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Burma, by B. M. Croker

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The Road to Mandalay

A Tale of Burma

by B. M. Croker

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TO
LT.-COLONEL A. E. CONGDON
LATE ROYAL MUNSTER FUSILIERS
FROM HIS OLD FRIEND
THE AUTHOR

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THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

CHAPTER I

BLINDS DOWN

"What do you think, Mitty? All the blinds are down at 'Littlecote,'" announced Miss Jane Tebbs, bursting open the drawing-room door and disturbing her sister in a surreptitious game of patience. In well-ordered households the mistress is understood to have various domestic tasks claiming her attention in the morning. Cards should never appear until after sunset.

"Blinds down?" echoed Miss Tebbs, hastily moving a newspaper in the hope of concealing her ill-doing. "Why are you in such a taking, Jane? I suppose the family are away."

"Rubbish!" exclaimed her relative, sinking into a chair and dragging off her gloves. "Did you ever know them all away together? Of course, Mrs. Shafto goes gadding, and Douglas is at Sandhurst, but 'he' seldom stirs. It is my opinion that something has happened. The Shaftos have lived at 'Littlecote' for ten years, and I have never seen the blinds down before to-day."

"Oh, you are so fussy and ready to imagine things!" grumbled Mitty, who meanwhile had collected and pocketed the cards with surpassing dexterity. "I don't forget the time when the curate had a smart lady in his lodgings, and you nearly went out of your mind: rampaging up and down the village, and telling everyone that the bishop must be informed; and after all your outcry she turned out to be the young man's mother!"

"That's true. I confess I was misled; but she made herself up to look like a girl of twenty. You can't deny that she powdered her nose and wore white shoes. But this is different. Drawn blinds are a sign of trouble, and there is trouble at 'Littlecote,' as sure as my name is Jane."

"Then, in that case, why don't you go up to the house and inquire?"—The query suggested a challenge.

"*Mitty!* You know perfectly well that I have never been inside the door since Mrs. Shafto was so rude to me about the book club, when I wrote and protested against the 'loose' novels she put upon her list. Why, you saw her letter yourself!"

Here a pause ensued, during which Miss Jane blew into every separate finger of her gloves and folded them up with the neatest exactitude. Presently she murmured with a meditative air:

"I was thinking of asking Eliza to run over."

"Oh, you may ask!" rejoined her sister, with a sniff of scorn, "but Eliza won't stir. There's a beefsteak pudding for dinner. And that reminds me that this is the egg woman's day, and I must see if she has called. I shall want three dozen."

And without another word the elder Miss Tebbs bustled out of the room and abandoned her relative to solitude and speculation.

Matilda and Jane Tebbs were the elderly orphans of a late vicar, and still considered the parish and community of Tadpool their special charge. Miss Jane was organist and Sunday school superintendent; Miss Tebbs held mothers' meetings and controlled the maternity basket and funds. Subsequent to their retirement from the vicarage the sisters had known straitened circumstances; in fact, had experienced the sharp nip of real poverty; but, no matter how painful their necessities, they contrived to keep up appearances and never withdrew from society, nor suffered their little circle to forget that their grandfather had been an archdeacon. In spite of anxious times and scanty funds, they clung with loyal tenacity to certain family relics, in the shape of old silver, china and prints, many of which were highly marketable.

In those evil days it was whispered that "the Tebbs had only one best dress between them"—a certain rich black silk. As Miss Jane was at least six inches taller than dumpy Miss Mitty, difficulties of length were cunningly surmounted by an adjustable flounce. Needless to add that on festive occasions, such as high teas, little dinners, and card parties, the sisters never appeared together, the one "out of turn" invariably excusing herself with toothache or a heavy cold. Although they argued and bickered in private, and had opposing tastes in the matter of boiling eggs and drawing tea, the Tebbs were a deeply attached pair and presented an unbroken front to the outer world.

After several years of brave struggle, during which the wolf of want prowled hungrily round Highfield Cottage, a substantial and unexpected fortune, fell to the Tebbs, restored them to comfortable independence—and to the notice of such far-sighted parents as happened to be in quest

of useful and benevolent godmothers. The sisters made but little change in their style of living; they now owned handsome furs, a separate wardrobe, and not a few rich silks; they still continued to occupy the cottage, and retained in their service a certain tyrannical treasure, widely known and feared as "the Tebbs's Eliza." Although an admirable and trustworthy servant, Eliza ruled the household, permitted no late hours, no breakfasts in bed, no unnecessary fires, no unnecessary guests. Her mistresses were obliged to do a considerable amount of household work; for instance, they made their beds and Miss Tebbs dusted the china; she also had the charge of the linen and store-room; whilst Miss Jane was responsible for the silver, the lamps, and, on Eliza's day out, "the door."

When the door was answered by Eliza in person, her manner was so fierce and intimidating that nervous callers complained that the Tebbs' maid looked as if she was ready to fly at, and bite them! Ill-natured tongues declared that the tyrant was tolerated merely because she was a channel for the most far-reaching, fresh and sensational gossip. But let us hope that this was a malignant libel!

Highfield Cottage was old, two-storied and solid; elsewhere than Tadpool it might have ventured to pose as a villa residence, but Tadpool, a fine, sixteenth century, self-respecting and historical village, tolerated no villas. If such abodes ventured to arise, they sprouted timidly in the fields beyond its boundaries. Moreover, the age and history of Highfield Cottage were too widely known for any change of name. The cottage was connected with the high road by a prim little garden and a red-tiled footpath; eight long narrow windows commanded a satisfactory outlook—including Littlecote Hall—a square white mansion withdrawn in dignified retirement behind elms and beeches, in age the contemporary of its humbler *vis-à-vis*.

Here resided Edward Shafto, late Fellow of St. John's, Oxford, his wife Lucilla, and his son Douglas. Ten years previously the family had descended on Tadpool as from the skies—or as a heavy stone cast into some quiet mill pond. No one in the neighbourhood could discover anything about them—although Jane Tebbs's exertions in the matter were admittedly prodigious and unwearied. The house agent proved disappointingly vague, and could only inform her that a gentleman who happened to hear of the place had come down from London, inspected the house, liked its lofty, spacious rooms with their old mahogany doors (it recalled his home), was much taken with the gardens—and promptly signed the lease! Certainly it was an audacious step to invade a strange neighbourhood without a social sponsor or reference. However, the community breathed more freely when they beheld the new tenant of "Littlecote," a middle-aged, distinguished-looking individual; and Miss Jane discovered, or pretended to discover, that he was one of the Shaftos of Shafton Court.

Mrs. Shafto (who looked surprisingly young to be the mother of a tall lad of ten) had a pretty figure, quantities of lightish red hair, an animated manner, and a pair of hard blue eyes. She was fashionably turned out, and her hat of a remarkable shape was discussed in the village for weeks.

The arrival of furniture vans, horses, carriages and a number of servants, afforded unqualified interest to the Misses Tebbs; and moreover advertised the fact that the new-comers were well-to-do; and after allowing a reasonable time for the strangers to settle down, the neighbours called.

By and by these calls were returned by Mrs. Shafto in a smart victoria and a still smarter costume; her husband was merely represented by a neatly printed card, which bore the name of "Mr. Edward Shafto, Athenaeum Club." Mr. Edward Shafto was rarely to be met beyond his grounds and garden, unless driving through the village to Bricklands railway station, en route for London. He did not sit on the Bench, nor was he a churchwarden, the usual grounds of meeting. When encountered he was invariably agreeable and had charming easy manners, but not much to say for himself, and his acquaintance, like the farmers and the claret, got "no forrarder." Gradually the painful truth was accepted that Shafto did not care to know people. He never dined out, he did not shoot or hunt, but it was mysteriously whispered that "he wrote." What, no one precisely knew, but one fact was common property: he was fond of horticulture and the once famous gardens of "Littlecote" had been delightfully restored.

If Tadpool was held at arm's length by Edward Shafto, the community had no difficulty in making acquaintance with his consort, a pretty vivacious lady who accepted all invitations, and herself gave tennis

parties, bridge parties, luncheons and teas. For some time the neighbourhood was disposed to like her, although perhaps she was not quite "off the top shelf," a little too demonstrative, loud and unreserved; then by degrees Mrs. Shafto fell into disfavour; quiet folk were afraid of her, she enjoyed repeating ill-natured remarks, was capricious in her likes and dislikes, made a good deal of mischief, and separated chief friends.

The lady was not disposed to be reticent respecting her family affairs; there was something satisfactory in this! People learned that her husband was really a Shafto of Shafton, and also that his elder brother, who actually reigned in the family place, was "a brute." She volubly explained that they had deserted the Border and moved south, partly because "the pater" wished to be within easy reach of London, his Club and musty old libraries, and also because it was more convenient for Douglas, who was at Winchester.

Then gradually it came to pass that the village bored the new-comer; bored her to death. She became restless and quarrelsome, had a coolness with the vicarage regarding a pew, with Mrs. Tremenheere at the Park about a housemaid, and actually cut Mrs. General Finch "dead" in the village post office, owing to a mislaid visiting-card. At the end of three years Lucilla Shafto had embroiled herself with almost everyone in her immediate vicinity, and found her true level and most congenial companions in the busy bustling town of Bricklands, a rapidly growing and prosperous mushroom place, situated thirty miles south of London, and within two miles of our ancient and respectable hamlet. Here she belonged to several clubs, bridge, tennis and croquet; enjoyed being a Triton among minnows; entertained a third-rate set at "Littlecote," and joined gay little theatre parties to London to "do a play," and return home by the last train.

Housekeeping sat but lightly on Mrs. Shafto's graceful shoulders, for the Shaftos also possessed a family treasure named Hannah, an elderly woman, who had been in service with "the family" and now managed the house, and looked after the comforts and buttons of her master and his boy.

Mr. and Mrs. Shafto went their separate ways, and were rarely to be seen in one another's company. The lady assured her friends that her husband's health was indifferent, and that he did not care for society; for her part she liked amusement, excitement, life; whilst he preferred to read, write, overlook his garden, and occasionally run up to London. She did not trouble herself much about her son—a handsome active boy, resembling his father in looks. Between these there undoubtedly existed a deep affection. During the holidays they were frequently to be met walking or riding together, and Shafto *père* would so far emerge from his retirement as to be a proud spectator at cricket matches in Tremenheere Park and elsewhere. Douglas and two of the Tremenheere boys were schoolmates, and he was in continual request at their home. Unfortunately these visits were displeasing to Mrs. Shafto, as was also his intimacy with the young people at the vicarage; and poor Douglas had an awkward part to play. He could not avoid or drop his friends; yet, on the other hand, there were painful difficulties with his mother, who declared that he was a mean fellow to run after people who had *insulted* her, and one day, when in a towering passion, she had been overheard to scream "that he was a thorn in her side, and a true Shafto!"

But all this time Miss Jane Tebbs remains stationed at the drawing-room window, watching the road with unwinking vigilance. For a long while she beheld no object of special interest, but at last, after seeing the grocer's cart, a travelling tinker, two cows and a boy go by, her patience was handsomely rewarded. To her delight, she descried Mrs. Billing, the doctor's wife, emerge from "Littlecote" and, hammering on the window to attract notice, she flew down to open the hall door.

Mrs. Billing, a stout, middle-aged lady, looked unusually hot and flustered as she waddled through the little green gate and entered the cottage.

"Why, my dear, you seem quite upset!" cried Jane, as she welcomed the visitor, "come into the dining-room, and have a glass of milk."

But Mrs. Billing dismissing the proffered refreshment with a dramatic wave of her hand, subsided upon the only chair in the narrow hall and gasped out:

"I have just come from 'Littlecote.' Mr. Shafto is gone—he died last night!"

CHAPTER II

WHAT HANNAH SAID

On hearing this announcement, Jane Tebbs gave a little lurch and leant against the wall in speechless horror; and yet in her heart she had been more than half expecting—we will not say hoping for—some tragedy. Then she made a rush to the store-room, where Miss Mitty, invested in a large blue apron, was methodically marking eggs.

"Sister, sister, come out!" she cried. "Mrs. Billing is here; she says Mr. Shafto is dead; I told you that something had happened!"

"Dead!" repeated Mitty, staring blankly at her relative. Then she cast aside her apron and hurried into the hall. "Let us all go into the dining-room," she continued, leading the way. "What a shocking thing, Mrs. Billing!"—turning to her visitor. "Do tell us the particulars. I can hardly believe it! Why, I saw Mr. Shafto in Bricklands on Tuesday, and he looked as well as he ever did in his life."

"That was the day he heard the news," announced Mrs. Billing, selecting an arm-chair and casting off her feather boa.

"Bad news?" suggested Miss Jane.

"Very bad indeed—could not be worse. He heard he'd lost every penny he possessed in the wide world."

"Great patience!" ejaculated Miss Tebbs; "you don't say so; but how?"

"Well, you know he was always comfortably off; indeed, one might say rich."

"That's true! They keep five maids indoors, and a charwoman three times a week, two men and a boy in the garden, and two men in the stables," glibly enumerated Miss Jane. "All that is not done on small means, and I happen to know that Mr. Shafto himself paid everything monthly—which is more than we can say for his wife; even her bridge losses"; here she halted on the brink of scandal.

After hesitating for a second, Mrs. Billing continued:

"Well, it appears, from what my husband can gather, that Mr. Shafto trusted all his money and investments to a man who had managed his affairs for years, and in whom he had the most absolute confidence; he just drew his income regularly, lived his quiet life, and never troubled his head about business. It seems that for a considerable time this agent had been speculating with his clients' capital, and paying them the interest to the day. He staved off the reckoning by every possible device, and when he could no longer hide his wickedness, when liabilities poured in, and proceedings were instituted, he shot himself! Not much comfort in that for the families he has beggared. I believe he had a splendid establishment at Hampstead; greenhouses, pictures, motor-cars, and entertained like a prince. He squandered the handsome fortune that was left to Mr. Shafto, and all that Mr. Shafto could be sure of, about a hundred and fifty pounds a year, belongs to Douglas."

"Oh, my dear, never mind the money, but do tell us about poor Mr. Shafto," urged Jane. "What was the cause of his death? Suicide? This morning I thought I heard a shot!"

"No, no, no—heart failure," hastily interposed Mrs. Billing. "He was always troubled with a rickety heart, and on several occasions my husband attended him for rather dangerous fainting attacks; no doubt that was partly the reason why he lived so quietly, just taken up with his books, his garden, and, when he was at home, his boy. It appears that when Mr. Shafto heard of the smash, he went straight up to London, interviewed a lawyer, and learnt the worst. He returned in the afternoon, very tired and excited, broke the news to his wife, and had a serious fainting attack. My husband was sent for, but he found Mr. Shafto sinking. He died at midnight. He himself had wired for Douglas, who arrived just in time for the end. Poor boy! He feels it terribly."

"Yes," assented Miss Mitty, "Douglas and his father were such friends. The loss of money will make a sad difference to him. There will be no going into the Army now, no more hunting and cricket; he will have to take a clerkship. Did you see him?"

"Yes. He and my Freddy are great pals, so I know him pretty well. I declare he gave me a shock, he looked utterly heart-broken; and he said: 'It is so sudden, so frightfully sudden—about the pater; the money may come back somehow or other, but he is gone for ever; I'll never see him again. If he had only known me—or spoken to me!' And then he just laid his head upon his arms and sobbed like a girl."

"And Mrs. Shafto, how does *she* bear this double loss?" inquired Miss Jane magisterially.

"She had one fit of screaming hysterics after another. If you ask *me*, I believe it's the money that touches her most keenly; my husband begged me to go up this morning, and see if I could do anything. She has no intimate friends here, and I have sent to Mrs. Boomer and Mrs. Jake; they will be over from Bricklands immediately. The doctor has given a certificate, and has undertaken to see about the funeral, and sent the notice to the *Times* and *Morning Post*. From what old Hannah told me, it seems that Mr. Shafto and his family were not on terms; I believe the quarrel had something to do"—she paused and glanced from one to the other of her eager listeners—"with Mrs. Shafto, and I am not surprised. They did not approve of the marriage—it was a mistake."

"I'm afraid it was," agreed Miss Mitty briskly; "they never appeared a well-matched couple; he, so reserved and aristocratic, and she such a gabbling, fluffy, restless creature—crazy about bridge and dress. I wonder who she was?"

"I can tell you that!" was Mrs. Billing's unexpected reply. "Mr. Shafto was a Fellow of his College at Oxford, wealthy and distinguished—he had taken no end of honours. He was hooked—there is no other word for it—by the niece of a local book-seller! He was an important customer, and the girl always contrived to be there, when he came in and out, and was so sympathetic, and bright and lively, as well as being uncommonly pretty, that the poor man lost his head and, with very little pressure from the uncle, married her. It was all scrambled up in a hurry, before his friends could turn round, or interfere. Of course he had to resign his fellowship and his beautiful rooms overlooking the garden, and he took his bride abroad. His relations dropped him and he dropped his Oxford friends; then he went and settled in the north. He must have lived there for years; his next move was here."

"And have you always known this?" demanded Miss Mitty, her countenance expressing injury and jealousy. Fancy Mrs. Billing knowing this story all that time and keeping it to herself; how sly!

"Oh, only lately," replied the visitor in an apologetic key; "an old aunt of mine lives in Oxford, and I met her in town last Easter. Somehow the name of Shafto cropped up, and I heard the whole tale. I told my husband and he said I'd better hold my tongue, and so I have, until now, when it's of no consequence who knows—as of course 'Littlecote' must be given up, and the Shaftos will go away."

"Well, we have often wondered who she was? and how Shafto—who looked like a duke—came to marry her," said Miss Tebbs; "such an odd, flighty, uncertain sort of creature, always for strangers, instead of her home. That poor boy never saw much of his mother; I believe he was hustled off to a preparatory school when he was about seven, and when he happened to be here for his holidays it was his father who took him about. I am very sorry for Douglas, a handsome, cheery, nice fellow," she continued, "always with a pleasant word, even for an old woman like me. The rectory lads and the Tremenheeres just love him!"

"Luckily there are no girls at the rectory," remarked Miss Mitty.

"Douglas is but nineteen, and really only a boy," protested Mrs. Billing.

"Well, this affair will make a man of him, or I'm greatly mistaken."

"More likely it will make him a slave," argued Jane; "he is bound to support his mother, and a hundred and fifty pounds a year won't go far with her! And now I dare say she will have her wish and be able to live in London. I suppose there will be an auction at 'Littlecote'?"

"Yes, of course," assented Mrs. Billing, "and that is sure to bring in a handsome sum—unless there are liabilities and debts. I've always admired that Crown Derby tea service—dark blue and gold."

"I know," rejoined Miss Tebbs, "a beautiful long set, and there's a nice little old Sheffield tea urn that we could do with! I expect the kitchen things will go pretty cheap; we want a new preserving pan."

"Talking of the kitchen, reminds me of food," remarked the visitor rising. "My husband will be back clamouring for his lunch and I must run," and in spite of her size, Mrs. Billing was out of the house in less than no time, pursued by a volley of questions to the very gate.

During that afternoon there was an unusual amount of visiting and talking; the recent event had stirred the village to its depths, but beyond the facts disclosed by Mrs. Billing everything was surmise and regret;

the personality of the late Edward Shafto, though slightly known, was much respected. "He was a gentleman"—the statement implied a left-handed compliment to his wife—"and his purse was ever open to the poor; it was said that he was a secret benefactor to various aged people, and to the local charities."

As the Misses Tebbs sat at supper the following night—a frugal meal of cocoa and bread and butter—Eliza tramped in, still wearing her hat; it had been her afternoon out. She seemed to be a little breathless, and was undoubtedly charged with some weighty intelligence.

"Well, Eliza, what is it?" eagerly inquired Miss Tebbs.

"I just thought I'd step over to 'Littlecote' this evening, and see Hannah." Oh, priceless handmaiden!

"Yes—and what did she tell you?"

Eliza placed her hands on her hips—invariable preliminary to an important announcement. "She took me to see the corpse; he looked beautiful, just like a marble statue; and there in front of the dead, what do you think Hannah told me? That Mrs. Shafto had *killed* him!" She paused to contemplate the effect of this statement. "Yes, his heart was always weak, he couldn't stand no shocks, and when he come back wore out from London, and told her as how he was ruined, the screams of that woman was enough to bring the house down! Hannah ran in and there was he, lying back in a chair, and she standing over him with a face all worked up, and her hands clenched, shouting at him that it was all through his lunacy and laziness they were beggared—and she wished he was *dead*. I couldn't tell you all the awful things she said, but he fainted right away and never come to again. Now, what do you say to that?" and she surveyed her audience judicially.

The sisters remained dumb; for once, speech had failed them.

"As for caring," continued Eliza, "Mrs. Shafto doesn't feel no more than this table," rapping it with her bony knuckles; "all she minds is about *the money*—and already they say she has been routing among his papers, searching for his bank book. Oh! she is an awful woman, her heart is just a stone. As for poor Master Douglas, now there's real grief! He hasn't tasted a bite or sup, and he looks crushed. Everyone in the place will be sorry for him and for his father; but as far as Mrs. Shafto is concerned, when she's paid off the money she owes—the sooner the place can get shut of her the better!"

CHAPTER III

THE CLOSED HOUSE

The break-up of the home at Littlecote Hall was a speedy and complete affair; Miss Jane Tebbs, being practically on the spot, volunteered invaluable assistance. Always energetic and anxious to be "up and doing," and with a sadly restricted field for her activities, here was a grand opportunity absolutely within her reach. The second Miss Tebbs had an immense acquaintance and correspondence, a fairly, good business head and, to her late enemy Mrs. Shafto, she ultimately proved a veritable tower of strength. The recent sad catastrophe had melted Jane's heart, and she promptly appeared in "Littlecote" drawing-room, waving a large olive branch—which her former adversary most thankfully accepted. In such a crisis as the present there was no more helpless, hopeless creature than Lucilla Shafto—a woman who was always ready to transfer her burdens to others. Strange to say, she somewhat distrusted her intimates in Bricklands; it seemed to her that their questions and sympathy were chiefly founded on vulgar curiosity and greedy self-interest. "How was she left? What had become of all the money? What was the boy going to do? Where would she settle? Would she not be glad to get rid of some of her smart summer clothes, now that she would be in weeds for at least two years? *What* about her sables?"

Jane Tebbs was totally different; an honest and single-hearted woman, she wrote business letters, interviewed the local agent, arranged for the auction and,—O wonderful and miraculous achievement!—was even instrumental in getting rid of the lease.

It was not surprising in all these circumstances that Mrs. Shafto should cling as a limpet to Jane Tebbs, whom she had so often apostrophised as a "meddling, mischievous, malignant old cat," but Lucilla Shafto was suffering from a violent mental shock. The sudden descent, as it were in one day, from comfortable affluence to a very narrow income, had temporarily stunned her, and she had a secret conviction that if she were to leave her affairs in the capable hands of her nearest neighbour, all would be well. She therefore remained secluded in her own spacious bedroom, whilst busy Jane undertook her affairs; helped with the auction list, interviewed the tradespeople, and, accompanied by the boy, went up to London to confer with Mr. Shafto's lawyers.

Douglas was subdued; he seemed a different creature, so silent and pale, but keenly anxious to put his shoulder to the wheel. He had withdrawn from Sandhurst and, in conversations with the Tremeneeres, informed them that his idea of going into the Army was knocked on the head, and that he now intended to look out for some job in the City.

It must not be supposed that Jane Tebbs, the indefatigable, was the only neighbour who had come forward with offers of assistance to the widow; the Tremeneeres, the vicarage, and many other acquaintances had been sincere in their sympathy and goodwill, but somehow or other Mrs. Shafto would have none of them! She refused to see the vicar or his wife, and lay in bed most of the day bewailing her fate, scribbling answers to letters of condolence, and occasionally dipping into a novel. "Read she must," she declared, "as it diverted her mind from the too dreadful present. A good novel was the best of anodynes."

The auction at "Littlecote" proved an important local event, and threw the annual Church bazaar woefully into the shade. It lasted three summer days and enabled a substantial sum to be placed to the credit of Edward Shafto's widow. Unfortunately Edward Shafto's widow had considerable private debts and, when these were settled, five hundred pounds was all that remained for investment.

As is proverbial with respect to auctions, good and even valuable lots went in some cases for the traditional old song; it is on record that Mrs. Shafto's smart victoria was sold to a jobmaster for six pounds, Mrs. Billing secured a wonderful bargain in the Crown Derby tea service, and the Sheffield tea urn fell to Miss Tebbs for ten shillings and sixpence! On the other hand, rubbish was at a premium. The kitchen utensils were dispersed at an alarmingly high figure, and a Turkey carpet, aged twenty years, fetched more than its original cost.

The sale was over. Needless to say, it had afforded enormous interest to the inmates of Highfield Cottage. Miss Jane could almost tell the price and history of each individual lot.

In a short time the great placards of advertisement were torn off the gate piers at "Littlecote," the house was closed, and once more the blinds were down.

CHAPTER IV

KICKS AND HALFPENCE

More than four years had elapsed since Mrs. Shafto and her son had driven away from "Littlecote" behind a pair of smart bay steppers. (The widow was determined to keep up what she was pleased to call "her position" to the last.) Immediately succeeding this dignified exit came a woeful change in their circumstances. Mrs. Shafto was obliged to make the best of boarding-house and 'bus, and Douglas, thanks to the exertions of his friends the Tremenheeres, found a situation in a mercantile house in the City. There was no time for him to pick and choose. It was imperative that he should begin to earn without delay, and not, as his parent frankly remarked, "look to a poor widow for support." This condition of abject poverty was, she declared, "entirely due to his father's criminal carelessness respecting his affairs. She had what would barely keep her alive"—170 pounds per annum—"and that was all." As for Douglas, he must work.

Although they were not congenial companions Douglas faithfully accompanied his mother in her varied wanderings, supported her in action with enraged landladies, helped her out of a libel case, covered her reverses and retreats, and lived by command under the same roof.

For the last eighteen months the pair had been established at a well-managed private hotel in Lincoln Square, Bayswater, W. "Malahide" was a flourishing concern; two substantial houses had been thrown into one; the rooms were spacious, clean, and adequately furnished; the food was plain but abundant. The double drawing-room contained a fine piano, one or two sofas, and card tables; also a sufficiency of sound and reliable chairs; but not an ornament, save two clocks—not one paper fan, nor bunch of coloured grasses, nor a single antimacassar, not even a shell! Such amazing restraint gave the apartments an empty but dignified appearance.

Among its various advantages, "Malahide" was within a few minutes' walk of "the Grove," and "Underground," a situation which appealed to men in business and to women whose chief occupation was shopping.

Mrs. Shafto appreciated her present quarters for several excellent reasons. Here she had no giggling young rivals and was, even at forty-five, the best-looking and best-dressed of all the lady boarders. Moreover, she had found a friend and admirer in her neighbour at meals—a certain Mr. Manasseh Levison, a widower, with a stout figure, a somewhat fleshy nose, and a pair of fine piercing black eyes. He was the proprietor of a fashionable and flourishing antiques and furniture business in a well-known thoroughfare, and was considered one of the best judges of old silver and china in the trade.

It exasperated Shafto to listen to his mother's "table talk," and he made a point of sitting as far as possible from her vicinity. She liked to impress Levison and other with highly-coloured reminiscences of her grand acquaintances; even the Tremenheeres—with whom she had quarrelled so bitterly—were dragged in and shown off as intimates. More than once Shafto had felt his face burn, as exaggerations and glorifications were unfolded in his parent's far-carrying and assertive treble.

Besides Mr. Manasseh Levison, were the two Misses Smith—twins—genteel, middle-aged spinsters, who, until the arrival of the sprightly and attractive widow, had alternately cherished high hopes of the wealthy Jew. Their chief energies were devoted to the task of blowing one another's trumpets, thereby drawing attention to particular virtues and modestly hidden accomplishments. For example, the elder would say:

"Darling Ella is so clever at cooking, as good as any French chef, her sauces and savouries are too wonderful."

They were!

And Ella, in repayment, assured her listeners that Jessie had a perfect genius for gardening and housekeeping; and yet it was whispered that this effusively fond couple, when alone, quarrelled and wrangled as cruelly as the notorious Kilkenny cats.

Among other patrons at "Malahide" were two quiet, polite little Japanese gentlemen, Mr. Den and Mr. Yabe; Madame Galli, a shrivelled old woman in a cheap wig, with sharp rat's eyes that nothing escaped, the soul of good nature, rich, miserly and incredibly mischievous. There were several boarders who were in business in the City, and Mr. Hutton, a careworn man of fifty, who spent his days working in the British

Museum. Next to him at table sat Douglas Shafto, now a well set-up, self-possessed young fellow, who still retained something of the cheery voice and manner of the Public School boy. Thanks to his steadiness and fair knowledge of French and German, he was drawing a salary of a hundred and fifty per annum.

His neighbour on the left happened to be his own cousin, Sandy Larcher, older by three years, and in the same office, but receiving a lower "screw," Sandy was of the "knut" tribe, a confident authority on dress, noisy, slangy, and familiar; much given to cigarettes and music-halls, a slacker at work, but remarkably active at play and, on the whole, rather a good sort.

Sandy's mother, Mrs. Larcher, the widow of a cab proprietor, was Mrs. Shafto's only sister, and in the days of that sister's glory had never obtruded herself; but now that poor Lucilla had come down in the world, she had advanced with open arms, and at "Monte Carlo," the abode of the Larcher family, Mrs. Shafto occasionally spent a week end. The "go-as-you-please" atmosphere, late hours, breakfast in bed, and casual meals, recalled old, and not unhappy times. Mrs. Larcher, who had never been a beauty, was now a fat woman past fifty, lazy, good-natured, and absolutely governed by her children. Besides Sandy, the dandy, she had two daughters, Delia and Cossie.

Delia was on the stage (musical comedy), petite, piquant, and very lively; a true grasshopper, living only for the summer; a loud, reckless but respectable young woman, who, having but thirty shillings a week salary and to find her own "tights," was ever ready to accept motor drives, dinners, or a smart hat, or frock, from any of her "boys." Cossie, the stay-at-home, was round-faced and plump; a tireless talker and tennis player. She managed the house, held the slender purse, accepted her sister's cast-offs, and always had a "case" on with somebody. Cossie was exceedingly anxious (being the eldest of the family) to secure a home of her own, and made this alarmingly obvious.

To "Monte Carlo" Douglas, the highly presentable cousin, was frequently commanded by both mother and aunt. At first he had hated this duty, but nevertheless went, in order to please and silence his parent, whose hand plied the goad and who otherwise "nagged" at him in public and in private. In private she pointed out that the Larcher family were his own blood relations, "so different from his father's side of the house, which, since his death, had ignored both her and him, and never even sent a wreath to the funeral!" By slow and painful degrees Douglas became accustomed to "Monte Carlo"; at first the manners and customs of his cousins had a rasping effect, and it was more than a year before he really fell into line, and visited his kindred without pressure. The girls were not bad-looking—in a flamboyant style—and effusively good-natured; they took his chaff and criticism without offence, and accepted with giggles his hints with respect to manners and appearance. When Douglas happened to be expected, they did not stroll about slipshod in dressing-gowns, with their hair hanging loose, or bombard one another with corks and crusts.

For his part, he brought them books and chocolates, watered the garden, mowed the tennis ground, mended the bells, and made himself generally useful. At first this flashy, muddling, free-and-easy household had disgusted him; and his cool assured manner and critical air irritated his relatives; whilst his attitude of superior comment had proved a vexatious restraint. But week by week Douglas came to see that it was to this particular class he now belonged. These were his nearest relatives, and he told himself that he must endeavour to accommodate himself to circumstances—and them; otherwise he was a snob, a beastly snob!

His first Christmas holidays had been spent at "Tremenheere," where he had received a heart-warming welcome. Other school friends had also claimed him, but his time was now mortgaged to the office, and by degrees correspondence and intimacy languished—or, rather, changed. His contemporaries had gone forth into the wide world; the Army, the Diplomatic Service, and India, had summoned them, their paths in life lay far apart from that of a mere correspondence clerk, and only the old birds remained in the nests. Those who were in England wrote and made arrangements for meetings in town, but Shafto found ready and real excuses and generally withdrew from his former circle. He liked his friends—nothing could offer him so much pleasure as their company—but he realised that in time they would arrive at the parting of the ways, and it was for him to make the first step in that direction; in such homes as "Monte Carlo" he must in future find society and entertainment.

"Monte Carlo" (sixpence return, third class, from town, and eight minutes' walk from the station) was a grotesque, little red-faced abode, situated among a tangle of villas and roads. It stood detached in a garden, with—O! theme of pride—a full-sized tennis court. There were also several flower beds, and six unhappy gooseberry bushes, but *the* feature was the lawn; here also were seats and a small striped awning. The grounds of "Monte Carlo" were only divided from its immediate neighbours by a thin wooden partition—there was no such thing as privacy or seclusion. Conversation was audible, and the boisterous jokes of "Chatsworth" and "Travancore" were thoroughly enjoyed at "Monte Carlo." In the same way "Monte Carlo" overheard various interesting items of news, some sharp quarrels and, once or twice, unpleasant personal truths! On the last occasion, the remark was so unfriendly (it dealt with Cossie's methods) that when "Chatsworth," ignorant of offence, sent the same evening an emissary to borrow three pints of stout, the reply was a harsh refusal!

Within doors space was naturally more contracted, but the click of the opposite gate, the sound of the next door dinner-bell and gramophone remained, as it were, common property! The tiny hall was choked with umbrellas, wraps, tennis shoes, and tattered sixpenny books; the drawing-room, with its pink casement curtains, gaudy cretonne covers, huge signed photographs, jars of dusty artificial flowers, packs of dingy cards, and scraps of millinery, looked "lived in"—but tawdry and untidy. The big Chesterfield sofa—a wonderful bargain—had broken springs (perhaps it was not such a wonderful bargain?) and many hills and hollows. In the roomiest of these last the mistress of the house was more or less a fixture, and the whole apartment, like a *passée* beauty, was to be seen at its best by candle-light.

The dining-room was chiefly notable for the heavy atmosphere of tobacco, and multitudes of empty black bottles under the sideboard. The kitchen, both in sound and smell, absolutely refused to be ignored. Such was "Monte Carlo!"

The inmates of "Malahide" have received honourable mention, but nothing has been said of Mrs. Malone, the proprietress, who kept the establishment running, as it were, on well-oiled wheels. Joyce Malone was an Irishwoman who had met with cruel reverses. Well born, well educated, and an almost penniless widow, she thankfully accepted the post of housekeeper in a nobleman's family, and there remained until her savings, and a timely legacy, enabled her to set up for herself. From the first she had met with success. Her terms were moderate; butter, eggs and poultry came from her native land; there was no skimping of coals, or hot water; and clients—who became permanent—flocked to "Malahide." In appearance Mrs. Malone was a tall old woman, with a stoop, who shuffled a little as she walked, and always wore a black gown, a gold Indian chain, and a white lace cap with ribbon bows. She kept severely aloof from her guests and had her own little lair on the second landing. It was, she said, "her business to see to domestic matters, and not to gossip or play bridge." Nevertheless, she had her favourites: Mr. Hutton and young Shafto. (Envy and malice declared that Mrs. Malone had *no* favourites among her own sex.) She was drawn to the boy by his air of good breeding and admirable manners; also she noticed with secret indignation how shamefully his mother neglected and snubbed him. She took far more notice of Jimmy Black, or Sandy Larcher, than of her own son. No doubt she disliked to be so unmistakably dated by his tall, well-grown youth, and her hostess mentally agreed with a gossip who declared that "Mrs. Shafto didn't care a pin for her boy—rather the other way, and if she had kept her figure, she could never keep her word, or a secret—and was a hard, selfish, grasping woman."

Although Shafto and his mother lived under the same roof, she, figuratively, sat with folded hands as far as he was concerned; it was kindly Mrs. Malone who looked after his little comforts, saw that his socks were mended, and made him a hot drink when he had a heavy cold. Also, as a special honour, she invited him to her "den," gave him a cup of coffee, or a glass of port, and talked to him of her Irish home and her young days. Once upon a time she had been a capital horsewoman, and it was strange to hear this old lady and the bright-eyed youth comparing notable runs.

One day in the Strand at luncheon hour, Shafto came face to face with his old friend Geoffrey Tremenheere, looking bronzed, splendidly fit, and independent as a prince.

"Hallo, Douglas!" he exclaimed. "Well, if this isn't a piece of luck! How are you, old man?"

"All right—and you?"

"I arrived from India yesterday and go up to Scotland to-night—the family are all on the moors. I've just been looking for a pair of guns. Come and give your opinion, and then we will lunch. I'm stopping at the Grand."

"I'd like to awfully, I need not tell you, Geoff, but I've got to be back at 1.15 sharp—it's mail day."

"Oh, hang mail day! Come along and lunch—and let us have a good old *bukh!*"

"I don't know what that means—but I'll be glad of lunch, and more glad of a bit of a jaw!"

"Now, tell me all about yourself, Douglas," said his schoolfellow, as they sat *vis-à-vis* in the marble hall. "You don't look particularly chirpy. Still in the office?"

"Yes—I expect to live and die there."

"Poor old boy—and doing work you hate!"

"Oh, I'm getting used to it now. I shall manage to hang on."

"And Mrs. Shafto—how is she?"

"As usual—going strong. We live in the same boarding-house."

"Umph! Well, let me tell you this—you are in the black books at home. I hear you refuse all invitations and make monstrous excuses."

"You know I'd love to go down to 'Tremenheere,' but how can I? My time is not my own, and I only got a week's holiday in August and three days at Christmas. There's nothing to tell about my career—let's hear yours?"

Thus invited, Geoffrey, a gay young officer in a crack regiment, broke into short and vivid descriptions of Indian quarters, polo matches, and capital black-buck shooting in the Central Provinces, and gave a full and detailed history of his one tiger.

Shafto, an eager and enthusiastic listener, exclaimed:

"I say, how splendid! Do you know, Geoff, I'd give ten years of this life to have a good chance of seeing the world—especially the East?"

"Who knows—you might yet!"

"Pigs might fly! Still I must not grumble. I'm delighted you have had such a glorious time; when one's friends are enjoying themselves, it's next best to doing the same oneself. What leave have you got?"

"Only three months and every hour is priceless. This time to-morrow I shall be blazing away at a grouse drive."

From grouse they fell to talking of shooting, of old scenes, of rabbiting and ferreting, of cricket matches, schoolfellows and scrapes.

Suddenly Douglas sprang to his feet and pointed to the clock.

"Half-past one, I must run! Good-bye and good luck, old boy," wringing his friend's hand, "I shan't forget this lunch in a hurry," and he was gone. This little break and talk of old times and warm friends gave Shafto something pleasant to think of for many days; it was like a gleam of sunshine in his grey and joyless life.

Richard Hutton, hack writer and "ghost," sat next to him at table twice a day, and proved a sympathetic neighbour. Hutton was a clever, cultured, and—when he pleased—a wholly delightful companion. Occasionally on Sundays the pair made little excursions together, visited the City churches and quaint bits of Old London, or ventured a dash into the country, or up the river.

"You say Friday is a holiday in your office, Shafto," he remarked one evening; "how would you like to come for a prowl, and see what we can find in the Caledonian Market? It's an out-of-the-way place, where once a week all manner of rubbish is shot, and now and then you pick up a really staggering bargain."

"What's that?" inquired Shafto.

"Well, I'm told that lately a woman bought a rusty steel fender for two shillings and, when she went to clean it, it turned out to be solid silver—a bit of loot from some old French chateau. I must confess that I've never found any spoil, but I only root among the books. Once, I thought I'd got hold of a Coverdale Bible, but it proved to be a fake."

"All right," agreed Shafto, "I'd like to try my luck; I'll go with you and look for a set of gold fire-irons. I've nothing special on—only tennis in the afternoon."

"And the market is at its best in the morning—we'll start at ten."

Friday morning found the couple roaming aimlessly round that great bare enclosure at the end of the Camden Road, known as the Caledonian Market. It was just eleven by the clock tower, and wares were still

pouring in; arriving in all manner of shabby carts and vans—mostly drawn by aged and decrepit horses. Every variety of goods had its own particular pitch. In one quarter were piles of books, brown, musty volumes of all shapes and sizes, also tattered magazines, and of theological works a great host. Farther on the explorers came to a vast collection of old iron. It was as if numbers of travelling tinkers had here discharged their stock; fenders, gasoliers, stair-rods, tin-cans, officers' swords—yes, at least a dozen—frying pans and saucepans. Old clothes were needless to say, a prominent feature. Here you might suit yourself with a bald-looking sealskin, a red flannel petticoat, a soiled evening gown on graceful lines, or a widow's bonnet. Here also were black costumes (dripping beads), broken feathers, and hopeless hats. Old furniture had several stands and was an important department. Grandfather clocks, sideboards, chairs (Chippendale or otherwise), chairs in horsehair or upholstered in wool-work, and framed family portraits solicited notice. Should anyone marvel as to what becomes of the rubbish and relics belonging to houses whose contents have been scattered, after several generations—trifles that survived wrecked fortunes, odds and ends which, for sacred reasons, people had clung to till the last, let them repair to the "Market"—the relics are there, lying on unresponsive cobble stones, a pitiful spectacle, handled, despised, and cast aside—the precious hoarded treasures of a bygone age.

Delicately worked samplers, faded water-colours, portraits, old seals, snuff-boxes, and lockets, attract the curio-hunter. Here is a Prayer Book with massive silver clasps, inscribed, "Dearest Mary, on our wedding day, June 4th, 1847, from Gilbert." There, in a red morocco case, is a miniature of a handsome naval officer. At the back, under glass, are two locks of hair, joined by a true lover's knot in seed pearls. Some ruthless hand will pick out those pearls and throw the hair away.

For a considerable time Shafto strolled about with his hands in his pockets, so far seeing nothing to tempt him. Meanwhile his companion eagerly examined books and bargained over a tattered old volume. Shafto noted with surprise the number of well-dressed visitors poking among the stalls, in search of treasure trove. There were a parson with a greedy-looking leather bag, an officer in uniform, and various smart ladies, hunting in couples. Among a quantity of jugs and basins, soup tureens and coarse crockery, Shafto's idle glance fell upon a frightful Chinese figure, the squat presentation of a man, about eight inches in height.

"I say, did you ever see such a horror?" he asked, pointing it out to his companion; "a curio for ugliness, and just the sort of monster Mrs. Malone would love. I'll try if I can get hold of it. What's the price of the China demon?" he inquired of a wizened old woman, who wore a bashed black bonnet and a pair of blue sand shoes.

"Five shillin'," she replied promptly.

"Five shillings!" he exclaimed. "You're joking."

"No time for jokes here," she retorted, "it's a good piece" (picking up the figure), "and come out of a grand house. If it were in Bond Street, they'd ask you five pounds. I showed it to a man, who said it was good, although there was no mark, and it might be worth a lot; but I've no time to be raking up things—my trade is a quick sale—and cash."

"I'll give you half a crown," said the customer.

"Two half-crowns, and it's yours, and a bargain; you won't know the old fellow when he's had a wash!"

"What do you say, Hutton?" inquired Douglas, turning to his friend.

"Well, I think you might risk five shillings; you don't see such ugliness every day, and I should not wonder if it was a good piece. I've never come across one like it."

"All right then, I'll take the horror."

And in another moment the bargain was effected. Douglas tendered two half-crowns, which the old woman carefully examined and pocketed, then she wrapped up the figure in a piece of crumpled newspaper, and presently he and his friend departed, each bearing his booty.

"There is little to find now," said Hutton, as they passed through the gates; "the Market has become one of the weekly fashionable gatherings of the town, and is dredged by dealers from all over England, who look on it as a sort of lucky-bag—but the bag is nearly empty."

Mrs. Malone was enchanted with the monster—she had a secret weakness for cheap little gifts—that is to say, from her own particular friends. More than once Douglas had brought her some trifling tribute, but his mother had felt deeply affronted by such uncalled for generosity to a stranger; and when he ventured to exhibit the Chinese atrocity, she

exclaimed with great bitterness:

“Oh, for Mrs. Malone, Of course! It’s rather strange that you never think of bringing me a present.”

“But, mother, you wouldn’t care for this sort of thing,” he protested, “and it was awfully cheap.”

“Cheap and nasty!” she retorted. “If you had offered me such hideous rubbish, I’d have sent it straight to the dustbin!”

CHAPTER V

CLOUDS

It was an abnormally hot summer; all London lay at the mercy of a fierce and fiery sun; grass in the parks was brown, plants drooped in window boxes, and there was not even a little breeze to stir the soft dust under foot, nor one hopeful cloud in the blue vault overhead. But in the sky of Douglas Shafto's existence dark and threatening clouds were gathering; the largest of these was a haunting fear that his mother intended to marry her admirer, Manasseh Levison—the prosperous dealer in furniture and antiques, a wealthy man, who owned, besides his business, a fine mansion at Tooting; this he had closed after the death of Mrs. Levison, when he had repaired to "Malahide" for society and distraction—bidden there by his lively old friend, Mrs. Moses Galli. The shrivelled little miserly widow was his confidante, and, for the illumination of Mrs. Shafto, she had drawn glowing pictures of Khartoum House, and outlined an imposing sketch of the luxuries awaiting its future mistress. It was noticed as a significant fact that when Mrs. Shafto and Madame Galli went to Eastbourne for a week (at Mrs. Shafto's expense), they had been joined at the Grand Hotel by Manasseh Levison, who treated them to a special banquet, enlivened by the finest brands of champagne—and had subsequently motored them back to town.

The idea that Levison should usurp his father's place overwhelmed Douglas with horror and shame; the prospect was intolerable; so were other matters; for instance, his monotonous office life, the want of variety and fresh air. For exercise, he belonged to a neighbouring gymnasium, but this was not sufficient for a country-bred, energetic young man, in his twenty-fourth year. As for the variety of amusements that satisfied and delighted his brother clerks, they left him cold. He was sensible of a tormenting thirst for a far-away different life—and its chances, sick of this existence, of continually going round and round, like a squirrel in a cage. A change of surroundings and scene, or a spice of adventure, was what he longed for—as eagerly and as hopelessly as some fallen wayfarer in a desert land. His mother's flinty attitude and hostile nagging had frozen a naturally affectionate disposition, and Shafto passed several years of his youth without one single ray of woman's love, until generous Mrs. Malone had come forward and installed him in her heart. His usual routine was breakfast at eight, office at nine, lunch twelve-thirty, freedom at six, dinner at seven-thirty. On Saturday afternoons he was expected at "Monte Carlo"—to join the family at tennis and high tea—and here, over the little red villa, brooded yet another cloud! Cossie, the gushing and good-natured, had been given what her brother brutally termed "the chuck" by her young man; he had taken on another girl, and his repentance and return were hopeless.

Shafto listened to Cossie's hysterical lamentations and outpourings with what patience he could assume; until by degrees the dreadful truth began to dawn on him, that *he* was selected to replace the faithless Lothario! Of late Cossie's manner had become jealously possessive, she seemed to hold him by a nipping tenacious clutch, and pattered out to meet him at the gate, sat next to him at table, and was invariably his partner at tennis. Once, arriving unseen, he had overheard her declaiming to another girl:

"No, no, no, I won't have it; Douglas is my boy—and my joy! Douglas belongs to *me!*"

"There will be two opinions about that," he muttered to himself, as he flung down his hat and entered the tawdry little drawing-room; but, in spite of his stern resolutions, he found himself borne along by a strong and irresistible current of family goodwill. Sandy gave him cigars, Delia declared over and over again that he was a "darling," his aunt became extra-motherly, and Cossie endowed him with button-holes, pairs of ill-knit shapeless socks, and sent him many notes. She seemed to appropriate him as a matter of course, and once when they parted at the gate, had held up her face to be kissed—but this undesired favour he affected not to see. He noted, too, that when Cossie accompanied him to the same little gate, Delia and Sandy lingered behind with alarming significance. He began to hate Cossie and to revolt against the slap-dash untidy *ménage*, Delia and her train of rowdy boys, the shouting, the practical jokes, and the slang. Then suddenly the Levison cloud burst! One night, when he was flying upstairs to his sky parlour, his mother waylaid him on the landing and, with an imperative gesture, beckoned him into her room.

"Shut the door, Douglas!" she commanded in her usual frigid manner, "I have something to tell you. Come over here and sit down."

"Yes, mother, all right," but nevertheless he remained standing; "what is it?"

She cleared her throat and replied in her sharp metallic voice, "Mr. Levison and I have at last made up our minds to be married; you see, we have no one to consider but ourselves." This announcement was followed by a blank and paralysed silence.

"He is absolutely devoted to me," resumed Mrs. Shafto, "and is a wealthy man and, as you know, *I* was never accustomed to poverty. The wedding will take place in six weeks. Well, why do you stand glowering there?" she demanded impatiently. "What have you got to say?"

