The Potter's Thumb, Vol. 2

Flora Annie Webster Steel

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CHAPTER XI

THE *dîners à la russe* on the roof had not passed unnoticed by the world below. How could they? Over such strange doings curious tongues must need wag, setting other curious eyes to peep and peer; especially in the women's apartments, where life was so empty of novelty and where a crowded squabbling glimpse, from some lattice, of arrival or departure was all the inmates could hope for, beyond, of course, the ceremonial visit which the English ladies paid to a circle of selected wives.

But there, in company dresses and company manners, the chief women of three generations had found it impossible to ask enough questions to throw any light on the one absorbing phenomenon of utter shamelessness in their visitors; and after Colonel Tweedie's departure disputes began to run high in that rabbit−warren of dark rooms and darker passages, centred round a bit of roof walled in to the semblance of a tank, which lay to the right of the Diwan's tower.

The elder women, led by the old man's last remaining wife, a still personable woman of forty, upheld the theory which has had so much to do with British supremacy in the past; namely, that the sahib−logue, being barely human, must not be judged by ordinary human standards. As likely as not, their women were not women at all. The younger party, however, consisting largely of Dalel Beg's many matrimonial ventures in the forlorn hope of a son, declared that the true explanation lay the other way; namely, in the excess of frail humanity. Both positions being argued with that absolute want of reserve which is the natural result of herding women together away from the necessity for modest reticence which the presence of even their stranger sisters brings with it. That lack of reserve in the mind by which nature compensates herself for the seclusion of the body, and which makes those who have real experience of the working of the Zenana system put their finger on it as the plague−spot of India; a plague−spot which all the women doctors sent to bolster up the system by exotic and mistaken benevolence will never cure.

And to the war of words, Azizan listened listlessly as she crouched for hours beside that slit in the prison wall, whence on tip−toe she could see the flag−stone before the mosque on which she had sat when he was painting her picture. She had ceased to cry, ceased to do anything save mope about in the dark with dull resentful eyes taking in the emptiness and hopelessness of all things; even her desires going no further than a vague wish that she could have seen the flagstone where the sahib had sat, instead of that dull, uninteresting, unconsecrated one. But in that house of languid, listless, useless women her dejection might have passed unnoticed save for the fact that old Zainub, the duenna, began to be troubled with an old enemy—the rheumatism.

Up−stairs on the roof, the connection between Azizan's tears and Zainub's sciatica would have seemed far−fetched, obscure; down−stairs, however, it was self−evident, clear as daylight. Briefly, Aziz had the evil eye, like her grand− father the potter, and she was using it, as her mother had used it. Sixteen years before, after nursing that mother in the damp dungeon, where useless cries could be deadened, Zainub had nearly died of rheumatic fever. Not from the damp, of course; simply from the evil eye. Nothing, in fact, had saved her life then, save a promise to protect the baby. And now for the sake of money, she had brought grief on the child, and unless that grief could be assuaged, the result was certain; she would die. The pains were already upon her, and a dozen times a day she cursed her own folly in helping Châ ndni; Châ ndni who, when the ruse failed, had thrown her over with a paltry fee. Yet old Zainub, even while she blamed herself, confessed that no duenna could have foreseen such a coil about nothing; but then the world was full of strange new wickedness. In the old time no girl in her senses would have met the suggestion of carrying on the intrigue on her own account as Azizan had done, with vehement denial and glowering, unhappy eyes. The thought of them sent additional twinges through poor old Zainub s bones. George Keene, who had taken up his quarters in the state−rooms of the palace, so as to be near Lewis Gordon at night, never dreamt how narrowly he escaped the invasion of an old beldame beseeching him to remove a curse from her. He had for the time almost forgotten the Azizan episode; even the surprise which the potter's mention of his daughter's name had aroused he set aside for the present. There would be time enough for inquiry when he was alone once more; when the absorbing interest of the present had gone out of his life.

So the tragedy down−stairs was completely hidden from those up−stairs. It is so often in India. Occasionally we gain a glimpse behind the veil; for instance, when the periodical scare as to the number of human brains required to keep up British prestige seizes on some cantonment. A scare which it may interest the 'Peace with

Dishonour' party to know is apt to follow on any lowering of the Lion's tail. Then there are two simple syllables, known doubtless to many readers of this veracious story as they are to the writer of it, which if uttered casually—say in dinner− table conversation—will of a certainty lead to your servants leaving your service without delay. These things sound unreal, farcical, no doubt; so would George, as he handed their bread and butter to the ladies up−stairs, have deemed the fear which prompted old Zainub's wheedling words as she crouched by Azizan's bed plying her with greasy sweetmeats.

'Eat some, my pigeon—a morsel, beloved! Why wilt not be comforted, child? Say what is in thy heart, and if Zainub's old hands can compass it, 'tis thine.'

'I want nothing. Let me be,' muttered Azizan.

Zainub rocked herself to and fro, partly in despair, partly to allay a sharper twinge of the enemy, and looked round dismally as if for some inspiration of comfort. There was not much to suggest it in those bare walls, inexpressibly squalid, dirty beyond belief; save the cemented floor, which underwent a daily sprinkling from a skin water−bag, and a daily lashing with a reed broom. There was a mark of the passage of that skin bag up the narrow stairs in a cleaner streak along the grimy walls, and a mark of that reed broom in the spatter−work dado of slush round the room. The smoke of rushlights blackened the arched niches, their oily dribblings seamed the once whitewashed walls below, and centuries of cobwebs hung on the rough rafters. There was no furniture of any sort or kind, excepting the low stool on which Zainub crouched, and the string cot whereon the girl had flung herself recklessly. Not even resting fairly, but half on, half off, each listless curve showing her indifferent despair; her flimsy veil crushed into a pillow, her unkempt yet braided hair showing she had not thought of it for days. No uncommon sight in the zenana, when so and so's 'constitution is disturbed,' as the phrase runs.

'Would it soothe thee to talk of it?' whined the old lady.

'No! no!' Aziz sat up in sudden anger. 'I hate him. I hate everybody.' Then, her own confused emotion being strange and new to her, she sought refuge with a whimper in her old sullenness.

'Ari! pretty one,' replied Zainub, relieved at something tangible. 'Thou art right to hate him. Yet grieve not, since he hath gained naught of thee. Thou hast passed him by scornfully.'

On the face turned to the dirty wall something like a smile quivered.

'He hath the pot—the Ayôdhya pot,' murmured Aziz half to herself. 'He kept that—he liked that.' The duenna beat her shrivelled hands together and laughed shrilly.

'Wâh illâh! he hath kept it, sure enough, but he will rue it. Look you! I know not the ins and outs; yet will the pot bring him evil. Yea! even though he hath given it to the mem up−stairs.'

Azizan was on her feet ere the words were finished, her eyes aflame, her whole figure trembling with excitement.

'He hath given it away! Mai Zainub, is it truth? He hath given it to the mems! Ah! how I hate them. It is mine! I will have it back. I will—I will.'

She flung herself once more on the bed, almost choking with her passionate cries, wild in her uncontrolled jealousy, while Zainub, mystified and half impatient, deprecated the foolish, impossible desire. Did she not want revenge? Well, the pot was to bring it about. It would bring money to the treasury also, and before that consideration what mere personal whim could stand? Finally, it was not hers, but the Diwan's, who had a right to let the pot go as he chose.

Azizan's ultimatum came swiftly with a savage gleam in her light eyes.

'Then I will die; and others shall die, too.' The girl was no fool; she could see through the secret of Zainub's docility by the light of many a covert allusion of her companions to her strange eyes. Well, if the power was hers she would use it, so give her back the Ayôdhya pot or take the chance. Zainub crept away disconsolate; even with her life−long experience of the vagaries in which hysterical girls indulged she demanded shrilly of High Heaven if there had ever been contrariety equal to Azizan's. To set aside the possibility of revenge! Still she must do her best, and if the mem had the Ayôdhya pot in the palace there was always a chance of being able to steal it. As a beginning she spent some of Chândni's rupees on sweetmeats, and, hiding the tray under her domino, set off to pay her respects to Mrs. Boynton's ayah.

'The *burka* is certainly a most mysterious garment,' remarked Gwen, as she lent over the balcony just as Zainub shuffled through the courtyard on her errand. 'Did I ever mention the fright I had one morning? I woke thinking that a pair of those latticed goggles were glaring at me; but it was only Fuzli looking in to see if I was

awake. Still it alarmed me.'

'Women have a hard time of it,' said Lewis languidly from the arm−chair at her side, where he was playing the part of interesting invalid after four days of unwelcome fever. 'How I should hate to have nerves!'

'We are not a whole army of martyrs, however,' objected Rose swiftly. 'I, for one, decline to be credited with them.'

As she sat pouring out the tea with George Keene's help her face rather belied her words. She looked fine−drawn and eager, her eyes bright, yet tired. Gwen smiled confidentially at her companion.

'People in good times never have nerves, so you and Mr. Keene have no excuse for them at present. By the way, you must have been successful with the partridges to−day, for I assure you, Lewis, they were not in to breakfast till past twelve.'

Not much in the words—much in the manner. It made Rose bring her cup of tea to the balcony and stand looking with a satirical smile at the pair seated there before she turned to George.

'We think Mr. Gordon is in a good time also; don't we, Mr. Keene? You should break something too; Mrs. Boynton would be quite equal to another patient.'

The crudeness, not to say rudeness, of her own words startled her into adding hastily, 'For she is a good nurse; isn't she, Mr. Gordon?'

'First−class for one,' he replied coolly; 'but I doubt her managing three. Therefore, if Keene is going to break something, as you suggest, it would be as well if, for a change, you took some care of yourself. At present you look miserably ill.'

Rose flushed into health at once.

'I? Rubbish! If you have quite finished tea, Mr. Keene, let us go on with that match at tennis.'

'There they go, supremely happy,' commented Gwen from her post of vantage after a pause. 'I'm a shockingly bad chaperon, but that is your fault, Lewis, for getting fever. Do you think *monsieur le père* will be **very** angry?'

He shifted irritably. 'My dear Gwen, don't overdo it, for goodness sake. I'm grateful; you know that quite well. But if you want me to believe that Keene is in love with Miss Tweedie, I must decline to agree. The lad is palpably in love with you; as we all are. As for Miss Tweedie, I decline to have any opinion at all. Girls of her type are beyond me. She looks ill, of course, but no woman can stand half−a−dozen hours in the saddle before breakfast and half−a−dozen singles before dinner, with, I suppose, half−a−dozen problems before lunch and half−a−dozen books before bed. The thing's absurd, and as you don't seem able to stop it, it is as well we are leaving Hodinuggur so soon.'

His distinct loss of temper made Gwen change the subject outwardly, but retain it inwardly as a justification of her tactics. They had been very simple. A word to George of gratitude for his care of Rose, a playful remark to the latter on her marked anxiety for the patient's comfort had left the elder woman mistress of the situation. She was in no hurry, however, to bring it to a crisis. Time enough for that when they should have returned to civilisation, and she had that letter from the jewellers which might even now be waiting for a certain Mrs. Arbuthnot at the post−office at Rajpore.

Perhaps she might not have found Rose so ready to acquiesce in plans through which the young girl saw perfectly if they had not fallen in with the latter's convenience. It was easier that Lewis Gordon should believe her occupied with George, and better for the boy than dangling after Gwen all day; **he** was too good for that sort of thing. She told herself this savagely, many times a day; even when, with a worldly wisdom beyond her years, she was playing the part of elder sister and confidant to the lad's ardent admiration. As for him, he was supremely happy between the occupations of worshipping the most perfect woman in the world and being companion to the jolliest girl he had ever known.

The day had been hot and sultry, unusually so for the time of year, and as the four stood saying good−night to each other for the last time on the roof the sheet lightning was shimmering in a faint haze low down on the eastern horizon.

'Rain,' said Lewis Gordon in a low voice to Rose. 'Lucky for that dusty dhoolie journey to−morrow evening. In the meantime, I hope it may cure your headache.'

'I have no headache,' she replied coldly.

'I'm glad you did not say no head; that perjury could have been proved. Good−night.'

He turned to his cousin and let his hand linger in hers affectionately.

'Don't be alarmed if the storm is a bad one.'

'Of course I shall be alarmed,' she answered gaily. 'Then you and Mr. Keene will have no peace; for you don't suppose I intend to stay on the roof in order to be struck by lightning. I shall turn you out down−stairs at a moment's notice.'

George with adoring eyes on his divinity suggested eagerly that if he returned to the bungalow the ladies could move down at once. Gordon no longer required any one at night, and it would be more comfortable.

'Nonsense,' cried Rose impatiently. 'I don't believe it will rain. Anyhow, I shall stay where I am, storm or no storm.'

'Nerves or no nerves,' parodied Lewis, 'Keene shall come into my room, Gwen, and I will order his to be got ready for emergencies. Then, if nature does convulse, you can seek shelter without disturbing us. Even Miss Tweedie will allow the wisdom of that arrangement from a masculine, and, therefore, selfish point of view.'

She did allow it, inwardly. The worst of Lewis Gordon was his knack of being right in a way which forced her into disagreement. This consciousness accentuated her obstinacy, and even when Mrs. Boynton, pathetic and plaintive in a trailing white dressing−gown, sat on the edge of the girl's bed beseeching her to let discretion be the better part of valour, she would not yield. She was not going to give colour to Mr. Gordon's caricature of womanhood. Besides, it was close down−stairs. She had a headache, and liked the air. Finally, she was not afraid of being left alone; Gwen could go down if she wished.

As she watched the little procession bearing pillows and blankets file down the stairs, with the ayah in the rear, protesting that 'big storm come kill missy baba for laugh old Fuzli,' she felt glad to be left alone. Her head did ache; what is more, her pulses were bounding with a touch of sun−fever. It would be gone by morning; yet Lewis, perhaps, had been right also in saying that she had been exposing herself too much. The inclination to rest her hot head on the cool marble balustrade and sit there under the restful sky was strong, but with an instinct of fight she set it aside almost fiercely, and after looping back the curtains of the corner room so as to let in what air there was, lay down decorously. But not to sleep. A dreary disturbing round of thought kept her awake, sending her back and back again to the same point—the assertion that she had certainly been overdoing it. That was the cause of her depression. Until suddenly, causelessly, her native truth rebelled against the self−deception, and she sat up in the dark pressing the palms of her hot hands together. What was the use of lying to herself? Was it not better to confess frankly that with all his faults Lewis Gordon interested her more than any one else in the world? Perhaps it was love—yes! she cared for him as she cared for no one else in the world, and was it not detestable to blush and deny the fact instead of being straightforward? At any time this indictment of her honesty would have been intolerable; now, with fever running riot in her veins it forced her to exaggerated action. She had been behaving like a romantic school−girl in a novel. In future there should be no possibility of her denying the fact that she had wilfully, and without due cause, fallen in love with a man who did not love her. Yes, fallen in love! Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining when the light of the candle she lit fell on them. As she passed quickly into the mirror−room the thousand facets gave back her eagerness, her determination, as she deliberately chose out Lewis Gordon's photograph from a folding frame standing below the Ayôdhya pot. She stood for a moment looking at it, struggling with her pride, then she passed back into her room again and thrust it under her pillow. That was an end of all lies at any rate. After that she would never be able to deny the truth. She gave an odd, almost happy little laugh as she crept into her bed again, where, after a time, she fell asleep with one hand guarding something under the pillow: just as Gwen had guarded something in her corner−room a few nights before.

No doubt it was the growing coolness of the night which soothed the girl; on the other hand, it may have been the testimony of a good conscience not ashamed to confess facts. The lightning shimmered over her sleeping face, and, as it shimmered, showed a black arch of cloud looming from the east. By−and−bye the wind rose, bringing with it the fresh earthy smell of distant rain.

It was now between second and third jackal cry, that is to say, the deadest hour in the Indian night, when even natives and dogs sleep. Yet there were two figures stealing round the base of the Diwan's tower to the piled ruins of the old wall which had fallen on the potter's house long years before; fallen suddenly in the night, after just such a storm as that now sweeping up with the wind.

'Ari, heart's core!' pleaded a cracked voice, 'sure the rain begins even now, and God knows what the old stairs be like. 'Tis sixteen years gone since they were used. Holy Fâtma, what a flash! 'Tis no night for women−folk to be out; be wise and leave it. To−morrow, perchance, when they pack up the things, I may lay hands on it.'

'Be still, mai! What good to talk when 'tis settled! What didst say? Straight up to the hole in the wall, three steps down to the ledge, along that to the window slit in the Diwan's stair, so by them to the gate; thou hast the key. No, 'tis open, thou sayest. Is not that right? Lo, mai, 'tis easy.'

'In the old days; but the lattice parapet is gone, they say, and a false step—O Aziz, be wise! Would God I had not told thee of it.'

A faint laugh echoed into the pitchy darkness. 'Thy aches and pains would never have reached the pot otherwise, O mother!'

The hint was not lost on old Zainub. She stumbled on hastily until a shimmer of lightning showed an opening half hidden by *débris* in the base of the tower into which she crept.

'See, here are the matches,' she whimpered, 'and witness, O Aziz! I have done all, even to letting thee wear the old dress, since it pleaseth thee, though wherefore, God knows—'

"Tis light and strong,' interrupted the girl hastily. 'Stay you here, mother; I will be back ere long.'

A box of Swedish *tändstickors* made for the British market with a portrait of Mr. Pickwick on the cover, was an incongruous item in the scene, yet one of them looked tragic enough as it sent a glow through Azizan's brown fingers and showed a broken flight of steps.

'I will be back ere long,' she repeated at the first turn. Then the light went with her into the very heart of the wall.

Zainub sat crouching in the dark, shivering and groaning. 'Ai! my sins,' she muttered, hiding her face from a sudden flash of lightning, 'the pains of Jehannum are on me already. I perish of fear; the breath leaves my body.' She rocked herself backwards and forwards ceaselessly, moaning and muttering; a weird figure guarding the stair up which Azizan was toiling by the light of other *tändstickors*. Beyond the possibility of a half torpid snake, or a shower of loosened bricks from above, there was as yet no danger, even to one so unused to effort as the zenana girl. Thus she had time to think of what she was to do when she reached the roof. For one thing, she had to steal the Ayôdhya pot; for the rest, she was not sure, but something ready for impulse lay tucked away in the waist−folds of the old woollen dress. A glimmering slit showing its arched top against a lighter darkness of sky brought her back to the present. This must be the hole in the wall; and beyond it lay a chasm of night. She lit another match and held it over the gulf. The flame burned steadily, for the stair, in winding through the wall of the tower, had brought her to leeward of the storm. Nothing was to be seen save the blackness of clouds above, the blackness of God knows what below. Then as she stood peering out into the darkness a shiver of silent lightning revealed a silver plain far down beneath her feet, and above, to the right, silver balconies and cupolas. That must be the roof whither she was bound.

The expenditure of more matches disclosed the three steps downwards, and at right angles a ledge along the wall ending in a buttress some thirty feet off. That must be the support of the Diwan's stair. Both steps and ledge had once been protected by a latticed parapet; now they were edged by the blackness of the gulf. The ledge however, seemed perfect as ever, and the rest was, after all, mere fancy; especially at night when you could not see. Should she risk it? The match she held left indecision or her face as it flickered out. The storm, close at hand, took breath as it were for the onslaught in a long pause of intense silent darkness. Then a sudden shimmer shot over the old tower, spreading a silver mantle upon the slender figure of girl clinging to the wall. Darkness again; and then once more the same sight. A girl with her face against the wall moving step by step slowly, deliberately. Nearer and nearer each time to the buttress. Then a little cry, too inarticulate for comprehension, rose on the still air, and when the next shaft of light came it found nothing but the bare wall. The figure was gone.

So much might have been seen by any watcher on the roof, but there was none. It lay still, deserted. The very wind, stirring the folds of the curtain Rose had looped aside, made no noise, and the light and the dark played their game of hide and seek in silence. An odd game in the mirror−room, and the arches on arches of shadow leading to it. Each separate scrap of looking−glass would blaze out like a star, sending a beam on the blue bowl of the Ayôdhya pot, then dive into the dark again, carrying a reflection of the scene with it in triumph. Miles of shadowy arches, millions of blue bowls glowing amid countless stars; thousands of looped curtains showing a girl asleep on a white bed.

After a while the stars carried a new sight; a girl in a strange dress crouching by the bed. The lightning shimmered keenly over this group several times, bringing into glittering relief something held by the crouching figure, and something held close to a flushed cheek by the sleeping girl. The one was a knife, the other a

photograph of a young man in an immaculate coat and an irreproachable tie. Different things, indeed, yet the girls who held them differed little. They were both in dreamland; for Azizan, as she crouched beside Rose, felt that she was in a new world. The whiteness, the stillness, the solitude, guarding the pure sleep of girlhood—the refinement, the peace, made her think involuntarily of the dead laid out for their last rest. She gave a quick little sigh; her hand relaxed its grasp, then tightened again, as a flash showed the photograph clearly. It a picture of some one. If it was his picture, why then—

She struck a match softly and peered closer. No! She paused, taking advantage of the light to look at the sleeper. Rose stirred.

'Who is it?' she murmured, in the low quick tones of those who talk in their sleep.

The watcher's hand closed silently round the match extinguishing it.

'I am Azizan, Huzoor.'

The immediate answer had its effect. Rose nestled her head to the pillow once more, and from the ensuing darkness her breathing came soft and regular. Suddenly, with a crash the thunder rolled right overhead, the wind hushed, the heavy drops of rain fell, each in a distinct plash for a second, then merged into a hissing downpour on the hard roof.

Rose started up in bed, just as the quivering shaft of lightning blazed through the mirror room upon a girl in an odd dress, holding the Ayôdhya pot close to her breast. A girl with odd light eyes.

'I am Azizan, Huzoor.' The words seemed still in her ears, recalling a confused memory of the potter and her own promise.

'Your father wants you, Azizan,' she said half in a dream, and the sound of her own voice woke her thoroughly to darkness. Had she been dreaming? The wind rising, now the storm had broken, swept rain−laden through the open door, extinguishing the matches she struck hastily, so that the first glimmering of her own candle was echoed by the ayah's lantern as the latter came paddling over the streaming roof with petticoats held high over her trousered knees, and shrill denunciations of the missy−baba's obstinacy high above the storm. Rose Tweedie's thoughts flew to Lewis Gordon's warning, and his wisdom reminded her of her own foolishness. That was not a dream; and she blushed violently over it as she thrust the photograph out of sight before her attendant rolled the bedding into a bundle and staggered with it down−stairs. As the girl followed ignominiously in the mackintosh and umbrella supplied by that injured official, she told herself she must indeed have had fever, to commit such a ridiculous piece of folly. Her ears tingled over the very recollection of what had perhaps saved her life.

