor was right, said the man with a grin, it was the mem's, and was it to have three or four pounds of grain? George, noticing the little Arab's hanging head, suggested a bran mash, and went on feeling as if he had tumbled into another person's dream. Yet no more was to be discovered. The mem had come, sent her horse round, and gone to sleep in the sahib's arm−chair. Furthermore, what did the Huzoor mean to do about his breakfast?

George, who, to tell truth, was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger, hesitated between awaking his guest and taking his bath. He chose the latter alternative, moved thereto by the remembrance that he would be none the worse for a clean collar and what he termed 'all that sort of thing'; but half an hour afterwards, when he returned to the verandah with the refreshingly clean look of a newly−tubbed young Englishman, the situation had not improved. It had become worse, for, while the lady still slept, George felt ravenous; nor could he turn to his pipe as a palliative lest she should wake suddenly to find him reeking of tobacco—for he had always been a bit of a dandy, and fastidious over such things. This did not prevent him from feeling injured. No woman, be she ever so beautiful, had a right to take possession of a fellow's breakfast as she had done; and yet it was not so much her fault as the detestable Indian lack of pantries and larders, which led to every plate and knife, every eatable, save the desert−fowl in the cook−room, being, as it were, under the immediate guardianship of the Sleeping Beauty. Even if the store−closet had been in the bedroom, he might have 'vittled free' off sardines and captain's biscuit. And still she slept. At last, in sheer desperation, he determined to wake her; and, raising the screen, was beginning a preparatory cough, when the sight of the breakfast−table suggested the possibility of a raid. The next instant his shoes were off and the boyhood in him uppermost, as he stole in, his eyes on the sleeper. 'A good conscience, and no mistake,' he thought, as he annexed the loaf and a tin of sardines. 'One of the seven sleepers, surely!' This as he passed more leisurely to a pat of butter and a knife and fork; these he piled on the loaf, with a spoonful or two of marmalade. Apparently she had no intention of awakening for days! This thought led to a cup and some tea from the canister, finally to a milk jug; the latter proving fatal, for in retiring backward with his spoil through the screen, its contents dribbled on to his best suit, and the effort to prevent this, over−balanced the spoon of marmalade, which fell with a clatter.

Some people wake to the full enjoyment of their faculties, and with the first glance of those grey−blue eyes, George saw that concealment—with half the breakfast−table clasped to his bosom—was impossible. He blushed furiously, and began to apologise; which was foolish, since excuses, if due at all, were clearly owed by the

sleeper. She did not, however, make any.

'How kind of you not to disturb me before, Mr. Keene,' she interrupted in a charming voice. 'Have you been in long?'

Her coolness increased his apologies, making him assert on the contrary, he had but just returned. Only being rather in a hurry for his breakfast—

'Apparently,' she interrupted again. 'Dear me, what a very miscellaneous meal it would have been! But, as I am awake, hadn't you better put it all down before the marmalade runs into the sardines? Then, as I am quite as hungry as you can possibly be, you might tell the man to bring breakfast.'

George, if a trifle taken aback by her nonchalance, felt grateful for the opportunity, given with such easy grace, of getting at his shoes again before beginning explanations. On his return he noticed that she, also, had made use of the time to tidy her hair and restore a general daintiness of appearance. As he entered she was stooping to look under the table as if to seek something she had lost.

'It is a little diamond pin,' she said; 'I left it here with my gloves.'

'No,' he answered quickly, off his guard. 'It was on the floor—I mean—I—I think it is on the mantelpiece.'

'Thanks, so much!' She took it gravely ere going back to the arm−chair. Then she looked up at him archly.

'Was I snoring dreadfully when you came in first, Mr. Keene?'

For the third time since he had become aware of her presence he blushed.

'Snoring?—oh dear no,' he began angrily.

'That is a relief. I was afraid I must have been, to make you perjure yourself so. As if any sane woman could believe that you went about Hodinuggur in that costume! I believe you have been in for hours and hours, and I'm so sorry, Mr. Keene; but you will forgive me when you hear my tale of woe.'

George, with an odd little rapture at the thought, told himself he could forgive her anything because she was so beautiful.

'I'm Mrs. Boynton,' she went on; 'you will have heard of me, I expect, from Rose?'

He told her that he had heard of her from most people at Rajpore, which was the truth; but he did not say, which was also the truth, that their praises of her looks seemed to him miserably inadequate. No doubt, however, she saw this in his eyes, though she had too large an acquaintance with the expression to take any interest in it. Nice boys always admired her immensely, and this one looked very nice, with the beauty of cleanliness on him from head to foot, so she detailed her adventures with that confidence in sympathy and help which is such a charm to very young men. To say sooth George deserved it, for he was one of those who are born to stand between their women−folk and that necessity for taking the initiative which—*pace* the strong−minded sisters—most women cordially detest, and which is the cause of half the nervous exhaustion of the present age. So after a very short time he took possession of her future even more decidedly than she had taken possession of his bungalow. Briefly, the case lay thus. Colonel Tweedie's camp, owing to the increasing heat, had changed its route slightly, and was due, as the incoming post would doubtless let George know, at Hodinuggur next morning. To do this it had doubled up two marches across the desert into one, so as to include some inspection work before turning at right angles along the canal. Owing to this and some good sport on the way, every one had started by daybreak through the Bâr; that is to say, hard waste land dotted with tufts of grey caper−bushes, and stunted trees, just high enough and thick enough to prevent one seeing more than twenty or thirty yards in any direction, since beyond that the clumps became a continuous hedge shutting out the world. Colonel Tweedie and his immediate staff having ridden on in haste, the shooting party, beguiled by the prospect of bustards, had spread themselves through the jungle on one side of the track, followed by their horses and grooms. Mrs. Boynton, however, preferring such road as there was, had been walking her horse along it in the expectation of being rejoined, when the sudden firing of an unseen gun made her Arab bolt. First along the track, then missing it at a bend, the beast had swerved into some bushes, where a thorny branch had caught in his long tail, making him perfectly unmanageable. After a mile or more, he had apparently broken into the track again, and sobered down to a walk, much to her delight. Then a solitary native traveller had passed, and assured her, as she imagined, that she was right for the sahib−logue's camp; so she had trotted on, until, fearing she might lose the track once more, she had been foolish enough to walk her horse back on its traces, thus completely losing all her bearings. Finally, at a fork in the almost invisible path, she had been forced to confess that she had not the least idea in which direction her destination lay, north or south, east or west; the sun, therefore, being of little use to her as a guide. (Here her

pretty smile growing a trifle tremulous, made George profusely indignant with the desert.) Then, regaining her head, she remembered to have heard Mr. Fitzgerald—who, as Mr. Keene would know, had of course joined the camp on its entrance into the division—say that the more open country lay eastward, and so she had ridden as straight as she could into the shadows, that being her best chance of steering aright. (Here George grew clamorous over her courage.) Nevertheless, it had almost failed, she said, when on a sudden the great silver streak of the canal had appeared from among the bushes, and she had ridden along its banks till she came to a treeless waste with a big mound looming in the far distance.

'I knew it must be Hodinuggur,' she finished with a sort of caress to her own comfort among the pillows, 'by Mr. Fitzgerald's description, and I knew you from Rose Tweedie's, so I felt it was all right. And now, Mr. Keene! don't you wonder I didn't snore, considering I had been in the saddle for eight hours?'

George protested it was virtue itself for her to wake at all; but that she would have the whole day to rest, as it was manifestly impossible for her to return to the camp; absurd also, since the latter was to come on to Hodinuggur next day. So he would send to the Diwan and borrow a camel sowar, who would ride over with a note telling of her safety in the bungalow, and asking for anything she might require. For the rest, all he had was at her service.

'But I shall be turning you out of house and home, shan't I?' she asked kindly.

The young fellow's eyes softened. 'I don't think I ever thought of it as a home before,' he said with an embarrassed laugh at his own words; 'but won't you come to breakfast? It's awfully nasty, I'm afraid—'

'Then we can fall back on the sardines and the marmalade,' she interrupted gravely. This gravity was with her a perfect art, and gave a great charm to her gentle raillery.

Perhaps the food was nasty; if so, George, for one, did not mind except for her sake. He thought of nothing but her comfort; of how he could welcome her to take possession of everything, himself included. Was she not the most beautiful, the most fascinating, the most perfect woman he had ever seen? Did she not deserve the best he could give her? So, while she was writing the note for the camel sowar, George slipped away to give instructions to the factotum. The bedroom must be swept and garnished, and the things pitched away anywhere. The drawers must be re−papered, a towel put on the dressing−table, and—What a beastly hole it was, he thought ruefully as he left the man to his own devices; but half an hour afterwards his face cleared; for the factotum, having been in good services, had risen to the occasion. Not only was there a towel on the dressing−table, but two empty beer−bottles had been modestly draped into candlesticks, with the gilt ends of the pugree he had received from the Diwan, while the remainder of the muslin was festooned about the looking−glass. Azizan's portrait stood on the mantel−shelf with the Ayôdhya pot in front, and two dinner plates on either side, the arrangement being completed by two of his best ties knotted in bows about his hunting crop, and the kitchen fan. A tinsel veil, borrowed from the compounder of *egg−sarse*, did duty as a bed−spread, supported by his Cooper's Hill tennis muffler as an antimacassar. In the middle of the room the factotum still lingered, benign and superior, one hand holding a hammer and tacks, the other a pair of striped silk socks, with the decorative effect of which he was evidently enamoured. In addition, a figure swathed in white sa modestly behind the dressing−room door.

'It is my house,' said the man, with a large smile. 'Since it is not to be tolerated that the abode of princes should lack a female slave, the woman, at my command, takes the part of ayah. The Huzoor may rest satisfied. Azizan's knowledge of the mems equals this slave's of the sahibs.'

Azizan! The smile left George's lips at the name; and before leaving the room he thrust the portrait into a cupboard, replacing it by an illuminated text which was lying neglected under a pile of wire cartridges.

'The Huzoor is right,' declared the fac− totum cheerfully. 'The mems have them ever in their rooms. Lo! nothing is amiss.'

George, as he turned at the door for a last look, felt that the advice, 'Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together' emblazoned in Gothic characters, holly, and mistletoe, which a maiden aunt had sent him as a Christmas present, did indeed put the finishing touch to the solitude of the wilderness.

'But where are you going?' asked Gwen.

'I? Oh! they'll give me quarters in the palace, I expect. Perhaps I'd better go over now and see about it. Then I've inspection work, and—and a heap of other things. So perhaps I'd better say good−bye. I've told the servants about lunch and all that sort of thing. And your traps will be here before dark.'

A very nice boy, indeed, thought Mrs. Boynton, and showed her thought. So George went over to the palace

feeling quite intoxicated because he had been instructed without fail to dine in his own house; and after he had settled about his quarters with Dalel, and had ridden off on his fictitious tour of inspection, he dug the spurs into his pony out of sheer lightness of heart, and went sailing away over the desert, careless even of the direction in which he went.

Dalel meanwhile had repaired to the shadowy arches in a state of boastful superiority. His friend Keene was coming over to stop in the palace. They would play cards, and be jolly, and drink. And the lad always carried the key of the sluice−gate on his watch−chain.

'It is a chance indeed,' said Chândni, with a queer look. Then after a time broke in on Dalel's vapourings by snatching the banjo from the wall and breaking into a respectable and plaintive love−song.

'Lo! thou hast thy way, and I have mine,' she laughed recklessly. 'Let us see who succeeds best.' So slipping on the decent white domino, she set off for the palace, and turned down the dark passage leading to the women's apartments. Doubtless it was a chance which must not be neglected.

Between his desire not to disturb Mrs. Boynton's kindness too early, and his dislike to becoming a prey to Dalel at the palace, George in the end had to gallop his pony the last four miles, and then found him− self with but ten minutes in which to dress. But he dashed up the narrow stair leading to the odd little arcaded room placed at his disposal by the Diwan, feeling confident in the factotum's forethought; and, sure enough, on the silk coverlet of the high lacquered bed lay his dress−clothes and white tie complete. Nothing else, except his sleeping−suit; so, choice being denied him, he flung himself into ceremonious black, discovering as he did so that two or three jasmine blossoms and a sprig of maidenhair fern had been pinned into the button−hole of his coat. The factotum was evidently determined he should play the right game. As he ran down the stairs again he wondered whence the man could possibly have procured the fern, and then remembered having seen a few fronds clinging, far down on the masonry of his well, into which the canal water filtered. The seed of this hill−born plant must have filtered with it; just as these strange items of knowledge—the shibboleth of dress−clothes and button−holes—filtered into the brains of these odd people. Life in Hodinuggur was really very amusing, and full of delightful surprises. Yesterday he had been waiting— without a collar!—for a Barmecidal feast, to−day in swallow−tail and a button−hole he was going to dine with the most beautiful woman in the world! and there, like a fairy tale, was the branded bungalow illuminated out of all recognition. And inside were more wonders in a table set out with flowers, and Mrs. Boynton coming forward to greet him with a bouquet of jasmine and maidenhair amid the soft ruffles of her white dress—humiliating yet still amusing, having to confess it came, not from his courtesy, but the factotum's sense of duty. Then the very sight of the man himself, in spotless raiment, lording it over Mrs. Boynton's kitmutgâr was pure comedy. In fact when, dinner being over, George was left face to face with three napkin−swathed black bottles hung with foolscap tickets of port, sherry, claret, engrossed in the village schoolmaster's best hand, he gave one look at Mrs. Boynton before exploding into laughter, while she vowed to keep the *ménu* to her dying day, if only to show the folly of allowing facts to interfere with fancy.

Then by−and−bye, when coffee came in—the factotum diffident over the breakfast cups but triumphant over the under−footman with hot milk and sugar on a dinner−plate—they laughed again; yet the laughter brought a moisture to George Keene's merry grey eyes. In a vague way the boy knew what had happened, knew that the most beautiful woman in the world had not only taken possession of house and home, but of body and soul; and he was glad of it, despite the moisture in his eyes—glad to the heart's core as he chattered away confidentially, while she listened graciously, thinking what a charming boy he was, and what an excellent husband he would make by−and−bye for any girl. What an admirable son−in−law, in short, he would have made if she had had a daughter and he had had money; for women of her sort view mankind chiefly from the matrimonial point of view, and seek to give variety to the question by importing into it all their female friends.

'That reminds me,' she said, as she listened to the hope that she was fairly comfortable which George tacked on to his good−night. 'You have the most fascinating blue pot on your mantelpiece. Where did you get it?'

'Do you really like it?' he asked eagerly; 'if so, you can have it.'

'My dear boy!' she laughed, 'I don't mean to appropriate **everything** you possess.'

