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THE JUNGLE GIRL

BY GORDON CASSERLY

AUTHOR OF *THE ELEPHANT GOD*, ETC.

NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I

THE GREY BOAR

Youth's daring courage, manhood's fire
Firm seat and eagle eye
Must he acquire who doth aspire
To see the grey boar die

—*Indian Pigsticking Song*

Mrs. Norton looked contentedly at her image in the long mirror which reflected a graceful figure in a well-cut grey habit and smart long brown boots, a pretty face and wavy auburn hair under the sun-helmet. Then turning away and picking up her whip she left the dressing-room and, passing the door of her husband's bedroom where he lay still sleeping, descended the broad marble staircase of the Residency to the lofty hall, where an Indian servant in a long red coat hurried to open the door of the dining-room for her.

Almost at that moment a mile away Raymond, the adjutant of the 180th Punjaub Infantry, looked at his watch and called out loudly:

"Hurry up, Wargrave; it's four o'clock and the ponies will be round in ten minutes. And it's a long ride to the Palace."

He was seated at a table on the verandah of the bungalow which he shared with his brother subaltern in the small military cantonment near Rohar, the capital of the Native State of Mandha in the west of India. Dawn had not yet come; and by the light of an oil lamp Raymond was eating a frugal breakfast of tea, toast and fruit, the *chota hazri* or light meal with which Europeans in the East begin the day. He was dressed in an old shooting-jacket, breeches and boots; and as he ate his eyes turned frequently to a bundle of steel-headed bamboo spears leaning against the wall near him. For he and his companion were going as the guests of the Maharajah of Mandha for a day's pigsticking, as hunting the wild boar is termed in India.

He had finished his meal and lit a cheroot before Wargrave came yawning on to the verandah.

"Sorry for being so lazy, old chap," said the newcomer. "But a year's leave in England gets one out of the habit of early rising."

He pulled up a chair to the table on which his white-clad Mussulman servant, who had come up the front steps of the verandah, laid a tray with his tea and toast. And while he ate Raymond lay back smoking in a long chair and looked almost affectionately at him. They had been friends since their Sandhurst days, and during the past twelve months of his comrade's absence on furlough in Europe the adjutant had sorely missed his cheery companionship. Nor was he the only one in their regiment who had.

Frank Wargrave was almost universally liked by both men and women, and, while unspoilt by popularity, thoroughly deserved it. He was about twenty-six years of age, above medium height, with a lithe and graceful figure which the riding costume that he was wearing well set off. Fair-haired and blue-eyed, with good though irregular features, he was pleasant-faced and attractive rather than handsome. The cheerful, good-tempered manner that he displayed even at that trying early hour was a true indication of a happy and light-hearted disposition that made him as liked by his brother officers as by other men who did not know him so well. In his regiment all the native ranks adored the young sahib, who was always kind and considerate, though just, to them, and looked more closely after their interests than he did his own. For, like most young officers in the Indian Army, he was seldom out of debt; but soldierly hospitality and a hand ever ready to help a friend in want were the causes rather than deliberate extravagance on his own account. Taking life easily and never worrying over his own troubles he was always generous and sympathetic to others, and prompter to take up cudgels on their behalf than on his own. His being a good sportsman and a smart soldier added to his popularity among men; while all women were partial to the pleasant, courteous subaltern whom they felt to have a chivalrous regard and respect for them and who was as polite and attentive to an old lady as he was to the prettiest girl.

While admiring and liking the other sex Wargrave had hitherto been too absorbed in sport and his profession to have ever found time to lose his heart to any particular member of it, while his innate respect for, and high ideal of, womankind had preserved him from unworthy intrigues with those ready to meet him more than half-way. Even in the idleness of the year's furlough in England from which he had returned the previous day he had remained heart-whole; although several charming girls had been ready to share his lot and more than one pretty pirate had sought to make him her prize. But he had been blind to them all; for he

was too free from conceit to believe that any woman would concern herself with him unasked. He had dined and danced with maid and young matron in London, ridden with them in the Row and Richmond Park, punted them down backwaters by Goring, Pangbourne and the Clevedon Woods, and flirted harmlessly with them in country houses after days with the Quorn and the Pytchley, and yet come back to India true to his one love, his regiment.

As Raymond watched him the fear of the feminine dangers in England for his friend suddenly pricked; and he blurted out anxiously:

"I say, old chap, you haven't got tangled up with any woman at home, have you? Not got engaged or any silly thing like that, I hope?"

Wargrave laughed.

"No fear, old boy," he replied, pouring out another cup of tea. "Far too hard up to think of such an expensive luxury as a wife. Been too busy, too, to see much of any particular girl."

"You had some decent sport, hadn't you?" asked his friend, with a feeling of relief in his heart.

"Rather. I told you I'd learnt to fly and got my pilot's certificate, for one thing. Good fun, flying. I wish I could afford a 'bus of my own. Then I had some yachting on the Solent and a lot of boating on the Thames. I put in a month in Switzerland, skiing and skating."

"Did you get any hunting?"

"Yes, at my uncle's place near Desford in Leicestershire. He gave me some shooting, too. It was all very well; but I was very envious when the regiment came here and you wrote and told me of the pigsticking you were getting. I've always longed for it. It's great sport, isn't it?"

"The best I know," cried Raymond enthusiastically. "Beats hunting hollow. You're not following a wretched little animal that runs for its life, but a game brute that will turn on you as like as not and make you fight for yours."

"It must be ripping. I do hope we'll have the luck to find plenty of pig to-day."

"Oh, we're sure to. The Maharajah told me yesterday they have marked down a *sounder*—that is, a herd—of wild pig in a *nullah* about seven miles the other side of the city, which is two miles away, so we have a ride of nine to the meet."

"That will make it a very hard day for our ponies, won't it?" asked Wargrave anxiously. "Eighteen miles there and back and the runs as well."

"Oh, that's all right. The Maharajah mounts us at the meet. We'll find his horses waiting there for us. Rawboned beasts with mouths like iron, as a rule; but good goers and staunch to pig."

"By Jove! The Maharajah must be a real good chap."

"One of the best," replied Raymond. "He is a man for whom I've the greatest admiration. He rules his State admirably. He commanded his own Imperial Service regiment in the war and did splendidly. He is very good to us here."

"So it seems. From what I gathered at Mess last night he appears to provide all our sport for us."

"Yes; he arranges his shoots and the pigsticking meets for days on which the officers of the regiment are free to go out with him. When we can travel by road he sends his carriages for us, lends us horses and has camels to follow us with lunch, ice and drinks wherever we go."

"What a good fellow he must be!" exclaimed Wargrave. "I am glad we get pigsticking here. I've always longed for it, but never have been anywhere before where there was any, as you know."

"It's lucky for us that the sport here is good; for without it life in Rohar would be too awful to contemplate. It's the last place the Lord made."

"It's the hardest place to reach I've ever known," said Wargrave. "It was a shock to learn that, after forty-eight hours in the train, I had two more days to travel after leaving the railway."

"How did you like that forty miles in a camel train over the salt desert? That made you sit up a bit, eh?"

"It was awful. The heat and the glare off the sand nearly killed me. You say there is no society here?"

"Society? The only Europeans here or in the whole State, besides those of us in the regiment, are the Resident and his wife."

"What is a Resident, exactly?"

"A Political Officer appointed by the Government of India to be a sort of adviser to a rajah and to keep a check on him if he rules his State badly. I shouldn't imagine that our fellow here, Major Norton, would be much good as an adviser to anybody. The only thing he seems to know anything about is insects. He's quite a famous entomologist. Personally he's not a bad sort, but a bit of a bore."

"What's his wife like?"

"Oh, very different. Much younger and fond of gaiety, I think. Not that she can get any here. She's a decidedly pretty woman. I haven't seen much of her; for she has been away most of the time, that the regiment has been here. She has relatives in Calcutta and stays a lot with them."

"I don't blame her," said Wargrave, laughing. "Rohar must be a very deadly place for a young woman. No amusements. No dances. No shops. And the only female society the wives of the Colonel and the Doctor."

"Luckily for Mrs. Norton she is rather keen on sport and is a good rider. You'll probably meet her to-day; for she generally comes out pigsticking with us, though she doesn't carry a spear. I've promised to take her shooting with us the next time we go. Hullo! here are the ponies at last. Are you ready, Frank?"

The two officers rose, as their *syces*, or native grooms, came up before the bungalow leading two ponies, a Waler and an Arab. Raymond walked over to the bundle of spears and selected one with a leaf-shaped steel head.

"Try this, Frank," he said. "See if it suits you. You don't want too long a spear."

His companion balanced it in his hand.

"Yes, it seems all right. I say, old chap, how does one go for the pig? Do you thrust at him?"

"No; just ride hard at him with the spear pointed and held with stiffened arm. Your impetus will drive the steel well home into him."

Mounting their ponies they started, the *syces* carrying the spears and following them at a steady run as they trotted down the sandy road leading to the city, where at the Palace they were to meet the Maharajah and the other sportsmen. The sky was paling fast at the coming of the dawn; and they could discern the dozen bungalows and the Regimental Lines, or barracks, comprising the little cantonment, above which towered the dark mass of a rocky hill crowned by the ruined walls of an old native fort. On either side of their route the country was flat and at first barren. But, as they neared the capital, they passed through cultivation and rode by green fields irrigated from deep wells, by hamlets of palm-thatched mud huts where no one yet stirred, and on to where the high embasured walls of the city rose above the plain. Under the vaulted arch of the old gateway the ponies clattered, along through the narrow, silent streets of gaily-painted, wooden-balconied houses, at that hour closely shuttered, until the Palace was reached as the rising sun began to flush the sky with rose-pink.

The guard of sepoy at the great gate saluted as the two officers rode into the wide, paved courtyard lined by high, many-windowed buildings. In the centre of it a group of horsemen, nobles of the State or officials of the Palace in gay dresses and bright-coloured *puggis*, or turbans, with gold or silver-hilted swords hanging from their belts, sat on their restless animals behind the Maharajah, a pleasant-faced, athletic man in a white flannel coat, riding-breeches and long, soft leather boots, mounted on a tall Waler gelding. He was chatting with four or five other officers of the Punjaubis and raised his hand to his forehead as the newcomers rode up and lifted their hats to him.

"Good morning, Your Highness," said Raymond. "I hope we're not late. Let me present Mr. Wargrave of our regiment, who has just returned from England."

With a genial smile the Maharajah leant forward and held out his hand.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Wargrave," he said, "and very pleased to see you out with us to-day. Are you fond of pigsticking?"

"I've never had the chance of doing any before, Your Highness," replied Frank, shaking his hand. "I'm awfully anxious to try it; but, being a novice, I'm afraid I'll only be in the way."

"I'm sure you won't," said the Maharajah courteously. His command of English was perfect. "Pigsticking is not at all difficult; and I hear that you are a good rider."

He looked at his watch and then, turning in the saddle, addressed another officer of the regiment who was chaffing Raymond for being late:

"Are we all here now, Captain Ross?"

"Yes, sir. These two lazy fellows are the last," replied Ross laughingly.

"Very well, gentlemen, we'll start."

He waved his hand; and at the signal two black-bearded *sowars*, or soldiers of his cavalry regiment, dashed by him and out through the Palace gates at a hard-gallop, leading the way past the guard, who turned out and presented arms as the Maharajah and the British officers, together with the crowd of nobles, officials and mounted attendants, followed at a smart pace. The city was now waking to life. From their windows the sleepy inhabitants stared at the party, mostly too stupefied at that hour to recognise and salute their ruler. Pot-bellied naked brown babies waddled on to the verandahs to gaze thumb in mouth at the riders. Pariah dogs, nosing at the gutters and rubbish-heaps that scented the air, bolted out of the way of the horses' hoofs.

As the sportsmen passed out of the city gates the sun was rising above the horizon, the terrible Hot Weather sun of India, whose advent ushers in the long hours of gasping, breathless heat. For a mile or so the route lay through fertile gardens and fields. Then suddenly the cultivation ended abruptly on the edge of a sandy desert that, seamed with *nullahs*, or deep, steep-sided ravines, and dotted with tall clumps of thorny cactus, stretched away to the horizon. The road became a barely discernible track; but the two *sowars* cantered on, confidently heading for the spot where the fresh horses awaited the party.

Over the sand the riders swept, past a slow-plodding elephant lumbering back to the city with a load of fodder, by groups of tethered camels. Hares started up in alarm and bounded away, grey partridges whirred up and yellow-beaked *minas* flew off chattering indignantly. The slight morning coolness soon vanished; and

Wargrave, soft and somewhat out of condition after his weeks of shipboard life, wiped his streaming face often before the guiding *sowars* threw up their hands in warning and vanished slowly from sight as their sure-footed horses picked their way down a steep *nullah*. This was the ravine in which the quarry hid. One after another of the riders followed the leaders down the narrow track, trotted across the sandy, rock-strewn riverbed and climbed up the far side to where the fresh horses and a picturesque mob of wild-looking beaters stood awaiting them.

Among the animals Wargrave noticed a smart grey Arab pony with a side-saddle.

"I see Mrs. Norton intends coming out with us," observed the Maharajah looking at the pony. "We must wait for her."

"It won't be for long, sir," said Raymond, pointing to a rising trail of dust on the track by which they had come. "I'll bet that is she."

All turned to watch the approaching rider draw near, until they could see that it was a lady galloping furiously over the sand.

"By Jove, she can ride!" exclaimed Wargrave admiringly. "I hope she'll see the *nullah*. She's heading straight for it."

A shouted warning caused her to pull up almost on the brink; and in a few minutes she joined the waiting group. Wargrave looked with interest at her, as she sat on her panting horse talking to the Maharajah and the other officers, who had dismounted.

Mrs. Norton was a decidedly graceful and pretty woman. The rounded curves of her shapely figure were set off to advantage by her riding-costume. Her eyes were especially attractive, greenish-grey eyes fringed by long black lashes under curved dark brows contrasting with the warm auburn tint of the hair that showed under her sunhat. Her complexion was dazzlingly fair. Her mouth was rather large and voluptuous with full red lips and even white teeth. Bewitching dimples played in the pink cheeks. Even from a man like Wargrave, fresh from England and consequently more inclined to be critical of female beauty than were his comrades, who for many months had seen so few white women, Mrs. Norton's good looks could justly claim full meed of admiration and approval.

Accepting Captain Ross's aid she slipped lightly from her saddle to the ground and on foot looked as graceful as she did when mounted. Raymond brought his friend to her and introduced him.

Holding out a small and shapely hand in a dainty leather gauntlet she said in a frank and pleasant manner:

"How do you do, Mr. Wargrave? You are a fortunate person to have been in England so lately. I haven't seen it for nearly three years. Weren't you sorry to leave it?"

"Not in the least, Mrs. Norton. I'd far sooner be doing this," he waved his hand towards the horses and the open desert, "than fooling about Piccadilly and the Park."

"Oh, but don't you miss the gaities of town, the theatres, the dances? And then the shops and the new fashions—but you're a man, and they'd mean nothing to you."

The Maharajah broke in:

"Mrs. Norton, I think we had better mount. The beaters are going in; and the *shikaris* (hunters) tell me that the *nullah* swarms with pig. There are at least half a dozen rideable boar in it."

In pigsticking only well-grown boars are pursued, sows and immature boars being unmolested.

Ross started forward to help Mrs. Norton on to her fresh pony; but Wargrave refused to surrender the advantage of his proximity to her. So it was into his hand she put her small foot in its well-made riding-boot and was swung up by him.

The saddles of the rest of the party had been changed on to the horses that the Maharajah had provided. The beaters streamed down the steep bank into the ravine which some distance away was filled with dense scrub affording good cover for the quarry. Forming line they moved through it with shrill yells, the blare of horns, the beating of tom-toms and a spluttering fire of blank cartridges from old muskets. The riders mounted and, spear in hand, eagerly watched their progress through the jungle. Wargrave found himself beside Mrs. Norton; but, after exchanging a few words, he forgot her presence as, his heart beating fast with a true sportsman's excitement, he strained his eyes for the first sight of a wild boar.

Suddenly, several hundred yards away, he saw a squat, dark animal emerge from the tangled scrub and, climbing up the *nullah* on their side, stride away over the sand with a peculiar bounding motion that reminded Wargrave of a rocking-horse. All eyes were turned towards the Maharajah, who would decide whether the animal were worthy of pursuit or not. He gazed after it for a few moments, then raised his hand.

At the welcome signal all dashed off after the boar at a furious gallop, opening out as they went to give play for their spears. Wild with excitement, Wargrave struck spurs to his horse, which needed no urging, being as filled with the lust of the chase as was the man on its back. Like a cavalry charge the riders thundered in a mad rush behind His Highness, whose faster mount carried him at once ahead of the rest. He soon overtook the boar. Lowering his spear-point the Maharajah bent forward in the saddle; but at the last moment the pig "jinked," that is, turned sharply at right angles to his former course, and bounded away untouched, while the baffled sportsman was carried on helplessly by his excited horse.

Wargrave, following at some distance to the Maharajah's right rear, saw to his mingled joy and trepidation the boar only a short way in front of him.

"Ride, ride hard!" cried Mrs. Norton almost alongside him.

Frank drove his spurs in; and the gaunt, raw-boned countrybred under him sprang forward. But just as it had all but reached the quarry, the latter jinked again and Wargrave was borne on, tugging vainly at the horse's iron jaws. But the boar had short shrift. With a rush Ross closed on it and before it could swerve off sent his spear deep into its side and, galloping on, turned his hand over, drawing out the lance. The pig was staggered by the shock but started to run on. Before it could get up speed one of the Indian nobles dashed at it with wild yells and speared it again.

The thrust this time was mortal. The boar staggered on a few steps, then stumbled and fell heavily to the ground. The hunters reined in their sweating horses and gathered round it.

"Not a big animal," commented the Maharajah, scrutinising it with the eye of an expert. "About thirty-four inches high, I think. But the tusks are good. They're yours, Captain Ross, aren't they?"

"Yes, Your Highness, I think so," replied Ross.

Pigsticking law awards the trophy to the rider whose spear first inflicts a wound on the boar.

"Better luck next time, Mr. Wargrave," said Mrs. Norton, riding up to him. "I thought you were sure of him when he jinked away from the Maharajah."

"To be quite candid I was rather relieved that I didn't get the chance, Mrs. Norton," replied the subaltern. "As I've never been out after pig before I didn't quite know what to do. However, I've seen now that it isn't very difficult; so I hope I'll get an opportunity later."

"You are sure to, Mr. Wargrave," remarked the Maharajah. "There are several boars left in cover; and the men are going in again."

The tatterdemalion mob of beaters was descending into the *nullah*; and soon the wild din broke out once more. A gaunt grey boar with long and gleaming tusks was seen to emerge from the scrub and climb the far bank of the ravine, where he stood safely out of reach but in full view of the tantalised hunters. But a string of laden camels passing over the desert scared him back again; and while the riders watched in eager excitement, he slowly descended into the *nullah*, crossed it and came up on the near side some hundreds of yards away.

The Maharajah raised his spear.

"Ride!" he cried.

"Go like the devil, Frank!" shouted Raymond, as the scurrying horsemen swept in a body over the sand and he found himself for a moment beside his friend. "He's a beauty. Forty inches, I'll swear. Splendid tusks."

Wargrave crouched like a jockey in the saddle as the riders raced madly after the boar. The Indians among them, wildly excited, brandished their lances and uttered fierce cries as they galloped along. Their Maharajah's speedier mount again took the lead; but even in India sport is democratic and his nobles, attendants and soldiers all tried to overtake and pass him. The white men, as is their wont, rode in silence but none the less keenly excited. Over sand and stones, past tall, prickly cactus-plants, in hot pursuit all flew at racing speed.

It was a long chase; for the old grey boar was speedy, cunning, and a master of wiles. First one pursuer, then another, then a third and a fourth, found himself almost upon the quarry and bent down with outstretched, eager spear only to be baffled by a swift jink and carried on helplessly, pulling vainly at the reins.

At length a sudden turn threw out all the field except the Maharajah, who had foreseen it and ridden off to intercept the now tiring boar. Overtaking it he bent forward and wounded it slightly. The brute instantly swung in upon his horse, and with a fierce grunt dashed under it and leapt up at it with a toss of the head that gave an upward thrust to the long, curved tusk. In an instant the horse was ripped open and brought crashing to the ground, pinning its rider's leg to the earth beneath it. The boar turned again, marked the prostrate man, and with a savage gleam in its little eyes charged the Maharajah, its gleaming ivory tusks, six inches long, as sharp and deadly as an Afridi's knife.

CHAPTER II

YOUTH CALLS TO YOUTH

But at that moment a shout made the boar hesitate, and Raymond dashed in on it at racing speed, driving his spear so deeply into its side that, as he swept on, the tough bamboo broke like match-wood. The stricken beast tottered forward a yard or two, then turned and stood undauntedly at bay, as a *sowar* rode at it. But before his steel could touch its hide it shuddered and sank to the ground dead.

The dying horse was lifted off the Maharajah who, with the courage of his race, had remained calm in the face of the onrushing death. He was assisted to rise, but was so severely shaken and bruised that at first he was unable to stand without support. Leaning on the arm of one of his nobles he held out his hand to Raymond, when the latter rode up, and thanked him gratefully for his timely aid. Then the exhausted but

gallant prince sat down on the sand to recover himself. But he assured everyone that he was not hurt and, insisting that the sport should go on, gave orders for the beat to continue.

Wargrave had chanced to dismount to tighten the girth of Mrs. Norton's horse, when a fresh boar broke from cover and was instantly pursued by all the others of the hunt. The subaltern ruefully accepted the lady's apologies and hurriedly swung himself up into the saddle again to follow, when his companion cried:

"Look! Look, Mr. Wargrave! There's another. Come, we'll have him all to ourselves."

And striking her pony with her gold-mounted whip she dashed off at a gallop after a grey old boar that had craftily kept close in cover and crept out quietly after the beaters had passed. Wargrave, filled with excitement, struck spurs to his mount and raced after her, soon catching up and passing her. Over the sand pitted with holes and strewn with loose stones they raced, the boar bounding before them with rocking motion and leading them in a long, stern chase. Again and again the beast swerved; but at last with a fierce thrill Wargrave felt the steel head of the spear strike home in the quarry. As he was carried on past it he withdrew the weapon, then pulled his panting horse round. The boar was checked; but the wound only infuriated him and aroused his fighting ardour. He dashed at Mrs. Norton; but, as Frank turned, the game brute recognised the more dangerous adversary, and with a fierce grunt charged savagely at him. Wargrave plunged his spurs into his horse, which sprang forward, just clearing the boar's snout, as the rider leant well out and speared the pig through the heart. Then with a wild, exultant whoop the subaltern swung round in the saddle and saw the animal totter forward and collapse on the sand. Only a sportsman could realise his feeling of triumph at the fall of his first boar.

Mrs. Norton was almost as excited as he, her sparkling eyes and face flushed a becoming pink, making her even prettier in his eyes as she rode up and congratulated him.

"Well done, Mr. Wargrave!" she cried, trotting up to where he sat on his panting horse over the dead boar. "You did that splendidly! And the very first time you've been out pigsticking, too!"

"It was just luck," replied the subaltern modestly, not ill-pleased at her praise.

"What a glorious run he gave us!" she continued. "And we had it all to ourselves, which made it better. I'm always afraid of the Maharajah's followers, for in a run they ride so recklessly and carry their spears so carelessly that it's a wonder they don't kill someone every time. Will you help me down, please? I must give Martian a rest after that gallop."

With Wargrave's aid she dropped lightly to the ground; and he remarked again with admiration the graceful lines and rounded curves of her figure as she walked to the dead boar and touched the tusks.

"What a splendid pair! You are lucky," she exclaimed. "The biggest anyone has got yet this season."

"I hope you'll allow me to offer them to you," said Wargrave generously, although it cost him a pang to surrender the precious trophy. "You deserve them, for you rode so well after the boar and I believe you'd have got him if you'd carried a spear."

"No, indeed, Mr. Wargrave; I wouldn't dream of taking them," she replied, laughing; "but I appreciate the nobility of your self-denial. This is your first pig; and I know what that means to a man. Now we must find a *sowar* to get the coolies to bring the boar in. But I wonder where we are. Where is everyone?"

Wargrave looked about him and for the first time realised that they were far out in the desert without a landmark to guide them. On every side the sand stretched away to the horizon, its flat expanse broken only by clumps of bristling cactus or very rarely the tall stem of a palm tree. Of the others of the party there was no sign. His companion and he seemed to be alone in the world; and he began to wonder apprehensively if they were destined to undergo the unpleasant experience of being lost in the desert. The sun high overhead afforded no help; and Wargrave remembered neither the direction of the city nor where lay the ravine in which the beat had taken place.

"You don't happen to know where we are, I suppose, Mrs. Norton?" he asked his companion.

"I haven't the least idea. It looks as if we're lost," she replied calmly. "We had better wait quietly where we are instead of wandering about trying to find our way. When we are missed the Maharajah will probably send somebody to look for us."

"I daresay you're right," said Wargrave. "You know more about the desert than I do. By Jove, I'd give anything to come across the camel that Raymond tells me brings out drinks and ice. My throat is parched. Aren't you very thirsty?"

"Terribly so. Isn't the heat awful?" she exclaimed, trying to fan herself with the few inches of cambric and lace that represented a handkerchief.

"Awful. The blood seems to be boiling in my head," gasped the subaltern. "I've never felt heat like this anywhere else in India. But, thank goodness, it seems to be clouding over. That will make it cooler."

Mrs. Norton looked around. A dun veil was being swiftly drawn up over sun and sky and blotting out the landscape.

"Good gracious! There's worse trouble coming. That's a sandstorm," she cried, for the first time exhibiting a sign of nervousness.

"Good heavens, how pleasant! Are we going to be buried under a mound of sand, like the pictures we used to have in our schoolbooks of caravans overwhelmed in the Sahara?"

Mrs. Norton smiled.

"Not quite as bad as that," she answered. "But unpleasant enough, I assure you. If only we had any shelter!"

Wargrave looked around desperately. He had hitherto no experience of desert country; and the sudden darkness and the grim menace of the approaching black wall of the sandstorm seemed to threaten disaster. He saw a thick clump of cactus half a mile away.

"We'd better make for that," he said, pointing to it. "It will serve to break the force of the wind if we get to leeward of it. Let's mount."

He put her on her horse and then swung himself up into the saddle. Together they raced for the scant shelter before the dark menace overspreading earth and sky. The sun was now hidden; but that brought no relief, for the heat was even more stifling and oppressive than before. The wind seemed like a blast of hot air from an opened furnace door.

Pulling up when they reached the dense thicket of cactus with its broad green leaves studded with cruel thorns, Wargrave jumped down and lifted Mrs. Norton from the saddle. The horses followed them instinctively, as they pressed as closely as they could to the shelter of the inhospitable plant. The animals turned their tails towards the approaching storm and instinctively huddled against their human companions in distress. Wargrave took off his jacket and spread it around Mrs. Norton's head, holding her to him.

With a shrill wail the dark storm swept down upon them, and a million sharp particles of sand beat on them, stinging, smothering, choking them. The horses crowded nearer to the man, and the woman clung tighter to him as he wrapped her more closely in the protecting cloth. He felt suffocated, stifled, his lungs bursting, his throat burning, while every breath he drew was laden with the irritating sand. It penetrated through all the openings of his clothing, down his collar, inside his shirt, into his boots. The heat was terrific, unbearable, the darkness intense. Wargrave began to wonder if his first apprehensions were not justified, if they could hope to escape alive or were destined to be buried under the stifling pall that enveloped them. He felt against him the soft body of the woman clinging desperately to him; and the warm contact thrilled him. A feeling of pity, of tenderness for her awoke in him at the thought that this young and attractive being was fated perhaps to perish by so awful a death. And instinctively, unconsciously, he held her closer to him.

For minutes that seemed hours the storm continued to shriek and roar over and around them. But at length the choking waves began to diminish in density and slowly, gradually, the deadly, smothering pall was lifted from them. The black wall passed on and Wargrave watched it moving away over the desert. The storm had lasted half an hour, but the subaltern believed its duration to have been hours. The fine grit had penetrated into the case of his wrist-watch and stopped it. A cool, refreshing breeze sprang up. Pulling his jacket off Mrs. Norton's head, Wargrave said:

"It's all over at last."

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed fervently, standing erect and drawing a deep breath of cool air into her labouring lungs. "I thought I was going to be smothered."

"It was a decidedly unpleasant experience and one I don't want to try again. My throat is parched; I must have swallowed tons of sand. And look at the state I'm in!"

He was powdered thick with it, clothes, hair, eyebrows, grey with it. It had caked on his face damp with perspiration.

"Thanks to your jacket I've escaped pretty well, although I was almost suffocated," she said. "Well, now that it is over surely someone will come to look for us."

"Then we had better get up on our horses and move out into the open. We'll be more visible," said Wargrave.

Yet he felt a strange reluctance to quit the spot; for the thought came to him that their unpleasant experience in it would henceforth be a link between them. A few hours before he had not known of this woman's existence! and now he had held her to his breast and tried to protect her against the forces of Nature. The same idea seemed born in her mind at the same time; for, when he had brushed the dust off her saddle and lifted her on to it, she turned to look with interest at the spot as they rode away from it.

They had not long to wait out in the open before they saw three or four riders spread over the desert apparently looking for them, so they cantered towards them. As soon as they were seen by the search party a *sowar* galloped to meet them and, saluting, told them that the Maharajah and the rest had taken refuge from the storm in a village a couple of miles away. Then from the *kamarband*, or broad cloth encircling his waist like a sash, he produced two bottles of soda-water which he opened and gave to them. The liquid was warm, but nevertheless was acceptable to their parched throats.

They followed their guide at a gallop and soon were being welcomed by the rest of the party in a small village of low mud huts. A couple of kneeling camels, bubbling, squealing and viciously trying to bite everyone within reach, were being unloaded by some of the Maharajah's servants. Other attendants were spreading a white cloth on the ground by a well under a couple of tall palm-trees and laying on it an excellent cold lunch for the Europeans, with bottles of champagne standing in silver pails filled with ice.

As soon as his anxiety on Mrs. Norton's account was relieved by her arrival, His Highness, who as an orthodox Hindu could not eat with his guests, begged them to excuse him and, being helped with difficulty on his horse, rode slowly off, still shaken and sorely bruised by his fall. His nobles and officials accompanied him.

After lunch all went to inspect the heap of slain boars laid on the ground in the shade of a hut. Wargrave's kill had been added to it. Much to the subaltern's delight its tusk proved to be the longest and finest of all; and he was warmly congratulated by the more experienced pigstickers on his success. Shortly afterwards the beaters went into the *nullah* again; and a few more runs added another couple of boars to the bag. Then, after iced drinks while their saddles were being changed back on to their own horses, the Britishers mounted and started on their homeward journey.

Without quite knowing how it happened Wargrave found himself riding beside Mrs. Norton behind the rest of the party. On the way back they chatted freely and without restraint, like old friends. For the incidents of the day had served to sweep away formality between them and to give them a sense of long acquaintanceship and mutual liking. And, when the time came for Mrs. Norton to separate from the others as she reached the spot where the road to the Residency branched off, the subaltern volunteered to accompany her.

It had not taken them long to discover that they had several tastes in common.

"So you like good music?" she said after a chance remark of his. "It is pleasant to find a kindred spirit in this desolate place. The ladies and the other officers of your regiment are Philistines. Ragtime is more in their line than Grieg or Brahms. And the other day Captain Ross asked me if Tschaiowsky wasn't the Russian dancer at the Coliseum in town."

Wargrave laughed.

"I know. I became very unpopular when I was Band President and made our band play Wagner all one night during Mess. I gave up trying to elevate their musical taste when the Colonel told me to order the bandmaster to 'stop that awful rubbish and play something good, like the selection from the last London *revue*.'"

"Are you a musician yourself?" she asked.

"I play the violin."

"Oh, how ripping! You must come often and practise with me. I've an excellent piano; but I rarely touch it now. My husband takes no interest in music—or indeed, in anything else I like. But, then, I am not thrilled by his one absorbing passion in life—insects. So we're quits, I suppose."

Their horses were walking silently over the soft sand; and Wargrave heard her give a little sigh. Was it possible, he wondered, that the husband of this charming woman did not appreciate her and her attractions as he ought?

She went on with a change of manner:

"When are you coming to call on me? I am a Duty Call, you know. All officers are supposed to leave cards on the Palace and the Residency."

"The call on you will be a pleasure, I assure you, not a mere duty, Mrs. Norton," said the subaltern with a touch of earnestness. "May I come to-morrow?"

"Yes, please do. Come early for tea and bring your violin. It will be delightful to have some music again. I have not opened my piano for months; but I'll begin to practise to-night. I have one or two pieces with violin *obligato*."

So, chatting and at every step finding something fresh to like in each other, they rode along down sandy lanes hemmed in by prickly aloe hedges, by deep wells and creaking water-wheels where patient bullocks toiled in the sun to draw up the gushing water to irrigate the green fields so reposeful to the eye after the glaring desert. They passed by thatched mud huts outside which naked brown babies sprawled in the dust and deer-eyed women turned the hand-querns that ground the flour for their household's evening meal. Stiff and sore though Wargrave was after these many hours of his first day in the saddle for so long, he thoroughly enjoyed his ride back with so attractive a companion.

When they reached the Residency, a fine, airy building of white stone standing in large, well-kept grounds, he felt quite reluctant to part with her. But, declining her invitation to enter, he renewed his promise to call on the following day and rode on to his bungalow.

When he was alone he realised for the first time the effects of fatigue, thirst and the broiling heat of the afternoon sun. But Mrs. Norton was more in his thoughts than the exciting events of the day as he trotted painfully on towards his bungalow.

The house was closely shut and shuttered against the outside heat, and Raymond was asleep, enjoying a welcome *siesta* after the early start and hard exercise. Wargrave entered his own bare and comfortless bedroom, and with the help of his "boy"—as Indian body-servants are termed—proceeded to undress. Then, attired in a big towel and slippers, he passed into the small, stone-paved apartment dignified with the title of bathroom which opened off his bedroom.

After his ablutions Wargrave lay down on his bed and slept for an hour or two until awakened by Raymond's voice bidding him join him at tea. Strolling in pyjamas and slippers into the sitting-room which they shared the subaltern found his comrade lying lazily in a long chair and attired in the same cool costume. The outer doors and windows of the bungalow were still closed against the brooding heat outside. Inside the house the temperature was little cooler despite the *punkah* which droned monotonously overhead.

Over their tea the two young soldiers discussed the day's sport, recalling every incident of each run and kill, until the servants came in to throw open the doors and windows in hope of a faint breath of evening coolness. The *punkah* stopped, and the coolie who pulled it shuffled away.

After tea Raymond took his companion to inspect the cantonment, which Wargrave had not yet seen, for he had not reached it until after dusk the previous day. It consisted only of the Mess, the Regimental Office, and about ten bungalows for the officers, single-storied brick or rubble-walled buildings, thatched or tiled. Some of them were unoccupied and were tumbling in ruins. There was nothing else—not even the "general shop" usual in most small cantonments. Not a spool of thread, not a tin of sardines, could be purchased within a three days' journey. Most of the food supplies and almost everything else had to be brought from Bombay. Around the bungalow the compounds were simply patches of the universal sands surrounded by mud walls. No flowers, no trees, not even a blade of grass, relieved the dull monotony. Altogether the cantonment of Rohar was an unlovely and uninteresting place. Yet it is but an example of many such stations in India, lonely and soul-deadening, some of which have not even its saving grace of sport to enliven existence in them.

After a visit to the Lines—the rows of single-storied detached brick buildings, one to a company, that housed the native ranks of the regiment—where the Indian officers and sepoys (as native infantry soldiers are called) rushed out to crowd round and welcome back their popular officer, Wargrave and Raymond strolled to the Mess. Here in the anteroom other British officers of the corps, tired out after the day's sport, were lying in easy chairs, reading the three days' old Bombay newspaper just arrived and the three weeks' old English journals until it was time to return to their bungalows and dress for dinner.

Early on the following afternoon Wargrave borrowed Raymond's bamboo cart and pony—for he had sold his own trap and horses before going on leave to England and had not yet had time to buy new ones—and drove to the Residency. When he pulled up before the hall-door and in Anglo-Indian fashion shouted "Boy!" from his seat in the vehicle, a tall, stately Indian servant in a long, gold-laced red coat reaching below the knees and embroidered on the breast with the Imperial monogram in gold, came out and held a small silver tray to him. Wargrave placed a couple of his visiting cards on it, and the gorgeous apparition (known as a *chuprassi*) retired into the building with them. While he was gone Wargrave looked with pleasure at the brilliant flower-beds, green lawn and tall plants and bushes glowing with colour of the carefully-tended and well-watered Residency garden, which contrasted strikingly with the dry, bare compounds of the cantonment.

In a minute or two the *chuprassi* returned and said:

"Salaam!"

Wargrave, hooking up the reins, climbed down from the trap, leaving Raymond's *syce* in charge of the pony, and entered the grateful coolness of the lofty hall. Here another *chuprassi* took his hat and, holding out a pen for him, indicated the red-bound Visitor's Book, in which he was to inscribe his name. Then one of the servants led the way up the broad staircase into a large and well-furnished drawing-room extending along the whole front of the building. Here Wargrave found Mrs. Norton awaiting him. She looked very lovely in a cool white dress of muslin—but muslin shaped by a master-hand of Paris. She welcomed him gaily and made him feel at once on the footing of an old friend.

She was genuinely glad to see him again. To this young and attractive woman, full of the joy of living, hardly more than a girl, yet married to a much older man, sober-minded, stolid and uncongenial to her, and buried in this dull and lonely station, Wargrave had appealed instantly. Youth calls to youth, and she hailed his advent into her monotonous life as a child greets the coming of a playfellow. With the other two ladies in Rohar she had nothing in common. Both were middle-aged, serious and spiteful. To them her youth and beauty were an offence; and from the first day of their acquaintance with her they had disliked her. As for the other officers of the regiment none of them attracted her; for, good fellows as they were, none shared any of her tastes except her love of sport. But in Wargrave she had already recognised a companion, a playmate, one to whom music, art and poetry appealed as they did to her.

On his side Frank, heart-whole but fond of the society of the opposite sex, was at once attracted by this charming member of it who had tastes akin to his own. Her beauty pleased his beauty-loving eye; and he would not have been man if her readiness to meet him on a footing of friendship had not flattered him. He had thought that a great drawback to life in Rohar would be the lack of feminine companionship; for the ladies of his regiment were not at all congenial, although he did not dislike them. But it was delightful to find in this desert spot this pretty and cultured woman, who would have been deemed attractive in London and who appeared trebly so in a dull and lonely Indian station. He had thought much of her since their meeting on the previous day; and although it never occurred to him to lose his heart to her or even attempt to flirt with her, yet he felt that her friendship would brighten existence for him in Rohar. Nor did the thought strike him that possibly he might come to mean more to Mrs. Norton than she to him. For, while he had his work, his duties, the goodfellowship of the Mess and the friendship of his comrades to fill his life, she had nothing. She was utterly without interests, occupation or real companionship in Rohar. Her husband and she had nothing in common. No child had come during the five years of their marriage to link them together. And in this solitary place where there were no gaieties, no distractions such as a young woman would naturally long for, she was lonely, very lonely indeed.

It was little wonder that she snatched eagerly at the promise of an interesting friendship. Wargrave stood out and apart from the other officers of the regiment; and his companionship during the uncomfortable incident of the sandstorm bulked unaccountably large in her mind. It seemed to denote that he was destined to introduce a new element into her life.

As they talked it was with increasing pleasure that she learnt they had so many tastes in common. She found that he played the violin well and was, moreover, the possessor of a voice tuneful and sympathetic, even if not perfectly trained. This made instant appeal to her and would have disposed her to regard him with favour even if she had not been already prepared to like him.

The afternoon passed all too quickly for both of them. Violet Norton had never enjoyed any hours in Rohar so much as these; and when, as she sat at the piano while Frank played an *obligato*, a servant came to

enquire if she wished her horse or a carriage got ready for her usual evening ride or drive, she impatiently ordered him out of the room. When the time came for Wargrave to return to his bungalow to dress for dinner she begged him to stay and dine with her.

"I shall be all alone; and it would be a charitable act to take pity on my solitude," she said. "My husband is dining at your Mess to-night."

"Thank you very much for asking me," replied the subaltern. "I should have loved to accept your invitation; but it is our Guest Night and the Colonel likes all of us to be present at Mess on such evenings."

"Oh, I forgot!" she exclaimed. "I ought to have remembered; for Mr. Raymond told me the same thing only last week when I invited him informally. Well, you must come some other night soon."

Reluctant to part with her new playmate she accompanied him to the door and, to the scandal of the stately *chuprassis*, stood at it to watch him drive away and to wave him a last goodbye as he looked back when the pony turned out of the gate.

India is a land of lightning friendships between men and women.

CHAPTER III

THE LOVE-SONG OF HAR DYAL

The bugler was sounding the second mess-call as the Resident's carriage drew up before the steps of the Mess verandah on which stood all the officers of the regiment, dressed in the white drill uniform worn at dinner in India during the hot weather. From the carriage Major Norton, a stout, middle-aged man in civilian evening dress, descended stiffly and shook hands with the Commandant of the battalion, Colonel Trevor, who had come down the steps to meet him and whose guest he was to be.

On the verandah Wargrave was introduced to him by the Colonel and took his outstretched hand with reluctance; for Frank felt stirring in him a faint jealousy of the man who was Violet's legal lord and an indefinite hostility to him for not appreciating his charming wife as he ought. And while the Resident was shaking hands with the others Wargrave looked at him with interest.

Major Norton was a very ordinary-looking man, more elderly in appearance than his years warranted. He was bald and clean-shaved but for scraps of side-whiskers that gave him a resemblance to the traditional stage-lawyer of amateur theatricals, a likeness increased by his heavy and prosy manner. It was hard to believe that he had ever been a young subaltern, though such had once been the case, for the Indian Political Department is recruited chiefly from officers of the Indian Army. But he was never the gay and light-hearted individual that most junior subs. are at the beginning of their career. Even then he had been a sober and serious individual, favourably noted by his superiors as being earnest and painstaking. And now he was well thought of by the Heads of his Department; for his plodding and methodical disposition and his slavish adherence to rules and regulations had earned him the reputation of being an eminently "safe" man. How such a gay, laughter-loving, coquettish and attractive woman as Violet Dering came to marry one so entirely her opposite puzzled everyone who did not know the inner history of a girl, one of a large family of daughters, given "her chance in life" by being sent out to relatives in Calcutta for one season, with a definite warning not to return home unmarried under penalty of being turned out to face the world as a governess or hospital nurse. And Violet liked comfort and hated work.

