The Potter's Thumb, Vol. 3

Flora Annie Webster Steel

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CHAPTER XIX

AZIZAN was waiting for darkness, like many another woman in India; waiting for the veil of night to destroy the veil of man's contriving. Not so much because she dreaded to show her face in the daylight, but because it suited her to keep up the mystery of her appearance. Waiting, however, for the last time; since once her work of warning was done there need be no more concealment, no more playing like a cat over a mouse with the Palace folk. Once that was done, she meant to forget caution and kill some of them; for she felt that her own death was nigh, and revenge would sweeten the end of life. As she sat, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, Azizan had no very distinct plans for that revenge. First of all the Ayôdhya pot must be taken from its hiding−place in the stair of the old tower. That, with its secret bribe of jewels, it would prove to the sahib that there was truth in the tale she had gathered during her nightly wanderings as a ghost about Hodinuggur. When that was done, she would be free in some of those nightly wanderings to kill the Diwan or his son, the man who killed her mother. Perhaps she might be able to kill both, and yet have some strength left for Chândni—Chândni who had told her so many lies. For there was a fire now in Azizan's light eyes, which quite accounted for the consideration which the courtesan had shown the girl when, more than once, Chândni had awakened to find them looking at her. Of course, by and by a stop must be put to this masquerading through the village, but at present it would be unsafe, when so much depended on good luck, and thus Azizan had hitherto been unmolested. Indeed, Chândni herself had taken malicious pleasure in countenancing current tales of the return of the potter's dead daughter; and once when Khush−hâl Beg, during his son's absence, had deemed it well to single her out for favour, she had sent the hoary old sinner back to his swinging cradle like a quaking jelly from abject fear of what he might meet by the way. Still it was only when she was on the roof with the old Diwan that she ventured to speak in whispers of a time when this mad girl should be taught her own impotence for good or evil.

So in the meantime, the freedom from interruption, and the dread which the mere thought of her existence roused in the simple village folk, conspired to increase Azizan's faith in her own supernatural power, and as she sat in the growing dusk no doubt of her own success assailed her; for the chota sahib had returned—during the night. At least so said the old man, who, with all his craziness, was to be trusted. Therefore, in less than an hour, he would know all, since the day was dying down quickly; smothered in a hot haze−like smoke. There was not a shadow anywhere; only a dull darkness growing momentarily as the dull darkness had grown upon her mind day by day. For all that she had the power; the potter might mould the clay, the palace folk might plot and plan, but she, the woman with the evil eye, was stronger than they!

'Aziz! Oh! thou art there still, Heaven be praised!' The cry roused her from a sort of dream to find the old man beside her, breathless as from running, his mild face, seen dimly in the darkness, full of piteous entreaty. 'Go not from me this night, oh Heart's−joy! Leave me not again in the storm!'

'The storm! What storm, poor fool?' she asked indifferently.

He laid his trembling hand on her arm. 'Listen! Thou canst hear the noise of many waters. They came before, so the fathers sang, and made a new world. Down yonder at the palace, where thou goest, 'twill run like the race of a river, and the stones of the old wall where thou liest will be crumbling into it. Go not there to−night, oh, Light of mine Eyes! It is safe here on the heights.'

'There is no water,' she answered, with a short laugh, 'there will be none; save in the canal. The sahib will see to that now he hath returned.'

'How can he see when he is dead—'

'Dead,' she echoed. 'Bah! thou liest! He is not dead. There is no water, and there is no death—'

She broke off suddenly, silenced by his look as he stood with one hand raised as if listening. In the breathless air a strange whispering reached her ear, and like an arrow from a bow, she flew to the gap in the palisade, whence she could see the dip between the ruins and the canal bank, and beyond that silver streak again to the bungalow dotted down upon the level plain.

'*Dohai! Dohai!*'

The Great Cry—the blind human cry of her race for justice burst from her instinctively. The next moment found her bare−faced in the open on her way to prove if the old man spoke truth in death also.

'Azizan! go not! Leave not the House of Safety! It is the Flood of the Most High! Go not, oh! go not!'

His unavailing plea came back to him unanswered from the night which had fallen suddenly, as the dust from below sprang electrically up to meet the dust above and hide everything from sight. But through the thick veil that rush of water rose louder and louder as the girl sped on her way. It was true what the old man had said, and she had seen it. There was a river by the old palace. Was the other thing true also? Was the sahib dead? Had they killed him? The darkness lightened a little as she ran over the bridge so that she could see a great swirl of yellow water shooting past the piers not three inches below the keystone of the arch. Lower down it had found the open sluice−gates, hurled them from their foundations and carried them with it as it burst through the embankment weakened by the new−made cuttings of the villagers, and had raced in a mad river to fling itself against the mound of Hodinuggur, tearing down yard after yard of crumbling sand as it turned abruptly from the collision, to try conclusions by a flank movement. Azizan saw none of this; nothing but the dim white arches where she had waited once before.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

No answer, and in her eagerness she crouched down at the closed door, tapping softly.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

There was only a quarter−inch planking between them, that was all, for they had left him as he fell till some other white−face should come to accept the responsibility of interference. Yet it did the work as effectually as all the barriers of custom and culture which had divided them in life.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

Could it be true? It must be true that he was dead; otherwise he would surely hear her cry!

'Sahib! Sahib!'

As she crouched she might have put out her hand and taken his, but for that trivial quarter−inch of wood between them; but he did not hear. Because he was dead? Perhaps, yet even in life he had not heard, he had not known. The light in the potter's yard, lit by her passionate love and care, had only served to arouse his contempt. Better darkness, he had thought, than such a light as that.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

At last she rose and stumbled across to the servants' quarters, seeking the certainty which she must gain somehow. A light glimmered behind the grass palisades, sacred to her namesake's modesty, and from within came the eager yet subdued tones of gossiping women. Azizan crept close, and crouching in on herself held her breath to listen.

'Lo! I content myself with goodwill towards all men,' came the widow's voice self−complacently. 'Yet, O Motiya! wife of Ganesha the groom, I make bold to aver that this is no more or less than a judgment on—'

'What? Dost think it to be really the Flood of Destruction?' broke in Motiya, whimpering.

'*Ai pargul!* Who cares for the water? It flows south, not north; so we are safe. No! 'tis the sahib's death. Mayhap 'twill teach other folks' relations not to be in such a hurry to thrust themselves into other folks' service against the custom—'

'But—'

'*Ai teri!* wouldest deny my right—the widow's right? *Ai! meri adme*, thy sahib is dead, and there is none to see justice done and employ thy relations! *Ai! meri dil murgya! murgya!*'

As the renewed sense of her wrongs rose in the familiar wail, the women from within joined in it dutifully. Without, the girl, with her hands clenched and her wild eyes straining into the shadows, seemed to be caught and carried away by it also, and her shrill voice echoed theirs instinctively.

'*Ai! meri sahib murgya. Ai! meri dil murgya! murgya!*'

The women, scared to death at the unexpected aid, stopped suddenly, and the young voice rose alone.

'*Ai! meri dil murgya! murgya!*'

The sound of her own wailing brought home to her the truth, rousing her passion, her grief, her anger, to madness; and in one swift desire for revenge she turned and ran.

'*Meri sahib murgya!*'

The wail echoed over the wild swirl of the flood−water as she crossed the bridge once more. It was trembling now before its doom as the water rose inch by inch. And could that be rain? that large warm drop upon her hand,

so large that it ran down between her fingers? Another on her upturned face, blinding her. If those were raindrops, and many of them came, it might, indeed, be the deluge of the Most High. And if it were? Had not the end of all things come to her already? Yet as she ran she looked curiously into the sky. Not a cloud was visible; only an even haze of grey vapour, through which now and again a great drop splashed down upon her, warm and soft.

'*Ai! meri sahib! meri sahib!*'

No more than a sob now; yet even that she hushed as the Mori gate showed black before her. Should it be Chândni? No, not yet; but for Dalel and the hopes of him, the woman would have cared nothing for water or no water. So she passed on through the causeway. One or two villagers, hurrying, like her, through the darkness, talking in scared whispers of the strange flood, fell back from her path terrified. A knot of men in the bazaar huddled aside as she slipped by like a shadow; even in the courtyard of the palace the watchmen, gathered round one pipe for the comfort of companionship in such uncanny times, gave no more than an uneasy glance at the half−seen figure which they did not care to challenge.

Should it be Khush−hâl Beg in his swinging cradle? He had betrayed her mother, and the knife she carried was long enough to reach through the fat to his heart, long enough to do the mischief, when held in reckless hands, even if aid came to the unwieldy body. No! it should not be Khush−hâl either. Let him wait a while since he had done little to harm the sahib. The true quarry lay higher in the old man up yonder in his nest like a bird of prey; seeing all things with his keen old eyes, plotting and planning with his wise old brain. But for him, the others had not been; but for him the sahib would have been alive, and now he was dead. Each step of the stairs as she laboured up them seemed to need that cry of 'dead! dead!' to help her on her way; and they left her breathless on the first platform of the roof, where those huge drops of rain were falling in audible thuds upon the hard plaster. Faster and faster. This was no rain. Something must have given way in the sky, and, as the old man had said, it was '*Tofhân Ehlâi*.' So much the better for her purpose. In the arcades on either side faint figures glimmering white in the shadows showed where some of the servants were sheltering. So much the better, also, since she might find the old man alone; not that she cared for that either, save in its greater assurance of success. He would not be in the pavilions at this time, but in the room to the north end of the tower, of which she had heard the women speak. The room with the big jutting balcony whence you could see north, east, and west, everything except Hodinuggur itself.

By this time the raindrops, falling faster and faster, had become a sheet of water streaming down straight with such curious force that she staggered under it. A little sun−baked fireplace against which she stumbled dissolved to sheer mud ere she had recovered her balance, and a loosened brick on the last step upwards rolled down, beaten from its place ere her foot touched it. It was the '*Tofhân Elâhi*' indeed, though every moment the sky grew lighter and she could now see her way clearly.

'*Meri sahib murgya! murgya!*'

She kept the wild fire glowing in heart and eyes by the murmur, until through an open door she saw what she sought—an old man seated at a chess−table, still as a statue. With a cry she darted forward, snatching at the knife in her girdle, then paused abruptly. Where was the hurry? he could not move. So with a half laugh of exultation she turned back deliberately to bolt the door—a strong door, as befitted one giving on the favourite sleeping−place of despotism. It would need time to force an entry there; more time than she would need to do her work. Meanwhile she must look at this arbiter of her fate ever since she was born—this tyrant whom she had never seen. What! was that all? that wreck of a man, with his head upon his breast? but as she came nearer, the light, such as it was, from the wide−arched balcony, aided by a cresset smoking in a niche, showed her something of the youth in his eyes. Perhaps it showed him something of the age in hers, for the Diwan paused in his first haughty challenge, then began again.

'Hast come to frighten me, as thou frightenest the villagers, oh! Azizan, daughter of the potter's daughter?' he asked coldly. He was defenceless, and he knew it, save for craft of the brain.

'Nay! I have come to kill thee, Zubr−ul−Zamân, Diwan of Hodinuggur,' she replied; 'to kill thee as thou hast killed the sahib.'

A sound which might have been a laugh reached her as she took a step nearer, brand− ishing the knife; perhaps it was that which made her pause again in her turn; for laughter was hardly what she expected.

'I did not kill the sahib, fool. He killed himself for love of the mem sahib: the fair mem who took the Ayôdhya pot.'

The girl fell back the step she had taken, and the hand bearing the knife went up to her forehead in a gesture matching her sharp cry of pain. The truth struck home; yet she caught at denial desperately.

'Thou liest! She did not take it. I took it once—twice. I have the pearls—the Hodinuggur pearls. I—I—not she.'

One of those curious spasms of life came to the wreck of a man, as it turned to look at the girl more closely.

'So! Thou also hast brains. 'Tis the woman's *yôg*[1] now−a−days. My son, and my son's son, have none. Thou shouldst have been my granddaughter, Azizan, had I but known. Thou mayest be now.'

His granddaughter! Of course! she had suspected so all her life, had known it to be so for months, yet she had never realised the

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[1] Reign.

fact till now; and an odd, inexplicable sense of kindred rose up in her against her will.

'I shall kill thee, no matter who thou art,' she cried quickly.

'Wherefore? What harm have I done to thee, Azizan? 'Twould have suited me better had the sahib fancied thy face. Thou hadst thy chance.'

Something in her shrank back abashed before the naked truth of the old man's words. She had had her chance, according to her world, and she had failed. She had failed utterly; and yet— Something else in her, strange, incomprehensible, clamoured against the verdict, and the deadly weariness, the passionate apathy she had so often felt before came over her. The knife dropped to her side, and half mechanically she looked out through the arches of the balcony to where the red−brick bungalow should stand. There was nothing to be seen but sheets of water streaming from above, while from below came a rush and a roar. Suddenly as she listened came another sound; a **pit−pat pat−pit** on the floor in half a dozen places. The rain had conquered the thick−domed roof.

'It is "*Tofhân Elâhi*," ' she said, and even as she spoke a babel of voices rose at the closed door.

'Open! open! The river saps the foundation. *Ari bhai!* is he dead, that he hath no fear? Beat it down!—Oh, Diwan sahib!—Oh! servant, who hath closed the door?—Open! open!—Nay! without a smith 'tis hopeless—And I tarry not!—Listen! there goes more of the wall—Open, fools! open!'

Amid the roar and rush, the vain blows and shouting, the old man's eyes were on Azizan's, not so much in appeal as in command. He could not move and his faded voice would never reach through the clamour, so his only safety lay in her obedience. But she shook her head, then crouched down—as if to wait till they should once more be alone—in her favourite attitude, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, the knife still clasped in her hand ready for use. A louder roar came from without, a rattle as of bricks, mingled with cries of caution and alarm. Then gradually the blows and voices dwindled away from the ceaseless clamour of the rain and the intermittent rumblings of falling masonry, as the smallest crack widened beneath the pressure to a breach until, bit by bit, the solid walls seemed to melt away.

'Why didst thou not open the door, fool?' The words in the greater silence were just audible to the girl.

'Because I did not choose.'

Again the odd sound like a laugh came from that bent figure.

'The woman's reason. Why didst thou not choose, Azizan?'

There was no anger, scarcely a trace of anxiety even, in his tone. He was no novice to the ways of women, and the girl's face told him that his chance of life was almost gone. What must be must, and death came to all; to the mad fool in her turn. The sombre fire of her eyes met his sullenly; but she made no answer, save to lay the knife down quietly on the sill of the arch against which she leant. The steel rang clear upon the hard red sandstone.

The old Diwan's wrinkled hand hovered for a moment over the pieces on the board, then fell back upon his knees. So they sat staring at each other silently in the bow of the bal− cony. There was nothing more to be said. She had chosen; why, she knew not. And as the clamour of the rain and the rush of the river rose higher and higher, Zubr−ul−Zamân's head sank upon his breast with the old formula—

'Queen's mate; the game is done.'

The woman's reason, or unreason, had conquered the Strength of the World. But that was no new thing to the Diwan's wisdom.

But to the people outside in the open, huddling together under the pitiless downpour for safety's sake, it was

more or less of an amusement to wonder how long the old tower would hold out against the mad stream sapping at its foundations. Not long; for already the ruined wall had gone, disclosing a portion of the secret stair, where Zainub, the old duenna, lay parched up almost to a mummy. A hideous sight, no doubt, had there been light enough to see it; but there was not, and the refugees upon the higher ground could discern nothing but the block of the old tower and the swirling water below. A faint light came from the balcony of the room where the Diwan was known to be; and, as they watched it, people speculated how the door came to be fastened. Perhaps it had swung−to, perhaps— Well, he must be dead, or would soon be dead since rescue was impossible; and, after all, he had lived his time. Khush−hâl had been saved from his swinging cradle, and then there was Dalel away up at Simla. Rulers enough for a poor country−side, if God spared it from the '*Tofhân Elân*;' and if not, why then the old man was at least better off than they, exposed as they were to the elements. Far better; both he and the outcasts in their straw huts, which would hurt no one even if they fell. So the first in the land was as the last, and the last first. ' *Sobhan ullah!*'

As the rain slackened the night grew darker, until even the block of the tower ceased to show against the sky, and the little company of watchers could only hear the thunder of its fall.

'God rest him,' muttered a peasant, muffled into a formless bundle in his blanket. 'He was a hard master, and the new one may be harder still. There will be a good crop anyway.'

And down on the very edge of the boiling stream, when the rain ceased, a light went twinkling up and down, up and down. It was the potter looking for his dead daughter as the *débris* of the old wall, beneath which she had been buried sixteen years before, crumbled away bit by bit before the furious stream.

CHAPTER XX

THE dawn broke upon a new world as far as Hodinuggur was concerned. Where the desert had stretched thirsty and dry, lay a shoreless sea. Where the streak of silver had split the round horizon into halves, the double line of the canal banks looked like twin paths leading to some world beyond the waste of waters. They steered straight out of sight on either side, almost unbroken save for the great gap where the sluice−gate had stood. There the stream still swept sideways to circle round the island of Hodinuggur, which bore, like an ark, its company of refugees from the surrounding levels; a little company which straightway, taking advantage of the coming sun, began to wring out its wet garments and spread them to dry, until a general air of washing−day reduced the tragedy of tile past night to the commonplace. And after all, what had happened? An old woman or two had been drowned, the Diwan and his tower swept away. But the world held too many old women and more than enough of nobles. For the rest, it had not been the Flood of the Most High; and though Death came to all in the end, and the loneliness of it must be dreary, still it was somehow more terrifying to die in batches, wholesale.

So, clothed in their white, new−washed robes like the elect, they went down after a time in companies to see the extent of damage done to their belongings, and test how far it was possible to wade through the water towards the village homestead or two which rose above the flood. Canal−wards, of course, passage was barred, would be barred for days until the stream ceased flowing or a boat was brought. So the horseman whom they could see picking his way flounderingly along the northern bank might be the only survivor of the big world beyond, and they be none the wiser—for the time. It was Dan Fitzgerald who, after an enforced shelter at the half−way village, was wondering who could have taken the responsibility of anticipating the telegram he carried in his pocket by opening the sluice−gates, and so, in all probability saving the big Sunowlie embankment farther down. For the sluice had been opened; that was evident to his experience at once, since without the lead of the current to cut, the flood would have swept on to do its worst elsewhere. Well! whoever had done it, be he watchman or Diwan, deserved something at the hands of the Department, and be the past record a bad one or not, this act should have its reward—its just reward—if he could compass it.

Ten minutes after, he had driven the chattering servant from the room, and grief−stricken, yet convinced into a sort of calm acceptance of the inevitable, had lifted the poor lad's body tenderly to the bed. He scarcely even thought of a reason for the tragedy; perhaps there was none, for Dan in his rough and ready life had seen such a thing before; had known the useless search for some adequate cause. And was there not cause enough here for a sudden loss of balance? That race down from Paradise to Purgatory!—the intolerable journey—the horrible home−coming; and then the cursed bottle he had left. The remembrance sent his whole mind into useless regrets. If he had only ridden faster, if somehow he could have been there in time to prevent the loneliness, the awful desolation of it all! for he had been through such loneliness himself, and knew what it had meant to him. Perhaps, taking his own excitability as a standard, he over−estimated the effect on George's nature. At any rate, as he stooped mechanically to pick up the revolver round which the boy's dead hand had still been closed, he felt that, given the necessity for sudden return, the rest might be inferred. And then, beside the revolver he saw the open locket, with Gwen's smiling face staring up at him. **Gwen!** Great God! what did it mean? His own locket, of course, and yet—he sat down at the table white as death, looking first at the pretty face, then at the still figure on the bed, now decently shrouded from the glaring light of day. And by degrees the colour returned to his cheek. No! it could not be so. She was not cruel, only careless; and ah! what a grief this would be to her! Besides, George was not one to put a life−long regret of that sort into a friend's life. So pondering, he realised that among other incidents of the home−coming had been that of learning who his sweetheart really was. That, then, did not happen at Simla, so that could not have been the cause of the lad's sudden return.

Why, then, had he come? The new lock and keys lying on the table, gave him a clew, and his quick wits suggested danger to the gates. Then it came to him in a flash confusedly, almost irrationally, that it had been done for his sake and hers, and he was on his knees by the bed in a minute.

'Oh! George! George! why did you do it?'

So with the answering silence came a decision, impulsive, yet immutable. Such blame as could be taken he would take. No one should know or dream of failure. No one should ever say—'Ah, poor fellow, he shot himself; must have been something wrong, you know.' Rapidly he counted the costs, the possibility of silence.

Hodinuggur, separated from him by an impassable stream, could not be taken into account, so he must accept the risk there. It would not be much, if the servants' tale was true, that they had only discovered their master's death when the storm began, and had done no more than send word to the palace. No one, then, could have seen the body save those four or five servants, who loved their master, and worshipped rupees, and, above all, desired peace and quiet, and not the dangerous rakings up of the past which always followed on the advent of the police. Then for the Department itself. What he had said in his ignorance was true. Whether George had opened the sluice when, as the servants said, he went out in the middle of the day, or whether the palace folk had done it, the Department, in either case, owed the opener a debt of gratitude. If the latter, the Moghuls would be glad to keep silence; if the former, even if they set up a claim for compensation for damage, they would have been due so much had he, Dan, arrived in time to carry out his orders; thus no injustice would be done.

So half an hour afterwards, one of the servants started along the path to the outer world with a telegram to headquarters, and that evening, when the flood had subsided a little, Dan chose out the driest spot he could find in the sandy compound, and read the Church service over his friend's body. No one, he told himself, should know the truth; except some day perhaps, Gwen, when she came there as his wife. Then he would tell her, the pity, the needlessness of it all; and yet the needlessness had this virtue in it, that it made concealment possible; for the flood had swept away the error, if error there had been.

The telegram reached Colonel Tweedie next morning, among many more telling of disaster and death along the line of the great canal. Yet none was more pitiful than this one which ran thus—

'Opening of sluice−gate, as ordered, saved Sunowlie embankment, but palace injured. George Keene died yesterday of cholera. Very prevalent here. Details by post.'

'Dear! dear!' fussed the Colonel. 'How very sad! What a blow to poor Mrs. Boynton. She is so tenderhearted, and really, she was almost unnecessarily interested in that boy.'

They all thought of her; even Lewis Gordon, as, yielding to that odd desire to see for oneself which besets us all when bad news comes by telegram, he sat looking at the flimsy message of evil; yet his first words were of Rose.

'Your daughter will feel it also, sir; feel it very much I'm afraid.' Then he paused, to resume in more ordinary tones. 'I had, I think, better start at once, sir. I can report all along the line, and wire if your presence seems necessary. I hardly think it will be, and it is useless inconveniencing yourself for nothing.'

Colonel Tweedie bridled. 'I am not accustomed to consider my own convenience as against the public service'—he was beginning pompously, when Lewis cut him short.

'I'm afraid I wasn't thinking so much of you, sir, as of Miss Tweedie. This will be a great blow to her.' He thought so honestly, and as he jolted down the hill in a tonga half an hour afterwards he told himself he was glad to have escaped the necessity for seeing her grief, even while he was conscious of a curiosity to know how she would take the news. There was no such difficulty in imagining Gwen's behaviour. He could almost see the pretty pathetic face keeping back its tears, and hear the soft voice saying with a little thrill in it that George was the nicest, dearest boy she had ever met, and that she would never forget his kindness and goodness to her—never! never!

As he thought of this his expression was not pleasant, for Gwen had, in his opinion, done her level best to turn the lad's head, and so must surely know that she was talking bunkum. A man would know it; though perhaps it was not fair to judge a woman by a man's standard of truth, and Gwen, doubtless, was as genuine as she knew how to be; as genuine, anyhow, as Rose Tweedie, with her pretensions of utter indifference to all sentiment. Well, poor girl! she was face to face with realities now, for she had certainly cared a good deal for George, even to the extent of trying to keep him from Gwen's wiles. Poor George! a fine young fellow, who, for one thing, had been saved a bad heartache.

