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**In the Guardianship of God**

**In the Guardianship  
of God**

BY

**FLORA ANNIE STEEL**

AUTHOR OF "ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS," "VOICES OF  
THE NIGHT," "HOSTS OF THE LORD," ETC.

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## IN THE GUARDIANSHIP OF GOD

"Dittu Sansi, aged twenty-one, theft, six months," read out the overseer of the gaol, who was introducing a batch of new arrivals to the doctor in charge of a large gaol in the Upper Provinces of India. It was early morning. Outside the high mud walls, which looked like putty and felt like rock, the dew was frosting the grass in the garden where a few favoured criminals were doing the work of oxen for the well-wheel, and turning the runnels of fresh water to the patches of spinach and onion. But here, inside the gaol square, everything had the parched, arid look of sun-baked mud. Not a speck was to be seen anywhere; the very prisoners themselves, standing in a long line awaiting inspection, with their dust-coloured blankets folded upon the ground in front of them, looked like darker clay images waiting to be put on their pedestals. There was a touch of colour, however, close to the arched gateway. First, a red-turbaned warder or two, guarding the wicket; then half-a-dozen constables in yellow trousers, and a deputy-inspector of police smart in silver laces and fringes; finally the gaol *darogah*, or overseer, a stoutish, good-looking Mahomedan with a tendency to burst out, wherever it was possible, into gay muslin, and decorate the edges of his regulation white raiment with fine stitchings. These, with a nondescript group fresh from the lock-up, were gathered about the plain deal table set in full sunlight where the Doctor sate, ticking off each arrival on the roster. He matched the gaol, being dressed from head to foot in dust-coloured drill, with a wide pith hat which might have been carved out of the putty walls.

"All right, *Darogah*," he said with a yawn. "Number five hundred and seven. Go on,--what's the matter?"

Shurruf Deen, the Overseer, was looking intently at the paper in his hand, and the rich brown of his complacent face seemed to have faded a little. "Nothing, *Huzoor*," he replied glibly enough, though a quick observer might have seen the muscles of his brown throat labouring over the syllables. "The list is badly written, in the broken character. Thou shouldst speak to the clerk in thine office, Inspector-*jee*; this name is almost illegible."

"'Tis Shureef, clear enough, *Darogah-jee*," dissented the Inspector, huffily; "and I should have thought it fits thine own name too close for--"

"Shureef," read out Shurruf, the Overseer, brusquely, "Shureef, Khoja, thirty-five, lurking house trespass by night, habitual offender, ten years."

The Doctor looked up sharply. Ten years meant business; one can teach a lot in ten years--carpet-weaving, wood-carving, pottery-making--and the Doctor's hobby was his gaol. What he saw was a man, looking many years older than his age, haggard and grey, yet despite this with a lightness and suppleness in every limb. Though this figure was lean where the Overseer was fat, wrinkled where the Overseer showed smooth, there was a similarity in the rich colour of their skins, in the regularity of their features, which made the Englishman turn to look at the *Darogah* with the mental remark that the race-characteristics of India were very instructive; for Shurruf was a Khoja also. "All right," said the Doctor. "Number five hundred and eight."

"Five hundred and eight," repeated the habitual offender, calmly. "I will not forget. Salaam, *Huzoor*! Salaam, *Darogah-jee*!"

"Do you know the man?" asked the Doctor quickly of his subordinate; he was sharp as a needle, and there had been a note in the salutation which he did not understand.

"He was in for two years when I was sub-overseer at Loodhiana, *Huzoor*," replied Shurruf, imperturbably. "He gave much trouble there; he will not here, since the Doctor-*sahib* knows how to manage such as he."

Once more there was an undertone, but the Doctor's attention was riveted by the adroit flattery, and he rose to begin his inspection with a smile. It was true; he did know how to manage a gaol, and there could not possibly be any cause for complaint when he was there to apportion each ounce of food scientifically, to rout every germ, every microbe, and treat even contumacy as a disease. The five hundred and odd prisoners were, as it were, the Doctor's chessmen. He marshalled them this way and that, checkmating their vile souls and bodies while they were in his care. If they passed out of it into their own, he took no heed. They might make what they liked of themselves. But if they died, and, as the phrase runs, chose the Guardianship of God, he buried them temporarily in the gaol graveyard with all possible sanitary precautions, against the time when relations or friends might appear to claim the corpse. There was no official regulation as to the limit of time within which such claim could be preferred; but as a dead body remains in the

special Guardianship of God for a year, it was an understood thing that man should take over the task before the Almighty gave up the job; it was more satisfactory, especially if the corpse was a Hindu and had to be burned. As for the Doctor, he would have preferred to burn the lot, Hindu and Mahomedan alike; failing that, he--took precautions.

As he walked down the line rapidly his sharp eye noted every detail, and Shurruf Deen had many a swift, probing question to answer. He answered them, however, as swiftly, for he was the best gaoler conceivable; so good that even the Doctor allowed that he was almost capable of managing the gaol himself. A man of unimpeachable character, he had yet a curious insight into the minds of the criminals he guarded, and a singular tact in managing them, so that his record of continual rise in the world seemed likely to lengthen itself by an appointment to the most important gaolership in the Province. Shurruf Deen was working all he knew to secure this, and therefore, as he followed the Doctor, his keen, bold eyes were everywhere forestalling the possibility of blame. They fell, among other things, on Shureef's thin, somewhat bowed figure, as it was marched off to be shaved, washed, manacled, and dressed to pattern. Then they turned almost mechanically to the paper he still held. *Shureef Deen, Khoja--ten years' hard--three months' solitary*. He gave a faint sigh of relief. Solitary confinement, even when broken up by philanthropy into blocks of a week, gave time. It meant many ameliorations to a prisoner's lot which would be unsafe amid the ruck. Besides no man, he told himself, would be fool enough to risk losing these favours simply to spite another man.

He repeated this thought aloud that same evening, after lights were out, and the silence of solitary cells lay all over the gaol, save in one of the latter, where Shurruf sate whispering to Shureef. In the utter darkness the curious similarity of the place to a wild beast's cage, with its inner grating-barred cubicle and its outer high-walled yard let open to the sky, was lost, and the two men might have been anywhere. Shurruf, however, sate on the millstones, as being more suited to his figure, while Shureef crouched on the ground beside the little heap of corn he was bound to give back ounce for ounce in flour and bran. And as he crouched, leaning listlessly against the wall, his supple hand moved among the wheat raising it idly, and as idly letting it slip back through his thin fingers.

"Fate!" he echoed to something the other said; "nay, 'twas not Fate, brother, which sent me to thy gaol. I was hard pressed; I am growing old for the life; it kills men soon. The police would have had me in the big *dacoity* case at Delhi despite all; so I bungled one farther north, to come--where thou wast--brother."

"And thou didst right," assented Shurruf, eagerly; "I can make things easy for thee."

The wheat slipped with a soft patter, like rain, through Shureef's fingers. "'Twas not that either which brought me to thy gaol. Listen. I am far through this life, but another begins. I am not going to plead *guilty* there. It is *not guilty* there, *not guilty* on the first count, *not guilty* as a lad of fifteen for theft--" He paused, then a faint curiosity came to his listlessness and he looked at the half-seen figure beside him--"and such a theft! I--I have not done so mean a one--since--"

Shurruf moved uneasily. "Mayhap not; boys do things men do not. And I have always--yea! thou knowest it--upheld thee better than some think. What then? Thy life is past amendment now, save for tobacco and such like; and these I will give, if thou art wise, for the ten years--"

"I shall not live three months of the ten years, brother," interrupted Shureef, calmly; and at the words a pang of regret that the solitary confinement could not be inflicted straight on end shot through Shurruf's breast, killing the faint remorse the remark had awakened; it would have simplified matters so much to have Shureef safe from the possibility of tale-bearing for those three months. "And, as I said, I want none of these things," went on Shureef; "I only want the truth. Promise to tell it, and I say naught; wilt promise, brother?"

"No!" whispered Shurruf, fiercely. "What good would it do now?"

"It would make some mourn for me; it would make more than cursing follow me; it would be evidence for me, a boy, at the Great Court."

The sleek face beside the anxious one took a strange expression, half joy, half fear. "That is fools' talk. Doth not the Lord know, is He not just?"

"Yes, He knows," persisted Shureef; "but others must know, else they will not claim my body, else my grave will not be cooled with tears. It would not harm thee much, Shurruf. Mayhap 'twould be wiser for thee not to seek advancement, since one, who might hear if the truth were told, seeks it also; but if thou stayest in this fat post--"

"Peace, fool!" interrupted Shurruf, passionately. "I will not. Thou hast no proof, so do thy worst. Thou canst claim me brother if thou wilt, naught else--" Shureef bent forward and whispered a name in his ear, making him start back. "It is not true," he went on rapidly; "he died long since. Think not I do not understand, that I cannot follow thy evil thoughts. Have I not watched thee these twenty years? Have I not seen thee sink, and sink, and sink? Can I not guess thy guile--"

"Because it should have been thine own, Shurruf," interrupted his brother in a new tone. "But let that be. It matters not. I asked this thing of thee that thou mightest do it freely; if not, I take

it--for I can take it now. I give thee a fortnight to consider; till then I have no more to say, and thy words will be wasted."

He rose, feeling his way by the wall to the inner cell, and Shurruf, after pausing a moment uncertainly, stole from the outer one, locking the door behind him. There were stronger arguments than words at his command, and he had a fortnight wherein to use them. And use them he did, unsparingly. The week of solitary confinement which followed, and the week of work in the general ward, were alternately hell and comparative heaven; a hell of scant food, work beyond limit, and punishments; a heaven of tobacco, opium, even a nip of country liquor now and then; and, as a foretaste of favours to come, there was a day of work in the gaol-gardens among the cool runnels of water and the spinach-patches. For the Doctor, having small faith in things beyond his ken, was dividing the dead who were in the Guardianship of God, from the living who were in his own; in other words, he was enclosing a new graveyard beyond the garden, and as this involved work in the absolute open air, with greater chance of escape, the good-conduct men from the walled garden were drafted outwards, and their place supplied from within. But neither fifteen lashes, nor the privilege of smoking surreptitiously behind a thicket of jasmine and roses, tempted Shureef from the settled resolve which gave his face a curiously spiritual look. The Doctor called it something else, and in the private list he kept of those in his care, put the name of an incurable disease opposite Shureef's, with this after it: *? three months--*and he did not try to teach him carpet-weaving or pottery-making.

The Overseer, however, felt that three months was all too long for him, when, another week of solitary confinement coming round, he slipped over in the dead of night to Shureef's cell, and found him once more fingering the corn idly; but as it was a moonlight night now, he could see the grains of wheat, shining like gold, slip through the lean fingers.

"It is not much I ask, brother," persisted Shureef, almost gently; "only that the home folk may claim my body when I die. That is why I came to thy gaol; for they will not, if the truth be not told, and only thou canst tell it without flaw. True, I can harm thee, but I have no wish for that. See! I give thee yet another week for thought. That is three from three months; but I give no more."

Shurruf Deen went back to his quarters over the big entrance-gate, where the warders waited on him as if he were a prince, and pondered over the dilemma in a white heat of indignation. It was so selfish of Shureef; when God knew, what were a few tears more or less when a man had deliberately cast away his right to wailing a dozen times over? What Shureef had said about the first count was true, but what of the others? What right had he to claim any compensation for that first injustice? What right had he even to claim commiseration for the result of a life he had chosen? Yet the Doctor gave it him; he even ordered him back to the garden after a day or two, with the remark to the native assistant-surgeon that it was a case of the candle of life having been burned at both ends. "He might live a year," he said critically, "but I give him three months; and, of course, he might drop down dead any day."

He might; if he only would before the week was out, thought Shurruf, longingly. It would save so much trouble, for though the whole truth could easily be shirked, it would scarcely be possible to deny the relationship, or hush up his own share in the youthful escapade. For there had been sufficient for him to be dismissed by the magistrate with a reprimand for keeping bad company; and this, added to the scandal of a notorious criminal claiming kin to him, would militate against promotion. If Shureef would only drop down dead!

He did. The very day before the week was up he was shot in an organized attempt at escape on the part of five or six prisoners, who saw their opportunity in the temporary freedom of garden-work. A very determined attempt it was, involving violence, in which Shurruf gained fresh laurels by his promptness in ordering the sentry to fire. One man was wounded in the arm, and broke his leg in falling back from the wall he was scaling. Shureef was picked up quite dead behind the thicket of jasmine and rose. As two or three shots had been fired in that direction, it was possible it might have been an accident, and that he was not really one of the plotters; on the other hand both opium and tobacco were found upon him, proof positive that he had friends in the gaol. And though the warder, who had connived at the attempt at escape, and now pleaded guilty in the hope of lessening punishment, swore that Shureef was not in the plot, he had nothing to reply when Shurruf asked him for the name of any other gaol official who tampered with his duty.

"Poor devil!" said the Doctor, musingly, as he finished the necessary examination. "He was a fool to try--if he did; the run would have finished him to a certainty. Even the excitement of being in the fun might have killed him without anything else, for it was worse than I thought; his heart was mere tissue-paper."

Once more the Overseer's rich brown skin seemed to fade, though he was glib enough with his tongue. "He is to be buried tonight?" he asked easily.

"The sooner the better. *His* friends aren't likely to want him back; but all the same put him in the new yard." The Doctor's hand, as he drew up the sheet, finally lingered a bit. "If--if he wanted to get outside, he may as well, poor devil!"

So in the cool of the evening Shureef, wrapped in a white cloth, was taken from a solitary cell

and given into the Guardianship of God in the sun-baked patch of earth where he was the first to lie. It was a desolate patch, bare of everything save a white efflorescence of salt, showing, as the warder remarked cynically, that it was only fit for corpses. Not even for them, dissented the diggers, who, with leg-irons clanking discordantly, lingered over their task while Shureef, a still, white roll of cloth, waited their pleasure. The soil, they said, was much harder than in the old place, and if folk were to be dug up as well as buried--not that any would want the expense of moving Shureef, whose name was a byword--here the Overseer's portly figure showed in the adjoining garden, and they hurried on with their work.

Shurruf did not come over to the grave, however, perhaps because he was in a demi-toilet of loose muslin, without his turban, and in charge of his little son, a pretty child of four, whom the obsequious gardener had presented with a bunch of jasmine and roses, and who, after a time becoming bored by his father's interest in the spinach and onions, drifted on by himself to find something more attractive, until he came to stand wide-eyed and curious in the mourners' place at the head of the grave. And there he stood silent, watching the proceedings and keeping a tight clutch on his flowers, until a hand from behind, dragging him back passionately, sent a shower of earth over the edge on to Shureef's body which had just been laid in its last resting-place, and sent also a bunch of roses and jasmines to lie close to Shureef's heart, for the child dropped them in his fright.

"Weep not, my prince!" cried the warder. "Thou shalt have them again. Here, some one, go down and hand them up."

But Shurruf, the Overseer, who, with his little son clutched up in his arms, stood now in the mourners' place, his face almost grey, turned on the man with a curse. "Let the flowers lie," he said; "there are plenty more in the garden." So, without another word, he left them to fill up the grave; and they, having done it, left Shureef with the flowers on his breast to the Guardianship of God.

And there he stayed month after month, until the year drew close to its end. And Shurruf Deen stayed in the gaol, for, after all, the man whose place he had hoped to get was allowed another year's extension of service. Perhaps it was the deferred hope which told on the Overseer's nerves; but certain it is that the passing months brought a strange look of anxiety to his face. Perhaps it was that, though he had set aside much, he could not quite set aside the thought of that bunch of roses and jasmine which his little son's hand had thrown upon Shureef's breast. Something there was in his mind without a doubt, which made him, but a few weeks before the Guardianship of God must end, and before the momentous question of promotion must be decided, steal out more than once at night to Shureef's solitary grave, as he had stolen to his solitary cell. But the memory of the still, white roll of cloth with the flowers upon it, touched him more closely than the memory of the listless figure letting the wheat-grains slip through its idle fingers. Why it should have done so it were hard to say. Fear had something to do with it--sheer superstition that when the Guardianship of God was over, the uncared-for body might fall into the keeping of the devil and torment him. Love had its part too; love, and a vague remorse born more of the chance which had made his little son chief mourner, than of a sense of personal guilt. Plainly it did not do to try and escape the tie of kindred altogether.

So, by degrees, the thought grew that it would indeed be safer for Shureef to pass into other guardianship before God's ended. He had asked for nothing, save that his grave might be cooled by tears; if this could be compassed, surely he ought to be satisfied, ought to forget everything else and leave his kindred in peace. And it might be compassed with care. Shureef's mother--not his own, for they had only been half-brothers--was alive, alive and blind, and poor too, since his father, stung by his son's disgrace, had sent her back to her own people. Poor, blind, and a mother! Here was material ready to his hand. It would not cost half a month's pay, even with the expenses of moving the body; and then--yes, then, when they were no longer needed, those flowers, even if they were dust, as they must be, could be taken away and forgotten.

It was the anniversary of Shureef's burial, and in the cool of the evening the clanking leg-irons were once more at work upon his grave; for, much to the Doctor's disgust, an old woman had put in an appearance at the last moment with unimpeachable credentials of relationship and sufficient cash to convey the remains to her village. There was, as Shurruf, the Overseer, said regretfully, no valid excuse for refusal, and the Doctor-*sahib* might rely upon his doing all things decently and in order, and on strict sanitary principles. Whereupon the Doctor had smiled grimly, and said that in cases of resurrection there was safety in extremes.

Nevertheless, it was the love of horrors, no doubt, which made the gathering round the opening grave so large. The old woman sate in the mourners' place, her tears flowing already. The others, however, talked over probabilities, and told tales of former disinterments with cheerful realism, while Shurruf Deen bustled backwards and forwards among his elaborate arrangements.

They dug down to one side of the original grave after approved fashion, so that there should be as little disturbance as possible, and when traces of what was sought showed in a fold of still, white shroud, extra cloths were sent down, in which, covering as they exposed, the workmen gradually swathed all that was mortal of the dead *dacoit*.

"He hath not lost much weight," said those at the ropes as they hauled.

So there the task was done, decently and in order. But Shurruf wanted something which he knew must still lie within the brand-new shroud, and, ere they lifted the gruesome bundle to the coffin awaiting it, he stooped,--then stood up suddenly, grey to the very lips, and crushing something in his hand, something, so it seemed to those around, pink and white and green. But his face riveted them. "In the Guardianship of God," he muttered, "in the Guardianship of God."

"What is it?" said one to another, as he stood dazed and speechless. Then they, too, stooped, looked, touched, until, as he had lain when they found him behind the rose and jasmine thicket, Shureef lay before them looking more as if he was asleep than dead.

"*Wah!*" said a voice in the crowd; "he cannot have been so bad as folk thought him, if the Lord has taken all that care of him."

Shurruf gave a sort of sob, stepped back, lost his footing on the edge of the open grave and fell heavily. When they picked him up he was dead.

The Doctor, summoned hastily, shook his head. Death must have been instantaneous, he said; the neck was broken. After which he went over and looked at Shureef curiously; then stooped down and picked up some of the earth on which the body lay, earth which had come from the bottom of the grave. "Look," he said, pointing out minute white crystals in it to the native assistant; "that's bi-borate of soda. I knew there was some of it here when I chose this patch. It's a useful antiseptic; but he has been in a regular mine of it--a curious case of embalming, isn't it?"

It certainly was; and it was still more curious that a bunch of fresh roses and jasmine should have been found on Shurruf Deen the Overseer's breast, as he lay in Shureef's grave; but, as the Doctor said, the obsequious gardener had most likely given them to him as he passed through the spinach and onion patches. And perhaps it was so.

## **A BAD-CHARACTER SUIT**

A flood of blistering, yellow sunshine was pouring down on to the prostrate body of Private George Afford as he lay on his back, drunk, in an odd little corner between two cook-room walls in the barrack square; and a stream of tepid water from a skin bag was falling on his head as Peroo the *bhisti* stood over him, directing the crystal curve now on his forehead, now scientifically on his ears. The only result, however, was that Private George Afford tried unavailingly to scratch them, then swore unintelligibly.

Peroo twisted the nozzle of the *mussuck* to dryness, and knelt down beside the slack strength in the dust. So kneeling, his glistening curved brown body got mixed up with the glistening curved brown water-bag he carried, until at first sight he seemed a monstrous spider preying on a victim, for his arms and legs were skinny.

"*Sahib!*" he said, touching his master on the sleeve. It was a very white sleeve, and the buttons and belts and buckles all glistened white or gold in the searching sunlight, for Peroo saw to them, as he saw to most things about Private Afford's body and soul; why God knows, except that George Afford had once--for his own amusement--whacked a man who, for his, was whacking Peroo. He happened to be one of the best bruisers in the regiment, and George Afford, who was in a sober bout, wanted to beat him; which he did.

There was no one in sight; nothing in fact save the walls, and an offensively cheerful castor-oil bush which grew, greener than any bay-tree, in one angle, sending splay fingers of shadow close to Private Afford's head as if it wished to aid in the cooling process. But despite the solitude, Peroo's touch on the white sleeve was decorous, his voice deference itself.

"*Sahib!*" he repeated. "If the *Huzoor* does not get up soon, the Captain will find the master on the ground when he passes to rations. And that is unnecessary."

He might as well have spoken to the dead. George Afford's face, relieved of the douche treatment, settled down to placid, contented sleep. It was not a bad face; and indeed, considering the habits of the man, it was singularly fine and clear cut; but then in youth it had evidently been a superlatively handsome one also.

Peroo waited a minute or two, then undid the nozzle of his skin bag once more, and drenched the slack body and the dust around it.

"What a tyranny is here!" he muttered to himself, the wrinkles on his forehead giving him the perplexed look of a baby monkey; "yet the master will die of sunstroke if he be not removed. *Hai,*



*Hai!* What it is to eat forbidden fruit and find it a turnip."

With which remark he limped off methodically to the quarter guard and gave notice that Private George Afford was lying dead drunk between cook-rooms Nos. 7 and 8; after which he limped on as methodically about his regular duty of filling the regimental waterpots. What else was there to be done? The special master whom he had elected to serve between whiles would not want his services for a month or two at least, since that period would be spent in clink. For Private George Afford was a habitual offender.

Such a very habitual offender, indeed, that Evan Griffiths, the second major, had not a word to say when the Adjutant and the Colonel conferred over this last offence, though he had stood Afford's friend many a time; to the extent even of getting him re-enlisted in India--a most unusual favour--when, after an interval of discharge, he turned up at his ex-captain's bungalow begging to be taken on; averring, even, that he had served his way out to India before the mast in that hope, since enlistment at the Depôt might take him to the other battalion. The story, so the Adjutant had said, was palpably false; but the silent little Major had got the Colonel to consent; so Private George Afford--an ideal soldier to look at--had given the master tailor no end of trouble about the fit of his uniform, for he was a bit of a dandy when he was sober. But now even Major Griffiths felt the limit of forbearance was past; nor could a court-martial be expected to take into consideration the trivial fact which lay at the bottom of the observant little Major's mercy, namely, that though when he was sober George Afford was a dandy, when he was drunk--or rather in the stage which precedes actual drunkenness--he was a gentleman. Vulgarity of speech slipped from him then; and even when he was passing into the condition in which there is no speech he would excuse his own lapses from strict decorum with almost pathetic apologies. "It is no excuse, I know, sir," he would say with a charming, regretful dignity, "but I have had a very chequered career--a very chequered career indeed."

That was true; and one of the black squares of the chessboard of life was his now, for the court-martial which sentenced Private George Afford to but a short punishment added the rider that he was to be thereafter dismissed from Her Majesty's Service.

"He is quite incorrigible," said the Colonel, "and as we are pretty certain of going up to punish those scoundrels on the frontier as soon as the weather cools, we had better get rid of him. The regiment mustn't have a speck anywhere, and his sort spoils the youngsters."

The Major nodded.

So Private George Afford got his dismissal, also the bad-character suit of mufti which is the Queen's last gift even to such as he.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was full six weeks after he had stood beside that prostrate figure between cook-rooms Nos. 7 and 8 that Peroo was once more engaged in the same task, though not in the same place.

And this time the thin stream of water falling on George Afford's face found it grimed and dirty, and left it showing all too clearly the traces of a fortnight's debauch. For Peroo, being of a philosophic mind, had told himself, as he had limped away from the quarter guard after his report, that now, while his self-constituted master would have no need of his services, was the time for him to take that leave home which he had deferred so long. Therefore, two or three days after this event, he had turned up at the Quartermaster's office with the curious Indian institution, "the changeling," and preferred his request for a holiday. It was granted, of course; there is no reason why leave should not be granted when a double, willing even to answer to the same name, stands ready to step into the original's shoes, without payment; that remaining a bargain between the doubles.

"Here," said Peroo, "is my brother. He is even as myself. His character is mine. We are all water-carriers, and he has done the work for two days. I will also leave him my skin bag, so that the Presence may be sure it is clean. He is a Peroo also."

He might have been *the* Peroo so far as the Quartermaster's requirements went. So the original went home and the copy took his place; but not for the two months. The order for active service of which the Colonel had spoken came sooner than was expected, and Peroo, hearing of it, started back at once for the regiment. A "changeling" could pass muster in peace, but war required the reality; besides, the master would, no doubt, be released. He was surely too good fighting material to be left behind, Peroo told himself; yet there his hero was, lying in the dust of a bye-alley in the bazaar in a ragged bad-character suit, while the barrack squares were alive with men, not half so good to look at, talking, as the mules were laden, of the deeds they were to do!

The wrinkles on Peroo's forehead grew more like those of a monkey in arms than ever. This

was indeed a tyranny! but at least the Presence could be moved out of the burning sun this time without, of necessity, getting him into more trouble. So a few friends were called, and together they carried George Afford into the windowless slip of a room which Peroo locked at four o'clock in the morning and unlocked at ten at night, but which, nevertheless, served him as a home. There was nothing in it save a string bed and a drinking vessel; for Peroo, after his kind, ate his food in the bazaar; but that for the present was all the Englishman required either. So there Peroo left him in the darkness and the cool, safe for the day.

But after that? The problem went with Peroo as he limped about filling the cook-room waterpots, for on the morrow he must be filling them on the first camping-ground, fifteen miles away from that slip of a room where the master lay. What would become of him then?

The sandy stretches in which the barracks stood were full of mules, camels, carts, and men of all arms belonging to the small picked force which was to march with the one solid regiment at dawn on their mission of punishment.

"*Pâni* (water)," shouted a perspiring artilleryman, grappling with a peculiarly obstinate mule, as Peroo went past with his skin bag. "*Pâni*, and bring a real *jildi* (quickness) along with it. W'ot! you ain't the drinkin'-water, ain't yer? W'ot's that to me? I ain't one o' yer bloomin' Brahmins; but I'll take it outside instead o' in, because of them black-silly's o' the doctor's. So turn on the hose, Johnnie; I'll show you how."

"E knows all about it, you bet," put in one of the regiment cheerfully. "Wy, 'e's bin hydraulic engineer and waterworks combined to that pore chap as got the sack the other day--George Afford--"

"Sure it was a thriflin' mistake wid the prepositions his godfathers made when they named him; for it was on and not off-erd he was six days out of sivin," remarked a tall Irishman.

"You hold your jaw, Pat," interrupted another voice. "'E was a better chap nor most, w'en 'e wasn't on the lap; and, Lordy! 'e could fight when he 'ad the chanst--couldn't 'e, Waterworks? Just turn that hose o' yours my way a bit, will yer?"

"*Huzoor*," assented Peroo, deferentially; he understood enough to make the thought pass through his brain that it was a pity the master had not the chance. Perhaps the curve of water conveyed this to that other brain beneath the close, fair curls, whence the drops flew sparkling in the sunlight. At any rate, their owner went on in a softer tone--

"Yes, 'e fit--like fits. Looked, too, as if 'e was born ter die on the field o' glory, and not in a bad-character suit; but, as the parson says: 'Beauty is vain. I will repay, saith the Lord.'"

The confused morality of this passed Peroo by; and yet something not altogether dissimilar lay behind his wrinkled forehead when, work over, he returned to the slip of a room and found Afford vaguely roused by his entrance.

"I--I am aware it is no possible excuse, sir," came his voice, curiously refined, curiously pathetic, "but I really have had a very chequered life, I have indeed."

"*Huzoor*," acquiesced Peroo, briefly; but even that was sufficient to bring the hearer closer to realities. He sat up on the string bed, looked about him stupidly, then sank back again.

"Get away! you d---d black devil," he muttered, with a sort of listless anger. "Can't you let me die in peace, you fool? Can't you let me die in the gutter, die in a bad-character suit? It's all I'm fit for--all I'm fit for." Voice, anger, listlessness, all tailed away to silence. He turned away with a sort of sob, and straightway fell asleep, for he was still far from sober.

Peroo lit a cresset lamp and stood looking at him. Beauty was certainly vain here, and if the Lord was going to repay, it was time He began. Time some one began, at any rate, if the man who had fought for him, Peroo, was not to carry out his desire of dying in the gutter--dying in a bad-character suit! The latter misfortune could, however, be avoided. Things were going cheap in the bazaar that evening, as was only natural when it was to be deserted for six months at least, so it ought not to be hard to get the master an exchange for something more suitable to his beauty, if not to his death.

Five minutes afterwards George Afford, too much accustomed to such ministrations to be disturbed by the process of undressing, was still asleep, his chin resting peacefully on Peroo's best white cotton shawl, and the bad-character suit was on its way to the pawnshop round the corner. It was nigh on an hour, however, before Peroo, having concluded his bargain, came back with it, and by the light of the cresset set to work appraising his success or failure. A success certainly. The uniform was old, no doubt, but it was a corporal's; and what is more, it had three good-conduct stripes on the arm. That ought to give dignity, even to a death in the gutter.

Peroo brought out some pipeclay and pumice-stone from a crevice, and set to work cheerfully on the buttons and belts, thinking as he worked that he had indeed made a good bargain. With a judicious smear of cinnabar here and there, the tunic would be almost as good as the master's old one--*plus* the good-conduct stripes, of course, which he could never have gained in the regiment.

But out of it? If, for instance, the Lord were really to repay Private George Afford for that good deed in defending a poor lame man?--a good deed which no bad one could alter for the worse! Peroo on this point would have been a match for a whole college of Jesuits in casuistry, as he laid on the pipeclay with lavish hand, and burnished the buttons till they shone like gold.

It was grey dawn when George Afford woke, feeling a deferential touch on his shoulder.

"*Huzoor!*" came a familiar voice, "the first bugle has gone. The *Huzoor* will find his uniform--a corporal's, with three good-conduct stripes--is ready. The absence of a rifle is to be regretted; but that shall be amended if the *Huzoor* will lend a gracious ear to the plan of his slave. In the meantime a gifting of the *Huzoor's* feet for the putting on of stockings might be ordered."

George Afford thrust out a foot mechanically, and sate on the edge of the string bed staring stupidly at the three good-conduct stripes on the tunic, which was neatly folded beside him.

"It is quite simple," went on the deferential voice. "The *Huzoor* is going to march with the colours, but he will be twelve hours behind them; that is all. He will get the fighting, and by-and-by, when the killing comes and men are wanted, the Colonel-*sahib* may give a place; but, in any case, there will always be the fighting. For the rest, I, the *Huzoor's* slave, will manage; and as there will, of necessity, be no canteen, there can be no tyranny. Besides, since there is not a cawrie in the master's jacket, what else is he to do?"

The last argument was unanswerable. George Afford thrust out his other foot to be shod for this new path, and stared harder than ever at the good-conduct stripes.

That night, despite the fatigues of a first day in camp, Peroo trudged back along the hard white road to meet some one whom he expected; for this was the first step, and he had, perforce, been obliged to leave his charge to his own devices for twelve hours amid the distractions of the bazaar. Still, without a cawrie in his pocket--Peroo had carefully extracted the few annas he had found in one--a man was more or less helpless, even for evil.

Despite this fact, there was a lilt in the lagging step which, just as Peroo had begun to give up hope of playing Providence, came slowly down the road. It belonged to George Afford, in the gentlemanly stage of drink. He had had a chequered life, he said almost tearfully, but there were some things a man of honour could not do. He could not break his promise to an inferior--a superior was another matter. In that case he paid for it honestly. But he had promised Peroo--his inferior--to come. So here he was; and that was an end of it.

It seemed more than once during the next few hours as if the end had, indeed, come. But somehow Peroo's deferential hand and voice extricated those tired uncertain feet, the weary sodden brain, from ditches and despair; still it was a very sorry figure which Peroo's own hasty footsteps left behind, safely quartered for the day in a shady bit of jungle, while he ran on to overtake the rear-guard if he could. The start, however, had been too much for his lameness, and he was a full hour late at his work; which, of course, necessitated his putting in an excuse. He chose drunkenness, as being nearest the truth, was fined a day's wages, and paid it cheerfully, thinking with more certainty of the sleeping figure he had left in the jungles.