Meanwhile, the girl with the Ayôdhya pot, whom Rose, in her absorbing shame, had decided must have been a dream, was stumbling down the broken stairs once more, her courage gone, her chaos of emotion reduced to one heart−whole desire to reach Zainub in safety. How she had crossed the ledge again she scarcely knew; she had dropped the *tändstickors* on the way, and, as she felt her way step by step in the dark, she was sobbing like a frightened child. Half−way down a displaced brick in the outside masonry allowed the lightning to glimmer over a sort of landing, where she paused for breath. God and his Prophet! What was that huddled up on the next step? She had to await another flash ere she could decide; and in the interval her heart beat with sickening, fearful curiosity.

'Mai Zainub! Mai Zainub!' Her cry of relief and content came swift as the flash. There was no answer save renewed darkness, bringing downright terror with it. Still that was a human form warm under her touch.

'Mai Zainub! Mai Zainub!'

There was no flutter beneath the hand seeking the heart. Could she?— Then came a blaze of light, and the familiar face all unfamiliar; the fixed eyes wide open, the jaw fallen.

The next instant she was dashing down the stairs recklessly; down and down, out into the open, over the *débris*; anywhere, so as to leave that horror behind. The wind caught her, the rain blinded her, the thunder crashed overhead, as she ran on blindly, till with a cry she slipped on a loose brick and fell, stunned, against a mass of broken masonry. So she lay, looking almost as dead as the poor old duenna huddled up on that landing in the secret stair, where, with one final twinge at her heart, the rheumatism had left her for ever.

An hour after, when the storm had passed, and a faint greyness told that the dawn was at hand, a feeble light began to flicker about the ruins: up and down, up and down, as if it sought for something. It was Fuzl Elâhi, the potter of Hodinuggur, looking for his dead daughter. He had looked for her after every storm for sixteen years; and this time, with the Miss sahib's promise to send her back lingering in his memory, he sought in hope.

When the sun rose, three things were amissing from the palace at Hodinuggur: the Ayôdhya pot, Azizan, and the old duenna.

Up−stairs, while George, and Gwen, and Rose, all for private reasons of their own, acquiesced, Lewis Gordon declared that some servant must have broken the former in dusting the room, and, as usual, made away with the pieces.

Down−stairs the same unanimity prevailed. Aziz and Zainub had their reasons for running away. They would be found ere long, since no one near at hand dare shelter them, and the old woman could not go far.

If the folk up−stairs had known of the disappearance down−stairs, they might have connected the two losses, but they did not. So none of these three things were traced, and no one cared very much: especially Gwen Boynton. The pot might have reminded her of Hodinuggur, and now she was leaving it there were some things she intended to forget. Besides, no one now could ever say she had taken the jewels.

CHAPTER XII

'**I NEVER** was so tired of any place in my life,' remarked Mrs. Boynton. 'It was not so bad at first; but nothing would ever induce me to attempt the wilderness again.'

She was back in the big hall at Rajpore once more, the centre of a circle assembled to bid her welcome; for Gwen was not the sort of person to come or go unnoticed. She looked charming in a new dress which she had ordered on the morning after the fire to be ready against her return. The band was playing, the dim lights were twinkling above the polished floor, people were coming and going through the swing−doors, and Dan, devoted as ever, was waiting for his promised first waltz. A sheer bit of vanity was this promise on Gwen's part; she liked to re−enter her familiar world looking perfection, and Dan was the best dancer in the room. Yet she lingered with her hand on his arm to glance at Lewis Gordon, who, still wearing a sling, stood on the outside of the circle trying not to look bored.

'And I don't think civilised people ought to go to those wild places and live in uncivilised ways,' she continued, clinching the argument against Hodinuggur. 'It is demoralising living on the roof without doors and windows. Look at my cousin. I don't believe he will ever settle down to work again.'

'"No locks had they," etc.' quoted Lewis. 'I shouldn't have thought you were likely to disapprove of Arcadia anyhow, or Hodinuggur either. I assure you, Graham, Mrs. Boynton played the "Light of the Harem" to perfection.'

She met the general chorus of belief with a little shudder, not all put on.

'I hope not. If I thought that, I would have elected to stay in my room till I could appear like a Christian. But it only bears out my contention. Civilised people should eschew barbaric environments. They are not safe.'

'A bad look−out for me,' laughed George, who had been given three days' leave in order to escort the party to headquarters. Gwen turned to him in kindly familiarity.

'You! Oh, I'll except you as beyond temptation, if you like. Shall you be here on my return? the next is ours, remember.'

She knew quite well that the boy had remembered little else since she had given the promise half an hour before; but she knew also how sweet the reminder would be with all those older aspirants standing by. And she was always anxious to please when she could. Lewis Gordon, however, lifted his eyebrows and walked over rather aggressively to Rose Tweedie.

'Why aren't you dancing?' he asked. 'I am unfortunately a cripple; but Keene, I am sure, would be horrified if he saw you sitting down. May I tell him?'

'No, thanks. I don't feel up to dancing to−night. I fancy I have been overdoing myself a little over tennis and riding at Hodinuggur.'

There was no challenge in her manner, but Lewis chose to suppose one.

'Your wisdom, Miss Tweedie, is of that truly feminine type which begins when the cake is finished. But it is refreshing to find you have these womanly weaknesses; without them you would be unassailable.'

'If the carriage is here,' remarked Rose quietly, 'I think I shall go home. If you see my father, Mr. Gordon, tell him I have done so.'

His manner changed in an instant.

'I will tell him now, and join you, if I may, for a lift back to the Club. I am out of it also: my brute of a bearer has bandaged me all wrong, and I must get it altered.'

Rose, with an ambulance certificate, would have liked to offer help, but had to be silent. Even on such a charitable errand Mrs. Grundy would have been horrified at a visit to a bachelor's quarters. And while she acknowledged the limitation, Rose felt irritated by it as she stood waiting by the door for Lewis Gordon's return, and watching Mrs. Boynton skim by like a swallow under Dan's guidance. Why should the married women have all the chances?

'She waltzes beautifully, doesn't she?' asked Lewis, finding her so engaged.

'She does everything beautifully,' replied Rose coldly.

Not a good beginning for their drive together; but it was always so, and as she watched the carriage taking her companion on to his quarters after it had set her down, she told herself disconsolately that they seemed to have a

bad effect on each other, and to show to the very worst advantage in each other's company. She, at any rate, was never so painfully uncompromising in her condemnation of other people's foibles; perhaps because she did not care whether they existed or not. But she did care dreadfully when Lewis was in question; that was the worst of it.

Mrs. Boynton was not long either in leaving the hall; in fact, George Keene's promised waltz was but half through when she exclaimed at the lateness of the hour, and after salving over his disappointment with an invitation to tea on the morrow, bade her coachman drive home. An order, however, which she changed at the gates of the garden, so that the carriage instead of turning westward towards the civil station, chose the eastward road towards the native town. Towards the post−office also, which lay close to the Dukhani Gate of the city. For a letter, addressed to a certain Mrs. Arbuthnot, should be waiting 'to be called for'; and at that hour, a few minutes before closing−time, all but subordinates would have left the office. So a veiled lady asking for a letter would run no risk of being recognised. Yet as Gwen Boynton drove home again along the dark Mall, with the expected letter still unread in her pocket, she told herself there was really no need for such precautions; only it was as well to prevent those gossiping native jewellers from advertising the fact that mem Boynton sahiba was so hard put to it that she had to sell her trinkets. That was all; yet each passing carriage, as it flashed its lamp rays on her face, seemed desirous of proclaiming the fact that she had been citywards to the eyes of its unseen occupants. She felt a feverish desire to know who those occupants might be, and a distinct dislike to and distrust of the whole business rose up in her, making her glad to find time had run so short that she must dress at once for the dinner−party given to welcome her back to Rajpore. With a feeling of relief from immediate certainty, she threw the letter, still unopened, on the sitting−room table as she passed it. But half an hour after, when she returned in her trailing white garments, the sight of it changed her mood. It would be better to know. After all, the jewels might be paste—worth nothing. It would almost be a relief if it were so.

She sat down by the table and turned the envelope over and over in her delicate hands. It might mean so much; it might mean so little. And what in either case did she intend to do? She had literally no idea, as with reluctant fingers she tore slowly at the envelope.

It seemed to her as if ages had passed before she realised that she was staring down at those few words telling her briefly, that the jewels sent were worth six thousand rupees, and asking her if she would have the money in notes or by bill of exchange.

How simple it was! No question of taking or leaving. Only whether it should be in notes or by bill of exchange. And six thousand would not only pay Dan—if indeed she decided on that—it would leave something over for the coming season at Simla. A welcome something indeed! when all one's wardrobe had been burnt; and people were so particular how she was dressed. Then, if one came to think of it, did she not deserve some compensation for that loss of her dresses? Trivial thought! going further towards decision than any of the others. In the midst of her meditations a white−robed servant appeared at the door saying indifferently—

'Gordon sahib salaam deta.'

Another triviality; yet she rose quickly, thrusting the letter into her pocket. So he had come already! She had known well enough that he would miss her, that he would come to seek her, but this was soon indeed. She gave the permission to show him in calmly, and yet the woman's triumph at her own power came uppermost, as, awaiting his entry, she turned to finish the fastening of a bunch of white gardenias. Her back was towards him, but he could see, and she knew that he could see her framed by the long mirror, like a picture. Her hair a golden setting to the diamond stars, her white arms whiter than her white dress, whiter than the furred cloak hanging loosely from her white shoulders, or the huge ostrich−feather fan dangling from her slender waist. Lewis thought instantly of Fedora in the ballroom scene; then, that on the stage or off it he had never seen a more utterly desirable woman to present as your wife for the world's approval. That is a feeling which decides many marriages.

'It seems a shame to trouble you,' he began, 'but the bearer **is** such a fool. The sling is always too high or too low, and I want to go to the club. I thought you wouldn't mind seeing to it, and I saw by the light in this room that you were still here.'

Every word of this speech, though the speaker was unconscious of it, showed Gwen that her cousin had been thinking the very thoughts she wished him to think. Translated by her feminine finesse it stood thus—

'You are too lovely to be bothered, but then, you do everything so well. It is too deadly dull without you, so, knowing I could rely on your sympathy, I kept a look−out for some sign of your presence.' Now, when a woman hears everything she desires in the words of a man, her reply is generally a return in kind. In this case, words were

of less importance than those pretty, soft, white hands so solicitous over his comfort.

'Is that better?' she asked. Her concern was absolutely honest, for she was a woman every inch of her, loving to cosset and care for her men−folk. Those hands were so close to his cheek that their softness seemed to thrill through him. After all, was it not a wife's part to flatter and cajole? to make life soft and sweet? Who could do that better than she?

'Dear little hands,' he said, laying his suddenly on one and pressing it tight to his breast. Then a quick passion blazed in his eyes. 'Gwen,' he cried, 'oh, Gwen! how sweet you are!' The ring in his own voice satisfied him. Yes! this was happiness, and he stooped to kiss the face so close to his own. And then? She was beautiful as ever; he was cool as ever. The glamour had gone, the world was as it had been before his fate was settled. For he had settled it definitely, though he scarcely knew if he were glad or sorry for the fact.

'Am I to beg your pardon, dear?' he said gently, looking into her gracious eyes; 'or will you believe that you have so spoilt me that I cannot get on without the spoiler? Will you forgive me, and try and put up with me, Gwen?'

'Of course I will forgive you, Lewis,' she began plaintively; and then the lack of emotion in her own voice, her own heart, struck her disagreeably. Yet what else could she expect when her first thought had been one of gratitude for that offer of six thousand rupees in her pocket? For all that, she felt aggrieved, thinking illogically how different it was with Dan. Unwonted tears rose to her eyes and made her face tender as she went on.

'And why should I not spoil you, Lewis? You know I am always glad to help—anybody. And, after all, we are cousins. After all, there is always **that** between us.'

She did not know why she offered him this excuse, this loophole of escape. Not from calculation or finesse, certainly, yet it touched him as nothing else would have done; for he, too, had felt the flatness of it all; he, too, had thought vaguely that the sacrifice of his freedom deserved more solid satisfaction in return.

'Yes, dear,' he replied, half playfully, 'there is that. But there is something more, is there not, Gwen? At least I hope so—for you have spoilt me—I cannot do without you.'

It was her hand, however, that he kissed this time. And then the carriage being announced, he escorted her to it most decorously, taking care, with all the attentive calm of a husband, that her dress should not suffer from the wheel. The fact struck him ruefully as he went off to the club, feeling that his fate was definitely settled; though, of course, the matter need not be made public at once. Gwen would be sure to prefer that her season at Simla should be untrammelled by open engagements, and he was in no hurry. Leave was inconvenient till the cold weather, so during the rains when people wanted amusement they could afford them the excitement of the news.

Gwen's feelings as she drove to her dinner party were of the same nature. It was settled, definitely settled of course, but no one need know of it; no one must guess at it until she had given Dan his *congé*. It was the first time she had ever really put that thought into words, and the very suggestion made her heart sink. There would be no lack of emotion about that interview at any rate. Even the preliminary of paying back the debt seemed beset with difficulties. He was so quick to understand, so hard to turn aside once he had the least clew to her feelings. Finally, after much cogitation she decided on waiting until she had actually received the money from Delhi. It would be more difficult for him to refuse the notes down on the table; besides, George Keene's leave would be over, he would have returned to Hodinuggur, and the possibility of confidences given under the influence of strong excitement would be over. For Gwen had not failed to notice the strong friendship growing between the two; in a way, she was vexed at what seemed to her a childish, almost absurd, deference to the lad's opinion on Dan's part. Dan, who was his superior in every possible way; that is to say if he chose to be reasonable. Last of all, the delay meant a closer proximity to that annual flight to the Hills which would provide her with a safe retreat. So she set the idea aside for a time and became cheerful over the respite.

George, having tea with her next day, thought her if possible gayer, brighter, more charming than ever; especially when his talk turned on his hero, Dan Fitzgerald. Now, no one had ever heard Mrs. Boynton say an unkind word of her neighbours; indeed, the peculiar *cachet* this gave to her personality made her remembered in after years by all admirers, not so much as a beautiful, as a perfectly gracious woman. To George, accustomed chiefly to the high−spirited freedom of sisters, this virtue seemed divine, the more so, because the world generally disapproved of Dan—of his recklessness and want of reverence. Gwen Boynton, on the contrary, found nothing to regret, save that Mr. Fitzgerald was not the finest man **out** of the service, instead of **in** it; since, as Mr. Gordon said, he was too good to slave among men years his junior. Whereupon George, his young face full of importance,

informed her as a dead secret, that the reason Dan stuck to his colours was that a girl had promised to marry him whenever he got his promotion. That would be in the next spring at the latest, since, as he, George Keene, was in charge of the sluice no prejudicial *contretemps* could possibly occur. And Gwen with an actual smile at the mystification—which so many women dearly love—reminded him that even when folk did their best, slips came between cups and lips.

The lad laughed joyously.

'Oh! I don't venture to stand sponsor for the young woman, of course; I only meant that Dan would get his promotion if it depends on that gate being kept shut. I carry the key about with me like Hare did in the "Pair of Spectacles." It's "peculiarly inconvenient," of course, but as they say on the Surrey side, "the villain who would reach it must pass over my dead body."'

Gwen, who had a fine taste, admired the determination underlying the jest. Mr. Fitzgerald, she said, was lucky in such a friend. Nevertheless it might be a doubtful kindness, since the loss of promotion might induce him to seek fairer fortune elsewhere.

She insisted on this argument even with herself, yet her heart beat uncomfortably fast, when, delay having been extended to the limit of possibility she sat awaiting Dan's arrival in the pretty room which was so like herself in its softness and its solid attention to comfort beneath all the delicate tasteful ornamentations. The three thousand rupees in notes were ready for use in her pocket, and a long letter from Hodinuggur in George's fine bold handwriting lay on the writing−table beside the bouquet of flowers which Lewis had sent her from his garden that morning. From the next room came the sound of the ayah dusting out boxes against the immediate packing up. All Gwen's excuses for delay had vanished; yet she found it hard as ever to face one man's confidence—the confidence which showed in his glad greeting. It forced her into beginning remotely, half affectionately, regrets over his want of tact at the Delhi conference. It had not been an unqualified success so far as Dan's department popularity went. How could it, when he had deliberately but savagely attacked the wisdom of his elders? True, the under−secretary had sniggered in describing the scene, and even Mr. Gordon had laughed amid his vexation, saying that none knew better than he, what a confounded ass Colonel Tweedie could be when confronted in public with new ideas; at the same time it had been needless, almost brutal on Fitzgerald's part, seeing he had right on his side; that alone should have made him temperate. Of course, once his method had been suggested, no other was open to any one out of a lunatic asylum; all the more reason for mercy in bringing the fact home. So Gwen in her soft voice attempted to convey her blame to the sinner, who, with his hands in his coat−pockets stood before her trying to look penitent and only succeeding in looking provokingly *debonnair*.

'But sure it's the blatant stupidity of the world that is its greatest crime,' he protested. 'Don't I remember my mother saying to us, "Oh, children! I don't mind your being naughty—I can whack you for that; but I will not have ye stupid."'

Gwen laughed. Who could help it, over that picture of home training so utterly unfit for one recipient, at least? Indeed, she was conscious of a wish that her companion were more dull; less full of eager vitality. It made that inevitable task so hard!

'Dan,' she began desperately in sudden resolve, 'I want to talk about business. The fact is, I've had a windfall of money lately. And so—I—I intend to pay you back that loan of yours. It isn't fair—'

He was on his knees beside her, to get a closer look at her face ere she had finished. 'What is it, Gwen?' he asked rapidly. 'You owe me nothing. What do you mean? There is no question of money between us,' he went on in answer to her silence. 'There never was but once. There never shall be again. Is it anything else, Gwen?—anything in which I can help; or are you only feeling afraid of the future? Tell me outright, dear?'

Where was the good, she thought petulantly, of delays and preparations when he met her first hint in this direct fashion; yet against the grain, for she hated scenes, she took her courage in her hand and spoke up—

'Yes, I am afraid; afraid of the future for you as well as for myself—O Dan! I really wish you would sit down like a Christian and listen properly. Kissing my hand is no answer. And I am serious. This idle foolish promise of thinking about it all seriously next year when you get your promotion is not fair on you—don't laugh, Dan, it isn't. It ties you down, and prevents your doing yourself justice. And then it isn't fair on me.'

He interrupted her quickly. 'How is it not fair on you, Gwen? I don't see it. You do not like any one else as much as you like me; you know you don't. And if this half promise to me holds you back from marrying some one you do not like as you like me, why, then,' his voice lowered to tender gravity, 'I thank God for it as I should

thank Him for any good He sent into your life.'

'You do not understand,' she retorted querulously. 'Surely I am the best judge of myself, and there is no reason why I should want to marry some one else because I don't think it would be right to marry you. I should make a bad wife, Dan, to any poor man; and I should not be happy. Surely, surely, I ought to know best! It isn't as if I were the inexperienced girl I was before. I have been married for years, and I think, yes I am sure, that I am happier as I am.' Her last words degenerated into something between a laugh and a sob. It really was too ridiculous, too grievous, that she, Gwen Boynton, with all her knowledge of the world, should not be considered fit to judge for herself.

'Married!' he echoed thoughtfully, and something in his voice arrested her. 'No, Gwen, my dear, you have never been married. You don't even understand what it means to be married; for your knowledge of it is all evil. That's the worst of it. Don't be angry, dear, I'm not going to lecture like Mrs. Grundy on the sin of a loveless marriage, or the degradation of one, like the sentimentalists. Surely, surely a man or a woman may marry from pity, from honour, from self−devotion, and yet touch the perfection of the tie. But you,'—he paused a while, 'you did not only lose the love of it, Gwen; the thing itself was never yours. The facing of life, hand in hand; two of you where there was but one before. See! there is my hand, Gwen, and there is yours. A difference, isn't there? But how close they fit, each to each! How close and warm,'—he paused again to smile at her. 'What is it the song says, Gwen, about giving your hand where your heart can never be? Fudge! It should be, "How can I give my heart where my hand can never be?" Yes! there they are, close, and I am there too, my darling. Ready, always ready. Never again, Gwen, without the touch of a hand, like "children frightened in the night, like children crying for the light." Never again, Gwen, never again.'

They were sitting together side by side on the sofa, her hand held in his so lightly that she could have withdrawn it without an effort. But it lay there in his clasp as she sat listening to the soft voice. Listening on, even when it ceased, as if its spell lingered. They were not even looking at each other. Beyond the silent room, through the open door, the sunshine showed Gwen's bearer cleaning the lamps with a dirty duster. Not a romantic sight; but it is to be doubted if either saw it, for their eyes were blinded by the great darkness in which they found themselves, trustfully, hand in hand.

At last, with a little shiver, she tried to move, but his fingers closed on hers more firmly.

'Too late, Gwen! Too late. You should have taken it away when you had the chance,' he said joyously. 'Oh, Gwen, my darling, if we were married you would forget to be afraid, as you did just now; didn't you, Gwen?'

'I believe you mesmerise me,' she replied, trying to jest, 'and forgetting bills doesn't help to pay them; does it, Dan?'

'So you are back at the money again. Well, I don't care. Money or no money; promotion or no promotion—'

'No! no!' she interrupted, yielding, as she always did, to his decision, 'that really is not fair—the bargain was promotion—it was indeed.'

'Promotion be it,' he assented with a contented laugh, 'though I can't for the life of me see what it has got to do with the matter.'

'You would at least have more pay,' she put in, wondering faintly the while how it came about that they should be discussing such questions when she had meant to be so firm. 'I could not marry a pauper; could I?'

'Indeed, and indeed, it might be the best thing for you; then nobody would give you credit, dear, but me. And I—Oh, Gwen, my dear, my dear,—you might be bereft of everything—of all, save your own self, and sure I would give you credit for the all, still. Credit!' he echoed to his own words, 'isn't it absurd to be talking of it, as if either of us could be debtor or creditor to the other.'

That was all she gained from the interview. That, and the unwelcome remembrance of full five minutes when the touch of her lover's hand and the sound of his voice had made her forget the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But not for long. As she sat after Dan had gone, trying to comfort herself by the fact that one never knew what might happen, that they might all be dead and buried before the necessity for action arose—which, by the way, was her favourite consolation—she looked up to see the servant standing at the door, doubtfully expectant.

'What is it?' she asked languidly.

'The vakeel of the Diwans of Hodinuggur, Huzoor. He hath brought an offering, and desires an audience.'

'The Diwans of Hodinuggur!' repeated Gwen, startled.

'The agent, Huzoor. Shall I tell him the mem sahiba is going to eat the air in her carriage? It is but to say

something about a pot, he bade me mention. A pot that the Huzoor fancied.'

Gwen stood up, holding to the table.

'Now!' she said after a pause, 'show him in now.'