He had intended passing on as quickly as possible to Hodinuggur, but being delayed by the necessity for settling endless requisitions for repairs, had barely reached Rajpore ere Dan Fitzgerald returned, reporting that there was no reason for him to go out. Permanent repair was impossible till the rains should be over, as every lesser flood must run down the channel cut out for it by this deluge, and everything to ensure the further safety of the palace had been done. Barring the Diwan's tower, there had not after all been much damage, as the jewels and treasure in the vaults below had been saved: besides, the bumper crops which would follow on the inundations would more than compensate for any loss. There was, however, a certain anxiety in Dan's face as he said this.

'Well, even if they were to claim,' replied Lewis complacently, 'the saving of the Sunowlie bank would be dirt cheap at a few thousands. It cost us over two lakhs, and I was in an awful funk about it, thinking we must be too late. I tried to intercept poor George with a wire, knowing he would take the order quicker as he was already on the way.'

Dan's whole soul leaped towards the possibility. 'Then he got it after all. I was wondering—' he paused, angry at his own imprudence.

'Wondering what?' asked Lewis impatiently. 'I was going to say I missed him, and then I didn't see how you could possibly get there in time. By the way, when did you get my wire?'

'About an hour after you sent it off,' said Dan uneasily. He did not care for Lewis Gordon's sharp, practical eyes on these details.

'That is, say, ten o'clock on the morning of the 6th, I suppose. Good riding, indeed! And that reminds me. The report from the Rajah's people, which came through your office, says that the water first ran through the cut about middle day on the 6th. Manifestly impossible. You had hardly left Hodinuggur. It's a trifle, of course, but you had better stamp on the inaccuracy and show you are on the watch, or they will go on to cooking generally.'

'Yes—,' replied Dan slowly. This simple difficulty in concealing the discrepancy of time had escaped him before; but he was fully alive to it now. Most men in his place would have set the question aside, at all costs, for further consideration, and risked the possible consequences of the evasion. But Dan's mind was of finer temper; he could trust it to thrust home at any moment. This is the true test of power, and it is only the second thoughts of the commonplace which are better than their first. So he took advantage of the occasion calmly, knowing his man.

'But they are right. I did not open the gates. I believe George did, but even of that I am not sure. However, you shall judge for yourself. I don't ask for confidence, of course. I haven't the right; but I expect you will give it all the same.' Then boldly, plainly, yet with one reservation, he told the tale of what he knew and what he surmised. George had shot himself—of that there was no doubt. The sluice had been opened, in his opinion, by treachery, of which George, at Simla, had received some hint, and which he had arrived too late to prevent; though this also was mysterious, since the gates had not been opened till long after George's arrival. The guard at the sluice had been drowned or had disappeared, and the new Diwan, Khush−hâl, professed pious ignorance. In fact, only this much was certain, that the Sunowlie embankment had been saved, that George had taken the responsibility on himself even to death, and that the flood had made it possible to keep his memory from stain. For the sake of his friends alone, was not this desirable? This hint, no more, he gave of the inner tragedy connected with the locket. Yet as those two men sat looking at each other across the office−table littered with papers, their thoughts, all unknown to each other, flew to the one woman; but the memory brought tears to Dan's dark eyes, and left Lewis's hard as the nether millstone in the conviction that Gwen was at least morally responsible for George Keene's death. It came to him as a certainty, and yet a contemptuous tolerance came with it. She had not meant, of course—women never did—to play fast and loose with the boy's head. Yet she had done so. He had spent too much money, he had been careless; honest, perhaps, though even that might not be so, no one could tell. Why then should they try to find out now, when it was all irrevocable, when no harm could come out of silence? And George had been a good sort; too good for such an end; besides, even for Gwen's sake silence was best. He felt very bitter against her, very sore; yet such things must not be said about his future wife as might be said if the truth were really known.

'I suppose it had better remain as it is,' he said at last, moodily. 'Cholera has served its turn in such a case before—one of the advantages of living in a land of sudden death. Poor George! I daresay there was treachery.'

Dan, shading his eyes with his clasped hands, was silent a moment. 'If there was, he had no part in it. I wonder if you remember a conversation in the balcony at Hodinuggur about what a man would do—in such a case. "**No, you wouldn't, not unless you wanted to be thought guilty**." Do you remember saying that, Gordon?'

Lewis nodded; it was not a pleasant memory.

'I can't tell you the whole. But I am convinced George shot himself to save me. He knew,—what, perhaps, you don't—that I was engaged to a woman—'

Gordon pulled some papers towards him impatiently, and took up a pen, as if to end the subject.

'I suppose it is always "*cherchez la femme*"; yet it does not seem to me an agreeable factor in existence.'

'*Cherchez la femme!*' echoed Dan. 'Why not? They are our mothers and sisters, our sweethearts and wives, after all. And have you ever thought, Gordon, what it must be like to look back over a lifetime, and see next to

nothing that you would rather have left undone? Or, if you're pious, to take a sort of pride in pillorying yourself for a cross word or a tarradiddle? There isn't a man in a million with that record, but half the women one meets—ay! half the women one patronizes—have it. Perhaps it is small blame to anything but fate; still they have it.'

'Or think they have—which has the same effect! You remind me of a countryman of yours, a doctor, I knew once. "The sex," he said, "can't do wrong, and when it does it's hysteria." However, let us leave that poor lad to rest in peace; in a way that is more worth than the happiness of any woman who ever was born. And, look here, make the tale of reports complete, send them to me, and I'll consign them, dates and all, to a pigeon−hole. That is the beauty of official mistakes; you **can** pigeon−hole them and no one is the wiser, unless, indeed, some personal motive crops up. But that is not likely. So far as I can see, it is to no one's interest to make a row—not even if there **is** a woman at the bottom of it all.'

There was a concentrated bitterness in his tone, due to no cynicism, but rather to an intensity of pain; for if Rose Tweedie belonged by birth to that strange latter−day feminine development which unconsciously sets passion aside both from mind and emotion, and will none of it spiritually or physically, Lewis belonged to that still larger class of men who have driven it from the mind: who say openly that it is despicable; but that the world cannot get on without it; who insist in a breath in its unworthiness and its necessity. Gwen, he said to himself after Dan had gone, was very woman, capable of ruining any man in a week if she chose, and then being sorrowfully surprised at the result. Still it would be unkind to wound her needlessly by telling her that result; the more so because she would certainly tell other people, and Rose Tweedie might break her heart over it. Even if the pigeon−holed mistake were found out, they might get up a fiction about the telegram having reached George after all. The com− pensation might have to be given; but even in that case he could see no need for raking up the mud since the claim would be a just one.

Nevertheless a week after, when he and Dan were once more seated opposite each other at the office table, he felt vaguely uncomfortable. For a schedule of the dead lad's debts lay between them ready for the Administrator−General, and that showed an item of six thousand rupees borrowed on George's note of hand, backed by some youngsters on the very day on which he had left Simla.

'It was a first holiday, you know,' said Dan regretfully. 'And Hodinuggur is such a hole. There were the races, you know, and—and—'

'*Cherchez la femme*,' quoted Lewis; 'I don't blame him, not a bit. But if there had been an inquiry, Fitzgerald?—'

Dan shook his head and sighed fiercely. 'Yes! I know. For all that, he was straight—straight as a die! My only regret in keeping the thing dark is that some one has to go scot−free.'

CHAPTER XXI

A SHIVERING woman in one pannier; in the other, such things as a breathless fugitive can gather together in one hurried half hour. Between them the hump of a camel, a camel which every instant seems as if it must split into halves as its long splay legs slither and slide in the mud that covers all things.

Such was the method of Chândni's flight from Hodinuggur. Not a comfortable one, but under the circumstances necessary; nor was she altogether unprepared for that necessity. People of her trade know what to expect when they are attached to petty intriguing courts, where one ruler's meat is invariably the next ruler's poison. Besides, in this case she had to reckon on Khush−hâl Beg's anger at the repulse she had given him on more than one occasion; given him, of course, with a view to future possibilities with his son Dalel, but that rather increased than diminished the offence. And now her patron, old Zubr−ul−Zamân, was dead, Khush−hâl had supreme power, and what was more, three pearls were amissing from the Hodinuggur necklace; three pearls which could easily be traced home to her safe keeping, **and no further**, if needs be. So, at the first hint of inquiry, Chândni had deemed it wiser to seek the protection of the only man who knew something—if not all—about the intrigue which had ended so strangely in Providence setting aside the necessity for any intrigue at all. If Dalel chose to remain at Simla, where, no doubt, he was amusing himself hugely, she would not interfere with his amusements; that had never been her plan. She would only resume her empire over his weak, worn−out wickedness. And yet the flight entailed horrible discomfort. The splaying camel was to her what a bad passage across the channel is to a fashionable lady, and as she clutched wildly at the sides of the pannier, she decided that life was not long enough for a repetition of such experience. If she returned to Hodinuggur at all, it must be in a position which would ensure a different style of locomotion. Even the night journey by rail, cooped up behind iron bars in the wild−beast−cage−like compartment, labelled in three languages for 'modest women,' was, in comparison, comfort itself. Huddled up decently into a shapeless white bundle, she could at least think over the odd turn affairs had taken, and make up her mind what had best be done. The first thing, of course, was to bring Dalel to her heel. That ought not to be difficult, for though—the water having been procured—he might, like his father, find it convenient to underrate her services in the matter, she had one or two good cards to play in her adversary's strong suits which might with care save the trick. At any rate they ought to prevent any reckless disregard of her claims. First, they wanted the pearls back, and now the Diwan was dead, she was the only person who could tell them the ins and outs of that transaction. Next, they wanted payment of the heavy *douceur* promised by the Rajah for good offices in making it possible for the water to irrigate that basin of alluvial soil to the south. But now the Diwan was dead, they would find difficulty in proving that anything had been done—that the flood was not responsible for all, unless she chose to help them with her evidence.

For the rest, give her Dalel and a bottle of champagne to herself for one hour. If in that space he did not come back, as he had done a dozen times before, to her empire of evil, she would have none of him. He would be dead to all she had to offer in fullest perfection. He would be beyond her influence, as it were, and so, useless for her purpose. She was not going to marry a fool in order to wear a veil and live with a lot of women.

By this time two coolies were carrying her up the hill from Solon, in a thing like a bird−cage slung on poles; so small, so square, that she had to sit in it cross−legged and bolt upright. But though she could not sleep, even with the aid of opium, and though the hillsides, after the first rush of the rains, were clothed with tinted blossoms, and the winding valleys green as emeralds with young rice, Chândni never parted the thick patchwork curtains shrouding her from the public gaze, until the setting down of the dhooli warned her of an oppor− tunity for a gossip and a pipe. Then her feet came over the side with a challenging clash of their silver bells, and a quick stir run round the sleepy, sun−sodden stage where travellers, and coolies, and sweetmeat−sellers lay huddled together in the shade. Even the cowboy driving his cattle from the bales of fodder on their way up for the sahib−logue's ponies, paused to look at her with a grin, while his beasts ate on. The bees were flitting from flower to flower, a golden oriole flashed through the green transparency of the walnut−trees, and below the branches the great emerald hearts of the yam leaves outlined themselves against the sapphire distance of the valley, which was divided from the sapphire distance of the sky by the glittering pearly spikelets of the snowy range. Sapphires and pearls echoed and re−echoed in ever−receding distance by the white clouds dividing one sea of ether from another.

But in all this world there was nothing worth a look, apparently, save Chândni, the courtesan, swinging her silver anklets over the edge of a dhooli; to judge at any rate by those human eyes.

She did not go straight to her destination, but paused at a house in the bazaar where such as she were all too welcome. There was never any mincing of words or thoughts with Chândni. To one end she had been born a *Kanjari*, and to this end she lived to the best of her ability. So she paused to clothe herself in clean clear muslins, and hang great garlands of tuberose and jasmine about the column of her massive throat; to redden her lips, and give a deeper shadow to her eyes; looking at herself the while in the thumb−mirror worn on her left hand. No more, no less, intent upon appearing at her best than many a person who has not been born to that end; many a decent, respectable person, who would be dreadfully shocked at having her innocent half hour before the cheval−glass evened to Chândni's most reprehensible occupation. Perhaps the difference lies in the size of the mirrors; at any rate it is not palpably apparent elsewhere.

Mirza Dalel Beg was living, she knew, in a European house, as the upper ten of natives love to do. Why, is, in five cases out of six, a mystery. The sixth, no doubt, has acquired exotic tastes; the remaining five, no doubt, consider it good style to pretend them. So, after paying roundly for the privilege of toilet−sets and dinner−services, they prefer the water−carrier with his skin bag to a lavatory, and a big platter on the floor to all the neatly−laid dining−tables in creation.

A curious example of the fascination which useless comforts have for some people came to light during one of the many Embassies from Cabul which British diplomacy, or the want of it, has inveigled into India. During its stay there, district−officers were instructed to provide the whole horde of barbarians with house−room in European fashion so as to avoid invidious distinctions. As a rule, the local Parsee was invited to furnish a requisite number of empty houses with the necessary repp curtains, French clocks, Britannia metal teapots, and German prints, needed for the night's hospitality. Next day, so runs the tale, there never was a soup−plate to be found. Occasionally the guests packed up a French clock; once, it is affirmed, a sponge−bath went amissing, but unless they ate them, that Embassy must have gone back to Cabul with some hundreds of dozens of soup−plates stowed away among the official presents of watches that won't go, and guns that won't fire; and soup is not a national dish in Afghanistan.

So Dalel Khan had rented a house which he got cheap, because three of its previous tenants had died of typhoid fever. It was a pretty place enough, shut in somewhat by the ravines which furrow the lower part of the ridge, but with an outlook beautiful beyond belief over the plains. The single dahlias—refuse run wild from many a garden above—found foothold in every cranny of the rocks, and great sheets of morning glories climbed over the broken rails fencing the narrow path from the steep *khud*, which seemed to leap at one bound to the pale blue of the valley below. Chândni, stepping out of her dhooli, looked at it all distastefully, reached forth a strong, ring−bedecked hand, appropriated a yellow dahlia, which she stuck behind her ear, and called. Then the bells clashed again as she walked with a free step over to the verandah of the house, raised the chick, and looked in, while the dhooli−bearers squatted down beside the railings, and apparently resumed a conversation begun in the bazaar. For the rest, sunshine and silence.

Chândni, dazzled by the glare outside, could at first see nothing clearly; the room, though to her unaccustomed eyes crammed full of useless things, seemed empty of what she sought. Then suddenly there came a shrill, unformed voice—

'Go away! We don't want you. Mam−ma, send her away. Go, I tell you! The Mirza is married now; I am his wife.'

The girl who came forward was not more than fifteen by the look of her, with a frizz of hot−pressed light hair over her forehead, and a skin which gave one the impression of being bleached, perhaps because of the coal−black eyes set in the narrow sharp face; yet with a certain attractiveness about the figure, dressed as it was in the height of fashion, with sleeves to the ears, and a waist requiring the surgical bandage of folded silk to prevent it from breaking in two.

His wife! Chândni, from her full height and magnificent development, looked at her as distastefully as she had looked at the view from the terrace. Neither were to her liking: they both appealed too much to the imagination. This other woman who came in answer to the call was better, though past her prime and pulpy; drowsy, too, from the snooze she had been enjoying on the sofa. Still with a torrent of capable, tell−tale abuse for the intruder.

'Ari!' laughed Chândni contemptuously, when the fat lady paused for breath. 'So thou too hast been of the

bazaar? But I want not thee, or that half−fledged thing who calls herself a wife. I want Dalel—where is he?'

'Mamma!' cried the unformed voice in English, breaking down over its own feeble passion. 'Send her away, I tell you! The Mirza will be back soon, and she must not be here. Don't fool with words. Call the servants. *Ai! budzart!* (base−born). I will throw you down the *khud!*'

Chândni laughed again—laughed louder as, in response to the girl's cry, a face showed itself behind her.

'Salaam, oh *bhai!* (brother),' she said, nodding her head at the new−comer. 'Ah! 'tis thou, Mohammed I look you, this image saith she will fling me down the *khud*. If it came to force, my pigeon, I know which would have the Mirza; but I will not fight for him thus, he is not worth it. So, he fancies thee? God help him! Sure, thy mother is the better woman.'

'Come, come, mother Chândni,' urged the servant in response to shrill commands. 'This is no place for thee now. These are mem's. And he hath married her,' he went on fast and low. 'Yea! 'tis true, the *nikka* hath been read, so abuse is vain. Come, thou canst see him elsewhere.'

'Nay! I will see him here—here with his mem,' retorted Chândni airily. Then she turned swiftly on the elder woman, who, going to the door, was about to call for further assistance. 'What harm shall I do thee, fool, who art as I am with a piebald skin, or as this one, who would be as I am had God made her a woman. Lo! ask thy servants who Chândni the courtesan is, and what she has been, ay! and will be—if she chooses.'

It was an odd scene. The room decorated into bastard civilisation; the girl depending on a lack of pigment in her skin for all her claims to mem−ship, that being the only trace of her unknown European father; the mother without even this distinction. yet clinging to her taint of Western blood, as to a patent of nobility; clinging to it farcically, in fringe and furbelow, in fashion generally. Before them, as it were, against them, stood Chândni, in her trailing white Delhi draperies and massive garlands, a figure which might have served as model for some of those strange solemn−eyed statues, half Greek, half Indian, which are found buried in the sand−hills of the frontier. There was a little crowd of dark expectant faces at the door now, towards which she nodded familiarly.

'Go back! oh brothers! I do no harm. 'Tis not my way with women folk. I wait the Mirza's return. Then, if I am not wanted, I will go. Lo! Chândni the courtesan hath no need to keep a man in a leash; she hath no need to have the *nikka* read, my little pigeon, as thou hast. Ari! so the pictures in the papers Dalel used to bring me are true, and 'tis a beauty to have no body and a big head.'

Beatrice Norma Elflida D'Eremao, presently her Highness Mrs. Dalel Beg, gave a little scream of rage, and stamped her tiny high− heeled shoes upon the floor. Mrs. Lily Violet D'Eremao, her mother, known in her time by many a *sobriquet* until she settled down to sobriety and the education of a fair daughter, screamed too, in voluble abuse; but they were both quite helpless before the white−robed figure standing between them and the sunlight with a laugh on its red lips, which did not leave them when into the midst of the scene came Dalel Beg, got up in his dandy riding gear; only the folded pugree remaining to tell the tale of his birth. Perhaps because the ideas within the head it covered needed some such excuse for their existence. His face was hideous in its sheer malice, livid, not with passion or fear, but from that hatred of opposition which belonged to his race. And Chândni, recognising this, swept him a low salaam, graceful to the uttermost curve of each finger, a salaam which would have made Turveydrop die of envy, a salaam such as one sees once or twice in a lifetime. A minute before she might have given it in derision; now she yielded it to the lingering majesty in this pitiful representative of a long line of tyrants.

'Long life attend my lord,' she said, in those liquid tones of set ceremony, which her class pride themselves on acquiring. And even among them Chândni had a silver tongue: none near her, so the report ran.

Dalel Beg's eyes saw, his ears heard. They would not refuse their wonted office, and yet as he took a step nearer, he raised the hunting crop he held.

'Go!' he cried. 'Go! Mohammed! Fuggu—turn this scum of the bazaars from the door.'

'Which scum of the bazaars?' she asked coolly. 'This—or that?'

It was not scorn exactly, it was an indifferent contempt which seemed to leave no denial possible, and which held action arrested.

'Which is it to be, Mirza sahib?' she asked again, crossing swiftly to where the girl stood as if to measure her height against that small insignificant figure. 'There is not much to choose between us, except in the outside—and thou hast eyes!'

'Fuggu! Mohammed! Dittu! Scoundrels, turn her out! call the Kotwâl! Turn her out, I say!' shrieked the Mirza,

fast loosing all dignity in a sort of animal admiration for this woman, who, he knew, would come back to him at a word. A word he dare not give,—which he did not wish to give, as yet.

'Softly! softly! oh, my brothers,' came that liquid voice. 'There is no need to touch Chândni the courtesan. The master hath his right, and I will go. I only ask a word, and sure my words are better for the ear than theirs.'

It was incontestably true, for mother and daughter were now at the highest pitch of the Eurasian accent aggravated by hysterics, and the men stood uncertain, siding, every one of them, with that which was familiar.

'The word is this,' she went on boldly, 'I have done my part. Is there to be payment?'

Dalel's face lost its last trace of dignity and settled down into mere spite.

'So! it is payment. Lo! mother−in−law, hold thy peace! 'Tis nothing but a bad debt, a debt without a bond! Payment! Go, fool, and ask it of the old man—the old devil who was drowned. Ask not here—here we need all the money we can get.'

Then in his delight and content in this op− portunity for malice, he forgot a suspicion of fear which had been with him hitherto, and turned to the girl with a leer and a laugh: 'Aha! we want the **oof** ourself, don't we, Tricks? Lo! I give you gold watch and chain to−day. I give you gold bangle to−morrow, if you're good girl. But that one—nothing—nothing.'

He echoed the last words jeeringly in Hindustani, cutting with his whip towards Chândni as one cuts at a dog to frighten it from the room. Perhaps he was nearer than he thought; anyhow, the uttermost end of lash touching the silver bells on her ankle set them jingling. A slight thing to make two women cease their cries, and half a dozen men or more hold their breath involuntarily; yet it did, commanding silence for that clear voice.

'Lo! thou hast given me something, oh Mizra Dalel Beg! which no man hath given before to Chândni the courtesan. It is enough. I go.'

So far dignity went with her. But at the door she turned to give the women back in kind and with interest the abuse which they had given to her. Even with a despicable cheat like the Mirza, there was a reputation to keep up—he was at least the descendant of worthy men who had done their best for such as she; but with those two women, even as herself, but without her claims, why should she be silent?

Yet ere she was half−way back to the bazaar she had forgotten them and their abuse; forgotten everything save that clash of the silver bells. That was an end—an end for ever to Dalel. In a way she was glad, for he was unendurable when sober, and not much better when he was drunk. Now nothing remained save the necessity for compensation and revenge. If the Moghuls would not pay, there were others who would. The mem, for instance, who had taken the pearls. And those who had spread it abroad that the chota sahib had died in his bed, they would not care to have their truth impugned. They had bribed the servants no doubt, the Diwan was dead, and they had held the water sufficient inducement for the others. But she? She had had nothing, and she meant to have something. And then when she had got her money's worth for silence, she would go and sell that silence to the Rajah, unless indeed by that time the Moghuls had bidden higher for her speech. Without her evidence the question as to whether the bribe were honestly due for favours done could not be settled. She would begin with the mem; not by demanding money, but the pearls, since most likely they had been disposed of and the difficulty of getting hold of them again would, as it were, increase her power of screw. If at the end of a month the sahib−logues defied her, she would offer her silence or her speech to the highest bidder, and give her evidence for either. After that, a merry life, even if it had to be a short one; for the mere taste of comparative freedom she had had that morning in the wooden house in the Simla bazaar, had aroused the old reckless instincts, and before the evening was over the news that Chândni, singer and dancer from Delhi, had come to the place, was on the tip of every native's tongue.