The afternoon sun was slanting through the trees before it stirred, and George Afford woke from the sleep of fatigue superadded to his usual sedative. He felt strangely refreshed, and lay on his back staring at the little squirrels yawning after their midday snooze in the branches above him. And then he laughed suddenly, sate up and looked about him half confusedly. Not a trace of humanity was to be seen; nothing but the squirrels, a few green pigeons, and down in the mirror-like pool behind the trees--a pool edged by the percolating moisture from the water with faint spikes of sprouting grass--a couple of egrets were fishing lazily. Beyond lay a bare sandy plain, backed by faint blue hills--the hills where fighting was to be had. Close at hand were those three good-conduct stripes.

That night Peroo had not nearly so far to go back along the broad white road; yet the step which came echoing down it, if steadier, lagged more. Nor was Peroo's task much easier, for George Afford--in the abject depression which comes to the tippler from total abstinence--sate down in the dust more than once, and swore he would not go another step without a dram. Still, about an hour after dawn, he was once more dozing in a shady retreat with a pot of water and some dough cakes beside him, while Peroo, in luck, was getting a lift to the third camping-ground.

But even at the second, where the sleeping figure remained, the country was wilder, almost touching the "skirts of the hills," and so, when George Afford roused himself--as the animals rouse themselves to meet the coming cool of evening--a ravine deer was standing within easy shot, looking at him with head thrown back and wide, startled nostrils, scenting the unknown.

The sight stirred something in the man which had slept the sleep of the dead for years; that keen delight of the natural man, not so much in the kill as in the chase; not so much in the mere chase itself as in its efforts--its freedom. He rose, stretching his long arms in what was half a yawn, half a vague inclination to shake himself free of some unseen burden.

But that night he swore at Peroo for leading him a fool's dance; he threatened to go back. He was not so helpless as all that. He was not a slave; he would have his tot of rum like any other

soldier as--

"*Huzoor*," interrupted Peroo, deferentially, "this slave is aware that many things necessary to the *Huzoor's* outfit as a soldier remain to be produced. But with patience all may be attained. Here, by God's grace, is the rifle. One of us--Smith-*sahib* of G Company, *Huzoor*--found freedom to-day. He was reconnoitring with Griffiths, Major-*sahib*, when one of these hell-doomed *Sheeahs*--whom Heaven destroy--shot him from behind a rock--"

Private George Afford seemed to find his feet suddenly. "Smith of G Company?" he echoed in a different voice.

"*Huzoor!*--the *sahib* whom the *Huzoor* thrashed for thrashing this slave--"

"Poor chap!" went on George Afford, as if he had not heard. "So they've nicked him--but we'll pay 'em out--we--" His fingers closed mechanically on the rifle Peroo was holding out to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a fortnight after this, and the camp lay clustered closely in the mouth of a narrow defile down which rushed a torrent swollen from the snows above; a defile which meant decisive victory or defeat to the little force which had to push their way through it to the heights above. Yet, though death, maybe, lay close to each man, the whole camp was in an uproar because Major Griffiths' second pair of *putties* had gone astray. The other officers had been content with one set of these woollen bandages which in hill-marching serve as gaiters, and help so much to lessen fatigue; but the Major, being methodical, had provided against emergencies. And now, when, with that possibility of death before him, his soul craved an extreme order in all things, his clean pair had disappeared. Now the Major, though silent, always managed to say what he meant. So it ran through the camp that they had been stolen, and men compared notes over the fact in the mess-tent and in the canteen.

In the former, the Adjutant with a frown admitted that of late there had been a series of inexplicable petty thefts in camp, which had begun with the disappearance of Private Smith's rifle. That might perhaps be explained in an enemy's country, but what the deuce anybody could want with a pair of bone shirt-studs--

"And a shirt," put in a mournful voice.

"*Item* a cake of scented soap," said another.

"And a comb," began a third.

The Colonel, who had till then preserved a discreet silence, here broke in with great heat to the Adjutant.

"Upon my soul, sir, it's a disgrace to the staff, and I must insist on a stringent inquiry the instant we've licked these hill-men. I--I didn't mean to say anything about it--but I haven't been able to find my tooth-brush for a week."

Whereupon there was a general exodus into the crisp, cold air outside, where the darkness would hide inconvenient smiles, for the Colonel was one of those men who have a different towel for their face and hands.

The stars were shining in the cleft between the tall, shadowy cliffs which rose up on either side, vague masses of shadow on which--seen like stars upon a darker sky--the watchfires of the enemy sparkled here and there. The enemy powerful, vigilant; and yet beside the camp-fires close at hand the men had forgotten the danger of the morrow in the trivial loss of the moment, and were discussing the Major's *putties*.

"It's w'ot I say all along," reiterated the romancer of G Company. "It begun ever since Joey Smith was took from us at Number Two camp. It's 'is ghost--that's w'ot it is. 'Is ghost layin' in a *trew-so*. Jest you look 'ere! They bury 'im, didn't they? as 'e was--decent like in coat and pants--no more. Well! since then 'e's took 'is rifle off us, an' a greatcoat off D Company, and a knapsack off A."

"Don't be lavin' out thim blankets he tuk from the store, man," interrupted the tall Irishman. "Sure it's a testhimony to the pore bhoy's character annyhow that he shud be wantin' thim where he is."

"It is not laughing at all at such things I would be, whatever," put in another voice seriously, "for it is knowing of such things we are in the Highlands--"

"Hold your second sight, Mac," broke in a third; "we don't want none o' your shivers tonight."

You're as bad as they blamed niggers, and they swear they seen Joey more nor once in a red coat dodging about our rear."

"Well! they won't see 'im no more, then," remarked a fourth philosophically, "for 'e change 'is tailor. Leastways, 'e got a service khakee off Sergeant Jones the night afore last; the Sergeant took his Bible oath to 'ave it off Joey Smith's ghost, w'en 'e got time to tackle 'im, if 'e 'ave ter go to 'ell for it."

Major Griffiths meantime was having a similar say as he stood, eye-glass in eye, at the door of the mess-tent. "Whoever the thief is," he admitted, with the justice common to him, "he appears to have the instincts of a gentleman; but, by Gad, sir, if I find him he shall know what it is to take a field officer's gaiters."

Whereupon he gave a dissatisfied look at his own legs, a more contented one at the glimmering stars of the enemy's watchfires, and then turned in to get a few hours' rest before the dawn.

But some one a few miles farther down the valley looked both at his legs and at the stars with equal satisfaction. Some one, tall, square, straight, smoking a pipe--some one else's pipe, no doubt--beside the hole in the ground where, on the preceding night, the camp flagstaff had stood. That fortnight had done more for George Afford than give his outward man a trousseau; it had clothed him with a certain righteousness, despite the inward conviction that Peroo must be a magnificent liar in protesting that the *Huzoor's* outfit had either been gifted to him or bought honestly.

In fact, as he stood looking down at his legs complacently, he murmured to himself, "I believe they're the Major's, poor chap; look like him somehow." Then he glanced at the Sergeant's coatee he wore and walked up and down thoughtfully--up and down beside the hole in the ground where the flagstaff had stood.

So to him from the dim shadows came a limping figure.

"Well?" he called sharply.

"The orders are for dawn, *Huzoor*, and here are some more cartridges."

George Afford laughed; an odd, low little laugh of sheer satisfaction.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was past dawn by an hour or two, but the heights were still unwon.

"Send some one--any one!" gasped the Colonel, breathlessly, as he pressed on with a forlorn hope of veterans to take a knoll of rocks whence a galling fire had been decimating every attack. "Griffiths! for God's sake, go or get some one ahead of those youngsters on the right or they'll break--and then--"

Break! What more likely? A weak company, full of recruits, a company with its officers shot down, and before them a task for veterans--for that indifference to whizzing bullets which only custom brings. Major Griffiths, as he ran forward, saw all this, saw also the ominous waver. God! would he be in time to check it--to get ahead? that was what was wanted, some one ahead--no more than that--some one ahead!

There was some one. A tall figure ahead of the wavering boys.

"Come on! come on, my lads! follow me!" rang out a confident voice, and the Major, as he ran, half-blinded by the mists of his own haste, felt it was as a voice from heaven.

"Come on! come on!--give it 'em straight. Hip, hip, hurray!"

An answering cheer broke from the boys behind, and with a rush the weakest company in the regiment followed some one to victory.

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"I don't understand what the dickens it means," said the Colonel almost fretfully that same evening, when, safe over the pass, the little force was bivouacking in a willow-set valley on the

other side of the hills. Before it lay what it had come to gain, behind it danger past. "Some one in my regiment," he went on, "does a deuced plucky thing--between ourselves, saves the position: I want naturally to find out who it was, and am met by a cock and bull story about some one's ghost. What the devil does it mean, Major?"

The Major shook his head. "I couldn't swear to the figure, sir, though it reminded me a bit--but that's impossible. However, as I have by your orders to ride back to the top, sir, and see what can be done to hold it, I'll dip over a bit to where the rush was made, and see if there is any clue."

He had not to go so far. For in one of those tiny hollows in the level plateau of pass, whence the snow melts early, leaving a carpet of blue forget-me-nots and alpine primroses behind it, he, Sergeant Jones, and the small party going to make security still more secure, came upon Peroo, the water-carrier, trying to perform a tearful travesty of the burial service over the body of George Afford.

It was dressed in Sergeant Jones' tunic and Major Griffiths' *putties*, but the Sergeant knelt down beside it, and smoothed the stripes upon the cuff with a half-mechanical, half-caressing touch, and the Major interrupted Peroo's protestations with an odd tremor in his voice.

"What the devil does it matter," he said sharply, "what he took besides the pass? Stand aside, man; this is my work, not yours. Sergeant! form up your men for the salute--ball cartridge."

The Major's recollection of the service for the burial of the dead was not accurate, but it was comprehensive. So he committed the mortal remains of his brother soldier to the dust, confessing confusedly that there is a natural body and a spiritual body--a man that is of the earth earthy, and one that is the Lord from heaven. So following on a petition to be saved from temptation and delivered from evil, the salute startled the echoes, and they left George Afford in the keeping of the pass, and the pass in his keeping. And as the Major rode campwards, he wondered vaguely if some one before the great white throne wore a bad-character suit, or whether wisdom understood the plea, "I've had a very chequered life, I have indeed."

But Peroo had no such thoughts; needed no such excuse. It was sufficient for him that the *Huzoor* had once been the protector of the poor.

## **FIRE AND ICE**

It was in a little lath-and-plaster house down by the river that it all happened. The veriest confection of a house, looking for all the world as if it were a Neapolitan ice. Strawberry and vanilla in alternate stripes, with shuttered windows of coffee, and a furled wafer of an awning over the filagree chocolate balcony. And it rested, so to speak, against a platter of green plantain-leaves, bright as any emerald. No doubt the trees belonging to the leaves grew somewhere to the back or the side of it, but from the wide street in front you could see nothing but the green leaves surrounding the ice-cream.

For the rest it was a three-storeyed house outwardly; inwardly a two-storeyed one; or to be strictly accurate, it consisted of a storey and a half, since the further half of the ground floor and the whole of the middle storey belonged to a different house, having a different entrance in a different street, which lay in a different quarter. A very respectable quarter indeed, whereas the less said about the morals of the wide street down by the river the better. They were so bad that the modesty of the middle storey did not permit of a single window whence they could be seen. And this gave the house a queer, half-hearted look, for the top storey, and that half of the lowest one which belonged to it, were full of windows and doors opening on to the broad path leading to destruction. There were five, with fretted wooden architraves filling up the whole of the ground floor, so that you could see straight into the long, shallow hall whence there was no exit save by a narrow slit in the middle, showing a dim, steep staircase. It was always empty, this hall, though it was carpeted with striped carpets, and painted elaborately in flowery arabesques of a dull, pale, pink and flaming crimson; an odd mixture reminding you vaguely of bloodstains on a rose-leaf. And there was a red lamp over the centre door, which sent a rosy redness into the growing dusk; for it was lit early.

So was the pale--the palest of green lights--on the top storey which you could see swinging from the roof when the coffee-ice shutters were thrown back as the evening breeze came down the river. It was pale, yet bright like the first star at sunseting.

And sometimes, but not often, if you watched in the early dusk you might see the owner of the ice-cream house flit across the open window. She was like a sugar-drop herself, rose or saffron

decked with silver leaf, a slender scrap of a creature who tinkled as she walked and gave out a perfume of heavy scented flowers. But this was seldom; more often you only heard the tinkle, either of silver or laughter, since Burfâni--for that was her name--was of those who barter the one for the other. It was in truth her hereditary trade, though neither her father nor her mother had practised it; their rôle in life having been that of pater and mater-familias. A very necessary one if the race is to survive, and so in this generation, also, her brother had undertaken the duty of marrying his first cousin. The young couple being now, in the privacy and propriety of the second storey, engaged in bringing up a fine family of girls to succeed to the top storey when Burfâni's age should drive her to a lower place in life. In the meantime, however, she allowed them so much a month; enough to enable idle Zulfkar to fight quail in the bazaars and keep his wife Lâzîzan in the very strictest seclusion--as befitted one filched from the profession of bartering smiles in order to fulfil the first duty of a woman--the rearing of babes.

Thus, in more ways than one, the house was conglomerate. On the side overlooking the broad path there was the stained rose-leaf hall, empty, swept, and garnished, and the dark stair leading up and up to the wandering star of a lamp twinkling out into the sunset amid the sound of laughter and money. On the side giving upon narrow respectability a hall full of household gear and dirt where the little girls played, and a dark stair leading to a darker room where Lâzîzan sat day after day bewailing her sad fate; for, of course, life would have been much gayer over the way, since she was a beautiful woman. Far more beautiful in a lavish, somewhat loud fashion, than the lady belonging to the ice-cream house with her delicate, small face; but that was the very reason why she had been chosen out from many to carry on the race as it ought to be carried on. Burfâni, of course, was clever, and that counted for much, but it never did in their profession to rely on brains above looks. Nevertheless Lâzîzan, when in a bad temper, was in the habit of telling herself that if she had been taught to sing and dance, as the little lady had been taught, she could have made the ice-cream house a more paying concern than it was--to judge by the pittance they received from it! And this angry complaint grew with her years until as she sat suckling her fourth child, she felt sometimes as if she could strangle it, even though it was a boy, and though as a rule she was an affectionate mother. In truth the sheer animal instinct natural to so finely developed a creature lasted out the two or three years during which her children were hers alone; after that, when they began crawling downstairs and playing in the hall where she might never go, she became jealous and then forgot all about them.

Nevertheless, the boy being only some nine months old when he was suddenly carried off by one of those mysterious diseases common to Indian children, she wept profusely, and told Burfâni--who, as in duty bound, came round decently swathed in a *burka* to offer condolence on hearing of the sad event--that some childless one had doubtless cast a shadow on him for his beauty's sake, seeing that--thank Heaven!--all her children were beautiful. There was always a militant flavour underlying the politeness of these two, and even the presence of the quaint little overdressed dead baby awaiting its bier on the bed did not prevent attack and defence.

"They favour thee, sister," replied Burfâni, suavely. "In mind also, to judge from what I see. Therefore I shall await God's will in the future ere I choose one to educate."

Lâzîzan tittered sarcastically, despite her half-dried tears.

"'Tis my choice first, nevertheless. The best of this bunch in looks--ay, in brains too, perchance--marries my brother's son, according to custom. Sure my mother chose thus, and I must do the same, sister."

She spoke evenly, though for the moment the longing to strangle something had transferred itself to the saffron-coloured sugar-drop all spangled with silver which had emerged from its chrysalis of a *burka*. What business had the poor thin creature with such garments when *her* beauty was hidden by mere rags?

Burfâni laughed in her turn; an easy, indifferent laugh, and stretched out her slim henna-dyed palm with the usual friendly offering of cardamoms.

"Take one, sister," she said soothingly, "they are good for spleen and excessive grief. *Hai! Hai!* thou wilt be forlorn, indeed, now thy occupation is gone."

Lâzîzan, with her mouth full of spices, tittered again more artificially than ever. "I can do other things, perchance, beside suckle babes. Maybe I weary of it, and am glad of a change."

The saffron-coloured sugar-drop, seated on a low stool in front of the white-sheeted bed with its solemn little gaily-dressed burden, looked at its companion distastefully through its long lashes, and the slender, henna-dyed hand, catching some loops of the jasmine chaplets it wore, held them like a bouquet close to the crimson-tinted lips.

"It is a virtuous task, my sister," quoth Burfâni, gravely sniffing away at the heavy perfume, as if she needed something to make her environment less objectionable. "Besides, it is ever a mistake to forsake the profession of one's birth--"

"And wherefore should I?" interrupted Lâzîzan, seizing her opportunity recklessly. "Hast thou forsaken it, and are we not sisters?"

Again a cold, critical look of dislike came from the long, narrow eyes with their drowsy lids.

"Such words are idle, sister. Forget them. Thou wouldst not find it easier--"

"How canst tell?" interrupted Lâzîzan once more. "As well say that thou couldst put up with my life."

The saffron and silver daintiness shifted its look towards the bed, and the henna-dyed hand straightened a wrinkle in the sheet softly.

"God knows!" she said with a sudden smile. "Anyhow, sister, 'tis not wise to change one's profession as one grows old."

As one grows old! This parting shot rankled long after the decent *burka* had slipped like a shadow through the swept and garnished hall, and so up the dark stairs to the wandering starlight shining feebly out into the sunset; long after the preacher and the bier, and the family friends had carried the gaily-dressed baby to its grave, leaving the mother to the select and secluded tears of her neighbours; long after the little girls, wearied out with excitement, had fallen asleep cuddled together peacefully, innocent of that choice in the future; long after Zulfkar, full of liquor, tears, and curses, due to a surplusage in the funeral expenses allowed by Burfâni, to parental grief, and to bad luck at cards, came home, desirous of sympathy. He got none, for Lâzîzan, despite her seclusion, had never lost the empire which he felt she deserved as the handsomest woman he knew. 'Twas his own fault, she said curtly; he could marry another wife, have more liquor, and gamble as much as he liked if he chose. It was but a question of money, and if he were content to put up with beggarly alms from his sister, that ended the matter.

Whereupon, being in the maudlin stage of drink, he wept still more.

It must have been fully three months after the baby's funeral procession had gone down the respectable street, and so by a side alley found its way into the broad path leading alike to destruction and the graveyard, that Burfâni went round to her sister-in-law's again. This time she was in pink and silver, like a rose-water ice, and her words were cold as her looks.

"Say what thou wilt, Lâzîzan, the youth lingers. Have I not windows to my house? Have I not eyes? And such things shall not be bringing disgrace to respectable families."

Lâzîzan tittered as usual: "Lo! what a coil, because an idle stranger lingers at the back instead of the front, 'Tis for thy sake doubtless, sister, though thou art unkind. I wonder at it, seeing he is not ill-favoured."

"So thou *hast* seen him! So be it. See him no more, or I tell Zulfkar."

"Tell him what? That thou hast cast eyes on a handsome stranger, and because he comes not to thy call wouldst fasten the quarrel upon me? Zulfkar is no fool, sister, he will not listen!"

"If he listen not, he can leave my house--for 'tis mine. And mark my words, Lâzîzan Bibi, no scandal comes nigh it."

Cæsar's wife could not have spoken with greater unction, and in good sooth she meant her words, since in no class is seclusion bound to be more virtuous than in that to which Burfâni belonged.

So, as the motes in the sunbeam of life danced along the broad path in front of the ice-cream house, and drifted up its dark stair, the painted and perfumed little lady under the pale green lamp kept an eye upon the virtue of her family. Thus ere long it came to be Zulfkar's turn to listen to his sister's warning, and as he listened he sucked fiercely, confusedly, at the inlaid hookah which stood for the use of approved visitors; for in good sooth there had been more money to spend of late, and Lâzîzan was discreet enough save to those watchful, experienced eyes. The sound of his hubblings and bubblings therefore was his only answer, and they filled the wide, low, white-plastered upper storey, frescoed round each coffee-shuttered window with flowery devices, until Burfâni lost patience, and began coldly:

"Hast been taking lessons of a camel, brother?" she asked, rustling the tinsel-decked fan she held; and then suddenly she seemed to grasp something, and the contemptuous indifference of her bearing changed to passionate anger. Her silver-set feet clashed as they touched the floor, and she rose first to a sitting posture, finally to stand before the culprit, the very personification of righteous wrath.

"So! thou hast taken gold! This is why thou canst ruffle with the best at Gulâbun's--base-born parvenu who takes to the life out of wickedness--as *she* hath done, bringing disgrace to the screened house where thy mother dwelt in decency. But thou dwellest there no longer--thou eatest no bread of mine--I will choose my pupil from another brood."

"Nay, sister, 'tis not proved," stammered Zulfkar.

"Not proved!" she went on still more passionately. "Nay, 'tis not proved to thy neighbours, maybe, but to me? Mine eyes have seen--I know the trick--and out thou goest. I will have no such doings in my house, and so I warned her months ago. But there! what need for railing? Live on her gold an thou wilt, it shall not chink beside mine."



She sank back upon the silk coverlet again, and with a bitter laugh began to rustle the tinsel fan once more. And Zulfkar, after unavailing protests, slunk down the dark stairs, and so along the street to a certain house over the liquor-seller's shop, about which a noisy crowd gathered all day long.

And that night screams and blows came from the second storey, and unavailing curses on the mischief-maker. But if the latter heard them, she gave no sign to the approved visitors drinking sherbets in the cool upper storey with the windows set wide to the stars.

It was Zulfkar beating his wife, of course, because she was so handsome primarily; secondly, because she had been foolish enough to be found out; thirdly, because even in liquor he was sharp enough to recognise that Burfâni would keep her word.

And she did. The supplies stopped from that day. Within a week the second storey lay empty, while Lâzîzan wept tears of pain and spite in a miserable little lodging in the very heart of the city. It is difficult even to hint at the impotent rage the woman felt towards her sister-in-law. Even Zulfkar's blows were forgotten in the one mad longing to revenge herself upon the pink-and-saffron daintiness which would not spare one crumb from a full table. For so to Lâzîzan's coarse, passionate nature the matter presented itself, bringing with it a fierce delight at the perfections of her own lover. He had deserted her for the time, it is true, but that was the way of lovers when husbands were angry; by-and-by he would come back, and there would be peace, since Zulfkar must have gold.

So ran her calculations; but she reckoned without a certain fierce intolerance which the latter shared with his sister; also somewhat prematurely on an immediate emptying of his pockets. But luck was not all against him; the cards favoured him. And so, when a few days after the flitting from the second storey, she, being sick to death of dulness, thought the time had come for self-assertion, she found herself mistaken. Zulfkar, still full of Dutch courage, fell upon her again, and beat her most unmercifully, finishing up with an intimidatory slash at her nose. It was not much, not half so serious as the beating, but the very thought of possible disfigurement drove her mad, and the madness drove her to a corner where she could plan revenge while Zulfkar slept heavily--for he was more than half drunk. And *this*, too, was the fault of the saffron-and-rose devil in the upper storey, who had her amusement and spied upon other women's ways. And *this* meant days more ere she, Lâzîzan, would be presentable, even if she did not carry the mark to her grave, and all because that she-devil was jealous--jealous of *her* lover!

Oh for revenge! And why not? The door was unlatched, since Zulfkar had forgotten it in his anger; the streets were deserted. Even the broad path down by the river would be asleep, the green light gone from above, only the red lamp swinging over the outer door, sending a glow.... Fire! The thought leapt to her brain like a flame itself. Why not? Zulfkar had purposely kept--all unbeknown to the she-devil--a second key to that empty second floor, and he was in a drunken sleep. If she stole it--if she took the bottle of paraffin--if she set fire to the wooden partition separating the stairs--if she broke the red lamp and pretended that was it--

She did not stop to think. She had begun the task almost before she had thought out the details, and was fumbling in Zulfkar's pockets as he lay. And there were two bottles of paraffin in the corner; that was because he had brought one home, and the market-woman another by mistake. So much the better, so much the bigger blaze. Then out into the street, not forgetting a box of safety matches--strange companions to such a task. She knew her way well, having wandered free enough as a child before the lot was drawn, the die cast which sent her to suckle babes. Yet, being a woman beset by a thousand superstitious fears, it needed all her courage ere she found herself face to face with the thin wooden partition surrounding the steep stair leading upwards. How many times had she not listened to feet ascending those unseen stairs, and heard the tinkle of laughter as the unseen door above opened?

Well, it would blaze finely, and cut off at once all means of escape. A devilish plan indeed, and the leaping flames, ere she left them to their task, showed the face of a fiend incarnate.

And so to wait for the few minutes before the whole world must know that the saffron and the rose daintiness was doomed. No more laughter--no more lovers--that would be for her, Lâzîzan, not for the other with her cold sneers.

A licking tongue of flame showed for an instant and made her pray Heaven none might see it too soon. Then a crackle, a puff of smoke, next a cry of fire, but, thank Heaven, only from the broad path. And what good were the running feet, what good the shouts of the crowd in which her shrouded figure passed unnoticed, unless the upper storey had wings? For the stairs must be gone--hopelessly gone--by this time.

More than the stairs, for with one sudden blaze the lath-and-plaster house seemed to melt like ice itself before the sheet of flame which the soft night wind bent riverwards.

And still the top storey slept, or was it suffocated? No! there was some one at the window--some one gesticulating wildly. A man--not a woman.

"Throw yourself down!" cried an authoritative foreign voice, "'tis your only chance."

Surely, since the ice melted visibly during the sudden hush which fell upon the jostling crowd.

"Throw yourself down!" came the order again; "we'll catch you if we can. Stand back, good people."

"Quick! it's your last chance," came the inexorable voice once more. Then there was a leap, a scream--a crash, as in his despair the man overleapt the mark and fell among the parting crowd. Fell right at Lâzîzan's feet face uppermost.

And it was the face of the handsome stranger--of her lover.

Her shriek echoed his as she flung herself beside him. And at the sound something white and ghostlike slipped back from the window with a tinkle of laughter.

"Burfâni! Burfâni!" shouted the crowd. "Drop gently--we'll save you! Burfâni! Burfâni!"

But there was no answer; and the next moment with a roar and a crash Vice fell upon Virtue, and both together upon the swept and garnished hall and the hall where the little girls had played.

The ice-cream house had become a blazing pile of fire.

## THE SHÂHBÂSH WALLAH

Shâhbâsh, Bhaiyan, Shâhbâsh!

The words, signifying "Bravo, boys, bravo!" came in a despondent drawl from the coolie leaning against the ladder--one of those crazy bamboo ladders with its rungs tied on with grass twine at varying slants and distances, whereon the Indian house-decorator loves to spend long days in company with a pot of colour-wash and a grass brush made from the leavings of the twine.

There were two such ladders in the bare, oblong, lofty room, set round with open doors and windows, and on each was balanced a man, a pot, and a brush--all doing nothing. So was the coolie below.

He was a small, slight man, with a dejected expression. Stark naked, save for two yards or so of coarse muslin wisped about his short hair and a similar length knotted about his middle. What colour either had been originally could not be guessed, since both were completely covered with splashes of colour-wash--blue, green, yellow, and pink. So was his thin body, which, as he stood immovable at the bottom of the ladder, looked as if it was carved out of some rare scagiola.

For they were doing up the hospital in Fort Lawrence, and Surgeon-Captain Terence O'Brien, of the 10th Sikh Pioneers--then engaged in making military roads over the Beloochistan frontier--had an eye for colour. Not so, however, Surgeon-Major Pringle, who that very morning had marched in with the detachment of young English recruits which had been sent to take possession of the newly enlarged fort. It was a queer mud building, looking as if it were a part of the mud promontory which blocked a sharp turn in the sun-dried, heat-baked mud valley, through which the dry bed of a watercourse twisted like the dry skin of a snake. Everything dry, everything mud, baked to hardness by the fierce sun. It was an ugly country in one way, picturesque in another, with its yawning fissures cracking the mud hills into miniature peaks and passes, its almost leafless flowering shrubs, aromatic, honeyful, and its clouds of painted butterflies. A country in which colour was lost in sheer excess of sunshine.

That, however, was not the reason why Surgeon-Captain O'Brien had painted his wards to match Joseph's coat. As he explained to Surgeon-Major Pringle, who, as senior officer, took over charge, it was wiser, in his opinion--especially with youngsters about--to call wards by the colour of their walls rather than by the diseases to be treated in them; since if a patient "wance found out what was really wrong with his insoide, he was sure to get it insthanter."

The Surgeon-Major, fresh from England and professional precisions--fresh also to India and its appeals to the imagination--had felt it impossible to combat such statements seriously. Besides, there was no use in doing so. The walls were past remedy for that year, and even the *post-mortem* house--that last refuge of all diseases--was being washed bright pink; a colour which, according to Terence O'Brien, was "a nice, cheerful tint, that could not give annyone, not even a corpse, the blues."

In the course of which piece of work the small man at the foot of the ladder was becoming more and more like a statue in *rosso antico*, as he repeated: "*Shâhbâsh, bhaiyan, shâhbâsh!*" at

regular intervals.

His voice had no resonance, and not an atom of enthusiasm about it; but, like a breeze among rain-soaked trees, it always provoked a pitter-patter of falling drops--a patter of pink splashes like huge tears--upon the concrete floor and the scagiola figure. For the words set the brushes above moving slowly for a while; then the spasm of energy passed, all was still again, until a fresh "Bravo, boys, bravo!" was followed by a fresh shower of pink tears.

"Lazy brutes!" came a boy's voice from the group of young recruits who were enjoying a well-earned rest after having marched in fifteen miles, carrying their kits as if they had been born with them, and settling down into quarters as if they were veterans. For they were smart boys, belonging to a smart regiment, whose recruiting ground lay far from slums and scums; one whose officers were smart also, and kept up the tone of their men by teaching them a superior tolerance for the rest of the world. "Jest look at that feller--like an alley law. He ain't done a blessed 'and's turn since I began to watch 'im." They were seated on some shady mud steps right over against the hospital compound, and the *post-mortem* house being separate from the wards, and having all its many windows and doors set wide, the inside of it was as plainly visible as the out.

"Rum lot," assented another voice with the same ring of wholesome self-complacency in it. "I arst one of the Sickees, as seems a decent chap for a nigger and knows a little decent lingo, wot the spotted pig was at with his everlastin' *shabbashes*, an' 'e says it's to put courage to the Johnnies up top. Not that I don't say I shouldn't cotton myself much to them ladders, that's more like caterpillars than a decent pair o' 'ouse-steps. A poor lot--that's wot they are, as doesn't know the differ in holt between a nail and a bit o' twine."

"Well, mates," said a third voice, "all I can say is that if they ain't got no more courage than *shâhbâsh* can put to them, it's no wonder we licks the blooming lot of them--as we does constant."

There was a faint laugh first, and then the group sucked at their pipes decisively as they watched the doings in the *post-mortem*. Though they would have scouted the suggestion, the *shâhbâsh wallah* had justified his calling; for patriotism brings courage with it.

He did not trouble his head about justification, however. Some one, in his experience, always did the shouting, and it suited him better than more active occupation, for he was lame; stiff, too, in his back. Surgeon-Major Pringle, coming in later to find the *post-mortem* very much as it had been hours before, looked at him distastefully, and began a remark about what two English workmen could have done, which Surgeon-Captain Terence O'Brien interrupted with his charming smile: "Sure, sir, the sun rises a considerable trifle airlier East than West, an' that's enough energy for wan hemisphere. Besides, ye can't get on in India without a *shâhbâsh wallah*. Or elsewhere, for that matter. Ye always require 'the something not ourselves which makes for righteousness'--"

"Makes for fiddlesticks!" muttered the senior under his breath, adding aloud, "Who the dickens is the *shâhbâsh wallah* when he is at home, and what's his work?" He asked the question almost reluctantly, for his junior's extremely varied information had, since the morning, imparted a vague uncertainty to a round world which had hitherto, in Dr. Pringle's estimation of it, been absolutely sure--cocksure!

"What is he? Oh! he's a variety of names. He's objective reality, moral sanction, antecedent experience, unconditioned good. Ye can take yer choice of the lot, sir; and if ye can't win the thrick with metaphysics--I can't, and that's the thruth--play thrumps. Sentiment!--sympathy! Ye can't go wrong there. Ye can't leave them out of life's equation, East or West. Just some one--a fool, maybe--to say ye're a fine fellow, an' no misthake, at the very moment whin ye know ye're not. Biogenesis, sir, is the Law of Life. As Schopenhauer says, the secret that two is wan, is the--"

His senior gave an exasperated sigh, and preferred changing the subject. So at the appointed time, no sooner, no later, the last patter of pink tears fell from the brushes upon the floor of the *post-mortem* and upon the still figure, which might have been a corpse save for its drowsy applause--"Bravo, boys, bravo!" Then the caterpillar ladders, with the decorators and the pots of colour-wash and the brushes still attached to them, crawled away, and the *shâhbâsh wallah* followed in their wake, his skin bearing mute evidence to the amount of work he had provoked.

His turban and waistcloth testified to it for days--in lessening variety of tint as the layers of pink, green, blue, and yellow splashes wore off--for at least a fortnight, during which time Surgeon-Major Pringle, busy in making all things conform to his ideal, constantly came across the *shâhbâsh wallah* bestowing praise where, in the doctor's opinion, none was deserved. What right, for instance, had the water-carriers filling their pots, the sweepers removing the refuse, to senseless commendation for the performance of their daily round, their common task?