During dinner Wargrave found himself instinctively criticising Norton's manner and conversation, and rapidly arrived at the conclusion that Raymond had described him accurately. The Resident, though a very worthy individual, was undoubtedly a bore; and Colonel Trevor, beside whom he sat, strove in vain to appear interested in his conversation. For he had heard his opinions on every subject on which Norton had any opinions over and over again. As the Resident was the only other European in the station he dined regularly at the Mess on the weekly Guest Night with one or other of the officers. He was not popular among them, but they considered it their duty to be victimised in turn to uphold the regiment's reputation for hospitality; and in consequence each resigned himself to act as his host.

After dinner, as the Resident played neither cards nor billiards, the Colonel sat out on the verandah with him, all the while longing to be at the bridge-table inside; and, as his guest was a strict teetotaler, he did not like to order a drink for himself. So he tried to keep awake and hide his yawns while listening to a prosy monologue on insects until the Residency carriage came to take Major Norton away.

When his guest had left, the Colonel entered the anteroom heaving a sigh of relief.

"Phew! thank God that's over!" he exclaimed piously. "Really, Norton becomes more of a bore every day. I'm sick to death of hearing the life-story of every Indian insect for the hundredth time. I'll dream of *coleoptera* and Polly 'optera and other weird beasties to-night."

The other officers looked up and laughed. Ross rose from the bridge-table and said:

"Come and take my place, sir; we've finished the rubber. Have a drink; you want something to cheer you up after that infliction. Boy! whiskey-soda Commanding Sahib *ke wasté lao*. (Bring a whiskey and soda for the Commanding officer.)"

"You've my entire sympathy, Colonel," said Major Hepburn, the Second in Command. "It's my turn to ask the Resident to dinner next. I feel tempted to go on the sick-list to escape it."

"I say, sir, I've got a good idea," said an Irish subaltern named Daly, who was seated at the bridge-table. "Couldn't we pass a resolution at the next Mess meeting that in future no guests are ever to be asked to dinner? That will save us from our weekly penance."

The others laughed; but the Colonel, whose sense of humour was not his strong point, took the suggestion as being seriously meant.

"No, no; we couldn't do that," he said in an alarmed tone. "The Resident would be very offended and might mention it to the General when he comes here on his annual inspection."

The remark was very characteristic of Colonel Trevor, who was a man who dreaded responsibility and whose sole object in life was to reach safely the time when, his period of command being finished, he could retire on his full pension. He was always haunted by the dread that some carelessness or mistake on his part or that of any of his subordinates might involve him in trouble with his superiors and prevent that happy consummation of his thirty years of Indian service. This fear made him merciless to anyone under him whose conduct might bring the censure of the higher authorities on the innocent head of the Commanding Officer who was in theory responsible for the behaviour of his juniors. It was commonly said in the regiment that he would cheerfully give up his own brother to be hanged to save himself the mildest official reprimand. Perhaps he was not altogether to blame; for he was not his own master in private life. It was hinted that Colonel Trevor commanded the battalion but that Mrs. Trevor commanded him. And unfortunately there was no doubt that this lady interfered privately a good deal in regimental matters, much to the annoyance of the other officers.

Now, relieved of the incubus that had hitherto spoiled his enjoyment of the evening, the Colonel gratefully drank the whiskey and soda brought him by Ross's order and sat down cheerfully to play bridge. He always liked dining in the Mess, where he was a far more important person than he was in his own house.

It did not take Wargrave long to settle down again into the routine of regimental life and the humdrum existence of a small Indian station. But he had never before been quartered in so remote and dull a spot as Rohar. The only distractions it offered besides the shooting and pigsticking were two tennis afternoons weekly, one at the Residency, the other at the Mess. Here the dozen or so Europeans, who knew every line of each other's faces by heart gathered regularly from sheer boredom whether the game amused them or not. Neither Mrs. Trevor nor her bosom-friend Mrs. Baird, the regimental surgeon's better half, ever attempted it; but they invariably attended and sat together, usually talking scandal of Mrs. Norton as she played or chatted with the men. Mrs. Trevor's chief grievance against her was that the General Commanding the Division, when he came to inspect the battalion, took the younger woman in to dinner, for, as her husband the Resident was the Viceroy's representative, she could claim precedence over the wife of a mere regimental commandant. No English village is so full of petty squabbles and malicious gossip as a small Indian station.

Like everyone else in the land Wargrave hated most those terrible hours of the hot weather between nine in the morning and five in the afternoon. He and Raymond passed them, like so many thousands of their kind elsewhere, shut up in their comfortless bungalow, which was darkened and closely shuttered to exclude the awful heat and the blinding glare outside. Too hot to read or write, almost to smoke, they lay in long cane chairs, gasping and perspiring freely, while the whining *punkah* overhead barely stirred the heated air. One exterior window on the windward side of the bungalow was filled with a thick mat of dried and odorous *kuskus* grass, against which every quarter of an hour the *bheestie* threw water to wet it thoroughly so that the hot breeze that swept over the burning sand outside might enter cooled by the evaporation of the water.

But Frank found alleviation and comfort in frequent visits to the Residency, where Mrs. Norton and he spent the baking hours of the afternoon absorbed in making music or singing duets. For Violet had a well-trained voice which harmonised well with his. No thought of sex seemed to obtrude itself on them. They were just playmates, comrades, nothing more.

Yet it was only natural that the woman's vanity should be flattered by the man's eagerness to seek her society and by his evident pleasure in it. And it was delightful to have at last a sympathetic listener to all her little grievances, one who seemed as interested in her petty household worries or the delinquencies of her London milliner in failing to execute her orders properly as in her greater complaint against the fate that condemned a woman of her artistic and gaiety-loving nature to existence in the wilds and to the society of persons so uncongenial to her as were the majority of the white folk of Rohar.

To a man the rôle of confidant to a pretty woman is pleasant and flattering; and Wargrave felt that he was highly favoured by being made the recipient of her confidences. It never occurred to him that there might be danger in the situation. He regarded her only as a friend in need of sympathy and help. His chivalry was up in arms at the thought that she was not properly appreciated by her husband, who, he began to suspect, was inclined to neglect her and treat her as a mere chattel. The suspicion angered him. True, Violet had never definitely told him so; but he gathered as much from her unconscious admissions and revered her all the more for her bravery in endeavouring to keep silent on the subject.

Certainly Major Norton did not seem to him to be a man capable of understanding and valuing so sweet and rare a woman as this. After their introduction in the Mess Frank's next meeting with him was at his own table at the Residency, when in due course Wargrave was invited to dinner after his duty call. Raymond was asked as well; and the two subalterns were the only guests.

Their hostess looked very lovely in a Paris-made gown of a green shade that suited her colouring admirably. England did not seem to the young soldiers so very far away when this charming and exquisitely-dressed woman received them in her large drawing-room from which all trace of the East in furniture and decoration

was carefully excluded. For the English in India try to avoid in their homes all that would remind them of the Land of Exile in which their lot is cast.

Major Norton came into the room after his guests, muttering an unintelligible apology. He shook hands with them with an abstracted air and failed to recall Wargrave's name. At table he asked Frank a few perfunctory questions and then wandered off into his inevitable subject, entomology, but finding him ignorant of and uninterested in it he engaged in a desultory conversation with Raymond. He soon tired of this and for the most part ate his dinner in silence. He never addressed his wife; and Wargrave, watching them, pitied her if her husband was as little companionable at meal-times when they were alone. He pictured her sitting at table every day with this abstracted and uncommunicative man, whose thoughts seemed far from his present company and surroundings and who was scarcely likely to exert himself to talk to and entertain his wife when he made so little effort to do so to his guests.

Determined that on this occasion at least his hostess should be amused Frank did his best to enliven the meal. He described to her as well as he could all that he remembered of the latest fashions in England, told her the plots of the newest plays at the London theatres, repeated a few laughable stories to make her smile and provoked Raymond, who had a dry humour of his own, to a contest of wit. Between them the two subalterns brightened up what had threatened to be a dull evening. Mrs. Norton laughed gaily and helped to keep the ball rolling; and even the host in his turn woke up and actually attempted to tell a humorous story. It certainly lacked point; but he seemed satisfied that it was funny, so his guests smiled as in duty bound. But Wargrave noted Mrs. Norton's look of astonishment at this new departure on the part of her husband and thought that there was something very pathetic in her surprise. When the meal was ended she laughingly declined to leave the men over their wine and stayed to smoke a cigarette with them.

When they all quitted the dining-room the Resident asked his guests to excuse him for returning to his study, pleading urgent and important work; and his wife led the subalterns up to the drawing-room and out on to the verandah that ran alongside its French windows. Here easy chairs and a table with a big lamp had been placed for them. As soon as they were seated one of the stately *chuprassis* brought coffee, while another proffered cigars and cigarettes and held a light from a silver spirit-lamp. Then both the solemn servitors departed noiselessly on bare feet.

After some conversation Mrs. Norton said to the adjutant:

"Do you remember, Mr. Raymond, that you have promised to take me out shooting one day?"

"I haven't forgotten," he replied; "but I was not able to arrange it, as the Maharajah had pigsticking meets fixed up for all our free days. But I don't think we'll have another for some time; for I hear that His Highness is laid up from the effects of his fall. So we might go out some day soon."

"Good. When shall we go?" asked Wargrave. "Let's fix it up now."

"What about next Thursday?" said his friend, turning to Mrs. Norton.

"Yes; that will suit me. Where shall we go?"

"There are a lot of partridge and a few hares, I'm told, near the tank at Marwa, where there is a good deal of cultivation," answered Raymond. Then turning to his friend he continued:

"You are not very keen on small game shooting, Frank; so you can bring your rifle and try for *chinkara*. I saw a buck and a couple of doe there not very long ago. A little venison would be very acceptable in Mess."

"The tank is about eight miles away, isn't it?" said the hostess. "I'll write to the Maharajah and ask him to lend us camels to take us out. My cook will put up a good cold lunch for us."

She rose from her chair and continued:

"Now, Mr. Wargrave, come and sing something. I've been trying over those new songs of yours to-day."

She led the way into the drawing-room and Raymond was left alone on the verandah to smoke and listen for the rest of the evening, while the others forgot him as they played and sang.

Suddenly he sat up in his chair and with a queer little pang of jealousy in his heart stared through the open window at the couple at the piano. He watched his friend's face turned eagerly towards his hostess. Wargrave was gazing intently at her as in a voice full of feeling and pathos, a voice with a plaintive little tone in it that thrilled him strangely, she sang that haunting melody "The Love Song of Har Dyal." Wistfully, sadly, she uttered the sorrowful words that Kipling puts into the mouth of the lovelorn Pathan maiden:

"My father's wife is old and harsh with years
And drudge of all my father's house am I
My bread is sorrow and my drink is tears
Come back to me, Beloved, or I die!
Come back to me, Beloved, or I die!"

And the singer looked up into the eager eyes bent on her and sighed a little as she struck the final chords. Out on the verandah Raymond frowned as he watched them and wondered if this woman was to come between them and take his friend from him. Just then the bare-footed servants entered the room, carrying silver trays on which stood the whiskies and sodas that are the stirrup-cups, the hints to guests that the time of departure has come, of dinner-parties in India.

As the two subalterns drove home in Raymond's trap through the hot Indian night under a moon shining with a brilliance that England never knows, Wargrave hummed "The Love Song of Har Dyal."

Suddenly he said:

"She's wonderful, Ray, isn't she? Fancy such a glorious woman buried in this hole and married to a dry old stick like the Resident! Doesn't it seem a shame?"

The adjutant mumbled an incoherent reply behind his lighted cheroot.

Arrived in their bungalow they undressed in their rooms and in pyjamas and slippers came out into the compound, where on either side of a table on which was a lighted lamp stood their bedsteads, the mattress of each covered with a thin strip of soft China matting. For in the hot weather in many parts of India this must be used to lie upon instead of a linen sheet, which would become saturated with perspiration. Looking carefully at the ground over which they passed for fear of snakes they reached and lay down on their beds, over each of which a *punkah* was suspended from a cross-beam supported by two upright posts sunk in the ground. One rope moved both *punkahs*, and the motive power was supplied by a coolie who, salaaming to the sahibs and seating himself on the ground, picked up the end of the rope and began to pull. Raymond put out the lamp.

Wargrave stared up at the moon for a while. Then he said:

"I say, Ray; didn't Mrs. Norton look lovely to-night? Didn't that dress suit her awfully well?"

"Oh, go to sleep, old man. We've got to get up in a few hours for this confoundedly early parade. Goodnight," growled the adjutant, turning on his side and closing his eyes.

But he listened for some time to his friend humming "The Love Song of Har Dyal" again! and not until Frank was silent did he doze off. An hour later he woke up suddenly, bathed in perspiration and devoured by mosquitoes; for the *punkahs* were still—the coolie had gone to sleep. He called to the man and aroused him, then before shutting his eyes again he looked at his companion. The moon shone full on Wargrave's face. He was sleeping peacefully and smiling. Raymond stared at him for a few minutes. Then he muttered inconsequently:

"Confound the woman!"

And closing his eyes resolutely he fell asleep.

In the days that elapsed before the shoot at Marwa, Wargrave rode every afternoon to the Residency with the *syce* carrying his violin case, except when tennis was to be played. In their small community this could not escape notice and comment—not that it occurred to him to try to avoid either. The Resident did not object to the frequency of his visits; and Frank saw no harm in his friendship with Mrs. Norton. But others did; and the remarks of the two ladies of his regiment on the subject were venomously spiteful. But their censure was reserved for the one they termed "that shameless woman"; for like everyone else they were partial to Wargrave and held him less to blame.

His brother officers, although being men they were not so quick to nose out a scandal, could not help noticing his absorption in Mrs. Norton's society. One afternoon his Double Company Commander, Major Hepburn, walked into the compound of Raymond's bungalow and on the verandah shouted the usual Anglo-Indian caller's demand:

"Boy! *Koi hai?*" (Is anyone there?)

A servant hurried out and salaaming answered:

"*Adjitan Sahib hai.*" (The adjutant is here).

"Oh, come in, Major," cried Raymond, rising from the table at which he was seated drinking his tea.

"Don't get up," said Hepburn, entering the room. "Is Wargrave in?"

"No, sir; he went out half an hour ago."

"Confound it, it seems impossible ever to find him in the afternoon nowadays," said the major petulantly. "I wanted him to get up a hockey match against No. 3 Double Company to-day. He used to be very keen on playing with the men; but since he came back from England he never goes near them. Where is he? Poodlefaking at the Residency, as usual?"

This is the term contemptuously applied in India to the paying of calls and other social duties that imply dancing attendance on the fair sex.

"I didn't see him before he went out, sir," was Raymond's equivocal reply. He loyally evaded a direct answer.

Hepburn shook his head doubtfully.

"I'm sorry about it. I hope the boy doesn't get into mischief. Look here, Raymond, you're his pal. Keep your eye on him. He's a good lad; and it would be a pity if he came to grief."

The adjutant did not answer. The major put on his hat.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to see to the hockey myself."

He left the bungalow with a curt nod to Raymond, who watched him pass out through the compound gate. Then the adjutant walked over to Wargrave's writing-table and stood up again in its place a large photograph of Mrs. Norton which he had hurriedly laid face downwards when he heard Hepburn's voice outside. He looked at it for a minute, then turned away frowning.

When the morning of the shooting party arrived Wargrave and Raymond, having sent their *syces* on ahead with their guns, rode at dawn to the Residency. In front of the building a group of camels lay on the ground, burbling, blowing bubbles, grumbling incessantly and stretching out their long necks to snap viciously at anyone but their drivers that chanced to come near them. At the hall-door Mrs. Norton stood, dressed in a smart and attractive costume of khaki drill, consisting of a well-cut long frock coat and breeches, with the neatest of cloth gaiters and dainty but serviceable boots. To their surprise her husband was with her and evidently prepared to accompany them. For he wore an old coat, knickerbockers and putties, from a strap over his shoulder hung a specimen box, and he was armed with all the requisite appliances for the capture and slaughter of many insects.

Avoiding the camels' vicious teeth the party mounted after exchanging greetings. Mrs. Norton and Wargrave rode the same animal; and Frank, unused to this form of locomotion, took a tight grip as the long-legged beast rose from the ground in unexpected jerks and set off at a jolting walk that shook its riders painfully. Then it broke into a trot equally disconcerting but finally settled into an easy canter that was as comfortable a motion as its previous paces had been spine-dislocating. The route lay at first over a space of desert which was unpleasant, for the sand was blown in clouds by a high wind, almost a gale. But the camels were fast movers and it did not take very long before they were passing through scrub jungle and finally reached the wide stretch of cultivation near Marwa.

The tank, as lakes are called in India, lay in the centre of a shallow depression, the rim of which all round was about four hundred yards from the water which, now half a mile across, evidently filled the whole basin in the rainy season. The strong breeze churned its surface into little waves and piled up masses of froth and foam against the bending reeds at one end of the tank, where, about fifty yards from the water's edge stood a couple of thorny trees, offering almost the only shade to be found for a long distance around. In the shallows were many yellow egrets, while a *sarus* crane stalked solemnly along the far bank, and everywhere bird-life, rare elsewhere in the State, abounded. The land all about was green, a refreshing change from the usual sandy and parched character of most of the country.

But beyond the tank the fields stretched away out of sight. At the edge of the cultivation the camels were halted and the party dismounted from them and separated. Mrs. Norton, who was a fair shot and carried a light 12-bore gun, started to walk up the partridges with Raymond, while her husband went to search the reeds and the borders of the lake for strange insects. Wargrave armed with a sporting Mannlicher rifle, set off on a long tramp to look for *chinkara*, which are pretty little antelope with curving horns. The wind, which was freshening, prevented the heat from being excessive.

The sport was fairly good. When lunch-time came the adjutant and Mrs. Norton had got quite a respectable bag of partridges and a few hares. The entomologist was in high spirits, for he had secured two rare specimens; and Wargrave had shot a good buck. So in a contented frame of mind all gathered under the trees near the end of the tank, where lunch was laid by a couple of the Residency servants on a white cloth spread on the ground. As they ate their *tiffin* (lunch) the members of the party chatted over the incidents of the morning; and each related the story of his or her sport.

After the meal Mrs. Norton decided to rest; for the ride and the long walk with her gun had tired her. The servants spread a rug for her under the trees and placed a camel saddle for her to recline against. Then carrying away the empty dishes, plates, glasses and cutlery they retired out of sight.

"Are you sure you don't mind being left alone, Mrs. Norton?" asked Wargrave.

"Not in the least. Do go and shoot again," she replied, smiling up at him. "I'm very comfortable and I'm glad to have a good rest before undertaking that tiresome ride back. It's very pleasant here. The wind comes so cool and fresh off the water. Isn't it strong, though?"

The breeze had freshened to a gale and under the trees the temperature was quite bearable. The Resident had already gone out of sight over the rim of the basin, having exhausted the neighbourhood of the tank and being desirous of searching farther afield. Wargrave and Raymond now followed him but soon separated, the latter making for the cultivation again, while his friend set off for the open plain. Ordinarily the heat would have been intense, for the hours after noon up to three o'clock or later are the hottest of the day in India; but the gale made it quite cool.

To Wargrave, tramping about unsuccessfully this time, came frequently the sound of Raymond's gun.

"Ray seems to be having all the luck," he thought, as through his field-glasses he scanned the plain without seeing anything. "I'm getting fed up."

At last in despair he shouldered his rifle and turned back. After a long walk he came in sight of the adjutant standing near the edge of the fields talking to Norton. When Frank reached them he found that his friend had increased his bag very considerably.

"Well done, old boy, you'd better luck than I had," he said. Then turning to the Resident he continued: "How have you done, sir?"

"Nothing of any value," replied Norton "Have you finished? We're thinking of going back now."

"Yes, sir; I'm through. By Jove, I'm thirsty. I could do with a drink, couldn't you, Ray?"

"Rather. My throat's like a lime-kiln. We'll join Mrs. Norton and then have an iced drink while the camels are being saddled."

They strolled towards the lake, which was hidden from their view by the rim of the basin. As they reached the slight ridge that this made all three stopped dead and gazed in amazement.

"What's happened to the tank?" exclaimed Raymond. "The water's almost up to the trees."

"Good God; My wife! Look! Look!" cried the Resident.

They stood appalled. The wide body of water had swept up to within a few yards of the trees under which Mrs. Norton lay fast asleep. And stealthily emerging from it a large crocodile was slowly, cautiously, crawling towards the unconscious woman.

CHAPTER IV

A CROCODILE INTERVENES

Major Norton opened his mouth to cry a warning; but Wargrave grasped his arm and said hurriedly:

"Don't shout, sir! Don't wake her! She'd be too confused to move."

Then he thrust his field-glasses into the adjutant's hand.

"Watch for the strike of my bullet, Ray," he said.

He threw himself at full length on the ground and pressed a cartridge into the breech of his rifle. His companions stood over him as he cast a hurried glance forward and adjusted his sight, muttering:

"Just about four hundred yards."

The crocodile was nearly broadside on to him; and even at that distance he could see the scaly armour covering head, back and sides, that would defy any bullet. The unprotected spot behind the shoulder was hidden from him; the only vulnerable part was the neck. Wargrave laid his cheek to the butt and sighted on this.

The crocodile crept on inch by inch, dragging its limbs forward with the slow, stealthy movement of its kind when stalking their prey on land. The horrified watchers saw that the terrible snout with its protruding fangs was barely a yard from Mrs. Norton's feet. Raymond's hands holding the glasses to his eyes trembled violently. The Resident shook as with the palsy; and he stared in horror at the crawling death that threatened the sleeping woman.

Wargrave fired.

As the rifle rang out the creeping movement ceased.

"You've hit him, I'll swear," cried Raymond. "I didn't see the bullet strike the ground."

Wargrave rapidly worked the bolt of his rifle, jerking out the empty case and pushing a fresh cartridge into the chamber. He fired again.

"That's got him! That *must* have got him!" exclaimed Raymond.

The crocodile lay still. Frank leapt to his feet and, rifle in hand, dashed down the incline. At that moment Mrs. Norton awoke, turned on her side, raised her body a little and suddenly saw the horrible reptile. She sat up rigid with terror and stared at it. The brute slowly opened its huge mouth and disclosed the cruel, gapped teeth. Then the iron jaws clashed together. With a shriek the woman sprang to her feet, but stood trembling, unable to move away.

"Run! Run!" shouted Wargrave, springing down the slope towards her.

Behind him raced Raymond, while her husband, who was unable to run fast, followed far behind.

Mrs. Norton seemed rooted to the spot. But she turned to Wargrave with outstretched arms and gasped:

"Save me, Frank! Save me!"

With a bound he reached her, and, as she clung to him convulsively, panted out:

"It's all right, dear. You're safe now."

He pushed her behind him, and bringing the rifle to his shoulder, faced the crocodile. The brute opened and shut its great jaws, seeming to gasp for air, while a strange whistling sound came from its throat. Its body appeared to be paralysed.

"It can't move. You've broken its spine," cried Raymond, as he reached them. "Your first shot it must have been. Look! Your second's torn its throat."

He pointed to the neck and went round to the other side. From a jagged, gaping wound where the expanding bullet had torn the throat, the blood spurted and air whistled out with a shrill sound.

Wargrave turned to Violet and took the terrified woman, who seemed on the point of fainting, in his arms.

"All right, little girl. It's all right. The brute's done for."

She pulled herself together with an effort and looked nervously at the crocodile. Then she released herself

from Frank's clasp and said, smiling feebly:

"What a coward I am! I'm ashamed of myself. Where's John? Oh, here he is. Doesn't he look funny?"

The Resident, very red-faced and out of breath, had slowed down into a shambling walk and was puffing and blowing like a grampus. As he came up to them he spluttered:

"Is it safe? Is it dead?"

"It's harmless now, sir," answered Raymond. "It's still living but it can't move. The spine's broken, I think."

The Resident turned to his wife. The poor man had been in agony while she was in danger; but now that the peril had passed he could only express his relief in irritable scolding:

"How could you be so foolish, Violet?" he asked crossly. "The idea of going to sleep near the tank! Most unwise! You might have been eaten alive."

His wife smiled bitterly and glanced at the grumbling man with a contemptuous expression on her face.

"Yes, John, very inconsiderate of me, I daresay. But how was I to know that there was a *mugger* (crocodile) in the tank?"

Then for the first time she realised the nearness of the water.

"Good gracious! I thought I was much farther—how did I get so close to it? Did I slip down in my sleep?"

"No; there are the trees," said Raymond. "It's extraordinary. The whole tank seems to have shifted."

The Resident was mopping his bald scalp and lifted his hat to let the gusty wind cool his head. A sudden squall blew the big pith sun-helmet out of his hand. Wargrave caught it in the air and returned it to its owner.

"By Jove! it's a regular gale," he said. "I think I know what's happened. This wind's so strong that it's blown the water of the tank before it and actually shifted the whole mass thirty or forty yards this way."

"Yes, I've known that to occur before with shallow ponds," said Raymond. "I've heard the passage of the Red Sea by the Israelites and the drowning of Pharaoh's Army explained in the same way. It's said that the crossing really took place at one extremity of the Bitter Lake through which the Suez Canal passes."

Major Norton was staring at the far end of the tank now left bare.

"There may be some interesting insects stranded on the bottom uncovered by the receding water," he said, abstractedly, and was moving away to search for them when Wargrave said disgustedly:

"Don't you think, sir, that, as Mrs. Norton has had such a shock, the sooner we get off the better?"

"Yes, yes. Very true. But you can order the camels to be saddled while I'm having a look," replied the enthusiastic collector. "I really must go and see. There may be some very interesting specimens there."

And he hurried away. His wife smiled rather bitterly as he went. Then she turned to the two subalterns.

"But tell me what happened? How did the *mugger* come here? How was I saved?"

Raymond rapidly narrated what had taken place. Violet looked at Wargrave with glistening eyes and held out her hands to him.

"So you saved my life. How can I thank you?" she said gratefully. Her lips trembled a little.

Frank took her hands in his but answered lightly:

"Oh, it was nothing. Anyone else would have done the same. I happened to be the only one with a rifle."

Raymond turned away quickly and walked over to the crocodile. Neither of them took any notice of him. Violet gazed fondly at Wargrave.

"I owe you so much, Frank, so very much," she murmured in a low voice. "You've made my life worth living; and now you make me live."

He was embarrassed but he pressed the hands he held in his. Then he released them and tried to speak lightly.

"Shall I have the *mugger* skinned and get a dressing-bag made out of his hide for you?" he said, smiling. "That'd be a nice souvenir of the brute."

She shuddered.

"I don't want to remember him," she cried, turning to glance at the crocodile. "Horrid beast! I can't bear the sight of him."

The *mugger* certainly looked a most repulsive brute as it lay stretched on the ground, its jaws occasionally opening and shutting spasmodically, the blood from its wounded throat spreading in a pool on the sun-baked earth. It was evidently an old beast; and skull and back were covered with thick horny plates and bosses through which no bullet could penetrate. The big teeth studded irregularly in the cruel jaws were yellow and worn, as were the thick nails tipping the claws at the ends of the powerful limbs.

"The devil's not dead yet. Shall I put another bullet into him?" said Wargrave.

"It's only wasting a cartridge," replied his friend. "He can't do any more harm. When the men come we'll

have him cut open and see what he's got inside him."

Violet shuddered.

"Oh, do you think he has ever eaten any human being?" she asked, gazing with loathing at the huge reptile.

"Judging from the way he stalked you I should think he has," answered Raymond. "Hullo! here comes one of the camel-drivers with some of the villagers. They'll be able to tell us about him."

On the rim of the basin appeared a group of natives moving in their direction. Suddenly they caught sight of the crocodile, stopped and pointed to it and began to talk excitedly. One of the local peasants ran back shouting. The rest hurried down for a closer view of the reptile. A chorus of wonder rose from them as they stood round it. The Mahomedan camel-driver exclaimed in Hindustani:

"Ahré, bhai! Kiya janwar! Pukka shaitan! (Ah, brother! What an animal! A veritable devil!)"

As the villagers spoke only the dialect of the State, Raymond used this man as interpreter and questioned them about the crocodile. They asserted that it had inhabited the tank for many years—hundreds, said one man. It had, to their certain knowledge, killed several women incautiously bathing or drawing water from the tank. As women are not valued highly by the poorer Hindus this did not make the *mugger* very unpopular. But early in that very year it had committed the awful crime of dragging under water and devouring a Brahmini bull, an animal devoted to the Gods and held sacrosanct.

By this time the crocodile had breathed its last. Raymond measured it roughly and found it to be over twelve feet in length. The peasants turned the great body on its back. Wargrave saw that the skin underneath was too thick to be made into leather, so he bade them cut the belly open. The stomach contained many shells of freshwater crabs and crayfish, as well as a surprising amount of large pebbles, either taken for digestive purposes or swallowed when the fish were being scooped up off the bottom. But further search resulted in the finding of several heavy brass or copper anklets and armlets, such as are worn by Indian women. Some had evidently been a long time in the reptile's interior.

When the camels had come and the party was preparing to mount and start back home, a crowd of villagers, led by their old priest, bore down upon them. Learning that Frank was the slayer of the sacrilegious crocodile the holy man hung a garland of marigolds round his neck and through the interpreter offered him the thanks of gods and men for his good deed. And to a chorus of blessings and compliments he rode away with his companions.

So ended the incident—apparently. But consequences undreamed of by any of the actors in it flowed from it. For imperceptibly it brought a change into the relations between Mrs. Norton and Wargrave and eventually altered them completely. At first it merely seemed to strengthen their friendship and increase the feeling of intimacy. To Violet—they were Violet and Frank to each other now—the saving of her life constituted a bond that could never be severed. He had preserved her from a horrible death and she owed Wargrave more than gratitude.

Hitherto she had often toyed with the idea of him as a lover, and the thought had been a pleasant one. But it had hardly occurred to her to be in love with him in return. In all her life up to now she had never known what it was to really love. She had married without affection. Her girlhood had been passed without the mildest flirtation; for she had been brought up in a quiet country village where there never seemed to be any bachelors of her own class between the ages of seventeen and fifty. Even the curate was grey-haired and married. She had made up for this deprivation during the voyage out to India and her season in Calcutta; but, although she had found many men ready to flirt with her, Norton's proposal was the only serious one that she had had and she accepted him in desperation. She had never felt any love for him. She did not realise that he had any for her; for, although he really entertained a sincere affection of a kind for her, it was so seldom and so badly expressed that she was never aware of its existence. Since her marriage she had had several careless flirtations during her visits to her relatives in Calcutta; but her heart was not seriously affected.

She never acknowledged to herself that any gratitude or loyalty was due from her to her husband. On the contrary she felt that she owed him, as well as Fate, a grudge. She was young, warmblooded, of a passionate temperament, yet she found herself wedded to a man who apparently needed a housekeeper, not a wife. Her husband did not appear to realise that a woman is not essentially different to a man, that she has feelings, desires, passions, just as he has—although by a polite fiction the prudish Anglo-Saxon races seem to agree to regard her as of a more spiritual, more ethereal and less earthly a nature. Yet it is only a fiction after all. Violet was a living woman, a creature of flesh and blood who was not content to be a chattel, a household ornament, a piece of furniture. It was not to be wondered at that she longed to enter into woman's kingdom, to exercise the power of her sex to sway the other and to experience the thrill of the realisation of that power. Often in her loneliness she pined to see eyes she loved look with love into hers. She was not a marble statue. It was but natural that she should long for Love, a lover, the clasp of strong arms, the pressure of a man's broad chest against her bosom, the feel of burning kisses on her lips, the glorious surrender of her whole being to some adored one to whom she was the universe, who lived but for her.

Now for the first time in her life her errant dreams took concrete shape. At last she began to feel the companionship of a particular man necessary for her happiness. She had never before realised the pleasure, the joy, to be derived from the presence of one of the opposite sex who was in sympathy, in perfect harmony with her nature.

In her lonely hours—and they were many—she thought constantly of Wargrave; his face was ever before her, his voice sounding in her ears. She usually saw her husband—absorbed in his work and studies—only at meals; and as she looked across the table at him then she could not help contrasting the heavy, unattractive man sitting silent, usually reading a book while he ate, with the good-looking, laughter-loving playfellow who

had come into her life. She learned to day-dream of Wargrave, to watch for his coming and hate his going, to enjoy every moment of his presence. He had brought a new interest into her hitherto purposeless life, the life that he had preserved and that consequently seemed to belong to him. New feelings awakened in her. The world was a brighter, happier place than it had been. It pleased her to realise what it all meant, to know that the novel sensations, the fluttering hopes and fears, the strange, delightful thrills, were all symptoms of that longed-for malady that comes sooner or later to all women. She knew at last that she loved Wargrave and gloried in the knowledge. And she never doubted that he loved her in return.

Did he? It was hard to tell. To a man the thought of Love in the abstract seldom occurs; and the realisation of the concrete fact that he is in love with some particular woman generally comes somewhat as a shock. He is by nature a lover of freedom and in theory at least resents fetters, even silken ones. And Wargrave had never thought of analysing his feelings towards Violet. He was not a professional amorist and, although not a puritan, would never set himself deliberately to make love to a married woman under her husband's roof. He was fond of Mrs. Norton—as a sister, he thought. She was a delightful friend, a real pal, so understanding, so companionable, he said to himself frequently. It had not occurred to him that his feelings for her might be love. He had often before been on terms of friendship with women, married and single; but none of them had ever attracted him as much as she did. He had never felt any desire to be married; domesticity did not appeal to him. But now, as he watched Violet moving about her drawing-room or playing to him, he found himself thinking that it would be pleasant to return to his bungalow from parade and find a pretty little wife waiting to greet him with a smile and a kiss—and the wife of his dreams always had Violet's face, wore smart well-cut frocks like Violet's, and showed just such shapely, silken-clad legs and ankles and such small feet in dainty, silver-buckled, high-heeled shoes. And he thought with an inward groan that such a luxury was not for a debt-ridden subaltern like him, that his heavily-mortgaged pay would not run to expensive gowns, silk stockings and costly footwear.

Yet it never occurred to him that Violet cared for him nor did it enter his mind to try to win her love. But he felt that he would do much to make her happy, that saving her life made him in a way responsible for it in future; and he knew that she was not a contented woman. His sympathy went out to her for what he guessed she must suffer from her ill-assorted union.

But soon he had no need to surmise it; for before long Violet began to confide all her sorrows to him and the recital made his heart bleed for one so young and beautiful mated to a selfish wretch who was as blind to her suffering as he was to her charm. The younger man's chivalry was up in arms, and he felt that such a boor did not deserve so bright a jewel. At times Frank was tempted to confront the callous husband and force him to open his dulled eyes to the bravely-borne misery of his neglected wife and realise how fortunate he ought to consider himself in being the owner of such a transcendent being. But the next moment the infatuated youth was convinced that Norton was incapable of appreciating so rare a woman, that only a nature like his own could understand or do full justice to the perfections of hers. Such is a young man's conceit. He rejoiced to know that his poor sympathy could help in a measure to make up to Violet for the happiness that she declared that she had missed in life. And so he gladly consented to play the consoler; and she, for the pleasure of being consoled, continued to pour out her griefs to him.

But if Frank was unconscious of the danger of his post as sympathising confidant to another man's young and pretty wife, others were not. Her husband, of course, was as blind as most husbands seem to be in Anglo-Indian society. For in that land of the Household of Three, the Eternal Triangle, it is almost a recognised principle that every married woman who is at all attractive is entitled to have one particular bachelor always in close attendance on her, to be constantly at her beck and call, to ride with her, to drive her every afternoon to tennis or golf or watch polo, then on to the Club and sit with her there. His duty, a pleasant one, no doubt, is to cheer up her otherwise solitary dinner in her bungalow on the nights when her neglectful husband is dining out *en garçon*. No *cavaliere servente* of Old Italy ever had so busy a time as the Tame Cat of the India of to-day. And the husband allows it, nay seems, as Major Norton did, to hail his presence with relief, as it eases the conscience of the selfish lord and master who leaves his spouse much alone.

But if the Resident saw no harm or danger in the young officer constantly seeking the society of his pretty wife others did. At first Frank's well-wishers tried to hint to him that there was likelihood of his friendship with her being misunderstood. But he laughed at Raymond's badly-expressed warning and rather resented Major Hepburn's kindly advice when on one occasion his Company Commander spoke plainly, though tactfully, to him on the subject. Then Violet's enemies took a hand in the game. Mrs. Trevor, having failed to decoy him to her bungalow for what she called "a quiet tea and a motherly little chat," cornered him one afternoon when he was on his way to the Residency and spoke very openly to him of the risk he ran of being entangled in the coils of such an outrageous coquette as "that Mrs. Norton," as she termed her. Frank was so indignant at her abuse of his friend that for the first time in his life he was rude to a woman and snubbed Mrs. Trevor so severely that she went in a rage to her husband and insisted on his taking immediate steps to arrest the progress of a scandal that, she declared, would attract the unfavourable attention of the higher military authorities to the regiment.

"Do you realise, William, that you will be the one to suffer?" said the angry woman. "If anything happens, if Major Norton complains, if that shameless creature succeeds in making that foolish young man run away with her, you will be blamed. You can't afford it. You know that the General's confidential report on you last year was not too favourable."

"It wasn't really bad, my dear; it only hinted that I lacked decision," pleaded the hen-pecked man.

"Exactly. You are not firm enough," persisted his domestic tyrant. "They will say that you should have put your foot down at once and stopped this disgraceful affair."

"But what can I do?" asked the Colonel helplessly.

"Someone ought to speak to Major Norton at once."

"Oh, my dear Jane, I couldn't. I daren't."

"For two pins I'd do it myself. Mrs. Baird said the other day that it was our duty as respectable women."

"No, no, no, Jane. You mustn't think of it," exclaimed the alarmed man. "I forbid you. You mustn't mix yourself up in the affair. It would be committing me."

"Then send that impertinent young man away," said Mrs. Trevor firmly. No General would have accused *her* of lack of decision. "I used to have a high opinion of him once; but after his insolence to me I believe him to be nearly as bad as that woman."

"Where can I send him?" asked the worried Colonel. "He has done all the courses and passed all the classes and examinations he can."

"You know you have only to write confidentially to the Staff and inform them that young Wargrave's removal to another station is absolutely necessary to prevent a scandal; and they'll send him off somewhere else at once."

Her husband nodded his head. He was well aware of the fact that the Army in India looks closely after the behaviour and morals of its officers, that a colonel has only to hint that the transfer of a particular individual under his command is necessary to stop a scandal—and without loss of time that officer finds himself deported to the other side of the country.

One morning, a week after Mrs Trevor's conversation with her husband, Wargrave, superintending the musketry of his Double Company on the rifle range, was given an official note from the adjutant informing him that the Commanding Officer desired to see him at once in the Orderly Room. As Major Hepburn was not present Frank handed the men over to the senior Indian company commander and rode off to the Regimental Office, wondering as he went what could be the reason of the sudden summons. Reaching the building he found Raymond on the watch for him, while ostensibly engaged in criticising to the battalion *durzi* (tailor) the fit of the new uniforms of several recruits.

"I say, Ray, what's up?" asked his friend cheerily, as he swung himself out of the saddle.

The adjutant nodded warningly towards the Orderly Room and dropped his voice as he replied:

"I don't know, old chap. The C.O.'s said nothing to me; but he's in there with Hepburn trying to work himself up into a rage so that he can bully-rag you properly. You'd better go in and get it over."

Wargrave entered the big, colour-washed room. The Colonel was seated at his desk, frowning at a paper before him, and did not look up. Major Hepburn was standing behind his chair and glanced commiseratingly at the subaltern.

Frank stood to attention and saluted.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "You wanted to see me?"

Colonel Trevor did not reply, but turning slightly in his chair, said:

"Major Hepburn, call in the adjutant, please."

As the Second in Command went out on the verandah and summoned Raymond, Wargrave's heart misgave him. He had no idea of what the matter was; but the Colonel's manner and the presence of the Second in Command were ominous signs. He wondered what crime he was going to be charged with.

"Shut the doors, Raymond," said the Commanding Officer curtly, as the adjutant entered. The latter did so and sat down at his writing-table, glancing anxiously at his friend.

Colonel Trevor's lips were twitching nervously; and he seemed to experience a difficulty in finding his voice. At last he took up a paper from his desk and said:

"Mr. Wargrave, this is a telegram just received from Western Army Head Quarters. It says 'Lieutenant Wargrave is appointed to No. 12 Battalion, Frontier Military Police. Direct him to proceed forthwith to report to O.C. Detachment, Ranga Duar, Eastern Bengal.'"

CHAPTER V

SENTENCE OF EXILE

At the words of the telegram Raymond started and Frank stared in bewilderment at the Colonel.

"But I never asked for the Military Police, sir," he exclaimed. "I——"

The Colonel licked his dry lips and, working himself up into a passion, shouted:

"No, you didn't. But I did. I applied for you to be sent to it. I asked for you to be transferred from this station. You can ask yourself the reason why. I will not tolerate conduct such as yours, sir. I will not have an

officer like you under my command."

Frank flushed deeply.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I don't understand. I really don't know what I've done. I should——"

But the Colonel burst in furiously:

"He says he doesn't know what he's done, Major Hepburn. Listen to that! He does not know what he's done"; and the speaker pounded on the desk with his clenched fist, working himself up into a rage, as a weak man will do when he has to carry out an unpleasant task.

"But, sir, surely I have a right——," began Wargrave, clenching his hands until the nails were almost driven into his palms in an effort to keep his temper.

"I cannot argue the question with you, Wargrave," said the Colonel loftily. "You have got your orders. Headquarters approve of my action. I have discussed the matter with my Second in Command, and he agrees with me. You can go. Raymond, make out the necessary warrants for Mr. Wargrave's journey and give him an advance of a month's pay. He will leave to-morrow. Tell the Quartermaster to make the necessary arrangements."

Frank bit his lip. His years of discipline and the respect for authority engrained in him since his entrance to Sandhurst kept the mutinous words back. He saluted punctiliously and, turning about smartly walked out of the Orderly Room. In the glaring sunshine he strode out of the compound and down the white, dusty road to his bungalow, his brain in a whirl, blind to everything, seeing neither the sepoy saluting him nor his *syce* hurrying after him and dragging the pony by the bridle.

When he reached his house he entered the sitting-room and dropped into a chair. His "boy" approached salaaming and asked if he should go to the Mess to order the Sahib's breakfast to be got ready. Wargrave waved him away impatiently.