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. BOYNTON had behaved very much as Lewis Gordon had anticipated on hearing of George Keene's sudden death from cholera. She had wept honest tears over the dear lad, even while she could not help feeling happier than she had done for months; happier because of the flood which had come and gone, sweeping away with it all her difficulties, all her troubles. Yet it brought her one unavailing regret that she should so unnecessarily have put the bitter pain of hearing her confession into those last days, and that he should have gone down to his death not thinking ill of her exactly—the dear lad would never have done that—but hurt, disappointed, unhappy. She would have liked him to have seen a certain letter which lay in a drawer of her writing−table. A letter addressed, sealed, stamped, ready for sending, which she had only kept back one day. Only one; yet, but for that lucky chance it might have fallen into Dan's hands while George was ill and brought needless pain into another kind heart; for there was, thank heaven! no more need for humiliation and confession and promises of restitution. She had torn open the letter in order to read it again, and had been quite satisfied with its straightforward avowal of responsibility and firm intention, should difficulties arise, of taking the whole blame on herself. Then she had put it away again as a perpetual witness to her repentance and amendment. And surely these virtues had a right to forgiveness? One person, she knew, would do more than forgive if he knew all, and this conviction joined to the sense of loss which his prolonged absence from her environment always produced in Gwen Boynton made her think very tenderly of Dan, who wrote her such kind, sympathetic letters from Hodinuggur about the dear lad. He was not jealous, and full of evil imaginings like Lewis, whose temper had certainly not been improved by his visit to the plains. Though she did not consciously feel the need of something stronger than the cousinly affection she had for him, there is no doubt that the shock of her own lapses from strict honesty, joined to that of George Keene's sudden death, had made her disinclined for final decision; so the fact that Dan would, from pressure of work, be unable to get leave that year, and Lewis, from the same cause, was not likely to be urgent in love−making, suited her capitally. She would have time to recover her tone. To this end she proceeded, with a curious strength of purpose, to dismiss the nightmare of the past from her mind. It was over. What had been, had been. She would 'reach out to the things which were before;' no! not reach out! She would not again be premature; she would let fate and luck have their say to the full.

One small fact showed her state of mind exactly. She dismissed her ayah, giving her as a parting present most of the articles which Manohar Lal had forced her into buying from him. The woman sulked, yet held her tongue, no doubt knowing through her patron, the jeweller, that so far as he was concerned the mem was safe; besides, when all was said and done, the bucksheesh was sufficient; under no circumstances could more have been expected. So, on the whole, life went quite smoothly in the pretty little drawing−room where poor young George had sat with his head on the table dazed and stunned by his bitter pain.

Over the way, however, in Colonel Tweedie's house, things were different. Lewis Gordon, up to the ears in endless calculations, yet found time to notice that grief suited Rose very ill. And grief, forsooth, for a boy who had not cared a pin for her, who had run into debt, and gambled and lost his head completely over another woman; who, if the truth were known, had shot himself because—to take the most charitable view of the matter—he had not the pluck to bear disappointment. Naturally a young fellow felt being fooled—more or less—by a woman, because certain instincts were the strongest a man had—as a man. But one expected something more—or less—in a gentleman. And there was Miss Tweedie, who depended for attractiveness on the *beauté du diable*, looking pale and worn, over a mere sentimentalism; for she herself would be the first to deny that she had been what he, Lewis, would call 'in love' with George. Finally, though he, knowing to the full Gwen's responsibility for the boy's suicide, had every right, if he chose, to be hard on his cousin, why should this girl, who knew nothing, stand aloof and show her disapproval so plainly?

'You don't understand girls,' said Gwen easily, in reply to some hints of his to this effect. 'Dear Rose can't help huffing me at present. I should feel the same, I'm sure, towards any one who had, to my mind, stood between me and my dear dead.'

Lewis shifted irritably in his chair, and wished to goodness she would talk sense.

'Sense! Why, you yourself are always blaming me in your heart because that poor boy thought me the most perfect woman in the world! You know you are! As if it was my fault. As if I ever encouraged such an idea in any

one, or set up for being perfection.'

It was true enough. She never posed as anything but a woman *pur et simple*. That was one of her charms in his eyes, and the injustice of cavilling at what he really liked made him say more gently—

'I don't suppose you could help it, dear; and perhaps Miss Tweedie can't either. I don't pretend to understand women—have enough to do in trying to understand the atrocious English men put into their reports. But I wish you could come over sometimes as you used to do. The girl oughtn't to be allowed to eat nothing and grow so disagreeably thin.'

Gwen gave an odd laugh. 'Well, I'll invite myself to luncheon to−morrow. It is bad for the girl—and so useless, into the bargain.'

The common−sense of the last remark lingered in Lewis Gordon's mind comfortably as he went home. In more ways than one it was quite useless to dwell on George Keene's unfortunate death. No doubt Rose, if she knew all, would judge Gwen very harshly, and not only Gwen, but those who, knowing what they did, went on as if nothing had happened; but Rose Tweedie, the fates be praised, was not his judge.

And yet when he passed the window of her room on his way to his own, she was in sober truth sitting in judgment on the figure she saw for a second between the draped curtains. He had been over as usual to Mrs. Boynton's—to the woman who had been the last to see George Keene, and who would say so little of that interview; the woman who no doubt was to blame if, as her father said, George had run into debt, and gambled, and lost his head. Lewis must know all this, perhaps more, yet he went on approvingly. By and by he would marry this woman—for they were engaged, of course, even now. Was not that enough to make any one unhappy who cared for him as she cared? Rose leant forward over the book her eyes were studying, and tried hard to bend her mind also to its consideration.

Despite these thoughts she received Mrs. Boynton on the next day without a sign of disapproval; for Rose, like most unmarried girls at the head of a house, was intensely proud of her position. In society, if she did not care to speak to Gwen, she would not speak; if she did not care to have her in the house she would not ask her; but if she came, as she did now, uninvited, she was nothing more nor less than a guest to be treated as a guest should be treated. Perhaps Lewis Gordon had an inkling as to the cause of her graciousness, but Colonel Tweedie saw nothing but a renewal of those amenities the loss of which he had helplessly deplored during the past fortnight. It had put him out terribly, and left him completely puzzled as to its cause. Certainly not to any change in his mind, for the coolness had checked a steadily growing conviction that he would not only like, but that he also ought, to ask Mrs. Boynton to marry him. Rose was too much alone; she brooded, as the former had kindly pointed out, over life, and fancied herself in love with subordinates. She was too sensible for that sort of thing to be real, but the constant companionship of a woman of the world was a necessity to a young girl. It is surprising how many second marriages are inspired by sensible considerations; still more surprising why such prudence should then be thought virtuous, moral, blameless, yet be deemed *anathema maranatha* in first marriages. There are some things which, as Dundreary said, 'no fellah can find out,' and one is the curious ethical code which has quite obscured the real issues of marriage, and made it possible for quick−witted husbands and wives to quarrel desperately with each other about things that have nothing to do with the tie between them. Colonel Tweedie, however, treated his secondary reasons with the greatest respect, and beamed pompously round the luncheon table as he announced his infinite regret that the duties of his responsible position made it necessary for him to leave such pleasant company sooner than he would otherwise have done. Mrs. Boynton, however, would readily understand that Councils of State were paramount to the public servant. Whereupon Gwen, after her fashion, took the edge off his anguish by saying that she also had to be at home early, seeing she had promised to interview some dreadful Madrassee creature who had been recommended to her as an ayah.

'Why did you send old Fuzli away?' asked Rose suddenly. They had risen as they were speaking, and she had been standing by the window listening with certain weariness in her face to her father's ornate regrets.

'The old reason, "**I do not like thee, Dr. Fell,**"' laughed Gwen. 'I suppose it is very illogical—therefore, as Lewis would say, very womanly,—but I can't help disliking my world by instinct.'

'That is monstrously unkind,' broke in the Colonel, eager as a boy over the opportunity, 'when your world can't help doing the reverse.' There is something very satisfactory apparently in a compliment to the person who makes it, and the Colonel felt and looked quite light−hearted over his.

'When you have got rid of us all, Miss Tweedie,' said Lewis Gordon in a low tone which yet covered Gwen's

little laugh, 'you should go out and have a jolly ride. I'm not using Bronzewing—she frets at waiting—so she is at your service, if you care—' he paused in quick surprise—

Such a very little thing upsets a woman's balance at times; and Bronzewing had been the one subject over which she and Lewis had never quarrelled since the day of his accident. It was foolish, but the look on her face made him turn hastily from the window to his cousin, and catch at the first thing likely to give the girl time to recover herself.

'I believe your ayah's coming here, Gwen; at least I see one of those little covered dhoolies descending from your house, and if there are to be *purda−nishin* women about, sir, it is time we men were going.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Lewis. It is somebody going to pay a visit to the *khansaman's* wife. The ayah wouldn't be *purdah*, and she wouldn't dare to come here; and if she did, I am not going to make a *zenana* out of Colonel Tweedie's drawing−room.'

'But you could go into Rose's sitting−room, of course,' protested the Colonel; 'couldn't she, dear?'

'But indeed, good people,' began Gwen, laughing, 'it can't—'

Just then a servant, entering stolidly, announced a woman waiting to see Mem Boynton sahib.

'I told you so,' cried Lewis joyfully, 'and, as a matter of fact, we ought to be off, sir. It will take us a good twenty minutes to the Secretariat.'

'Show the woman into the Miss Sahib's office,' cried the Colonel fussily. 'Rose, my dear—'

But the girl had taken the opportunity of escaping through the open French window.

'Please don't mind,' said Mrs. Boynton. 'I know my way about this house—at any rate I ought to, seeing how hospitable and good you have been always. Good−bye. I hope your interview will prove more pleasant than mine is likely to be.'

Their ponies were waiting, and she stayed to see them start and give a parting nod as they rounded the last visible turn of the path leading to the Mall. Gwen always added these pleasant friendly touches to the bareness and business of life. They came to her by instinct, and she herself felt cold and cheerless without them.

Then, very well satisfied with herself, she crossed the long matted passage which ran from end to end of the house, separating the portion Colonel Tweedie reserved for his own use from that occupied by the office. Here, beside her father's private room, was Rose's little study, and beyond that again Lewis Gordon's quarters and the big glazed verandah where the clerks sat designing. It was quite a small room, and, as Mrs. Boynton entered it, seemed to her over full of perfume, possibly from the vase full of wild turk's−cap lilies on the table. The window was shut too, and Gwen as she made her way to the most comfortable chair, with scarcely a glance at the white−robed figure standing in the shadow of the curtains, gave a quick yet languid order to set the glazed doors wide open.

'They are best shut if the Huzoor does not mind. I have that to say which requires caution.'

Those round, suave tones, with almost the nightingale thrill in them belonged to no ayah, surely! Gwen looked round hastily. That was no ayah's figure either, tall, supple, unabashed. Instinctively the Englishwoman stood up and confronted her visitor, more curious than alarmed. Even to that ignorance of native life which is so typical of the mem−sahib—an ignorance not altogether to be deprecated—the woman's trade was unmistakable. That was writ large in the trimness and cleanliness, the spotless white, the chaplets of flowers, the scent of musk and ambergris filling the room; all the more reason for surprise at her presence there. Yet, even so, curiosity outweighed indignation and resentment in Gwen's cold questioning.

'Who are you? What do you want?'

The answer came quick, so quickly that it left the hearer with that breathless sense of pained relief that the worst is over, which comes with the clean sharp cut of a surgeon's knife.

'I am Chândni of Delhi. I want the Hodinuggur pearls which the Huzoor took out of the Ayôdhya pot.'

There was no mincing of the matter here; none of that beating about the bush which, as a rule, Gwen loved. Yet the directness did not displease her; it seemed to rouse in her a novel combativeness, taking form in similar effrontery and cool assertion.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' she said indifferently, 'and I don't want you. Go!'

Her Hindustani, though limited, was of the imperative order and suited the occasion; yet it evoked one of Chândni's shrill mocking laughs.

'The mem sahiba mistakes. She is not as I am, a daughter of the bazaars, and if it comes to words Chândni hath

two to her one. So I come quietly to ask reasonably for my rights; not to dispute after the manner of my kind. There is no need to tell the mem sahiba the story. She remembers it perfectly. She knows it all as well as I. But this she does not know: The pearls are mine, and I will have them back, or their price in revenge.'

'I think you are mad!' cried Gwen more hastily. 'Go! go instantly, or I will call the servants.'

'That were not wise! Lo! I know all about the papers of safety, which Manohar Lal gave in exchange for the chota sahib's rupees. But the pearls went not once, but twice.'

'Twice!' The involuntary echo had a surprise in which angered the courtesan.

'Yes, twice! The mem knows that as well as I do. The Ayôdhya pot—'

'Was stolen from me in the Palace,' put in Gwen; 'you stole it, I dare say.'

Again Chândni laughed. 'If I did, what then? The mem got it again and sent it back through the post for more pearls. But we did not send it thus; we sent it by the chota sahib, who gave it to the mem, and she sent the key in return. The papers are about the first pearls. These are the second, and there is no safety paper about them.'

'It is not true!—it is a lie—he never took them—he never gave them to me,' cried Gwen, her courage, oddly enough, failing before what was to her an absolutely novel and unfounded accusation. 'I will not listen! Go! or I will call.'

Chândni took a step nearer, lowering her voice. 'What! wouldst let the truth be known; when thou canst conceal it—for ever! Give me the pearls and no one shall know—no one shall cast dirt on the mem, and on the chota sahib—no one shall know how he took the bribes for you—no one shall know thou didst beguile him as men are beguiled.'

'I—I did not—it is a lie, I—' faltered Gwen, falling back till Chândni's hand closed like a vice on her wrist.

'*Wah!* What use to deny it to me? Do I not know the trick? A word, a look, no more. What! do men send bullets through their hearts as Keene sahib did for no cause? Ari, sister! we know better.'

The jeering comradeship was too much for caution, even though the story of poor George's death passed by her as a wanton lie. Gwen, struggling madly, gave one scream after another for help, and, breaking from her persecutor, turned to fly. At the same moment Rose, who had been into her father's study for a book, burst through the door and stood bewildered at the scene.

'Send her away! She tells lies—lies about me and George—lies about everything. Oh! have her sent away, Rose. Please send her away.'

The girl, clasping the hands with which Gwen clung to her, turned on the intruder angrily, and an indescribable hardness and contempt came to her face, as she took in the meaning of the figure and its dress.

'How dare you come here? Go this instant! Put on your veil, hide yourself, and go! Impertinent! Shameless!'

There was no answering laugh now. 'The Huzoor speaks truth,' replied the courtesan quietly. 'I have no business here. I came but to see the mem, bethinking me she might listen better in the house of those who were friends to the chota sahib—'

But Gwen's immediate terror had passed, leaving her face to face with future fears.

'Don't listen, Rose!' she interrupted in English. 'You should never listen to what women of that sort say about any one. She frightened me at first with her lies, but the wisest plan is to send her away. I'll call a servant.'

Chândni, listening to the quick whisper, smiled.

'The mem sahiba wants silence,' she said, nodding her head; 'but silence is ever unsafe unless tongues are tied. And mine will wag if not here, elsewhere, unless I get the Ayôdhya pot.'

Rose gave a quick exclamation, but Gwen's hand was on her arm, her voice full of passionate entreaty.

'Don't, Rose! don't speak to her. I can tell you all. It is all lies; some rigmarole declaring that after the pot had been stolen at Hodinuggur it was sent back to me here at Simla, and that I returned it again. There isn't a word of truth in it; I never—'

But the girl set aside her detaining hand with an impatient gesture, and crossed to where Chândni stood watching them.

'You have made a mistake,' came the clear unfaltering voice. 'The Ayôdhya pot was not sent to the mem sahiba, it was sent to me; and it was I who returned it. What then?'

The frank admission brought a curiously similar expression to those two listening faces; it seemed to leave both, abashed, uncertain, so that Rose had to repeat her clear question before it gained reply.

'What then?' echoed the courtesan at last, somewhat sulkily. 'How can I tell if this be so; and if it be so, how

can I tell what came? Only this I do know: the pot went to Keene sahib the day he left. He gave it to some one. Let that some one answer. I care not who 'tis, so I have my pearls that were hidden in the pot.'

'Pearls! There were no pearls in it when it came to me,' cried Rose quickly; then remembering the jagged edge of clay she had noticed inside, she turned to Gwen: 'Did you notice anything like a false bottom when you had it before?'

The face into which she looked paled. 'You don't understand!' said Gwen, petulantly; 'the woman says that these pearls were put there after it was stolen, so how could I notice anything when I tell you I never saw, never heard of it again? I told the woman so just now. I will tell her again before you! then I must, I will have her sent away, she has no business here.'

But Chândni's recklessness had grown. 'I care not who has them. See! there are three of us here in this room who have handled the pot. Let her who hath it and its hoard speak truth, and save the chota sahib. For he had it, sure enough; of that there is proof.'

'Three of us!' repeated Rose absently, as if struck by a thought. Then obeying a sudden impulse, she went over to a portfolio standing in one corner of the room. 'You mistake,' she continued, her eyes full on the courtesan. 'There are not three, but four of us. Look! Keene sahib painted that.'

Chândni fell back, averting her face from the portrait of Azizan, which Rose placed against an easel on the table.

'The evil eye! the evil eye! God save us from the witch,' she muttered, thrusting out her right hand in that two−fingered gesture, which is used against a baleful glance in both East and West. But Gwen pressing closer looked at the picture with a dawning light of relieved comprehension in her face.

'Did he paint that—how pretty it is! And it explains—it explains—a—a great deal. He gave her the pot, I suppose—Well! it is a pity, but one ought not to be—'

'Ought not to be what?' interrupted Rose fiercely, with a fine scorn in her face, scarcely less concealed than the contempt with which she turned to the other woman.

'You both seem to know or understand this picture better than I do,' she said superbly. 'Perhaps you can tell me whom it represents?'

'My dear Rose,' expostulated Gwen, aside; 'don't for pity's sake ask that creature. What would your father say if he knew? You may mix yourself up—'

'Whose picture is it, I ask?' repeated Rose, unheeding. Then in the silence of Chândni's smile, and Gwen's frown, she turned passionately to the portrait itself. 'Why don't you speak and shame them? You look as if you could tell the truth, and if he made you so, it was true!' The very vehemence of her own fanciful appeal imposed on her, and she paused as if waiting a reply. It came with a laugh from Chândni.

'She was another of the chota sahib's friends. The miss saith true. There are three of them here. Which will give back the pearls and save him?'

'Save him from what?' cried Rose, disregarding Gwen's appeals for her to leave the mad woman to the servants. 'What has Keene sahib done that you can dare to threaten?'

The girl's bitter contempt roused all Chândni's savageness. After all she was the mistress, and this girl, despite her courage, in her power too; and what is more, she should learn it.

'From what? from the shame which comes to the sahib−logue when their pretence of honesty is found out—from the shame of having friends—the shame of taking jewels for those friends—the shame of being untrue to salt—Ask the mem how 'tis done, she knows—the shame of sending the key of the sluice−gate so that the water—'

Her voice had risen with each sentence; now it ended in a gasp and a gurgle.

'Open the door, please,' said Rose to Mrs. Boynton, who gasped also in the intense surprise of the girl's swift action. 'Don't struggle, fool!' she went on in the same hard tone, only the dead whiteness of her face and a catch as she drew breath telling of the wild passion surging in her veins. 'I won't choke you if you hold your tongue.'

Once before Chândni had felt a girl's grip on her throat; a hot, straining grip. This was neither. It was the grip of a strong healthy hand made vigorous by constant use. Those fierce fights over bat and ball with the dead lad had had their share in the sheer muscle of her defence of him, before which Chândni's large softness gave way, leaving her not even a slandering tongue.

'Put the veil over her face, please! I won't even have it known who dared to come here!' continued the girl,

forcing the woman backwards step by step till they reached the door. Then she pushed her from it magnificently. 'Now go! and tell what lies you like elsewhere.'

But her face changed as she turned when the door was closed and bolted to Gwen Boynton.

'Is it true? For God's sake tell me if there is a word of truth in it, and I will find the money.'

Gwen dissolved into helpless tears at once; tears at once of vague remorse, and a very real sense of injustice. 'True! oh, Rose, how can you ask? Of course it isn't true. I wouldn't have done it for the world. Indeed and indeed I never saw the Ayôdhya pot again, and I don't believe George did. He was the soul of honour, and so good—so good to me. It is all wicked, wicked lies, unless, indeed, that girl—but there, I daresay she was bad like that horrid creature. Perhaps they stole the pot between them and are now trying to blackmail us.'

'Stole the pot!' repeated Rose slowly, for the first time remembering her dream on the night of the storm at Hodinuggur. 'Yes! that is possible, and yet—' She looked at Azizan's picture, and then back at Gwen, who was dabbing her eyes with a soft pocket handkerchief. 'You are sure?' she began again.

'Of course I am quite sure,' retorted Gwen, whose remorse had vanished in grievance at this impudent attempt to amend and enlarge the text of a past incident. 'I never saw or heard of the pot again. I may be weak, I may have done things for which I am sorry in the past, but whatever you may think, my conscience is clear. And as for the sluice? Dan opened it by order; besides, there was the flood. It is all an attempt to blackmail me, and I won't be blackmailed. I have done nothing they can take hold of, nothing—nothing.'

Rose gave a sigh, almost of dissatisfaction. If it really was a case of blackmailing, payment would be but a temporary relief. Perhaps, as she had also suggested, the girl in the picture was in league with Chândni. She did not look that sort either. Nor did she look as if— Rose glanced from the pure oval of the cheek and the fine long curves of the mouth to Mrs. Boynton's tear−stained face and frowned.

'Some one has the pearls,' she said, 'and George's memory must be saved—somehow.'

CHAPTER XXIII

'**COME** in!'

The words were given in an impatient tone, for Lewis Gordon was busy, and he hated being disturbed; especially when, as now, he had taken his coat off, literally as well as figuratively, before a difficult file.

The garment hung on the back of his chair, which, in obedience to a fad of his, was the only one in the office; a second one, he declared, being easily sent for if required, while its absence shortened many a trivial interruption. Otherwise it was a comfortable enough room, with a large French window set wide on a magnificent view of the serrated snows resting on the wall of blue distance, and framed by the curved tops of a forest of young deodars. The day was bright as a morning in the rainy season can be; bright by very contrast between the brilliant lights and shadows in earth and sky; bright as a rain−cloud itself when the sun shines on it. A fresh breeze came in with Rose Tweedie through the opening door and blew some papers off the table.

'I beg your pardon,' came in duet as Lewis fumbled blindly for his coat: his eye−glass having deserted him in the surprise, after the manner of eye−glasses. As he did so, he felt injured. Not that he was such a crass idiot as to be outraged by a pair of shirt sleeves in himself or others. But he knew quite well that no man can look dignified, when struggling, even into a lounge−coat, and he liked to be dignified, especially with Rose Tweedie. His irritation, however, hid itself under a different cloak; that is to say, annoyance at a most unusual intrusion. Perhaps she read the expression of it in his face, for her first words were an excuse.

'I came here—to your office, I mean—because I want to ask you something, and I didn't want you to feel hampered—not as a friend, you know.' Her eyes met his in confidence of being understood so far, at any rate, and he gave rather a stiff little bow.

'You are very welcome. Won't you take a chair—the chair, perhaps I ought to say? I've been sitting all the morning, and shall be glad of a change; unless you require some time. If so, I will send—'

'No, thanks, I prefer standing also,' she interrupted, with a quick flush. 'I only wanted to ask you a question. It is about George Keene.'

'Yes—' he replied coldly, unsympathetically; and yet he was noting her anxious eyes and haggard face with a sort of angry wonder why she should make herself so unhappy. Rose's fingers held nervously to the edge of the table by which she stood.

'Have you any reason—I mean, is there officially any reason to suppose that the Hodinuggur sluice was opened before the flood came down, or before Mr. Fitzgerald—?' She paused with her eyes on Lewis's face. She had lain awake almost all the night thinking of Châ ndni's threats and hints, and with clear sight had seen that their worth or unworth depended largely upon the official report of what had actually happened at Hodinuggur. To her father she could not go without danger from his want of judgment; there remained Lewis, who was always just, always to be trusted in such matters.

His heart gave quite a throb of dismayed surprise at her question, and forced him by contraries into still greater chilliness of manner.

'I'm afraid I can't quite see your right to ask me such a question—as yet. Perhaps if you could give me a reason—'

'Oh yes! I can give you a reason,' she interrupted, with a ring of scorn in her voice, 'though I think you might credit me with a good one where George is concerned, surely? Only if I have to tell, you had better send for the chair. I thought, perhaps, you would understand, for once.'

The bitterness of her tone did not escape him, and accentuated his annoyance. As he handed her the chair and leant negligently against the table, his hands behind him, he told himself that he was in for *mauvais quart d'heure* with this girl. Man−like she would expect to know all, woman−like she would expect sentiment to outweigh official integrity. These thoughts did not serve to soften his heart towards the dead lad even at the beginning, and as her story unfolded itself, his face grew sterner and sterner. Hers lightened. It was an infinite relief to have his advice—his help, and she told him so frankly, even while she appealed for it.