Mrs. Boynton's neat victoria waited for its mistress long after the smiling and obsequious visitor had given his shoe−money to the servant and departed. Waited patiently till, as it grew dark, the ayah came out and removed the cushions and parasols. Mem sahiba was not well, and would not go to the gardens; she would not go out to dinner either, so the horses could be put up. Then, the bearer coming into the verandah with the lighted lamps, a shrill altercation began over the shoe−money; the ayah asserting that when the visit was to a lady, her female attendant had a right to half, and even the grooms putting in a claim on the ground that they had been present. Their mistress, lying on the sofa where but a short time before she had sat hand in hand with Dan Fitzgerald, heard the dispute and had not the courage to rebuke their greed.

And yet the vakeel of the Diwans had simply brought a message, that if the mem sahiba would like another Ayôdhya pot, **similar in all respects to the last**, one could doubtless be found and forwarded without delay. She had refused the offer promptly, decisively; but the fact of its having been made filled her with regrets and alarms. If—oh! how lonely she felt, without a soul to stand between her and trouble. Then Dan's words recurred to her! bankrupt of everything yet credited with all! They brought no comfort, however; only a vague irritation against the speaker. But for him she would not have been tempted; but for him she would never have kept the discovery of the jewels secret—if indeed it was a discovery. Could it be a bribe? For what? Had they found out her entanglement with Dan Fitzgerald? Her vexation blazed up at the bare suspicion, and though every fresh proof of the attraction he had for her unstable nature invariably resulted in a recoil of the pendulum, she was conscious this time that it had never before swung back so far. He was to blame; yes! he was undoubtedly to blame for the whole miserable business.

She felt herself too much upset for Lewis Gordon's sharp eyes to be a safe ordeal, so, as he was to be one of the dinner−party, she sent an excuse, and spent the long evening in nursing her wrath; a very necessary process if Gwen Boynton was to bear malice, since her temper was of the sweetest. Even with this encouragement the next morning found her ready with excuses for everybody, herself included. After all, matters were not so serious. Three days would see her safe in Simla, where six thousand rupees would be better than three, infinitely better than none; and it would be quite easy to keep her understanding with Lewis dark for some time to come. Then what proof could any one have that she had kept, or even found the jewels? Who was to say that the pot had not been stolen, jewels and all? As for the jewellers who had bought them, they neither knew her real name nor address. The only possible danger lay in weakly yielding to conscience in the way of attempted restitution. Besides, if the pearls were really meant as a bribe, surely those who offered it deserved to lose them and gain nothing; for, of course, the idea of gaining anything from her was preposterous.

She went to the hall that evening, cheerful as ever, and exclaimed airily at the changes one short twenty−four hours had wrought in the shifting society of mid−April. The Grahams had left, the Taylors were to start that evening if there was room in the train laden with women and babies flying before the punkahs. Laden, too, with melancholy husbands conveying their families to the foot of the hills, whence they would return to stew in solitude. Lewis Gordon divided these unfortunates, cynically, into two classes—those who would be sent home in charge of the khânsâmah, with a *menu* of the first month's dinners, and an almost tearful injunction not to let the master, when he went out to dine, eat things which were likely to disagree with him; and those given over to the 'bottlewasher' who 'can cook a little, you know.' And there was truth in his cynicism. Mankind is not like an Amoeba, all stomach, yet nothing can be closer to tears than two sights often to be seen during an Indian hot weather: the one, a meal sent away untouched in favour of a clean whisky and soda; the other, an elderly Mohammedan at a big dinner−party waving the lobster salad away behind his master's back, and presenting him with cheese and biscuits instead. There is full−blown tragedy in both. Tragedy also in Lewis Gordon's cheerful remark to his companion—

'And, by the by, Robinson has been ordered home next mail. They were afraid of abscess. So that jolly little house at Simla is going a−begging. He asked me if I knew of a tenant, but it is rather late in the day, I fear, even though he only asks half−rent.'

'I'll take it,' said Gwen calmly. 'Don't stare so. The fact is, I have had a little windfall of money lately, and I hate hotels. This will be almost as cheap, and much more comfortable.'

'Infinitely so,' assented Lewis. The house was fully a mile nearer his quarters at Colonel Tweedie's and that was a great convenience, especially during the rains.

CHAPTER XIII

'**SEND** it back! It is hers; it is not mine! He gave it her! I stole it. Don't tell. Oh! send it back! send it back!'

Over and over again, through the long hot days and nights, the murmur, in its monotonous hurry, blent with the hum of the potter's wheel. The old man had removed the latter to the farther courtyard, where he sat working feverishly, yet without avail, so far as the village people could see through the door, beyond which they were forbidden to go. The simple folk were agog at the potter's strange looks and strange ways. He never seemed to cease working, for even when the familiar sound of the wheel was hushed something like an echo of it rose from within. Those were the times when he stood wistfully in the dark airless hut beside a restless head turning itself from side to side on the hard pillow, and keeping time to the monotonous rhythm of the murmur, 'Send it back, send it back.'

'Yea! dear heart, I will send it.' Then there would be silence for a while; but only for a while, since the fever strengthened day by day. Small wonder, when all Nature seemed in the grip of heat. The thermometer, we are told, is accurately divided into degrees. If so, the fallacy of such classification is self−evident, since every one with experience knows that the difference between eighty−four degrees and eighty−six degrees of Fahrenheit's instrument embraces the difference between comfort and discomfort. Between these two points that engine of torture, the punkah, trembles ere it begins the steady swing which is only one degree less awful than the unsteady swing necessitating the occultation of boots and other light articles of furniture with a human head. Doubtless to the uninitiated it seems a trivial affair to loop a parti−coloured rope through hooks in the rafters, and to attach to it a whitewashed board with a newly starched frill tacked to its lowest edge, thereinafter making mysterious dispositions of a leathern thong, the neck of an old whisky bottle thrust through the mud wall, and a circumambient flask of evil−smelling oil. But those who know what it is, on returning from a morning ride, to find the punkah in possession of your home, feel a chill at the very thought, such as the thing itself will never produce by legitimate means. The hot weather is upon one, and God only knows if fever, cholera, home−sickness, sheer deadly *ennui*, will allow you to pass through it unscathed as an honest gentleman.

George Keene, however, over in the branded bungalow, knew nothing of the horrors of a hot weather in the jungles, and, while poor little Aziz lay moaning out her impotent repentance, was actually superintending the swinging of his punkahs; which is equivalent to a man personally conducting his own hanging. He even, after the manner of engineers, took pride in a device which was to secure a perfect silence in the infernal machine. All unwitting of a time when, in the scorched darkness, it might be preferable to curse a monotonous scroop giving tangible excuse for wakefulness, than to lie visualising the unseen swoop, as of some vampire eager to suck your heart's−blood.

Those two degrees of heat bring a thousand other changes. Even at Hodinuggur, arid as it always was, they intensified the drought till a drop of water seemed as visionary a consolation to the parched horizon as it must have been to poor Dives in the fires of hell. The very canal denied its nature as it slipped past yellow and thick with silt from the clayey defiles of the lower hills, each little swirl and eddy looking as if streaked and pitted in mud. Yet the chill of its snowy birth came with the flood, so that in the red−hot evenings George's factotum used to call through the yellow−dust haze to the groom who sat on the edge of the canal, apparently moored to his place by a soda−water bottle tied to a string, and then Ganesha would haul in the strange buoy and scramble up the bank with it rapidly, so as to give the master's dinner−drink a chance of being cool.

All this amused George Keene hugely at first. He drew caricatures of it for the rectory, and sent a very impressionist sketch of his world to Mrs. Boynton. It consisted of a dust−storm, a caper bush, and a rat−hole. She put it on the mantelpiece of the pretty drawing−room in the little house among scented pine−woods, where she was just beginning to appreciate the soothing effect of having a decent balance at your banker's. Her lady−visitors laughed and said it was very clever, but some of the men looked queer and muttered 'poor devil' under their breath. Not that George looked on himself in that light. On the contrary, Hodinuggur amused him. Its dreary antiquity was all new to him, and as he went through the cool, dark passages of the old palace on his way to play chess with the Diwan, he learnt to admire some things about it; notably the thickness of its walls, through which the sun never filtered, though it soaked piteously into his red−brick bungalow. Upon the roof Zubr−ul−Zamân shrivelled under the heat almost as much as a certain figure which still lay huddled up on the landing of the secret

stair in the thickness of the tower beneath him as he sat at chess. Below that again Khush−hâl Beg lay stark naked, like a huge baby, in a swinging cradle, which was pulled to and fro by a drowsy coolie, while a bheestic supplied the fat carcass alternately outside and inside with tepid water from his skin bag, and as the *mushk* shrank, Khush−hâl swelled visibly—horribly.

Yet further, in the bazaar by the Mori gate, Dalel Beg, abandoning Europe−fashion under the stress of climate, slept all day and waked all night, doing both more viciously than before, like a snake rendered lively and dangerous by the heat. But Chândni, from her cool arches, smiled calmly, even when 'Ta−ra−ra−boom−de−ay' rose from the opposite balcony, which was now occupied by some one who could dance as well as sing. To tell truth, she was glad to be quit of Dalel's amusement for a time. Such deviations from her control never lasted long, and this time she knew that the Diwan himself was on her side. So she lounged about in the shadows, watching the pigeons in the niches, and rubbing her soft palms together. Sometimes a pellet of opium lay between them; sometimes nothing at all, for it was a trick of hers. Sometimes, on the other hand, it was a great deal; neither more nor less than one of the Hodinuggur pearls, which were as well known to all the jewellers of that part of the country as the Koh−i−nur diamond is to the keeper of the regalia. That was why Chândni on her return from Delhi, whither she had gone ostensibly to learn new music−hall songs for Dalel's benefit, had laughed so triumphantly at her own cleverness as she sat at the Diwan's feet telling him what she had done.

'It was easy, with my cousin a jeweller; and we of the bazaar know a trick or two with goldsmiths. Manohar Lal hath the pearls, sure enough. All thou hast to do is to offer him a rupee more than he gave the mem (which will not be half their value). The Hindu pig will take it, seeing it is better than having the yellow−trousered ones set on him as a receiver of stolen goods.'

Zubr−ul−Zamân looked at her approvingly from under his bushy eyebrows. She was a clever woman, but he would improve on her plan. He would put the screw tighter on the Hindu pig, and get the pearls back in exchange for a promise to pay. So far, however, Chândni's plot had been unexpectedly successful. Both George Keene, by giving the Ayôdhya pot to the mem, and Dan Fitzgerald, by taking the jewels himself to Manohar Lal, as Chândni's spies said he had done, were mixed up in the affair. There was sufficient foundation for an *esclandre*, of course, but how would that help them? They did not merely want revenge, as is so often the case, they wanted the key of the sluice−gate. The courtesan standing with wide−spread arms to fold her veil around her decently ere she left the Diwan's presence, laughed shrilly at his difficulties.

'How? sayest thou. Who can tell? Save this. The mem will send for more if she get the chance. That is our way. One rupee claims another. Bid the vakeel at Rajpore go to her and suggest a marrow to the pot. All things go in pairs, and we could send it through Keene sahib. For the rest we must wait. There is a time yet, and if we are to work by fear of exposure, that comes ever at the last moment. I play for a high stake, as I have told thee, O my father! and I mean to win.'

Then it was that the old man, with regretful thoughts of his past youth, had promised her one of the pearls in pledge for a future, when, if she succeeded, she could wear the whole necklace as Dalel's wife. That was how she came to be rolling the pearl against her palm lazily one moonlit night, when George, who began to find the long empty evenings coming at the end of a long empty day rather wearisome, strolled over for the first time since his return from Rajpore to see the potter, and while away half an hour in hearing some of his tales. Rather to his surprise, since he knew nothing of the novel freak for solitude, he found the outer palisade barred by thorn bushes, and going a little farther along to where it joined the mud wall, vaulted over the latter lightly into the inner courtyard. It was empty, and the door of the hovel closed. Supposing the old man to be absent, he turned to go, when a low cough from within made him pause and knock.

The next instant the potter burst out on him with eyes ablaze. 'Devils! wilt not leave me in peace?' he began before recognising his visitor. Then his manner changed; he drew the door to behind him, saying hurriedly, 'This slave mistook; the children tease. But if the Huzoor wants songs he must come to the outer court. The wheel is there now. Will not the Huzoor come?'

He moved away like a plover luring an intruder from its nest, but George paused again to listen to a repetition of the quick, low cough.

'Who is that ill?' he asked unwarily. The potter echoed the sound instantly.

'It is I who cough, Huzoor,' he went on, still moving away. 'Pity of God, how I cough! And I have fever, too; mercy of the Most High! fever always with mutterings hard to understand. But 'tis no matter. The potters of

Hodinuggur do not die; we go and come, we come and go.'

He had reached the wheel and set it a−spinning. But it seemed pivoted askew in its new place and whirled in fitful ovals. Then he looked up with a foolish laugh.

'My thumb will slip often now, Huzoor. Maybe 'twere better Fuzl turned no more pots.'

The thought made him slacken the wheel to silence. He sat staring at it vacantly, while George looked at him, wondering at the change in the old man. His face had the weary, over−strained expression of those who have wilfully forsaken sleep; the look which comes to those who are on the rack day and night beside a sick−bed, and George, remembering the cough, jumped to the conclusion that the potter had an invalid in the hut. Most likely some female relation; whence his desire for secrecy. To be sure, the old man had often said he lived alone, but in India one never could be sure how far modesty interfered with truth. So being accustomed to such vicarious prescribings, the young man suggested he should send some medicine for the cough.

His companion brightened up immediately, 'It is not all a cough, Huzoor,' he replied hurriedly. 'It is fever. God! what fever. It is only a little cough, with a rattle, as of dead wheat−straw under my bosom as I draw breath; quick, quick, with curving nostrils like a horse galloping fast.'

The vivid accuracy of the word−picture made George realise an idea which had of late haunted his fancy. The idea of a hand−to−hand fight with death alone, unaided, as the beasts of the field meet the destroyer. Here was some one doing it; dying, perhaps, of pneumonia, when others were being nursed through a finger−ache. The pity, the injustice of it struck him fairly. Then the potter's voice going on softly gave inconsequent answer to the vague doubt surging against the boy's youthful content.

'Not that it matters, as I tell myself in the night season when I am worst. We of Hodinuggur do not die. We go and come, we come again and go.'

Something in his own words, perhaps, seemed to arrest the old man's attention, and he paused.

'Huzoor!' he cried suddenly, 'I have something which belongs to the mâdr mihrbân. If the Huzoor would write an address.'

'Belonging to Miss Tweedie,' echoed George in surprise.

'Do not thanks belong to those who earn them!' replied the potter evasively. 'If the Huzoor could write. I have pen and ink. Lo! it is naught but potter's work, and the miss was kind.'

He fumbled in the niche beside his seat, and drew out a parcel done up in waxcloth. Evidently a pot of some sort, thought George, beginning to print boldly, as one of his profession should, with the slant−cut native pen. The moonlight shone full on the potter seated at his wheel, and the young Englishman pencilling Rose Tweedie's name. What was that rising on the stillness of the night? A murmur from the hut? George could not say for certain, as the old man set his wheel a−humming instantly, but once more the feeling of injustice, the flash of pity came to disturb his self−complacency. The feeling lasted longer this time, and as he walked home his thoughts were full of that uncertainty which is so hateful to the young. The Mori gate showed black and white in the moonshine; a clash of silver bells rose from the shadows as he passed; a pomegranate blossom fell at his feet. He took a step aside to crush it fiercely, passionately; it lay between that and picking it up he felt uneasily. Life here, at Hodinuggur, was so simple, so confusing in its simplicity. To live and to die. Was that all?

He spent the remainder of the evening in writing to Mrs. Boynton, putting his heart into reserved, half−jesting hints at his own puzzles. And as he wrote, the potter, standing at the door of his hut, was listening to a murmur coming from the darkness within.

'It is sent, dear heart! She has it. No one shall know,' he answered softly. Then there was silence for a while. But only for a while. The murmur came again and again through the hot night, to be stilled by the same reply.

The post in due time brought Mrs. Boynton her letter. She read it with great interest, and then promptly put it into the fire; her favourite maxim being, that the keeping of letters was, at any rate, one reason for the slow progress of humanity; since improvement was dangerous when you were tied down in black and white to past opinions. And the postman, after leaving the snug little house in the pine−woods, came on to Colonel Tweedie's with a packet for Rose. Half−an−hour afterwards the girl was sitting with the contents of the parcel on the table in front of her, puzzling her brains why any one should have sent her back the Ayôdhya pot, or one exactly like it. There could be no doubt about it, however. She took up the wrapper more than once; but the clear print, if unmistakable, was also unrecognisable. She felt carefully inside, hoping for a scrap of paper, a hint of any kind; but there was nothing save a few bits of crumbling clay, leaving a rough rim near the bottom of the pot. And all

the time her first impression remained unaltered. There was a mistake; it had been meant for Mrs. Boynton. Undoubtedly it was meant for her. Under ordinary circumstances Rose would most likely have taken the Ayôdhya pot over to the little house without more ado, but, though she did not acknowledge it to herself, she could not treat its occupant in an ordinary way. Besides, there was an element of mystery in the whole affair, and Rose hated mystery. The memory of her dream on the night of the storm at Hodinuggur annoyed her. She had slurred it over at the time, merely mentioning it as part of a feverish attack; but now she wondered if the Diwan, or some one else, could really have arranged a theft. And gradually there grew up in her one distinct dislike to the whole business. She would have nothing to do with it. She would say nothing, but simply send the thing back whence it came. She would not even suppose that George had sent it; she would return it straight. After all, it might be another pot, and if she made a mistake in thinking this, they would know the truth at Hodinuggur. A knock at the door roused her, and she slipped the vase behind another on the mantelpiece ere she said 'come in.'

'Only to say, Miss Tweedie,' came in Lewis Gordon's voice from the threshold, 'that I shall not be in to lunch. Your father has given me a half−holiday, and, like a good little boy, I am going to spend it with my relations. You will be at the Graham's tennis, I suppose? We shall.'

'No. I shall utilise my half−holiday with my relations also,' she replied. 'Father and I will go for a ride. I don't often get him to myself.'

'Then *au revoir* till dinner. How comfortable your little snuggery is! It and Gwen's drawing−room are the two prettiest rooms in Simla.' There was a hard, almost angry look on Rose's face as she repacked the parcel. Gwen's pretty room should at least be none the prettier for the Ayôdhya pot.

The result being that three days after this Châ ndni sat at the Diwan's feet once more, holding it in her hands.

'So I am right, O father!' she cried, with that shrill laugh of hers; 'the mem hath sent for more. Lo! I shall wear the pearls ere long.'

'If they are sent again, thou mayest lose them this time,' retorted the old man, but there was no warmth in his warning. He had begun to believe in her luck, and the two sat in the purgatorial heat on the roof, imagining evil as unconcernedly as if the universe could hold no fiercer fire for the wicked. The pearls must be sent again, of course, and the parcel given to be addressed by Keene sahib. So much was clear. And Manohar Lâl might be told to offer a less sum this time.

'Thy father was the devil!' remarked Zubr−ul−Zamân again—this time more suavely, 'and pearls or no pearls thou shalt have Dalel. For look you, Khush−hâl is a waterbutt, a grease jar, and Dalel hath forgotten how to deal fair, even by himself; but thou hast brains. So bring thine ear within reach of a whisper. There is much to tell of Hodinuggur ways ere I forget with age.'

She bent her head back till it almost rested on the old man's breast and brought her flower−decked ear close to his mouth. One elbow touched his knee, the hand giving light support to her chin: the attitude of one all ears to hear. The Diwan, still as a statue, nothing but a voice. A queer couple up there on the roof overlooking the red−hot, red brick house, where George Keene was being introduced to what is familiarly called a go of fever.

Even that was to begin with somewhat of an amusement, for a certain feeling of self−complacency comes with the first intermission. After the tortures and fires of the damned for some hours, the sudden and complete escape from them seems to rebound to the credit of your constitution, and you are confirmed in the impression that you are a fine fellow. But it is not long before the fever fiend can knock that sort of conceit out of a man if it chooses. In George's case it did choose, and, having got him well in its grip, refused, after a day or two, to let him go again.

The factotum lingered round with something he called beef−tea, and another thing he called barley−water. Which was which, the patient, with his mouth full of Dead Sea apples and quinine, could not say; nor after a time did he very much care. He cared for nothing; unless indeed it was to get rid of that vision of the schoolroom in the rectory—a schoolroom with a cheery−cheeked boy roasting blackbirds at the fire. If you didn't twist the bit of brown worsted stolen from your sister's work−basket, then the birds slackened—slackened like the potter's wheel. Oh! it was a lifetime of twisting, or there you were plumb, burning with a horrid smell. When the factotum sat in the room the blackbirds didn't; but then he breathed. Wasn't it rough that a man could not stop breathing for half−an−hour just to oblige a friend? Yet if the breathing beast sat outside, a '**whittering**' beast came in its place. '**Whitter! Whitter!**' under the bed; behind the boxes. That was the worst of a musk−rat; no one could possibly tell where it would '**whitter**' next. It wasn't its fault, of course; it meant no harm. Poor little beggar! what a rummy sight it must be, if the yarn was true, taking its kids out for a walk, tail by tail, in a string! And then to George's

infinite surprise and discomfiture, the feeble laugh ended in a flood of tears; tears like a woman's, drenching the dry, hot pillow. That was one comfort. As good as a water−cart! So they came again between the laughs; for George, seventy miles away from a white face, was down with the worst type of jungle fever.

Sometimes when he felt a little better the factotum brought out the medicine−chest and between them they made wonderful compounds, which the latter administered when his master had gone back to the blackbirds.

It is a common enough experience, and George, not being a whit behind many another young Englishman, fought his way through it pluckily, while Ganesha, the groom, fished for soda−water bottles all day long, and the water carrier circled round the house, cooling the dust with sprinklings, and keeping an eye on the punkah coolie during the factotum's absence over more barley−water or beef−tea.

Scorching nights, blistering days, devils in sparrow shape, the fringe of the towel pinned to the punkah, flicking your nose, yet sparing the mosquito battening on your cheek. All this George knew, till discomfort itself grew dim, and he ceased to care for anything in this world or the next.

Then after a time there was something dead cold—cold as ice—trickling down his nose, and that surely was Dan's face. At any rate it was Dan's voice.

'It's all right, dear boy. Sure the Doctor's ridden out too, and you'll be round in a jiffy.'