He sat staring unseeingly at the wall. He could not think coherently. He felt dazed. His bewildered brain seemed to be revolving endlessly round the thought of the telegram from Headquarters and the Colonel's words "I will not have an officer like you under my command." What was the meaning of it all? What had he done? A pang shot through him at the sudden remembrance of Colonel Trevor's assertion that Major Hepburn agreed with him. Frank held the Second in Command in high respect, for he knew him to be an exceptionally good soldier and a gentleman in every sense of the word. Had he so disgraced himself then that Hepburn considered the Colonel's action justified? But how?

He shifted uneasily in his chair and his eyes fell on Mrs. Norton's portrait. At the sight of it his Company Commander's advice to him about her and Mrs. Trevor's spiteful remarks flashed across his mind. Could Violet be mixed up in all this? Was his friendship with her perhaps the cause of the trouble? He dismissed the idea at once. There was nothing to be ashamed of in their relations.

A figure darkened the doorway. It was Raymond. Wargrave sprang up and rushed to him.

"What in Heaven's name is it all about, Ray?" he cried. "Is the Colonel mad?"

The adjutant took off his helmet and flung it on the table.

"Well, tell me. What the devil have I done?" said his friend impatiently.

Raymond tried to speak but failed.

"Go on, man. What is it?" cried Wargrave, seizing his arm.

The adjutant burst out:

"It's a damned shame, old man. I'm sorry."

"But what is it? What is it, I say?" cried Wargrave, shaking him.

The adjutant nodded his head towards the big photograph on the writing-table.

"It's Mrs. Norton," he said.

"Mrs. Norton?" echoed his friend. "What the—what's she got to do with it?"

Raymond threw himself into a chair.

"Someone's been making mischief. The C.O.'s been told that there might be a scandal so he's got scared lest trouble should come to him."

Frank stared blankly at the speaker, then suddenly turned and walked out of the bungalow. The pony was standing huddled into the patch of shade at the side of the house, the *syce* squatting on the ground at its head and holding the reins. Wargrave sprang into the saddle and galloped out of the compound. Raymond ran to the verandah and saw him thundering down the sandy road that led to the residency.

Arrived at the big white building Frank pulled up his panting pony on its haunches and dismounting threw the reins over its head and left it unattended.

Walking to the hall door he cried:

"*Koi hai?*"

A drowsy *chuprassi* at the back of the hall sprang up and hurried to receive him.

"*Memsahib hai?* (Is the mistress in?)"

"*Hai, sahib.* (Yes, sir)" said the servant salaaming.

Wargrave was free of the house and, taking off his hat, went into the cool hall and walked up the great staircase. He entered the drawing-room. After the blinding glare outside the closely-shuttered apartment seemed so dark that at first it was difficult for him to see if it were tenanted or not. But it was empty; and he paced the floor impatiently, frowning in chaotic thought.

"Good morning, Frank. You are early to-day. And what a bad temper you seem to be in!" exclaimed a laughing voice; and Mrs. Norton, looking radiant and delightfully cool in a thin white Madras muslin dress, entered the room.

He went to her.

"They're sending me away, Violet," he said.

"Sending you away?" she repeated in an astonished tone. "Sending you where?"

"To hell, I think," he cried. "Oh, I beg your pardon. I mean—yes, they're sending me away from Rohar, from you. Sending me to the other side of India."

The blood slowly left her face as she stared uncomprehendingly at him.

"Sending you away? Why?" she asked.

"Because—because we're friends, little girl."

"Because we're friends," she echoed. "What do you mean? But you mustn't go."

"I must. I can't help it. I've got to go."

Pale as death Violet stared at him.

"Got to go? To leave me?"

Then with a choking cry she threw her arms about his neck and sobbed.

"You mustn't. You mustn't leave me. I can't live without you. I love you. I love you. I'll die if you go from me."

Frank started and tried to hold her at arm's length to look into her face. But the woman clung frenziedly to him, while convulsive sobs shook her body. His arms went round her instinctively and, holding her to his breast, he stared blankly over the beautiful bowed head. It was true, then. She loved him. Without meaning it he had won her heart. He whose earnest wish it had been to save her from pain, to console her, to brighten her lonely life, had brought this fresh sorrow on her. To the misery of a loveless marriage he had added a heavier cross, an unhappy, a misplaced affection. No exultant vanity within him rejoiced at the knowledge that, unsought, she had learned to care for him. Only regret, pity for her, stirred in him. He was aware now as always that his feeling for her was not love. But she must not realise it. He must save her from the bitter mortification of learning that she had given her heart unasked. His must have been the fault; he it must be to bear the punishment. She should never know the truth. He bent down and reverently, tenderly, kissed the tear-stained face—it was the first time that his lips had touched her.

"Dearest, we will go together. You must come with me," he said.

Violet started and looked wildly up at him.

"Go with you? What do you mean? How can I?"

"I mean that you must come away with me to begin a new life—a happier one—together. I cannot leave you here with a man who neglects you, who does not appreciate you, who cannot understand you."

"Do you mean—run away with you?" she asked.

"Yes; it is the only thing to do."

She slowly loosed her clasp of him and released herself from his arms.

"But I don't understand at all. Why are you going? And where?"

He briefly told her what had happened. His face flushed darkly as he repeated the Colonel's words.

"He wouldn't have an officer like me under his command," he said. "He treated me like a criminal. I don't value his opinion much. But Major Hepburn agrees with him. That hurts. I respect him."

"But where is this place they're sending you to?" she asked.

"Ranga Duar? I don't know. Eastern Bengal, I believe."

"Bengal. What? Anywhere near Calcutta?"

"No; it must be somewhere up on the frontier. Otherwise they wouldn't send Military Police to garrison it."

"But what is it like? Is it a big station?" she persisted.

"I can't tell you. But it's sure not to be. No; it must be a small place up in the hills or in the jungle. There's only a detachment there."

"But what have I got to do with your being sent there?" she asked in perplexity.

"Don't you understand? Someone's been making mischief," he replied. "Those two vile-minded women have been talking scandal of us to the Colonel."

"What? Talking about you and me? Oh!" she exclaimed.

His words brought home to her the fact that these bitter-tongued women whom she despised had dared to assail her—her, the *Burra Mem*, the Great Lady of their little world. Had dared to? She could not silence them. And what would they say of her, how their tongues would wag, if she ran away from her husband! And they would have a right to talk scandal of her then. The thought made her pause.

"But how could I go with you to this place in Bengal? Where could I live?" she asked.

"You'd live with me."

"Oh! In your bungalow? How could I? And how would I get there?" she continued. "I haven't any money. I don't suppose I've got a ten-rupee note. And I couldn't ask my husband."

"Of course not. I would——" He paused. "By Jove! I never thought of that." It had not occurred to him that elopements must be carried out on a cash basis. He had forgotten that money was necessary. And he had none. He was heavily in debt. The local *shroffs*—the native money-lenders—would give him no more credit when they knew that he was going away. All that he would have would be the one month's advance of pay—probably not enough for Violet's fare and expenses across India—the Government provided his—and certainly not enough to support them for long. He frowned in perplexity. Running away with another man's wife did not seem so easy after all.

Violet was the first to recover her normal calm.

"Sit down and let us talk quietly," she said. "One of the servants may come in. Or my husband—if people are talking scandal of us."

She touched the switch of an overhead electric fan—the Government of India housed its Political Officer in Rohar much more luxuriously than the military ones—and sat down under it. Wargrave began to pace the room impatiently.

"Come, Frank, stop walking about like a tiger in a cage and let's discuss things properly."

With an effort he pulled himself together and took a chair near her. The woman was the more self-possessed of the two. The shock of suddenly finding herself up against the logical outcome of her desires had sobered her; and, faced with the prospect of an immediate flight involving the abdication of her assured social position and the surrender of a home, she was able to visualise the consequences of her actions. The most sobering reflection was the thought that by so doing she would be casting herself to the female wolves of her world—and she knew the extent of their mercy. There were others of her acquaintance besides Mrs. Trevor who would howl loud with triumph over her downfall. The thought has saved many a woman from social ruin.

Thinking only of what she had so often told him of the misery of living with a man as unsympathetic as her husband, Frank pleaded desperately with a conviction that he was far from feeling. The hard fact of the lack of sufficient money to pay for her travelling expenses, the difficulty of getting off together from this out-of-the-way station, were not to be got over. Then the impossibility of knowing whether she could remain with him when he was on frontier duty and of supporting her away from him, the realisation of the fact that they would have to face the Divorce Court with its heavy costs and probably crushing damages, all made the situation seem hopeless. In despair he sprang up and resumed his nervous pacing of the room.

At last Violet said:

"All I can see, dearest, is that we must wait. It will be harder for me than for you. You at least will not have to live with anyone uncongenial to you. But I must. Yet I can bear it for your sake."

He stopped before her and looked at her in admiration of her courageous and self-sacrificing spirit. Then he bent down and kissed her tenderly. Sitting beside her he discussed the situation more calmly than he had hitherto done. It was finally agreed that he was to go alone to his new station, save all that he could to pay off his debts—he would receive a higher salary in the Military Police and his expenses would be less—and when he was free and had made a home for her Violet would sacrifice everything for love and come to him. With almost tears in his eyes as he thought of her nobility he strained her to his heart. When the time came for parting the woman broke down completely and wept bitterly as she clung to him. He kissed her passionately, then with an effort put her from him and almost ran from the room, while she flung herself on a lounge and sobbed convulsively.

One of the Residency *syces* had taken charge of the pony; and Wargrave, mounting it, galloped madly back to his bungalow, his heart torn with anguish for the unhappiness of the broken-hearted woman that he was leaving behind.

When he arrived home he found that Raymond and his own "boy" and sword-orderly (his native soldier-servant) had begun his packing for him, for his heavy baggage had to be despatched that afternoon. The bungalow was crowded with his brother-officers waiting to see him. He had intended to avoid them, for he felt disgraced by the Colonel's censure which it was evident the Commanding Officer had not kept secret, though the whole matter should have been treated as confidential. But they made light of his scruples and

showed him that he had their sympathy. He had meant to dine alone in his room that night; but his comrades insisted on his coming to the Mess, where they were to give him an informal farewell dinner. They would take no refusal.

Daly, who was the Acting Quartermaster of the battalion, told him that the arrangements for his journey had been made. He was to leave at dawn and drive sixty miles in a *tonga*—a two-wheeled native conveyance drawn by a pair of ponies—to a village called Basedi on the shores of a narrow gulf or deep inlet of the sea which formed the eastern boundary of the State of Mandha. Here he would have to spend the night in a *dâk-bungalow*—or rest-house—and cross the water in a steam-launch next morning. After that, five days more of travel by various routes and means awaited him.

Before dinner that night a few minutes apart with Hepburn made Frank happier than he had been all day. For his Company Commander told him that he had only agreed with the Colonel's action because he believed that it would be for the subaltern's own good, not because he considered that the latter had done anything to disgrace him. Hepburn added that if he was given command of the regiment in two years' time—as should happen in the ordinary course of events—he would be glad to have Wargrave back again in the battalion then. Frank, with a guilty feeling when he remembered his compact with Violet, thanked him gratefully, and with a lightened heart went to the very festive meal that was to be his last for some long time, at least with his old corps.

The Colonel had refused to agree to his being invited formally to be the guest of the regiment; and neither he nor the other married man, the Doctor, were present. If they slept that night they were the only two officers in the Cantonment that did; for none of the others, not even senior major, Hepburn, left the Mess until it was time to escort their departing comrade to his bungalow to change for the journey. And, as the *tonga*-ponies rattled down the road and bore him away, Frank's last sight of his old comrades was the group of white-clad figures in the dawn waving frantically and cheering vociferously from the gateway of his bungalow.

The memory of it rejoiced him throughout the terrible hours of the long journey in the baking heat and blinding glare of the Hot Weather day. The worse moments were the stops every ten miles to change ponies, when he had to wait in the blazing sunshine. His "boy," who sat on the front seat of the vehicle beside the driver, produced from a basket packed with wet straw cooled bottles of soda-water, without which Wargrave felt that he would have died of sunstroke.

Then on after each halt; and the endless strip of white road again unrolled before him, while the never-ceasing clank of the iron-shod bar coupling the ponies maddened his aching head with its monotonous rhythm.

As the weary miles slid past him his thoughts were with Violet, so beautiful, so patient and brave in her self-denying endurance. And he cursed himself for having added to her pain, and inwardly vowed that some day he would atone to her for it.

At last the *tonga* rattled into the bare compound of the Basedi *dâk-bungalow* standing on a high stone plinth. The untidy *khansamah*—the custodian of the rest-home—hurried on to the verandah to greet the unexpected visitor and show his "boy" where to put the sahib's bedding and baggage in a bleak room with a cane-bottomed wooden bed hung with torn mosquito-curtains.

From a glass case in the sitting-room containing a scanty store of canned provisions the *khansamah* provided a meal with such ill-assorted ingredients as Somebody's desiccated soup lukewarm, a tin of sardines and sweet biscuits to eat with them, and a bottle of beer to wash it down with. Wargrave was too choked with dust, too sickened with the heat and glare, to have any appetite. After a smoke he dragged his weary body to bed and in spite of the mosquitoes that flocked joyously through the holes in the gauze curtains to feast on him slept the profound sleep of utter exhaustion.

He was up at daybreak; for the tide served in the early morning and only at its height could the launch approach the shore, which at low water was bordered with the filthy slime of mangrove swamps.

Landed at the other side of the gulf he had even a worse experience of travel before him than on the previous day. For the next stage of the journey was forty miles across a salt desert in a tram drawn by a camel. The car was open on all sides and covered by a cardboard roof; and its wooden seats were uncomfortably hard for long hours of sitting. The heat was appalling. It struck up from the baked ground and seemed to scorch the body through the clothes. The glare from the white sand and even whiter patches of salt was blinding and penetrated through the closed eyelids. A hot wind blew over the hazy, shimmering desert, setting the whirling dust-devils dancing and striking the face like the touch of a heated iron. Wargrave's small store of ice and mineral water was exhausted, and he felt that he was likely to die of thirst. For in the villages where they changed camels cholera was raging; and he dared not drink the water from their wells.

The tram slid easily along the shining rails that stretched away out of sight over the monotonous plain, the camel loping lazily along, its soft, sprawling feet falling noiselessly on the sand. The last ten miles of the way lay through less sterile country; and the tram passed herds of black buck—the pretty, spiral-horned antelope. Used to its daily passage, the graceful animals, which were protected by the game-laws of the native State through which the line ran, barely troubled to move out of its way. They stood about in hundreds, staring lazily at it, some not ten yards off, the bucks turning their heads away to scratch their sides with the points of their horns or rubbing their noses with dainty hoofs.

That night Wargrave slept at a *dâk-bungalow* near the terminus in a little native town with a small branch-railway connecting it with a main line. Then for four days he travelled across the scorching plains of India, shut up in stuffy carriages with violet-hued glass windows and Venetian wooden shutters meant to exclude the heat and glare. Over bare plains broken by sudden flat-topped rocky hills, through closely-cultivated

fields and stretches of scrub-jungle, by mud-walled villages, he journeyed day and night. The train crossed countless wide river-beds in which the streams had shrunk to mean rivulets; but when it clattered over the Ganges at Allahabad the sacred flood rolled a broad and sluggish current under the bridge on its way to the far-distant Bay of Bengal.

On the fourth night Wargrave slept on a bench in the waiting-room of a small junction, Niralda, from which a narrow-gauge railway branched off to the north from the main line through Eastern Bengal. At an early hour next morning he took his seat in the one first-class carriage of the toy train, which journeyed through typical Bengal scenery by mud-banked rice-fields, groves of tall, feathery bamboos and hamlets of pretty palm-thatched huts, their roofs hidden by the broad green leaves of sprawling creepers. Soon across the sky to the north a dark, blurred line rose, stretching out of sight east and west. It grew clearer as the train sped on, more distinct. It was the great northern rampart of India, the Himalayas. Then, seeming to float in air high above the highest of the dark mountain peaks and utterly detached from them, the white crests of the Eternal Snows shone fairy-like against the blue sky.

As Wargrave gazed enraptured, suddenly hills and plain were shut out from his sight as the train plunged from the dazzling sunlight into the deep shadows of a tropical forest. And the subaltern recognised with a thrill of delight that he was entering the wonderful Terai Jungle, the marvelous belt of woodland that stretches for hundreds of miles along the foot of the Himalayas through Assam and Bengal to the far Siwalik range, clothing their lower slopes or scaling their steep sides into Nepal and Bhutan. Deep in its recesses the rhinoceros, bison and buffalo hide, herds of wild elephants roam, tigers prey on the countless deer, and the great mountain bears descend to prowl in it for food. Frank had learned on the way that Ranga Duar was practically situated in it; and the knowledge almost consoled him for his exile in the promise of sport that kings might envy.

At a small wayside station in a clearing in the forest his railway journey ended. Beside the one small stone building two elephants were standing, incessantly swinging their trunks, flapping their ears and shifting their weight restlessly from leg to leg. Frank, on getting out of his carriage, learned with pleasure from their salaaming *mahouts* (drivers) that these animals were to be his next means of transport, a novel one that harmonised with the surroundings. On the back of each great beast was a massive, straw-filled pad secured by a rope passing surcingle-wise around its body.

Each *mahout* carried a gun, one a heavy rifle, the other a double-barrelled fowling-piece, which they offered to Wargrave.

"*Huzoor!*" (the Presence—a polite mode of address in Hindustani), said one man, "the *Burra Sahib* (the Political Sahib) sends salaams and lends you these, as you might see something to shoot on the way."

"Oh, the Political Officer. Very kind of him, I'm sure," remarked the subaltern. "What is his name?"

"Durro-Mut Sahib."

"What a curious name!" thought Frank. For in the vernacular "*durro mut!*" means, "Do not be afraid!" He concluded that it was a nickname.

"Why is he called that?" he asked in Hindustani.

"Because the Sahib is a very brave sahib," replied the man. "Where he is there no one need fear."

The other *mahout* nodded assent, then said:

"The Commanding Sahib has sent Your Honour from the Mess a basket with food and drink. I have put it on the table in the *babu's* (clerk's) office in the station."

Frank blessed his new C.O. for his thoughtfulness and made a welcome meal while he watched his baggage being loaded on to one of the elephants.

"*Buth!*" (Lie down) cried the *mahout*; and the obedient animal slowly sank to its knees and stretched out its legs before and behind. Frank's "boy" mounted timorously when the luggage had been strapped on to the pad. When the subaltern was ready the second elephant was ordered to kneel down for him; and he clambered up awkwardly and clung on tightly when the *mahout*, getting astride of the great neck, made it rise.

Along a broad road cut through the forest the huge beasts lumbered with a plunging, swaying stride that was very tiring to a novice. Holding both guns Frank glanced continually ahead, aside and behind him with a delicious feeling of excited hope that at any moment some dangerous wild beast might appear. On either hand the dense undergrowth of great, flower-covered bushes and curving fan-shaped palms, restricted the view to a few yards. From its dense tangle rose the giant trunks of huge trees, their leafy crowns striving to push through the thick canopy of vegetation overhead into the life-giving air and sunshine.

But no wild animal appeared to cheer Wargrave on the long way; and as hour after hour went by his whole body ached with the strain of sitting upright without a support to his back and being jolted violently at every step of the elephant. At last they reached a clearing in the forest where stood the *mahout's* huts and a tall, wooden building, the *peelkhana*, or elephant stables. It lay at the foot of the mountains; and from here the road wound upwards among the lower hills, under steep cliffs, by the brink of precipices and beside deep ravines down which brawling streams tumbled.

As the party mounted higher and ever higher the big trees fell away behind them until Frank could look down on a sea of foliage stretching away out of sight east and west but bounded on the south by the Plains of India seen vaguely through the shimmering heat-haze. Up, up they climbed, until far above him he caught glimpses of buildings dotted about among jungle-clad knolls and spurs jutting out from the dark face of the

mountains. And at last as evening shadows began to lengthen they reached a lovely recess in the hills, a deep horse-shoe; and in it an artificially-levelled parade-ground, a rifle-range running up a gully, a few bungalows dotted about among the trees and lines of single-storied barracks enclosed by a loopholed stone wall told Wargrave that he had come to his journey's end. This was his place of exile—this was Ranga Duar.

CHAPTER VI

A BORDER OUTPOST

"What a beautiful spot!" thought Frank as he gazed entranced at the scenery. "I've never seen anything like it. It looks like Heaven after the ugliness of Rohar. And how delightfully cool it is, too, up in the mountains! Well, with this climate and good shooting in the forest below life won't be as dreadful as I thought. I wish poor Violet were here out of the heat and glare. How she'd love all this beauty, these trees, these gardens, the glorious mountains!"

He sighed as he thought of the woman who was so far away.

"*Huzoor*, that is the Mess" broke in the voice of his *mahout*, as he pointed to a long, red-tiled building half-hidden among the trees a few hundred feet above them. To reach it they had to pass a large, well-built stone bungalow, two-storied, unlike all the others and standing in a lovely garden glowing with the vivid hues of the flowers, the flaming red of huge bushes of bougainvillea and poinsettia. Frank, glancing towards it, was about to ask the *mahout* who lived in it when he started in horror and cried to the man:

"Stop! Stop your animal! Look there!"

And he snatched at his rifle. For on the farther side of the house a huge tusker elephant in the garden stood over a little European boy about four years old, who was sprawling almost under the huge feet. And high above its head the brute held in its curved trunk a younger child, a girl with long golden curls, as if about to dash it to the ground.

As Frank grasped the rifle the *mahout*, who had turned at his cry, seized the barrel and said with a smile:

"*Durro mut*, Sahib! Do not fear, sir. Those are Durro Mut Sahib's babies and the elephant is their playmate."

And as he spoke Wargrave saw the elder child spring up from the ground and beat the great animal's legs with his tiny hands, crying:

"*Mujh-ko bhi*, Badshah! *Mujh-ko bhi! Uth! Uth!* (Me too, Badshah! Me too! Take me up!)"

And the baby held aloft was crowing in glee and kicking its fat little legs frantically. The elephant lowered it tenderly to the ground and picked up the boy in its stead and lifted him into the air, while he laughed and clapped his hands. The two *mahouts* raised their palms respectfully to their foreheads and cried to their animals:

"*Salaam kuro!* (Salute!)"

And the two trunks were lifted together in the *Salaamut*, the royal salute given to Kings and Viceroy.

Frank's *mahout* explained.

"*Gharib Parwar* (Protector of the Poor), the pagan ignorant Hindus around here say that the elephant is a god. Aye, and that his master, Durro Mut Sahib, is one too. *That's* like enough. Well, Allah alone knows the truth of everything. But those two are more than mere man and animal, that is certain. *Mul, Moti!* (Go on, Pearl!)"

And he kicked his elephant under the ears with his bare feet to quicken her pace. But Frank bade him stop. Despite the man's optimism he could not believe it wise to allow tiny tots like that to play with such a huge, clumsy animal. He was sure that their mother would be horrified if she knew it. He loved children, and felt that it was madness to allow these babies to continue their dangerous pastime.

"Have they a mother?" he asked the *mahout*.

"Yes, *Huzoor*. The *mem-Sahib* (lady) is doubtless within the house."

"I want to dismount," said Frank; and he grasped the surcingle rope as the elephant sank jerkily to its knees. Then sliding down from the pad he entered the gate and passed up through the garden towards the bungalow. As he did so a dainty little figure in white, a charmingly pretty girl with golden hair and blue eyes, came out on the verandah. Seeing him she walked down the steps to meet him and held out her hand, saying in a pleasant, musical voice:

"You are Mr. Wargrave, of course? Welcome to Ranga Duar."

Frank, uncomfortably conscious of his dishevelled appearance and travel-stained attire, almost blushed as he took off his hat and quickened his steps to meet her, wondering who this delightful young girl—she looked about nineteen—could be. Possibly an elder sister of the children outside. But as they shook hands she said:

"I am the wife of the Political Officer here. My husband, Colonel Dermot, has just gone up to the Mess to see your C.O., Major Hunt."

Frank was astonished. This pretty young girl, scarcely more than a child herself, the mother of the two chubby babies! Touched by her kind manner he shook her hand warmly and said:

"Thank you very much for your welcome, Mrs. Dermot. It's awfully good of you, and I—I assure you I appreciate it a lot just now. I was coming to tell you—I wonder do you know that your babies—I suppose they *are* yours—are playing what seems to me rather a dangerous game with an elephant at the side of the house."

Mrs. Dermot smiled; and the dimples that came with the smile carried his mind back for an instant to Violet.

"Yes, they are my chicks," she said. "I left them in Badshah's charge."

Frank was not altogether reassured. The young mother evidently did not know what was happening.

"But—pardon me—is it quite safe? I was a bit scared when I saw them. The animal was tossing them up in the air."

"You needn't be alarmed, Mr. Wargrave—though it's very good of you to be concerned and come to tell me," she replied. "But Badshah—that's the elephant's name—is a most careful nurse and I know that my babies are quite safe when they are in his care. He has looked after them since they were able to crawl. Come and be introduced to him. I must tell you that he is a very exceptional animal. Indeed, we almost forget that he is an animal. He has saved our lives, my husband's and mine, on more than one occasion. Next to the children and me I think that Kevin loves him better than anyone or anything else in the world. And after my chicks and Kevin and my brother I believe I do, too. As for the babies, I'm not sure that he doesn't come first with them."

She led the way round the house, and in spite of her assurances Wargrave felt a little nervous when they came in sight of the strange nurse and its charges. The tiny girl was seated on the ground tightly clasping one huge foreleg; while the boy was beating the other with his little fists, crying:

"Mujk-ko uth! Pir! Pir! (Lift me up! Again! Again!)"

When he saw his mother he ran to her and said:

"Mummie, bad, naughty Badshah won't lift me up."

He suddenly caught sight of the stranger and paused shyly.

"Brian darling, this is a new friend," said his mother, bending down to him. "Won't you shake hands with him?"

The child conquered his shyness with an effort and walked over to Frank, holding out his little hand.

"How do you do?" he said politely.

The subaltern gravely shook the proffered hand. The little girl scrambled to her fat little legs and finger in mouth, surveyed him solemnly. Then satisfied with her inspection she toddled forward to him and said:

"Tiss me."

Frank laughed joyously.

"With all my heart, you darling," he cried.

This delightful welcome in the dreaded place of exile was inexpressibly cheering. He swung the dainty mite up in his arms and kissed her. She put her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"Me like 'oo," she said.

"You little flirt, Eileen," exclaimed her mother laughing. "Now it's Badshah's turn."

She walked to the elephant, a splendid specimen of its race, though it had only one tusk, the right. She held out her hand to it. The long trunk shot out, brushed her fingers and then her cheek with a light touch that was almost a caress. She stroked the trunk affectionately.

"Now, Badshah, this is a new Sahib."

Frank, with the baby girl seated on his shoulder, stepped forward and extended his hand. The animal smelt it and then laid its trunk for a moment on his free shoulder.

"Badshah accepts you, Mr. Wargrave," said Mrs. Dermot seriously. "And there are few whom he takes to readily."

Eileen, with one arm around Frank's neck, stretched out the other to the elephant.

"Me love Badshah," she said.

The snake-like trunk lingered caressingly on her golden head. The baby caught and kissed it.

"Now then, chickies, time for bed," said their mother. "Say goodnight to Badshah."

The little boy ran to the great animal and hugged its leg tightly, while the snaky trunk touched the child's face affectionately.

"Come along, Brian. Let him go now"; and at his mother's bidding the boy released his clasp and ran to her.

"Goodnight, Badshah. *Salaam!*" said Mrs. Dermot, waving her hand to the mammoth, while her little daughter on Wargrave's shoulder imitated her.

The big animal raised its trunk in salute and, turning, walked with swaying stride out of sight behind the bungalow.

"By Jove, what a splendid beast!" exclaimed Frank. "And how wonderfully well trained he is. I'm not surprised now that you let the kiddies play with him."

Mrs. Dermot smiled.

"You would be even less so if you knew his story," she said. "He is my husband's private property now. The Government of India presented him to Kevin. Now come back to the house and have tea. Oh, no, after your long ride you'll prefer a whiskey and soda."

"I'd really rather have the tea, I think, Mrs. Dermot. I don't feel thirsty up in this deliciously cool air. It's awful down in the Plains now. But what about my elephants and baggage?"

"Tell the *mahouts* to go to the Mess. You are to have a room there."

Frank did so; and the two animals lumbered away up the hill after the *mahouts* had brought the Colonel's guns into the bungalow.

Mrs. Dermot led the way into the house. The little boy had possessed himself of Wargrave's free hand, the other one being engaged in holding Eileen, who was perched on the subaltern's shoulder. Mrs. Dermot found it difficult to separate the children from their new friend when at last she bore them off to bed.

Left to himself, Frank examined with deep interest and admiring envy the splendid display of Colonel Dermot's trophies of big game shooting that filled the bungalow. From the walls many heads of bison and buffalo, of *sambhur* and *barasingh*, those fine Indian stags, looked mildly at him with their glass eyes; while tigers, bears and panthers snarled at him from the ground. Long elephant-tusks leaned in corners, smoking and liqueur-tables made up from the mammoths' legs and feet stood about, and crossed from ceiling to floor; on the walls were the skins of enormous snakes such as Frank had never seen or imagined. He had thought a six-foot cobra or an eight-foot python long—here were reptiles sixteen or eighteen feet in length, and he hoped that he would never meet their equals alive in the jungle.

While he was gazing with admiration at the fine collection of trophies Mrs. Dermot returned.

"What a magnificent lot of heads and skins you've got here!" he exclaimed. "All your husband's, I suppose?"

She laughed as she glanced round the room, while pouring out the tea that her butler had brought.

"I'm afraid they make the house rather like a museum of natural history," she answered. "Yes, they are all Kevin's, or nearly all. There are a few of mine among them."

He looked at her in open admiration.

"Oh, you shoot? How splendid!" he said. "Have you ever got a tiger?"

"A couple," she replied, smiling.

"I envy you awfully," he said. "I've never even seen one—out of a cage."

"Well, if you are keen on shooting, Mr. Wargrave, you ought to have little difficulty in bagging a tiger or two before long," she said.

"I'd love to have the chance of going after big game. I'm hoping for it here. Shall I? I've never had any, although I've shot a panther or two and a few black buck and *chinkara*."

"You will have every opportunity of good sport here. Neither of the other two Europeans, your Commanding Officer and the doctor of your detachment, go in for it, the latter because his sight is very bad, Major Hunt because he doesn't care for it. I'm sure my husband will be glad to take you out with him; and nobody in the whole Terai knows more about big game than he."

"By Jove; how ripping," exclaimed Frank eagerly. "Would he?"

"I'm sure he would. He'll be only too delighted to have someone for company. I used to go with him always, until my babies came. Now Kevin has no one but Badshah."

"Badshah? Oh, yes, that ripping elephant. I don't know much about those animals, but isn't it unusual for him to have only a single tusk?"

"Yes; Badshah is what the natives call a 'Gunesh.' You know that Gunesh is the Hindu God of Wisdom and is represented as having an elephant's head with only the right tusk? Consequently any of these animals born with a single tusk, and that the right, is considered sacred and looked upon as a god."

"One of the *mahouts* said that the Hindus here regard your husband as one, too," said Frank, "and he seemed inclined to believe it himself. I like the name they've given Colonel Dermot—Durro Mut Sahib, Fear Not Sahib."

A look of pride came in the young wife's eyes as she repeated the name softly to herself.

"Fear Not Sahib. Yes, it suits him." Then aloud she continued:

"I think you'll like my husband, Mr. Wargrave. All men do. He's a man's man. The hill and jungle people worship him. He understands them. Ah! here he is, I think."

Her face brightened, and Frank saw the light of love shine in her eyes as she turned expectantly to the door. He sprang up as a tall man with handsome, clear-cut features, dark complexion and eyes, and close-cropped black hair touched at the temples with grey, entered the room. With a pleasant smile the newcomer walked towards the subaltern with outstretched hand, saying in a friendly voice:

"Glad to welcome you to Ranga Duar, Wargrave."

"Thank you very much, sir," replied Frank gripping his hand and greatly taken at once by the Political Officer's appearance and friendly manner. "It was very kind of you to send those guns for me. But I had no luck. We saw nothing on the way."

After greeting him Colonel Dermot bent over his wife and kissed her fondly. It was obvious to the subaltern that after their five years of married life they were lovers still. Frank looked at them a little enviously. He wondered would it be so with Violet and him after the same lapse of time; for the sight of their happiness sent his thoughts flying to the woman who loved him.

"Are you keen on shooting, Wargrave?" said the Colonel.

"Oh, yes, he is, Kevin," broke in his wife. "I told him that I was sure you'd be glad to take him with you into the jungle sometimes."

"I'll be happy to do so, if you care to come with me, Wargrave," said the Colonel.

"I'd love to, sir. It would be awfully good of you," replied the subaltern eagerly. "But I've only a Mannlicher rifle."

"Ah, you'll need a bigger bore than that. But I can lend you a .470 high velocity cordite weapon. You want something with great hitting power for dangerous game," said Dermot.

He went on to speak of the jungle and its denizens; and his conversation was so interesting that Wargrave forgot the flight of time until his hostess reminded him that he had to report his arrival to his commanding officer and find his new quarters. Her husband volunteered to show him the way to the Mess and introduce him to Major Hunt.

As Wargrave shook hands with Mrs. Dermot, she said:

"I wanted to ask you to dinner this evening; but Kevin thought you might prefer to spend your first night with your brother officers. But we shall expect you to-morrow, when they are coming, too."

On their way up the steep road from his bungalow the Political Officer spoke of the great forest below them and the sport to be found in it. Then he said:

"It's lucky you like shooting, Wargrave, for Ranga Duar is very isolated and life in it dull to a person who has no resources. Still, it has its advantages, and chief among them is the climate. It's delightful in the cold weather and pleasant in the hot."

"By Jove, it is indeed, sir! It's like Heaven after the heat in the Plains below. I don't know how I lived through it coming across India."

"The rainy season is the hardest to bear. We have five months of it and over three hundred inches of rain during them. One never sees a strange face then—not that we ever do have many visitors here at any time. Still, you'll like your C.O., and Burke the doctor is a capital fellow. Here we are."

He turned in through a narrow gate leading to a pretty though neglected garden in which stood the Mess, a long, single-storied building raised on piles. On the broad wooden verandah to which a flight of steps led from the ground two men were reclining in long chairs reading old newspapers. On seeing Dermot and his companion they rose, and the Colonel introduced Frank. They shook hands with him and gave him a hearty welcome, which, coming on the top of the Dermot's, cheered the subaltern exceedingly and for the time made him forget the circumstances of his coming.

"It's mighty glad I am to see you here, Wargrave," said Burke, the doctor, in a mellow brogue, "aven av it's only to have someone living in the Mess wid me. The Major there lives in solitary state in his little bungalow; and I'm all alone here at night wid *shaitans* (devils) and wild beasts walking on the verandah."

"What? Has that panther been prowling round the Mess again?" asked the Political Officer.

"Faith! and he has that. Sure, I heard him sniffing at me door last night. I wish to the Powers ye'd shoot him, sir."

"I can't get him. I've tried often enough."

"Troth! and it's waking up one fine morning I'll be to find he's made a meal av me. Keep your door shut at night, Wargrave. Merrick, who lived in the room you'll have, forgot to do it once and the divil nearly had him."

"Is that really a fact?" asked Frank, delighted at the thought of having come to a place with such possibilities of sport.

"Yes; we're plagued by a brute of a panther that prowls about the station at night, jumps the wall of the Fort and carries off the sepoy's dogs, and has actually entered rooms here in the Mess. He has killed several Bhuttia children on the hills around here. Nobody can ever get a shot at him. He's too cunning. Will you have

a drink, Colonel?" said Hunt.

The Political Officer thanked him but declined, and, reminding them all of his wife's invitation for the morrow, bade them goodnight.

"That's one av the finest men in India," exclaimed Burke, as they watched Dermot's figure receding down the road. The doctor had a pleasant, ugly face and wore spectacles.

"He is, indeed. He keeps the whole Bhutan border in order," said the commandant, Major Hunt, a slight, grey-haired man with a quiet and reserved manner. "The Bhuttias are more afraid of a cross look from him than of all our rifles and machine-guns. Have a drink, Wargrave? Yes? And you, Burke? Hi, boy!"

A Gurkha servant with the ugly, cheery face of his race appeared and was ordered to bring three whiskeys and sodas.

"Ranga's not a bad place if you can stand the loneliness," continued the Major. "Are you fond of shooting."

"Yes, sir, awfully."

"Hooray! That's good," cried Burke. "Now we'll have someone to go down to the jungle and shoot for the Mess. We want a change from tinned Army rations and the tough ould hins that these benighted haythins call chickens."

"Yes, you'll be a Godsend to us if you're a good shot, Wargrave," added the Commandant. "We never get meat here unless someone shoots a stag or a buck in the jungle; and for that we generally have to rely on Dermot. But he is away such a lot, wandering along the frontier, keeping an eye on the peace of the Border. Now we'll be able to look to you. We have three transport elephants with the detachment, all steady to shoot from."

Frank was delighted.

"I'd love to go into the jungle if you'd let me, sir."

"Yes, I'll be glad if you do. There's not much work for you here; and this is a dull place for a youngster unless he's keen on sport. I'm not, myself; and Burke's as blind as a bat. But you can always have an elephant when they aren't wanted to bring up supplies from the railway."

The subaltern thanked him gratefully and inwardly decided that his new commanding officer was a great improvement on Colonel Trevor.

"Now, Burke, I'm off to my bungalow. Show Wargrave his quarters," said the Major rising. "See you at dinner."

Burke showed the subaltern his room, one of the four into which the Mess was divided. Like the doctor's quarters, it was at one end of the building, the centre apartment being the officers' anteroom and dining-room. Frank found that his "boy," with the ready deftness of Indian servants, had unpacked his trunks, hung up his clothes and stowed his various belongings about the scantily-furnished room. He had stood Violet's photo on the one rickety table and laid out his Master's white mess uniform on the small iron cot.

Major Hunt, Wargrave learned, lived in a bungalow a few hundred yards away, but, being unmarried, took his meals in the Mess. The Indian officers and sepoy's of the detachment were quartered in barracks in the Fort.

Frank dressed and entered the anteroom or officers' sitting-room, from which a door led into the messroom. Both apartments were poorly furnished, but the walls were adorned with the skulls and skins of many beasts of the jungle, presented by Colonel Dermot, as Frank learned. Shelves filled with books ran across one end of the anteroom.

As the interior of the Mess was rather hot at that time of year—though to Wargrave it seemed very cool after Rohar—the dinner-table was laid on the verandah; and while the officers sat at their meal the pleasant mountain breeze played about them. Frank thought with gratitude of his escape from the burning heat which at that moment was tormenting the hundreds of millions in the furnace of the Plains of India stretching away from the foot of the cool hills.

The meal was not luxurious, for it consisted almost exclusively of tinned provisions, fresh meat being unprocurable in Ranga Duar—except fowls of exceeding toughness—and vegetables and bread being rare dainties.

During dinner Wargrave learned how completely isolated his new station was. Their only European neighbours were the planters on tea-gardens scattered about in the great forest below, the nearest thirty miles off. The few visitors that Ranga Duar saw in the year were the General on his annual inspection, an occasional official of the Indian Civil Service, the Public Works or the Forest Department, or some planter friend of the Dermots.

The reason of the existence of this outpost and its garrison was the guarding of the *duars*, or passes, through the Himalayas against raiders from Bhutan, that little-known independent State lying between Tibet and the Bengal border. Its frontier was only two miles from, and a few thousand feet above, Ranga Duar.

"You are just in time for our one yearly burst of gaiety, Wargrave," said the Commandant, "the visit of the Deb Zimpun."

"What on earth is that, sir?" asked the subaltern.

"Sounds like a new disease, doesn't it?" said Burke laughing. "But it isn't. The Deb Zimpun is a gentleman av high degree, the Heridithary Cup Bearer to the Deb Raja."

"To the what?" demanded the bewildered Frank.

Major Hunt smiled.

"Bhutan is supposed to be ruled by a temporal monarch called the Deb Raja and also by a spiritual one, known in India as the Durma Raja. In reality it is under the sway of the most powerful of the several great feudal lords of the land, the Tongsa Penlop or Chief of Tongsa, whom we regard as the Maharajah of Bhutan. He has placed himself, as far only as the foreign relations of the country go, under the suzerainty of the Government of India; and in return we grant him a subsidy of a *lakh* of rupees a year. It used to be fifty thousand, but the sum was doubled years ago. To get the money one of the State Council comes every year. He is an official called the Deb Zimpun."

"Faith! he's a rum old beggar, Wargrave," broke in Burke. "Looks like the Pope av Rome in his thriple crown, for he wears a high gold-edged cap and a flowing red robe av Chinese silk, out av which sticks a pair av hairy bare legs."

"The Political Officer receives him in *darbar*, and we furnish a Guard of Honour. The Colonel gives a dinner to him and us, and we have another spread in the Mess. That reminds me. I suppose Dermot will be going into the jungle soon to shoot for the pot, as the *darbar* is next week. You'd better get him to take you. You can have one of our elephants and provide for our larder."

"Thanks very much, Major," said the delighted subaltern. "The Colonel promised to let me accompany him and lend me a rifle."

When he went to his room that night the subaltern turned up the oil lamp that lighted it and before he undressed sat down before Violet's photograph. As he looked at it he thought affectionately and a little sadly of the lonely woman so far away from him now. He pitied her for the isolation in which she lived, an isolation far completer than his own, for she had few friends, no intimates, and a husband worse than a stranger in his lack of understanding of her. Surely it would be only right to take her from such a man, right to give her a fresh chance of finding the happiness that she had missed; for the warm-hearted, intelligent and artistic-natured woman would be far happier with him in this beautiful spot, remote from the world though it was. And his new comrades would appeal to her, Dermot, strong, capable, one who would always stand out from his fellows; Hunt grave, kindly, well-read; Burke witty, clever and good-hearted. And, little though Violet cared for her own sex, as a rule, surely in Mrs. Dermot she would find a friend. This happy wife, this loving mother, was so sweet and sympathetic that she would win the older woman's liking, while the two delightful children would take her heart by storm. Poor, lonely Violet, so beautiful, so ill-fated! Frank sighed as he took up her portrait and kissed it.