He looked at her with shining happy eyes. 'But it isn't mine as yet; it belongs to some one, though, who wants to sell it, and if you would give it to me, now, I'd finish the bargain to−morrow morning and you shall have it back by breakfast−time if it is to be had for love or money.' Love or money! The old formula came carelessly to his lips.

Azizan meanwhile, crouching behind one of the palace arcades, and wondering when she would hear his foot on the stairs, was echoing the thought in another language. She was trembling all over from excitement, and fear, and hope; of what, she scarcely knew, she did not understand. They had dressed her in her best beneath the flimsy white veil which pretended to conceal the finery it really enhanced, and surely, she thought, if he had deemed her pretty when in that dreadful old shroud, he would be still kinder now. They had bidden her ask for the Ayôdhya pot, and take him to settle the price with her mother. But of doing this she was not sure; she was sure of nothing save that she must see him again—must see him to make certain that he was not vexed. And then she would tell him that traps were being laid for him—at least she might tell him—but come what might she must see him; ay, and he must see her as she ought to be seen.

Not a very safe interruption for George to have found awaiting him in the long moonlit shadows of the arcades had he been in the same mood as the girl; not even though all the plotting and scheming would have seemed incredibly absurd to him at any time, and in any mood. Indeed, even by the dim light of the cook−room, where the factotum was putting away a copy of the *ménu* among his certificates as proof positive of his acquaintance with the appetites of the ruling race, Châ ndni's snare would have met with the derision it deserved; but in the dark intricacies of palace politics it seemed simple enough, especially to one of her vile experiences.

But George never went near the palace. He sat on the canal bridge till dawn, smoking one pipe after another, and looking aimlessly, dreamily at the dark windows of the bungalow. No one could have foreseen this, not even the lad himself. He had no intention of out− watching the stars when the balmy air and a feeling of measureless content first tempted him to pause and set aside the forgetfulness of sleep for a time—or would it have been sleep when **she** was in the desert alone with God knows what ruffians about? A rage grew up in him at the thought of Dalel and his kind, until the palace itself became distasteful. So, almost before he realised that he was on the watch, the gurglings of many camels and the thud of a mallet told him that the advanced guard of the big camp had arrived, and sent him across to the camping ground to warn the tent pitchers to be as quiet as possible. 'May the angels of the Lord pitch their tents around us this night' used to be the favourite bidding prayer of a certain Scotch divine when he ministered to a volunteer congregation, until one day a veteran happening to be there said audibly, 'Then I'm hopin' they'll no mak muckle noise wi' the tent−pegs.' A tale which shows the danger of imperfect local colouring; a fact which was to be brought home that night both to Dalel and Châ ndni, for even then George did not return to the champagne and the snares. That incomprehensible love of the picturesque on which the latter had counted, kept him engrossed in the novel sight of a canvas city rising like magic from the bare sand. First came an autocrat with measuring tape and pegs mapping the ground into squares; then, one by one, in its appointed place, a great ghost of a thing flapping white wings against the purple sky, to rise stiff and square above a fringe of even silvery ropes.

It was not until a saffron−coloured glint in the east startled him into the thought that he was a confounded ass, that George, out of sheer lightheartedness, ran all the way back to the palace, stumbled up the steep stairs, and threw himself into the high lacquered bed to fall asleep before the saffron had faded into daylight. Perhaps it was as well, since even the Hodinuggur sun, which had been at work since the beginning of all things, might have stared to see a masher in dress clothes knocking into a Moghul palace with the milk. It stared instead at a more familiar sight; at a girl, face down on a bare string bed in the women's quarters, sobbing as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER VI

NATURALLY enough George overslept himself. Naturally also he woke to feel himself hustled and bustled, for he was due to meet the incoming camp at the borders of his district at a certain hour; a feeling he proceeded to vent on the factotum for being late with the early tea which that worthy had had carried over from the bungalow in an odd little procession, tailing off to some of the large−eyed village lads and lasses learning betimes the customs of their rulers. Then George had promised an answer about the Ayôdhya pot, and now, even by hurrying, which he loathed, he could scarcely find time to seek Azizan in the old place. Still he did hurry, and leaving the camel which he was to ride gurgling in the courtyard, wasted five minutes in tramping up and down the flags in front of the mosque; finally, in vexation, returning by the short cut through the bazaar. In these early hours it had a deserted, yet still dissipated air, the few loungers looking as if they had been up all night. Only the quails challenged cheerfully from their shrouded cages. In the arched causeway, however, he came on Dalel Beg, most offensively European in costume and manner; for he too was bound on reception−duty.

'Aha! Keene, old chappie,' he began with a leer, 'you sleep well after burra−khana (big dinner) with the mem. By Jove, you keep it up late.'

George could scarcely refrain from kicking him then and there. But the thought that these people had possibly put their own construction on his absence from the palace made him feel hot and cold with rage and regret. To avoid the subject—the only course open to him—he hastily held out the Ayôdhya pot which he was carrying, and asked the Mirza if he had any idea to whom it belonged.

Now the Mirza's oblique eyes had been on it from the first; but at the question they narrowed to mere slits of compressed cunning.

'Ah, so! very good. I know. Yes, yes! it belong to you, Keene, of course. Bah! it is worth nothing. I hate old trumpery matters. You are very welcome.'

'You mistake, sahib,' retorted George haughtily, 'this does not, did not belong to your grandfather; it belongs to an old woman who lives near the palace. She promised to sell it to me, and now I'm rather in a hurry to complete the bargain. Mem Boynton sahiba wants it, and they leave to−morrow or next day.'

Dalel Beg, who had been turning the pot over and over in his hand, laughed.

'So you say it is another—'

'Certainly it is another,' interrupted George, annoyed beyond measure by his manner; 'it belongs, as I said, to an old woman. She has a daughter called Azizan—' he paused, doubtful of putting Dalel on any woman's track.

'Azizan!'—the Mirza signed his attendants to fall back with unwonted decision before he went on,—'Azizan! tell me, Keene, a young girl? with eyes of light like potter's?'

Evidently he knew something of, and was interested in the girl, and George, now that it was too late, regretted having mentioned her name.

'Can't wait any longer now, I'm afraid,' he replied, glad of the excuse; 'just send one of your fellows up to my quarters with the pot, will you? Thanks, I've no time to lose.'

Left thus cavalierly, Dalel Beg scowled after the young Englishman; then with a compendious oath turned back to the side door whence he had emerged, and, stumbling in his anger up the dark stairs, appeared again in Chândni's presence. He almost flung the pot beside her as she lay curled up on her bed, and then, driven to words by her arrogant silence began a volley of furious questions.

What mischief had the woman been up to? How came it that the English cub had seen Azizan? Azizan, who after all was his half−sister, one of the race, though they did keep her out of his sight. And that oaf, that infidel—. His wrath was real, for beneath the veneer of modern thought the fierce jealousy of the Moghul lay strong as ever.

Chândni gave a jeering laugh, 'Thou art too handsome for the maidens, oh Dalel; too wicked also even for the race. Thou needest one like me to keep thee straight. Lo! there is nothing to know, nothing to tell. Hadst asked last night, the answer might have been other. I set a snare and it failed; for thou wert right—the boy is no boy, but a milksop. May fate send him death and us a black man in his place, else I stop not here!'

Her jingling feet struck the ground with a clash and she yawned again. In truth she was tired of Hodinuggur, and longed for the Chowk at Delhi. Dalel, with a sneer adulterating his frown, looked at her vengefully, 'Wâh! thou art a poor creature, putting the blame on others, after woman's way. Thy wiles are useless, forsooth, because

the boy is a milksop. Then a strange mem comes and he sits drinking wine—my wine, look you, for his servant required it of me—until the dawn; then comes home tipsy after losing himself among the tent−pegs.'

This was Dalel's version of the incident. It interested his hearer into provoking details by denial.

'It is a lie,' she said calmly.

'Daughter of the bazaars, 'tis true! did I not wait till nigh three with champagne and devil−bone, yet he came not? Did not his servant tell me but now I had stinted them in wine? Did not the tent pitchers say he wandered as a madman among the pegs? Was he not at me, even now, to get this pot for this mem, this woman?' So far his anger had swept him past its first cause; now he remembered and harked back to it. 'How came he by the pot, I say? how hath he seen a woman of our race?'

'Ask the Diwan,' she replied coolly; 'for me that measure is over, I will dance to another tune.' And as she spoke, though her feet scarcely shifted, a new rhythm came to these jingling bells. "Tis odd,' she murmured in a singing tone, as she lifted the pot and held it out at arm's−length, 'we come back to this old thing at every turn, and now his mem wants it. Leave it with me a space, O Mirza Dalel Beg. I will set it yonder in the niche where I take the seed of dreams; it may bring wisdom to them.'

Dalel gave a contemptuous grunt.

'Thou art no better than an old spay−wife with thy dreams and omens and fine talk. Sure the Hindu pig, from whom I took thee, hath infected thee with his idolatrous notions—'

'See, I go not back to them and him,' she interrupted quickly, 'leave it, I say, if thou art wise. If the sahib seek it of thee, say one of thy women knows the owner and makes arrangement. 'Tis true, and thou lovest the truth, O Dalel.'

As usual, her recklessness cowed him, and when he had gone and she sat rolling the opium pellets in her palms, the Ayôdhya pot lay in the niche. Something had declared in its favour, and wisdom lay in humouring the mysterious will which nine times out of ten insisted on playing the game of life in its own fashion. Then she lay back half asleep, half awake, her hands clasped behind her smooth head, her eyes fixed on the shifting pattern beneath the glaze. The sun climbing up sent a bar of shine through a chink in the balcony roof. It slanted into the recesses, undulated over her curved body and reaching the niche made the Ayôdhya pot glow like a sapphire. But by this time Chândni was dreaming so she did not hear the merry laughter of a cavalcade passing through the Mori gate on its way to the canvas city in the camping ground. A cavalcade of aliens, with Rose Tweedie on a camel, her English side−saddle, perched on the top of a native pad, giving her such height that she was forced to stoop.

'Another inch, Miss Tweedie,' cried George gaily, 'and you would have had to dismount; you will have to cultivate humility before trying Paradise!'

'Sure Miss Rose is an angel already,' put in Dan Fitzgerald.

But Lewis Gordon rode gloomily behind; partly because he himself was in a shockingly bad temper, partly because the camel he rode was a misanthropist. And these two causes arose the one from the other, since it was not his usual mount. That, when Rose Tweedie had taken advantage of Mrs. Boynton's absence to desert the dhoolies which were the only alternative conveyance across this peculiarly sandy march, had been impounded for the young lady on account of its easy paces. He remembered those paces ruefully, as, with low−pitched indignation he wondered why she could not have stuck to the more ladylike dhooli. Yet she looked well on the beast and rode it better than most men would have done on a first trial; than he would, at any rate. But these were aggravations, not palliations, of her offence; still, when, on dismounting, she came straight up to him, her natty top−boots in full evidence, the huge sola topee, borrowed from her father, making her slim upright figure show straighter and slenderer than ever, he was forced to confess that if she did do these horrible things she did them with infinite *verve* and good taste.

'I'm so sorry, Mr. Gordon!' she exclaimed eagerly, 'indeed I didn't know of the exchange father made till we had started, or I'd have stuck to the dhooli—indeed I would. What an awful brute it was! I saw it giving you a dreadful time. Do let me send you over some Elliman?'

'I'm not such a duffer as all that, Miss Tweedie,' he began.

'I didn't mean that, you know I didn't; but if you won't have the Elliman, take a hot bath, it's the next best thing I know for stiffness. You can tell your bearer to take the water from our bath−fire. And thanks so much, I enjoyed the ride immensely. Mr. Fitzgerald raced me at the finish, and I beat by a good head.'

'A particularly good head, I should say,' he replied, out of sheer love of teasing, for he knew how intensely she disliked his artificial manner with women. The fact annoyed him in his turn. It was another of her unwarrantable assumptions of superiority; nevertheless he followed her advice about the bath.

Indeed Hodinuggur for the rest of the day claimed suppleness of joint, in the mind at least. We all know the modern mansion where, entering a Pompeian hall you pass up a Jacobean staircase, along Early English corridors, and Japanese landings to Queen Anne drawing−rooms; mansions of culture, where present common−sense is relegated to the servants' attics. Hodinuggur was as disturbing to a thoughtful person unused to gymnastics; perhaps more so because a certain glibness of tongue in slurring over chasms and ignoring abysses, became necessary when, as fell to Lewis Gordon's lot, most of the day passed in interviews. Solemn interviews of State, then personal interviews with an ulterior object, finally begging interviews *pur et simple*. The other members of the camp, however, had an easy time of it, their attendance not being required. Dan Fitzgerald passed most of his day in vain hopes of a *tête−à−tête* with Mrs. Boynton, for he was on tenter−hooks to explain the feeling with which, on returning late to the camp, he had found it in commotion over her loss; but Gwen, who always dreaded Dan when he had reasonable cause for emotion, avoided him dexterously, chiefly by encouraging George, who was nothing loth to spend his day in camp. At first the lad felt no little vexed to find himself shy and constrained among so large a party; but this feeling wore off quickly, and when he came, ready dressed for tennis, into the drawing−room tent at tea−time it seemed quite natural to be once more amid easy−chairs and knick−knacks, to see the pianette at which Rose sang her Scotch songs with such spirit littered with music, and to find her busy at a table set with all manner of delightful things to eat. He was boy enough to try many of them, that Dan had to apologise for his subordinate's greed before they trooped out laughing to the very different world which lay beyond the treble plies of the tent—that mystical veil of white, and blue, and red, which, during the camping months, hangs between India and its rulers, giving rise to so much misunderstanding on both sides. It is the fashion now−a−days to accentuate the faults of the latter, but much of the bad name given by superficial observers to Anglo−Indian society, is the result of that curious light−heartedness which springs from the necessity for relaxation, consequent on the gloveless hold India exacts on the realities and responsibilities of life. The saying, 'Let us eat and drink and be merry, for to−morrow we die,' is hurled unfairly at pleasure−seekers all the world over, simply because merriment has become associated with a low type of amusement. If we change the verbs, the blame vanishes; since to live happily is the end and aim of all morality. Then in India the pursuit of pleasure must needs be personal, for there are no licensed purveyors of amusement. You cannot go to a box−office, buy seats, spend the day seriously, dine at a restaurant, and take a hansom to the play. As a rule you have to begin by building the theatre. So it is in all things, and surely after a hard day's work in bringing sweetness and light (and law) within reach of the heathen, even a judge with a bald head may unbend to youthful pastimes, without breaking the Ten Commandments!