Especially when it was so ill performed; even in the matter of punkah-pulling, a subject on which the native might be credited with some knowledge. Surgeon-Major Pringle seethed with repressed resentment for days over the intermittent pulse of the office punkah, and finally, in a white heat of discomfort and indignation, burst out into the verandah, harangued the coolie at length, and in the fulness of Western energy went so far as to show him how to keep up a regular, even swing. His masterly grasp of a till then untouched occupation not only satisfied

himself but also the *shâhbâsh wallah*, who, as usual, was lounging about in the verandah doing nothing. So, of course, his "*Shâhbâsh, jee, shâhbâsh*," preceded Surgeon-Major Pringle's hasty return to the office and prepared Terence O'Brien for the dictum that the offender must be sent about his business; for *if* he was a camp-follower he *must* have some business, some regular work.

"Worrk, is it?" echoed Terence with his charming smile of pure sympathy. "Be jabbers! yes. Worrk--plenty, but not regular, as a rule. The man's a torch-bearer. If it happens to be a dark night, and annybody wants a *dhooli*, he carries the torch for it."

Dr. Pringle's resentful surprise made him stutter: "Do you mean to say that--that--that--that--the public money--the ratepayers' money--is wasted in entertaining a whole man for so trivial a task?"

"Trivial, is it? When he's a pillar of fire by night an' a cloud of witnesses by day? And then he isn't a whole man, sir, at all at all. Wan of his legs is shorter than the other. I had to break it twice, sir, to get it as straight as it is. Thin, I've grave doubts about his spinal column; and as I trepanned him myself, I know his head isn't sound. It was two ton of earth fell on him, sir, last rains, when he was givin' a drink to wan of the Sikhs that got hurt blasting. It's nasty, shifty stuff, sir, is the mud in these low hills--nasty silted alluvial stuff, with a bias in it. So, poor divvle! seeing he wasn't fit for much but the hospital, I put him to the staff of it. And he kapes things going. Indeed, I wouldn't take it upon myself to say that he doesn't do the native patients as much good as half the drugs I exhibit to the unfortunate craythurs, since for sheer mysterious dispensations of Providence commend me to the British pharmacopœia."

Once again Surgeon-Major Pringle felt that professional dignity could best be served by silent contempt, and orders that the offender was, at least, not to loaf about the verandahs.

But the fates were against the fiat. In the moonless half of May, driest of all months, a Hindu returning from Hurdwar fell sick, and half-an-hour after the report, Surgeon-Captain Terence O'Brien, going out of the ward with his senior, paused in his cheerful whistling of "Belave me, if all those endearing young charms," to say under his breath, "Cholera, mild type." Now cholera, no matter of what type, has an ugly face when seen for the first time, especially when the face which looks into it, wondering if it means life or death, has youth in its eyes. So in the dark nights the *dhooli* came into requisition, and with it the torch-bearer, until the green and the blue and yellow wards overflowed into the verandahs, and even the pink *post-mortem* claimed its final share of boys. Not a large one, however, since, as Terence O'Brien said, "It was wan of those epidemics when ye couldn't rightly say a man had cholera till he died of it."

It was bad enough, however, to make the Surgeon-Major, who had never seen one before, set to work when it passed, suddenly as it had come, to cipher out averages, and tabulate treatments, with a view to what is called future guidance. And so, as he confided to his assistant with great complacency, it became clear as daylight that the largest percentage of recoveries, their rapidity, and as a natural corollary the incidence of mildness in the attack itself, seemed in connection with the position of the cots. Those close to the doors, or actually on the verandahs, were the most fortunate, and so he was inclined to believe in the value of currents of fresh air.

"Fresh air, is it?" echoed Terence, with an encouraging smile. "Maybe; maybe not. God knows, it may be anything in the wide wurrlid, since there's but wan thing you can bet your bottom dollar on in cholera, sir, and that is that ye can't tell anything about it for certain, and that your experience of wan epidemic won't be that of the next."

"Neither does your experience, Mr. O'Brien," retorted his senior, sarcastically, "militate against mine being more fortunate. I mean to leave no stone unturned to arrive at reliable *data* on points which appear to me to have been overlooked. For instance, I shall begin by asking those cases of recovery if they remember anything which seemed at the time to bring them relief, to stimulate in them that vitality which it is so essential to preserve."

In pursuance of which plan he went out then and there to the verandah, where a dozen or more lank boys were lounging about listlessly, just beginning to feel that life might soon mean more than a grey duffle dressing-gown and a long chair.

"No, sir," said the first, firmly. "I disremember anythin' that done me good. I jest lay with a sickenin' pain in my inside, an' a don't-care-if-I-do feelin' outside." He paused, and another boy took up the tale sympathetically.

"So it was. A reg'lar, don't-care except w'en that little 'eathen--'im that's always saying *shâhbâsh*, sir, come along; an' that seem to me most times. 'E made me feel a blamed sight--beggin' pardon, sir--worse. For I kep' thinkin' of where I see 'im first, like a alley taw in the dead 'ouse; and the dead 'ouse isn't a cheerful sorter think w'en you ain't sure but wot you're going there. It made me--" he paused in his turn.

"Made you what?" asked Terence O'Brien, who had followed to listen.

"Give me the 'orrors, sir, till I'd 'ave swopped all I knew to kick 'im quiet; but not bein' able, I jest lay and kep' it for 'im against I could, till it seemed like as I must; an' so I will."

"In cases of extreme nervous depression, sir," began the junior, mischievously, "a counter irritant--"

"Pshaw!" interrupted Dr. Pringle, angrily, and walked back with great dignity to the office.

But the conversation thus started lingered among the grey dressing-gowns, the result of comparing notes being a general verdict that "Alley law" deserved that kicking. He did not actually get it, however; the boys were too big, and he too small for that. But he sank into still greater disrepute, becoming, in truth, that most unenviable of all things not made nor created, but begotten of idle wit--a garrison butt. Not that he seemed to care much. He grew more furtive in his lounging, but nothing seemed to disturb the divine calm of his commendation for the world which he had created for himself with his "Bravo, boys, bravo!" Behold, all things in it were very good! That, at least, was Terence O'Brien's fanciful way of looking at the position. As he went about his work whistling "Belave me, if all those endearing young charms"--a tune which, he said, cheered the boys--he would often pause to smile at the *shâhbâsh wallah*. After a time, however, the smile would change to a quick narrowing of the eyes, as if something in the bearing of the man was puzzling. Finally, one day, coming upon the man sidling along a bit of brick wall, which had been built to strengthen a crack in the mud one overhanging the dry watercourse, he pulled up, asked a few rapid questions, and then lifted the man's eyelids and peered into the soft brown eyes, as if he wanted to see through them to a crack he knew of in the back of the man's skull.

"And you are sure you see as well as ever?" he asked again.

"Quite as well, *Huzoor*," came the answer, with a faint tremor in it. "I can see to carry the torch on the darkest of nights if it is wanted, *Huzoor*!"

"Hm!" said Dr. O'Brien, doubtfully, promising himself to test the truth of this statement. But the fates again decreed otherwise. The next day's mail brought orders for him to go and act elsewhere for a senior on two months' leave.

Dr. Pringle was not sorry. How could you collaborate properly with a man who calmly admitted that at a pinch he had used a bullet-mould to extract a tooth?

The monsoon had long since broken in the plains ere the young doctor returned; but in the arid tract in which Fort Lawrence lay rain came seldom at any time. And that was a year of abnormal drought. The fissures in the mud seemed to widen with the heat, and the fringe of green oleanders which followed every turn of the dry watercourse, mutely witnessing to unseen moisture below, wilted and drooped. In the new-built fort itself a crack or two showed in the level platform jutting out across the low valley on which the building stood, and in more than one place portions of the low mud-cliffs crumbled and broke away. The whole earth, indeed, seemed agape with thirst.

But water in plenty came at last. On the very day, in fact, when Terence O'Brien returned to the fort, which he reached on foot, having had to leave his *dhooli* behind, owing to a small slip on the road; nevertheless, as he crossed over from the mess to his quarters close to the hospital that evening, he told himself that he had the devil's own luck to be there at all. For the rain was then hitting the hard ground with a distinct thud, and spurting up from it in spray, showing white against the black mirk of the night. And the rush of the stream filling up the dry bed of the watercourse, and playing marbles with the boulders, was like a lion's roar.

It did not keep him awake, however, for he was dead tired. So he slept the sleep of the just. For how long he did not know. It was darker than ever when he woke suddenly--why he knew not, and with the same blind instinct was out into the open, quick as he could grope his way.

Not an instant too soon, either. A deafening crash told him that, though he could not see his own hand. The rain had ceased, but the rush of the river dulled hearing to all lesser sounds. As he stood dazed, he staggered, slipped, almost fell. Was that an earthquake, or was the solid ground parting somewhere close at hand? And if his house was down, how about the hospital and the sick folk?

He turned at the thought and ran till, in the dark and the silence of that overwhelming roar, he came full tilt upon some one else running in the dark also. It was the Surgeon-Major.

"The hospital's down. Have you a light--anything--a match?" panted Dr. Pringle. "We must have a light to see--"

"*Oh, masâl! Oh, masâl-jee!*" (Oh, the torch! Oh, the torch-bearer!) shouted Terence at the top of his voice as he ran on till stopped by something blocking the way. Ruins! And that was the sound of voices.

"What's up?" he cried.

"Don' know, sir," came from unseen hearers. "Part o' the 'orspital's down, but we can't see. It's a slide o' some sort, for there's a crack right across nigh under our feet. If we could get a light!"

"*Oh, masâl! Oh, masâl-jee!*" The doctor's voice rang out again towards the camp-followers' lines, but the roar was deafening. And in the night, when all men are asleep, the news of disaster

travels slowly. Yet without a light it was impossible even to realise what had happened, still less to help the sick who might lie crushed.

"*Oh, masâl! Oh, masâl-jee!*--thank God! there's a light at last."

There was, in the far distance across the quadrangle. But it was not a torch; it was only an officer in a gorgeous sleeping-suit running with a bedroom candle. Still it was a light!

"Come on, man!" shouted Terence O'Brien, as it slackened speed, paused, stopped dead. His was the only voice that seemed to carry through the roar.

But the gay sleeping-suit stood still, waving its candle.

"It's the crack, sir," called some one in Terence O'Brien's ear. "It goes right across, I expect--we'd best find out first."

It did. A yawning fissure, twenty feet wide, had cut the hospital compound in two, and isolated one angle of the fort--that nearest the river--from the rest. Twenty feet wide, at least, judged by the glimmer of light! And how deep? Had the river cut it? Was it only a matter of time when the mud island on which they stood should be swept away? And what were the means of escape? There was more light now; more bedroom candles and sleeping-suits; a lamp or two, and others behind, as the boys--last to wake--came running, to pause like the first-comers, at the unpassable gulf; for the more it could be seen, the more difficult seemed the task of crossing it at once. By-and-by, perhaps, with ladders and ropes it would be possible--but now? Terence O'Brien, feeling the "now" imperative, skirted the crumbling edge almost too near for safety in his eagerness to find some foothold for a daring man; but there was none. True, the brick wall, built to strengthen the cracked mud one, still bridged the extreme end of the fissure, looking as if the mud had deliberately shrunk from its intrusion. It hung there half seen, on God knows what slender foundation--perhaps on none. But it could give no help. To trust it would be madness; a touch might send it down into the river below. No! Since none could cross the gap there must be more light on the farther side; torches, a bonfire, anything to pierce the dark and let men see how to help themselves and other men!

"*Oh, masâl! Oh, masâl-jee-ân!*" The cry went out with all the force of his lungs. Surely the camp-followers must be awake by now.

One was, at any rate; for, surrounded by a halo from the faggot of blazing pitch-pine it carried, a figure showed upon the path worn, close to the mud walls of the native quarters, by the foot-tracks of those whose duty took them to the hospital. It was the *shâhbâsh wallah*, coming slowly, almost indifferently, in answer to the call; coming as if to his ordinary duty towards the growing fringe of ineffectual candles and eager men bordering the impossible. That was better! Given half-a-dozen more such haloes--and there were plenty if they would only come--and eager men on the other side would see how to help themselves and their comrades!

But no other halo appeared behind the one which followed the foot-track of others so closely; and so once again the call was given--

"*Oh, masâl! Oh, masâl-jee-ân! Oh, masâl! Oh, masâl-jee!*"

"*Hâzr, Huzoor!*" (Present, sir).

The nearness of the voice made Terence O'Brien look up, for it was the first voice he had heard clearly from the other side against that roar of the river. But as he looked another voice beside him said hurriedly--

"My God! he's coming across!"

He was. Surrounded by the halo of his own light, and keeping religiously to the beaten path, the *shâhbâsh wallah*, leaving the mud wall of the quarters, had struck the outer brick one as it stood, supported for a few yards by a spit of earth upon which the foot-track showed as the light passed. A spit narrowing to nothing--no! not to nothing, but to a mere ledge of earth and mortar clinging like a swallow's nest to the brick--wider here, narrower there, yet still able to give faint foothold upon the traces of those feet which had passed and repassed so often to their trivial round, their common task. Foothold! Ay! But what of the brain guiding the feet? What of the courage guiding the brain?

And even then, what of the foundation?

A sort of murmur rose above the roar. "He can't do it--impossible--tell him. Call to him, O'Brien. Tell him not to try."

The doctor stood for one second watching the figure centring its circle of light against the background of wall; then, even though there was no need for it, his voice fell to a whisper. "Hush!" he said. "Don't hustle him. By the Lord who made me, he doesn't know; he's feeling his way every inch by the wall! He's blind, and by God! if anybody can do it, he will."

He did. Step by step, slowly, confidently, in the footsteps of others.

And the great cry of "Bravo, brother, bravo!" which went up from both sides of the gap as he and his torch stepped on to firm ground, brought him as much surprise as a voice from heaven might have done.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Pressure on the brain!" said Surgeon-Captain Terence O'Brien, about three weeks after this, when he and Dr. Pringle had had a consultation over the *shâhbâsh wallah*. He was not only blind now, but there was a drag in the good leg as he limped about, over which both doctors shook their heads. "And there's nothing to be done that I can see. The boys will miss him!"

That was true. Alley Taw had come into favour since the night when, as Terence phrased it, "he had done a brave deed without doing it," and by failing to see the evil, had enabled other men to do good. For the torch had not disclosed irretrievable disaster, and by timely rescue not a life had been lost.

Surgeon-Major Pringle frowned. He was beginning to understand his India a little, but the idea of the *shâhbâsh wallah* being a useful member of society was still as a red rag to a bull. And so, out of sheer contrariety, he began to talk doctor's talk as to the possibility of this or that.

"It's life or death, annyhow," said the junior, shaking his head, "but I don't see it. I wouldn't thry it myself--not now at any rate."

Perhaps not then. But after a month or two more he said, "It's your suggestion; I don't belave it can be done; but you may as well thry."

For the *shâhbâsh wallah*, half paralysed, had even given up his cry. So, part of the hospital being still under repair, they took him to the pink *post-mortem* house and set all the doors and windows wide for more light. He was quite unconscious by that time, so Terence O'Brien only had the chloroform handy, and kept his finger on the pulse. Half-a-dozen or more of the boys were on the mud steps over against the hospital compound waiting to hear the *shâhbâsh wallah's* fate. But you might have heard a pin drop in the *post-mortem*, save for the occasional quick request for this or that as the Surgeon-Major, with the Surgeon-Captain's eyes watching him, set his whole soul and heart and brain on doing something that had never been done before.

So the minutes passed. Was it to be failure or success? The Surgeon-Major's fingers were deft--none defter.

The minutes passed to hours. That which had to be done had to be done with one touch light as a feather, steady as a rock, perfect in its performance, or not at all.

And still the minutes passed. Terence O'Brien's face was losing some of its eagerness in sympathy, Dr. Pringle's gaining it in anxiety; for clear, insistent, not-to-be-silenced doubt was making itself heard. Only the *shâhbâsh wallah* cared not at all as he lay like a corpse.

It had come to the last chance. The last; and Dr. Pringle, with a pulse of wild resentment at his own weakness, realised that his nerve was going, his hand shaking. Still, it had to be done. The splinter of bone raised--the whole process he had thought out as the last chance gone through. He steadied himself and began. Failure or success? Failure--failure--failure! The word beat in on his heart and brain, bringing unsteadiness to both.

"Dresser, the chloroform," said Terence O'Brien, sharply; for there was a quiver in the man's eyelids.

But ere the deadening drug did its work, the *shâhbâsh wallah's* brain, set free to work along familiar lines by the raising of that splintered bone, had sent its old message to his lips--

"*Shâhbâsh, bhaiyan, shâhbâsh!*"

In telling the story Dr. Pringle says no more; generally because he cannot.

But after a time, if you are a brother craftsman, he will give you all details of the biggest and most successful operation he ever did.

And though he is slow to allow the corollary, he never denies that the *shâhbâsh wallah's* verdict put courage into him.

## THE MOST NAILING BAD SHOT IN CREATION

This again is one of poor Craddock's stories which he told me when we were stretching a steel-edged ribbon of rail across shifting sandhills; that ribbon uniting West to East on which, a few years later, he met his death in trying to rid the permanent-way of something which Fate had decreed should be permanently in the way.

It happened in mutiny time; shortly after his appearance down the King's Well, which is told elsewhere. He was serving as a volunteer in one of the breastworks which, as the long hot-weather months dragged by, began to seam and sear the face of the red rocks on the Ridge at Delhi; creeping nearer and nearer to the red face of the city wall.

And with him, as the catch phrase runs, "lay" Joe Banks, the Yorkshireman; tall, stolid, silent. Good-looking also, with a thick close crop of curly brown hair and hard, honest blue eyes. He was not stupid by any means; only phenomenally silent, except when the talk turned on women, and then, as Craddock put it tersely, he "damned free"; perhaps because, as the latter worthy used to add with a suspicion of sympathy in his drink-blurred face, he had "cared a sight deal too much for one woman to 'ave much likin' left for the lot."

To one side of the breastwork lay a dry ravine where every day the vipers used to sun themselves on the hot red rocks. Just across it, within range, rose a small Mahomedan shrine amid sparse brushwood, which thickened a bit till it was barred by the ruined wall of a garden where the slow oxen circled round the well, sending runnels of slippery-looking water to the scented shade of citruses, roses, and mangoes, heedless of the great cannon-balls which sometimes came trundling, like playthings, down the wide walks. Not often, though, for the stress of strife lay at the other angle of the breastwork which faced the city wall.

Still, those who came to smoke a hard-earned pipe in what was the safest spot in the outpost, soon found that the pious-looking shrine, the peaceful garden, were not always so innocent as they looked. In the dusk of dark or dawn they were tenanted by what, after a time, the men agreed to call the "most nailin' bad shot in creation." "The direction wasn't, so to speak, so bad, sir," Craddock used to explain to me. "'E'd about 'ave 'it the sea-serpent for length; it was the elevation which, as Bull's-eyes said, savin' your presence, sir, was d----ficient. The top o' the Monument was about in it, sir, an' that was why the only feller as really use langwidge was Joe Banks; for 'e was a 'ead and shoulders higher than the lot o' us." So when, in the dark, a flash used to glimmer for a second among the brushwood like a firefly, the men learnt to sing out, "That's for you, Joey," "Duck, my darlin', duck," and other witticisms of that kind, until the big Yorkshireman's face darkened beyond jesting-point: for he had the devil's own temper when roused. It was this, joined to his extreme good looks and a somewhat hazy recollection of the Bible and the classics among the volunteers, which earned him the nickname of Apollyon. So to soothe him, some of the wilder spirits would organise a charge over the ravine, scattering, perhaps, a few drowsy adders which had forgotten to go to bed; but nothing else. The blind old fakeer in the shrine was always fast asleep, the bullocks in the garden circling slowly, driven by a drowsy lad curled up behind them.

So the days passed; and, despite practice, the Most Nailin' Bad Shot shot badly as ever. The odds, however, as the men pointed out gravely to Apollyon, kept on improving; so that sooner or later there must be a "casualty" in the garrison of Number One outpost. Joey, too, would get careless; he wouldn't smart enough, etc., etc. And, sure enough, one evening just as the moonlight was mixing with the daylight, and Joey Banks had risen to his full height in a huff because Craddock for once had sided against him in the perennial argument as to whether it was worth while fighting for women who didn't know what they would be at, and hadn't the pluck of a mouse, one of these firefly flashes was followed by a sudden clapping of the giant's hands to the very crown of his head.

"We looked, sir," Craddock used to say gravely, with that reminiscent biblical knowledge of his which had doubtless supplied Apollyon, "for 'im to fall dead; as 'e deserve rich; for 'e'd been damnin' uncommon free, sir. But 'e only use it worse. And then, savin' your presence, sir, we see that 'e'd 'ad, so ter speak, a narrer-gauge line laid down thro' 'is jungle--right through 'is curls, sir. Lordy! 'ow we laughed. It was a lady, we told 'im, as wanted some locks an' no mistake. It sorter made 'im mad, for 'e just stooped and gathered the lot--bein' fair, you could see it shinin' in the dust--together.

"'She shall 'ave 'em, never fear,' 'e says, quiet like. 'Yes! the person who fired that shot shall 'ave more o' my 'air than he reckons for.'"

Just at that moment, however, one of those sudden alarms which for three months kept the men and officers before Delhi on the alert by day and night broke up the company, and so Joe Banks' loss passed out of most minds. Except his own, of course. It lingered there, aided by that narrow gauge over his brain on which the cool night wind blew pleasantly.

So when the alarm passed, instead of coming back to rest, he crept out surreptitiously by the



back of the breastwork, for such sorties were strictly out of order, and so by a slant downwards across the ravine. It was a brilliant moonlight night, and he caught the sparkle of many a deadly pair of eyes among the rocks. But he was in no mood to step aside from any danger, and once beyond fear of recall he strode along straight as if the whole place belonged to him; it might have, for all the opposition he met. The fakeer was asleep as usual, the oxen circling round the well, and in the scented shade of the roses and citrons he could find nothing save some drowsy birds who fluttered and twittered helplessly as his tall head forced a way through the thickets.

Feeling ill-used, he set his face back towards the breastwork, until the extraordinary peace of the moonlit scene, which, as Craddock asserted, used in the interval of onslaught to make the beleaguered city look like the New Jerusalem, brought him to a standstill; first to look, then to take out his pipe; finally to sit on a rock and think vaguely of the Yorkshire wolds and of some one, no doubt, who had not had the courage of her convictions, for after a bit he murmured, "She were a raight down coward, that's where it is, aw'm thinkin'."

He had not much time for reflection, however, for at that moment there was a flash, a crack, and something whizzed past his left ear. The Most Nailin' Bad Shot was better at close quarters. His blood was up in a second, and without pausing to pick up his musket, which he had laid aside, he was off to the spot whence the flash had come. And there! *whoop forward! gone away!* was his quarry for sure, running like a hare for some hiding-place, no doubt, among the rocks. It might have been reached, for romance tells of many secret passages between palaces inside the city and gardens without, but for a true lover's knot of viper which refused to budge from the path; which made the flying figure give a screech, and the flying feet, in their effort to overleap it, miss footing and fall.

The next instant Joe Banks was on it as it lay, and conscious even in his hurry that what he gripped was something young and soft--a boy, no doubt--devil's spawn.

"Aw'm goān ter choak ye on t' hair," he said grimly. "Open yer domed mouth, d'ye hear?"

It was almost as if the prostrate figure understood; but the next instant a set of gleaming white teeth had closed like a squirrel's round Joe Banks' first finger. He let off an echoing yell to the previous screech, and an oddly satisfied smile came to the fierce little face he could scarcely see for his big hand. It was an oval face, smooth as a girl's.

"That's nowt to Joey Banks, lad, he can kill anoother waay," he growled savagely, as he shifted a knee to press his prisoner down, loosened his left hand, his right being detained, and deliberately drew out one of the many knives stuck in his enemy's waistband. "Aw'll lay t' hair abun tha' heaart, tha' wrigglin' worm, and driv it hoām--that aw wull."

In pursuance of which plan, he undid an embroidered satin waistcoat, and began to push aside an inner muslin vest. A whiff of musk and roses mingled with the moonlight.

"Stinks and bites like a foumart," he muttered. "Soa lie thee still, will tha? an' tak' that to thissen ma--gor amoighty!"

Joe Banks was on his feet; so was his enemy. Both dazed, uncertain. Flight seemed to come uppermost to the latter's thought, when the big man suddenly laughed a low chuckle of sheer amusement.

"An' t' coom like a wild cat at Joey Banks--that caps owt!"

The next instant he was grappling with a whirlwind of knives and nails, anything.

"Woa! woa! ma lass! Hands off, tha little vixen, till a' git a look at tha!" he said soothingly, as he prisoned two small hands in one huge fist, and with the other held his adversary almost tenderly at arm's length. What he saw, as he afterwards described it to Craddock, was just a "moit o' pistols an' pouches."

"Well! well! *Aw'm,--aw'm* jiggered!" he exclaimed at last; adding argumentatively, "Whatten iver mad tha' go fur t' do it, tha foolish lass?"

Something in his broad, not unkindly rebuke seemed to take the starch out of the Most Nailin' Bad Shot. It seemed to cower in on itself and become smaller; though, as Joe Banks told himself perplexedly, it had been small enough to begin with.

"Well, aw *am* jiggered," he repeated more softly. "Whatten iver mad tha' do it, ma lass?"

The answer was feminine and disconcerting; a sudden storm of tears. So they stood, the quaintest couple in the world. She bristling with cold steel of sorts; he bareheaded in the moonlight, with nothing but his hands for weapons.

"Dunnot," he said soothingly, not without a certain trepidation. "Aw'm noān goān t' hurt thee, ma gell. We'm not thaat soort t' womenkind; an' tha's a main pratty gell." Here he laughed softly; a laugh that was lost in a third--

"Wall, aw'm *jiggered*."

He appeared to be so, for he ceased thrusting her from him--she being, indeed, too much engaged with tears to make it dangerous--and passed his hand over his forehead as if to clear his brain.

"Aw'm noãn goãn t' hurt tha, ma lass," he repeated suddenly, as if for his own information. "Aw'm nobbut goãn t' shame tha' fur tha' badness."

And with that he lifted her right up like a baby, sate down on a neighbouring rock, and set her on his knee.

"Thou'rt as light as a feather," he said almost admiringly. "An' t' coom at Joey Banks like a wild cat; for sure it caps owt; but thou'rt a bad gell, an' mun be shamed. So set tha still an' be doon wi' it."

Once more he might have claimed comprehension, for the Most Nailin' Bad Shot sate still; with the half-wicked, half-frightened look of a curious squirrel, as one by one he transferred knives and pistols to his own person. It was rather a lengthy business by reason of his right hand--the one that had been bitten--being still occupied in prisoning hers. Not that she struggled; on the contrary, she sate curiously still, checking even her sobs.

"Now for t' hair," he went on methodically, pulling off the large green turban wound around the small head. He sate half perturbed and breathless after this was done, and the half-wicked, half-frightened dark eyes watching him, seemed to admit a faint smile.

"Whew-w-w," he said under his breath, "it's long, for sartin sure." It was, and a faint scent of orange-blossom assailed him as he loosed the plaits. His hand trembled among them a little, and lingered.

"Aw mun be as good's ma word," he muttered, "as Joey Banks' word. See tha here--sit tha still, there's a good lass, an' let me hurry up; wilt thee?" There was almost an appeal in his voice, and both hands shook a little as the long black tresses twined themselves about the big fingers like snakes.

"Aw'm noãn goãn t' hurt," he reiterated blandly; when, perhaps fortunately, the whole bewildering face before him relapsed into a mischievous smile, and one small finger pointed derisively to the crown of his head. He flushed up scarlet.

"Thee'm nobbut a wicked, bad gell," he said fiercely, "an' Joey Banks'll shame tha--a bold hussy." So he set her on her feet, and attacked her last bit of masculinity. This was a long, green waistband wound about her middle, and which had carried a score or so of pistols, yataghans, and Heaven knows what murderous weapons. Of this portion of the toilette Craddock said it was hard to get Joey Banks to speak at all, and when he did, his voice dropped to a whisper, and he looked positively scared. She was so main slender, he said, that he thought he would never have done unwinding, though after a bit she helped cheerfully by twiddling like a teetotum. At last, however, she stood there, slim, girlish, her long hair shimmering, her dark eyes shining, half with tears, half with smiles.

"An' then, Joey?' I arst 'im, sir, when 'e sate mumchance," Craddock interpolated.

"Aw out wi' 'Fower angels rouand ma bed,' man, an' a' up wi' her in ma arms, an' a' kissed her fair an' oft, man, fair an' oft, just t' shame her, an' a' runned awaay. That's what a' did--aw runned awaay."

Half-way across the ravine, however, he paused to pick up his musket and look back. The Most Nailin' Bad Shot in creation was standing where he had left her, her face hidden in her hands. For an instant something tore at his heart, bidding him go back; then he set his teeth with an oath, and ran on. Five minutes afterwards he had slipped into a favourite cranny of rock beside Craddock and was puffing away at his pipe as if nothing had happened, absolutely silent, till, according to the latter's report, he "give a silly sort of laugh," and in the moonlight his eyes could be seen shining like stars as he turned and said softly--

"Well, lad--a' ha' dune it this toime."

"Done what, Apollyon?" asked Craddock.

"A' dunnot roightly kna', but a' ha' dune it, for sartin sure," replied Joe Banks, succinctly; and then he told the story.

"One of them *gazes*<sup>[1]</sup> as they call 'em," interrupted Craddock, when the big man told of his discovery in a sort of hushed voice. "They makes 'em male an' female--the latter most wicious. Bad lots out o' the bazaar, needin' a passport to the skies--or the devil."

Joey Banks' big fist came down like a sledgehammer on Craddock's knee.

"Hush, mon!" he said peremptorily. "She woan't none that sort. When a' kissed her--" he stopped short, and blushed furiously.

"Apollyon!" remarked Craddock, after a pause, with great severity. "It ain't wholesome to keep sech things comfortable in yer own buzzum. It's better to 'ave up an' done with it an' begin agin. When you kiss her--w'ot then?"

But Joe Banks' shining eyes were looking out into the soft darkness, soft and dark for all their shininess. "A' meant to 'a' keppen coont--but a' didn't somehow." His voice was quite dreamy, and Craddock rose in wrath.

"It's my belief, same as I was in the catechising, Joey Banks, that you bin an' fallen in love with a female *gaze*; but mark my word--there ain't no gratitooode to speak of in *gazes*, and she'll nick you yet, sure as my name's Nathaniel James. She'll nick you yet, I du assure you."

But Craddock was wrong. Whatever else she did, the Most Nailin' Bad Shot shot no more. Not that it mattered much to Joey Banks whether she did or not, since but a few days after there was a "casoolty" in Number One outpost, Volunteer Joseph Banks, sometime canal overseer, was reported missing after a sortie; but as he had been last seen mortally wounded close to the city wall, his comrades mourned Apollyon from the first as dead. So as Craddock said feelingly, "there weren't even a lock o' 'is 'air for 'is old mother, an' she was a widder."

Not that there was much time for mourning in the outpost, since the long months of the siege were drawing to a close. Then came the final assault, the ten days of struggle within the city, until even the Palace was ours, and the army which had taken it prepared to move on elsewhere. It was the evening before the start, and Craddock, who, as a volunteer, had more liberty to go and come as he chose, went down to the now deserted outpost to smoke a last pipe, and think over the past with the pleasing melancholy which goes so admirably with tobacco.

"Poor Joey Banks!" he thought, as memory came round to that episode, "'im an' 'is female *gaze*. I shan't never forget 'em."

I will tell the rest in Craddock's own words; they suit it.

"I look up, sir, an' you might 'ave knock me over with a ninepin, for there was Joey, lookin' as spry as spry. 'Joey,' says I, takin' it as one does, sir, for all them sayin's of ninepins and feathers and such like, quite calm, 'so you're not dead?'

"'Na! lad,' he says back, as calm like. 'Aw'm goãn t' be married, an' a've coom t' get t' best man.'

"It took me all of a 'eap, sir, sorter Malachi an' the minor prophets, sir, as things does sometimes. 'Joey, my boy,' I says, 'you ain't never goin' to marry a female *gaze*?' says I.

"But 'e was, sir. Ter cut a long story short, she'd found 'im an' nursed him. An' we all knows wot that means, white or black, sir. 'E'd a 'eap to tell--though Lord knows where 'e got it, for 'e didn't know no 'Industani to speak of, sir--about 'ow she lived in quite a fine 'ouse an' 'ow her father an' brothers 'ad bin killed, so as she kinder 'adn't no choice but *gazing*. But I wasn't to be took with chaff, so I says to 'im quite solemn like, 'Afore I'm best man, I've got to know, Joey--is she square?' 'E just looked at me, sir, as if I were slush.

"'She'd gotten ma hair in t' buzzum,' he said, an' said no moor.

"So I gave my word to be best man, sir, an' 'e sighed like as a weight was took off him. 'Then coom awa' wi' me t' passon,' says 'e, 'fur I'm goãn t' be marrid afoor aw goes with t' army to-morer.'

"'Then you've 'ad the banns cried,' says I, for my father bein' bell-ringer same as give me my name in 'oly baptism, sir, I was up to them dodges. 'E give me a real Apollyon frown, sir.