It is an Eastern record of life which tells us of a love passing the love of women, and, even in these latter days one sees it more often East than West; perhaps, paradoxically, because men have so often to play a woman's part towards each other in India. Dan Fitzgerald in particular was as gentle as any sister of mercy, and stronger than most. To be sure he sat on the bed smoking, and after a day or two his language over the barley−water was simply disgraceful. But by this time George had come back from No−man's−land and could remember a little booklet called 'Home Comforts Abroad,' which had been given him by his grandmother. So Dan ferreted it out from the bottom of a box full of canal records, and ordered the charcoal brazier into the verandah. Then he stirred diligently while George, propped up by pillows, read out the directions weakly. The result being that the factotum bore away a deadly mixture in triumph, because even with this surpassing love in his heart for the compounder, the boy could not swallow it.

Nevertheless, wearied out by feeble laughter, he slept the first real sleep of recovery and woke to extol the factotum's beef−tea. That functionary being thus appeased, the little red brick furnace out in the wilderness became a home indeed; that is to say, an abode of love, and peace, and a great contentment.

It was on the very day of promotion to an arm−chair and a cigarette that George received a letter from Colonel Tweedie, enclosed in one from Rose. His eyes grew moist as he read it; he had to pause ere he could turn to where his companion sat busy over his share of the post, and even then his voice faltered.

'You—you **beast**, Dan!'

The words were uncomplimentary; the tone was a caress. His hearer did not affect to misunderstand.

'Well, it will be jolly for you at Simla. The gayest fortnight of all just before the rains, and there is nothing like a whiff of hill air for killing the microbes. Besides, the Tweedies' house is awfully jolly to stay in.'

'But you?—you will be here,' said George remorsefully, despite the eager pleasure in his eyes.

Dan laughed.

'It isn't the first time I've been in a jungle station. Are you thinking of the whisky bottle again? Sure I'll take a temperance ticket for the fortnight, if it would make my keeper easier.'

'Don't be a fool, Dan.'

He came round to lean over the back of George's arm−chair.

'Is that the thanks I get for warming a viper in my bosom? But I must get back to the office for a day or two first. Then I'll start you off with my blessing and all the boiled shirts you have in the world. And more, by token, that picture of the girl with the Ayôdhya pot that's lying underneath them. Why didn't you show it me before? It's the best thing you ever did, and must go to the exhibition. Always put your best foot foremost up at Simla among the big−wigs. That is my advice.'

'Which you don't follow yourself.'

'But I do!—only my foot's a beetle−crusher, and the worms don't like it. So that is settled, and we will tell the washerman about the white ties. And look here, George, I'll bring the duplicate of that key back with me. Then you can take yours, and I shall know—'

George's hand went up to the back of his chair as if to find another to clasp; then he changed the *venue* with an

odd little laugh.

'Give me a light, old man. I—I can't keep this cigarette going, somehow.'

As Dan stooped over him their eyes met, and that enough.

CHAPTER XIV

THE angel Azrael had turned aside from other doors in Hodinuggur besides that of the red−hot bungalow across the canal. Fuzl Elahi, the potter, sat once more at his work, with the old calm on his face. The wheel was back in the inner yard again, where the westering sun sent a creeping shadow of the high wall almost to the edge of the spinning circle. It spun so slowly that the eye could see the blue outline of a pot upon the moulding pirn.

'It was a woman seeking something,
Over hill and dale, through night and day she sought for something.
"Foul play! foul play! look down and decide."
"Not I—""The chant stopped in a start. There was a grip on one shoulder, a thin brown hand over the other pointing accusingly at the wheel.

'Why didst lie to me?' panted a breathless voice, low yet hard. 'Why didst say thou hadst sent it to her? Why? why?'

'I lied not, heart's delight.'

The slackening wheel, as his hands fell away from it, showed the Ayôdhya pot, as if in denial of his words; yet he repeated them gently, looking back the while at the girl who had crept from the open door of the hut behind him. 'I sent it; but it hath come back, as all things do in Hodinuggur; as even thou didst, Azizan. Be not angry with thy father. Lo, it is fate!'

She set his deprecating hand aside roughly.

'Let be, father—if father thou art. I tell thee 'tis the pot. Give it me here. Yea; 'tis so, and thou hast put a false bottom of new clay to it. Wherefore?'

The old man's forehead wrinkled in perplexity.

'I do it always. Let me finish the task, Aziz. Châ ndni, the courtesan, will give money for it, as always; then thou shalt have violet sherbet to allay the cough. Pity of me! how thin thou art!'

In truth the girl was emaciated to skin and bone: her small face seemed all eyes; yet, though she swayed as she stood from sheer weakness, there was energy and to spare in her grip on the Ayôdhya pot.

'Châ ndni!' she echoed; then suddenly the fire died down, the tension of her hold slackened. 'Lo, wherefore should I care if it be lies or truth,' she muttered to herself; 'the old man is crazy, and 'tis the Diwan's when all is said and done—not hers. Here, take it, poor soul. I care not now, so I be left alone in peace.'

'Art not angry with thy father, Aziz?' he asked humbly; but there was no answer. He watched her languid retreat to the hut almost fearfully. 'Lo, she forgets the things I have remembered, and I forget those she remembers,' he murmured, before he broke once more into his chant with a quavering voice.

This forgetfulness of the girl's, showing itself so often, was a perpetual wonder to the old man, who never for an instant doubted that his dead daughter had indeed returned to him. 'Nay, but thou knowest beloved!' he would remonstrate against her ignorance. 'Hast not played in the Mori gate, and bought sweetmeats of old Bishno, perched on my shoulder like any tame squirrel?'

'Mayhap, mayhap!' she would answer impatiently. 'I care not. There was a Hindu girl, I remember, who did not weep as the others used to do. Life was a dream she said. We would forget it soon in another. Mayhap 'tis true and I have forgotten.'

It suited her to deceive the old man. When she had first realised the position, she had been too weak to do more than wonder at it. Then, by degrees, while she still lay helpless, the potter's talk, her own recollections of old Zainub's hints, joined to the extraordinary similarity in those extraordinary eyes, had given her a shrewd guess as the truth. And with it came a fierce savage delight in her inheritance of witchcraft. It meant revenge; revenge and safety. The potter deemed her a ghost from another world; the village folk should think the same. So she hid herself away in the dark hovel, spending the long hot days in dreaming of a time when she could creep out on some moonlit night and frighten the wits out of the world which had wronged her; for her whole nature was jangled and out of tune. She hated everything and everybody, herself included; at least so she told herself as she sat idle, listless, brooding over revenge. It was not difficult for her to avoid observation. To begin with, the village folk were afraid of the potter's eyes at the best of times, and of late strange tales had been told. Finally, Mai

Jewun's longed−for son had been born with a distinct thumb−mark, and had died. The only person, in fact, who could have allayed these fears lay shrivelling into a mummy with the heat on the old secret stairs; so Azizan might have wandered through the village had she chosen without fear of anything save sending all the women into hysterics, and making the men give themselves up as doomed to die. She did not care to wander, however; she cared for nothing save to sit crunched up at the lintel of the hovel door and stare into vacancy until the dawn sent her back to the darkness within.

The potter found her so when he returned from taking the pot back to the Mori gate late in the evening. The fading daylight struggled still with the rising moon, making confused havoc among the shadows, and giving an odd iridescence to the dust−laden air. From without came a barking of dogs, an occasional cry, every now and again a group of bleatings from the goat−pens. All the every−day common−place sounds of village life; and in the courtyard the same lack of outward novelty. Only an old man with his pugree off eating his supper of bajra cakes and water beside a sick girl.

'Ari, beloved, cough not so!' came his tender voice. 'Lo! I will go but now for the sherbet. Dittu was away when I passed his shop. And see, I will seek out the sahib ere he leaves to−morrow and ask for more medicine. It did thee good.'

The girl's breath came faster.

'Leaves? Wherefore?'

'He hath been ill, dear heart, so Chândni says. He goes to the mem sahiba in the hills.'

Azizan's hand clutched the old man's arm. 'And the pot! what of the pot?'

He shook his head. 'Maybe it was for her. I know not. Cough not so, beloved. See, I will fetch the sherbet.' He bent over her, as he rose, in gentle pleading. 'Go not from me when I am away, Aziz. Lo! I will be back ere long.'

She gave a short laugh, and sank back, still breathless from her fit of coughing.

'Go! whither should I go? God knows!' The old man sighed as he turned away, to look back more than once at the listless, dejected figure. So it remained for an instant after his had disappeared through the outer yard; then, as if galvanised, it rose suddenly, and the thin arms were flung out passionately.

'She shall not have it. Chândni shall not give it to her. She shall not, she shall not.'

Five minutes after, trembling half with weakness, half from sheer hurry, Azizan was on her way through the village wrapped in a white sheet snatched from the hut. What she was going to do she scarcely knew, just as she scarcely knew whither she was going. Though within a stone's−throw of her birthplace, the path down which she stumbled was as unfamiliar to her feet as the tempest of emotion was to her mind. A fever of excitement, anger, mistrust of everything and everybody surged through her veins. The road was silent, deserted; but even had it been thronged, the girl would not have hesitated. Amid all the confusion, but one thing was certain: Chândni must tell the truth; she must be found and made to tell the truth. But where? Yonder was the Mori gate; she had seen that before through the lattice, and that, at any rate, was a landmark. She would go there first and see. As she came within ear−shot of the tunnelled causeway, a woman's voice rang out in shrill laughter from the dark recesses to the right. Her first instinct was to pause; then second−thought made her keep straight on her way as if to pass through, till at the farther end of the causeway she turned suddenly to the left and sank down behind a plinth. It was as if a shadow had disappeared. A minute to regain her breath, and then she crept farther into the darkness, where, unless some belated gossipers should choose that side of the arch, she was secure. From over the way a clash of anklets and a low full voice, contrasting strangely with those high trills of laughter assured her that she had come straight upon her quarry. The rest was patience, till, sooner or later, the woman would be left alone. Sooner or later the laugh must cease; sooner or later even wickedness must tire and turn to sleep. So the girl sat crouched into herself in the curiously impassive attitude of her race, her thin arms round the thin knees whereon her small chin rested. Not a very startling sight outwardly; though, to describe what lay within is wellnigh an impossible task with an audience of Western ears; for Azizan's knowledge would be to such ears incompatible with her ignorance, her jealousy and passion with her patience. Such an audience must remember an upbringing foreign to all their experience, and imagine her, still as a statue, though the blood raced like liquid fire in her limbs and throbbed like sledge−hammers in her temples. The moon, sinking slowly, sent a slanting yellow light through the dust−haze, visible beyond the arched causeway; the village dogs ceased one by one the nightly challenge to their fellows; yet, still the laugh went on. Would wickedness never tire? The wonder, and her own heart−beats lulled the girl to a drowsier patience. She woke to silence, and, standing up, strained eyes and ears

into the shadows. Not a sound. She stole softly across the causeway, slipped into the recesses at the right, and listened again. A low breathing from one corner made her feel a way towards it, and her touch, light as a breeze, hovered over a figure on the ground wrapped from head to foot in a sheet like a corpse; yet she knew it could scarcely be Chândni, for she would not choose so airless a spot. But there must be rooms above, and a roof above that, and they were worth a trial before going on to the bazaar. Slowly, for she knew nothing of where she was, Azizan groped her way to some winding stairs, thence to a suite of low chambers, empty of all save the pigeons rustling and cooing at her step in the dark. Upwards again till, at a turn, an archway gave on a terraced roof not six feet square; and there, lying on a string cot, which, from its narrow resting−place, seemed suspended in mid−air, she saw the soft curves of a woman's figure outlined against the moon−lit dust−haze beyond. It was not a place for a sleep−walker's slumbers; not a place even for a restless one; but Chândni slept the sleep of the unjust, which, nine times out of ten, is sounder than that of the just. Her conscience never troubled her; and in addition she belonged to a race apart from the customs and creeds of the people. A race born to the profession of pandars and prostitutes, openly, shamelessly.

So, not being afraid, like other women−folk, of sleeping in the moonlight with face uncovered, she lay carelessly as she had thrown herself down, her tinsel−set veil turned aside by one arm thrust under her head, the other stretched almost straight into the gulf of dusty air, which glittered faintly like the ghost of a sunbeam. Beneath its filmy net covering the bold sweep of her bosom rose and fell softly, with its faded burden of the past day's jasmine chaplets. They gave out a last breath of perfume as Azizan's thin brown fingers closed round the sleeper's throat.

'If thou stirrest,' whispered the girl to the startled eyes as they opened, 'I kill. Feel!'

Only a prick above the heart, but joined to that scorching, stifling grip, it was sufficient to send the coming shriek back from Chândni's lips. She lay terror−stricken, staring up at the wild light eyes which, catching the moon rays as they dipped to the horizon, seemed to glow with a pale fire. This was no ghost! it was something worse than that; something that meant more than mere fright.

'Why didst send the Ayôdhya pot to her? Why? Give it me back!'

Chândni slackened all over in sudden relief. If she could have laughed with that hand on her throat the shrill sound would no doubt have risen on the hot air. So that was all! Nothing but jealousy! Of all things in the world the easiest to rouse—or to allay—by lies, and she had plenty of those at her command. So many, that poor Azizan, after a time, wondered sullenly how she came to be sitting amicably on the string cot beside the woman whom she had meant to coerce.

'Poor little chicken,' said the courtesan in contemptuous consolation. 'So thou wouldst have killed me, thy best friend? One who seeks to destroy the mem! 'Twill be the ruin of her, look you, and then he will have none of her. That is their way. She will not get him; so pine no more, child. Lo! I will teach thee how to have lovers and to spare.'

'I want no lovers,' muttered the girl angrily. 'If 'tis to harm her, and thou hast sworn to that, I care not. And thou hast sworn to let me be also. That is enough.'

As she rose, folding her white veil round her, Chândni felt sorely tempted to give the little push which must have overset the weak balance, and sent Azizan to certain death below. But the thought that, if looks said the truth, fate would do the work for her ere long without scandal, stayed her hand. Besides, the knowledge that the girl was alive and intent on revenge might be of use in dealing with the palace−folk, if they showed themselves traitorous to her claims. So, when she had watched Azizan go stumbling down the stairs, Chândni rolled over lazily to meet the midnight wind which was springing up, and shortly afterwards fell like a child, into dreamless slumber, long before Aziz, who had sunk down on a step of the silent causeway, hoping to regain strength for the homeward journey, felt equal to the task. A deadly despondency had replaced her excitement; yet beneath this again lay a dull resentment against fate. If she had understood, if she had known, as Chândni seemed to know, the ways and thoughts of these white people, she might have done better. She had meant no harm—no harm in her world at least—for she was not bad. He might, as Chândni said, turn away from the mem for being wicked, but he would never have had cause to turn from her, if she had only known. She never would have done anything to displease him—never have done, or said or looked— The sting of shameful memory drove her from her resting−place to stumble on recklessly in the direction of a twinkling light upon the mound. That must be the potter's house and he must be watching for her; there she would at least find shelter. But it was not the house; it

was the potter himself seeking for her among the ruins. His face, by the light of the cresset he carried, showed haggard, and its anxiety soothed her, even while it sent a new pain to her heart. He was unhappy at losing her, and she? O God! how her own heart ached! Must it always be so when those you loved were lost? Then would **he** feel so if he had to turn away from the mem? Would it send that pain into **his** heart?

The question was insistent, imperative, as, scarcely listening to the old man's deprecating delight she followed him back to the darkness of the hut. Even there it haunted her. Through the hot night, through the long hot day as she lay huddled up out of sight. 'Would he care? And if he did care, would she be glad or sorry for his pain?'

The moon and the setting sun were disputing possession of the world again, when George lay on a lounge chair in the verandah of the red−hot bungalow. The air was fresher, if not cooler there, and the factotum within was disturbing the foundations of the round world in attempting to pack his master's things; among them Azizan's picture, and a parcel which had been sent from the palace addressed to Mrs. Boynton. Something, it was said, she had asked the vakeel at Râjpore to get for her. The lad, though still weak, was joyous to the heart's core in the knowledge that another hour would see him on his way to spend his holiday in the society of the most perfect woman he had ever seen. That was how he viewed his world. Gwen was in full focus; the rest of humanity out of it; even poor Dan, who was at that moment riding his hardest across the desert in order to take over charge of the sub−division at its outermost limit, and so give the boy every possible second of his leave. Not a very just estimate of relative values, but a very usual one when Narcissus is absorbed with the reflection of himself.

'Salaam Aliakoom,' came a breathless voice behind him. He turned to see Azizan, who had sunk as if exhausted on the verandah steps. He stared at her silent with surprise, in which a certain shamefaced annoyance was mingled. He had no desire to be reminded of her existence at present, and even if, as he had felt inclined to suspect, there was some mystery about her, he could do no good by inquiring now, on the very eve of his departure.

'I have come for the pot, Huzoor,' she began without preamble. 'They took it from me. Lo! I was poor, and the poor have no voice. Justice! Justice!'

'Took it from you?' echoed George, his annoyance increasing at this plunge into the past. 'Do you mean by force?' She nodded. 'But,' he went on, 'you sold it. I gave the money to your mother when she came here—on the night the tents were burnt.'

'My mother died before that, Huzoor. It was not my mother who came, but a bad one from the palace. It is true that I never sold it, never got the money; and now I want the pot back again. It brings luck. I will not sell it.'

'But why didn't you come at once and tell me?' asked George angrily. 'Then I might have done something; now—'

She interrupted him eagerly.

'Your slave has been ill; as the Huzoor may perchance notice.' Her wistful tone made George look at her more closely.

'Very ill I should say,' he assented shortly. 'You are not fit to come so far. Why did you? Why didn't you send some one else?'

'I thought the Huzoor would not believe unless he saw me,' she answered after a pause. 'I heard the Huzoor was going away to−day, and I wanted the pot. Surely he will give it back! The protector of the poor has so many things; his slave has but this one thing.'

Her face was outlined against the white pillar beside which she sat, and with all the languor of sickness on it still showed strong in its entreaty. Something in it struck George with regret, even amid the pressing desire to kick somebody which her words had roused in him.

'Give it back,' he echoed savagely. 'Of course I would, if I could; but I can't. It was stolen—'

'It has been found again, Huzoor.'

'Perhaps; but I haven't found it. I'm very sorry, my good girl, but I haven't got it.'

'The Huzoor mistakes. He has it. It is in the parcel that came from the palace. They took it from me again to send it back to the mem.'

George stared at her, unable to believe his ears.

'Took it again—then you were the thief—is that it?'

There was a slight pause ere she replied. 'The Huzoor always speaks the truth. I stole it—but it was mine.'

George gave a low whistle; then a sudden grimness came to his face. 'And you say it is in that parcel they sent

addressed—. By Jove, if it is,' he added in English as he rose hastily. A minute after, when he returned from within, his face was still more grim.

'Here! take it,' he said, thrusting the blue curves of the Ayôdhya pot at her, as if in haste to be rid of it—and her. 'When I get back I'll inquire, and if what you say is true—' He paused, reduced in his anger to thinking incoherently of Dalel Beg and horsewhips. How dare he send it to her, mixing her up, as it were, in such a discreditable affair? 'Well,' he continued, looking impatiently at the girl, 'that's all, I suppose. You don't want anything more, do you?' The attitude in which she was sitting reminded him perforce of the sunshine glowing on the blue−tiled mosque and of the sidling pigeons—of a past, in short, of which he did not care to be reminded, and a hardness crept over his face.

'That is all,' she replied, rising to go. 'But the Huzoor should not be angry. The pot belonged to this slave.'

'Angry?' he echoed, with a sort of lofty consideration. 'Why should I be angry with you? Every one has a right to their own surely. Now you have got it, go home and get stronger, my child. Salaam, Azizan!'

'Salaam Alaikoom, Huzoor.'

He took up his cigar again, relieved to find it alight; for he felt that he needed soothing. On his return. Dalel must be brought to book and smashed; meanwhile he was not sorry that the cursed pot had finally passed into the hands of its rightful owner, for it had a knack of appearing and disappearing in a way which annoyed his common−sense. Now, he need never see it or its owner again. One palpable reason for the latter probability made him give a compassionate glance after the thin, small face where consumption had set its mark indubitably, and which he had seen for the last time.

No! not the last. She too was pausing to look back from the gateless gateway, guiltless of a fence on either side, which served no purpose save arbitrarily, uselessly, to divide one portion of a dusty road from another. So he saw her outlined against the shadows which softened the havoc sickness had wrought in her young face; a graceful figure, seen as he had painted her against the purple mound of Hodinuggur, with the pot clasped to her breast.

Yes! when Mrs. Boynton saw the picture she would be pleased; that is to say, if he showed it to her at all. The thought absorbed him, and when he looked up the shadows were empty.

CHAPTER XV

TEN days had passed since George, after many hours deadly discomfort, found himself admitting that the world was not such an intolerable place, even in India; that, when all was said and done, there were some things in it worth looking at.

Those who have experience of these convalescent journeyings will know at once that this must have been just about that turn of the upward−trending road where a bridge slants the dhooli across the dry torrent−bed, so that the traveller can see a stream of pink oleander blossoms filling the narrow ravine. The morning sunshine lies yellow on the red, parched hillocks, the red rocks crumble from thirst, but the heat−hidden water proclaims its presence beneath them by that glory of flowers. Nothing else, far or near, suggesting moisture; save, perhaps, the candlestick−euphorbia, re− minding one vaguely of the Ark of the Covenant. Not a very welcome reminder, in this land of drought, where even a deluge of rain would be a blessing; so, at least, thought George, all unwitting of the times now close at hand, when a racing, roaring demon would fill the narrow valley, the oleander flowers would seem adrift, and the arch of the bridge would echo to the metallic churnings of the boulders below, until, maybe, it would take a fancy to join them, and leave travellers staring at each other across an impassable torrent.

Another slanting turn or two, and the candlestick−bush is left behind. The red−flowered indigo hides the dry, red soil, and from it rise strange shrubs with sparse foliage and abundant blossom—yellows and whites and lilacs—with here and there a burnished pomegranate, vivid green and crimson. A sweet scent fills the air from grey aromatic herbs, among which the wild bees keep up a perpetual hum. It is the land of honey and honey bees. Butterflies also. There goes a purple emperor, and, by Jove! yonder is one of those swallowed−tailed whoppers you have seen somewhere in a glass case. The head sinks back on the pillow again, tiredly content, to watch the scarlet flash of a sun−bird. Was that a fern hidden in the crevice of the yellowing rocks? Yes! parched, dwarfed, but still a fern. So on and up, until the coolies set the dhooli down on a bit of real green grass beside the tiny trickle of the spring whence they slake their thirst, and some one from a shingled hut hung with flowering, fruiting gourds, brings the sahib a red−brown earthen pot. A land of milk this—somewhat smoky, no doubt, yet still milk. Over the tops of the fragrant pine−trees something blue climbs up and up into the sky. Can it be a hill?—the hills '**from whence cometh your help!**' The memory of some early morning service in the odd little station church comes over you, with the punkahs swinging overhead, the Deputy−Commissioner reading the psalms, and the involuntary stir northwards of the small knot of worshippers as the words sink straight into their hearts, bringing thoughts of dear faces looking down on the heat−sodden plains. Yes! those are the hills; for, as the coolies slither through the slippery pine needles, the faint blue mist blending into the clouds rises, and the headman, pausing, points to a cluster of white dots. Those are the sahib−logues' houses.