But Colonel Tweedie was not bald, and he played tennis vigorously in what Rose called the duffers' game, with Mrs. Boynton, the under−secretary, and Lewis Gordon who pleaded shortsightedness as an excuse for not joining the Seniors against the Juniors, where Rose and George challenged all comers. Yet he owned it was pretty enough to see the former sending back Dan's vicious cuts with a setting of her teeth ending in a smile either at success or failure. Pleasant to see the alertness, confidence, confidentialness between the boy and girl; to hear his quick 'Look out,' evoke the breathless 'I've—got it,' as the ball whizzed to some unguarded spot. It was a fierce struggle and the wide−eyed villagers who had trooped out to see the strange doings on their ancestral threshing−floor, gathered instinctively round the harder game.

'Ari, sister!' murmured a deep−bosomed mother of many to her gossip, as they squatted on one of the heaps of chaff which had been swept aside from the hard beaten floor. 'That one in the short skirt is a *budmârsh*. [1] Her man will need his hands.' Yet an unrestrained chuckle ran round the female portion of the audience as Dan, over−running himself in a hopeless attempt after the impossible, scattered a group of turbaned pantaloons, who, retreating with shaking heads to re−form further off, muttered in wondering rebuke, 'Hai! Hai! does not shame come to her.' But a third section, ranged in rows, gave an exotic 'hooray!' a ridiculous, feeble little cheer, started by a young man in a black alpaca coat, and accompanied by still feebler clapping. This was the village school arid its master, claiming its right to be a judge of 'crickets.'

'You have the better half of creation on your side, Miss Tweedie,' remarked Lewis, when, the games being over, the men were resuming their coats. 'What is more, the rising generation of the worser half also. The boys

were unanimous for the "Miss"; we miserable men being left to the support of past ages. India is doomed. Another decade will see woman's rights rampant.'

She turned on him readily, as she always did. 'The boys applauded because the rising generation, thank heaven, is being taught to love fair play—even towards women.'

'At it again!' interrupted Mrs. Boynton plaintively, 'really I must get you two bound over to keep the peace.'

'Then I shall have to hire another camel for my luggage,' said Lewis gravely, 'for Miss Tweedie knocks me and my arguments to bits.'

Gwen turned aside impatiently, saying in a lower voice, 'How foolish you are, Lewis! One would have thought you would have tired of it by this time.'

'On the contrary,' he replied in his ordinary tone: 'the bloom is perennial. I wither beneath the ice of Miss Tweedie's snubs, and revive beneath the sun of her smiles like—like a bachelor's button.'

And Rose did smile. Her contempt always seemed to pass by the man himself, and rest on his opinions. Even there, much as she loathed them, she was forced to confess that they did not seem to affect his actions; that it was impossible to conceive of his behaving to any woman, save as a gentleman should behave. Yet this thought aggravated the offence of his manner by enhancing its malice aforethought, and made her frown again.

'Come! there is light enough for a single yet, Mr. Keene,' she said imperiously, and George, with one regretful glance at Mrs. Boynton, obeyed. Lewis Gordon looked after them, shrugged his shoulders, and strolled off to the messroom−tent.

'It really is shameful of Lewis to tease Miss Tweedie as he does,' began Gwen, who, finding herself unavoidably paired with Dan, instantly started what she thought a safe topic of conversation. He looked at her with absent eyes.

'A shame, is it? but when a man likes a girl he is very apt—'

She broke in with a petulant laugh. 'Are you asleep, Dan? What could induce you to think that?'

'What? Why, love of course! Set a thief to catch a thief. A man can't be in love himself without—'

He certainly was not asleep! but she managed to double back to safer ground. Yet his words recurred to her that evening during the half hour *tête−à−tête* which she accorded with the utmost regularity to Colonel Tweedie in his capacity of host; Rose meanwhile singing songs to the younger men who gathered round the piano, leaving those two decorously to the sofa.

'There is a little song I want Mrs. Boynton to hear,' called the Colonel during a pause. 'I forget its name—you haven't sung it for a long time, and I used to be so fond of it. A little Jacobite song—really a charming air, Mrs. Boynton.' Rose flushed visibly—at least to the feminine eyes in the party—and shook her head.

'But you must remember it, my dear,' persisted her father; 'do try.'

'Oh yes! please do try! I should so like to hear it,' echoed Gwen curiously, her eyes full on the blush. Rose, conscious of it, felt herself a fool, and looked still mere uncomfortable.

'Talking of Jacobite songs,' remarked an indifferent voice beside her, 'I wonder, Miss Tweedie, if you know a great favourite of mine, called "Lewie Gordon"—don't laugh, you boys, it's rude. If so, please sing it. I haven't heard it for years; people are always afraid of making me vain.'

She gave him a quick, grateful look, as, with a nod, she broke into the song.

'O send Lewie Gordon hame,
And the lad I daurna name,
Tho' his back be to the wa',
Here's to him that's far awa'.' She sang with greater spirit than before, a sort of glad recognition of his kindly tact leading up to the decision of the climax:

'That's the lad that I'll gang wi'.' Yet after all, amid the chorus of thanks, she heard him say in his worst manner,—'The lad I daurna name!' 'How like a woman!' And he added to the offence; for, when the little under−secretary remarked diffidently that he had always understood that the song referred to Charles Edward, though whether to the old or the young Pretender he could not say, Lewis, as he dawdled away to his nightly task of breaking up the *tête−à−tête*, murmured that at any rate it referred to a pretendu. But Rose had caught Gwen's appealing look from the sofa also, and rising, closed the piano with a bang and suggested a round game. If her intention was to punish the offender, who hated that form of amusement, she failed ignominiously; for he sat on the 'Stool of Repentance' with perfect nonchalance, and, when it came to her turn, paid her such double−edged, charmingly caustic little

compliments, that she had to join in the laugh they raised. It was, in fact, past midnight ere the Colonel, with many allusions to the delight of such company, said they really must go to bed, and they trooped in a body out of the big tent to seek their several quarters.

'I'm glad not to make a casual of you to−night,' said Mrs. Boynton softly to George.

'Almost wish you were,' he replied, giving a rueful look towards the red brick prison on the farther side of the canal. 'This is home; that is exile.'

Dan nodded his head sympathetically. 'I know that feeling. It comes from jungle stations. And the bungalow does look cheerless in comparison. Odd; for one naturally associates a camp with wars and tumults, battles, murders, and sudden death; all the evils of a transitory world, in fact. But you must have noticed, Mrs. Boynton, the extra−ordinary air of peace, security, almost of permanence which tents have in the moonlight. Look! might they not be solid blocks of marble fastened by silver cords?'

'I noticed it last night when I was watching them being put up,' began George unguardedly. Mrs. Boynton looked up quickly. Rose, who was leaning against a rope by the door of her tent which stood next the mess, glanced along the line of the camp.

'Silver cords and marble blocks,' she echoed. 'Yes! but it sounds like the new Jerusalem.'

'I always thought,' remarked Lewis Gordon argumentatively, 'that it was the tents of Midian. I'm sure some one told me so when I learnt hymns. Or was it hosts of Midian and tents of Ishmael? Anyhow, they had nothing to do with Paradise, and I for one have been prowling round long enough. So good−night, Gwen; don't grow wings in the night, please; it would be so disconcerting. Good−night, Miss Tweedie.'

Being close beside her he held out his hand.

'Good−night; I hope you are not very stiff.'

'I almost wish I were, for then you would sympathise with misfortune—like a woman,' he replied in a low voice, and as he passed to his own tent next hers, she heard him quote the lines—
'Tho' his back be to the wa',
Here's to him that's far awa'.' She looked after him, her face showing soft in the moonlight then, with a good−night to the others, disappeared in her turn.

George lingered, giving still more rueful glances at the bungalow. 'I suppose I must be off too. Oh! by the way! it's all right about the Ayôdhya pot. Dalel Beg tells me his women know the owner, so you will have it to−morrow. Good−night, Fitzgerald.'

Dan, thus left alone to walk two tents−length with Gwen, felt that fate was on his side at last; more probably **she** was, since her fine tact told her it was never wise to ignore his passion entirely. Besides, something in her shrank from treating him always as a mere outsider.

'I've been longing for this chance all day,' he began at once in a tone that was in itself a caress.

'Do you think I am quite blind?' she interrupted, a trifle petulantly; 'the only wonder is that every one in the camp didn't see it also. You are so reckless, Dan! Of course you wanted to tell me how you felt when I was lost, and all that; as if I couldn't imagine it!' she gave in to a smile that was almost tender as she spoke—'Why, Dan! I can see you! with a face yards long, and the whole camp, Chief and all, under orders in half a minute. Fire−escapes, life−preservers, first aid to the wounded, everything mortal man could devise to avert disaster, ready before the rest had time to think! Do you suppose I don't know what you are, Dan?' The odd, composite ring in her voice sank as she added, in a lower tone, 'sometimes I almost wish I didn't.'

They had reached the place where their ways separated; hers to the last tent forward, his to the second row, and she held out her hand with a smile to say good−night. His heart beat hard at her half−reluctant admission of praise; besides, Gwen Boynton was not the sort of woman who could smile thus, and yet expect to end the interview then and there; perhaps, again, she did not wish it so to end. In her relations with this man, she often found it difficult to know what she did, or did not, desire.

'Gwen,' he said eagerly, standing close, with his warm nervous hands clasping hers, 'did you think of me—then?—when you knew you were lost, I mean—did you, Gwen?—I don't often ask anything of you, my darling—you might tell me—It isn't much to ask—Did you, Gwen?'

She gave something between a laugh and a sob. 'Did I? Oh! Dan, you know I did. There, that is enough—you said that was all you wanted. Good−night, Dan.'

He went over to his quarters happy as a king. As for Gwen, the personal influence his immediate presence had

over her passed away quickly, and that which his real absence from her life invariably produced did not come to soften the curious dread with which she recognised that in her trouble of the day before, her first thought had indeed been for him. How foolish she had been in letting him re−enter her life at all; but he had come back in her first loneliness when the future had seemed very black. Now it was different, now it was once more that choice between poverty and comfort which she had made in her girlhood. With what pain, none—save Dan, who, alas! always understood—would believe. And if the choice was necessary then, what was it now with her acquired habits, her knowledge of the world? They would both be miserable if they married without money. Then the thought of the bills came, as it always did to remind her of the tie they imposed. Even if Lewis, whom she liked and respected, were to make up his mind to marry, she could not accept him without dismissing Dan. Yet how could she dismiss him, even for his good, until that money was repaid? Poor Dan! he loved her dearly, and in a way she cared for him as she had never cared for any of her other lovers. Yet the decision which had turned out so comfortably ten years before was still the right decision. And many of those lovers had been as devoted to her; and yet they had recovered from their rejection. Then the remembrance of George Keene's admission that he had been out watching the stars made her smile. He was a nice boy, who already deemed her an angel; but Lewis objected to wings, and of the two that was the most convenient view for the woman.

While she was coming to this conclusion George had been looking after her interests, for on his return to the bungalow he had been startled by the sudden uprisal of a veiled female from a shadowy corner of his verandah.

'I am Azizan's mother,' said a muffled voice. 'The Mirza sent me. I have been waiting the Huzoor's return. There is the pot if the Huzoor will give ten rupees for it. It is much, yet the pot brings luck.'

'Ten!' echoed George in delight, taking it from her. 'Yes! you shall have that; then I owe Azizan also. Shall I pay you?'

'My daughter is as myself,' replied the voice. 'It is ten for the picture, and ten for the pot.'

George fetched the money and counted it carefully into the shrouded hand.

'That is all, I think?' he asked.

'Huzoor, that is all. May the blessing of the widow and the fatherless go with the merciful Protector of the Poor.'

But while he was thinking, as he undressed, how pleased Mrs. Boynton would be, the veiled figure was pausing in the moonlight to speak to the factotum.

'You have seen nothing, you are to say nothing. And the Diwan sends these to the servant−people.' Then came twenty careful chinks, this time into a clutching hand, and Chândni, hurrying back to the city, laughed silently to herself. The idea of bribing the chota sahib's servants with his own rupees would please Dalel, and put him into a good temper again; so if this plan matured, her future would ripen with it. As she passed the sleeping camp she paused, wondering in which tent lay the mem who had succeeded so easily where she had failed. The lights were out in all save two, and the double row of glistening white roofs struck even her insensibility with a savage recognition of undeserved peace and security. They were no better than she; no better than those shadowy crouching figures of the village bad−characters set out here and there to keep watch and ward, on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief; a plan which at least secures a deserving criminal should thefts occur. For it was in the East that the strange hybrid between altruism and egotism which we call a scape−goat was invented by mankind.

CHAPTER VII

ONE of the lights Chândni saw came from Lewis Gordon's tent. He was hard at work, not altogether from sheer industry. Sleep with him—oddly enough in one claiming such serenity of temperament—had to be approached discreetly, and for many days past a disturbing current of thought had required the dam of good solid official business before he could trust himself safely to the waters of Lethe. He had not been constantly in his cousin's company for six weeks without learning to appreciate her infinite charm. She was emphatically a woman to ensure a husband's success as well as her own. A man would never have to consider enemies with her at his side, whereas with many others—Rose Tweedie for instance—it might be necessary to fight your wife's battles as well as your own. This comparison of the two arose from no conceit on his part in imagining that any choice lay with him. Simply, he could not avoid comparing the only two women in his daily surroundings. At the same time he was fully aware that Gwen would marry him if he asked her, and the question which had at first assailed him in the hall at Rajpore, recurred again and again, disturbing him seriously by alternate attraction and repulsion. He had seen too much of fascinating wifehood to care for possessing a specimen himself, yet Gwen would marry him because she considered it would further their mutual interests; and that, surely, was a more reliable foundation for a permanent contract than a girlish affection. Quite as pleasant, too, as the hail−fellow−well−met liking, which seemed to be Rose Tweedie's notion of love. George Keene and she were like a couple of boys together. The remembrance jarred, though he went on working with a smile at the thought of her eager readiness to take up the glove on all occasions.

Rose, meanwhile, lay awake next door frowning over the same readiness, and then frowning at her own frowns; since what was it to her if Lewis Gordon were nice or nasty? He himself did not care what she thought, and would end by marrying his cousin, though in his heart of hearts—

Rose sat up in bed angrily. What did she know or care of Lewis Gordon's heart? *Dieu merci*! Gwen Boynton was welcome to it, but she should not drag George Keene captive as she seemed welcome to do. George was too good to hang round a pretty woman, like Lewis—

This was intolerable. To escape the tyranny of thought she rose, slipped on her white dressing−gown, lit the lamp she had extinguished, and sat down to read a stiff book till she felt sleepy. The process was not a long one, for she was really fatigued, and ten minutes saw her turning down the lamp once more.