"I have got to say," replied Douglas, then his voice broke a little, "that I don't see how you can do it, or put that fat Jew tradesman into my father's place!"

"Your father!" she screamed passionately, and a scar on her chin showed white against a suffused complexion; "don't talk to me of your father. Before we were married, he often came to my uncle's shop, and talked to me about books—I got up Haydn's Dictionary of Dates, bits of Browning, and Lamb's Essays, and Omar Khayyam. I had to study them in my own room at night, so as to make him think I was well educated and shared his tastes; but I did not; no," she cried, with a stamp of her foot, "*I hated* his tastes! Aristotle and Plato, yes, and Shakespeare—dull to the last degree, but I liked him: he was so handsome, so thoughtful, such a gentleman. And I believed that as he was madly in love I could easily twist him round to my way of thinking—but I was mistaken!" She paused, momentarily out of breath, then resumed: "He soon found me out and was sick of me in three weeks. He disliked dances, theatres, and smart society, and buried me alive in the country. We had nothing in common; he was just a bookworm, with a sarcastic tongue, who left me a beggar! Now I am free, I am going to be a rich woman, marry a man who understands me—and lead a new life."

"I see you are easily satisfied," remarked her son.

"I am; and although Mr. Levison is a Jew tradesman, as you have remarked in your nasty sneering way, he has been generous enough to offer you an opening as his assistant. He will take you into the shop and pay you two hundred a year."

"No, thank you," replied Douglas stiffly; "I know nothing about old furniture."

"Only old family, I suppose! Well, you might do worse; and when you marry Cossie, as is probable, I will make you a small allowance."

(Shafto had relinquished his income of a hundred and fifty a year, and made it over to his mother legally, immediately he had come of age.)

"I haven't the smallest idea of marrying Cossie, or anyone else," he answered, with white-faced decision.

"Well, she, and indeed they *all*, expect it."

"I've never given them any reason to do so."

"Yes, you have," she contradicted sharply; "you go there, sit by her, and take her into the garden."

"There is nothing in that," he rejoined, too chivalrous to add that it was his cousin who sat by, escorted him, and clung to him like the traditional limpet.

"She is five years older than you, I know, but very sweet-tempered, and not a bad manager—she runs 'Monte Carlo'!"

"Cossie is absolutely nothing to me beyond a cousin; nor have I ever given her reason to think otherwise—or ever shall."

"Oh, you are wonderfully bold and courageous here with *me*; I should like to hear you telling them this at 'Monte Carlo'! I know my sister has set her heart on the match; she has been talking to me about the trousseau, and intends to give you table linen, and a silver tea-pot—she has two."

"Even the silver tea-pot would not bribe me!" declared Douglas with an angry laugh.

"Well, I can assure you that it's an understood thing," persisted his parent, with spiteful emphasis.

"How can it be understood, when I have never asked the girl to marry me and never shall? Cossie is straight enough and can tell you that herself."

"Oh, she has told me lots of things!" said her aunt mysteriously. "Well, to turn to another subject, am I to inform Mr. Levison that you refuse his

offer of two hundred a year? You may come to us for week-ends if you like; he is doing up the house at Tooting and giving me a fine car."

"No, thank you, I prefer to remain where I am; and now if you've told me everything you wished to say, I think I'll go to bed," and with a brief "Good night" he departed.

But he did not go to bed when he found himself in his bare fourth-floor room, but sat on the side of his lumpy mattress, and smoked cigarettes for a couple of hours. He must squash this Cossie question at all costs; even if it led to a disagreeable interview with his relations and made a complete breach between them. In one sense this breach would mean freedom and relief, and yet he was rather fond of his dowdy old Aunt Emma, and he also liked that slangy slacker Sandy; he could not bear to give anyone pain, or to appear shabby or ungrateful. Of course he ought to have taken a firm stand weeks ago, and repelled advances that had stolen upon him so insidiously. He saw this now; yet how can you refuse to accept a flower from a girl, or be such a brute as to leave her notes and telephones unanswered, or rise and desert her when she nestles down beside you on the sofa? He felt as if he was on the edge of a precipice; and must make a desperate, a life or death struggle; be firm and show no weakness. To be weak would establish him with a wife, house-linen, and the tea-pot, in some dingy little flat near his office, where, plodding monotonous round like a horse in a mill, he would probably end his days. Always too anxious to please and to be liked, he had enjoyed lounging about at "Monte Carlo" and chaffing his cousin, but the price now demanded was exorbitant. He recalled Cossie, stout and smiling, with rather pretty eyes and a ceaseless flow of chatter. She had ugly hands and thick red lips, her hair was coarse, but abundant, and she frequently borrowed her sister's rouge. Cossie was immensely good-natured and affectionate, and he would be sorry to hurt her feelings, poor little thing.

Then as to his mother and her marriage to Levison, he hated to think of it. He could not endure his future stepfather; between them there existed a bottomless chasm of dislike and distrust. Levison considered Shafto a conceited young cub, "but a clever cub"; and Shafto looked on Levison as a purse-proud tradesman, ever bragging of his "finds," his sales, and his titled customers.

Douglas had never felt so abjectly miserable since the time of his father's death; his depression was such that he wished he was dead too; but fate was in a kindly mood and, although he was unconscious of the fact, the clouds were lifting.

CHAPTER VI

AN EMPTY OFFER

The night that Shafto subsequently spent was wakeful and seemed endless; he tossed about on his hard bed and thumped the irresponsive pillow, paced his room from end to end, drank all the water in the carafe—and even encroached on the ewer; he felt as if his vitality had been sapped, that he had no energy with which to face his new position, nothing to which he could look forward, no gleam of hope and, as it turned out, no appetite for breakfast. Seated at table, he proved infectiously depressing and gloomily silent. On the way to the Underground, Sandy Larcher, who happened to be in exuberant spirits, noticed his cousin's grave face and chaffed him about Cossie. (Sandy, a coarse-grained creature, knew no reserves, did not profess to be a gentleman, and had never heard of the word "tact.")

"And so you couldn't sleep for thinking of her, eh? Ate no breakfast, only a bit of toast, and half a kipper; quite in a bad way, poor old chap."

"Come now, Sandy, none of that!" angrily protested the victim. "You are a sensible fellow, though you do play the ass; and must know as well as I do myself that you are talking through your hat. I swear on my word of honour, I have never made love to Cossie, I'd as soon think of making love to the parrot next door, and I have not the remotest idea of marrying her. Imagine marrying on a hundred and fifty pounds a year!"

"Oh well, I couldn't face it myself, old man," generously conceded his companion, "but the mater and the girls are dead nuts on the idea; they are awfully fond of you, and say you are so mortal clever, so well-bred and such top-hole style, that you are bound to rise in the world; and Cossie is getting rather long in the tooth. Of course, I know as well as if you told me, how she rushes a chap, and writes silly notes, manicures his nails, and gives him flowers and cigarettes. She overdid it with Freddy Soames and got the knock; and now he is formally engaged, I expect she is mad keen to show that two can play at that game!"

"I'm not for it, and that's certain," declared the other, with an emphasis that was almost violent. "I like Cossie right enough as a cousin, but I'm not a scrap in love. Why, we've not one single taste in common—bar tennis and walnut pickles! I hate saying all this to you, old man—it seems monstrously caddish, and really—"

"Oh, don't apologise," interrupted Sandy; "I know Cossie and her little ways—you are not the first by a long way that she's tried it on with."

"Couldn't you drop her some sort of gentle hint? Do, like a good chap and say a word to my aunt? I'd stay away from 'Monte Carlo,' only that I'm drawn to play in this confounded tournament."

"No good! They wouldn't listen to *me*; you must do the business yourself, Douglas, old man. Come on, hurry up, or we'll miss our train!" and Sandy began to run.

Shafto had not long been perched on his office stool and invested in his office coat and paper cuffs, when he received a message that Mr. Martin—the head of the firm—wished to see him in his private room.

"This is the limit!" he said to himself, as he followed the messenger into a cool, luxurious apartment. "Now I'm going to get a slating—over that French correspondence—and it was Fraser's job. Well, if that's the case, I'll enlist; I'm sick of this life!"

He found Mr. Martin temporarily idle, seated in front of his large writing-table, scanning the *Financial News*. He raised his eyes as Douglas entered, and said:

"Hullo, that you, Shafto? I have something to say to you. How would you like a little promotion?"

"Very much indeed, sir," he replied after a moment's hesitation due to amazement.

"You've been over four years with us as correspondence clerk?"

"Yes, sir."

"I believe you know Mr. Tremeneere?"

"Yes."

"So do I. He has called here to see me about you. What would you think of going abroad for a change—say, to Burma?"

"Burma—yes, sir, all right," assented Shafto, with a glowing face. Something within him had always craved for the East.

"It's like this," continued the other, leaning back and placing his fingers together, tent fashion. "Our house in Rangoon wants a smart,

healthy, young fellow, quick at figures, and able to manage bills of lading. You would soon pick up that; it will be chiefly an out-of-door job on the wharves."

"I'd like that."

"The pay offered is four hundred rupees a month, and house rent; not much, I admit, considering the fall of the rupee and Rangoon prices; but we have been compelled to modify expenses, our profits are run so fine, thanks to an active German mercantile element. Well, what do you think, Shafto?"

Shafto thought Mr. Martin a species of genie, who was offering him a magic carpet that would transport him into the great, hurrying, active world; into the land of sunshine he had longed to see; he would have jumped at the proposal if the salary had been half, and he replied:

"I shall be glad to accept."

"Then that's all right! I was afraid you might have some ties in this country. Of course, in time you are bound to get a rise, and I believe there are boarding-houses in Rangoon where they make you fairly comfortable."

"When do you wish me to start?"

"As soon as you can get under way," was the unexpected reply. "One of the Bibby Line sails on Saturday week, and that brings me to another matter. You have to pay for your own passage and outfit. The passage money is six hundred rupees; the outfit, good English boots, cool clothes, a solar topee, and a revolver—and a medicine-chest might come in handy. No doubt some of your relations will help, or give you a loan. You see, you are getting a big rise and a capital opening in a new line."

"That is true, sir," replied Douglas, whose face had considerably lengthened, "but I'm afraid I cannot manage the ready money—near a hundred pounds. Is my salary paid in advance?"

"No, that is out of the question in a province where cholera carries a man off in a couple of hours. I am sorry about the passage; at one time we did pay, but now we have to pinch and consider our expenses. No doubt you would like to talk over the matter with your people?"

"Well, yes, I should, thank you," he answered, staring fixedly at the floor.

"Then let me have your decision before mail day. I may tell you, Shafto, that, irrespective of Mr. Tremenheere's interest, you have given us entire satisfaction, and for this chance, and it *is* a chance, you have only yourself to thank. You can take a couple of days' leave and let me hear from you definitely on Friday morning."

It was only eleven o'clock, an oppressively warm July day, and Douglas walked up to Lincoln's Inn Fields, took a seat in the cool shade of the finest trees in the largest square in London, and there endeavoured to think out some plan.

"I say, what a chance!" he muttered to himself. "What a stroke of luck! A new start in life, offering change and freedom." Yet he must lose it—and all for a paltry hundred pounds. Paltry—no; to him it represented a huge and unattainable fortune; there wasn't a soul from whom he could borrow; not from the Tebbs, nor the Tremenheeres, and his associates at "Malahide" were, with one detestable exception, as poor as himself. After long meditation, entirely barren of inspiration, he went down to the Strand and lunched at Slater's, and then took the Tube to Bayswater Public Library, where he got hold of some books on Burma—Burma, the land of the Pagoda and Golden Umbrella. Somehow the very name fired his imagination and thrilled his blood.

After sitting in the library, greedily devouring information, he strolled back to Lincoln Square, in time for dinner, and all that evening he kept his great news to himself. It would have seemed natural for an only son to carry such important tidings to his mother; but Mrs. Shafto was the last woman to welcome his confidences. She was entirely without the maternal instinct and, armed with a certain fierce reserve, held her son inflexibly at arm's length. A stranger would scarcely have discovered the relationship—unless they happened to note that the pair walked to church together on Sunday, and that she pecked his cheek of a night before retiring. As a matter of course, she made use of Douglas and, insisting on maternal claims, thrust on him disagreeable interviews, sent him messages, borrowed his money—when short of change—and allowed him to pay her taxis. Honestly, she did not care for the boy. He was too detached and self-contained; he had such odd ideas and resembled his father in many respects—especially in appearance—though Douglas's expression was keener and more animated, he had the same well-cut features, fine head, and expressive dark grey eyes.

Yes, he recalled too forcibly a dead man whom she had neglected, detested and deceived. And as for Douglas, for years he had been sensible of the smart of a baffled instinct, a hunger for a mother's love and affection, which had never been his—and never would be his.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, the boarders were amusing themselves as usual and making a good deal of noise, yet somehow the circle presented an air of rather spurious gaiety. Mrs. Shafto, in a smart black-and-gold evening frock, was smoking a cigarette and playing auction-bridge with Mr. Levison and the two Japanese; the Misses Smith and various casual boarders were engrossed at coon-can. Another group was assembled about the piano. Douglas Shafto sat aloof in the window seat absorbed in the book on Burma and acquiring information; for even if he were never to see the country, it was as well to learn something about it. Rangoon, the capital (that fact he already knew), once a mere collection of monasteries around the Great Pagoda, was now assumed to be the Liverpool of the East, the resting-place of Buddha's relics, and an important industrial centre. As his reading was disturbed by the boisterous chorus at the piano, and the shrieks of laughter from the coon-can set, he tucked the volume under his arm and slipped out of the room as noiselessly as possible. He could rest at peace up in his "cock loft" and endeavour to puzzle out some means of reaching the land of the Golden Umbrella—even if he worked his passage as a cabin steward. In passing the door of Mrs. Malone's den, some strange, unaccountable impulse constrained him to knock. Yes; he suddenly made up his mind that he would confide in *her*—and why not? She was always so understanding, sympathetic and wise.

In reply to a shrill "Come in," he entered and found the old lady sitting by the open window with a black cat on her lap. The room was small and homelike; there were some shabby rugs, a few fine prints, a case of miniatures, and, in a cabinet, a variety of odd "bits" which Mrs. Malone had picked up from time to time.

"So it's you, Douglas," she exclaimed; "come over and sit down. I'm always glad to see you; you know you have the private entrée!" and she laughed. "What have you been doing with yourself to-day?"

As he muttered something indefinite, she added, "What's your book?" holding out her hand. "Burma, I declare! One does not hear much of that part of the world; it's always connected in my mind with rice and rain. Douglas," suddenly raising her eyes, "I believe you have something on your mind. What is it? Come now—speak out—is it a love affair, or money? You know I'm *safe*."

Thus invited, in a few halting sentences, he told her of his friend's good offices, the offer, his supreme delight—and subsequent despair.

"A hundred pounds—yes, well, it's a tidy sum," she admitted, "and you will want all that. I think Gregory and Co. might pay your passage, as the salary is not large."

"No," agreed Shafto, "but I'll be only too glad to earn it. It's this blessed ready money that stumps me."

He began to pace about the room with his hands in his pockets, then suddenly broke out:

"Mrs. Malone, I'd give one of my eyes to go; to be up and doing, and get out into the world—especially to the East. Isn't it hard lines—one moment to be offered a splendid chance, and the next to have it snatched away."

"I suppose you couldn't borrow?" she suggested, looking at him over her spectacles.

"No, who would lend *me* money? I have no security and no wealthy friends."

"Well, I am not a wealthy friend, Douglas, but I will lend you a hundred pounds—I've saved a good bit—and I can."

"No, no, Mrs. Malone," he interrupted. "I couldn't accept it. I know how hardly your money has been earned; I know all your hateful worries; your bothers with servants and coal; your trappings into 'the Grove,' and up and down these confounded stairs."

"But, Douglas, you can pay me back by degrees."

"No; you'd run a poor chance of seeing your hundred pounds again. Mr. Martin informed me the firm never paid in advance, as cholera carried off people in a few hours—cheerful, wasn't it? And if I were carried off, where would *you* be?"

"Here, my boy, and in the deepest grief."

"Well, thanking you all the same, I will not touch a penny of your money; but I know you are long-headed and may think of some scheme

for me. I've got nothing to sell of any value; I parted with my father's watch—and it's still at the pawnbroker's; worse luck!" (His pitilessly selfish mother had borrowed ten pounds and forgotten the debt, and he had been compelled to apply to his "Uncle.") Shafto found his salary a very tight fit; eleven pounds a month seemed to melt away in board, clothes, washing and those innumerable little expenses that crop up in London.

"Anyhow, you have till Friday, you proud, obstinate boy, and before that, I may be able to thrash out something. I have noticed that you don't look yourself the last few weeks, not my dear lively Douglas, tearing up and down stairs, whistling like a blackbird. Tell me the reason," and she laid a well-shaped wrinkled hand upon his arm.

Then, walking up and down the room, he frankly unfolded his troubles—the approaching marriage of his mother (this was no news), and, in an agitated and incoherent manner, his desperate predicament with regard to Cossie Larcher.

"The poor boy," said his listener to herself. "That man-hunting, determined little cat has got her claws into him. I have seen the vulgar, made-up minx, without education, fortune, or modesty, trying to carry off her gentleman cousin! But she shan't have him. No! by hook or by crook, he must be got out of the country, as sure as my name is Joyce Malone!"

CHAPTER VII

"THE MONSTER"

For a considerable time Mrs. Malone sat, stroking her long nose with her long forefinger and thinking profoundly; there fell, in consequence, an unusual silence. At last this was broken by the old lady, who exclaimed with an air of triumph:

"Douglas, my boy, I do believe I have got hold of a bright idea!"

"That's nothing new," he rejoined with a smile.

"Come now, none of your blarney! You know the queer little monster you brought me some time ago. You see him there grinning at us out of the cabinet? Well, a friend of mine noticed him yesterday—she is a bit of a connoisseur, and she said that, if genuine, that diabolical object had considerable value! To-morrow, I will take it round to a shop in 'the Grove,' and get an opinion; let us hear what the expert says, and if the object is good and marketable, I'll sell him—and you shall have the money. Now," raising a hand authoritatively, "I warn you not to say 'No' to me again, for if you do, I'll just take the poker and smash the deformity into a thousand atoms!"

"Oh, well, I suppose that puts the lid on," said Douglas, "but I ask you, if anything in the whole world can be meaner than to give a present and to take it back? However, I'll consent to commit that outrage to save the monster. I don't believe he is worth a sovereign!"

"Stop! I hear them moving in the drawing-room, so, my dear boy, fly up to your roost at once. You know how it vexes your mother to see you spending your time with me. Good night, my dear child," and rising, she laid her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek.

The very next evening, shortly before dinner, Mrs. Malone sent for her favourite boarder.

"I've grand news for you!" she announced. "I've had the ugly figure valued and a man has offered me a hundred and ten pounds."

"A hundred and ten pounds!" repeated Shafto. "Come, this is one of your good old Irish jokes!"

Alas! it must be here recorded that warm-hearted Mrs. Malone was not joking—but lying. She had never been to any expert. The hundred and ten pounds were to come out of her own lean pocket; this had been her "bright idea," when she contemplated the monster in the cabinet. She was sincerely fond of Shafto; during the time he had been under her roof she had never known him to do a mean or ungentlemanly action; he was considerate, unselfish, and generous—poor as he was; also he opened doors, handed chairs, treated age with deference, and in short conducted himself like the people among whom she had lived most of her life.

Richard Hutton was of the same type, so were the two Japanese; but Levison, her most valuable guest, Larcher, and other young boarders had, in her opinion, no manners at all. They smoked where and how they pleased (barring the drawing-room), left cigarette stumps all over the house, kicked off their boots in the hall, were late for meals, loud in talk, arguments and complaints, and supremely indifferent to the comfort of their companions.

In some extraordinary and inexplicable manner the story of the monster had leaked out—at any rate, it was in the air. Perhaps the monster himself had blazoned forth the fact of his own value, or Michael, the handy man, had caught a whisper from Maggie (Mrs. Malone's right hand)? However it was, Mrs. Malone was not a little startled when Mr. Levison, in his loud resonant voice, shouted at her down the dinner table:

"So I hear you've come in for a wonderful find, ma'am—a Chinese figure valued at a handsome sum! Do you know I'm something of a judge of such stuff—old porcelain is rather in my line—and I'd like to have a look at the prize after dinner, if you don't object, and if the bargain is not clinched perhaps I might go one better."

Mrs. Malone coloured like a young girl—or was it the blush of guilt? Would her sin find her out? No; no matter what the dealer said, she determined to stick to her story; she would not allow him to see the figure. She knew Manasseh Levison to be a persistent, over-bearing sort of man; nevertheless, she was resolved to defeat him. If the worst came to the worst, she would go to bed, and either take the figure with her, or

hide it up the chimney. But alas for her plans! Manasseh, scenting a good thing, immediately after his cigar was finished, boldly followed the old lady into forbidden ground—her sitting-room—and did not even knock, but just turned the handle of the door and walked in. He discovered his hostess and young Shafto, evidently holding a weighty conference—with the figure on the table between them.

“Mr. Levison,” she exclaimed, “are you aware that this is my private apartment, and that such an intrusion is unwelcome?”

Levison, not the least abashed, had snatched up the figure and critically examined it, glass in eye. For an appreciable time he stood silent and transfixed, obviously gloating over the article in his grasp—yes, gloating, with the absorbed expression of a devotee! At last he spoke, raising his voice almost to a shout:

“And are *you* aware, madam; that this—this piece in my hand, is a most glorious specimen of old ‘Kang He’? An altar vessel, too; a most perfect, complete, and unique specimen of Chinese enamelled porcelain, dating from the Kang dynasty? By George!” handling it and turning it about with tender loving care, “what an astonishing find! I’ve never come across such a piece, and I’ve seen a good few in my time. How did you get hold of it?”

“Mr. Shafto gave it to me,” replied Mrs. Malone, in her stiffest manner.

“And I picked it off a stall in the Caledonian Market,” supplemented Shafto.

“What luck; what incredible luck!” exclaimed the dealer, nodding his big head; “well, Mrs. Malone, will you please inform your other customer that I will pay you three hundred pounds down for this piece—that rather snuffs him out, eh? I’ll give you a cheque in the morning,” and carrying the monster as reverently as if it were some holy relic, Manasseh Levison, expert and connoisseur, marched out of the room in triumph.

CHAPTER VIII

BOUND FOR BURMA

It was some minutes before Mrs. Malone recovered her breath and composure, the invasion and purchase had been so startlingly abrupt. At last she found her tongue and her wits, and after a lengthy and animated discussion, it was ultimately decided that she and Douglas would each take a hundred pounds (privately she determined to invest her share for his benefit) and hand the remaining hundred to the old woman in the black bonnet at her stand in the Caledonian Market.

The journey to Rangoon was now likely to be accomplished, thanks to the Chinese Monster. When Douglas picked it off the cobble stones, from among coarse common crockery, how little he dreamed what a factor this figure would prove in his future—it had been the means of shaping his destiny!

On Friday morning he sent in a formal acceptance of Mr. Martin's offer and, having obtained leave, hurried away to the Caledonian Market, in search of the old rag and bottle female. It was half-past twelve o'clock when he arrived, he was late, and her pitch was empty. Had she departed already? On inquiry he was informed that old Mother Doake had departed for good—was, in fact, dead!

"Yes, she were run over by a motor-trolley ten days ago," announced the woman in the next stall; "she was terribly old and blind and a real wicked miser. There was no one belonging to her. Her clothes were just lined with bank-notes, and there was a whole lot of papers and bonds in her mattress, and a lovely silver tea-set up the chimney. She grudged herself a penn'-orth o' milk, or a drop o' brandy, and she worth thousands o' pounds! Being no heirs, the Crown takes the lot! Thank you, sir," accepting a tip, "I suppose I could not tempt you with a splendid fur-lined overcoat? Cost a hundred—but you can have it for six. It belonged to a lord—I got it off his man. Well, maybe it's a bit warmish, but it's dirt cheap and would come in next winter."

Since Mother Doake was now defunct, her share divided gave Douglas another fifty pounds, and he felt quite a wealthy man. The first use he made of the monster's money was to take his father's watch and chain out of pawn; the next, to secure his passage in the Bibby Line to Rangoon. Then he spent a long morning at the Stores and bought a new outfit, saddle and bridle, steamer trunks, and a steamer chair.

The purchase of the "Kang He" piece and its price were naturally not withheld from Mrs. Shafto. She pounced upon Douglas in the hall and drove him before her into the empty dining-room.

"Well, I've heard all about your wonderful luck!" she began excitedly, "and how Mr. Levison has actually paid you three hundred pounds for that frightful figure."

"Yes, so he did; it's a true bill."

"And now, my dear boy; you will be able to help me with my trousseau," said this daughter of a horse-leech, "I must really get good frocks. Mr. L. is so sharp, and notices everything, and can tell the price of a gown to a sixpence; he has wonderful taste, and is very particular. You must let me have fifty or sixty to begin with—it's not much out of three hundred pounds. What a windfall!"

"Oh, but I have already divided it with Mrs. Malone," replied Douglas; "she insisted upon my taking half—you see, the figure was hers."

"Divided it with Mrs. Malone!" screamed his mother. "What a mean, grasping, greedy old hag! I shall speak to her about it and make her disgorge. She has no right to your money; whilst I am your mother!"

"I do beg you won't interfere. Mrs. Malone is the most generous woman I know."

"Generous!" echoed Mrs. Shafto. "The greatest old skinflint in London—she charges me sixpence a day for having my breakfast in bed, and —"

"Well, you will soon be out of it," interrupted her son impetuously, "and so shall I! And I am glad to have an opportunity now of telling you that I have got promotion in the office and am going to Burma."

"Oh! are you? Burma—Burma! Why, that's abroad—some place near India—or is it the West Indies?"

"You are thinking of Bermuda. Burma is east of India. I have to pay for my passage and outfit, and this unexpected windfall is a wonderful bit of luck. If I hadn't got it, I never could have accepted the post, or made a

new start."

"And when do you leave?"

"In a week."

"So soon," she exclaimed cheerfully; "I wonder what Cossie will say?"

"It is not of the slightest consequence what Cossie says; she has nothing to do with my plans."

"Cossie won't think so, and when she hears you have been promoted and are off to Burma, she will stick to you like a burr."

"But, my dear mother, what is the use of her sticking to me?" protested Douglas. "I haven't the faintest intention of being engaged to Cossie. If she imagines that I am in love with her, she is making the greatest mistake in her life."

"Cossie is a foolish girl," admitted her aunt, "and has made heaps of mistakes; but if she sees her way to bettering herself, she can be as determined as anyone. Of course you will have to run down and say 'good-bye.'"

"Yes, I shall go to-morrow."

"I must say I don't envy you the visit!" declared his mother with a malicious smile.

"No, I daresay it will be disagreeable—but Aunt Emma will see me through. In Cossie's case it is not a matter of deep attachment; she only wants to play me off against that fellow Soames. Ah, here is Michael jingling his tray outside; he wants to lay the cloth and we had better clear."

In some respects the dreaded farewell at "Monte Carlo" was even more trying than Douglas had anticipated. His relatives had learned and digested his news; to them, it seemed an uplifting of the entire connection. After pushing congratulations and some high-flown talk respecting the delights of his future career and "position," the girls, as if by mutual agreement, rose and left him alone with their mother.

Thus abandoned to a *tete-à-tete*, after a lengthy silence, Mrs. Larcher, sitting among the collapsible spring's, began to speak in a shaky voice.

"Ahem! We have *all* seen, Douglas, how devotedly attached you are to Cossie, and the marked attentions you have paid her. Of course, on such a small salary you were too honourable to say anything definite. Ahem! But now that you are in a better position, with splendid prospects, I have no objection to an engagement, and as soon as you are comfortably settled in Rangoon, Cossie will join you."

Douglas instantly lifted himself out of his chair and confronted the unfortunate catspaw; standing erect before her, he said:

"My dear Aunt Emma, kindly understand once for all that I am not in love with Cossie. I have never made love to her, or ever shall. I like her as a cousin—but no more. Even if I were madly in love, I could not marry; my screw will barely keep myself."

"Oh, but you'll get on!" interposed his aunt eagerly. "They all do out there, and you who are so well educated and gentlemanly will soon be drawing high pay, and keeping dozens of black servants, and a motor—and you know poor Cossie is *so* fond of you."

"I am truly sorry to hear you say so; I cannot imagine *why* she should be fond of me; or why, quite lately, she has got this preposterous idea into her head. Naturally it is a delicate subject to discuss with you, Aunt Emma; but I declare on my honour that I have never thought of Cossie but just as a jolly sort of girl and a cousin."

"But you have given her presents, my darling boy; yes, and written to her," urged the poor lady, clinging to the last straw.

"I have given her chocolates, and a couple of pairs of gloves, and answered her notes; and if Cossie imagines that every man who gives her chocolates, and answers notes about tea and tennis, is seriously in love with her, she must be incredibly foolish. Cossie knows in her heart that I have never cast her a thought, except as a relation; and, as a matter of fact, of the two girls I like Delia the best! I don't want to say unpleasant things when I'm on the point of going away—probably for years. I hoped to have spent a jolly long day among you, but from what you have just told me I really could not face it, and I must ask you to say good-bye to my cousins for me. I will write to you, Aunt Emma, as soon as I get out to Rangoon. You have always been very kind, and made me feel at home here; you may be sure I won't forget it." And he stooped down suddenly and gave her a hearty kiss. Then before the poor stout lady could struggle out of the cavity which her weight had made in the Chesterfield Douglas had departed. She heard the close of the hall door, immediately followed by the click of the garden gate. Yes, he was *gone!*

And Cossie, who all the time had been listening on the top of the stairs, instantly descended like a wolf on the fold. She would have run out bareheaded after Douglas, but that her more prudent sister actually restrained her by violent physical force; and then, what a scene she made! Oh, what recriminations and angry speeches and reproaches she showered upon her unhappy parent!

"You told me to sound him about an engagement, and I did. Oh, but it was a hateful job, and here's my thanks!" whimpered Mrs. Larcher. "He looked awfully white and stern, and said he only likes you as a cousin, and that he had no intention of anything—and I believe him. It was only in the last two months, since Freddy Soames broke it off, that you've gone out of your way to hang on to Douglas. I'm sure I wish there had been something in it—he's a dear good boy, and I could love him like a son," and the poor lady sobbed aloud.

"You bungled the whole thing, of course!" cried her ungrateful offspring, "I might have known you would put your foot in it; you've let him slip through your fingers and just ruined my last chance. Oh, if I'd only talked to him myself, I'd have been on my way to Burma in six months!"

Then Cossie broke down, buried her head in a musty cushion, and wept sore.

However, after a little time, the broken-hearted damsel recovered; her feelings were elastic, and she allowed herself to be revived with a stiff whisky and soda and a De Reské cigarette. On the following day she had so far recovered as to be able to make a careful toilet and walk out, to call upon her two most intimate pals, in order to inform them—in the very strictest confidence—that she was engaged to her cousin, Douglas Shafto, who had just got a splendid appointment in Burma and would come home in two years! Then she added impressively, "I don't want this given out—mother would be *furious*; but the first time you come across him I don't mind if you whisper the news to Freddy Soames."

Cossie sent her cousin a heart-broken letter of farewell, full of underlined words and vague expressions of despair—a portion of which she had copied from a dramatic love scene in a novel. She implored him to write to her, and remained "his devoted till death, Cossie."

Shafto thrust his devoted-till-death Cossie's letter into the waste-paper basket, with a gesture of excommunication, and barred the doors of his memory upon her round fat face.

Preparations for departure proceeded satisfactorily. He received a number of good wishes and not a few gifts. The Tremeneheeres sent him an express rifle, the Tebbs a dispatch box, Mrs. Malone gave him a silver cigarette case and a warm rug, Mrs. Galli gave him her blessing, and his mother gave him advice.

On the appointed day a band of friends travelled down to Tilbury to take leave of Douglas Shafto. These included Mrs. Malone, Mr. Hutton, the two Japanese gentlemen, and several of his fellow clerks.—Mrs. Shafto had excused herself, declaring that "her feelings would not endure the strain of a public leave-taking."—Shortly before the *Blankshire* (Bibby Line) sailed, Sandy—alas! accompanied by Cossie—hurried down the gangway (for Cossie was allied to the stamp of the British soldier, who never knows when he is beaten and entirely refuses to accept defeat!). She wore her best hat—a conspicuous affair with enormous green wings—a somewhat murky white fur, and carried a presentation bunch of wilted flowers. The new arrival, chattering like a magpie, took immediate possession of her cousin, snatched her away from poor Mrs. Malone, who was looking very old and sad, and insisted on inspecting his cabin and as much as was possible of the ship. When the bell rang and the moment of parting arrived, she burst into wild unrestrained sobs, and clung, in the best melodramatic style, to her unresisting kinsman, who was compelled to accept her kisses and tears. In fact, as her brother rudely stated, "she made a shameless show of herself, slobbering over Douglas before all the passengers, and he was sorry for the poor chap, who was covered with blushes; and not for her at all—as anyone could see with half an eye!"

However, Cossie returned home by the Underground, fortified with the conviction that the party who had witnessed her farewell were bound to realise that Douglas Shafto was her affianced lover.

The last signal Shafto received, ere the group of friends had dissolved into a blur, was a frantic waving of Cossie's damp handkerchief, and he turned his face towards the bows of the *Blankshire*, now heading down the river, with the happy exaltation of freedom and a grateful sense of escape.

CHAPTER IX

THE "BLANKSHIRE"

The *Blankshire* was a full and well-known ship. Not a few of the passengers had made several trips in her and some, as they met in saloon and corridors, exchanged loud hearty greetings and hailed one another as old friends. These were chiefly planters and officials from Ceylon, Southern India and Burma, who herded in parties both at meals and on deck.

It was not to be expected that Shafto would see one familiar face, and he felt completely "out of it," as he took a seat at a draughty table between two elderly people, whose interest was entirely concentrated upon their meals and the weather.

The second day proved rough and wet and the smoking-room was crowded. Here Shafto made an acquaintance with a well-set-up, weather-beaten young man, his neighbour. Finding they had similar tastes with regard to cigars and boots, they proceeded to cement an acquaintance. Hoskins was the name of Shafto's companion, and after half an hour's lively talk, he exclaimed:

"I say, look here, we must dig you out of 'the Potter's Field,' and bring you to our table."

"What do you mean by 'the Potter's Field'?"

"Why, to bury strangers in! We bury dull folk and such-like in the table near the door; but I'll speak to the head steward and get you moved."

And before the next meal Shafto's transition was an accomplished fact, and he found himself one of a merry and congenial circle. In his novel and detached position he realised a sense of independence; he was breathing a new existence, an exhilarating atmosphere, and enjoying every hour of the day.

At table and in the smoke-room he picked up a certain amount of useful information respecting Burma, listened to many a "Don't" with polite attention, and was offered the address of a fairly good chummery in Rangoon. As he could play bridge without letting down his partners, was active at deck sports, and invariably cheery and obliging, he soon gained that effervescent prize, "board-ship popularity."

Here was a different fellow from Douglas Shafto of "Malahide." He seemed to have cast off a load of care; the cramped, monotonous life, his mother's hard indifference, the octopus-like Cossie, all had slipped from his shoulders and were figuratively buried in the heaving, dark blue sea. What delicious hours of tranquil ease were enjoyed in a steamer chair; hours when he looked on the past five years as a distant and fading dream!

As he paced the deck with a companion he learnt many strange things. Odd bits of half-told stories, confidences respecting some girl, or some ambition—and now and then a warning.

"You are so new and green to the East," said Hoskins, his first friend, a police officer returning from short leave. "You had better keep your eyes skinned! Rangoon is not like India, but a roaring busy seaport, where every soul is on the make. You will find various elements there, besides British and Burmese. Tribes from Upper Burma, Tibetans, Hindoos, Malays, Chinese and, above all, Germans. They do an enormous trade, and have many substantial firms and houses, and put through as much business as, or more than, we do ourselves. No job is too small, no order too insignificant for their prompt attention. They have agents all over the country, who pull strings in wolfram and the ruby mines, and have a finger in every mortal thing. I'll say this for them, they're most awfully keen and industrious, and stick at nothing to earn the nimble rupee, underselling when they can, and grabbing contracts and trade secrets. Some of these days they will mine us out of Burma!"

"So I see they needn't go to you for a character," remarked Shafto.

"Oh, they are not all tarred with the same brush! I have some good pals in the German Club—fellows that are as straight as a die. Is this your first journey out of England?"

"Yes, bar winter sports in Switzerland, when I was a kid."

"Well, you will see a small bit of the world this trip; as soon as we collect the passengers at Marseilles, and once the awnings and the moon are up, things will begin to hum!"

"How do you mean hum?"

"We shall have sports, dances, concerts—this has always been a gay

ship, and the purser is a rare hustler. We are due at Marseilles tomorrow morning, and we take in a cargo of the lazy luxurious folk who abhor 'the Bay,' and have travelled overland. I'd have done the same, only I'm frightfully hard up; three months at home, having a 'good time,' comes pretty expensive!"

"I hope you will be a fixture in Rangoon?"

"I'm afraid not; I'm going straight up to Mandalay, but I shall be down later, and meanwhile I'll do my best to settle you in that chummery. I'll send a line to FitzGerald of my service; he lives there; a rattling Irishman, with lots of brains in his handsome head, and a good sort; there's also Roscoe, a clever oddity, and MacNab of the Irrawaddy Flotilla—a wonderful golfer. Most of the fellows in business in Rangoon are Scotch. Murray was in the same chummery; there were four chums till May."

"And Number Four has gone home?"

"He has—to his long home, worse luck; he broke his neck fooling over a log jump."

On this fresh October morning the *Blankshire* lay moored at her usual berth in Marseilles harbour, and the overland passengers were streaming aboard in great numbers.

Hoskins and Shafto, leaning over the bulwarks, watched the long procession of travellers, followed by porters, bearing their light baggage.

"There are a good few, you see," remarked Hoskins; "this is a popular ship and date. We won't have an empty berth—anyway as far as the Canal. Most of this crowd," waving a hand, "these with maids and valets, are bound for Egypt; there will be a big contingent for Colombo and Southern India. I'm a bit curious to see our own little lot.—Ah! here comes one of them!"

He indicated a stout imposing person, who was majestically ascending the gangway.

"That's Lady Puffe, the consort of one of our big wigs; very official and dignified, keeps old Fluffy in grand order. The next, the tall handsome woman, is Mrs. Pomeroy, wife of the Judicial Commissioner, a real lady, and—hullo! she has brought out a daughter! Not, as far as I can see, up to her mother's sample; too much nose and too much bone. And next, we have Mrs. Flint, of Flint and Co., a big house. She gives the best dinners in Rangoon. The little fair lady with the small dog is Mrs. Maitland, wife of the General Commanding in Burma, and the one with her must be her sister, or sister-in-law. Here comes the great Otto Bernhard, junior partner in the house of Bernhard Brothers; as you see, a fine, handsome man, with the most All Highest moustache; and also owns a heavenly tenor voice—but I would not trust him farther than I could throw him!"

"And that would not be far," said Shafto; "he weighs every ounce of fourteen stone."

"Yes, a big man in every way, trades on his voice and his good looks, as well as in teak and paddy—an unscrupulous devil where women are concerned; the lady he is escorting is Mrs. Lacy; you would not think to look at her, so slim, gracious and smiling, that she is a noted man-eater."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, perhaps the expression is a bit too strong. She has a subtle way of attracting mankind. It amuses her and, in the long run, does no harm. Wait till you see how they will collect about her on board—like flies round a pot of honey."

"Shall you be one of the flies?"

"Possibly. I enjoy being fascinated and I like honey! She is very amusing and dances like a moonbeam. Those are two coffee planters, wonderful pals and bridge players, and here comes a strange lady, probably a tourist—rich too."

Shafto looked and saw a handsome grey-haired woman, with a round smiling face, wearing a long sable coat and an air of complacent prosperity.

"Why, for a wonder I know her!" he declared. "It's Mrs. Milward. Her sister was our neighbour at home; I've met her often."

"Who is she?"

"A widow—very rich, I believe. I think her daughter is married to a man in India—or Burma."

"Is this the daughter following up the gangway?"

"No; I've never seen her before."

"I say, what a pretty girl—and a ripping figure! Once seen, never forgotten, eh? When you have claimed the chaperon you must present

me to the young lady—especially as you are out of the running yourself.”

“Out of the running—what do you mean?”

“Merely that I happened to witness that tender parting at Tilbury—the little girl in the green hat, who was crying her eyes out!”

“She was my cousin,” protested Shafto; “nothing more.”

“Oh, come!” rejoined Hoskins, with a knowing sidelong glance.

“Upon my honour! nothing whatever to me but that.”

“Well, I suppose I’m bound to take your word for it, but it looked uncommonly touching—so like the real thing, and yet merely a case of strong family affection!”

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Well, let us descend and make ourselves presentable for lunch; nothing like first impressions.”

After lunch, when the new-comers had found their places and scattered about, watching the shores of France recede, Shafto approached Mrs. Milward and bowed himself before her.

“Why, Douglas!” she exclaimed, “this *is* a surprise, a delightful surprise. What on earth are *you* doing here?”

“Making a voyage to Rangoon.”

“Rangoon! So am I. An amazing coincidence. Now come and sit down at once and tell me all about yourself.”

“I think you have heard all there is to know.”

“Yes; that you had become so distant and reserved and so like an oyster in its shell, and there was no getting you to ‘Tremenheere.’”

“But I was not my own master—I was in an office.”

“My dear boy, where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“There is no way of taking leave—unless you wish to get the key of the street,” he retorted with a laugh.

“And what takes you to Rangoon?”

“A post in a big mercantile house. I’ve to thank Mr. Tremeneere: I owe it to his interest—it’s a splendid chance for me.”

“Well, I’m sure you deserve it, my dear boy, if ever anyone did. You don’t ask why I am on the high seas. I am en route, to Mandalay—Ella is there. After I’ve paid her a visit, I’m going on to India, to stay with your old friend Geoffrey. He and you are about the same age, are you not?”

“Yes; where is he now?”

“He is in the White Hussars at Lucknow—he was at Sandhurst with you, wasn’t he?”

Shafto nodded, and the lady continued:

“I’m bringing out a girl, such a darling!—She’s down unpacking in our cabin; a dear child. Her mother is an old friend of mine; her father was rector of our parish. I drop her in Rangoon.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Her name is Sophy Leigh, and she is going out to stay with an aunt, who is something of an invalid. Her husband is in business, a German—said to be rolling in money.”

“That sounds all right.”

“And Sophy can’t speak a word of German, though French like a native, and she plays the piano delightfully. Her father died some years ago, and Mrs. Leigh and the girls live in town—Chelsea; not rich, but have enough to go on with and are a very happy trio. One day a letter came from the German uncle asking for a niece—and if possible a musical niece—so Sophy was sent; anyway, her sister is engaged to be married and was not available. My friend, Mrs. Leigh, was very sorry to lose her girl—even for a year or so, but it seemed such a chance for Sophy to see the world, and make friends with her rich and childless relatives.”

“I expect she will have a good time in Burma?”

“Bound to, for she is one of those fortunate people who make their own happiness. Here she comes!”

As she concluded, a tall, slim girl, with a face of morning freshness, wearing a rose silk sports coat and fluttering white skirt, approached, and Shafto instantly realised that such a personality was likely to have a good time anywhere! Miss Leigh’s dark eyes were lovely, and she had a radiant smile; she smiled on Shafto when he was presented by her chaperon:

“Sophy, this is a most particular friend of mine; I’ve known him since he was in blouses—a boy with sticky fingers, who refused to be kissed.

Mr. Shafto—Miss Leigh.”

Mrs. Milward was a handsome, impulsive, kind-hearted woman of forty five; her arched, dark eye-brows and a wonderful natural complexion gave her a fictitious air of youth—slightly discounted by a comfortable and matronly figure. Some declared that her round face, short nose, and large eyes produced a resemblance to a well-to-do pussy cat, but this was the voice of envy. She had a clever maid, dressed well, and with the exception of the loss of her husband, had never known a care; there was scarcely a line or wrinkle on her charming soft face. Now, with her girl happily married, and her boy in the Army, she felt a free woman, and was anxious to try her wings—and her liberty! Though popular with rich and poor, she was by no means a perfect character; extraordinarily indiscreet and rash in her confidences—there was no secret cupboard in her composition—she threw open all her mental stores and also those of her intimates. Aware of this failing, she would deplore it and say:

“Don’t tell me any important secrets, my dear—for I can never keep them, in spite of my good resolutions. They will jump out and play about among my latest news and good stories.”

That night in their cabin, as she and her charge talked and discussed their fellow passengers, the life history of Douglas was her principal topic. With considerable detail, she related his happy prospects and the shattering of these; told of his cultured father and odious, underbred mother, whom she particularly detested; spoke of his withdrawal from old friends, lest he might seem to sponge, and how, instead of being in the Army serving his country like her own boy, enjoying his youth and a comfortable allowance, he was stuck in a gloomy City office, drawing a miserable salary, and enduring the whims and temper of an empty-headed, selfish parent.

“She married again the other day,” added Mrs. Milward, “a rich Jew. I’ve not a word to say against the Jews—a marvellously clever race; in fact, I think a little Jew blood gives brains; and as to riches, of course there’s no harm in *them*; but this Manasseh Levison is so common and fat, and seems to reek of furniture polish and money. I’ve seen him at ‘the Mulberry’ at tea, gobbling cakes like a glutton and making such a noise. Oh, what a contrast to Mr. Shafto, so aristocratic and so courteous—a man whom it seemed almost a privilege to know!”

And in this strain, Mrs. Milward, reclining in her berth, chattered on, whilst her companion brushed her heavy, dark hair, and imbibed a strong feeling of interest and pity for the good-looking hero of her chaperon’s impressive sketch.

Quite unintentionally this voluble lady had enlisted the mutual sympathy of these young people; she had laid, so to speak, a match; whether a mutual liking would ignite it or not was uncertain—but the prospect was favourable.

CHAPTER X

THE LAND OF PROMISE

As the voyage progressed various groups thawed and amalgamated, even "the Potter's Field" experiencing a temporary resurrection. Theatricals, bridge tournaments and concerts brought the passengers into touch with one another, the sole member who held herself augustly aloof being Lady Puffle. She remained secluded in her cabin, or occupied an isolated position on deck, appearing at dinner with a brave show of appetite, diamonds and airs, paralysing her neighbours with a petrifying stare. Occasionally she accorded a bow or "Good morning" to her sole and necessary acquaintance, the ship's doctor, whom she informed that in her position she was debarred from mixing with the crowd—as later, in Rangoon, these people might presume on the acquaintance.

One of the special events of the voyage was the two days' sports, and here Shafto distinguished himself by winning a severe obstacle race; he was a nimble, muscular youth, who, thanks to school games and the gymnasium, climbed, ran, and leapt with inspirited agility, and when at last he touched the winning tape, breathless but exultant, there was a spontaneous outburst of clapping and cheers.

Prize-giving was the occasion of his triumph. This was his five minutes, when he advanced to receive from Lady Puffle a clock, set of studs and a thermos flask—all carefully laid in at Malta by the provident "Amusements Committee." Shafto bore his honours modestly, and was glared on by Bernhard who, drawn up beside her ladyship like an Imperial Guardsman, presented an alarmingly militant and stern appearance.

Between him and this particular "Englander" no love was wasted. Once, when they had collided on the companion ladder, Shafto's agility alone had saved him from a heavy fall, and the obstructor had neither looked back nor offered apology. Probably he concluded that charming Miss Leigh, who accompanied his songs with such delicate sympathy, accorded too much of her society to this young man; and, after all, what was he? A London clerk, going out to begin at the bottom of the ladder, as one of Gregory's assistants. Naturally he disliked Gregory's, a rival and substantial house, which, like his own, dealt largely in paddy—and this casual, outspoken, clear-eyed youngster was just the type of person specially abhorred by the Prussian Junker. Now that the music-room had two such efficient performers as Bernhard and Miss Leigh, Shafto and others abandoned the bridge tables and enjoyed a rare treat. Miss Leigh presided at the piano and appeared to have complete command of the instrument; she could read anything at sight, no matter how it bristled with sharps and accidentals; her repertoire ranged from Beethoven, Bach, Grieg, Chopin, to the latest ragtime, and her playing had a crisp ringing touch that was delightful.

Hoskins, who was endowed with a good baritone, sang quaint Burmese songs with gratifying effect. There was something weird and yet musical in the solemn and majestic "Toung Soboo Byne," or "Yama Kyo," from a native opera, and the Royal boat song as sung by the King's boatmen when rowing His Majesty on State occasions.