'You needn't even answer my question, Mr. Gordon,' she went on earnestly. 'You will know so much better than I do what had best be done. I thought of going to see the woman myself—'

'You didn't go, I hope?' put in Lewis hastily.

'No! I made up my mind to ask you first. You see, if there is no truth in all this—no truth whatever—'

'That is unlikely, I warn you,' interrupted Lewis. 'These women— Really, Miss Tweedie, if you follow my advice—much as it may pain you at the time—you will leave this business alone, absolutely alone. It is not one with which—excuse me for even alluding to the fact—a girl such as you are should meddle. Unfortunately, we men have to face these things, and they are not pleasant, even for us.'

'You speak as if you thought George was guilty,' said Rose hotly. 'What right have you to do that?'

'I may have more right than you suspect. Believe me Miss Tweedie, I am heartily sorry—especially for you; and, so far as is compatible with the facts, I will do my best to avoid official *esclandre* should this matter really crop up. In the meantime, I am afraid I must decline to interfere in what Mrs. Boynton, you tell me, stigmatised as an impudent attempt at blackmailing. She has her faults, no doubt, like everybody else; but she has, excuse me for saying so, more knowledge of the world than you have. In fact, you could scarcely do better than take her advice on this point.'

The girl, with a frown on her face, rose from her seat slowly.

'Then you refuse to find out the truth? You are content to let this suspicion lie upon—upon me and upon your cousin?'

Lewis smiled. 'That is rather far−fetched, Miss Tweedie, surely. The idea of suspicion with you is simply absurd; and as for Gwen! Well, I know you are ready to admit she has her faults; but she has called this claim impudent blackmailing, and you must excuse me if I incline to believe her.'

'And for George Keene? Do you suspect him? Are you going to allow his memory to be smirched?'

'I have told you I will do my best. For the rest, he must take the consequence of his own acts, I'm afraid. Indeed, I am sorry, very sorry,' he added hastily, impelled to it by the look on Rose Tweedie's face. It had grown ashen pale, yet she stood steadily before him, her eyes on his unflinchingly.

'Then there is truth in it? You had better tell me. It would be kinder to tell me—if you can.'

Perhaps, after all, it would. Perhaps, if this scandal had to come to light, it would be better she should be prepared. Even if it did not, was it not wiser she should know the real truth about George Keene, and so be able to judge him fairly? Not a bad boy, of course. That talk of bribery was no doubt false, and he had done no more in other ways than hundreds of boys in a like position. Even at Simla he had only run wild a bit, and for that he was not the only one responsible. Still, when all was said and done, he had shot himself, and that alone made the task of whitewashing him an impossibility if these women chose revenge.

'Yes! there is some truth in it,' he said gravely. 'If you will sit down again, I will tell you everything I know, and then you can judge for yourself. I should like you to understand, however, that in spite of appearances, I don't believe George lent himself to anything more than—what you would—not you, perhaps—but most of us would expect in a young fellow of his age and his position. Life is—is rather intoxicating to—to some of us.'

So, leaning against the table, he told her the truth, trying to do his task calmly and kindly, yet beset by a certain impatience at the still figure seated in his office chair, its elbows among his files, the coils of its beautiful hair showing beyond the hands in which the face was hidden. What business had it there? What business had the thought of its pain to come so close to him? closer even than his own reason, his own sense of justice?

'And you have known that he shot himself from the beginning?' she asked, raising her head suddenly to look him full in the face. He assented with a distinct self−complacency.

'Then what did you think made him do it? What did you think then—before you knew anything about the debts or the opening of the gates?'

The self−complacency vanished. 'There are many reasons or want of reasons, for that sort of thing, Miss Tweedie,' he said evasively. 'I did not—I mean it was impossible to say absolutely, and that is why I acquiesced in Fitzgerald's plan. It was more convenient to every one concerned.'

'Much more convenient,' echoed Rose sharply. 'And you have known this all the time, and not—' she broke off, as if incredulous of her own half−uttered thought.

'Certainly, I have known it, and we would have kept the secret too, Fitzgerald and I, but for this unfortunate business,' he retorted, and his tone was not pleasant.

'Ah! **he** is different: **he** did not know! **he** thought George had done it for his sake, to screen him. But you? What did you believe?' The girl's very voice was a challenge.

'I must say, Miss Tweedie, that I scarcely see how my belief affects the question; or, pardon me, what it

matters to you,' he replied, taking refuge once more in his indifference.

'Do you not? Then I do. Not that it matters now,' she added in sudden passion, 'for I will have my own way in the future. If you won't help me, I can't help that; but I will have the truth. I will go down to this woman in the bazaar and make her tell me. Whether her story is a lie or not, there shall be no more concealment. I will not have it.'

'And George Keene's memory?' he suggested, angered almost beyond his self−control by her unmistakable defiance. 'My advice is unwelcome, of course, but if you took it, and Mrs. Boynton's—only that is unwelcome too—you might save all scandal. I cannot say for certain that it would, but as I have told you, I would do my best. Officially even, I would do my best. That seems to be an offence also, for some reason, but I would do it as much for the sake of the Department as for the boy's. You—I know—think only of him—

She turned upon him like lightning, carried out of herself by her scorn, by her passion.

'Of him! I was not thinking of him at all! I was thinking of you—of you only, as I always do. Why should you not know the truth? You will not care a pin whether I think of you or not. And I? I care for nothing—nothing so long as you do not blindfold yourself wilfully—so long as you are just and honest. Ah! you may think I am mad—perhaps if what you believe about men and women is true, I am—but it means everything—everything in the world to me that you should be so—just and honest; because what you are is more to me than all the world beside. That is the truth.' The last words came slowly as the fire of her passion died down; yet there was no uncertainty in them. 'I suppose I oughtn't to have said this,' she went on, turning from him to lean her elbows on the table, and rest her head on her hands wearily. 'But you won't mind, and I don't care. It can't hurt any man to know that he is loved—it can't.'

'**Loved!**' The word sent a thrill through the man such as he had never felt before. '**Loved!**' was that what she meant? The thought broke through even his armour of surprise. He stood for an instant looking down at her, then turned slowly and walked to the window, to return, however, in a second, with quick clear steps breaking the silence of the room.

'What do you mean?—I can't believe it. What do you mean?'

His impatience would not wait for a reply in words. Her face would give it truly, that he knew, and he stooped over her, taking her by the wrists, in order to draw her hands apart. She turned to him then bravely enough.

'Rose!'

It was almost a cry, as, stooping lower still, he knelt before her, his eyes on hers incredulous, yet soft. Then suddenly, still clasping her slender wrists, he buried his face upon them on her lap, muttering—

'Oh, I am sorry!—I am sorry!'

Never since, as a child, he had said his prayers at his mother's knee, had Lewis Gordon so knelt to man or woman. And something of the child's unquestioning belief in an unselfish love came back to him, joined to a perfect passion of the man's clear−sighted remorse and regret for long years of past disbelief.

'Don't,' she said, gently bending over him; 'please don't. There is nothing for you to be sorry about—indeed, there isn't.'

Nothing to be sorry about! Once more he echoed this girl's words to himself with that strange thrill, as, recovering his self−command, he stood straight and stiff beside her, conscious only of one vehement desire to care for and to protect her.

'What is it you want me to do?' he said at last unsteadily. 'Tell me, and I'll do it.'

Then, woman−like, she began to cry; it is a way the good ones have when they succeed in imposing their own will on those they love.

'I don't think I want you to do anything—particular,' she answered, trying to conceal her tears. 'I don't know; besides, I would much rather you did it your own way.'

If the uttermost truth could be told about a man's emotion in such scenes, as it can be regarding a woman's, it would have to be confessed that Lewis Gordon came very near to crying also over this foolish unconditional surrender on Rose Tweedie's part. For he understood the irresolution of a generous nature before its own success and what is more, the woman's desire to give the man she loves the glory of justifying her belief in him. He felt quite a lump in his throat, and had to seek escape from the tenderness of one sex in the decision of the other; for in nine cases out of ten these are but different methods of showing the same emotion.

'I will go down and see this woman to−day; and then—' He paused, not in order to think over his next

move—that undoubtedly would be to see Gwen Boynton—but to overcome a dislike to mentioning her name at all which suddenly assailed him. Why, he scarcely knew except that it seemed mean, unmanly. Rose, however saved him from the necessity by again repeating—this time almost abjectly—that she would rather not know; that she would be quite content to leave the matter his hands.

'Thank you,' replied Lewis, in such a very low tone that it was almost a whisper. It did not lead, however, as might have been expected, to a silence, but to a louder, more aggressive gratitude. 'I have to thank you—for many things. I won't affect to ignore or set aside what—what you did me the honour of telling me just now. That would be sheer impertinence on my—'

Now, when he had got so far in a perfectly admirable sentiment, calculated to soothe both her feelings and his, why he should suddenly have found his hands in hers again, his heart full of an unpremeditated assertion that he was glad she loved him, cannot be explained logically; but so it was. Yet before the scared look in her eyes his own fell, he loosened his clasp, and the appeal died from his lips. There was no place for him or his questionings in her avowal. That hedged itself about from intrusion with a dignity he recognised. So what remained, save to pass on with as much of the same quality as he could compass to the work assigned to him.

'I will come in and tell you what I have done this afternoon about five o'clock,' he said quietly; 'that is, if it is convenient.'

'Quite, thank you.'

The baldest, most conventional of tones on both sides. The baldest, most convenient holding open of the door for her to pass out—to pass out from a scene that would linger in his memory; in nothing else. The descent to normal diapason comes sooner or later, no matter how highly strung the instrument may be to begin with, and melodrama fades into padding. In real life it generally leaves some of the actors dissatisfied with the way the scene has played. Lewis Gordon felt this distinctly as he was left looking at his own chair, as if he still saw a girl's figure seated there, her elbows resting on the litter of official papers, and the great coils of her burnished hair showing beyond the hands which hid her face.

'It can't hurt any man to know that he is loved.'

She had said so; but she was wrong. It did hurt confoundedly. So that was what she meant by love, was it?—

If any of the trivial interruptions which Lewis Gordon so much dreaded had come during the following five minutes, they would have found the coveted chair vacant, though the owner's face was buried in his hands among the files of memorandums and reports. Apparently he gained little consolation from them, for when he resumed work he looked about as upset and disordered as a tidy man can do when he is cool and properly clothed. Nor did they gain much from him during the next hour, which ticked away remorselessly from the chronometer by which Lewis loved to map out his day. He thrust them aside at last impatiently, and ordered his pony, thinking that may be when he had been through that visit to the bazaar he might feel less of a duffer, and not quite so much knocked out of time. And yet she had said there was nothing to regret,—that he would not care,—that it would not matter to him if she thought of him or not!

It was a queer world! He set his teeth over it as he rode reluctantly between the shingled arcades of the big bazaar, and then through a narrow paved alley, pitching, as it were, sheer down into the blue mists of the valley below; and so on to the balconied house where, from inquiries at the Kotwâli, he learned that Chândni was lodging. The task before him was a disagreeable one, and he swore inwardly as he thought that but for his abject capitulation Rose would have attempted it herself. Rose! of all people. He began to understand that the feminine world could not be divided into two classes, since there was a third composed of one specimen. As he went on into the house the very cleanliness and order, contrasting so sharply with the dirt of surrounding respectability, struck him offensively on the girl's behalf, the giggling in the lower storey gave him a vicarious shock, and the obsequiousness of his introduction into the higher one, where Chândni sat secluded, actually made his cheek burn.

'It can't hurt any man to know that he is loved.'

He set aside the haunting words angrily, and began his task so soon as the patchwork drapery at the door fell behind him, leaving him face to face with white−robed salaaming grace.

'See here, my sister, this is for the truth. 'Tis not often thy sort are asked for it; but I ask nothing else. I will take nothing else.'

Checked thus in her languid welcome to the unknown guest, Chândni looked distastefully at the hundred−rupee note thrust into her hand, then at the giver; though both were to her liking. The latter she

recognised instantly, having seen him among the party at Hodinuggur. So her seed of slander had taken root already.

'My lord shall have that which he requires, surely. Wherefore else are there such as I?'

The cynical truth of her answer showed him her wit at once, and he acknowledged it frankly when, half an hour afterwards, he felt himself baffled by the calm simplicity of her story. Most of it he had already heard, and the rest showed still more unpleasant details to have raked up should the worst come to the worst. Azizan, he was told, had been a palace lady, with whom George had had clandestine meetings, over which he had first become mixed up with the intrigues about the water. The key of the sluice had been sent from Simla, whether by the Mem or the Miss, or the sahib himself, Chândni did not know, could not say. Was she not telling the Huzoor the bare truth she knew to be true, and nothing else?

'And how much do you want to keep all this quiet?' he asked calmly, when she had finished. It was as well to know her price, at any rate.

For an instant the immediate temptation to take the bird in the hand made the courte− san hesitate. Then she struck boldly for higher game.

'The pearls, Huzoor! The pearls, or my revenge!' This man, with the cool, refined face and the contempt which made her involuntarily remember the Miss sahib's also, affected indifference now, and would most likely offer her some paltry sum. She could afford to wait for the change which was sure to come; for she was not in the least afraid of anything Lewis could do, and, without being absolutely insolent, took care to show him the fact as she lolled about at her ease, chewing betel ostentatiously. She had nothing to gain here by affecting delicacy, so he might see her at her coarsest and worst; it contrasted better with his brains.

The result being that Lewis Gordon came into Gwen's Boynton's drawing−room for his next interview looking depressed; partly because he had been riding through a tepid shower−bath, for recurring rain had washed away the bright promises of the morning and was falling drearily over the rank, dank grasses and beating down the fringes of delicate ferns growing upon the dripping branches of the oak trees, until they lost shape and became nothing but a green outline against the grey mist.

Within, however, by the light of a blazing pine−wood fire, Mrs. Boynton looked bright yet soft, like a pastel painting, or a figure seen in a looking−glass; for she soon recovered from her emotions, and took pains to hide their effects even from herself. So the fact that she had lain awake half the night wondering if by chance Chândni's impudent lies had been prompted by any flaw in the chain−armour of security which George and the flood had forged for her, did not show in her face. For they were lies; even that tale of the dear lad's death, which had given her such a shock at the time, was nothing but the vile woman's wicked, cruel invention. Rose had evidently heard nothing and still knew nothing of it; besides, Dan did not know, and even if **he** had wished to keep the pain of such knowledge from her, Lewis, with his jealous blame, would have been sure to point a moral; a pointless moral at best, since George could have had no cause for despair. Had not the flood come to end even his anxiety? unless, indeed, there was any truth in the tale about the portrait. Yet why should truth be supposed in one incident when causeless wicked lying was evident in all the others? No; it was an impudent attempt at extortion, and must be met by denial. Therein lay safety, both for her and for poor George Keene's memory, since the conspirators would never face the evidence of those papers which they knew she held. So, as her cousin came in she greeted him with a smile changing to sweet concern at his ill looks.

'I have a headache,' he replied curtly. 'No wonder; the smells and general abominations of the bazaar are enough to kill one, and I had to go down there. Besides, I'm damp, and I've had no lunch. Isn't that a long enough catalogue of ills? No, thanks; don't order anything for me. I'd rather have a cup of tea by−and−bye.'

It was the worst thing for him, he knew that. Nothing but a quiet cigar and a man's drink would have restored his balance. But he told himself captiously that he had been in a melodramatic atmosphere all the morning, and might as well go through with it to the bitter end. He felt demoralised, and so, almost out of contrariety, put himself at a further disadvantage by rushing at his fence.

'Gwen,' he began abruptly, 'I've come to ask you for the truth.' He did not hand her a bank−note as he had to the other woman; yet the thought had crossed his mind bitterly that one of sufficient value might be useful. He had set it aside, of course, as utterly unworthy since, in common justice, he had no more right to prejudge Gwen's implication than he had to prejudge Rose Tweedie's. There was, no doubt, the fact of George Keene's suicide against the one; but that was no new thing. She had been judged on that count before, and he had decided to save

her from the pain of knowing it; to that decision, also, he meant to keep if it were possible.

Gwen's heart gave a great throb; she understood in an instant that the crisis had come sooner than she expected. Yet she was prepared for it.

'I suppose Rose Tweedie'—she began coldly.

'Yes; Rose Tweedie asked my advice, and I've been down to that woman in the bazaar. She sticks to her story. So now I have come to you—'

'If you had come to me first, Lewis,' she interrupted with a vibration of real anger in her voice, 'I would have warned you not to waste your time in playing Don Quixote at Rose Tweedie's bidding. The woman is an impostor, and should be treated as such. I would have sent the police after her yesterday, had I thought it wise to take even so much notice of her lies. And now you have been to see her! It is too foolish—too annoying! And all because Rose went crying to you, I suppose, about her lover. Her lover, indeed! You are very soft−hearted, Lewis! Perhaps some day your desire to console will lead you into taking his place.'

He stared at her; that sort of thing being so unlike Gwen's usual sweetness; but his surprise did not equal his confusion, while his common−sense showed him her possible wisdom.

'Miss Tweedie did not cry over her lover, I assure you,' he began, feeling in very truth that the young lady in question had meted out more blame than sympathy; 'and I did not choose to allow such tales of you to pass unnoticed.'

'So you listened to them again?' retorted Gwen in rising anger, which she wilfully exaggerated. 'Listened to what a common woman in the bazaar had to say of me! Really, I am obliged to you, Lewis! And she, I suppose, told you that I had stolen the pearls and the pot, and then taken it and a fresh bribe from poor George? Well, since you have come to me at last for the truth, I tell you, as I told Rose—who, perhaps, did not repeat it—that I have never seen the thing since the night of the storm at Hodinuggur. So I have less to do with it than she, since she confesses it was sent to her, and that she sent it back on the sly. Did she tell you that? and have you been asking her for the truth also? Or am I the only one who has to be questioned like that creature in the bazaar?'

Gwen had never looked better than she did at that moment, with the unwonted fire of real indignation lighting up her face, and Lewis Gordon felt vexed that it awoke no thrill in him. Was he really allowing Rose Tweedie's open mistrust to bias him? The idea made his reply more gentle than it might otherwise have been.

'Perhaps you are right to be angry with me,' he said quietly. 'I beg your pardon, if I have hurt you; but indeed, it seemed best to me at the time. Perhaps, as you say, it would have been better to wait a while;—until, for instance, I can consult with Fitzgerald. I wired him to−day to come up on three days' urgent private business. He knows a lot.'

Gwen gave an odd sort of laugh, not unlike a sob, and her face softened.

'I'm glad he is coming,' she cried passionately; 'very glad. He always understands, and he knows.'

Yes! he knew and trusted her—he would stand by her even if he knew that one fatal mistake. Whereas Lewis would treat her as a Magdalen, as if she, Gwen Boynton, were a fit subject for a penitentiary!

'Yes,' she repeated slowly, 'I am glad he is coming. You did the right thing there, Lewis, at any rate.'

So, with this small consolation, he had to make his way back to give in his report to the girl who had told him that she loved him. Another delicate task, and he felt himself detestably awkward over it, the more so because Rose herself met him as if nothing unusual had occurred.

'Well,' she said eagerly, 'what news?'

He told her briefly that there was none. He had had three versions of truth—her own, Châ ndni's, and Mrs. Boynton's—and there seemed nothing to be done save wait for Dan's arrival. He might be able to throw some light on the subject—he was the last person, at any rate, who was likely to do so.

'You forget the girl—the girl of the portrait, I mean,' suggested Rose quickly. Lewis frowned.

'She disappeared, they say, just before we reached Hodinuggur. I should like, by the way, to see the picture, if you don't mind.'

He stood looking at it in silence for some time.

'And that, you say, was the face of your dream?' he asked at last.

'The face, the dress, the pot clasped so to her breast. I seem to grow more sure of it every hour. And I am certain now it was she who said, "I am Azizan."'

'That sort of certainty grows upon one unconsciously,' he replied, after another pause. 'I confess it is odd; but

you can hardly believe it really was the potter's daughter! She has been dead these sixteen years. You think it was her ghost, perhaps; but did George paint the ghost?'

Rose stood silent, her hands clasped tightly.

'Who knows?' she said slowly. 'One knows so little. When I think of it all—of that strange old man with his refrain, "We come and go—we come and go," I seem to feel that odd, uncanny sense of helplessness which one has during a storm at sea, when you realise that the waves are not moving on at all, but rise and fall, rise and fall for ever in the same place. It is the ship which drifts within their power, giving them their wrecker's chance once more. And now—you will say that I am superstitious; but I almost regret that you should bring Mr. Fitzgerald into this business at all. You remember the potter's measure? Think of it, and how poor George himself—'

She paused, her eyes full of tears.

Lewis, watching her, told himself he would never understand women−folk. Here was a girl, overflowing with fanciful sentiment in some ways, who yet apparently had none to spare for the one subject round which sentiment was supposed to cling—love and marriage. In addition, here were two women, both of whom he desired to help, and yet they were at daggers−drawing about the best method of giving that aid. If he pleased one, he displeased the other; and anyhow, he got no comfort out of either.

CHAPTER XXIV

'**NAY**! thou hast given me enough, oh Mizra sahib. More than a free woman cares to have,' said Chândni, with a shrug of her massive shoulders. 'Thou hadst thy chance to pay me fair.'

Dalel Beg, clad in his European clothes, and perched in all the isolation of an esteemed visitor in the cane−bottomed chair of state, felt he would like to be on a level with those jeering lips as he used to be at Hodinuggur. Not for the sake of desire only, or for the sake of revenge, but for a mixture of both. As usual, the very audacity of her wickedness fascinated him, yet, now that wickedness was directed against himself he could have strangled her for it.

'Pay thee! How can I pay thee,' he whimpered, 'when those low−caste white swindlers with whom I betted will not pay what I have won? When those white devils of women turn the place into a museum until every Parsee in the bazaar threatens to summon me to court?'

It was not much more than a week since he had defied Chândni in the presence of the said white devils; but the interval had not been pleasant. Beatrice Elflida Norma's mamma knew all about Chândni's long years of hold on the Mizra Sahib, and he was totally unaccustomed to the nagging of wifely jealousy. Besides, something had happened which had opened his eyes to the danger of allowing the courtesan to have a free hand. A proposal had been made by the Canal Department to allow water to run permanently along the sluice−cut; the Rajah who owned the land to the south, having spent a whole season at Simla in order to work the oracle, and the flood having come opportunely as a warning to the experts that it might be wise to provide a more satisfactory outlet for the surplus water. Now, in this case, Hoddinuggur, which would benefit but little by the plan, might by judicious application of the screw make the Rajah pay for its consent, as a considerable portion of its best land would have to be taken up for various works. This sort of secret intrigue, these almost endless ramifications of rights and dues, underlie the simplest transactions in India, and are recognised by its people as an integral part of administration. Besides, Hodinuggur itself, in lieu of compensation for damage done—which for various reasons it had not yet claimed, one being a delay on the part of the Rajah in paying the promised fee for the opening of the sluice—might manage by the same judicious diplomacy to secure some trifling hold on the water−supply; something, in short, which might be used as a screw for the extortion of a perpetual, if small revenue. But for this, silence as to the past was necessary. Such considerations, to European ears, may seem almost too fine−drawn to be worth notice; but to Dalel Beg and Chândni they were quite the reverse, for he came from a long line of courtiers born and bred in such intrigues; men whose trade had passed with the corrupt courts of other days, while the memory of it survived in their title. Diwans of Hodinuggur; not Nawabs or Nizams, but Diwans, that is, in other words, prime minister. And she? Every atom of her blood came from the veins of those who for centuries had woven a still finer net of women's wit around the intrigues of their protectors. It is this extraordinary strength of heredity which, in India, makes the cheap tinkering of Western folk, who are compounded of butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers, so exasperating to those who have eyes to see. If English philanthropists would spend their motley benevolence on the poor, the diseased, and the drunken of their own country, it would be better both for it and for India, where the death−rate is no higher, drunkenness is practically unknown, and poverty is neither unhappy nor discontented.