"'Na, lad; aw've noãn had nought cried, but aw'm goãn t' wed her fair afoor a' fight, so save t' breath an' coom t' passon.'

"Well, sir, parson wasn't a bad chap, as I knowed, 'aving seen 'im doing dooty stiddily like the rest o' us, but 'e'd got 'is black coat on agin, an' 'e were by nature, the canonised red bricky sort; so 'e wouldn't none o' it, though I stood solemn for Joe like as if I bin godfather, tellin' 'im 'ow Joe would 'ave bin a deader but for 'er, an' 'ow she was willin' to become a Christian in 'oly baptism wen she 'ad a chanst, an' 'ow Joe wouldn't never 'ave bin in a 'urry without bridesmaids but for bein' that eager to fight 'is country's foes agin--for of course, sir, 'e 'adn't 'ad a look in at anythin' but beef-tea an' barley water till we took the city.

"'Why doesn't he wait decently till he comes back?' says parson. 'The sacrament of marriage is not a responsibility to be entered into unawares, my good--'

"Joe rose up--Lord bless you!--two 'eads taller nor parson. 'Coom awa'! best man,' 'e says. 'It's waaste toime heere, an' aw'll need tha at t' mosque; passon theer ar'n't so scrumfumtious, an' she tow't ma t' Kulma this marnin' foor fear--that's their creed, sir, same as the *Gazes*, male an' female, yell when they're a stickin' of you.

"Well parson 'e brought up sharp at this an' said, 'Stay a bit.' Then 'e look at Joe, an' Joe look

at 'im.

"'Tha see she's gotten t' be ma wife, man,' said Joe apologetic like, an' parson 'e push 'is red bricky prayer-book away fretful.

"'But I don't know anything,' he said. 'I don't even know if she is a spinster or a widow. Will you swear she hasn't a husband living?'

"Well, sir, Joe looked at parson, and then 'e looked at me, an' then 'e scratch 'is 'ead--the curls 'ad grown tight as ever, sir--an' then sudden 'e smile--one o' them smiles like the sun on a daisy, sir.

"' Aw dunnot rightly know,' says 'e, 'aw nivver arst her,' an' parson 'e look at me an' at 'im and at the solemnisation o' 'oly matrimony as 'f 'e didn't know which was which.

"Well, the end o' it was that the three o' us went down to one o' them light an' shady open-air houses with a tree growin' out o' a wall, and a lot o' pigeons. Parson 'e stood in one o' the arches raise up a step or two, an' they stood in the space below, right in the sun, an' I stood 'twixt an' between, for you see, sir, I was clerk as well as best man.

"'Will you take this woman to be thy wedded wife?' arst parson.

"'Such is my desire,' says I, in order; but Joe Banks wouldn't none o' that.

"'Fur better fur worse,' 'e says, 'fur richer fur poorer, domed if a' doan't.'

"So 'e was wedded to the Most Nailin' Bad Shot in creation."

"And was she pretty?" I asked of Craddock.

He shook his head. "I niver set eyes on her, sir, though I was best man. She was wrap up in a white veil, an' 'e kep' her so--said she liked it--they does, sir, when they've got a good 'usband."

"So they lived happy ever after?"

"Not for long, sir--" here Craddock slipped his hands into his pockets as the first step towards slouching off. "That sort o' thing don't somehow last long, sir," here his eyes caught the gold of the setting sun, as they had a trick of doing when they grew soft. "Seems to me--savin' your presence, sir--as if there was too much o' the Noo Jerewsalem about that sort o' thing fur this world; that's 'ow it is. She died, sir, a few years after, when 'e was back in the Canals, in a God-forsaken spot, where there wasn't no one to--to be best man like. An' so they found 'im lying beside 'er with a bullet in 'is brain. So I was a minor prophet after all, an' Joey Banks got nicked at last by the Most Nailin' Bad Shot in creation."

## **THE REFORMER'S WIFE**

### **A SKETCH FROM LIFE**

He was a dreamer of dreams, with the look in his large dark eyes, which Botticelli put into the eyes of his Moses; that Moses in doublet and hose, whose figure, isolated from its surroundings, reminds one irresistibly of Christopher Columbus, or Vasco da Gama--of those, in fact, who dream of a Promised Land.

And this man dreamt as wild a dream as any. He hoped, before he died, to change the social customs of India.

He used to sit in my drawing-room, talking to me by the hour of the Prophet and his blessed Fâtma--for he was a Mahomedan--and bewailing the sad degeneracy of these present days, when caste had crept into and defiled the Faith. I shall never forget the face of martyred enthusiasm with which he received my first invitation to dinner. He accepted it, as he would have accepted the stake, with fervour, and indeed to his ignorance the ordeal was supreme. However, he appeared punctual to the moment on the appointed day, and greatly relieved my mind by partaking twice of plum-pudding, which he declared to be a surpassingly cool and most digestible form of nourishment, calculated to soothe both body and mind. Though this is hardly the character usually assigned to it, I did not contradict him, for not even his eager self-sacrifice had sufficed for the soup, the fish, or the joint, and he might otherwise have left the table in a starving condition. As it was, he firmly set aside my invitation to drink water after the meal was

over, with the modest remark that he had not eaten enough to warrant the indulgence.

The event caused quite a stir in that far-away little town, set out among the ruins of a great city, on the high bank of one of the Punjab rivers; for the scene of this sketch lay out of the beaten track, beyond the reach of *babus* and barristers, patent-leather shoes and progress. Beyond the pale of civilisation altogether, among a quaint little colony of fighting Pathans who still pointed with pride to an old gate or two which had withstood siege after siege, in those old fighting days when the river had flowed beneath the walls of the city. Since then the water had ebbed seven miles to the south-east, taking with it the prestige of the stronghold, which only remained a picturesque survival; a cluster of four-storeyed purple-brick houses surrounded by an intermittent purple-brick wall, bastioned and loop-holed. A formidable defence, while it lasted. But it had a trick of dissolving meekly into a sort of mud hedge, in order to gain the next stately fragment, or maybe to effect an alliance with one of the frowning gateways which had defied assault. This condition of things was a source of sincere delight to my Reformer Futteh Deen (Victory of Faith) who revelled in similes. It was typical of the irrational, illogical position of the inhabitants in regard to a thousand religious and social questions, and just as one brave man could break through these sham fortifications, so one resolute example would suffice to capture the citadel of prejudice, and plant the banner of abstract Truth on its topmost pinnacle.

For he dreamt excellently well, and as he sat declaiming his Persian and Arabic periods in the drawing-room with his eyes half shut, like one in presence of some dazzling light, I used to feel as if something might indeed be done to make the Mill of God grind a little faster.

In the matter of dining out, indeed, it seemed as if he was right. For within a week of his desperate plunge, I received an invitation to break bread with the municipal committee in the upper storey of the Vice-President's house. The request, which was emblazoned in gold, engrossed on silk paper in red and black, and enclosed in a brocade envelope, was signed by the eleven members and the Reformer; who, by the way, edited a ridiculous little magazine to which the committee subscribed a few rupees a month. Solely for the purpose of being able to send copies to their friends at court, and show that they were in the van of progress. For a man must be that, who is patron of a "Society for the General Good of All Men in All Countries." I was, I confess it, surprised, even though a casual remark that now perhaps his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor would no longer suspect his slaves of disloyalty, showed me that philanthropy had begun at home. For the little colony bore a doubtful character, being largely leavened by the new Puritanism, which Government, for reasons best known to itself, chooses to confound with Wahabeeism.

The entertainment given on the roof amid starshine and catherine-wheels proved a magnificent success, its great feature being an enormous plum-pudding which I was gravely told had been prepared by my own cook. At what cost, I shudder to think; but the rascal's grinning face as he placed it on the table convinced me that he had seized the opportunity for some almost inconceivable extortion. But there was no regret in those twelve grave, bearded faces, as one by one they tasted and approved. All this happened long before a miserable, exotic imitation of an English vestry replaced the old patrician committees, and these men were representatives of the bluest blood in the neighbourhood, many of them descendants of those who in past times had held high offices of state, and had transmitted courtly manners to their children. So the epithets bestowed on the plum-pudding were many-syllabled; but the consensus of opinion was indubitably towards its coolness, its digestibility, and its evident property of soothing the body and the mind. Again I did not deny it. How could I, out on the roof under the eternal stars, with those twelve foreign faces showing, for once, a common bond of union with the Feringhee? I should have felt like Judas Iscariot if I had struck the thirteenth chord of denial.

The Reformer made a speech afterwards, I remember, in which, being wonderfully well read, he alluded to love-feasts and sacraments, and a coming millennium, when all nations of the world should meet at one table, and--well! not exactly eat plum-pudding together, but something very like it. Then we all shook hands, and a native musician played something on the *siringhi* which they informed me was "God Save the Queen." It may have been. I only know that the Reformer's thin face beamed with almost pitiful delight as he told me triumphantly that this was only the beginning.

He was right. From that time forth the plum-pudding feast became a recognised function. Not a week passed without one. Generally--for my gorge rose at the idea of my cook's extortion--in the summer-house in my garden, where I could have an excuse for providing the delicacy at my own expense. And I am bound to say that this increased intimacy bore other fruits than that contained in the pudding. For the matter of that it has continued to bear fruit, since I can truthfully date the beginning of my friendship for the people of India from the days when we ate plum-pudding together under the starshine.

The Reformer was radiant. He formed himself and his eleven into committees and subcommittees for every philanthropical object under the sun, and many an afternoon have I spent under the trees with my work watching one deputation after another retire behind the oleander hedge in order to permutate itself by deft rearrangement of members, secretaries, and vice-presidents into some fresh body bent on the regeneration of mankind. For life was leisureful, lingering and lagging along in the little town where there was neither doctor nor parson, policeman nor canal officer, nor in fact any white face save my own and my husband's. Still we went far and fast in a cheerful, unreal sort of way. We started schools and debating societies,

public libraries and technical art classes. Finally we met enthusiastically over an extra-sized plum-pudding, and bound ourselves over to reduce the marriage expenditure of our daughters.

The Reformer grew more radiant than ever, and began in the drawing-room--where it appeared to me he hatched all his most daring schemes--to talk big about infant marriage, enforced widowhood, and the seclusion of women. The latter I considered to be the key to the whole position, and therefore I felt surprised at the evident reluctance with which he met my suggestion, that he should begin his struggle by bringing his wife to visit me. He had but one, although she was childless. This was partly, no doubt, in deference to his advanced theories; but also, at least so I judged from his conversation, because of his unbounded admiration for one who by his description was a pearl among women. In fact this unseen partner had from the first been held up to me as a refutation of all my strictures on the degradation of seclusion. So, to tell truth, I was quite anxious to see this paragon, and vexed at the constant ailments and absences which prevented our becoming acquainted. The more so because this shadow of hidden virtue fettered me in argument, for Futteh Deen was an eager patriot, full of enthusiasms for India and the Indians. Once the sham fortifications were scaled, he assured me that Hindustan, and above all its women, would come to the front and put the universe to shame. Yet, despite his successes, he looked haggard and anxious; at the time I thought it was too much progress and plum-pudding combined, but afterwards I came to the conclusion that his conscience was ill at ease, even then.

So the heat grew apace. The fly-catchers came to dart among the *sirus* flowers and skim round the massive dome of the old tomb in which we lived. The melons began to ripen, first by ones and twos, then in thousands--gold, and green, and russet. The corners of the streets were piled with them, and every man, woman, and child carried a crescent moon of melon at which they munched contentedly all day long. Now, even with the future good of humanity in view, I could not believe in the safety of a mixed diet of melon and plum-pudding, especially when cholera was flying about. Therefore, on the next committee-day I had a light and wholesome refection of sponge-cakes and jelly prepared for the philanthropists. They partook of it courteously, but sparingly. It was, they said, superexcellent, but of too heating and stimulating a nature to be consumed in quantities. In vain I assured them that it could be digested by the most delicate stomach; that it was, in short, a recognised food for convalescents. This only confirmed them in their view, for, according to the Yunâni system, an invalid diet must be heating, strengthening, stimulating. Somehow in the middle of their upside-down arguments I caught myself looking pitifully at the Reformer, and wondering at his temerity in tilting at the great mysterious mass of Eastern wisdom.

And that day, in deference to my Western zeal, he was to tilt wildly at the *zenâna* system.

His address fell flat, and for the first time I noticed a distinctly personal flavour in the discussion. Hitherto we had resolved and recorded gaily, as if we ourselves were disinterested spectators. However, the Vice-President apologised for the general tone, with a side slash at exciting causes in the jelly and sponge-cake, whereat the other ten wagged their heads sagely, remarking that it was marvellous, stupendous, to feel the blood running riot in their veins after those few mouthfuls. Verily such food partook of magic. Only the Reformer dissented, and ate a whole sponge-cake defiantly.

Even so the final Resolution ran thus: "That this committee views with alarm any attempt to force the natural growth of female freedom, which it holds to be strictly a matter for the individual wishes of the man." Indeed it was with difficulty that I, as secretary, avoided the disgrace of having to record the spiteful rider, "And that if any member wanted to unveil the ladies he could begin on his own wife."

I was young then in knowledge of Eastern ways, and consequently indignant. The Reformer, on the other hand, was strangely humble, and tried afterwards to evade the major point by eating another sponge-cake, and making a facetious remark about experiments and vile bodies; for he was a mine of quotations, especially from the Bible, which he used to wield to my great discomfiture.

But on the point at issue I knew he could scarcely go against his own convictions, so I pressed home his duty of taking the initiative. He agreed, gently. By-and-by, perhaps, when his wife was more fit for the ordeal. And it was natural, even the *mem-sahiba* must allow, for unaccustomed modesty to shrink. She was to the full as devoted as he to the good cause, but at the same time--Finally, the *mem-sahiba* must remember that women were women all over the world--even though occasionally one was to be found like the *mem-sahiba* capable of acting as secretary to innumerable committees without a blush. There was something so wistful in his eager blending of flattery and excuse that I yielded for the time, though determined in the end to carry my point.

With this purpose I reverted to plum-puddings once more, and, I fear, to gross bribery of all kinds in the shape of private interviews and soft words. Finally I succeeded in getting half the members to consent to sending their wives to an after-dark at-home in my drawing-room, provided always that Mir Futteh Deen, the Reformer, would set a good example.

He looked troubled when I told him, and pointed out that the responsibility for success or failure now lay virtually with him, yet he did not deny it.

I took elaborate precautions to ensure the most modest seclusion on the appointed evening,

even to sending my husband up a ladder to the gallery at the very top of the dome to smoke his after-dinner cigar. I remember thinking how odd it must have looked to him perched up there to see the twinkling lights of the distant city over the soft shadows of the *ferash* trees, and at his feet the glimmer of the white screens set up to form a conventional *zenân-khâna*. But I waited in vain--in my best dress, by the way. No one came, though my ayah assured me that several jealously-guarded *dhoolies* arrived at the garden-gate and went away again when Mrs. Futteh Deen never turned up.

I was virtuously indignant with the offender, and the next time he came to see me sent out a message that I was otherwise engaged. I felt a little remorseful at having done so, however, when, committee-day coming round, the Reformer was reported on the sick-list. And there he remained until after the first rain had fallen, bringing with it the real Indian spring--the spring full of roses and jasmines, of which the poets and the bul-buls sing. By this time the novelty had worn off philanthropy and plum-pudding, so that often we had a difficulty in getting a quorum together to resolve anything; and I, personally, had begun to weary for the dazzled eyes and the eager voice so full of sanguine hope.

Therefore it gave me a pang to learn from the Vice-President, who, being a Government official, was a model of punctuality, that in all probability I should never hear or see either one or the other again. Futteh Deen was dying of the rapid decline which comes so often to the Indian student.

A recurrence of a vague remorse made me put my pride in my pocket and go unasked to the Reformer's house, but my decision came too late. He had died the morning of my visit, and I think I was glad of it.

For the paragon of beauty and virtue, of education and refinement, was a very ordinary woman, years older than my poor Reformer, marked with the small-pox, and blind of one eye. Then I understood.

## **THE SQUARING OF THE GODS**

It was the night before the great Eclipse. A vast, vague expectancy brooded over the length and breadth of India. Of prophesying there had been no lack, for signs and wonders had been as blackberries in September.

So, far and near, east, west, south, and north, the people of Hindustan--many-hued, many-raced, many-faithed--were watching for they knew not what, watching with grave, silent, yet curious composure.

But there was no outward sign of this inward expectation on either side. The millions of dark faces behind which it lay were as inscrutable as the telegraph wires through which the mere fraction of white faces responsible for the safety of those millions of dark ones were flashing silent messages of warning and preparation.

And here, in the Sacred City, beside the Sacred River, in which multitudes of those millions hoped to bathe on the morrow during the fateful moments of the sun's eclipse, the dim curves of the world had never been outlined against a calmer, more restful sky--a sky almost black in its intensity of shadow. Yet the night was clear, full of a starlight that could be seen, which showed the bend of the broad river, angled on one side by the straight lines of its curved sequence of bathing-steps that swept away to the horizon on either side.

The steps themselves, shadowy, vague, were spangled as with stars by the little trembling lamps of the myriads on myriads of pilgrims already gathered on them waiting for the dawn. The reflection of these lamps lay in the water beside the reflection of the stars, making it hard to tell where heaven ended, where earth begun.

Behind this long length of bathing-steps--irregular in height, in slope, in everything save an inevitable crowning by the tall temple spires--lay Benares. Benares, the only city in the world--since the reputation of Rome lives by works as well as faith--whose every stone tells of that search after righteousness which lies so close to the heart of humanity. Benares, with its sunless alleys, full of the perfume of dead flowers and spent incense--alleys which thread their way past shrine after shrine, holy place after holy place; mere niches in a worn stone, perhaps, or less even than that; only the bare imprint of a bloody hand on the tall, blank walls of the crowded tenement houses which seem to narrow God's sky as they rise up toward it. Benares, where the alien master steps into the gutter to let a swinging corpse pass on its way to the Sacred River,

but where the priest behind it--his dark forehead barred with white, or smeared with a bold patch of ochre--steps into the opposite gutter, and clings to the shrine-set wall like a limpet, lest he be defiled by a touch, a shadow. Benares, which is, briefly, the strangest, saddest city on God's earth.

It lay this night, far as the eye could reach along the outward curve of the Ganges, dreamful exceedingly, dimly paler than the sky. But on the other side of the river, where the land bulged into the stream, lay a scene as, dreamful; yet dreamful in a different way; for here, almost from the water's edge, the young green wheat stretched away into that level plain of India, the most densely populated agricultural country in the world, where myriads and myriads of men live content as the cattle with which they till the soil.

So a whole world lies between these two banks of the Ganges; between the men of whom pilgrims are made, and the pilgrims made of those men. And spanning them, joining them, aggressively, unsympathetically, is the railway bridge built by the alien "Bridge-builders."

Seen in the starlight, with its lattice of dark girders showing against the sky, its white piers blocking the water-slide at intervals, this bridge looked quaintly like a fell and monstrous hairy caterpillar out for a night-walking, one of those caterpillars with turreted excrescences at its former and its latter end. The hinder one here was clearly outlined against a distant block of greater darkness. This was a dense grove of mango trees; and through its far-off shadow shone twinkling coloured lights, while from it came fitfully, at the wind's caprice, a faint sound of drumming, a twangling of *sitaras*; for, in the shelter of the grove, some of the white faces who were responsible for the dark ones were in camp--in a pleasure-camp full of guests come to see the show, and whither the telegrams of warning flashed and whence the answers flashed back, even while the *nautch*, bidden to amuse those guests, went on and on in twanglings, drummings, screechings, posturings.

Such details, however, were hidden even from the nearest point of the angled curve of bathing-steps which swept right away to the starlit horizon on the opposite side of the river. The only movement visible thence by the waiting crowd, as it looked across the river, was a curious dazzling flicker, as if the bridge were shivering, which was caused by the continuous stream on its outer footway of arriving pilgrims, showing now against the dark girders, now against the paler sky.

"Mai Gunga hath her hands full!" murmured one of the group squatting immovable on these nearest steps; "they come, and come."

A face or two, patient, dark, turned to the bridge, and another voice came, calm, passive.

"Ay! 'tis easier for folk to find salvation with 'rails' and bridges than, as of old, with blistered feet and boats." A dark hand nearest the water's lip, as it lapped a lazy, silvery whisper on the worn stone steps, slid into the sacred flood with a sort of tentative caress.

"Yet they said *She* would revenge Herself for the rending of Her bosom, for the burden of bricks laid on Her; but *She* hath not. *She* gives and takes as ever."

The long, dark fingers gathered some of the fallen petals which the river was returning to those who had cast their flower-offering on its surface, and the dark eyes watched a white-swathed corpse that was drifting down stream, a faint streak in the slumbering shadow.

"True!" came another passive voice; "but the time is not past. There is to-morrow yet."

The absolutely unrepresentable *chuck!* made by the tongue against the roof of the mouth, which is the most emphatic denial of India, echoed suddenly, aggressively, into the peaceful air.

It came from the blackness of a low masonry abutment which, traversing the last three steps, projected a few feet into the river, like a pier. A yard maybe above the water, some three long, and perhaps a couple broad, there was just room on its outer end for a small square temple with a rude spiked spire--the plainest of temples, guiltless of ornament, looking out over the Ganges blankly. For its only aperture, a low arched doorway, faced the steps and showed now as a blot of utter darkness.

"Not *She*, brethren!" said a cracked voice following on the denial. "*She* or *Her* like will never harm the *Huzoors!* They have paid their toll, see you, they have squared the gods."

A dozen or more faces turned to the voice, the figures belonging to them remaining immovable, as if carved in stone.

"Dost think so really, Baha-*jee?*" came a question. "I have heard that tale before--and that 'tis done in the 'Magic-houses.'" <sup>[2]</sup>

The emphatic denial rose again. "Not so! These eyes saw it done--here, in this very place, forty years ago! here, at Mai Kâli's shrine!"

In the pause that followed, a pair of claw-like hands could be seen above the bar of shadow, wavering salaams to the little temple, in the perfunctory manner of priesthood all over the world.



"'Tis old Bishen, the flower-seller," said a yawning voice. "He was here in the Time of Trouble, [3] and he tells tales of it--when he remembers!"

"Then let him tell," yawned another, "since the night is long and the dawn lingers. How was't done, Baha-*jee*?"

There was a pause.

"Many ways, doubtless. Here and there different ways. But here, one way. Forty years ago, brothers! Yea, forty years ago, these eyes saw the 'squaring of the gods.' In this wise ..."

There was another dreamful pause, and then, from the shadow, came the old thin voice once more.

"Yonder, where the bridge stands now, was Broon-*sahib*'s house--"

"Broon-*sahib*?" echoed a curious listener. "Dost mean Broon-*sahib* who built the bridge?"

"Who built the bridge?" hesitated the tale-teller. "God knows! More like his son; for the years pass--they pass, Mai Gunga! and I grow old. Grant me this last cleansing, Mother! Wash me from sin ere I go hence ..."

"Lo! thou hast made him forget the rest," reproved another listener, "as if there were not Broon-*sahibs* ever! Even now, here in Benares! Yes! Baba-*jee*, of a certainty, Broon-*sahib*'s house stood here, where the bridge stands now."

The old memory, started afresh, went on.

"It was a boy, the child. A toddler, but with the temper of tigers. Lo! it would scream and yell in the *ayah*'s arms, and beat her face to be let crawl down the steps to pull the spent bosses of the marigolds out of the water and fling them back like balls. A mite of a boy; white as jasmine in the face, yellow as the marigolds themselves in hair. The *mem*, its mother, had the like face and hair. I used to see her in the verandah over the river, and driving above the steps. There were many *sahibs* came and went to the house, after their fashion, and she smiled and spoke to them all. There was one of them--so young, he might have been a son almost--who came often; and she smiled on him, too, as he played, like a boy, with the child. He was one of the *sahibs* who have eyes; so, after a time, he would nod to me and say '*Râm! Râm!*' with a laugh as he passed above me, sitting here in the shadow, selling my garlands.

"So, one day, as he came by, there was the baby screaming in its *ayah*'s arms to be let crawl to the water, and she was denying it by the *mem*'s orders. What the young *sahib* said at first I know not; but after a bit he came running down the steps, the child in his arms, calling back to the woman, in her tongue, 'Trouble not, *ayah!* I'll square it, never fear!'

"And there he was beside me, the two white faces, the yellow heads--for he was but a boy himself, slim, white, yellow-haired--close together, brother-like, buying a garland of the biggest marigolds I had. So down at the water's edge, he teaching the child how to throw them in like a thrower.

"'No underhand work, brotherling,' he said in our tongue, for the baby, after the fashion of the *baba-logue*, knew none other. 'So! straight from the shoulder. Bravo! Thou wilt play crickets, by-and-by, like a man.'

"After that once of chance, it came often of set purpose. He would come down from the house with the child, and I had to keep the biggest marigolds for the game, since, see you, they held the bits of brick better with which he weighted them.

"Thus it went on till one day all the *sahibs* and *mems* were at the house yonder, for God knows what amusement! and in the cool they strolled down here--the *mems* dressed so gay, the *sahibs* all black and smoking--to see how well the toddler, who could scarce speak, had learnt to throw. At least, so it seemed, for they watched and laughed; but after a time they took to throwing the flowers themselves, laughing more and jesting, until not a marigold was left. Then they began on Shivjee's *dhatura* blossoms, filling their white horns with pebbles, and hurling them far, far into the stream.

"So, when paying time came, the young *sahib*--he had the child by the hand--flung rupees into my empty basket, and said, 'Lo! Bishen'--for he was one of those who remember names--'those who seek to curry favour with the gods will have no chance to-day. We are beforehand. We have squared them.'

"At this the *mem*, standing close by, frowned and spoke some reproof; maybe because she was of those who drive to church often. But the boy only laughed, and, catching the child up, cried, 'Lo! brotherling, then are we sinners indeed; since we do it so often, you and I!'

"And with that he raced up the steps with the child, calling '*Râm, Râm!*' and '*Jai Kâli Ma!*' like any worshipper; so that the *mem* and the others strolling after could not but laugh. And some echoed the cry as they went up the steps."

The old voice paused in its even sing-song; and when it began again, there was a new note in it which seemed to bring a sense of hurry and stress even to that uttermost peace.

"But they came down again. How long after matters not. I see them so in my old eyes. Going up, laughing in the sunset, then returning. It was starlight when they came down, the *mems* and the *sahibs* and the *baba-logue*. Starlight as it was now, brethren, but not still, like this. There were cries, and flames yonder, and folk running.

"The boats lay here below the temple. And one--a Mahomedan--came with them, promising safety. So they begun to get into the boats, and one moved off, the crowd looking on. Then suddenly, God knows why! it ceased looking on, and began to kill. They were half in, half out of the boat; the *sahib-logue* and some cried to stop, some to go on. But the *mems* made no noise; only you could see their faces white out of the shadows.

"And his, the young *sahib's*, was whiter than any, glittering, it seemed, with a white fire. The *mem* was in the boat, and Broon-*sahib* on the bottom step, the baby in his arms. But he, the boy, was above him facing the crowd--making time.

"Then, just as the *mem* stretched her hands for the child, a bullet--they were firing from the top steps--hit Broon-*sahib*, and he fell half in, half out of the water, pushing the boat out in his fall. So it began to slide down stream.

"Some in it would have stopped it, but the *mem* gave a look at those other *mems*, those other babies, and laid her hand on one that would have gone back.

"No!"

"That was the cry she gave--a great cry; but a greater one rang out through the shadows and the lights, from the boy who had caught up the child as it fell upon the steps.

"I know not what it was, but it was great, and it echoed out as the boat slipped fast to safety. And he held the child to his breast and waved his sword, so that the *mem's* white face rose from her hands, where she had hidden it, and she looked back. That was the last thing I saw out of the shadows as the boat slipped to safety; but it held me, so that when I looked round, the boy was no longer on the steps.

"He had leaped to the plinth of the temple, and his arms were empty of his burden. Only he stood in front of the doorway with his glittering white face--his glittering white face, his glittering white sword!

"Come on, you devils!" he shouted in our tongue. "Come on! Mai Kâli shall have blood to-night if she wants it."

"And she had, brothers!"

"It ran from the plinth and trickled to the river; for none could touch him from behind, and his sword was in front.

"There was a method in its hackings and hewings. At least so it seemed to me, watching helpless for good or evil, from my place in the shadow. For ever, as its keenest stroke fell, so another body fell blocking the plinth, until he had to stand almost in the arch itself.

"Then a burly Mahomedan trooper challenged him, and I knew not which way the fight was going, till, with a shout that was almost a laugh, the white face and the white sword showed, lunging back at the big body as they broke past. And it fell sidelong, blocking the doorway quite.

"But none thought of that, of it. None thought of anything save the glittering face and the glittering sword that had burst through the circling crowd, and now, facing it again, was backing up the steps, fighting grimly as it backed.

"Up and up, step by step, and we--even I, brothers, watching helpless--drawn after it perforce, to see--to know ...

"So the steps were left silent in the starlight. I did not see the end, brothers. It was beyond my sight. They told me afterwards it was in the bazaar, with half the town to see; but I had crept away, a great shivering on me, for I had remembered the flowers and the young *sahib's* words about the gods.

"And I remembered the child. What had become of the child?"

"Then suddenly I understood. Then I knew what the method of the sword had been--how it had hidden, had lured!

"It was nigh dawn when I remembered; dawn as it is now. Look! The iron of night's scabbard grows into the steel of day's sword upon the water; and hark! that is the cry of the mallards. The world is waking. So it was when I crept down to Kâli's shrine.

"The blood was still dripping into the water, and when I drew the dead mass of flesh from

blocking the doorway, the red of it lay in a pool up to Her feet. But the child had crawled on Her knees, brothers, and had cried itself to sleep there.

"Yet when it wakened at my touch it did not cry, for, see you, it knew me; and so, when it saw the milk, set in a bowl before Her as offering, it stretched its hands for it.

"Thus it was made clear. So I gave it Mai Kâli's milk, knowing it was true what he had said, 'that they had squared the gods.'"

The voice paused, and another asked, "And then?" before it went on dreamily.

"Yea! it was true indeed, for ere the day ended they were back with guns and soldiers. So, since silence is better than speech when nought is sure, I crept in the night to a Colonel's house and left the child in the garden for them to find.

"Forty years ago, brothers! Forty years is it since the boats slipped down to safety with the *Huzoors*, and now ..."

There was a sudden stir in the waiting crowd.

A boat had slipped up the river shadows from the bridge and was making for the steps.

"That's your station, Brown," said an English voice; "the water is a bit deep about the shrine, remember, and the old women are devilish hard to keep back. All right!" it continued, as a man stepped out. "Go on to the next. We are a bit early on the field; but it is as well to be beforehand, and square things."

As the boat paddled on, another English voice in the stern said in a low tone, "Why did you put Brown there? Just where his father was killed, don't you remember?"

"Just why I did! He won't stand any nonsense, and it is a troublesome job. Besides, he wasn't killed, and there's luck in it. That was a queer story. Some one saved him, of course, but why? and how? Now, Smith! there you are. And, as I said to Brown, for Heaven's sake look after the old dodderers, male and female. When they've nothing left to live for ..."

The rest was lost as the boat went on to a yet farther station.

So, as the sun rose, it rose on that great angled sweep, not of steps, but of humanity; full, pressed down, running over into the spired town behind--on a million and more of dark faces, and a dozen white ones dotted here and there at the most dangerous points.

And Broon-*sahib*, bearded, a bit burly with his forty and odd years, sat on the plinth, and thought, no doubt, of that past at first, then took out his pipe, and with it some scraps of smoked glass, since the coming eclipse must not be lost, even though one *was* on duty.

The sun climbed up, brilliantly unconscious, or at least regardless, of its coming fate. And after a time boats began to slide up and down, and a big barge came punting up stream sedately. It was full of English women and children; and under its wide awning a table was laid with flowers and sparkling silver against the champagne breakfast which was to follow on a successful performance of duty.

For not even here could there be allowed hint or sign of that expectancy of possible evil. A little girl holding her mother's hand nodded her yellow curls delightedly, as the barge went past, to Dada sitting swinging his legs just where the blood had dripped into the stream forty years ago; but something in the woman's face made a call echo over the water.

"It's all right. Show going A 1!"

As a show there could be no doubt of that. There was a breathlessness in it, a mighty surge of emotion from one end of that bank of humanity to the other, a curious wail in the ceaseless roar of voices, that struck through eyes and ears to the heart.

And now, what was that?

Broad daylight still; not a shadow had shifted, and yet a sense as if a candle had gone out somewhere.

Broon-*sahib* put his pipe in his pocket, looked through a glass darkly, stood up, raised his helmet, wiped his forehead, and put it on again.

The time had come--there was a nibble of shadow on the ball of light!--the monster had begun his meal!

As he looked round, unarmed, defenceless, on the hundreds of thousands of dark heads which held this thought, he smiled and nodded with the words.

"Have patience, brethren; there is time!" Doubtless, but not much time to think of other things beyond the mere keeping of that forward crush of bathers, that backward crush of those that had

bathed, from inextricable confusion.