Mrs. Maitland's contribution was a beautifully trained light soprano, but the Caruso of the company was Herr Otto Bernhard; amazing that a man of his sensual nature and proclivities should be gifted with a voice fit to swell heaven's choir. He sang Wagner, Gounod, Schubert with absolute impartiality, as well as numbers of melting German *lieder* and touching English ballads. He brought smarting tears to the eyes of comfortable matrons, and swept their thoughts back to poignant moments of long ago—to youth and first love, to moonlight nights, entrancing meetings and heart-rending farewells! As for the younger and less emotional generation, even they were moved out of their everyday composure and hung upon the singer's words with breathless appreciation.

There was a number of young people on board the *Blankshire*, and since the good old days of Tadpool Shafto had never enjoyed himself so thoroughly. It was the first time since he had arrived at man's estate that he had been associated with girls of his own class. There were no fewer than thirty on board—of these, eleven were brides elect—but the prettiest of all, and to him the most attractive, was Miss Leigh. He looked for her the first thing when he stepped on deck in the mornings, and in the evenings watched her departure with wistful regret. Meanwhile, between morning and evening he contrived to see as much

of the young lady as possible—though when out of sight she was never absent from his mind.

“Was he about to fall in love?” He was conscious of a vague wonder and sense of alarm. A hopeless attachment would be a fatal misfortune to a fellow beginning a new life; a life that required the whole of his mind and the best of his energies; but, like the moth and the candle, he still continued to hover round Miss Leigh—and Miss Leigh was not averse to his society. Together they talked and argued, played quoits and danced. A stern, inward voice assured Shafto that, luckily for him, there was a fixed date for the terminating of his enchantment—the day when the *Blankshire* entered the Irrawaddy river and was moored to her berth. Then Miss Leigh would go her way to be the joy and the light of wealthy relatives—he, to begin his new work at the very bottom of the ladder.

Another voice also made itself heard, which said: “One is young but once! Make the most of these shining hours; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

When in a placid temper, the Red Sea is favourable for dances and theatricals and, much against his will, Shafto was dragged into “the Neptune” company by Hoskins, a resolute, determined individual, who filled the thankless office of stage manager. Shafto was cast for the part of an old gentleman, the role being softened and alleviated by the fact that he was to undertake to play uncle to Miss Leigh. Although Bernhard had no part in the piece itself, being an authority, he superintended its production, and on several occasions addressed Miss Leigh’s temporary “uncle” in a manner that increased Shafto’s natural aversion to what Hoskins termed “The great blond brute!” The play proved to be a success and there was little or no jealousy or friction. Amazing to record, Miss Pomeroy and Miss Leigh—the two principal ladies—still remained the very best of friends. During rehearsals Shafto and his “niece” exchanged a good deal of dialogue that was not in the piece—thanks partly to Mrs. Milward’s introductions and revelations, and partly to a mutual attraction, they now knew one another rather well. They sat with their chaperon and listened to her incessant flow of talk with appreciative sympathy, played deck quoits, walked and danced together, and were for looks and accomplishments the most prominent couple on the *Blankshire*.

“Tell me, dear lady,” said Mrs. Maitland, sinking into a deck-chair beside Sophy’s chaperon, “do you intend anything to come of *that*?” and she nodded at a pair who, with heads fairly near, were leaning over the side, engrossed in watching the divers at Aden.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s rather a case, is it not? First love and an early marriage!”

“If you mean Sophy and young Shafto, why, they haven’t a bad sixpence between them!”

“No?” and Mrs. Maitland looked gravely interrogative.

“Well, perhaps I’ve been incautious—indiscreet—now that I look back.” (Yes, and with a sense of guilt she recalled her talks to both; her praise and her explanations.) “But the fact is that though they have never met till now, I’ve known them both as children, and I could not well avoid bringing them together, but I don’t think there’s any harm done; they are as simple and open as the day. There’s no flirting—they are just enjoying the new surroundings and these golden hours—but I’ll be more careful and put a stop to their after-dinner promenades. I’ll take your hint.”

“I hope it won’t be a case of locking the stable-door when the steed has been stolen.”

“No; but whoever steals Sophy will get a prize—and she does thoroughly enjoy every hour of the day. She is so pretty and transparent and sweet; she makes me think of a lovely flower, floating serenely on a summer river. I expect she will be a great success in Rangoon.”

As there was no immediate answer on the part of Mrs. Maitland, she added quickly:

“Don’t you think so?”

“Well, yes—I hope so; but, you see, Miss Leigh is going to live in rather an odd home.”

“Odd?”

“Oh, it’s absolutely respectable—but—out of the world—our world. Mr. Krauss is a German and said to be rich; he does not belong to a firm or house, but is on his own. Of course, he is a member of the Gymkhana and all that; but he keeps to the German set and lives among them over in Kokine; then his English wife, once a celebrated beauty, is a semi-invalid. As he never—they say—does anything without some well-considered

reason, and is always on the make, I hope to goodness he has not decoyed this charming girl to Rangoon merely to be her aunt's nurse—and his housekeeper."

"I should hope not, indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Milward. "My cousin Mary Gregory must have an eye on my young friend—I'll see to that. I shall be stopping with Mary for a few days before going up the river; but I think Sophy will be all right. After all, Mrs. Krauss is her own aunt."

If Shafto and Sophy had become friendly over games, discussions and little special teas with Mrs. Milward, Bernhard cemented his acquaintance by means of their mutual love of music; but it seemed to the girl that, after he had heard her destination, Herr Bernhard's manner had undergone a subtle change. The protégée of a wealthy woman—who wore wonderful rings and priceless pearls and carried herself as a high-born dame—was another person from the mere transitory companion who, once at Rangoon, would be handed over to Karl Krauss, her uncle—incredible! Uncle by marriage—yes, but still an inmate of his home.

"And so I hear you are niece to Herr Krauss," he began abruptly, as he lounged against the bulwarks; "I know him well."

"And my aunt?"

"Yes, I've met her two or three times; she must have been splendidly handsome once; now she looks broken up—it's the climate. No woman should remain in Lower Burma for eight years without a change."

"I did not know the climate was so bad; I'm afraid I know very little about Burma; it seems so far away—much farther off than India."

"Yes, and a far more beautiful country—a land flowing with rivers and riches, and full of charming people, who live for the day, like so many butterflies, and do no work."

"Then who does work?"

"The Madrassi, the Sikh, the Chinese, and, above all, the European. Rangoon has an enormous trade; I wonder what you will think of it?"

"I feel sure that I shall like it; I have always longed to see the East."

"Ah, that is a common wish—the *sun* rises in the East! We Germans like the East—the East likes us. *We* own Burma!"

After a moment's pause, which gave his companion time to digest this surprising statement, he went on, "Have you ever seen Herr Krauss?"

"No! when my aunt came home he always went to Germany—to Frankfort, I think."

"So his acquaintance has yet to be made; it is what you call a pleasure in store. I wonder what you will think of the unknown uncle; perhaps some day you will tell me?" Then he gave an odd laugh and walked away, still laughing.

Bernhard's place was speedily filled by another man. Most people considered Miss Leigh the beauty of the ship, but this novel and agreeable prominence had not spoiled her and she was always ready to oblige—to accompany a song, amuse the children, pick up and rectify a piece of knitting, promenade the deck, play quoits, or dance.

The various other girls on board, with whom she was popular, had assured her of the joys awaiting her and them in Rangoon. Dances, picnics, concerts, paper-chases—in short, no end of gaiety—all to be enjoyed in that yet unknown and romantic country, "the Land of the Golden Umbrella." Often the girls sat in one another's cabins, discussed and described frocks and beautiful toilettes, at present unseen and packed away in the baggage-room. Also they talked over their fellow-passengers—not forgetting the young men—and when Shafto's name was mentioned, an occasional sly glance or hint would be thrown at Sophy, of which she endeavoured to appear serenely unconscious.

Early one morning the passengers awoke to find themselves at anchor in Colombo harbour, and the soft warm air brought them a delicious whiff of the celebrated cinnamon gardens. Many were landing for Southern India and a quantity of cargo had to be discharged. As this was bound to be a lengthy process, the remnant who were bound for Rangoon had nearly a whole day ashore. Mrs. Milward and maid, and her young friends Miss Leigh and Mr. Shafto, Herr Bernhard, the Pomeroyes, Mrs. Lacy and several of her satellites, breakfasted at the Galle Face Hotel, and subsequently made trips in rickshaws, shopped in the bazaar, and had afternoon tea at Mount Lavinia.

It was, as everyone agreed, a most delightful break. On that same

evening, as they steamed out into the moonlit Bay of Bengal, Sophy and Shafto paced the half-deserted deck, gazing on the Southern Cross, and the former suddenly said:

"That was our last stopping-place. When I leave the *Blankshire*, where I have been so much at home, I shall feel rather astray."

"So you would like a home on the rolling deep?" suggested her companion.

"No, indeed; shall I *ever* forget that day we had off Crete? But I have never been long away from mother; I am going to a new country, a new life, and almost new relations—it all seems so strange and vague."

"But your aunt cannot be a stranger," suggested Shafto. "You know her, don't you?"

"Oh, yes; but I have not seen her for eight years. The last time she was over, she stayed with us for a few weeks. I remember her as handsome and beautifully dressed, with wonderful toilet arrangements in ivory and silver, and bottles of heavy Indian scent. She was very kind and had such soft caressing manners, and gave us lots of chocolate and nice presents. I recollect a beautiful emerald ring she wore—but I cannot recall the colour of her eyes."

"Oh, well, that oversight will soon be repaired!"

"Aunt Flora was fond of gaiety and theatres; we lived in Chelsea, and as our small house could hardly hold her big boxes and we had no telephone, she went to the Carlton, where she was more in the middle of things, and could entertain her friends from India and Burma—but she came to see us two or three times a week."

"And where was her lord and master?"

"In Germany; I have never seen him."

"How did your aunt come across him?"

"In Hong Kong, of all places! She was married at eighteen to a young officer; they ran away, and I believe grandpa never forgave her. He was a General, a strict old martinet, and she was his favourite daughter. After they had been married a couple of years, Aunt Flora's husband was killed in an accident and she was left rather badly off. People out there were very kind to her. She had been hurt in the accident and was laid up for months. Then this rich German asked her to marry him, and as she was reluctant to return home and face grandpa, she said 'Yes.' But perhaps it was love match number two."

"Yes, perhaps it was."

"That all happened twenty years ago, and since then Aunt Flora has made her home in the East—China, the Straits Settlements and Burma. You see, her friends and her interests are mostly out there. She and mother always write to one another; we do her commissions in London, and she sends us Burmese silks and umbrellas and curry stuff; but we were immensely surprised when, without any little hints or preparations, Uncle Karl wrote and invited me to pay them a long visit—and so here I am! I do hope I shan't be a fish out of water. I've never been accustomed to living with wealthy people, and, I'm told that Uncle Karl is immensely rich."

"You need not consider that a drawback. It is better than being immensely poor—for instance, like myself."

"You don't look poor."

She smiled as she glanced at his well-cut suit and admirable brown shoes.

"I'm not exactly a whining beggar, selling boot laces and matches, but I am uncommonly glad to have got this job, which brings me in about four hundred a year. In London I was a clerk at less than half, and here is my chance to see the world—and I'm bound to make the most of it."

"Mrs. Milward said you were to have gone into the Army."

"Yes, but if you can't get what you like, you must like what you can get," was the philosophic rejoinder.

"I suppose your people were very sorry to part with you. My poor mother cried for nearly three days; my sister, I know, will miss me dreadfully. This is not sheer vanity, as you might suppose, but we have always done things together—and there is only a year between us."

"Well, my mother did not cry much, and I have no sisters to mourn for me."

"No sisters," she echoed, as if the fact struck her as unusual.

"No, nor brothers either—only cousins."

"Sometimes they do just as well; are they pretty?"

"No," he answered rather curtly, as Cossie's round complacent face rose before his mental eye.

After a short pause he changed the topic and asked:

"Do you ride, Miss Leigh?"

"Yes, but not since we've come to London; I love riding. In the country, in father's lifetime, I rode a cob—he went in the cart, too; he was such a dear, but very tricky; once or twice he ran away with me; I didn't tell father, because I knew I'd never again be allowed to ride alone, and I do enjoy riding by myself."

"I'm sorry to hear that, for if I can rise to the price of a gee, I was hoping you would allow me to join you occasionally."

"I should be delighted, but——" and she hesitated.

"Oh, yes," he added quickly, "I know what you are going to say: 'How about a chaperon?'"

"Perhaps they don't keep chaperons in Rangoon?"

"Oh, yes, my dear, they do," declared Mrs. Maitland, who, as she joined them, had overheard the last remark, "and extra fierce specimens, I can assure you! Miss Leigh, they want me to sing Gounod's 'Ave Maria,' so will you be an angel and come and play my accompaniment?"

As Miss Leigh was always ready to be "an angel" at a moment's notice, she offered no resistance when Mrs. Maitland took her by the arm and led her away to the music-room.

Shafto and Miss Leigh were usually among the first to appear on deck, both being early risers; she, in order to leave a clear field for Mrs. Milward's prolonged toilet, and the elaborate operations of her clever maid. The pretty grey hair had to be taken out of pins, brushed, back-combed and deftly arranged, as the frame to its owner's beaming and youthful face. Lacing, buttoning and hooking also absorbed considerable time.

As for Shafto, he was no lie-a-bed. Even in those dark, raw winter days at Lincoln Square, when breakfast was served by electric light, he was always punctual, and one of the first to descend and retrieve his boots through the smoky atmosphere of the lower regions. What a contrast were those murky hours to these glorious mornings in the tropics—the green translucent sea, the soft golden light, the salt, stimulating air, all shimmering and melting together! The day really dawned for Shafto when a certain Panama hat, crowning a beautiful head, emerged from the companion ladder, and the smile in a pair of bright dark eyes greeted him like a ray of sunshine. One morning, as the couple paced the deck before breakfast, accompanied by Mr. Hoskins, an excited fellow traveller accosted the trio.

"I say," he began, "have you heard? They have just signalled land ahead!"

"Oh, where?" cried Sophy eagerly.

"Do you see over the starboard bow, that faint dark streak upon the sky line?"

She nodded.

"Well then," he announced impressively, "that is Burma!"

Shafto snatched up a pair of glasses and gazed at the long line of coast and, as he gazed, he felt as if he stood upon Pisgah and a whole new world lay open before him. He was figuratively surveying the Promised Land!

CHAPTER XI

A BURMESE HOSTESS

Early in the same afternoon the *Blankshire* picked up her pilot at Elephant Point and entered the famous Irrawaddy. Long before her destination was in sight, twenty miles from the sea, the glorious Shwe Dagon, a shining golden object, towered into view, flashing in the sunlight against a background of impenetrable woods.

Rangoon, on a river navigable for nine hundred miles, is a large and important seaport and, as the wealth of one of the richest countries filters through its ports, naturally the approach is thronged with shipping. Our incoming liner met or overtook cargo steamers, tank ships, battered tramps and heavily laden wind-jammers in the tow of straining tugs, not to mention steam-launches, barges and swarms of the local *sampan*, or small boat.

At the wharf where, amidst deafening yells and hoarse shoutings, the *Blankshire* crept to her berth, crowds of different races—brown, black, yellow and white—awaited the English mail. Passengers were eagerly claimed by their friends and hurried away to motors and carriages; all was excitement and bustle. Alas! 'board-ship friendships soon evaporate, and presently Shafto found himself standing on the aft-deck with his gun-case and cabin luggage, deserted and forgotten—no, for here came Hoskins, the police officer, hot and breathless.

"I say, look here, old chap!" he panted, "I'm just off to catch my train to Tonghoo, but I've had a word with FitzGerald; it will be all right about the chummery; they can take you in on Monday. I see Salter on board, one of the head assistants in Gregory's; I expect he has come to meet you. Well, I must run; so long!"

This good-natured fellow passenger was immediately succeeded by a cabin steward. "Been looking for you everywhere, sir," he said; "there's a gentleman come aboard asking for you." As he concluded, a spare, middle-aged man wearing a large topee and a dust-coloured suit approached and said:

"Mr. Shafto, I believe?" and offered a welcoming hand.

"Yes," assented the new arrival.

"I'm Salter from Gregory's. Manders, the head assistant, asked me to meet you. I'll be glad to help you get your things ashore and take you to the Strand Hotel, where I have booked you a room."

"That is most awfully good of you," replied Shafto. "On Monday I believe I am to get quarters in a chummery."

"Ah, so you are settled, I see. Now, if you will show me your baggage, I have a couple of coolies here with a cart and a taxi for ourselves."

Mr. Salter proved to be remarkably prompt in his measures, and in less than ten minutes Shafto found himself following his flat narrow back down the steep gangway and setting his foot for the first time on the soil of Burma. He halted for a moment to look about. Here was a landmark in his life, a new sphere lay before him; the street was humming and alive with people, and he stared at the jostling, motley crowd of British, Burmese, Chinese, mostly a gaily-clad ever-changing multitude. Among them were shaven priests in yellow robes. Shans in flapping hats; right in front of him stood a stalwart Burman, wearing a white jacket, a pink silk handkerchief, twisted jauntily around his bullet head, and a yellow Lungi, girded to the knee, displayed a three-tailed cat tattooed on the back of each substantial calf.

And what a curious, soft and penetrating atmosphere; moist and loaded with unfamiliar, aromatic odours!

However, Mr. Salter, a man of action, had no time to spare for contemplation, and briskly hustled the stranger into a waiting taxi—for the old days of the rattling, shattered *gharry* are numbered.

"I suppose this is all new to you?" said Shafto's acquaintance as they struggled up the crowded Strand, lined with imposing offices and vast *godowns*, or warehouses.

"You may say so," he replied, eagerly gazing at the dense passing throng—animated women with flower-decked hair, square-shouldered, sauntering men, carrying flat umbrellas and smoking huge cheroots, Khaki-clad Tommies and yellow-faced John Chinamen.

"Oh, there's lots to see in Burma," continued Salter, "an extraordinary mixture of people and races, and a most beautiful country; such splendid rivers and forests—but here, in Rangoon, everyone has but one idea."

In answer to Shafto's glance of interrogation he said:

"We are a commercial community, and our sole aim and object is to work, to get rich, and go home."

"But that doesn't apply to the native?"

"No, the Burman does not work; he is merely a spectator. The industry of others amuses him; his chief object is to enjoy life. Well, here is the hotel; let us go in and have a look at your quarters."

After the baggage had been disposed of and Shafto's room inspected and criticised, his companion still lingered talking. To Salter, the proverbially eccentric, this new-comer appeared to be an intelligent young fellow whom he would like and take to. There was no superior "just out from London to the back of God-speed" air about him. On the contrary, he appeared to be genuinely interested in his surroundings and insatiable for information. It struck him, too, that the forlorn stranger would put in a mighty dull and solitary evening and, stirred by a benevolent impulse, he said:

"Suppose you come back and dine at my diggings? I may be able to give you a few hints as I am an old hand."

"I should be delighted," assented Shafto, "if it won't be putting you out?"

"Oh no, not a bit; Mrs. Salter is accustomed to my bringing home a stray guest."

"Had I not better dress?"

"Certainly not; come along with me now, just as you are."

Thus the matter being arranged, the pair once more entered the taxi, and were presently steering through the traffic of various thoroughfares and teeming bazaars. All at once, with an unexpected lurch, the car turned into a wide, well-shaded enclosure and halted before a low, heavily-roofed house, supported on stout wooden legs—an old-time residence.

"Do you go up," urged Shako's host, "whilst I pay the taxi—you can settle with me later." Here spoke the canny Yorkshire tyke.

Shafto, as requested, climbed the stairs leading up to a wide veranda, on which opened a sitting-room, lined with teak wood and lighted by long glass doors. Here he was confronted by a little Burmese woman with a beaming face. She wore a short white jacket, an extraordinarily tight satin petticoat, or, *tamain* of wonderful butterfly colours, enormous gold ear-rings, and a flower stuck coquettishly behind her left ear. At first he supposed her to be a picturesque attendant, but when she extended a tiny hand loaded with rings and murmured "Pleased to see you!" he realised that he was addressed by the mistress of the house.

"This is my wife," announced Salter as he entered. "Mee Lay, here's Mr. Shafto, one of our new assistants, just out from England; I hope you can give him a good dinner?"

"Oh yes, it will be all right," and once more she beamed upon her guest, "I will go and see about it now."

And in spite of her tight skirt, Mee Lay glided out of the room with an air of surpassing grace.

"I dare say you are surprised to see that Mrs. Salter is of *this country*," said her husband, as he sank into a chair; "but it is by no means an uncommon match here. Burmese women are very good-humoured and capable; they make capital wives, and there is no denying the fascination of the Burmese girl—always so piquant and smiling and dainty. They have also a wonderful capacity for business and money-making, and a real hunger for land; some of the best plots in and about Rangoon have been picked up by these shrewd little creatures. The men-folk, on the other hand, are incurably lazy. They loaf, gamble and amuse themselves and leave their women-kind to trade, or to weave silks and manufacture cheroots; numbers of them are in business. Mee Lay, my wife, owns and runs a good-sized rice mill; and if you were to look into the back compound you would see it entirely surrounded by her matted paddy-bins, biding a rise in the market."

A yet further surprise awaited Shafto, in the shape of a little sallow girl, with clouds of crimped golden hair, beautifully dressed in European style, in a white embroidered frock and wide silk sash.

Rosetta had inherited the high cheek-bones and short nose of her mother's race, the blue eyes and firm jaw of her Yorkshire parent. On the whole, she was an attractive child.

Miss Rosetta Salter received the strange gentleman with overpowering condescension, and spoke English in a thin, squeaky voice. In a flatteringly short time she had descended from her high horse, and

accepted Shafto as a friend, revealed her age (eight years) and told him all about her French doll and her new brown boots—also from Paris.

The dinner, which was announced directly after the return of Mrs. Salter, proved to be excellent, well cooked and a novelty. For the first time Shafto tasted real curry, also mango fool. The appointments were exclusively European, with the exception of a massive silver bowl, filled with purple orchids, which adorned the centre of the table. Two snowy-clad Madras servants waited with silent dexterity and conversation never flagged. Salter discoursed of chummeries and the *Blankshire* passengers, and Mrs. Salter thoughtfully prepared the new arrival for the alarming insects of Lower Burma, whilst Rosetta, for her part, kept up an accompaniment on a high chirruping note.

During a momentary pause Shafto was startled by an odd sound—an imperious, unnatural voice that called, “Tucktoo! Tucktoo! Tucktoo!”

“What is it—or *who* is it?” he inquired anxiously.

“Oh, it’s only a large lizard that lives under the eaves,” explained Salter, “one of our specialities. In the rains, when he is in good voice, he is deafening.”

“He brings good and bad luck,” added Mrs. Salter. “Oh, yes, that is so,” and she flipped the air with her two first fingers, a favourite gesture among Burmese women.

“How do you mean luck?” Shafto asked.

“If he gives seven ‘Tucktoos’ without stopping, that is luck—great big luck—but if he goes on, he brings trouble.”

“Only if he stops at an odd number,” corrected the child.

“I see you know all about it,” remarked the guest.

“Oh, yes, our Tucktoo never goes beyond seven—I think he is old—and mother says the *nats* are kind to us.”

“The cats are kind to you!” ejaculated Shafto. “But why not?”

“No, no,” hastily broke in Salter, “nats are spirits, good spirits or bad, who live in the trees; you will hear enough about them before you are a month in Burma. Their worship is the national faith.”

“But I thought Buddhism—” began Shafto, and hesitated.

“Oh, yes, ostensibly and ostentatiously, but wait and see.”

“I am a Catholic,” announced the child abruptly.

She was excessively self-conscious and anxious to show off before Shafto.

“Are you really?” he said with an incredulous smile.

“Oh, yes, I attend the convent school; I am learning French and dancing, I go to mass; mother goes to the pagoda festivals—mother is a heathen.”

“Rosetta! Mind what you are saying,” sharply interposed Salter; “your mother’s no more a heathen than yourself.”

“Rosetta is a nasty little girl,” said Mrs. Salter, rising, “she forgets herself before company, and must go away to be—”

A succession of shrieks interrupted the verdict.

“Oh, do forgive her, please!” implored Shafto; “I ask it as a favour, a special favour.”

Meanwhile Rosetta clung to her mother apostrophising her in an unknown tongue, then with piercing screams, entirely regardless of her beautiful clean frock, she flung herself flat upon the floor.

If Shafto had been inclined to meditation, he might have reflected on the future of the offspring of two such divergent countries as the West Riding of Yorkshire and Pegu. At one moment the prim, well-mannered English girl; the next, an impulsive, emotional daughter of the Far East. When she grew to woman’s estate, which of the races would predominate?

Meanwhile, as Rosetta lay prone and kicking upon the *dhurri*, her father murmured apologetically:

“When the lassie is a bit over-fired and excited, she doesn’t know what she is saying.”

Mee Lay raised her struggling offspring, was about to bear her away and give her “Tap Tap,” when again Shafto interposed:

“Oh, I say, do forgive her this time, please, Mrs. Salter. This is my first day in Rangoon—and I ask it as a particular favour.”

Mee Lay, an adoring parent, was by no means reluctant to grant his petition, and when the tearful culprit was released and set down, she turned to Shafto and said in her piping treble:

"Thank you, nice gentleman, but she would not have hurt me much. It was not I who said mother was a heathen savage, but Ethel Lucas, and I slapped her, so I did—and Sister gave me a bad mark. I, too, go to the pagoda festivals and like them awfully much. There are bells and beads, and flowers and priests, the same as in the convent."

"Now that peace has been declared, Rosetta, here is a chocolate," said her father, "and you can go to bed. Shafto, we will adjourn into the veranda to smoke, watch the rising moon, and listen to the hum of the bazaar—a new sound for your ears!"

In a few minutes both were extended in comfortable, long cane chairs, no doubt experiencing an agreeable sense of *bien être*. The outlook, with its heavy foliage, was restful to the eye, and the air was charged with a spicy warmth.

Presently Salter began: "On Monday you are due at the office to report yourself. You need not be scared at the Head, although he has a stiff, discouraging sort of manner, and they say that, like the east wind, he finds out all your weak points in the twinkling of an eye! He is just and impartial, and no man is more respected in the whole of Burma than George Gregory. I suppose you know that Gregory's is one of the oldest-established houses here?"

Shafto nodded; he had learned this fact on board ship.

"We do a great trade and employ a number of young fellows, mostly from public schools and universities. One or two other firms do not engage gentlemen—for reasons that, perhaps, you may guess. Out of business hours our house keeps a sharp eye on their employés. A young chap can get into any amount of mischief in Rangoon—Rangoon is full of temptations."

"Oh, is it?" muttered Shafto indifferently—what could its temptations offer in comparison to London?

"Anyhow it seems a huge, stirring sort of place," he added, as he watched motors, bicycles, and *gharries* whirring past the entrance.

"Stirring! Why you may say so—it's humming like a hive day and night. There are so many taps to turn in this wealthy country—timber, rice, wolfram, jade, tin, oil, rubies. A man with a little capital, if he does not lose his head, can make a fortune in ten years, especially in paddy. Our particular trade is teak and paddy—that's rice, you know. I expect your work will be on the wharf and pretty heavy at first."

"Well, anyway, it's an open-air job."

"Yes, you have the pull now; this is our cold season—October to March; but the hot weather is no joke; as for the rains, you might as well live in a steam laundry; we get a hundred inches here in Lower Burma."

"A hundred inches!" echoed Shafto, "you are not serious?"

"Yes; it pours down as if the sea were overhead, and goes on steadily for days. Frogs flop round and round your room, and you can almost hear the trees growing. In the rains the forests are a wonderful sight, such dense masses of foliage and flowers. Can you imagine great trees entirely covered with exquisite blooms, and garlands of pink and lilac creepers interlacing the jungle?"

"How gorgeous! Perhaps I may see all this some day," said Shafto, "after I have explored Rangoon itself."

"Well, I hope you may," assented his companion, "and now I want to ask you a strange question."

"All right—ask away!"

"You have only been a few hours on shore, and I am curious to know if you have received any impression of the place and people—you know, first impressions go a long way!"

"Yes. Although I have only just rattled through the streets and along the Strand, the impression I gathered is that the Burmese appear to be an amazingly happy crew, with no thought for the morrow; they were all laughing and chattering as if life was a splendid joke and they enjoyed it thoroughly. The *joie de vivre* simply hits me in the eye!"

"I can explain all that," said Salter, putting down his cheroot and sitting forward in his long chair. "The Burman has no fear of death, but proclaims an intense consciousness that it is a mere passing over to another existence—one of a chain of many future lives—and I think I may say that this belief is universal. They also declare that a man's present life is absolutely controlled by the influence of past good or bad deeds, and that in the next world they may possibly be better off than they are in this. Although a Burman gives alms, worships at the pagoda on appointed days, and repeats the doxology he has learnt at school, he governs his life by the *nats*—spirits of the air, the forests, streams, and

home, who must be propitiated."

"I never heard of these *nats* until now," said Shafto.

"No; but, as I have said before, you will hear a good deal about them here, especially if you mix with the Burmans."

"I certainly hope I shall see something of the people of the country."

"You will find them interesting; a full-blooded, pleasure-loving race; they've curious, original ideas, drawn from their ancient and sacred books, and an amazingly generous notion of time. For instance, they talk glibly of worlds a hundred thousand years old, and believe that this very planet has been destroyed no fewer than sixty-five times—chiefly by fire, on ten occasions by water, and once by wind! According to them, as in the New Testament, 'a thousand years are but as yesterday.' And yet they do not acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being—the highest glory is annihilation."

At this moment a light little figure flitted up the stairs, leaving an impression of slender elegance and satin skirt.

"Ah, there goes Ma Chit, my wife's cousin!" explained Salter.

"And I must be taking my departure," said Shafto rising. "What you have been telling me is extraordinarily interesting, and I would gladly sit on for hours, but it is ten o'clock."

"Yes, and we workers are early birds. I hope you will come and see us again. I have been twenty years in the country and I can tell you many a curious tale. To-morrow will be Sunday and, if you like, I will call round and take you to do a bit of sightseeing—the Pagoda and the lakes."

"I should enjoy it of all things; perhaps you will have tiffin with me at the hotel?"

"No, you must come to us; twelve o'clock sharp, and afterwards we'll make a start."

"Then I'll just go in and say good-bye to Mrs. Salter."

When they entered the sitting-room, where lamps had been lighted, they found the lady of the house in an ecstasy of admiration, gesticulating with her tiny brown hands, as she gloated over a length of rose and silver brocade. Standing beside her was the proud owner of this magnificence; a slim, graceful girl, wearing heavy gold ornaments and flowers in her hair, and, in spite of an extravagant use of pearl powder, undeniably pretty. Her slanting eyes were long-lashed and expressive, and her little mocking mouth wore a bewitching smile.

"Look at my *tamain*, Papa Salter!" she cried; "a piece of the best satin, just enough for a skirt—one yard and a half; Herr Bernhard brought it to me from England."

"Splendid indeed, Ma Chit," he replied; "you will cut them all out at the big festival and the *Pwes*. Mee Lay, Mr. Shafto wishes to say 'good night!'"

Mee Lay took a somewhat preoccupied leave of her guest, her eyes and attention being riveted upon the gorgeous material in her hand; but Ma Chit accorded the young man a gay salutation and a splendid view of her beautiful white teeth.

Salter accompanied his guest to the entrance gate, giving him careful directions as to the whereabouts of his hotel. It was an exquisite starlight night; the roar of the bazaar, the clang of the trams, and the whistling of launches were in the distance; the compound itself was so still that the sudden thud of a fallen jack-fruit made quite a startling sound. As the men exchanged last words, their attention was arrested by a charming tableau in the lighted sitting-room; two figures were outlined in strong relief against the dark teak walls, both absorbed in conversation. Ma Chit presented a particularly attractive picture, with her rose-crowned head, graceful posture, and waving hands; even as they gazed, her rippling laugh drifted seductively towards them.

"In this country, great is the tyranny of Temptation, and *there* is one of the temptations," gravely announced Salter; "Rangoon is full of these fascinating *chits*, who have no morals, but are witty, good-tempered and gay. Ma Chit—the name means 'my love'—is said to be irresistible and the prettiest girl in the province; she is Bernhard's housekeeper."

"His housekeeper!" repeated Shafto; "why, he told me he lived at the German Club!"

"That may be; but he has a fine house in Kokine. It is not an uncommon situation—that sort of temporary marriage. Ma Chit looks after his interests, rules his household, and makes him comfortable; her people acquiesce. All marriages are easily arranged and easily dissolved among the Burmans. A young man may offer sweets, serenade a girl a few times; if he is acceptable, there's a family dinner, with much chewing of

betel nut, and that constitutes the ceremony!"

"What a happy-go-lucky country!" exclaimed Shafto.

"Happy, yes! Lucky, I'm not sure! Well now, don't lose your way; first turn to the right, second to the left, and there is the Strand. Good night!"

CHAPTER XII

EAST AND WEST

The first and principal sight in Rangoon is the great Shwe Dagon Pagoda, and on Sunday afternoon Shafto and his new acquaintance passed between the golden lions at its base, and slowly ascended flight after flight of steep brick steps, lined with flower-decked shrines and blocked by dense masses of worshippers, who were swarming up and down.

The temple stands in imposing majesty on a wide platform and dominates the town—in fact, apart from the trade and business element, the Pagoda *is* Rangoon. The splendid edifice is entirely encased in plates of solid gold, and the “Ti,” which rises from the inverted begging-bowl, is studded with priceless precious stones—emeralds, rubies, sapphires and diamonds—which flash and glitter in the sun. These have been presented by pious pilgrims from all parts of the province and beyond; for, with the exception of the Caaba at Mecca, no earthly shrine attracts such multitudes, or receives such generous largesse.

Shafto and his companion having toiled up the steps, worn hollow by millions of feet, halted on the plateau, which was half-covered with little stalls, whose keepers were selling flowers, candles, flags, dolls, and images of Buddha—made in Birmingham. Here were hundreds, nay thousands of joyous gaily-clad worshippers moving to and fro, a truly brilliant pageant of passing life. It was difficult to say which were the more strikingly dressed: the men in brilliant turbans and silk waist cloths, or the women in satin skirts of endless pattern, their chignons wreathed with flowers, wearing a profusion of gold ornaments, and attended by many children.

“Ah, I see you are struck with the spectacle!” said Salter. “Isn’t it an orgy of colour—rose, orange, purple, scarlet? There is nothing more picturesque than a Burmese crowd.”

“Yes, a great show!” rejoined Shafto; “in gala costume. I can now understand why the national emblem is a peacock.”

As they made their way through the throng there was a clanging of melodious gongs and sounds of loud continuous chanting, whilst overhead the far-away sea breeze stirred the bells on the Ti to a silvery tinkle, tinkle.

To Shafto this scene was amazing and impressive; the wonderful golden Pagoda with its crown of jewels, the vast multitudes in many-hued garments, the flowers, fluttering flags, coloured lights, all as it were attuned to the accompaniment of merry voices, sonorous Gregorian chanting, and deep-toned gongs.

And what a labyrinth of shrines! Hours might be spent examining their rich carvings. At one of the principal of these shrines a service was proceeding; to Shafto, it recalled the celebration of mass in a Roman Catholic chapel, for here were shaven priests intoning prayers on the steps of a decorated altar; here also were incense, lights, and a multitude of devout people, kneeling, rosary in hand, chanting the responses.

Among the worshippers Shafto recognised Mee Lay and her cousin Ma Chit, attired in what, no doubt, were their festival toiles. Mee Lay’s white jacket was fastened by diamond buttons, and large diamonds sparkled in her little brown ears; as for Ma Chit, she was adorned with the national gold necklace, or *dalizan*. In her sleek, black hair were artfully arranged sprigs of scarlet hibiscus, and between her tiny hands, glittering with rings, and uplifted palm to palm, she held a beautiful flower, which, when her devotions were accomplished, she laid upon the shrine with an undulating movement of adoration and grace.

“You see my wife follows her own religion,” remarked Salter, “and I make no objection. I was brought up as a Baptist, in the very strictest sense of the word. Rosetta, as you already know, is a Roman Catholic; sometimes Mee Lay brings her here; the service and the spectacle are attractive enough, though never so to me. My Nonconformist blood leaves me cold to this sort of display. Mee Lay is a good, religious woman; when you come to think of it, the East is far more devout than the West. She insists that our faith is a mere feeble copy of Buddhism, which had six hundreds years the start of Christianity. There is no doubt that the Buddhists preach most of the moral truths that are to be found in the Gospels, and Buddha was a Deliverer, who taught the necessity of a pure life, of self-denial and unworldliness. He exhorted his disciples to practise every virtue. But here is the difference between Buddhism and

Christianity: Buddha brings a man by a thorny path to the brink of a huge, black chasm, and drops him into annihilation."

"It seems unsatisfying," said Shafto. "Yet, by all accounts, Buddhism is a wonderful religion. I heard a fellow on board ship discussing its code and the extraordinary way in which it has fastened on mankind, and spread. He declared that every fourth human being who came into the world was a Buddhist!"

"So they say," replied Salter with a careless shrug. "I doubt if the assertion would hold water. At the same time Buddha has an enormous number of followers in China, Tibet, India, and Ceylon; they, too, have traditions of a Holy Mother and Child, of a fast in the wilderness, and here, even now, crucifixion is the form of capital punishment."

"And what do you think about Buddhism in Burma?" inquired Shafto.

"Buddhism will hold its ground, in spite of many converts among the Karens. The Burmans are a sunny, happy people, as you see, who hope for a good time here, and a good time in the worlds to come. They held the same expectations and creed, and wore the same clothes, two thousand years ago; time does not appear to touch them; they are as gay and irresponsible as so many butterflies. You know Kipling's lines to Rangoon?"

Before Shafto could reply, Salter quoted in a sonorous monotone:

'Hail, Mother! Do they call me rich in trade?
Little care I, but hear the shorn priest drone,
And watch my silk-clad lovers, man by maid,
Laugh 'neath my Shwe Dagon.'

"From the 'Song of the Cities.' Rather appropriate to the occasion, eh?"

"Yes, fits it to a T," assented Shafto, as his eye wandered over the vast assemblage on the plateau, talking, joking, laughing, smoking, absolutely content with the day, without a thought for the morrow.

The atmosphere felt heavy with the scent of incense, flowers, and cheroots; little bells still tinkled gaily and the air was full of silver music.

"Now I should like to show you the reverse of this scene," said Salter; "it won't take you long," and he led his companion away to a solitary, deserted place at the rear of the Pagoda.

"Here," he said, indicating some dilapidated moss-grown stones, "are a number of totally-forgotten English graves. There was desperate fighting all round this very plateau when we first came to this country, some seventy odd years ago; these dead, forgotten pioneer fellows struck a stout blow for the British flag. British and German trade, thanks to them, have flourished like a green bay tree; ships and railways carry all before them, and the days of the caravan are numbered. Well, now we shall move on to the Royal lakes and Dalhousie Park, and see all we can, for, after to-day, you won't have much spare time for doing the tourist—you will be a cog in the machine."

The scene presented by the Royal lakes proved an uncompromising contrast to that at the Pagoda; save for the Eastern background of palms and bamboos the gathering might have been in London. Here were motor-cars, smart carriages, pretty women wearing the latest fashions, men in flannels and tweeds; there was but little colour in their clothes—or their complexions—no brilliant orange or flaming scarlet, no bells, gongs, buoyant vitality, or merry laughter; the community were languidly discussing the mail news, the latest bridge tournament, and the approaching race meeting. By the lakes you encountered Europe—more particularly Great Britain. At the Shwe Dagon you found yourself in touch with an older world and face to face with the silken East!

CHAPTER XIII

“KEEP AN EYE UPON HER”

Gregory's proved to be a vast and imposing concern, occupying a prominent situation on the Strand and evidently doing an immense trade. All this the new assistant readily gathered as Salter steered him in the direction of the manager's sanctum.

Here he found the head of the firm, a tall individual, with grizzled hair covering a fine square head, a hard, clean-shaven face, and a pince-nez—which pince-nez he invariably removed when about to make a disagreeable remark. He received the new employé with an air of cool detachment, and shook hands in a manner that implied, “You must not expect this sort of thing every day.” Being taller than Shafto, he appeared to tower over him as he questioned him respecting the firm in London—which was but a small and insignificant offshoot of the great house in Rangoon; then he made a few perfunctory remarks on the subject of the voyage out, and said:

“I understand from Salter that you have found quarters in a chummy; I hope your house-mates will prove congenial——” he paused and added as a sort of afterthought, “Mrs. Gregory is usually at home on Thursdays from three to six.”

“Thank you,” murmured Shafto.

The principal then struck a handbell, which summoned an elderly man to his presence.

“Lowcroft,” he said, “this is Mr. Shafto, who will take over Mr. Shaw's share of the landing business; you had better show him round and give him instructions. By the way,” turning to Shafto, “I suppose you don't know a word of Burmese or Hindustani?”

The new arrival announced his complete ignorance of either language.

“Then you must see about getting a munshi at once.”

And with a nod the new assistant found himself dismissed.

On the very first Thursday after his arrival in Rangoon, Shafto presented himself at the “Barn,” a residence purchased many years previously for the use of the then reigning Gregory.

The house was large but unostentatious; the well-matured beautiful grounds and gardens were notable even in Rangoon. A recent acquaintance, who escorted Shafto, presented him to Mrs. Gregory, a smart, sandy-haired little lady of five or six and thirty, with an animated, expressive face, intelligent grey eyes, and slightly prominent white teeth. She was exquisitely dressed in some soft pale blue material, and wore a row of large and lustrous pearls. Among the crowd of guests the newcomer discovered, to his great relief, several of his fellow-assistants, and not a few passengers from the *Blankshire*, including Mrs. Milward, who hailed him with a radiant countenance and plump, uplifted hands.

“My dear Douglas! How I've been longing to see you! I'm off to Mandalay to-morrow morning.”

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.”

“And I'm very sorry to go—there's such lots to do and see in this surprising place, but Ella has nailed me down to a date. Have you seen anything of Sophy—I mean,” correcting herself, “Miss Leigh?”

“No, I've been tremendously busy fitting on my new harness and have had no time for calling.”

“And yet you are *here!*” she protested, with arched brows.

“Oh yes, but this is official; Gregory as good as ordered me to wait upon his consort.”

“Hush, hush, Douglas! She is a great friend of mine—my own cousin, and a dear. Of course, I know that George looks as if he had swallowed the fire-irons, but that really means nothing; he is obliged to keep all you naughty boys in order!”

“You think I'm a naughty boy?”

“Oh well, I didn't mean that, my young Sir Galahad! Now come away with me and I'll show you the wonderful ferns and the orchid house. I must have a good, comfortable, private talk.”

As soon as the pair found themselves alone in the fernery she turned to face him, and said, with unusual animation:

“Now I want to tell you about Sophy—I'm miserable when I think of her.”

“Miserable—but why?”

"When you've been to call at 'Heidelberg'—I may tell you it's miles and miles away—you'll see for yourself; it's my opinion that she has been decoyed out to this country under false pretences."

"Oh, but surely Mrs. Krauss is her own aunt?"

"She is, and more or less an invalid, utterly broken down by years of Burma. Mrs. Krauss is apathetic, dull, and boneless, and looks as if you could fold her up and put her in a bag. Herr Krauss is a fat, loud-talking, trampling German—*not* a gentleman, but a man with a keen eye to business. His wife's half-caste maid who waited upon her, managed the house, and was with her for years, has married and gone to Australia, and poor Sophy has been imported to replace the treasure; that is, to nurse her aunt, run the house, and play the old bounder's accompaniments, for he, like Nero, is musical. He is also a friend of that odious Bernhard's. Bernhard is a well-born Prussian—I'll say that for him—the other is of the waiter class, who has made his money in China and Burma."

"Oh, come, I say, this is rather bad! What's to be done?"

"I only wish I knew. The Krauss abode is large and gloomy—it looks like a house in a bad temper, and stands in the heart of the German community; the servants seemed a low-class lot, the rooms were dark and untidy, and smelt of mould and medicine, but Sophy was just as bright and cheerful as usual; apparently delighted with everything—loyal, of course, to her own blood. Now, I know that you and Sophy are friends, and I want you to keep an eye upon her," concluded this injudicious matron.

"I'm afraid my eye will not be of much use," protested Shafto, "I am most frightfully sorry for what you tell me, but Miss Leigh has lots of pals. There are the Pomeroy's, Maitland's and—"

"Yes, that's true," interrupted Mrs. Milward impatiently, "but she has no way of getting about. Krauss takes the car and is away in it all day. I gather that he has the strict German idea about a girl's being brought up to cook, to sew, to slave, to find *all* her interests in her home! In fact, he told me so plainly; he also added that he had paid for Sophy's passage and implied that he intended to have the worth of his money—his pound of flesh!"

"Brute!" ejaculated Shafto.

"Agreed! I have enlisted one friend for the poor child. Polly Gregory—she is so clever, clear-headed and decided, and will be a rock of strength—she is sure to like Sophy, eh?"

"Oh yes, that will be all right!"

"I put in a good word for you too, Master Douglas."

"That was kind," and he swept off his straw hat.

"I wonder if that's meant sarcastic? Perhaps you think good wine needs no bush? Yes, and I've told Polly I knew you as a boy—and how, instead of quill-driving, you hoped to wear a sword."

"Hope told a flattering tale," he answered with a laugh. "Don't forget that the pen is the mightier of the two."

"No," she dissented; "I back the sword, though it's rarely drawn now, thank goodness. Well, I've said my say and given you my impressions and instructions; we must go back and join the *Burra Mems*. I shall write to you from Mandalay and see you later, when I pass through to Calcutta. Now you had better go and try to get a set of tennis," and, with a wave of adieu, Mrs. Milward strolled away across the grass, an attractive personality with her fresh complexion, soft round face, dark pencilled brows, and bewitching mauve toilet—which toilet was subsequently tabooed by her daughter as "too young"!

"George," said Mrs. Gregory to her husband, "that new importation is a nice boy; Milly Milward has known him since he was in blouses; he has had rather hard luck; his father was swindled out of a comfortable fortune, and he has to turn to and earn his bread."

"What we all do!" growled George.

"Yes, but some ways are so much more agreeable than others. His profession was to have been along the path of glory."

"What is that?"

"Why, the Army, of course."

"And now his profession is checking inventories and cargoes. As he is new to the business, he will have his hands fairly full for the next few months; so, my dear Polly, don't turn his head just *yet*."

"As if I ever turned anybody's head."

"I cannot answer for others, but you certainly turned mine."

"Ah, but that was twelve years ago; I'm afraid my fascinations have faded since then. Joking apart, George, Milly has left me two legacies—two protégés to befriend. Shafto is one—I am to invite him to tea, and talk to him with wisdom, and win his complete and entire confidence."

"Oh! and the other?"

"The other is Miss Leigh, whom she chaperoned from home. She is living with an aunt, who is married to a German named Krauss."

"Yes, I know; a poisonous chap!"

"So she seems to think, and that this girl, who by all accounts is very pretty and charming, and a marvellous pianist, has been lured out to act as maid and housekeeper, and save the pocket of Herr Krauss. Now, as I have two legacies, I want to know if you will take one of them off my hands?"

"As if my hands were not full!"

"Yes, officially, only; now I offer you your choice. Which will you have? Shafto or the girl?"

"You need scarcely ask; I'll take the girl, of course, and leave you Shafto."

"Oh, you are an old silly!" she exclaimed, ruffling up his grizzled hair; "I wonder which of us will have the better bargain."

With regard to the subject of Mrs. Gregory's conversation, Douglas set to work with the proverbial enthusiasm of a new broom and soon became—as Salter had predicted—a cog in the whirling wheels of a machine. But Thursday being the Station holiday, he hired a taxi and had himself driven out to Kokine, in order to call on Mrs. Krauss and Miss Leigh; unfortunately his journey proved to be a waste of time and money. The leisurely servant who emerged from the entrance of "Heidelberg," salver in hand, accepted his visiting-card with a salaam, and then announced with stolid unconcern:

"Missis can't see."

CHAPTER XIV

THE MANTLE OF FERNANDA

During the long and weary wait whilst the *Blankshire* was being made fast, Sophy Leigh and her girl friends had collected in a group taking leave of one another and making plans for future meetings.

"I must say I envy you," said Lena Morgan, the elder of the two plain, pleasant sisters, whose father was "something in timber." "You will be the darling of enormously rich relatives, have several motors, and horses galore."

"I'm not so sure," she gaily rejoined. "'Galore' is such a big word, but from what my aunt has told us, I believe I shall have what is called 'a good time,' and I hope everyone of us will share it. I expect Aunt Flora will be here to meet me," she added with happy certainty.