Thus Chândni and Dalel were well matched as she lolled back in her cushions with a laugh.

'So she spends money! Lo! since thou hast married a "*vilayeti* " wife thou canst advertise, as the sahibs do, in the papers, that thou art not responsible for her debts. There is no sense in stopping half way as thou hast done. Thou shouldst have gone to a "mission" and been baptized instead of making that half−caste girl repeat the "Kulma" on promise that thou wouldst not in future claim the right of the faithful to other women. Yea! yea! I know the trick.'

'If I have,' muttered Dalel, vexed yet pleased at her boldness, her shrewdness, 'such promises are easily broken. Divorce is easy.'

'If thou hast money to pay the dower to her people—not when thou hast none! Lo! 'tis a mistake to try new ways of wickedness instead of keeping to the old ones.'

So she dismissed him, feeling on the whole contemptuous over her adversaries so far; the Miss Sahiba's arms had been strong, for sure, but the men were worth nothing! nothing at all.

Dan Fitzgerald, dangling his long legs disconsolately from Lewis Gordon's office−table two days after, said as much himself. 'The fact is, I ought to have killed her; only I didn't feel up to it to−day, after my journey. Oh, you may smile, Gordon!' he went on more eagerly, his face losing some of its dejection in his love of the extravagant, 'but it's true. That sort of woman doesn't belong to our civilised age; and we are absolutely at a dis− advantage before her. There was I, as the mad old potter said, with a hero's measure round the chest, driven to words and threats of a policeman. I couldn't, even at the time, but think of that old sinner Zubr−ul−Zamân and what her chance would have been with him—just an order, a cry, and then silence. Sure, one feels helpless at times when one stands face to face with that old world. What's the use of strength—what's even the use of brains nowadays except to make money? There was I, with that woman, I give you my word, at the end of her tether, but 'twas the hangman's rope to me if I went a step closer, and so I didn't.'

'If **you** didn't,' remarked Lewis grimly, 'there isn't a civilised man who will; so we had better try something else. Still, unless that woman is silenced, we must face an inquiry, and then the facts of poor Keene's death must come out. By the way, Miss Tweedie knows them, but we have agreed to keep them, if possible, from my cousin. There seemed no use—'

'I'm glad of that,' interrupted Dan, with a sudden quiver of his mouth. 'I should be sorry to have that memory spoilt.'

He was pacing up and down the room now, his hands in his pockets, the brightness of his face absorbed as it were by a frown.

'Gordon!' he said abruptly. 'I'd give everything I possess if I could lay my hands on that cursed pot. Not that it would satisfy the horse−leech's daughter unless the contained the pearls—which isn't likely, for I believe the whole story to be a myth. But the thought that it is somewhere visible, palpable to the meanest fool on God's earth, is maddening. Or even if we could say to that she−devil, "do your worst." Oh! why didn't you send that wire sooner, and save poor George from his needless death?'

'Why didn't you tell the truth about it at first? you might as well ask that. It would have been better, as it turns out, if you had; but who can tell? As it is, I'm quite ready, as I told you before, to burke everything I can, in conscience; but, so far as I can see, it will do no good. If that woman breaks silence, the main facts must come to light.'

'I wish I had killed her,' said Dan regretfully.

'And I wish she were dead,' replied Lewis cynically, 'that is the difference between us. You are active, I'm passive, but we don't either of us seem to be of much use.'

That was the honest truth, and they had to confess as much to Gwen Boynton that afternoon. She looked a little haggard as she listened even while she protested bravely that in her opinion the vile creature would never dare to put her lies to the proof. So they sat and played at cross purposes; for she could not tell them of the papers she held in absolute disproof of what would be the first accusation, and they wished if possible to save her from the knowledge of George Keene's suicide. Perhaps if they had set their own feelings aside and told her the truth, she might even then have confessed her lion's share in the blame. But only perhaps; for she was a clever woman, capable of seeing that her confession could do no good now, and that she had, as it were, lost her right to save poor George from suspicion. Besides, she had brought herself to believe in the duty of denial; for, like many another woman, she required a really virtuous motive before she could do a really wrong thing; in sober fact—even in her worst aberrations from the truth—never losing hold of a fixed desire to be amiable and estimable. To this self−deception, as was natural, Lewis Gordon's half−hearted belief was gall and wormwood, while Dan's wholesale confidence was balm indeed. She could not refrain from telling him so when the former, pleading stress of work, left the latter alone with her beside the cosy little tea−table glittering in the firelight; for Gwen was one of those people who will never have been more comfortable in body and soul than they are on their death−beds.

'Now, don't spoil it all, dear, by wanting me to marry you to−morrow,' she said half−laughing, half−crying. 'We are all too busy for such talk, and too sad—at least I am. He was so good to me—you don't know how good. I shall break my heart if this vile creature succeeds in sullying his memory.'

'It will not be your fault, dear, if she does; that is one comfort.'

A chance shot may hit the quarry truer than the best aim, and Gwen turned quickly towards him with a little cry.

'Dan! you will prevent it, won't you? You are so clever, and, really, it is for my sake as well as for his. For my

sake you will, won't you?'

'I do everything for your sake—you know that,' he answered simply.

Gwen stared at him as if she had seen a ghost. Perhaps she did; the ghost of a dead boy who had said those very words to her in that very room not a month ago.

'Gwen I what is it?' came Dan's voice sharply, anxiously. 'What is the matter?—tell me.'

Yes! The past was repeating itself. **He** had begged her to tell him also, and in her selfishness, her fear, she had yielded, and put a needless pain into his life at its close. She would not yield again; in denial lay her duty.

'Nothing is the matter,' she echoed, 'save this—that you say we can do nothing. I do not believe it. God will never let these lies prevail—He will never let my poor lad's memory suffer—never, never!'

If her mind could have been taken to pieces and strictly analysed as she gave utterance to this burst of real feeling, it would have afforded fruitful study to a whole college of psychologists. Yet the mental condition described as 'sitting in a clothes−basket and lifting yourself up by the handles' is quite common to humanity of both sexes, though women are as a rule the greater adepts in the art. Mrs. Boynton was really a firm believer in a Providence which was bound by many promises to help the virtuous, and George, therefore, had a claim to its assistance. The fact that Providence might possibly have appointed her as its instrument was a totally different affair, and did not interfere with the confused good faith and good feeling which made her voice thrill as she went on fervently, in answer to Dan's doubtful yet admiring face.

'Oh, you mayn't think so—you perhaps don't believe as I do, Dan, in "a Providence which shapes our ends, rough−hew them as we will"—you don't—'

'Don't I?' he asked, catching fire, as it were, more from his own thoughts than her words. 'Oh, Gwen! my dear, it's little you know of me, then, if you think that. Don't I see it?—who but the blind do not—in everything? Isn't it that which makes me content to go on as I'm doing? Gwen! it's because I know that it is bound to come—that sooner or later you will take my hands in yours as I take yours just now. Yes, Gwen! it's Fate—but when will it be, my dear? When will it be?'

She was never proof against this mood in the man, this tone in his voice.

'Oh, Dan!' she cried, in a petulance that was all feigned, 'didn't I say you would be asking me to marry you to−morrow if I was so rash as to tell you that you were a comfort to me? As if that had anything to do with it.'

'Sure it has everything to do with it!' replied her lover fondly. The future, in truth, gave him few fears: it was the present, with the chance of annoyance if that venomous woman remain unscotched in the bazaar, which caused him anxiety. On the other hand, it was the future over which Lewis Gordon frowned, as he sat trying to make up his mind about his own feelings, for though the present was was palpably unpleasant, it seemed clear that the future would be worse, since they must face the possibility of a scandal boldly in the hopes that Châ ndni's story would break down; except perhaps as regarded George, and he, poor lad, had brought it on himself. And then, when all this was over, he—Lewis—was going to marry Mrs. Boynton. No doubt about it; for it was too late now to judge her for that other fault—far too late. He had condoned it with full knowledge of what he was doing, and the fact that Rose Tweedie's subsequent scorn had awakened a tardy blame did not alter the past. At the same time, he had an insane desire that Rose should be brought to see this as clearly as he saw it. In fact, the idea of talking over the matter with her, and perhaps taking her advice upon it, had an attraction for him; and though he heaped contumely on himself for the mere thought, it lingered insistently. It was partly that which made him pause to knock at her sitting−room door on his way to the drawing−room before dinner. She would be glad to have the last news of the miserable affair, he told himself, but in his heart he knew that was not the real reason—that he himself scarcely knew what the reason was. Reason? there was none! Only a foolish curiosity to understand better what this icicle of a girl meant by love. It did not seem to hurt her, at any rate. But as he entered to see her sitting by the fire, the reading−lamp on the table lighting up her dress, but leaving her face in shadow, he seemed to forget all these thoughts in the friendly confidence of her greeting.

'I'm so glad you have come. I was wondering if you would. What news?'

He shook his head. 'None. We have all had our chance, and failed.'

'Not all,' she answered quickly, pointing to Azizan's portrait, which showed dimly above the mantelpiece against which he leant. 'You forget the girl—she has not said her say.'

The unreality, the strangeness of it all, struck him sharply, not for the first time, as he replied after a pause—

'And never will. She is dead. Fitzgerald managed to get that out of the woman to−day. She must have been

hidden away—as a punishment, most likely—in some dungeon of the old tower, for her dead body was found among the ruins—by—by the old potter. Yes! I know what you are thinking of; but that is impossible. He was always searching about, you see, and so he was more likely than others to find anything that was to be found. It is a coincidence, I admit; but the fact of the death seems undoubted. The woman let it out in her anger—Fitzgerald is not a nice cross−examiner, I expect—and tried to gloze it over afterwards. Perhaps it is as well. That story may be best unknown.'

'I don't agree with you,' said Rose quickly. 'I have been counting on her help—perhaps more than I realised—and now that her chance has gone—' The girl's eyes filled with tears, and her voice failed for a moment, 'it seems as if we could do nothing more to save him.'

'I'm afraid not. You see, once we begin to question outsiders we show our hand. There is no alternative between the silence and defiance which Gwen advocates so strongly, and a bold and open inquiry. In my opinion it is time for the latter. You see, my cousin is not quite a fair judge. She does not know that Fitzgerald and I have so far concealed George Keene's suicide, and that from purely personal motives we, or at least I, cannot have this scandal sprung by an outsider. He would take the risk, he says; but I, in my position, conceive that it is not my duty to do so. He, however, has suggested that we four shall meet and talk it over finally before I take any action, so I took the liberty of asking Gwen to come over to−morrow morning. It is Fitzgerald's last day, and something must be done before he goes down. I don't see the use of this meeting myself—we have all, as I said, had our chance—but it can do no harm, and it may satisfy Gwen—and you.'

'I am satisfied already,' she replied gently. 'You could have done no more than you have done; I see that now.'

'I am glad,' he began, and then stopped, realising that he was not in the least glad of the evident finality in her meaning. Was she contented that things should end as they had begun? Had her passionate interest in him died down with his obedience to her orders? A sorry reward, surely! A most perplexing result of his repentance!

'I **shall** be glad,' he corrected himself, almost angrily, 'when we can get out of this muddle. Of course I have heard before of such intrigues, but I never came in personal contact with that sort of thing before. It is maddening. I scarcely seem to know whether we are in the nineteenth century or the ninth. Ever since we went to Hodinuggur we seem to have got mixed up in some antique dream; the whole thing is absurd—scarcely credible.'

As he spoke the dinner−bell rang, and he held the door open for her to pass from the consideration of these things to the well−appointed table, worthy of a house in Belgravia, where the dark−skinned, white−robed servants handed sherry with the soup, and vinegar with the salmon quite as naturally as Jeames or John in their plush liveries. But heredity was here also; Jeames or John's father may have been a day labourer or a gentleman at large, but not one of these could not have answered truthfully—'Huzoor, my father was servant to so−and−so or so−and−so in the great mutiny time, and his father served such and such a sahib in the Sutlej campaign, or in Cabul, or somewhere else.' Faithfulness or unfaithfulness to salt being, of course, a different question; though that also might possibly be one of heredity. Such thoughts strike one sometimes after years of complacent blindness, and on this evening they increased the sense of unreality which had already taken possession of Lewis Gordon. Nor did a remark of Colonel Tweedie's on his daughter's improved looks during the past few days amend matters. He felt that he might be living in that twenty−ninth century, when humanity may reasonably be supposed to have educated itself out of some frailties as, in the necessary glance at the young lady's face required by decorous assent, he met a perfectly unconscious, happy smile, so full of friendly confidence, that a positive gladness glowed at his heart that she should be content with him.

Nevertheless he made one more effort to get back finally to the every−day world by riding over to the club after dinner and listening to the gossip of the day. But there was nothing wrong with the world; it was going on, he found, as usual. He played a game or two of pool, talked gravely with Major Davenant over some new rules intended to prevent such another fiasco as the last race−meeting, heard the latest official canards, and listened more patiently than usual to some boys—who had to go down from leave next day—bemoaning the general beastliness of the country as a residence for an English gentleman. It was only, so the verdict ran, fit for niggers.

Yet even this demonstration that life in the main was commonplace as usual, did not restore Lewis Gordon's general indifference. And the knowledge that this was so made him more than ever determined to carry his point when next morning the four met in Rose Tweedie's room, to settle the course of events.

The rain after a downpour during the night had ceased, or, perhaps, had become too light to make its way through the thick white mist which had settled down like cotton−wool upon everything, blotting out the world.

There was not a breath of air, not a sound save occasionally a soft pit−pat, as the vapour condensing on the roof dropped into the hearts of the rain lilies which fringed the verandah with their upturned orange cups. Yet it was neither dark nor dull as on a cloudy day. The whiteness of the mist was almost luminous, and through the wide−set windows sent a faint glow, like that from newly−fallen snow, on the faces of poor George Keene's four friends, and showed still more clearly on the even surface of Azizan's portrait as it stood upon the mantel−shelf. Rose stood beside it, looking beyond everything in the room, beyond the row of orange lilies, into the cotton−wool mist which seemed bent on suffocating the house and its inhabitants. There was silence in the room—the silence which comes to a discussion when the last objection has palpably fallen through, and a conclusion absolutely satisfactory to no one seems inevitable. Gwen, a flush of excitement on her cheek, lay back among the cushions of her easy−chair, nervously turning and twisting the rings upon her fingers. Dan Fitzgerald, who was seated close beside her, had evidently been the last to speak, and was now leaning towards her, his eyes fixed with kindly encouragement and sympathy on her face. Lewis Gordon, apart from the others, his elbows resting on the table, looked half regretful, half resentful,—the look of a man who knows he must take the initiative in a singularly disagreeable duty.

At last through the silence came Rose Tweedie's voice reluctantly, yet with a sort of challenge in it: 'I suppose that is settled, and that we can none of us suggest any other reason why we should delay longer?'

'I have told you before,' broke in Mrs. Boynton, 'that I have every reason to believe that no action will be taken by the woman; that she will never court inquiry.'

'I did not mean that,' replied Rose, still with the same note in her voice. 'I meant that if none of us have any further knowledge beyond what we have already discussed, then Mr. Gordon's plan for a private yet open inquiry with my father's knowledge seems best. I, for one, have none. I know nothing, absolutely nothing, in favour of delay. Nothing that would prevent the possible danger to George Keene's memory.'

Lewis Gordon followed fast on her words in swift, vexed comprehension of her challenge.

'I fancy we are all able to say the same, Miss Tweedie. If we agree, I may have to speak of something I should not otherwise mention, but it is no reason for delay. On the contrary, it is a reason why open inquiry will be the safest, even for George Keene's memory. I know nothing better;—I wish I did.'

'Nor I,' said Dan Fitzgerald, then paused, and rising from his chair crossed to the open door, whence he looked out, as Rose had done, beyond the rain lilies to the mist. 'I know better than any of you what poor George was; I know better than any of you what he did. If this is settled, I, too, will have to tell something to his credit; something that will make inquiry the better for him. Yet I'd give all I possess to save the necessity for it. But I'm lost,—' he stretched his hands out impulsively into the mist—'lost, as one might be out yonder—lost, as the lad's own explanation is lost in the mystery of death. It's hard to say so, George, but I can't help it.'

He spoke as if to some one out of sight, and Gwen Boynton sate up suddenly, nervously, with a scared look in her eyes.

'I think you are all wrong,' she said querulously. 'The woman must know that proof is against her story; but you will not believe it, and so I cannot help it. I cannot, indeed.'

Her voice died away to a sort of sigh, and she sank back again, clasping her hands tightly together. Rose let hers fall from its grip on the mantel−shelf. Dan's tall figure leant more loosely against the lintel, and Lewis Gordon mechanically turned the pages of a book lying beside him on the table. The tension was over, and the relief of decision, even of helpless decision, held them silent in the silence for the moment. They had done their best. They had played their part in the strange play.

Then suddenly out of the mist came a quavering, chanting voice—

'It was a woman seeking something
Through day and night—"Listen!' cried Dan, his face ablaze. Rose's hand went up again to the picture hurriedly, and Lewis started to his feet; only Gwen looked from one to the other bewildered:
'O'er hill and dale seeking for something.' The voice grew clearer as if the singer was toiling up the unseen path below the lilies.

'Foul play! foul play!—look down and decide."The mad potter!' cried Dan, with wonder in his tone.

'Azizan! it is her turn at last,' cried Rose, with a hush in hers, which sent a thrill through Lewis

Gordon—though he only said prosaically—

'I'll go and see who it is.'

But Dan had forestalled the thought, and, vaulting the railings, had disappeared into the mist, whence they could hear him hallooing down the path to the unseen singer as they stood waiting by the lilies. Then came a quick greeting, a low reply, and so, clearer and clearer—though they could see nothing—every syllable of eager questioning and slow answer until, as if from behind a veil, the strange couple stepped into sight—Dan, eager, excited, towering above the bent, deprecating figure of the old potter.

They had heard so much, those three in the verandah, that Rose without a pause could step forward and strike at the very root of the matter with the question, 'What is it? What is it that you want of me?'

The shifty, light eyes settled on her face with a look of relief before the old man bent to touch her feet.

'Madr−mihrbân,' he said. 'Madr−mihrbân—that is well!'

He was still breathless from his swift climb beside Dan's long stride, and, as he straightened himself again, his long supple fingers, busied already about a knotted corner in the cotton shawl folded round him, trembled visibly.

'Lo, I sent it before,' he went on in low excuse; 'but it returned, as all things return at Hodinuggur. Then she was vexed and could not rest. "Send it back! send it back," she cried all night long. Pity of God! what a fever; but now she sleeps sound—' He paused, to fumble closer at the knot.

'You mean Azizan, your daughter?' suggested Rose softly, while the others stood silent, listening and looking, the whole world seeming to hold nothing for them save this tall girl with her bright, eager face, and that bent old man trying to undo a knot.

'Huzoor—Azizan!' came the quavering voice. 'I looked for her so often till the Mâdr mihrbân came. Then I found her with the pot clasped to her breast, but the bad dreams would not let her sleep. "It is not mine; it is hers." It kept her awake always. So when I found her again, lying asleep by the river with it still in her bosom, I said to myself, "I will not set a writing on it, and put it in the box with a slit as I did last time, trusting it to God knows who, after the new fashion. I will take it myself in the old fashion and give it to the Mâdr mihrbân's own hands, and pray her hold it fast so it return not to wake the child; for she sleeps sound at last in the dust of her father's."'

The knot was undone. The shaking fingers held the Ayôdhya pot for a second, the white glare of the mist shining in a broad blaze of light upon its intense glowing blue. The next it had slipped from the potter's hand and lay in fragments on the ground!

Still fragments of sapphire colour—moving fragments of milky white, rolling hither and thither like drops of dew on a leaf seeking a resting−place for their round lustre.

Pearls!—the Hodinuggur pearls!

And Gwen's voice, with a triumphant ring in it, became articulate above the old man's cry of distress and the low exclamations of the others.

'So Azizan stole them, after all!'

Rose turned on her sharply. 'Who knows? This much is certain, she has brought them back, and saved George when we could not.'

'Yes! she has saved him,' assented Dan, 'we have that she−devil on the hip now!'

Lewis Gordon stood silent a moment; be had grown very pale. 'You are both right, I expect,' he said quietly. 'It settles—everything.'

Gwen drew a long breath of relief, but Rose seemed lost in thought.

'No! not everything,' she said absently, half to herself. 'It does not tell us why George shot himself.'

She scarcely knew she spoke aloud; she had forgotten everything but the dead boy.

'**Shot himself!**' The words came back to her in a sort of cry. '**Shot himself!** What do you mean? What does she mean?'

Gwen stood as if petrified before those regretful faces. Then, as the truth struck at her, beating down her shield of self−deception, she turned at last, forgetful of all else. to the shelter of Dan's kind arms. 'Dan! Dan! it isn't true—it can't be true! say it isn't true.'

He drew her closer to him, looking down into her agonised face with a perfect passion of tenderness and kissed it; forgetful, in his turn, of everything save that she had come to him at last.

'It is true, my darling; he did it to save me and you. Gwen! Gwen! it wasn't your fault—My God! she has fainted!'

'I'm sorry,' began Rose, feeling paralysed by surprise, but Dan's kind smile was ready even in his distress.

'Don't worry. It's best over, for I must have told her. You see we have been engaged for years, and George knew it. If I carry her to your room, Miss Rose, she will be better there. 'Tis the shock, and she was so fond of him, dear heart.'

Lewis Gordon, left alone in the verandah while another man before his very eyes carried off the woman to whom he supposed himself to be engaged, felt that the world had broken loose from its foundations altogether. So that was the explanation! And then a low murmur of moaning from the potter arrested his attention, which, as is so often the case after a shock, had lost its airt and become vagrant.

The old man, still crouched beside the fragments of the Ayôdhya pot, was rocking himself backwards and forwards, and muttering to himself, 'She will be angry; the Mâdr mihrbân will be angry, and then Azizan will not sleep.'

Lewis walked up to him and laid his hand reassuringly on the thin, bent shoulders. 'I don't think the Mâdr mihrbân will be angry. I'm almost sure she won't.' His own words made him smile, until, as he looked at the old man's shifty, bright eyes raised to his doubtfully, he remembered the young sad face which George had painted. 'And Azizan is asleep,' he said gently; 'she will not wake again.'

As he stooped to gather up the jewels his eyes were dim with unwonted tears—why, he scarcely knew.

When Rose came back ten minutes after, leaving Gwen to Dan's kind consolations, she found Lewis leaning over the railings looking at the rain lilies through his eyeglass as if it had been a microscope. He turned to her with the air of a man who has made up his mind.

'You thought I was engaged to my cousin, Miss Tweedie,' he said. 'So did I. Apparently I was mistaken. So let us set that aside, once and for all, and think over more important matters. There is no lack of other surprises, thank Heaven.'

The semi−cynicism of his words did not sit ill on him, and Rose recognised that he had certainly chosen the most dignified way out of the difficulty. At the same time it left her free, unexpectedly free, to consider the position as an outsider, and all involuntarily, yet naturally enough, her first thought expressed itself in words:

'I wonder what father will say?'

This was too much both for temper and dignity, fortunately, also for humour. He gave her one indignant look, then relaxed into a smile.

'Really, Miss Tweedie, in this Comedy of Errors I am only responsible for my part; and that, believe me, is rather a sorry one.'