The path steepens; George pulls up the neglected shawl as shelter from the growing cool; and as he is hurried along the curving road to find old familiar friends in every flower and leaf his renewed vitality expresses itself, oddly enough, in the inward conviction that here at last is a place in which one could **die** comfortably. Not that George, or any other convalescent in his position, contemplates the possibility of death; why should one when life has suddenly become attractive?—when one can breathe instead of merely drawing breath?—above all, when it is safe to go out into the garden without a hat, and pick a carnation for your button−hole before strolling over to have tea with the most perfect woman in the world.

Those ten days, therefore, passed like wild−fire. George knew no more how he had spent them than how he had spent all his money. Chiefly, it may be said, on sweets at Peliti's, kid gloves, and new ties. It was the first time the young fellow had ever been let loose on equal terms in the very best of society— a society, moreover, bent on amusing itself. That he should follow its example was a foregone conclusion; and it must be owned that he certainly got his money's worth in solid enjoyment. There is always one particular period in the life of every man and woman when the sun seems to stand still in the heavens on purpose to make pleasure perpetual. This had set in for George, and it had its usual effect in giving a fine−drawn, eager expression to his face. Small wonder, perhaps, seeing that, as a rule, he never went to bed till three in the morning, and that the days passed in one ceaseless round of amusement. It seemed incredible, even to himself, that, not a fortnight past, he had been agonising at Hodinuggur on beef−tea and barley−water. But then Hodinuggur itself was incredible; almost as much so as the fact that he had proposed to wear his old white shirts, washed by a desert−washerman at Simla!

They were thrust aside in a bottom drawer now, and their place filled by brand−new ones from a Europe shop; for how could one dance with the most perfect woman in the world in a shirt that had no deportment? How, in fact, could you do anything without reference to the certainty that your unworthy self would form a part of perfection's environment? That is what it comes to, when a steady, honest young fellow like George falls down on his knees to worship a pretty face and a gracious smile. No doubt it was not a very admirable occupation, but it seemed so to him, as it seems to that majority of mankind which does not ask itself questions; simply because he had been taught, as we have all been taught, to look on sentimental love between the sexes as something almost divine. Thus, the real issues being hopelessly confused, this new feeling of passionate worship had all the effect of a new religion upon him. So other things besides old shirts were thrust out of sight. Among them Azizan's picture. The idol should not see it till the depths of deceit regarding the Ayôdhya pot had been fathomed, lest in any way perfection's ears should be sullied by a queer story. By−and−bye, when, on returning to Hodinuggur he had time to unravel the mystery, he might send the portrait to her as the best piece of work he had ever turned out; but now? Why now, as usual, it was time to ride over on the hired pony—of whose mane and tail you were inwardly ashamed—to the pretty little house among the pine−woods, and there, in Paradise, try to forget that but three days' more leave lay between you and purgatory. Certainly not an admirable occupation; but the novelty, the excitement, the supreme pleasure had gone, like wine, to the boy's head, producing that exalted condition of mind and body, which has been described as leaving one in doubts whether to have another whisky and water, or to say one's prayers and go to bed.

Lewis Gordon, standing in the back verandah, watched the young fellow ride off with a frown.

'It's too bad of Gwen,' he murmured to himself, as he went back to finish dressing. 'I can't think what the fun can be. But the boy is having a good time; that's one thing. And I suppose we all have to go through it some time or another.'

When he had done putting himself into an extremely dandified racing kit, he passed through into the office again and began work steadily on some files. **He** was not on leave, and if he had to ride a steeplechase at half−past four, that was no reason why he should waste an hour in dawdling down to Annandale beside Gwen's *dandy*. There was no reason, either, for his doing duty with Colonel Tweedie and his daughter, who had ordered their horses at three. Time enough if he galloped down at four, when the road would be pretty clear, instead of being clogged by a perfect procession of women and coolies masquerading in ridiculous costumes; whence it may be inferred that Lewis Gordon was in a bad temper. As a matter of fact, he had been more or less so ever since he arrived at Simla, despite the welcome he received from Gwen's constant smiles, exquisite dresses, and admirable lunches. Perhaps he was conscious that some one would have to pay for all these amenities, and the prospect of responsibility in the future weighed on him; not in a pecuniary point of view, but in reference to the fact that the debtor would be his wife. For, like most men of his *genre*, he was fastidious over the duties of women who were in any way connected with him. Anyhow, he was distinctly dissatisfied with his world, as he sat, buried shortsightedly up to his nose, in piles of paper; his racing−colours, white with a crimson hoop, looking ridiculously out of keeping with his occupation.

A clatter of hoofs told him that the Colonel and Rose were off. He could see them from his window passing a turn of the road below the house, their figures outlined for a moment against the dim blue of the valley. She sat straight, certainly, and as he watched her, a smile came to his face as he remembered the partridge−hunt; but it was replaced immediately by a frown. For the memory of Hodinuggur conjured up that of Dalel Beg, who had come up to Simla for these races, and had, in Lewis' opinions been making himself most objectionable.

There was no reason on earth, of course, why Dalel should not come; no reason on earth why the Governor−General should not shake hands with him, or any one else—that was part of the duty for which Governor−Generals were paid; but that Gwen Boynton should shake hands with him and allow him to speak to her familiarly, was different. That was a matter of feeling, not a matter of reason. Apart from the question of colour, Dalel was an objectionable brute—could scarcely be otherwise, considering his up−bringings. That much of this was sheer insular prejudice on Lewis Gordon's part may be true. If put to it, he would have frankly confessed to many another objectionable brute with a white face; but that the dark−skin should enter into the question is at present inevitable in India, where it is typical of those theories and practices which make real social intercourse between the upper classes of the two races an impossibility—**at present**.

And, to say sooth, Dalel was not nice, outwardly or inwardly. Even the best tailor in Simla could not make him

look aught but intolerable in his elaborate riding−gear as he paused on his way to the race−course before a small shop in the bazaar. A dark hole of a place, squalidly bare of all save a sign where, in crooked lettering, it was announced that 'MUNAHRLALLOFDELHIJEWLERGOLDWORKS' was ready 'TOBYANDSELL.'

'No news of the pearls yet?' asked Dalel in an undertone of the man in dirty white dhoti and low turban, who came out hastily to cringe at his stirrup.

'Huzoor, no! The ayah saith they have not come. Perhaps the chota sahib—'

A measured shuffle of footsteps and a gay laugh arrest the deprecating voice. It was Mrs. Boynton, carried by four men arrayed in white; she herself being a vision of angelic spotlessness. Beside her, his hand on the shafts of her *dandy*, his young face intent on hers, came George Keene. It needs great ignorance or great experience to walk in this fashion, without appearing either ridiculous or unseemly. George looked neither; only supremely happy.

'Who was that?' he asked, as his companion bowed. Her little gloved hand resting so close to his tightened nervously.

'Dalel Beg. He bowed to me.'

George gave a quick glance backwards. 'By Jove, so it is! What cheek!'

He thought so, honestly, as they passed on between the irregular rows of shingled huts, leaving the group before the jeweller's shop, looking after them curiously. Past the bazaar, down many a turn, till a bare zigzag showed on the hillside beneath them, and below that again a green oval of valley set in trees. The eye following each angle of the descent, could see, as it were in terraces, an almost continuous stream of *dandies, rickshaws*, and ponies, all bent towards that grassy oasis where a tent or two gleamed white, and a crowd of humanity already swarmed like bees.

There is no gayer crowd in the universe than this of Simla out for a holiday; though, even as it passed downward, a man with a sober face and a telegram in his pocket passed upwards on a sorry errand. Ten minutes before that telegram handed in to the Club tent had hushed the laughter into silence for a while. 'Cholera, of course,' said some one after that while. 'I heard yesterday from Galbraith it was getting rather stiffish in those parts. Poor old Jackson! After all these years, too.' And then the recipient had ridden off in hot haste, because the poor widow—the widow of his best friend—was coming down at four with his wife to see the steeplechase, and it would be best to prevent **that**, if possible. A sorry errand indeed, past those holiday−makers, to whom he had to give back greeting, irrespective of that death−message in his pocket lest the news might travel too fast. Even to the pallid, pretty−faced young wife raising herself eagerly from her cushions as he passed to ask if Mrs. Jackson had heard from **her** husband that morning. She had had no letter; but of course Mr. Jackson would have mentioned it if there had been anything wrong with Charlie? Doubtless, Mr. Jackson would have done so, came in answer to the wistful eyes, ere the messenger rode on full of that wrathful, surprised grief which such scenes bring to the average Englishman. And it must not be forgotten that it is in such scenes as these that the foundation of all that best in our Indian empire is laid. Going to the hills! Whose fault is it that the phrase conjures up to the English ear a vision of grass−widows, flirtations, scandals, frivolities! Surely it is the fault of those who, telling the tale of a hill−station, leave out the tragedy of separation which makes our rule in India such a marvel of self−sacrifice both to the woman and the man.

Yet below, in the Club tent, and round the shady ring the laughter went on after its brief check. Mrs. O'Dowb, whose husband had held hill appointments ever since he married a big−wig's daughter, improving the occasion against her bitterest foe, Mrs. Larkins, by declaring that some women had no sense of duty, and seemed to forget that they had sworn at the altar to cherish their husbands. To which her little enemy, using the sharp tongue which captivated mankind in general, assented smilingly; she herself knew women who could not be brought to understand that their absence must be a far greater comfort than their presence. Whereat there was war.

A gay crowd indeed! with here and there a surge, accompanied by murmurs of 'Your Excellency,' and a steady circle round some recognised leader holding her little court. Not much interest on the whole, however, over the races, save among a knot of men near the betting−tent, when Dalel Beg, hand in glove with a shady lot of men from a newly−opened hotel, went swaggering about with his jockey's colours pinned on to his coat.

'I'm not on duty to−day,' replied a handsome man to Gwen Boynton's inquiry why he was not as usual in the tent. 'A contingent of bad lots brought their ponies up and rushed the meeting. They do it sometimes, and then it isn't good enough for old stagers. All we stewards can do is to keep 'em as straight as we can, and that isn't easy.

Weight for weight, inches for inches, Mrs. Boynton, I'll back an Indian gymkhana, where nobody has any money to pay, and all the subalterns think they know something about a horse—especially their own—to lick creation in sheer crookedness. And when the profession come down like a wolf on the fold, as they have done to−day, it is crookeder still. And all about a *pari mutuel* for the most part.' The look of disgust on the speaker's face was almost comical.

'Poor Major Davenant!' smiled Gwen sympathetically. 'But the chase will be good. Mr. Gordon is in it.'

'I wish he wasn't.'

A wish which was echoed by Rose Tweedie, who stood within earshot. For the last half hour she had been trying to keep her eyes away from the zigzag—now almost deserted—on the opposite hill−side. An ineffectual attempt; ineffectual as her wish, for there, coming down at a rattling pace, was an unmistakable figure. She clasped her hands tighter on her riding−whip, impatient at her own nervousness, and went on talking to George Keene.

'No! you are not a creditable patient. You don't look a bit better than you did a week ago; I am not sure you don't look worse. And you have only three more days; you should ask father for an extension.'

Mrs. Boynton turned round quickly. 'What a splendid idea! Do, Mr. Keene! Rose will back you up, and so will I. You mustn't go before the Club ball.'

The young fellow flushed, but shook his head, with a laugh. 'And poor old Dan down in the wilderness? Not I. It is only excess of amusement, Miss Tweedie. I shall soon get over that at Hodinuggur.'

His face sobered at the very thought.

'Poor fellow,' murmured Gwen in an undertone, and he brightened up again.

'How many gloves was it to be on Bronzewing, Miss Tweedie? You promised to back her against the field, you remember,' came a voice, making Rose start. How nice he looked with his covert coat just showing the white and crimson! She hated herself for thinking such things, and yet she thought them all the same; it seemed to her, sometimes, as if she were always thinking of him; but she had given up hating herself for that—that had to be faced, and kept secret, like this strange feeling of dread. She had seen dozens of men ride steeplechases before without a flutter at her heart: but now—

'You bet? Then I lay you three to one against. You need not pay, lady−fashion,' interrupted another voice ere she had time to reply. It was Dalel Beg, swaggering along fresh from a Vice−Regal hand−shake to assert his rights in society; notably with Mrs. Boynton, much to her tall companion's horror, for he had done his best on two occasions to get the offender kicked off a racecourse. The Mirza's flabby hand was now thrust out at Rose, but the riding−whip seemed a fixture in both of hers, as it would have been had the hand offered been fair instead of dark, for there was a certain class of men with whom the girl never shook hands. Lewis Gordon, watching her with curious impatience, as he often did in society, had often been forced to confess unwillingly that her instincts in this respect were generally right. This time her refusal gave him distinct pleasure.

'I don't bet lady's−fashion,' she replied coolly; then turning to Lewis, went on in the same tone: 'I believe I did promise, Mr. Gordon; so perhaps Major Davenant wouldn't mind half−a−dozen pairs to one on the mare.'

'Double the odds wrong way up,' smiled the Major, crossing over to her side. 'You wouldn't make your fortune as a bookmaker, I'm afraid. However, I'll take it, if you let me hedge for you.'

'You don't know Bronzewing. I do.'

'You don't know the field. I do. In fact, Gordon, if I had had any idea we were to be inundated with down−country ruck, I should have advised you to scratch. They don't want outsiders.'

'They will have to thole them, as we say north of the Tweed,' replied Lewis. As a rule he was shy of admitting his Scotch birth, and the pronoun sounded sweet in Rose's ears.

'What an arrant pirate you are, Gwen,' he said in a low tone as he took the place beside her *dandy* vacated by Dalel Beg, who, after returning to her for consolation, had gone on to the tent. 'You have been betting against me, haven't you, dear?'

'Against Bronzewing, you mean. What chance can she have with the Confederation's Waler? If you were riding **it**—and I am so badly off for gloves.' As she looked at her lavender−cased fingers plaintively, she was as pretty and well−dressed a picture of gracious womanhood as the imagination could paint. The fact was mollifying and brought admiration to his eyes.

'Don't see it. Seems to me you want nothing. What a jolly shawl that is! too good, surely, to be crumbled up

that way.'

He was right. A white cashmere with a broad bordering in faint greys and lavenders is hardly the thing for a dust−cloth. Perhaps she was aware of the fact; anyhow, she coloured up.

'Not at all. I bought it for a mere song. Isn't it time you were weighing−in or something of that sort? they have been ringing a bell.'

'Directly. You see, I'm dressed and ready.'

'Yes, I see. You look so nice.'

Rose might have made the remark with far more fervour than Gwen could conjure into it, and yet the latter scored the points, for Lewis strolled off feeling less dissatisfied with life than before. Men are trivial creatures when they have to do with that trivial creature, woman.

To a large proportion of men, a horse−race is a most uninteresting affair; to the majority of women, it is a mere accessory to a misused wedding−breakfast or a somewhat spoilt *fête champêtre*. This one was no exception to the rule, and the interest of the resident racers being reduced to a minimum, there was little excitement beyond the immediate circle by the tents.

'Game little beast that of Gordon's,' remarked Major Davenant after Lewis had cantered past. 'Pity she hasn't a chance, but I'm afraid she is out−classed. By George, they are off, and she—no! That's a pity.'

A short man standing close by laughed.

'For Gordon. I know that dun beast; seen him down country; warranted to wear out the temper of any but his stable companions. Is Bronzewing keen, Miss Tweedie?'

'Very.'

'I thought so. There—back again. Gordon looks pleasant, doesn't he?'

His face certainly showed irritation, his hand did not; and as he turned the mare to face the starter again, he leant forward to pat the fine bronze neck.

There was greater interest this time as the pace slackened to a walk.

'Splendid line,' commended the Major—'now then, starter! Oh! dash the mare! No—by Jove, that was well done.'

'For the dun,' echoed the short man. 'Smart; very. Wonder how he managed it?' For as the flag fell, Bronzewing had reared straight on end, only to shoot forward with a bound which more than compensated for the delay on which the others had counted.

'Didn't you hear?' cried Rose, clasping her hands. 'It was the partridge's note did it. He—Mr. Gordon gave it. You heard, didn't you, Mr. Keene?'

'Yes! I heard.' He was as excited as she was. 'By Jove, what a sell for that dun brute! Look, there they are. He is in—right in to the posts; trust Gordon for that.'

Now to be in to the posts means something when you have to go twice round a course which follows the narrow oval of a valley. Except at the ends of the ellipse when a less clever−footed beast than Bronzewing might find trouble in the sharp curve.

'Oh! how badly that man rides,' cried Rose. 'He can't hold his horse. Ah!' She felt a wild inclination to cover her eyes—to get away—not to see; for, as the horses rose to a stone wall, a sudden swerve of his left−hand neighbour carried Lewis Gordon's foot clear out of the stirrup.

'All right, Miss Tweedie, over like a bird. But you are right. Green rides—badly.' And the short man looked at the Major comprehensively.

'Jimmy,' called the latter quickly, when the horses showed again at the end curve as they came round on the winning post for their first turn, Bronzewing fourth and ousted from her inner place by Blue−and−white, who was making the pace over the straightest bit in the course; 'get me all you can from them on the mare—in Simians. Gad! I should like to let those fellows in.'

'But she is behind, ever so far behind,' interrupted Rose, divided between regret and relief that she would not have to watch a reckless tussle at the end, with its thousand possibilities of mishap.

'There isn't a beast near her at the jumps, and if Gordon—he's saving her now, Miss Tweedie—gets the inner lap again top and bottom; it is as near a moral as racing ought to be. Lord! how she took that water! Well done, little 'un, well done!'

He was almost as excited as George, who was craning forward to catch a last glimpse of the trail of bright

colours skimming round the farthest turn behind some trees.

'By Jove! he is in again, and how Green is riding him! Stick to it, man, stick to it! Game little lady! not an inch to spare, and waltzed over it as if she had the floor to herself. They mean Blue−and−white to win; that's clear. Ah! now it's on the straight! Now Green will shoot! H'm—not much to spare in that cross. Green's in—that's an end. Blue−and−white wins, unless he makes a mistake.' Major Davenant put down his field−glasses with a sigh.

On they came; the Red−hoop and the Green almost neck and neck, close in to the posts. Keeping pace half a length behind in the clear, Blue−and−white saving breath for his awkward beast at the last hedge; behind them, a trail of colours like a pennant streaming backwards. Now they are at the sharpest corner, and a murmur rises as Bronzewing shoots ahead, making the Green give way.

'Hullo, what's that?' cries the Major; 'a foul? Did any one see it?'

There was no time for an answer as yet. Green, seeing his work over, slacks to pace, and there is nothing but an easy hedge and a couple of hundred yards galloping between the Crimson−hoop, Blue−and−white and the winning post. Inch by inch Bronzewing gives way before the swinging stride of the Waler, but she presses him hard, too hard for the last fence, easy as it is. They rise almost at the same second. It is the mare's last chance against those longer, clumsier legs, and she gains it. Blue−and−white sways in his saddle as his beast, touching the rail staggers, jumps short, and rolls over easily. Green, half a length behind, is alongside in a second, but a second too late; for Lewis Gordon wins by that second, and no more.

Rose, who for the last minute has been completely blinded by the beating of her own heart, was left alone amid feminine congratulations, the men having gone to offer theirs in person to the winner.

'Oh, Jimmy, my boy! I wish I'd said thousands,' mourned Major Davenant as he passed his pal in the outer tent.

Jimmy whistled softly. 'Just as well you didn't; they claim a foul for Green, and it looks bad. I wish you had been on. Williams and Gray are such duffers, and Van Souter'—a shrug of the shoulders completed his meaning effectually.

'A foul! Well, I must own it looked like one to me. What does Gordon say?'

'Looks black as thunder. Go inside and see. Most of the field swear to it; but it isn't like Gordon.'

There was not much judicial serenity about the inquiry which was being made in the steward's tent; nor much of the pomp and circumstance of justice either. Nothing but a bare tent, a cane−bottomed chair or two, and the weighing machine, where Lewis still sat listening to Dalel Beg, who was volunteering information. An Englishman in like position would have been told to hold his tongue; but what are vaguely termed political considerations affect the question in regard to the native nobility, especially at headquarters.

'I beg your pardon, I'm sure,' interrupted one of the judges diffidently; 'but if you will allow me—since the claim is made—perhaps Mr. Crosbie—that is, I think, your name, sir?—will kindly tell us what occurred.'

The man in green silk bowed. He was a gentlemanly−looking man, with a suspicion of past military training in his carriage.

'I regret it excessively, and I am sure it was quite unintentional on Mr. Gordon's part, but there can be no question about the foul. As most of those present can bear me out in saying, I had taken and kept the inner place fairly. Mr. Gordon was riding for it also. At the corner post his mount was too eager, and the foul occurred. So violently that, as you see, two buttons have been almost wrenched off my breeches. I quite admit that I recovered an outside place without much delay; but I beg to remind the judges that the race was lost by a second.'

'And I beg to remind the judges,' added the Blue−and−white jacket, 'that I was on a level with Mr. Crosbie and Mr. Gordon, a little farther out, and saw the whole affair. It was not Mr. Gordon's fault; but the foul was indubitable.'

'And what have you to say about it, Mr. Gordon?'

'I?' He rose quietly and went over to Green. 'I should advise Mr. Crosbie to try benzine collas. It's the best thing I know for taking paint off breeches—doesn't stain at all. By the way, Davenant, I've often told you that is a most awkward post. It's just on the angle, and if you haven't perfect control over your beast, it is almost sure to go the wrong side, as Mr. Crosbie's did, and then, if the thing is newly painted as it is to−day you—you spoil your clothes.'

He turned on his heel as he drawled out the last words and walked away.

'I utterly deny, I—I—it is impossible—' stuttered Green and Blue together.

He looked back from the door. 'Exactly so; I leave you, gentlemen, to settle how Mr. Crosbie got that red paint

on his left knee, when, according to you, he was hugging the post with his right. It is an interesting question, and I shall be glad to hear the judges' decision, when they have arrived at it.'