What happened next she scarcely knew; only this—a glare of light—a feeble crash. Then fire in her eyes, her face, her hands—fire at her feet, licking along the thin carpet, soaking up the folds of her filmy dress. The bed lay close at hand; she was on it in a second, wrapping the blankets round her, and beating out the runnels of flame, with eyes, brain, and body absorbed in the immediate personal danger. When that was over, and she looked up, she sprang to her feet on the bed with a cry. The fire was everywhere, creeping up the sides of the tent, filling it with suffocating smoke. She wound her trailing skirts round her and made a dive for the first outlet—for her only chance of escape! The thick wadded curtain swinging aside let in a wind, making the smouldering cotton flame; but the next instant she was outside, constrained to pause, wondering if by chance it was nothing but a bad dream. For the camp lay serene and peaceful in the moonlight; not a sound, not a sign, even from her own tent. She stood positively irresolute, staring back at what she had left. Was it a dream? Then, suddenly a faint drift of smoke rose through a crevice in the cloth.

'Mr. Gordon!—Mr. Gordon!' She burst through the thick, guided by the light in his tent to the nearest help. 'Your knife—quick! my tent is on fire! Quick, or the whole camp will catch!'

The blood was flowing from a cut over her forehead, one arm showed bare through scorched muslin, the draperies caught round her were singed and blackened, the stamp and smell of fire was on her from head to foot. Lewis, starting to his feet, stared at her.

'Oh, quick! please, quick! Your pen−knife—anything! Cut down the tents—Mr. Fitzgerald said it was the only—'

He had grasped the position ere she could finish, snatched up a hunting−knife and was out; she, with a pen−knife, close at his heels.

'Good God! how the wind has risen,' he muttered, as they ran. 'No, not mine!—The mess−tent first; the wind is that way.'

As they flew past her tent, the scene seemed peaceful as ever; but ere the guy−ropes of the next were reached, a swirl of smoke and flame, prisoned until then by the outer fly of canvas, swept straight up into the sky in the first force of its escape; then bent silently to the breeze. So silently!—not a roar, not a crackle—just a pyramid of fire splitting the taut canvas into long shreds, which the wind flung in pennants of flame on the mess−tent as those two hacked silently at the ropes. There was no time for words; no time for thought. A quiver came to the solid−looking pile, a shimmer in the moonlight. Another rope—another—then a sudden sway, a crash of glass and china from within. Down! but with a creeping trail of fire within its folds!

There was no lack of helpers by this time. Knives, hatchets were at work right and left upon the ropes lest the message of fire should find the tents taut. Colonel Tweedie was shouting confused orders in front. Dan Fitzgerald, after a quick inquiry if all were safely out, was back in the rear row, where the danger grew with delay. The din was deafening, yet the flames made no noise; it was the dark humanity yelling, as it capered over the big tent, treading out the curling snakes of fire. Seen against the glare of a burning pyramid behind, the figures showed like the demons in a mediæval Judgment beating the lost souls down to the worm which dieth not.

Rose, standing to rest, now that abler arms were at work, felt a hurried touch on her shoulder, and turned to see Lewis Gordon holding out an ulster which he had fetched from his tent.

'Put it on,' he said unceremoniously, 'or you'll catch cold.'

She flushed with surprise, then, as she complied, realising for the first time the havoc fire had made in her dress, continued to blush with an odd feeling of resentment.

'Where is Mrs. Boynton?' she asked quickly, to cover her confusion. ' I suppose you—I mean, she is safe, of course?'

'Of course. I haven't seen her though; but I heard your father calling to her. She must be with him. I'll see.'

'Mrs. Boynton? God bless my soul, isn't she with Rose?' cried Colonel Tweedie, who was still shouting excited orders to the crowd of coolies. 'She answered me and her tent is down. She must be out.'

'Mrs. Boynton! Has any one seen Mrs. Boynton?' Gordon's cry ran down the line without response.

'Gwen!—Gwen! the fools must have cut the thing down on top of her!' He had dashed up to the mass of ropes and canvas lying without beginning or end, in hopeless chaos. 'Gwen! Gwen!—are you there?'

A muffled cry was audible now in the hush of the workers.

'Not stunned, that's one thing,' he muttered to himself before shouting encouragement. Rose was at his elbow and caught his whisper.

'The sparks, for God's sake, Miss Tweedie! I trust you. If the tent smoulders she may suffocate before we—Coming, Gwen, coming directly!'

But no obstacle against eager help was ever more successful than that tortuous heap of heavy canvas, full of blind folds and entangled ropes, stayed fore and aft, and still fastened beyond possibility of removal to the bamboo−strengthened sides and the yet uncut guys. The seekers dived into the folds again and again to find themselves meshed; while Rose, with a sickening fear at her heart lest she should miss one, watched the sparks and shreds drifting by in clouds settling here, there, everywhere, and needing swift command to the little band of helpers.

'Quick, quick!—yonder by the corner. Another there! Stamp it out—quick! Well done!'

'What is it? what is it?' A new voice rose above the turmoil as Dan Fitzgerald came running from the rear grasping the truth as he ran. 'No, no!' he panted. 'No use, Gordon —too long. Get to the guys, for God's sake—the thickest—half a dozen men. Colonel, the right corner, please, sir; Gordon, the left; Smith, round to the back. They are not cut there, and see that the pegs hold—they **must** hold. Miss Tweedie, put a man to each stay as the front rises. I want the doorway—the door **must** show. Brothers,' he continued in Hindustani to the men who were fast falling into place, 'we have to raise the tent again. **Remember, the tent rises at the word!** Gordon, are you ready? All ready?—'

He paused, gave a rapid glance at the sparks, and lowered his voice. 'It has to be done sharp, Colonel, or—' Again he hesitated between fear of letting the prisoner know her imminent danger, and fear of not enforcing the necessity for speed. Rose understood, and racked by anxiety as she was, felt a thrill of recognition at Dan's quick thought which, even in such a moment, enabled him to remember that, as Mrs. Boynton knew but little Hindustani, he could continue in that language. 'The tent is certain to catch fire, but it may be smouldering now; so we must risk it. Remember that I **must** get in and out before the canvas yields, or— So be sharp. Gordon! you

give the word!'

There was an instant's silence, broken by a voice. Then a shout, a heave, and Rose straining at a rope as she never strained before, felt, rather than saw, something rise, pause, sink; rise again fluttering, swaying.

'Higher! higher!' shouted Dan, standing close in, ready for a dive at the door. 'All together, Gordon. Shâh−bâash, brothers! My God! it's caught already!'

A blot of shadow near her showed the coming doorway, and, half clear as it was, she saw Dan dash into it with the cry, which was echoed from outside as a little runnel of fire quivered up the half−stretched canvas.

'Stand fast! stand fast!' shouted Gordon at the guy. 'Run in, half of you, to the bamboos; they may hold longer than the stays.'

Rose was at one in a moment and clung to it, seeing nothing, thinking of nothing, but that irregular square of shadow. When would he come through it again? The tangles within! how would he thread them? For the pole having slipped from its supporting pegs had slid along the ground and would not rise more than half−way; so the inner fly−sides must be hanging in a maze—a maze of smouldering canvas. Horrible! a burning pall! Ah! would he never come?

Suddenly came another cry, as a great sheet of fire ran up the right ridge and the men at the rope fell backwards under the slackened strain of the parting canvas; yet still the corners held. But for how long! Oh! would he never come out?

'Mr. Fitzgerald! Mr. Fitzgerald! be quick, oh, please be quick.'

It was a foolish, aimless little cry, yet somehow it raised a new idea in her mind. What if he had lost his way in that hideous tangle? She was at the blot of shadow in an instant calling again and again. Too late! surely too late, for the bamboo lintel to which she clung frantically swayed. Not down yet—yes! down, and she with it, half kneeling still. She heard a cry from Lewis bidding the others run in on the fire and stamp it out; but as she staggered to her feet still holding on to the lintel something else staggered beside her.

'All right,' gasped Dan, before the great shout of relief rose up drowning his voice. When it had passed and they crowded about him, he had set Gwen's feet on the ground and drawn the folds of blanket from her face, though his arm was still round her as she clung to him, scarcely believing in her safety.

'Only frightened—half suffocated,' he went on, struggling to get back his breath. 'Couldn't some one bring her a glass of water—don't move yet—they will bring it to you here. It is all over—except the shouting.'

Rose standing aside, giddy with sudden relief, could hardly believe it could be over. Yet the coolies were rubbing themselves and laughing over their sprawl in the dust when the tent collapsed, and the tent itself was blazing away unheeded on the ground. Yes! it was over, and so quickly that George Keene, roused by the crash of the mess−room tent, came too late for anything save sympathy. He gave that to the full; not unnecessarily, for in truth the condition of the camp was pitiable. Lewis Gordon's tent, being the only one to windward of the original outbreak, was left standing; the rest were either smouldering in ashes or severely damaged beyond the possibility of re−pitching without repair, while the extent of other injuries must remain unknown till dawn brought light, and time allowed the fires to die out undisturbed; for any letting in of air while the wind remained so high might cause a fresh blaze.

Colonel Tweedie, looking a perfect wreck in his striped flannel suit, fussed about uncertain and querulous, while George and Dalel Beg, who had arrived from the palace, competed for the honour of putting up the ladies during the remainder of the night; Dalel, minus the least vestige of European attire, being re−inforced after a time by Khush−hâl Beg, breathless but dignified, bearing the Diwan's urgent prayer to be allowed the honour of helping a beneficent Government in its hour of need.

Dan with an impatient frown on his face waited for decision till his patience failed. Then he buttoned−holed Lewis, who amid all the wild costumes looked almost ridiculously prim in his dress suit, and expounded his views vehemently, the result being that the Chief concluded in favour of the palace. If, as was possible, they might be forced into halting for several days, the old pile would hold them all, and a regiment besides. So, after a time, odd little square dhoolies, smelling strongly of attar, came for the two ladies, and in them, duly veiled from public gaze, they were hurried along, much to their amusement. The gentlemen after a raid on Lewis Gordon's wardrobe, following suit, all except the under−secretary, who, coming last, found nothing available save a white waistcoat and a pair of jack boots, in which additions to a pyjama sleeping suit he looked so absurd that the others sat and roared at him, as men will do at trifles when still under the influence of relief and excitement, until George carried

him off to his bungalow, promising to return him next morning clothed and in his right mind. Thus the night ended in comedy for all save Mrs. Boynton. To her, clothes were anything but a triviality, and as she lay among silk quilts and hard roly−poly bolsters in the little strip of a room to which she and Rose were taken, pending the preparation of a state suite upstairs, she mourned sincerely over the probable fate of her wardrobe. Had it remained in the leather trunks escape might have been possible, but, knowing they were to halt for a day at least, she made the ayah hang up all the dresses round the tent. Poor Gwen seemed to see them, like Bluebeard's wives in a row, getting rid of their creases, and the thought of under−garments which might be uninjured gave her no consolation.

Rose was more calm, remembering that her riding habit had, as usual, been removed in order to be brushed, and would most likely be produced next morning. Besides, she was worn out by the excitement, and forgot even the smart of a large scorch on her arm in the memory of that five minutes during which she had waited for Dan to come out of the fiery maze. Despite her boasted nerves, the stress and strain of it all came back again and again, making her set her teeth and clench her hands. Yet Gwen, who had so narrowly escaped a dreadful death, was grumbling over the loss of her dresses. Rose, lying in the dark listening to the plaintive regrets, felt scornfully superior, not knowing that her companion was deliberately trying to forget, to ignore, a like memory—the memory of her own feelings when Dan fought his way to her at last. If that sort of thing went on he would end by marrying her in spite of her wiser self; and then they would both be miserable. She was not a romantic fool, and yet—a very real resentment rose up against him as she remembered her own confidence, her own content. She felt vaguely as if he had taken advantage of her fear, and that something must be done to prevent a recurrence of this weakness on her part. If she could only pay back the money he had paid for her, matters would be easier to manage. As it was, even Lewis, with his easy−going estimate of women, would not stand the knowledge of her indebtedness to another man, so something must be done, something must be changed. That, oddly enough, was the underlying grievance which found expression in petulant assertions that Fate was doubly hard in making her fair; had she been dark like Rose, the part of Eastern Princess she would have to play until another consignment of civilised dresses arrived from Rajpore would have been fun. As it was, she would look a perfect fright.

She did not, however. Had she not been aware of this fact ere she made her appearance next morning in the long flowing robes and veil of a Delhi lady, she must have gathered it from the looks of her companions. But she had appraised herself in one of the big mirrors in the suite of state apartments halfway up the stairs, and decided that she would wear a similar costume at the very next fancy ball.

This in itself was sufficient to chase any save immediate care from a mind like hers. In addition, even a stronger character would have found it difficult to avoid falling in with the reckless merriment which had seized on all the other actors in the past night's incident; partly from relief at its comic ending, partly because the charm of absolute novelty, the zest of the unexpected, enhanced the pleasure of extremely comfortable quarters—for Lewis in his capacity of personal *aide* had decided against the dark state suite of apartments on the second storey in favour of the roof above, with its slender balconies, long arcades, and cool central summer−house open on all sides to the air. Here, high above the sand swirls, safe from the sun, they would be far better off than in tents during the growing heat of the days. Gwen, leaning against a clustered marble pillar, looking down an the red−brown slant of windowless wall spreading like a fort to the paved courtyard below, said it was like living on a slice of wedding−cake. A solid chunk below, above a sugar filigree; whereat George, delighted, assured her that the whole palace itself viewed from afar had always reminded him of the same thing. Filigree or no filigree, she said it was charming, and the central hall of the twelve−doored summer−house was a marvel of decoration; fast falling to decay no doubt, yet losing no beauty in the process, since the floriated white tracery overlaying the background of splintered looking−glass was so intricate that the eye could scarcely follow the pattern sufficiently to appreciate a flaw. Seated there in coolest shadow you could see through the inner arches to the long slips of vaulted rooms on all four sides; through them again to the blue sky set in its rim of level plain, save to the north where the view was blocked by the Diwan's tower rising a dozen feet or more from the terraced roof, with which it was connected by a flight of steps barred by a locked iron *grille*. Thus the roof lay secure from all intrusion except from the court−yard, whence an outside stair, clinging to the bare wall, gave access to the state rooms below, and thence, still slanting upwards, to the lowest terrace of roof. Rose, leaning over a balcony looking sheer down to where the servants, like ants, were running to and fro over the preparations for breakfast, declared she would use one of the four little corner−rooms of the summer−house as her bedroom. All it needed was a curtain at

the inner arch, when it would be infinitely preferable to those dreadful rooms downstairs all hung with glass chandeliers and silvered balls, which made her inclined to hang herself in sympathy. In the hopes rather, suggested Lewis, of improving the style of the decoration; a remark which brought the usual frown to the girl's face. In truth, Rose Tweedie in her trim riding habit did not suit her surroundings half so well as Gwen Boynton in her trailing tinsel−decked robes. On the other hand, Colonel Tweedie would have done better in not yielding to the temptation of playing 'Sultan' to Mrs. Boynton's 'Light of the Harem'; for native costume does not suit an elderly Englishman. But the opportunity had been too strong for him.