When he extinguished the lamp and lay down in bed it was pleasant, after the heat in Rohar, to find it so cool that he was obliged to pull a blanket over him. Only those who have endured the torment of hot nights in the tropics can appreciate his thankfulness as in the silence broken only by the monotonous cry of the nightjars he drowsed contentedly to sleep. Already he was reconciled to Ranga Duar.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE TERAI JUNGLE

In the pleasant light of the morning the little outpost looked as charming to Wargrave as it had done on the previous evening. Above Ranga Duar the mountains towered to the pale blue sky, while below it the foot-hills fell in steps to the broad sea of foliage of the great forest stretching away to the distant plains seen vaguely through the haze. The horse-shoe hollow in which the tiny station was set was bowered in vegetation. The gardens glowed with the varied hues of flowers, and were bounded by hedges of wild roses. The road and paths were bordered by the tall, graceful plumes of the bamboo and shaded by giant mango and banyan trees, their boughs clothed with orchids.

Frank had noticed the previous day that the Fort, barracks and bungalows were all newly built, and he learned that during the great war which had raged along the frontiers of India five years before, the post had been fiercely attacked by an army of Chinese and Bhutanese and the little station practically wiped out of existence, although victory had finally rested with the few survivors of the garrison.

From the first the subaltern took a great liking to the tall Punjaubi Mahommedan and hook-nosed, fair-skinned Pathan native officers and sepoy of the detachment. The work was light and scarcely required two British officers; and Frank soon found that Major Hunt, who seemed driven by a demon of quiet energy, preferred to do most of it himself. Frank got the impression that to the elder man occupation was an anodyne for some secret sorrow. Although the subaltern had no wish to shirk his duty he could not but be glad that his superior officer seemed always ready to dispense with his aid, for thus he would find it easier to get permission to go shooting.

His first excursion into the jungle was arranged at dinner at the Dermots' house on his second evening in Ranga Duar. The Colonel proposed to take him out on the following Monday, for on the next day the *Deb Zimpun* would arrive.

"He always brings a big train of Bhuttias with him, eighty swordsmen as an escort to the small army of coolies necessary to carry a hundred thousand silver rupees in boxes over the Himalayan passes. I like to give them the flesh of a few *sambhur* stags as a treat," said the Colonel.

"Hiven hilp ye av ye bring any *sambhur* flesh to the Mess, Wargrave," said Burke. "We want something we can get our teeth into. No, we expect a *khakur* from you."

"What's a *khakur*?" asked Frank.

"It's the *muntyac* or barking deer," replied Dermot. "You wouldn't know it if you haven't shot in forests. It gets its English name from its call, which is not unlike a dog's bark."

"Whin ye hear one saying '*Wonk! Wonk!*' in the jungle, Wargrave, get up the nearest tree; for the *khakur* is warning all whom it may concern that there's a tiger in the immajit vicinity."

Frank had already learned to distrust most of Burke's statements on sport, for the doctor was an inveterate joker. So he looked to the Political Officer for confirmation.

"Yes, it's supposed to be the case," agreed the Colonel. "And I've more than once heard a tiger loudly express his annoyance when a *khakur* barked as he was trying to sneak by unnoticed. There's a barking-deer." He pointed to the well-mounted head of a small deer on the wall of the dining-room.

"Whom do you expect up for the Durbar, Mrs. Dermot?" asked Major Hunt.

"Only Mr. Carter, the Sub-divisional Officer, and probably Mr. Benson."

"Eh—is—isn't Miss Benson coming too?" asked the doctor in a hesitating manner so unlike his usual cheery and assured self that Frank looked at him. It seemed to him that Burke was blushing.

"Oh, yes, I hope so," replied Mrs. Dermot.

"Er—haven't you heard from her?" persisted the doctor anxiously.

"I had a letter this afternoon brought by a coolie. Muriel wrote to say that they were in the Buxa Reserve but hoped to get here in time. I'm looking forward to her coming immensely. It's four months since I saw her."

Frank could not help noticing that Burke seemed to hang on Mrs. Dermot's words; and he began to wonder if the unknown lady held the doctor's heart.

"It's rather hard on a girl like Miss Benson to have to lead such a lonely life and rough it constantly in the jungle as she does," remarked Major Hunt. "At her age she must want gaiety and amusement."

"Muriel doesn't mind it," replied the hostess. "She loves jungle life. And she thinks that her father couldn't get on without her."

"Sure, she's right there, Mrs. Dermot," cried Burke. "The dear ould boy'ud lose his head av he hadn't her to hould it on for him. She does most av his work. It's a sight to see that slip av a girl bossing all the forest guards and *habus* and giving them their ordhers."

Wargrave was anxious to hear more of this girl, in whom it appeared to him Burke was very much interested; but Colonel Dermot broke in:

"Talking of orders, have you any for the butcher's man, Noreen?" he asked, smiling at his wife.

"Yes, dear; will you please bring me a *khakur* and some jungle fowl? And if you can manage it a brace of *Kalej* pheasants," said the good housewife seriously.

"Well, Wargrave, we've both got our orders and know what to bring back from the jungle," said the Colonel, turning to Frank, who was sitting beside him. Then the conversation between them drifted into sporting channels until all adjourned outside for coffee on the verandah.

Next afternoon the subaltern, passing down the road, was hailed from the Dermots' garden by an imperious small lady with golden curls and big blue bows and ordered to play with her. Her brother and Badshah had to join in the game, too. Frank, chasing the dainty mite round and round the elephant, began to think himself in the Garden of Eden.

But that same evening he found that his Himalayan Paradise was not without its serpent. The three officers of the detachment were seated at dinner on the Mess verandah, Major Hunt with his back to the rough stone wall of the building. A swinging oil lamp with a metal shade threw the light downward and left the ceiling and upper part of the wall in shadow.

When dinner was ended the Commandant, lighting a cheerot, tilted his chair on its back legs until his head nearly touched the wall. Frank, talking to him, chanced to look up at the roof. He stared into the shadows for a moment, then, suddenly grasping the astonished major by the collar, jerked him out of his chair. And as he did so a snake, a deadly hill-viper, which had been trying to climb up the rough face of the wall, slipped and dropped on to the Commandant's chair, slid to the floor and glided across the verandah and down into the garden before anyone could find a stick with which to attack it.

Major Hunt, his sallow face a little paler than usual, looked up at the wall to see if any more reptiles were likely to follow, then sat down again calmly.

"Thank you, Wargrave," he said quietly. "But for you that brute would have got me. And his bite is death. Ranga's full of snakes, like all these places in the hills. We've killed several in the Mess since I've been here; but no one's had such a close shave as this. I'll stand you a drink for that. Hi, boy!"

But for all this quiet manner of taking it Frank had made a staunch friend that night by his prompt action.

As Burke took the filled glass that the Gurkha mess-servant brought him at the Major's order he said:

"I hate snakes worse than the Devil hates holy water. They're the only things in life I'm afraid of. I never go to bed without looking under the pillow nor put on my boots in the morning without first turning them up and shaking them. I wish St. Patrick had made a trip to India and driven the serpents out of the country the same as he did in Ireland."

"We've the worst snake in the world, I believe, here in the Terai, Wargrave," said Major Hunt. "Look out for it when you're in the jungle. It's the hamadryad or king-cobra. Have you heard of it?"

"I saw the skin of one sixteen feet long in a Bombay museum, sir," replied the subaltern.

"It's the only snake in Asia that will attack human beings unprovoked; it's deadly poisonous, unlike all other big snakes, and they say it moves so fast that it can overtake a man on a pony. Benson, the Forest Officer of the district, tells me there are many of them in the jungles here."

"One of the devils chased Dermot's elephant once and turned on the Colonel when he interfered. It got its head blown off for its pains," put in the doctor.

"Don't tell me any more, Burke," exclaimed Wargrave laughing, "or I won't be able to sleep to-night."

He pushed back his chair as the Commandant rose from the table and, saying goodnight to the two junior officers, picked up from the verandah and lit a hurricane lantern and walked down the Mess steps with it on his way home to his bungalow. Europeans in India do not care to move about at night without a lamp lest in the darkness they might tread on a snake.

Early on the following Monday morning Wargrave, dressed in khaki knickerbockers, shirt and puttees, and wearing besides his pith helmet a "spine protector"—a quilted cloth pad buttoned to the back—as a guard against sunstroke, went down to the Dermots' bungalow. In the garden the Colonel, also prepared for their shooting expedition, stood talking to his wife, while their children were trying to climb up Badshah's legs. The elephant was equipped with a light pad provided with large pockets into which were thrust Thermos flasks, packets of sandwiches and of cartridges. Close by two servants were holding guns.

"Good morning, Wargrave," said the Colonel, as the subaltern greeted him and his wife. "You're in good time."

Eileen, deserting Badshah, ran to Frank and demanded to be lifted up and kissed. When he had obeyed the small tyrant, he said:

"I haven't brought a rifle, sir."

"That's right. I have one and a ball-and-shot gun for you. We'll walk down to the *peelkhana* by a short cut through the hills to look for *kalej* pheasant on the way. Take the gun with you and load one barrel with shot; but put a bullet in the other, for you never know what we may meet. Badshah will go down by the road, as well as one of the servants to bring the rifles and tell the *mahouts* to get a detachment elephant ready. It will follow us in the jungle to carry any animals we kill, while we'll ride Badshah."

Kissing his wife and children the Colonel led the way down the road, followed by Frank and the servant, Badshah walking unattended behind them.

"Good sport, Mr. Wargrave!" called out Mrs. Dermot, as the subaltern turned at the gate to take off his hat in a farewell salute; and the little coquette beside her kissed her tiny hand to him.

After they had gone half a mile the two officers, carrying their fowling-pieces, turned off along a footpath through the undergrowth, leaving the servant and the elephant to continue down the road. The track led steeply down the mountain-side, at first between high, closely-matted bushes, and then through scrub-jungle dotted with small trees, among the foliage of which gleamed the yellow fruit of the limes and the plantain's glossy drooping leaves and long curving stalks from which the nimble fingers of wild monkeys had plucked the ripe bananas. Here and there the ground was open; and the path following a natural depression in the hills gave down the gradually widening valley a view of the panorama of forest and plain lying below.

As they passed a clump of tangled bushes a rustle and a pattering over the dry leaves under them caught the Colonel's ear.

"Look out! *Kalej*," he whispered, picking up a stone and throwing it into the cover. A large speckled black and white bird whirred out; and Wargrave brought it down.

"Good shot! There's another," called out Dermot, and fired with equal success. "We're lucky," he continued. "As a rule they won't break, but scuttle along under the bushes, so that one often has to shoot them running."

Frank picked up the birds and examined them with interest before the Colonel stuffed them into his game bag and moved on down the path, which was growing steeper. The trees became more numerous and larger as they descended nearer the forest. Out of another clump of bushes the sportsmen succeeded in getting a second brace of pheasants. Lower down they passed through a belt of bamboos, where in one spot the long feathery boughs were broken off or twisted in wild confusion for a space of fifty yards' radius.

"Wild elephants," said the Political Officer briefly and pointed to a patch of dust in which was the round imprint of a huge foot.

Frank was a little startled; for he felt that against these great animals the bullets in their guns would be useless.

"Are they dangerous, sir?" he asked.

"Not as a rule when they are in a herd, although cow-elephants with calves may be so, fearing peril for their young. But sometimes a bull takes to a solitary life, becomes vicious and develops into a dangerous rogue. It probably happens that, finding crops growing near a jungle village and raiding them, he is driven off by the cultivators, turns savage and kills some of them. Then he usually seems to take a hatred to all human beings and attacks them on sight. Hallo! here we are at the *peelkhana* at last."

They had reached the high wooden building which housed the three transport elephants of the detachment. In the clearing before it Badshah and another animal were standing, a group of *mahouts* and coolies near them.

"We'll mount and start at once," said Colonel Dermot, beckoning to his elephant, which came to him. "Get up, Wargrave."

The subaltern looked up doubtfully at the pad on Badshah's back.

"How can I, sir? Isn't he going to kneel?" he asked.

"Put your foot on his trunk when he crooks it and grab hold of his ears. He'll lift you up then."

The understanding elephant at once curled its trunk invitingly and cocked its great ears forward. Frank did as he was directed and found himself raised in the air until he was able to get on to the elephant's head and from it scrambled on to the pad. Dermot followed and seated himself astride the huge neck.

"*Mul!* (Go on!)" he ejaculated.

With a swaying, lurching stride Badshah at once moved across the clearing, followed by the transport elephant, on to which a *mahout* and a coolie had climbed, and plunged into the dense undergrowth which was so high that it nearly closed over the riders' heads. The sudden change from the blinding glare of the sun to the enchanting green gloom of the forest, from the intense heat to the refreshing coolness of the shade, was delightful.

Beyond the clearing the vegetation was tangled and rank, high grass concealing thorny shrubs, tall matted bushes covered with large, white, bell-shaped flowers, all so dense that men on foot could not push their way through. But it divided like water before the leading elephant's weight and strength. The trees were now not the lesser growths of bamboo, lime and sago-palm that covered the foot-hills. They were the great forest giants, enormous teak, *sal* and *simal* trees, towering up bare of branches for a good height above the ground, rising to the green canopy overhead and thrusting their leafy crowns through it, seeking their share of the sunlight. Their massive branches were matted thick with the glossy green leaves of orchid-plants and draped with long trails of the beautiful mauve and white blossoms of the exotic flowers. Hanging from the highest branches or swinging between the massive boles creepers of every kind rioted in bewildering confusion, a chaos of natural cordage, of festooned *lianas* thick as a liner's hawser, some twisting around each other, others coiling about the tree-trunks, biting deep into the bark or striving to strangle them in a cruel grip. Not even the elephants' weight and strength could burst through the stout network of these creepers in places. While they tore at the obstructions with their trunks it was necessary for their drivers to hack through the creepers with their sharp *kukris*—the heavy curved knives carried in their belts and similar to the Gurkha's favourite weapon.

Here and there the party came upon glades free from undergrowth, where in the cool shade of the great trees the ground was knee-deep in bracken. In one such spot Wargrave's eye was caught by a flash of bright colour, and his rifle went half-way to his shoulder, only to be lowered again when he saw two *sambhur* hinds, graceful animals with glossy chestnut hides, watching the advancing elephants curiously but without fear. For, used to seeing wild ones, they did not realise that Badshah and his companion carried human beings. Their sex saved them from the hunters who, leaving them unscathed, passed on and plunged into the dense undergrowth on the far side of the clearing.

The elephants fed continually as they moved along. Sweeping up great bunches of grass, tearing down trails of leafy creepers, breaking off branches from the trees, they crammed them all impartially into their mouths. Picking up twigs in their trunks they used them to beat their sides and legs to drive off stinging insects or, snuffing up dust from the ground, blew clouds of it along their bellies for the same purpose.

Suddenly the Colonel stopped Badshah and whispered:

"There's a *sambhur* stag, Wargrave. There, to your left in the undergrowth. Have a shot at him."

The subaltern looked everywhere eagerly, but in the dense tangle could not discern the animal. Like all novices in the jungle he directed his gaze too far away; and suddenly a dark patch of deep shadow in the undergrowth close by materialised itself into the black hide of a stag only as it dashed off. It had been standing within fifteen paces of the elephants, knowing the value of immobility as a shield. At last its nerve failed it; and it revealed itself by breaking away. But as it fled Colonel Dermot's rifle spoke; and the big deer crumpled up and fell crashing through the vegetation to the ground. The second elephant's *mahout*, a grey-bearded Mahomedan, slipped instantly to the earth and, drawing his *kukri*, struggled through the arresting creepers and undergrowth to where the stag lay feebly moving its limbs. Seizing one horn he performed the *hallal*, that is, he cut its throat to let blood while there was still life in the animal, muttering the short Mussulman creed as he did so. For his religion enjoins this hygienic practice—borrowed by the Prophet from the Mosaic law—to guard against long-dead carrion being eaten. At the touch of the Colonel's hand Badshah sank to its knees; and Wargrave, very annoyed with himself for his slowness in detecting the deer, forced his way through the undergrowth to examine it. The stag was a fine beast fourteen hands high, with sharp brow antlers and a pair of thick, stunted horns branching at the ends into two points.

Leaving the elephants to graze freely the *mahout* and his coolie disembowelled the *sambhur* and hacked off the head with their heavy *kukris*. Aided by the Political Officer and Wargrave they skinned the animal and then with the skill of professional butchers proceeded to cut up the carcass into huge joints. While they were thus engaged the Colonel went to a small, straight-stemmed tree common in the jungle and, clearing away a patch of the outer mottled bark, disclosed a white inner skin, which he cut off in long strips. With these, which formed unbreakable cordage, they fastened the heavy joints to the pad of the transport elephant.

When this was done Wargrave, looking at his hands covered with blood and grime, said ruefully:

"How on earth are we to get clean, sir? Is there any water in the jungle? We haven't seen any."

The Political Officer, looking about him, pointed to a thick creeper with withered-seeming bark and said with a laugh:

"There's your water, Wargrave. Lots of it on tap. See here."

He cut off a length of the *liana*, which contained a whitish, pulpy interior. From the two ends of the piece water began to drip steadily and increased to a thin stream.

"By George, sir, that's a plant worth knowing," said Frank.

"It's a most useful jungle product," said the Colonel, holding it up so that his companion, using clay as soap, could wash his hands. "It's called the *pani bel*—water-creeper. One need never die of thirst in a forest where it is found. Try the water in it."

He raised it so that the clear liquid flowed into the subaltern's mouth. It was cool, palatable and tasteless.

"By George, sir, that's good," exclaimed Wargrave, examining the plant carefully. "Now let me hold it for you."

After Dermot and the two natives had cleansed their hands and arms the party moved on, the transport elephant looking like an itinerant butcher's shop as it followed Badshah. Again the undergrowth parted before the great animals like the sea cleft by the bows of a ship and closed similarly behind them when they had passed. Of its own volition the leader swerved one side or the other when it was necessary to avoid a tree-trunk or too dense a tangle of obstructing creepers. But once Dermot touched and turned it sharply out of its course to escape what seemed a very large lump of clay adhering to the under side of an overhanging bough in their path.

"A wild bees' nest," said the Colonel, pointing to it. "It wouldn't do to risk hitting against that and being stung to death by its occupants."

A few minutes later he suddenly arrested Badshah at the edge of a fern-carpeted glade and whispered:

"Look out! There's a barking-deer. Get him!"

Across the glade a graceful little buck with a bright chestnut coat stepped daintily, followed at a respectful distance by his doe. Their restless ears pointed incessantly this way and that for every warning sound as they moved; but neither saw the elephants hidden in the undergrowth. Raising his rifle Frank took a quick aim at the buck's shoulder and fired. The deer pitched forward and fell dead, while its startled mate swung round and leapt wildly away.

"A good shot of yours, Wargrave," remarked Colonel Dermot, when Badshah had advanced to the prostrate animal. "Broke its shoulder and pierced the heart."

Frank looked down pityingly at the pretty little deer stretched lifeless among the ferns.

"It seems a shame to slaughter a harmless thing like that," he said.

"Yes; I always feel the same myself and never kill except for food," replied the Political Officer. "Unless of course it's a dangerous beast like a tiger. Well, the *khakur* is too dead to *hallal*; but that doesn't matter, as we're going to eat it ourselves and not give it to the sepoys."

The *mahout* and the coolie were already cleaning the deer and, without troubling to cut it up, bound its legs together with *udal* fibre and tied it to the pad of their elephant; and the party moved on again.

Half a mile further on the silence of the forest was broken by the loud crowing of a cock, taken up and answered defiantly by others.

"Hallo! are we near a village, sir?" asked Wargrave, surprised at the familiar sounds so far in the heart of the wild.

"No; those are jungle-fowl," whispered the Political Officer. "Get your gun ready."

He halted the elephant and picked up his fowling-piece. Frank hurriedly substituted a shot cartridge for the one loaded with ball in his gun. He heard a pattering on the dry leaves under the trees and into a fairly open space before them stalked a pretty little bantam cock with red comb and wattles and curving green tail-feathers, followed by four or five sober brown hens, so like in every respect to domestic fowl that Wargrave hesitated to shoot. But suddenly the birds whirred up into the air; and, as the Colonel gave them both barrels, Frank did the same. The cock and three of his wives dropped. The *mahout* urged his elephant forward and made the reluctant animal pick up the crumpled bunches of blood-stained feathers in its curving trunk and pass them to him.

Colonel Dermot searched the jungle for some distance around but could not find the other jungle-cocks

that had answered the dead one's challenge. Looking at his watch he suggested a halt for lunch, which Wargrave, whose back was beginning to ache with fatigue, gladly agreed to. Dismounting, they sat on the ground and ate and drank the contents of the pockets of Badshah's pad, but with loaded rifles beside them lest their meal should be disturbed by any dangerous denizen of the jungle. The two natives sat down some distance away and, turning their backs on each other, drew out cloths in which their midday repast of *chupatis*, or thick pancakes, with curry and an onion or two was tied up. The elephants left to themselves grazed close by and did not attempt to wander away.

Their meal and a smoke finished the party mounted again and moved on. But luck seemed to have deserted them. Much to the Political Officer's disappointment they wandered for miles without adding anything to the bag. He had calculated on getting another couple of *sambhur* stags to present to the *Deb Zimpun* as food for his hungry followers. The route that they were now taking led circuitously back towards the *peelkhana*, which they wished to reach before sundown. They had got within a mile of it and were close to the foot of the hills when Badshah stopped suddenly and smelt the ground. Colonel Dermot leaned over the huge head and stared down intently at something invisible to his young companion.

"What is it, sir?" asked Wargrave in a whisper.

"Bison. Badshah's pointing for us. We can't shoot them here, for we're in Government jungle where the killing of elephants, bison and rhino is forbidden unless they attack you. But the track leads north towards the mountains and at their foot the Government Forest ends. That's only half a mile away and we can bag them there. Load your rifle with solid-nosed bullets. This is the *pug* (footprint) of a bull, I think."

The two natives had seen the tracks by this and were wildly excited. Badshah without urging moved swiftly through the trees and soon brought his riders to the hills and into sight of the sky once more. The mountains stood out clear and distinct in the slanting rays of the setting sun. Suddenly a loud though distant, almost musical bellow sounded, seeming to come from a bamboo jungle about a mile away.

"That's a cow-bison calling," said Dermot in a low voice. "There's a herd somewhere about; but the '*pugs*' we're following up are those of a solitary bull. We're in free forest now; so with luck you may get your first bison. It's very steep here; we'll dismount, leave the elephants and go on foot."

The subaltern was wildly excited, and his heart thumped at a rate that was not caused by the steep slope up which he followed Dermot. The Colonel tracked the bull unhesitatingly, although to Wargrave there was no mark to be seen on the ground.

They were creeping cautiously through bamboo cover on a hill when Dermot, who was leading, suddenly threw himself on his face, lay still for a minute or two, then, motioning to his companion to halt, crawled forward like a snake. A few paces on he stopped and beckoned to Wargrave, and, when the latter reached him, pointed down into the gully below. They were almost on the edge of a descent precipitous enough to be called a cliff. Immediately underneath by a small stream was a massive black bull-bison, eighteen hands—six feet—high, with short, square, head, broad ears and horizontal rounded horns. The only touches of colour were on the forehead and the legs below the knees, which were whitish. The animal, with head thrown back, was staring vacantly with its large, slatey-blue eyes.

Wargrave trembled with excitement and his heart beat so violently that the rifle shook as he brought it to his shoulder and gently pushed the muzzle through the stiff, dry grass at the edge of the cliff. But for the one necessary instant he became rigidly steady and without a tremor pressed the trigger. Then the rifle barrels danced again before his eyes, when he saw the great bull collapse on the ground, its fore-legs twitching violently, the hind ones motionless.

"Good shot. You've broken his spine," exclaimed Dermot, springing to his feet and sliding, scrambling, jumping down the steep descent. The excited subaltern outstripped him; but before he reached the bull it lay motionless, dead.

"You're a lucky young man, Wargrave. A splendid bison on your first day in the jungle. Those horns are six feet from tip to tip I bet," and the Political Officer held out his hand.

Frank shook it heartily as he said gratefully:

"I've only you to thank for it, sir. It was ripping of you to let me have first shot; and you gave me such a sitter that I couldn't miss. Thank you awfully, Colonel."

Dermot gave a piercing whistle and stood waiting, while the overjoyed subaltern walked round and round the dead bison, marvelling at its size and exclaiming at his own good fortune.

When in a few minutes Badshah appeared, followed by the panting men, Colonel Dermot sent the *mahout* on his elephant to the stable to fetch other men to cut up and bring in the bison. Then he and Wargrave on Badshah made for the road to Ranga Duar.

It was dark long before they reached the little station. The Colonel brought his companion in for a drink after the three thousand feet climb, most of which they had done on foot. Mrs. Dermot met them in the hall; and, after she had heard the result of the day's sport, warmly congratulated Wargrave on his good luck. Loud whispers and a scuffle over their heads attracted the attention of all three elders, and on the broad wooden staircase they saw two small figures, one in pyjamas, the other in a pretty, trailing nightdress daintily tied with blue bows, looking imploringly down at their mother. She smiled and nodded. There was a whirlwind rush down the stairs, and the mites were caught up in their father's arms. Then Frank came in for his share of caresses from them before they were sternly ordered back to bed again. And as he passed out into the darkness he carried away with him an enchanting picture of the charming babes climbing the stairs hand in hand and turning to blow kisses to the tall man who stood below with a strong arm around his pretty wife,

gazing fondly up at his children.

And the picture stayed with him when, after dinner at which he was congratulated by his brother officers, he went to his room and found a letter overlooked in his rush to dress for Mess. It was from Violet, the first that had come from her since his arrival in Ranga Duar. It breathed passion and longing, discontent and despair, in every line. As he laid his face on his arm to shut out the light where he sat at the table he felt that he was nearer to loving the absent woman than he had ever been. For the vision of the Dermots' married happiness, of the deep affection linking husband and wife, of the children climbing the stair and smiling back at their parents, came vividly to him. And it haunted him in his sleep when in dreams tiny arms were clasped around his neck and baby lips touched his lovingly.

CHAPTER VIII

A GIRL OF THE FOREST

From the frontier of Bhutan, six thousand feet up on the face of the mountains, a line of men wound down the serpentine track that led to Ranga Duar. At their head walked a stockily-built man with cheery Mongolian features, wearing a white cloth garment, *kimono*-shaped and kilted up to give freedom to the sturdy bare thighs and knees—the legs and feet cased in long, felt-soled boots. It was the *Deb Zimpun*, the Envoy of the independent Border State of Bhutan. Behind him came a tall man in khaki tunic, breeches, puttees and cap, his breast covered with bright-coloured ribbons. His uniform was similar to the British; but his face was unmistakably Chinese, as were those of the twenty tall, khaki-clad soldiers armed with magazine rifles at his heels. They were followed by three or four score Bhutanese swordsmen, thick-set and not unlike Gurkhas in feature, with bare heads, legs and feet, and clad only in a single garment similar to their leader's and kilted up by a cord around the waist, from which hung a *dah*, a short sword or long knife. In rear of them trudged a number of coolies, some laden with bundles, others with baskets of fruit.

Where the track came out on the bare shoulder of a spur free from the small trees and undergrowth clothing the mountains the *Deb Zimpun* pointed to the roofs of the buildings in the little station a thousand feet below them and hitherto invisible to them.

"That is Ranga Duar," he said briefly. The Chinaman behind him looked down at it.

"It seems a very small and weak place to have stopped our invading troops in the war," he said in Bhutanese. "So here lives the Man."

"The Man? Yes, perhaps he is a man. But many, very many, there be that think him a god or devil. They say he can call up a horde of demons in the form of elephants. With such he trampled your army into the earth.

"Devils? Leave such tales to lamas and the ignorant fools that believe their teaching. But if even a part of what I have heard about this man be true he is more dangerous than many devils. He stands in China's way, and he who does shall be swept aside."

"He is my friend," said the *Deb Zimpun* shortly, and tramped on in silence.

Before they reached the station they were met by two of the Political Officer's men, Bhuttias resident in British territory, detailed to receive and guide them to the Government Dâk Bungalow in which the *Deb Zimpun* and as many of his followers as could crowd into it were to reside during their stay. Arrived at it the long line filed into the compound.

Half a mile away down the hill Colonel Dermot and Wargrave watched them through their field-glasses.

"Who is that fellow in khaki uniform, sir?" asked the subaltern.

The Political Officer lowered his binoculars and laughed.

"A gentlemen I've been very anxious to meet. He's the Chinese *Amban*—we call him an Envoy of the Republic of China to Bhutan. But the Chinese themselves prefer to regard him as a representative of the suzerainty they pretend to exercise over the country. I'm curious to see him. He is a product of the times, an example of the modern Celestial, educated at Heidelberg University and Oxford, speaking German, French and English. He has been specially chosen by his Government to come to a Buddhist land, as he is a son of the abbot of the Yellow Lama Temple in Pekin and so might have influence with the Bhutanese by reason of his connection with their religion."

"But what have the Chinese to do with Bhutan?"

"Nothing now. But they've been intriguing for years to re-establish the suzerainty they once had over it. This *Amban*, Yuan Shi Hung by name, is a clever, unscrupulous and particularly dangerous individual."

"You seem to know a lot about him, Colonel."

"It's my business to do so. There is no apparent reason for his coming here with the *Deb Zimpun*, nor has he a right to. But I won't object, for I want to study and size him up. By the way, the Envoy will make his official call on me this morning. Would you like to be present?"

"Very much indeed. I'm always interested in seeing the various races of India and learning all I can about

them. I'd love a job like yours, sir, going into out-of-the-way places and dealing with strange peoples."

"Would you?" The Political Officer looked at him thoughtfully. "Are you good at picking up native languages?"

"Fairly so. I got through my Lower and Higher Standard Hindustani first go and have passed in Marathi and taken the Higher Standard, Persian."

Colonel Dermot regarded him critically and then said abruptly:

"Come to my office a few minutes before eleven. That's the hour I've fixed for the *Deb Zimpun's* visit."

Punctually at the time named Wargrave reached the Dermots' bungalow, on the road outside which, a Guard of Honour of fifty sepoy under an Indian officer was drawn up. Passing along the verandah he entered the office and saluted the Colonel who, seated at his desk, looked up and nodded for him to be seated and then returned to the despatch that he was writing.

In a few minutes a confused murmur drew nearer down the road and was stilled by the sharp words of command to the Guard of Honour and by the ring of rifles brought to the present in salute. Over the low wall of the garden appeared the heads and shoulders of the Envoy and his Chinese companion, followed by a train of attendants and swordsmen. They passed in through the gate. The Political Officer rose as the *Deb Zimpun*, removing his cap, entered the office and rushed towards him. The bullet-headed, cheery old gentleman beamed with pleasure as they shook hands and greeted each other in Bhutanese. Wargrave marvelled at the ease and fluency with which Colonel Dermot spoke the language. The *Amban* now entered the room and was formally presented by the *Deb Zimpun*.

Speaking in excellent English but with an accent that showed that he had first acquired it in Germany, he said:

"I am very pleased to meet you, Colonel. I have heard much of you in Bhutan."

"It gives me equal pleasure to make Your Excellency's acquaintance and to welcome you to India," replied Dermot with a bow.

Then in his turn Wargrave was presented to the two Asiatics, and the Envoy, calling an attendant in, took from him two white scarves of Chinese silk and placed one round each officer's neck in the custom known as "*khattag*". All sat down and the Envoy plunged into an animated conversation with Colonel Dermot, first producing a metal box and taking betel-nut from it to chew, while the attendant placed a spittoon conveniently near him.

Yuan Shi Hung chatted in English with Wargrave, who was astonished to find him a well-educated man of the world and thoroughly conversant with European politics, art and letters. But for the inscrutable yellow face the subaltern could have believed himself to be talking to an able Continental diplomat. The contrast between the semi-savage Bhutanese official and his companion, in whom the most modern civilised gentleman's manners were successfully grafted on the old-time courtesy of the Chinese aristocrat, was very striking. The old Envoy was a frank barbarian. He laughed loudly and clapped his hands in glee when Colonel Dermot presented him with a gramophone—which, it appeared, he had longed for ever since seeing one on a previous visit to India—and taught him how to work it. He showed his betel-stained teeth in an ecstatic grin when a record was turned on and from the trumpet came the Political Officer's familiar voice addressing him by name and in his own language with many flourishes of Oriental compliment.

Towards the termination of their call the *Deb Zimpun* called in two attendants with large baskets of fine blood oranges and walnuts from Bhutan and presented them in return. A number of coolies were needed to carry off the royal gift of the flesh of the bison, the sight of which made the Envoy's eyes glisten. He shook Wargrave's hand warmly when he learned to whose rifle he owed it. Then he and his Chinese companion took their leave, and with their followers passed up the hilly road. Wargrave, gazing after them, came to the conclusion that of the pair he preferred the savage to the ultra-cultivated Celestial.

Having thanked the Colonel for permitting him to be present at the interview, which had interested him greatly, the subaltern was about to leave when Mrs. Dermot appeared at the office door.

"May I come in, Kevin?" she began. "Oh, good morning, Mr. Wargrave. I was just sending a *chit* (letter) to you and Captain Burke asking you to tea this afternoon. A coolie has arrived from the *peelkhana* to say that Mr. and Miss Benson and Mr. Carter are on their way up and will be here soon. So you'll meet them at tea. You will like Miss Benson. She's a dear girl."

"Thanks very much, Mrs. Dermot. I'll be delighted to come, if you'll forgive me should I be a little late. I've got to take the signallers' parade this afternoon. I'll tell Burke when I get to the Mess. I'm going straight there now."

"Thank you. That will save me writing. *Au revoir*."

Half-way up the road to the Mess Wargrave looked back and saw an elephant heave into sight around a bend below the Dermots' house and plod heavily up to their gate. On the *charjama*—the passenger-carrying contrivance of wooden seats on the pad with footboards hanging by short ropes—sat a lady and two European men holding white umbrellas up to keep off the vertical rays of the noonday sun. When the animal sank to its knees in front of the bungalow Wargrave saw the girl—it could only be Miss Benson—spring lightly to the ground before either of her companions could dismount and offer to help her. Her big sunhat hid her face, and at that distance Wargrave could only see that she was small and slight, as she walked up the garden path.

When the signallers' afternoon practice was over the subaltern passed across the parade ground to the Political Officer's house. When he entered the pretty drawing-room, bright with the gay colours of chintz curtains and cushions, he found the strangers present, one man talking to Mrs. Dermot at her tea-table, the other chatting with the Colonel, while Burke was installed beside a girl seated in a low cane chair and dressed in a smart, hand-embroidered Tussock silk dress, *suede* shoes and silk stockings. Little Brian stood beside her with one arm affectionately round her neck, while Eileen was perched in her lap. But when Frank appeared the mite wriggled down to the floor and rushed to him.

The subaltern was presented to Miss Benson, her father and Carter, the Sub-Divisional Officer or Civil Service official of the district. When he sat down Eileen clambered on to his knee and seriously interfered with his peaceful enjoyment of his tea; but while he talked to her he was watching Miss Benson over the small golden head. She was astonishingly pretty, with silky black hair curving in natural waves, dark-bordered Irish grey eyes fringed with long, thick lashes, a rose-tinted complexion, a pouting, red-lipped mouth and a small nose with the most fascinating, provoking suspicion of a tip-tilt. She was as small and daintily-fashioned as her hostess; and Wargrave thought it marvellous that their forgotten outpost on the face of the mountains should hold two such pretty women at the same time. His comrade Burke was evidently acutely conscious of Muriel Benson's attractions, and, his pleasantly ugly face aglow with a happy smile, he was flirting as openly and outrageously with her as she with him.

"Sure, it's a cure for sore eyes ye are, Miss Flower Face," he said. "That's the name I christened her with the first moment I saw her, Wargrave. Doesn't it fit her?" Then turning to the girl again, he continued, "Aren't you ashamed av yourself for laving me to pine for a sight av ye all these weary months?"

Miss Benson could claim to be Irish on her mother's side and so was a ready-witted match for the doctor's Celtic exuberance; though to Wargrave watching it seemed that Burke's easy banter cloaked a deeper feeling.

Drawn into their conversation Frank found the girl to be natural and unaffected, without a trace of conceit, gifted with a keen sense of humour and evidently as full of the joy of living as a school-boy. He thought her laugh delightfully musical, and it was frequently and readily evoked by Burke's droll remarks or the quaint oracular sayings from the self-possessed elf on Wargrave's knee. Her admiration of and genuine affection for Mrs. Dermot was very evident when Noreen joined their group.

The subaltern, covertly and critically observing her, could hardly believe the tales which their hostess had previously told him of the courage and ability that this small and dainty girl had frequently shown. But only a few minutes' conversation with her father convinced Frank that he was an amiably weak and incompetent individual, more fitted to be a recluse and a bookworm than a roamer in wild jungles where his work brought him in contact with strange peoples and constant danger. It was evident that the reputation which his large section of the Terai Forest bore as being well managed and efficiently run was not due to him and that somebody more capable had the handling of the work. Hardly had Wargrave come to this conclusion and begun to believe that the stories that he had heard of the daughter's business ability and powers of organisation were true when he was given a very convincing proof of her courage and coolness in danger.

After tea, as the sun was nearing its setting and a deliciously cool breeze blew down from the mountains, a move was made to the garden, where the party sat in a circle and chatted. When evening came and the dusk rose up from the world below, blotting out the light lingering on the hills, Mrs. Dermot made her children say goodnight to the company and bore them reluctant away to their beds. As the darkness deepened the servants brought out a small table and placed a lamp on it, and by its light carried round drinks to the men of the party. Miss Benson was leaning back in a cane chair and chatting lazily with Burke, who sat beside her. She had one shapely silk-clad leg crossed over the other, and a small foot resting on the grass. Opposite her sat Colonel Dermot and Wargrave. As the brilliant tropic stars came out in the velvety blackness of the sky occasional silences fell on the party. A tale of Burke's was interrupted by the Political Officer's voice, saying in a quiet forceful tone:

"Miss Benson, please do not move your foot. Remain perfectly still. A snake is passing under your chair. Steady, Burke! Keep still!"

There was a terror-stricken hush. Frank looked across in horror. The lamplight barely showed in the shadow under the chair a deadly hill-viper writhing its way out within a few inches of the small foot firmly planted in its dainty, high-heeled shoe. He looked at the motionless girl. Less pale than the men about her she sat quietly, smiling faintly and apparently not frightened by the Death almost touching her. One pink hand lay without a tremor in her lap, but the other rested on the arm of her chair and the knuckles showed white as the fingers gripped the bamboo tightly. She did not even glance down. But the men, frozen with dread, watched the shadowy writhing line passing her foot slowly, all too slowly, until it had wriggled out into the centre of the circle of motionless beings. Then Colonel Dermot sprang up. Seizing his light bamboo chair in his powerful grip he whirled it aloft and brought it crashing down on the viper, shattering the chair but smashing the reptile's spine in half a dozen places.

The other men had risen from their seats; but the girl remained seated and said quietly:

"Thank you very much, Colonel, for warning me. I might easily have moved my foot and trodden on the snake. I've seen so many of the horrid things in camp lately. Now, Captain Burke, I'm sorry that the interruption spoiled your story. Please go on with it."

Her coolness silenced the men, who were breaking into exclamations of relief and congratulation. Even her father sat down again calmly.

But Burke's enthusiastic admiration of her courage found an outlet at Mess that night when he recounted the adventure to Major Hunt and appealed to Wargrave for confirmation of the story of her plucky behaviour.

Later in his room as he was going to bed Frank smiled at the recollection of the Irishman's exuberant expressions; but he confessed to himself that the girl's calm courage was worthy of every praise.

"She is certainly brave," he thought. "I'm not surprised at old Burke's infatuation. She is decidedly pretty. What lovely eyes she's got—and what a provokingly attractive little nose! Well, the doctor's a lucky man if she marries him. She seems awfully nice. Violet will certainly have two very charming women friends in the station if she hits it off with them."

But as his eyes rested on her pictured face his heart misgave him; for he remembered that she had little liking for her own sex. And then, he told himself, these two would probably refuse to know a woman who had run away from her husband to another man. When he had turned out the light and jumped into bed he lay awake a long time puzzling over the tangle into which the threads of her life and his seemed to have got. Time alone could unravel it.

He tossed uneasily on his bed, unable to sleep, and presently a slight noise on the verandah outside caught his ear. He lay still and listened; and it seemed to him that soft footfalls of a large animal's pads sounded on the wooden flooring. Then suddenly he heard a beast sniffing at his closed door. "A stray dog," he thought. But suddenly he remembered Burke's account of the panther that haunted the Mess; and a thrill of excitement ran through him and drove all his unhappy thoughts away. He sprang out of bed and rushed across the room to get his rifle, but in the darkness overturned a chair which fell with a crash to the ground. This scared the animal; for there was a sudden scurry outside, and by the time Wargrave had found the rifle and groped for a couple of cartridges there was nothing to be seen on the verandah when he threw open the door. It was a brilliant star-lit night. Burke called to him from his room and when Wargrave went to him said that he too had heard the animal, which was undoubtedly the panther.

Returning to bed Frank was dropping off to sleep half an hour later when he was startled by a shrill, agonised shriek coming from a distance. Rifle in hand he rushed out on to the verandah again and heard faint shouts coming from a small group of Bhuttia huts on a shoulder of the hills hundreds of feet above the Mess. He called out but got no answer; and after listening for some time and hearing nothing further he returned to bed and at last fell asleep. In the morning he learned that the panther had made a daring raid on a hut and carried off a Bhuttia wood-cutter's baby from its sleeping mother's side, and had devoured it in the jungle not two hundred yards away.

The Durbar, or official ceremony of the public reception of the Bhutan Envoy and the paying over to him of the annual subsidy of a hundred thousand rupees, was held in a marquee on the parade ground in the afternoon. There was a Guard of Honour of a hundred sepoy to salute, first the Political Officer and afterwards the *Deb Zimpun* when he arrived on a mule at the head of his swordsmen and coolies. The solemnity of his dignified greeting to Colonel Dermot was somewhat spoiled by shrieks of delight and loud remarks from Eileen (who was seated beside her mother in the marquee) at the stately appearance of the Envoy. He was attired in a very voluminous red Chinese silk robe embroidered in gold and wearing a peculiar gold-edged cap shaped like a papal tiara.

The Political Officer's official dinner took place that evening at his bungalow. Besides the officers and the three European visitors the *Deb Zimpun* and the *Amban* were present. The latter wore conventional evening dress cut by a London tailor, with the stars and ribands of several orders. But the old Envoy in his flowing red silk robe completely outshone the two ladies, although Miss Benson was wearing her most striking frock.

"Sure, don't we look like a State Banquet at Buckingham Palace or a charity dinner at the Dublin Mansion House?" said Burke, looking around the company gathered about the oval dining-table. He was seated beside Miss Benson, who was on the host's right and facing the *Amban* on his left.