He was in a towering temper despite his cool words; and Mrs. Boynton felt quite a pang of alarm as he apologised curtly for not being able to wait for her, saying he was in a hurry to get home to some important work. That, however—as she noticed keenly—did not prevent him from spending five minutes beside Rose Tweedie in eager conversation. Of course, Lewis Gordon was not such a fatuous idiot as to allow the mere gain or loss of half a dozen pairs of kid gloves to affect his arrangements for the future; but it certainly affected him in the present, and Gwen was quite aware of the fact, and felt glad that the proceedings of the *pari mutuel* were strictly confidential. As she went home, listening gracefully to George Keene's adoring small−talk, her mind was full of care. Now at these periods of life when the sun stands still in the heavens, and a man acquires the art of talking about the most trivial details in a tone which is a caress, he is apt to pall, unless the caress means as much to the woman. So Gwen sent George home from the turn up to her house, and went alone through the scented pine−woods, where the long shadows lay across the path. Her face, now there was no necessity for a smile, looked haggard and anxious; utterly out of keeping with the luxury of her surroundings, and the comfort of the flower−decked verandah, where the ayah stood waiting to receive her mistress. Some one else was waiting too, in highly starched muslin and a low−wound white pugree showing a triangle of pale−pink folds above the forehead. A smirk was on his face, a wooden pen−box under his arm, and an attendant was squatting beside more boxes done up in a Manchester handkerchief.

'Mem sahiba see my thing? Gold−work, Delhi−work, Cashmir−work—all work.'

He thrust a card into her hand—

'MANOHAR LAL, FROM DELHI.'

She turned away quickly. 'I don't want anything. Ayah! how often have I told you never to let these people come?'

'Manohar Lal say he know Mem sahiba,' murmured the ayah sulkily, moving off with the wraps.

'No need to buy, Huzoor,' said the crafty lips. 'I have good things to look. Or I buy. Anything. Gold−work, silver−work, pearls. I buy three big pearls of lady in Rajpore last months. Shall I open boxes, Huzoor?'

'Yes; you can open them,' said Gwen quickly.

CHAPTER XVI

DEODARS and soft green stretches of turf, surrounded by a map of Asia in high relief; silver streaks of rivers at the bottom of the map; snowy peaks and passes at the top of the map, just as if they were set there to show comparative lengths and heights. Such was the scene from the ridge chosen out for what is called a Rajah's picnic. What Rajah or Maharajah, what Nizam or Nawab, matters not. Some one of the many feudatories who crowd to prefer their claims to something at Simla had asserted his dignity by giving a picnic to society, and society had consented to come and eat *pâté de foie gras* and drink champagne on a hill−side, at the expense of a man to whom one or other of these two things was an abomination. That is the case in a nutshell; and so long as the *pâté* was not bought cheap from a box−wallah, and the champagne was drinkable, nobody cared whether the host was or was not performing the whole duty of man in tempting his fellows to do those things which he himself considered worthy of purgatorial pains. But then, to nine−tenths of the guests the host was a mere lay figure imported into society on certain occasions, in order to give it local colour by the display of gold tissue and diamonds.

Barring the shock it gives to first principles in some minds, a Rajah's entertainment is generally pleasant enough; never more so than when it takes the form of a picnic—which, by the way, the natives translate adroitly into pâgul khâna, or 'fool's dinner.' This one was no exception to the rule. Two huge flat−roofed tents, open on all sides save for a deep valance of gay appliqué−work, and supported by fern and flower−wreathed poles, served as marquées, where a most elaborate lunch was laid out in a style worthy of the great Simla caterer. What the cost was to be per head to the unfortunate noble playing the part of host is a trivial detail. So, to him, was the lunch itself, seeing that in this particular case, the host was a Hindu of the strictest caste; too pure, too proud even to sit down at a table spread with such abhorred viands. His part consisted, therefore, in receiving the company in a Cashmir shawl tent with silver poles, yawning between the handshakes, and thereinafter, when the outcasts were safely started on the champagne and the *pâté*, jolting back joyfully in a *jhan−pan* to Simla in order to purify himself in unmentionable ways before eating his own dinner. The next day or the day after he would pay the bills, some official would be told off to congratulate him on the success of the entertainment; perhaps, if he was a great swell, to say that H— E—y had enjoyed it immensely. And then the only thing remaining to be done would be to enter the cost in the State accounts. Under what heading outsiders cannot presume to say; possibly civilisation.

But none of the guests troubled themselves about these details. The sky was blue as blue could be, the grey bloom on the spreading deodar branches glinted white in the strong light, the shadows beneath them showed black. Across the valley, contours of terraced crops round a cluster of apricot−trees marked the village sites. Blue air lay between you and them, blue air between them and the snows, blue air gave a thousand iridescent tints to the plains rolling up into the southern sky beyond the dotted ridge of Simla. And below you, drifting up the valleys like grazing sheep, were little fleecy mist−clouds, inconsequent, hopelessly astray.

'Poor things! How lost they look!' said Gwen gaily, pointing at them with her white lace parasol.

'A fellow−feeling makes us wondrous kind,' quoted one of her circle. 'Mrs. Boynton knows what it is for a heavenly being to be condemned to earth.'

'That sounds prettier than it is. An angel astray! Lewis! defend me from my friends!'

She turned to him with the prettiest air of appeal, the sweetest confidence in a regard, which to the outside world was cousinly, to these two something more. Such a bait seldom fails to rouse a man's vanity, even if it leaves his heart untouched.

'My dear Gwen,' he replied readily, 'there is no need for defence. The angel is not astray since you are here with us, and we are in Paradise.'

George Keene applauded with both hands as he sat at her feet looking out over the plains. Once more it seemed incredible that there should be such a place on God's earth as Hodinuggur.

'Well, some of us will be sitting at the gate thereof disconsolate ere long,' remarked a man leaning against a rock, with a cup of black coffee and a cigarette. 'By the way, Keene, we might share a tonga the day after to−morrow.'

'Mr. Keene is not going,' interrupted Mrs. Boynton quickly. 'No one wants him down there, and we need dancing men dreadfully. Miss Tweedie had spoken to her father about it?'

'And you?'

The question, which came almost in a whisper, was answered by a smile only; but it brought a sort of mist to George Keene's young eyes as he looked out over the plains again. The spiritual exaltation of it all was almost too much at times for the hard−headed young fellow who had clothed his own honest uprightness with a woman's softness and sweetness, in order to worship it.

Now, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Boynton had said nothing to Colonel Tweedie about the lad's leave; still, as she fully intended doing so in the course of the afternoon, her smile was perhaps excusable. What is more, she kept to her intention. Half an hour afterwards any one rash enough to do so might have interrupted a *tête−à−tête* she was conceding to the Colonel in the shade of a huge deodar tree to one side of a level stretch where two mud tennis−courts had been laid out. But no one did. A certain officialdom prevails in Simla society, and the heads of departments have recognised rights and privileges. The Colonel, however, would scarcely have admitted that he owed his good fortune to his seniority, for he felt juvenile in a new lounge suit with very baggy trousers—quite the thing for lolling about in on the grass while a pretty woman leant over the shafts of the *dandy* she was using as a seat, and asked for your opinion on a number of trivial personal questions. Yet Gwen Boynton was in earnest about it all—to judge from her eyes—as she let the conversation drift further afield.

'He is such a nice boy—one of those boys who make a woman think how delightful it would be to have a son in her old age. But he looks as if he would be the better of another week in the hills; and I suppose even **you** cannot manage that.'

He smiled condescendingly.

'The Lieutenant−Governor might object, of course.'

'Then you can! Ah! Colonel Tweedie, if you would! He really isn't fit to go down, and Mr. Fitzgerald, who is as strong as a horse, could easily stop at Hodinuggur. He wouldn't like it, of course, but it won't hurt him. Only—' She paused, looked at her companion, and shook her head gravely.

'Only?' echoed her elderly admirer, his heart, which had melted like wax at her cavalier mention of Dan, stiffening again at what might be consideration for that most ill−advised person.

'Only George won't consent to that, I'm afraid. He has such a ridiculous attachment to Mr. Fitzgerald. And I suppose it would be quite impossible to leave the place even for a few days without a really first−class man in charge. What a comfort it must be for you to have officers on whom you can rely, like Mr. Fitzgerald.'

Colonel Tweedie gave his little preparatory cough. 'No doubt, no doubt. At the same time, I am not aware that Mr. Fitzgerald's presence—er—is so—er—indispensable. The fact is, my dear Mrs. Boynton, that, owing—er—to previous occurrences, we were anxious to keep him out—er—out of the responsibility as much as possible. In fact but for his own request I should not—er—have arranged for him to take Mr. Keene's work at all. To refuse, however, would have—er—given rise to—er—unfounded comment, and so—'

She interrupted his halting mixture of dignity and desire to be at once considerate and captious with a sigh.

'Poor Mr. Fitzgerald, he has been unlucky. And I suppose if anything were to go wrong when he was there you would have to take notice of it. How dreadful for him! Perhaps, after all, it would be better for George to go back. One would need to be omnipotent to carry out all one's kindly impulses, wouldn't one, Colonel Tweedie? And we women are so helpless.'

He leant forward and laid his hand close to hers as it rested on the framework of the *dandy*. 'Unless you have a stronger arm at your disposal, as you have now—my dear lady—if only for your kindness to my daughter, and, as you say, young Keene is not quite the thing. Besides,—I—I mean you—I mean there are privileges which—'

What those privileges were remained unexplained, though Gwen, no doubt, had a shrewd guess at them, for, just at that moment Dalel Beg, having no fear of Departments before his eyes, came swaggering up in a bright−green velvet coat.

'Aha, you here! Hi, you *kitmutghar*, bring me champagne cup. Jolly, Tweedie, ain't it?' The Colonel's face belied the proposition, but the new−comer was not one of those who look for support to surroundings; he was a law unto himself only. 'You see I wear swagger clothes like you, Mrs. Boynton. Rajah Sahib old−style man, so I come as native of India to please him. He is neighbour, Mrs. Boynton, by Hodinuggur, down waste−water canal cut. You give him water, sir, he give you lakhs on lakhs.'

This time the Colonel's expression was a study, but Gwen, despite her usually keen sense of the ludicrous, did not add a smile to the Mirza sahib's crackling laugh.

'I regret,' began the head of the Department loftily, but Dalel's mind was full of one thing only, and that was

himself; his immense superiority over the Rajah−Sahib, his equality with the sahib−logues.

'Hi, kitmutghar. *Ai, soor ke butcha kyon nahin szunté ho*? (Ah, son of a pig, why don't you listen?) *Ek* glass curaçoa. Cup what you call hog−wash, eh, Tweedie? Rajah, poor chap, know nothing about cup. *Khansamah* do him in the eye, hee, hee! Poor old chappie. Gone home to do *poojah* and have baths. What rot!'

'Will you take me to get a cup of coffee?' said Gwen hastily to Colonel Tweedie. 'I won't trouble you to bring it here; it spills so in the saucer and then it drops over one's best frock.'

The courteous excuse for escape, which came quite naturally to Gwen's lips, pleased neither of her companions. The gracious instinct prompting it, which to Colonel Tweedie seemed uncalled for, was totally lost on the Mirza. He scowled after her, and muttering something as he tossed off the curaçoa, went off to bestow his favours elsewhere.

A minute or two afterwards, George Keene ran up to the empty *dandy* and pushed something under the cushion.

'She won't mind,' he said half aloud, 'and it's safer there than in the tent. Wouldn't do to lose it here, of all places in the world. All right, Markham, I'm coming! Spin for court. Rough? Rough it is. If I'd only known they were going to put me up in the doubles, I'd have come in flannels.'

With coat and waistcoat off, however, his white shirt−sleeves rolled up, showing young, white round arms, and his Cooper's Hill scarf doing duty as a belt, George looked workman−like enough to play in the impromtu match of civil against military; and being of wholesome mind and person straightway forgot the round world in the effort to keep one ball a−rolling.

The sun hung in the west above a frilled edging of lilac−tinted hills, the snows began to glisten, the valleys on either side grew fathomless as the mist rose from the streams dashing through them. On the ridge itself the deodars sent long shadows eastward, though the yellow sunshine still seemed to crisp the tufted parsley−fern among which civilisation grouped itself in cliques and sets for afternoon tea, and in which the servants, decked in gorgeous liveries for the occasion, flitted about like gay butterflies. A great content was on all; perhaps the memory of an excellent lunch lingered with the men, the gratifying consciousness of being well−dressed with the women, but the most of them felt that it was good to be there, transfigured, as it were, on a hill−top, forgetful even of Simla, whose shingled roofs showed on a jagged outline to the south. Yet Gwen Boynton, who, as a rule, would have shown at her best in such a scene, a situation, a society, pleaded a headache as an excuse for getting away early; so that when George came back to where he expected to find her *dandy* , she was already on her way back to Simla.

'What is it, Mr. Keene?' asked Rose, who was mounting her pony close by.

'Oh, nothing; only I put my watch and keys under the cushion of Mrs. Boynton's *dandy*, and now she has gone off. If you see her on the road, you might tell her. I have to play a return match—bad luck to it!'

'You don't look very unhappy,' laughed the girl, as he finished the task of putting her up by professional little tugs at her habit to make it sit wrinkle−less. 'And oh! by the way, it's all right about your leave. Father has arranged it; he told me so just now.'

'How good you are! If I could only leave my interests in your hands, always, the future would have no terrors for me, as they say in the melodramas. Good−bye, Miss Tweedie, till dinner−time, and—you won't forget about the watch, will you? I don't want Mrs. Boynton—'

'I'll take care she doesn't make off with it,' interrupted Rose, wilfully unsympathetic, as she moved away at a walk. A hundred yards or so along the broad ride—which had been cut for the occasion in the hill−side from the high road to the picnic place—a zigzag bridle−path led down into the valley. Rose had never ridden that way, but she knew that, once at the stream below her, a recognised short cut would take her direct to her destination. At the worst, she might have to dismount and lead her horse for a while, and there was something decidedly fascinating in a downward path at all times, more especially when every step showed something new stealing into vision out of a blue mist. In addition, she would avoid the rush of people, and of late Rose Tweedie had found a large proportion of her fellow−creatures very tiresome; perhaps because humanity is only gifted with a certain capacity for liking, and she expended too much of hers on one person. The first mile or so fully justified her choice; the path, if steep, was safe, and, after passing over a small bridge, she was about to follow a track, apparently leading down the right side of the ravine to the road below, when she heard a faint shout behind her to the left. With her experience of the Himalayas, she stopped instantly, knowing she must be on the wrong track, and retraced her

steps, expecting, after a few turns, to come on the shepherd or coolie, who, having seen her from above, had raised the warning cry. Instead of this she came on Lewis Gordon, riding at what was really a breakneck pace for the style of the path. He pulled up suddenly.

'Miss Tweedie! you don't mean to say it was you I saw on the other bank? I had half a mind not to shout, for a man with a clever pony could do it easily. What a piece of luck for you I did!'

She flushed up at once. 'I'm afraid I don't see it in that light. I've no doubt I could have done it as easily as a man, and it is annoying to be brought back half a mile out of your road for nothing.'

'Unless that road happens to be a mile longer to begin with, as it is in this case,' replied Lewis coolly. 'But you really ought not to have tried the short cut alone. Your father, of course, had arranged to meet the Lieut.−Governor, and Keene couldn't get away; but if you had asked me, I should have been delighted to do my duty—I suppose you won't let me say pleasure; that is reserved for my juniors.' There was a certain snappishness in the conclusion of his speech which somehow appeased Rose's wrath.

The futility of many proverbs has scarcely a better example than that one which sets the orthodox number for anger at two, when almost universally it is either one or three. For the spectacle of another man losing his temper is almost sure to soothe the first offender, unless dispassionate humanity reappears in the shape of a spectator. So Rose said sweetly that he was always very kind, and she certainly would have asked him to pioneer her, had she anticipated any difficulty; since no one could give a better lead over than Bronzewing and her rider. And then, having reached the valley and a broader path, they dawdled along it at a walk beside the very edge of a stream splashing and dashing over its pebbly bed, and curving round tiny meadows just large enough to serve as a stand for some huge walnut tree. The soft mist they had seen from above, now they were in it, only intensified the blueness of the shadows or the gold of the sunlight following the contours of the hills. Down in the hollows the maidenhair−fern grew like a forest, out in the open great turk's−cap lilies rose higher than the blue and white columbines, and in every cranny the potentilla hung out its bunches of scarlet, tasteless, strawberry−like fruit.

Side by side they strolled for a mile or more, along a level grassy path, as if there were no such thing as effort in the world, as if civilisation and comfort, dinner and bed, all the necessaries of life in fact, did not lie two thousand feet or so over their heads.

'This way, I'm afraid,' said Lewis at last, turning his pony into a road joining the path at right angles; an engineered road with drains and retaining walls, scientific, uninteresting, guiltless of ups and downs, facing the ascent evenly.

'Oh dear!' cried Rose in tones of regret. And then they both laughed. But the peace of the valley went with them, so that their gay chatter echoed up the zigzagging road to where glimpses of a *dandy* toiling on ahead showed through the trees. Its occupant looking downwards could see them far below, the girl in front, the man behind, their voices becoming clearer and clearer, until just at the last turn where the zigzag merged into the high road, each careless word was distinctly audible as they came scrambling up below the retaining wall, which at this point carried the branch to its junction with the main road. Gwen Boynton's hand closed tight on the shaft of her *dandy*, partly in sympathy with her thoughts, partly because the coolies swung round the last corner sharply. The wall, which was not two feet high at the first turn sloped rapidly up to some fifteen feet before ending in the one which supported the big road. As is usually the case, it was built in steps or terraces giving the required slant of support. Just as the *dandy* was at the turn of the road a horseman, followed by two mounted orderlies, came clattering along it; perhaps this frightened Rose's pony; perhaps the sudden swerve of the *dandy* to get out of the new−comer's way just as the girl was about to pass it, actually forced her mount into shying and backing. Anyhow, it did. There was a struggle, a rattle of stones over the edge, a slip, then a jerk back as the beast found a momentary foothold for its hind legs on the narrow step some two feet down. A cry of dismay broke from the spectators—for with the next movement a fall backwards seemed inevitable—but it ended in one of relief, as Rose wheeled the pony clear round with swift decision, and giving it a cut with her whip leapt into the road below. It was a bold stroke for life instead of death, and as the pony came on its knees with the shock, it seemed for an instant as if both it and its rider must go rolling over and over down the side of the hill. The next they had both struggled to their feet, and stood quivering all over; but safe and absolutely unhurt. Lewis, who had pulled up at the corner aghast with impotent horror, was back beside them, almost incoherent in his relief and admiration.

'And—and—I only had a snaffle,' said Rose with a tremulous laugh not far removed from tears. She felt it imperative, if those were to be controlled, that they should descend to commonplace at once, being aided in this

by Dalel Beg, who having reined in at the sight of a disaster for which he was partly responsible, was now standing by Gwen's *dandy* oblivious of apology.

'Shâhbâsh. Well done indeed. Pretty! pretty. You are rippin' rider, Miss Tweedie. If you race, you win like Gordon. Aha! Gordon. I congratulate you for lucky accident of paint. That Crosbie take me in also. He swore it was foul, Mrs. Boynton, and I thought I saw foul—you believe that, eh, Gordon?'

Lewis, to whom the temporising decision of the judges, that foul or no foul, Mr. Crosbie was out of it by having been at the wrong side of some post at some part of the course, had been irritating, scowled up at the group above.

'I am sure you saw foul,' he replied. 'Now, Miss Tweedie, if you please. The beast is all right and the sooner you get home for a quiet rest the better.'

He was so occupied with the shock to her that he scarcely seemed to realise that it must have been one to his cousin also, though Rose as she passed paused to say that she was absolutely unhurt and that it was nobody's fault but her own for riding an unsteady pony on the hills. They had gone on nearly half a mile before she recollected George Keene's message.

'I don't see the necessity for going back at all,' said Lewis crossly, 'but since you are so determined to obey orders, I'll go. If you ride on at a reasonable pace I'll catch you up again in no time— What was it he left in her *dandy*?'

'His watch,' called Rose after him.

As he galloped back his temper was none of the best. He objected to a great many things. To George's familiarity with Gwen, to Rose's familiarity with George, and as he came on the *dandy*, to Dalel Beg's familiarity with it; for the Mirza had dismounted and was walking along with his hand on the shaft—just like an Englishman. The sight enlarged the focus of Lewis's displeasure, making it include Gwen.

'It was only a message from Keene,' he said curtly in reply to her welcoming smile. 'He asked Miss Tweedie to tell you, but she forgot; so I came back. He put his watch in your *dandy* to keep it safe.'

'His watch!' echoed Gwen, feeling at the same time among the cushions. 'Yes! here it is. Lewis! what am I to do with it? Won't you take it?' For, without drawing rein he had turned his pony and was riding off. He looked back carelessly.

'Keep it, I suppose, till Keene comes to claim it. That won't be long.'

As he rounded the next curve in the road, Mrs. Boynton and Dalel Beg were left face to face with George Keene's watch between them. It had a Chubb's key attached to the chain, and Dalel Beg's eyes, as he stood beside the *dandy*, clothed in a green velvet coat and European rowdyism, were attached to the key. Gwen's were on Lewis's retreating figure, and there was real jealousy and anger at her heart.

An hour and a half later, George, galloping the hired pony along the Mall after the manner of very young men on hired ponies, pulled up at the side of Mrs. Boynton's *dandy* in pleased surprise.

'I'm so glad!' she exclaimed before he could say a word; 'there is your watch.'

As she handed it over to him their eyes met, and his took an expression of concern.

'I'm afraid your headache is very bad. You should have been at home hours ago.'

'On the contrary, it is better,' she replied quickly. 'I came by the low road and dawdled. Besides, I had to call at the dressmaker's, and she kept me waiting for ages. By the way, Colonel Tweedie says you are to have another week's leave—'

'So his daughter told me. How good you both are to me! Only, Hodinuggur will be worse than ever—afterwards.'

He would have liked to say 'after Paradise,' but he refrained. She gave a nervous little laugh.

'Don't think of it yet. I hate thinking. It does no good, for one never knows what mayn't happen. You are safe for a week, anyhow.'