CHAPTER XXV

WHETHER Lewis Gordon spoke truth or not regarding the part he had to play, there could be no doubt that Dan found his anything but sorry. A subdued sort of radiance softened yet brightened the man as he came out to ask Rose for the loan of her *dandy*, Mrs. Boynton being anxious to get home as soon as possible. There seemed no need for words; the situation explained itself, and even Lewis looking at his rival's eager face, could not help acknowledging that Dan was more likely to give Gwen the support she evidently needed than he was. Besides, the sudden change for the future seemed lost sight of in that, which the opportune arrival of the Ayôdhya pot had on the present, and on Chândni's impudent claim. It was of course clear evidence against the truth of the story so far as Gwen was concerned, but whether it would prevent the woman raking up the true facts of George Keene's death, out of sheer wanton malice, was another thing. Lewis felt himself rather helpless before the phenomenon of such a nature as hers, and confessed as much when Dan came racing back, breathless and excited after seeing Mrs. Boynton safely home, for a council of war. He brought a quick decision and intuition with him. The sluice had been opened by treachery of course, and now that he was free to speak of his engagement, Dan told the story of the open locket, which to him seemed proof−positive that George had voluntarily taken the blame on himself when thrown off his balance by the discovery that the happiness of the man and the woman he loved best in the world depended on Dan's getting his promotion. How the sluice had been opened was another matter. Chândni had always said by means of a key made after an impression sent from Simla; but this was manifestly impossible unless some servant had done it. Indeed he had never paid much attention to this assertion, for the woman in making it had contradicted herself more than once, and evidently had no definite story as to how the impression had been secured. In his own mind he had decided that the key itself had been stolen from the boy while he slept so heavily, and that the knowledge that this was so had had its share in bringing about his rash act. So that even if the real facts came out, nothing beyond carelessness could be laid to George's charge, now that the potter was there to prove that Azizan had had the Ayôdhya pot all the time, and that they were there to prove that the pearls had remained in the pot. So much for Chândni and the only possible cause of further action—a woman's wanton cruelty. For the rest, the old Diwan was dead, Khush−hâl seemed to be out of it, and Dalel had everything to lose and nothing to gain by a scandal. Finally, these intrigues were always as a house of cards; remove one support and the whole structure disappeared.

'Nevertheless,' said Dan, looking across the table with a grim smile, 'I'm not going to take you down as a witness to my interview with that she−devil this afternoon. You are too fine for the work, and that's the fact.'

'Can I lend you anything peculiarly bar− baric in the way of a knife?' asked Lewis. 'I've a Malay crease in my room which fills most people with terror, though personally I should funk a woorâli dart more than anything.'

'Ah! you may jeer; but 'tis true. Sure! our fineness is at the bottom of half our mistakes in this country. Even in our kindness we treat these people as we would like to be treated ourselves—a poor philanthropy compared to treating them as they would like to be treated. And when we come to mere justice! Why, we might as well give a child who has disobeyed his mother the right to appeal against her in court. What chance would the child have to begin with, and then what good would it do? and what good is our complicated system of procedure save to put power into the hands of the educated few who naturally clamour for more? But there! This has nothing to do with Chândni. She wouldn't care a tinker's damn for what you'd say to her, because you would be regulating yourself by codes and sections instead of by the way she is made. I won't. I don't mind stooping to her level to get my will. So let me go with the old mad potter and his eyes, and see if between us we can't make a settlement. And then, please God, we will have done with the whole bad dream from beginning to end. So if you have three thousand rupees you can spare on a loan, I'll just have them handy in my pocket as a salve to her wounded feelings when I've got my own way.'

What really happened at the interview Dan resolutely refused to say. On his return from the bazaar he asked for a whisky and soda and a hot bath to take the taste of it out of soul and body. Yet he returned triumphantly with a written declaration signed by Chândni, stating that she herself had stolen the key from George while he slept.

'It isn't true, of course,' said Dan with a rueful look at Lewis, 'but upon my soul, no one could tell if it is, or not. My mind seemed a vast cobweb with lines going everyway into the outside world, but all beginning in that woman, and the only way was to smash through it. She has done worse things—that's one comfort. Maybe the

pearls should have gone back to Hodinuggur direct, but she will make her bargain there, never fear, and by God they deserve—'

He broke out then with curses into the tale of Azizan's birth, which it seemed had been his strong card—that and the potter's eyes. He had played the one against the other till he wormed the story out of his enemy, while the old man waited below, ready, if Dan failed to be told the truth, to bring his evil glance to bear on the question. That fear had really settled the matter; she had acknowledged the part Azizan had played in bringing her plans to naught, and confessed the wisdom of dancing to a different tune in the future.

'We parted on the best of terms. She offered me cinnamon tea and fritters, and I took some as a sign of peace,' said Dan with a shudder. 'And now I must be off and tell poor Gwen 'tis all settled for ever.' He lingered a moment as he rose, to add with a half shy, half happy smile, 'Were you very much surprised, old man?'

'Very,' replied Lewis with dignity. But Dan still lingered.

'I wonder what on earth the Colonel will say?' he remarked apprehensively after a pause.

Then Lewis laughed; he could not help it. And actually the idea of playing second fiddle to Colonel Tweedie's disappointment in the eyes of the world, helped him materially in the interview which he had with his cousin next morning. Even without this, however, he would have felt it difficult to be severe, for he found her full of remorse and self−abasement; rather vague, perhaps, but still real. She would never forgive herself, she said, not so much for her indecision about Dan, for she had always loved him, and Lewis was well quit of her selfish regard. No! it was about poor George! She had sided with Simla in turning the boy's head—she had made too much of him and behaved most unwisely—really Lewis must let her say what she knew to be true—she had been over friendly, over confidential, and had asked him to do too much for her. All this and his foolish fancy about being the keeper of Dan's conscience, of which the latter had told her, had been too much for the dear, dear, lad's kind, sensitive heart. Then the terrible home−coming after all the pleasure and spoiling! Was not that enough, more than enough, to upset the balance? She was so insistent on this point that Lewis had to confess his assent to it, and finally went away feeling that she had more heart than he had given her credit for in the past, and that he might even be in a measure responsible for not having appealed to this better nature while he had the chance. Dan seemed to have done it successfully, for she had evidently given up all thoughts of a mercenary marriage. He understood her, she said plaintively, he knew her faults and yet he loved her; while Lewis—he must excuse her for saying so—had always treated her as if she had no heart, no sentiment; had always committed the unpardonable mistake of making her remember that she did not love him. Of course she had behaved abominably to everybody—far worse than they would allow, for they were all too good for her—but in the future she would have Dan, who was a tower of strength to her.

In fact, like many another woman of her type—many a man also—Gwen Boynton had taken refuge from the greater remorse in the lesser one—if indeed there was a greater one?—if indeed the real limit of her sinning had not been that over−confidence to which she had confessed. Not in detail truly; still she had confessed it with tears to Dan, and he had forgiven her *en masse*; as, no doubt, he would forgive in detail if she had thought it right to tell him what she had told George. But what right had she to put this pain into another man's life, or speak of that vague fear which even Châ ndni's confession of having stolen the key would not smother utterly? It would be worse than foolish! it would be wicked; and this dreadful doubt was her cross, her punishment, which she thoroughly deserved for doing as she had done. And when she had got thus far, remorse was once more in a clear open channel where it could spread itself out and lose its chill under the sunshine of Dan's kind consolations.

Thus it really turned out that, after all, the person most upset by the unexpected *dénouement* of affairs was Colonel Tweedie.

'Engaged for years,' he said angrily, in reply to his daughter's information. 'Well! I am surprised. A most extraordinary proceeding which er—er—complicates—the—er—If you had said "of late," I might have seen some sense in it, for during the last week or so even Gordon, who is generally to be relied upon, has been absent over his work—er—not to say—er—somewhat negligent. And of course being his cousin—the—er—interest—'

Rose hastened to confess that the engagement had only as it were, been a definite one during—here she hesitated a little—the last few days. Which tribute to his perspicacity soothed the Colonel's dignity, and encouraged him to further ventures in the seer's path by a suggestion that no doubt his daughter's improved appetite and appearance, which he had observed during the same period, was due to the proverbial interest which women took in the matrimonial affairs of their neighbours. Though for his part he must may that the friendly

admiration he had had for Mrs. Boynton had been very considerably impaired by—er—the lack of judgment she had displayed in engaging herself to an assistant engineer, a man whose promotion, he believed, could not possibly come before the following July—if then. He went off to consult the departmental lists with portentous gloom, leaving his daughter defenceless before the truth. Certainly she had been much happier since Lewis had known her feeling for him, and what is more, Mrs. Boynton's decision in favour of Dan was a great relief in one way, though in another it was disturbing—confusing; for despite her theories Rose felt that the fact of his freedom to make other ties did make a difference in her relations with Lewis Gordon. It ought not to do so, of course; she was angry with herself for admitting the fact, but she was totally unable to juggle with realities, or escape, crab−like, from a difficulty sideways. No thought of marriage or what she was pleased to call sentimental rubbish had marred the self−forgetfulness of that unpremeditated appeal she had made to her belief in him. No such thought existed even now, and that the fear of it should creep in was intolerable, absurd. No! she must feign the virtue of unconsciousness, even if she had it not, and by an increase of friendly confidence, combined with a strict attention to prose, prevent the awkwardness of the position from falling on innocent Lewis, and show him clearly that the altered situation had made no change in her, yet was not expected to make any change in him. Only by these means could she show him, what was really the truth, that her past avowal of interest was not mere sentiment.

Lewis, for his part, also tackled the position with a boldness which he had denied to himself while he was still engaged to his cousin, still smarting under the curiously mixed sensations which the knowledge of the girl's real feelings had aroused. Then he had felt bound to conventional modes of thought, and, to tell truth, had been more or less afraid lest on inquiry a sentimental love for Rose might pop up somewhere like a Jack−in−the−box. For her confession had affected him in a perfectly incomprehensible way, and the only other explanation of it he had been loth to admit, since it ran counter to all his pet theories. What feeling could there be between a man and a woman save the one feeling? This warmth at his heart when he thought of her praise, this pain at the thought of her blame, could only be the old, old story; and yet he had been in love before, and this was not the same experience. Well, it might be milk−food suited to babes and women, but it was not strong meat for strong men; withal it was strangely satisfying, strangely final, so that when a return to commonplace diet became possible, he found himself in two minds about taking to it. She evidently had but one; she evidently had given him all she intended to give, and the only return he could make was by showing her that he did understand this, and that he did not think it necessary to salve over her wounded modesty by making love to her. Wounded modesty! The very thought seemed an insult. He could not agree with her theories altogether, but he could at least respect them.

So for the next month, while Gwen was slowly recovering her shock, and all Simla was divided into factions over the surprise of her engagement to penniless Dan Fitzgerald, a very pretty little comedy was being enacted in the big house where Rose, as hostess, treated Lewis Gordon as a friend, and he returned the compliment in kind. There was absolutely no humbug, no effort about it at all. They were not in love with each other, they were not restless 'or moody' or excited, but absolutely content and happy with things as they were. A state of affairs accentuated by the relief from anxiety, the improving weather, and the charming gaiety and *verve* of the society in which they lived.

Thus it happened that Rose Tweedie had her chance of being wooed in the only possible way in which girls of her type can be wooed. One sees dozens of them now−a−days in society; one will see more and more year by year, as the unnatural disproportion in the number of the sexes tends to intensify the present seclusion of the nicest girls from the men. It is not the fault of the latter. In a bevy of several hundred young ladies, the fortunate possessor of the handkerchief naturally throws it at some of those who press forward into individuality, or at some fair face which even a crush cannot hide. So the choice for a wife falls on beauty or brass. The latter may be too hard a term, yet the girls who are likely to make the most faithful wives, the most devoted mothers, are not those who are the readiest to attract and assent. On the contrary they do not fall in love, and men have no time to give them friendship. Friendship! They are engaged—nay, married—before the mere thought of such a thing crops up.

So the younger generation of women is rapidly dividing itself into the girls who dress and the girls who don't dress. In other words, those willing to attract men by one certain if seamy side of their natures, and those who are not willing. Who does not know the opposite extremes of these two factions? The girl who forces you instinctively to think of a looking−glass, and the girl who makes you wonder if there be such a thing in her room. The girl with not a hair out of place, and the girl with a hiatus between her soul and her body, as the feminine

phrase runs. Rose belonged outwardly to neither factions, yet in her heart she strenuously resented the old−fashioned theory that marriage was the larger half of a man's life and the whole of a woman's. Truthfully, though she was three−and−twenty, she had never felt the slightest desire to marry anybody, not even Lewis, and she felt in consequence proportionally grateful to him for behaving, at any rate, as if he believed the fact.

Yet, even so, they sometimes found each other out, as for instance one day when he came back from his cousin's full of unexpected news. Dan Fitzgerald had sent in his resignation to the Department, and accepted an offer of employment from Australia.

'I'm as glad,' said Lewis heartily, 'as if I had had the chance myself; partly because I couldn't make anything of it! Brown—that is the man who has wired for him—was out here contracting one of the big railway bridges. A bloated mechanic; began life as a riveter sort of fellow, but with a knack of making money and a keen eye beyond belief. I remembered his telling me that Dan was too good for us, and that if ever he came across a job in which he wanted help, he would try and steal him. This is some huge irrigation scheme—private—down South. If Dan succeeds, and he will if any one can, there will be millions in it.'

'I suppose your cousin is delighted?' said Rose.

'Gwen? Never saw a woman more relieved in my life. For, mind you, though she is awfully fond of Dan—fonder than I personally should have thought she could have been of any one—the idea of the poverty was telling on her. You know it **is** absurd to think of her as an assistant engineer's wife. It is really not an environment in which she was likely to shine, and when all is said and done on the romantic side people ought to consider sur−roundings in making a settlement for life. Besides, I am sure she is relieved to get away from us all and make a fresh start. She feels it more than I should have expected.'

'Mr. Gordon,' said Rose suddenly, 'I'm very sorry I judged her so harshly that—that time. I've wanted to say so often; but **then** it seemed foolish. As if it could have mattered what I said or thought.'

'I don't think it did really matter,' he replied frankly. 'Rather the other way round, I expect. Yet I doubt if you did judge her as harshly as she judges herself now; so it is far better she should leave all these associations behind. If he and she had had to go inspecting at Hodinuggur, or even if she had to meet Dalel Beg and his wife—did I tell you I saw her at the vice−regal squash yesterday, a perfect child in the most awful get−up?—why, then, it would revive the old affair. And if, by chance'—he paused a moment. 'One never knows what mayn't crop up, and Dan is a queer chap in some ways. He works by instincts, as it were, and hitherto they have led him right. If they didn't, and he found it out, I don't know what mightn't happen. He is not what I call a very safe man unless he is successful. So they are both lucky to get out of the uncongenial atmosphere which Government service is to him and poverty is to her. They start in smooth water, and I must buy my wedding−present, for they are to be married next month.'

'So soon?'

'He has to leave at once. The wedding is to be at Rajpore after we all go down. No bridesmaids, and I'm best man. If you want to know the wedding dress, ask Gwen; she is sure to have settled it long ago. Women always do.'

'I haven't,' protested Rose hastily. 'I shall be married in my every−day things.'

She tried hard to be grave while Lewis roared with laughter, but in the end she joined in the joke against herself. For they never quarrelled now. What was there to quarrel about?

It was on another of these pleasant peaceful days, that he came to lunch, with the news that Dalel Beg was even now detaining her father by abject apologies for past old−style misdemeanours at Hodinuggur, and profuse promises that in future it would be the abode of all the civilised virtues. Khush−hâl Beg it appeared had died of apoplexy, brought on no doubt by the unrestrained orgies with which the fat man had celebrated his accession, and in consequence Dalel was king.

'I don't quite understand it all,' he said thoughtfully. 'He is a fool, and yet he is playing his cards well. Do you know, I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear that Châ ndni was back again as chief adviser. She is a very clever woman. It seems that there is a scheme on foot for establishing stud farms or grazing paddocks for Government remounts. It is supposed to be cheaper and better in the end to buy them as yearlings and let them run loose, instead of being tethered heels, heads, and tails, in native fashion. And as the water supply is to be constant at Hodinuggur now, Dalel proposes that Government should utilise some of his waste land there, and put him in charge, or partly in charge. Of course it would bring him in a steady income if he gets his finger in the pie.'

'He ought to get nothing,' interrupted Rose hastily; 'I believe he was at the bottom of all that intrigue. We shall never know what went on exactly, but there was intrigue, and that sort of thing should be punished.'

'Undoubtedly; but as I said before, Dalel is a fool—except about a horse. It was the old man and Chândni; they belonged to that age. This man tries to break the Ten Commandments in two languages, and misses the idiom in both. But he does know the points of a horse, and as Government must keep up these old families and try to civilise them, it is as well to get some work out of them.'

'Hodinuggur civilised! I can't imagine it,' echoed Rose. 'When I think of the old potter, and that mirrored room on the roof—of Azizan and the Ayôdhya pot—it seems like some old dream of life into which we nineteenth century folk strayed by mistake.'

'With disastrous results,' put in Lewis thoughtfully. 'Well! with half the *dramatis personæ* of the play dead, and the other half married, it ought to have come to an end now like a decently behaved melodrama. Not a very moral one, I'm afraid, Miss Tweedie, and virtue must be its own reward.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You and I have been left out of the prizes altogether; but then, as the potter said, we didn't belong to his world.'

'I wish you had not reminded me of that scene,' she interrupted hastily. 'I cannot help thinking of how Mr. Fitzgerald sat smiling at me while the old man measured him; just as George did when he measured himself, and he is dead.'

'What a woman you are when all is said and done!' he replied, smiling at her. 'Still I do think that poetic justice has not been meted out all round. Gwen, for instance, has everything she wants, and I am out in the cold.'

'Do you feel out in the cold?' asked Rose aggressively.

He hastened to assure her that on the contrary he was quite warm and comfortable, but in spite of this the conversation languished till Colonel Tweedie came in, full of his intention of recommending Dalel Beg's plan strongly to the authorities.

To say, however, that it was Dalel Beg's was, as Lewis Gordon had suspected, to credit that gentleman with too much sense. It was Chândni's. When Dan Fitzgerald had left her after partaking in friendly fashion of cinnamon tea, she had put the pearls away in a safe place, and set herself, as she had been doing ever since she came to Simla, to amuse herself. She had looked after Dan as he rode away without the least malice, saying that there was a man indeed; one of the old sort like the Diwans. If he had had her in the old days, say at Hodinuggur, there would just have been one order, and then silence. She nodded her head and smiled over the thought. But now she had three thousand rupees and the pearls. She could not sell them of course, could not at present let any one know she had them. They were too well known, these Hodinuggur pearls, for Chândni to traffic in them without fear of being accused of theft. By and by, perhaps, she might trade them off on Dalel; but nothing of that sort was safe as long as Khush−hâl was alive. So long too, as they thought the mem had them they would not dare to move in the matter, now that there was all this talk of a permanent water−supply; for Chândni, in the wooden−balconied house at Simla, heard all the latest talk, and had quite a bevy of respectable native gentlemen who drank sherbets at her expense. She heard also from a friend at court of this taking up of waste land, and as she listened to all the stir of intrigue after this thing and that thing, felt a pang of regret for that vanished dream of some day being a motive−power in Hodinuggur. This court−life was as the breath of her nostrils, and if she had been in the place of that half−caste girl down in the house with the dahlias, she would not have been half starved and beaten; for if bazaar rumour said sooth, Dalel Beg had carried his occidental estimate of the marriage−tie to this almost incredible length.

Then one day, after a rich Hindu contractor had roused her wrath by claiming her more or less as his special property, by reason of the money he had chosen to lavish on her, came the news of Khush−hâl Beg's death in the odour of court sanctity. She could imagine it all down in the ruined palace out in the desert—the old ways, the old etiquette; poverty−stricken may be, yet still courtly. And why, in these pushing days when fat pigs like that Hindu made money, should they remain poverty−stricken? yet even so, it was better in a way to be Chândni of Hodinuggur, than Chândni of a bazaar, especially as one grew older.

That same afternoon a patchwork−covered dhooli went jolting down to the house with the dahlias, which was a miserable spot now; deserted, forlorn. A miserable room also, whence the indignant Parsees had reft the French clocks and the *bric−à−brac*. A most miserable pair of women too, reduced to cooking their own food at the

drawing−room fire, lest their over−looking neighbours might see them in the degradation of the cook−room—since the deepest degradation of all in Eurasian eyes is to be servantless.

'Don't be a fool,' said Chândni to Mrs. D'Eremao's shrill abuse, as the former walked in upon them unceremoniously, and, squatting down, went on calmly chewing betel. 'You have nothing to do with the business. But, if she is wise, she will listen.' Beatrice Elflida Norma looked at her shrewdly and said, 'Be quiet, mamma, there is no harm in hearing what she has to say.'

It was not much, but to the point. No doubt, if they appealed to English justice, they could force the Diwan to support his wife. But how? At Hodinuggur under lock and key. It would not be nice, and Chândni had tales to tell which made Mrs. D'Eremao's hair stand on her head even while she protested that **she** was a freeborn British subject. Doubtless; but then they must give up all hopes of the position for which the girl had married such an atrocity. (Here Beatrice Elflida dissolved into tears.) Besides, that was not the way to treat a Mohammedan gentleman, an off−shoot of the great Moghuls; but she knew how to treat him, and for a consideration, was quite willing to use her influence with Dalel to set things straight. She did not want him, and had flouted his proposals of peace a dozen times, but she was quite ready, **for this consideration**, to make herself useful. Briefly, that consideration was a free hand if she could get it, no cabals against her position, and an assignment, in case of Dalel's death, of a good slice of that state pension, which, in such case, would be given to the wife. If there were children, so much the better, since the pension would be larger. In addition, they had to remember that refusal would not amend the position, since Dalel would no doubt bribe her back in some other way.

So a week after this, her Highness Beatrice Elflida Norma of Hodinuggur's name appeared on the list of donors to a certain Fund, opposite no less a sum than one thousand rupees, and she herself appeared at the next vice−regal squash in full native costume, with her hair quite straight, and many shades darker in colour. She sat and talked affably to a stout English matron about her husband's great desire to assimilate the lives of Indian women more closely to those of their European sisters; so that, on her return home, the stout English matron mentioned to her stout English husband, who happened to be a Commissioner, that the Hodinuggur creature seemed to have ideas and should be encouraged.

And that evening, Dalel said to Chândni, ere he left the little balconied room where so many grave and reverend gossip−mongers sat drinking sherbet, 'Thou wilt return to Hodinuggur as thou hast promised.'

'I will return; but not as before. I am free to come and go. And see that thou pay me back that thousand rupees out of the first batch of horses. Else Chândni goes, never to come again.'

CHAPTER XXVI

IT was a hot October. The rains coming early had stopped early, giving Lewis Gordon and Rose that charming sunshiny month on the Hills, of which mention has been made. A whole month of almost idyllic happiness and content.

And now, after the usual hiatus of a visit or two for Rose *en route*, and a hasty tour for her father round some outlying canals, they had settled down for the cold−weather life at Rajpore. Perhaps it was only the rather unusual heat which made it seem less pleasing than usual to at least two of the party. And this was more evident to Lewis Gordon than to the girl, since she had the occupation and distraction of preparing for Gwen's approaching marriage. Naturally, it was to be a great function, for, while her admirers were legion, Dan's friends were many; besides, as every− body admitted, the bride and bridegroom alone would be worth going to see, worth remembering as a pattern pair of lovers. So the Tweedies were lending their house for the breakfast—which was to be a real breakfast, since the marriage was to take place so as to allow of a start by the cool morning mail; the regiment was lending its band for the wedding−march, and, on this tepid October afternoon, every garden in the place was sending white oleanders and hibiscus to the odd octagon church which had once been a Mohammedan tomb. Nay more! one devoted though disappointed lover far down by some distant canal had sent, by special messenger, a great basket of belated white lotus lilies, with a request that they might be trodden on by the bride's happy feet.

Gwen, as she bent over this offering, sniffing at the faint almond scent of the huge, jewelled flowers, was a gracious sight to look upon. She had quite recovered herself, and in sober truth felt absolutely content. 'How nice of the dear thing!' she murmured sweetly.

And so it was; very nice. One might give it another epithet and say it was almost heroic. But of this Gwen Boynton had no conception, and never would have one. That side of human nature, its passion, its tears, its temptations, its triumphs, had been left out of her composition. She roused it in others, she played with it prettily, she even spoke warily and discreetly about it; yet Rose Tweedie, despite her girlish disdain, had more real sympathy with it than she had.