At the Durbar Wargrave had noticed that the Chinaman stared all the time at the girl, and now during the meal he seemed to devour her with an unpleasant gaze, gloating over the beauties of her bared shoulders and bosom until she became uncomfortably conscious of it herself. The unveiled flesh of a white woman is peculiarly attractive to the Asiatic, the better-class females of whose race are far less addicted to the public exposure of their charms than are European ladies. While the *Deb Zimpun* touched nothing but water the *Amban* drank champagne, port and liqueurs freely—even the untravelled Chinaman is partial to European liquors—yet they seemed not to affect him. But his slanted eyes burned all the more fiercely as their gaze was fixed on the girl opposite him.

He endeavoured to engage her in conversation across the table, and appeared ready to resent anyone else intervening in the talk as he dilated on the gaieties and pleasures of life in London, Berlin and Paris, where he had been attached to the Chinese Embassies. He glared at Burke when the doctor persisted in mentioning the panther's visit during the previous night, for the conversation at their end of the table then turned on sport. A chance remark of Miss Benson on tiger-shooting made Wargrave ask:

"Have you shot tigers, too, like Mrs. Dermot? And I've never seen one outside a cage!"

The girl smiled, and the Colonel answered for her.

"Miss Benson has got at least six. Seven, is it? More than my wife has. And among them was the famous man-eater of Mardhura, which had killed twenty-three persons. The natives of the district call her 'The Tiger Girl.'"

"Troth, my name for you is a prettier one, Miss Benson," said Burke laughing.

She made a *moue* at him, but said to the subaltern:

"Cheer up, Mr. Wargrave, you've lots of time before you yet. You oughtn't to complain—you've only been a few days here and you've already got a splendid bison. And they're rare in these parts."

"We'll have to find him a tiger, Muriel," said their host. "When you hear of a kill anywhere conveniently near, let me know and we'll arrange a beat for him."

"With pleasure, Colonel. We're soon going to the southern fringe of the forest; and, as you know, there are usually tigers to be found in the *nullahs* on the borders of the cultivated country. I'll send you *khubber* (news)."

"Thank you very much," said Wargrave. "I do want to get one."

All through the conversation the girl felt the Chinaman's bold eyes seeming to burn her flesh, and she was glad when the Political Officer spoke to him and engaged his attention. And she was still more relieved when dinner ended and Mrs. Dermot rose to leave the table. When the men joined them later on the verandah Burke and Wargrave made a point of hemming her in on both sides and keeping the *Amban* off; for even the short-sighted doctor had become cognisant of the Chinaman's offensive stare.

When he and the *Deb Zimpun* had left the bungalow she said to the two officers:

"I'm so glad you didn't let that awful man come near me. He makes me afraid. There's something so evil about him that I shudder when he looks at me."

"The curse av the crows on the brute!" exclaimed Burke hotly. "Don't ye be afraid. We won't let the devil come next or nigh ye, will we, Wargrave?"

And on the following day when the visitors were entertained by athletic sports of the detachment on the parade ground and an interesting archery competition between excited teams of the *Deb Zimpun's* followers and of local Bhuttias, they allowed the *Amban* no opportunity of approaching her. During the sports Wargrave noticed on one occasion that he seemed to be speaking of her to the commander of his escort of Chinese soldiers, a tall, evil-faced Manchu, pock-marked and blind of the right eye, who stared at her fixedly for some time. At the dinner at the Mess that night the two ladies wore frocks that were very little *décolleté*. Burke, as Mess President, had arranged the table so that the *Amban* was as far away from them as possible; and Wargrave and he mounted guard over Miss Benson when the meal was ended.

The *Deb Zimpun* had fixed his departure for an early hour on the following morning and was to be accompanied by the Political Officer, who was going to visit the Maharajah of Bhutan. In the course of the day the Chinese *Amban* had announced to Colonel Dermot that he did not wish to leave so soon and desired to remain longer in Ranga Duar; but the Political Officer courteously but very firmly told him that he must go with the Envoy.

Early next morning, while Noreen Dermot was occupied with her children, and her husband was completing his preparations for departure, Muriel Benson went out into the garden. Badshah, pad strapped on ready for the road, was standing at one side of the bungalow swinging his trunk and shifting from foot to foot as he patiently awaited his master. The girl greeted and petted him, then went to gather flowers and cut bunches of bright-coloured leaves from high bushes of bougainvillea and poinsettia that hid her from view from the house.

Suddenly a harsh voice sounded in her ears.

"I have tried to speak to you alone, but those fools were ever in my way. Do not cry out. You must listen to me."

She started violently and turned to find the *Amban*, dressed in khaki and ready to march, behind her. Courageous as she usually was the extraordinary repulsion and terror with which he inspired her kept her silent as he continued:

"I want you, and I shall take you sooner or later. Listen! I am one of the richest men in all China. One day I shall be President—and then Emperor the next; and when I rule my country shall no longer be the effete, despised land torn with dissension that it is now. I can give you everything that the heart of a woman, white or yellow, can desire—take you from your dull, poverty-stricken life to raise you to power and immense wealth. I shall return for you one day. Will you come to me?"

The girl drew back, pale as death and unable to cry out. He glanced around. The tall, red-leaved bushes hid them; there was no one or nothing within sight, except the elephant shifting restlessly.

"Answer me!" he said almost menacingly.

She was silent. He sprang forward and seized her roughly.

"Speak! You must answer," he said.

The girl shrank at his touch and struggled in vain in his powerful grasp.

Then suddenly she cried out:

"Badshah!"

The Chinaman thrust his face, inflamed with passion and desire, close to hers.

"You must, you shall, come to me—by force, if not willingly," he growled. "By all the gods or devils—."

But at that instant he was plucked from her by a resistless force and hurled violently to the ground. Dazed and half-stunned he looked up and saw the elephant standing over him with one colossal foot poised over his prostrate body, ready to crush him to pulp. Brave as the Chinaman was he trembled with terror at the imminent, awful death.

But a quiet voice sounded clear through the garden.

"*Jané do!* (Let him go!)"

The elephant brought the threatening foot to the ground but stood, with curled trunk and ears cocked forward, ready to annihilate him if the invisible speaker gave the word. The girl shrank against the great animal, clinging to it and looking with horror at the prostrate man. The *Amban* slowly dragged his bruised body from the ground and staggered shaken and dizzy out of the garden.

Muriel kissed the soft trunk and laid her cheek against it, and it curved to touch her hair with a gentle caress. Then she fled into the bungalow to find Colonel Dermot on the verandah grimly watching the Chinaman stumbling blindly up the steep road. His wife beside him opened her arms to the shaken girl.

"He shall pay for that some day, Muriel," said the Political Officer sternly. "But not yet."

An hour later the two women watched the snaking line crawl up the steep face of the mountains, and through field-glasses they could distinguish Badshah with his master on his neck, the *Deb Zimpun* and his followers and the tall form of the Chinaman, until all vanished from sight in the trees clothing the upper hills.

Benson and Carter left that afternoon, Muriel remaining to spend a longer time with her friend and, as she told Wargrave, to try and regain the affections of the children which he had stolen from her.

Frank was thinking of her next day as he was standing on the Mess verandah after tea, cleaning his fowling-piece, when on a wooded spur running down from the mountains and sheltering the little station on the west he heard a jungle-cock crowing in the undergrowth not four hundred yards away. Seizing a handful of cartridges he loaded his gun and, running down the steps and across the garden, plunged into the jungle. He walked cautiously, his rope-soled boots enabling him to move silently, and stopped occasionally to listen for the bird's crow or the telltale pattering over the dried leaves. Peering into the undergrowth and searching the ground he crept quietly forward. Suddenly his heart seemed to leap to his throat. In a patch of dust he saw the unmistakable *pug* (footprint) of a large panther. One claw had indented a new-fallen leaf, showing that the animal had very recently passed. Wargrave halted and thought hard. He had only his shotgun, but the sun was near its setting and if he returned to the Mess to get his rifle—which was taken to pieces and locked up in its case—darkness would probably fall before he could overtake the panther, which was possibly moving on ahead of him. So he resolved not to turn back, but opened the breech of his gun and extracted the cartridges. With his knife he cut their thick cases almost through all round at the wad, dividing the powder from the shot. For he knew that thus treated and fired the whole upper portion of the cartridges would be shot out of the barrels like solid bullets and carry forty yards without breaking up and scattering the shot.

Reloading he advanced cautiously, frequently losing and refinding the trail. Creeping through a clump of thin bushes he stopped suddenly, frozen with horror and dread.

In an open patch of woodland the two Dermot children stood by a tree, the girl huddled against the trunk, while the little boy had placed himself in front of her and, with a small stick in his hand, was bravely facing in her defence an animal crouching on the ground not twenty yards away. It was a large panther. Belly to earth, tail lashing from side to side, it was crawling slowly, imperceptibly nearer its prey. With ears flattened against the skull and lips drawn back to bare the gleaming fangs in a devilish grin it snarled at the brave child whose dauntless attitude doubtless puzzled it.

"Don't cry, Eileen. I won't let it hurt you," said the little boy encouragingly. "Go 'way, nasty dog!"

He raised his little stick above his head. A boy should always protect a girl, his father had often said, so he was not going to let the beast harm his tiny sister. The panther crouched lower. The watcher in the bushes saw the powerful limbs gathering under the spotted body for the fatal spring. Every muscle and sinew was tense for the last rush and leap, as the subaltern raised his gun.

CHAPTER IX

TIGER LAND

Wargrave fired. His shot struck the panther rather far back, wounding but not disabling it. It swung round to face its assailant. Seeing Frank it promptly charged. The second cartridge took it in front of the shoulder and raked its body from end to end. Coughing blood the beast rolled over and over, biting its paws, clawing savagely at the earth, trying to rise and falling back in fury, while Frank rapidly reloaded and stepped between it and the children. But the convulsions became fewer and less violent, the limbs stiffened, the beautiful black and yellow body sank inert to the ground. The tail twitched a little. A few tremors shook the panther. Then it lay still.

The subaltern turned eagerly to the children.

"It's Frank. Look, Eileen, it's Frank," cried Brian. "He's killed the nasty dog."

The little girl, who had sunk to the ground, struggled to her feet and with her brother was swept up in a joyous embrace by the subaltern. Then, bidding the boy hold on to the sleeve of the arm carrying the gun, Wargrave started back with Eileen perched on his shoulder. As they passed the panther's body she looked down at it and clapped her hands.

"He's deaded. Nasty, bad dog!" she cried.

Striking a path through the undergrowth the subaltern climbed down the steep ravine that lay between the hill and the Political Officer's bungalow. As he struggled up the steep side of the *nullah* he heard their mother calling the children with a note of inquietude in her voice; and he answered her with a reassuring shout. Coming up on the level behind the low stone wall of the garden he found Mrs. Dermot and Muriel anxiously awaiting him.

"Mumsie! Hallo, Mumsie! Here's me. Fwank shooted bad dog," cried Eileen, waving her arms and kicking her bearer violently in her excitement.

"Yes, Mumsie, Frank killded the nasty dog that wanted to eat us," added Brian.

Wargrave passed the children over the wall into the anxious arms outstretched for them, then vaulted into the garden.

"What has happened, Mr. Wargrave?" asked Mrs. Dermot, pressing her children to her nervously. "What is this about your shooting a dog?"

The subaltern told the story briefly.

"Oh, my babies! My babies!" cried the mother with tears in her eyes, clasping the mites to her breast and kissing them frantically. The little woman who had many times faced death undauntedly at her husband's side broke down utterly at the thought of her children's peril.

She overwhelmed Wargrave with her thanks, while Muriel complimented him on his promptness and presence of mind and then scolded the urchins for their disobedience in wandering away from the garden by themselves. But the unrepentant pair smiled genially at her from the shelter of their mother's arms and assured her that "Fwankie" would always take care of them. Their mother, even when she grew more composed, could not be severe after so nearly losing them; but although unwilling to terrify them by a recital of the awful fate from which the subaltern had saved them by the merest chance, she impressed upon them again and again her oft-repeated warning that they must never leave the garden alone.

But they were not awed; so, bidding them thank and kiss him, she bore them off to bed, her eyes still full of tears.

Wargrave sent a servant to fetch his orderly and the detachment *mochi*, or cobbler, to skin the panther, the news of the death of which soon spread. So Major Hunt and Burke joined Miss Benson and the subaltern when they went to look at its body, and numbers of sepoys streamed up from the Fort to view the animal, which had long been notorious in the station. Lamps had to be brought to finish the skinning of it; and the hide, when taken off, was carried in triumph to the Mess compound to be cured.

On the following afternoon on the tennis-court in a corner of the parade ground Miss Benson was left with Burke and Wargrave when Mrs. Dermot had taken her children home at sunset.

"You've completely won her heart," the girl said to the subaltern, pointing with her racquet to the disappearing form of her friend. "Nothing's too good for you for saving these precious mites. But she'll never let them out of her sight again until their big nurse returns."

"You mean their elephant? Well, of course he's a marvellously well-trained animal; but is he really so reliable that he can always be trusted to look after those children?"

"Badshah is something very much more than a well-trained animal. Perhaps some time out in the jungle you may understand why the natives regard him as sacred and call Colonel Dermot the 'God of the Elephants.' You don't know Badshah as we do."

"Well, old Burke here has told me some strange yarns about him. But, as he's always pulling my leg, I never know when to believe him."

The doctor grinned.

"We won't waste words on him, Captain Burke," said the girl. "It's time to go home now."

They escorted her to the Dermots' bungalow, where the doctor lingered for a few more minutes in her society, while Wargrave climbed up to the Mess and went to look at the panther's skin pegged out on the ground under a thick coating of ashes and now as hard as a board after a day's exposure to the burning sun.

A few days later Miss Benson left the station to rejoin her father in one of the three or four isolated wooden bungalows built to accommodate the Forest Officer in different parts of his district, each one lost and lonely in the silent jungle. For days after her departure Burke was visibly depressed; and Wargrave, too, missed the bright and attractive girl who had enlivened the quiet little station during her stay.

A fortnight later Colonel Dermot returned from Bhutan; and his gratitude to the subaltern for the rescue of his children was sincere and heart-felt. He was only too glad to take the young man out into the jungle on every possible occasion and continue his instruction in the ways of the forest. This companionship and the sport were particularly beneficial to Wargrave just then. For they served to take him out of himself and raise him from the state of depression into which he was falling, thanks to Violet's letters, the tone of which was becoming more bitter each time she wrote.

Her reply to his long and cheery epistle describing Ranga Duar's unusual burst of gaiety during the Envoy's visit and his own rescue of the children was as follows:

"You do not seem to miss me much among your new friends. While I am leading a most unhappy and

miserable life here you appear to be enjoying yourself and giving little thought to me. You are lucky to have two such very beautiful ladies to make much of you; and I daresay they think you a wonderful hero for saving the little brats who, if they are like most children, would not be much loss. Their mother seems extremely friendly to you for such a devoted wife as you try to make her out to be. Or perhaps it is the girl you admire most; this marvellous young lady who shoots tigers and apparently manages the whole Terai Forest. You say you love me; but you don't seem to be pining very much for me. While each day that comes since you left me is a fresh agony to me, you appear to contrive to be quite happy without me."

This letter stung Wargrave like the lash of a whip across the face. To do Violet justice no sooner had she sent it than she regretted it. But deeply hurt as he was by the bitter words he forgave her; for he felt that her life was indeed miserable and that he was unconsciously in a great measure to blame for its being so. But it maddened him to realise his present helplessness to alter matters. He was more than willing to sacrifice himself to help her; but it would be a long time before he could hope to save enough to pay his debts and make a home for her. Whether it was wicked or not to take away another man's wife did not occur to him; all that he knew was that a woman was unhappy and he alone could help her. It seemed to him that the sin—if sin there were—was the husband's, who starved her heart and rendered her miserable.

In his distress work and sport proved his salvation. He threw himself heart and soul into his duty, and whenever there was nothing for him to do with the detachment Major Hunt encouraged him to go with the Political Officer into the jungle. For little as he suspected it the senior guessed the young man's trouble and watched him sympathisingly.

One never-to-be-forgotten day as Wargrave was returning from afternoon parade Colonel Dermot called to him from his gate and showed him a telegram. It ran: "Tiger marked down. Come immediately *dāk* bungalow, Madpur Duar. Muriel."

As the subaltern perused it with delight the Colonel said:

"Ask your C.O. for leave. Then, if he gives it, get something substantial to eat in the Mess and be ready to start at once. Madpur Duar is thirty odd miles away; and we'll have to travel all night. Come to my bungalow as soon as you can."

Half an hour later the two were trudging down the road to the *peelkhana* carrying their rifles. Badshah, with a *howdah* roped on to his pad, plodded behind them; for it is far more comfortable to walk down a steep descent than be carried down it by an elephant. At the foot of the hills they mounted and were borne away into the gathering shadows of the long road through the forest. As they proceeded their talk was all of tigers; for in India, though there be bigger and more splendid game in the land, its traditional animal never fails to interest, and to Wargrave on his way to his first tiger-shoot all other topics were insignificant.

The sun went down and darkness settled on the forest. The talk died away and no sound was heard but the soft padding of their elephant's huge feet in the dust of the road. The subaltern soon found the *howdah* infinitely more trying than a seat on the pad when Badshah was in motion; for the plunging gait of the animal jerked him backwards and forwards and threw him against the wooden rails if he forgot to hold himself at arm's length from them. The discomfort spoiled his appreciation of the strange, attractive experience of being borne by night through the sleepless forest, where in the dark hours only the bird and the monkey repose; and even to them the creeping menace of the climbing snake affrights the one and the wheeling shapes of the night-flying birds of prey scare the other. But on the ground all are awake. The glimmering whiteness of the road was occasionally blotted by the scurrying forms of animals, hunted and hunters, dashing across it. Once a tiny shriek in the distance broke the silence of the jungle.

"A wild elephant," said Colonel Dermot.

Then followed the loud crashing of rending boughs and falling trees.

"That's a herd feeding. They graze until about ten o'clock and then sleep on well into the small hours, wake and begin to feed again at dawn," continued the Political Officer.

Once a wild, unearthly wailing cry that seemed to come from every direction at once startled the subaltern:

"Good Heavens! what's that?" he exclaimed, gripping his rifle and trying to pierce the darkness around them.

"Only a Giant Owl," was the reply. "It's an uncanny noise. There!"

Right over their heads it rang out again; and the stars above them were blotted out for a moment by a dark, circling shape above the tree-tops.

Hour after hour went by as they were borne along through the night; and Wargrave bruised and battered by the *howdah*-rails, fell constantly against them, so overcome with sleep was he. At last to his relief his companion called a halt for a few hours' rest; and they brought the elephant to his knees, dismounted and stripped him of *howdah* and pad. Sitting on the latter they supped on sandwiches and coffee from Thermos flasks, and then stretched themselves to sleep, while Badshah standing over them grazed on the grasses and branches within reach. Wargrave was dropping off to sleep when he was roused by the sharp, *staccato* bark of a *khakur* buck repeated several times. The tired man lost consciousness and was sunk in profound slumber when the silence of the forest was shattered by a snorting, braying roar that rang through the jungle with alarming suddenness.

Wargrave sprang up and groped for his rifle. But his companion lay tranquilly on the pad.

"It's all right. It's only a tiger that's missed his spring and is angry about it," he said sleepily. "Lie down again."

"Only a tiger, sir?" repeated Wargrave. "But it sounded close by."

"Yes, but Badshah will look after us. Don't worry"; and the Colonel turned over and fell asleep.

It was a little time, however, before Frank followed his example, and he had his rifle under his hand when he did. But the dark bulk of the elephant towering over them comforted him as he sank to sleep.

A couple of hours later they were on their way again. It was broad daylight before they emerged from the jungle. It seemed strange to be out once more in the wide-stretching, open and cultivated plains and to look back on the great forest and, beyond it, to the mountains towering to the sky. Before them lay the flat expanse of the hedgeless, fertile fields dotted here and there with clusters of trimly-built huts or thick groves of bamboos and seamed with the lines of deep *nullahs*, the tops of the trees in them barely showing above the level and marking their winding course.

The *dâk* bungalow at Madpur Duar was soon reached, a single-storied building with a couple of trees shading the well behind it and a group of elephants and their *mahouts*. On the verandah Benson and his daughter were standing, the girl dressed in a khaki drill coat and skirt over breeches and soft leather gaiters, and waving a welcome to Badshah's riders.

After a hurried breakfast the latter were ready to start for the day's sport. By then a line of ten female elephants, the tallest carrying a *howdah*, the rest only their pads, was drawn up before the bungalow; and at a word from their *mahouts* their trunks went up in the air and the animals trumpeted in salute as the party came out on the verandah.

"We borrowed Mr. Carter's and the Settlement Officer's elephants for the beat," said Miss Benson, as, wearing a big pith sunhat and carrying a double-barrelled .400 cordite rifle, she led the way down the verandah steps.

It had been arranged that she was to take Wargrave with her in her *howdah*, while her father accompanied Colonel Dermot on Badshah. Her big elephant knelt down and a ladder was laid against its side, up which she climbed, followed by the subaltern. When all were mounted she led the way across the plain. Although the ground was everywhere level and just there uncultivated the elephants tailed off in single file as is the habit of their kind, wild or domesticated, each stepping with precise care into the footprints of the one in front of it. Here in the Plains the heat was intense; and Wargrave, shading his eyes from the blinding glare, thought enviously of the coolness up in the mountains that he had left. As they moved along Muriel explained to him how the beat was to be conducted.

Where the southern fringe of the Terai Jungle borders the cultivated country it is a favourite haunt of tigers, which from its shelter carry on war against the farmers' cattle. Creeping down the ravines seaming the soft soil and worn by the streams that flow through the forest from the hills they pull down the cows grazing or coming to drink in the *nullahs*, which are filled with small trees and scrubs affording good cover. A tiger, when it has killed, drags the carcass of its prey into shade near water, eats a hearty meal of about eighty pounds of flesh, drinks and then sleeps until it is ready to feed again. If disturbed it retreats up the ravine to the forest.

So, beating for one with elephants here, the sportsmen place themselves on their *howdah*-bearing animals between the jungle and the spot where the tiger is known to be lying up, and the beater elephants enter the scrub from the far side and shepherd him gently towards the guns.

Pointing to a distant line of tree-tops showing above the level plain she said:

"There is the *nullah* in which, about a mile farther on, a cow was killed yesterday. I hope the tiger is still lying up in it. We'll soon see."

They reached the ravine, which was twenty or thirty feet deep and contained a little stream flowing through tangled scrub, and moved along parallel to it and about a couple of hundred yards away. Presently the girl pointed to a tall tree growing in it and a quarter of a mile ahead of them. Its upper branches were bending under the weight of numbers of foul-looking bald-headed vultures, squawking, huddled together, jostling each other on their perches and pecking angrily at their neighbours with irritable cries. Some circled in the air and occasionally swooped down towards the ground only to rocket up again affrightedly to the sky; for the tiger lay by its kill and resented the approach of any daring bird that aspired to share the feast. Muriel hurriedly explained how the conduct of the birds indicated the beast's presence.

"If he were not there they'd be down tearing the carcass to pieces," she said, as she held up her hand and halted the file behind her.

"The beater elephants had better stop here, Colonel," she called out to Dermot. "There is a way down and across the *nullah*, by which you can take Badshah to the far side. We will remain on this."

The Political Officer, who had seen and realised the significance of the vultures, waved his hand and moved off at once. Muriel called up the *mahouts* and bade them enter the ravine and begin the beat in about ten minutes, then told her driver to go on. Half a mile beyond the tree she ordered him to halt and take up a position close to the edge of the *nullah*, into which they could look down. Below them the bottom was clear of scrub which ended fifty yards away. Dermot stopped opposite; and both elephants were turned to face towards the spot where the tiger was judged to be.

"Mr Wargrave, get to the front of the *howdah* and be ready," she said in a low tone.

The subaltern protested chivalrously against taking the best place.

"Oh, it's all right. We've brought you out to get the tiger; so you must do as you're told. If he breaks out this

side take the first shot," she said peremptorily.

He submitted and took up his position with cocked rifle. As the *nullah* wound a good deal the tops of the trees in it prevented them from seeing if the beater-elephants had gone in; but in a few minutes they heard distant shouts and the crashing of the undergrowth as the big animals forced their way through the scrub.

"Be ready, Mr. Wargrave," whispered the girl. "Sometimes a tiger starts on the run at the first sound."

His nerves a-quiver and his heart beating violently the subaltern held his rifle at the ready, as the noise of the beaters drew nearer. Again and again he brought the butt to his shoulder, only to lower it when he realised that it was a false alarm. The sounds of the beat grew louder and closer, and still there was no sign of the tiger. Frank's heart sank. He saw the vultures stir uneasily and some rise into the air as the elephants passed under them.

At last through the trees he began to catch occasional glimpses of the *mahouts*, and he lost hope. But suddenly from the scrub below them in the *nullah* a number of small birds flew up; and the next instant the edge of the bushes nearest them was parted stealthily and a tiger slunk cautiously out in the bottom of the ravine.

Wargrave's rifle went up to his shoulder; and he fired. A startled roar from the beast told that it was hit; but it bounded in a flash across the ravine and up the steep bank on their side not forty yards from them. As it scrambled swiftly over the edge it caught sight of the elephant and with a deep "wough!" charged straight at it.

Frank fired again, and his bullet struck up the dust, missing the swift-rushing animal by a couple of feet. The next moment with a roar the tiger sprang at the elephant. With one leap it landed with its hind paws on the elephant's head, its fore-feet on the front rail of the *howdah*, standing right over the *mahout* who crouched in terror on the neck. The savage, snarling, yellow-and-black mask was thrust almost into Wargrave's face, and from the open red mouth lined with fierce white fangs he could feel the hot breath on his cheek as he tugged frantically at the under-lever of his rifle to open the breech and re-load. In another moment the tiger would have been on top of them in the *howdah* when a gun-barrel shot past the subaltern and pushed him aside. The muzzle of Muriel's rifle was pressed almost against the brute's skull as she fired.

Frank hardly heard the report. All he knew was that the snarling face disappeared as quickly as it had come. The whole thing was an affair of seconds. Shot through the brain the tiger dropped back to the ground with a heavy thud and fell dead beside the staunch elephant which had never moved all through the terrible ordeal.

A cry of relief and a prayer to Allah burst from the grey-bearded Mahomedan *mahout*, as he straightened himself; and Wargrave turned with glowing face and outstretched hand to the girl.

"Oh, well done! Splendidly done!" he cried. "You saved me from being lugged bodily out of the *howdah* or at least from being mauled. This lever jammed and I couldn't re-load."

Her eyes shining and face beaming with excitement she shook his hand.

"Wasn't it thrilling? I thought he'd have got both of us." Then to the *mahout* she continued in Urdu, "Gul Dad, are you hurt?"

The man was solemnly feeling himself all over. He stared at a rent in the shoulder of his coat, torn by the tiger's claw. It was the only injury that he had suffered. He put his finger on it and grumbled:

"Missie-*baba*, the *shaitan* (devil) has torn my coat."

In the reaction from the strain the girl and Wargrave went off in peals of laughter at his words.

"But are you not wounded?" Miss Benson repeated. "Has it not clawed you?"

The *mahout* shook his head.

"No, missie-*baba*; but it was my new coat," he insisted.^[1]

Frank looked down at the tiger stretched motionless on the yellow grass.

"By George, you shot him dead enough, Miss Benson!" he exclaimed.

She stared down at the animal.

"Yes; but it's well to be careful. I've seen a tiger look as dead as that and yet spring up and maul a man who approached it incautiously," she said.

She raised her rifle and covered the prostrate animal.

"Throw something at it," she continued.

Wargrave took out a couple of heavy, copper-cased cartridges and flung them one by one at the tiger's head, striking it on the jaw and in the eye. The animal did not move.

"Seems dead enough," said the girl, lowering her rifle. "Here come the beaters."

The other elephants had now burst out in line through the scrub. Their *mahouts* shouted enquiries to Gul Dad and when they heard of the tiger's death cheered gleefully, for it meant *backsheesh* to them. Badshah was seen to be searching for a way down into the *nullah* and in a few minutes brought his passengers up alongside Miss Benson and the subaltern. Her father and Dermot congratulated the girl warmly; and the

latter, having made Badshah kick the tiger to make certain that it was dead, dismounted and examined it.

"Here's your shot, Wargrave," he said, pointing to a hole in the belly. "A bit too low, but it made a nasty wound that would have killed the beast eventually."

"I'm so ashamed of missing it with my second barrel, sir," said the subaltern. "But for Miss Benson I'd have been a gone coon."

"Yes, it certainly looked exciting enough from our side of the *nullah*," said the Colonel, smiling; "so what must it have been like from where you were? Well, anyhow it's your tiger."

"Oh, nonsense, sir; it's Miss Benson's. I ought to be kicked for being such a muff."

"Jungle law, Mr. Wargrave," said the girl, laughing "You hit it first, so it's your beast."

"You needn't be ashamed of missing it," added the Colonel. "A charging tiger coming full speed at you is not an easy mark. No; the skin is yours; and Muriel has so many that she can spare it."

"Well, Miss Benson, I accept it as a gift from you; but I won't acknowledge that I have earned it," said the subaltern.

"Now, we'd better pad it and see about getting back," said Dermot, looking at his watch.

The other elephants had now found their way up the bank and joined Badshah and his companion. When their *mahouts* heard from Gul Dad the story of the tiger's death they exclaimed in amazement and admiration:

"*Ahré, Chai!* (Oh, brother!) Truly the missie-*baba* is a wonder. She will be the death of many tigers, indeed," they said.

Then each in turn brought his elephant up to the prostrate animal and made her smell and strike it with her trunk in order to inspire her with contempt for tigers. Colonel Dermot measured it with a tape and found it to be nine feet six inches from nose to tip of tail. It was a young, fully-grown male in splendid condition. Then came the troublesome business of "padding" it, that is, hoisting it on to the pad of one of the elephants to bring it back to the bungalow to be skinned. It was not an easy matter. For the tiger weighed nearly three hundred and fifty pounds; and to raise the limp carcass, which sagged like a feather bed at every spot where there was not a man to support it, was a difficult task. But it was achieved at last; and with the tiger roped firmly on a pad the elephants started back in single file.

As they went over the plain in the burning sun Wargrave looked back to where the striped body was borne along with stiff, dangling legs.

"By Jove, it's been great, Miss Benson," he exclaimed. "Some people say tiger shooting's not exciting. They ought to have been with us to-day. I am lucky to have got a bison already and now to have seen this. With luck I'll be having a shot at an elephant next."

The girl replied in a serious tone:

"Don't say that to Colonel Dermot. Elephants are his especial friends. Besides, you are only allowed to shoot rogues; and since he's been here there have been none in these jungles which formerly swarmed with them. There's no doubt that he has a wonderful, uncanny control over even wild elephants. Do you know that once a rajah tried to have him killed in his palace by a mad tusker, which had just slaughtered several men, and the moment the brute got face to face with him it was cowed and obeyed him like a dog?"

"Good gracious, is that so?"

"Yes, I could tell you even more extraordinary things about his power over elephants; but some day when you're in the jungle with him you may see it for yourself. Oh, isn't it hot? I do wish we were home."

Arrived at the *dák* bungalow the tiger's carcass was lowered to the ground and given over to the knives of the flayers summoned from the *bazaar* of Madpur Duar a mile away. As soon as the news was known in the small town crowds of Hindu women streamed to the bungalow compound, where with their *saris* (shawls) pulled modestly across their brown faces by rounded arms tinkling with glass bangles they squatted on the ground and waited patiently until the skin was drawn clear off the raw red carcass. Then they crowded around a couple of the older *mahouts* who, first cutting off all the firm white fat of the well-fed cattle thief to be melted down for oil (esteemed to be a sovereign remedy for rheumatism), hacked the flesh into chunks which they threw into the eager hands of the women. These took the meat home to cook for their husbands to eat to instil into them the spirit and vigour of a tiger. The skin, spread out and pegged to the ground, was covered with wood ashes and left to dry. Little of the animal was left but the bones, to the disappointment of the wheeling, whistling kites waiting on soaring wings in the sky above.

After tea the two officers took their leave with many expressions of gratitude from the younger man to the girl for her kindness in arranging the beat for him. Hours afterwards, as they halted in the forest for a rest in the middle of the night, Colonel Dermot said:

"You told me once that you'd like a job like mine, Wargrave. Would you care for frontier political work here?"

"I'd love it, sir," exclaimed the subaltern enthusiastically. "Would it be possible to get it?"

"Well, I've been thinking for some time of applying to the Government of India for an assistant political officer who would help me and take over if I went on leave, but I'd want to train my own man and not merely accept any youngster who was pitchforked into the Department just because he had a father or an uncle with

a pull at Simla. Now, if you like I'll apply for you, on condition that you'll work at Bhutanese and the frontier dialects. I'll teach them to you."

"I'd like nothing better, sir. I'm not bad at languages."

"Yes, I've noticed that your Hindustani is very good and idiomatic. I've been watching you and I like your manner with natives. One must be sympathetic, kind and just, but also firm with them. Well, I'll try you. The rainy season will be on us very soon, and then all outdoor work and sport will be impossible. One dare not go into the jungle—it's too full of malaria and blackwater fever. The planters and Forest Officers have to cage themselves in wire gauze 'mosquito houses.' During the rains you'll have plenty of time to work at the languages."

"Thank you very much, Colonel. I promise you I'll go at them hard."

"You'll have a fellow-student for part of the time. Miss Benson's coming to stay with us during the Monsoons for a bit; and she has asked me to teach her Bhutanese, too. She wants it, as she has to deal with Bhuttia woodcutters and hill folk generally. Well, that's fixed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, sir," answered the subaltern, as he lay down on the pad and stared at the stars. He was overjoyed at Colonel Dermot's offer, and as he dropped asleep it was with a thrill of pleasure that he realised he would see something more of the girl who had been his companion that day.

CHAPTER X

A POLITICAL OFFICER IN THE MAKING

The lightning spattered the heavens and tore the black sky into a thousand fragments, the thunder crashed in appalling peals of terrifying sound which echoed again and again from the invisible mountains. The rain fell in ropes of water that sent the brown, foam-flecked torrents surging full-fed down every gully and ravine in the mist-wrapped hills. The single, steep road of Ranga Duar was now the rocky bed of a racing flood inches deep that swirled and raged round Wargrave's high rubber boots as he waded up towards the Mess clad in an oilskin coat, off which the rain splashed. He was glad to arrive at the garden gate, turn in through it, climb the verandah steps, and reach his door. Here he flung aside his coat and kicked off the heavy boots.

Entering his room he pulled on his slippers, filled his pipe with tobacco from a lime-dried bottle and sat down at his one rickety table at the window. Then he took out of his pocket and laid before him a manuscript book filled with notes on the frontier dialects taken at the lesson with Colonel Dermot from which he had just come. He opened it mechanically but did not even glance at it. His thoughts were elsewhere.

Months had elapsed since the day on which he had seen his first tiger killed. Not long afterwards the Rains had come to put a stop to descents into the jungle. But his interest in the preparation for his new work compensated him for the imprisonment within walls by the terrible tropical storms and the never-ceasing downpour. He had flung himself enthusiastically into the study of the frontier languages, of which Colonel Dermot proved to be a painstaking and able teacher. Miss Benson, who had returned to Ranga Duar and remained there longer than she had originally intended, owing to fever contracted in the jungle, joined him in these studies and astonished her fellow-pupil by her aptitude and quickness of apprehension. But her presence proved disastrous to him. Thrown constantly together as they were, spending hours every day side by side, the subaltern realised to his dismay that he was falling in love with the girl.

It would have been strange had it been otherwise so pretty and attractive was she. Often Mrs. Dermot, peeping into her husband's office and seeing the dark and the fair head bent close together over a book, smiled to herself, well-pleased at the thought of her favourites being mutually attracted. To her husband the thought never occurred. Men are very dull in these matters.

But to Wargrave the realisation of the truth was unbearable. He was pledged to another woman, whose heart he had won even if unconsciously, who was willing for love of him to give up everything and face the world's censure and scorn. He could not play her false. He had given her his word. He could not now be disloyal to her without utterly wrecking all her chances of happiness in life and dishonouring himself for ever in his own eyes. Muriel Benson had left the station ten days ago to rejoin her father; and Wargrave had instantly felt that he dared not see her again until he was irrevocably and openly bound to Violet. So he had written to her on the morrow of the girl's departure and, without giving her the real reason for his action, begged her to come to him at once, enclosing, as he was now able to do, a cheque for her expenses. It seemed to him that only by her presence could he be saved from being a traitor to his word.

As soon as he had sent the letter he went to his Commanding Officer and told him everything. It was not until he was actually explaining his conduct that he realised that he should have obtained his permission before inviting Violet to come, for Major Hunt, as Commandant of the Station, had the power to forbid her residing in or even entering it.

The senior officer listened in silence. When the subaltern had finished he said:

"I've known about this matter since you came, Wargrave. Your Colonel wrote me—as your new C.O.—what I considered an unnecessary and unfair letter giving me the reason of your being sent here. But Hepburn, whom I know slightly, discovered I was here and also wrote explaining matters more fully and, I think, more

justly."

The subaltern looked at him in surprise; but his face brightened at the knowledge of his former commander's kindness.

"Now, Wargrave, we've got on very well together so far, you and I. I have always been satisfied with your work, and was glad to help you by agreeing to Colonel Dermot's application for you. I believe that you will make a good political officer, otherwise I wouldn't have done so—even though I'm your debtor for saving me from that snake—."

"Oh, Major, that was nothing," broke in the subaltern. "Anyone would have done it."

"Yes, I know. But it happened that you were the anyone. Now, I'm going to talk to you as your friend and not as your commanding officer. Frankly, I am very sorry for what you have just told me. I was hoping that Time and separation were curing you—and the lady—of your folly. Believe me, only unhappiness and misery can come to you both from it."

"Perhaps so, sir; but I'm bound in honour."

The older man shook his head sadly.

"Is honour the word for it? I'll make a confession to you, Wargrave. You consider me a bachelor. Well, I'm not married now; but I was. When I was a young subaltern I was thrown much with a married woman older than myself. I was flattered that she should take any notice of me, for she was handsome and popular with men, while I was a shy, awkward boy. She said she was 'being a mother' to me—you know what a married woman 'mothering' boys leads to in India. She used to tell me how misunderstood she was, neglected, mated to a clown and all that." (Frank grew red at certain memories.) "Women have a regular formula when they're looking for sympathy they've no right to. I pitied her. I felt that her husband ought to be shot. Looking back now I see that he was just the ordinary, easy-going, indifferent individual that most husbands become; but then I deemed him a tyrant and a brute. Well, I ran away with her."

He paused and passed his hand wearily across his brow.

"There was the usual scandal, divorce, damages and costs that plunged me into debt I'm not out of yet. We married. In a year we were heartily sick of each other—hated, is nearer the truth. She consoled herself with other men. I protested, we quarrelled again and again. At last we agreed to separate; and I insisted on her going to England and staying there. I couldn't trust her in India. Living in lodgings and Bayswater boarding-houses wasn't amusing—she got bored, but I wouldn't have her back. She took to drinking and ran up debts that I had to pay. Then—and I selfishly felt glad, but it was a happy release for both—she died. Drank herself to death. Now you know why I'd be sorry that another man should follow the path I trod."

He was silent. Wargrave felt an intense sympathy for this quiet, kindly man whose life had been a tragedy. He had guessed from the first that his senior officer had some ever-present grief weighing on his soul. He would have given much to be able to utter words of consolation, but he did not know what to say.

Major Hunt spoke again.

"You must dree your own weird, Wargrave. If the lady wishes to come here—well, I shall not prevent her; but the General, when he knows of it, will not permit her to remain. But you have to deal with Colonel Dermot. You had better tell him. You might go now."

Without a word the subaltern left the bungalow. He went straight to the Political Officer and repeated his story. Colonel Dermot did not interrupt him, but, when he had finished, said:

"I have no right and no wish to interfere with your private life, Wargrave, nor to offer you advice as to how to lead it. Your work is all that I can claim to criticise. Of course I see, with Major Hunt, the difficulty that will arise over the lady's remaining in this small station, where her presence must become known to the Staff. If you are both resolved on taking the irretrievable step it would be wiser to defer it until you were elsewhere. I don't offer to blame either of you; for I don't know enough to judge."

"Well, sir, I—perhaps you won't want me under you—and Mrs. Dermot—you mightn't wish me to—," stammered the subaltern, standing miserably before him.

"Oh, yes; you'll make a good political officer none the less," said the Colonel smiling. "And you need not be afraid of my wife turning away from you with horror. If she can be a friend to the lady she will. As for you, well, you saved our children, Wargrave"—he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder—"you are our friend for life. I shall not repeat your story to my wife. Perhaps some day you may like to tell it to her yourself."

Wargrave tried to thank him gratefully, but failed, and, picking up his hat, went out into the rain.

That was days ago; and no answer had come from Violet, so that the subaltern lived in a state of strain and anxious expectation. Indeed, some weeks had passed since her last letter, as usual an unhappy one; and, sitting staring out into the grey world of falling rain turned to flame every minute by the vivid lightning, he racked his brains to guess the reason of her silence.

A jangle of bells sounded through the storm. Glancing out Wargrave saw a curiously grotesque figure climb the verandah steps from the garden and stand shaking itself while the water poured from it. It was an almost naked man, squat and sturdy-limbed, with glistening wet brown skin, an oilskin-covered package on his back, a short spear hung with bells in his hand. It was the postman. For a miserable pittance he jogged up and down the mountains in fine weather or foul, carrying His Majesty's Mails, passing fearlessly through the jungle in peril of wild beats, his ridiculous weapon, the bells of which were supposed to frighten tigers, his only protection.

Wargrave opened the door and went out to him. The man grinned, unslung and opened his parcel. From it he took out a bundle of letters, handed them to the subaltern, and went on to knock at Burke's door with his correspondence. Frank returned to his room with the mail which contained the official letters for the detachment, of which he was still acting as adjutant. He threw them aside when he saw an envelope with Violet's handwriting on it. He tore it open eagerly.

To his surprise the letter was addressed from a hotel in Poona, the large and gay military and civil station in the West of India, a few hours' rail journey inland from Bombay. He skimmed through it rapidly.