"Why, of course she will," assented Eva Pomeroy; "she does not have a niece out every mail. I dare say she has already bought you a nice saddle horse. You will be riding every morning, and we can meet and arrange all sorts of jolly picnics and expeditions. I shall come round and look you up as soon as I've unpacked and settled."

At this moment a heavy bang announced the letting down of the gangway, over which a crowd instantly poured and scattered about the decks.

Among the first to appear aft was an immense individual, wearing a loose tussore suit, a huge pith topee, and a black and yellow cummerbund. His face, with its great jowl, wide lipless mouth, short chin, and a pair of goggle eyes, was distinctly of the frog type.

"Which of you is Miss Leigh?" he demanded in a loud voice, as he approached the group of girls.

Sophy stood forward and before she could evade the outrage, this ugly fat man had put his hands on her shoulders and given her a smacking kiss on each cheek.

Even in this exciting moment of imminent departure, the circle paused for a moment and stared aghast—such an appalling person to claim and kiss Sophy Leigh! What a frightful shock for the unfortunate girl—whilst the sensations of several young men on the verge of the group are better imagined than described!

Herr Krauss, for his part, had received a surprise of a far more agreeable nature, being entirely unprepared to welcome such a pretty, fashionable young lady, in the character of his wife's niece. Flora had invariably spoken of her relatives as "ugly, dowdy little things"; but then, she had only known them at the awkward age and, being herself remarkably handsome, was super-critical with regard to beauty.

"Now come along and show me your luggage," urged Herr Krauss, releasing his new acquaintance, "and I will see about it. The hand gepäck can go in the car."

With a sense of dazed bewilderment, Sophy took a hasty leave of her friends and prepared to follow her leader. As she kept close behind him, whilst he forced his way through the crowd, she noticed his short, thick neck, and powerful, aggressive shoulders—she also noticed that he allowed her to carry all her parcels herself.

When at last they reached the car, he stepped in with surprising agility and said as he seated himself:

"Now come along, put your things, umbrellas, wraps and parcels here. My man," nodding towards a native, "will look after the heavy baggage. Better stick your dressing-bag in front, as there is not much room. I take up two shares—ha! ha!"

This remark was painfully true. His burly form occupied most of the back seat, and Sophy with difficulty squeezed herself in beside him. As they glided slowly away, through the dense throng, she looked about her—her curiosity as raw and eager as that of Shafto.

"What a wonderful, busy place!" she exclaimed. "I see you have telephones and trams in all directions."

"Oh, trams!" Krauss echoed contemptuously. "We have *everything* in Rangoon; great shops and offices, public buildings, a cathedral, a mosque, theatres, clubs, sawmills, rice mills, banks—oh yes, it's a fine place, and so rich," and he smacked his lips as he added, "Burma is the land of opportunity."

"How is my aunt?" inquired Sophy.

"Only middling—she will be glad to see you, and I expect you will do

her good. We live a long way out—in Kokine, where Germans herd together, and I take this chance of a talk. I am a busy man—particularly of late; and time with me means *money*, so I'll tell you what I have to say in as few words as possible."

Sophy nodded her head in agreeable assent.

"Some years ago my wife met with a bad accident—a fall, out paper-chasing. It did not seem much at the time, though she lost her nerve; but it came against her later. During the last two or three years her health has broken down; she suffers from chronic neuralgia in head and spine, and for days she lies like a dead woman."

"Oh, poor Aunt Flora, how very sad!"

"Yes, you may say so. Well, for the last ten years she has had an invaluable maid—Fernanda, a Portuguese half-caste, a treasure, who waited on and nursed her, and took entire charge of the housekeeping. Fernanda understood my tastes to a T—the curries and stews and blood sausages that I am fond of, and was a rare hand at coffee. Then came a blow! Fernanda made up her silly mind to marry a Scotch engineer and go to Australia. I was at my wits' end the day she gave notice; I said to myself: 'Ach Gott! what can we do? No maids in Rangoon, and meine liebe Flora so helpless!' Then a splendid thought came into my mind—her nieces! Flora is fond of her family and has often talked of your mother, and of you, so I wrote off at once, and—here you are!"

Sophy was about to speak, but he laid a heavy, restraining hand upon her arm and continued:

"There are just one or two little things I wish to say. Your aunt has a clever ayah who knows what to do, and when she has her attacks I leave her alone—by her own wish. Also, she doesn't like to have her health noticed—though everyone knows that she's more or less an invalid. I believe, if her mind were diverted and occupied she would be better."

"I'm a pretty good nurse," began Sophy; "I've a Red Cross certificate and I like nursing—"

"Oh, that is of no use," he interrupted impatiently. "You must nurse her *mind*; amuse her with cards, reading, games, music—that is your job. Well, then there is the housekeeping; you will have to take the place of Fernanda. She looked after the servants, the mending, the stores, and the cooking—you shall step into *her* shoes. Of course, it will be an immense responsibility for a young girl."

As he spoke he turned his head and looked at his *vis-à-vis* with a glance which seemed to imply that he was endowing her with an empire.

"Of course, I am aware that you English are slatternly, ignorant, and extravagant managers," he continued pleasantly, "but my excellent friend and neighbour, Frau Wurm, has promised to take you in hand."

"But I'm afraid I could not undertake all this," protested Sophy. "I know very little of housekeeping in a large establishment. I can knit and sew, make coffee and savouries, arrange flowers—and that's about all."

"Gott! Gott! Can you not make confitures and cakes and salads? Confiture I must have with every meal—a nice saucer of cherries or raspberries or greengages, so good with meat. Well, well, never mind, you shall soon learn. Frau Wurm will teach you much. We no longer see company—just two or three men to dine and smoke; your aunt has dropped her English circle. The English community changes, and many of her old friends have gone away or died—and a good job, too! We live in the German quarter and are surrounded by compatriots. You speak German, of course?"

"No—only French; German is so difficult."

"Tch! tch! tch! How lazy you English are! We all speak English. As for me, my mother was English—you could not tell that I was not born an Englishman?"

Apart from his appearance and guttural r's, this claim was justified.

"I suppose you made lots of friends on board ship?"

"Yes, a good many."

"Girls, I suppose—idle girls, who will come buzzing round to coax you to play with them. That is all they are good for; but you will have your work, as I have pointed out. If you are industrious, I shall lend you a horse that was your aunt's—he is not up to my weight—and I will take you to our fine club when I can spare an afternoon. At present, I am immensely occupied, engaged in collecting wolfram. Do you know what wolfram is?"

"No, I have never heard of it," humbly admitted Sophy.

"Well, it is ore used for hardening steel—extremely scarce and

valuable; it comes from Tavoy, but business connected with it takes me up and down the river, and even as far as Calcutta and Singapore. Now, with you to look after the house and your aunt, I shall feel so free and easy in my mind. Ah, here we are; this is 'Heidelberg,'" he said, as the car swung in between two tall gate piers.

"Heidelberg" was a good-sized residence, with spacious surroundings; palms, bamboos and crotona abounded, and a wonderful collection of gigantic cannas—red, yellow and orange—gave colour to the compound. A crowd of lazy retainers, who were hanging about, gaped in silence upon the new arrival.

"Now, I'll take you to your aunt at once," said Krauss, descending heavily from the car, but making no effort to assist his niece. Then he led the way upstairs, striding along the veranda with a heavy, despotic tread, and through a large, dim drawing-room, where Sophy caught an impression of much carved furniture, the figure of a large alabaster Buddha gleaming through the shadows, and a stifling atmosphere of dust and sandalwood. Pushing aside a tinkling bamboo screen, they entered another apartment, which was yet gloomier and more obscure, and here on a wide sofa, propped, among large, silk cushions, lay a sick and wasted woman, who turned on Sophy a sallow face and a pair of drowsy, dark eyes.

"Here is your new treasure, mein schatz," announced her husband! "I brought her straight up."

"Oh, dear child," she murmured, "this is one of my—my dreadful days; so sorry—so sorry—so sorry," and she slowly closed her eyes upon her pretty niece.

Sophy stooped and lifted her hand (which was limp and clammy) to her lips, and said to herself, as she did so, that poor Aunt Flora was woefully changed. She recalled her as a beautiful vision, beautifully dressed, and so gay. Now her face was yellow and withered, and she looked positively old and gaunt.

All at once a buxom ayah advanced—a stout, straight-backed Madrassi, with her black hair in a chignon, a ring in her nose, jewelled rings in her ears, wearing a handsome blue-and-gold saree, coquettishly draped round her ample form, the usual short silk bodice, or *choli*, and numerous heavy bangles. She salaamed to Sophy with both hands, and Sophy, who had never before beheld such an apparition, gazed in admiring silence; the ayah's carriage, her gait and sheeny protuberance, recalled to mind a prosperous pouter pigeon.

"My missis plenty sick to-day," said Lily, "never seeing people—that no good; to-morrow, she may be arl right, but *now* she must sleep, and I will take the new missy to her room."

Sophy's room, which was large and, rather bare, overlooked the stables, cook-house and servants' quarters, and here she was introduced to her own attendant Motee, a timid creature in white, who seemed to rise, as it were, out of the floor.

"Motee is the best lady's ayah in Rangoon," explained Lily with an offhand air, "she understands Miss Sahibs, she will pack and unpack, dress hair—and hold her tongue."

After giving Motee some directions, unpacking her favourite hats and changing her dress, Sophy went forth in order to explore her new home. The whole establishment had a squalid, neglected appearance and sadly lacked the eye of the mistress. The compound or garden, with its masses of gorgeous tropical trees and plants, was overgrown and jungly, poultry wandered about at their own sweet will, and even invaded the veranda—yet apparently there was no lack of staff. On the contrary, from her bedroom window she had observed groups of men talking and smoking, presumably servants, as several wore silver badges on their turbans, and soiled white linen coats, and among these were some jovial Burmans and one or two wide-trousered Chinamen.

No doubt Fernanda, the treasure, had kept the house in working order, and now that she had abdicated, her sceptre lay in the dust—in every sense of the word. Was it her, Sophy's, duty to raise it? She noticed quantities of litter and cobwebs in the drawing-room, but there were no flowers or knick-knacks; the silver teapot that appeared with tea at five o'clock was nearly black. It was not a luxurious meal, a weak Chinese mixture, and a plate of fossilised biscuits.

The morning after her arrival Sophy was awakened by a soft tremulous touch on her hand; she opened her eyes and beheld her aunt stooping over her. She was clad in a shabby, splendidly embroidered red kimono, and appeared to have made a temporary recovery.

Mrs. Krauss offered her niece a warmly affectionate welcome and

many caresses, and then, sitting on the side of the bed, asked eager questions respecting her mother and sister, their mutual relations, and all the family news; but made no allusion to the state of her own health, or to the dirty and neglected condition of her establishment.

"So Karl met you himself," she said, "although he is so busy; that was nice. He has a kind heart and I do hope you will like one another."

"Yes, I hope we shall," assented Sophy, but her conscience protested that this hope was vain—already she disliked him.

"He looks to you to step into Fernanda's shoes; but of course I won't have that. Fernanda had enormous wages. Oh, dear child, I can't tell you how I miss her," and tears stood in her dark eyes. "Karl has such odd, old-fashioned German ideas—you must not mind him—though he is getting more German every day. He says a woman is just a hausfrau, who must sew and cook and do whatever a man orders. She is to have no mind of her own—and very little amusement."

"Then, Aunt Flora, one thing is certain—I shall never marry a German."

"I dare say it strikes you as strange that I should have done so; but Karl has always been devoted to me. I suppose your mother has told you that, when I was eighteen, I ran away to marry Charlie Bellamy, whose regiment was under orders for Hong Kong; we were fearfully poor and fearfully happy; then in a dog-cart accident, Charlie was killed and I was taken up for dead. But I recovered, as you see. The Hong Kong people were angels to me—one's own country folks always *are*, when you are in trouble abroad. I was laid up for months. When I was better, Karl came forward and implored me to marry him; I was almost penniless and loathed the idea of going home, so that was how it happened. Karl was wealthy in those days, but afterwards he lost his money—our fortunes go up and down like a see-saw. I am afraid he is too fond of speculating and taking huge risks; he likes to be a man or a mouse. Just now he is not a mouse, but very, very rich. Well, my dear, I'll leave you to have a bath and dress; we shall meet at breakfast; it is many a day since I appeared there. Do you know I feel as if you'd done me good already!" and with a clinging embrace she departed.

As hours and days wore on, Mrs. Krauss became more and more charmed with her companion; it did not take her long to discover her unselfish character, amazing adaptability to these strange surroundings and, above all, her gift of music. The invalid would lie prone on her sofa with a handkerchief over her face—rather suggesting the idea of a laid-out corpse—motionless and spell-bound, and when she spoke it was merely to murmur:

"Please go on, please go on, Sophy darling; your music is wonderful; you are my David and I am gloomy Saul. Oh, my dearest child, your exquisite gift has given me new thoughts, and opened the door of many delicious and half-forgotten memories!"

Besides soothing her aunt with dreamy and enthralling melodies, Sophy remembered her "job," and endeavoured to interest her in patience, in puzzles and the latest stitch; but Frau Krauss had no taste for cards or puzzles. She was, however, profoundly interested in Sophy's pretty frocks, examined them, priced them, and tried them on; otherwise she preferred to lounge among her cushions and talk, whilst her niece, who busied herself mending table linen, proved an invaluable listener.

"You are a treasure, my sweet child," she remarked; "I have so often longed for a companion of my own class and nation. All my neighbours are German; here in Kokine is a German colony; they all dine and have music, and gossip together, and I am rather out of it. Of course, I speak German, but not very fluently. There are two or three uncommonly smart women who speak English as well as you do, and their children have English names; but all the same, they hate us in their secret hearts and often give me a nasty scratch; so I needn't tell you that I don't open my heart to *them*. The English live in another direction—down the Halpin Road, or out by the Royal lakes, and I have really grown too lazy and careless to go among them. Besides, what is the good? My friends return to England, new people come, but as for poor me—I stay on for ever."

"And, of course, you would like to go home, Aunt Flora, would you not?"

"For some things, yes! But how can I leave Karl? Also, I feel that this country has got such a hold upon me—oh, such a hold!" And she closed her eyes and sighed profoundly.

Three whole weeks had elapsed since Sophy arrived, and during that time she had not been outside the compound. Herr Krauss had departed up country and taken the car with him; in the meanwhile Sophy had contrived to carry out some improvements, and induced her aunt to

dismiss and replace several worthless servants. There had been a grand cleaning, dusting, and polishing; the drawing-room was rearranged, the compound cleared and tidied, flowers decorated the sitting-rooms—and the hens had been interned.

All this Sophy had not contrived to manage without assistance and advice; several German ladies had been to call, to inspect, to offer instruction, and to criticise. There was Mrs. Muller, a remarkably pretty, smart young woman (wife of the head of an important firm, who spoke English perfectly, played bridge and the violin). She and Sophy had an interesting musical talk, and arranged about duets and practisings; it was she who helped with regard to weeding out the staff, finding substitutes, and engaging a *dirzee* to mend and make. Augusta Muller was a born administrator, and the head of the neighbouring community. Another visitor was Frau Wendel, a dowdy middle-aged woman, who wore a hideous check cotton gown (much too short), green spectacles, and velvet boots; she stared hard at Sophy and asked her many personal questions. There was also the Baroness—a little lady with small patrician features, faded light hair and a brisk manner; and last, but by no means least, Frau Wurm, who daily arrived to fulfil a promise to Herr Krauss, and every morning, for one solid hour, imparted to Sophy instruction in the management of native servants, the reckoning of bazaar accounts, the coinage—rupees and pice—and the proper way to keep house linen and stores. She also gave her lessons in cooking on the oil stove in the veranda—not invalid delicacies, but dishes that were favourites with the master of the house, including confitures and Russian salad.

Frau Wurm was a competent teacher—practical and brisk. She drew up a list of menus, of shops to be dealt at, and hours for different tasks. As she worked she talked incessantly in excellent guttural English; her talk consisted of a series of personal and impertinent questions—her curiosity was of the mean and hungry class, and to every reply, satisfactory or otherwise, she invariably ejaculated, “Ach so!”

Among other matters she desired to know Sophy’s age—the age of her mother—and sister; if their washing was given out; who had paid for her passage and outfit; where her mother lived, the rent of her house, and number of servants.

“So she keeps *three* servants!” she exclaimed. “Ach! but I thought she was poor!”

“No, not poor,” replied Sophy. “Mother has a pretty good income.”

“Ach so! and that is the reason, I suppose, that you cannot cook or make your own frocks, or do anything useful. Are you engaged to be married?”

“No,” replied Sophy with a laugh, “not yet.”

“Ach so! I do not think your uncle will permit you to marry any of those silly young English officers, who play games all day and are ashamed to wear uniform. Have you any relations in the Army?”

“Yes, I have two cousins; one in the Flying Corps and one in a submarine.”

“Ach so! That is *most* interesting. Some day you will tell me all about them, will you not? I like to hear about submarines.”

“Very well,” said Sophy, who was busy mixing a pudding according to an elaborate German recipe.

“Yes, you are getting on,” admitted Frau Wurm patronisingly. “You will be a good little housekeeper before I have finished with you. Tell me—how is your aunt to-day?” she asked abruptly.

“She seems better, much better.”

“Yes, much better—better since you came; you rouse her, though she doesn’t get up now till eleven o’clock. She suffers from such a strange complaint—very mysterious,” she added with a significant sniff.

“I don’t think there is anything mysterious about neuralgia.”

“Oh, yes, there is,” rejoined Frau Wurm, lowering her voice; “we often talk it over and wonder. Long ago she was as others; now she is different, and seems but half awake—always so jaded and feeble and vague. There was only one who understood the case—that was Fernanda, and she has gone away, ach so!”

Sophy found her present life unexpectedly strenuous. The mornings were devoted to incessant house-keeping, writing lists, and making pickles and German condiments; in the afternoons her aunt absorbed her time. She did not seem to come to life till then.

“I know I am selfish,” she confessed, as she looked through a number of invitations and cards which had been left for Sophy. “I do so want to keep you to myself; I don’t wish to share you with the Maitlands and

Morgans and Pomeroy's; you have brought me a new lease of life. Of late I have felt like a half-dead creature, without even the energy to open a book, much less to get up and dress. I have the Burma head, and take *no* interest in anything."

"Then do please take an interest in me, Aunt Flora," said Sophy coaxingly, putting her arm about her and smiling into her haggard eyes.

"Very well, my dear; yes, I will—and at once. I shall take you out and amuse you. No time like the present! To-day I shall telephone for a motor, get Lily to look out my smartest clothes, and you and I will make a round of calls. You know it is the duty of a new arrival to wait on the residents?"

Sophy nodded.

"We will go in the afternoon, when they are all out, and so get through a number. There are no end of sets here: the Government House, the civilian, military, the legal, and above all the mercantile—they really *count*, these merchant princes, being numerous, wealthy, and so generous and charitable, and can snap their fingers at precedence. Then there is the German set, to which I should belong—but I don't. I tell Karl that my father was an English General and I am English—a real Englishman. We differ in so many ways from these German women—in what we eat, like, and believe, and how we make our beds, do our hair, and even how we knit!"

Dressed for making a round of visits, Mrs. Krauss presented a different appearance from that loglike invalid her niece had first beheld. She was a picturesque, graceful woman, with a pair of heartrending dark eyes, while a little touch of colour on her faded cheeks illuminated a face that still exhibited the remains of a remarkable beauty. Mrs. Krauss, in a hired and luxurious motor, made a rapid round of calls among the principal mem-sahibs—who, as predicted, were not at home—and wrote her own and Sophy's name in Government House book.

The last house they visited was "The Barn." Mrs. Gregory received them and gave Mrs. Krauss and her niece a genial welcome. She and Mrs. Krauss had known one another for years, but had never been really intimate or close friends. Mrs. Gregory was energetic, modern and vivacious; the other, a somewhat lethargic beauty, was not interested in the burning questions of the day, and had long ceased to take part in local gaieties; but her niece, as Milly said, was charming, and Mrs. Gregory felt immediately inspired by a liking for this pretty, graceful, unaffected girl. Sophy, for her part, was delighted with this large, English-looking drawing-room, with chintz-covered furniture, quantities of flowers, books, an open grand piano, and a pile of music. The hostess, too, Mrs. Milward's cousin, attracted her and made her feel at home.

"And what do you think of Rangoon?" inquired Mrs. Gregory.

"Oh, do not ask her," interposed Mrs. Krauss with a dramatic gesture, "she has been with me for more than a fortnight, and this is the first time she has been beyond Kokine. It is all my fault; she has had such a lot of housekeeping to see to and take over, and she is such a delightful companion that I have not been able to bear her out of my sight."

"But, dear Mrs. Krauss, we cannot allow you to appropriate Miss Leigh altogether. I hope you will spare her to me now and then. Perhaps Miss Leigh could come with me to the Gymkhana dance next week?"

"I should like it very much indeed," said Sophy, glancing interrogatively at her aunt.

"Well, if I cannot take her myself, I shall be glad if you will chaperon Sophy. She has not had any amusement yet and one is young but once! And now we must go; no thank you, we won't wait for tea. I intend to rush the child round the lakes—she has not seen them—and then do some shopping in the bazaar."

After the departure of her visitors, Mrs. Gregory stood in the veranda and watched them as they sped away together—the dark faded beauty, the pretty, fresh girl—and said to herself:

"I wonder!"

CHAPTER XV

THE CHUMMERY

The chummary to which Douglas Shafto had been introduced was a rambling old bungalow, and the edge of the Cantonment, sufficiently close to offices and work. Although by no means modern, it boasted both electric light and fans, and the rent was fairly moderate; the landlord, Ah Kin, a Chinaman, called for it punctually on the first of every month, but closed his slits of eyes to various necessary repairs.

Among the three chums already established was Roscoe, a dark, well-set up man of five or six and thirty, with a clean-shaven, eager face, artistic hands, and a pair of clever eyes. Roscoe had been in turn a junior master, a journalist and actor. Dissatisfied and unsatisfactory in these situations, his friends had found him an opening where he would be at too great a distance to trouble them—in short, a billet in a Burma oil company in Rangoon. Amazing to relate, the post suited him and the rolling stone came to a standstill; well educated and intellectual, endowed with a curious eye and a critical mind, he was anxious to see, mark and learn the life of his present surroundings. Out of business hours, Roscoe devoted himself to this task with such whole-souled enthusiasm, that at times he actually imagined that he had his finger upon the pulse of this strange, new world. The oldest and least prosperous of the fraternity, his companions liked him and spoke of Roscoe as “a queer fish, but a rare good sort.”

Patrick Ormond FitzGerald, police officer, a genial native of County Cork, was about thirty years of age, handsome, generous and hot-headed, who enjoyed every kind of scrap and sport—including chasing dacoits and smugglers. He diffused an atmosphere of good humour and confidence, was universally popular and invariably in debt. Chum number three, James MacNab, hailed from “Bonnie Scotland”—a spare, sandy, canny individual, who, far from being in debt, was carefully amassing large savings. He had a pretty fiancée in Crieff, who sent him weekly budgets and the *Scotsman*. He owned a sound, steady ambition, and seldom made an unconsidered remark. “Mac” was an employé in the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, where he was rapidly rising, so to speak, to the surface.

Each “chum” had a room to himself, but they took their meals together in a wide, open veranda, and were catered for by a fat Madrassi butler, who did not rob them unduly, seeing that his accounts had to be inspected and passed by thrifty “Mac,” who ruthlessly eliminated all imaginative items.

In their large compound their cook kept game fowl—long-legged fighting cocks from Shanghai—and other poultry, including the curly feathered freaks of Aracan. Here FitzGerald stabled his horses—a capital pair, trust an Irishman for that!—and Roscoe, a stout elderly Shan, ironically nicknamed “Later On.” MacNab rode a bicycle; a useful mount that required neither oats nor groom.

The three chums soon made Shafto feel at ease and at home; they were lively companions, too. Roscoe was a capital mimic, and kept his company in roars of laughter. FitzGerald drew notable caricatures and could tell a story with the best. “The MacNab,” who had a certain dry wit, took the stranger firmly in hand with regard to finance—namely, the furnishing of his room and other expenditure.

“Bide a wee; go slow at first,” he advised. “Just hire a few sticks from Whiteway and Laidlaw, and wait your chance for picking up bargains at Balthasar’s auction rooms; anyway, you don’t want much. A bed, a couple of chairs, table, washstand and tub. I have a chest of drawers I can let you have cheap. In the rains the pictures fall out of their frames, the glue melts, rugs are eaten by white ants in a few hours—and your boots grow mushrooms.”

“That’s a cheerful look out!” exclaimed Shafto. “Well, I have nothing to tempt the white ants.”

Shafto was adaptable and soon found his feet. At first his entire time and energies were concentrated on his new job and learning an unaccustomed task; he spent hours on the wharves along the Strand, or across the river at Dallah, standing about in the glare, and dust and blazing sun, amongst struggling, sweating coolies and swinging cranes. He had also to supervise his Eurasian subordinates, see paddy shipped, and keep a sharp look out for their delinquencies, such as receiving “palm oil,” or overlooking damages.

In the midst of his daily work Shafto was not insensible to his

surroundings, but, on the contrary, acutely alive to the strange bewildering glamour of the East, where life dwells radiantly. He was interested in the ever-changing shipping, the crowds of strange craft lying by the wharves or moored to buoys in the great impetuous Irrawaddy, and the swarms of sampans darting in all directions. Overhead was the hot blue sky, blazing upon a motley crowd, which included the smiling faces of the idle, insouciant, gaily-clad Burmans—most genial and most engaging of nations.

Down by the *godowns*, where Shafto worked, the stir and press of commercial life was tremendous; on every side roared and dashed trams, motor-lorries, traction engines and—curious anachronism—long strings of heavily-laden bullock carts. Here was trade from the ends and corners of the earth; out of her abundance this rich country was shipping to the nations wood, oil, rice, metals, cotton, tea, silken stuffs, ivory, jade, and precious stones; masses of cargo lay piled on the wharves, amid which a multitude of noisy coolies, busy as ants, went to and fro incessantly, whilst in the distance the saw-mills screamed, the steam dredgers clanked, and tall factory chimneys blackened the heavens.

All this amazing restless activity seemed strangely out of its natural perspective; the scene should have been laid in Liverpool or Glasgow, instead of displaying a background of palms, tropical trees, gilded pagodas, and a circle of gaily-dressed, idle natives.

Although the British and German residents did not assimilate, Shafto saw a good deal of their mercantile element. At ten o'clock every morning hundreds of Teuton clerks poured into Rangoon from the surrounding neighbourhood, and he could not but admire their indefatigable business activity, tireless industry, and world-wide radius of action. Long, long after British firms had closed for the day, and their employés had rushed off to amuse themselves at football, golf, or boating, the German was still sticking to it and hard at work. But there was another feature of which Shafto was aware and could not applaud; this was the "spy" system. There were rumours of an active gang (manipulated from Berlin), whose business it was to discover what English firms were doing in the way of large contracts, and subsequently to enter into competition, cut out, and undersell. It was said that their methods were both prompt and ruthless. It was also hinted that one or two firms winked at contraband, offered irresistible bribes, and made fabulous profits.

The individual characteristics of his fellow-inmates were soon impressed upon Shafto, and the interest they evinced in him—a mere stranger—was undeniably agreeable to his *amour propre*. MacNab, who was sincerely concerned about his financial affairs, instructed him in many clever economies, and the localities of the cheapest shops; he was also emphatic on the subject of cautious outlay—and full of warning against the horrors of "a rainy day."

FitzGerald, on the contrary, was eloquent in favour of "the best that was going, and hang the expense!"

"You'll want two horses, my boy," he announced, "if you're going in for paper-chasing and the gymkhana; you might chance on a bargain, too. I heard of a fellow who got a wonder for three hundred rupees, an ugly ewe-necked brute, but he carried off the Gold Cup and every blessed thing he was entered for. On the other hand, such a windfall is a very outside chance; then you must have a small car for the rains—I believe you would get a nice little Ford for six hundred rupees."

Shafto received this advice with a shout of laughter.

"A racer and a car on four hundred rupees a month! FitzGerald, you are raving mad. If I followed your advice——" he paused.

"You would soon be shunted out of Gregory's," supplemented MacNab, who, with impassive face, was lolling in a long chair, a silent but attentive listener.

"Ah, don't be minding that fellow!" protested FitzGerald. "Shure, he'd sell his father's gravestone, if he ever had the heart to put it up."

"Well, I pay my way, Fitz, and can walk down Phayre Street at my case, whilst you——" he paused significantly.

"Oh, well, I own a few bills, I know—six hundred rupees a month goes no way here, but it'll be all right when my ship comes in; anyhow, I'll have had a good time—I'll have *that* to look back upon when I'm an old fellow upon the shelf. Now you," suddenly turning to stare at MacNab, "never spend a rupee; you wouldn't take a taxi to save your life, never go to a cinema or a concert, nothing that costs money; you just bicycle and drink lemon squashes and write home."

"Oh, if you want to ride in taxis and go to cinemas, you might as well

be in London," put in Roscoe, who had joined them.

"I wish to the Lord I was!" declared FitzGerald; "standing at the corner of Piccadilly Circus this blessed minute, and making up my mind whether to go to the Criterion grill or to Prince's?"

"But as you happen to be in Rangoon, and *not* Piccadilly Circus, why don't you open your eyes and see the place, and enjoy it?"

"*Enjoy!*" repeated FitzGerald with a dramatic gesture; "see it? I see a deal too much of it; while you fellows are snoozing in bed, I'm turning out filthy liquor shops, drug stores, tea houses, and stopping Chinese fights, smuggling and murder."

"Yes, we know all that," rejoined Roscoe; "you look into the dark, Shafto and I see the bright side of this country."

"Oh, yes, you're a bright pair, and here, I'm off!" exclaimed the police officer, as he suddenly caught sight of a mounted orderly and thundered down the stairs.

Roscoe was neither economical, nor yet extravagant; he patronised the theatres and shows, made expeditions into the country on "Later On," read many books, and occasionally took a trip up the river in a cargo boat.

Shafto and Roscoe had one taste in common—a craving to see, know, understand and, as it were, get under the skin of this wonderful land. An impossible achievement! From the first they had been drawn together; they were searching in an eager way for the same object; they had both been at a public school and once, when Shafto dropped a word about Sandhurst, Roscoe said:

"I was intended for the Army, but I couldn't pass the doctor—rather a facer after scraping through the exam.; when that was knocked on the head, I got a post as assistant-master, but I couldn't stick it for more than a couple of years; after that, I was in a newspaper office; then I got badly stage-struck and went on the boards. Unfortunately, I was not a success; I never could do the love parts—I neither bellowed nor whined; at last my people got fairly sick of me, I was so often 'resting,' and they made a combined effort and hustled me out here into the oil business, and here I am in my element."

"I can't say you look particularly oily," observed his companion.

"Perhaps not, but I dare say to lots of young fellows I seem a dry old stick—anyhow, I *was* a stick in 'the Profession.'"

Occasionally Roscoe invited Shafto to accompany him of an evening, and introduced him to strange and wonderful sights—wrestling, cock-fighting, puppet *pwes*, or plays in the Burmese character. These were acted by little figures wonderfully manipulated by strings behind the scenes; the holder of the string also supplied any amount of dialogue (not always of the most decorous description), and also all the latest and coarsest jokes from the bazaar. To the Europeans these entertainments offered scanty amusement, but to natives they proved enthralling. An audience would sit spell-bound and motionless for a whole night, soothed and cheered by the strains of the Burmese band—that unique and original collection of sounds and instruments.

"In former days," explained Roscoe, as he and his companion sat staring at the bedizened actors and shrill little figures on a long, low stage, "these plays took place in the open air, on a *midan*; all the world was welcome, and as there was no charge, naturally all the world was present! They were usually given by some rich Burman, or widow, in honour of some offering or anniversary. An uncle of mine was quartered here years ago, and I remember him saying that he suffered sorely from these *pwes*; one play lasted for three consecutive days and nights—the Burmese brought their bedding. The great *midan* outside his bungalow was a seething mass of people; whose families were encamped—the place resembled a huge fair. Some were bartering, gambling, or eating horrible-looking refreshment, and altogether thoroughly enjoying themselves; rows and rows squatted motionless on the ground in front of the stage; of course, sleep, with such a fiendish commotion, was out of the question, and so my uncle was obliged to get up and wander about among the masses until daybreak; he said he never could make head or tail of the play, but one of his brother officers loved it; he engaged an interpreter and squatted for hours in front of the stage, enjoying what he considered 'a priceless treat.'"

Shafto, like Roscoe's uncle, failed to appreciate *pwes*, which were now held within stated bounds; he preferred out-of-door entertainments, as the heat, the smoke, the smell of raw plantain skins, the band, and the jabber were too much for him.

Roscoe, his cicerone, had contrived to learn a little of the difficult

Burmese language, and knew the town to a certain extent—including something of the vast underworld, and even FitzGerald admitted that “old man Roscoe” could tell a thing or two, if he liked.

Before he had been long in Rangoon Shafto had also a glimpse into its depths. One night, returning from a “sing-song,” as he reached the bottom of the outer stairs, he was startled by a voice from the pitch dark space beneath the house—a voice which said in a husky whisper:

“Is that you, Joe? Joe, for God’s sake stop and give me a couple of rupees.”

“It’s not Roscoe,” said Shafto, striking a match; “who are you?”

The flickering and uncertain light discovered a gaunt and unshaven European in the shabbiest of clothes.

“Roscoe’s out; what do you want?” he brusquely demanded.

“Only a couple of rupees,” was the hoarse reply. “I’m ashamed for you to see me; I’m down and under, as you may guess.”

“Drink?” suggested Shafto, lighting another match.

“No; drugs—two devils: cocaine and morphia.”

“I say, that’s bad; can’t you take a pull at yourself?”

“Too late now.”

“Nothing’s too late,” declared Shafto; “believe that and buck up. Well, here are four rupees for you.”

As he put them into a shaking hand the match went out, and the loafer noiselessly melted away into the soft and impenetrable darkness.

Next morning Shafto informed Roscoe of this strange encounter.

“Such a water-logged derelict was never seen! One of your underworld friends, I take it?”

“Worse than that,” rejoined Roscoe; “he’s my own first cousin.”

In reply to Shafto’s exclamation he added: “His father was the officer I told you about, who was so terribly worried by the plays. This chap was erratic, but a clever fellow and great at languages; he passed into the Woods and Forests out here, and enjoyed the wild jungle life for a good many years; now you see what he is—a wild man of the bazaars.”

“But I say, Roscoe; can you do nothing?”

“Absolutely nothing; a cocaine case is hopeless. Opium you might tackle; the other is beyond the power of man or woman.”

“But how does the fellow live?”

“God knows!” replied Roscoe. “Most of these chaps keep body and soul together by stealing; there’s a lot of smuggling going on in Burma, and I shouldn’t be the least surprised if my cousin Richard had a hand in that!”

CHAPTER XVI

MR. AND MRS. ABEL SALTER

Shafto had been six weeks in Rangoon and, thanks to his chums, was beginning to feel completely at home—as is sometimes the case with adaptable young people in a strange and fascinating country.

His neighbours, the Salters, who were hospitable and friendly, had lent him a hand to find his bearings. Occasionally, of an evening, he and Roscoe would stroll over there after dinner, and sit in the deep veranda discussing many matters with the master of the house. Roscoe and Salter were more nearly of an age, and mutually interested in subjects that to Shafto seemed deadly dull and obscure. He liked to hear about sport, the country, and the Burmese; to all such topics he was an eager and ready listener, but when philosophy and sociology were on the tapis he would join Mrs. Salter indoors, to discuss the paddy crop, inspect her great rice bins, and argue over prices and sales; or he would listen to blood-curdling tales about *nats*, or house spirits, related by his hostess in animated, broken English, and with appropriate gesticulations. Mee Lay had a high opinion of the young man, and this was shared by her daughter, for "Shaft," as she called him, helped her to fly her kite, mended broken toys and brought her chocolates such as her soul loved.

During one of their prowling expeditions Roscoe had imparted the life-history of Salter to his chum. Salter's forbears were Yorkshire folk—thrifty, self-respecting, stiff-backed Nonconformists. His father and grandfather belonged to what is called "the old school," when parents ruled their families with an iron rod, and the meek, down-trodden children accepted punishment without question. Salter's grandmother had dismissed grown-up sons from table and kept a rebellious daughter for weeks incarcerated in her room. Salter's father had inherited her stern, Spartan spirit; he gave his heir a first-class education in the neighbourhood of London and, when he was twenty, recalled him to Bradford, there to take his place in the works and live at home. But Salter, junior, having tasted the delights of liberty, found home life unspeakably irksome; the laws against drink, dancing, smoking and the theatre were Draconic. He hated the long chapel service on Sunday, the endless hymns and emotional exhortations; the day concluding with family worship, which lasted three-quarters of an hour. The young fellow dreaded the Sabbath and rebelled against his gloomy, comfortable, middle-class home, where he had no individuality, no rights—and no latch-key! At last he broke loose—the flesh and blood of twenty-two years old revolted. At twelve o'clock one night he found himself locked out and, as the first bold peal of the bell elicited no reply, he never again applied for admittance, but with four pounds in his pockets and a good saleable watch, launched his little skiff upon the great, wide world.

Behold him now comfortably established in a foreign land, occupying a responsible position in a well-known firm, the husband of a clever, thrifty woman, who was actively engaged in building up his fortune. After an interval of some years, the Salters at home discovered that their prodigal had undoubtedly killed and thriven on his own fatted calf. The usual little bird had informed them that "Abel was much thought of and prosperous; had a grand home in Rangoon, dozens of servants, and was married." Friendly letters were dispatched—for "Nothing succeeds like success"—and a brisk correspondence ensued. Information and photographs were promptly exchanged, and the family received a nicely-finished presentment of Rosetta in her smartest and shortest frock. They were much impressed by the grandchild born to them in Burma, and she was immediately installed in a handsome silver frame, introduced to all their neighbours and to most of their chapel friends.

But what would have been the sensation of these worthy people if they had received a portrait of Mee Lay in full festival costume—flowers in hair and white cheroot in hand!

On the subject of Mrs. Abel Salter there was but scanty information; her old maid sisters-in-law were given to understand that she sent them her best good-wishes—she also forwarded silks and jars of Burmese condiments, but her husband declared that she was very lazy about letter-writing and constitutionally shy. Her maiden name, they were told, had been Mary Lee, and this information had sufficed.

Besides having the entrée to the Salters' domestic circle, Shafto had been elected a member of the Gymkhana Club, where he made various new acquaintances—and these increased in number as his prowess in tennis and cricket became evident; then, with the advice—and, indeed,

almost under the compulsion—of FitzGerald, he purchased a smart stud-bred mare, certainly no longer in her first youth, but sound, clever and full of “go.” She was not called upon to shine on a race-course, but carried her master admirably in Station paper-chases on Thursday afternoons.

By the MacNab this investment was looked upon with a dubious and unfavourable eye, although he was aware that the price of “Moonshine” had come out of a small nest-egg which her owner had brought from home. He pointed out the enormous price of gram, or English oats, and he earnestly entreated Shafto “not to be led into follies by other people” (meaning FitzGerald), “but to keep his head and go slow.”

During this month of November Shafto had frequently come across his fellow-passengers in the *Blankshire*; even Lady Puffle had acknowledged his existence with a bow; not once had he beheld the desire of his eyes—Miss Leigh. She appeared to have vanished as completely as a summer mist and, it was whispered, had been swallowed up and submerged by the German colony.

Mrs. Krauss had vouchsafed no notice of his visit and card; her niece was never to be seen either at the Gymkhana, or on the lakes—the principal meeting-places for young and old. More than once he imagined that he had caught sight of her in the cathedral at evening service, but she looked so different in smart Sunday clothes—a feathered hat and gauzy gown—that he might have been mistaken, and he heard from MacNab (the gossip of the chummery) that Krauss had brought forward a remarkably pretty niece, who had recently played in a concert at the German Club, and made a sensational success.

When Shafto rode in the mornings, he eyed expectantly every passing or approaching habit, but Sophy Leigh was never among the early cavalcade—for the excellent reason that she had no horse.

Mrs. Gregory, in spite of multifarious occupations as the firm’s vice-reine, had by no means forgotten pretty Miss Leigh, nor her cousin’s emphatic instructions; the girl had failed to accompany her to the Gymkhana dance—“her aunt was ill; she had been unable to leave her”—a stereotyped excuse to every invitation. The truth was that Mrs. Krauss, after two or three social efforts, culminating in a large dinner-party to her German neighbours, had collapsed with one of her worst attacks, and between nursing her relative and housekeeping for Herr Krauss (who was shamelessly greedy and exacting), Sophy had not a moment to spare, and the Madras boy turned away all callers—including Miss Leigh’s friends—with his mechanical parrot cry, “Missis can’t see!”

CHAPTER XVII

AT THE PLAY

Theatrical performances are the chief entertainment in Burma; the Burmese as a nation delight in plays—operatic, tragic, opera bouffe and ballets, such as the "Han Pwe," when a number of young girls, all dressed as royalties, posture and dance with extreme grace; and as their training is perfect, the entertainment evokes unqualified applause. So interested and absorbed do the audience become in long drawn-out dramatic performances, with interludes of dancing and singing, that they will bring their bedding, and not merely remain all night but several nights—according as the play may hold them! As a rule, the background is a palace, and the plot concerns the love story of a prince and princess, which is interrupted by all manner of vicissitudes—some grotesque, others of genuine pathos; to these the accompaniment of soft, wailing Burmese music is admirably adapted.

Po Sine, the greatest actor in Burma—an Eastern "star"—had recently returned to Rangoon from a prolonged tour, and his admirers, who numbered thousands, were all agog to see and welcome him.

The principal theatre was established in a large space at the back of the Great Pagoda, trustfully open to the soft blue night, otherwise strictly encompassed with matting; for in these changed and money-making days, there was an official box-office at the entrance and no admittance without cash payment! The stage was only raised a foot or two from the ground, and a long row of little lamps threw a becoming red light upon the scene. Here many rows of chairs were arranged for the use of Europeans, whilst the Easterns sat upon the ground on mats and folded themselves up in easy native fashion.

On the first night of Po Sine's reappearance, the arena was packed to the utmost limit of the matting. In the front were assembled many European residents, who were treated to bunches of flowers, paper fans, cheroots and lemonade; also, in a reserved space and on gorgeous rugs, reclined a number of splendidly attired and bejewelled Burmese ladies—princesses of the Royal house, a sprightly and animated group; their flashing diamond combs and long diamond chains made a feature amid the audience.

Mrs. Gregory had brought a small party, which included Mena Pomeroy, Robin Close—one of the assistants—and Douglas Shafto, who had never yet seen the famous Po Sine. Somehow Miss Pomeroy and Mr. Close had contrived to get separated from their chaperon, but Shafto still stuck faithfully to his hostess.

A puppet play represented the curtain-raiser, and as this, to Shafto, was no novelty, he stared about him at the masses of shining black heads; men with jaunty silk handkerchiefs twisted round their brows, women with their wreaths and golden combs—an undeniably smart audience—all smoking. The stage was open to the dark blue sky, which was sprinkled with stars. Right above them clanged a temple gong; from far down the river came the hoot of a steamer's syren, and during intervals the soft humming of the wind among the labyrinth of shrines—a complete contrast in every respect was this Eastern scene to the last play he had witnessed in a London theatre!

All at once there was an influx of people surging in—crafty folk who knew how to avoid the curtain-raiser. These included a number of Germans. Among the party in the train of Mrs. Muller, and attended by Herr Bernhard, was Miss Leigh in a dainty white frock and flower-trimmed hat, but somehow looking a little bit out of the picture. Her chaperon, magnificent in a Viennese toilet, unexpectedly encountered friends who had recently arrived from the Fatherland; these she hailed with boisterous jubilation, and as she chattered and gesticulated, listened and interrupted, she entirely forgot her charge; in fact, she moved on, still talking, and abandoned her, so to speak, to her fate.

Sophy's fate, luckily for her, happened to be Mrs. Gregory, who signed to Shafto to rescue the young lady and conduct her to a place under her own wing.

"How are you?" he said, accosting her eagerly. "Mrs. Gregory has sent me to ask if you won't sit by her? There is lots of room."

"I should love to, but you see I am here officially with Mrs. Muller. I'll go and speak to her, but I think she has filled my seat."

A hasty word to the chaperon, who had entirely forgotten her existence, released Sophy and, as she joined Mrs. Gregory, Frau Muller

said with a shrug:

"Oh yes, she is rather pretty in her way. She has got among those odious English—let her stay with them!"

(Then she threw herself once more into the interesting topic of the latest scandal in Frankfort.)

"I am so pleased to see you," said Mrs. Gregory, making room for Sophy beside her; "what has become of you all these weeks?"

"Oh, I have been in Kokine and quite safe," she answered, but her smile was not so ready and whole-hearted as it had been on board ship. "Aunt Flora caught a chill and has been laid up. Poor dear, she is a martyr to neuralgia."

"I know she is subject to it, but surely she does not require you to be with her *all* day?"

"No, but Herr Krauss is at home now; the old cook has departed after a fearful explosion, and housekeeping is a struggle; servants are so difficult to find and deal with, especially by a strange 'missy' like myself. And Herr Krauss is particular about punctuality and the plates being hot, and all that sort of thing; I have to make Russian salads, confitures and sauces, so I have really had no spare time."

"Yes, I can imagine your hands have been pretty full. But do you mean to tell me that *you* run the house?"

"I don't exactly run it, but I do my best to drag it along—and it's rather awkward from my being a new-comer; pice and rupees are novelties, and everything is supposed to be in German fashion."

"German fashion!" echoed Shafto. "What's that?"

"Oh, particular hours, particular food, *Blutwurst*, sausages, Russian salads, cakes, creams, and plenty of them."

"Well, I must say Krauss looks sleek and well fed; he does you credit! But don't you ever get your Sunday off or your day out?"

"I suppose I do in a way. I have been to dine with one or two of our neighbours, and we had some really first-rate music; and then, you see, we live at a long distance from the Cantonment and the Gymkhana."

"But what about the car?"

"Herr Krauss uses it; he is away most of the day."

"But you have a horse to ride?"

"Yes, there was one; rather a nice-looking little bay, but soon after I arrived, he was borrowed by a man who has taken it up to Prome."

Mrs. Gregory had been listening to this conversation, making mental notes and setting down bad marks! Her cousin was returning from Mandalay on the following day, and she determined that she and Milly would wait upon Mrs. Krauss, and request her to liberate this prisoner. Mrs. Krauss was a charming, indolent, clinging sort of individual, who had latterly sunken into a somnolent existence and rarely appeared above the social surface. Formerly she had been a brilliant figure in Rangoon society, gave excellent dinners, danced, rode and played bridge and tennis; but, by degrees, she seemed to have dropped out of things, and Mrs. Gregory remembered how, once upon a time, when riding together, she had lamented that she had no children and no particular interests, and that her energy, such as it was, was ebbing rapidly. Of course, she had been too long in Lower Burma—eight years of Lower Burma, merely diluted with an occasional few weeks at May Myo, was enough to undermine any woman's mental and bodily state.

"And so your aunt has been ill?" she asked after a long pause.

"Yes, but she is much better now and very cheerful, so I was able to leave her and accept Mrs. Muller's invitation to accompany her to this play."

"You have seen nothing so far?"

"Well, not much, but there is lots of time."

Mrs. Gregory glanced at the girl and, in the searching electric light, noticed that her lovely colour was already fading, the lines of the face seemed a trifle sharper; beauty is fleeting in Lower Burma. Meanwhile Shafto, sitting so silent at the ladies' feet, was secretly boiling with rage.

So the fat old German, in spite of his wealth, had made his wife's niece both sick nurse and house-keeper; one of these tasks was ample for any girl; Miss Leigh had been six weeks in Rangoon and had never even seen the Pagoda!

"I know you are fond of riding," he began; "do you think you could come for a gallop if I produced a pony?"

"And a chaperon," supplemented Mrs. Gregory. "I can offer my

services and a mount, and I'll call for you at seven o'clock on Thursday morning. You may come, too," she added, turning to Shafto, "and we will go to the Pineapple Forest."

"How delightful, and how very kind of you!" said Sophy. "I am sure I can manage—as long as I am in by nine o'clock."

"But why nine o'clock, my dear Cinderella?"

"Because I have to interview the cook when he returns from the bazaar. Herr Krauss is something of a gourmand and rather querulous about his food, and he often brings in one or two men to tiffin or dinner."

"A nice, amusing change," said Shafto. "You must find old Krauss a bit monotonous. What does he talk about? Wolfram or sausages?"

"He talks a good deal about my aunt—he really is devoted to her."

"Well, I'll mark him up one for that. I suppose the guests are his own compatriots?"