As she lay awake that night in defiance of her own wisdom, thinking over the matter in all its bearings, she told herself that he was safe for more than a week. Every one was safe. At the worst, Dan might lose his promotion, but even that would be no unmixed evil if it forced him into independence. Indeed, if he knew of her worries, of the snare laid for her, of the covert hints about an *esclandre* involving both him and George Keene which were wearing her to death, he would gladly sacrifice something for the sake of safety. If by any chance the sluice were to be opened during that week of absence, how it would simplify the whole business! And, after all,

what had she done? nothing. Surely a woman might go and see her dress− maker sometimes and leave her *dandy* outside? Was it her fault if the dressmaker lived in a house close to the bazaar in full view of Manohar Lal's shop? Was it her fault if the coolies slipped away to smoke their hookahs? Was it her fault that the key of the sluice was behind the cushions of the *dandy*, and that Dalel Beg knew it was there? What had she done? What had she said? Nothing. Had she not set aside the Mirza's suggestion that she should look in on Manohar Lal's new jewellery on her way home, by saying that she had no time, that she must go to the dressmaker's? Had she not hitherto refused to listen to hints or threats? Had she not even defied Manohar Lal? And now, would it really be her fault if any one had taken advantage of her absence? Gwen turned her face into the pillow and moaned helplessly, telling herself that never was woman before so beset by misfortune. She had meant no harm, yet George had given her the pot, and Dan had taken the jewels to Manohar Lal's. There was no proof, of course, but the *esclandre* would kill her, and that must be averted at all costs.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. BOYNTON was physically incapable of being constant to anything disagreeable, even to her own thoughts. The love of ease which came uppermost in her made it impossible; so, as she sat waiting for George Keene on the following evening, she had forgotten the vague remorses and regrets which had assailed her the night before. All she chose to remember was the fact that both George and Dan would be away from Hodinuggur **if anything happened**. What more could any one ask from one in her position? She made a pretty picture in the pretty room. A wood fire blazed on the hearth, a scent of English flowers filled the air. Everything, from the books on the table to the graceful figure in white satin and pearls on the wicker chair, told a tale of delicacy and refinement, of what it is the fashion now−a−days to call culture. On the mantel−piece, among a Noah's Ark of china beasts, and supported by a placid brass Buddha, George Keene's sketch of the dust−storm, the *kikar*−tree, and the rat−hole, struck a dissonant note in the general harmony; but Gwen's ears were too much attuned to content for her to notice it. Briefly, she was full of solid relief; not only because escape from a tight corner seemed assured, but that such relief had come in the nick of time. For Lewis Gordon had been over to tea, saying things which made it imperative that something definite should be settled about Dan's promotion and prospects. Saying, for instance, that he was growing sick of doing orderly duty at the Tweedies' house, and wanted one of his own. That she needed a firm hand to prevent her wasting her pension on *pari mutuels*, and beneath these jesting complaints she had seen real discontent and a determination for change in the future. And was he not right? Her whole mind gave its assent to his wisdom. What an unspeakable relief it would be to find herself back in a straight path; not only for her own sake, but for the sake of others—of those two especially whom she had implicated all unwittingly. But for them she would have defied the plotters; but for them she would never have stooped to flatter Dalel Beg, and take shawls and ornaments at nominal prices from Manohar Lal; to do any of those things, in short, with which their covert hints had forced her to rivet the chain which bound her to deceit. At least so she told herself, but then she was a proficient in the art of playing the thimble trick on her own mind, and, as often as not, was really incapable of saying where the motive power of her own actions lay. So, as she sat in the wicker chair waiting for George Keene, she felt quite virtuous over the sacrifice of her own honourable instincts on the shrine of friendship. Even if **anything did happen**, all real blame would lie with Colonel Tweedie for allowing both George and Dan to be absent; but what was blame to the head of a Department? It slipped from him like water from a duck's back. And then, in regard to the water itself? Even Lewis allowed that the poor people might just as well have it as not—

'Keene sahib *salaam deta*,' said the servant, interrupting her soliloquy of smooth things. She rose with outstretched hand and kindly smile.

'Punctual as ever. We shall be in time for number two—' then she paused abruptly in careless surprise. George, who had been told off as escort during the three−mile *dandy* ride to the Town Hall, was still in his light morning suit. Smart enough in his new shirts and ties, and with a carnation in his buttonhole, but still scarcely in the costume for a bachelors' ball. 'What is the matter? Aren't you coming?' she asked quickly as he stood silent yet disturbed, for the sight of her always had the nature of an electric shock upon him.

'To see you so far, of course. To the ball? I'm afraid not. You see I have to start to−night.'

'Start? Where?'

'For Hodinuggur; where else?' He spoke lightly, but his face contradicted his tone. When is it a light matter to leave Paradise?

'Nonsense!' broke in Gwen sharply, startled out of a save negation. 'You must not go.'

'Must, I'm afraid,' he echoed, and his voice was a trifle unsteady. 'You see,' he went on more confidently, 'I ought never to have taken that offer of extra leave. I knew it at the time, but I thought Dan would stop, and the temptation— However, I'm off now.'

'Now?' she echoed in her turn, still lost in her surprise.

'To−night I mean. Of course I have no chance of a tonga, so I must go by dhooli. It is a bore, but it can't be helped.'

The phrase seemed to bolster up his manliness, and he smiled at her. Such a pleasant−faced boy! so clean, so wholesome, so full of promise for the future. A pang shot through Gwen's heart at the sight of him and roused

quick opposition to unlucky chance.

'But why? It isn't as if you were keeping him—I mean Mr. Fitzgerald. We settled all that; he goes back to Rajpore all the same.'

'So Gordon told me this afternoon. That is why I must return—the place can't be left alone, of course.' As he stood leaning against the mantelpiece his eye caught his own sketch, and he took it up half mechanically. 'To think I shall be back in that hole the day after to−morrow,' he said with a short laugh. He felt very sore, yet determined to face his pain in dignified fashion. 'Meanwhile,' he added, 'you must not be late. Is that your cloak?'

The futility of being tactful, even for your most familiar friends, was being borne in upon Gwen Boynton with the remembrance of her own certainty that Dan Fitzgerald's return to Rajpore must be necessary to the lad's acceptance of the leave. And here he was declaring it to be the stumbling−block! The thought sapped the very foundation of her general security, and made the results which this change in his plans might produce in hers strike her confusedly. She set aside the wrap he held out, with quite a tremulous hand.

'You are very foolish. Nobody wants you to go. Even Dan—'

'Perhaps,' he interrupted, feeling set up, as it were, by her evident regret. 'But, if anything were to go wrong, you know, I should never forgive myself.'

The words were to a certain extent quite meaningless to him; he did not even seriously contemplate the possibility they suggested and yet they roused her fears, her regrets.

'But if anything were to go wrong,' she answered, forgetting caution in her eagerness, 'it would be better you should be away. Surely you must see that it would be better for you both to be away—if—if **anything should happen**.'

He smiled indulgently. 'But nothing can happen if I am there. And it means such a lot to Dan. I think I told you that he is engaged to a girl—'

'Yes! yes! I know; I know. But, as I said, if I were the girl—' She broke off hurriedly, then began again. 'George, what has that to do with the question? Nothing will happen, of course, and then you will have lost your pleasure for nothing. Don't go! It is foolish. It is unkind—when we all want you to stay—when I want you—I do indeed—you will stay, won't you, George?—just to please me.'

To do her justice, she seldom stooped to use her own personal charm as she did then, wilfully; but the case was urgent—the boy must not go. George stared at her incredu− lously for a moment. 'Don't,' he said in a low voice; 'please don't.'

'But it is true, George,' she went on, laying her hand on his arm. 'I do want you to stay; I do indeed.'

His hand met hers suddenly, almost unconsciously, to fall away from it again in a gesture of quick renunciation.

'No! no!' he began in the same low tones, 'it isn't true—how can it be true?' Then his whole nature seemed to cast reserve aside, and his voice rose passionately. 'Why should you care? I have never thought you could—never—I swear to you never! How could I? Do you not see it is only what you are to me, not what I am to you? What does that matter? But for the other—for what you have been, and are, and will be all my life?—Ah! that is different—Yet you know that! well enough—you must know—for I can't tell it—not even to you.'

And there, English boy as he was, she saw him on his knee stooping to kiss the hem of her garment. It was cut in the latest fashion, full round the edge, and bordered by pearls of great size. They might have been of great price also—the Hodinuggur pearls, for instance—and George been none the wiser. He saw nothing but a blaze of light through the open gates of heaven showing him a woman, transfigured, glorified? And she? There was nothing before her eyes save a boy at her feet—a very ordinary boy, whose every−day admiration she had accepted carelessly; yet it was she who, covering her face with her hands, shrank back as if blinded.

'Don't,' she cried in sharp accents of pain. 'You don't know—I—I don't like it.'

He was on his feet again in an instant, blushing, confused. 'I—I beg your pardon,' he stammered. 'I don't know what induced me to—to behave like—like a fool.'

In sober truth he did not, being all unused to self−analysis, and far too young to understand his own instinctive recoil from the cheap cajolery which had caused his outburst. But she was older; she understood. He would not let her stoop, and yet—ah, God! how low she had stooped already! So the emotion she had wantonly provoked in him caught her and swept her from her feet.

'Oh, George!' she cried, coming a step nearer and thrusting her hands into his as if to hold him fast and make

him listen. 'It was a mistake! I meant no harm—no harm to any one—least of all to you.'

'No harm!' he echoed blankly. 'What harm have you done?'

She looked at him, realising her own imprudence, yet for all that not sufficiently mistress of herself for caution. A worse woman than she might have kept silence; but she could not. The shame, the dread of betraying the lad who trusted her so utterly forced her on.

'Don't ask, George!' she pleaded. 'I can't tell you—indeed there is nothing to tell. Only you must not go down to Hodinuggur now. Believe me, it is better you should not. I can give you no reason, but it is so. Don't go, George, for my sake.'

'For your sake,' he echoed, still more blankly. 'Why? I don't understand—Mrs. Boynton, I—' He paused; his hand went up in a fierce gesture, and came down in still fiercer clasp on the mantelpiece. His eyes left her face, shifting their startled, incredulous gaze to his own grim jest leaning against the brass Buddha. 'Unless—unless—'

There was a dead silence.

'If there is anything to tell,' he said at last, 'tell it me for God's sake; it would be better—than this. Why am I to stay?—for your sake.'

Tell! How could she tell the horrible truth; and yet if he knew all he might be able to help. Then the need of support, the craving for sympathy, which at all times make it hard for a woman in trouble to keep her own counsel, fought against the evasion suggested by caution.

'Oh, George! I meant no harm—I did not, indeed.' The weak appeal for mercy, which presages so many a miserable confession, struck cold to the lad's heart. He walked over to the table and flung himself into a chair, hiding his face in his clasped hands.

'You had better tell me everything,' he said in a muffled voice. 'Then I shall know what to do—don't be afraid—it—it won't make any difference.'

Once more his words roused her self−scorn and made her forget herself for a time. 'But it must make a difference, I want it to make a difference,' she cried hotly, crossing to the table in her turn, and seating herself opposite him. 'Yes! I will tell you. It is the only thing to be done now.'

She was never a woman given to sobs and tears, and even through the shame of it all, there was a relief in telling the tale.

'Yes! yes!' he said once, interrupting that ever recurring plea of her own innocence of evil intent, 'of course you meant no harm. So you took the jewels and sold them to Manohar Lal for six thousand rupees.'

The fact, recounted in his hard, hurt voice, seemed to strike her in its true light for the first time, and she looked up wildly from the resting−place her head had found upon her bare crossed arms.

'Did I?' she asked, pushing the curls from her forehead. 'Yes, I suppose I did. It seems incredible now. Oh, George, what shall I do? what shall I do?'

It did seem incredible, and yet his fears as to what she might yet have to tell him, proved his credence of what he had already heard.

'You had better go on,' he answered dully. 'I can't say what is to be done till I have heard all.'

The sound of his own voice shocked him. Was it possible that he was sitting calmly listening to such a story from her lips and asking her to go on? The curse of the commonplace seemed to settle upon him, depriving him even of his right to passionate emotion.

'Is that all?' he asked wearily, when she had told him of everything save the empty *dandy* waiting outside the dressmaker's shop. His question came more from the desire to help her along should there be more to tell than from curiosity or fear. Since, from the very beginning, he had been vexedly conscious of his own relief in remembering that she had returned his watch and chain before she had even reached home.

The query, however, roused in her a sudden fierce resentment against her own humiliation. Every syllable of that story, now that it was told, seemed an outrage on that love of smooth things which was her chief characteristic, and a sort of vague wonder at her own confidence made her answer swiftly.

'That is all I know. Is it not enough?' After all, it was true; what more was there to tell save the barest possibilities?

Her reply left George face to face with action, yet he sat on silent, unable even to speak. At last he rose, and crossing to where she leant face downwards over the table, stood beside her with quivering lips. 'I am sorry,' he began, then stopped before the fatuity of his own words.

'Do you think I am not sorry too?' she broke in recklessly, raising herself to look him full in the eyes. 'I wish I were dead—if that would help; but it won't. Something must be done; and done at once. George! Why should you go down? To stay is so simple, and it will hurt no one—believe me, it is best—best for us all.'

She was back to the position she had taken up before her appeal to his passion had recoiled upon herself, but he could not follow her so far, and he gave a bitter laugh.

'For you and for me, no doubt. But for Dan? Remember what the possible loss of promotion means to him. Besides, I have promised. No! I must go down, that much is certain.'

'And after?'

For the life of him he could not tell. He seemed unable to think of any course of action save the palpably proper one of going straight to the Chief and telling him of the plot laid against the sluice−gate. His instinct for this remaining clear and well defined amid all the confusion. As he stood silent, almost sullen, she laid her hand quickly on his arm. 'You will not be rash, George—for my sake you will not—'

'Whatever I do will be for your sake,' he said unsteadily.

'And you must not be angry with me. Indeed and indeed, I meant no harm at first, and afterwards I was so frightened; so afraid for you all. Oh, don't be angry with me, George.'

He set her hand aside with a hopeless gesture, and turned away to hide the tears in his eyes. She did not understand, and a great dumbness was upon him. He could say nothing. After all, what was there to say? She had done this thing, meaning no harm, and he must save her, and himself, and Dan from the consequences, somehow. He took out his watch mechanically and looked at the time. Barely ten o'clock! So it was possible to destroy heaven and earth in half an hour!

'It is time you were going,' he said, in quite a common−place tone. 'I can see you so far. You had better go. Gordon—and the others—might wonder.'

It was the first time he had ever hinted at the supposition that some definite tie existed between her and her cousin; this, and his cynical acceptance of the fact that in the tragedy of life action must be swayed by the desire of the spectators as much as by the emotions of the actors themselves, brought home to Gwen her crime against the boy's youth, and for the first time she broke into a sob.

'Oh, George! why did I do it? why did I do it?'

Why, indeed? A pitiable thing, surely, to stand silent without an answer. Pitiable also for the woman, forced by considerations into self−control. Into bathing her face, possibly powdering it, certainly re−arranging the pretty artful curls, and so setting off through the dark night to the Town Hall, as if nothing had happened. For what loss of liberty is comparable to that entailed on the possessor of a fringe which will come out of curl, even with the damp of tears?

The first clouds of the coming monsoon were drawn over the heads of the hills like an executioner's cap, and George, riding the hired pony behind the *dandy*, felt as if he were following the funeral of a faith condemned to death. A dreary little procession this, despite its goal, as it wound its way between the dark chasm of the valleys on the one side and the dark shadow of the hills on the other. And then, like some enchanted palace set between earth and sky, that pile upon the ridge sending long beams of light and fitful snatches of dance−music across the ravines came into view; so familiar, yet so strange. So were the twinkling lamps, the crowd of *rickshaws* and *dandies* blocking up the angles and arches, the red carpet in the porch, the red streak of baize climbing up the white stairs.

He kept that pearl−edged hem of her garment from the dust till she reached them.

'Have you settled what you are going to do?' she asked in a low voice, as he held out his hand to say good−bye. He shook his head.

'I'll settle it somehow, you needn't be afraid.'

'I am not afraid. But, if the worst comes to the worst, I will not let others suffer for my fault. So be careful—for my sake.'

'Whatever I do will be for your sake—you know that.'

He stood watching her go up the stairs; up and up, until the last trail of that hem disappeared amid the coloured lamps and flowers. That was the end of it all!—of all save Hodinuggur and the desire to kill somebody. First of all, however, there must be safety for her; and that might be secured by money. During that three miles' ride his thoughts had been busy over possibilities, and one of them made him turn the hired pony's nose towards Manohar

Lal's shop instead of homewards. There was no power in India like the power of rupees, he thought; and they—with the club still open and half a dozen young fellows as reckless as oneself ready to back the chance of one living to pay just debts—were not difficult to borrow for a month or two. Especially when there was something—not much—but still a few hundred pounds or so to come when the dear old governor— George choked down a sob in a curse at the hired pony for stumbling over the ill−paved alley.

The dawn had broken when the patient beast pulled up for the last time by the verandah of Colonel Tweedie's house. A drowsy servant dozed against the long coffin−like dhooli, the bearers crouched outside, nodding in a circle round a solitary hookah.

'The Huzoor having lost chance of the mail, may perhaps delay till eve,' suggested the half−roused torch−bearer, mechanically corking up his useless bottle of oil at the sight of the growing glow in the east.

George, his face flushed yet haggard, stood for an instant looking over the pine woods to where, had the light been stronger, he might have seen the angle of a little house among the trees. After all, why should he not stop now, if only to see her gratitude? Twelve hours' delay was not much, especially when she was safe. Why need that be his last sight of her going up the stairs with the pearls—pearls!—

An hour afterwards, when the sun tipped over the lower hills to make the morning glories, festooned from rock to rock, open their eyes, they opened them upon the coffin−like dhooli going rapidly down hill to the accompaniment of shuffles and grunts, and recurring protestations that the sahib was '*do mun puccka*.' If the heaviness of heart could have been measured, George might have weighed a ton.

Even at the best of times the *descensus avernus* from the cool hills to the hot plains is never easy, and in this case paradise lay behind, purgatory in front.

'I am so sorry Mr. Keene has gone,' said Rose Tweedie at breakfast. 'I shall miss him dreadfully.' Lewis Gordon's eyebrows went up superciliously.

'No doubt; but he was right to go, in more ways than one.'

Colonel Tweedie, busy over a virtuous plate of porridge and milk which in some mysterious way he regarded as a sign of youth, gave his preliminary cough.

'I scarcely agree with you, Gordon. In my opinion there is—er—a savour—of—of insubordination; or, not to speak so strongly—a—a want of respect, in this sudden departure. Of course, the zeal and the—the desire to do his duty—are pleasing, very pleasing in so young a man. At the same time, a little more confidence in—er—the judgment of—'

Mr. Gordon wasn't thinking of that, father,' interrupted the girl, with her grey eyes showing some scorn for both her companions; 'he meant to imply that George—Mr. Keene—was better away from Simla.'

'Your perspicacity does you credit, Miss Tweedie; I did mean it. He has been going rather fast, and will be none the worse of saving up some more rupees at Hodinuggur.'

'If he had the money to spend, I don't see why he shouldn't spend it in having a good time,' she retorted quickly. 'He won't ask you to pay the bills, will he?'

'Hope not, I'm sure; but the bearer brought quite a little pile of them to me this morning by mistake.'

Rose bit her lip. 'Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell your man to put them back into Mr. Keene's room. I'll forward them when I write. Are you coming with me to the Grahams' this afternoon, father?'

But Colonel Tweedie was not to be diverted from the Head−of−the−Department frown he had been preparing.

'I am sorry to hear it. To say the least, it is bad taste to—to—'

'Leave I.O.U's instead of P.P.C's,' remarked Lewis flippantly. 'But really, sir, I don't see how he could help it, after all. He had to go in such a hurry.'

'I deny the necessity,' continued the Colonel pompously. 'I fail to see any just cause for setting his opinion against that of—of his elders and superiors.'

'Unless he had private reasons of his own,' suggested his daughter.

'My dear Rose, a public servant can have no private reasons.'

There was an epigrammatic flavour about the remark which, to the Colonel's ears, completely covered its absolute want of sense. He felt vaguely that he had said something clever, and that it might be as well to let it close the subject, which he did by answering the previous question as to whether he would go to the Grahams'. Certainly, if it did not rain; but the barometer was falling fast, and a telegram had come to the office that morn−ing to say the monsoon had broken with unusual violence at Abu. It might be expected north at any moment. On

which the two men fell to talking about dams and escapes, inundations, cuts, and such like things, while Rose sat silent, indignant with Lewis, yet disturbed at the confirmation his hints gave of her own fears. George had been reckless, there could be no doubt of that. Had not one of her partners last night told her that he had left George playing poker at the Club but half an hour before? George who had declared he had not time to put in an appearance at the ball!

When breakfast was over she went into the lad's empty room for the bills, and took the opportunity of giving a housewifely glance round to see if nothing had been left behind or taken away in the hurry. The former, certainly, for there was the bottom drawer quite full;—old shirts and ties, a rather battered pot−hat, and beneath the whole a picture.

She stood looking at it blankly. What a very odd coincidence! The girl of her dream! The girl with the quaint dress and the Ayôdhya pot clasped to her breast. Why had George brought it up to Simla and never showed it to any one? Why, when the pot was stolen, had he said nothing about the girl? though, on the other hand, she herself had kept silence about her dream. She puzzled over it for some time; at last, finding certainty on but one point—namely, that for some reason or another George had wished to keep the picture secret—she took it away to her own room. For she was of those who regard unspoken wishes on the part of a friend to be quite as binding as any they may express.

Just about the same time Gwen Boynton, still in her bed, was looking at something else George had left behind him, but this had only been an envelope carefully addressed to her. It contained two pieces of paper signed by Manohar Lal. One was a receipt for a diamond necklace, on which Rs. 6000 had been lent. The other, of later date, giving a quittance in full for the same sum plus interest.

How simple! Why had she never thought of such plan before? But where could she have raised the money necessary to buy freedom? Besides—she buried her face among the pillows in vain desire to shut out the conviction which rushed in on her, as she recognised that if the plotters had gained what they wanted from the empty *dandy* outside the dressmaker's house, they would naturally be quite ready to deal with George and take money for a security they were already pledged to give. Which, in fact, they would have given, since the canons regulating bribery in India are strict in regard to value returned for value received. Every penny, therefore, of the money George must have paid for these papers, was so much clear unexpected gain to Manohar Lal **if the little plotters had already attained their object**.

Still she was safe, and even if anything happened nobody could blame George. Now she had had time to consider the whole bearings of the matter she told herself such blame was impossible; while as for Dan—! If he would only leave Government service and make money, she was ready to marry him to−morrow! She had woven a conscience−proof garment for herself out of the old hair−splitting arguments long before George's dhooli had reached the level plain. When it did, the clouds had banked themselves against the higher hills, shutting out the boy's farewell glance. As he climbed into the country gig in which forty miles of dusty road had to be covered, the barometer was falling fast, and the driver remarked cheerfully, that when the rain came, the cholera would increase. It had been bad at the third stage that day, and one of the coolies belonging to the Government bullock train had died on the road about five miles farther on. The sahib might perhaps still see the body lying there.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE last twelve hours before the advancing rains break over your particular portion of the fiery furnace!—who can describe them? Who, having once endured them, can need description as an aid to memory? The world one incarnate expectation, blistering, parched, like the tongue of Dives. The heavenly drop of water for which you long, squandered on the hot air, moist with a vanguard of vapour, so that the breath you draw is even as the breath you exhale. If indeed you breathe at all; if indeed by sensation of touch or temperature you can differentiate yourself from the sodden heat of all things, or get rid of the conviction that, like the devils in a still hotter place, you are an integral part of the show!