She wrote that, utterly weary of the dullness of Rohar, she had gone to Poona to spend part of the festive and fashionable season there and was now revelling in the many dances, dinners, theatricals and other gaieties of the lively station. Everybody was very kind to her, especially the men. She was invited to the private entertainments at Government House, and His Excellency the Governor always danced with her. Her programme was crowded at every ball; and she had been asked to take one of the leading parts in "The Country Girl" to be produced by the Amateur Dramatic Society. She had two excellent ponies with which to hunt and to join in *gymkhanas*. She wished Frank could be with her; but probably he was enjoying himself more with his wild beasts and Tiger Girls. As to his proposal that she should go to him at once in that little station he must have been mad when he made it. For had they not discussed the matter thoroughly and decided that they must wait? She presumed that he had not suddenly come into a fortune. From his description of Ranga Duar and its inhabitants it could be no place for her under the circumstances. No; there was nothing to do but to wait. Besides, it was so very jolly now at Poona. Frank must not be an impatient boy; and she sent him all her love. His cheque she had torn up.

The subaltern whistled, read the letter again very carefully, folded and put it away. What had come to Violet? This was so unlike her. Still, he had to confess to himself that he was relieved at not yet having to cross the Rubicon. Perhaps she was right; it might be better to wait. He was glad to know that for a time at least she was away from the uncongenial surroundings of Rohar and again enjoying life. He went through the official correspondence, shoved it in his pocket, put on coat and boots and splashed through the water down the road to the Commanding Officer's bungalow. When they had discussed the official letters and drafted answers to them Wargrave told Major Hunt of the gist of Violet's reply. The senior officer nodded, but said nothing about it and went on to talk of other matters.

Next day the subaltern informed Colonel Dermot, who made no comment and did not refer to the matter again. His wife, ignorant of Mrs. Norton's existence, delighted to talk to Wargrave about Muriel, a topic always interesting to him, dangerous though it was to his peace of mind. His thoughts were constantly with the girl, and he sought eagerly for news of her when occasional letters came to Mrs. Dermot from her, touring their wide forest district with her father.

Frank had never been able to fathom Burke's feelings towards her. The Irishman's manner to her in public was always light-hearted and cheerfully friendly; but the subaltern suspected that it concealed a deeper, warmer feeling. He betrayed no jealousy of Frank's constant companionship with her when she took part in his studies; and his friendly regard for his younger brother officer never altered. On her side the girl showed openly that she shared the universal liking that the kindly, pleasant-natured doctor inspired.

The weary months of the rainy season dragged by; but the subaltern spent them to advantage under Colonel Dermot's tuition and, possessing the knack of readily acquiring foreign languages, made rapid progress with Bhutanese, Tibetan and the frontier dialects, his good ear for music helping him greatly in getting the correct accent. Another accomplishment of his, a talent for acting, was of service; for the Political Officer wished him to be capable of penetrating into Bhutan in disguise if need be. So he taught him how to be a merchant, peasant, nobleman's retainer or a lama Red or Yellow, of the country—but always a man of Northern Bhutan and the Tibetan borderland, for his height and blue eyes were not unusual there, though seldom or never seen in the south. Frank was carefully instructed in the appropriate manners, customs and expressions of each part that he played, how to eat and behave in company, how to walk, sit and sleep. But he specialised as a lama, for in that character he would meet with the least interference in the priest-ridden country. He was taught the Buddhist chants and how to drone them, how to carry his praying-wheel and finger a rosary to the murmured "*Om mani padmi hung*" of the Tibetans, and—for he was something of an artist—how to paint the Buddhist pictorial Wheel of Life, the *Sid-pa-i Khor-lô* or Cycle of Existence that the gentle Gautama, the Buddha, himself first drew and that hangs in the vestibule of every lamasery to teach priest and layman the leading law of their religion, Re-birth.

Colonel Dermot was helped in his instruction of his pupil by his chief spy and confidential messenger, an ex-monk from a great monastery in Punaka, the capital of Bhutan. This man, Tashi, before he wearied of the cloistered life and fled to India, had been always one of the principal actors in the great miracle plays and Devil Dances of his lamasery, for he was gifted with considerable histrionic talent. He delighted in teaching Wargrave to play his various *rôles*, for he found the subaltern an apt pupil.

As soon as the rains ended the Political Officer began to take his disciple with him on his tours and patrols along the frontier. Alone they roamed on Badshah among the mountains on which the border ran in a confusedly irregular line. Sometimes with or without Tashi they crossed into Bhutan in disguise and wandered among the steep, forest-clad hills and deep, unhealthy valleys seamed with rivers prone to sudden floods that rose in a few hours thirty or forty feet. Wargrave marvelled at the engineering skill of the inhabitants who with rude and imperfect appliances had thrown cantilever bridges over the deep gorges of this mountainous southern zone. Among the dull-witted peasants in the villages he practised the parts that he had learned, speaking little at first and taking care to mingle Tibetan and Chinese words with the language of Bhutan to keep up the fable of his northern birth. He soon promised to be in time as skilful in disguise as his tutor.

Colonel Dermot was anxious to investigate the activities of the Chinese *Amban*, reputed to reach their

height in the territory just across the Indian border ruled by the Tuna Penlop and lying west of the Black Mountain range that divides Bhutan. This great feudal chieftain was reputed to be completely under the influence of Yuan Shi Hung and both anti-British and disloyal to his overlord the Maharajah or Tongsa Penlop. The close watch that his myrmidons kept on the stretch of frontier between his territories and India prevented Dermot from learning what went on behind the screen; for the spies of the Political Officer's Secret Service could not penetrate it and bring back news.

Wargrave was present when the last sturdy-limbed Bhuttia emissary reported his failure to cross the line. As the man withdrew the Colonel turned to Frank and said:

"We'll go ourselves. I wanted to avoid it if possible; for it wouldn't do for me to be caught. Not only because it would cause political complications, for I'm not supposed to trespass on Bhutanese territory uninvited, but also because fatal accidents might happen to us if Yuan Shi Hung and his friends get hold of us. I'm not anxious to die yet. Be ready to start at midnight."

"Do you really think we'll be able to get through, sir?" queried the subaltern. "How shall we do it?"

"Wait and see," was the curt reply.

Before the sun rose next day Badshah was deep in the forest, bearing the two officers and Tashi on his back. He moved rapidly along animal paths through the jungle in a direction parallel with the mountains. Jungle fowl whirred up from under his feet, deer crashed away through the undergrowth as he passed; but never a shot was fired at them, though rifles and guns were in the riders' hands. Little brown monkeys peeped down at them from the tree-tops or leapt away along the air lanes among the leafy branches, swinging by hand or foot, springing across the voids, the babies clutching fast to their mothers' bodies in the dizzy flights.

In the afternoon a distant crashing, which told of trees falling before the pressure of great heads and the weight of huge bodies, made Wargrave ask:

"Wild elephants, sir?"

Dermot nodded.

"Sounds as if they were right in our path. Shall we see them?"

"Yes. Don't touch that!" said the Colonel sharply; for the excited subaltern, who had never yet seen a wild herd, was reaching for his rifle. Wargrave obeyed, remembering Miss Benson's remark on the Political Officer's love of the great animals.

Soon unmistakable signs showed that they were on the track of a herd; and presently Frank caught sight of a slate-coloured body in the undergrowth, then another and another. As he was wondering how the animals would receive them Badshah emerged on an open glade filled with elephants of all ages and sizes, from newborn woolly calves a bare three feet at the shoulder to splendid tuskers nine feet ten inches in height and lean, ragged-eared old animals a hundred and thirty years of age. All were regarding the newcomer and their trunks were raised to point towards him, while from their throats came a low purring sound, which appeared to the subaltern to have more of pleasure than menace in it. Instead of seeming hostile or alarmed they behaved as though they had expected and were welcoming their domesticated brother. This was so evident that Frank felt no fear even when they closed in on Badshah and touched him with their trunks.

Dermot, smiling at his companion's amazement, said:

"This is Badshah's old herd, Wargrave, and they're used to him and me. I've come in search of them, for it is by their aid that I propose to enter Bhutan."

And the subaltern was still more surprised when the animals, which numbered over a hundred, fell in behind Badshah—cows with calves leading, tuskers in rear—and followed him submissively in single file as he headed for the mountains. When night fell they were climbing above the foot-hills under the vivid tropic stars.

A couple of hours before midnight the leader halted, and the line behind him scattered to feed on the bamboos and the luscious grasses, though the younger calves nuzzled their mothers' breasts. Badshah sank to his knees to allow his passengers to dismount and relieve him of his pad. The three men ate and then wrapped themselves in their blankets, for it was very cold high up in the mountains, and stretched themselves to sleep, as the great animals around them ceased to feed and rested. Badshah lowered himself cautiously to the ground and lay down near his men.

Before Wargrave lost consciousness he marvelled at Dermot's uncanny power over the huge beasts around them—a power that could make these shy mammoths thus subservient to his purposes. He began to understand why his companion was regarded as a demigod by the wild jungle-folk and hill-dwellers.

When at daybreak the herd moved on again, climbing ever higher in the mountains, the three men lay flat on Badshah's back and covered themselves with their grey blankets lest vigilant watchers on the peaks around might espy them. Thus do the *mahouts* of the *koonkies*, or trained female elephants employed in hunting and snaring wild tuskers, conceal themselves during the chase.

But darkness shielded them effectively when the herd swept at length through a rocky pass on the frontier-line between India and Bhutan, and with cries of fear and dismay armed men seated around watch-fires fled in panic before the earth-shaking host. The screen was penetrated.

Daylight found them on the banks of a broad, swift-flowing river in a valley between the range of mountains through which they had passed and a line of still more formidable and snow-clad peaks. The elephants swam the wide and rushing water, for of all land animals their kind are the best swimmers. The tiniest babies were

supported by the trunks of their mothers, on to whose backs older calves climbed and were thus carried across. Without stopping the herd plunged into the awful passes of the next range, of which they were not clear until the evening of the following day. Then they halted in dense forest.

Next morning Dermot took from the pockets of Badshah's pad the dresses and other things that they needed for their disguises, and instead of replacing the pad concealed it carefully. Then he said:

"We'll leave our escort here, Wargrave, and carry on by ourselves; for we are not far from inhabited and cultivated country, and indeed fairly near the *Jong* (castle) of our enemy the Penlop of Tuna."

The wild elephants were feeding all around, paying no heed to them. The Colonel turned to Badshah and pointing to the ground said one word:

"*Raho!* (Remain!)"

Then he continued to Wargrave:

"We'll find them, or they'll find us, whenever we return."

An hour later two elderly lamas in soiled yellow robes and horn-rimmed spectacles, followed by a lame coolie carrying their scanty possessions, emerged, rosary and praying-wheel in hand, from the forest into the cultivated country.

For some weeks they wandered unsuspected through the Tuna Penlop's dominions and even penetrated into his own *jong*, where they were entertained and their prayers solicited by his cut-throat retainers. They learned enough to realise that the *Amban* was endeavouring by the free supply of arms and military instructors to form here the nucleus of a trained force to be employed eventually against India, backed up by reinforcements of Chinese troops and contingents from other parts of Bhutan.

Their investigations completed they returned safely to the forest in which they had left the herd; and, much to Wargrave's relief, they had not been many hours camped on the spot where they had parted with them when Badshah and his wild companions appeared. The spies returned to India as they had come, unseen and unsuspected.

This excursion was but the first of many that Wargrave made with the Colonel and the herd; and he soon began to know almost every member of it and make friends, not only with the solemn but friendly little calves, but even with their less trusting mothers. He was now thoroughly at home in the jungle and no longer needed a tutor in sport. His one room in the Mess began to be overcrowded with trophies of his skill with the rifle. Other tiger-skins had joined the first; and, although he had not secured a second bison, several good heads of *sambhur*, *khakur* and *cheetul*, or spotted deer, hung on his whitewashed stone walls.

Thus with sport and work more fascinating than sport Wargrave found the months slipping by. From Raymond he learned that Violet had returned to Rohar before she wrote herself. When she did she seemed to be in a brighter and more affectionate, as well as calmer, mood than she had been before her visit to Poona. But gradually her letters became less and less frequent; and Frank began to wonder—with a little sense of guilty, shamed hope—if she were beginning to forget him.

Christmas came; and with its coming Ranga Duar woke again to life. Besides the Bensons and Carter, who now brought his wife, Mrs. Dermot's brother—a subaltern in an Indian cavalry regiment—and five planters, old friends of his from the district in which he had once been a planter himself, came to spend Christmas in the small station. Major Hunt's bungalow and the Mess took in the overflow from the Political Officer's house.

Brian and Eileen had the gayest, happiest time of their little lives. Presents were heaped on them. Muriel and Frank initiated them into all the delights of their first Christmas tree, and Burke introduced them to a real Punch and Judy Show. On Christmas Day Badshah, his neck encircled with a garland of flowers procured from the Plains, was led up solemnly by his seldom-seen *mahout* to present Colonel Dermot with a gilded lime and receive in return a present of silver rupees which passed into the possession of the said *mahout*. Then he was fed with dainties by the children; and Eileen insisted on being tossed aloft by the curving trunk, to the detriment of her starched party frock.

The weather was appropriate to the season, cold and bright, and although no snow fell so low down, it froze at night, so that the Europeans could indulge in the luxury—in India—of gathering around blazing wood fires after dinner.

All, young and old, thoroughly enjoyed this almost English-like Christmas—all except one. Burke's attentions to Muriel became more marked and more full of meaning than they had ever been before; and it was patent that he intended to put his fate to the touch during this visit of hers. He did so without success, it seemed; for before she left there was an evident sense of constraint between them and they tried to avoid sitting beside each other or being left alone together, even for a moment. Shortly after the departure of the visitors Burke contrived to effect an exchange to another station, to the regret of all in the little outpost, and he was replaced by a young Scots surgeon, named Macdonald, his opposite in every way.

CHAPTER XI

TRAGEDY

The annual Durbar for the reception of the Bhutan Envoy and the payment of the subsidy had come and gone again. The *Deb Zimpun*, who had not been accompanied by the Chinese *Amban* on this occasion, had departed; and of the few European visitors only Muriel Benson remained. Colonel Dermot had been called away to Simla, to confer with officials of the Foreign Department on matters of frontier policy. Major Hunt was ill with fever, leaving Wargrave, who was still nominally attached to the Military Police, in command of the detachment.

It was delicious torture to Frank to be in the same place again with Muriel, to see her from the parade ground or the Mess verandah playing in the garden with the children, to meet her every day and talk to her and yet be obliged to school his lips and keep them from uttering the words that trembled on them.

A few nights after the Durbar he dined with Mrs. Dermot and Muriel and was sitting on the verandah of the Political Officer's house with them after dinner. He was wearing white mess uniform. The evening was warm and very still, and whenever the conversation died away, no sound save the monotonous note of the nightjars or the sudden cry of a barking-deer, broke the silence since the echoes of the "Lights Out" bugle call had died away among the hills.

Wargrave looked at his watch.

"It's past eleven o'clock," he said. "I'd no idea it was so late. I ought to get up and say goodnight; but I'm so comfortable here, Mrs. Dermot."

His hostess smiled lazily at him but made no reply. Again a peaceful hush fell on them.

With startling suddenness it was broken. From the Fort four hundred yards away a rifle-shot rang out, rending the silence of the night and reverberating among the hills around. Wargrave sprang to his feet as shouts followed and a bugle shrilled out the soul-gripping "Alarm," the call that sends a thrill through every soldier's frame. For always it tells of disaster. Heard thus at night in barracks swift following on a shot it spoke of crime, of murder, the black murder of a comrade.

The two women had risen anxiously.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" they asked.

The subaltern spoke lightly to re-assure them.

"Nothing much, I expect. Some man on guard fooling with his rifle let it off by accident," he said quietly. "Excuse me. I'd better stroll across to the Fort and see."

But Mrs. Dermot stopped him.

"Wait a moment please, Mr. Wargrave," she said, running into the house. She returned immediately with her husband's big automatic pistol and handed it to him. In her left hand she held a smaller one. "Take this with you. It's loaded," she said.

Frank thanked her, said goodnight to both calmly, and walked down the garden path; but the anxious women heard him running swiftly across the parade ground.

"What is it, Noreen? What does it mean?" asked the girl nervously.

"A sepoy running amuck, I'm afraid," replied her friend. "He's shot someone—"

She swung round, pistol raised.

"*Kohn hai?* (Who's that?)" she called out.

A man had come noiselessly on to the shadowed end of the verandah.

"It is I, *mem-sahib*," answered Sher Afzul, her Punjaubi Mahomedan butler. He had been in her service for five years and was devoted to her and hers. He was carrying a rifle, for his master at his request had long ago given him arms to protect his *mem-sahib*. Before her marriage he had once fought almost to the death to defend her when her brother's bungalow had been attacked by rebels during a rising.

"It would be well to go into the house and put out the lights, *mem-sahib*," he said quietly in Hindustani. "There is danger to-night."

As he spoke he extinguished the lamp on the verandah and closed the doors of the house. A second armed servant came quietly on to the verandah and the butler melted into the darkness of the garden; but they heard him go to the gate as if to guard it.

"You had better go inside, Muriel," said Mrs. Dermot, but made no move to do so herself.

The girl did not appear to hear her. She was listening intently for any sound from the Fort. But silence had fallen on it.

"Muriel, won't you go into the house?" repeated her hostess.

"Eh? What? No, I couldn't. I must stay here," replied Miss Benson impatiently. In the black darkness the other woman could not see her; but she felt that the girl's every sense was alert and strained to the utmost. She moved to her and put her arm about her. Against it she could feel Muriel's heart beating violently.

Suddenly from the Fort came the noise of heavy blows and a crash, instantly followed by a shot and then fierce cries.

"Oh, my God! What is happening?" murmured the girl, her hand on her heart.

Presently there came the sound of running feet, and heavy boots clattered up the rocky road towards the Mess past the gate.

Then the butler's voice rang out in challenge:

"*Kohn jatha?* (Who goes there?)"

A panting voice answered:

"Wargrave Sahib *murgya*. Doctor Sahib *ko bulana ko jatha*"—(Wargrave Sahib is killed. I go to call the Doctor Sahib)—and the sepoy ran on in the darkness.

"O God! O God!" cried the girl, and tried to break from her friend's clasp. "Let me go! Let me go!"

"Where to?" asked Noreen, holding the frenzied girl with all her strength.

"To him. He's dead. Didn't you hear? He's dead. I must go to him."

She struggled madly and beat fiercely at the hands that held her.

"Let me go! Let me go! Oh, he's dead," she wailed. "Dead. And I loved him so. Oh, be merciful! Let me go to him!" and suddenly her strength gave way and she collapsed into Noreen's arms, weeping bitterly.

They heard the clattering steps meet others coming down the hill and a hurried conversation ensue. Noreen recognised one of the voices. Then both men came running down.

"It's the doctor," said Mrs. Dermot. "Come to the gate and we'll ask him what has happened."

"Mr. Macdonald! Mr. Macdonald!" she cried as the hurrying footsteps drew near.

"Who's that? Mrs. Dermot? For God's sake get into the house. There's a man running amuck. Wargrave's killed. I'm wanted"; and the doctor, taking no thought of danger to himself when there was need of his skill, ran on into the darkness.

"I must—I will go!" cried Muriel.

"Very well. Perhaps it's not true. We must know. We may be able to help," replied her friend.

And with a word to Sher Afzul to guard her babies from danger she seized Muriel's hand, and the two girls ran towards the Fort in the track that Wargrave had followed to his death, it seemed.

Pistol in hand Wargrave had raced across the parade ground. At the gate of the Fort he was challenged; and when he answered an Indian officer came out of the darkness to him.

"Sahib," he said hurriedly. "Havildar Mahommed Ashraf Khan has been shot in his bed in barracks. The sentry over the magazine is missing with his rifle."

Wargrave entered the Fort. Opposite the guard-room the detachment was falling in rapidly, the men carrying their rifles and running up from their barrack-rooms in various stages of undress. By the flickering light of a lantern held up for him a non-commissioned officer was calling the roll, and his voice rumbled along in monotonous tones. The guard were standing under arms.

"Put out that lamp!" cried the subaltern sharply. It would only serve to light up other marks for the invisible assassin if, like most men who run *amôk*, he meant to keep on killing until slain himself. "No; take it into the guard-room and shut the door."

In the darkness the silence was intense, broken only by the heavy breathing of the unseen men and the clattering of the feet of some late-comer. Suddenly there rang out through the night the most appalling sound that had ever assailed Wargrave's ears. It was as the cry of a lost soul in all the agony of the damned, an eerie, unearthly wail that froze the blood in the listeners' veins. In the invisible ranks men shuddered and clutched at their neighbours.

"*Khuda ke Nam men, kiya hai?* (In the Name of God, what is that?)" gasped the subaltern.

The Indian officer at his side answered in a low voice:

"It is Ashraf Khan crying out in pain, Sahib. He is not yet dead."

"*Subhedar* sahib, come with me," said Wargrave. "Let your *jemadar* (lieutenant) take the men one by one into the guard-room and examine the rifles to see if any have been fired. We don't know yet if the missing sentry did the deed."

The *Subhedar* (company commander) gave the order to his subordinate and followed Wargrave to the barrack-room in which the crime had been committed. The sight that met the subaltern's eyes was one that he was not easily to forget.

The high-roofed chamber was in darkness save at one end where a small lamp cast weird shadows on the walls and vaulting ceiling. At this end and under the flickering light a group of figures stood round a bed on which a man was writhing in agony. He was struggling in delirious frenzy to hurl himself to the stone floor, and was only held down by the united efforts of three men. From a bullet wound in his bared chest the life-blood welled with every movement of his tortured body. He had been shot in the back as he lay asleep. The lips covered with a bloody froth were drawn back tightly over the white teeth clenched in agony, and red foam lay on the black beard. Out of the sweat-bathed, ghastly face the eyes glared in frenzy. The features

were contorted with pain. Again and again the wild shrieks like the howl of a mad thing rang through the long room and out into the night.

With tear-filled eyes and heart torn with pity Wargrave looked down at him in silence. Ashraf Khan was one of his best men. "But where is the doctor sahib?" he asked the native officer suddenly.

The *subhedar* stared and shook his head. In the excitement no one had thought of sending for the medical officer. Wargrave turned to one of the men around the bed.

"Mahbub Khan, run hard to the Mess and call the doctor sahib. Here, stop!" He remembered that Macdonald did not possess a revolver. For all one knew he might encounter the murderer on his way. Wargrave thrust Mrs. Dermot's pistol into the sepoy's hand, saying, "Give the sahib that."

The man, who was barefoot, ran out of the chamber and went to his own barrack-room for his shoes, for the road was rocky and covered with sharp stones. The subaltern turned away with a sigh from the bedside of his poor comrade. He could do nothing now but avenge him. As he walked away from the group he trod on an empty cartridge case and picked it up. It had recently been fired. It told its tale; for it showed that the assassin had reloaded over his victim and intended that the killing should not end there. If he were the missing sentry then he had nine more cartridges left—nine human lives in his blood-stained hand. And as the subaltern crossed the verandah outside the barrack-room the *jemadar* met him and reported that all the rifles of the detachment had been examined and found clean except the missing weapon of the sentry, a young Pathan sepoy called Gul Mahommed. It was remembered that the dying *havildar* (sergeant) had reprimanded him hotly on the previous day for appearing on parade with accoutrements dirty. So little a cause was needed to send a man to his death!

The first thing to be done now was to hunt for the murderer. While he went free no one's life was safe. Wargrave shuddered at the thought of danger coming to Muriel or her friend, and he hoped that they were safely shut in their house. It was a difficult problem to know where to begin the search. The Fort was full of hiding-places, especially at night. And already the assassin might have escaped over the low wall surrounding it. As Wargrave stood perplexed another Indian officer ran up, accompanied by two men with rifles.

"Sahib! Sahib!" he whispered excitedly. "The murderer is in my room, the one next that in which Ashraf Kahn was shot. I left the door wide open when I ran out. It is now shut and bolted from the inside and someone is moving about in it."

The subaltern went along the verandah to the door and tried it. It was firmly fastened.

"Here, sahib!" cried a sepoy who ran up with a comrade carrying a heavy log.

"*Shahbash!* (Well done!) Break in the door," said Wargrave.

Other men, who had come up, seized the long log and dashed it violently against the door. The bolt held, but the frail hinges gave way and the door fell in.

"Stand back!" cried Wargrave.

It seemed certain death to enter the room in which a murderer lurked in darkness, armed with a rifle and fixed bayonet and resolved to sell his life dearly. But the subaltern did not hesitate. He was the only sahib there and of course it was his duty to go in. He could not ask his men to risk a danger that he shirked himself. That is not the officer's way, whose motto must ever be "Follow where I lead."

Wargrave sprang into the room unarmed. He was outlined against the faint light outside. A spurt of flame lit the darkness; and the subaltern, as he tripped over the raised threshold, felt that he was shot. He staggered on. A rifle lunged forward and the bayonet stabbed him in the side; but with a desperate effort he closed with his unseen assailant and grappled fiercely with him. Struggling to overpower the assassin before his ebbing strength left him he fought madly. The Indian officers and sepoy blocking up the doorway could see nothing; but they could hear the choking gasps, the panting breaths, the muttered curses and the stamping feet of the combatants locked in the death-grapple. They could not interfere, they dared not fire. In impotent fury they shouted:

"Bring lamps! Bring lamps!"

Then, groaning in their powerlessness to aid their beloved officer, they listened, as a light danced over the stones from a lantern in the hand of a running sepoy. The moment it came and lit up the scene they rushed on the murderer wrestling fiercely with Wargrave and dragged him off as the subaltern collapsed and fell to the ground. The glare of the lantern shone on his white face.

"The sahib is dead!" cried a sepoy, and sprang at the murderer who was struggling in the grip of the two powerfully-built Indian officers. Others followed him, and his captors had to fight hard and use all their authority to keep the prisoner from being killed by the bare hands of his maddened comrades. Only the arrival of the armed men of the guard saved him.

Frenzied with grief the sepoy bent over their officer lying motionless and apparently dead on the stone floor. They loved him. Many of them wept openly and unashamed. The *subhedar* knelt beside him and opened his shirt. The blood had soaked through the white mess-jacket that Wargrave wore.

The native officer looked up into the ring of brown faces bent over him. Suddenly he cried angrily:

"Mahbub Khan, why hast thou not gone for the doctor sahib as thou wert told, O Son of an Owl?"

The face staring in horror between the heads of the sepoy was hurriedly withdrawn, and Mahbub Khan, who had lingered to see the end of the tragedy, turned and pushed his way out of the crowd.

Macdonald found the subaltern lying to all appearances dead on the broken door out in the open, where they had gently carried him.

"Hold a light here," he cried as he knelt down beside the body.

By now a dozen lanterns or more lit up the scene. The doctor laid his ear against Wargrave's chest and held a polished cigarette case to his lips. Then he pulled back the shirt to examine his injuries.

"Oh, is he dead? Is he dead?" cried a trembling voice.

The doctor, looking up angrily, found Miss Benson and Mrs. Dermot standing over him. The sepoy had silently made way for them.

"You shouldn't be here, ladies," he said with justifiable annoyance. "This is no place for you. No; he's not dead. And I hope and think that he won't die."

"Oh, thank God!" cried the two women.

The sepoy's crowding round and hanging on the doctor's verdict could not understand the words but saw the look of joyous relief on their faces and guessed the truth. A wild, confused cheer went up to the stars.

"Mr. Macdonald," said Mrs. Dermot bending over him again. "Will you bring him to my house? There is no accommodation for him in your little hospital, you know; and he'd have no one to look after him in the Mess. I can nurse him."

The doctor straightened himself on his knee and looked down at the unconscious man.

"Yes, Mrs. Dermot, it's a good idea," he replied. "There is nowhere else where he'd get any attention. My hands are full with Major Hunt. He's taken a turn for the worse. His temperature went up dangerously high to-night; and he was almost delirious."

He stood up.

"I can't examine Wargrave properly here. He seems to be wounded in two places. But I hope it's not—I mean, I think he'll pull through. His pulse is getting stronger. I've put a first dressing on; and I think we can move him. Hi! stretcher *idher lao*. (Bring the stretcher here!)"

Suddenly Wargrave opened his eyes and looked up in the doctor's face.

"Is that you, Macdonald?" he asked dreamily. "Never mind me; I'm all right. Go to poor Ashraf Khan. If he must die, at least give him something to put him out of his misery. I can wait."

His voice trailed off, and he relapsed into unconsciousness. Ordering him to be carried away the doctor, after a word with the Indian officers, entered the barrack-room. It was useless. Ashraf Khan had just died.

The crowd fell back in a wide circle to let the two hospital orderlies bring up the stretcher for Wargrave and, as they did, left a group of men standing isolated in the centre. All of these were armed, except one whose hands were pinioned behind his back. His head was bare, his face bruised and bleeding, and his uniform nearly torn off his body. It needed no telling that he was the murderer.

Miss Benson walked up to him with fierce eyes.

"You dog!" she cried bitterly in Urdu.

The man who had smiled defiantly when the hands of his raging comrades were seeking to tear the life out of his body and had shouted out his crime in their faces, cowered before the anger in the flaming eyes of this frail girl. He shrank back between his guards. The sepoy's looking on howled like hungry wolves and, as Mrs. Dermot drew the girl back, made a rush for the murderer. The men of the guard faced them with levelled bayonets and ringed their prisoner round; and the sepoy's fell back sullenly.

Suddenly a shrill voice cried in Hindustani:

"Make way! Make way there! What has happened?"

The circle of men gapped and through the opening came Major Hunt, white-faced, wasted, shaking with fever and clad only in pyjamas and a great coat and with bare feet thrust into unlaced shoes. He staggered feebly in among them, revolver in hand.

"Heaven and Earth! Is Wargrave dead?" he cried and tottered towards the stretcher.

Suddenly the pistol dropped from his shaking hand and he fell forward on the stones before Macdonald could catch him.

"This is madness," muttered the doctor. "It may kill him. I hoped he wouldn't hear the alarm."

"Bring him to my house too," said Mrs. Dermot.

Another stretcher was fetched, the Major lifted tenderly into it, and the sad procession started, the sepoy's falling back silently to make way.

Major Hunt having been put to bed in one of the guest-rooms of the Political Officer's house, Macdonald, with the aid of the subaltern's servant, undressed Wargrave and examined his injuries, Noreen holding a basin for him while Muriel, shuddering, carried away the blood-tinged water and brought fresh. The shot-wound, though severe, was not necessarily dangerous, and the bullet had not lodged in him. The doctor was relieved to find that the bayonet had not penetrated deeply but had only glanced along a rib, tearing the

intercostal muscles and inflicting a long, jagged but superficial wound which bled freely. Indeed, the most serious matter was the great loss of blood, which had weakened the subaltern considerably.

Wargrave did not recover consciousness until early morning. When he opened his eyes they fell on Muriel sitting by his bed. He showed no surprise and the girl, scarce daring to believe that he was awake and knew her, did not venture to move. But as he continued to look steadily at her she gently laid her hand on his where it lay on the coverlet.

Then in a weak voice he said:

"Dearest, I mustn't love you, I mustn't. I'm bound in honour—bound to another woman and I must play the game. It's hard sometimes. But if I die I want you to know I loved you, only you."

Her heart seemed to stop suddenly, then beat again with redoubled force. Was he conscious? Was he speaking to her? Did he know what his words meant? She waited eagerly for him to continue; but his hand closed on hers in a weak grip and, shutting his eyes, he seemed to sleep. The girl sank on her knees beside the bed and stared at the pale face that in those few hours had grown so hollow and haggard. Did he really love her? The thought was joy—until the damning memory of his other words recurred to her and a sharp pain pierced her heart. There was another woman then—one who held his promise. Who was she? He could not be secretly married, surely; no, it must be that he was engaged to some other girl. But he loved her—her, Muriel. He wanted to say so, he had said so, though he strove to hold back, in honour bound. He would play the game—ah! that he would do at any cost to himself. For she knew his chivalrous nature. But he loved her—she was sure of it. Then the doubts came again—did he know what he was saying? Was it perhaps only delirium that spoke, the fever of his wounds? The girl suffered an agony worse than death as she knelt beside the bed, her forehead on his hand. And Noreen, entering softly an hour later, found her still crouched there, weeping bitterly but silently.

Shortly after sunrise Macdonald entered the house, wan and haggard, for he had not been to bed all night. Besides the hours that he had spent with his patients he had been busy in the Fort all night. He had to make an autopsy of the dead man, and, as the only officer available, investigate the crime, examine the witnesses and the prisoner who calmly confessed his guilt, and telegraph the news of the occurrences to Regimental, Divisional and Army Headquarters. He found Major Hunt sleeping peacefully; but Wargrave woke as he tiptoed into the room and looked up at him, at first not seeing the woman. He was fully conscious and asked eagerly for an account of what had happened. Noreen and Muriel shuddered at the delight with which he heard of the murderer's capture; for they were too tender-hearted to understand his passionate desire to avenge the cruel slaying of one of his men. When he turned away from Macdonald and saw Muriel his eyes shone eagerly for a moment, then seemed to dull as memory returned to him. He begged Mrs. Dermot to forgive him for upsetting her domestic arrangements by his intrusion into the house.

Later in the morning Noreen was sitting alone with him, having sent Muriel to lie down for a couple of hours. She had not been to bed herself, but after a bath and a change of clothing had given her children their breakfast and bidden them make no noise, because their beloved "Fwankie" was lying ill in the house. Yet she could not forbear to smile when she saw the portentous gravity with which Eileen tiptoed out into the garden to tell Badshah the news and order him to be very quiet.

Now, looking fresh and bright, she sat beside Wargrave's bed. Since the doctor had left him he had lain thinking. He felt that Violet must be informed at once that he had been hurt but was in no danger, lest she might learn of the occurrence through another source and believe him to be worse than he really was. As he looked at Mrs. Dermot the desire to ask her instead of Macdonald if she would be the one to communicate with Mrs. Norton grew overwhelming, and he felt that he wanted to confide to her the whole story, sure that she would understand. And she could tell Muriel—for he had been quite conscious when he had spoken to the girl in the morning. It was only right that she should know the truth, but he shrank from telling it to her himself.

So he opened his heart to Noreen; and the understanding little woman listened sympathisingly and made no comment, and undertook to explain the situation to Muriel. So, an hour or two later, when Macdonald was again with the subaltern, she went to her friend's room and told her the whole story.

The girl's first feeling was anger at the thought of Frank making love to a married woman.

"Seems to me it's the married woman who made it to him, from what I can gather," said Noreen, a little annoyed with Muriel for her way of receiving the story. "He did not say so, but it was easy to guess the truth. Now, my dear, don't be absurd. Men are not angels; and if a pretty woman flings herself at the head of one of them it's hard for him to keep her at arm's length. And you've seen yourself in Darjeeling how some of them, the married ones especially, do chase them." Her eyes grew hard as she continued, "I remember how Kevin once was——." Then she stopped.

"But Frank! How could he? Oh, how could he? And he loved her," sobbed the girl.

"Don't be silly, Muriel. I tell you I don't believe he ever did. He loves you now."

"Oh, do you think he does? What am I to do?"

"Nothing. Merely go along as you've been doing. Just be friendly. And don't be hard on him. He's had a bad time. I've always felt that there was something troubling him. Now I know; and I'm not going to let him ruin himself and throw away his happiness for a woman who's not worth it. He's the nicest, cleanest-minded man I've known after Kevin and my brother. He saved my babies, and for that I'd do anything for him. I feel almost as if he were one of my children; and I'll stand by him if you won't."

"Oh, but I will, I will," cried the girl. "But how can I help him?"

"As I said, by acting as if nothing had happened and just keeping on being friends. It oughtn't to be hard. See how he's suffering and think how brave he's been. Remember, he loves you; and you do care for him, don't you? I've an idea that he hopes that this woman is tiring of him and may set him free. Of course he didn't say as much, but——." She nodded sagely. Her intuition had told her more of his feelings in a minute than Frank had dared to acknowledge to himself in many months. "Anything I can do to help to bring that about I will."

The days went by; and Wargrave, aided by his clean living, the devoted nursing that he received, and the cool, healthy mountain air, began to mend. Major Hunt had recovered and returned to duty, relieving the officer sent from Headquarters to command during his illness. Colonel Dermot had come back from Simla with Frank's appointment to the Political Department as his assistant in his pocket. The murdered man had long ago been laid to rest by his comrades; but his slayer still sat fettered in the one cell of the Fort awaiting the assembling of the General Court Martial for his trial, and seeing from his barred window the even routine of the life that had been his for three years still going on, but with no place in it for him.

The period of Wargrave's convalescence was a very happy time for him. Muriel had remained a whole month after the eventful night; for Mrs. Dermot declared that, with the care of her house and children, she had no time to nurse the subaltern, and the girl must stay to do it while he was in any danger. So she lingered in the station to do him willing service, wait on him, chat or read to him, give him her arm when he was first allowed to leave his room, and did it all with the bright, cheerful kindness of a friend, no more. She never alluded to his words to her; but her patient somehow guessed that she had not been angered by the revelation of the state of his feelings towards her. And from the tenderness of her manner to him, the unconscious jealousy that she displayed if anyone but she did any service for him, he began to half hope, half fear, that she cared a little for him in return. But even as he thought this he realised that he must not allow her to do so.

At last the time came when she had to return to her father down in the vast forest; and bravely as she said goodbye to everyone—and most of all to Frank—the tears blinded her as she sat on the back of the elephant that bore her away and saw the hills close in and shut from her gaze the little station that held her heart.

Wargrave, however, was not left to pine in loneliness after her departure. All day long, if they were allowed, the children stayed with him, Eileen smothering him with caresses at regular intervals. They told him their doings, confided their dearest secrets to him and demanded stories. And "Fwankie" racked his brains to recall the fairy tales of his own childhood to repeat to the golden-haired mites perched on his bed and gazing at him in awed fascination, the girl uttering little shrieks at all the harrowing details of the wicked deeds of Giant Blunderbore and the cruel deceit of the wolf that devoured Red Ridinghood.

But the subaltern, had a grimmer visitor one day. The orders came at last for Gul Mahommed to be sent to Calcutta to stand his trial without waiting for Wargrave's recovery, the latter's evidence being taken on commission. The prisoner begged that he might be allowed to see the wounded officer before he left; and, Frank having consented, he was brought to the subaltern's bedroom when he was marched out of the Fort on the first stage of his journey to the gallows.

It was a dramatic scene. The stalwart young Pathan in uniform with his wrists handcuffed stood with all the bold bearing of his race by the bedside of the man that he had tried to kill, while two powerful sepoys armed with drawn bayonets hemmed him in, their hands on his shoulders.

The prisoner looked for a moment at the pale face of the wounded man, then his bold eyes suffused with tears as he said:

"*Huzoor!* (The Presence!) I am sorry. Had I known that night it was Your Honour I would not have lifted my rifle against you. The Sahib has always been good to me, to all of us. My enemy I slew, as we of the *Puktana* must do to all who insult us. That deed I do not regret."

Wargrave looked up sorrowfully at the splendidly-built young fellow—barely twenty-one—who had only done as he had been taught to do from his cradle. Among Pathans blood only can wash away the stain of an insult. The officer felt no anger against him for his own injuries and regretted that false notions of honour had led him to kill a comrade and were now sending him to a shameful death.

"I am sorry, Gul Mahommed, very sorry," he said. "You were always a good soldier, and now you must die."

The Pathan drew himself up with all the haughty pride of his race.

"I do not fear death, Sahib. They will give me the noose. But my father can spare me. He has five other sons to fight for him. If only the Sahib would forgive——."

Wargrave, much moved, held out his hand to him. The prisoner touched it with his manacled ones, then raised his fingers to his forehead.

"For your kindness, Sahib, *salaam!*"

Then he turned and walked proudly out of the room and Wargrave heard the tramp of heavy feet on the rocky road outside as the prisoner was marched away on the long trail to the gallows. Two months later Gul Mahommed was hanged in the courtyard of Alipur jail in Calcutta before detachments of all the regiments garrisoning the city.

The subaltern had long chafed at the restraint of an invalid before Macdonald took him off the sick-list and he was free to wander again with Colonel Dermot in the forest and among the mountains. Before the hot weather ended Raymond came to spend three weeks with him and he was initiated into the delights of sport in the great jungle.

When the long imprisonment of the rains came Wargrave began to suffer in health; for his wounds had sapped his strength more than he knew and Macdonald shook his head over him. Nor was he the only invalid; for little Brian grew pale and listless in the mists that enveloped the outpost constantly now, until finally the doctor decreed that his mother, much as she hated parting from her husband and her home, must take the children to Darjeeling. And he ordered the subaltern to go too. Frank did not repine, after Mrs. Dermot had casually intimated that Muriel Benson was arranging to join her at the railway station and accompany her on a long visit to Darjeeling.

It was Wargrave's first introduction to a hill-station; and everything was a delightful novelty to him, from the quaint little train that brought them up the seven thousand feet to their destination in the pretty town of villas, clubs and hotels in the mountains, to the glorious panorama of the Eternal Snows and Kinchinjunga's lofty crests that rise like fairyland into the sky at early dawn and under the brilliant Indian moon.

As Mrs. Dermot could not often leave her children it was Muriel, who knew Darjeeling well, who became his guide. Together every day they set out from their hotel, together they scaled the heights of Jalapahar or rode down to watch the polo on the flat hill-top of Lebung, a thousand feet below. Together they explored the fascinating bazaar and bought ghost-daggers and turquoises in the quaint little shops. Together they went on picnics down into the deep valleys on the way to Sikkim. They played tennis, rinked or danced together at the Amusement Club; and the ladies at the tea-tables in the great lounge smiled significantly and whispered to each other as the good-looking fair man and the pretty, dark-haired girl came in together when the light was fading on the mountains. Frank forgot cares. He ceased to brood unhappily—for it had come to that—on Violet, who, as her rare letters told him, had spent the Hot Weather in the Bombay hill-station of Mahableshwar and was now enjoying life during the Rains in gay Poona. She seldom wrote, and then but scrappily; and it seemed to him certain that she was forgetting him. And he felt ashamed at the joy which filled him at the thought. Was he always destined to be only the friend of the girl he loved, the lover of the woman to whom he wished to be a friend?

CHAPTER XII

"ROOTED IN DISHONOUR"

Government House, Ganeshkind, outside Poona, the residence of the Governor of Bombay during the Rains, was blazing with light and gay with the sound of music; for His Excellency was giving a fancy dress ball. Motors and carriages were still rolling up in a long line to the entrance where the gorgeously-clad Indian Cavalry soldiers of the Governor's Bodyguard—tall and stately back-bearded men in long scarlet tunics, white breeches and high black boots, their heads swathed in gaudy *loongies* (turbans) with tails streaming down their backs, holding steel-headed bamboo lances with red and white pennons in their white-gauntleted right hands—lined the approach. Inside, the splendid ballroom, ablaze with electric lights, was crowded with gaily-dressed figures in costumes beautiful or bizarre. The good-looking, middle-aged baron who was the King's representative in the Bombay Presidency was standing, dressed as Charles II., beside his plain but pleasant-featured wife in the garb of Amy Robsart, receiving the last of their guests, while already the dancing had begun.