Dan, meanwhile, in Lewis Gordon's office, disregardful of the lack of chairs, was kicking his heels as he sat on the table, declaring loudly that he would of a certainty break down in replying to the toast which was to be given at the club dinner in his honour that night. What the dickens did the fellows mean by giving him a dinner? What had he ever done for any of them? What had he ever been but a reckless, insubordinate, unsteady, loafing brute, who ought to have been kicked out of the service years ago?

'I expect they know their own minds,' replied Lewis rather wearily. He had a headache; and he was telling himself it was liver when he knew quite well it was not; a most unsatisfactory denial since there is no phase of depression so unendurable as that when even a blue pill fails to hold out cheering hopes. Yet he spoke kindly and patiently also; for he must have been of base clay, indeed, who would not have recognised that Dan, transfigured as it were on the summit of his hopes, was a worthy sight in this work−a−day world, and that, in a measure, it was well to be there on the hill−top with him. 'Besides,' he added, 'I think I overheard Simpson saying something about a sick baby—'

'Oh! bad cess to the baby,' interrupted Dan hastily. 'Sure it's a boy now, and one can't see a child die for the want of ice when your pony has four legs. More, by token, it had but three for a month after, poor beast. But what's that to do with it? It isn't so much that I'm too bad. It's the world that's too good for me, and that's a fact. When I think of all you fellows who have been so good and so patient with me, my heart's broke about it entirely—and when I think of George! sure, it's only Gwen's kind face that comforts me. Oh, Gordon! what have I done that she should be going to marry me to−morrow?'

So he ran on, as many another man has run on; as most men, good and true, do run on when they are just about to marry the woman they love.

And Lewis Gordon sat listening to him with a headache and a pain in his heart; for the most part thinking that if Rose could only see this man, only hear him, she might not be quite so disdainful of it all; might acknowledge that, be it bad or good in its essence, this feeling did step into a man's life for the time and claim him body and soul, to the detriment of neither.

'And by the by,' said Dan suddenly, 'I've been meaning to ask you for a long time, but I wasn't sure if you'd like it. And now that I'm going away for good and all, and you can't get out of being my best man, I'll risk it. When are you going to marry Miss Tweedie?'

'Never,' replied Lewis firmly, roused into instant resistance. 'What put such a fancy into your head now?'

'Now?' Dan's face was a study in tender humour. 'It's been in my head for the last year, and in yours too. I told Gwen so, I remember, before we went to Hodinuggur that time, and I could see by her manner she thought so also.'

Lewis looked at him with an odd expression. 'Then you were both mistaken, that's all. And Fitzgerald, if you're quite done talking about yourself—I've a lot of work to finish, old chap—'

Dan laughed. 'Well! I'll go; but it is true, Gordon, and what is more, she likes you; any one can see that.'

True! absolutely true. Lewis knew it right well, none better, and the remembrance of the affection she had given him unasked filled him as ever with a glow of intense satisfaction. And yet he had to confess that he was not happy. That idyllic month spent in each other's company had been charming, but that fortnight of absence had been the reverse. And what he felt now was something very different from that calm, contented confidence in their mutual friendship which remained, thank Heaven, untouched by this new passion. For it was that, and nothing else. He had felt it before, for other women, this moody, restless, selfish desire of appropriation, and if Rose would not marry him he would probably feel it again for some one else. In a half−hearted way he almost regretted that it should have obtruded itself in this, the most perfect idyl of his life, and yet, call it what hard names he would, there it was, a palpable factor in the future. Rose was the best of friends; but she was also a very charming girl into whose company he had been thrown, and he had fallen in love with her; naturally enough—only it complicated matters.

He gave a queer little grimace and began to add up a column of figures, telling himself that no doubt he would get over it as he had got over similar attacks before; and that at any rate he would wait and see. Anything seemed better than the risk of paining Rose by letting her think that after all he had failed to understand the absolute unconsciousness of her regard for him. And that she might think so, seemed more than likely, since with all his experience, all his knowledge, he was only just beginning to realise that this passionate love was indeed a thing absolutely apart from his affection for her. So much so, that it almost seemed to him that it would have been easier to tell her of the former, if the latter had not hedged her in with reverence and tenderness. It came to him, with a smile, that indeed and in truth it would have been easier had he been able to send the barber round with proposals to her father in native fashion; after all, there was an immense deal to be said for that side of the question.

And then, in his careful methodical fashion, he began to add up the column of figures again. This time the total was different; a trifle to be easily set right, yet he was not used to such aberrations of intellect, and it annoyed him. He did it again, this time allowing no thoughts of Rose or anything else to obtrude themselves, and a new set of figures rewarded his perseverance. He laid the pen aside and faced himself resolutely. Yes! he had been doing atrocious work of late, he had been thinking of Rose all day long, he had not been able to settle steadily to anything, and, unless this could be stopped, the sooner he took advantage of the many changes in the department—consequent on Dan's going and the usual cold−weather returns from furlough—in order to give up his present position, the better. There was nothing like breaking loose from one's surroundings at once, and he was due some promotion. But if he had to do this, Rose ought to know the reason. Why should she live in a fool's paradise? Why should she not face the facts of life as well as he? If she had been like other women he had known, he would have made love to her and proposed as a matter of course; but she was not like others; or rather what did he know of the matter, save that never by word, or look, or sign had she shown her knowledge even of the most elementary facts in life. How could you go to a girl like that and ask her to marry you straight off? What could you do save gloze over the question by phrases, by mixing it up with other things, even with that perfect, angelic, absolutely unselfish affection and regard which she had given him, and which he, apart from all this, felt for her. Still, it had to be done; in common fairness to her and to himself, he must tell her that he was a fool, and that life was quite unendurable without her; he must tell her, if only because there was no other earthly reason why he should give up the Secretaryship. And if this had to be, if he had to tell her, then there was no time like the present, when the necessity for action seemed clear to him.

So ten minutes after, he walked into the room where Rose sat making wedding favours as for dear life,

surrounded by a perfect *chevaux de frise* of white satin ribbons, bows, and blossoms. The windows were set wide open on to the verandah where great baskets of white flowers lay awaiting her final visit to the church. On the table stood the lotus lily offering with a note from Gwen to say it was too good to be trodden on, and would Rose see the pretty things were put on the altar, where they would look quite sweet. The girl in her white dress with her brisk hands flying about scissors, needle, and thimble, and her mind busy with the coming marriage, seemed, like her surroundings, in unsympathising connection with his purpose; and the perception made him say discontentedly as he paused beside her to lean against the table—

'I thought you didn't approve of wedding favours?' It was an opening of the siege at the very furthermost outworks of the position which she frustrated by a laugh.

'Oh, it doesn't matter! other people seem to like them, and I've made you such a beauty. There it is, beside you on the table—take care! you're almost sitting on it. Smell it, it's real orange−blossom.'

There was apparently not a vacant chair in the room. They were all occupied with white wreaths and true lovers' knots—but with a cross here and there he was glad to see—so he continued to lean against the table, smelling perfunctorily at his own favour, and thinking of the utter inconsequence of the feminine mind, until a certain irritation came to his aid.

'I wish you would put that work down for a minute, Rose,' he said quietly. 'I have something I want to say to you.'

Her hands paused, arrested among the white ribbons, her mind on one word; for he had never before called her by her Christian name. So she sat looking at him doubtfully, with the light from the windows behind her edging the great coils of her hair with bronze.

'I have come to tell you that I'm a fool,' he began almost argumentatively. 'At least, I suppose it's foolish. I am quite ready to admit, if you like, that it is so; but the fact remains. I can't go on as we are—as we have been, I should say—any longer. Don't think it is because I cannot understand. I do—at least I think I do. You are my friend, Rose, and will be that always, I hope. I don't say the best friend I ever had, or ever shall have, because that has nothing to do with the question, and, besides, there aren't any degrees in friendship—you have taught me that. So I think you may admit that I understand you. The question is, if you will understand me.'

He paused, and Rose's kind shadowless eyes noted with a sudden shrinking back from the sight, that his usual calm was broken by a palpable effort to steady his voice. He felt, indeed, that he had not the least clew to the girl's mind; that he was absolutely taking a leap in the dark. And that what he had to say now was, in reality, so foreign to every single word they had ever said to each other before, that even if she consented to marry him he could not be sure if she meant it—if she really understood the difference which he saw so clearly.

'Rose,' he went on, 'the fact is, that I've fallen in love with—with you; and if you don't really want to marry me, I had better go away. I would take an out−district for a time. I've had enough—perhaps too much—secretary work.' He seemed to take refuge in details from the main point.

'Why—why should you go away?' asked Rose in a low voice. 'We were very happy, weren't we?'

Her eyes, which had sought her hands among the white satin bows, came back to his face anxiously, almost fearfully.

'Why?' he echoed passionately, and as he went on his words, his voice, his manner trembled in the fine balance between the humour of the thing and its gravity. 'Ah, Rose, that is the question! Because I'm a fool, say you; because I'm a man, say I. Because I love you, Rose; because I think of you when I ought to be thinking of other things. Because I'm an idiot, and have gone all to pieces. Because it's torture to think you may go away and marry some one else. Because I can't even add up a column of figures without wondering what you will say now—now when I ask you to marry me? Because—yes! have it so—because I am a fool!—'

He had held out his hands towards her, and hers were in them in an instant.

'Oh, Lewis, what a wretch I've been!' she cried; 'but why didn't you ask me before?'

'Why—didn't—you—ask me—before,' he repeated slowly. The favours which had fallen from her lap lay round about their feet, and those on the table were squashed remorselessly as he seated himself upon its edge with the air of a man who requires some physical support, and still holding her by the hands, drew her down beside him silently. 'I shall never understand you, dear—thank God!' he said at last in an undertone: then went on in a different voice—'It **is** a little confusing, Rose, you must admit. All this time, ever since you told me that you—'

She interrupted him quickly, eagerly—'Ah, but that was a totally different thing altogether!'

'Totally different,' he echoed meekly. 'Yes, of course!' And then he paused again with his eyes on hers. 'I suppose you would rather I didn't kiss you?' he began irrelatively, with a half smile of infinite tenderness.

'Oh, I don't mind,' she put in hastily; 'it doesn't really matter—if you wish—only don't talk nonsense, Lewis; please don't. I do hate it so; it makes me feel inclined to put my head in a bag.'

'Then I won't; I can't afford to lose sight of your dear face just now.'

'Lewis!'

'But if I don't say that sort of thing, what **are** we to talk about?' he asked, only half in jest. 'The weather—the news? Not very interesting subjects either of them to a man when the girl he loves has just promised to marry him—for you have promised, haven't you, Rose?'

She took no notice of his question.

'Talk about,' she echoed, her kind eyes growing a little absent—'surely there are heaps of things to talk about besides you and me. There is the house we are going to have, Lewis; such a nice house! The prettiest drawing−room you ever saw; I will have it so. And a study for you, all to yourself, sir, where you can go when you're tired of me. And then the dinners, Lewis! That's one blessing of my having kept house for father. I know all about it. There won't be any cold mutton, Lewis; but the nicest little dinners.' She paused to nod her head wisely.

'Well,' said Lewis, 'please go on; this is really most interesting.'

'And the garden. I'll make you gardener, Lewis. I don't believe you know the difference between a carnation and a chrysanthemum now; but I'll teach you, and you shall tie them up for me—I hate tying up flowers. And I'll copy your reports for you, and keep the house quiet. And then, and then, everybody will be so hungry, Lewis, and there will be so many bills to pay; but it won't matter, for every one will be happy, and the children will brag about their home to all the other girls and boys—'

'Go on, dear, go on!' There was a little tremble in his voice now, and as they sat ruining the wedding favours, his right arm drew her closer to him; but she seemed not to notice it. A half smile was on her lips, a certain sadness in her eyes.

'And then, dear? Who knows—who can tell? There are so many things, and death comes—even to the little ones.' She paused, then went on more lightly—'And I'll grow stout; yes, I'm afraid so, Lewis. I'm the sort of girl, you know, who is apt to get stout. And you are sure to grow bald. Then I'll be cross, and you'll be cross; only it won't so much matter, for we will both be cross together—and no wonder, with the boys wanting cricket−bats, and the girls clamouring for music−lessons! So there will be more bills than ever. Then you and I will begin to get old, Lewis; and the girls will want me to sit up till three in the morning at balls, and I shall be so sleepy; but you shall stay at home and smoke, dear. And then the boys will get into scrapes—boys always do, don't they, Lewis—for they're not like girls, you know. And when they come to me to get them out of their trouble, I shall say: "No, dears, go to your father, he will understand; for he—for he is the best man I ever knew."'

Her voice ended in a little sob; he could feel it, hear it, as if it were his own, for her face was hidden on his breast.

'Rose! Rose! my dear, my dear!'

It was almost a cry. He would have liked to kneel before his love, as he had done before the other, but with her there so close to his heart, he could only hold her fast and tell himself passionately that, in those long years to come, it should be even as she had said, and that never, in word, thought, or deed, would he sully her pure ideal.

So they sat silent—for, to tell truth, other words seemed to him sacrilege, and she had said her say—until with a half apologetic smile she drew herself away.

'I'm sure you are sitting on your favour, Lewis, and I've such a lot more to make; besides, I promised to go down to the church at half−past five. It must be that now, and I've wasted all this time.'

'I've been here exactly seven minutes and a half,' he replied, gloomily taking out his watch; 'for I looked just before I came in.'

She laughed. 'Well, that was very methodical of you; and I think, on the whole, dear, that you managed very nicely. And now, as I hear the carriage coming round, you might just help me to put in the flowers. Aren't the lotus lovely?'

There was no help for it. She was hopelessly back in realities, and Lewis had to accept the position. After all, as he watched her drive off, like a bride herself in the midst of her white flowers, he told himself that she had managed to compress a great deal into those seven and a half minutes; a whole dream of life which must, which

should come true. It would be more difficult for him than for her, of course; perhaps that was one reason why he was still thinking over it long after she had forgotten everything else in the fervour of a free fight with the parson, who objected on principle to lotus−blossoms in the chancel. They were a heathen flower, sacred to unmentionable beliefs and rites, and could not be admitted beyond the body of the church. It was but an offshoot of an old quarrel between these two, which renewed itself every Christmas and Easter−tide; but Rose, who by instinct understood the story which these particular flowers had to tell, opened up the whole question of symbolism hotly, finally marching off with her lilies in a huff to the lectern, whence, she told herself, their message of love and sacrifice might fittingly go forth. And while she worked away under the echoing dome of the old tomb, the band in the bit of public garden close by was clashing and bashing away at 'Rule Britannia' and 'Ta−ra−ra−boom−de−ay,' much to the delight of ayahs leading sallow dark−eyed children by the hand, and a motley crowd of servants and shopkeepers from the neighbouring bazaar.

Sometimes a palki gharry, like a green box on wheels, with four or five specimens of Tommy Atkins and a black bottle inside, would come rattling past, drawn by an anatomy of a horse, and leave a shower of gibes and greetings behind it for those other green boxes on wheels which were drawn up beside the road, while their gaily−dressed occupants chewed betel or strolled about with clanking feet among the long shadows thrown by the flowering shrubs. Light, and laughter, and noise; a whole eternity of time and space between this life and the girl under the dome, decorating the Bible with lotus−blossoms.

'There's going to be a big shâdi (wedding) in the girja ghur (church) to−morrow morning,' said one of the occupants, dressed in tight mauve silk trousers and a yellow veil, as she clambered back into the green box where a figure in white lay listening lazily. 'They are doing all sorts of pooja there to−day. It is that big, long sahib in the canals and Boynton sahib's widow. Ai, the sorry tale! Making a fuss of shâdi about a woman who has had the misfortune to kill one man.'

Chândni sat up suddenly. 'Tobah! a sorry tale, indeed! So she is to marry him! Lo, there is a man, indeed! but I wonder what he would say if he knew what I know now?'

'Dost know aught? Dost know him?' began the other enviously.

'I have seen him. He was down at Hodinuggur a week ago putting up a white marble stone to the young sahib who died there of the sickness last rains. They were friends, see you, great friends. Lo, tell thy driver to go on, Lâlu; this wearies me, the folk have no manners.'

They had not far to go; only to the Bedâmi bazaar, with its current of life below and its latticed balconies above. The full moon rose through the golden−dust haze to hang like a balloon above the feathery crowns of the palm−trees; the clatter of horses' hoofs bearing their owners home to dinner died from the Mall hard by; and Rose stood at the door of the tomb looking back into the shadowy dome, where the huge lilies showed like the ghosts of flowers. It would look very nice, she thought, in the cool light of early morning; and she would have it decorated in the same way when she and Lewis were married.

But Chândni, as she paused to think of the future, thought of the past also.

'He fought me fairly,' she said to herself; 'and for his beauty's sake, I could bear more than he gave. That is our way. But she! Lo, she is even as I, and he shall know it. I will put that in the platter as the wedding tribute, and it will help him to pay her back for me. 'Tis almost as well I had not learnt the tale from Dalel in those days. It comes better now.'

So, as the night fell, she wrapped herself in the white domino of respectability, sent for another green box on wheels, and drove in the direction of the house where Dan was living. That was not difficult to discover; all that was necessary being a word of inquiry from the general merchant who sold everything heart could desire in the shop below the balcony. And the night was warm. She would as lief sit in the moonshine behind the hedge of white oleanders and talk to the gardeners, as stay in the stuffy bazaar with its evening odours of fried meats and pungent smoke.

CHAPTER XXVII

'**I WAS** never so happy or so sorry in all my life before, and I thank Heaven that I'm enough of an Irishman still to say so without being afraid of being laughed at.'

He stood at one end of the table looking his best, as a gentleman always does in his evening dress—a curious fact, since there is no more cruel test for the least lack of good breeding. But this man stood it triumphantly, and not one of those other men seated that night round the long table but carries to his grave a remembrance of Dan Fitzgerald's look when he was bidding good−bye to his friends. The eager vitality of the man, always his strongest characteristic, seemed to have reached its climax.

'I'm not going to say anything of her,' he went on, the rich, round voice softening. 'There isn't any need, since you all know her. Besides, though you have all come here to−night—why, I can't for the life of me tell—to wish us good luck in the future, it isn't so much of the future I'm thinking as of the past. It has been so happy, thanks to you all. And it's over. That is the worst of it. I suppose it isn't quite what a man is expected to say on these occasions; but the ladies—God bless them!—would, I'm sure, agree, if they could only be made to understand that marriage is the end of a man's youth. It doesn't alter the case at all that it may be the end of the woman's also, or that we get something that may be as good in exchange. What has that to do with the past?—the merry, careless past, which I've enjoyed so much, and to which I'm now saying good−bye. Well, Heaven help those who say good−bye to it without a solid reason, or have a sneaking intention of not really saying good−bye to it at all! for their lines are in evil places. And that sounds like a sermon, and you never heard Dan Fitzgerald preach before, and you never will again. It isn't only that I'm off with the morning to the other end of the world—to a new world, if it comes to that, worth this old one and the past and all of you put together, if you'll excuse my saying so—it is because even if I were stopping here I should be out of the old life as surely as if I were dead and buried. To begin with, I shall have to think of every penny I spend, so that I may have enough to pay for paradise! The world is full of paradoxes for me to−night; and I'm the greatest of them all myself; for I don't want to say good−bye, and yet I wouldn't miss having to say it for the world. Then it seems to me to−night as if I'd solved the puzzle; and there's Doveton—the old bachelor—grinning as if he knew I was a fool, and that I was making the biggest mistake of my life. I don't think so—I don't think I ever shall think so; I hope not, anyhow. And so, good−bye to you—good−bye! And may none of us, married or single, live to know the pain of a "heart grown cold, a head grown grey—in vain!"'

Down the disordered table with its litter of glasses and flowers, its atmosphere heavy with the odours of dinner and drink, a hush lay for a second; not more. Then some one laughed, and with a roar of applause the general tone— varying from concert pitch to normal diapason, according to the taste of the owner—struck into the old chorus; the refrain which, touching as it does the lowest and the highest ideals of humanity, has provoked more mixed sentiment and emotion than any other in the language:

'**For he's a jolly good fel−low. For he's a jolly good fe−el−low.** '

Love, admiration, assent. But to what? That lies in the creed of the singer.

And Dan, as the chorus went swaying and surging about in the discords and harmonies, was left alone, silent—as it were on a pinnacle.

Lewis Gordon, feeling responsible for his man, and noting his growing excitement, inveigled him out after a time for a quiet cigar on the verandah, and then suggested he should go to bed; whereat Dan laughed softly. Did not his best man see that the idea was palpably absurd when life itself was a dream—a dream that only came once to a fellow? When you hadn't a wish ungratified, save of course that some others he wot of, might have as good luck as he.

'If you mean me,' replied Lewis stolidly, 'I'm all right. I'm going to marry Rose Tweedie whenever she can spare five minutes from your wedding to arrange mine.'

'You don't say so! By the powers, what a good match−maker I am! And so it's settled. I say, Gordon, do you think there is any chance of her being up still?' put in Dan all in one breath.

'Couldn't say; she had a lot of favours to make and re−make when I last saw her, certainly,' replied Lewis, with an inward smile at the remembrance; 'but you can't go and call on her now; it's half−past ten at least.'

'Can't I? There is nothing I couldn't do to−night, it seems to me. And **you** are yawning. Oh, go to bed, old man!

or you will spoil the show to−morrow.'

'And you?'

'I'm off too, but not to bed! No, you needn't be afraid. I'll turn up again in time.'

The glamour of the soft Indian night was on Lewis also; even on those who one by one drifted from the laughter within to stand for five minutes, arrested by the peace without, before going on their way. And if this were so to men in the slack−water of life, what must it have been to Dan on the flood−tide of his threescore years and ten! To Dan with his vivid imagination, his soft heart, his excitable, impulsive nature. As he rode along noiselessly at a foot's pace through the sandy dust which looked hard as marble in the glare of the moon, he and his shadow were the only moving things in that world of light. No darkness anywhere! Not even in the distant arcades of trees. Only a soft grey mist of moonlight blending all things into the semblance of a mirage seen from afar. A fire−fly or two showed against the flowering shrubs in intermittent glimpses of light. Here, and then gone, as it were, upon the soft quiver of the insistent cicalas in the air.

Was not life worth living, indeed if only for such a night as this!

'**On such a night did young Lorenzo!**'

But Dan Fitzgerald had passed beyond that flood−mark on the shore. Passion counted for much in the elation of mind and body which was the apotheosis of both; but love counted for more. The memory of a thousand griefs and pains with pity hidden in their hearts came to fill the mystic cup of life which the Unseen, Unknown Hand held out to him from Heaven —the Sangreal of Humanity—the sacraments of Birth and Death. The child dying of the potter's thumb−mark in the dust—that other in loving arms with the ice chilling even death's cold touch—George with the bullet piercing the friendship in his heart—Rose with her pure wisdom fearless and unashamed—these and many another remembrance seemed to blend sorrow and joy into peace, even as the moon−mist blent the world around him into vague beauty.

And there was Rose herself! He could see her, as with the easy friendliness of India he paced his pony through the open gates of the garden, and so passed the house. She was still at work among the white flowers beside the door which was set wide upon the warm balmy night.

'Is that you, Mr. Fitzgerald?' she called, pausing at the faint sound of his coming to look out into the flood of moonlight clear as noonday.

'It is I, Miss Tweedie.'

He had slipped from his pony and stood beside it welcoming her with outstretched hands as she came forth, eager with some message for the morrow which he might deliver.

'Lewis has told me, and I'm so glad,' he said, breaking in on her words. 'It is the best wedding present I've had yet, and I came along on the chance of seeing you. I've something to give you. I meant it for to−morrow, as a parting gift—just a remembrance of your kindness to us both. But I'd rather give it to you with our best wishes.'

He unfastened something from his own wrist and put it, soft and warm, into her hand. It was a native amulet cunningly twisted of silk thread and pearls, with a triangle of some blue stone strung in the centre.

"Tis only a glorified ram−rukhri,' he went on half−jestingly, 'the bracelet sisters give their brothers to bring them good luck. Only it is the other way round with you.'

Rose looked at the blue of the triangle doubtfully, then at his kindly face.