"Yes, they come on business, and are nearly always the same. They talk German all the time, which I cannot understand—only when they stare at me and say something about 'Engländerin'; after dinner we have music and Herr Krauss and I play duets. His instrument is the violin—most of the neighbours are musical, first-rate musicians and so critical; I appreciate that—it keeps me up to the mark."

"I think, among them, they all keep you up to the mark," observed Mrs. Gregory, and whatever she was about to add was abruptly interrupted by a loud, swelling, unanimous murmur of "Ah Wah, Ah Wah," which suddenly rose from a thousand throats. This rapturous acclamation hailed the appearance of Po Sine, the star of the Burmese theatre—unsurpassed and unapproachable in either tragedy or comedy. Po Sine was nothing to look at—a thin, ordinary, little man, but endowed with genius; even those who could not understand a word he said immediately recognised the great actor.

This particular play was a favourite comedy; shouts of laughter shook the audience and the encompassing walls of matting, and in this Shafto and his companion could not help joining.

"I wonder what it is all about," said Sophy. "I know it's very amusing. What was that funny thing he said last?" she asked as the shrieks died down.

Shafto coloured guiltily. Although far from being an expert in the Burmese language, he had caught the drift of this sentence—a coarse *double entendre*, which he could not possibly interpret to a girl. Burmese plays are not always decorous; this particular performance was an odd mixture of ancient and modern. The lovers, who were, as usual, princes and princesses, played stately roles and moved about with majestic dignity and in gorgeous raiment—their prototypes dated from the days of Buddha; on the other hand, the clown and the country men, who enacted the parts of villains and devils, were essentially modern—as quick with patter songs and up-to-date local events and jokes as the cleverest music-hall artist. At intervals the weird Burmese band, with its clashing cymbals, harps and clarions, discoursed the latest Burmese operatic airs.

It was one o'clock and the great bell in the heart of the Pagoda had throbbed out its long deep note, when Mrs. Gregory rose and collected her party.

"I'm so sorry I can't take you with me," she said to Sophy. "I hope your German friends will not remain all night. However, I shall depute Mr. Shafto to look after you. Please tell your aunt that I hope to call and see her very shortly—and do not forget that you are to ride with me on Thursday morning."

As if it was likely! Then Mrs. Gregory took her departure, leaving Sophy and her companion to a *tête-à-tête*.

"I think we will move up closer to your friends," he said; "I see two empty seats behind them. Our people can't stick this for more than three or four hours."

"How have you been getting on?" inquired Sophy, "and how do you like Burma?"

"Burma suits me down to the ground; I like it most awfully. I've been very busy learning my job, but I've seen a good deal outside business hours."

"What have you seen?"

"Oh, well, wrestling, tattooing and cock-fights; I have been once up the river as far as Prome, and to several native shows, including a funeral."

"How have you managed that?"

"Salter, a fellow in our house, took me; the funeral was a strange affair

—not a bit like ours; everyone in gala clothes, great feasting and a band in the house; altogether a lively entertainment. When a man is dying, his friends come and gather round and cheer him, and tell him of all the good deeds he has done in his lifetime. At the graveside there is an extraordinary business with a silk handkerchief, in which the nearest relation is supposed to catch and enclose the departed spirit, now in the form of a white butterfly—and dangerous to mortals for seven days and nights. I have seen a good deal of native life already.”

“How lucky you are!” exclaimed the girl; “and I’ve seen nothing but Germans.”

“Salter has taken me about and naturally he has extra opportunities, being married to a Burmese.”

“Married to a Burmese?” echoed Sophy; her tone was incredulous.

“Yes. At one time it was quite a common thing. Mrs. Salter—her real name is Mee Lay—is sitting over there in about the fifth row back, behind the fellow with the scarlet handkerchief twisted round his head. Presently you must turn and look at her. She is a nice, cheery woman, and Salter is an interesting, original sort of man. I dine with them now and then. Mee Lay is uncommonly businesslike—has a good deal of land and a flourishing rice concern.”

“She has? How amazing!”

“I see you don’t know much of Burma yet.”

“No; so far I am only acquainted with the bazaar prices, the gorgeous flowers, delicious fruit and futurist insects!”

“Well, women do most of the business and do it well; the men are a lazy, loafing lot; very genial and sporting, fond of cock-fighting and gambling—absolutely regardless of expense or debt. Mrs. Salter is rich; if you will look round now you will see her—the little woman with the yellow fan and diamond comb; notice her blazing ear-rings; and yet I have seen the same lady with her petticoats kilted high, standing knee-deep in a rice cart and diving with both hands into the grain to test its quality!”

“That is a very pretty girl with flowers in her hair, beside her,” remarked Sophy; “look, she is nodding to you. Who is she?”

“Her name is Ma Chit; she is Mrs. Salter’s cousin. Sometimes she drops in when I am there; the Salters live close to my chummery. I have a munshi now and I am learning Burmese.”

“And—and I am learning German!”

“How do you hit it off with your uncle?”

“Please don’t call him my uncle.”

“Then I am answered.”

Sophy laughed and coloured brilliantly.

“I suppose so. We do not coalesce; our ideas, age and country are different; he is hard as a rock, brusque and overbearing—but amazingly clever and energetic. He seems to hold so many threads in his hands, to deal with such numbers of people; his correspondence is enormous; his office, when he is at home, is surrounded and stormed by all sorts of people—Mohammedans, Chinese, Burmese, all waiting on his good pleasure and his nod. I scarcely see anything of him except at meals, and then he is too much taken up with eating to have time to spare for conversation; but we meet in one spot—music-land! He plays the violin; we do Beethoven together and are great friends; then when the piano closes——” she paused.

“You are enemies?”

“Not exactly enemies, but I do hate the way he gobbles his food and bullies the servants; and then he says such rude things about England—perhaps it’s only done on purpose to make me angry? He declares we are a wretched, rotten, played-out old country, going down the hill as hard as we can fly. He is narrow-minded, too; so arrogant—the Germans can do no wrong, the English can never do right. I am telling dreadful tales, am I not? All the same, he has an English wife, and is simply devoted to Aunt Flora; nothing is too good for her. It is really funny to see this rough overbearing man so gentle and thoughtful. But then, she is a dear!”

“Oh, is she?”

“You shall see for yourself. You must come to tea on Sunday. I am sure I may invite you; Aunt Flora is so kind and sympathetic, and has a look of mother.”

“I’ll come all right, if you think she’ll not be *durwaza bund*.”

“No, she is ever so much better, but the last few years has been more

or less an invalid."

"What is her particular illness? Is it fever?"

"Fever and neuralgia. Some days she will lie in a darkened room and see no one but her ayah; she won't even admit me, though occasionally I do slip in; she has had a bad attack lately, but is now convalescent. Oh, I see Mrs. Muller moving at last; now we shall be going."

"I'm afraid you've found this show a bit dull."

"Not at all—it has been a most interesting sight; I don't know when I have enjoyed myself so much."

"So have I; it has been a——"

Whatever Shafto was about to add was interrupted by Mrs. Muller, who pounced on his companion with a laughing apology, and handed her over to the charge of Herr Bernhard.

Two days later Mrs. Gregory and Mrs. Milward called at "Heidelberg," and on the veranda encountered Sophy, who was hurrying out to keep an appointment to practise duets with Frau Muller.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry," she said, when the first greetings were over, "but I must go; I'll get back as soon as ever I can. Aunt Flora is at home."

But when Sophy returned the visitors had already departed, leaving their hostess a good deal disturbed. Indeed, Mrs. Krauss's languid spirits had been violently shaken. Mrs. Milward had remarked on Sophy's changed appearance, and her tone had been hostile.

"It is very plain that Burma does not suit her," she said. "I could not believe that any girl would have altered in so short a time; I shall write to her mother at once."

"Oh, dear Mrs. Milward, what do you mean?"

"I should think anyone could *see* what I mean," rejoined the lady, who was very angry and had heard the tale of Sophy's heavy cares.

"The girl looks ill. I have known Sophy for years—known her since she was a small child—and I can assure you that she has never been accustomed to a strenuous indoor employment, to getting no exercise or relaxation—or ever meeting people of her own age."

Her hostess was struck dumb; her torpid conscience suddenly awoke and condemned her; Mrs. Milward, who was immediately leaving Rangoon and had no fear of retaliation, continued with ruthless animosity:

"It is true what you say—that your niece has been a wonderful comfort to *you*, but will it be a comfort to her mother when she hears that she is merely a hard-worked lady-help? I think it would be well to arrange that she should return home with *me*."

Tears now trembled in the culprit's dark eyes, and she fumbled for her handkerchief.

"Oh, Mrs. Milward," she said piteously, "I do see what you mean. I have been ill and stupid; my husband has always spoiled me, and thinks that other people are only brought into the world to wait upon *me*. I realise my selfishness now. Yes, you are right, the child looks pale and no longer flits about the house singing her little songs. I beg you will not alarm my sister; I will undertake that things are altered and you may depend upon me, dear Mrs. Milward; you have made me feel horribly guilty. I know I am a self-centred invalid, but I intend to mend my ways." And tears, no longer to be restrained, trickled down the worn, cadaverous face of Mrs. Krauss.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHINESE SHOP

The solemn promise Mrs. Krauss had made to Mrs. Milward was honourably redeemed, and a new and agreeable vista opened before Sophy Leigh. Her aunt roused herself, as it were, from a long sleep; the little bay horse was recalled from Prome; a Rolls-Royce was purchased (Herr Krauss signed the cheque without a murmur); a highly-recommended Portuguese butler was engaged to undertake the heavier forms of housekeeping; and Mrs. Krauss once more re-entered society—figuratively leading by the hand a lovely niece, of whom she was unaffectedly proud and who, she imparted to her friends, “had given her a new interest in life.”

Hitherto, she declared, she had felt like a flower that was withering for the lack of sun; now Sophy supplied the sunshine. Sophy was endowed with a personality that inspired happiness, and looked on the world as the abode of joy. And so at last pretty Miss Leigh tasted the delights of the Gymkhana Club, and took part in tennis, golf and dancing. There were boating parties on the Royal lakes and picnics in the woods. She made many acquaintances and had quite “a waiting list” of partners. Sometimes of a morning, but much more frequently of an evening, after tennis or boating, Mrs. Krauss would drive down to Phayre Street. There the shops were on the best European lines, and exhibited all the latest articles from London, Paris, or Berlin, tempting rupees out of people’s pockets. Mrs. Krauss was a liberal purchaser, whether of European stores, fancy goods, drapery, or jewellery; this generous aunt presented Sophy with a pair of heavy gold bangles, a string of pearls and an exquisite fan and kimono. These latter were found at an Indian repository owned by a well-known Bengali, with a large clientèle (Burmese themselves are too indolent to make successful shopkeepers—they much prefer to look on, and laugh, and bargain). In this and other emporiums of the same class were to be found rare embroideries, ivory carvings, eggshell china, Oriental draperies, jade, and piles of Chinese and Japanese silks of the most exquisite fabric and colour. Sophy liked to wander round, to marvel and admire, but soon discovered that to do the latter was to be immediately endowed with her fancy—be it an enormous Chinese jar, or a lacquered cabinet, or a mere silver bowl. Mrs. Krauss firmly resisted every denial and excuse.

“My dear,” she would protest, “do not refuse me; mine is the pleasure. I don’t know how to spend all my money, and never until now have I had a girl to whom I could offer presents—and to *give* is such a joy. I am a rich woman, with no belongings except you and yours. Certainly, I don’t deny that this big gong” (the present in question) “is rather a clumsy affair, but it is old and a beauty. What a deep, rich, melancholy tone! When struck it seems to tell of some sad, sad story that happened hundreds of years ago. After you are married, dear child, it will be so useful in your hall.”

On these excursions there was one little shop that was never neglected or overlooked; this was situated in a narrow slum, a long way from the great artery of traffic and fashion. After negotiating various tortuous windings and encountering horrible gusts of stale *napie* and the ever-odorous *dorian*, the car halted at a certain corner, and Mrs. Krauss and her companion made their way into a narrow ill-lit lane, and entered a mean den kept by a fat, crafty-looking Chinaman and his lean, pock-marked son. There was, as far as Sophy could discern, nothing whatever to interest or attract upon the premises. The stock was ordinary and scanty; a few coarse china tea-sets, some teapots in cane baskets, paper fans, lacquer trays and odds and ends of the cheapest rubbish; but Mrs. Krauss solemnly assured her niece that “it was the *only* place in Rangoon for the real guaranteed netsukes,” of which she was making a collection.

A Japanese netsuke is an elaborately-carved ivory button of various shapes and sizes—no two are alike; they take the form of men or animals and, as a rule, are executed with amazing delicacy, and, if signed and old, are of considerable value.

Mrs. Krauss, who spoke a little Chinese—and was proud of her accomplishment—appeared to know the fat proprietor rather well, and together they would retire into a dim inner recess, illumined by an oil lamp hanging before an altar, and there examine, bargain and gloat over treasures.

Meanwhile Sophy, who remained in the outer shop, was offered a seat and tea, without milk or sugar, in what resembled a doll’s cup; by her

aunt's express desire she always accepted this refreshment, although she found the decoction unspeakably nasty; it seemed to taste of an evil odour. Sometimes Mrs. Krauss would linger for fifteen minutes, sometimes for longer, talking over netsukes and Hong Kong with Ah Shee. The atmosphere of the place was overpowering; such a stifling reek of a mysterious effluvium, the combination of joss sticks, stale fish, rancid oil, and a sickly taint like the fetid breath of some mortal sickness; it made Sophy feel faint and, after a short interval, she invariably made her way into the street, where the air—though by no means fresh—was an improvement on that within the shop.

The street was narrow and squalid and the houses were dilapidated—even for a native quarter; passers-by had a slinking stealthy gait, and cast glances of surprise and suspicion at the young lady who lingered outside the premises of Ah Shee.

One evening, as she waited thus, in the warm, damp dusk, FitzGerald in uniform clattered by; he caught sight of Sophy out of what is called "the tail of the eye," and pulled up so suddenly as to throw his horse upon its haunches.

"Miss Leigh!" he exclaimed. "Yes, it is! May I ask why you find yourself among the Seven Dials, or devils, of Rangoon?"

"Oh, Aunt Flora comes to Ah Shee's shop hunting for ivories; she is collecting netsukes."

"Netsukes!" he repeated; "netsukes *here!*"

"Oh yes, and such good ones—the best in Burma; but it's a horrible place, and as to the odours!" and she made a gesture expressive of disgust.

"Yes, by Jove, the Chinese beat all the world in stinks; but I say, Miss Leigh, try to persuade your aunt to hunt elsewhere for ivories—this part of the world is unhealthy."

"I'm not surprised at that."

"Be advised by me and make *this* your last visit to this chinky shop. Well, I must be shoving on," and he trotted away.

A moment later Mrs. Krauss emerged and, by the quivering eye of an electric lamp, Sophy noticed that she looked strangely animated—indeed almost radiant. No doubt she had secured some wonderful prize.

"Who were you talking to, my dear?" she asked.

"Mr. FitzGerald; he was so surprised to see me and says we ought not to come here—the place is unhealthy and, indeed, Aunt Flora, I wonder you can stand the reek of Ah Shee's den for so long without feeling horribly sick."

"Oh, Mr. FitzGerald—the police-officer? Yes, he is right; it is a low neighbourhood and the air is poisonous, but I've managed to get what I wanted," and she held up a pocket handkerchief bulging with ivories. "I won't have to come again for ages and ages."

Meanwhile Ah Shee and son had shuffled off to summon the chauffeur, and the car now appeared round the corner of the street, looking like some crouching black monster, with round, fiery eyes. Attended by the two obsequious Chinamen, Mrs. Krauss and her niece entered the motor and were speedily borne away. For a considerable time the former did not open her lips, but lay back in her corner in an attitude of contented lassitude.

They made their way homewards through the teeming bazaar and brilliantly illuminated Phayre Street, with its brave show of shops, offering a kaleidoscopic review of jewellery, glittering silver, cut glass and brass work, or masses of rich, many-coloured stuffs and silks, each shop with a special circle of admirers.

It was the hour when offices disgorge their employés, when idlers come to lounge and stare, and between foot-passengers, trams, taxis and carts, the thoroughfare was almost impassable. During a block Mrs. Krauss suddenly roused from her condition of happy contemplation, and said, as she opened her handkerchief:

"My dear Sophy, I've got *such* treasures—such finds; real, old netsukes, signed, and *so* cheap! Do look at this delicious rabbit!" holding out a beautiful model. "Is it not too perfect, exquisitely carved, and smooth with age? And the tortoise with the little tiny one on its back—what a darling!" and she took it up and kissed it with rapture.

It puzzled Sophy to witness this extraordinary enthusiasm and then to recall the cold fact that, on her return to "Heidelberg," her aunt's interest in these ivories seemed to wane and disappear. Was there not a bowl of specimens in the drawing-room already consigned to oblivion and dust? Aunt Flora's character exhibited an amazing combination of

fantastic caprice and invincible good nature.

CHAPTER XIX

CHAFF

It was Thursday, the Station holiday. A capital paper-chase had recently engaged the entire community; the pace had been unusually severe; the obstacles large and formidable—especially the notorious Log Jump—and casualties were not a few. Shafto and FitzGerald, on hot and heaving horses, had only halted for a moment at the hospitable "Finish," where refreshments were being served, as care for their precious steeds was taking them and their animals home. After an unusually long silence FitzGerald exclaimed, apropos of nothing in particular:

"So—sits the wind in that quarter?"

Shafto turned his head and met a pair of knowing Irish eyes.

"That quarter!" repeated FitzGerald, indicating the red-tiled roof of the Krausses' bungalow, where it peeped out from amid a solid mass of palms and bamboos.

"I haven't the remotest idea what you are driving at," said Shafto impatiently. "Is it a bit of dialogue in the play you are rehearsing?"

"No, me boy, that is fiction—this is fact! In my official capacity I am bound to take notes, and within the last week I have twice met you early of a morning riding with Miss Leigh—no third party visible to the naked eye. In fact, you were there before the rest of the crowd—and, of course, the early bird gets the worm!"

"And which is the worm—Miss Leigh or I?"

"Oh yes, you may try to laugh it off, but there's some reason for these early *tête-à-têtes*. The reason is as plain as the stick in my hand—no, I beg its pardon, the reason is uncommonly pretty."

"FitzGerald, you are talking most blatant bosh."

"Maybe I am and maybe I'm not, and, let me tell you, you're not the only string to the lady's bow; she has as many as a harp! There's Fotheringay, the A.D.C.; there's Captain Howe; there's Bernhard—"

"Bernhard's a beast," burst out Shafto.

"Naturally *you* would think so—it's only human nature. But Otto is a handsome man and has a fine seductive voice; and mind you, music has charms to soothe the breast, savage or otherwise; as for your prospects, you may apply to me for a testimonial of character: steady, sober—"

"There, Fitz, that's enough—drop it!"

"Drop it!" repeated FitzGerald with a laugh. "Don't get your frills out, old boy, I mean no harm; she is by a long way the prettiest girl in the place."

"That will do," exclaimed Shafto impatiently; "leave the ladies alone, or, if you must discuss them, what about the little American Miss Bliss? You danced with her half the night at the last Cinderella."

"Ah! now I suppose you think you're carrying the war into the enemy's quarter, don't ye? Dancing is not compromising—like solitary rides with a girl before the world is warm, and Miss Bliss, by name and nature, is the only girl in Rangoon who can do a decent turkey trot. Now, as to Miss Leigh—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake leave Miss Leigh alone and talk about something else—talk about horses."

"Talk about horses," repeated FitzGerald in a teasing voice, "and if he isn't blushing up to his ears! I'll tell you what, young Shafto, it's a treat to see a real blush in this part of the world; blushing is rare in Burma, and I'd just like to have your coloured photograph," continued FitzGerald, whose methods of chaff were as rude and crude as those of any schoolboy.

"Come, don't let's have any more of this, Fitz, or you and I will quarrel."

FitzGerald grinned from ear to ear, delighted at the rise he had taken out of his companion, touched his cap, and said:

"All right, yer honour," but to himself he added, "by Jingo, it's *serious*! Well, well! However, he's as poor as a rat and that's a great comfort."

Comfort was constituted by the fact that, in these circumstances, there could be no immediate prospect of a break-up of the congenial chummery.

"See here, Mr. Shafto, on your high horse, if you promise not to trail your coat and frighten me, I'll tell you something that will interest you. I know you have been poking round with Roscoe and diving into queer

places—are you as keen as ever?”

“I am, of course,” rejoined Shafto, still stiff and unappeased.

“Well, then, I can show you a quarter where Roscoe has never dared to stick his nose—a cocaine den.”

“Not really? Surely you couldn’t take me in there.”

“I can so, as one of my subordinates; I am looking for evidence in a murder case; I’ll lend you a coat, and all you will have to do is to look wise and hold your tongue.”

“This is most awfully good of you,” exclaimed Shafto, “and I needn’t tell you I’ll go like a shot.”

“Oh, I’m good now, am I?” jeered FitzGerald; “but, joking apart, this will be an experience. Not like puppet plays and dances—but a black tragedy.”

“Yes, I suppose so; I know it’s pretty awful.”

“Cocaine smuggling is playing the very devil with the country and there’s no denying that.”

“But can’t you do something to stop it?”

“Is it stop it? You might just as well try to stop the Irrawaddy with a pitchfork. And it’s growing worse; there are some big people in it—the Hidden Hand Company—who keep out of sight, pay the money, employ the tools and collar the swag. They have agents all over this province, as well as India, China and the Straits.”

“Where does the stuff come from?”

“It’s chiefly manufactured in Germany, though some comes from England.”

“What, you don’t mean that! I always thought it was concocted out here.”

“’Tis little ye know! It is mostly sent in from Hamburg, and in all manner of clever ways; the smugglers are as cute as foxes and up to every mortal dodge. A lot of the contraband is done by native crews, of course without the knowledge of the ships’ officers. Hydrochloride of cocaine travels in strong paper envelopes between fragile goods, or in larger quantities in false bottoms of boxes, under plates in the engine room, or in the bulkheads.”

“But how can they possibly land the stuff?” inquired Shafto.

“Easier than you think! There are lots of nice, lonely, sequestered coves, where goods can be put ashore of a dark night, or dropped carefully overboard, hermetically sealed, with an empty tin canister as a float, and picked up at daybreak by a friendly sampan. Of course, the customs house officers have to be reckoned with from the moment a ship enters till she leaves the port, but sometimes in this drowsy climate a man falls asleep in his long chair, and here is the *serang’s* chance—the *serang* being the head and leader of the crew. The contraband is quickly lowered in gunny bags to the sampans and carried off in triumph to its destination. However, not long ago, the customs made a haul of twelve hundred ounces; out here cocaine sells for six pounds an ounce. So that was a nice little loss, and yet only a drop in the ocean—for every grain that is seized a pound enters the market. Oh, I’d make my fortune if I could run one of these foxes to earth.”

“I wish you could,” said Shafto; “have you no clue, no suspicions?”

“Hundreds of suspicions, but no clue. There’s a fellow in a sampan who unnecessarily hoists a white umbrella—I have my best eye on him; and there is said to be a broken-down, past-mending motor-launch in a creek beyond Kemmendine, which I propose, when I have a chance, to overhaul on the quiet. Chinese steamers plying between Japan and Rangoon run stacks of contraband; as soon as one method of landing is discovered they find another; their ingenuity is really interesting to watch. The chief smugglers are never caught—only their satellites, who get about four months’ gaol and never blow the gaff. If they did I wouldn’t give much for their lives.”

“Do you mean to tell me that their employers wouldn’t stick at murder?” cried Shafto aghast.

“They stick at nothing; a murder done second-hand is quite cheap and easy—just a stab with a *dah*, or long knife, and the body flung into the Irrawaddy; you know the pace of that racing current and how it tells no tales! Well, here we are! You see, for once I can discourse of other things than horses; and, talking of horses, these fellows had better have a bran-mash apiece; but once you get me on cocaine smuggling, I warn you I can jaw till my mouth’s as dry as a lime-kiln.”

CHAPTER XX

THE PONGYE

Late one warm afternoon in January, when Shafto was unusually busy on the Pagoda wharf—consignments of paddy were coming in thick and fast—suddenly, above the din of steam winches and donkey engines, there arose a great shouting, and he beheld an immense cloud of white dust rolling rapidly in his direction.

"Look out, it's a runaway!" roared a neighbouring worker. "By George, they'll all be in the river!"

Sure enough, there came a rattle-trap hack *gharry* at the heels of a pair of galloping ponies. The reins were broken, a yelling soldier sat helpless on the driver's seat and several of his comrades were inside the rocking vehicle. The animals, maddened with fear, were making straight for the Irrawaddy and, as Shafto rushed forward with outstretched arms to head them off, they swerved violently, came into resounding contact with a huge crane, and upset the *gharry* with a shattering crash. Several men ran to the struggling ponies; Shafto and another to the overturned *gharry* and hauled out two privates; number one, helplessly intoxicated; number two, not quite so helpless; the third person to emerge was, to Shafto's speechless amazement, no less a personage than a shaven priest—a full-grown *pongye* in his yellow robe! He looked considerably dazed and a good deal cut about with broken glass. Waving away assistance, he tottered over and sat down behind a huge pile of rice stacks. Shafto immediately followed to inquire how he could help him, but before he had uttered a word, the *pongye*, who was much out of breath, gasped:

"Bedad! that was a near shave!"

Could Shafto believe his ears?

"Whist! now, and don't let on!" he continued, staunching a cut with a corner of his yellow robe—which he presently exchanged for Shafto's handkerchief—"the fright knocked it out of me!"

"So you're not a Burman?"

"Faix, I am not; I'm a native of Cork and was born in Madras, and only for yer honour we'd all be floating down the Irrawaddy this blessed minute."

His honour found it impossible to articulate; he merely stood and gaped. The Irish *pongye*, born in Cork and Madras, was a tall, gaunt, middle-aged man, with high cheek-bones, a closely-shorn head, and horn spectacles.

"Might I ask yer name, sorr?" he inquired at last, "and where ye live?"

"My name is Shafto; I live in a chummery at the corner of Sandwith Road."

"Oh, an' well I know it an' its old compound. They say it's full of *nats*, because of a murder as was done there. My name is Mung Baw, at yer service, and I'll not forget what ye did for me this day, and I'll call round. Blessed hour! where's my begging-bowl?"

As soon as Shafto had discovered and restored his *patta*, the *pongye* arose, gave himself a shake and, without another word, stalked away, a tall, erect, unspeakably majestic figure.

When Shafto met Roscoe he lost no time in recounting his extraordinary adventure, and added triumphantly:

"So you see, Joe Roscoe, you are not the only man here who makes a strange acquaintance."

"I'm not surprised," he rejoined; "I've heard more than once of these white *pongyes*. I dare say the chap will be as good as his word and will look you up; I foresee an interesting interview."

In about three weeks Roscoe's prediction was verified. Returning home late one evening Shafto was struck by the unusually impressive appearance and gestures of the fat Madrassi butler who, beckoning him aside with an air of alarming mystery, informed him that "someone was in his room waiting to see his honour."

"In my room," he repeated indignantly. "Why the mischief did you put him in there? Couldn't he sit in the veranda, like other people?"

"No, saar, he refused; he would not."

Shafto flung open the door of his apartment with a gesture of annoyance and, to his profound amazement, discovered the *pongye* seated in easy comfort upon his bed. He was surrounded by an odd medicinal aromatic atmosphere, his sandals, begging-bowl and umbrella were carefully disposed beside him and he appeared to be thoroughly at

home.

"I thought I'd give ye a call, sorr, before I went up country. I'm off to Mandalay to-morrow on a pilgrimage."

"Oh, are you?" said Shafto, taking a seat and feeling at a complete loss what he was to say and how he was to handle this novel situation.

"I thought," resumed the *pongye*, "that I'd like to offer ye an explanation of the way I happened to be in that 'ere accident."

"Yes," assented his host; "I suppose this," pointing to his yellow gown with his stick, "is a fancy dress, for, of course, you are not a real *pongye*?"

"Troth, I am so," he rejoined with indignant emphasis; "I've been properly initiated—I know Burmese and the Pali language, and can intone a chant with anyone."

"All the same, you're an Irishman and your speech bewrayeth you. I wonder you are not kicked out."

"Is it kick me out? No fear! For besides being well respected and well liked, I'm a magician."

"Oh, come, that's all rot!" exclaimed Shafto impatiently.

"'Tis not," he rejoined in a vigorously defensive tone; "and 'tis little ye know. This is a queer country; the people are terribly superstitious and weak in themselves, on account of *nats* and bad spirits."

"Oh, that I can believe," replied Shafto; "your pals in the *gharry* could tell you something about bad spirits."

"Wait now and I'll explain," said the *pongye*, with an intimate gesture of his great bony hand.

"Sometimes I've a sort of ache to be mixing up with European soldiers—even if it's only for a couple of hours." After a pause he added in a thoughtful tone, "For ye see I was wance a soldier meself."

"What!"

"It's the pure truth I'm tellin' ye—a corporal, with two good-conduct stripes; the other week Paddy Nolan had drink taken, and nothin' would please him but that he must drive, so he turned off the *garriwan* and made a cruel bad hand of it—as you saw for yourself! They were a couple of raw new ponies, come down out of last drove, and unused to trams and motors, and frightened dancing mad; only for you heading them off, we were all as dead as mutton."

"But how did you get into the Burmese priesthood?" inquired Shafto with abrupt irrelevance.

"It was like this, sorr, I'm country-born; me father was a sergeant in the Irish Rifles, me mother was a half-caste—an Anglo-Indian from Ceylon—so I'm half Irish, quarter Cingalese. I was left an orphan when I was seven years old and educated at the Lawrence Asylum. I always had a wonderful twist for languages; it came as easy as breathing to me to talk Tamil or Telugu. Well, when I was close on eighteen I enlisted and put in seven years with the Colours, mostly in Bengal; then we come over here and lay in Mandalay and, after a bit, I—somehow got lost."

"That is, you deserted," sternly amended Shafto.

"Oh well, have it whatever way ye like, sorr. I was shootin' in the jungles and was took terribly bad with fever and nearly died. The natives are good-natured, kind, soft people—none better; they took me in and nursed me, and one of the *pongyes* doctored me. You see, I was entirely out of touch with Europeans, and when I got cured was just a walking skeleton. Some thief had made away with my boots and breeches, so I stopped among the natives and never laid eyes on a white face for two years. I soon picked up the Burmese lingo, which some say is difficult; but to me it was aisy as kiss me hand. Then I was received into the priesthood; that was over seven years ago, and here I am still. Of course, as ye know, I can go or stay as I please; but I stick to the yellow robe as if it was me skin. Still and all, I won't deny that the sight of a soldier draws me, and that," he concluded modestly, "is my only wakeness."

"I say, you don't mean to tell me that you are a *real* Buddhist?"

"Why, of course I am; what else would I be? The religion is pure and good and friendly; the other priests know that I'm from India—and that's enough for *them*. In this country no questions is asked—and that's what makes livin' so nice and aisy. And, sure, aren't we Buddhists all over the world? Our doctrines are wise and ancient; we pray and keep fasts and live to ourselves, and there's little differ, in my mind, between us and the Catholic religion—in which I was born and reared. Haven't we the mass, and vespers, and beads, and monasteries, and Lent,—all complete?"

"So then you're a celibate—a monk?"

"And to be shure I am; ye don't think I look like a nun, do ye?"

"A water drinker?"

"Well, sorr, I'm tell ye no lie—not altogether; I am not a teetotaller all out, I'm a sober man, and I mostly drink cocoanut water and tea. It's a fine, free life, I can tell ye."

"Fine and idle, eh?"

"I'm not more idle than the rest of them; it's true that I don't teach, and, of course, it's only the young fellows that do the sweeping, water-carrying and filtering, and the work at the *kyoung*. I see a heap of the country and have many friends, who give me small presents, and smokes and food; I have a far better time—a thousand times a better time—than sweating in route marches and carrying round Orderly books in Rangoon or Calcutta; and many's the quare tale I could tell ye—tales about animals and elephant dances and big snakes, ay, and spirit tales that would open your eyes."

"Well, if it's any comfort to know it, you've opened my eyes about as wide as they will go. What is your real name?"

"Michael Ryan. Me father came from Cork—a real fine country for fighting men, and I understand that, once upon a time, my ancestors had a great kingdom beyond the Shannon. Well, sorr," now beginning to unfold himself and rise from the bed, "I thought I'd just drop in and explain matters a bit before I go up country."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Mung Baw."

"I'll be back in a while, and I needn't tell ye, Mr. Shafto, that as long as I draw breath I'll never forget how I'm beholden to ye. I'm vowed to poverty, of course, but I'm a rover and go about a lot, and some day I may be able to put a good thing in your way, and I can tell ye one thing—ye have a lucky face!"

"I'm glad to hear it; and now, before you depart, will you tell me something else? How do you contrive to get so much liberty—careering round the town with Tommies and coming to look me up? It's past seven o'clock—and I understand your Roll Call is at six."

"That's true," assented the *pongye*, "but there are exceptions, and I'm one of them," suddenly sliding off the bed and drawing himself up to his full height—about six feet two. "I don't enjoy very good health being, as ye understand, no native of the country; so I'm allowed a certain margin and liberty. Well now, I'll be takin' leave of ye; but before I go, I want you to accept something I brought you—just a small trifle of a talisman."

And from some mysterious receptacle he produced a good-sized dark stone, about the size of a pigeon's egg. "Now, whatever ye do, put this carefully away and keep it safe and secure."

Shafto took it in his hand, examined the gift and murmured his thanks.

"No harm of any sort can come next or nigh ye," continued the *pongye*, "as long as that stone's in your possession—and that's as shure as me name's Mung Baw."

And hastily collecting his umbrella and bowl, before Shafto could realise the intended move the stranger was gone. Nothing remained of his visit but the curious aromatic odour and the so-called "talisman." The stone was round, dark and by no means beautiful, and at first Shafto was inclined to throw it into the compound, but, on second thoughts, he thrust it into his dispatch box and locked it away.

"Evil spirits, a magician, a talisman," he said to himself. "I suppose the poor fellow was discharged from the Service as a hopeless lunatic."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Shafto changed his clothes and went to dinner in the veranda, where he was well chaffed about his recent visitor.

"Been stealing something up at the Pagoda and they sent a *Bo* after you," suggested FitzGerald; "I must say your new friend is a rum-looking customer; a powerful, strapping *pongye*. He'd make a grand constable! What did he want?"

"Oh, he merely came to pay a visit of ceremony," replied Shafto. "He was in a *gharry* accident a few weeks ago, and I happened to come to his rescue and pick up the pieces; he called to express his thanks and drop a P.P.C."

CHAPTER XXI

THE COCAINE DEN

"To-night's the night," said FitzGerald to his confederate. "You and I will creep out in half an hour's time, and no questions asked. Roscoe has gone up to Tonghoo about oil; the MacNab is dining at the Pegu Club with one of his Big Pots and talking Flotilla and finance."

"All right, I'll be ready in two jiffs—you won't forget the coat?"

"Not likely! We will taxi down to the end of Dalhousie Street, and into the bazaar about half-past nine o'clock, and then proceed on foot. I am taking two constables—both armed."

It was a gay and busy scene; Dalhousie Street—which, it is said, never sleeps—was a blaze of light, humming with noise and excitement and packed with crowds of pleasure-seekers; a crude mixture of races, struggling and pushing to their different goals of entertainment.

As the two young men halted for a moment at a popular corner, it seemed as if the whole town and bazaar flowed past in a wave of colour and movement. Burmans' and Shans, male and female, clothed in coloured silk and satin, the women decked with flowers and jewellery, all smoking and jabbering in their strange monosyllabic tongue; solid, well-set-up Germans parading in couples; rollicking sailors; Chinamen; Malays in great numbers; stately Sikhs and the inevitable Babu filled the scene.

"They are all out to-night," observed FitzGerald, "lots of shows on; well, now for *ours*."

As he spoke he turned into a narrow street that led through an endless maze of curves and angles and, followed by two stalwart Sikh police, they made their way into the heart of the China bazaar and plunged into the worst slum quarter of this crowded, cosmopolitan city—a city, at least, in wealth, extent, population and importance. They passed flaring joss-houses, gambling dens and brazenly naked haunts of vice, and after picking their steps through a particularly noisome gully—odorous of *napie* and rotten vegetables—they arrived at an innocent little door in a high blank wall. After some whispered parley with an old Chinaman, the pair were admitted and ushered into a large, low saloon, where scores of gamblers were engrossed in the hypnotic pleasures of "Fan Tan," or the "36 animal lottery," so popular and so simple!

The adjoining room was a well-appointed opium resort. Here the roar of the bazaar and pulsing of tom-toms were blurred and almost inaudible. A reek of *bhang* and *betel* hung in the air; there were rows of neat bunks, lacquered pillows, and small trays containing the opium pipe, lamp and other necessaries. Everything was apparently carried out decently and in order; the clients were of a respectable, well-to-do class—some who had merely dropped in for a pipe of *chandu*, or a jolt of opium; and Shafto noticed quite a number of Europeans and, among them, at present asleep, a man whom he knew and frequently met on the Strand. He had sometimes wondered at his dried-up, withered skin and lank, dead-looking black hair. *Now* he understood.

The police officer was not disposed to linger on these premises. A cocaine den was his goal, and after a short talk with an affable old Chinaman, who spoke perfect English, he took leave and once more they were threading the odorous gloom of the slums. They soon came to a halt and, leaving the two constables outside, after the usual delay and mystery, were admitted and entered a most evil-smelling den. This was lighted by two or three smoky oil-lamps, the rank smell of which, with the sickly reek of squalid humanity, struck them like a blow in the face. Between forty and fifty victims appeared to be present, all belonging to the poorer classes, and nothing could be more repulsive than their appearance. Excessive emaciation and festering sores were their most marked characteristics. Some were lying on their mats in semi-stupor, several who had just received an injection were patiently awaiting their dreadful sleep—one of the chief attributes of cocaine is its almost immediate effect. Here was a group squatting round a man armed with a syringe—fatal germ-carrier—busily engaged in mixing the cocaine and morphia. When the concoction had been prepared, one of the customers turned up his sleeve to discover—if he could—a spot in which to insert the needle; but there was not a place, even the size of a pin's head, so he rolled up his *lungyi* and searched for a site on his thigh; then the needle was produced, its contents were pumped in, and the man made room for the next victim. This performance held Shafto with a sort of hideous fascination; the crowd appeared to be entirely insensible to his presence

and only alive to the enjoyment awaiting them.

At the far end of the room was an iron-bound enclosure, behind which sat a wily and inscrutable Chinaman who, having received a formal notice that this visit was "safe and unofficial," obligingly exhibited his scales and small packets of drugs—wares to bring rich delights to the narcotised—which he disposed of in infinitesimal quantities, at from four to six annas a dose.

Sprawling about on filthy rush mats were numerous Chinese, Burmese and Indians; also a few women of the lowest class, each and all sunken in the various stages of an ecstatic slumber.

As FitzGerald was now engaged in whispered conference with a pock-marked Malay (who was awaiting his turn), Shafto stood back against the wall, a completely detached figure, acutely sensible of the chill horror of this unknown sphere—the so-called "underworld."

He noticed that one or two customers sat round covetously watching the operation of the syringe—not having the money with which to indulge themselves; he also observed several who appeared to be in the last stage of their existence—thin to emaciation, mere wrecks, like half-dead flies, scarcely able to crawl about the floor.

Quite in the shadow, he caught sight of a tall figure in European clothes, who was, like himself, an impassive spectator, and, with a start, he recognised Roscoe's cousin. To-night he appeared cleaner and more human; he had shaved recently, and there was an undeniable family likeness between him and his relative—such a resemblance as may exist between a dead and broken branch and one still flourishing upon a healthy tree. On this occasion he was evidently not ashamed to be seen and recognised, for he nodded to Shafto, then crossed the room and joined him.

"Ah, so you've not taken a pull at yourself yet?" said Shafto.

"No, the cocaine debauchee has no power to resist the drug," he replied in a thin refined voice. "I am fairly normal to-night; it is not a case of virtuous repentance, but merely because I have no money."

As he made this statement the despairing eyes that looked into Shafto's were those of some famishing animal.

"You have the power to raise me from the pit," he continued in a husky voice; "you can lift me straight into heaven!"

"Only temporarily," brusquely rejoined Shafto.

"Even that is something when it offers peace and satisfaction to the restless human heart."

"But surely you can free yourself and your restless heart? Why not walk out of this filthy den with us? Roscoe will help you, so will I. Come, be a man!"

"It would be impossible for me to regain the normal balance of life," declared the victim of the drug; "also, I am no longer a man—I am a fanatical worshipper of cocaine, and only death can part us. Some day soon I shall fall out of her train, the police will find me in the gutter and take the debased body to the mortuary, whence, unclaimed and unknown, it will be carried to a pauper's grave."

"But can nothing be done to stop this hellish business?"

"Nothing," replied the victim with emphasis, "nothing whatever, until sales are rendered impossible and the big men—the real smugglers who are trading in the life-blood of their brothers—are reached and scotched. As for myself, I am past praying for; but thousands of others could and ought to be saved—by drastic measures and a stern exposure. The fellows in this business are as cunning as the devil; the stuff arrives by roundabout channels and from the most surprising quarters. Now and then they allow a consignment to be seized, but as a mere blind, a sop, and trade flourishes; there is no business to touch it in the money-making line."

He paused and met Shafto's searching eyes, then went on:

"It must amaze you to hear a fellow in this sink talking plain grammatical English, but before the cocaine fiend caught and tortured me I had brains. Joe Roscoe is a good chap—he has often held out a helping hand, but it was not a bit of use, I only sank deeper. When I recall the things I have done, the meannesses I have stooped to, I squirm and squirm and *squirm!* Well, I am nearly at the end of my tether, and a hair of the dog that bit me is all I ask. Your friend FitzGerald here, now looking up evidence from that rascally Malay, is working his very best to find some clue to the headquarters of the gang; but they are much too clever and are making their thousands and tens of thousands; profits are enormous, and the servants of the company are well paid for any risks or

prosecutions.”

“But what about informers?” asked Shafto.

“Oh, as for betraying secrets or giving the game away, the employés know exactly what to expect. More than one would-be witness has disappeared; his epitaph is, ‘Found drowned.’ Ah, I see FitzGerald moving, and so you must take your departure out of this inferno into the clean upper-world.”

“You come along with us,” said Shafto, suddenly seizing him by the arm.

But Roscoe threw him off with astonishing force and shook his head emphatically. Nevertheless he followed the pair to the entrance—a tall wraith-like form moving behind them, a shadow in the shadows.

As soon as the door had closed and the visitors were once more in the street, the police officer broke out:

“Upon my word, Shafto, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! Didn’t I see you slip money into the hand of that broken-down Englishman?”

“Yes, you did,” Douglas boldly admitted; “I was obliged to, right or wrong. If you had only seen his eyes, his starving, despairing eyes! I believe they will haunt me as long as I live; somehow I feel to-night as if I had looked through the gates of hell!”

CHAPTER XXII

THE APPROACHING DREAD

The cold weather was waning in the month of March, women and children were flocking to cooler climes than Lower Burma—chiefly to May Myo, north-east of Mandalay. Once a stockaded village, it was now a fair-sized and attractive station, with a garrison, a club, many comfortable bungalows, an overflowing abundance of flowers and fruit, and in its neighbourhood beautiful moss-green rides. When the hot weather had begun to make itself felt, and the brain-fever bird to make himself heard, Mrs. Krauss had insisted on dispatching her niece to this resort, chaperoned by Mrs. Gregory; but as far as she herself was concerned nothing would induce her to leave home.

"I love my own veranda and my own dear bed," she declared; "I shall have lots of electric fans and ice, all the new books, and Lily will look after me; but you, Sophy, being a new-comer and not acclimatised, must positively depart."

Sophy exerted her utmost eloquence to induce her aunt to follow the fashion and spend, at least, two months in the hills, and her efforts were warmly supported by Mr. Krauss, but his wife made no reply—she merely beamed and shook her head. Eloquence and persuasion were wasted. He and Sophy might just as well have appealed to the alabaster Buddha in the drawing-room. Flora Krauss never argued—possibly this was one phase of her indolent nature. She merely assumed an immovable, negative attitude and met every suggestion with a smile and a shake of the head.

Sophy had no desire to leave Rangoon; she protested that she had only been out seven months and really required no change; but her appeal was silenced by the voice of authority.

"My dear child," said her aunt, "you've no idea what you would be like in three months' time. I am hardened and acclimatised, but your nice complexion would soon take leave, never to return. You would be covered with hideous spots and you would probably get fever. Mrs. Gregory is most anxious for your company and *I* am equally anxious for your departure. You will have a very good time up at May Myo and go you must!"

Sophy had no alternative and was compelled to obey orders.

"I shall miss you most dreadfully, my dear," said her aunt; "it is so nice to have you flitting about the house, not to speak of your vivacious company and delicious music. Your music is really wonderful; it seems to exorcise an evil spirit that gives me no peace."

"Oh, Aunt Flora," expostulated the girl, "how can you say such things? Surely you don't believe in evil spirits?"

"But, my dear child, how can I help it when I live in a country where millions of people worship and fear them?"

"Those are only ignorant natives; you would not allow their superstitions to affect you."

"Well, at any rate, your playing uplifts and soothes me; I can't imagine how you inherited this gift; your mother was not particularly musical, nor was I. I recollect my misery as a girl in struggling through 'The Harmonious Blacksmith,' and I never remember hearing that we had any musical genius in the family. Of course, the natives here would find an easy answer and say that you had been a great musician in another incarnation."

On hearing this solemn explanation Sophy burst into peals of laughter, at which rejoinder Mrs. Krauss looked both shocked and hurt and, after an awkward silence, the subject dropped.

And so, in spite of Sophy's efforts to remain in Rangoon, she was figuratively driven into the arms of Mrs. Gregory. The Maitlands and the Pomeroy's had also invited her to May Myo, but Mrs. Gregory overbore all competition and insisted that she must have Sophy as a companion to share her bungalow and accompany her songs, and departed in triumph, carrying the girl with her.

Mrs. Krauss attended her niece to the railway station, loaded her with books and fruit and saw her off with urgent and affectionate injunctions and many kisses. During the last few months Mrs. Krauss appeared to have become a transformed person; she went about continually in her smart new car, was seen at dances, little dinners and the theatre, and had recovered a faint shadow of her former good looks and something of her old animation.

Herr Krauss naturally attributed this change to her niece, and showed his gratitude to Sophy in various abrupt ways, suffering her to mix with the English society without sneers or interference. Sophy did not now see so much of the German community; she was aware that Mrs. Muller and others no longer approved of her, and Frau Wurm had said openly, "that although the girl had done her best to learn how to keep a house, her heart had never been in the business and she was not *schwärmerisch* to German people or German ways!"

Whilst Sophy Leigh had been enjoying herself at May Myo, among the green hills and soft airs of Upper Burma, Shafto, in the oppressive sultry heat, had had some pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

The pleasant experience was that his salary had been raised. Now he could afford to buy another horse and keep a *tum-tum*; with a heavier purse he was able to send home some well-chosen and handsome presents—a China crêpe shawl for Mrs. Malone, ivory carvings to the Tebbs, an Indian *chuddah* to his aunt and a heavy gold bangle for each of the girls. Unfortunately one gift to "Monte Carlo" had a dire and unexpected result—it brought him a deluge of letters from Cossie, who was rapturous over his promotion and "his beautiful, exquisite, *darling* gift," which she wore on her arm day and night!

"I felt sure you had *not* forgotten me," was her ominous opening; "you could not; there is a secret telepathy between us, and I am *always* thinking of you, dear old boy."

Several mails later there arrived a letter from Sandy, the contents of which almost made his cousin's hair stand on end. After one or two preliminary sentences, Shafto's eyes fell upon these lines:

"By this you will have heard that our Cossie will be afloat; she has been very restless and unsettled for a long time—almost ever since you left; nothing seems to please her. First she took up nursing and soon dropped that; then she took up typing and soon dropped that. At last she has got the wish of her life, which is to go abroad. She has answered an advertisement and secured a top-hole situation, as lady nurse in Rangoon. She starts in ten days in the ship that took you out—the *Blankshire*, and is so busy and excited that she is nearly off her nut."

The same post delivered a thick letter from Cossie, which her ungrateful and distracted relative tore up unread. Already, in his mind's eye, Shafto could see Cossie permanently established in Rangoon, informing everyone that she was his cousin, bombarding him with *chits*, worrying him for visits, treats and attentions. Heaven be praised! neither of his horses carried a lady, it was as much as he could do to ride them himself. He could not possibly leave Rangoon and so effect his escape; he was nailed down to his work, not like his lucky chums, whose business duties occasionally carried them up the country. His job was confined to Rangoon itself, for eight hours a day.