Later in the evening a group of officers in varied costumes stood near one of the entrances criticising the dresses and the company.

"By George, that's a magnificent kit," said a Garrison Gunner just arrived on short leave from Bombay. "What's it supposed to be?"

"A Polish hussar, I think," replied a subaltern in Wellesley's Rifles.

"No, he's Murat, Napoleon's cavalry leader," said an Indian Lancer captain.

The wearer of the costume alluded to was passing them in a waltz. He was a young man in a splendid old-time hussar uniform, a scarlet dolman thick-laced with gold, a fur-trimmed slung pelisse, tight scarlet breeches embroidered down the front of the thighs in gold, and long red Russian leather boots with gold tassels. He was good-looking, but not in an English way, and the swarthinness of his complexion and a slight kink in his dark hair seemed to hint a trace of coloured blood. He was plainly Israelite in appearance; and the large nose with the unmistakable racial curved nostril would become bulbous with years, the firm cheeks flabby and the plump chin double.

"That dress cost some money, I'll bet," said the Gunner, cheaply attired as a Pierrot. "Just look at the gold lace. I say, he's got glass buttons."

"Glass be hanged, Fergie, they're diamonds. Real diamonds, honour bright, Murat wore diamonds. He was buckin' about them in the Club to-night," said a captain in a British infantry regiment quartered in Poona. "That's Rosenthal of the 2nd Hussars from Bangalore. Son of old Rosenthal the South African multi-millionaire. A Sheeny, of course."

"Who's the woman he's dancing with?" asked the Gunner. "Jolly good-looking she is."

"That's Mrs. Norton, wife of a Political somewhere in the Presidency. Rosenthal's always in her pocket since he met her at Mahableshwar."

As the dance ended the many couples streamed out of the ballroom and made for the *kala juggas*—the "black places," as the sitting-out spots are appropriately termed in India from the carefully-arranged lack of light in them. Mrs. Norton, looking very lovely as Mary, Queen of Scots, and her partner crossed the verandah and went out into the unlit garden in search of seats. The first few they stumbled on were already occupied, a fact that the darkness prevented them from realising until they almost sat down on the occupants. At last in a retired corner of the garden Rosenthal found a bench in a recess in the wall. As they seated themselves he blurted out roughly:

"I'm sick of all this, Vi. When do you mean to give me your answer? I'm damned if I'm going to hang on waiting much longer. I'm fed up with India and the Army. I mean to cut it all."

"Well, Harry, what do you want?" asked his companion, smiling in the darkness at his vehemence.

"Want? You. And you know it. I want to take you away from this rotten country. What's all this——," he waved his hand towards the lighted ballroom, "compared to Paris, Monte Carlo, Cairo, Ostend when the races are on? Let's go where life is worth living. This is stagnation."

"Oh, I find it amusing. You forget, we women have a better time in India than in Europe. There are too many of us there, so you don't value us."

"Better time. Oh, Law! What rot!" He laughed rudely. "You've never lived yet, dear. Look here, Vi. My father's one of the three richest men in South Africa; and all he's got will come to me some day. As it is he gives me an allowance bigger than those of all the other men in the regiment put together. I hate the Service and its idiotic discipline. I want to be free—to go where money counts. Damn India!"

"Doesn't it count everywhere?" she asked, fanning herself lazily. His rough, almost boorish, manner amused her always. She felt as if she were playing with a caged tiger. "Doesn't it here?"

"No; in the Army they seem to think more of some damned pauper who comes of a 'county family,' as they call it, than of a fellow like me who could buy up a dozen of them. I hate them all. And I mean to chuck it. But I want you to come with me, Vi. And, what's more, I mean to have you."

"But your father wishes you to stay in the Service. You told me so yourself. Will he like it if you leave—and will he continue your allowance?"

"Oh, I'll get round him. He's only got me. He's no one else to leave his money to. It'd be all right, Vi. Answer me. I mean to get you."

He grasped her wrist and tried to drag her towards him. She laughed and held him off.

"Take care, my dear boy. Darkness has ears. We're not alone in the garden, please remember. If you can't behave prettily I'm going back to the ballroom. Come, there's the music beginning again."

He tried to seize her in his arms, but she eluded his grasp with a dexterity that argued practice, and, rising, moved across the grass. He followed sulkily, dominated by her cool and careless indifference. When they reached the verandah one of the Government House aides-de-camp rushed up to her.

"Oh, Mrs. Norton, I've been hunting for you everywhere. I've a message from His Excellency. He wants you to come to his table at supper and save him from the Members of Council's awful wives."

"Oh, thanks, Captain Gardner, I'll come with pleasure," she answered, smiling prettily on him. An A.D.C. is always worth cultivating.

"I say, is it hopeless asking you for a dance now?" he said. "We poor devils of the Staff don't get a chance at the beginning of the evening, as we're so busy introducing people to Their Excellencies."

She looked at her programme.

"You can have this, if you like. It's only with some Indian Civilian in spectacles; and I hate the Heaven Born. They're such bores." She smiled and sailed off on the A.D.C.'s arm to the disgust of Rosenthal, calmly abandoned. But he could not help being amused when a round-faced young man dressed as an ancient Greek with gig-lamp spectacles rushed up to overtake Mrs. Norton before she entered the ballroom, and stopped in dismay to gaze after her open-mouthed and peer at his programme.

But the Hussar drove her back from Government House to Poona in his particularly luxurious Rolls-Royce with an English chauffeur and would hardly let her go when the car drew up before the door of the Munster Hotel where she was staying. Laughing, crushed and dishevelled, she broke from him and jumped out of the automobile, ran up the verandah steps and turned to wave to him as the chauffeur started off to take him to his quarters in the Club of Western India.

Still smiling Violet stumbled up the unlighted stairs and reached her sitting-room. When she turned up the lamp a letter lying on the table caught her eyes. She picked it up indifferently; but when she saw that it bore the handwriting of one of her Calcutta cousins and the Darjeeling postmark she tore it open eagerly and ran her eye rapidly down the pages. She came to the lines:

"I have seen the man you asked me about. He is always with a girl called Benson, rather a pretty little thing. She is popular with all the men; but Mr. Wargrave seems to be the favourite. They are staying at the same hotel; and everyone says they are engaged."

Then the writer went on to talk of family matters. But Violet read no more. Her eyes flamed with anger as she crumpled the paper up, flung it on the floor and stamped it under foot. She paced the room angrily, tearing the lace handkerchief she held in her hands to shreds. This, then, was Frank's loyalty to her, this was how he consoled himself for her absence. With this chit of a girl, with whom he probably laughed at her,

Violet's readiness to give up reputation, good fame, home, for him. She almost sobbed with jealous rage at the idea. She forgot her own infidelities and want of remembrance and felt herself to be a deceived and much-abused woman. But she would not bear such treatment meekly. Frank was hers; no other woman had a right to him, should ever have him. She was resolved on that. She stopped and, picking up the letter, smoothed it out and re-read it. Then, frowning, she passed into her bedroom and tore off her costume. Not for an instant did she sleep during the remainder of the night, but tossed on her bed, revolving plans of vengeance.

Next day she was seated in the train on her way to Darjeeling, a journey that would take days. She had telegraphed fruitlessly for a room at the Oriental Hotel at which she knew from his letters that Frank was staying; but she had secured one at the larger Eastern Palace where her Calcutta relatives were residing. Only on the second day of her journey did she wire to Wargrave, bidding him meet her on her arrival.

As the train carried her across India her heart was still filled with anger, jealousy and almost hate of the man whom she had favoured above all others and who spurned her, dared to be faithless to her, it seemed. She did not know how much love she had left for him; for his image had grown dim in the flight of time and among the distractions of gayer stations than Rohar. Certainly she had flirted herself, flirted recklessly; but that was a different matter to his faithlessness. She might do it; but he must not. Did she want him? She hardly knew. But she was not going to be put aside for this tiger-killing young person, this jungle girl, who must be taught not to trespass on Violet's property.

Then her mind went back to Rosenthal; and in the solitude of the ladies' compartment she laughed aloud at the thought of the shock that his self-sufficiency must have received when he learned of her sudden and mysterious disappearance from Poona. For she had left him no word. It would do him good; he needed a lesson, for he was too sure of her. She had never troubled to analyse her feelings for him and did not know whether she liked or hated him most. She saw his faults clearly, his blatant conceit, his irritating belief in the supremacy of money, his arrogance, his bad manners. She knew that men deemed him a bounder. But his very boorishness, his savage outbreaks against conventionality, attracted her. Under the thin veneer of civilisation, he was simply an animal; she knew it and it appealed to her baser nature, the sensual strain in her. That he was beast, and wild beast at that, did not affright her; she felt that she could always dominate him when she would. Once or twice the beast had come out into the open; but she had driven it back with a whip—and she believed that she could always do it. The wealth, the life of luxury that he offered, appealed to her strongly; but she kept her head and remembered that he was dependent on his father's bounty, and she had no intention of compromising herself irretrievably under such circumstances. If he had the disposal of the old man's immense riches then the temptation might be over-powering; but until he had she would wait. And ever the memory of Wargrave obtruded itself, rather to her annoyance; but angry as she was with him she could not pretend to herself that she was indifferent to him.

Up in Darjeeling on the very day that she left Poona Frank sat with Miss Benson under a massive, orchid-clad tree in the lovely Botanical Gardens, gazing moodily down into the depths of the valley far below them. Turning suddenly he found his companion looking at him. Something in her eyes moved him strongly and he forgot his caution.

"Muriel, you know how it is with, me," he said impetuously. "I oughtn't to say anything; but—well, all the men here run after you, and I can't bear it. I'm a fool, I know, but I can't help being jealous. I'm always afraid that some one of them will take you from me. The other woman seems to be forgetting me completely. She hasn't written to me for weeks, months. Surely she's tiring of me. I don't suppose she ever really cared for me—just was bored in that dull station. If—if she sets me free would you—could you ever like me well enough to marry me?"

The girl looked away over the valley and a little smile crept into her eyes. Then she turned to him and laid her hand on his.

"Dear boy, if you were free I would," she answered.

They were all alone, no one to see them; and his arms went out to her. But she drew back.

"Not yet, dear. You're another woman's property still," she said.

He bit his lip.

"Yes, you're right, sweetheart. But—well, even if I weren't, I haven't much to offer you. I'm still in debt; and I'd be only condemning you to pass all your existence in the jungle."

"There'd be no hardship in that, dear. I love the forest better than anywhere else in the world. Life in it is happiness to me."

"But would you be content to live as Mrs. Dermot does?"

"Content? I'd love it better than anything else, if I were with you."

Then he forgot her reproof and she her high-minded resolves as his arms went round her and he drew her to him until their lips met in a long, passionate kiss. Afterwards they sat hand in hand and talked of what the future would hold for them if only Fate were kind. And Mrs. Norton, speeding across India to shatter their dream-world, smiled a little grimly as she pictured to herself her meeting with Frank.

Next day the blow fell. Wargrave was sitting at lunch with Mrs. Dermot and Muriel in the hotel dining-room when Violet's telegram was handed to him. His companions could see that he had received bad news; but he pulled himself together and said nothing about it until he was alone with Mrs. Dermot in her private sitting-room after *tiffin*. Then he exclaimed suddenly, handing her the telegram:

"She's on her way here."

Noreen understood even before she looked at the paper. When she read the message she asked:

"What's she coming here for?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a letter from her for a long time," he replied wearily.

"What are you going to do about her?"

"What can I?" he said with a gesture of despair. "It's for her to decide. If she wishes it I must keep my word."

"But Muriel? What of her? You know she cares for you. Has she no right to be considered?" demanded her friend impatiently. "Are you going to ruin her life as well as yours? This woman will only drag you down. She can't really be fond of you or she wouldn't forget you as she's been doing. You don't love her. Don't you see what it will all mean to you?—to be pilloried in the Divorce Court, made to pay enormous costs, perhaps heavy damages as well. And even now you say you're in debt. And then to be chained for life to a woman you don't care about while you're in love with another. Oh, Mr. Wargrave, do be sensible. Tell her the truth. Tell her you can't go on with it."

"I've given her my word," he said simply.

She pleaded with him passionately, but to no avail. At last, as Muriel entered the room, she rose, saying:

"Tell her. I'll not mention the subject again."

And she walked indignantly into her bedroom and shut the door almost with a bang; for the little woman was furious with him for what she deemed his crass stupidity.

"What's the matter with Noreen?" asked the girl in surprise.

Without a word he gave her the telegram.

"Oh Frank!" she gasped, and sank overwhelmed into a chair, letting the fatal paper flutter to the floor.

He did not go to her but stood by the window, the image of despair, gazing out with unseeing eyes.

"What am I to do?" he asked miserably.

"You must keep your word if she wishes it," answered the girl bravely.

But the next moment she broke down and, burying her face in her hands, wept bitterly. He made no move to her; and she rose and went quietly back to her own room.

In the interval that elapsed before Violet's arrival Mrs. Dermot did not abandon hope, and in spite of her words she attacked Wargrave persistently, trying to shake his resolution. But to her despair Muriel sided with him and declared that he was right. So finally Noreen gave it up and vowed that she would wash her hands of the whole affair.

When Violet reached Darjeeling Wargrave met her at the railway station. Face to face with him her anger died and something of the attraction he had had for her revived. So she greeted him effusively and all but embraced him on the platform. Other men seeing the meeting wondered why he looked so miserable when such a lovely woman evinced her delight at seeing him so plainly. She passed her arm through his with an air of possession and chatted volubly while he watched his servant help hers to collect her luggage. When she took her seat in the *dandy*, or chair carried on the shoulders of coolies, and was being conveyed towards her hotel she behaved as though they had not been parted a week, rattled on gaily about her doings in Poona and Mahableshwar and, with all the glories of the Himalayas about her, declared that the Bombay hill-station was far lovelier than Darjeeling. Wargrave was relieved that she showed no desire to be sentimental and gladly responded to her mood, detailing the forthcoming gaieties and promising to take her to them all.

When they reached the Eastern Palace Hotel and were shown up into her private sitting-room she put her hands on his shoulders as soon as they were alone and said:

"Let me look at you, Frank. You have improved. You've grown handsomer, I think. Aren't you going to kiss me?"

He did it with so little fervour that she made a grimace and thought "It's quite time that I came to bring him to heel. Not much loving ardour about that. I wonder if he kisses the jungle girl as coldly." Aloud she said:

"Now let's go down to *tiffin*. I'm starving. Will you please secure a table and I'll follow you in a few minutes?"

During the meal she chattered gaily, criticised the dresses and appearance of the other women in the dining-room and, chaffing him merrily on his want of appetite, ate a substantial meal herself. Mrs. Dermot, anxious to befriend him, had thought that she could help him by inviting him to bring Mrs. Norton to tea with her that afternoon. When during *tiffin* he hesitatingly conveyed the invitation Violet said:

"Oh, I don't want to be bothered with women, my dear boy. Take me out and show me the place and the shops and the *Gymkhana*—what do you call it here? Oh, the Amusement Club. No, stop a minute. Mrs. Dermot is your dear friend from Ranga Duar, isn't she? So she's here. And the other, the jungle girl, where is she?"

Frank flushed as he replied:

"I suppose you mean Miss Benson? She's with Mrs. Dermot."

"So you're all staying at the same hotel. How very nice for you! But, my dear Frank, doesn't it strike you that it'll be rather dull for me staying by myself here? You'll have to change to this hotel."

"I asked about rooms here; but they told me they're full up now."

"I'll see if I can't get round the manager and make him find a corner for you. Well, now for this tea-party. Yes; on second thoughts I'll go. I'd like to see the ladies who've been consoling you for my absence."

"Oh, nonsense, Violet. They haven't. They're just friends, that's all," he said irritably.

"Of course, dear; I know. Well, tell me what these 'just friends' are like."

She certainly derived little idea of them from Wargrave's lame attempt at description. And when later she and he were shown into Mrs. Dermot's sitting-room at tea-time Noreen and Muriel found his picture of her as a meek, long-suffering, neglected wife very unlike the radiant, condescending lady who patronised them from the start. She showed a tendency to address most of her conversation to the girl, despite the latter's evident disinclination to talk, or perhaps because of it; for the older woman seemed to take an impish delight in teasing her about her friendship with Wargrave and their relations as nurse and patient, although it was apparent that her malicious humour made the others uncomfortable. She paraded her authority over Frank and treated him like a hen-pecked husband. When finally she bore him away to escort her to the Amusement Club she left the two girls speechless behind her. But not for the same reason. Noreen was furious.

"What a hateful woman!" she exclaimed as soon as her visitor departed. "And I pitied her as a poor neglected wife! What do you think of her?"

Muriel only shook her head, as she sat looking despondent and thoroughly miserable. Mrs. Norton's malice affected her little, but her undoubted loveliness had made her despair. How could an insignificant little person like herself, she thought, hope to win affection from any man whom this radiant beauty deigned to favour? Frank could not help adoring so attractive a woman. He must have loved her in Rohar, although he said that he had not. Muriel felt that she could have resigned herself more easily to his keeping his word to Violet, if the latter had been less good-looking.

Mrs. Dermot broke in on her miserable thoughts.

"Come, dear, we'll take the children for their walk and then go on later to the Amusement Club."

"I couldn't go to the Club this evening, Noreen. I really couldn't. We'd only see that woman again—with Frank."

"Well, what of it? We're not going to let her think we're afraid to face her. I've no patience with Mr. Wargrave. Whatever he can see in her I can't think. You're worth twenty of her, darling. Shallow, conceited. She neglected? She badly treated? My sympathy is with her husband now. What fools men are!" And Noreen swept indignantly from the room.

Every moment of the hour that they spent in the Club that evening was a lifetime of torture to Muriel. She had faced a charging tiger with less dread than she did the crowd at the tea-tables in the rink. She fancied that every woman who looked at her was laughing in her sleeve at her, that every man who bowed or spoke to her was pitying her. Suddenly her heart seemed to stop beating, for she saw Frank sitting with Mrs. Norton and two other ladies, her Calcutta cousins, as well as a couple of men in the British Infantry regiment at Lebong. They were looking at her; and she felt that Violet was pointing her out as the deserted maiden. She tried to smile bravely when her rival waved her hand and called out a cheery "good evening" to her and Noreen, who answered the greeting with an almost defiant air of unconcern.

For days afterwards she saw practically nothing of Wargrave, who was obliged to be in constant attendance on Mrs. Norton. Violet had induced the manager of her hotel to find a room for him; and he was forced to transfer himself and his belongings to the Eastern Palace. She monopolised him, insisted on his taking her shopping in the mornings, calling in the afternoons or to Lebong to watch the polo, or else playing tennis with her at the Amusement Club. He dined with her every evening and escorted her to the dances, concerts or theatricals that filled the nights during the Season. He hardly recognised her in the gay social butterfly with seemingly never a care in the world; and she made him wonder every day if she had any love left for him or wanted him to have any for her. For she showed no desire to be sentimental and treated him very much as she had in the early days of their acquaintance. She never discussed their future. He had not the moral courage to ask her outright if she still wanted to come to him. She gave no indication of being happy only in his company; for she soon began to release him from attendance on her on occasions in favour of some one or other of the new men friends that she rapidly made. He took advantage of this to see something of Muriel again.

But this did not suit Mrs. Norton. Even if she did not want Frank herself that was no reason why the girl should have him. She tried being jealous and insisted on his breaking off the friendship; but, although he hated the scenes that ensued, he resolutely refused to do so. Then Violet adopted another plan. She pretended to be convinced by his assurances that it meant nothing and declared that she wished to be friends with Muriel. She went out of her way to be nice to the girl when they met in public and at last invited her to tea at the Eastern Palace Hotel on an afternoon on which she knew Mrs. Dermot to be engaged. Muriel accepted because she did not know very well how to refuse.

When she was shown into Mrs. Norton's private sitting-room she found Wargrave already there with her hostess, who received her very amiably. During tea the conversation flowed in safe channels at first. But suddenly Violet startled her guests by saying:

"Now, Miss Benson, that we three are alone I think it a good opportunity to speak very plainly about Frank's relations with you. I've just been giving him a serious talking to about the way he has behaved to you."

The girl drew herself up haughtily.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Norton," she said. "The way Mr. Wargrave has behaved——? I don't understand you."

"Oh yes, you do. It's best to speak plainly. I'm afraid Frank has been leading you to believe that he's in love with you——."

"Violet!" broke in Wargrave angrily. "Please don't go on. You've no right to say such things."

She smiled sweetly on him.

"Yes, I have, Frank. You know, my dear boy, that you've got pretty ways with women—I fear he's rather a flirt, Miss Benson—that you are apt to make some of them think you mean more than you do."

"What absurd nonsense!" he cried, more angrily still. "Please stop, I beg of you."

"No, Frank, it is only right that I should warn Miss Benson." She turned to the girl. "He hasn't told you, I'm sure, that he's not free to marry you or any other girl."

Wargrave sprang up.

"I've told her everything about us, Violet," he protested. "I ask you as a favour to drop the subject."

The girl sat as if turned to stone while Mrs. Norton went on:

"You are young, my dear, and can't know much about men. I suppose you've lived in the jungle all your life. Now, a little bird has told me you've let yourself get too fond of Frank—oh, he's very charming, I know, and this playing at nursing a poor wounded hero is a dangerous game. But I'm going to tell you plainly that Frank is pledged to me. He has asked me to leave my husband for him, and I've consented; so there's no use your trying to catch him, my dear. You're too late."

The girl sprang indignantly to her feet.

"I've done nothing of the sort, Mrs. Norton. How dare you say so? You've no right to speak to me as you're doing."

The older woman sat back coolly in her chair and laughed; but her eyes grew hard.

"Oh yes, I have, my dear girl. You two were the talk of Darjeeling before I came. Of course you're angry, naturally, at failing to catch him, but I'm going to put a stop to your trying, here and now. He has got to break with you."

"You are a wicked woman," began the girl; and then indignation choked her.

Mrs. Norton leant forward in her chair.

"Can you deny that you're in love with him?" she asked.

Wargrave tried to interpose; but the girl waved him aside and faced her rival.

"I'll answer you. I am. I love him as you could never do. I was willing to give him up to you—for he loves me, not you—so that he should not be false to his word. I didn't know what you were like, then. But now I don't believe you'd ever make him happy. You don't love him—you haven't got it in you. You wouldn't be content with any one man. I've watched you. You're absolutely heartless; and you'd only make Frank miserable. You're willing to disgrace him as well as yourself. You don't mind if you ruin him. Frank——"

She turned towards Wargrave.

"You said you loved me. Is it true?"

He answered firmly:

"Yes, I do."

"Then will you marry me? This woman will only wreck your life. Choose between us."

He turned in desperation to Mrs. Norton.

"Violet, you don't really want me, do you? You don't love me. I've felt for a long time that you're forgetting me. I love Muriel and she loves me. If you ever cared for me release me from my promise."

Mrs. Norton lay back calmly in her chair and looked with a smile from one to the other. Then she said deliberately:

"This morning I wrote to my husband and told him that I was never returning to him, that I was going to you, Frank. That is why I asked this girl here to-day to tell you before her that now I'm going to ask you to keep your promise. Will you?"

The girl looked at him appealingly and stretched out her hands to him.

"Frank, for your own sake, if not for mine, don't listen to her."

He stood irresolute, torn by conflicting emotions. Then with an effort he replied:

"Muriel, I must. I can't break my word."

Mrs. Norton gave a mocking laugh. The girl shrank from him and hid her face in her hands for a moment. Then she looked up and said, desperately calm:

"Very well, be it so. You've decided and there's nothing more to be said. You've shamed me before this woman; and I never want to see you again."

She turned and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE

As Muriel passed through the door Wargrave started to follow her; but Violet cried peremptorily:

"Frank, stay here. Please realise that I come first now. Sit down."

He obeyed mechanically. She went on petulantly:

"These emotional scenes are rather exhausting. Do you mind calling the hotel 'boy' and ordering a cocktail for me? You ought to have one yourself. I suppose, like all men, you hate scenes. Then you should be grateful to me for saving you from that spiteful little jungle cat."

Going to the verandah outside the room he called a hotel servant and gave him the order, then returned to his chair and sat down wearily. He stared at the floor in silence. He had sent the girl that he loved away utterly humiliated; and he knew that, with her proud spirit, the shame of his rejection of her would cut her to the heart. He cursed himself for bringing this pain to her. It was all his fault. Not only had he had no right to speak of love to her while he was bound to another woman, but he ought never to have sought her society as he had done, never striven to gain her friendship, for by doing so he had unconsciously won her love. The harm was done long before he spoke to her of his feelings. What a selfish brute he was to thus cause two women to suffer!

Presently he remembered that his moodiness, his silence, were uncomplimentary, cruel, to Violet. She was right in saying that she came first. Indeed she was the only one to be considered now. The other had passed out of his life. It might be that they should meet again some day in their restricted world, but while he could he must try to avoid her. There was only Violet left.

He looked up to find his companion's eyes fixed on him with an undefinable expression. He roused himself with an effort that was not lost on the woman watching him.

"So you have told your husband," he said. "Well, now we must arrange what we are going to do."

"We won't discuss our plans at this moment," replied Violet. "I'm not in the mood for it." Then after a pause she added bitterly, "I must give you time to recover from the shock of the abrupt ending to your little jungle romance."

Before he could reply the servant appeared with a tray.

"Ah, thank goodness, here are the cocktails. There's only one. Aren't you having one, too? It will do you good. No?"

She sipped her cocktail slowly. When she had finished it she got up from her chair, saying:

"I'll get ready to go to the Amusement Club. Will you wait for me here? You needn't change—we won't play tennis to-day; for we've got this dinner and dance on to-night and I don't want to tire myself. I shan't be long."

As she passed his chair she tapped his cheek and said:

"Don't look so miserable, my dear boy. You'll soon get over the loss of your jungle girl. There, you may kiss my hand as a sign of your return to your allegiance."

But when she entered her bedroom she did not at once proceed to get ready to go out, but unlocked her dressing-case and, taking out of it a letter, sat down to read it for the tenth time since she had received it that morning. Yet it was short and concise. It was from Rosenthal and addressed from the Mess of the 2nd (Duke's Own) Hussars in Bangalore; for, as it told her, he had returned to his regiment as his leave had expired. It was the first that had come from him since she had left Poona, although, as he said in it, he had obtained her new address from the Goanese clerk in the Munster Hotel office on the day of her flight, thanks to the persuasive powers of a fifty-rupee note.

He told her that although her abrupt departure had puzzled him and he could not understand why she had tried to conceal her whereabouts from him, he wished her to realise that if it were an attempt to escape from him it was useless. He could bide his time, for sooner or later he would get her.

Violet smiled as she read his confident words, although they caused a little shiver of fear to run through

her. Then she rose, locked the letter away and put on her hat.

Not until after lunch next day was Wargrave able to find time to go to the Oriental Hotel, not to see Muriel, he sternly told himself, but to pay a visit to Mrs. Dermot. When he was shown up to her sitting-room he had to wait for some time before Noreen entered; and he was struck at once by the coldness of her greeting. It was evident that she was very displeased with him. She said no word about Muriel; and Wargrave felt curiously averse to mentioning her name.

At last he summed up courage to ask her. With as near an approach to frigidity of manner as she could show to a man to whom she was so indebted Noreen replied:

"Muriel has left Darjeeling."

"Left Darjeeling? Where for? Where has she gone?" he exclaimed in surprise.

"To her father."

"But why? She wasn't to have left for weeks yet," said Wargrave.

Mrs. Dermot looked at him angrily.

"Why? Need you ask? I should have thought commonsense would have told you. I don't think we'll talk about it, please. As I said before, I've washed my hands of the whole affair."

Further conversation on the subject was rendered impossible by the irruption of her children, who rushed at Wargrave and reproached him for not being to see them lately.

During the next few days Violet baffled every attempt that Frank made to discuss their future course of action. The constant succession of gaieties, the balls, theatricals, concerts, races, *gymkhanas*, that filled every afternoon and evening of the Darjeeling Season, took up all her time. Whenever he tried to talk matters over with her she invariably replied that there was no hurry, even when he pointed out that Major Norton might arrive any day in consequence of her letter. That he had not already done so was inexplicable to Wargrave; and the subaltern could only believe her assurance that her husband accepted her loss with equanimity. It never occurred to Frank to doubt that she had written the letter.

But one morning matters came to a crisis. When Violet and Wargrave returned to the hotel from their ride before breakfast a telegram was handed to the latter. He found it to be an official message from Colonel Dermot, which ran:

"Please return forthwith to Ranga Duar. I start for Europe on sick leave to-day."

Frank stared at it in surprise. He had heard nothing of his superior officer being ill. It must be something very serious to necessitate his being sent to Europe. The news was an unpleasant shock to him; for he genuinely liked and respected the Political Officer.

Then it occurred to him that this order to return brought everything to a head. Violet saw that he was perturbed.

"What is it, Frank?" she asked.

"I'll tell you upstairs, dear," he said.

In her sitting-room he handed her the telegram.

"I must leave to-day. Will you be ready to come with me?" he asked.

"What? To-day? My dear boy, it's impossible," she replied.

"But I must go. You see, it's imperative. The Colonel's already gone."

"Yes, I see you must. But—well, I simply couldn't be ready," said Violet calmly. "Besides, I'm singing at the concert to-morrow night; and there's the dance at Government House the night after. I must follow you later."

"But that means your travelling alone," he argued. "Wouldn't it be much pleasanter for you to come with me?"

"Don't worry about me for goodness' sake, Frank. I'm not a helpless person. I came across India by myself to get here; and surely I'll be able to manage to do a twenty-four hours' journey alone."

"Very well, dear," he replied with an inward, unacknowledged feeling of relief that the decisive step had not to be taken yet. "I'll come down from Ranga Duar with an elephant to meet you at the railway station when you arrive. Now, while you're changing for breakfast, I'll rush round to the Oriental and see if Mrs. Dermot has more news."

When he reached the hotel he found Noreen busily packing. She was pale and evidently deeply distressed, although outwardly calm and collected.

"You have heard?" she asked, as he entered her sitting-room.

"Only that your husband is starting for England on sick leave and that I'm to return at once. What's the matter? I hope it's not serious."

"Mr. Macdonald wires that Kevin must go at once to England for an operation. He says I'm not to worry, as there is no immediate danger. But of course I can't help being alarmed. It's all so sudden. I didn't know that Kevin was ill. Mr. Macdonald is travelling with him to the junction on the main line where the children and I

are to meet them. Isn't it kind of him? I'm so glad to know my husband will have someone with him until I come."

"We'll meet at the railway station after lunch, then," said Wargrave. "We'll be together as far as the junction."

Mrs. Dermot hesitated.

"Are you travelling alone?" she asked.

Frank flushed as he replied:

"Yes. She—Violet is to follow later."

Noreen made no comment; and having learned all that he could he returned to his hotel.

He dreaded the ordeal of the parting with Mrs. Norton, but when the time came for it he found his fear of a distressing scene quite uncalled for. She said goodbye to him in a pleasantly friendly, though somewhat casual, manner, and did not offer to accompany him to the station as she had a previous engagement. And long before the little train had zig-zagged down the seven thousand feet to the foot of the Himalayas she had dismissed him from her mind.

The truth was that the gay and admired Mrs. Norton, caught up in the whirlwind of social amusement in a lively hill-station, was not the woman who passed weary days of *ennui* in the company of a dull and unattractive husband in a small, dead-and-alive station. Nor was the dejected man who so plainly showed that he was pining for someone else the good-looking, heart-whole subaltern who had fascinated her in the boredom of existence in Rohar. Was he worth incurring social damnation for? Would his companionship—for she knew that she had not his love—make up for a life of loneliness, debt and poverty in a frontier outpost? If she were resolved on giving up her present assured position—and Violet felt that existence with Norton would be more than ever unendurable after the exciting pleasures of Poona and Darjeeling—would it not be wiser to do so for someone who could amply compensate her for the sacrifice? Love in a cottage—or its Indian equivalent, a subaltern's comfortable bungalow—did not appeal to her. Her statement that she had written to tell her husband that she was leaving for Wargrave was false. It had served the purpose for which it was made, and that was the defeat of her rival. So now, content with her victory, she put all burdensome thought from her and dined, danced and flirted to her heart's content in the gaieties of the Darjeeling Season.

When Wargrave reached Ranga Duar the little outpost seemed strangely forlorn without the Dermots and their children. Major Hunt and Macdonald welcomed him warmly. The latter informed him that he had insisted on the Colonel going to England for his operation because the Political Officer had not been out of India for seven years and needed the change, and besides he would receive more care and attention in a London nursing-home than in an Indian hospital. The trouble was intestinal but there was no immediate danger to his life.

Another familiar figure was missing. Before departing Dermot had released Badshah and left him to wander in freedom in the jungle, unwilling that his faithful companion of years should be servant to anyone else and confident that the elephant would come back to him when he returned to the Terai. Major Hunt placed one of the detachment elephants at Wargrave's disposal whenever he required it to take him on his tours along the frontier. And Frank needed it constantly. For, as soon as the news of Colonel Dermot's departure spread, the lawless spirits that for fear of him had not ventured for five years to disturb the peace of the Border, began to show signs of restlessness. The Political Officer's strong personality and the reputation of divinity that he enjoyed had kept them in check. But now that he was gone they thought that they could defy with impunity the young sahib who replaced him.

So the Assistant had not long to wait for an opportunity to show his mettle. Dermot had not been gone a fortnight before one or two raids were attempted on British villages by lawless mountaineers from across the Bhutan frontier. Wargrave soon proved that the mantle of Colonel Dermot had not fallen on unworthy shoulders. Single-handed he intercepted and faced a party of Bhutanese swordsmen swooping down from the hills on a tea-garden in search of loot, shot the leader and two of his followers and put the rest to flight. With a handful of sepoy of the Military Police he surprised a Bhuttia village in the No Man's Land along the border-line and captured a notorious outlaw who had plundered in Indian territory and had sent him a defiant challenge.

Wargrave was glad of the excitement and the occupation, for they kept him from brooding over his troubles and worrying about the future. He had not time to puzzle over Violet's silence. She had not written to him since their parting. As a matter of fact she seldom thought of him, so engrossed was she in the pursuit of pleasure. Admittedly the prettiest woman in Darjeeling that season she received enough attention and admiration to turn any woman's head; and she enjoyed it all to the full. Although she had answered Rosenthal's letter from Bangalore he had not written again; but she felt that he was not forgetting her. She thought oftener of him than of Wargrave; for the vision of the great riches that she might one day share with him fascinated her. It haunted her dreams sleeping and waking. Often she let her fancy stray to the existence that he had promised would be hers when he was the possessor of his father's fortune, a life of luxury in the gayest cities of the world with all that immense wealth could bestow, a life infinitely better worth living than her present one. Would she ever be given the chance of it?

The question was speedily and unexpectedly answered. One morning after breakfast she received a telegram from Rosenthal. It said:

"My father is dead. I sail from Bombay for South Africa on Friday to settle up his affairs. Will you come?"

She stared at the paper almost incomprehendingly for a few moments. Then the meaning of the message

dawned on her. She sat down at her writing-table and thought hard. She had little time in which to make up her mind; for if she wished to reach Bombay before Rosenthal sailed she would have to leave Darjeeling that afternoon. What should she do? Should she go? She found a pencil and a telegraph form and addressed the latter to the Hussar. Then she hesitated. But she was not long in coming to a decision. With a firm hand she wrote the one word "Yes" and signed her name. Then she rose from the table, called a hotel servant, despatched the telegram and went to her bedroom to pack. And the same train that took her away from Darjeeling carried a letter from her to Wargrave.

But the subaltern did not receive it until more than a week afterwards, when he returned to Ranga Duar with Tashi after chasing back across the Border a mongrel pack of *dácoits*—brigands—who had been harrying Bhuttia villages in British territory. The letter lay on the table in the room which he still occupied in the Mess, although he was no longer an officer of the detachment, together with a pile of correspondence that had accumulated during his absence. Recognising Violet's writing on the envelope he tore it open anxiously. He rapidly scanned the first page, stared at it incredulously, read it again carefully and then finished the letter. It ran:

"My dear Frank,

"I am going to relieve your mind of a great weight and send you into the seventh heaven of delight by giving you the glad news that you are never likely to see me again. Before the week is ended I shall have left India for ever with someone who can give me all I want and not condemn me to a poverty-stricken existence in a wretched little jungle station, which is all that you had to offer me. I know it was not your fault and you are really a dear boy. I was very fond of you; but you did not love me and we would have been very miserable together. For you would be always pining for your jungle girl and I would have hated you for it. Now we part good friends and she is welcome to you. I ought to tell you that I did not really write to my husband as I said I did.

"I wish you luck—won't you wish me the same?"

"Yours affectionately,

"VIOLET."

When he had thoroughly grasped the meaning of this extraordinary letter he forgave her everything in the joy of knowing that she had set him free. He did not speculate as to the man with whom she was going; his thoughts flew at once to Muriel. But his delight was tempered by the fear that his liberty had come too late to be of service to him with her. Would she ever forgive him? His heart sank when he remembered her indignation, her bitter words when they parted. Surely no woman who had been so humiliated could pardon the man who had brought such shame upon her. Yet how could he have acted otherwise? It was natural that the girl should blame him; but how could he have been false to his plighted word and desert the one who held his promise? If only he could see Muriel and plead with her. Perhaps in time she might bring herself to forgive him. But how was he to meet her? Now that Mrs. Dermot had gone to England, the girl would not come again to Ranga Duar. She was, he knew, accompanying her father in his tour of the forests of the districts in his charge. How could he go to their camp or lonely bungalow in the jungle and force his presence on her? What was he to do?

Longing for someone to confide in, someone to advise him, he went to Major Hunt and told him the whole story. The older man rejoiced in learning of the subaltern's release from his entanglement, but, knowing Miss Benson well, shook his head doubtfully over the chances of her forgiving Wargrave. Nevertheless, unwilling to kill the young man's hope, he affected a confidence that he was far from feeling and bade him take courage. He advised him to arrange a few days' shooting in the neighbourhood of the Bensons when he could spare the time from his duties. The father would be sure to offer him hospitality and the daughter could not well avoid him. In the meantime he might write and plead his cause on paper.

Wargrave sat up half the night composing a letter to Muriel. Sheet after sheet was torn up in disgust before he was even tolerably satisfied. But the laboured result was never sent. Next morning after breakfast as he sat smoking in the Mess with Major Hunt and the doctor his servant entered to tell him that a forest guard wanted to see him. A wild hope flashed through his mind that perhaps Muriel had sent him a message. But on going out to the back verandah where the man awaited him he was handed an envelope "On His Majesty's Service," addressed in a strange handwriting. He opened it and glanced carelessly at the letter, but the first lines riveted his attention.

"Forest Officer's Bungalow, Barwana Section.

"From the District Superintendent of Police, Bengal Civil Police.

"To the Assistant Political Officer, Ranga Duar.

"Sir,

"Three days ago a party of Chinamen attacked and severely injured the Deputy Conservator of Forests, Mr. Benson, in this bungalow, and abducted his daughter. They were ten or twelve in number and well armed, and over-awed the servants and forest employees. They have been tracked towards the Bhutan Frontier and, I fear, have crossed it by this. There was, unfortunately, much delay in the information reaching me while I was touring the district south of the forest; and I have only just arrived here. I hasten to acquaint you with the occurrence as I am powerless if the ruffians have crossed into Bhutan. Please request the Officer Commanding Military Police Detachment to send out parties to try to cut off the raiders from the passes through the mountains, although I fear it is too late. Can you meet me here and confer with me? Please bring the Medical Officer of the detachment with you, as Mr. Benson is in a bad state and no civil surgeon is available for a great distance from here.

"Your obedient servant, Edward Lawrence. D.S.P."

Horror-stricken, Wargrave questioned the forest guard. The man had not been at the bungalow at the time

of the outrage and could not greatly supplement the information contained in the letter. The story that he had learned from the servants was to the effect that a party of Chinamen had arrived at Mr. Benson's bungalow and asked for employment as carpenters. There was nothing unusual in this, as Chinese from the Southern Provinces frequently make their way on foot through Tibet and Bhutan over the mountains in search of work on the tea-gardens or in Calcutta. Apparently they had suddenly struck the old man down and surprised Miss Benson before she could offer any resistance. Producing fire-arms they had terrified the servants. They had a mule hidden in the jungle and on this the girl was placed and led off. Long after they had disappeared some of the forest guards had timidly followed their track for some distance and found that it led towards the Bhutan Frontier.

When Wargrave had extracted from the man all the information that he could he rushed into the Mess and acquainted the two officers in it with the terrible news. Like him they were horrified at the outrage. Major Hunt went at once to the Fort to order out parties of the detachment in accordance with the District Superintendent's request; and Macdonald got ready to proceed to the Forest Officer's bungalow forty miles away.

The Assistant Political Officer despatched a cipher telegram to the Foreign Department, Government of India, at Simla, informing them of the occurrence and of his intention to investigate the affair personally, and, if possible, rescue Miss Benson. He knew that the Heads of the Department, although they would not sanction or approve officially of his crossing the frontier in pursuit of the raiders, as it would be contrary to the Treaty with the Bhutanese Government, would not enquire too closely into his movements. But whether they liked it or not he intended to follow the abductors if necessary into the heart of Bhutan, Treaty or no Treaty.

His first step was to send for Tashi and order him to prepare the disguise that he intended to use. His rifle he left behind, but armed himself with a brace of long-barrelled automatic pistols to which their wooden holsters clipped on to form butts, thus converting them into carbines accurate up to a range of a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards. He found a third for Tashi in Colonel Dermot's armoury, which was at his disposal.

Night had fallen long before the detachment elephant that bore Wargrave, Macdonald, Tashi and the forest guard as well as its own *mahout*, reached the bungalow where the District Superintendent of Police awaited them. The doctor found Benson suffering from a wound in the head, with concussion and fever. Frank interrogated the servants carefully and elicited from them one fresh fact about the outrage that shed a flood of light on its motive and its author. It was that the leader of the party was pock-marked and blind in the right eye; and this at once confirmed Frank's suspicion that the instigator of Muriel's abduction was the Chinese *Amban*, whose parting threat to the girl had thus materialised.