And Hodinuggur on this sodden July day had small hope of future improvement to lighten the burden of the present, for it stood on the edge of the rainless tract, in the debatable land of meteorological reporters. Not more than a shower or two from that South−westerly column of cloud was due to bring up its scanty average of rainfall, which came, for the most part, from electrical dust−storms and such like turbulent, undisciplined outbreaks. So the heat lay over it hopelessly, and even the peasant patiently awaiting the return of the smith to mend his ploughshare, did so more from habit than from any expectation of needing the tool in any immediate future. After all, waiting was his chief occupation in life. Waiting for something to grow, or for something to be reaped; waiting for some one to be born or for some one to die. So, the smith being absent over some work for the palace, why should he not be waited for even though the sun was setting red behind the heat−haze? For one thing, it would be cooler to tramp home with the ploughshare over your shoulder. A tall, grave, bearded man was the peasant, sitting with his back against the wall, his hands hanging listlessly between his knees. The painted girl on the balcony above looked down and told him the news, calling him father, respectfully. No question of her trade here, with this dweller in the fields; only a pious 'God keep us all,' ere she became voluble over Shumshere the zither−player's seizure by cholera that morning as he lay fighting quails in the street. Doubtless he was dying, now the sun was setting; any moment the wail might arise from that seventh arch down the colonnade where he lodged. Whereat the long beard below wagged slowly over the fact that the Great Sickness had visited the hamlet also, bidding a crony or two wait no longer for anything; not even for ploughshares or rain. And then to solace themselves both courtesan and peasant quenched their thirst on huge chunks of water−melon, bought for a cowrie from the heap of green and red fruit which had just been shot off a donkey's back into the dust at one corner of the Mori gate; the donkey meanwhile browsing unrebuked at the edges of the pile.

'Ari! father! There it is. Did I not say so?' remarked the painted one, pausing, as a low moan rising to a banshee skirl broke the sodden stillness of the air.

'Râm! Râm!' ejaculated the peasant piously. 'It is bad year for sure, rain or no rain.'

So, having finished his water−melon, he broke a morsel of opium from the lump he carried in a fold of his turban, rolled it under his tongue and dozed off, still propped up against the wall. And the sunset faded leaving the world hotter than ever, though in the crypt beneath the staircase of the Mori gate the air was cooler than outside, despite the fire which flickered fitfully over the blackened arches. It flickered also on the silver bracelets circling Châ ndni's round brown arm as she lay curved across a string bed, her jingling feet swaying softly in tune with the tinsel fan she waved above the bold outlines of throat and bosom. And the fan, in its turn, kept time with the flicker of the fire, and the wheezing breath of a smith's bellows rousing the charcoal embers into dancing flame, or letting them die down to a dull red glow.

'Thou art long, oh lohar−ji!' she said, looking backwards at the bare bronze figure crouching before a low anvil. 'All these hours to make a key—when thou hast a mould before thine eyes, too!'

'True, oh mother! but the key is not as our father's keys, and the hand lacks cunning in new patterns. Lo! I had made one for the treasure−chest of kings in half the time. But there! 'tis done. See how it fits its bed like the seed of a pomegranate! God send it may do its work fairly and well!'

'God send it may, for thy sake, smith−ji,' she replied carelessly. 'Here, take the rupees, and have a care no key is forged to unlock thy tongue regarding this matter. The Diwan is old, but there are others behind him, and behind him again, and Châ ndni behind them all.'

The reckless triumph of her words rang through the low arches, as she brought her feet to the ground with a clash.

Five minutes afterwards she was looking down on a slender key lying in Zubr−ul−Zamân's nerveless hands.

'I have won the prize,' she said; 'the pearls are mine.'

The hands quivered, and the keen old eyes seemed to seek her out from head to foot, revelling in her beauty and her boldness. Then the light died out of them, the head sank again. 'The game is played,' he muttered. 'The game is played.'

'Yea! it is played indeed.'

The woman's contemptuous laugh echoed out into the dark night, through which George Keene, on a hired camel, was making his way across the desert. Not by the usual road, since that meant delay and Dan's questioning eyes at Rajpore, but by a side route, branching from the railway, farther to the south. A hot night, an intolerable smell of camel, dust in the eyes and nose and mouth, dust and ashes in the heart; in the endless darkness of all things even the twinkling lights of the palace seemed home−like and welcome to poor George, for though the consciousness of doing your duty soothes the mind, it is powerless before bodily discomfort; and George was wretchedly uncomfortable. To begin with, a high−paced camel driven at full speed is not an easy method of conveyance, nor does the necessity for having its unwashed attendant bumping in the after−saddle add to its charm, even though that saddle be to leeward of you—for which Heaven be thanked! And then the lad had had nothing to eat since a hastily−swallowed breakfast at a rest−house, save some smoked milk and a tough dough−cake brought him at the village where he changed camels. So, as he bumped through the silent night on the bubbling, breathing, silent−footed beast, with that silent breathing brute behind him, more than half George's slender hold on the joys of life lay in the prospect of supper, even though it must be one of the factotum's Barmecidal feasts. Such things defy the mind, especially when that mind is lodged in a young and healthy body. Thus while he could set his teeth over the remembrance of that half hour during which his world came to pieces in the hand, he could not prevent himself coming to pieces on the camel.

It was a dark night indeed; so dark that the red−brick bungalow showed only by the white arches of its verandah; rising like a ghostly colonnade out of the shadow. The servants' houses too, were dark as the night itself, and silent as the grave. George, stepping stiffly into ankle−deep of yielding sand, called once, twice; then, giving in with irritation to his experience of native slumber, walked over in the direction of the cook−room. It was too sandy for snakes; besides, booted as he was, they could hardly reach him. Necessary thoughts these now that he was back in purgatory, with death for aught he knew coiled in the path and they came back to him naturally as part of the uncomfortable environment of life. He gave another call without the screen of tall grass sacred to the modesty of the compounder of egg− *sarse*, and then impatiently set aside a mat at its entry.

'They might as well be dead,' he muttered angrily, going up to a string bed in the centre of the little yard, whereon he could just distinguish a figure long enough to be a man.

'Get up, you lazy brute!' cried George, shaking it by the shoulder. There was no answer, and he drew back hastily, shouting for some one, any one. A twinkling light showed from the stables, a drowsy exclamation rose from within the hut. So, out of the surrounding dark, came timorous steps, a hand bearing a cresset, a doubtful face or two peering at the intruder and yielding to surprised salaams; then suddenly breaking into garrulous clamour—'Ohi! ohi! 'Tis the Huzoor returned. And the Huzoor's faithful servant hath been sum− moned by the Lord. Lo! if the Huzoor had but come three hours ago there would still have been a kitmutghar (*lit.* worker) in his honour's house. But it was the Great Sickness, Huzoor, which waits not; all day long ill in the Huzoor's cook−room, with great patience, and—Ohi! ohi! the sahib must be hungry, and lo! where is he who gave the Huzoor meats fit for his rank? Oh my sister! Oh, bereaved one! Oh, widow! put thy grief from thee and prepare food for the master; in duty sorrow finds solace.'

'Is—is he dead?' asked George, standing dazed, looking incredulously at the sheeted figure, dimly visible by the flickering rushlight. He had seen the man sleep thus dozens of times. At the question another sheeted figure, which had crept from the hut into the circle of light, broke into a gurgling cry: 'Ohi, *meri admi mur−gya—meri dil mur−gya—mur−gya,' and one or two later arrivals, in like disguise, crouched beside the voice, joining in the strange low whimper of the conventional wail. George fell back a step or two, repelled to his heart's core, shocked out of speech.*

'Weep not, oh widow!' snivelled the water−carrier, who, being the only Mohammedan male present, felt impelled to the duty of consoler. 'Didst not give him beef−tea? Ay! and barley−water likewise? even as the Huzoor when he was stricken. And did not the master arise to health thereby? Wherefore, is it not the will of God,

plainly, that thy man should find freedom? Therefore place thy heart on comfort— He will be buried at sunrise, Huzoor, so that the sahib will have no more annoyance; and by the fortune of the Most High, there is even now to be had without delay a servant who can cook—the one that is dead is as nothing to him—faithful to salt, having many certificates, mine own wife's cousin, a—'

George, who by this time was half−way back to the dark house, cursed him and his wife's relations utterly; then bade him bring a light somehow. Meanwhile, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, the lad groped his way into the room where he had first seen **her**, and, stumbling against a chair, sat down mechanically, resting his head upon the back, over his crossed arms. Would the light never come? and when it came, what would it reveal? more dead men waiting to be roused? Oh, horrible—most horrible that remembrance of the limp—No! no! he would not think of it. He would think of that other face asleep on the red cushions of the easy chair—but that was dead too—the face of a dead ideal. Ah! the light at last, thank God! and he could be sensible.

Whatever it showed George, he showed it a mask terrible in its needless pain, ghastly in the hunted, shrinking look in the young eyes which used to be so bold. Even the water−carrier, dense as he was, saw it and understood vaguely.

'This is a bad word that the Huzoor should return thus. It is not fitting his honour. If he had only waited till Fitzgerald sahib comes back—'

'Comes back,' echoed George dully. 'Why should he come back?' Yet he knew quite well in his own mind that Dan also had judged it wrong to leave the fort unguarded as it were, and his mind wandered to the love he bore this man, while the water−carrier went on volubly about the sahib having gone in a hurry that morning and being very angry about something he had lost; something that the sahib's base−born personal attendant had said must have been stolen—as if—

George, looking at all things with uncomprehending eyes, suddenly lost patience, cursed the speaker, quite quietly this time, and bade him go about his business.

'Your honour's kitmutghar's widow can cook food if the Huzoor—'

George did it a third time solemnly. When he was left alone, he glanced round quickly, as if uncertain of what the room might contain. The easy−chair with its red cushions; a bare bed—brought in, doubtless, for the sake of the larger room and cooler air—a dirty tablecloth on the table, littered with the crumbs and plates of Dan's last meal and left in slovenly native fashion to await deferred cleansing. A half−empty whisky−bottle and a water−surahi; that, at any rate, was something, and his hand went out to them instinctively. Even in his general confusion, however, the precepts of modern hygiene remaining clear, he deferred a drink till they brought him some tepid soda−water. Such precaution was neces− sary with cholera in the compound. Whatever else it may do, civilisation certainly intensifies the dread of death. The peasant and the courtesan had munched melons in the very shadow, but George's cultured nerves had no such courage. He was no coward, but he had received a shock which was bound to make its mark on the highly sensitised mind and body; bound to weaken them for the time.

Ah! that was better! The room did not seem quite so dreary after the whisky and soda! Then he took another, and after that the outlook itself seemed less dreary, and he told himself that Dan had been right in saying that he, George, did not know the temptation of stimulants. Temptation?—if they brought you up to your bearings with a round turn in this fashion—Why! he felt twice the man he had been five minutes ago. Now he could think; now he could reason; now he could see clearly and decide what ought to be done. To begin with, **she** was safe. Those papers, joined to little Azizan's confession of having stolen the Ayôdhya pot, made it quite impossible to prove **she** had ever known about the jewels. As for himself, that did not matter; though, as a fact, he was quite as safe as Dan. That is to say, the palace devils might raise a scandal, but the breakdown of their case in regard to her would show it was no more than revenge for their failure; for they would fail, of course. So far, nothing had happened. There was no water in the overflow cut; he had made sure of that as he rode along. And now that he was on the spot he could do quite as much, off his own bat, to prevent treachery as any one—the Colonel and all the Department to boot—could have done had he reported the whole affair. To−morrow the guard would be changed, and doubled to provide against any violent attempt; an unlikely event, as such an assault would take time, and he meant to pitch his tent down at the sluice so as to be on the spot at night, and during the day he could watch from the bungalow. Against other and more stealthy treachery he was also provided absolutely—so absolutely that he gave a short laugh as he drew a couple of Chubb's keys and a lock from his wallet. That would puzzle them if they came thinking they had hit on the old fastening. But that also was for to−morrow; there remained only to−night.

No! not to−night; since already it was past one o'clock. What wonder that he was tired—did any one in the wide world know or care how tired? He stood up sharply, every vein tingling now; his whole mind aglow despite his weariness. He must have something to eat first, of course—his very determination insisted on that; but not from those plague−stricken purlieus out yonder—cautious civilisation insisted on that. There must be biscuits or something of that sort in the cupboard, and as he crossed over to it the memory of his raid while **she** slept among the red cushions returned to make him laugh again.

'And when she went there
The cupboard was bare.'The childish doggerel fitted the occasion and left him smiling at some ship's biscuit—the last resource by sea or land—left at the bottom of a tin. Dan certainly **was** a bad housekeeper. The comedy of his disappointment struck him; the tragedy, needing the sequel to develop it, remained invisible like a photograph in film−embryo.

It was dry work, eating ship's biscuit in a fiery furnace, with a ten−pound thirst upon you and whisky and soda within reach. When he stood up again the weariness seemed to have crept upwards, leaving nothing alert save his brain. Had he ever been so tired in all his life? As tired as **she** must have been when she fell asleep in the chair he was just passing. His hand lingered on the back of it for an instant, almost caressingly.

By Jove! what a furnace it was outside! Lighter than it had been, however, because of the suggestion of a moon low down in the heat−haze. And there was the potter's lamp twinkling like a star above the domed shadow of the Hodinuggur mound. Queer old chap—queer start the whole thing—if one came to think of it. A crazy, irresponsible creator! as Dan had called him. Why not he as well as another? Who knew? who cared?—

He stood so for a space, looking out with sensitive, seeing eyes to the broad shadows, formless save for the pin−point flicker of the potter's light. Face to face at last, he and Hodinuggur; between them the sliding water, mother of all things. Then came a memory.

'HATH NOT THE POTTER POWER OVER THE CLAY?'

Ah! if that was all the light amid the shadows of life, better far were darkness! If that—he turned quickly, beset by uncontrolled, passionate contempt, uncontrolled, passionate desire for action, and beneath his shaking hand the lamp on the table flared out, smokily. A poor protest; yet the dark was better. Darkness and rest—if rest could come to one so tired as he was, as it had come to her. Not that it mattered if he were tired or not—

Five minutes after, the twinkling light, could it have reached so far, would have found him asleep, peaceful as a child, among the red cushions where **she** had slept. But even Azizan's eyes, set keen as they were by devotion, could not pierce the darkness. For the light George had seen was in her hand, as she stood looking out from the yard towards the other bank of the canal.

'It hath gone out again,' she murmured; 'a servant likely, on no good errand; and the old man tells me the truth, I think. Another week ere he returns. I would it had been sooner, so that I might warn him. But there! 'tis the same! The task is mine in the end.'

As she crossed back to the hut, she paused an instant to look, by the light of the cresset she shaded with her thin fingers, on the figure of old Fuzl Elâhi asleep in the open beside his wheel.

'Poor fool,' she said softly, as if to the sleeper. And after that even the potter's light disappeared, leaving both sides of the sliding water to darkness.

The dawn came and went; the sun climbing into the sky turned it to brass—a brazen dome in which the sun itself seemed merged and lost. Yet still George slept on, undisturbed even by the water−carrier's cautious peepings through the chick.

'Lo! the Huzoor is young, and he was broken into pieces by thy bad animal,' he said to the camel man who was impatiently awaiting payment. 'Sleep is even as food and drink to him, and besides, ere he wakes, my wife's cousin, whom I have sent for, will be present to cook my lord's breakfast. There is great virtue in being *majood* (created), and the man who cooks one meal hath himself to blame if he cook not many. If thou art hurried, go. Who wants thee and thy evil−smelling brute?'

So George slept on, and when he woke at last it was to the confused, unreasoning consciousness of those who have been drugged. He stared round him incredulously, until out of the mist, as it were, the empty whisky bottle on the table grew clear, accusingly clear, and he sprang to his feet, becoming aware, as he did so, of a racking headache.

Undoubtedly he had been drinking; not perhaps without excuse, he added, as memory began to return. The next instant he was at the door. Yellow haze and yellow heat, and through it a silver streak steering for the south!—

That was all be saw, but that little changed the whole world for him in the twinkling of an eye. The sluice−gate was open. The devils had won—they had won!—they had won!

What use is there in saying that he felt this, that he felt that? What use in pointing out whether anger or regret came uppermost in the conglomerate of passion? As a matter of fact, George felt nothing consciously; not even when, after an hour or more, he came back wearily to the red−hot bungalow, out of the red−hot air.

He sat down then on the table, now cleared of last night's crumbs, and relaid by the wife's cousin with that superfluity which marks new zeal in India, and tried to think of what he had thought, or said, or done since he first caught sight of that silver streak steering southward where no streak should be. But, after a time, he found himself deeply interested in reconstructing the pyramid of five forks intertwined, with which the new hand had adorned the centre of the table. What a fool! what an arrant fool he was, to be sure. Even if there had been any one upon whom to use the revolver, he would most likely have lost his opportunity or missed the beggar! But there had been nobody, and he might as well have left it at home, lying on the table ready, as it was now. The sluice−gate, not ten minutes before he woke, had been opened by a key—a key which had broken in the lock, making it impossible to close it again till it was repaired. Of course there were the other keys and the new lock; but what need was there for hurry now? No power in earth or heaven could hide the fact that the sluice−gate had been open. For months to come, miles on miles of crop ripening to harvest would proclaim the failure, the treachery. 'As ye have sown so shall ye reap.' Concealment was impossible; that much was certain—and the certainty brought with it an odd sort of content. Since it was all his fault from beginning to end, it was as well he should suffer. Yes! it had been opened quietly while the guard was eating his dinner; opened quietly while he, George, was asleep; why not say drunk at once—that was nearer the truth.

And the Diwan! George's listless hands tightened as he thought of that brief interview with the old man on the roof. His own torrent of reckless abuse, the courteous regrets and replies ignoring his very accusations. But those palace devils could afford to eat abuse! Zubr−ul−Zamân had played, and the game was done indeed. But how? Half mechanically George drew out the key attached to his watch−chain and looked at it; carelessly at first, then carefully. And what he saw there clinging to the inner surface of a ward, changed heaven for him in the twinkling of an eye, even as the silver streak of water had changed the world.

It was a very simple thing; only a piece of wax. How long he sat there staring at it he did not realise. The yellow haze outside grew ruddier with the sinking of the sun, the water−carrier, shadowed by a white−robed aspirant to the dead factotum's duties, hovered about the verandah expectantly.

'What do you want, you fool?' bawled George, looking up, surprised at his own anger, surprised that anything should touch him save the thought that **she** had known—must have known—that **she** had done it, must have done it.

The man edged in through the screen, signing to the white−robed one to follow his example.

'Only to bring the Huzoor this,' he began noisily. 'Only to bring this proof of honesty to the feet of justice. Lo! it was found even now by this man with a foresight and quickness to be commended. In the sahib's own room, Huzoor, beneath the matting, thus causing the face of the big sahib's ill−begotten servant to be blackened by reason of his base insinuation of theft! Theft! How can there be theft in a house where the water−carrier is as I am, and the kit will be as this one—mine own wife's brother, Huzoor—'

George broke out suddenly into dull laughter, 'Oh! go to blazes with your wife's brother—put the thing down there on the table, I tell you, and go—go—do you hear?'

Anger, and something more than anger was back in his tone ere he ended, and the water−carrier, knowing his master's voice, fled. The white−robed one with the courage of ignorance risked all by a salaam.

'At what hour will the Huzoor please to dine?'

The young man looked at him curiously, feeling that the world was past his comprehension.

'The usual time, I suppose.'

As well this fool as another—as well to−morrow as to−day. Everything was trivial of course, and yet the trivial commonplace interruption had somehow brought home the reality of what had happened to the lad, and his head sank on his crossed arms once more in utter dejection. **She** might have told him, warned him. Surely when he had

promised **she** might have done so much for his sake, and Dan's—by the way, what was it that Dan had lost and that chattering idiot had brought in with him? George's right hand trembled a little as it reached over the table to take a plain gold locket on a slender gold chain. It was familiar enough to him. Dan wore it day and night, and many a time had George chaffed him about the young woman, so it was no wonder the dear old man had been vexed at the thought of losing it. Losing it? or losing her? In the keen thrust of this thought, the locket slipped through George's fingers, and falling, opened. So it lay, face upwards, while the boy sat staring out into the room blindly, intent on the remembrance that after all it was not a case of whether a man or a woman should suffer; it was one woman or another. The woman **he** loved or the woman **Dan** loved. A hundred thoughts beset him, but, analysed, they all resolved themselves to this: his love or Dan's. To save **her** from even a breath of scandal he was willing to bear the blame; but how could this be without also imperilling Dan's future? No! if the worst came; if he could find no way—yet surely, surely, there must be some way, some simple way of taking all the responsibility on his shoulders; then **she** must be brave; **she** must tell the truth and save this woman whom Dan loved—whose face lay there in the locket. His eyes sought it mechanically—

'**Gwen**.'

The sound, barely a whisper, scarcely stirred the sodden air. After a while he pushed back his chair slowly and crossed to stand once more looking out over Hodinuggur. It seemed to have a fascination for him; yet his mind held but one thought—a desire to get away—to find some place where there was neither truth nor lies, where he need say nothing—need think nothing. That surely would settle it.

'**No, you wouldn't, old chap, not unless you wanted them to believe you guilty**.' Lewis Gordon's idle words as they had stood laughing and jesting on the balcony yonder but a few months ago came back to him; the only real, living memory in the chaos of his present pain. The scene reproduced itself before his haggard young eyes. Yes! that would settle it; and after all he was guilty. Why had he not told the Colonel? why had he slept? why—

The sound was louder this time; yet not loud enough to disturb the servants' chattering across in the cook−room over the chances of perquisites under the new régime. Loud enough, for all that, to deafen the lad's ears for ever to questionings of truth or untruth.

He lay on his back, face upwards, and a faint stream of blood oozing from the blue bruise just over his heart traced a fine girdle round his breast; perhaps to show that the potter's thumb had slipped, and the pot had cracked in the firing.

Maybe a fiery furnace and a red−hot bungalow are over−trying even to the best of clay when it is fresh from the moulder's hand; but that is neither here nor there.

The fact remains that George had run away; from truth and untruth, from himself and his fellow−men, but most of all from Hodinuggur and the crazy irresponsible creator; yet could he have realised the fact, no one in the wide, wide world would have been more incredulous of his own action. And as he lay dead, with a bullet through his heart, the barometer upon the mantelpiece was falling faster and faster, while Dan, with a telegram in his pocket, was riding all he knew across the desert to open the sluice−gate against the biggest flood within the memory of man. To open it so far and no farther, and so to prevent any weakening of the channel for a while. Too late! For already the peasants were knee−deep in their fields breaking through every obstacle which might stem the rising water. And still the barometer fell faster and faster; but the only one who could have understood the silent warning had deserted his post.

END OF VOLUME II.