The prospect filled him with despair; life would become intolerable. A vivid imagination painted the picture of Cossie, helpless and plaintive, appealing for information and advice, coming to him to patch up disputes between her and her employer, to take her on the lakes, to the gymkhana, or the theatre on her days out. And what would Sophy Leigh think when she saw him accompanied by Mrs. So-and-So's European nurse? Putting her absurd partiality for him on one side, Cossie in her normal condition was a good-natured, amiable creature, and, of course, when she arrived in Burma he, as her only relative in the country, would be bound to look after her and show her attention; probably all the world would believe that they were engaged! Unchivalrous as was the idea, he had a hateful conviction that it would not be Cossie's fault if they did not arrive at that conclusion.

With this sword of Damocles hanging over his head, and the object of his apprehension being daily brought nearer and yet nearer, Shafto was and looked abjectly miserable. FitzGerald rallied him boisterously on his glum appearance, and on being "off his feed."

"What on earth ails you?"

To his well-intended queries he invariably received the one brief unsatisfactory answer: "Nothing."

Roscoe, too, endeavoured to puzzle out the mystery. It was not the lack of money—Shafto was prompt in his payments; *his* door was never haunted by bill-collectors, nor had he got into hot water in his office; both his horses were sound. What could it be?

In due course the *Blankshire* was signalled and arrived, and the usual

mob of people swarmed aboard to meet their friends. Among these, carrying a heavy heart, was Shafto; after all, he realised that he must do the right thing and go to receive his cousin; but, amazing to relate, there was no Miss Larcher among the passengers! On inquiry he was presented to an excited lady, who had brought her all the way from Tilbury, filling the situation of lady nurse. Miss Larcher had not completed the voyage, but had landed at Colombo! On hearing of his relationship to her late employé, Mrs. Jones, a hot-tempered matron, fell figuratively tooth and nail upon defenceless Shafto. In a series of breathless sentences she assured him that "his cousin, Miss Larcher, was no better than an adventuress, and had behaved in the most dishonest and scandalous manner."

After a moment—to recover her breath—she went on in gasps:

"I took her on the recommendation of a mutual acquaintance, and at our interview she appeared quite all right and most anxious to please; but once on board ship, with her passage paid, I soon discovered that she was not anxious to please *me*, but any and every unmarried man she could come across! Such a shameless and outrageous flirt I *never* saw. As to her duties, she was absolutely *useless*; I don't believe she had ever washed or dressed a child in her life before she came to me; she did nothing but dress herself and sit about the deck with men, leaving me to do her work. When I spoke to her she simply laughed in my face; the children couldn't endure her and screamed whenever she came near them. So I was obliged to do nursemaid whilst she danced and amused herself—and all at my expense. She made no secret of the fact that she was on the look out for a husband; and she has gained her end—for she is married."

"Married!" repeated Shafto. The news was too good to be true.

"Well, at least they landed at Colombo with that intention," announced the lady sourly; "she and a coffee planter, a widower, with a touch of black blood. They were going up country to his estate, and she declared that she was about to have the time of her life—but I doubt it."

This piece of news was an unspeakable relief to Shafto. The hypocrite listened to the long list of his cousin's enormities with a downcast and apologetic air, whilst all the time he could have shouted for joy. When at last he was permitted an opportunity of speaking, he assured the angry matron that he much deplored Miss Larcher's shortcomings. His sympathy even took a practical form, for he generously offered to refund Mrs. Jones half of Miss Larcher's passage money; this the lady vouchsafed to receive and subsequently always spoke of young Shafto as "a remarkably nice, gentlemanly fellow." Little did she suspect that the cheque so punctually lodged at her banker's was in the form of a heartfelt thank-offering—the price of a young man's peace!

CHAPTER XXIII

MYSTERY AND SUSPICION

One evening after dinner the four chums—unusual circumstance—were all present; MacNab, seated at the big round table, engaged in putting up a remarkably neat parcel, the others lounging at ease, smoking and talking.

"Bedad, I know the address of that!" drawled FitzGerald from his long cane chair, "St. Andrew's Lodge, Crieff, Perthshire, N.B. Ahem—presents endear absents."

"N.B.," retorted MacNab, "*you* don't send many!"

"Why, man alive, it's all I can do to keep myself in boots! And you're wrong about presents, for I did send my sister a ruby ring out of 'Top-Note's' winnings. Things are getting so bad with me financially"—here he struck a match and then went on—"that some day I'll be obliged to make a present of myself!"

Shafto, who was reading, looked up over the edge of his book and said: "How do you know you won't be declined with thanks?"

"I will take an observation and make sure, me boy—I'm not a confounded fool. Talking of fools—what about your crazy expedition tomorrow? I say," addressing himself particularly to Roscoe and MacNab, "did you know that this fellow is going out tiger shooting? Tiger shooting, if you please! Tiger shooting is to be his way of spending the Sabbath; what do you say to *that*, my stiff-necked Presbyterian?"

"Tiger shooting where?" inquired Roscoe.

"Somewhere near Elephant Point, with Stafford of the Buffers," replied Shafto. "We have got leave, a pass and two trackers."

"You'll find it a pretty expensive business," remarked the canny Scotsman.

"Worse than that!" supplemented Roscoe. "There will be no bag, no tiger skin, claws, whiskers, or fat. As long as I've been in Rangoon—and that's some years—I've been hearing of this same tiger. Dozens of parties have been out after him, with no success; he is still living on his reputation—just a myth and a fortune to the trappers. Lower Burma is much too wet a district for the great cat tribe."

"But I am told that there are plenty of elephants and tigers in this district," argued Shafto. "And what about the tiger that was actually crawling on the Pagoda not so very long ago! Why, hundreds of people saw the brute; it was shot by a fellow called Bacon."

As this was a hard and unanswerable fact Roscoe was for the moment silenced. After a short pause he continued:

"All the same, I don't believe in the Elephant Point tiger; the other was no doubt a pious beast—who came from Chin Hills to make a pilgrimage."

"You'll have a fine, rough journey, me boy," said FitzGerald; "nasty deep swamps, terrible thorn thickets, grass ten foot high—it wouldn't be *my* idea of pleasure."

"No," retorted Shafto, "tiger shooting and turkey-trotting are widely apart."

"But look here," exclaimed FitzGerald, as if struck by a thought and now sitting bolt upright. "Mind you keep your eyes skinned and your ears pricked when you are down there," and he threw his friend a significant glance; "you never know your luck, and you might happen on valuable *kubber*—and start some rare sort of game."

FitzGerald's warning was amply justified; the tiger-shooting expedition proved a much rougher business than the sportsmen had anticipated. Once they quitted the roads and foot-path, vegetation became rank and overpowering and in places impassable. Swampy ground, dense thorn thickets and elephant grass made progress enormously difficult—the jungle guards well its many secrets and is full of dangers to mankind.

It was a bright moonlight night when Shafto and his companions alighted at the selected area and tossed for posts. These were at a considerable distance apart, each in a tree, over a "tie-up"—which, on this occasion, happened to be a goat.

The hours dragged along slowly; Shafto, doubled up in a cramped position on a *machan*, felt painfully stiff and was obliged to deny himself the comfort of a cigarette. There was no sound beyond the bleat of the victim—unwittingly summoning its executioner, the buzz of myriads of insects, the bass booming of frogs and the stealthy, mysterious

movements of night birds and small animals. Then by degrees the moon waned and the stars faded—though the sky was still light. It was about three o'clock in the morning and Shafto was beginning to agree with Roscoe respecting the tiger myth and to feel uncommonly drowsy, when his ear was struck by a far-away sound, entirely distinct from buzzing insects or booming frogs.

The spot which had been thoughtfully selected by the trapper, was within a few hundred yards of a small cove, chosen as an inviting place for the tiger to come and slake his thirst. The distant sound came from this direction and, by degrees, a faint but definite pulsation grew more audible and distinct, and finally resolved itself, into the steady throbbing of a motor-launch. It was approaching.

Then from the back of Shafto's mind he dragged out a memory of FitzGerald's mention of a broken-down petrol boat. Here was probably the very one—by no means a derelict; on the contrary, a fast traveller. For a moment he was startled, then promptly made up his mind. This was a chance, perhaps, to secure some really valuable *kubber*. More than once he had heard it rumoured that, in these distant creeks and bays, some of the smugglers had discharged their valuable cargo. Well, if the cargo was now about to be landed, here was his opportunity! As the bleating of the goat would undoubtedly give him away, he must get rid of the animal immediately, so he quickly shinned down the tree and commanded the trapper to remove it.

"Tiger not coming to-night," he explained to the astonished Burman, who rejoined:

"Tiger coming soon, soon, now; after the waning of the moon."

"Oh well, never mind," said Shafto impatiently, "you take away the goat. Look sharp—take him quickly, quickly and *keep* him."

This was an extraordinary *thakin*, who, at the very climax of the tiger hour, climbed out of the *machan* and liberated the bait! Certainly these English folk were mad.

"You go towards the camp," he ordered, "and take my gun."

The Burman, still completely bewildered, obeyed; he could not understand the situation, but he felt bound to do what he was told, and presently he disappeared, moving with obvious reluctance, leading the goat and carrying gun and cartridges. His employer did not immediately follow, but remained for a considerable time motionless—listening. The pulsation had almost ceased—evidently the motor-boat had arrived at her destination, which was unfortunately not in his immediate vicinity. He crept stealthily along in the direction of the possible anchorage, fighting his way through roots and undergrowth; it was all of no use—a barrier of morass and elephant grass proved absolutely impassable, so he turned back towards his camp, pausing now and then to listen. He could make out voices—one in an authoritative key summoning "Mung Li." Well, he had at least discovered something definite—he was in the vicinity of smugglers. In a short time he discovered something else; through a breach in the undergrowth he caught a glimpse of a Burman leading a stout, grey pony carrying a European saddle and—unless his eyes entirely deceived him—the animal was Krauss's well-known weight carrier, "Dacoit."

Two evenings later, at the Gymkhana Club, Krauss lounged up to Shafto, who happened to be looking on at a billiard match. Taking a cigar out of his mouth he astonished him by saying:

"Well, so you had no luck after that tiger down the river!"

This was taking the bull by the horns indeed. "No," replied Shafto, "but Stafford saw him and got a shot. He is there all right."

"Perhaps you will have another try?" suggested Krauss.

"Perhaps so—but not for some time."

"Too much work, eh? Gregory is doing a big trade just now."

"Pretty well," rejoined Shafto, who was secretly surprised that Krauss should accost and talk to him in this way. Hitherto their acquaintance had been slight and, when he had been to tea at "Heidelberg," the master of the house was invariably absent.

"How is Mrs. Krauss? I hope she is better."

"No, she has been pretty bad the last few weeks—her niece is coming home in a day or two and that will cheer her up." As he concluded he gave Shafto a nod and a curious look and then, with a sort of elephantine waddle, lounged away.

So far Shafto had never spoken of his *kubber*; even with the evidence of his own eyes he shrank from suspecting anyone connected with Sophy Leigh; but links were joined in spite of his reluctance to face facts. How

could Krauss have known that he had gone tiger shooting? Surely the affairs of an insignificant fellow like himself never crossed the mental horizon of such a big and busy person as Karl Krauss? There was no doubt that the animal he had seen near Elephant Point bore a suspicious resemblance to Krauss's weight-carrying grey pony! What was "Dacoit" doing in the jungle, thirty miles from Rangoon? He could make a pretty good guess. Krauss had motored down, sent the animal on ahead, and ridden through the grass and jungle in order to superintend the landing.

Could this be a fact? Or was the whole thing a mere coincidence? Was he obsessed by FitzGerald and suspecting an honest man, who might have been shooting in the swamps—why not?

CHAPTER XXIV

SENTENCE OF DEATH

When Sophy Leigh returned from May Myo she had half expected her aunt to meet her at the station, and was much concerned to discover, when she arrived home, that Mrs. Krauss had suffered a serious collapse, had not been out of the house for weeks, but was confined to her own apartments, nursed and attended by the ever-faithful Lily. Her condition seemed as serious as when Sophy had arrived from England, ten months previously, she found the patient propped up among her pillows, weak, apathetic, and terribly wasted. She looked dreadfully ill and her whole appearance was unkempt and strange.

"Oh, my dear Aunt Flora," said Sophy kneeling beside her and taking her limp hand, "why did you not let me know? *Why* did you not wire for me? I would have come back at once."

"No, no, no!" murmured Mrs. Krauss as she rolled her head slowly from side to side and closed her drowsy, dark eyes.

"But yes, yes, yes! and when you wrote to me you never said one word about being ill—though I might have suspected it. Your writing was so feeble—so shockingly shaky. How long has my aunt been like this?" she asked, appealing to Lily.

"About three—four weeks," replied the pouter pigeon, with calm unconcern; "ever since Mr. Krauss went to Singapore."

"Most of her friends have been away and my aunt has had no one to look after her, except you? Did the German ladies come to see her?"

"They did—yes, three, four times; asking plenty questions. Mem-sahib would not receive them, she liking only be left alone."

To-day Mrs. Krauss appeared almost unconscious of Sophy's presence and to be sunken in a sort of stupor.

As soon as Herr Krauss arrived home Sophy accosted him and deplored her aunt's condition.

"If you had only sent me a line I would have been here the next day."

"Oh yes, of course," he acquiesced brusquely. "She wanted you to have a good time. I have been away, too. Now that you are here I expect she will pick up, same as before."

"But do you not think that Aunt Flora should see a doctor? The pain is so agonising that she seems quite stupid and dazed!"

"A doctor—no," he replied; "she would not allow him inside the compound; her complaint comes and goes after the manner of its kind; just now it has been troublesome and this damp climate is bad for neuralgia. Your aunt refuses to leave home, and so there it is! Lily knows the remedies; she has been with us for years, and I have every confidence in her nursing."

After this Sophy realised that there was nothing more to be said or done, but patiently to await her aunt's recovery.

It was now the cool weather and, by degrees, Mrs. Krauss was able to leave her bed and repose in a long chair in the veranda. As her husband predicted, Sophy's company was a wonderful help towards her convalescence. She liked to hear all the news from May Myo about the people, their clothes, their doings and their gaieties. She even roused herself to play patience and picquet, to read, to enjoy Sophy's music, but she showed no inclination to emerge into society, or receive friends.

"You must go about and amuse yourself, Sophy; I do not feel up to motoring round, as I did last winter, but I won't keep you cooped up here with me—then we should have, not one invalid, but two. You must enjoy your young days, mix with other young people, dance and ride, bring me the gossip and tell me all your love affairs, honour bright! Mrs. Gregory has promised to chaperon you until I am better."

"No, indeed, Aunt Flora, I'd much rather stay with you," she protested. "I could not enjoy myself half so much if you are not with me. Don't you remember how nice it was last year, talking over everything together after dances and the theatre? I will play to you and read aloud, and if I ride in the morning, that will be as much outing as I shall require."

But in spite of Sophy's anxious protestations, once more her aunt consigned her to the charge of Mrs. Gregory, who, delighted in the responsibility, escorted her to dances and tennis parties, rode with her, and proved, in spite of the disparity in their years, a dear and congenial friend.

When at home Sophy would sit with her relative in her darkened room,

which always seemed to hold a peculiar and distinctive atmosphere, resembling that of a chemist's shop. She brought her all the news that she thought would interest or amuse her, read the letters from home, tempted her to drive out, and read her new novels; but in these days Aunt Flora seemed to take but a languid interest in life, and her recovery was strangely tardy and fitful. On some days she was better, on others worse. Occasionally she would crawl out to the motor, or appear at dinner, but she looked dreadfully ill, her face so yellow and wrinkled, her whole appearance unkempt and peculiar. She was also abstracted and odd in her manner, at times even a little incoherent; and her eyes had a glazed, fixed expression. Sometimes as Sophy sat in the darkened room her mind was burdened with vague anxieties; she recalled the looks and questions of Frau Wurm; could it be altogether neuralgia that brought her aunt to such a pass? And if not, what? A casual eye might suppose that the invalid was under the influence of drink, but this was not the case. Mrs. Krauss was exceedingly temperate—her favourite stimulant was strong black coffee.

The rains were over and Rangoon was unusually full, and the committee of the Pegu Club decided to give a dance. This dance was to be the cheeriest of the season, the secretary had exerted himself to the utmost, and the great ballroom looked particularly well, all colour and glow, with splashes of bright shades, a profusion of palms and flowers, and a reckless prodigality of electric light. Practically everyone was present, even Herr Krauss, who, on this supreme occasion, had volunteered to chaperon his niece. The band was playing the newest waltzes and a varied assortment of Rangoon residents swung over the polished floor—men well known and otherwise, stout girls of German ancestry, daughters of judges, and soldiers, princesses of the Burmese dynasty, and dark-eyed maidens of Anglo-India.

Shafto had only succeeded in securing two dances with Sophy Leigh—besides the privilege of conducting her to supper. They were resting in the veranda, after a long, exhausting waltz, watching the crowd pour out of the ballroom; among others they noticed, approaching them, Mr. FitzGerald and his partner, Miss Fuchsia Bliss, a little frail American, who had dropped out of a touring party from the Philippines, and since then, as she expressed it, "had been staying around in Rangoon," first at the Lieutenant-Governor's, next at the Pomeroy's, now, with a slight descent in the scale of precedence, with the Gregorys. She had struck up a demonstrative but sincere friendship with Sophy Leigh and stood in the forefront of her admirers.

Fuchsia Bliss was an orphan, absolutely independent in every sense of the word, who looked considerably younger than her real age, and appeared so small and so fragile that, like thistledown, she might almost be blown away. Nevertheless, she was anything but light, in either head or purse. Fuchsia was not pretty; indeed, to be honest, was barely good-looking. Her complexion was colourless, her thick hair a dull, ashen shade, her eyes, though remarkably lively, were much too small, her chin, on the other hand, was much too long. Beautifully marked brows, white teeth, and a fairy figure, were her assets; and, as she herself said, "she had plenty of snap!" Miss Bliss was uncommonly shrewd and vivacious. Her friends (these were many) were somewhat afraid of Fuchsia's plain speaking (her thoughts were too close to her tongue); she professed to be enormously interested in Burma and found it such a quaint old country, declared that the pagodas were "too sweet for words," and the Burmese women "just the dearest, daintiest, best tricked out, little talking dolls!"

(A cynical critic might have compared Miss Fuchsia herself to a "talking doll.")

"America," she announced, "was a brand-new nation, bubbling over with energy and vim, whilst this drowsy old Eastern land was most deliciously restful and ancient—it made a nice change."

Down at the bottom of a good-sized heart Miss Fuchsia was aware that it was not altogether an admiration for the East which detained her lingering in Burma. For the first time in her life the pale-faced heiress was seriously interested in one of the other sex. This fortunate man happened to be Patrick FitzGerald, of the Burmese Police; a fellow without a penny beyond his pay, but well set up, self-possessed, and handsome; a capital partner, a congenial spirit, and a complete contrast to herself.

The couple now approached Shafto and his companion, FitzGerald, rather warm, mopping his good-looking face, Miss Bliss, tripping airily beside him, in an exquisite green toilet, still—as always—talking.

"Only think—he has got to go!" she announced with a dramatic

gesture, halting in front of Sophy as she spoke. "Isn't it too—too awfully provoking? He has been sent for, right now in the middle of the ball—engaged to me for two more waltzes, supper and an extra, and here am I, side-tracked!"

"A true bill—I am off," said FitzGerald, with a significant glance at Shafto; "I leave Miss Bliss and my reputation in your hands."

"Miss Bliss can take good care of herself," she announced, sitting down.

"No doubt of that," assented Shafto; "all the same, Miss Leigh and I will attend Miss Bliss to supper."

"No, no," she protested, "I have planned to take in Mr. Gregory."

"That is if you can get hold of him," argued her late partner; "he is playing bridge."

"Oh well, anyway, *I* shan't go begging!" said Fuchsia, leaning back on the lounge and crossing her tiny, exquisitely shod feet.

"But whoever dreamt of that?" exclaimed Shafto. "And here by great good luck comes Gregory. I say, he looks as if his last partner had gone No Trumps on a Yarborough!"

Almost before he had joined them the police officer disappeared, and the party adjourned to the supper-room, where they found places at the same round table as Mrs. Pomeroy and Herr Bernhard. Herr Krauss, a ponderous free lance, who was completely detached, joined the circle uninvited, and pushed his huge person into an empty chair, next to Miss Bliss. The soup, hot quails, and champagne were above criticism. Miss Bliss, as usual, did most of the talking and entertained the company.

"What a difference there is between our dancing and the native performance," she remarked. "Our tangos and turkey-trotting are just an amusement, ending in a feast, whilst their diversion is mostly prayers, intoning, gongs, and bells, burning candles and telling beads. The Burmese seem to be always thinking of their souls; Oriental nations beat us at religion."

"Religion, such as it is!" rejoined Bernhard with a sneer. "After all, what does it amount to with them but the fear of evil spirits and the propitiation of *nats* and demons? Crowds go to the Pagoda and offer flowers, prayers and candles, yet all the time their faith is not in Buddha, but in devils. They cover up their pillars and offer sacrifices to the *nats*, build them nice little houses, make them flattering speeches, and look for a return in the shape of a piece of luck! Buddhism is merely a philosophy—not a religion," he concluded sententiously.

"Well, there is one item in their faith which I admire," said Shafto; "they have no fear of death—they firmly believe that we shall pass into another existence, and how we fare in the next world depends on our good or evil deeds in this."

"Surely that is an ordinary point of view," said Fuchsia, "and talking of evil deeds, such as big and little lies—murder—robbery—fraud, does anyone think there is *real* harm in smuggling? No one would call that an evil deed, although it is punishable by law. I must confess that it appeals to me enormously; it's like a game, a sort of hide and seek. If I only had an opening, I feel confident that it is *in* me to become a most accomplished professional! There is no injury to anyone, and it must be so exciting, and if you bring it off, oh, what a triumph! I did envy a woman I came across with from France. She landed a twenty-thousand pearl necklace in a hair-pad."

"You needn't go far for smuggling—there's plenty of it in this country," said Mrs. Pomeroy, in her slow, decided manner. "My husband says it is on the increase, and is a most serious question—a matter of vital concern."

"Increase!" echoed Krauss. "No, no, my dear lady, that is nonsense; don't you believe it. Smuggling isn't worth while in Burma—it couldn't pay."

"Oh, but it does exist and it pays hand over fist," argued Shafto. "Why only last week a piano-case full of opium was taken off a Chinese steamer."

"Opium smuggling!" broke in Fuchsia eagerly. "We know all about that in the States. Opium smuggling is frightfully bad in 'Frisco. There are deadly dens in parts of the town, where they say they make away with people."

"And here people make away with themselves," supplemented Shafto, whose thoughts flew to a recent suicide.

"Did any of you ever happen to read a story by Frank Norris about a girl who was lost?" And Fuchsia planted her sharp elbows on the table

and cast an interrogative glance round her audience. "No, I expect not; but it's perfectly true. Then listen," she proceeded with an air of genial narration. "A pretty girl and her fiancé—both from New York—were poking round the sights in 'Frisco and, leaving the rest of their party, pushed on into the worst Chinese quarter, without a guide. It had such a bad name that even the police gave it a wide berth. Well, in they went, these two innocents; it looked quite all right, just the same as other places they had visited, and they found a real dandy tea-house and ordered tea. Whilst they waited a most superior Chinaman appeared and invited the young man to come and inspect a wonderful piece of silk. He said it would not take him a moment to look at, while the young lady was resting; so the young man accepted the invitation, examined the beautiful piece of silk, made an offer for yards and yards, and hurried back, only to find that the girl had disappeared. Her gloves and sunshade were there all right, but she was never seen again, although her people offered an enormous reward, and more or less raised Cain!"

"Oh, that's just a bit of sensational fiction," growled Herr Krauss, "and I dare say brought the author a couple of hundred dollars. They pay high rates for that sort of rubbish in the States."

"I shouldn't be surprised if it couldn't be pretty well matched here," was Shafto's bold declaration. "Not in the way of kidnapping inquisitive young ladies, but there are dens and spiders' webs in Rangoon where people are drawn in like flies—and die like flies."

Krauss threw back his head, gave a loud harsh laugh, and tossed off a tumbler of champagne.

"Young Shafto," he exclaimed, "you *are* a funny fellow!"

"I do believe there is something in what Mr. Shafto says," said Fuchsia in her thin nasal voice. "I was told this as a mighty secret—but of course it's safe here," throwing a complacent glance round the table, "and I'd just like you all to know that the reason Mr. FitzGerald was sent for in such a hurry is that the police have been given the straight tip, and expect to make a real fine haul of smugglers and opium—this very night!"

Herr Krauss glanced quickly at his neighbour, his eyes flickering.

"Mr. FitzGerald," she continued, "said that if he could only get hold of one or two big men who are behind the cocaine and opium trade he'd be doing a service to the world; he is most frightfully keen on catching them."

"Not easy to catch what doesn't exist," declared Herr Krauss in his guttural voice.

"But smuggling does exist—surely you know that, and smuggling on an enormous scale," pronounced Mrs. Pomeroy authoritatively; "there are awful dens off the China bazaar."

"Yes, the place is honeycombed with them," supplemented Shafto.

"Pray, how do you know?" demanded Krauss with asperity.

"Well, since you ask me—I've been in one or two."

"Getting copy for a book, eh? Local colour—and local atmosphere."

"The atmosphere was pretty foul," rejoined Shafto; "I don't attempt to write."

"Not even fiction?"

There was a bitter sneer in Krauss's question.

"No, not even fiction," echoed Shafto stolidly.

"Now, I'll tell you all something that sounds like fiction or a dime novel," volunteered the irrepressible Fuchsia. Then, without a pause, she continued: "Mr. FitzGerald got a note from a broken-down European loafer; a gentleman who had lost every single thing in the wide world—self-respect, money, friends and wits—through drugs and nothing else; he could not keep away from them unless he was chained up, but he wanted to save others from his own wretched fate."

"That was very splendid of the loafer!" remarked Mr. Krauss, and leaning back in his chair he beckoned to a waiter and said: "Boy, champagne!" When the champagne was brought, he said: "Let us all drink the health of this noble loafer, who cannot help himself but helps others. Here's to the benevolent informer! Let us hope he will meet with his reward—even in this life," and he raised a brimming glass.

"I'm afraid there's not much chance of that, poor chap," murmured Shafto, "for if he is a man I know, he is down and under—his case is hopeless."

Mrs. Pomeroy, who had been slowly drawing on her gloves, now pushed back her chair and rose and, with sudden unanimity, the

company broke up and dispersed.

Little did Fuchsia suppose, as she chattered unguardedly and gave away a confidence, that, in doing so, she had signed what was neither more nor less than a sentence of death.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LATE RICHARD ROSCOE

Two days after the ball, as Shafto was passing through the veranda, Roscoe met him, took him by the arm, accompanied him into his room, and solemnly closed the door.

"Anything up?"

"Well, yes, there is," replied Roscoe gravely, "and I thought I'd tell you when we were by ourselves. That cousin of mine, Dirk Roscoe, has been done for. He was found this morning in a back drain, in one of the gullies, with the stab of a *dah* in his back."

"Oh, poor chap!" exclaimed Shafto.

"Well, he hadn't much of a life to lose, had he? However, such as it was, he laid it down for others."

"Then I suppose it was he who put FitzGerald on the track of this splendid haul—six hundred ounces of cocaine?"

"It was—yes, although he knew the risk he ran. He sent FitzGerald a line and warned him that there would be two sampans in Bozo creek; that one sampan would be a decoy, loaded with stones, but that they would find what they wanted in the other, which would attempt to clear off whilst they were examining the dummy. It's a pretty big loss to some people, and cocaine will be scarce for a week or two—and dear."

"It beats me to understand how these beggars manage to find the money?"

"Oh, they prowl round at night and thieve—and are capable of the most daring theft. I've known them steal a whole lot of furniture out of a sitting-room, a man's evening clothes out of his dressing-room—not forgetting his gold watch and chain and even tooth-brush and tumbler. Once they actually had the cheek to take a pony belonging to the Chief Inspector of Police and sell him over at Moulmein. The small fry take taps, pipes, bits of zinc roofing, rope—anything that will bring in a few annas."

"What about your cousin? Tell me more."

"Not much more to tell. He is in the mortuary and, of course, there has been the usual inquest; he will be buried this evening, quite late; FitzGerald and I are going to the funeral."

"I'll come, too, if I may."

"All right, do. Our padre is a brick—he is having a quiet service in the cemetery at ten o'clock; there is a good moon. If it had been a public, daylight affair, lots of questions would have to be asked—and answered."

At ten o'clock the three Englishmen and the chaplain stood round the grave of a man who, within the last few hours, had arrived at the end of a wasted life—a victim to the drug that deals misery and destruction. As the three chums walked away to where their horses awaited them, Roscoe said:

"My cousin Richard, although he looked any age under eighty, was only thirty-five—two years younger than myself."

"Look here, Joe," said FitzGerald, "your cousin was murdered for giving me information. He knew the risk he was running, he knew that there are eyes and ears all over the place, and the chances were ninety to one he would be put out of the way—he hinted as much in his letter. Now then, I'm going to put my back into the business, and if I don't find out something about this cocaine smuggling, I'll—I'll—" he reflected for a moment and added abruptly, "never go to another dance! It's a syndicate who had this crime carried out; they have their hired assassins like the 'Black Hand' in Sicily. Some of the crew are bound to be in Rangoon, for Roscoe's sentence and execution took place within a few hours. Now it is my aim and intention to discover who they are—and to carry war into the enemy's quarter."

"Well, Fitz," said Roscoe, "I know how you love adventure—and the smoke of battle, and I feel fairly confident that you will do your best and, let us hope, storm and shatter the cocaine stronghold."

CHAPTER XXVI

FITZGERALD IMPARTS INFORMATION

Up to the time of the murder of Roscoe, Shafto had kept his experience to himself; even with the evidence of his own eyes he shrank from suspecting anyone connected with Sophy. After all, there were plenty of Shan ponies in Rangoon, and Krauss's inquiry about the tiger might be just a mere coincidence; but now facts were forming up in stern array, despite his reluctance to face them. There was no doubt that Krauss had spies and tools, and if that was his grey pony "Dacoit," what was "Dacoit" doing in the jungle, thirty miles from Rangoon? It was suspiciously strange that, after Miss Bliss's mention of a loafer who had given information—a loafer toasted by Krauss—an individual answering the description had so promptly disappeared. Well now, Sophy or no Sophy, FitzGerald must be told!

Shafto found his opportunity the following night, when he and the police officer had the veranda to themselves. Roscoe, with an actor's unquenchable ardour for the theatre, was patronising a play. The tour of "Charley's Aunt" had reached Rangoon. The MacNab was dining with the Presbyterian minister.

After the table had been cleared and cheroots produced, without any circumlocution or preface, Shafto plunged into his subject and laid his information and suspicions before his friend who, to his amazement, replied:

"Oh well, I've had my own ideas for some time, me boy. I have noticed that Krauss is one of the loudest in crowing whenever we make a haul of contraband; it has struck me that his enthusiasm is a bit overdone. I believe he is in with a pack of swindlers, but has a wonderful knack of safeguarding his own ugly carcass. His wealth is a well-known fact, but its source is distinctly mysterious. He is not like the usual business man, who puts by a few thousands every now and then, made in teak or paddy; Krauss has a share in everything that's any good. Oil, rubies, trams, wolfram, rubber, and so on. The capital he invests in these concerns cannot come from ordinary speculation in rice and teak—so the question is, where does he get it?"

As Shafto made no reply, FitzGerald put down his cheroot, drew his chair closer to the table and, leaning over to his companion, said:

"Look here, me boy, you are a thundering good sort, and I'd like to tell you one or two small things—and give you a bit of advice that may be useful. From what you say, I have no doubt that Krauss suspects that you have seen something of his game—how much he cannot be sure; but one thing is absolutely certain—he won't trust you, and you'll find that, in some way or other, he'll have his knife into Douglas Shafto."

"Same as the late Richard Roscoe?"

"Let us hope he won't feel obliged to take such strong measures; but I wouldn't put it past him to do you a devilish nasty turn."

"This is pleasant but indefinite."

"Well, let me advise you to take cover; do not go about alone after dark, or on foot."

"I never do, except over to the Salters."

"Don't stir, even over to the Salters, or when you do go, take Roscoe; he and Salter are birds of a feather—a couple of philosophers, clever, deeply-read cranks. I shall notify to my men to keep a sharp eye on you."

"So then I'm to be under police protection, am I?"

"I am afraid it will be a distressing necessity; but the fact will naturally be known only to you and me."

"So you honestly believe that Krauss is not on the square?"

FitzGerald nodded and then replied:

"He does not associate with the best German people here—I think they smell a rat; and the English give him a fairly wide berth. His manners are impossible; even in Rangoon money is not everything, and his record is peculiar. He came away from China stony-broke, picked up a few thousands in Singapore and then settled in Rangoon about twelve years ago—and Rangoon has suited him down to the ground. When they first arrived Mrs. Krauss was an extraordinarily handsome woman, popular and lively; could keep a whole dinner-table going and was always splendidly dressed. On the whole, a valuable, but unconscious tool! Latterly her health has failed and she has subsided. Besides his German hangers on, the oddest sort of guests collect at 'Heidelberg,' though you

and I may not meet them—men from Calcutta, the Straits and even China. Not long ago I came across Krauss's brown motor in a block in Phayre Street. I happened to glance inside; there was Krauss himself and two fat natives, one a notorious *budmash*, and I noticed that, after I had passed, a hand *pulled down the blind*. Why? In a place like this, and indeed everywhere, a man is judged by his friends. Krauss tries to keep in with Rangoon society and poses as a brusque, eccentric sort of a fellow, with a rude manner and a good heart. The days of his grand dinner-parties came to an end some time ago. Now the fat grey spider at 'Heidelberg' has to rely more or less on his wife's pretty niece; she is bright and popular and attracts a lot of useful people into his web. To see that girl pouring out tea, or sitting at the piano, making delicious music, who would suppose that 'Heidelberg' was the headquarters of a gang of thieves? Mrs. Krauss is a back number, her health has gone to pieces, and lately I believe she is in a bad way." He paused, and surveying Shafto with half-closed eyes, added:

"I suppose you don't know what her complaint is?"

"Oh, yes—acute neuralgia."

"Acute grandmother!" scoffed FitzGerald. "Guess again!"

"Well—what?"

FitzGerald leant over, took a long breath, and whispered the word "Cocaine."

"Oh, nonsense!" And Shafto burst out laughing. "Why, man, you're mad!"

"Mad—not a bit of it! I happen to know where she gets the stuff and I've known for a good while, Krauss has no idea that his wife drugs; it's all so artfully managed. That Madras ayah is a rare treasure and as cunning as the devil; she ought to be in our Secret Service. I needn't tell you that she is extravagantly paid."

"Well—but, Fitz, I don't believe it; no, and I won't believe it."

"All right, then. Look here, have you never noticed how brilliant and lively Mrs. Krauss is at times, with shining eyes and a colour in her cheeks? Then on other days, if she does appear, she is limp as a wet rag, depressed and old; there is a complete lack of all vital force. Now tell me how you account for that?"

"Her illness," stammered Shafto; "the climate."

"Neither the one nor the other. But bar the cocaine habit, Mrs. Krauss is all right and straight; she has no suspicion of her husband's ill practices, nor he of hers."

"And you suspect both?"

"Why not? Suspicion is part of my trade. I think you and I had better be seeking our beds; I have seen the *chokidar* peering round the corner of the staircase; I don't know what he is up to; he may imagine that we are hatching mischief. I caught his eye when I was whispering just now, and it is more than likely that he has suspicions of us both!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A ROPE TRICK

This conversation with FitzGerald gave his housemate ample food for serious reflection. If Krauss was a deep-dyed scoundrel, and his wife a victim of the cocaine habit, what a home for Sophy! If he could only take her away from it! But what grounds had he for hoping that she would marry him? In spite of their pleasant meetings, their rides and dances, he had never ventured to hint at his real feelings, knowing that he was far from being what is called "an eligible match," and having a surprisingly humble opinion of his own merits. He was now receiving five hundred rupees a month, which, after all, did not go far in expensive Rangoon. Could a man marry on such an income, or on the supposition that what was barely enough for one would be sufficient for two?

As far as he was in a position to judge, Sophy's ideas were not extravagant, and she would be better almost anywhere than in her present abode; but he had not the slightest right to suppose that she cared two pins for him; on the other hand, he had a hateful and well-founded conviction that not a few of the young men among her acquaintances would be glad to claim Miss Leigh as a wife. There were Fotheringay the A.D.C., Gubbins of the Oil Company, and one or two others, fluttering about her and scorching their wings.

After a month of procrastination and delay, the Rangoon Commissariat Department, under an energetic new official, decided to embark a collection of sixty elephants, which had long been awaiting transport from the neighbourhood of Rangoon, to India. Now a large sailing-ship had been chartered to carry this interesting cargo across the Bay of Bengal to Vizagapatam, where they would be scattered to work in all parts of the country.

The sailing-ship was anchored across the river at Dallah, and, in order to reach their destination, the elephants were called upon to swim the Rangoon River—sixty, no fewer, mostly young animals which had been caught and trained, the property of the Indian Government. The move took place upon Thursday (the Garrison holiday), and a large number of people were assembled to witness this unusual departure. The emigrants were ranged up in groups, two huge tuskers appeared to be in charge of the business of embarkation, and, to do them justice, carried it out with conspicuous success, taking it in turn to convoy select parties across the river, here a mile wide. The "personally conducted" were at first delighted to be in the water. They splashed and played about like huge porpoises, and were smacked and kept in order like naughty children by their great tusker nurse, and eventually guided to a landing. Some, on the other hand, did not enjoy the excursion, were alarmed by the force of the current and turned tail. These were chased, vigorously chastised, herded in the way they should go, and escorted to the other side—all save one, which obstinately refused to quit terra firma, and was accordingly fastened to a launch, in order to be towed across; but the powerful and headstrong brute towed the launch inland and, having utterly smashed it and destroyed several bamboo sheds, effected its triumphal escape.

Meanwhile the fifty-nine were assembled at Dallah, patiently awaiting their fate. A number of people had collected on the landing-stage, close to the big ship, to watch her strange cargo being placed on board. The lower hold of this huge four-master had been entirely cleared, and into this receptacle the devoted elephants were lowered by a gigantic steam crane. Meanwhile they were formed up behind a huge shed in order that none should witness the scheme of departure, or the undignified transfer of its companions. A selected victim was coaxed, flattered, caressed, and then marched proudly down the pier between two deceitful and majestic tuskers, a pair of stern old gentlemen that would stand no nonsense; soothed and bribed by a generous supply of sugar-cane, the unsuspecting traveller was halted directly under the crane; a belly-band encircled his enormous waist, and to this was attached a hook; then, at a given signal, the astonished animal was suddenly hoisted into the air. And what a sight! Trunk waving madly, legs wildly reaching for foothold, a helpless and ridiculous monster, endeavouring to clutch the rigging. Presently the frantic passenger was slowly lowered to the hold, where his own beloved mahout and a pile of luscious lucerne awaited his agitated

arrival.

Lookers-on found the spectacle of a helpless elephant struggling in mid-air excessively amusing, and the immediate neighbourhood of the ship was crowded. Here were the Pomeroy's, Maitlands, Morgans, Puffles, Mrs. Gregory, Miss Leigh, and numbers of others, including Shafto, who, much interested in this novel sight, had taken several snapshots. Just as he snapped the last elephant, he felt the sharp jerk of a rope round his ankles, and in another second was swept into the racing Irrawaddy.

As the water surged over his head, the sharp shock and the submersion momentarily took away his breath. Shafto was a strong swimmer, but the current was tremendous and not to be denied; it carried him right out into the middle of the river, spinning him round and round like a leaf in a torrent. He realised his danger and that his lease of life could now be counted by seconds. His thoughts flew straight to Sophy; with a sensation of piercing agony he felt that he would never see her again. By extraordinary good fortune a steam launch which was crossing had noticed the swimmer's dark head, as well as the shouts and the signals from the landing-stage, and promptly overtook him, drew him breathless and half drowned on board, and landed him at Dallah. Shafto had had a miraculous escape, for those who fall into the Irrawaddy rarely emerge alive; his adventure was much discussed and debated for one whole day at Gregory's and elsewhere.

"How on earth did it happen? Lucky you were clear of the ship, otherwise you would have been sucked underneath and never been found," remarked a friend; "we cannot imagine how you tumbled in—did anyone *shove* you?"

"Oh, I just tripped over a rope," he announced, when questioned at the Club; but to FitzGerald he confided the truth—the whole truth:

"I was standing pretty close to the edge of the stage—among a lot of natives, as it happened—taking snapshots of the elephants, when all of a sudden I felt a rope twist round my legs; it gave a sort of sharp pull, and the next moment I was in the water! It's a nasty experience to have the Irrawaddy closing over your head; I have its taste in my mouth still! I'll swear that there were hands at the end of the rope, and that I saw no rope about when I first came on the pier, for I happened to be early—and it was pretty empty. Later, there was a big crowd and a lot of pushing and hustling. I noticed several Chinamen hanging round and pressing together; now that I come to think of it, they surrounded me. The rope was not the usual thick hawser, but something thinner and more flexible—more like whipcord such as a fellow could carry in his pocket."

"What did I tell you?" said FitzGerald, thumping on the table with both his fists. "We must get a move on and try to corner Krauss; that rope was a preliminary experiment, and all but landed you in Kingdom Come!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

MA CHIT

Although Shafto had many acquaintances and continual engagements, he never forgot his first friends, the Salters, and still strolled over of an evening, accompanied by Roscoe, to sit in the veranda, talk, smoke, and listen, until his companions began to discuss such abstract questions as, "What is the real driving force of life?" or to argue on the philosophy of Buddhism, or Herbert Spencer's "Descriptive Sociology" and the "Unknowable."

When conversation turned in this direction Shafto felt entirely out of his element and slipped indoors to play games with Rosetta or her mother. Recently it had struck him that Ma Chit appeared to have become more or less a permanent member of the establishment, being so constantly with her cousin. She took an enthusiastic interest in Rosetta's brick-building, superintended and sharply criticised Mee Lay's games of dominoes, and even suggested herself as a substitute. Burmese dominoes are black, with brass points, and held in the hand like cards. Mrs. Slater, a keen and clever opponent, indignantly refused to relinquish her post to her relative, and was radiant and triumphant when she carried off a stake of eight annas. Shafto would have enjoyed these matches, and this contest of wits and luck, had Ma Chit been elsewhere, instead of leaning on his chair, looking over his hand, laughing, throwing quick glances, and making idiotic remarks. Once he had been not a little startled to find her tiny brown fingers inserted between his collar and his neck! He shook them off impatiently; he hated such practical jokes, and said so in no measured terms.

More than once, he had been solemnly assured, the fascination of this girl's personality worked like a charm, and it had become disagreeably evident that she wished to cast a spell over *him*. How often had her bright black eyes imparted an alluring tale! However, he felt himself well protected by an impenetrable shield on which was inscribed the name of "Sophy," and Ma Chit gracefully posturing with tingling bangles and twittering talk, had no more effect upon her prey than on a stone image. No; although she hung over him, tapped him with too eloquent fingers, whispered jokes in his ear, and filled his nostrils with an exquisite and voluptuous perfume, she was powerless!

One evening he happened to be playing chess with Salter; Roscoe was at *pwe*; Mee Lay was putting Rosetta to bed, but Ma Chit was present, listening, smiling, and smoking her white cheroot. At the conclusion of a close and hard-fought game, in which Shafto was victorious she leant over, gazed into his eyes, and stroked his face with two caressing fingers. As he drew back quickly, she burst out laughing and exclaimed:

"But why are you so shy, dear boy? Always so shy—so odd and so foolish?"

Shafto found the siren undeniably pretty and seductive, but at the same time irrepressible and odious. He hated her catlike litheness, her undulating walk, and the unmistakable invitation of her whole personality.

"Come, Ma Chit, behave yourself!" said her host sternly. "If you can't—you don't come here again."

The beauty received this admonition with a scream of laughter, tossed a flower at Salter, wafted a kiss to his guest, and faded away into the veranda.

By degrees, thanks to his constant encounters with Ma Chit, Shafto avoided the Salters' bungalow, and Roscoe made his visits alone; but as it was not more than three hundred yards from the chummery Shafto had a painful conviction that, when dusk and darkness had fallen, the neighbourhood of his compound was haunted—not by the malignant and resident *nat*, but by the graceful and sinuous figure of a little Burmese girl! Once a stone, to which was attached a paper, was thrown into his room. On it was inscribed in a babu's clerkly hand:

"Do come and talk to Ma Chit."

CHAPTER XXIX

MUNG BAW

Returning one evening from a lively dinner at the "Barn," Shafto was surprised to see a light in his room, and still more surprised to find the *pongye* once again seated on his bed.

"Oh, so you've come back!" he exclaimed aghast, and a shadow of annoyance settled on his face.

"I have so," calmly responded this late visitor; "as I was passing I thought I'd give you a call in. I came down a couple of weeks back—as I have some small business here and wanted to show myself to a doctor. I don't hold with them native medicines and charms, and I'm inclined to a weakness in me inside."

"Why, you look as strong as a horse!" was Shafto's unsympathetic rejoinder, as he sank into a chair and pulled out a cigarette. The *pongye* contributed a special personal atmosphere, composed of turmeric, woollen stuff and some fiercely pungent herb.

"Looks is deceitful, and so is many a fine fellow," observed the *pongye* in a dreamy voice. After this pronouncement he relapsed into a reflective silence—a silence which conveyed the subtle suggestion that the visitor was charged with some weighty mission. At any rate, it was useless for Shafto to think of undressing and going to bed, since his couch was already occupied by the holy man, who appeared to be established for the night.

Interpreting Shafto's envious glance, he said:

"You'll excuse me sitting on the *charpoy*, but I've got entirely out of the use of chairs, and me bones are too stiff to sit doubled up on the floor like a skewered chicken."

"Oh, that's all right," said Shafto, who was very sleepy. "I suppose you have just come from Upper Burma?"

"Yes, that's the part I most belong to and that suits me. I can't do with this soft, wet climate, though I am an Irishman. I'm from Mogok, that's the ruby mine district, but what I like best is the real jungle. Oh, you'd love to see the scenery and to walk through miles and miles of grand trees on the Upper Chindwin; forests blazing with flowers and alive with birds, not to speak of game. Many's the time I've been aching for the hould of a gun, but, of course, it was an evil thought."

"Your religion forbids you to take life?"

"That's true; I've not tasted meat for years, but there's not a word to be said agin fish or an odd egg."

"Tell me something more about your new faith!"

"Well now, let me think," said the *pongye* meditatively. "We have no regular service for marriage or burial, and no preaching. We keep the five great rules—poverty, chastity, honesty, truth, and respect all life. There are two hundred and twenty-seven precepts besides. Most men can say them off out of the big book of the Palamauk, and there are stacks and stacks—thousands of stacks—of sacred writings, but I just stick to the five commandments, the path of virtue and the daily prayers. The singing and chanting is in Pali—a wonderful fine, loud language. Many of the *pongyes* is teachers, for every boy in Burma passes through their hands; but I'm no schoolmaster, though I was once a clerk in the Orderly room. I could not stand the gabble of them scholars, all roaring out the same words at the top of their voices for hours together."

"I can't imagine how you pass your time," remarked Shafto, "or how you stand the idleness—a man like you who were accustomed to an active life."

"Oh, I get through me day all right. In the early morning there's prayers and a small refreshment, and I sit and meditate; the young fellows, like novices, sweep and carry water and put flowers about the Buddha; then we all go with our bowls in our hands, parading through the village, looking neither right nor left, but we get all we want and more—for giving is a great merit. When we return to the *kyoung* we have our big midday meal, and then for a few hours I meditate again. The life suits me. It's a different country from India, with its blazing sun and great bare plains; there the people seldom has a smile on them. Here they are always laughing; here all is green and beautiful, with fine aisy times for flowers and birds and beasts. There's peace and kindness. Oh! it's a fine change from knocking about in barracks and cantonments, drilling and route-marching and sweating your soul out. By the way, have ye the talisman I give you?"

"If you mean the brown stone—yes."

"That stone was slipped into my begging-bowl one day."

"Not much of a find as an eatable!"

"That is so, though according to fairy tales the likes has dropped out of people's mouths before now. Ye may not suspicion the truth, but it's a fine big ruby! I believe it was found stuck in red mud in the ruby district, and someone who had a wish for me dropped it into the *patta*, and I—who have a wish for you—pass it on."