'Yes! it's a bit of the Ayôdhya pot—the only bit that wasn't in pieces. And it has my name on the back, and—and George's.'

'And George's?' echoed Rose softly.

'Ay! He would have liked it, I know— for you were kind to him—kind to us both, always,—Mâdr−mihrbân, as the old potter called you. And we two, George and I, are one part of the story; I was thinking of it as I came along just now—'

She put out her hand with a sudden gesture. 'Don't think of it, Mr. Fitzgerald! Forget all about it. Go away and forget.'

He gave a happy laugh. 'Why should I? I don't want to forget anything to−night—except my sins. The rest is all good. Let me put that on for you—so—good−night! We'll say good−bye to−morrow.'

So out on the deserted roads with the same happy unrest in his heart. He would go down and see the old familiar places in the garden opposite once more—even the pond where the ducks and geese had quacked and gabbled him into silence! Then through the hanging tassels of the grey tamarisk trees, round the gleaming white

road to the blue−tiled minarets of the old watch−tower standing causelessly upon the level plain where four ways met, and so back station−wards to the stunted dome of the church. The throbbing of tom−toms proclaimed the nearness of the bazaar, but the building itself stood unassailably silent and deserted on its high white plinth, save for some one lying on a string bed set in a shadow by the door. Dan slipped from his pony again, and hitched the reins to a broken iron clamp in the stone−work of the steps. The door, he knew, would be open to let in the cool night−air, so he would look in—'go round the course' as a horsey friend of his had said when discovered doing the same thing before his marriage. The remembrance made him smile as he stepped into the dark building and paused, arrested by the strangeness of what he saw. For the dome was full of fire−flies brought hither in the flowers; full of a causeless glimpsing of pale green fire showing every instant the white heart of some blossom. And the air was burdened with scent; distinct, through all, a faint, deadly smell of bitter almonds. That must be from the lotus Gwen had mentioned, and there they were, in the shaft of moonlight through the upper window, standing like sentinels over the lectern.

'Om mâni padma hom.'What did it really mean, that invocation used by so many millions? What was the mystic jewel in the lotus? Something fair but far, no doubt, such as all religions promise. And then with a rush came the thought that Gwen would stand beside them on the morrow, fair and near!

The echo of his pony's galloping feet made that throbbing in the bazaar pause an instant as if to listen. Pause and go on when he had passed. The darkened houses of his friends rose up beside him and were left behind; the club with its still twinkling arches, the garden where Chândni sat gossiping and waiting her chance to kill his faith wantonly. All these he passed. Awake or sleeping he must be near Gwen for an instant—must bid her good−night before the day came.

The chiming, echoing gong from the secretarial office rang twelve, clear; then the others began. Here and there from the various centres of law and order, many−voiced from the massive pile of the distant city. He was too late then, yet not too late; for there was a light still in the little front room, despoiled of its prettiness now and littered with boxes. She was awake, busy like Rose over the morrow.

'Gwen!' he called to her softly, for the chick was down, the door half closed.

'My dear Dan!' Her voice, as she opened it and came hurriedly into the verandah, was full of amused horror and half−vexed kindness. 'Do go away, there's a dear! I never heard of such a thing, never! And the hotel is crammed full of people!'

'It's only to wish you many happy returns of the day, dear!' he whispered fondly. 'When I've done that I'll go content. Who wouldn't be content with you, Gwen? And yet I wouldn't spare an inch of it all—I couldn't. Gwen! do you remember the day your bearer was cleaning the lamps out here, and we were sitting on the sofa?—odd, isn't it, how one remembers these things all in a jumble, the one with the other—and I said to you—the very words come back to me, dear, every one of them—"You might be bankrupt of everything, Gwen, of everything save yourself, and I'll give you credit for it all the same." Do you remember, dear? Well, I've come to take the promise back. You've spoilt me, Gwen, I can't do it.'

'I—I don't understand,' she said faintly. 'I wish you would go, Dan. We can talk of it to−morrow—afterwards.'

'To morrow? Sure it's to−day already, our wedding−day! And if I can't keep the promise, am I not bound to take it back while I can? Not that I'm afraid—that is why I've come, to tell you, selfish brute that I am—that is why I want it all—every scrap of your beauty, your goodness. I'll take nothing else, dear, now; for I know it's yours, and what is yours is mine by right!'

She had grown very pale, and a sort of terror came into her eyes.

'Ah Dan! what is the use of talking? I give you all I can. My best—I can't do more—it isn't kind—' she broke off almost impatiently, and yet she did not move from his clasp.

'Not kind, when I know what the best means? And yet, Gwen, it just comes upon me now that I couldn't stand it—if—if it were not so—not after this midsummer night's dream—of madness, if you will! Yes, dear, I'm going—I am indeed. But, Gwen—it's an idle fancy—and yet if there was anything it would be better to tell me now. You're not angry at the thought—it's only a thought. See, give me one kiss—just one, to be an answer for always.'

What right, she asked herself fiercely, had she to hesitate? What possible right, standing as she did on the threshold of a new life, **where no one could possibly know**—so she was back on the low levels among the

ordinary considerations of convenience and safety as she kissed him. But the touch of her lips sent his blood surging through his heart and brain; and without another word, another look, he turned and left her—content, absolutely content. Love, pity, friendship, passion, had all combined to raise him to the uttermost limit of vitality. He might come near it perhaps in the future; he was not likely ever to reach it again—not even without Chândni waiting to tell him the truth on his return to the odd little house at the other end of the station.

He neither knew nor cared where he was going; but his pony, tired of these incomprehensible wanderings, set its galloping hoofs on the shortest road home—that is to say, through the densely−wooded grounds of the Residency. Along a grassy ride or two, across a short cut they sped. Dan forgetting even his joy in the keen effort of steering a runaway through the trees; a runaway unheld, free to go as fast—nay, faster than it chose, yet obedient to that grip to right or left. It was a mad ride, a mad rider—yet a masterful one, wrestling imperiously with that other will, when the gloom grew as the trees thickened, and darkness and danger came together in the hot night, prisoned by the dense foliage above. Dan, looking down at the pony's heaving flanks as it paused, wearied by its short, sharp, unavailing struggle against his strong hands, felt flushed and hot. Not wearied,—he could not be that on such a night,—but glowing, palpitating, excited; drunk almost as if with wine. But yonder stood a remedy in that long, low−thatched roof, supported on brick pillars, and hung round with heavy bamboo screens. Dan laughed as he slid to the ground, thinking of the twelve feet of clear cool water running fresh and fresh into the big swimming−bath at the one end, and out at the other to irrigate the green levels of the garden. Fresh and fresh all through the scorching summer weather, when life held no greater pleasure than to feel that cool water close in round the hot limbs. Frequented then, morning and evening, though deserted and empty through the colder months. Only the day before Dan's smooth dark head had come up from its depths rejoicing, and now the thought of it was luxury itself when the blood was beating in his temples, and racing at fever heat through his veins. More than once coming home at night, after careless, reckless enjoyment, he had stopped here, as he did now, to try the water−cure—as he had tried it in the canal at Hodinuggur.

'Sure I need it to−night if ever I did,' he said half aloud. "Tis the wine of life has got into my head.'

It was dark—almost too dark inside; that was because the fools had put down all the screens when they should be opened by night to let in the fresh air. He told himself that he would speak to the Secretary of the caretaker's neglect; yet how would that be since he would never see him again?

Yes! it was the last time! and how many times had he not gone down red−hot from the spring−board as he would do now, to come up out of the dark water a new man, with all the evil tempers and the prickly heat quenched out of him?—sure, as a regenerating element, fire wasn't in it with water!

A leap in the dark indeed! But that was what life was, and he was not afraid of it.

The little bars of moonlight shining through the chinks between the bamboos came so far on the smooth white floor, then the soft depth of darkness where the cool water should be, and above it Dan, poised for a second.

'**I come! Mother of all!**'

The oft, old−repeated cry rang joyously up into the roof, followed by a strange, dull thud, and silence—dead silence. The bath had been emptied that morning for the cold weather, and Dan Fitzgerald was lying face downward on the hard cement with a broken neck.

Dead! Dead, without a word, a sigh, or a regret! And Chândni, growing tired of patience, went home to the bazaar, grumbling at her ill−luck, telling herself she might still write, if it were worth while.

But Dan was beyond her spite, beyond other things which, even without that spite, might have killed the best part of him.

Yet even in romance the sixth commandment outweighs all the others. The novelist may maim and degrade, may bear false witness against his own creations and filch from them the very characteristics which he has given them, in order to make degradation happy, but has must not kill; death in the verdict of the world being the only real tragedy.

So at any rate seemed the opinion of most people when in the early morning the gardeners coming to their work found Dan's pony drowsing, half asleep, still tethered to a hibiscus bush, whose great blossoms—in topsy−turvy fashion—showed rosy−red in death and snowy−white in life.

It was terribly sad, they said; an unredeemed tragedy, cruel, needless; altogether a manifestation needing much true Christian faith; one of the accidents of real life, so exasperating because so causeless, so inartistic because so unnecessary. These and many other comments the mourners made as, when the funeral was over, they returned

home; and so, it being Sunday morning, went to church, where they sang 'Jerusalem the Golden' piously.

Only Rose lingered, her kind, soft hands laying the half−dead lotus like sentinels on the grave; for Gwen's pure white cross of gardenia had, at her request, been buried on the coffin.

'I can't somehow be so sorry,' she said to Lewis, between her sobs. 'He was so happy that last night. I seem to see his face still.'

But the man caught his breath in hard. There was a verse which would ring in his ears, his heart; for he had helped to lift poor Dan, and it had come to memory then—
'Broken in pieces like a potter's vessel.' Yet, after all, what did it matter? but Rose must never know. In such things he would stand between her and needless pain.

And Gwen? She, as the phrase goes, bore up wonderfully. Not that she did not love the dead man dearly, but because she did love him. For odd as it may seem—topsy−turvywise, perhaps, like the hibiscus flowers—she had the same consolation as Rose Tweedie.

'I did not tell him,' she said to herself as she lay in her darkened room. 'He was happy to the last. I did my best—I did my best.'

So she cried softly; and so, once more, she escaped from her own remorse, and was comforted.

CHAPTER XXVIII

BOTH for the reader's and writer's sake it is never fair to end a story as you would end a play in a situation, for the former tries—vainly it may be—to present life even in its trivialities, the latter only in its more dramatic moments. So, though there is little more to tell, save what might easily be filled in by the reader's own imagination, it would give a false impression of the real value of poor Dan Fitzgerald's tragic death, were the curtain to come down upon the rest of the *dramatis personæ* in the first bewilderment and sorrow which such unexpected and causeless accidents must always arouse. As a matter of fact, there is no grief which passes sooner from the daily life than that caused by death, especially when a real and unselfish love has existed between the dead and the living. The mind, after the first physical sense of loss has spent itself, refuses to believe in the extinction of a feeling which, in its own experience, has survived death, and so is comforted not by forgetfulness but remembrance. Besides, it is false art to end any history embracing the life of more than one person with the balance in favour of pain. For were this so in reality, pain would cease to be pain and become pleasure, because it would then be the normal condition of life; since it is clearly to be demonstrated physiologically and psychologically that it is in the disintegration of reminiscent habit that the phenomena of pain arise. Indeed, in the mind, pain is incredible, impossible, unless we have first formed the habit of pleasure; since it consists essentially in privation.

Therefore the novelist who wishes to give a true picture of life will always leave his puppets content. Nor does this limit the field unduly, since it is clearly as much the duty and privilege of the writer to present new sources of content to his readers, as it is for him to present them with scenes, or situations, or characters of which they have no previous knowledge. Because Jones thinks the soul of bliss is incarnate in roast−beef and plum−pudding, is that any reason why the more ethereal Brown should be denied his cup of nectar? or that the philosophic Robinson, seeing that birth and death are alike inscrutable phenomena, should refuse empirically to believe that the one is joyful and the other sorrowful?

But the public seems to think differently; 'Oh don't kill him, or her, or them,' it says cheerfully, 'let them enter into life halt, and maimed, and blind. What does anything matter so long as they have the average number of breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners allotted to humanity, and can thus go down to their graves in the fulness of time with the pleasing consciousness that their funeral *cortège* is followed by a Noah's ark, consisting of the ghosts of the animals they have devoured?' For the world sides with Esau, who bartered away his birthright for a mess of pottage. And good pottage is, no doubt, warming, comforting, consoling. Yet some people who have it not are happy; for instance, the two hundred and odd millions of India—but then to them Birth and Death are alike the pivot on which the wheel of life spins.

So thought the potter of Hodinuggur. So had thought his fathers who lay buried in the dust beside him, and though the old man had no son to step on to the treadles when his feet slipped from them, the wheel span steadily, and the women of the village, as they rung the temper of the water−jars before they bought them, nodded their heads saying—'Fuzl is a good potter. Look you, it comes with a man's birth. When he goes, we shall have to send for another. Meroo thinks he can make them, because the Sirkar taught him when he was three years in jail for cattle−thieving. But it takes more than three years to make a potter.'

Still Fuzl Elahi showed no signs of going; on the contrary, he seemed to have a firmer hold on life than ever, as if Time had stood still for him. Rose Gordon remarked on the fact to her husband as they sat side by side one day on the old log. They had been married nearly a year, and he had brought her out for change of air on one of his inspection tours—for he had given up the Secretaryship on his marriage in favour of greater quiet and more freedom.

'It is so strange, Lewis,' she said, 'you and I coming back, so changed. And so many things have changed! even the palace scarcely looks itself with that dreadful sort of Swiss châlet Dalel has built for Beatrice Norma tacked on to the ruins of the old tower. And George and Dan are dead, and the water is running in the cut yonder as if there had never been any tragedy about preventing it from running. Yet the village, with the potter sitting in the topmost house, is just the same.'

Lewis Gordon smiled. 'You never read Megasthenes' account of his travel through India in the year B.C. 300 or you wouldn't be surprised. It might have been written to−day; for these people do not change except under

pressure from without, and then they disintegrate suddenly. But the old man seems to me more sane than he was—more at rest. No doubt Azizan's death—'

The familiar name caught the potter's ear and he looked up from his work.

'Yea! she sleeps still, Huzoor. The breaking of the pot did not disturb her at all. She was weary, see you, after sixteen years of waking. So now when my fathers say, "Where is Azizan?" I can answer, "Hush! she sleeps! she will waken when she is refreshed." Lo! it is well the pot broke. It was accursed; bringing ill to all.'

'There you see, Lewis!' began Rose eagerly—

'It did not bring it to me, dear,' he replied, interrupting her, 'and a man can but judge from his own experiences. And then, as I have often told you, we really know nothing for certain—'

'Except,' put in Rose obstinately, 'that poor George—'

'Don't you think we ought to be moving?' he asked quietly. 'Remember you promised Mrs. Dalel to have tea in the châlet and inspect the son and heir, and you are tired enough as it is.'

'But you said you wanted to go and see some slope or another, and I'm not in the least tired,' she insisted when they had left the yard and reached the road. 'Lewis! you never used to fuss this way. I wish you wouldn't.'

'It is only another method of showing my real views on the mental and physical calibre of women. You must have read, my dear, of the wonderful recuperative power which the lower animals have of reproducing another tail when—ahem—by the way, this is not a safe spot! I remember saying something of the same sort on purpose to annoy when we were here before—'

He paused, and looked down the narrow alley of the village to where the palace was beginning to share the unreal beauty which the dust−cloud from the feet of the homing cattle gave to the whole scene, by hiding the dull plain in a golden mist that gave distance and height to the low sand−hillocks behind which the sun was setting cloudlessly. A glorious sight! the dignity and calm majesty of which lingers long in the memory of those who have seen it in India, day after day, month after month; lingers to claim a higher place in the imagination than the more varied and complex sunsets of the West with their stormy contrasts and passionate beauty.

'Leave me here,' she said suddenly. 'I should like it. I'll sit on that pile of old potsherds, and wait till you come back. It will rest me.'

It was peaceful enough of a certainty, and silent too. Only every now and again the tinkle of a low−toned bell from some leader of the herds below, chiming in on the musical moan of the potter's wheel heard over the low wall.

'It was a woman seeking something.'The rhythm came back to her, stirring the old sense of curious unrest. Stirring it in others of her sex also, if one might judge by the eyes which, seeing the stranger alone, began to peer from the neighbouring hovels. Eyes followed by figures; deep−bosomed mothers most of them, with a slim girl or two doing nursemaid to other folks' babies.

Nearer and nearer they came, attracted by the great feminine quality, until in answer to Rose's nod of welcome and encouragement they squatted near, yet far, gathered in as it were upon themselves, apart even from that other woman; even from her, with the cares of coming motherhood writ clear upon her, and causing her to look at those other mothers with kindly, friendly eyes.

'Ari bahin!' said one with a nudge to her neighbour. "Tis for sure she who played bat and ball last year like a boy. Wah! that is over; she knows her work now.'

'I trow not,' replied another shrilly. 'She hath been sitting with the potter's eyes upon her this half hour past. She is bad, caring but for her pleasure.'

'Mayhap she knows not,' said an older voice, 'and they have no mothers, these ones, nor mothers−in−law. Yea! 'tis true. My man went to dig for the sahibs the year there was no corn in the land, and he hath told me. They marry of themselves and there is none to see to them that they fall not into ignorant mischief. It is fool's work.'

'No mothers−in−law?' tittered a bold−faced lump. 'Ai teri! that is no fool's work.'

But the elder woman had risen, to stand a few steps nearer Rose, looking down at her with dignified wonder.

'May the Lord send a son,' she began, going to the very root of the matter without preamble.

'I will take what He chooses to send me, mother,' replied Rose, smiling.

'Tsi−si−si!' The matron's pliant forefinger wagged **sideways**, in that most impressive gesture of denial never seen out of India.

'Mention not such things, my daughter,' went on the grave voice, 'lest He take thee at the word. Then what wouldst say? And see! Go no more to the potter's yard. It is not safe. Wouldst have the son come to thee with his mark on the breast? I trow not.'

They had come forward one by one to cluster round the speaker, their dark assenting eyes on Rose.

"Tis not to be helped, though,' put in another. 'Do I not know? I, Jewun, whose son died of it this year; yet I remember the old ways and my mother's counsel. Lo! it is Fate; naught else. And 'tis better to crack and be done with it. Then folk know. Not like my new milk−jar this day. Sound to sight and touch, yet six good quarts of milk spilled on the ground, as it crumbled like sand ere a body could get a hand to it. The old man shall give me another in its place. It is not fair.'

'Nay! Mai Jewun,' put in a third, 'a pot comes to pieces ever; if not one, then another way, when it is tired of going to the well for water. Thou hast naught to complain about. Ai sisters! hither returns the sahib! He will be angry that we have spoken to his mem.'

'He will not be angry,' protested Rose; but the thought was beyond them. They were off swiftly, yet sedately, only the elder woman pausing to waggle her finger again, and say, 'Go not to the potter's. It is not well. I, Junto, mother of seven, say so.'

There were tears in Rose's eyes when Lewis came up and in consequence he did look angrily at the retreating figures. She was pale and tired, he said, and must send an excuse to Mrs. Dalel. He would not have her knocking herself up with other folks' infants. So they went back quietly to the two white tents standing beyond the Mori gate, where the pigeons, as of old, circled iridescent round the dark niches. As of old, too, the clash of silver anklets came from the shadows, since Chândni was back again in her old haunts; but with a recognised position, for Her Highness Beatrice Elflida Norma was a shrewd little person, and knew that she would need help to hold her own amid the intrigues of that surely−coming long minority which lay in the future. It is a recurring fraction; that long minority, in the problem of our dealings with petty principalities and powers; for civilisation does not conduce to longevity with the native noble− man, and Dalel, with the income from the stud farm, was diligently burning his feeble little constitution at both ends. On the sly, however, for virtue, to all outward appearance, reigned at Hodinuggur. Only that morning Rose had inspected a female school with rows of nice little girls with very clean primers and brand−new slates. A brand−new visitors' book, too, in which Rose had, with some misgivings, inscribed her name at the end of a trite little remark on the blessings of education; for she was only just beginning to make up her bundle of opinions, and was not quite sure of them.

But that night, as he was carefully guiding her steps through the maze of ropes and pegs to the door of the sleeping−tent, she paused suddenly to say to her husband—

'Lewis! I'm glad we came here. I thought it would be so painful seeing George's deserted grave and reviving the old memories; but it has only seemed to make it all more natural, to make everything, somehow, more simple.'

This, then, was what the years were bringing to Rose. She and Lewis were very happy; though sometimes, especially when they were out in camp together, alone, he would enter a feeble protest against her lack of sentiment. When, after work and dinner were over, they sat beside the roaring stove—the mingled lamplight and firelight making the tent cosy beyond belief—and he, laying down the volume of Thackeray from which he was reading aloud, would remark, for the hundredth time, that Rose was like one of his favourite heroines.

'If you say those stupid things, Lewis,' she would reply, 'I will make you read shilling shockers, and then you can't—or I hope you won't.'

'Oh! it is all very well to scoff,' he would continue in injured tones, 'but I am the victim of an unrequited attachment. You are the heroine of my romance always, and you never had a romance at all.'

'Well, dear! that is better than having one with some one else, isn't it?' she would reply placidly, and Lewis's hand would reach out to touch the one which was so busy with needles, and thimbles, and threads—just to touch it for an instant, in a certain shamefast, deprecatory acknowledgment of her wisdom. For he knew quite well that he, like most men, had had several romances in his life, and that the possibility of several more remained in him. Whether the climax of Rose's dream of the future ever came about, and the boys got into scrapes, cannot be told; for the simple reason that Lewis himself is still within the torrid zone of life. But he does his best to prepare for the crisis, and he follows his wife's lead in this; that he finds life more simple and less sad as time goes on and he faces its facts less egotistically.

Gwen Boynton, however, found it quite the reverse. She married Colonel Tweedie two years after Dan's death,

having, she said, buried all thoughts of personal happiness in the grave of the only man she had ever loved. This, as usual with Gwen's remarks, was true in itself, and yet left her free to marry for position without remorse; or rather, accurately speaking, to utilise her regrets as a motive for doing what she wanted to do without remorse. So she made Colonel Tweedie an excellent wife, much to his delight and comfort, for as Rose acknowledged, he sorely needed some one to keep him from fussing when she had gone to perform the same kind office to Lewis. Nevertheless, Gwen Boynton, when she came back to society after the shock of Dan's death, had lost some of her charm, and, from being a fascinating woman, had become elegant and interesting, as befitted one with a history. Life, she said, was so mysterious; Humanity a mere shuttlecock in the hand of Fate beaten backwards and forwards by devastating passions! Altogether the world was a sad sojourning in which a vague mysticism was the only anodyne for the sensitive.

She became a half−hearted disciple of Madame Blavatsky's, and reached what may be called the climax of her kindly, absolutely untrustworthy nature, when with tears in her eyes and much gentle mournful resignation to the mysterious inevitable, she would tell the story which she had heard from Rose, of how Dan Fitzgerald and George Keene had been measured for heroes in the potter's yard, and of their sad deaths within the year. Of course it was incredible; and yet—?

Thus, none of the actors in the little drama ever knew the whole truth about it. Gwen had the best chance so far as facts went, but she, being handicapped by her method of vision, failed to see her real part in the tragedy; for she resolutely set aside the possibilities of that hour during which her *dandy* waited outside the dressmaker's.

Besides, she knew no more than the rest of the other key to the position which lay in Azizan's love for George. And this was hidden even from him, though every night, winter and summer, an odd little light—like a lost star—twinkled on the summit of the shadowy Mound of Hodinuggur. It was the oil−cresset which the old potter put nightly on Azizan's grave to prevent her from having bad dreams. The branded brick bungalow was empty and deserted now that the sluice−gate required no guarding, so there was no one to see its feeble yet persistent light; still it could be seen distinctly from the little enclosure where, on a white marble slab, the legend ran—
'St. George Keene, aged 21,
Who died alone at his post.' And between the two graves the gleaming streak of the big canal lay like a sword splitting the world into East and West.

END OF VOLUME III.