'My dear father,' said Rose helplessly, when she first caught sight of her parent in a khim−khâb coat and baggy trousers. She might have said more, had not Mrs. Boynton's grave compliment on his appearance sent the girl away impatiently to lean over the balcony once more, and wonder if they were ever going to bring breakfast.

To her, when he appeared, went Dan Fitzgerald, without even a look at the others.

'Thanks, Miss Tweedie,' he said in a low tone. 'I hadn't time to say it last night. I **had** lost myself, and your voice—However, it can be only "**thank you**," and you have that.'

Rose, with a smile, let his hand linger in hers for a second as their eyes met. Honest, friendly eyes.

And George Keene also passed straight to her.

'Better! That is all right. By Jove, you were bad, when I found you outside the fuss when it was all over. You would have fainted, if it hadn't been for the whisky and water—which, by the way, I stole from Gordon's flask—'

'You didn't tell him?' interrupted Rose quickly.

'Not I! I knew you wanted it kept dark about the scorch. It's better, I hope? Why, you have curled your hair over the cut on your forehead. What a dodge!'

His young face was overflowing with a sort of pride in her pluck, when Mrs. Boynton came up. She was in a mood which craved attention, and some of her slaves had passed her by to give Rose the first word.

'What are you two discussing so eagerly?' she began. 'Good morning, Mr. Keene. How delightfully commonplace you look in exactly the proper breakfast costume for a young Englishman!'

George blushed. He would have given worlds to say that she looked anything but commonplace, but was too young to venture on it. But he looked the sentiment, and Gwen smiled bewilderingly back at him. She was made that way, and could not help it.

'Isn't it quaint up here?' she went on, leaning over the balustrade and looking, as Rose had been doing, at the servants filing up the steps with silver dishes of sausages and bacon, and all the accessories of an orthodox English breakfast, regardless of the feelings of their pig−loathing hosts. 'I declare, I have fallen in love with everything.'

'Yourself included, I hope,' added Lewis, joining the group; 'or, to put it politely, you have fallen in love with everything, and everything has fallen in love with you. And no wonder. The fact is, Gwen, that you do suit your present environment to perfection. I should not have believed the thing possible—but so it is.'

As he sat on the coping with his back to the landscape, he bent forward looking at her critically—'No!' he went on; 'I should not have thought it possible, but you look the part.'

'It must be awful, though, to be a native,' remarked George fervently. His eyes were on Colonel Tweedie as he spoke. That conspicuous failure was, however, only partly responsible for his opinion. In a more or less crude form the childish hymn of gratitude for having been born in order to go to a public school survives wholesomely amongst young Englishmen.

'I don't know,' dissented Gordon languidly. 'A civilised conscience is a frightful inter− ference with the liberty of the subject. Personally, I object to the native views of comfort, pleasure, and all that. But I can imagine some very good fellows preferring them. They are not nearly such a strain on the nervous system. For instance, Gwen, were you really the Shah−zâdi you look, there would have been no necessity for sending back those brocades over which I found you weeping half an hour ago. You would have appropriated them without demur. Wouldn't she, sir?'

The Colonel gave his little preparatory cough, and looked grave.

'It wasn't a brocade, Colonel Tweedie,' protested Gwen. 'It was simply the most lovely piece of old−gold satin in the world. It stood up of itself, and yet was absolutely invertebrate in its folds. Perfect! The same on both sides too. I had half a mind to be double−faced myself, and take it when Mr. Gordon's back was turned.'

'Why didn't you?' retorted the latter cynically. 'You are the only one of us who would not be criminally

responsible for the action. Isn't that so, sir?' He was mischiev− ously amused by his chief's evident dislike to the subject.

'Should I be responsible?' asked Rose, surprised.

'Your father would be, for your action. Wouldn't you, sir?'

This was too much even for reticent dignity.

'I—er—don't—I mean, doubtless; but—er—it is not—er—a subject which comes within the range of practical politics.'

'I should hope not,' cried Rose. 'My dear dad! fancy your being responsible for my actions. It isn't fair!' Her face of aggrieved decision made the others laugh.

'Perhaps it isn't, Miss Tweedie,' remarked Lewis gravely; 'but I can assure you that we officials are all responsible for our female relations in the first degree. A merciful Government has, however, drawn the line at cousins. So Mrs. Boynton could only lose her own pension, if she were found out.'

Gwen made a *moue* of derision.

'That is not much to risk. I wish I had known this before. Lewis! do you think you could prevail on them to give me another chance with the satin?'

'What on earth is delaying the breakfast?' fussed Colonel Tweedie, moving off. He hated *persiflage*, especially between his guest and his secretary.

'Coming, sir, coming,' said George, leaning over to look; 'there is a regular procession of silver dishes filing up Jacob's ladder.'

'Oh dem silver dishes,' hummed Rose gaily, leaning over to look, too. 'How funny it is, isn't it?'

'Funny!' echoed Dan, 'it is simply appalling.'

Perhaps the sudden sense of the utter incongruousness of it all accounted for the silence which followed, as they stood on the balcony, which clung like a swallow's nest to the bare walls. Below them, beyond the courtyard, lay the shadowy arcades of the bazaar and the great pile of the Mori gate. Beyond that again the bricks and sandheaps of Hodinuggur, with the village creeping up to be crowned by the grass palisades where the potter sat at work.

'Talking of bribes,' said Dan absently, after the pause, 'I've often wondered how a fellow feels when he has been informed that her gracious Majesty has no further need of his services. They seldom go beyond that now−a−days, but that must be bad enough.'

'Very much so, if the bribe has been insufficient,' assented Lewis.

'Mr. Gordon! how can you?' began Rose, pausing, however, at the sight of his satisfied smile.

'You should adopt the sun with the motto "Emergo" as your crest, Miss Tweedie. It would suit both you thoughts and deeds,' he replied teasingly.

'Don't mind him,' put in Dan; 'he always was weak in his grammar, and doesn't know that rise must be the correct present tense of Rose.'

'But, really,' persisted Lewis, when the laugh ended; 'if a man **had** taken a bribe, the first thought to one of his *genre* would naturally be if the game was worth the candle. If he **hadn't** —why, dismissal from the public service is not always misfortune. There is the disgrace, of course, but personally, I have never been able to understand the sentiment of the thing; it appears to me strained. Half your world, as a rule, dislikes you; it believes you capable of murdering your grandmother at any moment. Yet the fact doesn't distress you. It is inevitable that some people should think ill of you. So why should you care when they invent a definite crime for you to commit? It doesn't affect your friends.'

'Well, I don't know,' said George Keene sturdily. 'That's all very philosophical, but I believe I should shoot myself.'

'No! you wouldn't, old chap; unless you wished people to consider you guilty.'

'This conversation is becoming gruesome,' put in Mrs. Boynton; 'let us change it; though Lewis is right, for Government service seems to me a doubtful blessing—'

'But an assured income,' interrupted Dan, with a laugh.

Lewis Gordon turned on him quite hotly. 'I like your saying that, Fitzgerald—you of all people in the world. Why, man alive! if I had your power I would chuck to−morrow, and die contractor, engineer, K.C.I.E, and the richest man in India!'

Gwen Boynton looked up in quick interest. 'Really! do you mean that **really**, Lewis?'

'I won't swear to the K.C.S.I., or the superlative, but Fitzgerald knows perfectly that I always say he has mistaken his line of life. We want hacks. People to obey orders, not to give them.' As he spoke he glanced meaningly at Colonel Tweedie walking about fussily, and then at his friend's face.

Dan swung himself from the balustrade where he had been perched. 'Some one must give orders, and I mean to stick on for my promotion. It must come next year. So that is settled. Are you not coming to breakfast, Mrs. Boynton?' She met his smile without response as she turned away.

'Dear me! the others have gone in already, and I was so hungry. But one doesn't often get the chance, Mr. Fitzgerald, of considering an old friend in a new character. It was quite absorbing—for the time.'

So the balcony was left to the sunlight, and some one, who had been watching it from an archway in the bazaar, withdrew to the shadow where she rolled the little pellets of opium in her soft palms and prepared for her mid−day sleep. The burning of the tents had been a real piece of luck, the mem—that was she no doubt in the native dress—would be in the palace for two or three days, and women were women whether fair or dark. This one, too, looked of the right sort. Chândni's dreams that day were of a time when she would have the upper hand in Hodinuggur and become virtuous, for it paid to be virtuous under the present Government. Dalel should start a women's hospital. Then the Sirkar would give him the water every year, and the necessity for scheming would disappear. In the meantime they must not be niggardly. That did not pay with women, since, if they were of the sort to take bribes, they were of the sort not easily satisfied.

CHAPTER VIII

'**COME** and see our mad potter before you go home, Miss Tweedie,' pleaded George Keene, 'he really is one of the shows, isn't he, Fitzgerald?'

They had been doing the sights of Hodinuggur as an afternoon's amusement; tennis in a riding−habit having no attractions for Rose. Mrs. Boynton, however, on the plea of being a Zenana lady, had elected to remain on the roof, Colonel Tweedie keeping her company until the time came for his return visit of state to the Diwan on his tower. Lewis might have made the same choice had he been given it; but he was not. So he had preferred loafing round the ruins to toiling after problematical black buck with the sporting party, and made a pleasant companion, as even Rose admitted; being ready with information on most points, and between the references talking affably with Dan regarding the respective merit of Schultze *versus* brown powder; thus leaving the younger couple to themselves. So his change of manner stood out with unusual distinctness as Rose turned to him for consent to George Keene's invitation.

'As you please, Miss Tweedie; we are your slaves. A mad potter sounds cheerful; he is the man, I suppose, who made that jolly little pot Keene sacrificed to my cousin's greed this morning. When you are as old as I am, my dear fellow, you will really keep the pretty things out of the sight of ladies. I always do, now−a−days. There was a little woman at Peshawur, I remember—she had blue eyes—who wheedled—'

'Mrs. Boynton was most welcome to the Ayôdhya pot,' blurted out George hastily.

'*Cela va sans dire*! It is just because we love to give the pretty things to the pretty creatures that it becomes unwise to let the pretty creatures see the pretty things.'

'Then it is your fault, to begin with,' interrupted Rose hotly.

'Exactly so. I'm sure, Miss Tweedie, you have heard me say a dozen times that we men are to blame for all weaknesses of women. They are simply the outcome our likes and dislikes; and they will remain so until there is a perpetual leap−year.

'For heaven's sake, Keene,' said Dan, laughing, 'lead the way to the potter's or there will be murder done on the king's highway! Don't mind him, Miss Rose! He "only says it to annoy because he knows it teases." He doesn't really believe anything of the kind.'

Lewis, his eye−glass more aggressive than ever, murmured something under his breath about the inevitable courses of nature, as Rose, with her head held very high, followed George Keene into the potter's yard.

It was a scene strangely at variance with the party entering it. Indeed, old Fuzl Elahi, who had never before set eyes on an Englishwoman, would have started from his work had not George detained him with reassuring words:

'He tells his yarns best when he is at the wheel,' he explained as he dragged forward a low string stool for Rose. 'And I want you to hear an awfully queer one called "The Wrestlers." You know enough of the language to understand him at any rate.'

'Miss Tweedie is a better scholar than most of us,' remarked Lewis Gordon curtly from the seat he had found beside Dan on a great log of wood; one of those logs so often to be seen in such courtyards−relics, perhaps, of some ineffectual intention of repair long since forgotten. This one might, to all appearance, have fallen where it lay, in those bygone days of which the potter told tales, when the now treeless desert had been a swampy jungle on the borders of an inland sea.

The afternoon sun, slanting over the grass palisades, played havoc with the humanity it found gathered round the wheel by sending their shadows distorted to long lengths across the yard, and tilting them at odd angles against the irregular wall of the mud hut beyond. Altogether a conglomerate pyramid of shadows, with the potter's high turban dominating it as he sat silent, spinning his wheel. And as the clay curved and hollowed beneath his moulding hand a puzzled look came to the light eyes, which, usually so shifty, were now fixed with a sort of fascination upon that strange figure in the riding habit.

'It is not there,' he muttered uneasily, 'I cannot find a clew.'

George gave Rose the triumphant glance of a child displaying a mechanical toy when it behaves as it ought to behave. The potter was evidently in a mad mood, and might be trusted for a good performance.

'Now, Fuzl Elahi, we want "The Wrestlers," please. The Miss sahiba has never heard it.'

'How could she?' broke in the old man sharply. 'She does not belong to that old time. She is new. I cannot even

tell the old tale if she sits there in the listener's place. I shall forget, the old will be lost in the new; as it is ever.'

'Change places with me, Miss Tweedie,' put in Lewis with a bored look. 'I am not regenerate out of the old Adam, am I, potter−ji?'

But as he rose the pliant hand went out in a gesture of denial. 'There is room on the log for both, and crows most with crows, pigeons with pigeons. The big Huzoor can sit on the stool if he likes. I know him. I have seen him many and many a time.'

'Only once, potter−ji,' protested Dan, as he and Rose changed places and the wheel began to hum.

'The post is going from Logborough junction to St. Potter's burgh,' murmured Lewis discontentedly. 'If we are going to play round games I shall go home.'

'Do be quiet, Gordon!' put in George eagerly; 'he is just beginning, and it really is worth hearing.'

But Lewis was incorrigible. '*Proxime accessit*,' he went on, to Rose, 'what crime in your past incarnation is responsible for your being bracketed with me in this?'

'Oh, do listen,' protested George again.

'Listen! Who could help listening to that infernal noise?—I beg your pardon, Miss Tweedie, but it is infernal.'

It was startling, certainly. A shrill moan coming from the racing, rocking, galloping wheel as the worker's body swayed to and fro like a pendulum. It seemed to rouse a vague sense of unrest in the hearers, a dim discomfort like the remembrance of past pain. Then suddenly the story began in a high−pitched persistent voice, round which that racing, galloping rush of the wheel seemed to circle, hurrying it, pushing at it, every now and again sweeping it along recklessly.

'It was a woman seeking something,
Over hill and dale, through night and day, she sought for something.

The wrestlers who own the world wrestled for her,
On the palm of her right hand wrestling for her,
"She is mine, she is mine," said one and the other,
While over hill and dale, through night and day, she sought something.

"O flies! you tickle the palm of my hand,
Be off and wrestle down in your world."
So they brought flowers and grass as a carpet,
Wrestling on as she sought for something—
Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.

"Your carpet is hot, be off, you flies."
So they brought her trees and water for cooling,
Wrestling on as she sought for something—
Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.

"The grass grows long with the water," she cried,
"Be off, O flies, and tickle your world."
So they brought her flocks to devour the grass,
Wrestling on as she sought for something—
Over hill and dale, through day and night, seeking for something.