"But if it is so valuable I could not dream of accepting such a gift," protested Shafto. "You will have to take it back—thanks awfully, all the same."

"Oh, ye never rightly know the price of them stones till they are cut; but the knowledgeable man I showed it to said it might be worth a couple of thousand pounds, and I've come to tell ye this—so that ye can turn it into coin—and if ye wanted to get out of Burma, there ye are!"

"That *is* most awfully good of you, but I really could not think of accepting your treasure, or its value in money—and I have no wish to leave Burma, the country suits me all right."

As he ceased speaking Shafto got up, unlocked a leather dispatch box and produced the ruby, which he placed in the large, well-kept hand of the visitor.

"Well, now, I call this entirely too bad!" the latter exclaimed as he turned it over. "An' I need not tell ye that I can make no use of the ruby, being vowed to poverty—which you are not; and I want to offer some small return for what ye did for me last time I was down in Rangoon. I can't think what ails ye to be so stiff-necked; is there nothing at all I can do for ye?"

"Well, Mung Baw, since you put it like that, I believe you could give me what would be far more use than a stone—some valuable help."

"Valuable help!" repeated the *pongye*, adjusting false horn spectacles and staring hard. "Then as far as it's in me power the help of every bone in me body is yours and at your service."

"Thank you. Now, tell me, have you ever heard of the cocaine trade in Burma?"

"Is it cocaine? To be sure! It's playing the mischief in Rangoon and all over the country."

"I want you to lend a hand in stopping it; if we could only discover the headquarters of the trade, it would be worth a thousand rubies."

"I have a sort of notion I could put me finger on a man that runs the concern; ever since he come into Burma he has been pushing the world before him and doing a great business. From my position, being part native, part British, part civilian, and more or less a priest of the country and clever at languages, I've learnt a few things I was never intinded to know."

"Then I expect you have picked up some facts about cocaine smuggling?"

"That's true, though I never let it soak into me mind; but from this out I promise ye I'll meditate upon it."

"If you can help the police to burst up this abominable traffic you will deserve to go to the highest heaven in the Buddhist faith."

"I'll do my best; I can say no fairer. I'm sorry ye won't take the ruby,"—turning it over regretfully. "Maybe your young lady would fancy it? It would look fine in a ring!"

"But I have no young lady, Mung Baw."

"Is that so?" He paused as if to consider the truth of this statement, cleared his throat and went on: "The other day, when I was down by the lake, I saw a young fellow, the very spit of yourself, riding alongside of a mighty pretty girl on a good-looking bay thoroughbred?"

Here he again paused, apparently awaiting a reply, but none being forthcoming, resumed:

"And now, before I go, I want to give ye what ye can't refuse or return—and that's a wise word. It was not entirely the ruby stone as brought me here—it was some loose talk."

"Loose talk, Mung Baw, and you a Buddhist priest! I'm astonished!"

"Yes, talk straight out of Fraser Street, my son. Many of our priests are holy saints; altogether too good to live; with no thought whatever of the world—given over entirely to prayer and self-denial, blameless and without one wicked thought; but there does be others that is totally different. 'Tis the same in a regiment—good soldiers and blackguards. Some of the *pongyes*, when the prayers is done, spend all their days

gossiping, chewing betel nut and raking through bazaar—*mud!*” Then suddenly he leant forward and stared at his companion as if he were searching for something in his face, as he asked: “Do you happen to know a girl called ‘Ma Chit’?”

Shafto moved uneasily in his creaking wicker chair; after a moment’s hesitation he replied:

“Yes, I know her.”

“Don’t let her put the ‘Comether’ on you! These Burmese dolls have a wonderful way with them. She’s a gabby little monkey, and they say she has chucked Bernard and taken a terrible fancy to you! I would be main sorry to see you mixed up with one of these young devils—for I know you are a straight-living gentleman.”

“There is not the smallest chance of my being what you call ‘mixed up’ with any young devil,” said Shafto in a sulky voice. “As for Ma Chit—she is not the sort you suppose.”

“Oh, may be not,” rejoined the *pongye* in a dubious tone. “Still, I know Burma—lock, stock and barrel, and a sight better nor you. Av course, I never spake to a woman and give them all a wide berth—but I cannot keep me ears shut. Listen to me, sir. These young torments have no scruple. Ma Chit is dead set on you, and that’s the pure truth. Now, there’s one thing I ask and beg—never take or smoke a cigarette she might offer.”

“Not likely! I only smoke Egyptians, or a pipe. But tell me—why am I to refuse Ma Chit’s cigarettes?”

“The reason is this, and a good one—these black scorpions employ what they call ‘love charms.’ Oh yes, laugh, laugh, laugh away! But one of these charms would soon make you laugh the wrong side of your mouth. They are deadly, let me tell you; a cigarette loaded with a certain drug has been the ruin of more than one fine young fellow. I disremember the name of the stuff—it begins with an ‘M,’ and is surely made in hell itself, for it drives a man stark mad. Once he smokes it he falls into a pit and is lost for ever, body and soul.”

“Come, I say, isn’t this a bit too thick, Mung Baw?”

“Well, you ask the doctors. There’s a good few cases of lunacy and suicide in this country—all caused by a love charm; so when Ma Chit sidles up, showing her teeth, and offers you a smoke—you will know what to do. Now,” concluded the visitor, scrambling to his feet, “I must be on the move. I am stopping for a while at the big Pongye Kyoung, near the Turtle Tank, and if you should happen to be riding round that way, we might have a talk on this cocaine business. If I am to go into it, neck and crop, I can’t be coming about here—as it would excite suspicion.”

“All right then; I’ll turn up and you will report progress; but how am I to spot you among the crowd of priests?”

“Easy enough!” replied Mung Baw, drawing himself up to his full height; “I’m the tallest *pongye* in Rangoon.”

“Yes, no doubt. Burmese are a bit undersized.”

“But fine, able-bodied fellows. I suppose you’ve seen the wrestlers?”

“Yes. Now, before you go, can I get you a drink or a smoke?”

“Oh, as for a smoke, I’m thinking your tobacco would not be strong enough for me, but I don’t say that I wouldn’t like a drink, although I am a sober man; just the least little taste of whisky and water, as a sort of souvenir of old times. Ye might bring it in here, for I don’t want them native chaps makin’ a scandal about me.”

As soon as the *pongye* had been secretly supplied with a fairly moderate souvenir, he resumed his sandals, picked up his umbrella and begging-bowl and, with a military salute to Shafto, swept down the rickety stairs.

CHAPTER XXX

ENLIGHTENMENT

Miss Fuschia Bliss was still in Rangoon and, as she modestly expressed it, "crawling round, on approval." She had brought letters of introduction to the Lieutenant-Governor, the Pomeroyes, and the Gregorys. Sir Horace and Lady Winter had no young people, so she presently passed on to the Pomeroyes, who in their turn reluctantly yielded their guest to Mrs. Gregory.

Hosts and hostesses were only too glad to secure the company of Miss Bliss, a girl who had seen so many strange countries, and noticed so much with her sharp eyes, that her inferences and original remarks were equally novel and interesting. Fuchsia's society was invigorating, and the American could easily have put in twelve months in Burma if so disposed. But one obstacle—and one only—interposed, and detained her from joining her friends in Cairo. (This is in the strictest confidence.) She was awaiting the moment when that great, big stupid Irishman would speak!

Although Fuchsia looked no more than two- or three-and-twenty, eight-and-twenty summers had passed over her ash-coloured head. She had received an excellent education, had travelled far, and was as experienced and worldly-wise as any matron of fifty. Indeed, in natural wit and the art of putting two and two together, she was considerably ahead of most of her sex.

Mrs. Gregory enjoyed having young people with her, but her mornings were engaged. She had a hand in the principal benevolent societies in the place; was treasurer of this, or secretary of that, apart from her house-keeping and large correspondence, so that she was rarely at liberty before tiffin; therefore Fuchsia had all the forenoon to herself, and spent the time visiting her girl friends or shopping in the bazaar. The heiress had hired a motor, a little two-seater that she could drive, and with respect to locomotion was entirely independent of her hostess. No one in Fuchsia's circle received so many visits as Sophy Leigh; she was fond of Sophy, and frequently turned up at "Heidelberg" to tiffin or to tea, although she did not care about the set of people that she met there—stout German ladies with somewhat aggressive manners, or second-rate women from the fringe of Society. Everyone of these was, in the eyes of the little American democrat, an "Outsider." Fuchsia was fastidious, an aristocrat to her finger-tips, and it was no drawback to Pat FitzGerald that his maternal uncle was an earl.

"How could Sophy tolerate these stupid people," Fuchsia asked herself, "with their sharp, probing questions and heavy jokes? Why did Mrs. Krauss invite them?"

And here she came to yet another question: What was the matter with Mrs. Krauss? There was something strange and mysterious about her ailment; her attacks were so fitful; now she appeared brilliant and vivacious, with gleams of her former great beauty, the gracious and agreeable hostess; again, her condition was that of sheer indifference and semi-torpor. And who was the officious and familiar ayah, her attendant and shadow, an obtrusive creature with bold black eyes and a resolute mouth? Why did she speak so authoritatively to her mistress? Why did she wear such handsome jewellery and expensive silk saris, heavily fringed with gold, and strut about with such an air of importance?

Lily appeared to have enormous influence with Mrs. Krauss—she knew something! She held some secret. This was the conclusion at which Fuchsia the shrewd arrived, after she had paid a good many visits to "Heidelberg."

Fuchsia, with her long chin resting on her hand, set her active brain and cool judgment to work. She recalled a certain scene one evening when she had driven over in her car to take Sophy to the theatre, and was sitting in the veranda half hidden by a screen, awaiting her friend, whilst Mrs. Krauss, lying prone upon the sofa, fanned herself with a languid hand. Presently, from a doorway, Lily noiselessly drifted in. She was amazingly light-footed for her bulk.

"Now, it is nine o'clock," she said, addressing her mistress, "and you have got to go to bed." Her voice was sharp and authoritative. The reply came in a low murmur of expostulation.

"I'm going to the Pagoda to-night," continued Lily, "but you will be all right. As soon as you are undressed you shall have your *dose*."

On hearing this promise Mrs. Krauss furled her fan, rose from the sofa with astonishing alacrity, and followed her ayah as commanded.

Now the question that puzzled Fuchsia was, what was the nature of the dose? It must have been something agreeable, or Mrs. Krauss would not have bounded off the sofa and hurried away—and who would rush for a dose of quinine or even the fashionable petrol? Undoubtedly the dose was a drug—some enervating and insidious drug. This would amply account for the lady's lethargy and languor. The crafty Fuchsia threw out several feelers to her hostess on the subject of "Heidelberg"—she wondered whether anyone shared her suspicions. Certainly Mrs. Gregory did not, but sincerely lamented her neighbour's miserable health, and deplored her obstinacy in remaining season after season in Rangoon.

"It's rather a dull house for poor Sophy," suggested her friend; "when her aunt has one of her bad attacks she sees no visitors for days. Mr. Krauss is absent from morning till night—not that I consider his absence any loss, for I dislike him more than words can express."

"Well, I can't say that I am one of his admirers," admitted Mrs. Gregory; "but I agree with you that Sophy has some long and lonely hours; she can come over here whenever she pleases, and she cannot come too often, for she is a dear girl, and I would be glad to have her altogether. You know she and I were house-mates up at May Myo, and when you live with another person in a small bungalow that is your opportunity to get down to the bed-rock of character."

It was about a week after the elephants had been transported across the river, and Sophy and Fuchsia were sitting in the latter's bedroom at the "Barn." Sophy was altering a hat for her companion; she was remarkably clever in this line, and a surprising quantity of her friends' millinery had passed through her fingers.

"Mr. Shafto had a narrow squeak this day week," remarked Fuchsia, who was lounging in a chair, doing nothing. "Did you hear someone say that he was *pushed* in?"

"Oh, no! By accident—or on purpose?"

"Whichever you please; the result was the same." Then, after a considerable pause, she added significantly:

"Perhaps he knows too much."

"Too much of what?" asked Sophy, looking up.

"Oh, there are many secrets in Rangoon," said Fuchsia, nodding her head; "I have grasped that, although I have only been here two months, and you a whole year. Have you never noticed anything? Have you no suspicions about people?"

"No—not of anything that matters. I suspect that the eldest Miss Wiggan rouges and darkens her eyebrows, that Lady Puffle wears a wig, and that the Grahams are thoroughly sick of their paying guest. But you are ten times cleverer than I am, Fuchsia, and, according to Mr. Gregory, singularly intelligent and acute."

"Acute—rubbish!" Fuchsia dismissed the idea with a gesture of her tiny hand. "I'm not thinking of wigs, or paint, or such piffle. Say, have you never heard of the cocaine business?"

"Oh, yes; Mr. Shafto is tremendously keen on the subject."

"Pat FitzGerald is mad about it, too, and is having a great big try to rope in the boss smugglers. He has told me the most terrible tales. Once the drug—it's cocaine and morphia mixed—gets a fast hold of a man, or woman, he or she is doomed!"

"Oh, Fuchsia, surely not so bad as that!"

"It's true; the poor thief to get a few annas to spend in the dens; the rich and educated buy it by stealth, and absorb it at home in secret."

"What are the symptoms?" inquired Sophy. "Have you ever seen anyone who took those drugs?"

"Well, I could not say," she answered evasively; "but I am aware that the symptoms are unaccountable drowsiness and lethargy, followed by a deathlike sleep, and, they say, the most *heavenly* dreams. Later, the dreamer wakes up, haggard, feverish, and miserable; the skin has a dried, shrunken look. And you can always tell a drug-taker by the eyes; the pupil is either as small as a pin's point or else enormously enlarged."

Fuchsia glanced sharply at Sophy, who was carefully manipulating a large bow.

Was she recalling a domestic picture? Did any suspicion sink into her simple mind? If such was the case the girl gave no sign.

"These drug-maniacs' lives are a real burden," continued Fuchsia; "they become indolent and slovenly; all they want in the whole world is

more, and more, and more—cocaine. The effect on some is to clear and stimulate the brain and, for a short time, they seem superhuman; but soon this marvellous illumination that has flared up dies down like a fire of straw, and leaves them nothing but the cold ashes.”

“Fuchsia,” said her companion, suddenly raising her head and gazing at her steadily, “I believe you are thinking of someone.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Tell me who it is.”

But Fuchsia merely looked down on the ground and maintained an unusual silence.

“Do you know anyone that the cap fits?” persisted Sophy. Then, with a quick movement, she put the hat aside and, confronting her companion, said, “Surely—surely, you don’t mean *Aunt Flora*?”

Fuchsia’s reply was a slow, deliberate nod.

“Oh, Fuchsia, this is too dreadful—how can you? Tell me—why you have such a hideous suspicion?”

“All right then, I will,” and Fuchsia sat bolt upright. “I’m older than you are, and have knocked about the world a bit, and I can’t help seeing things that are thrust under my nose and drawing an inference. I must tell you that my grandfather was a notable lawyer, and who knows but that a scrap of his mantle may not have descended upon me! Now to answer your question right away—you will admit that pretty often your aunt is dressed like a last year’s scarecrow; that she is drowsy, stupefied, and generally inaccessible. At another time she is real smart and vivacious, and puts other women in the shade. Then suddenly she disappears, shuts herself up along with Lily ayah, and not a soul may approach her—no, not even you. Undoubtedly Lily provides the drug and is handsomely paid. I ask you to look at her jewels and her diamond nose-ring. Your aunt refuses to see a doctor, for a doctor would diagnose her case the instant he set eyes on her; she also refuses to quit Rangoon, and why? Because she would be torn away from what is killing her inch by inch—and that is cocaine!”

By the time Fuchsia had ended this speech Sophy’s face was colourless, and, as she unconsciously stroked a piece of ribbon between her fingers, many facts in support of Fuchsia’s verdict flocked into her brain and forced themselves upon her comprehension. She had a conviction that what her friend had just told her was neither more nor less than a dreadful truth. An instant of clear vision had come; scales had fallen from her eyes; she recalled those strange excursions to Ah Shee’s stifling den, the purchase of ivories so soon thrown aside; undoubtedly this collection of netsukes was a blind—her aunt’s real object was to procure *drugs*!

“I’m afraid this is an awful blow to you, Sophy,” resumed Fuchsia, “and you will think I had no business to crowd in; but it is best that you should have your eyes opened before it is too late. What do you think yourself, dear?”

There was an agonising pause. Self-deception was no longer possible. With an effort she replied:

“I am afraid what you have told me is terribly true; it was stupid of me not to have guessed at something of the sort. I see things clearly now that you have put them before my eyes. Many puzzles are explained—the reason Aunt Flora keeps herself isolated; the reason why she has no really intimate friends; the reason why she is so untidy in her dress at times and talks so strangely. I suppose Mr. Krauss knows?”

“No!” replied Fuchsia with emphasis, “I have watched him carefully, and I don’t believe he has the faintest suspicion, any more than you had yourself. Your aunt’s ayah, and possibly the cook, are fellow-conspirators, and no doubt the cause of ‘the Missis’s’ long strange illness is common talk in the compound.”

“What can be done to cure it? Oh, Fuchsia, *do* advise me!”

“If I were to offer you one piece of advice you would not take it.”

“Well, at least allow me to hear it.”

“It is to clear out of the house altogether and return home.”

“I shall certainly not take that advice; I was invited to Rangoon to be a companion to Aunt Flora, and the moment that I find she has something frightful to fight against is surely not the time for me to run away and leave her in the lurch. No, I shall stay here and do what I can.”

“Ah, if you only could; but, my dear girl, I’m afraid it is too late. I have been questioning Pat FitzGerald—of course without letting him know that I had any ‘case’ in my mind’s eye. From what I have gathered, Mrs. Krauss has been taking this drug for a long time—and is past all help.”

"Then do you mean, Fuchsia, that I am to sit by, utterly helpless, whilst my aunt slowly puts herself to death?"

"Of course you might try various things. You could make it your business to find out and destroy the hypodermic syringe—or perhaps your aunt takes it in pellets. I should interview the ayah and inform her that you know the nature of her mistress's complaint; threaten that you will tell Mr. Krauss and have her discharged. I expect she gets enormous wages and has feathered her nest handsomely. If you could inveigle your aunt into taking a voyage to Australia, that might be of use. But these are just suggestions; in any way that I can help or back you up I will. All the same, I must return to my first statement, which is, that no matter how you strive, and hope and fear, your effort will come too *late*."

CHAPTER XXXI

SEEING IS BELIEVING

The recent enlightenment had given Sophy a painful shock; thoughts troublesome and insistent buzzed about her all day long and kept her awake at night. At first she had wept and abandoned herself to misery; then she summoned her strength and will and made plans, hoping that she would have the courage to carry them out. She resolved to invade her aunt's bedroom and discover the true state of affairs. During the last two or three days Mrs. Krauss had withdrawn into seclusion, being threatened with one of her so-called "attacks." On these occasions no one but Lily was permitted to cross the threshold of her apartment.

Late on the following evening, when the house was quiet and the servants had departed to their *godowns*, or the bazaar, and the "missy" was supposed to have retired, Sophy slipped on a dressing-gown and soft slippers and made her way into the anteroom, usually occupied in the day-time by her aunt, now dimly illuminated by one electric light. Before the door of the next apartment hung a heavy curtain which, when drawn aside, revealed a thick darkness, a peculiar odour, and the sound of rapid breathing. Sophy groped with her hand along the wall, found the switch, and the room and its contents were instantly revealed. A richly-carved bedstead, a masterpiece of Burmese work, stood in the middle of the floor; at either side were small tables, one heaped with an untidy pile of books and magazines; on the other were bottles, glasses and little boxes. In turning the switch Sophy had lit the bulb which hung directly over Mrs. Krauss's couch, and there, by its pitiless glare, she lay fully exposed, sunken in a sleep resembling a swoon, her splendid black hair lying loose upon the pillows. She looked woefully old and shrunken, her arms, displayed by an open-sleeved silk nightgown, were thin and strangely discoloured.

As Sophy stood surveying the scene the bathroom door opened softly and Lily stepped over the threshold. "Oh, my missy! Whatever are you doing here?" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands.

"I am searching for the hypodermic syringe by which you reduce my aunt," pointing to the bed, "to this horrible condition. Come with me, Lily," leading the way to the outer room. "I have something to say to you."

The ayah's face was almost green; she was shaking all over, but after a moment's hesitation she ultimately obeyed in sullen silence.

"I was not aware until two days ago," resumed Sophy, "that my aunt took drugs and that you supplied them."

"I don't know what the missy is talking about," stammered Lily.

"Oh yes, you understand, and Mr. Krauss will understand. At present he has no idea of my aunt's real ailment."

"Missy going to tell *him*? Well, if I am sent away to Madras and the drug taken from the missis she will soon die—you will see!"

Lily's tone was more triumphant than regretful.

"She will die anyway," rejoined Sophy, "and it were better that she should die in her senses than a drugged victim to cocaine. How long has this been going on?"

"Two, three years—maybe four years."

"Four years!" repeated Sophy incredulously.

"Yes, missis plenty sick—no sleep getting; doctor ordering small dose sleep mixture; missis liking too much, taking more and more, and more."

"And you have kept her supplied—you get it from Ah Shee?"

"If not me, then some other woman. I plenty fond of missis and I kept her secret."

"And, no doubt, she has paid you well."

"Yes, giving money; but too much trouble to get morphia and cocaine and to keep people from talk. One or two times she took too big dose, and then nearly die—but missis will have it all the same—die or no die!"

"Well, now, if I promise you one thing will you promise me another? I will not say a word to Mr. Krauss if you will agree to buy no more cocaine."

"I will promise not to give so much; but no more cocaine taking at all, missis would shrivel up and go out like one bit of paper in a candle! I will do what I can, missy, but missis always taking plenty—two grains is nothing."

"I am astonished," said Sophy, "that my aunt has never been suspected of taking drugs."

"Missy, you never suspect it yourself, and yet you have lived in same house for fifteen months. It was hard to keep it dark, but all the servants know. Of course, that is no matter, and as for the big mem-sahibs, they do not come here *now*."

"It seems so strange," said Sophy, "that my aunt should have sunk into this state—all through one little dose of morphia."

"Well, you see, missy, she was ill; it was in the rains; she was awfulee melancholy and depressed, and she had not much to fill her mind. She did not sew or ride or make music, like you do. Mr. Krauss was away, she was sick and lonely, and so she got the doctor's prescription made up over and over again. If she could have gone to Europe two years ago she might have cured herself of taking the stuff. Two—three times she has begun to stop it, but it was no good. I have talked to her and given her wise words and tried to help her—and *cheat* her, but she always found me out; so all I can do or have done is to stand between her and the other mem-sahibs and hide her—trouble."

The sound of light footsteps stealing across the veranda caused Lily to pause—then she added under her breath:

"It is that Moti ayah, missy; she very cunning, same like little snake and we had better go. I will keep my promise, though it will be plenty bother; I am glad that you know—for it will make business more easy for me now there is one less to hide it from."

Thus the conspirators parted, Sophy having maintained from first to last her mastery of the situation.

It was not long before Mrs. Krauss became aware, more by instinct than actual knowledge, that her niece had discovered the real cause of her illness. One evening as Sophy bent over to kiss her and say good night, she took her hand in both of hers and, with tears trickling down her face, whispered:

"Sophy darling, I've tried—it's no use; whatever happens, keep it from *him!*"

And this was the sole occasion on which Aunt Flora ever alluded to her failing.

CHAPTER XXXII

ON DUTY

The veil that shrouded her aunt's secret being now withdrawn, by a strange paradox a heavy cloud of darkness descended upon Sophy; she seemed to have suddenly passed from a warm glow of sunlight into a cold shadow-land of mystery and fear. Before Herr Krauss and the outer world she still carried a buoyant standard of false high spirits. Her rippling laughter and cheerful repartees were to be heard where young people were assembled at the Gymkhana, or elsewhere; but this Sophy wore another aspect when she sat on duty in her aunt's bedroom, whiling away restlessness and want of sleep with reading and talk, and even cards. Many a time the dawn was breaking before she was at liberty to go to bed. No wonder that she looked pale and fagged—no wonder people gazed at her keenly and inquired about her health. It is not easy even for a girl of two-and-twenty thus to burn the candle at both ends! Riding, dancing, and playing tennis in the daytime, and then sitting up half the night, with a restless and fretful patient. It was *this* Sophy who conferred so long and earnestly with Lily ayah, respecting methods to be adopted, pretences effected, infinitesimal doses exchanged for the usual amount, and the patient craftily beguiled—but it is almost impossible to beguile a person who is suffering from the fierce craving for a drug; and the want of her normal supply soon began to make itself apparent in Mrs. Krauss, and there were not a few exhausting scenes.

Sophy found it necessary to take her ayah Moti into her confidence—a humiliating obligation (as it happened, Moti had always been in the secret), and among the three it was arranged that the mistress of the house was to be watched and never left alone. Occasionally Mrs. Krauss had disputes and dreadful altercations with Lily; but by degrees she appeared to acquiesce; her strength was unequal to a prolonged struggle, and the victim of cocaine would throw herself down on her bed and moan like some dying animal. These moans pierced the heart of her unhappy niece.

Herr Krauss was seldom at home, but, when in residence, his personality obtruded itself in all directions, and it was surprising to Sophy that he never noticed any cause for anxiety in his wife's appearance, she looked so ill and emaciated; it was true that he was preoccupied with important affairs, and that he only saw her of an evening when the lights were shaded. She still appeared in the afternoon and at dinner, particularly if they were alone. When she received visitors, especially her German neighbours, Sophy felt exceedingly uncomfortable. It seemed to her—although this might be imagination—that the ladies exchanged coughs and significant glances, and noticed the trembling hand with which Mrs. Krauss helped herself to cake, her sudden lapses into silence, her abrupt interruptions and cavernous yawns. For years Mrs. Krauss had been at home once a week to her German neighbours. They are a gregarious nation, and the "Kaffee-Gesellschaft"—an afternoon affair, beginning at four o'clock—is greatly beloved by German women. Here they enjoy strong coffee, chocolate flavoured with vanilla and whipped cream, and every description of rich cake. These coffee parties are generally an orgy of scandal, and that at "Heidelberg" was no exception. Whether Mrs. Krauss was well or ill, the guests never failed to arrive. It was a standing institution and enjoyed their approval and countenance.

One bright hope upheld Sophy; Herr Krauss now talked of returning home—that is, to Germany.

"Business is booming, my dear old lady; I shall close down, and we will all depart. You have been in Burma too long, but in six months we shall be aboard the mail boat and watch the gold Pagoda gradually sinking out of sight. I shall take a handsome place in the neighbourhood of Frankfort, and entertain all my good friends. Then we will make music, and eat, drink, and be merry."

His talk was invariably in this hopeful strain; he never exhibited the least anxiety with regard to his wife's illness; it had become her normal condition, and he spoke of it as "that confounded neuralgia" and cursed the Burmese climate.

Sophy listened and marvelled, and yet she herself had been equally dense. Neuralgia covers various infirmities, just as the cloak of charity covers a multitude of sins. She had become excessively sensitive and suspicious, a sort of domestic detective—a post that was by no means to her taste. She had thought long and earnestly over the situation, and

from her reflections emerged the solid word "Duty." It was her duty to fight for her aunt, to contend against the demon drug—and fight she did. Oh, if she could only maintain the struggle until her charge was en route home, what a victory!

Mrs. Krauss never alluded to her illness—a remarkable contrast to many invalids; but one afternoon, as Sophy sat beside her in the dimly-lit lounge, she suddenly broke an unusually long silence:

"Life is very difficult, Sophy, my dear; death is easy, and I shall soon know all about it."

"Oh, Aunt Flo, why do you say this?"

"Because, before long, I shall die. Karl is full of great plans and talks of our wonderful future. I see no future for myself in Europe; I shall remain behind when you and he go down the Irrawaddy—but I am not afraid. On the contrary, I look forward."

"As for death, I hope you are mistaken, Aunt Flora, but I confess that yours is a most enviable frame of mind."

"It is, dear, I suppose, from living so long in the East, I have imbibed some of the people's ideas. In all the world these Burmans cannot be matched for their radiant cheerfulness—they make the best of the present, and, as they say, 'merely die to live again.' There is not one of them who does not believe in and speak of his past life, and look forward to a future existence; this is why they wear such an air of happiness and contentment."

"And do you really believe there is anything in this comfortable faith, Aunt Flora?"

"Yes, my dear, I have a sincere confidence that my soul, not this miserable wicked body, will live again, and be given an opportunity of being better in another world."

"Well, at any rate that is a consoling creed. For my own part, I know little about Buddhism, but I can see that the Burmans are a religious people, much given to worship and offerings, and with a good deal of gaiety in their ceremonies; but, Aunt Flora, although they are delightfully picturesque, and so merry and cheerful, as a mass they are terribly pleasure-loving and lazy; no Burman will work if he can help it; even the women are difficult to get hold of. Mrs. Blake, who is in the District, told me that her ayah, who never exerted herself, had put in for a *year's* holiday and rest."

"But what had that to do with religion, my dear?"

"Just this—that they are as a race too indolent and easy-going to study any big question, or to take the trouble to think for themselves."

"But what about the hundreds and thousands of holy priests who spend all their lives in profound meditation? What do you say to that? Come now."

"I say that they live a life of incorrigible idleness; they have no need to maintain themselves; they just eat, and sit, and muse; everything is supplied to them, including their yellow robe and betel nut. Their religion is selfish."

"Well, well, I'm too stupid to argue, my dear child, my brain is like cotton wool; but I have my hopes, my sure hopes. Karl is different. He is cultured, he reads Marx and Hegel, and says we are like cabbages and have no future; when we go it is as a candle that is blown out. Oh, here are visitors! What a bore! I shall not appear! Run and tell the bearer."

"Oh, but these are your own special old friends, Mrs. Vansittart and Mrs. Dowler. *Do* let them come in; they will amuse you—poor dears, you know they always call after dark."

These visitors, friends of former days, were social derelicts, who had, so to speak, "gone ashore" in Rangoon. One was chained to Burma by dire poverty and a drunken husband; the other, who had been a wealthy woman of considerable local importance, was now a childless widow, supporting herself with difficulty by means of a second-rate boarding-house. To these old friends, and in many other cases, Mrs. Krauss had proved a generous and tactful helper. Both visitors were wearing costumes which had been worn and admired at "Heidelberg" and were still fairly presentable.

After a stay of an hour the ladies withdrew, leaving their hostess well entertained but completely exhausted. Then they hastily sought out Sophy in order to express to her, in private, their horror at the terrible change in her aunt.

"Her spirit is there all right," said Mrs. Dowler (who had a hundred-rupee note in her glove), "but oh, my dear Miss Leigh, *how* she's wasted! I felt like crying all the time I was sitting with her."

"Yes, she should see a doctor, and that this very day," added Mrs. Vansittart.

"Oh, but you know Aunt Flora," protested Sophy; "she cannot bear doctors, and Lily, her ayah, knows pretty well what to do."

"Tell me, Miss Leigh, what is the real truth about your aunt's illness?" said Mrs. Dowler, suddenly dropping her voice to a mysterious whisper. "It has been so long and so tedious—off and on for at least three years. She has been worse the last four months, and indeed ever since you went up to May Myo. It is not a malignant growth, please God?"

"Oh, no, nothing of that sort; just weakness and this relaxing climate."

"She should have returned home years ago," said Mrs. Vansittart; "and when she does go—oh, it will be a bad day and a sad day for me and many others, not to speak of all the animals she has befriended. She is wonderfully sympathetic to dumb creatures and indeed to everybody."

"That's true," echoed her companion, "no one knows of your aunt's good deeds and charities, not even her own servants, and that is saying *everything*. Her hand has raised many an unfortunate out of the dust."

Thus whispering, advising and hoping and bemoaning, the two ladies were conducted by Sophy to their jointly-hired *ticka gharry*, and were presently rattled away.

Sophy, too, had her own particular visitors, Mabel Pomeroy, Mrs. Gregory and Fuchsia—Fuchsia, almost daily. To her it seemed that Sophy's confidences were frozen; she rarely mentioned her aunt, and gave evasive answers to her friend's probing inquiries. At last the brave American spoke out:

"You are frightfully changed, my Sophy girl—changed in a month. You have become so dull and absent-minded, and have lost all your pretty colour. Of course, *I* know the reason, but you can do no good—no, not a scrap. You had much better have gone home when you discovered the secret—you are as thin as a walking-stick, and look as if you sat up all night and never went to bed."

"Well, even if I did and, mind you, I'm not saying that I do, it is no worse for my health than dancing all night, is it? I'm very fond of Aunt Flora, and I'd do more than that for her."

"She has added years to your life; the gay flitting-about Sophy, with her pretty kittenish ways and harmless claws, has been thrust in a sack—and drowned!"

"Well, I do think you might have given her Christian burial," protested Sophy with a laugh.

"Christian burial brings me to the Marriage Service. What do you think—that great stupid Irishman, has at last blundered out a proposal, and in me," rising and making a curtsy, "you behold the future Mrs. Patrick FitzGerald."

"Oh, Fuchsia!" jumping up to embrace her, "I do congratulate you, and I do hope you will be very happy."

"Yes, I believe we shall. I have money and he——" she hesitated, and Sophy added:

"Has a warm, kind heart."

"Oh, well, I was about to say *looks*, but I'll throw in the heart as well! Next week I am going up to Calcutta to see about the trousseau and business. I'm real sorry to be the means of smashing up the Chummery Quartette."

"And when does the blow fall?"

"Not for some time; Patsy has asked for a long day."

"Fuchsia!"

"Well, no, it's not that; but he's obliged to finish some inspections. He really is fond of me—I dare say he's not as fond of me as Shafto is of someone! But *his* is a more serious, rigid character. If someone would smile, he would melt like a shovelful of snow on a coal fire!"

"My dear Fuchsia, do give your imagination a rest."

"Maybe you are right, and my tongue, too. I've only just one thing more to say," she paused and walked into the veranda in silence.

In silence Sophy followed her down to the car and, as she tucked in the knee-sheet, she raised her eyes and asked:

"What is this wonderful last word?"

"That I think 'Sophy Shafto' would be a nice easy name to say."

In another second Fuchsia's car had panted away and nothing remained of her visit but a cloud of red dust.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SOPHY

Sophy had a difficult part to act—in fact no less than three separate roles: one with her aunt, one with Herr Krauss, and a third in public. Those who saw Miss Leigh dancing and playing tennis at the Gymkhana, little guessed how she spent the remainder of the day, soothing and interesting a fretful invalid, or sitting up half the night on duty—and on guard. Herr Krauss was frequently from home, being incessantly engaged in winding up his affairs. Business took him one week to Moulmein, the next to Calcutta. This fat, elderly man displayed a sort of volcanic energy; he lived in a fever of repressed excitement and scarcely gave himself time to gobble his huge meals. Numbers of people—principally natives—pressed for interviews; one or two arrived in fine motor-cars; evidently it was not a European business that appeared to absorb all his time and faculties. However, whatever its nationality, Herr Krauss was happy and exultant; there was an expression of assured triumph upon his frog-like visage.

Naturally this triple life left its mark on Sophy, though she kept her miseries and responsibilities to herself. Mrs. Gregory and other friends put their heads together and decided that she looked ill and careworn; and the ever-active Fuchsia laid certain information before Shafto, with the result that the following day he arrived at "Heidelberg" to make a formal call. Of late he found that he could never have a word with Miss Leigh; she rarely rode in the morning and was seldom to be seen at the Gymkhana, and so he, as Fuchsia had suggested, "bearded the lioness in her den"—that is, he called at "Heidelberg" between the orthodox hours of four and five.

"This is very formal," exclaimed Sophy, as he entered the somewhat dusky drawing-room; "visiting hour and visiting card complete. What does it mean?"

"It merely means that I wish to see you," replied Shafto; "I can never get a look in elsewhere. One would almost think that you avoided me and wanted to cut me."

"What a ridiculous idea!" she exclaimed, sitting down and motioning him to a chair.

"Well, it does seem ridiculous that we see so very little of you. I hope you are not ill?"

"No, indeed, why should I be ill? Do I look like an invalid?"

"Since you ask me, I don't think you seem particularly fit. How is Mrs. Krauss?"

"Oh, much the same. Sometimes she is able to be out in the car and sits in the veranda; other days she cannot appear at all."

"And you and Herr Krauss are *tête-à-tête*! How do you get on together?"

"Oh, pretty well. I only see him at breakfast and dinner, and we talk about food and cooking and the servants. It's all right when he is alone, but when he brings friends to dinner it is rather disagreeable. I understand German now and am able to make out the hateful things they say about us as a nation. Naturally I stick up for my own country. I talk to them in English—they gabble to me in German, and we make an awful clatter. Herr Krauss looks on, or joins in, and roars and bangs the table. I am fighting one to five, and with my back to the wall! They are full of facts that I cannot dispute—not being posted up in statistics. When I attempt to bring forward our side they interrupt and shout me down. Now we have declared open war. Last night I got up and left them in possession of the field, and I have told Herr Krauss that the next time he has a session I prefer to dine alone. He treats it as a splendid joke and says I am a silly, ignorant *Backfisch*."

"Of course, a lot of it is trade envy," said Shafto; "but the Germans, to give them their due, are energetic, thrifty and pushing, and are taking places in the sun all over the world. Have you heard from Mrs. Milward lately?"

"No, not for some weeks; she writes such amusing letters."

"So I should imagine. She has a wonderfully elastic mind, and says and does the very first thing that comes into her head. Do you remember one day on the *Blankshire* when, half in joke, she said that we were two young lambs about to be turned out in strange and unknown pastures, and if one of us got into any difficulty the other was bound to help?"

"Yes, I remember perfectly well. It was after Mr. Jones, the missionary,

had been giving us a lecture on what he called 'Pitfalls in the East.'"

"Well, now I warn you that I'm going to be officious and interfering. I have a notion that you are in some difficulty. What Mrs. Milward said in joke I repeat in deadly earnest. If you are in any sort of hole, let me lend a hand."

"But why should you imagine that I am in any difficulty or, as you call it, 'a hole'?"

Sophy tried to carry it off gaily, but her eyes fell.

"Because you look so changed and depressed and seem to have lost your spirits. Perhaps, as you have no bodily ailment, there is something on your mind?"

"And who can minister to a mind diseased?" she quoted with a smile. "No, I'm really normal and absolutely sane."

"I wish you wouldn't put me off," he protested; "I know there *is* something."

"Even if there were, do you expect me to make you my Father Confessor?"

"No, indeed; but I do think you might give us a hint—I mean your friends—of what it is that has come between us."

For a moment she found it difficult to answer. At last she said:

"Well, there *is* something, I admit; something that claims all my time. I am sorry I cannot tell you more, for it is not my own secret."

"I see—it belongs to another."

Evidently Sophy had discovered the truth at last—a truth that was withering her youth and crushing her to the earth. His quick eye understood the signs of strain and fatigue; all life and light had faded from her face, and he realised that she was, as Fuchsia had described, "terribly changed."

For a moment neither of them spoke; she fidgeted with a turquoise ring—it was much too loose, or her fingers were much too thin, for it suddenly slipped, dropped into her lap and then rolled far away upon the floor with an air of impudent independence.

Shafto, as he searched for and picked up this ring, felt something forcing and driving him to speak and, after a moment's reflection, he made up his mind to dare all.

"I believe I know your secret," was his bold announcement, as he restored her property.

"You!" she ejaculated. "That is impossible."

"At least, I can guess," he said, dropping his voice.

Then he got up and, standing before her with his hands in his pockets, looked down at her steadily and continued:

"It has to do with a drug."

At the word drug she winced visibly, and her pale face changed.

"The drug is cocaine," he went on slowly, "and the victim is—a lady in this house."

Sophy's white cheeks were now aflame; bright tears stood in her eyes; she was passing through a painful crisis. To assent would amount to a betrayal. Should she put him off with a *lie*? There seemed to be an interminable pause before she spoke.

"Why do you say this to me?" she asked in a low voice.

"FitzGerald has means of finding out curious facts, and sometimes he tumbles into a thing by accident; he is mad keen to scotch this cocaine business, and incidentally discovered that one of Ah Shee's best customers was—you know *who*. She has been procuring the stuff for the last three years. I believe you have only recently found out the hideous fact, and this accounts for what anyone can see with half an eye—your look of care and anxiety. I am well aware that I have undertaken a dangerous mission in coming here to tell you this. Possibly you may never speak to me again; but I take the risk, because I do want so very, very badly to be of some use and to stand by you."

There was nothing for it but to accept the situation, and at last she said:

"The only way in which you can help me is by keeping silent."

"How long have you known?"

"About six weeks."

"So now I understand why we see you so seldom at tennis or the paper-chases."

"Yes; and now that you *do* understand, perhaps you will help me and

put people off when they ask tiresome questions." She spoke with a catch in her voice. "I scarcely ever leave my aunt. I read and talk and play the piano, and do my best to keep her amused; I am very fond of Aunt Flora."

"You must be!" he exclaimed sharply.

"But, indeed, she is not so much to blame as you suppose. Think of her loneliness and illness! Years of this relaxing climate and intense depression tempted her to seek relief, and once she had touched the drug it gripped her like a vice and made her a prisoner."

"Whom you are struggling to release? Does Herr Krauss know?"

"No; he has no suspicion. No more had I till recently. Lily, the ayah, Mr. FitzGerald, you and I, are all that are in the secret."

"It is much too heavy a load for your shoulders. Won't you tell Mrs. Gregory? She is so practical and so safe, and full of clever expedients and energy."

"No, I shall not open my lips; how could I? Mrs. Gregory is my loyal and kind friend; but once I began to take people into my confidence, I could never tell where it would end; soon it might be all over Rangoon that my aunt takes drugs. As it is I am making a little headway; we have diminished the quantity, and I have great hopes that the craving is *less*. Of course, I am obliged always to be on guard; that is why I am so rarely able to leave home. Herr Krauss talks of retiring in four months, and if I can only keep Aunt Flora safe until *then*, the day of our departure means the day of her escape. And now, please, let us talk of something more cheerful. I suppose you have heard about your friend, Mr. FitzGerald, and Miss Bliss?" And she threw him a charming confidential smile.

"Oh yes, rather! FitzGerald was in the most awful funk and talked of writing his proposal, but I choked him off, and told him that it was a cowardly way of putting his fate to the touch—the telephone would have been better—and that he must face the music like a man."

"You wouldn't be in the least nervous in similar circumstances."

"No, honestly, I would not, if I believed the girl cared two straws about me. Anyone that wasn't stone blind could see that Miss Bliss liked FitzGerald; he is a rattling good sort, and I believe they will suit one another splendidly."

But Shafto had not come to "Heidelberg" to discuss FitzGerald and his affairs; he wanted to talk to Sophy about herself.

"I do wish you would confide in Mrs. Gregory," he urged. "She is a tower of strength. I don't think you are strong enough to tackle the situation here."

"Oh, yes I am," she answered, rising; "it's just a question of will-power and holding out. It was good of you to come like this, but now I'm afraid I must send you away. This is the time I always sit with my aunt." As she spoke she approached nearer to the long glass door and, coming out of the gloom of the drawing-room, he saw by the unsparing light the startling alteration in her appearance; she looked so thin and worn, her eyes so large, her face so small—her whole appearance wilted! When he thought of Mrs. Krauss, with her deadly secret, her vampire hold on this girl; then of Krauss and his secret, he could no longer restrain himself. All those influences which stir the deepest emotions of the heart were silently operating on Shafto's. His face assumed a set expression and had grown suddenly pale.

"Sophy!" he exclaimed.

The word sent her heart galloping.

"I am sure you know that I—I adore you, but somehow I've never ventured to tell you this till now—" He paused, as if the words stuck in his throat, and meanwhile a huge brown insect of the bee tribe entered, booming alarmingly, and knocking itself about the room. "But now I've got to speak out and take risks. There is a terrible cloud over this house—a cloud of shame! I know I am saying all this most awfully badly, but I ask you to let me take you away from 'Heidelberg.'" He broke off abruptly and stood looking into her eyes.

Sophy, no longer pale, returned his gaze steadily. It was not now a question of her aunt's secret, but of her own future. She cared very much for her companion—why deceive herself?—and with the instinct common to her sex, had been aware of his feelings for a long time. All the same, she could not desert her post. She put up her thin hand (it was trembling, Shafto could see) with the gesture of one who was thrusting aside temptation.

"I don't understand about the cloud, but even so, my place is here. Surely you will see that—and—I am, all the same, very—grateful. I"—her

voice shook and sank almost to a whisper—"I am glad that you care for me."

At this moment a curtain was hastily swung aside and Lily appeared.

"Missy, the mem-sahib asking for you now; please to come quickly," and with a swift glance at her "missy" obeyed; the *pardah* fell heavily behind her slim, white figure and Shafto was alone. His mission had been fruitless, and yet when he rode away from "Heidelberg" in his heart he carried the flower of Hope.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ALL IS OVER

That same evening, as Sophy was sitting alone in the veranda after dinner, Lily ayah appeared, her fat arms uplifted in eloquent appeal.

"Oh, missy—you come with me—I think our mem-sahib soon, soon *die!*"

"Die!" exclaimed Sophy, springing to her feet.

"Yes, somehow these drug people are too clever—she has got cocaine. I think that water man bring it; anyhow, mem-sahib has taken one big, big dose, and lies as one gone from the world."

"Send at once for Herr Krauss—he is in his office," and Sophy ran towards her aunt's room and found, as Lily had described, that her relative was passing away; indeed, save for her faint breathing, one would have supposed that she had already crossed the border.

Herr Krauss cast one hurried glance, thundered out of the room, and rang up the telephone; then he returned and stood gazing at his wife, his face working with emotion.

"What has happened?" he asked, turning abruptly to Sophy. "*Why* is she like this? What does it mean?"

"I cannot tell." A reply which could be taken in two ways.

"It must have been some sudden attack—her heart, I suppose. Marling, the nearest doctor, will be here instantly." And as he spoke a square-shouldered, severe-looking man entered. Without a word, but in a most business-like manner, he made an examination of the patient, felt her pulse, turned back her eyelids, and then ejaculated an ominous:

"Ha!"

"What is it?" inquired Krauss; "what is the matter with my wife? Is it serious?"

"Don't you know?" demanded the doctor, turning on him sharply, "it is cocaine poisoning—the last stage."

"Cocaine!" echoed Krauss, and his large buff-coloured face turned to a leaden hue. "You are mistaken. That is not *possible!*"

"Well, if you don't believe me, get another opinion," retorted the doctor brusquely. "Judging from the slight examination I have made, your wife has been taking the drug for *years.*"

"Impossible!" almost shouted Krauss.

"Not at all," rejoined the doctor. "Cocaine has been poisoning people in Rangoon by hundreds. Mrs. Krauss is not the only victim."

Krauss, great heavy man that he was, was now trembling so violently that he was obliged to lean against the wall for support, and, pointing to the bed, he said:

"I had not the slightest suspicion—Gott bewahre, I had not. I thought her ailment was neuralgia. I will pay any money, no matter what fee. Surely, you can do something for her?"

"I am afraid not; Mrs. Krauss is beyond help, and can never recover consciousness. She has been taking quantities of the drug for a long time. Look at her arm!"—turning back the sleeve and revealing an emaciated tell-tale limb.

"Did *you* know?" said Krauss, appealing to Sophy, who stood at the other side of the bed. The words came in short savage jerks.

"Yes," she replied, "I only discovered it six weeks ago."

"And never told *me!*" glaring at her with a furious expression.

"No—because Aunt Flora implored me to be silent. I was doing my best to stop it and minimising the doses."

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor, "that accounts for this. She has been starved and, with the cunning of these morphia maniacs, found means to get a supply, and has absorbed an enormous quantity."

"Ach Gott! it seems incredible," moaned Krauss, now rising and coming towards the bed, and lifting his wife's limp hand. "What could have made her take to it?"

"Illness—loneliness—depression; this enervating climate; having nothing particular to do; an idle woman of forty has no business in Burma."

"But surely you have some remedy?—something that will bring her to? Gott in Himmel! you don't tell me that she will *never* see me, or speak to me again!"

"No; cocaine is one of the most powerful drugs—the greatest curse in

our pharmacopoeia. It is better that she should go like this. Even if she were to survive for a week, she would be a mere inanimate shadow."

"Oh, my poor Flora, my heart's joy! You must not go; you shall not leave me without one word!" And Herr Krauss tumbled down upon his knees and sobbed stertorously.

The doctor, who was surveying him with frigid amazement, suddenly turned and, seizing Sophy by the arm, said:

"You can do no good here now; this is no place for you."

Leading her to the door he closed it inexorably behind her.

Half an hour later she was joined by Lily, her round face wet with tears.

"All is over now, Miss Sahib. My missis always so good to me—my missis done die."