So much the better, perhaps. Less time, at any rate, for expectation of the new King who was to fall from the sun and sweep away existing kingdoms. Less time to notice the white horse led out ostentatiously by the Brahmins at the biggest temple, sign that such talk was true, that one æon had passed away, and another--in which Vishnu should appear in his final incarnation--had begun.

"Have patience! Have patience!"

That was the burden of the cry from the few white faces dotted among the dark ones, and it was caught up and echoed by the connecting links of yellow-legged policemen stationed every ten yards along the lowest step.

"Have patience! Have patience!"

A hard saying indeed.

Broon-*sahib* slipped down from the plinth and collared an old pantaloons just as he fell, hefted him up like a baby, and set him squatting in safety above. Then an old woman, gasping, gurgling from the first mouthful of the water into which, regardless of depth, she had literally been propelled.

"Have patience, brethren! Have patience!"

A harder saying, now that all things had grown grey; though still--weird, uncanny, beyond belief--not a shadow had shifted.

Hopelessly grey, and hopelessly cold--so cold. So curiously quiet, too; for the great roar of voices seemed to have severed itself from things earthly, and was like a mighty wind from heaven.

"Have patience, brethren! Have patience! There is time!"

A harder saying still, when in the greyness, the coldness, a flock of scared pigeons overhead sent a weird flight of faint grey shadows down that long length of angled curve, packed by expectant humanity.

Was He coming indeed?--that new ruler? Were these the heralds?

There was quite a little row, now, of rescued old dodderers on Mai Kâli's plinth, whence the blood had dropped forty years ago.

What was that? Had some one withdrawn a veil? Had some one said, "Let there be light"?

The greyness, the coldness, lost their character in an instant. There was promise in them now--promise of light to come! The sun was reasserting its sway, and--not half of humanity had bathed!

"Have patience, brethren! Have patience!" shouted Broon-*sahib*, and there was a certain fierce determination in his tone.

Hardest saying of all, when the precious moments were going--going so fast!

"*Huzoor!*" came a piteous, confused voice behind him from the plinth, "it is my last chance. I am old--I forget. I have forgotten so much--only this remains. For pity's sake--for the sake of forty years ago--let old Bishen, the flower-seller, find salvation!"

Even in his hurry, in his breathless recognition that here was the crucial instant--that a single mistake might bring disaster--Broon-*sahib* flung a quick look behind him.

He saw a pathetic old face, humble even in its grief.

"It's all right, *Baba*; there's plenty of time!" he said swiftly. "Here! look through this bit of glass--you'll see for yourself."

It only took a moment, those quick words; he was back, ready with hand and voice of command, almost without a break; but they did more for peace and order than a regiment of soldiers. For old Bishen, after one look through the smoked glass, rose to his feet and salaamed again and again, set, as he was, on high, in sight of all.

"Yea! it is true," he cried, in his thin old voice. "There *is* time. Let us wait, brethren; for they know--the gods have told them."

Half-an-hour afterwards, with its table laid with flowers and silver, the sliding barge held Englishmen as well as Englishwomen; and one of them was drinking deep draughts of iced beer, while a little girl with yellow hair watched him admiringly, and a woman, still rather pale of face, stood looking at him with evident relief.

"I told you it would be all right, my dear," he said, smiling. "There never was any rush to speak of but once; and then I gave a bit of smoked glass to an old chap, and he saw through a glass darkly what was up, and told the others. So we squared 'em--gods and Brahmins and all--as I told you we should, in spite of all the talk and the telegrams."

## **THE KEEPER OF THE PASS**

The low hills, as they lay baking in the sunshine of noon, showed in scallops of glare against the light-bleached sky. A fine dust, reddish but for that same bleaching of light, hid every green thing far and near, making them match the straggling camel-thorns, the stunted wormwood, the tufts of chamomile, and many another nameless aromatic herb which in these low hills come into the world ready dressed in dust, as it were, against the long rainless months.

Yet it was not hot here in the uplands, and so the district officer's tent was opened at one side and propped up by bamboos more for the convenience of its occupant holding an open-air audience than from any quest after coolness. The upward tilt gave the tent a quaintly lopsided look, as if it were some gigantic bird flapping one wing in its attempt to rise and fly away from the little hollow in which it stood.

It was a motley crowd, indeed, which awaited the fiat of the Dispenser of Justice in these fastnesses of the central hills of India; those climbing, rolling upward sweeps of sandstone where the ripple mark of the tides that built them remains to tell of the vanished sea which had once covered this dry and thirsty land, where no water is for nine long months of the year.

It was a curious crowd also. It could not fail of being that, since it struck the two extremes of that vast Indian scale of so-called culture, so-called civilisation. For a land case involving several miles of country was in dispute, and the semi-Europeanised, wholly clothed lawyers engaged on it stood cheek by jowl with the semi-clothed wholly aboriginal witnesses in it; representatives for the most part of the wild tribes belonging to these waste lands and forests. Rude iron-smelters, almost touching the bronze age in absolute savagery; or wandering fowlers, barbaric even to the extent of eating their poor, old, undesirable relations!

In one group, however, consisting of an old man and a young one, a quick observer might have noticed a palpable discrepancy between the dress (or the lack of it) and the address of the wearers. A discrepancy which made the magistrate of the district look up with a smile.

"Hullo! Nâgdeo!" he said. "On the warpath after a tiger?" The old man salaamed down to the ground. His skin was very dark, so that his white moustache and thin white whiskers, brushed out to stand, each hair singly, in a forward curve, like the whiskers of a cat, seemed to glisten against it. For the rest, he was small, slight, but extremely muscular, and he carried himself with no little dignity and importance.

"Not so, *Huzoor*," he replied, and his speech rose higher in that scale of culture and civilisation than his dress, which was no more than a waistcloth, a string of tiger claws, and a tasselled spear--"I come to put another foot on it. This is my grandson, *Huzoor*."

The dignity, the importance grew fifty-fold as he turned to the lad by his side. A good head taller, fairer of skin, infinitely better looking, there was yet something about the figure which made the eye turn back to the smaller, older one, as it stood before authority with a certain authority of its own.

He was, as all knew, explained Nâgdeo, the keeper of one of the wildest passes in that wild country, as his father and his father's father had been. Who could deny it? Was not their very caste name, to distinguish them from others, *Ghâtwâl*, or pass-keeping ones?

He had had to keep his a long time, because the Old God had decreed that his son should be defeated by a tigress and her cubs; which might happen to the best of pass-keeping ones, since those things feminine were untrustworthy. Consequently he (Nâgdeo) had had to go on beyond the years of greatest activity until his grandson reached them.

But here the boy was now. Of age, twenty; than most, taller; as any, learned in jungle law; with the spear, nimble; to keep the pass, ready; to be enrolled, present, the Old God before--

With his subject the old man's words had returned to the idiom of a wilder tongue, and he drew out of his waistcloth a little iron image of a tiger, not three inches long, to which he salaamed reverently.

For this was the Old God.

"What is your grandson's name?" asked the district officer.

It was Bagh la (tiger cub), said N gdeo.

It had seemed a suitable name for one born six months after his father had been found lying dead on the top of a dead tigress, his dead lips close to the teats that would suckle her dead whelps no more.

That had been a misfortune, deplorable yet without shame, and due, possibly, to the dead youth's over-soon marriage to a thing feminine; such things being notoriously untrustworthy! Therefore he had refrained from entangling *this* one with such things feminine, the more so because there were already sufficient of them in the house, what with Bagh la's mother and grandmother. Briefly, the worship of two female things was sufficient for any lad without adding to the adulation by a third!

So, in the evening, when the magistrate's legal work was over, the old man and the young one came up to the tilted tent again, and, after a curious little oath of fealty to the Old God--in the shape of the three-inch tiger--and a vow of war till death against live things that mimicked his shape had been taken from his grandfather's dictation by Bagh la, the latter's name was duly enrolled as hereditary guardian of the J dusa Pass, and the two struck a bee-line towards home over the low jungle as if it belonged to them.

As indeed it did; since few travellers, save the keepers of the passes, ventured to brave the tigers dreaming in their lairs, or pacing the trackless wastes hungrily, after dark.

But old N gdeo was jubilant over the mere chance of coming across one; not that it was likely, since what tiger ever was whelped which would dare to face him and his grandson? "Men"--here he gave a sidelong glance of pure adoration at Bagh la's height--"who had no backs; who, if they failed, as even pass-keepers must sometimes, were found face up to the sky, face up to the claws, face up to the teeth!"

Of course, sometimes, the accursed brutes who assumed the shape of the Blessed Budhal Pen--the Old God of Gods--would, out of sheer spite, roll a dead man over and claw at his back; but that also was without shame, since dead men had no choice.

So the old man babbled on garrulously, and the young one listened, till they reached the little village at the foot of the pass. The moon had risen by this time, and showed the upright slabs of sandstone clustering under the wide-spreading tamarind trees on its outskirts. Slabs marking the graves of dead and gone inhabitants.

"I am ready now for the young girls to break their pitchers and cover my emptiness with the shards," said the old man, pausing for a second beside a cluster of these stones. Then he raised his hand and spoke to the unseen: "Fear not, Slumberers! He who comes to join you hath no scratch upon his back."

That was his *Nunc Dimittis*. After which he made his way to a low shingled stone hut, covered with gourds, which stood on some rising ground outside the hamlet towards the pass; drank to excess--from pure joy--of a nauseous spirit made by the untrustworthy feminine out of wild berries, and then slept as sound as if he were indeed with the Slumberers.

For this question of the due keeping of the pass had been on the old man's nerves for months. The rains would be due ere long, bringing, no doubt, those twinges of lumbago to a grandfather's back which had of late made it difficult, indeed, to keep the pass open for travellers; since to do that a man must give the beasts no rest. He must harry their lairs when they were absent, scare them from the road with strange noises and ringing of bells, and, if they were obdurate, face claws and teeth.

But now there was some one to do all this. Some one of the true race, yet by the fiat of the Old God bigger than most. Ay! and with more personal enmity than most towards the evil ones who stole the Old God's likeness. For must not those six unborn mouths of wrong, of loss, of grief and anger, count for something?

Yes! Bagh la would be a Keeper of the Pass, indeed! That was the old man's thought as he fell asleep, his dream as he lay sound as the Slumberers themselves. And Bagh la slept, too, the badge of his new office, a necklace of tiger claws, round his neck, a tasselled spear, hung with jingling bells, beside him. But the untrustworthy feminine, the mother, the grandmother, still sate by the embers of the fire whispering fearfully; for *they* knew that those six unborn mouths, translated in *their* way, might mean something very different.

Bagh la himself, however, had no suspicion of the possibility. He set about his new duties with an immense amount of swagger. The least hint of a marauding intruder about the winding path which led to the fertile valleys towards the south, would send him through the village with boastful jinglings of his bells. And, as luck would have it, that jingling seemed all powerful for a time towards the keeping of the pass.

Nâgdeo, who, now that the necessity for presenting a youthful appearance was over, permitted himself a seat amongst the village elders, a certain stiffness of carriage generally, used to boast of this peace dogmatically. Such a thing as no *news*, even, of intruders, so far on in the season, was unheard of. He himself, in his palmiest days, had never been so fear-compelling. It was those six unborn mouths of hereditary hatred which did it, no doubt.

And Baghélia thought so too, as long as the rain was slight, as long as the flocks and herds kept to the uplands, and only the shepherds and herdsmen had tales to tell of loss. Then, one day, the clouds broke in slanting shafts of almost solid rain, and the water ran over the rippled sandhills as if it had been a tide once more. Then the sun shone for another day, and at dusk everything but a yard or two of shadow round Baghélia as he patrolled the path was a blank nothingness, blotting out even the darkness with wet, impenetrable vapour, dulling even the sound of the bells, deadening all scent.

So, neither he nor the tiger had an instant's warning.

They were face to face in a moment.

Then Baghélia knew what those unborn mouths had wrought in him. Terror, absolute, uncontrollable, seized on all his young strength; he knew nothing save the desire to escape. The next instant he felt a hot vapour on his back, heard the husky angry cough that sent it there, and all that young strength of his spent itself in a cry like that of the untrustworthy thing feminine, when they had told it of a young husband's death.

Into the mist he fled, feeling the cold vapour in his face, the hot behind; until, suddenly desperate, every atom of him leaped forward from what lay behind, and he fell.

None too soon; for even as he shot downward a shadow shot over him in the mist, and something ripped his bare back lightly, as, with greater impetus than his, that shadow plunged into the void.

A second afterwards a long-drawn howl of rage and spite rose upward through the mist to meet Baghélia's whimpers as he lay, caught above the sheer precipice, by a bush.

After a while he rose and crept carefully up to the verge; then sate and shivered at himself; at this inheritance of fear. And more than once his hand sought that faint scratch upon his back. It was not much; not more than a kitten might have made in play, but he felt it like a brand.

By degrees, however, he began to think. The tiger must be lying dead, or at least helpless, below the rocks. He must get down to it, leave the marks of his spear in it; the mark of its claws ...

A surge of shame swept through him. No! he must go back unscathed; no one must have the chance, in dressing wounds, of seeing that faint mark behind.

So the next morning, old Nâgdeo could scarcely contain himself for pride, as he sate among the village elders. The boy had killed his first tiger without a scratch. Had brought home its skin, the biggest seen for years. True, the lad himself had found the fight too hard, and was even now shivering and shaking with ague; but that only proved how hard the fight had been. And the untrustworthy feminine were dosing him, so he would be afoot again in a day or two. Then the village would see that, ere a month was over, a naked child might go through the pass alone in safety. But it was not so!

Baghélia, it is true, was well enough by day, but as the dusk came on, his strong young limbs always fell a shivering and a shaking. "There is more room for quaking, see you, in him than in me," old Nâgdeo would explain elaborately to his cronies, as he held out an arm, which with the inaction, the sudden cessation of imperious efforts, began to show its age clearly; "but one must pay for size and strength, and courage; and there is no harm done as yet. The mimicking devils had their lesson when he killed their champion without a scratch."

But the harm came in time. A party of salt-carriers, taking advantage of a break in the rains, arrived at the village carrying an extra load; the body of a man killed by a tiger, half eaten by jackals.

"Ague or no ague, sonling," said old Nâgdeo almost coaxingly to the lad half-an-hour after the appearance of this grim visitor, "thy bells must be heard in the pass to-night. They will be all-sufficient, considering the lesson thou hast taught the beasts. And thou art strong enough for the ringing of bells. Thou canst return afterwards to shiver and shake, sonling, since thou art not of those to do that in the pass. No! no!"

The old man's chuckle at his little joke was tenderly triumphant; but, when he had gone, and the untrustworthy feminine alone remained, Baghélia turned with a sob to his mother, who crouched beside him, and hid his face in her clothes, as if he had been a hurt child.

"Mother!" he cried, "I got it from thee!"

"Yes! heart of my heart," she answered passionately, "and from thy murdered father too. Have

I not told thee so, often? As for this old man! See you! Since *this* has come upon us, and the shivering is no longer refuge--go! There is no need to ring the bells--no need to go farther than the little caves. And the old man fails fast. He will not live long. Then, when he is dead, the old tale will be told, and we can tell a new one, like other folk. Why, even now, see you, there is no need for travellers to cross the pass. Let them take the 'rail' which the *Huzoors* have made! All this old-world talk is foolishness--yesterday's bread has been eaten, its water drunk; 'tis time for a new dinner!"

It was more than a month after this that some one, sitting on the village daïs underneath the tamarind trees in sight of the Slumberers, in trying to use a betel-cutter, said carelessly, "*It hath grown rusty, like Baghélia's bells!*"

Nâgdeo turned on the speaker like lightning. That month had left him curiously aged, with a wistful, anxious expectancy on his old face. Though when, more than once, folk had commented on his changed looks, and asked what ailed him, he had only replied, almost apologetically, "Death lingers; 'tis time I was with the Slumberers, since Baghélia keeps the pass as his fathers did."

But now his old voice rose haughtily, "Like thy wits rather! Canst not see that the youth hath been overbrave? The mimicking devils will not face the bells. And who can kill a foe that keeps his distance? And if the bells ring not, is it not in hopes to lure the cowards close--to take them unawares?"

The arguments came swiftly, as if they had been rehearsed before; rehearsed without audience; and yet when old Nâgdeo moved off as if in displeasure, his hands crept out towards the stones which marked the Slumberers, his eyes sought them almost pitifully.

And that night, after Baghélia had gone on his rounds, after the untrustworthy feminine had slothfully sought its bed, the old Keeper of the Pass crept out in the rear of the young one, spear in hand; yet without the jingles, since what need was there for two sets?

Two! But where was the one?

The old man's face grew more feline in its watchful anxiety, as he prowled among the bushes in the half moonlit darkness, listening for the challenge. And none came, though more than once in the denser shadow of thick jungle, he saw two spots of green light telling that some one was *waiting* to be challenged. But where was the challenger?

The night was far spent ere he was found, fast asleep on a bed of dry leaves in the little cave.

The sight seemed to take the finder back, not to his more immediate ancestors, the purely savage hunters of those low hills, but to something older still, to the barbarians who had swept down on them to found principalities and powers; for all the calm dignity of the Indo-Scythic sculptures was in Nâgdeo's pose as he pricked the sleeper with his spear.

"Rise up, Keeper of the Pass; they wait for thee without."

Baghélia was on his feet in a second. He knew the time had come, and something of the old racial courage in him held that new fear in check.

Until, not a hundred yards without the cave, in the faint grey light of the now coming dawn, a paler shadow showed in the darker shadows, long, low, sinuous; and something moved across their path with no sound of footfall; only a crackle of dry twigs, a sudden, soft, short wheeze, and then silence.

"Ring the bells, Keeper of the Pass," came the old man's voice. "There is no fear. Has not the tale of thy prowess spread among the tiger people?"

His prowess! The sting of that slight scratch was as fire on the lad's back; he paused. But a spear from behind reached to his, struck it sideways, and the next instant the challenge echoed through the pass.

And was accepted.

The shadow grew short, showed paler; till two green lights flashed out, and with a roar that rolled among the rocks, the tiger faced them, crouched and sprang.

Old Nâgdeo, his vanished youth returning for a space, sprang too, watching that other spring; so, spear in hand, found himself close to the striped skin of the base usurper of the Old God's shape, into which, with all the force he possessed, he drove his weapon's point. But Baghélia, with no thought but flight, felt the full force of those mighty claws on his back, and fell. Perhaps his neck was broken; anyhow, he lay still, heedless of the piteous cry that followed:--

"Face him, Keeper of the Pass! Face the teeth, face the claws, ere thou seekest the Slumberers!"

Yet the entreaty was not utterly disregarded; since--Baghélia dead--that Keepership passed again to one whose face faced the old enemy bravely.



That face, however, had no triumph of victory in it, when Nâgdeo stooped over his grandson's body, and turned its scored back to be hidden by Mother Earth. There was no mark anywhere else--not a scratch. That, at any rate, must not be. That must be remedied before the villagers saw it; before even the sun saw it. For was not Budhal Pen, the Old God, the Sun-god also?

So he drew the lad's body deliberately within reach of the mighty claws, and used them, slack as they were in newly-come death, for his purpose.

Then he sat down beside the two dead bodies, and looked at his own for scratch or hurt. There was not one; not even a bruise, not a spot of blood. So none need know. The girls might weep as they broke their pitchers over Baghélia bewailing his dead courage.

The courage which had died before he did, though none should know of it. Yet it had died. And who was to blame?

Nâgdeo sat gazing stupidly at his grandson's long length, at his fairer beauty; then suddenly he stood up.

That was it, of course!

And if that were so, then it were best to settle it before dawn, when folk might come prying. He bent curiously over the dead lad, then laid his hand on the dead heart.

"Go! Keeper of the Pass, to the Slumberers without fear. I, Nâgdeo, will punish the intruder."

Half-an-hour after, he stood silently in his hut beside his still sleeping wife. The old woman, blind, deaf, near her end as it was, scarcely stirred as he drove his spear through her heart.

"I doubt thee not, Naolé," he said inwardly, "unless a devil wronged thee; but thy son's son must be avenged. He must take no stranger's blood to the Slumberers."

But Herdâsi, the lad's mother, was awake, and screamed.

"Hold thy peace, fool!" said the old man, fiercely, "if thou wouldst not proclaim thyself harlot. Thy son is dead--face downwards. It came not from me, nor from my son; so that of us which goes to join the Slumberers must be avenged on the vile spirit that took form within thee. Come out from under the bed, woman! if thou wouldst prove he got it not with thy knowledge. Oh! untrustworthy feminine!"

And after a pause the untrustworthy feminine did come out with a curious dignity.

"He got it not from me but from my love. Yet what matter if he be dead!" said Herdâsi, and so died with her face to the foe to save her son's name. Since, if it was a devil's doing, none could blame the lad.

They found the old man sitting beside the two dead women when they came to tell him that the Keeper of the Pass had given his life for its safety.

"Yea, I know," replied Nâgdeo, quietly. "I went and found him before dawn when he returned not. So I came home and slew these useless ones. Since he was dead, and I am nigh death, and there was none to keep the untrustworthy feminine from wandering."

He adhered to this story steadfastly in the district magistrate's court, and when he was condemned to death made but one request--that he might be allowed to face it with the insignia of his office about him. So on the eve of his execution they gave the old man back his necklace of tiger claws, and told him he would be allowed to jingle his bells on his way to the scaffold. But when they came to rouse him in the morning he was lying dead, face upward; his arms, his chest, his throat all rent and ripped by those same tiger claws.

But there was not even a scratch upon the back of the last Keeper of the Pass.

## **THE PERFUME OF THE ROSE**

"I think we ought to be going back to the others," said the girl.

She was a pretty, fair English girl, fresh as a rose in her dainty pink muslin dress, flounced as they wore them in the mutiny year--in three full flounces to the waist, like the corolla of a flower. And the lace sunshade she held tilted over her shoulder as a protection against the slanting rays

of the afternoon sun added to her rose-likeness by its calyx of pale green lining.

"Ought we?" said the young Englishman who walked beside her, his hand clasping hers. They were a good-looking pair, pleasant to behold. "What a bore; it is so jolly here."

The epithet was not happy, save as an expression of the speaker's frame of mind. For the garden into which these engaged lovers had wandered away from the gay party of English men and women who had taken possession of the marble summer-house in its centre for a picnic, or, as the natives call it, "a fool's dinner," was something more than jolly.

It was beautiful, this garden of a dead dynasty of kings past and gone like last year's roses.

But there were roses and to spare still within its high four-square walls that were hidden from each other by the burnished orange-groves, by the tall forest trees fringing its cross of wide marble aqueducts bordered by wide paths.

Such blossoming trees! The *kachnar* flinging its bare branches, set thick with its geranium flowers, against the creamy feathers waving among the dense dark foliage of the *mangoes*, the *bakayun* drooping its long lilac tassels beside the great gold ones of the *umultâs*, and here and there its whole vitality lavished on a monstrous leaf or two, a huge flower or two, white, curved, solid, as if cut in cold marble, yet with a warm fragrance at its heart, a hill magnolia challenged the scent of the roses below.

Ineffectually, at least here in this square of the garden; for that cross of wide, empty aqueducts divided it into squares.

And this one was a square of roses--roses everywhere, even in the lower level of what in the old kingly days had been a marble-edged water-way, which now, half filled with soil, held more roses.

But they were all of one kind--the pink Persian rose, whose outer petals pale in the sunlight, whose rose of roses heart is full of an almost piercing perfume.

What wonder, when it is the otto of roses rose! It grew here for that set purpose in orderly lines, its grey green, velvety leaves almost hidden by its profusion of flowers.

And the scent of them filled the whole square of garden, where the air, still warm from the past noon, lay prisoned in that fringe of blossoming trees.

It seemed to fill the brain, also, with the quintessence of gladness, beauty, life, and love.

So His arm sought Her waist and their eyes met.

But only for a second; the next, Her blush matching Her flounces, She had drawn back, and He with an angry frown was glaring in the direction of the voice which had interrupted them.

It was a high, clear voice full of little trills and bubbings like a bird's, and it sang on incessantly, as if to give those two time to recover from their confusion. And as it sang, the Persian vowels seemed as piercingly sweet as the perfume into which they echoed.

"The rose-root takes earth's kisses for its meat,  
The rose-leaf makes its blush from the sun's heat,  
The rose-scent wakes-who knows from what thing sweet?  
Who knows  
The secret of the perfume of the rose?"

As the song ended, a head showed above the tufted bushes. It was rather a fine head; bare of covering, its long grizzled hair parted in the middle lying in a smooth outward curve on the high narrow forehead, then sweeping in an equal inside curve between the ear and throat. So much, no more, was to be seen above the roses, save, for a moment, a long-fingered, delicate brown hand hiding the face in its *salaam*.

"Who the *shaitan* are you?" asked the young man fiercely in Hindustani.

The head and hand met in a second *salaam*, then the face showed; rather a fine face, preternaturally grave, but with a cunning comprehension in its gravity.

"I am Hushmut the essence-maker, *Huzoor*," was the reply. "I belong to the garden, and, being hidden from the noble people in my occupation of plucking roses for my still, I sang to let them know."

The young Englishman gave a half-embarrassed laugh.

"What does he say?" asked the girl. She had only been two months in India, and these had been spent in falling in love.

"He thought we might like to know he was there, that's all--a joke, isn't it?" answered her

lover. She smiled, and so holding each other's hands boldly they stood facing that head above the roses.

It nodded cheerfully.

"The *Huzoors* are doubtless about-to-marry persons," came the voice. "It is not always so, even with the *Huzoors*. But this being different, if they require essences for the bridal let them come to Hushmut. Rose, jasmine, orange, sandal, lemon grass. I make them all in their season. Yea, even 'wylet'<sup>[4]</sup> which the *memi* love. It is not really *banafsha*, *Huzoor*; they grow not in the plains. I make it from the *babul* blossom, and none could tell the difference. Mayhap there *is* none, since He who makes the perfume of the flowers in His still, may send the same to many blossoms, as I send my essences to many lovers; even the noble people!"

There was distinct raillery in the last words, and the young Englishman's smile vanished.

"We people hold not with essences," he said curtly; adding to the girl, "Come, dear, I think we really ought to go back, your father will be wanting to go home--he has a lot of work, I know--"

A shuffle in the bushes made the lovers pause, a curious shuffle such as a wounded bird makes in its efforts to escape.

"If the most noble will tarry, this slave will at least make the luck-offering to the bride," came the voice again, and to point its meaning the delicate brown hand held up a circular shallow basket heaped with rose-petals. Heaped so lightly, that the hand held it level, and it seemed to glide on the top of the bushes, heralding the grizzled head which slid after it with a faintly undulating movement.

The cause of this became clear when the limit of the roses was reached.

Hushmut the essence-maker must have been a cripple from birth. The loose blue cloth, such as gardeners wear knotted round their loins like a petticoat, hid, however, all deformity, even when he clambered up the marble edge of the old water-way, and shuffled with sidelong jerks along the path to the pink muslin flounces.

The wearer's eyes grew soft suddenly. The mystery of such births came home to the woman who was so soon to be a wife, perhaps a mother.

She gave him a mother's look anyhow; the look of almost passionate pity a woman gives to a child's deformity.

Perhaps he saw it. Anyhow he paused; then, with his bold black eyes twinkling, held out the basket.

"A handful, *Huzoor*, for luck!" he cried.

"A rose ungathered is but a rose,  
Pluck it, lover, don't mind a thorn;  
Tuck it away in your bosom-clothes,  
And drink its beauty from night to morn."

The voice trilled and bubbled quite decorously, but the young Englishman intercepted a deliberate wink, and felt inclined to kick Hushmut to lower levels; till he remembered that the girl could not understand.

"Take a handful," he said, "and let's get rid of him." The girl obeyed, but, by mere chance, the little white hand with his ring on it did tuck its handful of pink rose-leaves away in the loose pink ruffles on her breast. Whereat Hushmut's approval became so unmistakable that the young Englishman felt that the only thing was to escape from it.

Yet as he hurried the girl back to the summerhouse he turned to listen to the essence-maker's voice as he went on with his song, and his rose-picking.

"Dig, gardener! deep; till the Earth-lips cling tight.  
Prune, gardener! keep those blushes to the light.  
Then, gardener, sleep! he brings the scent by night.  
Who knows  
The secret of the perfume of the rose?"

There was nothing to be seen now but the stunted grey green bushes half hidden in blossom; even the head had disappeared. They were a queer people, thought the young man, very difficult to understand. Then the refrain returned to him--

"Who knows  
The secret of the perfume of the rose?"

"Hushmut?" answered an older man who lounged smoking in one of the marble-fretted balconies of the dead King's pleasure-house. "Oh, yes! he is quite a character. A scoundrel, I believe; at least he knows all the worst lots in the city. They come to the garden at night, you see, and the bazaar women get all their essences from him. So I expect he knows at any rate of all the devilry that's going on. I wish I did." The speaker's face looked a trifle harassed.

"Is it true, sir, what they say?" asked another voice, "that Hushmut is really the King's son. That his mother was a Brahmin girl they kidnapped, who cried herself to death in one of these rooms. Then, when the child was a cripple, the King--by Jove, he was a brute!--disowned it."

"Is that about Hushmut?" asked the girl, who had joined the group in time to hear the last words.

The men looked at each other, and the older one said: "Yes, my dear; they say he was deserted by his parents because he was a cripple. Rather rough on him. Now I think I'll go and get your mother to come home. It's getting late. You'll follow, I suppose?"

"Yes, father, with him," she said, with a rose-blush.

So, by degrees, in couples, as a rule, but sometimes with a pale-faced child tucked into the carriage between father and mother, the pleasure-seekers left the garden of dead Kings to the scent of the roses. Left it cheerfully, calling back to their friends times and places where they were to meet again, as English men and women did on those fatal evenings in May, '57.

Only the girl in the pink frock and her lover lingered; while the dogcart in which he was to drive her home waited under the blossoming trees.

And as they stood talking, as lovers will, Hushmut the essence-maker, thinking the coast was clear, came shuffling down the scented shadow of the path--for the sun had left the garden--pushing his basket of rose-leaves before him, dragging his crippledom behind him.

"Do you think he would show us his still?" said the girl, suddenly. "I've never seen one. Ask him, will you?"

Hushmut's big, bold black eyes twinkled. Certainly the Miss-*sahiba* might see. There was no secret in his work. He took the scent as he found it, as wise men took love. Again there was that faint suspicion of raillery only to be pardoned by the girl's ignorance, and also by a conviction that Hushmut counted on that ignorance, and meant the remark only for the young Englishman. And so, oddly, the latter became conscious of a distinct antagonism between himself and the crippled essence-maker. It was absurd, ludicrous; but it existed, nevertheless.

There was not much to see in those vaults under the plinth of the pleasure-palace in which Hushmut had set up his distillery. They were very low, very dark, the only light coming through the open door, and from the row of rose-shaped air-holes pierced at intervals in the plinth. Viewed from outside, these formed part of its raised and pierced marble decoration. From within they looked quaint and flower-like, set as they were in the dim shadowy vault, hidden here and there by the dumpy columns, showing through the arches distantly, softly, brightly pink; for Hushmut had pasted pink paper over them, to keep out the bees and wasps, he explained, which otherwise, led by the scent of the flowers, came in troublesome numbers.

The rude still, like a huge cooking-pot, stood in one corner, and all about it lay trays on trays of fading rose-leaves.

"*Pah!* How sickly sweet! Let's get outside," said the young man after a brief glance round. But the girl stood looking curiously at a brownish-yellow mass piled beside the still.

"What is that?" she asked. Hushmut's black eyes turned to her comprehendingly. He shuffled to the pile and held out a sample for her to see. She bent to look at it.

"Rose-leaves!" she said. "Oh! I see--after scent has been taken out of them. Poor things! What a shame!"

Hushmut said something rapidly in Hindustani, and the girl turned to her companion for explanation.

"He says," translated the latter, with a curiously grudging note in his voice, "that they have their use. He dries them in the sun and burns them in the furnace of his still."

She shook her head and smiled. "That's poor compensation!" Then she bent closer and sniffed regretfully at what Hushmut held.

"All gone!" she said, so like a child that her lover laughed at her tenderly.

"What else did you expect, you goose!"

'Only the actions of the just, smell sweet and blossom in the dust!'

So come; we really must be off; it's getting late."

He felt in his pocket, and held out a *baksheesh* to Hushmut; but the latter shook his head, and once more said something rapidly in Hindustani. It had a note of petition in it, but the request was apparently not to the hearer's taste. That was to be seen from his face.

"What does he want?" asked the girl, curiously.

"Nothing he is going to get," replied her lover, moving off; "the cheek of the man!"

But the pink muslin stood its ground. "What is it?" she persisted; "I want to know. He doesn't look to me as if he meant to be rude, and--and"--her face softened--"if it is anything we can do, I'd--I'd like to do it. Tell me, please."

The young fellow shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Oh! only fooling! He wants you to give him back some of the rose-leaves he gave you, that he may put them in his new brew, to--to make it sweeter; says the luck-gift of a bride always does--"

The girl blushed and smiled all over.

"Well, why not? It is a pretty idea, anyhow." She drew out the handful of rose-leaves as she spoke, then paused with a faint wonder, for the warmth of their shelter had made their perfume almost bewildering.