"They have trodden my palm as hard as a cake."
So they caught up a plough and ploughed her hand,
Wrestling on while she sought for something—
Over hill and dale, through day and night, seeking for something.

"You have furrowed my palm; it tickles and smarts."
So they brought a weaver and wove her lint,
Wrestling on while she sought for something—
Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.

"Foul play! Foul play! Look down and decide,"
"Not I, poor flies, I must search for something."
So they caught up a town to watch the game.
"He is right! He is wrong!" cried old and young.
"He is wrong! He is right!" And so war began.
While they wrestled away and she sought for something,
Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.

"What a noise you make; I am tired of flies."
So she swept them into a melon rind.
"Be quiet, flies! lie still in the dark."
She clapped her palm to the hole in the rind.
"I'm tired of it all, I will go to sleep;
When morning comes I will seek for something—
Over hill and dale, through night and day, I must seek for something."

She rested her head on her palm, and slept,
Down in the valley close to the river;
Slept to the tune of the buzzing flies,
Wrestling and fighting about fair play.
And while she slept the big Flood came,
And the melon pillow floated away.
And all within swarmed out to the sun—
Grass, and herds, and ploughs, and looms.
People fighting for none knows what.
"I have made a new world," she said, with a laugh.
"A brand−new world; and the flies have gone.
But the palm of my right hand tickles still,
May be it will cool when I find what I seek."
So she left her new world down by the river,
Left it alone and sought for something—
Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.'The galloping wheel, which had responded always to the mad hurry of the recurring refrain, slackened slowly. Rose gave a sigh of relief, and glanced at Lewis Gordon to see if he too had been oppressed by that shrinking recognition of a stress, a strain, a desire, such as she had never felt before; but he was leaning forward, his chin on his curved hand, intent on listening, so she could not see his face.

'By the powers,' came Dan Fitzgerald's voice above the softening hum, 'the old chap has made an Ayôdhya pot—the same shape, I mean.'

'He always does when he tells this story,' broke in George quite pleased with the success of his entertainment. 'I don't think he quite knows why he does it, however. Sometimes he says the woman was looking for one; sometimes that she always carries one in her left hand to balance the world in her right. But he always takes the unbaked pot to the ruins and buries it with two of those odd little ninepins, he calls men and women, inside it. He is as mad as a hatter, you know.'

'Several hatters,' assented Gordon fervently, 'but it is an interesting theory of creation.'

'Now don't,' protested Dan, sitting with his long leg crunched up on the low stool close to the potter. 'It is too human for dissection by the Folklore Society. But I'm surprised at one thing. The wrestlers—they are persistent

figures in Indian tales, Miss Tweedie—are generally represented as giants. They are pigmies here.'

'The Huzoor is right and wrong,' replied the potter in answer to an inquiry; 'the pâilwans were neither pigmies nor giants. They were as the Huzoor—two and a half hâths round the chest—neither more nor less.'

'That's a good shot,' remarked Dan in English, 'forty five inches according to my tailor. You have an accurate eye potter−ji,' he added in Hindustani, 'only half an inch out.'

'Not a hair's−breadth, Huzoor,' replied the old man mildly. 'The measures of the pâilwans is the measure of the Huzoor. I have it here; my fathers used it, and I use it.'

He sought a moment in the little niche, hollowed, close to his right hand, out of the hard soil forming the side of his sunken seat, and drew from it a fine twisted cord of brown, red, and cream coloured wool. It was divided into measures by small shells strung on the twist and knotted into their places.

'Hullo!' cried Gordon eagerly, 'that must be hundreds of years old. Those are sea−shells, and very rare. Simpson at the museum showed me one in fossil the other day. I wonder how the dickens the old man got hold of them?'

'Two and a half haths,' repeated Fuzl Elahi absently, 'the potter's full measure for a man in the beginning and the end.' He leaned forward rapidly as he spoke, passed the cord round Dan Fitzgerald's chest, and drew the ends together. The curled spirals of the two shells lay half an inch apart. 'So much for the garments,' he muttered. 'Yea! I knew it. The measure of a true pâilwan to a hair's breadth.'

'And what am I, potter−ji?' asked George, laughing.

The puzzled look came back to the old man's face. 'The Huzoor may be a pâilwan too. Times have changed.'

'Rough on a fellow, rather!' exclaimed the boy, still laughing. 'Here, Fitz! chuck me over the thing. Is that fair, Miss Tweedie?'

She laughed back into his bright face, as he pulled his hardest to make the two second shells meet, then shook her head.

'Not on yourself, Mr. Keene. You are more of a hero than that, I should say.'

The potter's eyes were on her, then back on George. 'Everything is changed,' he muttered again, 'even the measure of the pots.'

'Then you measure them, do you?' asked Gordon, to whom George had handed the cord, and who was now examining it minutely.

'Surely, Huzoor. The first one of each batch. Then the hand learns the make.'

'Try what make you are, Gordon?' suggested Dan.

'Not I. Here, potter−ji, catch. Miss Tweedie and I, according to the best authority, are abnormal; we are not ordinary pots, so I, for one, decline to be measured by their standard. And now, if some of us are to be in time for such trivialities as dinner we ought to be going.'

The potter rose also and stepped out of his hole. Seen thus at full length, he showed insignificant, his hairy, bandy, almost beast−like legs, contrasting strangely with the mild high−featured face, with its expression of puzzled anxiety, as he laid a deprecating hand on George Keene's sleeve.

'Wants bucksheesh, I suppose,' murmured Lewis. 'I have some rupees somewhere, if you want them, Keene.' But it was not money; it was only leave to speak to the 'mâdr mihrbân.'

'That's a nice name for you, Miss Rose,' said Dan softly—'Mother of mercy—a name to be glad of.'

She blushed as she went forward a step, asking, 'What is it? what can I do for you?'

He stooped to touch her feet with his supple hands ere replying. 'Huzoor! it is a little thing. Fuzl Elahi, potter of Hodinuggur, has a daughter somewhere. Perhaps she has gone to the Huzoor's world; it is new, I do not know it. If the "mâdr mihrbân" were to see her, she might tell her to come back— just once—only once. I would not keep her. But now I have no answer when my father says: 'Where is thy little Azizan?'

'Azizan!' echoed George quickly. But the old man seemed almost to have forgotten his own request. He stood looking past the strangers, past the village, past even the ruins, into the sunset sky.

'I will send her—if I see her,' said Rose gently, with tears in her eyes; for George had told her the story of the lost daughter, and the sudden, diffident appeal touched her. Yet the vast gulf between her and the old man touched and oppressed her still more, as she left him standing alone beside his wheel.

'Well!' said Lewis Gordon, when in silence they had reached the road again. 'You may call that amusement, Keene, if you like; I don't. When I get home, I shall have a sherry and bitters.'

'He is rather a gruesome old chap,' admitted George cheerfully. 'I felt a bit creepy myself the first time I heard that song—by the way, Miss Tweedie, talking of creepiness, did I tell you about the Potter's Thumb? I didn't! Oh,—that is really a grand tale.' He told it, happily, as an excellent sequel to the show, while Dan, in one of his best moods, piled on the imaginative agony about Hodinuggur generally, until Lewis announced his intention of returning to the palace by the longer way. He would be late, of course, but that was preferable to having no appetite for dinner!

'By Jove! seven o'clock,' cried Dan, looking at his watch. 'And you and I, George, have to get over to the bungalow. We must run for it.'

Rose watched them racing down the path, laughing and talking as they ran, with a troubled look.

'Fine specimens, Miss Tweedie,' remarked Lewis after a pause. 'I don't think you need fear their cracking in the fire.'

'I—I—' faltered Rose, taken aback by his comprehension.

'Am Scotch! That's sufficient excuse. I notice we seldom get rid of our native superstition. Besides, it **was** uncanny—the yard−measure and the Potter's Thumb, and that horse−leech of a woman, who was never satisfied. I felt it myself.'

She knew he was speaking down to her as a nervous woman; yet she did not resent it, because it was a distinct relief not to be taken seriously.

'I wish they had not been measured, for all that,' she persisted. 'You will own it was odd, won't you?'

'Not so odd as Dan himself! He has been cracked ever since I knew him. And Keene is one of the sterling sort, certain of success; besides, he measured himself! Now, before you go upstairs to dress, if your Scotch blood is still curdling, as mine is, have a half of sherry and bitters with me. Crows roost with crows, you remember.'

His friendliness beguiled her into playfulness.

'Crows indeed! then I've a better opinion of you than you have of me. I thought we were meant for the pigeons.'

'To bill and coo?'

If she could have boxed his ears, it would have relieved her feelings. As it was, she raced upstairs, in a fury, without vouchsafing one word of resentment, and paced up and down her tiny room with flaming cheeks. Could a girl be expected, for ever and aye, to be on the outlook for such openings? Of course Gwen Boynton would have laughed easily—would not have minded, perhaps; but then Gwen was charming—everything apparently that a woman ought to be!

Rose looked at herself in her dusty habit. She would have to go down to dinner in it, and challenge comparisons with Gwen in her silks and tinsel. Why should she? No one would care, no one would have a right to care if she did stay in her room with a headache. The next instant she was ashamed of the impulse. What did it matter?—they were welcome to their opinion. As for her, she would adopt no feminine excuse; she would leave those little devices to men's women. So she brushed her habit, and went out, with a heightened colour, to join the others.

CHAPTER IX

ROSE TWEEDIE'S sneer against men's women lacked point, since it so happened that Mrs. Boynton, in the opposite corner−room of the pavilion, was, at the very moment, setting aside the temptation of pleading a headache as an excuse for not appearing at dinner. And she had more reason to seek quiet than the girl, though a new dress lay ready on the bed; for Gwen loved to dazzle her world, and had spent some of her leisure in instructing a native tailor how to run up a web of coarse native muslin bought in the bazaar into a very decent semblance of a fashionable garment. But the pleasure of the trick had gone out of it. Something had happened. Something incredible, yet, given the surroundings, natural enough. Something about which she must make up her mind. It seemed scarcely a minute ago since she had passed in swiftly to the solitude of her room in order to think. She, Gwen Boynton, in native dress, with a white scared face and something in her hand. Now she had to pass out of that room again as an English woman, and the transition left her oddly undecided. Indeed, as she paused for a moment ere taking the plunge, with one hand on the embroidered draperies doing duty as a door, it seemed almost as if she were awaiting some command, some voice which would relieve her of responsibility. Then she smiled and passed on to meet the surprised admiration of her little world; for she had never looked better in her life, and she knew it. The creamy muslin suited her in its careless folds, her excitement showed itself becomingly in flushed cheeks and bright eyes, and the chorus of wonder at her cleverness made her gracious beyond compare. They had been away so long, she said, airily, that she had had to amuse herself somehow, and were there not miles of muslin to be bought in every bazaar, and many men to put stitches into it? Any one could have done it. Rose, listening with a certain contempt in her look, told herself that Gwen said truth; any one could have done it who thought it worth while to take so much trouble for the sake of personal effect; yet a regret rankled somewhere, mingling with the resentment which came as Gwen called attention, somewhat garishly, to more of her good works. Did they not admire the room? When Colonel Tweedie had gone off to the Diwan she had consoled herself by pulling about the furniture; and did not the Ayôdhya pot look sweet on the corner−stand she had improvised out of three bamboos, a brass platter, and a yellow silk scarf?

'You should have packed it away in your box at once,' remarked Lewis coolly. 'Keene may repent his good−nature, or some of us may steal it. The colour is admirable.' As he spoke he walked over to the stand as if for closer examination.

'Don't touch it, please,' cried Mrs. Boynton hastily. 'You—you will spoil my draperies.'

'A thousand pities, when they are so artistic,' put in Colonel Tweedie, glad of the opportunity. 'That is dinner, Mrs. Boynton. I've had it laid in the small pavilion so as to keep this as your drawing−room.'

'Thanks! but everything is delightful; simply fascinating! In spite of what Mr. Keene said this morning, I begin to wish I were a native.'

'For the sake of the satin?' asked Lewis, who was following close behind with Rose. Gwen flashed back a brilliant look at him.

'No! not the satin. That game would not be worth the candle.'

Apart from the question of satin, Mrs. Boynton had excuse for admiring the *mise en scène*. The violet sky, spangled with stars, seemed made apparently but for one end—to hap and hold that terraced roof which was clearly outlined against it by the light streaming from the pavilions on to the fretted white marble balustrades. At the corners were shadowy cupolas, and there in the arched summer−house at the farther end, close upon the velvet darkness, was a table set with silver and glass, fruits and flowers. At one side, so as to divide the ladies equally, Rose, in her habit, doing the duty of hostess with a little air of gravity and pre−occupation; at the other, Gwen, in her soft clouds of muslin, keeping the men in a state of admiring gratification through their eyes and their ears. They gathered round her too, when, dinner being over, they adjourned to the balconies for coffee and cigars. It was deliciously cool; a faint breeze stirred Rose's hair as she sat a little apart from the others watching the twinkling lights go up and down the stair which formed the only tie between that world on the roof and that world in the courtyard below.

'We ought to go to bed early,' said Lewis, coming to stand before her. 'You are half−asleep—no wonder, after last night!—and Gwen is what superstitious Scotch folk call "fey." Then, if we have to join that detestable hawking−party to−morrow morning, we shall have to get up at five.'

'You needn't go unless you like,' she replied curtly. 'Mrs. Boynton has cried off.'

'I am not Mrs. Boynton's personal assistant, Miss Tweedie; I happen to be your father's—so duty calls.' As he spoke he seated himself on the balustrade and leant forward, his elbows on his knees, to watch the group or the other side of the arcade.

'If I didn't know that Gwen despises that sort of thing,' he went on in dissatisfied tones, 'I should say she had rouged this evening. Her way of showing fatigue, I presume; though, of course, neither of you have the common−sense to confess you are tired. Women are all ascetics at heart; at least they believe in the virtue of martyrdom. They have different ways of showing it, that's all. Gwen spends her fatigue in dress−making and conversation to please, and you, I'll go bail, haven't even a proper bandage on that scorched arm—'

'Mr. Gordon!'

'Yes! I saw you imagined I was blind—suppose we say like to imagine it; but I really had my eye−glass, Miss Tweedie. Besides, it doesn't require microscopic sight to see some things.'

'What a profound remark!' interrupted Rose, to hide her pleased surprise at his unusual consideration. At the same moment Gwen's gay laugh rang out, soft yet clear. Either the sound or the speech annoyed the hearer on the balustrade, for he frowned as he slipped his dangling feet to the floor.

'As profound as I can make it this evening, for I'm not ashamed to confess myself dog− tired. Couldn't tell a crow from a pigeon; so I shall be off. Good−night, Miss Tweedie, I wish you would persuade Gwen to go to bed. It is easier to give good advice than to take it.'