CHAPTER XXXV

MUNG BAW LIES LOW

In some mysterious manner the cause of Mrs. Krauss's death was hushed up; there was no inquest, and the announcement in the Rangoon Gazette merely stated: "On the 8th inst., Flora, the beloved wife of Herr Karl Krauss, suddenly, of heart failure."

Sophy had been carried off to the "Barn" a few hours after her aunt had passed away, and never again entered "Heidelberg." The funeral was large, expensive, and imposing, and included a crowd of rather unexpected and decidedly shabby mourners, who brought with them offerings of cheap, home-made wreaths and crosses, and wore faces of sincere and unaffected grief. Strange to say, the grave prepared to receive Mrs. Krauss was next to that in which lay the remains of Richard Roscoe. The two cocaine victims rested side by side in death, drawn together by the long arm of coincidence.

It had been decided that Sophy was to remain at the "Barn" and accompany Mrs. Gregory when she went home in August. She quickly recovered her looks and spirits amid bright society and cheerful surroundings. There had been an auction at "Heidelberg," everything was disposed of; the accumulation of twelve years was scattered to the winds, the servants were disbanded, and the house was closed.

Herr Krauss sent Sophy a quantity of his wife's jewels, with a letter thanking her for all her care and attention, but she only retained a ring that had been worn daily by her aunt, and returned the remainder, which was afterwards disposed of in Balthazar's Sale Rooms and fetched a handsome sum.

It was said that Herr Krauss had felt his wife's death acutely; he had left Rangoon without the ceremony of farewells, departing no one knew whither.

Time slipped by, and so far had brought no trace of the cocaine gang. On several occasions Shafto had ridden round by the big Kyoung behind the Turtle Tank and met with no success—nothing but a shake of the *pongye's* shaven head. On his first visit he had dismounted, given his horse to its *syce*, and boldly approached the monastery, outside of which an imposing group of *pongyes* was assembled. The attitude of some was lofty and disdainful; others, with a friendly glance, acknowledged the stranger's ceremonious greeting. Towering majestically among his fellows stood Mung Baw, who, throwing them a hasty explanation, advanced to welcome Shafto with a soldierly tread and a jaunty swing of his yellow robe. Then taking him aside he began to talk to him in a cautious undertone:

"I am sorry to tell you I have no *kubber* yet. If I had some female acquaintance it would so as easy as 'kiss my hand,' but I cannot break my vow or spake to a woman."

"So you have no clue?"

"There's dozens of clues, if I could get hold of one; that's what aggravates me and has me tormented. But I'll worry it out yet, and that's as sure as me name is Mick Ryan."

"I thought it was Mung Baw."

"So 'tis mostly—and officially, but this business I'm on is a white man's job, and if it's to be done, I'll do it." As he spoke he removed his clumsy horn spectacles, and Shafto realised that the eyes gazing unflinchingly into his own were those of an enthusiast, and possibly a hero.

Seen in tell-tale daylight, and without his disfiguring glasses, the *pongye* looked years younger; hitherto Shafto's impression had been that his strange acquaintance was a man of fifty. Five-and-thirty would be nearer the mark. His eyes were a shade of deep indigo blue, with thick black lashes, high cheek bones were possibly a legacy from his Cingalese grandmother; a square, well-shaped head, firmly set upon a fine pair of shoulders, a square chin and jaw, and a well-cut mouth with shining white teeth, were his inheritance from the West. Undoubtedly if Mung Baw's religion had not compelled him to sacrifice every hair on his body—including his eyebrows—he would have been an uncommonly good-looking fellow, but an absolutely bare face and bald cranium was a heavy handicap—were he Apollo himself!

At least thrice a week Shafto, in the character of a private inquiry officer, rode slowly round by the Kyoung and had a word or two with the tall upstanding priest.

One evening the latter beckoned to Shafto to dismount, and, leading

him apart, assured him that he was creeping on at last. "As soon as I know what I think I know, I'll send you a bit of a *chit*. It's an awful traffic, this infernal trade, now I've seen into it, cheek by jowl; these drugs is worse and crueller than wild animals, and we can't kill them."

"No, worse luck!" assented Shafto; "they kill us. I say, Mung Baw, don't your friends in the monastery wonder why I so often ride round this way and look you up?"

"Oh, yes, some does be as curious as a cat in a strange larder, but I have it all explained to their satisfaction." Then, dropping his voice, he added mysteriously: "They think I'm *convarting* you!"

"What—to Buddhism!" And Shafto burst out laughing.

"Faix, ye might do worse."

"Possibly; but I am all right as I am."

"That's a good hearing. Well, I'm not for troubling anyone's mind, shure; aren't we all," with a sweep of his powerful hand, "shtriving to reach the same place, and if it's what I expect, I'll hope to meet ye? There's the gong for prayers, and I must fall in."

Two days later Shafto received a letter written in a neat clerky hand. It said:

"If you will be at the Great Goddema in the woods beyond the Turtle Tank by five o'clock to-morrow, Tuesday, you may hear news,—M.R."

The Great Goddema in the woods is a gigantic image in alabaster, encompassed by palm ferns, and half clothed in flowering creepers. The day of this particular shrine has sunk below the horizon; worshippers are absent and the flowers laid around and about are entirely the contribution of Nature herself. Some day the shrine will disappear altogether, buried, like many others, in appreciative vegetation.

As Shafto approached the rendezvous, he saw the *pongye* seated on the steps, engrossed in a book with a red cover, which he hastily thrust into some inner pocket as he rose to his feet.

"Ye might not think it, but I'm a great reader," he explained apologetically. "It passes the time and is no sin; the saints themselves were wonderful writers and readers. A friend here gets me books out of the public library, and then I borrow when I can."

"What have you got hold of now?" inquired Shafto.

"'Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World,' and before that, 'Jungle Tales.' I could tell a good few myself; animals and birds does be very friendly and confidential with me; but it's not books I brought you here to talk about, but cocaine and opium."

"Yes, rather. Have you any news?"

"I have so. I've found out what I may call the head lair of the divils."

"Good for you—how splendid! How did you manage it?"

"Bedad, it was a terrible touch-and-go business, as you shall hear. You see, I should first explain how I get so much liberty to go mouching round the bazaars and wharves. Being for so long weak in the head—and also of another country—allowances are made, and I'm looked on as an oddity, and yet well respected, for I'm clever with cures and language. Well, I used to poke about among a lot of scum that has no respect for any cloth whatever—no, nor for life itself; and all the time I felt in me bones I'd surely find what I wanted among a crew that's just the sweepings of creation!

"There was one particular low wharf I used to hang round by way of watching fellows netting fish; and one warm afternoon, as I was meditating there, the chance looked my way. Two half-drunken Chinamen come along quarrelling and sat down near me, and I 'foxed' I was sound asleep. They argued about shares and money, and jabbered away very angry, telling me all I wanted. By and by, when they cooled down a bit, they saw me, an' this was what ye may call a critical moment for Mick Ryan."

"No doubt of that. Go on!"

"At first one of them was undecided as to whether I was asleep—or not. The other brute said: 'No chance take, stick knife in throat, and shove into the water.' You know what these thieves are with their long blades. I tell ye, Mr. Shafto, they might have heard me heart thumping! However, my good angel, Saint Michael himself, had his eye on me, for it turned out that neither of them had a *dah* with him. Then they come and leant over me, breathing into me face with their filthy rank breath, reeking of napie and pickled eggs, and I snored back like a good one! I snored for my very life, and I done it so natural, they were well satisfied; and I being such a big man and heavy to shift, they give up the notion of

slinging me into the Irrawaddy and went off still quarrelling. I stayed on without a move out of me for a full hour; then I got up yawning my head off, and walked away with the *clue* in me hand!"

"Is the den in Rangoon? There's many a queer place here?"

"No, not in Rangoon itself, but some way up the river; about twenty miles beyond Prome there is a deserted village that was cleared out by cholera twenty years ago. They say a big cholera *nat* lives there, and no one will go next or nigh it. There's a pagoda, a Kyoung, and a rest house, all smothered in jungle, and a nice little bit of a convenient landing, and 'tis there the Cocaine Company does its business—I learnt all their tricks. The Chinamen gave me a lot of news; it seems they smuggle opium, too, and distribute the stuff up and down the river by boats; on land by pack animals and the railroad. Oh, it's a wonderfully handy situation; they couldn't have picked a better!"

"And what about the people who run it?" asked Shafto.

"Well, the head of them all is gone; he was, as you may have suspicioned yourself, that fellow Krauss. No one knows what's become of him. Some say he's in Calcutta; more think he's dead—died aboard ship; but that may not be true. Them sort of ruffians generally live to a great age. Someone may have put him out, or rather done him in. There were two or three chaps what I've heard talkin' terrible bitter agin him; and one fine young man, Ar Bo, who is back from the Andamans—where he got sent to for three year, on account of this cocaine business—told me that he met a lot of clever fellows from all parts of the world; up to every dodge they were, and one of them instructed him in the way of killing a man stone dead—and not leaving a spot on him! I believe it's some little trick with the head, where it joins the spine. This chap confessed that he had tried it on several with success, and it wouldn't surprise *me* if he had made an experiment on Krauss!"

"But what about the cocaine?" said Shafto. "How, are we to set about getting a haul?"

"Ye'll have to go aisy, or rather Mr. FitzGerald and the polis must work by stealth; he can take a good few disguised, as it were on a sort of pilgrimage, but well armed, and passing through this village as it were accidental; and with a couple of boats on the river I think they might scare the lot. I'd like to go with them meself, for a bit of sport—only for me yellow robe, it wouldn't look well for me to be seen mixed up with cocaine, thaves and the polis."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Shafto. "You have to think of your cloth. Well, if you will write me down a few details on this slip of paper in my notebook, I will give it to Mr. FitzGerald at once, and I can't tell you how thankful he will be to get hold of it, or how grateful to you we are."

"Oh, I don't want no thanks for what has been a real pleasure. Haven't I seen with me own two eyes all the terrible harm this drug-takin' leads to? And if I've been in a small way the means of puttin' a stop to some of it, I'll be a proud man." He paused to clear his throat, and continued: "I suppose, you have not seen anything of Ma Chit lately?"

"No."

"She keeps you from goin' to the Salters, doesn't she? She's always sittin' about there on the steps, heart-broken, because she can't get a word wid ye! Of course, I'm not surprised she's took a fancy to ye."

"Fancy! Rot!" burst out Shafto. "I can't stand these cheeky Burmese girls. I only hope I may never set eyes on Ma Chit again."

"Well, then, as likely as not ye won't," remarked Mung Baw soothingly. "She has a rich relation up at Thayetmyo, and she's swithering between love and money. Perhaps, after all, money will carry the day. Well, now, I must be goin' to me duties—and me devotions, and I'll bid ye good evening."

The conversation at "Heidelberg" interrupted by Lily had been resumed on a suitable occasion in the gardens of the "Barn," and Sophy and Shafto were now provisionally engaged.

"I'm a wretched match for you, Sophy," he declared; "I don't believe your mother will allow it. I've no prospects."

"Never mind prospects," was her reckless reply. "We shall have enough to live on. I have a hundred a year of my own, and I'm quite a good manager, with a real taste for millinery. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall open a shop in Phayre Street and make our fortune!"

It was mail day and Shafto, who now dined at the "Barn," was

unusually late in appearing. He looked rather excited and out of himself as he entered with many apologies. After dinner he and Sophy paced the drive in the silver moonlight, and she began:

"I could hardly sit still, or eat a morsel, for anyone could see that you were bursting with some great news. What is it?"

"I have two pieces of news, and I'll give you first of all one that concerns ourselves. I saw in the *Mail* some weeks ago that my uncle, Julian Shafto, was dead. He had no family and left no will; and I found a letter to-day at the office from a lawyer, informing me that I, being next of kin, am heir-at-law, and succeed to the property and a fairly large income."

"Oh, Douglas, how splendid! It sounds too good to be true!"

"I never saw my uncle; he and my father had a disagreement before I was born, and had no communication with one another. He did not even send us a line when my father died. I fancy he was a hard-bitten old bachelor. I've not seen the family place, Shafton Court, and don't know much about it, except I remember my father saying there were one or two fine pictures, a fair library, and, what did not interest him, first-rate partridge shooting."

"Oh, what a piece of good fortune! Do let us go in at once and tell Polly."

"But would you not like to hear my other piece of news, which is even better?"

"It could not be better; but do tell me quickly."

"FitzGerald has brought off a splendid *coup* up the river—run in the cocaine gang and collared no end of drugs. He is to receive the thanks of the L.G. and the Government reward."

"How did he discover it?"

"A man I know really put him on the track. The cocaine lair was in a village, so deserted and tumble-down and haunted, that no one suspected it, or went near it. A *pongye* Kyoung, said to be infested by malignant *nats* and hundreds of snakes, was the head office. Rather a clever dodge."

"Do you think this will put an end to the traffic?"

"No; but it will give it a tremendous set-back; where there is a demand, there will always be a supply, but for a considerable time—at least a year or two—cocaine will be scarce. They caught a good many of the small fry, but as usual the big fish escaped—all but one wealthy Mahomedan, but he is bound to wriggle out somehow. Another point in favour of the short supply of cocaine is the disappearance of Krauss."

"What!" exclaimed Sophy. "Oh, Douglas, surely you don't mean that *he* was in it?"

"In it—I should think so. Up to his neck!"

"Oh, but are you certain?"

"Quite certain! This will explain his many mysterious journeys, the gangs of natives who were always hanging round his office, and his suspicious opulence. You may have noticed that he had no friends among the better class of Rangooner; whether British or German; they all suspected him of dirty hands. He had no conscience and was absolutely unscrupulous. It was a strange Nemesis that his wife—to whom you say he was devoted—should kill herself with the very drug he was smuggling."

"Yes, poor Aunt Flora," murmured Sophy; "that is a dreadful tale, which I shall always keep from mother. I think if she were to know it, it would nearly break her heart."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE BOMBSHELL

In spite of the claims of his own affairs, Shafto did not immediately resign his post at Gregory's, for it happened to be an unusually busy season; there was a heavy paddy crop and, owing to fever, the staff were short-handed; therefore, for the present he decided to stick to the ship, especially as Sophy was, so to speak, on board.

Mrs. Gregory and Sophy were returning to England at the end of August; naturally he booked his passage for the same date, and it was a happy coincidence that he and his fiancée were once more to be shipmates on the *Blankshire*. Meanwhile they were enjoying the time of their lives; the rides or strolls in the grounds or in Dalhousie Park, and dances at the Club, were delightful, and their world was sympathetic and smiled upon the engagement.

Mrs. Gregory loved a wedding. Her rooms, appointments and well-drilled staff readily lent themselves to such festivals, and why, she asked, should Sophy not be married from the "Barn," take a trip up the river for her honeymoon, in order to see something of the real country, and buy her trousseau after her arrival in London?

Fired with this project, both she and Shafto dispatched long and plausible letters to Mrs. Leigh; but Mrs. Leigh declined to entertain the idea and, in equally long and eloquent effusions, set forth the fact that she had seen nothing of her youngest daughter for nearly two years and claimed a share of her company ere she was carried away to another home. She had, however, given a cordial assent to Sophy's engagement, and declared that she would gladly accept Douglas Shafto as a son, but Sophy must be married from home and in the old church at Chelsea.

As Mrs. Gregory returned this letter, she said:

"Well, Sophy, you must only take a sort of pre-honeymoon tour; we will go up to Mandalay, and maybe explore a bit of the Shan hills; I shall coax George to come—he has not had a holiday for ages. Douglas must get a fortnight off duty, and Martin Kerr, our donnish old cousin, who is arriving from Calcutta in a day or two, may accompany us; he is a bachelor, very well off, and has lived all his life like a hermit crab in his college in Oxford. Lately he had a bad breakdown, and was ordered an immense rest and change; so now he has ventured out to blink at the universe beyond Carfax and the High, I expect he will find us shamelessly trivial and ignorant. How his eyes will open when they look upon this glaring world and behold some glaring facts! I shall invite Miss Maitland to join our party; she is of a nice suitable age, and I shall pair her off with Martin; we will take George's *durwan*, as courier, for he has Upper Burma at his finger-ends, and will see that we are comfortable."

The projected tour proved entirely successful; Mandalay was reached in thirty hours. From Mandalay, after a few days' halt, the explorers fared to farther and less trodden fields, visited the ruby mines, and the wonderful remains of Pagan; occasionally they found the accommodation at *zayats*, or rest houses, a little rough, but this was handsomely discounted by novel sights and experiences, a full view of the Burman at home, and the easy joys of village life. First of all, there was the morning procession of the stately *pongyes*, carrying their empty begging-bowls, and looking neither to the right nor left; there were delicious hours in the forests; boating and fishing expeditions on the rivers, or rides to the ruins of ancient cities, half buried in jungle.

Shafto and Sophy saw so many novelties that they were almost bewildered, but not nearly so much bewildered or impressed as was the Professor, when first introduced to the library of an ancient monastery, in comparison with whose age his beloved Bodleian was a mere infant. Here the volumes were written on palm leaves, then rubbed over with oil to toughen and preserve them; the edges were richly gilt and fastened together by drilling a hole at one end, through which a cord was passed, then they were placed in elaborate lacquer boxes. There were countless numbers of such books, devout and mystic, all inscribed in Pali; they included the "Three Baskets of the Law," also the Laws of Manu, which dated from the fifth century before Christ. Professional scribes were kept constantly employed in re-copying and restoring these precious tomes, as the palm leaves only last about a hundred years, after which they become brittle and difficult to decipher, and the copyists have an endless task.

The Professor, attended by an interpreter, haunted the library, made eloquent signs to the *pongyes* in charge, and was permitted to examine

and make notes of the rarest of their frail treasures, for which favour he duly made a generous acknowledgment.

Thanks to Mr. Gregory's courier, the travellers found comfortable quarters in his own ancestral village, and here they were able to watch the inhabitants both at work and play. They saw the oxen treading out grain, men working an oil mill, or caging fish; women weaving gay material, and children plaiting straw mats; so much for day-time occupations! At nights there were songs, dancings, gambings, and games; these included chess, played somewhat differently from what it is in Europe, but still the same chess as when it crossed the frontiers from China. There was a king, but instead of a queen a general, instead of bishops, elephants; and some of the moves were unusual.

Mr. Gregory, who rather fancied himself as a chess-player, boldly challenged one of the elders and, with the entire village as solemn spectators, suffered, alas! a humiliating defeat. Then Shafto took a hand at dominoes, at which, thanks to May Lee, he was an expert; fortunately he came off conqueror, and thus restored to some extent the credit of the party. These games were played by torchlight, the local band—harp, dulcimer, two drums and clappers—discoursed at intervals; here the inhabitants, unlike those of Rangoon, were early birds. By ten o'clock lights were extinguished, the crowd had dispersed, and a serene silence fell on the soft, purple night.

The College Don had thoroughly enjoyed this excursion into primitive life in Upper Burma; he also enjoyed the stimulating company of Miss Maitland; and in this delightful, highly coloured atmosphere, surrounded by agreeable companions, he fished, joked, flirted, and appeared to have shed his formal Oxford manner, along with his Oxford trencher and gown. He remembered Shafto's father and, on the strength of this memory, the two became excellent friends, and Shafto gave him assistance in the way of adjusting his puttees, helping him over awkward places, advising him what food to avoid and what insects to destroy.

The trip lasted for three weeks and the party returned to Rangoon delighted with their tour, and bringing with them quantities of snapshots, not a few small trophies and mementoes—which included the great Shan hat, purchased by the Professor—and amusing anecdotes of their varied adventures.

"I feel as if I'd had a bird's-eye view of the real country," said Sophy to her friend. "Those great calm seas of green rice, bounded by dark woods, with a white pagoda peeping through here and there; the fierce strong rivers flowing through overhanging forests, and the deep red sunsets, turning old ruins into flames, and then the golden days and silver nights, and all the nice friendly simple people. Douglas and I feel quite sad at the idea of saying good-bye to Burma."

"Well, my dear, the matter lies in your own hands," said Mrs. Gregory briskly, "and after you are married, you can return to Rangoon; there is a fine big empty house in Halpin Road; we might go over and inspect it some morning."

The assassination of the heir to the Crown of Austria and his Duchess had caused a profound sensation in Europe; ripples of this far-reaching tragedy had spread to the East; the Rangoon bazaar, like every other bazaar, was full of thrilling whispers, and various prudent traders were figuratively drawing in their horns and preparing for big trouble across the "Kala Pani."

It was the first week in August and on Wednesday; there had been a break-neck and exciting paper-chase, with the finish at Government House. Here a profusion of refreshments was displayed and all the world, more or less, was present; the men drinking pegs, the ladies iced coffee, gossiping, discussing the recent performance and various local matters. All at once a Government *peon* ran quickly through the crowd, a telegraph *peon*, then a motor arrived with two men (officials) who had not taken part in the paper-chase. Sir Horace Winter, the Lieutenant-Governor, and his military secretary disappeared abruptly indoors, and there was a sudden pause in the continuous chatter.

More than one of the guests experienced a curious thrill, as if there was something electric in the air; then from nowhere in particular the word "War" was whispered. "Great Britain has declared war on Germany." This seemed incredible; people stared at one another aghast, and boldly declared that "it was just a bazaar shave and a mistake," for out in the Far, Far East there had been no preliminary muttering of the

storm which was about to burst and drown half the world in tears.

Nevertheless, the news was horribly true. "War" had come; war, after so many years of European peace and prosperity; and newly aroused, startled countries found themselves face to face with the malignity of the unknown.

Presently the Lieutenant-Governor reappeared and verified the whisper. Wires were already active; the 29th Punjaub Infantry had been ordered from Mandalay; guests pressed round, eagerly snatching at scraps of information; Germans and British glanced curiously at one another, and presently the gathering dissolved—to talk, to write, and to cable.

For several days nothing remarkable occurred, save that the outgoing mail carried a number of British who had booked their passages at the last moment. Officers on leave were recalled, a few big business houses were closed and, in the District, many German mills and a large influx of stalwart young employés, who had been working in them and could not speak a word of English, suddenly flocked in, prepared to embark for Europe, to fight for the Fatherland.

Every berth in the *Blankshire* had been secured, and the night before she sailed the well-known German Club gave its parting dinner; a wild affair, with unlimited quantities of champagne, loud patriotic speeches, songs and shouts of "Deutschland über Alles," and finally a smashing of glass, a breaking of furniture, and the customary wrecking of the premises.

In her frequent journeys from Rangoon, the popular *Blankshire* had never been so crowded as on the present occasion; every berth was taken, chiefly by German passengers, who had also bespoken the chief seats at table and the best positions for their deck chairs; such was the crush that there would be no room whatever for casual travellers from Colombo or Port Said. The British, who were in a comparatively small minority, realised what a very bad time lay before them, when they and their country's enemies must pass weeks and weeks in close proximity. Many had caught the previous steamer, but the remnant included Mrs. Gregory, Sophy, Shafto and MacNab—who was actually paying the passage out of his hoarded funds, and sternly resolved to join the Cameronians. The party were figuratively swamped by the multitude of Teutons, who had swarmed on board, already looking truculent, arrogant and victorious—drinking and toasting one another noisily in vast libations at the bar. On the wharf an immense gathering of natives assembled to speed numbers of kind and generous patrons, who (with an eye to the future) had distributed a considerable amount of largesse and flattery, as well as silk and satin finery. What with the Germans and their native friends, egress from and ingress to the steamer were almost impossible; the gangway was choked, and the shouting and hurraing actually drowned the noise of the donkey-engine.

Many friends had come to see the last of Mrs. Gregory and her party; the military and official element were bound to remain in Rangoon. Sophy was talking to Miss Maitland and Ella Pomeroy, when a fresh influx of joyous and exultant Germans came pouring down the gangway with the force and violence of a human cataract. Sophy and her friends were thrust rudely apart and, from where she had been pushed against the bulwarks, she saw Frau Wurm pass by, also Frau Muller, who threw her a glance that seemed to distil hatred. She was immediately followed by Bernhard, looking extraordinarily elated and deeply flushed. Catching sight of Sophy he halted, clicked his heels together, and said, with a sort of savage courtesy:

"Ach, so here we are again, you and I, Miss Leigh, on the old ship that brought us out! I am delighted to have your company."

Sophy looked round for some means of escape, but she was helpless, being tightly wedged in between two bulwarks—the bulwark of the *Blankshire* and Bernhard's solid form—and separated from Mrs. Gregory by a seething crowd of jubilant Teutons.

"So 'Der Tag' has come at last!" he continued, staring into her face with arrogant blue eyes; "and we are on the eve of great events. I am about to join my Brandenburger regiment—every German is a soldier—we have several hundred reservists on board."

Sophy at last found her voice and murmured: "No doubt!"

"I caught sight of Shafto just now. Why is *he* going home?"

"To serve his country."

"Ah, bah! Better stick to his pen; it takes two years to make a soldier; in ten days we shall be in Paris, in a month in London. And why not? You have no army; we are a nation of fighting men, and you are a nation of

shopkeepers!"

"Of course we are not prepared; we would not listen to Lord Roberts; and, on the other hand, you have been arming and drilling and shipbuilding for the last forty years!"

"Ah, well, meine liebe fräulein, we must spread our borders! Who could expect the greatest nation in the world to remain cooped up in the North Sea? We demand and we will have space, power, and the sun. We understand patriotism and the love of country."

"The love of other people's countries," interposed Sophy sharply. "You Germans are everywhere—like the sparrows."

"To other nations we bring valuable lessons in industry and Kulture, prudence, thrift, and energy; other countries are only too fortunate to receive us. We have brains, bold hearts, and discipline—and know how to use them. Old Blücher, who won Waterloo, may yet find his aspirations fulfilled."

"Ah, you mean the sack and plunder of London?"

He nodded an impressive assent, and then said:

"When I am there I shall call on you, and show you my loot!" As he spoke he lent towards her, his eyes exultant, his breath heavy with champagne. Sophy instinctively recoiled and said:

"Pray do not trouble."

Bernhard gave a loud, boisterous laugh.

"It will be 'Missy can't see.' By the way, talking of loot, do you know that Herr Krauss is dead?"

"Dead!" she repeated. "No; I heard he had gone to Java."

"He has gone to his grave. Last night I was told that his body was found floating near the landing-stage at Moulmein; there were no marks on it, no signs of a violent end; and yet he was the last man in the world to commit suicide."

"Yes," assented Sophy; "he had so many plans and schemes for the future."

"They say a little bunch of coarse black hair was found in his clutch; however, at the inquest they brought in a verdict of 'Found Drowned.' It saved trouble. I wonder who will get his money. He was enormously rich."

"With ill-gotten gains."

"Well, he must have some German kin to claim his fortune, and I'll make it my business to find out all I can when I return here."

"So you are coming back?"

"Why, of course—possibly in six months. I leave my house and belongings all standing. Business is but temporarily closed. Burma, as old Krauss used to say, is 'the land of opportunity.' When next I see the Golden Pagoda, the whole of this rich and fertile country will belong to us."

"You are sanguine!"

"Sanguine! I am certain; and why not? Look at our wonderful trade! And the Burmese themselves like us a million times better than you English."

"Simply because you bribe them with money and presents."

"But look at the crowds," waving his hand towards the masses, "who have come to say '*Auf Wiedersehen*'; thousands and thousands." Then he turned his bold arrogant eyes on Sophy and said: "Your country has no chance against us, Miss Leigh; we shall crush you like pulp—your money, treasures and trade will all be ours. Hullo!" he exclaimed, "what are these police doing? Mounted police, too! Any escaped convicts on board?"

As he stood and watched, the swaying masses were parted with authority and a large force ranged up on the quay. Officers and officials came on board, armed with an order from the Lieutenant-Governor. Among the first strode FitzGerald in full uniform, not the everyday genial Patrick, but a smart stern guardian of the law. Approaching the bragging Bernhard, he said, with frigid severity: "Be good enough to go ashore, Herr Bernhard."

"What!" stammered his prisoner, who had become livid. "What the devil are you talking about! How dare you interfere with me? Or give me an order?"

"Official order," rejoined FitzGerald, entirely unmoved. "All men of German nationality to disembark immediately and be interned."

Sophy now made a forcible and frantic effort to effect her escape from

this hateful situation, and struggling through the crowd eventually managed to join her own friends.

Disembark—to be interned! What a thunderbolt! All at once Bernhard's flushed countenance became livid, his eyes glared savagely, and there suddenly spread a choking, suffocating expression on his large handsome face. The noise and clamour of hoarse angry voices became almost stupefying, but in the end the Teutons were compelled to accept the inevitable, and gradually streamed ashore, carrying their hand baggage, parcels of delicatessen, and other comforts intended for the voyage. The heavy baggage was hastily landed, for the *Blankshire* had steam up and was bound to catch the tide.

A more than half-empty ship, she now slipped from her berth and turned her bows towards home. As she glided slowly by the wharf, Shafto and Sophy waved vigorous farewells to their numerous friends, Burmese and European. There was Roscoe, there were the Salters and Rosetta. Apart from all, a solitary little figure stood prominent on a heap of rice bags. It was Ma Chit, waving a pink silk handkerchief. For once she was not smiling, her piquant face was grave, and the eyes fixed upon Shafto conveyed an eloquent and heartbroken farewell; presently she cowered down and hid her face.

"That was a wonderfully smart *coup!*" said a ship's officer to Mrs. Gregory and Sophy. "Those German fellows that were trampling all over the ship as if she was their own property were neatly caught. They will be shipped off to India out of harm's way, and within a week or two, I fancy, will find themselves at Ahmednuggur."

The interned passengers had left ample space and a grateful sense of relief and freedom. As the *Blankshire* throbbed down past "the Hastings" Shafto and Sophy stood side by side, taking their last look at the Great Pagoda, which gave an impression of being swathed in a mantle of dazzling gold, and dominated all its surroundings.

"It seems only the other day we were coming up the river in this very old boat," he said; "a year and ten months ago, and how much has happened in that time! Well, we have had strange experiences, seen many places, and made many friends. Here is one of them now," indicating Mrs. Gregory; "I expect she feels a bit down, after parting with old George, although he does follow in three months; so do you try to cheer her, while I go below and hurry up the tea."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE TUG OF WAR

One evening, after they had been several days at sea, as Sophy and Shafto were gazing down at the steerage passengers, she said:

"I have noticed such an odd person watching you—he looks as if he knew you!"

"Knew me!" repeated Shafto. "What is he like?"

"A tall, broad-shouldered, lanky man—there he is, leaning over the side, wearing a blue serge suit and a soft felt hat."

Shafto stared for a moment, then he said:

"By George! I *do* know him—though I can hardly believe my eyes. I'll go and speak to him and find out what this means," and he hurried away below.

"Hullo, Mung Baw!" he exclaimed. "Say, this is something like a surprise! What are you doing here?"

"Much the same as yourself, sir. The Tug of War is drawing us all home. I have left Mung Baw and the yellow robe behind me, and I'm now Corporal Michael Ryan. I'm going into the Army again. Why, I'm only thirty-four when all's said and done. Of course, the shaven head ages a fellow, but I'll grow me hair on me passage home and, maybe, a moustache as well; someone told me that kerosene oil is a grand thing. And you are going to join up too, sir?"

"I hope so; I put in two terms at Sandhurst, so I shall have a try. I should like to get into the Flying Corps."

"And what will herself say," with a glance towards Sophy on the main deck, "to all this fighting and flying?"

"Oh, Miss Leigh won't stand in my way—she intends to look for a job, too. Tell me, Michael, do you really believe they will take you back into the Service after your adventure in Upper Burma—and seven years' absence without leave?"

"Well, since ye ask me, sir, in my opinion they might do worse; anyhow, I'll have a good try. I might get a sort of doctor's certificate—*mental* you know. I'm a first-class shot, though naturally a bit out of practice; and very hefty with the bayonet. I'd like well to stir them Germans up, ever since one great ugly brute went out of his way to give me a kick. I was black and blue for weeks. Did you hear them the day before they were took off—just screeching mad, shoutin' and drinkin', as if the world was their own. Well, anyhow, I can enlist as full private; I'm sound in wind and limb and, I tell ye, we want all the men we can get, for I heard them Germans talkin' very big in Rangoon, saying they'd eat us all up within the next three months—body, sleeves and trimmings!"

"Easier said than done," rejoined Shafto; "although they have a splendid army—and thousands of big guns."

"I'd like well to have a hand in real fighting—none of your autumn manoeuvres, but the proper thing; and after I put the war over, I'll go and see Ireland. It's strange, although I'm Irish, I've never put a toe in the country, and never been nearer it than a black native. My father's people were reared in the Galtees; it's my Irish blood that's uppermost now and driving me home. I've often heard the boys talkin' of the grand purple mountains, the wonderful greenery everywhere, and the lovely soft, moist air."

"Well, Michael, I hope you may see it all some day. What put it into your head to throw off the yellow robe and take this sudden start?"

"It was the barrack talk, sir; I heard them chaps cursin' and groanin' that they were stuck fast in Rangoon and had no chance of gettin' a look in, and says I to myself, what's to hinder *you* from goin'?"

"But how about the passage money?" inquired Shafto. "I thought you were vowed to poverty and had nothing in your wooden bowl?"

"I had the ruby that you gave back to me. I believe it was a rare fine stone. I had it in me mind to offer it to the Pagoda; it was well I waited, as things turned out; a friend sold it for me in the bazaar—he got four hundred pounds of English money. He says it was worth some thousands; it was bought for a Pagoda, anyhow, and I have a nice big sum lodged in a London bank, and when the war is over, please God, it will help to settle me in a small place in Ireland. I took me passage and bought some kit, and I have a few pounds in hand—so that I won't be stranded. At first I felt the clothes terrible awkward, especially the trousers, after living in a petticoat so long; and I did not know what to be

doin' with a knife and fork—and leadin' such a quiet, cramped sort of life I lost the use of meself; but I tramped up and down the decks for a couple of hours of a morning, and a nice young fellow in the pantry has lent me a pair of dumb-bells. By the time I get to England I'll be well set up with a black moustache—and mabbe, ye'll hardly know me!"

"How did you get rid of the yellow robe?"

"Oh, easy enough, and without any ceremony of disgrace whatever. Shure, half the Burmans you meet have worn it for, p'r'aps, a year or two—but it's not everyone who has the vocation."

"I can't understand your ever taking to it."

"Can ye not, sir?" rejoined the *ex-pongye*, laying a muscular hand on the bulwark and fixing a far away, abstracted gaze upon the lazy green sea. "I may as well tell ye that the first story I made out to ye was not altogether the truth. I had in me mind a mental reservation. I just slipped out of Army life and hid meself in the forests—all along of a little girlie." His lower lip trembled as he added: "She died, sir—and I was just broke over it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Shafto. "Well, such things have happened before."

"It was like this, sir," now turning and fixing a pair of tragic dark eyes on his companion, "I was engaged to be married—same as yourself. She was the daughter of a sergeant in the arsenal in Madras; her father and mine were old friends, and when mine was killed in Afghanistan, me mother just dwindled away and broke her heart. Sergeant Fairon and his wife was real good to me and took me home; she mothered me and he 'belted' me, and they helped to start me for the Lawrence Asylum Orphanage. I was about eight years of age then, and this little girl was two. After a good spell I come back to St. George's Fort, a grown-up man and a corporal. Polly, she was grown up, too—and the prettiest girl you could see in a thousand miles; we fell in love with one another, and Sergeant Fairon had a sort of wish for me, being, they said, the very spit of me own father, and though I knew in me heart Polly was a million times too good for me and I was not fit to wipe her shoes, still, I made bold to ask him for her and he said 'Yes.' I knew I'd get permission to marry, for my name was never in the defaulters' book, and Polly was fair as a lily—not one of your yellow 'Cranies' the Colonel was so dead set agin. Well, I was just too happy to be lucky, saving up me pay and Mrs. Fairon buying a few bits of house linen for us, and Polly making her trousseau, when the regiment was shifted all of a sudden from Madras to Mandalay and our plans were knocked on the head."

"Yes, that was bad luck," said Shafto sympathetically.

"Still and all, I was full of hope, expecting my stripes and hearing every mail from Polly, when one day the letter corporal handed me an envelope with a deep black edge; it was from Sergeant Fairon telling me Polly was dead; taken off in three hours with cholera. He enclosed half a letter she was writing to me when she was called. Well, sir, I would not believe it! No; I held out agin it for days; but of course I had to give in. At first the grief was just a little scratch; but every day the pain went deeper and deeper, as if some one was turning a knife in my heart. To think I'd never look upon her again or hear her voice, and her gay laugh, it seemed impossible—but, in the end, I *believed*, and I felt as if I was groping about in black darkness! What had I to live for? What was the good of going on?"

"At times I thought of my rifle, but I put that idea aside because of the regiment and the scandal in the newspapers—still, I was always meditating some way *out*. I think now, if I'd opened my mind to one of my pals, it would have been easier, and I'd not have felt it so cruel hard; but somehow I'd never breathed the name of Polly to one of them—I held her like a holy thing apart. I could not stand the talk and the coarse chaff of the barrack-room, so I kept my trouble sealed up, till at last it grew too big for me, and I made up my mind to do away with myself, where no one would be a penny the wiser. I got a couple of days' leave—by way of seeing a pal at Tonghoo—and I went up the river and away into the Jungles, and wandered about looking for some venomous reptile to put an end to me in a natural way! But, if you'll believe me, sir, devil a bite could I get—not after searching for half a day; and, av coorse, had I been looking without intention, I'd have found dozens."

"What with walking miles in the blazing sun and nothing to eat, I believe I fell down with a stroke, and some wood-cutters found me and carried me into their village—a big place with a great thorn hedge and gates to keep off the Dacoits. The head man they call a Thugyi took me over, and his women nursed me; he was a rich fellow with four yoke of oxen, and so no expense was spared; and there I lived for many a long

day, very strange and out of myself. I could not remember who I was, nor where I came from; all the clothes I had to me name was a shirt and a pair of drawers. By degrees, thanks to great charity and kindness, I come round, I remembered everything only too well, and then I buried Mick Ryan in the jungle and became a *pongye*. The peace and quiet ate into me very bones, and I took on the yellow robe. The rest and the holy life tamed me and did my soul good; and many an evening when I'd be roaming in the forests, among the splendid tall trees and beautiful flowers, with the birds and animals around me so tame and at their ease, I'd have a feelin' that Polly was walkin' alongside of me, the face on her shining with the light of heaven! But," drawing himself erect, "excuse me, sir, for bothering you with all this foolish, crazy sort of talk."

"Not at all," said Shafto. "Thank you so much for telling me your story. I am truly sorry for you, Ryan; it was hard lines losing your Polly. Do you mind telling me some more? After you had recovered your memory and become a *pongye*, what happened next?"

"Well, after a while, I chanced to see English papers and hear outside news, an' I got a cast in a cargo boat down the river. I had a sort o' longin' to see the soldiers, the love of the Service is in me blood, so now and then I was drawn to Rangoon to get a sight of the khaki and to hear the barrack yarns. Ye see, one quarter of me is Cingalese—I suppose me grandfather on one side was a Buddhist, and that is how *pongye* life came so pleasant and aisy to me. The three quarters of me is an Irish soldier, an' every day the soldier within me grows an' the *pongye* dies away."

"And you will never return to Burma?"

"Never, no. I have laid out to go to Ireland and spend the rest of my time there when the war is over."

"Ah—I wonder when the war will be over?" said Shafto.

"God alone knows!" exclaimed the *pongye*. "They were talking in the bazaar of the end coming about Christmas. I think meself it will be a long business and an awkward business, too."

"So do I," agreed Shafto, recalling the sage remarks of George Gregory.

"Yes, it's like a light stuck in an old thatch! We'll have half the world in it before long, an' the greatest blaze as ever was known."

"I see that Australia and Canada and South Africa are all coming to lend a hand."

"Well, we want every hand we can get—and every foot, too! I've heard plenty of big talk in the bazaar, where the Germans have laid out a mint of money. By all accounts they are going to take Persia, India, Burma, the whole of our trade, money and fleet. Well, if that comes off, it'll be a cold world! By the way, sir," he continued in another tone, "did ye see Ma Chit the day we were leavin' Rangoon, signin' and wavin' to ye as we cast off?"

Shafto nodded curtly.

"An' ye never tuk no notice! Ye might have given her just a small sign to ease her heart—but I'm thinkin' ye have a hard drop in ye."

"I dare say I have," assented Shafto, "and I'm glad of it, for now and then it has prevented me from making an awful fool of myself."

"Ah, well, sometimes the fools have the best of it; not that I'm sayin' a word in favour of Ma Chit—only that if ye'd waved yer hand she'd a gone away with a small bit of consolation and comfort."

"By the way, Ryan, what did you mean by saying you were a magician?"

"Oh, that was only a bit of a boast, sir. I know a few tricks I learnt in the regiment; one of the privates was a professional conjurer and mighty clever when sober. When I showed off one or two little tricks with stones, or buttons, or bits of string, the Burmans were sure I was a real wizard, and looked up to me, so they did, and then the birds and animals being so friendly—I was always so much at my ease with them, and the childher—they said I cast *spells!*"

The steerage passengers were not a little surprised to note the forgoing of a first-class passenger with this odd reserved person (whose shaven head was associated in their opinion with the interior of Rangoon jail). Nor was this all; now and then a remarkably pretty young lady accompanied the said first-class passenger and brought fruit, and books, and cakes, and the three appeared to be on the best of terms. The *pongye* and Shafto had many long talks together; they discussed life among the Burmese, the prospects of war, the changes that might awake and shake the world, and, appropriate supplement to the topic of war,

more than once they spoke of death.

"I've been so long with the Buddhists that the fear of the grave is wore out of me," said Ryan; "I'd a'most as soon be dead as not—it's only another new life—ye just step in, an' meet yer old friends. I suppose, sir, you do not go along with me there."

"No," replied Shafto, who had all an Englishman's shrinking reluctance to discuss his belief, or his inner life; "yours is a nice easy path—too good to be true, I'm afraid. My creed is, to do our best, to help other people, and to take what comes."

"Goodness knows you have helped me, Mr. Shafto"—and the *pongye* drew back a step and looked at him queerly—"what with saving me life and then makin' sort o' friends with me—as man to man—your kindness will stand in me memory till the clay is over me!"

Shafto and the *pongye* separated at Marseilles; the latter went round by the Bay, whilst Mrs. Gregory and her party travelled overland, and they did not meet again for nearly two years.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SERGEANT-MAJOR RYAN

Many months later, on a clear February night, Shafto and Tremenheere stood together outside Headquarters, "somewhere in France," anxiously observing the signs in the sky. Shafto, a machine-gun officer attached to the Blanks, had been granted twenty-four hours' leave, and made a muddy and dangerous journey of fifteen miles to visit his old schoolfellow, now on the staff of a General commanding a division. He was challenged and so was his companion; their faces expressed the long strain of a terrible war; both looked years older than their actual age, for, like the sons and daughters of the worshippers of Moloch, "they had passed through the fire."

Shafto was fine-drawn to leanness, heavy lines were scored on his forehead, he had twice been wounded, had taken part in desperate fighting, witnessed many harrowing sights, and lost many friends.

The chill air was full of sounds; a continuous rolling of wheels, rumbling of guns, and the distant scream of a shell.

"There goes a signal to lengthen the German range," remarked Shafto.

"That's right, for they often show up lights that mean nothing."

"Look at that aeroplane of ours dropping red stars over the Boches' first line of trenches. I suppose the lines are fairly close?"

"By Jove, you may say so! The men can shout across at one another, but the trenches are a good four miles from where we stand."

As he concluded, a star shell broke and lit up a vast expanse of gleaming mud.

To the rolling and rumbling was now added a far-away sound of tramping feet and song.

"Here they come!" exclaimed Tremenheere; "back to billets; they changed at six o'clock, but it's heavy going—mostly wading in slosh."

The marching came nearer and nearer, also the sound of singing and mouth-organs.

"Michigan," said Shafto, "is a favourite; poor old 'Tipperary' is down and out."

Presently the force which had been relieved, muddy to the waist, but splendidly cheerful, splashed into the great courtyard.

"Irish," explained Tremenheere; "magnificent fellows, born fighters."

They watched the men as they fell out and scattered to their quarters in outhouses, barns and offices; and then Shafto and his friends made their way into the battered old chateau, and temporary Orderly room—once a lady's boudoir. It still exhibited strips of artistic wall-paper, a cracked mirror, a beautiful Louis XIV. cabinet stacked with papers, a few rude chairs, a couple of wooden tables.

Presently a sergeant-major came in to report, a fine stalwart fellow with a heavy black moustache and, in spite of his muddy waders, an air of complete self-possession. Having saluted and handed over his papers, his quick blue eyes rested on Shafto. He started, saluted, and said:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Shafto, sir, but I see you don't know me."

"Well, no, I can't say that I do," replied Shafto, casting his mind over the last eighteen months.

"Well, of course, sir, I'm entirely different to what ye may remember in Rangoon."

"What?—you don't mean to say—"

The late *pongye* nodded with emphasis..

"I'm now Sergeant-Major Ryan, in the second battalion of the old regiment."

Then suddenly stepping back and lowering his voice, he added, "They think I'm me brother. Shure, I never had one. And how is yourself, sir?"

"All right; I'm a machine-gun officer attached to the Blanks."

"And the young lady?"

"She's a Red Cross nurse at Rouen—I saw her three months ago."

"When next you meet will you give her my humble respects and tell her I've not forgotten her invitation, an' I'm coming to the wedding?"

"And no one will be more welcome; you have our address. I'm told you've been in some heavy fighting?"

"Well, yes, sir, at Ypres we lost eighteen of our officers; oh, it was a cruel bad mix-up. Still and all, the Boches were given their tea in a mug!

After our last charge ye'd see thim going every way—like crows in a storm! Our guns are grand; as for them aeroplanes they do all but speak; and the Tanks are wonders, God bless them!"

"You have been wounded?"

"Only just a cat's scratch—the German wire is mighty stiff; and there's six-inch spikes. Well, since we were last together, sir, you and I have been through a strange time and seen sights as we can't talk about. One thing is sure, we'll worry through all right."

"Oh, yes, we shall, and give the Boches something to think about."

The sudden opening of a distant door released a roar of voices singing, "Take me back to Blighty!" a rousing demand which instantly recalled the sergeant-major to his duty.

"Well, sir," he said, "I must be moving; so I'll wish you good-bye, and the best of luck."

"The same to you, Ryan. You'll let us have a line to say how you get on, won't you?"

Shafto held out his hand; Ryan gave it a hard, convulsive squeeze, and in another moment the stalwart Irishman had saluted and tramped forth.

"An old friend, I see," remarked Tremenheere.

"Yes, I knew him in Burma."

"He is a tip-top non-com., and has the D.C.M. and the French Cross; he worked miracles when his officers were killed at Ypres. They offered him a commission, but he wouldn't take it. The men love him; though he has some funny fads, never touches meat, and sings queer outlandish chants; but he's the splendid sort of fellow who was *born* for this war; full of heroic qualities and as hard as a bag of nails. I suppose his regiment was in Rangoon."

"Not in my time," replied Shafto. He hesitated for a moment, and then added, "If I were to tell you how I came across that Irish sergeant-major you'd say I was pulling your leg."

"Oh, go on, then—pull away."

"When I first met him he was a Burmese priest, with a shorn head, yellow robe, and begging-bowl."

"Come, I say, Douglas, this is a bit too much!"

"But it's a fact. He had been a soldier for six or seven years, got a bad stroke in the jungle, was taken in by Burmans, and was for seven years a *pongye*. When the war broke out he flung off his yellow robe, paid his passage to England, and is here, as you see, in his element."

"It's amazing—incredible—but incredible things come off nowadays."

Shafto nodded.

"If he gets through this, do you suppose he will return to his monastery?"

"Never! It is his fixed intention to go to Ireland; he has some money, and hopes to settle down on his own little farm."

"I'm afraid he's some way off that yet; in the meanwhile, he is seeing a good bit of life."

"And death," mentally added Shafto.

"I say," exclaimed Tremenheere, glancing at his wrist-watch, "it's time for our dinner—come on!"

In the autumn of the same year, Shafto, who had again been severely wounded, was granted a month's leave, and he and Sophy were married. It was the usual war wedding, no bridesmaids and no reception. Among the friends, "welcome at the church," were the Gregorys, Tebbs, Larchers, MacNabs, Mrs. Malone, Mr. Hutton, and the Tremenheeres. Captain Tremenheere supported his friend as best man.

One specially bidden guest was absent from the gathering. He lay beneath a black wooden cross, near by to Guinchy, where gallant Irish regiments had immortalised their colours. Alas! Sergeant-Major Michael Ryan was among the missing. To the unspeakable grief of his comrades, he had gone West—but not to Ireland.

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