"How--how sweet they are!" she murmured. Then, still smiling, but with the blush faded almost to paleness, she dropped the rose-leaves into the delicate, long-fingered hand.

"I hope it will be the sweetest essence you ever made," she said with a laugh, and Hushmut seemed to understand, for he smiled back and *salaamed* as he, in his turn, tucked the charm into his bosom for use when the still should be ready for closing, and as he did so, he said in his high, suave voice--

"May He who knows the secret of the rose protect the bride." He said it without the least suspicion of reality; simply as a dignified piece of courtesy.

A minute afterwards the wheels of that last dogcart, as it drove out of the garden, disturbed the birds which had already begun to choose their resting-places for the night; since they too looked for the usual rest and peace in that fatal Maytime.

And for a space the peace, the rest settled on the garden. Only Hushmut's voice, as he busied himself in packing the pink petals into his still, told of any life in it beyond the birds, the flowers, the bees.

One of these, belated, drifted into the vault through the open door, and hummed a background to the high, trilling voice.

"Pale, pale are the rose-lips, sweet!  
Red is the heart of the rose,  
But red are the lips mine meet,  
And your heart white as the snows."

Then a faint, almost noiseless patter of bare running feet paused at the door, and some one looked in to say breathlessly--

"It hath begun, they say. But who knows? I am off to the city to see."

Hushmut looked up startled from his rose-leaves; startled, nothing more.

"Begun!--so soon--wherefore?"

"God knows!" came the breathless voice. "Mayhap it is a lie. Some thought it would not come at all. I will return and tell thee the news."

The faint, almost noiseless patter of bare feet died away, and there was peace and rest in the garden for another space. Only Hushmut shuffled to the door, looked out curiously, then shuffled back to his work, for that must be finished before dark, else the roses would spoil, squandering their sweetness. There was another pile of brownish, yellow residuum ready dried for the furnace, and as he filled a basket with it, his hands among the scentless stuff, a sudden remembrance of his own impotence, his own deprivation, came to him. Perhaps he had seen a hint of the simile in the English girl's face.

He smiled half cynically and muttered--

"Only the dust of the rose remains for the perfume-seller."

He paused almost before the bit of treasured wisdom was ended. There was a sound of wheels; of a galloping horse's feet.

Some one was coming back to the garden. The next instant, through the open door, he saw two figures running; an Englishman, an English girl in a pink dress. The man's arm was round her as he ran; he looked back fearfully, then seemed to whisper something in her ear, and she gave answer back.

"What was it?" they said to each other. Hushmut knew by instinct.

He was thinking of the roof of the palace pleasure-house, of the winding stair that led to it, down which it would at least be possible to fling a foe, before the end came; and She was thinking of the marble plinth below, where, when that end came, a woman might find safety from men's hands in death.

So they came on through the growing shadows.

Hushmut shuffled to the door and watched the figures calmly, indifferently, as they neared him; for the way to the winding stair lay up the steps which rose just beyond the low door of his distillery in the plinth.

Perhaps the dusk hid him from those two; perhaps even in broad daylight they would not, in their fierce desire to reach not safety but resistance, have seen him.

They did not, anyhow; but as they passed the door the girl's muslin flounce caught hard on its lintel hasp, and as in frantic haste she stooped to rip it free, the scent of those rose-leaves Hushmut had given her, still lingering in the ruffles at her breast, seemed to pass straight back into those same rose-leaves in his own.

That was all, nothing more. But it brought back his last words to her: "May He who knows the secret of the rose protect the bride."

Strange!

The same instant his long-fingered brown hand was on her white one as she tugged at her dress.

"This way, *Huzoor!*" he cried in a loud voice, for the man to hear. "There is a secret passage here; it leads to safety."

Safety! That word, better than resistance, not to the man himself, but as sole guardian to the girl, arrested him in a second, tempted him.

He looked, hesitated, then dragged his charge on--dragged her from anything with a dark skin to it.

But her white one touching this dark one, found something in it to give confidence; or perhaps that fragrance of the flower from His still which "He sends to many blossoms," had passed from Hushmut's breast to hers, as hers had to Hushmut's. He knows, who knows the secret of the perfume of the rose.

Anyhow she hung back, and she called pitifully, clamorously--

"No! No! Let us trust him--let us take the chance."

There was no time for remonstrance.

The next second they were in the cool, scented darkness of the vault, with those pink air-holes showing like shadowy roses among the low arches, the squat pillars.

"At the farther end," came Hushmut's voice, amid his shuffling, till the latter ceased in the rasping of a chain unhasped. "Here, *Huzoor*, it leads to the Summer Palace beyond the garden wall. So by the mango groves to the Residency. May He who knows the secret of the perfume of the rose protect the bride."

His voice sounded hollow in their ears as they ran down the vaulted passage which opened before them, lit at intervals by those cunning air-holes hidden flowerfully in the scrollwork of one of the marble-edged aqueducts, and the closing door behind them blew a breath of the rose scent from the vault after their retreating figures.

Two years had passed. Nine long months spent in keeping a foe at bay; three in following that spent and broken foe to the bitter end; and then a year of English skies and English faces to dull the memory of that long strain to mind and body.

And then once more a young Englishman, with a girl in a pink dress, drove into that garden of dead Kings. But the four-square wall was in ruins. It had been a rallying-point of that spent and broken foe.

The garden itself was neglected, the roses unpruned. And those two were changed also, and an *ayah* holding a baby remained in the hired carriage which they left waiting for them under the blossoming trees, as the dogcart had waited that May evening two years before.

"I'm afraid he must have thought us awfully ungrateful," said the man, regretfully. "But it couldn't be helped at first; then afterwards one had to move on. But I did write, you know, more than once about him, after we got a grip on the place again; so I hope they have done something."

"They will have to now, at any rate," said the wearer of the pink dress, firmly.

The sight of the garden, changed, neglected as it was, had brought back the very picture of that grizzled head with the curved hair, slipping through the rose-bushes, the delicate dark hand holding the tray of rose-leaves, as it slid over the bushes with its luck-offering for the bride. Yes! even if justice had been slow, inevitably slow, it should come now. This very evening, though she and her husband had only arrived in the station that morning.

They went to the rose square first, but Hushmut was not there. Then, seeing by the lack of blossom that the time of roses was not yet, they went on to the orange groves.

No one was there. So, doubtfully, they passed to the jasmine, to the lemon grass.

But no one was to be seen. Nothing was to be heard but the lazy yet insistent cry of some one scaring the birds from the pomegranates.

"Let us ask him. He may know," suggested the wearer of the pink dress. So they called him and he came--an old man, wizened, careworn.

Yes, he said, he knew. Wherefore not, when he had guarded fruit in that garden since he was a boy? There was not much to guard now, owing to past evils. Hushmut the essence-maker--Hushmut was dead. No one made essences any more. How did he die? Very simply. He had seen it with his own eyes when he was guarding fruit. The *Huzoors* had doubtless heard of the evil times, even though, as the coachman had told him, they had just come from *wilayet*. Well, it began quite suddenly one evening in May. It was the peaches he was guarding then. There had been a "fool's dinner" in the garden, and afterwards a young *sahib* and a miss in a pink dress had come running in to take refuge from the troopers. He had seen them, but what could he do? But Hushmut had shown them the secret passage, no doubt. Anyhow he had come out alone and closed the door, and sate beside it singing when the troopers rode up.

And doubtless they would have believed him, seeing that he was friends with all the bad walkers in the city through the selling of his essences; but for a bit of the Miss-*sahiba's* dress which had caught in the door hasp. So they knew what he had done, and being enraged, had killed him there, by the door. It was quite simple.

Quite. So simple that those two said nothing. Only their hands sought each other as they turned back to the summer-house.

"I should like to see the place again," said the wearer of the pink dress in a hard, even voice. "I wonder if the door is open?"

It was; for no one made essences now. So they entered.

The still stood in the corner as before. The pile of that strange fuel lay between it and the trays of rose-leaves. But there was no difference between them now. Both were yellow, scentless; and though the pink paper which Hushmut had pasted over the rose-shaped air-holes was all broken and torn by birds and winds and weather, the bees did not drift in.

For there was no scent to lead them on. None.

The winds of two long years had swept it away absolutely. What else was to be expected?

Yet a vague disappointment showed in the woman's face as it had in the girl's.

But this time the man's voice trembled as he answered her look with the words--

"Only the actions of the just,  
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust."

# LITTLE HENRY AND HIS BEARER

## CHAPTER I

When I was a child I wept over a story--if I remember right, by Mrs. Sherwood--which bore this title.

Years after I came to man's estate, I felt inclined to weep over an incident in real life which this title seemed to fit.

Looking back on those first tears, I judge them uncalled for by what my maturer age condemns as false sentiment. Perhaps my later emotion is equally at fault. The reader had better judge for himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Speak on, O Bistrâm, bearer! Wherefore dost not obey? Speak on about Mai Kâli and the Noose--the Noose that is so soft, that never slips. Wherefore dost not speak, son of an owl?"

The voice was childish, fretful. So was the listless little figure in a flannel dressing-gown, which lay half upon the reed mat spread on the verandah floor, half against the red and yellow livery coat of Bistrâm, bearer. The latter remained silent, his dark eyes fixed deprecatingly on a taller figure within earshot. It was the child's mother, standing for a glance at her darling.

"Speak! Why dost not speak, base-born child of pigs? Lo! I will smite thee. Speak of Mai Kâli and the Noose. Lo! Bistrâm, bearer, be not unkind. Remember I am sick. Show me the Noose. *Ai!* Bistra! show it to Sonny Baba."

The liquid Urdu fell from the child's lips with quaint precision, and ended in the coaxing wail of one who knows his power.

That was unmistakable. The man's high-bred, sensitive face, which had not quivered under the parentage assigned to him by the thin, domineering voice, melted at the appeal, and the red and yellow arms seemed to close round their charge at the very suggestion of sickness. Bistrâm gave another deprecating glance at the tall white figure at the door, and then, from the folds of his waistcloth, took out a silk handkerchief crumpled into a ball. But a dexterous flutter left it in unincreased folds across the child's knees.

"Lo! Protector of the Poor! such is the Noose of Kâli," said Bistrâm, deferentially.

Seen thus, the handkerchief looked larger than one would have expected: or perhaps it is more correct to say longer, for, the texture being loose like canvas, even the slight drag across the child's knees stretched the stuff lengthwise. It was of that curious Indian colour called *oodah*, which is not purple or crimson, but which looks as if it had been the latter and might become the former--the colour, briefly, of recently spilt blood. It looked well, however, in the soft lustrous folds lying upon the child's white dressing-gown. He smiled down at it joyfully: yet not content, since there was more to come.

"Twist it for Mai Kâli. Twist it, Bistrâm, bearer! *Ai!* base-born, twist it or I will smite--"

"It is time for the Shelter of the World to take his medicine," began Bistrâm, interrupting the imperious little voice. "Lo! does his Honour not see the *mem* waiting for him?"

Sonny gave a quick glance at his mother. He knew his power there also. "I'se not goin' to take it, mum," he called decisively, "till he's twisted a' Noose. I won't--I want a' stwangle somefin' first. Tell him, mum--please. Then I'll 'waller it like a good boy."



"Do what he wants, Bistrâm, and then bring him here," said Sonny's mother, her eyes soft. For the child had but lately chosen the path of Life instead of the Valley of the Shadow, so even wayward footsteps along it were welcome.

"Now is it Government orders," boasted Sonny, reverting to the precisions and peremptoriness of Hindustani with a wave of his small hand. "So twist and strangle, and if thou dost it not, my father will cause hanging to come to thee."

"*Huzoor!*" assented Bistrâm, cheerfully, as he shifted his burden slightly so as to free his left hand. The next instant a purple crimson rope of a thing, circled on itself, settled down upon the neck of a big painted mud tiger, bright yellow with black stripes and fiery red eyes, which one of the native visitors had brought that morning for the magistrate's little son.

"Now the Protector of the Poor can pull," said Bistrâm, bearer. "It will not slip."

But Sonny's wan little face had perplexity and doubt in it. "But, Bisra, Mai Kâli rides a tiger. She wouldn't stwangle it. Would she, mum? I wouldn't stwangle my pony. I'd wather stwangle the gwoom; wouldn't you, mum? I would. I'd wather like to stwangle Gâmo."

"My dear Sonny!" exclaimed his mother, looking with amused horror at the still, helpless little figure which Bistrâm had brought to her. "You wouldn't murder poor Gâmo, surely!"

Sonny made faces over his quinine, as if that were a matter of much more importance.

"Ess, I would," he said, with his mouth full of sweet biscuits. "I'd stwangle him, and then Mai Kâli would be pleased for a fousand years; and then I'd stwangle Ditto an' Peroo too; so she'd be pleased for a fousand fousand years--wouldn't she, Bisra?"

"*Huzoor!*" assented Bistrâm, bearer.

"My dear," said Sonny's mother, going back with a somewhat disturbed look to the room where the magistrate, Sonny's father, was busy over crabbed Sanskrit texts and bright-coloured talc pictures; for in his leisure hours he was compiling a Hindu Pantheon for the use of students, "I almost wish Bistrâm would not tell Sonny so many stories about the gods and goddesses. They do such horrid things."

The scholar, who in his heart nourished a hope that his son might in due time follow in his footsteps, and, perhaps, gain reputation where his father only found amusement, looked up from his books mildly.

"Gods and goddesses always do, my dear. Their morality seldom conforms to that which obtains among their worshippers. I intend to draw general attention to this anomaly. Besides, Sonny will have to learn these things anyhow when he begins Greek and Latin; he will in fact find this previous knowledge of great use. Kâli, for instance, is the terrific form of Durga who, of course, corresponds to the Juno of the Greeks and Romans and the Isis of Egypt. She is also the crescent-crowned Diana, and as Parbutt the Earth-mother Ceres. Under the name of Atma, again, she is 'goddess of souls governing the three worlds,' and so equivalent to Hecate Triformis--"

"Yes! my dear," interrupted his wife, meekly. "But for all that I don't want Sonny to talk of strangling the grooms; it really doesn't sound nice. However, as Bistrâm is eager, now Sonny is really recovering, to get away at once for his usual leave, I won't say anything to the child. He will forget while Bistrâm is away, and I will give orders that the latter is not to mention the subject on his return."

Bistrâm himself, receiving his pay and his orders ere starting on the yearly visit to his own country, which was the only portion of his life by day or night not absolutely--without any reservation whatever--at the disposal of his employers, fully acquiesced in the *mem-sahiba's* dictum. The Noose of Kâli was scarcely a nice game for the little master; indeed his slave would never have introduced it under ordinary circumstances. But the *mem* must remember that dreadful day when the Heart's-eye lay so still, caring for nothing, and the doctor-*sahib* had said there was nothing to be done save to coax him into looking into the restless Face of Life instead of into the restful Face of Death. That was when he, Bistrâm, who knew, had spoken of the Noose; and, at least, it had done the little Shelter of the World no harm.

"Harm?" echoed Sonny's mother, gently. "You have never done him harm, Bisra. Why, the doctor-*sahib* himself said your hand was fortunate with the child. If you had not been with him, I think--I think, Bistrâm--he might have died. And now I am even wondering if I am wise to let you go--"

Bistrâm looked up eagerly. "I must go, *Huzoor*--I must go without fail to-night--the year is over--" He paused abruptly, then added quietly: "The *Huzoor* need have no fear. The little master will do well. The Mighty One who cares for children will protect this one."

He spoke with such faith in voice and face, that Sonny's mother going back once more to the study, and finding her husband busy as usual over his Pantheon, lingered to look doubtfully at the talc pictures, and finally remark that after all the people really had a good deal of religious feeling, and actually seemed to believe in a God. Bistrâm, for instance, had said that Sonny was in

the guardianship of One who suffered the little children-- Here her eyes filled with tears, and her voice sank.

"He meant Mâta Devi, I expect, my dear," replied the scholar without looking up. "She is another form of Kâli or Durga, and corresponds to Cybele or the Mater Montana--"

"He was very eager to get away, however," went on Sonny's mother, almost aggrievedly. "I really think he might have stayed a few days longer till the boy was quite himself. But devoted as he is, he is just like the rest of them--selfishly set on what they are accustomed to--"

"He put off going nearly a month though, and you know, my dear, that when he took service as Sonny's bearer, he stipulated for a fortnight's leave every spring, about a certain time, in order to perform some religious ceremonial," protested the justice.

"Well, and he has had it. Every year for five years; so he might have given it up for once. But he wouldn't. I don't believe he would, not even to save Sonny's life. However, I think the child is all right, and even if I had kept Bistrâm, he wouldn't have been much good, for he has been frightfully restless and hurried the last few days."

He did not seem so, however, as he stood quietly in the growing dusk at the gateless gate of the compound to look back at the house where he had left the little Shelter of the World asleep. His scarlet and yellow coat was gone, replaced by the faint coral-coloured garments of the pilgrim; he carried a network-covered pot for holy water, slung on his left wrist, and the yellow trident of Siva showed like a frown on his forehead. The thickets of flowering shrubs, the tangles of white petunias bordering the path, sent their perfume into the air; but above it rose the heavy, dead-sweet scent from a wild *dhatura* plant which, taking advantage of an unweeded nook by the gate, thrust its long white flowers across the pilaster; one of them indeed reaching past it, and so, seen five-pointed against the dusk beyond, looking like a slim white hand pointing the way thither.

Bistrâm stooped deliberately to pick it, tore it into its five segments, and placed the pieces in his bosom, muttering softly, "With heart and brain and feet, and hands and eyes, Devi, I am thy servant." Then for a second he raised himself to his full height, and stretched both his thin, fine hands--such delicately supple, strong hands--towards the house. "Sleep sound, Life of my Life," he murmured again. "Sleep sound, and have no fear. The offering will be complete, though the time is short indeed."

So, turning on his heel, he passed into the dusk, beyond the gate, whither the flower had pointed.

A fortnight later he came out of it once more, passed into his hut in the gloaming, dressed as a pilgrim, and emerged therefrom ten minutes afterwards in the red and yellow coat, with a huge white turban with a bend, as the heralds call it, across it bearing his master's crest. So altered, he slipped back into his place as if he had never left it, and setting aside the reed screen at the door of Sonny's nursery, stood within. Sonny, in his white flannel dressing-gown, was convalescent enough to be saying his prayers, kneeling on his mother's knee.

"Go on, dear," she said gently. "You can speak to Bistrâm afterwards."

Sonny, whose feet were less wayward, now shut his eyes again, and assumed a prayerful expression.

"--an' all kine friends, an' make me a velly good boy--yamen--O Bisra! where's the Noose?" The mother might smile, unable so far to pretend ignorance. Not so Bistrâm, bearer, who had his orders.

"What Noose, Shelter of the World?" he asked gravely. "Thy servant remembers none; but he hath brought the Protector of the Poor a toy."

It was only one of the many which you can buy in any Indian town for the fraction of a farthing, made of mud, straw, cane; a bit of tinsel perhaps, or tuft of cotton-wool, their sole value over and above the ingenuity and time spent in making them. But Sonny had never seen this kind before, and laughed as the snakes, made out of curled shavings, leapt and twisted. Leapt so like life that his mother drew back hastily, telling herself that the bearer had certainly a fine taste in horrors. And no doubt there would be some tale to match these. Sonny, however, seemed to know it vaguely, for a puzzled look replaced the laugh. "Yea! Bisra," he said in imperious argument, "Mai Kâli had snakes and skulls too; but I like the Noose best. Why didst not bring it back, son of an owl?"

The man never moved a muscle. "The little master mistakes," he replied calmly. "It was some others who tied the Noose. Not this dustlike one. He is but the Protector of the Poor's bearer, Bistrâm."

## CHAPTER II

A year is an eternity to the memory of a child. Indeed before a twelfth of one was over Sonny had ceased from suddenly, irrelevantly asking, "O Bisra! where is the Noose? Why didst not bring it back, son of an owl?" The thought seemed to have passed from his life altogether. From Bisrâm also, as he tended the child night and day, day and night, unremittingly, contentedly.

So the spring of the year returned, and with it, by one of those mysterious coincidences beyond classification, came the old desire. It came suddenly--irrelevantly it seemed to Sonny's parents--during a brief attack of fever which the changing season brought to the boy. But Bisrâm, bearer, hearing the little fretful wail, "O Bisra, where is the Noose? I want the Noose," stood silent for a moment with a scared look in his eyes, then turned them in quick appeal to his mistress, as if to ask leave for something. But she was silent also, so the old formula came gently-

"What Noose, Shelter of the World?"

That evening, however, when Harry--as his mother vainly strove to call him, now that, as she used to tell the boy fondly, he was a man and had had his curls cut--had fallen into the heavy sleep which brings so little relief, the bearer came into the study and asked for his usual yearly leave. A week might do, but leave he must have at once. True, the year was not up, but the master would doubtless remember that his slave had deferred going at the proper season last time because of Harry-*sahib's* illness (Bisrâm, punctilious to the least order, never forgot the child's new dignity). He did not want to lose the right season again; and so, if he went now, at once, even for a week, he would be back in time even if Harry-*sahib* were to be ill as he was last year, which Heaven forbid!

He was quite calm, but there was an almost pathetic entreaty in his dark eyes, so soft, so dark, that looking into them, one seemed to see nothing save soft darkness.

"Go!" commented Sonny's mother, when, moved by a vague feeling that Bisrâm meant well, his master handed on his request to the real authority. "Certainly not. I wonder he has the face to ask for leave when Sonny--I mean Harry--is down with fever. Not that it is anything, the doctor says, but a passing attack. Still, I am not going to run any risks with a strange servant. Go, indeed! It shows what his pretended devotion is worth--"

"Surely, my dear, he *is* devoted--"

"Oh, very! in his way. But really you spoil Bisra, Edward. Just because he can tell you things about those horrid gods and goddesses. Do you know, I really think of getting an English nurse for the child until I have--until I have to take him home," interrupted his wife, her initial sharpness of tone softening over the inevitable certainty of separation which clouds Indian motherhood. "It cannot be right to let him live in such an atmosphere of superstition and ignorance."

The magistrate, who was leaving the room, had paused at her remark about the nurse as he might have paused before a painful scene. "By Jove!" he murmured as if to himself, "I believe it would break the man's heart. I often wonder what on earth he'll do when the child has--to go home."

The inevitable lent a tremor to the father's voice also. But Bisrâm, despite the former's belief, spoke of the same separation quite calmly when, the very next morning the doctor coming early, found his little patient in the verandah getting the advantage of the fresh, bright air in Bisra's arms.

"When," asked the latter, calmly, but with that slow pathetic anxiety in his eyes, "was Harry-*sahib* going across the black water?"

"You think he ought to go?" said the doctor. "Why?"

"This slave does not think; he knows! The little master must go--go at once," replied the man, still calmly, though he held the child to him with a visibly closer strain. "The *Huzoor* himself knows how bad Hindustan is for the little ones. He must go, *Huzoor*, before he gets worse."

"But he is not going to get worse," said the doctor, kindly. "He is better already, and if he has another bout of fever his mother has promised to take him to the hills, so don't distress yourself."

Bisrâm's dark eyes looked wistfully into the doctor's.

"The hills? That would be worse. That would be nearer the evil. He must go far from Hindustan at once, *Huzoor*; and if you tell the *mem* this she will go--she will not mind."

"And you, Bisra?" asked the doctor, curiously.

The man's eyes flinched, but he never stirred a muscle under the blow.

"I am only the little master's bearer, *Huzoor*. He will not need one much longer: he grows big."

"It is only because he is in a hurry to get away himself, I verily believe," said Sonny's mother, when the doctor, also vaguely impressed with something in the man's appeal, told her of it. "You can't fathom these people. Oh! I know he wouldn't abate one atom of his care, and it is simply wonderful. All the same, I believe that just now he would be glad to be rid of the necessity for it, since it clashes with some of his religious notions. That's it, depend upon it. And I mean to let him go as soon as Sonny--I mean Harry--is better; and he really is better to-day, isn't he?"

"Much better. And you may be right; only it's always impossible to lay down the law for men like Bisra. Those high-caste hill Brahmins are a law unto themselves. However, I expect to find the boy quite cool to-morrow." He was not, however, and more than once, as he lay in Bisra's arms, the little fretful wail rose between sleeping and waking. "Where's the Noose, Bisra? I want the Noose." And Bisra would pause as if waiting for a promise of wayward life in threat or abuse, and when neither came would turn a wistful appeal to authority, and when it was silent say--

"What Noose, Shelter of the World?"

But in the dead of night a day or two later, when even maternal authority slept for a brief spell, Bisra's answer to the request, which came almost incoherently from the child's dry lips, was different.

Then he stood bent over the boy's cot in the attitude of a suppliant, and his joined petitioning hands trembled.

"Why dost ask it, Kâli ma?" he whispered rapidly. "Lo! have I not served thee? Would I not serve thee now if I could? But I have promised this, and they will not let me go for the other. Lo! Kâli ma! be merciful and ask no more, and when the child has gone away, I will serve thee all the years--yea! every day of all the years."

There was no passion, no excitement in his face or voice; only that pathetic appeal which passed into a murmured lullaby as the restless little sleeper turned on his pillow with a sigh of greater content.

"Better again this morning," was the doctor's verdict, with the rider that Bistrâm himself stood in need of a little rest. The man smiled faintly when his mistress replied that it would be her turn that night; though, to say sooth, Harry certainly did seem to improve when she slept.

"Perhaps Bistrâm works charms," remarked the doctor, thoughtlessly; whereat she frowned.

Charms or no charms, the boy was certainly worse next morning, and that despite the fact that Bistrâm, who had steadily refused to go further than the verandah, had spent the night huddled up outside the threshold, within which his mistress refused to allow him to come. He needed rest, she said, and though she could not compel him to take it, he should at least not work.

"You had better let him have his own way to-night," said the doctor at his evening visit. "The child gets on better, and you are fresher for the day's nursing. Those thin, delicate-looking natives are very wiry, and if the man won't rest, he won't, and that's an end of it."

He spoke cheerfully; but as he was getting into his dogcart he saw Bistrâm at his elbow. "The doctor-*sahib* thinks the little master very ill to-night?" he asked quietly.

"So ill that you must do your very best for him to-night. If any one can pull him through, you can, remember that."

"*Huzoor!*" said Bistrâm, submissively.

It was a very dark night; so dark that the rushlight in Sonny's room seemed almost brilliant from the verandah. Looking thence you could see the child's cot, one of its side rails removed, and in its place, as it were, the protection of Bistrâm's crouching figure. He did not touch the cot; he crouched beside it with clasped hands hanging over his knees, and dark eyes staring hard into the darkness as if waiting and listening.

So he sate, his clasped hands loosening, his eyes growing softer as the hours passed, bringing nothing but half-conscious sleep, half-conscious wakening to the child. Until suddenly, irrelevantly, just on the border-land of night and day, the fretful wail rose upon the silence loudly, insistently--

"Where is the Noose, Bisra? I want it. O Bistrâm, bearer, bring the Noose, and strangle something."

The slackness, the dreaminess left the man's hands and eyes. He stood up blindly, desperately to face these last words; the words for which he had been listening. Yet there was still the same pathetic self-control as he stretched his hands out over the sleeping child.

"Lo! Kâli ma," he muttered, "have I not served thee as ever, despite the child. Have I set him before thee? Nay! thou knowest I have risked life itself to have thy tale of offering complete when I was hindered. Thou didst not suffer. Wilt not wait for once? Wilt not wait one little while?"

His voice, sinking in its entreaty, ended in silence. But only for a second. Then the fretful wail began again.

"The Noose, Bisra! Be not unkind. Remember I am ill. O Bisra! I want you to strangle something for me--"

Bisra gave a faint sob; then joined his outstretched hands.

"*Huzoor!* so be it! the Noose shall find a victim. Yea, Shelter of the World, Bisra will strangle something. Sleep in peace!"

There was no sound in the room after that save the little contented sigh in which restlessness finds rest.

Outside, the shiver of the cicadas seemed to count the seconds, but inside the hours seemed to pass unnoticed as Bisra sate beside the cot, his hands listless, his eyes dreamy. There was nothing to wait for now, nothing to fear. That which had to come had come.

So with the first glint of light, a stealthy step glided in, and an anxious voice whispered--

"How is it with the child, Bisra?"

"It is well!" he whispered back, rising rather stiffly. "He hath slept since the darkest hour. He will sleep on."

The mother, peering carefully for a glimpse of the child's face, smiled at what she saw.

"He sleeps, indeed. Thou hast done well, Bisra!"

He made no answer. But ere he left the room, his night-watch being over, he paused to touch the foot-rail of the cot with both hands and so *salaam*, as those do who leave the presence.

Sonny was still sleeping when his father, entering his study with a lighter heart, found a stranger, as he thought, awaiting him there. It was a man, naked save for a waistcloth, lean, sinewy, lithe; the head was clean-shaven, save for the Brahminical tuft, and the face was disfigured by the weird caste marks of extreme fanaticism.

"Who--?" he began, shrinking involuntarily from one who might well be dangerous.

"It is Bisra, *Huzoor*" said a familiar voice, gently. "Bisra, the child-bearer. Bisra, the servant of Kâli also. Lo! here is Her Noose." As he spoke he held out the crimson-scarlet handkerchief twisted to a rope, and coiled in his curved palms like a snake. "The master, being learned, will know the Noose and its meaning. It hath brought Her many a blood-offering, *Huzoor*. Many and many every year without fail. And it will not fail this year either. It will bring Her the blood of Her servant, the blood of Bisrâm the Strangler."

"Bisrâm the Strangler!" echoed the magistrate, stupidly, as the even, monotonous voice ceased. Then he sate down helplessly in his chair. In truth he knew too much of the mystery of India to be quite incredulous.

Yet two hours after, when with the help of the police-officer he had been cross-questioning Bisra upon his confession, he told himself as helplessly that it was incredible--the man must be mad. He had been born to strangle, he said, and had strangled to keep Kâli ma content. That was necessary when you were born Her servant, especially when you had children. Perhaps he had let the little Shelter of the World creep too close to his heart, though he had striven to be just. At any rate Kâli ma had become jealous. He had not known this, at first, or he would never have given the mistress that promise about the Noose, for if it had been in Harry-*sahib's* hands Devi would never have sought his life. She always protected those with the Noose--they never came to harm--unless-- He had paused there, and then asked quickly if he had not said enough? Did they want him to tell any more! He could not give them the names of the victims, of course, not knowing them; but they were many--very many.

"There is nothing against him but his own story," said the magistrate, fighting against his growing conviction that the man spoke truth. "I can't commit him to the sessions on that."

"There is something more, I think," replied the police-officer, reluctantly. "Don't you remember that man who was found dead in a railway carriage about this time last year? He had an up-country ticket on him, and as this was out of the beat of Stranglers, no inquiry was made here. It was just about this time, and--and Bisrâm says he was in a hurry because the year was nearly up. He had been nursing the boy."

The boy's father, leaning with his head on his hand, groaned.

But Bisra was quite cheerful. He looked a little anxious, however, when two days after he was brought up formally to be committed for trial. There was still nothing definite against him save his own confession and the coincidence of the strangled man in the railway carriage. But opinion was dead against him amongst his countrymen. Of course he was one of Kâli's Stranglers. Did he not look one? Was he not born one? So how could he help being one? The argument brought no

consolation to Sonny's father. But Bistrâm again was cheerful. He stood patiently between two yellow-legged policemen and told his tale at length, as if anxious to incriminate himself as much as possible, anxious that there should be no mistake. And when all the mysterious intricacies of charges and papers were over, and the two policemen nudged him to make place for other criminals, with a friendly "Come along, brother," he paused a moment with handcuffed, petitioning hands to ask how soon he was to be hanged.

The magistrate, leaning his head on his hand, made no answer. He knew what the question meant, and could not. The thought of his little son came between him and the truth; namely, that Bisra's sacrifice must wait the law's pleasure.

The doctor, too, in charge of the gaol where Bisra awaited trial, had not the heart to tell the truth. Every day when on his rounds he looked into the cell, like a wild beast's cage, where Bisra, being a Strangler, and therefore dangerous to life, was confined alone, he answered the question which the tall, naked figure stood up at his entrance to ask in the same words. Harry-*sahib* was better, and as for the hanging, that would come soon enough, never fear. Yet every day the pathetic, self-controlled eagerness on the man's face struck him with a sense of physical pain, and left him helpless before his own pity.

Until a day came--after not many days--when with a face sad from the sight of bitter grief that he *could* understand, the sense of his absolute helplessness before the mystery of this man's nature made the doctor feel inclined to throw pity to the winds and fall back on sheer common sense. After all the man was a murderer; and if he had been fond of the child--what then? Such criminals were often men of strong affections.

Yet once again, the sight of the submissive, *salaaming* figure, the sound of the wistful yet calm voice made him answer as usual. The child was better. The hanging would doubtless come ere long.

For once, however, Bistrâm did not accept the reply as final.

"The *Huzoor* means that it will not come today?" he asked quietly.

The doctor raised his eyebrows. "To-day? What made you think of to-day? Certainly not. There's no chance of it."

But he was wrong. Two hours afterwards the gaol overseer sent for him in a hurry, because Bistrâm had completed his sacrifice by strangling himself in his cell with his waistcloth. What else could he do, seeing that it was the last day of the year during which the propitiation of a sacrifice kept Kâli ma from revenge?