Rose remained looking at the twinkling lights, and wondering if Lewis were really jealous of his cousin, till seeing the others go back to the central summer−house she followed suit.

'Tired!' echoed Gwen sharply, in reply to her information that Lewis Gordon had stolen away. 'Are we not all tired? I feel as if I had been up since the beginning of time seeking for something I could not find. My bed, perhaps. Good−night, Rose.'

They were an odd couple, as they bent to kiss each other in that mirrored room, where the oddness was reflected again and again in the myriad scraps of looking−glass on the walls. Each curved fragment giving and taking an eternity of Gwen's and Rose's bending to kiss each other.

'I am tired of it all, I will go to sleep;
When morning comes I will seek for something,
Over hill and dale, through night and day, I must seek for something.' The remembrance evoked by Gwen's chance words sent a little shiver through the girl; and with it came a sudden pulse of sympathy for the woman who, now that she saw her close, did indeed look haggard and worn.

'No wonder you are tired,' she said gently. 'Even I feel as if I could sleep for days.'

'But you are coming to hawk surely,' broke in George. 'Do, please! it won't be any fun without you.'

'Not a bit,' assented Dan. 'Gordon ordered your horse, I know, and told them to take you your tea at five punctually.'

'You must go, Rose,' put in Gwen with a shrug of her white shoulders. 'Diana *Chasseresse* mustn't disappoint her votaries. I'm glad my habit was burnt.'

She did not look it, and Rose, as she went off to her corner room wondered if Gwen could be jealous of her. The idea was absurd, but pleasing; and she fell asleep placidly over variations of the possibility.

But just over the way with that dark mirrored room between them, Gwen lay awake, with one hand thrust under the pillow where she could feel a tiny paper parcel. Should she keep it, or should she not? Should she say anything of the scene burnt in on her memory, or should she not? She seemed to see it as a spectator, not as the only actor in it. To see a woman in native dress in that room set round with eyes; the Ayôdhya pot in her hand, and in her tinsel−edged veil the jewels which had fallen from its false bottom. Jewels which if sold would buy her freedom, perhaps save her, and Dan too, from a great mistake. It was a chance. A chance most likely unknown to any one in the wide world save herself, for who would have knowingly sold a pot containing three huge pearls and an emerald for ten rupees? Nor was she bound to give more to the seller. Land was bought so, but if the mines were found afterwards, that was the buyer's good luck. Facts like these, accepted apparently by the honest and honourable, go far to give such as Gwen immoral support. No one could possibly know; she herself would not have known save for that chance slip, and the eyes made keen and eager through fear of some slight injury to the

treasure.

It was a chance of escape, and the danger had come home to her sharply in the past twenty−four hours. The danger of yielding to her own weakness about Dan made clear by his actions; the new danger, suggested by his words, of her losing her hold on Lewis. Could he really be attracted by Rose? The events of the evening gave colour to the possibility. If so, there was no time to be lost. She must be free; free to do as she chose. No one would know. Nobody would dream of bribing one so powerless as she. And if the jewels had been put there knowingly, it was only her risk. No one else was responsible. Lewis had said so—

So she argued, coming round always to the same thought, till the first glint of dawn brought sleep, as it so often does to weary eyes. Perhaps in the thought that the sun will rise, the world go on, no matter what we do, or think, or say.

She slept so soundly that all the bustle of the hawking party failed to disturb her; and when that was over the long stretch of terraced roof lay empty of all sound or sign of life, save for the green parrots shrieking and swooping about the carven work. A pair of them had built in a loophole, whence the young ones kept up a simmering, bubbling noise, like a boiling tea−kettle; a comfortable homely sound out of keeping with the bare beauty of stone, and sunlight, and hard blue sky.

Down in the courtyard below, two badge wearers in scarlet and gold lounged on the stairs, barring the roof from intrusion, chatting to the passers−by, and discussing the news which had just been brought in by the camel which was crouching beside a pile of fodder in the centre of the yard, while its owner stretched his limbs, cramped with riding all night across the desert, in front of the cook−room. Halfway up the stairs on the landing leading to the state−rooms, Mrs. Boynton's ayah squatted, combining business with pleasure, by being within reach of a call and her forbidden hookah, at one and the same time. A bundle of letters lay beside her, intended as a peace−offering against the possible smell of smoke.

The sun climbed up silently, shifting the shadows on the silent roof. That was the only movement, until suddenly a figure in a white domino peered through the *grille* which barred the flight of steps leading to the Diwan's tower. Then came the grate of a rusty key in a lock, and the figure flitted, silently as the shadows, to the summer−house, and paused in the mirror−room. Perhaps the transformation which Western taste and Mrs. Boynton's clever fingers had wrought in its adornment, was pleasing, perhaps the reverse. The *burka*, however, is of all disguises the most complete, since it blots out form, colour, expression, even movement. The figure showed indeed like a white extinguisher in the centre of the room, until, with a swaying of ample folds it glided over to the corner stand where the Ayôdhya pot stood out from Gwen's artistic drapery. Then something slid out, still shrouded in white folds, from the extinguisher, raised the vase, shook it slightly, replaced it, and slid back again in a horrible invertebrate protoplasmic sort of movement, calculated to send a shiver through a spectator. But there was none. The thing had the whole roof to itself save for that fair−haired sleeper in the corner room who lay with one hand clasping a little packet hidden under her pillow. Her face was turned to the doorway in full view of those latticed eye−holes belonging to the *burka*, which after a time came to look in on her from the half−raised curtain, and let in with a shaft of sunshine, a vista of blue skies and marble balustrades with two red and green parrots pecking at each other. It may have been the light, more probably the disturbing effect the dim consciousness of other eyes fixed on our own has upon most people, which roused Gwen Boynton. But she opened hers suddenly and started up in bed, her heart throbbing violently, though the curtain had fallen and not a sound was to be heard.

'Comin', mem sahiba, comin',' came in immediate answer to her imperative call as the ayah, thrusting her hookah aside, snatched at the letters, and shook what smoke she could from her voluminous garments. A trifling delay, but enough to allow the thing up−stairs to flit round the summer−house again; even to pause a second at the *grille*.

'It makes too much noise. I will leave it open,' it muttered as it disappeared up the steps with the rusty key held in its formless clasp.

'Where were you?' asked Gwen, her heart still throbbing. 'And who was that who looked in on me from the door? There was some one: I'm sure there was some one.'

'Me, mem sahiba,' grinned the woman readily. 'Me, ayah. Look in several time. Mem always neendi par; sota! sota! like baba. Ayah waitin' close to bring dâk. Many letters for mem sahiba.'

Mrs. Boynton looked at her doubtfully. It was not the ayah whom she had seen; of that she felt certain. On the other hand, if the woman really had been sitting outside was more than probable the whole thing was a dream. No

harm had come of it, anyhow; so five minutes after she was dividing her attention between early tea and a long epistle from an absent admirer. Gwen's victims were always excellent correspondents, perhaps because of that gracious indifference in which lay her great charm, since a letter had quite as good a chance as a man of whiling away her kindly, sympathetic leisure.

But when the ayah was brushing at the pretty hair Gwen's mind reverted to the question which had kept her awake. As so often happens—the learned say by unconscious cerebration—it appeared to have settled itself. Independently of Dan, or any secondary matter of that sort, money would be useful. Most useful, seeing she had just lost the best part of her wardrobe and had a season at Simla in immediate prospect. Now she came to think of it, Hodinuggur owed her some reparation for the loss it had inflicted upon her. Besides, it would be wiser to wait and see if the presence of jewels in the pot were suspected by any one or not. If the latter, it would clearly be flying in the face of a good Providence to mention her discovery. So, by the time she was ready to face her world, that world seemed quite simple and easy to face.

Chândni thought the same thing as she sat at the Diwan's feet in the big balconied room of the tower overlooking the canal, telling him in whispers of the success of her plan so far. The jewels were no longer in the pot. The mem must have them, for, as she had found out through a khitmutgar, the mem had been alone during many hours, and had been making a mess in the room with trumpery platters and pots.

'She may send it back yet,' said the Diwan cautiously. 'Lo! I am old, and this I have learnt through long years: Trust not a woman not to change her mind till she be dead.'

The courtesan laughed. "Tis as well for some men she is born so, father. But a night's thought is as death to a woman. Life is too short to give more to such things. And that night is over without a sign. Give her yet one more, an thou wilt; after that, say that Chândni hath dug the channel 'Twill be thy task to turn the water into it.'

CHAPTER X

AMONG those things which come by Nature and are not to be taught, may be reckoned a pretty seat on horseback. One may be a good rider without it, a poor one with it; but when grace and skill are combined a man certainly shows at his best on horseback. It was so with Lewis Gordon. He sat his lean little country−bred as if it belonged to him; not as the usual phrase runs, as if he were part of his horse. For that is a description which ignores the essence of the thing to be described; which is, surely, the mastery a man has over something which is **not** himself. Part of his horse! The very words conjure up a man paralysed to the waist and jelly above, agonising over a cavalry seat.

If Lewis Gordon were grateful to Providence for anything, it was for making and keeping him a light weight, and thus rendering him independent of Australian or Arab mounts. The fourteen−hand pony which he had picked up—a mere bag of bones—at a native fair, had to be hard held when trotting alongside of Colonel Tweedie's big Waler, yet she had only cost him a tenth of the price. As she forged along, quivering with impatience, Bronzewing was a pretty sight, the sunlight shining red through her wide nostrils, and shifting in golden curves over the bronze muscles which were almost black in shadow. Rose Tweedie always admired it immensely, and, illogically enough, felt inclined to be more lenient on the rider. She told herself it was because he wore spectacles on horseback, and they were less offensive than the eyeglass, which permitted variations of method in his outlook. She did not even fall foul of his indifference when he dawdled about, a picture of aimless dejection, at the hawking party; in fact, she had sneaking sympathy with his feelings. It **was** dreary work watching unfortunate grey partridges beaten up from one bush by coolies, only to be pounced on by a hawk ere it could reach the shelter of the next cover. She also shared his disgust at Dalel Beg, who, in top−boots, red coat, and doeskins, took a keen interest in the gorging of young hawks on the entrails of the still struggling victims, and gave shrill 'yoicks' and 'gone aways' at each fresh flutter. Khush−hâl Beg watching the sport from a bullock−cart on which he reclined among cushions was purely comical; his son purely offensive.

'I think,' remarked Lewis slowly, 'he is the worst specimen of civilisation I ever met; and I think this is the deadliest entertainment I ever was at. And both those facts mean something.'

Rose laughed, and suggested that it would have been different had they come across bustard. They, she had heard, were worth hawking. Her companion shook his head.

'I've seen it on the frontier at its best. You lose the essence of sport; that, I take it, lies in pitting your strength, or skill, or endurance against the quarry. In hawking you ride behind the skill; and as the country is easy, the whole thing resolves itself into the pace of your horse; in other words, what you paid for the beast.'

'Not always! I'd back Bronzewing against the field any day,' cried Rose impulsively.

He looked up with quite a flush of pleasure. 'Well! she should do her best to win the gloves for you, Miss Tweedie.'

The reply came as naturally as the remark which provoked it, but it made the girl feel suddenly shy and say hastily—

'She looks as if she wanted to be off now; how that partridge startled her!'

'Not a bit of it. She is only longing, as I am, for a hunt.'

'A hunt?'

'Yes! a partridge−hunt. Have you never seen one?' He gave a rapid glance round. 'There are too many bushes here, but Keene may know of some fairly−open country, with perhaps a thorn−hedge or two for you to jump—that is to say, if you have had enough of this festive scene.'

Five minutes after, George Keene, Dan Fitzgerald, Lewis Gordon, and she were sweeping along in line across low sand−hills in order to dip down into a harder plain among stretches of level, dotted sparsely with low caper−bushes, with here and there a patch of cultivation showing vividly green against its whitey−brown frame of desert, and here and there a bit of plough ready for the summer crop.

There is nothing more invigorating in the world than riding in line at a hand−gallop across such country in the freshness of early morning, especially when the party has gay hearts and light heads. Rose felt that it was worth all her purely feminine amusements put together, and, with a flush of enjoyment on her face, besieged Lewis Gordon with high−pitched questions as to what they were going to do; he calling back his answers, so that their

voices rose above the rhythmical beating of the horses' hoofs.

'We are going without dog or coolie, gun or any lethal weapon whatever—as the code says—to ride down and capture the grey partridge or *Ammoperdix bonhami*! Have you seen it done, Fitzgerald?'

'Heard of it only. The pace must be good.'

'Racing speed; no less. Therein lies the fun.' He gave a quick glance at Rose's tackle, and frowned. 'You should have a stronger bit,' he began when she interrupted him.

'It is the same as yours.'

'Perhaps. But a lady can't ride like a man, especially in this sort of work. If I had noticed it before, I—'

'Nonsense! I always ride with a snaffle, and Shâhzâd is as steady as a house.'

'That is no argument. In my opinion a lady should—'

The rest of the wrangle was spared to the company, for at that moment a partridge buzzed out of a bush at their feet, Bronzewing's equanimity gave way, and with a snort of eagerness she burst after it, Shâhzâd following suit; both beasts heading straight as a die after the quarry, heedless of their riders or their discussions.

'Give him his head, Miss Tweedie,' shouted Lewis, as he shot past. 'He has done it before and knows the game! Off we are!'

Off indeed, helter−skelter, behind the grey−brown buzz of wings showing against a blue sky.

'Ride it! Ride it! Keep an eye on it! I'll do back,' came Lewis Gordon's voice, boyishly excited, as, with hands down, he veered the mare a point or two by main force, until, as she caught sight of a heavier clump of bushes comprehension came to the game little beast, and she headed straight for it.

'Where? Oh! Where?' cried Rose dis− tractedly to Dan Fitzgerald, who was now racing beside her.

'Right ahead—there—don't you see?'

Just a brown speck against the blue sky still, skimming faster and faster to meet the brown horizon. There still, no—yes—

Gone!

Rose gave a cry, which was echoed by an exclamation from Dan, as instinctively they reined up, feeling the chase was over. George, hurrying up from behind, where his pony had been playing the fool, found them staring disconsolately at the bushes.

'Lost it, I suppose,' said Lewis, as he rejoined them. 'It is always difficult to keep it in sight on the horizon. However, you have had a good burst, Miss Tweedie. See! we started there—a good mile back. Have you any idea how you got here?'

'None! I suppose I rode; but I saw nothing but a sort of big bumble−bee buzzing in front of me. Shâhzâd did the rest.'

'As I said, not for the first time, which confirms me in saying he is only a Gulf Arab, for partridge−hunting is a Persian sport. Only don't tell your father, please; he would never forgive me.'