At daybreak Wargrave and Tashi started on foot accompanied by a forest guard to put them on the track of the gang. This led up towards the Bhutan Frontier, which runs among the hills at an average elevation of six thousand feet above the sea. As the Assistant Political Officer anticipated, the party had headed for the portion of the border under the control of the *Amban's* friend, the Penlop of Tuna. Enquiries among the inhabitants of the mountain villages resulted in several of them coming forward with the information that they had seen a small body of armed Chinese escorting a cloaked and shrouded figure on a mule and climbing up towards Bhutan. Two of the Government Secret Service agents among these Bhuttias had followed them cautiously to the frontier and seen them received there by a party of the Tuna Penlop's armed retainers. These men reported that the watch on all the passes into Bhutan was stricter than ever, and, as one of them phrased it, not even a rat could creep through unobserved.

This discouraging intelligence was a further proof of *Amban's* guilt. But Frank realised that it would not be sufficient to justify the Government of India claiming redress from the Republic of China; and, indeed, diplomatic procedure was much too slow to be of any use in the rescue of the girl. An appeal to the Maharajah of Bhutan would be equally fruitless; for his powerful vassal the Tuna Penlop was practically in rebellion against him and defied his authority. The sole hope of saving Muriel lay in Wargrave's prompt action.

Yet try as the subaltern would, he and Tashi were unable at any point to pierce the cordon of guards along the frontier. Generally they got away unseen; but on one occasion they were discovered and had to flee back into British territory under a shower of arrows. Fortunately fire-arms are scarce in Bhutan; and the Tuna Penlop's soldiers possessed only bows.

It was imperative that Wargrave and his follower should be circumspect in their movements, and by day they hid in caves or in the jungle clothing the slopes of the higher hills, to escape observation by Bhutanese spies. When they had exhausted the food that they had brought with them and failed to procure any more from their Secret Service agents in the villages, Tashi gathered bananas, dug up edible tubers like the *charpattia* or *charlong*, and snared jungle-fowl and Monal pheasants. Having obtained a bow and a sheaf of arrows from a village he sometimes succeeded in killing a *gooral*, the active little wild goat found in the lower hills, the flesh of which is excellent.

As day after day went by and found them no nearer success in crossing the frontier Wargrave began to lose heart. He was harassed by anxiety over Muriel's fate and feared that he would never be able to rescue her. At times he grew desperate and but for his companion's remonstrances would have tried to fight his way through the border guards, although in his saner moments he knew that it would be sheer madness.

Besides danger from human enemies the two men were menaced by peril from wild beasts as well. Panthers prowled among the hills, great Himalayan bears, a blow from the paw of one of which would crack a man's skull, wandered on the jungle-clad slopes and, though not carnivorous, were always ready to attack human beings. Herds of wild elephants, which had scaled the mountains into Bhutan at the beginning of the Monsoon to reach the northern face of the Himalayas and escape the heavy rains that deluge the southern slopes and also to avoid the insects that plague them in the jungle at that season, were commencing to return

to the Terai. Often Wargrave and Tashi had to climb trees to let a herd go by; and each time as he watched them the subaltern thought longingly of Colonel Dermot and Badshah. If he had them to help him how easily he could burst the barrier between him and the land that held the girl whom he loved and who needed him so!

Late one afternoon, as the two men were making their way through bamboo jungle at the foot of high cliffs close to a pass into Ghutan which they had not yet attempted, they blundered into the middle of a herd of elephants feeding. There was no tree in which they could take refuge, and before they were able to make their escape they found themselves surrounded on every side. A number of cow-elephants, which, having young calves with them, were very savage, pressed threateningly towards the men, who tried to force their way into the dense growths of the bamboos and so put a frail barrier between themselves and the menacing beasts. They knew that their pistols would be useless, and they had already given themselves up for lost when the huge animals which were apparently about to charge them, suddenly stopped and drew aside to allow a monstrous bull-elephant to pass through. It was a single-tusker, and it advanced steadily towards the men. Frank stared at it incredulously. Could it be——? Yes, it was. He was sure of it. It was Badshah.

And the elephant knew him and came towards him. In the sudden revulsion of feeling and his relief at knowing that they were safe Frank almost lost his head. A mad hope surged through him. He stretched out his arms imploringly to the great beast and cried impulsively:

"Oh, Badshah! *Hum-ko madad do!* (Help us!)"

To his amazement the animal seemed to understand. It sank slowly to its knees as though inviting him to mount it.

"Sahib! Sahib! He offers us his aid," cried Tashi excitedly, and he scrambled up after Wargrave who had climbed on to the broad shoulders.

The subaltern leaned forward and, touching the huge forehead, pointed in the direction of Bhutan. Badshah turned and moved off towards the pass through the mountains, while the herd followed; and Frank thrilled with the hope that at last he was about to break through the barrier of foes between him and the girl he loved.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DEVIL DANCERS OF TUNA

Flat-roofed, arcaded buildings terraced one above the other, with gaily painted walls from which covered wooden verandahs and box-like, latticed windows jutted out, surrounded a paved courtyard, its rough flagstones hidden by shifting, many-coloured throngs of gorgeously vested priests, mitred bishops, hideous demons, skeletons with grinning skulls and weird creatures with *papier maché* heads of bears, tigers, dragons and even stranger beasts. Wild but not inharmonious music from shaven-headed members of an orchestra of weird instruments—gongs, shawns, cymbals, long silver trumpets—deafened the ears. Crowds of gaily-clad spectators covered the flat roofs of the building and arcades, thronged the verandahs, filled the windows and squatted around the courtyard—these last kept in order by bullet-headed lamas with whips.

It was the annual ceremony of the Devil Dance of the great Buddhist monastery of Tuna, one of the fantastic Mystery Plays, the now almost meaningless functions into which the ideal faith preached by Gautama, the Buddha, the high-souled reformer, has degenerated.

From all parts of Bhutan west of the dividing line of the great Black Mountain Range, from Tibet, even from far-distant Ladak, the faithful had made pilgrimage to be present at the great festival in this most famous and sacred *gompa* of the land. Red lamas from Western Tibet and yellow from Lhasa, abbots and monks from little-known monasteries lost among the rugged mountains, nuns with close-cropped hair from the convents of Thimbu, Paro and Punaka, robber chiefs of the Hah-pa and graziers from Sipchu, townsfolk from the capital and peasants from the fever-laden Himalayan valleys—all had gathered there. For all who attended the sacred festival could gain indulgences that would save them a century or two's sojourn in the hot or cold hells of their religion.

In a gallery adorned with artistic wooden carvings and hung with brocaded silk and gold embroideries sat a fat, bare-legged man with close-cropped hair and scanty beard, wearing an ample, red silk gown ornamented with Chinese designs worked in gold thread. He was the Penlop of Tuna, the great feudal lord of the province, whose high-walled *jong*, or castle, crowned the rocky hill on which the monastery and the town were built. Behind him stood his officers and attendants clad in silk or woollen kimono-like garments bound at the waist by gaily-worked leather belts from which hung handsome swords with elaborately-wrought silver hilts inlaid with coral and turquoises and with gold-washed silver scabbards.

The courtyard was gay with fluttering prayer-flags, the poles of which as well as the wooden pillars of the arcades were hung with the beautiful banners artistically worked with countless pieces of coloured silks and brocades and needlework pictures of Buddhist gods and saints for which the monasteries of Bhutan are justly famed. From the blue sky the sun blazed on the riot of mingled hues of the decorations and the dresses of spectators and performers.

Especially gorgeous were the robes of the high priests in the spectacle. They strongly resembled Catholic

bishops in their gold-embroidered mitres, copes and vestments as, carrying pastoral crooks or sprinkling holy water, they moved around the courtyard in solemn procession behind acolytes carrying sacred banners, swinging censers and intoning harmonious chants. Troops of baffled demons fled at their approach howling in diabolic despair. Shuddering wretches clad in scanty rags, groping blindly as in the dark, wailing miserably and uttering weird, long-drawn whistling notes, shrank aside from the fleeing devils and stretched out their hands in supplication to the saintly prelates. They were intended to represent the spirits of dead men straying in the period of *Bardo*—the forty-nine days after death—during which the soul released from the body is doomed to wander in search of its next incarnation. In its journeyings it is assailed and terrified by demons, who can only be defeated by the prayers of pious lamas to Chenresi the Great Pitier.

The whole purpose of these representations is to familiarise during life the devout Buddhists with the awful aspect of the many demons that will obstruct their souls after death and try to lead them astray when they are searching for the right path to the next world in which they are to begin a fresh existence.

On this strange, bewildering spectacle an English girl looked down from a small balcony not twenty feet above the courtyard. And the sight of her caused the attention of many of the spectators to wander from the Mystery Play. The fat old Penlop frequently looked across the quadrangle at her from his gallery and as often uttered some coarse jest about her to his grinning followers, while he raised a chased silver goblet filled with *murwa*, the native liquor, to his lips.

It was Muriel Benson. For weeks she had been a prisoner in the lamasery, cloistered in a suite of well-furnished rooms and waited on by a close-cropped nun. She had been surprised in the bungalow and overpowered by three of the Chinamen before she realised her danger or could seize a weapon with which to defend herself. Had she been able to snatch up a revolver she would have made a desperate fight for freedom. But with fettered hands, a helpless captive, she had been carried away on a mule. From the first she had recognised the pock-marked, one-eyed leader of the gang as the *Amban's* officer, and so had known who was the author and cause of her abduction. For days she had been borne along up the rough track over the mountains, through narrow, high-walled passes, down deep valleys and across rushing torrents, closely guarded but always treated with respect. Her captors used broken Tibetan and Bhutanese when they desired to communicate with her, but they answered none of her questions. She had dreaded reaching their destination, where she expected to find Yuan Shi Hung awaiting her; and once, in fear of it, she had tried to throw herself down a precipice along the brink of which the path ran. After that she had been roped to a big, powerful Manchu.

On her arrival at the monastery she learned from her garrulous nun-attendant that the *Amban* had been summoned to Peking, where a revolution had taken place and his friends there hoped to make him President, which he regarded as a step towards the Imperial throne. The monks of the monastery were his faithful allies on account of his relationship to the powerful Abbott of the Yellow Lama Temple in the Chinese capital. They had agreed to guard his prisoner, if his men succeeded in capturing her, until he returned or sent for her.

At first the girl, relieved of the dread of falling at once into his hands, lived in the hope of a speedy rescue. It was unfortunate, she thought, that Colonel Dermot, with his extraordinary knowledge of and influence over the Bhutanese, had left India. But even without him the power of the British Empire would be set at once in motion to avenge this outrage on an Englishwoman. Dermot's understudy, the Assistant Political Officer, faithless lover though he was, would do all he could to save her. Assuredly she would not have long to wait.

But as the days dragged by and she still remained a prisoner her heart sank. She needed all her courage not to lose hope and give way to despair. For she had always hanging over her the dread of Yuan Shi Hung's return. But she had resolved to kill herself rather than fall into his hands, and for that purpose had bribed her cheery, good-natured attendant to procure a dagger for her. She pretended that she wanted it as a protection in the lamasery, for the door of her apartments was without a fastening. Even on the outside there was neither lock nor bolt, for escape was considered impossible for her. If she got out of the monastery she would be captured at once in the town.

She was not interfered with and saw no one but her nun. Once or twice she ventured to creep down to the great temple of the monastery, drawn by curiosity and the sound of harmonious Buddhist chants intoned by the lamaic choir. But for her anxiety about her father and her dread of the *Amban's* return her worst trial would have been the monotony of her captivity, were it not that the memory of Wargrave and her unhappy love caused her many a sleepless night.

With nothing to occupy her mind she hailed the festival of the Devil Dance as a welcome distraction. Not even the impertinent curiosity of the spectators could drive her from her balcony. She followed the many phases with interest, although she could not understand the meaning of them. For the performance was a curious mixture of religion and blasphemous mockery, of horse-play and coarse humour as well as a strange impressiveness. A comic interlude would follow the most solemn act. Troops of devils burlesqued the sacred rites of the faith, and bands of comic masks filled the arena at times and delighted the audience by playing practical jokes on the spectators and each other. The solitary white woman attracted their clownish humour, and they danced in front of her balcony, shouting out rude witticisms that caused much amusement to the lookers-on. Fortunately the girl's command of the language, fairly good though it was, was insufficient to enable her to understand their coarse jests. But their intention to insult her became obvious. The leaping, howling mob of strangely apparelled performers threatened to storm her balcony. Some climbed on each other's shoulders to get nearer her, others even began to swarm up the pillars supporting her balcony. To the delight of the audience the noisy mob eventually clambered up to the railing of the balcony and, jesting, laughing, uttering weird cries, perched on it and shouted and jeered at her.

Her face flaming, the girl drew back and was about to retire into her room when suddenly she stopped, rigid with surprise. For above the shouts of the maskers, the roars of the spectators and the din of the clashing cymbals and braying trumpets, she heard her name spoken distinctly. Incredulous she stood rooted

to the ground and stared at the yelling clowns perched on the railing. The uproar redoubled; but again she distinguished one word above it all:

"Muriel!"

A wild hope flashed into her heart. Pretending to be amused at the antics of the performers she advanced laughingly towards them. They gesticulated and shouted more furiously than ever. But in the medley of strange sounds she distinctly heard the words:

"It's I, Frank. Don't be afraid."

They seemed to come from the *papier maché* head of a grotesque serpent worn by a man who was foremost among her tormentors and wildest in his frenzied gestures. Smiling the girl stood her ground even when some of the maskers, encouraged by her attitude, climbed down from the rail and surrounded her, dancing, hallooing, leaping. The snake-headed one was the wildest in his antics and shrieked and shouted loudest of them all. But mixed up with incoherent cries and sounds she caught the words:

"Are you guarded?" A wild yell followed. "Can you get out?" Then he yelled like a mad jackal.

With wildly-beating heart the girl pretended to repulse the advances of the maskers good-humouredly and spoke to all in English, telling them to leave her balcony and cease to molest her. But with her laughing remonstrances she mingled the words:

"I am not guarded. I can leave my room. I will go down to the temple and wait behind the statue of Buddha."

Then the serpent-headed one, aided by another with dragon mask, both uttering fiendish yells, pushed his companions back to the railing, just as the Penlop spoke to one of his officials who shouted across to them an angry command to leave the white woman alone. The scared maskers tumbled over each other in their hurry to quit the balcony.

Thrilled with delight the girl watched them go and then, when the entry of a fresh body of mummers into the courtyard distracted the attention of the spectators from her, she withdrew quietly to her room. She was alone, the nun having gone long ago to witness the Devil Dance from among the crowd. Muriel opened the door leading to a broad stone staircase and peered cautiously out. There was no one to be seen. All the inhabitants of the monastery were gathered in the courtyard. She stole carefully down to a side door of the lamasery chapel.

This temple was a large and lofty building richly ornamented with fine wood carvings, rich brocades and elaborately embroidered banners and hangings. The pillars supporting the roof were covered with copper plates beaten into beautiful patterns and the altars were of silver, the chief one, as in all Bhutanese chapels, being adorned by a splendid pair of elephant's tusks. Idols abounded. There was a central seated figure of Buddha thirty feet high, heavily gilt and studded with turquoises and precious stones, with a canopy and background of golden lotus leaves. On either side were attendant female figures; and images of Buddhist gods, larger than life size, stood in double rows.

Muriel concealed herself behind the colossal statue of Buddha and had not long to wait before from her hiding-place she saw two maskers, the Snake and the Dragon, enter the Temple cautiously. The latter remained on guard at the door while his companion, who carried a bundle, advanced furtively towards the great idol. As he drew near he opened the jaws of the mask and said in a low tone:

"Muriel! Muriel! Are you here?"

At the sound of the well-remembered voice the girl trembled violently. Her heart beat quickly as she came out from behind the statue. When he beheld her the masker lifted the snake's head off; and Muriel saw that the face revealed, disguised and stained a dull yellow, was that of her lover. At the sight of it she forgot the painful past, forgot her grievance against him, forgot the other woman, the sorrow that he had caused her. As he sprang towards her with outstretched arms she cried:

"Oh, thank God you've come, dear!"

Frank caught her in his eager embrace. Then under the image of the Great Dreamer who taught that Love is Illusion, that Affection is Error, that Desire but binds closer to the revolving Wheel they kissed fondly, passionately, like two faithful lovers met again after a lifetime of parting. And the grotesque Devil-Gods around glared fiercely at them. But the Lord Buddha looked mildly down, on his sculptured face the ineffable calm of *Nirvana*, the peace of freedom from all Desire attained at last. But, heedless of gods or devils, the man strained the woman to his heart and rained kisses on her lips, her eyes, her hair.

There was little time for dalliance. Danger encompassed them. Wargrave produced from the bundle that he carried a mask and a costume with a pair of high, felt-soled boots, which effectively disguised Muriel. Then they joined Tashi; and the three passed out into the vestibule only just in time, for here they found a group of lamas and peasants from a distant part of the country stopping for a moment to look at the great pictured Cycle of Existence painted on the wall before they entered the temple. The vestibule opened on to a courtyard lined with the cells of the monks of the monastery and, as this led to the great quadrangle in which the Miracle Play was being performed, a stream of mummers, lamas and laymen was passing through it, mostly going to the spectacle, although a few were coming away from it. With Muriel clinging closely to him Wargrave followed Tashi as he pushed his way through the crowd, exchanging jokes and careless banter as he went.

The rabbit-warren of steep lanes, flights of steps and bridges over ravines through the town built on the precipitous slopes of the hill was almost deserted, for most of the inhabitants had flocked to the Devil Dance.

So, unmolested and unnoticed, they reached the caravanserai in which the two men had lodged for several days before the festival. Here they hurriedly changed their costumes. When they emerged from it Muriel, her hair cropped almost to the scalp and her face stained a yellowish tint, was garbed as a boy-novice of a lamasery in the priestly dress, with a great rosary round her neck. In one hand she held a begging-bowl while with the other she guided the feeble steps of the aged lama whose disciple she was supposed to be. Behind them limped a lame lay-brother of their monastery.

In this disguise the fugitives met with no hindrance as they quitted the town for the open country, heading towards the south. Only when well clear of the houses did Frank and Muriel venture to converse in their own language. Wargrave narrated all that had happened to him since they had parted. Anyone watching them beyond earshot would have wondered at the joy that shone in the face of the young *chela* (disciple) clasping the hand of the old priest and gazing affectionately at him as they went along; for Frank was telling the girl of Violet's letter which had set him free. He described his many fruitless attempts to cross the frontier, his fortunate meeting with Badshah and the marvellous way in which the wonderful animal had helped him. Safely inside Bhutan he and Tashi had parted with the elephants in what appeared to be the same forest as the one in which Colonel Dermot and they had left the herd on their previous entry into the country. Frank had tried to imitate his chief in ordering Badshah to meet them there again; but he was very doubtful of the result.

They had not found it difficult to follow the trail left by Muriel's abductors, for once inside the border the Chinamen had not tried to hide themselves. At every village along the rough road Tashi had learned of their passing with their captive, so the two had followed them without difficulty to Tuna, where they soon discovered where the girl was imprisoned. The festival had offered them an un hoped-for opportunity of rescuing her. Tashi, once a star performer in similar devil dances in his own monastery, procured costumes and taught his companion what to do. As the number of those taking part in the performances ran to hundreds it was easy to slip in unobserved among them.

Then Muriel told of her adventures. But, far more interesting to both than the details of these mere happenings, each revealed to the other the longings, the love, the hopes and fears, that had filled his and her heart during the unhappy period of their estrangement.

Now began a wonderful odyssey that, but for the dread of pursuit and capture would have seemed a journey in Fairyland to the re-united lovers. Indeed, as they travelled on day after day and danger seemed left behind, they forgot everything in the joy of being together once more, their vows exchanged, their faith pledged, the Future a long vista of golden days of delight. It was well that Tashi was with them to be on the watch, for the lovers walked with their heads in the clouds.

And certainly theirs was an interesting pilgrimage. Bhutan is perhaps the least-known country in Asia, the last that has kept its cherished seclusion since Anglo-Indian troops burst the barrier of Tibet and flaunted the Union Jack in the streets of the fabled city of Lhassa. But Bhutan is still a secret, a mysterious, land. Only a few British Envoys, from Bogle in the latter half of the 18th Century to Claude White and Bell in the beginning of this, and their companions, had intruded on its privacy before Colonel Dermot. So that for the lovers it had all the fascination of the unknown.

Sometimes, among the ice-clad peaks of the giant ranges of the Himalayas, they crossed snowy passes fourteen thousand feet above the sea, and did not neglect to throw a stone upon the *obos*—the cairns that pious and superstitious travellers erect to propitiate the spirits of the passes. Sometimes the path led under beautiful cliffs of pure white crystalline limestone that in the brilliant sunlight shone like the finest marble. Often they journeyed through a lovely land of gently-sloping hills, of grassy uplands, of deep valleys giving delightful vistas of snow-clad mountains far away. They walked through pinewoods, through forests of maple, silver fir, and larch, and miles of huge bushes of flowering rhododendrons. They toiled up a rough and stony track over bare and desolate land that was an old moraine and under moraine terraces one above another, forming giant spurs of the rugged hills. There were dark and fearsome ravines, so deep that they could scarcely hear the roar of the foaming torrents rushing among the great boulders below as they crossed on swaying suspension bridges of iron chains. These had been built hundreds of years before by long-forgotten Chinese engineers. Three chains on one level supported the bamboo or plank footway, while one on either side served as a hand-rail, and a bamboo or grass lattice-work between them and the roadbearers hid from sight the deep gorge below. Often these bridges were only of ropes of twisted withes or grass and swung and swayed in terrifying fashion with the motion of the traveller. There were broad rivers over the eddying, swirling waters of which strong cantilever bridges of stout wooden beams were pushed out from the steep banks.

Truly a beautiful land Bhutan, at its loveliest perhaps in spring, when the hills and upland meadows where the yaks graze, ten thousand feet above the sea, blaze with the mingled colours of anemones blue and white, of yellow pansies and mauve and white irises, of large white roses and small yellow ones, of giant yellow primulas with six tiers of flowers, when the oaks and the chestnuts are clothed in young green, and the apricot, pear and orange trees are in bloom, when large and lovely blossoms cover that little-known tree that the Bhutanese call *chape*, when the bright green of the young grass runs up to the white snowfields. The woods are full of a pretty ground orchid, beautiful trailing blossoms of others droop from the boughs of the great trees, and on the magnesium limestone hills one of the rarest orchids grows in profusion.

But to the two pilgrims of Love the land seemed beautiful even now that the winter was not far distant. In the silent woods, hidden from prying eyes, they sat hand in hand and whispered to each other over and over again the oldest, sweetest story that the Earth has known. Strange to hear words of love from the lips of such a weird-looking couple; yet Muriel in her quaint disguise with her silky hair cropped to the scalp was as beautiful in her lover's eyes as when he had seen her in her prettiest frocks. And she thought the yellow-skinned, wrinkled old lama infinitely more attractive than the gay young subaltern of Ranga Duar—for he was her own now. Such is Love's glamour. Muriel had forgiven royally.

Bhutan is a Buddhist-ruled land, therefore slaying for sport and fishing in the rivers is prohibited; nay, more, the Maharajah sometimes forbids the killing of even domestic animals for food. So wild life abounds. The fugitives often saw flocks of burhel—called *nao* in Bhutan—feeding on the precipitous slopes of the higher hills. Once Frank and Muriel excitedly watched a snow-leopard stalking one of these big-horned sheep sixteen thousand feet above the sea-level. And in these heights they even saw an occasional lynx or wolf, generally only to be found in the highest elevations bordering on Tibet. Silver-haired *langur* apes, the white fringes around their black faces giving them a comic resemblance to aged negroes, awoke the echoes of the mountains with their deep booming cry; while in the lower valleys little brown monkeys mopped and mowed from the trees at the fugitives as they passed. On one occasion Muriel, exhilarated by the keen, life-giving air, ran gaily on ahead of the others in a wood—and came on a tiger enjoying its midday siesta. But the striped brute only uttered a startled "Wough! Wough!" like a big dog and dashed away through the undergrowth. Another time they disturbed a red bear feeding on the carcass of a strange beast that seemed a mixture of goat, donkey and deer—Tashi called it a *serao*. And at a lower elevation they blundered on two black bears—not flesh-eaters these, yet more dangerous—grubbing for roots, and on another occasion saw one climbing a tree in search of wild bees' nests.

In a dense jungle early one morning a beautiful black panther with a skin like watered silk glided stealthily by them, showing its white fangs and red mouth in an angry snarl as it went. And deep down in a valley they espied a rhinoceros feeding a thousand feet below them. But they came across no elephants; and Frank noted the fact despairingly as rendering even less probable a meeting with Badshah and his herd.

Bird-life abounded, from the snow partridges that flew in the hills eighteen thousand feet high to pigeons of every kind: birds of all sizes, from great eagles to the little quails that hid in the cornfields; lammergeiers that were fed on human bodies, the dead of families of high degree, exposed on a flat rock of slate with head and shoulders tied to a wooden axle that stretched the corpse like a rack. In Bhutan ordinary folk are cremated.

On their journey the fugitives met with wayfarers of every rank and class. On a steep mountain track they stood aside to let a high official go by. He was sitting pickaback in a cloth on a powerfully-built servant, the ends of the cloth knotted on the man's forehead. Behind trudged an escort of bare-legged swordsmen with leather shields and shining steel helmets. Coolies, male and female, followed, carrying the great man's baggage in baskets placed in the crutch of forked sticks tied on their backs. Sometimes they passed a rival lama glaring with jealous eye at them. Often they met groups of raiyats, sturdy peasants, thick-limbed, bare-footed, bare-headed, the women clear-eyed, deep-bosomed, but uglier than the males. These did reverence to the holy men and put their modest offerings of copper coins or food into Muriel's begging-bowl.

Another time it was a family group at food, eating by the wayside. The group consisted of a stout, ruddy-faced woman with close-cropped hair, hung with many necklaces of coral and turquoise, and waited on by her three meek and submissive husbands, all brothers—for this is a land of polyandry. She invited the fugitives to share their meal, and bade her dutiful spouses serve the supposed lamas. They proffered cooked rice coloured with saffron and other food in the excellent Bhutanese baskets woven with very finely split cane. These are made in two circular parts with rounded top and bottom pieces fitting so well that water can actually be carried in them. From sealed wicker-covered bamboos the hosts filled *choongas* (bamboo mugs) with *murwa*, the beer of the country, and *chang*, the native spirit. Frank and Muriel refused the liquor; but Tashi drank their share as well as his, to give the pious peasants an opportunity of acquiring merit. And wife and husbands thought themselves amply rewarded by a muttered blessing.

A very different figure was that of a man lame of the right leg and limping painfully down a steep hill in front of the fugitives. Muriel, full of pity, whispered to her lover after they had passed him: "Oh, the poor wretch! Did you see, dear, he had lost the right hand as well?" But she shuddered when she learned that the cripple was a murderer punished by the severing of the tendons of the leg and the loss of the hand that struck the fatal blow.

In the cultivated valleys, where barley, buckwheat and mustard grew, there were everywhere evidences of the religious feeling of the Western Bhutanese. Every hill was crowned with a *gompa* or chapel, *chortens* and praying-wheels stood beside the road, and *mendongs* or praying-walls, a mile long, their stones engraved with sacred words, were built near habitations.

In the villages the disguised fugitives were well treated. Food and lodging were offered them freely in the cabins as in the great houses of officials and rich folks, where they spent hours watching the skilled artisans among the feudal retainers of their hosts weaving silk, making woollen and cotton garments, brocade and embroideries, or hammering artistic designs on silver or copper plates backed with lac. None suspected the three of being other than they seemed. The Buddhism of Bhutan and Tibet to-day has but one article of faith—"Acquire merit by feeding and paying the lamas and they will win salvation for you." So rich and poor vied in giving their best to the holy wayfarers, and sought not to intrude on the meditations or privacy of lama and *chela*, and welcomed the cheery company of the more worldly lay brother who could crack a joke or empty a mug with any man and pitch the stone quoits or shoot an arrow in the archery contests better than the village champion.

Thus, contentedly and free from care, the three fugitives wandered on towards the south where on the frontier they expected their troubles to begin. One day when passing a hamlet by the roadside they tarried to look on at a wedding at which a buxom country maid was being married to a family of six brothers. The village headman performed the simple ceremony, which consisted of offering a bowl of *murwa* to the gods, then presenting a cupful to the bride and eldest bridegroom, blessing them, and expressing a hope that the union might be a fruitful one. The rest, after the usual presents had been given to the bride's relatives, was simply a matter of feasting everyone. The stranger lamas were invited to join; but Frank refused and dragged away the convivial Tashi, who was anxious to accept the invitation. Wargrave with difficulty led him aside and was so occupied in arguing with his discontented guide that he did not notice that Muriel had not followed.

A sudden cry from her and his name shrieked out wildly made him turn in alarm. To his horror he saw the girl struggling in the grasp of a Chinaman, while another on a mule and holding the bridle of a second animal was calling on the villagers in the Penlop's name to assist his comrade.

CHAPTER XV

A STRANGE RESCUE

Neither Muriel, absorbed in watching the wedding, nor the two men engrossed in their dispute had noticed the Chinese come riding along the road and pulling up when they saw the peasants gathered together. One of them had been about to question the villagers from his saddle when his eyes fell on the disguised girl standing apart from the crowd. He stared at her for a few moments. Then he spoke hurriedly to his companions, and, springing from the mule's back seized Muriel in a rough grasp.

At her cry Frank ran back, forgetting his disguise. He recognised in her assailant the pock-marked officer of the *Amban*. The man, seeing him coming, drew a revolver; but Wargrave whipped out his pistol quicker and without hesitation shot him through the heart. The Chinaman collapsed to the ground and in his fall dragged the girl down. His comrade fired at his slayer and, missing him, wheeled his mule round and galloped off. Tashi returned the shot while Frank ran to Muriel. He fired several times and the rider was apparently hit; for he fell forward on the neck of his animal; but he recovered himself and, crouching low, was still in the saddle when a turn in the road hid him from sight.

The startled villagers scattered and fled in terror at the tragedy suddenly enacted in their midst, the six cowardly husbands deserting their new-made wife and leaving her to follow as they ran away, which she did at her utmost speed.

Frank freed Muriel from the stiffened grasp of the dead man and helped her to her feet; then the three hurried from the fatal spot, so lately filled by a cheerful crowd of merrymakers and now tenanted only by the corpse that lay with sightless eyes staring up at the blue sky. They made for the shelter of jungle-clad hills that rose a couple of miles away.

From now onwards, for two or three weeks, the fugitives led the lives of hunted rats. They travelled generally only by night, avoiding villages and farms, and keeping away from the road as much as possible. They were in the southern zone of Bhutan lying nearest the Indian frontier, a region of precipitous hills ten or twelve thousand feet high, their sides clothed with dense vegetation, of deep, fever-laden valleys of awe-inspiring gorges, of rivers liable to sudden floods and rising in a few hours thirty or forty feet.

Tashi in various disguises occasionally visited villages in search of food and information; while the lovers awaited his return in some hidden spot, Frank holding the anxious girl in his arms and trying to calm her fears. In one excursion the ex-lama got the first definite news of the pursuit. He learned that the *Amban* had returned unexpectedly to Tuna, the plot in his favour in Peking having failed. He was not satisfied by the tales told by the monks of the lamasery to account for Muriel's mysterious disappearance, which was that she had been carried off by devils. He insisted on a search being made for her along the road to the Indian border and sent his own Chinese guards to direct the pursuit. The companion of the pock-marked man had got back to Tuna and told of their recognition of her. Yuan Shi Hung, furious at the death of his officer but overjoyed at the discovery of the girl, set out at once with his personal followers and a body of the Penlop's soldiers to take up the chase.

The fugitives, hotly pursued, had several hair-breadth escapes. Once they almost blundered into a bivouac of their enemies at night. They succeeded at last in reaching the great forest in which Wargrave and the ex-lama had parted from the elephants, the forest which ran along the foot and clothed the northern slopes of the second-last range of mountains between them and the frontier. But alas! there was no trace of Badshah's herd; yet this was not surprising, for they found themselves in a part unknown to them. Through this vast jungle they travelled by day, until one evening they reached a deep gorge that pierced the range and seemed to promise a passage through the mountains.

They camped for the night by its mouth, intending to enter it at sunrise. Dawn found them breaking their fast on a scanty meal of dried mutton and bananas. Suddenly Tashi stopped eating and held up a warning hand. His companions drew their pistols, Frank having given his second weapon to Muriel. Presently they heard the faint sounds of an animal's approach on their track. Just as they had risen silently to their feet three gigantic dogs appeared, scenting their trail. They were Tibetan mastiffs, such as are to be seen chained in the court yards of lamaseries. At sight of them the huge brutes stopped, crouched for an instant, showing their fangs in a fierce snarl, and then rushed at them.

Without hesitation the three fired. One of the dogs dropped dead; but the others, though wounded, came on. One bounded at Muriel. Frank threw himself in front of her, firing rapidly at it. Several bullets struck it, but the savage brute sprang at his throat. He grappled with it, striving by main strength to hold it off. Muriel rushed to his aid and putting her pistol to the mastiff's head shot it dead. Tashi meantime had killed the third.

Knowing that their pursuers must be close behind the dogs they fled into the gorge. On either hand stupendous cliffs towered up two thousand feet above them, scarcely a hundred yards apart, seeming to meet overhead and shut off the sky. Here and there the giant walls were split from top to bottom in slits opening off the main passage. As the fugitives ran on the gorge narrowed until it was scarcely fifty yards wide, and

they began to fear that it might prove only a *cul-de-sac* in which they would be hopelessly trapped. They heard cries behind them, strangely echoed by the rocky walls. Breathless, panting, their tired limbs giving way under them, they staggered blindly on.

The pass turned sharply to the right. As they approached the bend they became aware of a dull rumbling, and the ground, which suddenly began to slope steeply down, shook violently under their feet. Wondering what new danger, what fresh horror, awaited them they stumbled on, turned the corner and stopped short in dismayed despair.

From side to side the gorge was filled with a tumultuous, racing flood of foam-flecked water, a rushing river that poured out of a natural tunnel in the steeply sloping rocky bottom of the pass as from a sluice. It surged against the precipitous cliffs, leaping up against the walls that hemmed it in, sweeping in mad onset of white-topped waves and eddying whirlpools flinging spray high in air. The stoutest swimmer would be tossed about helplessly in it, rolled over and over, choked, suffocated, sucked under, the life beaten out of him.

For one wild moment Frank thought of seizing Muriel in his arms and springing into the raging flood, but the sheer hopelessness of escape that way checked him. It was certain death. Better to turn and face their pursuers. There was more chance of life in battling with a score or two of Bhutanese swordsmen than with the tumbling, tossing waters.

So, pistol in hand, the three retraced their steps, looking everywhere for a suitable spot to make a stand. But on either hand the cliffs rose sheer, their faces seamed here and there with cracks, but with never a crevice big enough to shelter them. They passed the bend; and a few hundred yards beyond it some large rocks fallen from the cliff on one side lay close against its base.

Frank resolved to take their stand here. It was the only cover visible. They fitted the holster-stocks to their pistols, converting them into carbines which could be fired from the shoulder, enabling them to aim more accurately at a longer range. Then while Tashi crept cautiously along the pass to scout, the subaltern and the girl examined the position for defence. Thus occupied they were startled by shots ringing out, echoing down the vast canyon. Taking cover they saw their companion running back followed by a body of men, a few mounted, the majority on foot. Some had fire-arms, others bows, the rest swords.

Wargrave and Muriel opened on the pursuers with their automatic weapons and checked them. Tashi was about a hundred yards from shelter when a shot struck him. He stumbled and fell, while a howl of delight rose from his foes. As he tried to struggle up bullets kicked up the dust round him and several arrows dropped near.

"Muriel, loose off as many cartridges as you can to cover me," said Wargrave, laying his pistol beside her.

Before the girl realised his meaning he had sprung out from the rocks and was running towards Tashi. For a moment the pursuers were puzzled by his action and then fired their rifles and matchlocks and shot arrows at him. But unscathed he reached the wounded man who had been so faithful a comrade to him. Raising him on his back he staggered towards the rocks, while Muriel pumped lead at the enemy and succeeded in keeping down their fire somewhat. As Wargrave laid the ex-lama on the ground in shelter Tashi seized his hand and touched it with his lips and forehead in silent gratitude. Frank hurriedly examined and bandaged the wound made by a large-calibre bullet, which had passed through the leg below the knee, lacerating the muscles but not injuring the bone. Then he took up his post again, while Tashi dragged himself up behind a rock and opened fire on their foes.

These were for the most part Bhutanese, but there were several Chinese among them.

"Look! Look, Frank! There's the *Amban*," cried Muriel excitedly, pointing to a man who rode into sight along the pass on a white mule.

She fired at him. The bullet missed him but apparently went unpleasantly close, for Yuan Shi Hung galloped back into shelter behind a projecting buttress of the cliffs.

The attackers numbered sixty or eighty. They were apparently staggered by the rapid fire poured into them, which killed or wounded several of them. Some tried to find shelter by huddling against the side of the pass and others flung themselves on the ground behind boulders; but the leaders urged them on.

There could be little doubt as to the issue of the fight. The bullets from the Chinamen's rifles and the Bhutanese matchlocks spattered the rocks or the face of the cliff; but the archers began to shoot almost vertically into the air from their strong bamboo bows, and several iron-tipped, four-feathered arrows dropped behind the cover, one missing Wargrave by a hand's breadth.

Fearing for Muriel he tried to shield her with his body.

"What's the use, dearest?" she said. "If you are killed I don't want to live. Indeed, we must both die now. I shall not be taken alive. Kiss me and tell me once more that you love me."

He held her to his heart in a passionate embrace and kissed her fondly.

"They are coming now, sahib," said Tashi. "And I have only a few cartridges left."

The lovers paid no heed.

"Goodbye, my dear, dear love," whispered Muriel, "I'm happier dying with you than living without you."

Frank kissed her, solemnly now, for the last time. Then they turned to face the enemy. The swordsmen were massing for a charge. Crouching low they held their shields before them and waved their long-bladed *dahs* above their heads, uttering fierce yells.

Suddenly the *Amban* and other mounted men who had been sheltering out of sight dashed into view and rode madly into the rear ranks, knocking down and trampling on anyone in their way. The men on foot looked behind and broke into a run, coming on in a disordered mob. But it was not a charge—it was more like a panic. For with wild cries of frantic terror they fled past the defenders who, fearing a trick, fired their last cartridges into them, dropping several, some of whom tried to rise and drag themselves on in dread of something terrible behind.

Then into sight came a vast herd of wild elephants, filling the gorge from cliff to cliff and moving at a slow trot. A huge bull led them, lines of other tuskers behind him, crowds of females and calves bringing up the rear. The onset of the mass of great monsters was terrifying. It was appalling, irresistible.

Muriel cried out:

"It's Badshah! Frank, it's Badshah! Look at the leader! Don't you see?"

Tashi stared at the oncoming herd. Then he quietly unfixing his pistol and put it away in the holster.

"We are saved, sahib," he said with the calm fatalism of the East. "The God of the Elephants has sent them."

And he limped out from behind the rocks. The two Europeans followed him. Their foes had disappeared, all but the dead and wounded.

Badshah—for it was he—swerved out of his course and came to them, while the herd went on, opening out to pass him as he sank to his knees before the humans. Tashi, despite his wound, climbed on to his neck, while Wargrave mounted behind him and Muriel took her seat on the broad back, clinging to her lover. Then the tusker rose and moved swiftly after the herd.

As he rounded the bend a strange sight met the eyes of those he carried. Their enemies were huddled together in terror near the brink of the tunnel from which the surging water rushed out. Some endeavoured to pluck up courage to throw themselves into the river, while the majority had turned to face the elephants. But they were paralysed with fright. A few tried to discharge their fire-arms or loosed their arrows with trembling hands. As the elephants, quickening their pace, rushed on in an irresistible mass some of the men, crazed with fright, ran to meet them. Others flung themselves to the ground where they were.

But over both the great monsters passed, treading them to pulp under the ponderous feet. The animals of the mounted men, as terrified as their riders, swung about and sprang headlong into the river. Many of the men on foot did the same. The heads of animals and men appeared and disappeared, bobbing up and down, then their bodies were rolled over and over, tossed up on the waves and sucked under. One by one they disappeared.

A few of the panic-stricken mob had tried to climb the precipitous cliffs in vain. One, however, getting his hands into a narrow, slanting crack, dragged himself up a few feet.

It was the *Amban*. Frank drew his pistol; but Muriel clung to his arm and cried:

"Oh, spare the poor wretch!"

Tashi had no scruples, but his magazine was empty and he searched in vain for a cartridge.

But Yuan Shi Hung's time had come. Badshah's trunk shot out and caught the climber's ankle. The Chinaman was plucked from the face of the cliff and hurled to the ground. A frenzied shriek burst from him as the tusk was driven into his shuddering body, which in an instant was trodden to a bloody pulp. Muriel hid her face against her lover, but the agony of the wretch's dying yell rang in her ears.

Not one of their enemies was left alive. Then the elephants one by one slid and slithered down into the rushing water which was very little below the brink. The mothers supported the youngest calves with their trunks, the less immature climbing on to their backs. Tashi checked Badshah as he was about to follow the herd into the river and, lame as he was, slid down to the ground. He searched the crushed and mangled corpses of his fellow-countrymen and collected their girdles until he had enough to knot and plait into two ropes, one to go about Badshah's neck, the other around the great body. More girdles sufficed to join these together and supply cords by which the men and the woman on his back could tie themselves on to the ropes and to each other securely. When this was done Badshah slid into the river. As elephants do he sank in the water until only the upper part of his head and the tip of his upraised trunk were above it. Without the precaution that Tashi had taken his riders would have been instantly swept away.

Only elephants could have battled successfully with that raging torrent. The upflung spray and leaping waves hid the herd from the fugitives as they clung desperately to the ropes and to each other.

Eighteen months had gone by. In the garden of the Political Agent's bungalow in Ranga Duar Colonel Dermot, completely restored to health, and his wife stood with his Assistant, Major Hunt and Macdonald. They were watching Mrs. Wargrave who, with Brian and Eileen clinging to her, was holding out her two months' old baby to a great elephant with a single tusk. The animal raised its trunk as though in salute, then, lowering it, gently touched with its sensitive tip the laughing infant whose tiny hand instinctively clutched it and held it fast.

With a smile Muriel turned her head and looked at her husband.

"Badshah has accepted him. Your son is free of the herd," said Colonel Dermot.

THE END.

1 (return)

A similar incident occurred in real life near Alipur Duar in Eastern Bengal to a lady and an officer on a female elephant named Dundora during a beat. But in this case it was the man that killed the tiger with his second rifle when it was standing on the elephant's head with its fore-paws on the *howdah*-rail. I can personally testify to Dundora's immobility when facing a charging tiger.—THE AUTHOR.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE JUNGLE GIRL ***

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