"Poor devil!" said the doctor, as he stood up after his useless examination. "I'm glad now I didn't tell him the child was dead."

## **THE HALL OF AUDIENCE**

"This, gentlemen and respected sirs," said the blatant specimen of new India whom my friend Robbins had insisted on having as a guide to a ruined Rajput town, "is Hall of Common Audience, in more colloquial phrase, Court of Justice, built two, ought, six before Christ B.C. by Great Asoka, mighty monarch of then united Hindustan, full of Manu wisdoms, and sacred Veda occultations--"

Then I gave in. "For God's sake, Robbins," I said, "take away that fool or I shall kill him. A man who be-plasters even the Deity with university degrees is intolerable here."

Robbins gave me that look of condoling forbearance which had nearly driven me mad for a week and beguiled the *babee* away promptly, as if I had been a fractious child. I was, however, only a jilted man. A badly jilted man, whose jilting was of the kind which becomes almost comic from sheer excess of tragedy. To be brief, I had gone down on ten days' leave to Bombay to meet and marry the girl to whom I had been engaged for two years. Robbins, who was coming out in the same ship with her, was to have been best man. We had certainly been in love with each other when we last met; at least, if I was not, I have never been in love at all. If she was not, then I have never seen a girl in love. I wish to be absolutely fair in the matter, so I will confess that, as I went to meet her, I knew myself to be less emotional than I had been two years before. I had even vague qualms as to whether this sort of thing was quite wise. I was, to put it curtly, in the mental condition in which every man about to marry a *fiancée* whom he has not seen for two

years must be. Presumably her mental condition was similar. But whereas I had to spend the three weeks preceding the irrevocable step in a jungle station where any novelty must necessarily be attractive, she spent it in an environment which gave her endless opportunities of seeing other men, and comparing them with me, and her ideal. The result being that she found she was in love with some one else. Being frank and honourable she told me the truth, with a kind of blank dismay. She did not offer to fulfil her engagement. How could she? when from the beginning to the end, from her first confession that I was her ideal, to her last letter, then in my breast pocket, the whole fabric of our future lives had been built by us on our belief in the permanence of this selfsame love of ours. We could only look in each other's eyes and wonder what was the matter with the foundations of our round world.

Robbins said I behaved splendidly. In truth I was too much stunned at first to realise what it actually meant, and then a certain contempt for them both, especially for the man who came and offered me a shot at him, made me magnanimous. I merely offered in my turn to be best man at the wedding, and was only deterred from doing so by the feeling that it was theatrical, and by Robbins suggesting that I had better have some ice on the back of my head. He meant well, did Robbins, and insisted on accompanying me on what was to have been my wedding tour; for I had my ten days' leave, and I was in no hurry to go back to the gossiping little station where the bungalow I had furnished for her lay waiting a mistress.

Yes! Robbins meant well, and by sheer counter-irritation kept me going. There was a honeymoon off the same ship which came up country with us stage by stage, and the efforts Robbins made to prevent me from seeing its bliss were pathetically comic. The bride and bridegroom wore neat, new, brown-leather shoes, and she had a new brown-leather handbag, just like one which I had carried for my *fiancée* before she explained the situation. As I sate opposite them I wondered savagely if my face had worn the idiotic smirk of sheer content visible on the man's, and I tucked my own new brown shoes under the seat. They looked so forlorn beside Robbins' big boots. For all that, I combated all condemnation of the delinquents for the first three days. The only honourable theory of marriage being that based upon a mutual and romantic love, it would be unjust because of a single mistake, to blame any one for acting in accordance with a belief which had made Englishmen and Englishwomen what, thank God, they were. In fact I was badly, brutally moral, until, coming out into the hotel verandah during one of our rests by the way, I happened on the bride and bridegroom looking at the moon.

Then the primeval desire to murder rose up, seized me, and held me. Why hadn't I taken the scoundrel's offer and killed him? I was a good shot; and Robbins, as an army doctor, an excellent second. Then I could have married the bride-widow, or spurned her, as I preferred.

There was really, I told myself, no logical foothold between this and being best man. If marriage was an affair of love, these two were right, and the part designed for me by Providence obviously that of second fiddle. If not, they were wrong, and I had a right to claim redress. To shilly-shally, feeling at once hurt and magnanimous, was absurd. I had lain awake, afterwards, debating half in jest, half in earnest, whether I should send Robbins back to the wedding with my cartel, or go myself with a set of silver salt-cellars in a velvet case. But underneath my jest and earnest lay a keen yet vague desire to understand, to find some solid spot on which to rest. I had still been debating the question, when, to please Robbins, who liked me to have no time for thought, we had driven out next morning to these ruins. The country through which we drove had been the ordinary Rajputana country; flat--or nearly so--dry, rocky. Then we had come to a spiky, spiny, roach-back hillock, over which the dead town sprawled, half buried in its own dust, half lost in the sunshine.

I had been watching Robbins' big boots all the way, so I was in a bad temper. Apart from other causes, however, I had some excuse for threatening to kill the guide. For the Hall of Audience to which we had just climbed was, briefly, one of those places which make some of us nineteenth-century folk remember the warning given long ago to an eager reformer to take the shoes from off his feet, since the ground whereon he stood had already been made holy by other hands than his. Yet it was plain almost to bareness. Devoid utterly of any of that ornamentation telling of human hopes and fears, likings, dislikings, and ideals, which men all over the world strive wistfully, hopelessly, to make permanent by carving them in stone. But it was a miracle of light and shade, with its triple ranks of square stone columns--rose-coloured in the sunshine about their feet, blood red in the gloom of arches about their heads--standing like sentinels round a Holy of Holies which was roofed only by the open sky, and floored level to the marble pavement surrounding the still pool, with clear, cool water. And through the outer arches, on all sides, showed that indefinite glare, and dust, and haze, faintly yellow, faintly purple--that burden and heat of the Eastern day in which millions are born, and toil, and die--which seems to swallow up the real India and hide so much of it from Western eyes.

I had just got so far in my appreciation of the indefinable charm of the place, when Robbins returned to stand beside me and look down on the brimming water.

"Curious!" he said, "at the top of a hill like this. I wonder what's the reason of it?"

"Those of uncultivated mind, sirs," replied New India, promptly, "hold it by reason of Grace-of-God. We who through merciful master's aid have acquired hydraulics prefer system of secret syphons; though the latter belief is optional."

"If that man remains here," I remarked aside to Robbins, "I refuse to be held responsible for my actions. Take him away and see the rest of the ruins. I am going to stop here--this is enough for me."

They went off together, the guide babbling of modern equity. The last words I heard were a quotation: "Boots not to say, O Justice! what asperities have not been committed in Thy name!"

Perhaps. No doubt dreadful things had been done even in this Hall of Audience, though it lay very still now; very silent in the sunshine.

I sat down on the base of a sentinel column and looked at the sky, mirrored at my feet, wondering what other things the water had seen.

So by degrees the question seemed to clamour at me. What had been done there? What was it? What gave the place its charm for me? For it had a charm, an infinite charm.

I gave an impatient shrug of my shoulders at the sound of footsteps. Robbins need not surely watch me as if he feared I might commit suicide; though the water certainly looked inviting. But it was not Robbins. It was an old man with a shaven head, and a very clean saffron-coloured cloth, coming through the pillared ranks with a brass *poojah* basket like a big cruet-stand in his hand. My mind misgave me instantly. He was far too clean for a real ascetic, and there was a bogus air about him as of one expecting tourists and their alms. In addition he came straight towards me, and squatting down by the edge, within reach absolutely of my contaminating shadow, began to mutter prayers.

I rose disgusted; but my first movement showed me I was at any rate partly mistaken, for he turned his head, startled at the sound. Then I saw he could not have known I was there, for he was blind. I saw also that the basket which he had set down contained nothing but the star-like flowers of the wild jasmine.

"Whom are you going to worship?" I asked instantly, for I was a connoisseur in ceremonies, having spent years of study over the ancient cults of India.

He stood up instantly and salaamed, recognising the accent of the master. "No one, *Huzoor*," he replied. "I am only going to make Mother *Âtma* her crown."

"*Âtma*!" I echoed. "Who was she?"

A half-puzzled, half-cunning look came to his face. "It is a long story, *Huzoor*; but if the Cherisher of the Poor will give his slave a rupee--"

Returning to my first impression of him, I was about to move away, when he added plaintively: "I tell it better than the *baboo*, *Huzoor*, but now-a-days he comes with the *sahibs*. So my stomach is often empty. May God silence his tongue!"

The desire pleased me. It matched my own. And as I paused, I noticed that the old man, who had squatted down again, had begun to thread the jasmine flowers on some link which was invisible from where I stood.

"What are you using to thread the flowers?" I asked curiously.

"A woman's hair, *Huzoor*. It is always the hair of a woman who has died, but whose child has lived, that is used for Mai *Âtma*'s crown. Shall I tell the story, *Huzoor*?"

"Was she beautiful?" I asked irrelevantly, why I know not.

"I do not know, *Huzoor*," he replied. "Am I not blind?"

The answer struck me as irrelevant also, but I went on idly, feeling, in truth, but small interest in what I was convinced must be some hackneyed tale I had heard a hundred times before, since I was given to the hearing of tales.

"Is it about this place?" I asked.

He shook his head again. "I do not know, *Huzoor*. It is about Mai *Âtma*. Shall I tell the story?"

"You seem to know very little about the story, I must say. How do you know it is about *Âtma*?"

He smiled broadly. "It is about Mai *Âtma*, sure enough. The *Huzoor* will see that if he lets me tell the tale."

I clinked a rupee down among the jasmine flowers and bid him fire away, and be quick about it.

He began instantly, plunging without any preface into a curiously rhythmical chant, the very first line of which gave pathetic answer to my irrelevant question, and at the same time showed the cause of the old man's ignorance. It ran thus:--



"O world which she has left, forget not she was fair."

Vain appeal when made in the oldest known form of Arya-Pali--the dialect in which the edicts of Asoka are carved--and of which not one man in ten million, even in India, knows the very existence. I happened to be one of the few, and though at the time I could naturally only gather the general outline of the chant, I subsequently took it down word for word from the old man's lips. Some passages still remain obscure; there are yawning gaps in the narrative, but taking it all in all, it is a singularly clear bit of tradition, preserved, as it were, by the complete ignorance of those who passed the words from lip to lip. Roughly translated, it runs thus:--

"O world she left, forget not she was fair; so very fair. Her small kind face so kind. Straight to the eyes it looked, then smiled or frowned. About her slender throat were gold-blue stones. Gold at her wrists; the gold hem of her gown slid like a snake along the marble floor, coiled like a snake upon the water's edge.

"By night she asked the stars, by day the sun, what they would have her do.

"I was her servant sitting at her door,  
Watching her small feet kiss the marble floor;  
Reading the water mirror's heaven-learnt lore.

"O world she left, remember she was Queen!

"For Âtma ruled a queen ere she was born, her widowed mother wasting nine long months to give her life ere following the King.

"O Âtma mâta! strike thy servant blind,  
He and his sons for ever, lest they find  
Thy face within the crown their fingers bind.

"Hark! how her voice comes echoing through the Hall, 'Who hath a claim to-day 'gainst me or mine?' (There was a dainty jewel at her breast, kept time in sparkles to her lightest word.)

"'Who hath a claim'--her small, kind face so wise!

"O Âtma mâta! strike thy servant blind,  
He and his sons for ever!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"See! how her soft feet kiss the marble floor! Âtma, the girl-queen, dancing to herself, close to the pool; the jasmine in her hair falling to fit the rhythm of her feet, and scent their warm life with the scent of death, or sail away upon the water's breast like mirrored stars. Oh, bind from them a crown; a crown for Âtma mâta, who is kind--for Âtma, who hath struck her servant blind."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hark! how her voice comes whispering in my ear: 'I see naught but my own face in the deep. No other face but this--my face alone. And there are always stars about my head, or else the sun. Read me the riddle quick.' (There was a tremor in her perfumed hair which matched the tremor of her perfumed breath.) 'Âtma is queen,' I said; 'the stars, the sun, weave crowns as I do. Wear them. Oh! my queen.'

"O Âtma mâta! rightly am I blind,  
Blind was I then in heart and soul and mind.

"Hark! how her voice comes echoing through the Hall. (The cold blue stones about her slender waist clipped all her purple robe to long straight folds.) 'Go tell your masters, Âtma needs no King. She is the Queen, her son shall be the King, and not the son to Kings of other lands. So if they seek for beauty, seek not mine--it is not mine to give--it is my son's! My son the gods will send me ere I die.'

"O Âtma mâta! strike thy servant blind,

He and his sons for ever, lest they find  
Thy face within the crown their fingers bind.

"See! how her slim hand grasps the marble throne. See! how her firm feet grip the marble step! Hark how her voice rings clear with angry scorn. (There was a loose gold circlet on her wrist, slid to soft resting as she raised her arm.) 'Oh! shame to brawl like dogs about a bone! Cowards to kill because a woman's fair. Can they not take the promise of a Queen? Go! bid your masters bind fair sons in peace. Âtma will choose a father for her King--she needs no lover.'

"O Âtma mâta! strike thy servant dead.

"Hush!--just a whisper on the water's edge, a faint glow from the sacred censer's fire. 'What dost thou see, my friend, down in the deep? There in the circle of the sacred flowers?' (The incense cloud rose white upon the dark, and hid us from each other, hid all things save water and our hands--her hands in mine clasped in the cold clear pool.) 'Naught, oh my Queen! Naught but thy face--thy face--beside mine own.' (Cold was the water, cold her little hand, cold was her voice.) 'Nay! more than that,' she said, 'thou dost forget the stars about my head.'

"O Âtma mâta! strike thy servant blind,  
For being blind in heart and soul and mind.

"Hark! how her voice goes echoing through the Hall. 'Go, bid your masters sheathe their swords at once, nor spill men's blood because a woman's fair. For I have chosen. I will wed with none, but since God sends the children to the world and asks no questions how they come or why, I will take him as father to my King. The law allows adoption; be it so. From out God's children I have bought a son to be your King and mine. Lo! here he stands.' (Her arm about the sturdy, dimpled limbs drew the child closer to the cold blue stones clipping her purple robe to long, straight folds.) 'Some woman bore him--fair and strong and bold--bore him by God's decree to be a son. That is enough for me who am your Queen. Go, tell the brawlers, Âtma hath her King.' (So stooping, whispered softly to the boy, who straightway lisped to order parrot-wise.) 'Who hath a claim to-day 'gainst me or mine? Who hath a claim?' And as of old came answer: 'None, O King.'

"None said they all, and so I held my tongue.  
O Âtma mâta! shall I ever find  
Thy kind, wise face? Oh! wherefore am I blind?

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hark! how her voice breaks in upon the child's. A claim at last.

"So they--these kings--have dared  
To kill my people--nay! not mine--my son's!  
Have they no shame--no pity for the poor?

"The gold hem round her robe's straight virgin folds coiled like a snake asleep upon the floor, the sparkling jewel fastened on her breast shone bright and steady as a distant star.

"There was no tremor in her perfumed hair, there was no quiver in her perfumed breath; the cold blue stones about her throat and waist, the loose gold circlet on her slender wrist, the jasmine-blossom chaplet in her hair, looked as though carved in stone, so still she stood before the dead man on the marble floor.

"His red blood crept in curves to find her feet and clasp them in a claim for vengeance due, while those around cried 'Justice from the King!'

"Until she smiled--her small, kind face so wise, and her clear voice came echoing through the Hall. 'Vengeance is mine,' she said, 'and not the King's. Send forth no army, spill no blood for me. Search not the water-mirror for a sign. I know the answer of the sun and stars. So send our heralds out, and bid these Kings come as Kings should, and not as murderers to plead their cause before the King, my son. Come with all state as to a wedding feast, come with all hope as bridegrooms to the bride. My son shall choose my lover, so prepare all things in order--music, feasting, flowers.' (Then turned to where I stood, and said aside: 'Forget not thou to make a jasmine crown.')

"O Âtma mâta! wherefore was I blind?  
Did I not know how wise thou wert, how kind,  
How cold thy hand, how warm the heart behind?

"Fair, strong, and bold he stood, the little King; the noonday sun above the child's bare head scarce cast a shadow on his small, bare feet, standing so straight beside the water's edge, where, half afloat upon the clear, still depths, a small round raft of jasmine-blossoms lay ready to give the omen.

"Heaped so high, so piled with little scented stars, that I--her servant with the crown she had bespoke--stood wondering what need there was of all. And round about the mirror-pool in rank sat Âtma's lovers waiting the decree.

"Till suddenly the baby raised his hand. (There was a loose gold circlet on his wrist, which smote him on the breast as it fell back, making him wince, so all too large it was.) But the child bit his lip and took no heed, knowing his kingly part right royally; so, parrot-wise, he lisped the ordered words: 'My mother Âtma hath no need for love; since she hath mine. She hath no need, my lords, for you as lovers, but she sends by me, as sister sends her brothers, that which sure should heal the strife and make you brothers too.'

"So at the last he stooped, and with a push sent the flower-raft afloat upon the pool, dipping and dancing on the waves it made, so that the loose, white blossoms of the pile floated to drift like stars upon the depths, leaving what lay beneath them clear and cold.

"O Âtma mâta! why was I not blind?  
Thy face, thy face was there in flowers enshrined!  
Thy cold dead face, with cold dead flowers entwined.

\* \* \* \* \*

"O world she left! to bring it peace not war.  
O world she left, forget not she was fair,  
So very fair. The jasmine in her hair  
And round her kind, wise face; about her throat  
The cold blue stones, and for her queenly crown  
The sunlight in the water--like the stars.

"O Âtma mâta! strike thy servant blind,  
He and his sons for ever, lest they find  
Thy face within the wreath their fingers bind."

\* \* \* \* \*

The old man's song ceased, but he went on without a pause. "The *Huzoor* will hear that it is all about Âtma. Her name is there always."

He had finished stringing the flowers also, and now with a deft hand set the fragile garland--strung like a daisy chain upon a dead woman's hair and then tied to a circle--afloat upon the water, where it drifted idly, each separate flower separate, and keeping its appointed place.

A crown of scented stars!

I roused myself to answer. "Undoubtedly it is all about Âtma; but you have not told me why you weave the crown?"

"It is always woven, *Huzoor*," he replied. "Our family belongs to the place, and as one son is always blind, he stays at home--since he cannot earn money at other trades, *Huzoor*--and makes Mai Âtma's crown as his fathers did."

"One son is always blind?" I echoed curiously.

"Always, *Huzoor*. It is ever so. One is blind in each generation, so he makes Mai Âtma's crown."

*He and his sons for ever!* a strange coincidence truly.

"Then no one has ever seen her face 'within the wreath their fingers twine'?" I asked, quoting the words involuntarily and forgetting that he could not understand them. He answered the first part of the sentence.

"How could that be, *Huzoor*, seeing we are always blind?"

True. But if one was not blind? My thought was interrupted by Robbins' voice from behind.

"Hope you haven't found it long, old chap; but the *baboo* really knows a lot about Asoka. Fine old beggar he must have been. And then he has got a chant about some female called Âtma who had a lot of lovers, don't you know." Robbins pulled himself up hastily, and, to cover his confusion, protested that it was just the sort of unintelligible gibberish which interested me, and thereupon bade the *baboo* give me a specimen.

Before I could stop him, the brute had got well into the first line; but even in my wrath I was relieved to find that it was indeed absolutely unintelligible. New India evidently did not understand the old. I came to this conclusion before I got my fingers, as gently as I could, inside his rainbow-hued comforter and choked him off.

"I cannot help it, Robbins," I said as I tendered the *baboo* five rupees as hush-money. "If you knew all you would excuse me."

Robbins gave me one of his most sympathetic looks and said he quite understood.

Did he? Did I? I asked myself that question over and over again, until in the dead of the night I could ask it no longer. The desire for an answer grew too strong.

It was still night when I stood once more beside the water's edge. The moon had paled the red ranks of the sentinel pillars, the dust and heat and burden of the day was gone. All things were clear and flooded with cool, quiet, passionless light. And on the water lay the crown of starry flowers. It had drifted close to the edge, at the extreme end of the pool, beside a square projection in the marble floor, whence you could look clear into the depths. No doubt the place of divination. I went over to it moved by an irresistible impulse, and, kneeling down, thrust my hand into the cool water.

Was it fancy, or did I feel a cold, soft hand in mine? Was it a passing dizziness, or did a white, scented vapour close round me like a cloud, hiding all things save the water framed in that crown of jasmine?

*Âtma! Mai Âtma!!*

\* \* \* \* \*

There was no need so far as I am concerned for the appeal--

"Forget not she was fair."

I have never forgotten it, though it is years since I saw, or fancied I saw, her face in the water.

But I have forgotten other things. Indeed, I forgot them so speedily that I saw poor old Robbins was quite puzzled and hurt in his feelings. So, before my wedding tour came to an end, I thought it kinder to give him something definite as an excuse for my cheerfulness. I told him, therefore, that I had fallen in love with some one else.

He gave a low whistle, said, "By Jove!" then added heartily, "Upon my soul, old chap, I believe it's the wisest thing you can do."

Perhaps it was. But I am not yet married. I am waiting for a woman who does not want a lover.

## **IN A FOG**

A great flock of fleecy white clouds were browsing up the steep hillside like sheep, and hiding part of the great map of India which lay spread out five thousand feet below one of the isolated peaks which rise, in sheer masses of granite, from the dusty deserts of Rajputana.

Even to their dustiness, however, had come a faint tinting of green, since the seasonal rains had begun. For the moment, nevertheless, the incessant deluge had ceased, giving place to one of those brilliantly fine monsoon days--fine with the fineness of gentian skies, and snowdrift clouds, which remind Indian exiles of the cold, crisp North.

But already these same clouds were losing their lightness and beginning to sink earthwards; sure sign that the break in the rains was at an end. Still here, in the little station beside the lake, which looks as if the least tilt would make it brim over and send it rolling like quicksilver to the sun-dry plains below, the sky was all the clearer because of the steady increase of those fleecy

flocks among the glens and ravines which spread outwards, downwards, ray-like, star-shaped, from the summit.

The increase was so steady that, after a time, the flocks coalesced, and the likeness passed into that of a rolling sea, through whose waves the knolls and peaks rose like islands; until the whole scene, lake and all, showed as a clustered coral reef shows in the Pacific Ocean--still, dream-like, peaceful utterly.

There was no peace, however, on the face of the Englishman in undress uniform who was sitting at an office table in the verandah of a thatched bungalow, which, fenced in perfunctorily from a sheer precipice on three sides by a frail trellis of bamboo solidified by morning glories, was perched above the now unseen levels below.

"If I could get reliable information," he muttered irritably, "I could be prepared. But I can hear nothing of the relief columns, and it is quite impossible for me to predicate the movements of the mutineers; yet without this it is difficult to know how to receive them."

His voice rose as he went on, for a yawn and a stir from a lounge-chair set in the shade, told him he had a listener.

"Not the laste bit in loife, me dear bhoy," came with the yawn. "Sure we've got to kill them somehow."

The first speaker looked up angrily from the map he was studying.

"Perhaps if I were only directly responsible for fifteen convalescents, as you are, Tiernay, I should be content to--to be in a fog. But I am the Brigade Major, and in the absence on duty of the commanding officer, and, I regret to say, all but a mere handful of native troops, I am responsible for the safety of a hundred and thirty-five helpless women and children--their lives and deaths--"

He was interrupted by the mixed sound of a laugh and the finishing of some brandy and water over which Dr. Tiernay had evidently been snoozing.

"Divvle a bit. Loife and death's my business from wan year's end to the other. There's responsibility for yez. And I kill as many as I cure, as all we pill-boxes do. Sure we haven't a fair chance, for a man keeps well without a doctor. It's when he thinks of dyin' he comes to us--an' nine toimes out of ten we can't help him. For talk of bein' in a fog! Be jabbers! it's nothing to the British Pharmacopœia. When I write a prescription I always put D.V., weather permitting, at the tail of it."

The Brigade Major looked at the dishevelled, lazy figure, so different from his own, distastefully.

"Well, I prefer a clearer conception of my line of treatment. Now if this portion of the rebels, which, there seems little doubt, are making for us here"--his finger followed a red line he had marked, "elect to proceed--"

"Elect, is it?" interrupted the doctor. "Sure they won't elect to do anything. It will come to them widout their knowing how, like fayver or catarrh. An' it's no manner of use beginning to physic a patient till ye know what disease fancies him. So lave off wid worrying, me dear bhoy, and just get out the salts and senna--"

"Salts and senna!" echoed the Brigade Major, angrily. "Really, Tiernay, considering you are the only other man in the place--for I don't count your miserable convalescents, of course, and my handful of natives is more an anxiety than a help--I do think you might talk sense."

Dr. Tiernay rose, yawned, and walked over to the office table, a tall, lank figure with a reckless, whimsical face, alert now to the uttermost.

"An' isn't it sinse? Salts and senna is what's generally wanted to begin with. Well, I've collected every lethal weapon I can lay hands on, including the dintistry case and the horse-pistols with which me grand-uncle, Macturk of Turksville, shot his wife's brother; so me salts and senna's ready. And, by the Lord, I'll exhibit it too whin the patient comes along--trust Micky Tiernay for that. But till he does"--here his face took a sudden, almost serious gravity--"ah, just quit cultivating omniscience, and lave the fog alone. Sure only the divvle himself could say what the blackguards will do."

"But Hoshyari Mul, the banker, thinks--"

"Is it that fat, oily brute? Oh, don't belave him. Don't belave what anybody says. They don't know--not even what they'll be at themselves if the mutineers *do* come. There's only wan thing certain--there's but wan straight road from Nusseerabad up the hill to us. That's the tail end of it yonder through the break in the mist. Oh, I've been kaping an eye on it, I tell yez, even in my sleep. Well, if they come, they'll come that way."

"But Koomar the priest--"

Dr. Tiernay looked across the placid, still sunbright levels of the little lake, at the wonderful Jain temples which made this hilltop one of the holiest spots in all India, and shook his head.

"Don't trust him either, for all his white robes and his piety. He means well; but he's more in a fog than we are, for we know that we don't want the mutineers to come, and he isn't sure. How can he be? I'd just trouble ye to imagine his mental position--if ye can."

So saying, he took up his battered helmet, which looked as if some one had been playing football with it, and strolled over to the hospital. It was perched on another knoll close by, yet the mist now lay almost level between it and him; for the curved waves had given place, like the fleecy flocks, to a new formation of fog. This, far as the eye could see, was a flat plain of cotton-wool, white, luminous, on which the knolls, the temples, the glittering lake, showed like jewels.

He dipped into the cotton-wool as it lay soft in the hollow, and out of it again ere entering the hospital verandah, where a man in the loose uniform of a dresser rose from his task of polishing a pair of horse-pistols and saluted; a trifle unsteadily, for he, though the best of the bunch of convalescents, was somewhat of a cripple. Had he not been so, he would not have been left behind when every man who could hold a rifle tramped down the hill to do the work that had to be done in the plains, if not only Englishwomen, but England herself was to be saved.

"Parade will be a bit short to-day, sir," he said, with cheerful regret, "for Corporal Flanagan 'e 'ave 'ad to 'ave a hemetic, sir, and the fly-blister on Private MacTartan's chest is has big has a hostrich's hegg."

"Dear, dee-ar," commented the doctor in long-drawn sympathy, as he passed into where a dozen or more of men in grey flannel dressing-gowns were lounging about in their cots or out of them. They were an unshaven, haggard-looking lot, though one or two were beginning to show that air of alertness which tells that soul and body are coming back to the bustle of life.

One or two, again, lay cuddled into their pallets with that other hospital expression--impatient patience.

Most, however, were between these two extremes, and one of them asked eagerly: "Any news of the brutes to-day, sir? It would be just my luck when I'm down with another bad turn."

"Bad turn go to blazes," retorted Dr. Tiernay, with a reassuring smile. "News of the varmint would have more therapeutic power than every drug I possess, an' a galvanic bathery wouldn't be in it wid the first shot. Faix even if I'd killed ye, ye'd do old Lazarus to spite me. Oh, Flanagan, there ye are. A bit white about the gills, me bhoy, but it's a foine thing to be in light inarching order. An' as for you, MacTartan, sure you've the illigantest protective pad ever a man wore above his heart. Is there any more of you would like wan?"

Yet as he made merry, the doctor's eye had wandered to where the tail end of the upward road had shown more than once for a second, between a rift in the wet blanket; for that only connection between mutiny and helplessness climbed the hill perilously along a steep funnel-shaped ravine, up which the draught, caused by the cool air above the hot air below, swept like a chimney driving the fog before it.

There was nothing to be seen, however, not even a rift or break; so he went on to dress the leg of a cripple on crutches. He was in the middle of bandaging it when an excited voice called him by name from the verandah, and he rushed out, bandage and all, so that his patient remained attached to him by a fluttering ribbon of linen.

He found the Brigade Major on his pony. There was news at last. The mutineers were coming, but not by the road. They had been seen on the old footpath to the north--they evidently meant to steal a march in the rear.

"What made ye come and tell?" asked the doctor suddenly in Hindustani to the naked figure which had brought the news. It was that of a Jain ascetic with a muslin cloth bound about his mouth, so as to prevent the destruction even of the unseen life around him.

The set brown sanctity of his face wavered. "They come to kill--and I kill nothing."

Dr. Tiernay turned on his heel and faced the man on crutches (who, after vainly begging to be told what was happening, had come crawling on all-fours like a dog to the verandah), and began as it were to haul him in by rolling up the bandage. "Who the divvle tould ye to move, Tompkins?" he said; "come in at wanst and let me finish me job."

"But, doctor," protested the Brigade Major.

The doctor swung round again at the appeal.

"Don't believe his saintship. Don't, for God's sake. If it's killing he objects to, sure isn't he helping us to kill them? That sort of thing doesn't work. See you--he says there are five hundred of them. Sainted Cecilia! if that's so, an' they mean to come and kill us, why come up the back stairs?"

"But he says,--and Koomar also, and even Hoshiari Mul--"

"Well, I'd rather trust the fat little banker if it comes to trustin'," interrupted the doctor, "for, see you, I owe him money, and if I'm killed he won't get it. But if I were you I'd trust none of them. Even Hoshiar, compound interest at a hundred and fifty per cent. to boot, does not know what he'll be at, so take my advice and sit tight where ye are."

The Brigade Major did, very tight and square on his pony.

"I'm sorry you don't agree with me, Dr. Tiernay," he said stiffly, "and, of course, being in independent medical charge of this convalescent depot, you can remain behind if you choose. Indeed I think it would, in a way, be wiser, since your fellows would be of little use."

Dr. Tiernay looked round on the contingent of crippledom which had crowded and crawled to the verandah to listen. "Faix," he said, "their hearts are whole, anyhow, an' that's half the battle. But what's your plan?"

"I have thought out this eventuality before, and am certain that our defence must be at the defile--you know--about four miles from here. I shall take every soul I can--it's better to give every one something to do."

The doctor nodded. "That's sound, anyhow. Satan finds--then I'll stay here."

"If-I fail--you will do what you can for the women and children--I shan't give the alarm now; so--so you might tell my wife by-and-by--if necessary."

Mike Tiernay walked back and patted the pony's neck.

"I'll tell her. And ye may be right--ye can't tell--it's just a fog. Anyhow, the cripples will do what they can for the ladies and the babies--though wanst those murderin' villains set foot on the summit, it's all up--so--so--I'll keep an eye on the road for ye. Well, good-by, me dear bhoy, and good luck to ye."

The sun, that was still shining brightly above the mists, shone on the men's clasped hands for a moment.

After that, Dr. Tiernay finished Tompkins' leg.

It was rather a long job, as it had to be done all over again. Then there were minor hurts to arms and hands, so that an hour must have passed before the doctor, wiping his hands with the curiously minute care of the surgeon who knows what risks he runs, suddenly dropped the towel and said--

"Sainted Sister Anne! they're coming."

Yes. The rift for which he had been watching with the carelessness which comes with custom, had showed that tail end of the road for a moment, and showed something on it--a trail of men and horses, a flashing of bayonets and spear-points.

Ten minutes after the man on crutches was the only one left in the hospital, and he was sitting on the edge of his cot sobbing like a child disappointed of his holiday; but Mike Tiernay had left him the horse-pistols by way of consolation, with instructions to hold the fort as long as he could, and prevent the damned rascals from touching even the drugs.

"Ye'll have the best of it after all, I tell ye," had been the doctor's farewell, "for sure ye'll be sitting at your ease shootin' straight long after we've been silenced; and a last shot is always a last shot." He was wondering what his would be as he led his company of cripples through the hollow of mist which lay between the hospital and the head of that road whose tail had shown the upward gleam of bayonets.

As yet, however, everything was peaceful. The lake, the temples, the isolated houses set on their knolls, even the lower cluster of the bazaar were all bathed in sunshine, with the curious, translucent brilliance which only Indian sunshine can give. Only between them, clinging to every hollow, lay the thick, luminous white fog.

Mike Tiernay took off his helmet, wiped his forehead, and looked around.