As he turned in his saddle, resting one hand on the mare's quarters in order to speak to Rose, voice and face full of almost boyish enjoyment, the girl felt that this was a new development of his character, and that she liked it better than the ones she knew.

'Now, as we go along, I'll explain. That bird took us by surprise,' he went on eagerly. 'Four is an ideal number, though I've had rare fun riding partridge single−handed. Number one ought to make the pace, keeping both eyes on the bird. Number two keeps his on the going, so as to save Number one from coming to grief over rough country. Number three rides cautious, land−marks the flight, and is ready to turn if the bird breaks back—you can't when you are going full speed, unless the bird towers. Number four rides cunning, cuts off curves, and heads for likely covers. The whole aim being to press the partridge so hard that it has no time to settle in shelter, but, after skimming down to a bush, runs through it, and takes to wing again on the other side.'

'And gets away, I suppose,' muttered George Keene, still out of temper. 'Don't see the fun of it.'

'Wait a bit,' retorted Lewis gaily. 'Now you must remember that the *rôle* you have to play depends on how the bird breaks. There is no time to settle. The nearest in must ride it, the rest choose their parts as best—steady, mare, steady!'

It was only a faint 'te−tetar—te−tetar,' in the far distance, but Bronzewing started, and even George's pony cocked its ears; while humanity went on breathlessly in line, the horses' feet at a walk giving out a hollow sound on the hard soil, the yellow sunshine casting hard shadows.

'Look out!' cautioned Lewis, in a whisper. 'There's a partridge running on ahead; by you, I think, Fitzgerald.'

'Don't see it!'

'Farther to the left. The mare sees it. We must trot a bit, or it won't rise fair. Steady, lass, steady!'

'I see it,' came in excited tones from George, 'by the big bush, Miss Tweedie.'

'That's another,' cautioned Lewis again. 'Take care and don't—'

Whirr, buzz! Whirr, buzz!

'Ride it! Ride it!'

The cry came from two quarters; but Shâhzâd was already extended, and Rose forgetful of everything save those brown wings low down against the horizon. She was closer on them this time, for she could see their skimming swoop as they neared a heavy clump of cover. Yet she felt she must lose them, as she had done before when to her relief she saw Lewis shoot ahead.

'All right,' he shouted, 'I'm on. Look out for yourself.'

There was a cut of his thong against thorns as he rose Bronzewing to a hedge which Rose had not seen. But she had scarcely steadied herself in the saddle from the half−considered leap in his wake before the partridge was down and up again at right−angles to its first flight; Lewis meanwhile bringing the mare round all he knew, and shouting, 'Ride it, Miss Tweedie! ride it.'

Shâhzâd, still steadied by the jump, was in hand and on the track in a second, snorting in mad hurry and excitement, and the bird was not quite so fast this time, or Rose was riding straighter, for she saw the last skim of the wings change to running feet as it touched the grey brown earth which tinted so perfectly with its plumage.

'Not there! not there!' came that warning voice from behind. 'It's run on. The next bush—put Shâhzâd over it.'

A leap, a scurry, a flutter, and the quarry was up again, heading in its hurry for an impossible open, backed by bare plough. Bronzewing being now alongside, Rose found leisure to glance round for the others.

'Gone after the second partridge,' said Lewis. 'I was afraid of it. There's a hedge twenty yards ahead, Miss Tweedie, I'll mark.'

They were over it, almost in the stride, and now the bird was below the horizon, a mere shadow of darker brown against the plough.

'I've lost it! I've lost it again!' The despairing cry came from Rose's very heart as she tugged vainly at Shâhzâd. When she succeeded in bringing him up, she saw that Lewis was slipping from the mare.

'All right!' he cried cheerfully, dropping his white handkerchief on the ground, 'it's somewhere about! That's the place I marked; now for sharp eyes.'

Up and down the bare furrows he searched, followed by Bronzewing, her reins dangling. Up and down, with such patience, that Rose, gaining confidence, began to search also. Only, however, to lose hope, as minute after minute brought no result.

'I don't believe it's here,' she remarked at last; and with the words saw Lewis Gordon stoop to pick up something she had passed by, thinking it was a clod of earth.

'Your first partridge!' he said with a kindly laugh, as he placed the bird upon her lap. There it lay unhurt, wide−eyed and motionless as it had lain among the furrows.

'Why doesn't it fly away?' asked Rose, with a little catch in her breath, as she gently stroked the mottled back.

'It will, soon. At present it's winded. Give it five minutes, and we could ride it again; but we won't. It flew game, and I needn't ask if you enjoyed it.'

No need, certainly. The very horses panting, nose down in each other's faces, seemed discussing past pleasure.

'It is safe from kites now,' said Lewis. 'Throw it up, Miss Tweedie.'

The next instant a skimming flight had ended in a covert of thorns and Lewis was on his mare ready to start.

'It wouldn't head for the open again, I bet,' he said, 'they get as 'cute as an old fox after a time. To your left, please, that rise yonder is Hodinuggur.'

'But we might ride again, surely? It would give the others time to come up,' began Rose, fiercely bitten with the game.

'Best not. The ground here is bad going; all littered with bricks. And you could barely hold Shâhzâd that last time. A snaffle is hard work—for a lady.'

Rose refrained from open retort. Lewis had given her a morning's amusement, and she owed him something; for all that, she made a mental determination to ride partridge as often as she chose with a snaffle. His objection

was only part of that wholesale depreciation—here a partridge buzzed out of a bush, and partly from impulse, partly from sheer opposition, she gave Shâhzâd the rein. A bit of bravado in which she reckoned without the excited horse. Ere she had gone fifty yards, she realised it had the bit between its teeth. What was worse, she saw that Lewis realised it also.

'Look out for bricks,' he called, spurring Bronzewing alongside for a moment, 'and don't try to follow when the bird breaks back, as it is sure to do, for cover.'

The words were still on his lips, when the partridge towered and turned. Shâhzâd, no novice at such tricks, pulled up short, nearly throwing Rose over his ears. Then, with a bound, he dashed off sideways, catching Bronzewing on the flank as she swerved, and throwing her rider's foot from the stirrup. The mare staggered, pulled herself together smartly, set her hoof on a loose brick, and came down heavily; while Rose, tugging vainly at her beast, went sailing away to the horizon, with the memory of that crashing fall seeming to paralyse her strength. When she did manage to turn, Bronzewing was on her feet; but her rider lay where he had fallen. The girl's heart stood still an instant in that utmost fear which will come first—was he **dead**? Yet, as she galloped back she told herself, fiercely, that it was impossible; people fell so often, and did not hurt themselves. But not, surely, to lie as he lay, with eyes wide open and one arm under him as if he had pitched head−foremost. Rose had never seen an accident before, and at first all her helpfulness seemed lost in a senseless desire to gather him up in her arms and hold him safe. Then the thought of her own foolishness came to her aid. He had been right! Women were no good! A man would have known what to do, and as she thought these things, she searched, comically enough, in his pockets for a flask, as if unconsciously reverting to the first resource of the male animal; but she could find none, and there was no water. What was to be done, save to chafe his hands and call to him vainly, while a perfect agony of negation clamoured against her growing fear. He could not be dead! He was such a good rider. He must have fallen before and not been killed. Why should he be killed this time? He could not be killed on such a bright sunny morning—when they had been so happy—when he had been so kind. Ridiculous, trivial little thoughts, such as make up the sum of such scenes.

Finally she rose, resolved by her very despair. Water and help she must have. If no nearer than the palace, then to the palace she must go. Shâhzâd had taken advantage of liberty to seek a wheat field, but Bronzewing would carry her with the stirrup over. The mare, however, distrusting strangers, sidled off, still circling faithfully round her master. Then the girl's hopes and fears centred themselves on the immediate necessity for success. She coaxed, wheedled, cajoled, forgetting all else, till all of a sudden Bronzewing paused to whinny, and Rose, looking round instinctively, recognised the magnitude of her past despair in the light of her great relief as she saw Lewis Gordon, raised on one elbow, looking at her in a dazed sort of way. She was on her knees beside him in a minute, confessing the past fear she had so strenuously denied while it existed.

'I thought you were dead!' she cried. 'I thought you were dead.' She was trembling and shaking all over, quite visibly, and he gave an unsteady laugh.

'Thumped the back of my head; that's all. No!' a spasm of pain passed over his face as he sat up. 'My collarbone's gone. Well! it might have been worse. The ground is uncommonly hard.'

Worse indeed! Rose could not speak for a lump in her throat; but the loquacity of escape was upon him.

'Must have pitched on my shoulder, luckily. I don't in the least remember how it happened. We were partridging I suppose; but my mind is an absolute blank. No wonder my head is just splitting; but I can walk home all right.'

And when she proposed riding Bronzewing for help, he negatived it firmly on the ground that the mare wasn't broken in for a lady; a man never having such a strong hold on his individual quips and cranks as when he realises that he has been within an ace of losing them altogether; whence comes the proverbial captiousness of convalescents.

So she had to be content with giving him a hand up and walking beside him, feeling a sad trembling in the knees joined to a general sensation of having gone to pieces. He, on the contrary, talking and laughing in magnificent, manly fashion.

'You had better tell me how it happened,' he said, as they neared the palace. 'People make such a fuss, that it is as well to be prepared. Did you see me come to grief?'

Rose hesitated for a moment to own up; then she did it wholesale.

'You told me not to ride because of the snaffle, but I did. I lost control of Shâhzâd; he charged Bronzewing.

She put her foot on a loose brick, and—and I'm very, very sorry.'

'Stupid little beast,' he said, looking round at the mare, who was following them like a dog. 'I expect she wants re−shoeing.'

The evasion was kindly meant; but she regretted it. It seemed somehow to set her aside. But this was her portion in all things, for with Lewis in his room, scientifically bandaged by Dan and nursed by his cousin, Rose's part resolved itself into doing audience for her father's fussing. He had a capacity for it at all times, but Fate had provided him with special reasons for it now. Another delay! and when it was absolutely necessary that he should hold a Canal Committee at Delhi early in the week, how was he to manage without his personal assistant? Then there were private reason for annoyance which he did not confide to Rose, but which that clear−sighted young lady fully understood. If Lewis had to remain a few days longer at Hodinuggur, his cousin would remain also; in which case Dan Fitzgerald would stay to look after them. Now Dan, ever since the fire, had been in the Colonel's black books. He had, as it were, thrust himself forward and made himself conspicuous. Finally, any woman must feel gratitude to a man who had saved her life. It was all of a piece—all the result of disobedience to his superior wisdom. Why had Rose set fire to the camp? Had he not warned her a hundred times against sitting up to read? Why had she charged Lewis? Had he not begged her fifty times to ride in a more reserved and ladylike fashion?

Rose could only fall back on George for comfort, and he, for reasons of his own, was utterly unsympathetic. A broken collar−bone, he said, was nothing—except an awful nuisance to every one else. To tell truth, the only person in that up−stairs world who was satisfied at the new turn affairs had taken was Gwen Boynton. It suited her admirably in more ways than one. So she sat after lunch and talked with Colonel Tweedie in the balcony until his ill−humour vanished in a bland flood of conviction that this eminently charming woman really was full of sympathy for his difficulties, and thoroughly impressed with his responsible position. In fact, when she had apologised for returning to duty and her patient, he came and let loose his satisfaction upon his daughter. Nothing was more useful to a man having authority than the companionship of a really sensible woman of the world. It enabled you to do justice to yourself, to adopt the course you considered best without undue hesitation. Therefore he would start for Rajpore, as he had always intended to do, on the following day, taking Mr. Fitzgerald with him to supply Gordon's place. He knew something of the current work, and it would be a kindness, serving to show—er—that—er—there was really nothing against him at headquarters.

'That was very considerate of Mrs. Boynton,' interrupted Rose quickly. She saw the meaning of this manoeuvre so far that it roused her resentment, even though, after all, it would be better for Dan than dangling about with a sore heart while Gwen nursed the sick man. Better for George also, since the *partie carrée* could not well consist of three and a dummy. George should talk to her, and so be kept from dangling also.

Thus Dan himself was the only one to look blank at the proposal, and even he admitted its reasonableness when Mrs. Boynton pointed out the many advantages it would have. This was during the *tête−à−tête* , in a bell−shaped cupola, which she allowed him over their tea. To tell truth, Gwen always behaved with the strictest and most impartial justice to all who had claims upon her, and she would have felt herself unkind had she allowed poor dear Dan to go away feeling aggrieved. She was very sorry he had to go, or rather, to be strictly accurate, she was sorry that common−sense dictated that he should go. Had all things been consenting, there was no one in the wide world she would so gladly have had for a husband. Now, when a woman of Mrs. Boynton's type, which is at all times kindly disposed to lovers, has an idea of this sort firmly fixed in her mind, she can be very kind indeed, even in her dismissals. So Dan was perfectly happy after he had sat beside her, and given her a second cup of tea, and handed her the bread and butter, though he made wry faces over her lecture on the necessity for subordinating his opinions to Colonel Tweedie's.

'And, Dan,' she said, when the *tête−à−tête*, had lasted long enough, 'as you are going to Delhi, you might take a parcel for me to Manohar Lal, the jeweller's. It is quite small, but you might just send it round—the shop is in the Chowk—by the bearer. I wouldn't trouble you, but it is a chance, as you are going that way. It won't bother you, will it?'

'Bother,' echoed Dan in the tones which men in his condition use on such occasions.

'Then, I'll give it you now. I was going to send it by post, so it is addressed, and all the instructions are inside; but it would be safer if you took it—as you happen to be going.'

She repeated the phrase as if to convince herself of its truth. Yet when, on returning with her commission, Dan seized the opportunity of taking the parcel to kiss the fingers which held it, she felt something of a traitor. Even

though, in sending the jewels she had found to be appraised, she told herself she had no other intention beyond, if possible, getting enough money to repay the loan she had so unwisely taken. That was all; and this chance of sending to Delhi by a safe hand had decided her so far—no more.

'Good−bye, dear Dan,' she said; 'I always miss you so much when you go away.'

That night Chândni reported progress to the Diwan. The mem's ayah had let out that the big Huzoor, Fitzgerald sahib, was the greatest friend the mem had. She must be a regular bad one, if all tales were true. And the big sahib was going to Delhi, the most likely place in which jewels would be sold. She would write to her craft, who were good clients of the goldsmiths, and bid them keep a sharp look−out. It would at least do no harm.

'Thy father must have been the devil,' said Zubr−ul−Zamân admiringly; 'yet will I reward thee, as thou hast asked, if all goes well.'

'Does not all go well?' laughed the woman. 'The fire and the fall?'

'And the girl?'

'Oh, naught of the girl!—the lance−player hits not the peg first time. That part is done, that tune played, for good or evil. The bridegroom, they say, comes next week. 'Tis well; we want no evil eye to change the luck.'