"It's no good in life making the poor things anxious," he muttered to himself, "an' if we can keep the divvles at bay *he* will be back to tell his own story. But I'll just give a look round to hearten them up; there's plenty of time, for I can catch up the cripples in a jiffy." So, bidding his men march slowly down the road (saving themselves as much as possible, since their work would be cut out for them afterwards) until he rejoined them, he set off with swinging strides to the semi-fortified houses, in which, more for the name of safety than for the hope of it, the helpless women and children had been gathered during the last few days.

"Any news, doctor?" asked the Brigade Major's wife, coming out to meet him, her six months' baby in her arms. "Dick isn't back from office yet, and it's such weary work, waiting, waiting."

Dr. Tiernay bent rather abruptly to look at the fretful child, which was teething badly. One or two other women, pale-faced, anxious, their little ones clinging round them, had gathered to listen, and he spoke as it were to all.

"Well, it can't be long now, any more than it can't be long before Dick comes back, or before that troublesome eye-tooth comes through. If all goes well, me dear madam, all the worry will be over by tomorrow."

"And if it isn't you will come with your lancet, won't you?" asked the mother, pleadingly.

Dr. Tiernay frowned portentously. "It's against me principles, madam--but I'll use--well, some kind of lethal weapon, I promise you. An' tell your husband, when ye see him, that my cripples did as well as could be expected, considering the fog."

"Did as well?" she asked. "What have they done?"

"Gone for their first walk down the road," he replied, with a cheerful laugh, "an' I must be affther them to stop them from overtiring themselves. So good-by. Dick'll maybe bring good news."

"How cheerful he is always," said one pale-faced mother to another. "I always feel safer when I've seen him; and, you know, he can't really think there is any immediate danger or he wouldn't have talked of coming to lance the baby's gums, would he?"

Whatever Dr. Tiernay might have *thought*, he was by this time beginning to realise that in the fog it was impossible to *know* anything--even the positions of his own cripples. "Are ye all there, wid as many legs an' arms as ye have whole?" he called, after he had given the order for them to fall in; "for, by the Lord that made me, I must take ye on trust; ye might be anybody." He paused; his eyes lit up suddenly; he gave a wild hooroosh.

"I have it, men; let's play the fog on the divvies, an' be damned to them. They can't see us, so let's take them in flank at the zig-zag. Smith, out wid yur engineer's eye an' tell me what's the length of the zig-zag--wan zig of it, I mane."

Smith, in the fog, thought a moment or two. "Close on a mile, sir, more or less, and there's four of them."

"Say three-quarters, and we are fifteen; no, it's fourteen, for we had to leave poor Tompkins wid his crutches an' the horse-pistols. Tompkins absent."

"Beg pardin', sir," came a voice from the fog; "Tompkins present. Come a all-fours down the short cut quite easy."

"Fifteen," corrected the doctor, calmly, "fifteen into twelve hundred yards. Faix, it'll have to be open order."--He paused for an odd catch in his breath, something between a laugh and a sob. "See here, ye gomerauns--English, Irish, Scotch, whatever ye are--that's our game. We're not fifteen; we're fifteen hundred."

The cripples out of the fog broke into a faint cheer.

"You've got it, Mick Tiernay!" they assented wildly. "You've got it, doctor dear! The fog's our game."

"We're fifteen hundred strong, an' we're each of us a hundred men an' two officers," called the doctor back. "Now, d'ye understand, men? open order it is--wan hundred yards or thereabouts, at the top zig-zag, and chargin' down on the divvies in flank--an' the gift of tongues--an' Donnybrook Fair--Hooroosh, Pat! come on, lads."

The next moment, hirpling, hobbling, unseen even of each other until sometimes a jostle would bring a low-toned witticism--"Now, then, Cap'n, keep your regiment orf mine, will ye?" or, "I'll throuble you, sorr, to respect me formation!"--the men were making their way, fast as crippledom would let them, towards their forlorn hope. And despite the witticisms, their haggard lean faces, hidden, like all else, in the fog, were stern and strained. Men's faces are so, when each man has to find place in his body for a hundred souls.

"Quiet's the word. Let them come on almost to the turn," was the doctor's last injunction as he posted his men; the strongest at the narrowest end of the zig-zag because they would the soonest come upon the enemy, and so on in varying gradations of convalescence, till the line of the supposed battalion stopped at the widest end with Tompkins, who was given as much ammunition as they could spare, and told to fire freely, regardlessly.

The doctor himself, with MacTartan close beside him ("so as," he said, "to increase the illushion"), were at the extreme angle. The unseen road lay below them, not fifty yards off, and below that again, the doctor knew, was an almost precipitous grass slope down to the next zig.

"We must start them on that short cut, if we can," he said to his supporter, "an' if we do, they'll rowl and rowl and rowl to perdition, please the Lord!" So they waited, the jest forgotten in earnest.



Then suddenly through the fog came a jingle.

"Tension, B Company," whispered the man who had had a bad turn (his name was Brown) to himself, and steadied his shaking hands on his musket as he listened. Another jingle. A sound of voices first; then, as suddenly as the jingle had come, came a thud of many feet.

*Thud, thud, thud.*

Then all along the hillside, all along that three-quarters of a mile or more, a volley--not of rifles, but orders--orders familiar to those below, and suggestive of colonels and majors, regiments and wings, and companies. Finally, at the narrowest end, a call to fire and charge; a reckless volley into the fog, and then two reckless figures flinging themselves into the uttermost void, God knows how, God knows where, save that it was downwards on that climbing foe.

MacTartan first; remembering his Highland corries and half bursting his lungs in his effort to give the Highland yell of a whole regiment. Yet beneath the grim joke a grimmer earnest lay, as in the fog he and his bayonet found something.

"Hech, now! Is that you?" he said grimly, and the something was a man no more!

"Steady, men. Follow me!" shouted Dr. Tiernay. Once more the mist produced something, and two men in deadly earnest hacked at each other with swords.

"Go on, brothers! run! they are behind us! run! Go back, brothers! they are ahead!" came the cry. And above it rose those orders. From close at hand a dropping fire; and from the far end--Tompkins' end-- quite a respectable volley.

"Come on! come on! and let them have the bayonet!" shouted the doctor again; and with the shout one or two more men grew to sight from the mist upon one side of the climbing road. But the men who had been on the road first were disappearing into the fog on the other side; disappearing down the grass slope to the next zag. Only at the turn where the doctor and MacTartan fought side by side, the difficulty of escape made resistance fierce from a knot of troopers, till, with a curse, MacTartan caught one horse by the bridle, and deliberately backed it over the edge; but not before, in his desperate effort to be strong as he once had been, he had stumbled and fallen before the flash of a sabre that passed in mad flight downwards. "Gorsh me, I've spoilt myself," he murmured sadly, as he rose with difficulty.

"What is it, man? Are you wounded?" cried the doctor, rushing up.

"Bruk me blister, sir," replied MacTartan, stolidly, reaching for his bayonet and going on.

That upper zig-zag was clear now; but below in the fog lay another, and another, and another, where the fugitives might be caught. So the battalion charged again and again, while Tompkins coming down quite easily, "a all-fours," fired volleys steadily.

The jest and the earnest of it, what pen can tell?

Till through the fog rang a faint hurrah. The last of the zig-zags had blindly been reached, and neither far nor near upon the hillside down which the battalion had charged in open order, was foe--not to be seen, but felt! The uttermost void was void indeed.

"We've got no dooleys, men," said Dr. Tiernay, wiping his forehead once more, "so the wounded must crawl back to hospital as best they can."

So they crawled. All but Tompkins; the doctor insisted upon carrying him pick-a-back, on the ground that he, the doctor, was the only whole man in the battalion, and was bound to do double work.

And the next morning, when he went his rounds, he stood for a minute or two beside a fretful baby, and then took out his lancet.

"It's against me principles, me dear madam," he said, with a shrug of his shoulders; "for there's a toime for everything, and everything in its toime; and no one, not even a tooth, knows what it would be at till that toime comes. But as I said the throuble would be over, and the rest of it is;--why, I'll keep my word!"

And it was over; for a message saying he was close on the heels of his messenger came from the general in command of relief.

The fog had lifted by this time, lifted for steady rain; so the English troops coming up found the foes more easily than the battalion had done. But the foes were dead. Those random shots, those reckless charges from nothingness to nothingness had done some work.

And part of it was on the naked body of a Jain ascetic, with a bit of muslin swathed about his mouth, lest, inadvertently, he should bring death to the smallest of God's creatures.

## **GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH**

"Oh! Mummy," said the Boy, as his mother slipped a sort of nightgown over his trim little khaki uniform, "I think it'sh shkittles!"

Boy's invariable dissent--picked up about the barracks of an Indian cantonment--was applied in this instance both to the angelic robe represented by the nightgown, and the angelic part the child was to play in it.

For it was Christmas Eve, and the vague desire for peace and goodwill which, even in these latter days, comes with Christmas-tide, had made the English aliens in the station devise a Tree for those still greater aliens--the Boer prisoners--who lived among them in the strange spider's web of barbed wire, which to the casual eye seemed so inefficient a prison for enemies who had defied capture so long, so bravely.

It was Boy's mother who had started the idea. She was one of those women, lovable utterly, not always reasonable, who find solace in dramatising their own sorrows. So when, two years before, her husband, commanding a native cavalry regiment still quartered in the station, had been ordered to Africa on Staff duty, she had remained on in the big house, sharing it with a friend, and continuing religiously to care for all things for which her absent soldier had cared--even for the regiment which was still so proud of its Colonel at the front.

It was a heartrending solace, indeed, to see the native officers and men, when they inquired for the latest news, salute Boy as solemnly as they would have saluted his father; and it pleased her to perceive that the only regard these warriors had for *her* was as guardian of their Sahib's honour and of his only son; for the wellbeing of which things they were fiercely jealous.

To this woman, militant to the heart's core yet sentimentally pitiful, it had seemed appropriate that Boy--son of the only fighting father in the station--should play the part of the "*Christ-kind*," the Bringer of good gifts at the Christmas-tree. There was no geographical or ethnological reason why this German custom should obtain among the Boers, but Boy's mother had recollections of school-days abroad, and thought that her little son, with his aureole of red hair and grave baby face, so like the absent hero, would look sweet in the part.

"It isn't skittles at all, Boy," she said softly. "Remember what I told you about loving your enemies."

"I'd wather fight 'em, like Daddy," replied Boy, drawing from its scabbard the miniature sword of strict regimental pattern which--it being a new toy--he had refused to lay aside even for angelic robings.

"But it is Christmas," persisted his mother. "Remember what I told you about it--about the angels, and the peace, and goodwill."

"I shink Chrishmus shkittles, too."

"Quite right, youngster! It *is* skittles in India," put in a tall man, who, farther down the verandah, was watching a woman's fingers busy themselves over church decorations.

His rather reckless expression changed as, stooping to select a brilliant branch of scarlet-fingered poinsettia from the confused heap of flowers and greenery at their feet, he handed it to his companion, and she looked up to thank him with her eyes.

Boy's mother, who had glanced towards them at the interrupting voice, paused over the angelic robe, uneasily silent.

"I wish I had something white, beside the roses," remarked the cross-maker a trifle hurriedly. "They don't look a bit Christmassy."

"Lilies?" suggested the man.

She shook her head. "Lilies don't suit the climate; there aren't any--*here*."

He stooped and spoke lower. "Yes! it's a God-forsaken spot all round--for *you*. But, look here! I saw a *dhatura* actually in blossom to-day--close to my bungalow. It's not unlike a lily--as white, anyhow--and sweeter. They use it in their temples--so why not in church? It doesn't do to be too particular--when you want anything."

She shook her head again. "It's poisonous--besides, it doesn't do--to leave the beaten path."

"Try!"

There was a pause; for the undercurrent, which had seemed to sweep each trivial word to another meaning, seemed suddenly to sweep this man and woman within touch--dangerous touch--of each other.

"What *are* you two talking about?" asked Boy's mother, coming towards them. "What a lovely cross, Muriel! And why, please, should Christmas in India be skittles, Colonel Gould?"

He laughed. "How stern you look! I wish I could get that righteous indignation up for orderly room. I need it!"

"My husband never found the regiment difficult to manage," interrupted the wife of its absent commander jealously.

"Nor do I," retorted its present head, "but--" he paused, not caring to explain that he, an outsider sent but lately to drill a corps back to the discipline it had lost after her husband's departure, had naturally a very different task.

"Hullo, Boy!" he said, to change the subject, "that is a jolly little sword! Who gave it you?"

"Hirabul Khan gaved it me," replied the child. "When I'm Colonel, he'sh going to be my risshildar, 'cos you shee he was my Daddy's orderly first, an' then Daddy made him--oh, lots of fings."

"He'll have to look out if he doesn't want to lose some things," said Colonel Gould, sharply; then answering a vexed look of Boy's mother, continued: "He was a *protégé* of your husband's, I know--but he really has wind in his head. For his own sake it must be got out. I put him under arrest to-day, and told him squarely I'd have to block his promotion."

"What had he done?" She spoke quite fiercely.

"Cheek, as usual. It was over that escape from the camp. Haven't you heard? Viljeon, that cantankerous brute who gives so much trouble, managed to get out again last night. I wish it had been any one else--for he's half mad and dangerous. I'm glad the General has ordered the search-party to shoot at sight if he offers resistance."

Boy, in his white robe, his toy sword in his hand still, nodded his red aureole sagely.

"The Tommies down at the camp told *me*. He'sh just an awful brute, Vile John is. He is goin' to kill all the little English children he meets, 'cos--'cos they killed his: but that's a damned lie."

The calm deliberation of the last was so evidently imitative that Boy's mother smiled, despite a sudden pain at her heart.

"They died, dear, and so you must be very sorry for him. Think how sad I should be if--" The thought produced a sudden caress, a sudden glisten in her grey eyes. "Now, Boy of mine, let me take that thing off. Then you must go and lie down and sleep, for you'll have to keep wide awake half the night."

"Take care of my shword, Mummy, please!" said Boy, superbly, as, in unrobing, he shifted it from one hand to the other; "it's most dweadful sharp!"

"By George, it is," remarked Colonel Gould; "a trifle too sharp for safety."

"Is it?" said Boy's mother, anxiously. "Hirabul ought not--"

"It wasn't Hira," interrupted Boy. "It was Kunder sharpened it, so as I could kill Vile John if I met him, like as my Daddy done over in Africa. Didn't you, Kunder?"

A figure squatting in a far corner rose and salaamed.

"The *Huzoor* speaks truth."

The speaker was an old man, slender, upright, unusually dark-skinned; this latter fact made his bare limbs look curiously youthful and lissom.

"Done it uncommonly well, too," assented Colonel Gould, feeling the edge. "Where did you learn the trick?"

"Your slave was once sword-sharpener by trade," was the submissive reply.

"Kunder'sh an awful clever chap," said Boy, loquaciously. "He can make--oh! all sorts of fings as deads people--bows and stwangles, you know--can't you, Kunder?"

The man salaamed, with a watchful look at his other hearers.

"And," continued Boy, in vicarious boasting, "he can do all sorts of dweadful fings, too! He can steal people's purses when they'se sleepin', an' make dicky-birds tumble off bwanches, an' little

boys like me wake never no more--can't you, Kunder?"

Submissiveness grew crafty. "This slave has certainly told such tales to the children-people."

"Looks scoundrel enough," remarked Colonel Gould, carelessly. "Where did you pick him up?"

"Oh! he isn't *my* servant," replied Boy's mother. "He is Muriel's. I can't think why she keeps him."

The cross-maker rose and held her work at arm's length. "Does any one really know why they do anything?" she asked. "Perhaps, as you say, he will steal my jewels some day--or murder me. But, as Boy says, he's awful clever, and one must be amused! Now I must go and put this up. Will you drive me to the church, Colonel Gould?"

"Better come in the victoria with me," said Boy's mother, hastily; "it is going to rain." This other woman, this childless wife with an unspeakable husband, must be guarded from herself.

"I don't think so," put in the Colonel, firmly. "Kunder! call my dogcart, and we can go round by my bungalow and pick the *dhatura*."

Kunder, passing on his errand, looked up curiously at the last word.

Colonel Gould gave back the look. "Queer customer! Shouldn't wonder if he's a Thug--they use *dhatura* poison to stupefy their victims, you know."

He spoke carelessly as they stood looking out at the bare patch of parched ground called by courtesy a garden. The lowering sky, of an even purplish grey, was so dark that the level lines of dust-laden *sirus* trees along the road showed light against it.

"I wish some one would stupefy me," said Muriel, with a sudden passion in her voice; to cover which she went on recklessly: "How I hate Christmas in India!--the sham of it--sham decorations--sham church, for it isn't real! The reality is outside among the poor folk in the fields and the towns, to whom Christmas is a day when *we* guzzle and *they* pay the piper!"

"My dear Muriel!"

"It's true! Think of it! Peace and goodwill? Isn't the whole station at daggers-drawing because one lady said another wasn't the best-dressed woman in India? Isn't your regiment, Colonel, ready to murder you? Then that camp, right in the middle of us Christians, with how many prisoners eating their hearts out? And Vile John--as Boy has been taught to call him--half mad in thinking of his children who have died. Oh, I know it is all inevitable--but think, just think of him wandering about this Christmas Eve, liable to be shot at sight. There's a Santa Claus for you!"

Her voice had risen, her fingers had closed tremblingly on the sprig of poinsettia she had fastened in her breast. It showed against the white laces of her dress like a clutching scarlet hand.

Colonel Gould shrugged his shoulders uneasily. "Don't forget Kunder in the picture of peace and goodwill!--Kunder with his 'fings as kills'; for the matter of that don't forget *you* and *me*, and the rest of us! The Decalogue is in danger on Christmas Eve as always--perhaps more so."

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Boy's mother in sudden pitiful emotion. "Don't believe him, Muriel! Wait and see! Why, even that storm brewing"--as she spoke a shivering seam of lightning shot slanting across the purple pall behind the dusty trees--"only means the Christmas rains. How welcome they will be after this endless drought! They will perhaps save millions of lives--"

"A doubtful message of peace," put in the Colonel, drily. "But hadn't we better start? or we shan't have time for the *dhatura*."

"You haven't time," said Boy's mother, sharply. "You must be back by eight, Muriel, for we have to be at the camp by nine. Ayah will bring Boy down ready dressed when we want him--so please don't be late."

This thing which she saw looming as plainly as she saw that storm in the sky, should not be if she could help it. They were too good, both the man and the woman, for that sort of ruin.

She shivered as she watched the dogcart drive off. Truly there were storms ahead! And that thought of Viljeon--childless, half-distraught--wandering about, liable to be shot like a wild beast, made her fear for what might happen ere Christmas dawned.

The verandah darkened silently after she left it. Every now and again a puff of wind rattled the dry pods of the *sirus* trees, making them give out a faint crackle like that of a scaled viper coiled watchfully in a corner.

Kunder, in *his* corner, sate up keenly as a snake does. There was a louder crackle of a stealthy footstep.

"Is it well?" came a stealthy voice.

"If Fate wills," replied Kunder, sinking back again to sloth.

A stealthy hand reached out a tiny paper packet wound with unspun silk.

"The sleep-giver--from the Master--it is fresh and good."

"There is no need for sleep-giving," replied Kunder, passively. "The *mem* is drunk with the love-philtre women crave. I know their ways"--he gave a little soft laugh. "She will not return to-night. So, at dawn, I and the jewels will be--with the Master--if Fate so wills."

"Why should She *not* will?"

Kunder laughed again. "Who knows what Fate *may* will?"

He looked out, when the stealthy footstep had gone, at the dusty trees that were growing ghostly in the twilight, and told himself again that none knew. Had *he* known when, as a lad, he fought against the Sahibs, that one day the death of a Sahib's five-year-old son would be to him as the death of his own child? Had *he* known when that nursling's red-gold curls--so like Boy's curls--lay confidingly on his breast, that one day he would be thief--perhaps murderer?

No! it was as Fate willed. He was, as ever, in Her hands to-night.

Another footstep! not stealthy this time, but hurried even in its measured military rhythm.

It was Hirabul Khan, the disgraced native officer, seeking an appeal to Colonel Gould before the limitations of an open arrest made it necessary for him to return to his quarters.

"Yea, he was here!" replied Kunder, cynically. "He is ever here--after the *mem*! Where hides the doe thither comes the buck!"

Hirabul twirled his moustache fiercely. "Keep thy tongue off thy betters, scum of the bazaars, or I break thy every bone. I give thee womenkind in general--but *this* one is different. Whither hath he gone? for I must see him."

"No need," retorted Kunder, spitefully. "Thy pottage is cooked already. He told the *mem* so but now. 'No promotion,' said he--I know their speech. And she--"

"Base-born!--and she?"

"She laughed, as I do--scum of the bazaars! Ha, ha!" A devilish malignity had seized on him; he chuckled even while Hirabul shook him like a rat.

"Liar! Cur! Whither hath he gone?"

"To the church--with the *mem*! Thou wilt see! 'No promotion,' said he; and she--"

With a curse Hirabul flung the chuckler from him, and strode away into the growing darkness.

The church stood--after the manner of Indian churches--in a garden, and on the wide sweep of gravel round it carriages were awaiting the owners, who were busy within. The Colonel's dogcart was among them. So he was there, sure enough.

Hirabul Khan, hesitating at the open door he dared not enter, could see straight along the aisle to the altar; could see the cross of poinsettia and white roses upon the latter, the text above it--

"UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN."

Unmeaning as it all was to him, he stood looking at it dreamily, until suddenly from the unseen transept the Christmas hymn began, and those of the decorators who were not remaining for choir practice came trooping down the aisle. Then he retreated hastily to where the Colonel's dogcart stood, that being his best chance of the interview which, if humble apology might avail, would mean much to his pride.

So he waited, watching with uncomprehending eyes, listening with uncomprehensive ears--

"Oh! come all ye faithful,  
Joyful and triumphant,  
Oh! come ye, oh! come ye to Bethlehem."

Suddenly, on those distant voices, the sound of nearer ones became audible. He stepped back a pace or two, and peered through the thicket of rose and pomegranate.

The scum of the bazaars had spoken truth, then! That man and woman standing so close to each other in the scented twilight were the new Colonel, the real Colonel's wife! What infamy! He set his teeth and listened--though this was to him as incomprehensible as the call to peace and goodwill had been.

"For God's sake, have pity on her!" Boy's mother's voice was full of tears. "I heard you settle it. But if you two pick that *dhatura* tonight--'the last thing after the Tree, so that it may not wither!' Oh, yes, I heard, Colonel Gould--"

"You *did* hear. I don't deny it. My dear, kind lady--think! If it is not to-night--it *must* be soon. This life is killing her--it is wiser, kinder, to end the struggle now--"

"No! no! give her time. It is in your power to do this, for she loves you. Remember it is Christmas; you might, at least--"

"The better the day! No; Christmas must take care of itself--if *it* can! I mean to take her away and care for her--if *I* can. But thanks, all the same. I shall never forget your kindness."

In the semi-darkness the listener could see the man stoop and kiss the hand laid on his arm.

The next instant Colonel Gould was turning savagely on the figure which had thrust itself on to the path.

"What the devil are you doing here, sir? You are under arrest, and should be in quarters."

"It was only open arrest, sir, and the time--" Hirabul's tone matched the mutiny in his heart, and the Colonel broke in on it roughly--

"Consider it close arrest now. Go back and report yourself at once--and, by Heaven! if you say another word, I'll have you court-martialled. Go!"

A wild surge of impotent rage kept Hirabul Khan speechless, and ere he recovered himself the Colonel was driving off--the Colonel and a woman!

"Sing, choirs of angels,  
Sing in exultation."

He turned and shook his fist at the church; then plunging recklessly through the garden, sought silence and solitude. He needed calm before he could even begin his revenge.

There was no doubt about the coming of the rains now. More than one heavy, curiously round drop fell on the dust through which he strode; but all was still--very still as yet.

By-and-by twinkling carriage-lights, like fireflies, began to sparkle among the straight row of trees leading to the prison camp.

Yet the rain kept off, and it had not even begun to fall when the *ayah's* twinkling light roused Boy for his robing. But half awake, the child grew fractious, calling all things "shkittles," save the killing of Viljeon, who, he asserted, was hiding in the garden. To all of which *Ayah*, awaiting the carriage, agreed, until her charge, seated on his little bed, grew drowsy once more, and she stole off for a last pull at her forbidden pipe.

But Kunder's light went on twinkling in the farther room, where he was conscientiously finishing his old domestic duties, and preparing for new ones.

So after a time the carriage arrived, bringing with it a smell of damp dust.

"Hurry up, woman!" called the coachman. "It has begun down the road like the storm of God. Bring the child; it were best he was soon in safety."

Bring the child! How? When Boy, with his little pretence wings sewn on to his nightgown behind, his little sword that was not all pretence, was not to be found!

The twinkling lights--Kunder's among them--were all over the garden, accompanied by endearments, threats, promises.

"*Shiv-jee* save him!" muttered Kunder, as suddenly the rain began to fall in torrents, quenching his light, and washing him from head to foot. The child with the red-gold curls of his race might well drown on a night like this!

The Colonel felt the same fear, as, waiting at the camp-gate to pass the child in, he heard the news first; then, with a brief order that the boy's mother was only to be told that the carriage had been unable to return, owing to the violent storm, and that therefore the gift-giving must go on without the little giver, started to join the search.

Hirabul also, who, waiting his opportunity for revenge, had dogged the Colonel's footsteps all that evening, heard the tale as he skulked in the crowd, put up his revolver, and with a sob at the

thought of his far-away *sahib*, unconscious of his wife's treachery or his son's danger, set himself another task.

So the rain fell, and the wayfarers, keeping by the flare of incessant lightning to the raised roads, said to each other: "This is the deluge of God! Repent, while there is time!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"What a terrific noise it makes on this iron roof," said Boy's mother, when the gift-giving was nearly over. "I'm glad Boy didn't come--he might have been frightened."

\* \* \* \* \*

Was he frightened out in the dark alone? He had been. Not at first, however, when, half asleep, it had been almost a game to slip into the garden to find and kill Viljeon, and so, cunningly, when he found no one, into the belt of jungle adjoining it. He was not even frightened when, stumbling over the rough ground and his long white robe, he began to tire of his quest and tried to go back. It was not until the lightning which heralded the bursting of the rain-cloud turned the wilderness round him into black and white shadows that his courage left him, and he started to run blindly, too terrified to think, still too brave to scream.

But he was not frightened now. He was fast asleep, cuddled warmly on a big, broad breast against a big brown beard.

For that quaint little figure, sword in hand and with its ridiculous fluttering wings, had, almost in its first flight, run full tilt against a man who was crouching to leeward of a big tuft of tiger-grass--a man whose head was buried in his crossed arms, but who sprang to his feet with a curse at the unmistakable touch of humanity; then, as a flash of lightning showed him the white robe, the wings, the golden aureole of hair, fell back faltering.

"God in heaven!" he muttered in a foreign tongue. "What dost Thou here?"

Boy needed no question as to his wants. "Oh, please!" he panted, "take me home. I wanted to kill Vile John with the sword as Kunder sharpened; but now I'd wather, please, give the Chrishmus fings--the peace, you know, an' all that--please, sir. I weally would wather--"

A sudden smile, half bitter, came to the man's bewildered face. "You wanted to kill Vile John," he said in English. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know--but I don't want to now. I'd wather bring the peace."

And then silently the rain had begun--not rain such as Christmas usually brings in India, but the downpour as from a bucket which comes at times after long drought; rain before which nothing can stand, which seems to wash the world and the men in it from all things save a desire for shelter.

"God in heaven!" exclaimed the man, reverting to his own tongue. "We shall be drowned if we stop here. Come, little rat! Let us find a spot where we can keep dry."

A difficult job even for this man--Viljeon, prince of veldt roamers--to whom this country with its rapidly filling watercourses, its wide stretches of flood-land, was almost familiar. Seen, indeed, by the rapid shimmer of the lightning as he steered his way, the instinct of a pioneer waking in him at every step, he could scarce believe he was not mastering an African drift.

And the child cuddled close to his breast, wrapped for shelter in his coat? Who was this child which he held as if it had been his own--the child with its travesty of wings, its travesty of a sword?

Half bewildered as he was, the humour, the pathos of the strange chance made his heart softer, and his eyes grew keener, not only for himself but for his charge, as the danger increased minute by minute.

At first, mixed with his desire for present shelter had been that of future escape for himself. But by degrees the thought of the child came uppermost. Safety for it lay on different lines from safety to a strong man untrammelled; and the instinct of the veldtsman told him that the former was on the higher ground near the cantonment--near the prison he had left!

So, through the incessant rain, he threaded his way wading waist-deep at times, till on a rising bit of land the lightning showed him a ruined mud hovel. It might serve for shelter and rest for the time: if the flood rose to it he could but go on.

It was a sort of cattle-shed he found; a rude trough of mud ran round it, and in one corner was a pile of straw. He drew the driest of this from beneath the leaking roof, and, placing it in the trough, laid the still sleeping child upon it. It was better so than in his damp coat. Then, creeping to the doorway, he sate down to think and watch--alone.

Not quite so much alone, however, as the darkness of the night which followed on the sudden cessation of rain led him to believe; for not two hundred yards away, in another cattle-shed on this Government grazing-ground, three other refugees were also awaiting the dawn.

For Kunder, who had abandoned jewels in the search for gold curls, had happened in the dark upon Hirabul Khan, who in his turn was desperately seeking aid for a disabled man whose shouts for help he had answered, unwitting who gave them.

And if it *was* the Colonel, explained Hirabul, half apologetically, as they made their way back together to give the help--well! a man might be disloyal over women--who were the devil--yea! even to a real hero like the absent *sahib*, and yet not deserve to drown like a rat in a drain; and as for the other question, *that* stood over for settlement.

Whereupon Kunder had asked what treacherous woman had an absent hero, and had thereupon fallen into jeers over Hirabul's mistake. Was he a fool not to know it was the other *mem* who lived in the house? As for Boy's mother, was she not palpably a *pudmuni*, with no thought save for husband and son?

In consequence of which explanation a new and remorseful respect had come to Hirabul's helping of the Colonel, so that when the latter was at last in comparative safety in the cattle-shed, he, too, found food for thought as he also sate waiting for daylight, hoping against hope for Boy and Boy's mother.

So the grey dawn found him dozing at the door. But he started to his feet at an exclamation from Kunder, who was standing outside; and then across a stretch of shallowing water he saw another ruined cattle-shed, and at the doorway a tall, broad man, with a big brown beard.

"Viljeon!" he exclaimed under his breath.

"To be shot at sight," mumbled Hirabul, but half awake, as he reached round aimlessly for a rifle.

"Fool!" cavilled Kunder, all unwitting of the revolver in Hirabul's belt, "thou art not safe with things that kill, so 'tis well thou hast none. See! he beckons to us. Let us go to him. The rain hath washed evil from us all!"

They helped the Colonel, who could scarce believe his senses, to hobble across, while Viljeon stood guarding the door with a still, stern look on his face.

"You will find the Child lying in the manger," he said; "bring your offerings--I have brought mine."

\* \* \* \* \*

But only three wise men went down to cantonments that Christmas morning, bringing the child with them; for Kunder, wiser perhaps, or less wise, felt that his new virtue was better away from the proximity of the jewels he had left tied up ready in a bundle; so, seizing his opportunity, he slipped like a water-snake into the tangle of floods and was seen no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"And after all," said Boy's mother, softly, "Christmas *did* take care of itself!"

"Yes!" answered the Colonel, quietly. "We all brought our offerings--gold and frankincense and myrrh."



# **SURÂBHI**

## **A FAMINE TALE**

She was only a cow, but she was all things, wife and child, earth and heaven, to old Gopâl, the Brahmin who owned her.

And, apart from his estimation, she had value. Connoisseurs in the village, as they looked over the low mud wall which separated the slip of open courtyard, ten feet by six, where there was just room for a crazy four-legged string bed between Surâbhi's manger and the door, would nod and say she must have been a good cow when young; but when that was only God knew!

Whereupon Gopâl would raise his shaven head with its faint frosting of silver hair from Surâbhi's silver flank, as he squatted holding a brass *lotah* in one hand, milking with the other, and smile scornfully.

"Old or young, she is the best milker in the village, and the best looking one, and the best bred," he would say. "And wherefore not? Is she not Surâbhi the Great Milk-Mother, whom even the gods worship? Since without her where would the little godlings be?" And then he would pop down the *lotah* and cease milking for a moment, so that both hands might be free for a reverential *salaam* to the old cow who, at the cessation, would turn her mild white face--the real Brahmini zebu face with its wide dewy black nostril, wide dewy black eyes, and long lopping ears--to see what had come to old Gopi; and as often as not, would give his round frosted black poll a lick round with her black frosted tongue, by way of encouragement to go on, as if he had been a calf!

But the connoisseurs over the wall would snigger, and touch their foreheads, and say that Gopâl Das was getting quite childish and mixed up things. Though, no doubt, the great Surâbhi must have been just such another cow, since the old man said right. There was not her like in the village. No! not even now that Govinda had brought home the brown cow with five teats, which had taken the prize at the *Huzoor's* big show. It was younger, of course, but Surâbhi would outlast the old man, and what more could *he* want? Then who, before these latter days, had ever heard tell of a brown cow? And as for the five teats, they might portend more milk, but were they lawful?

So long-limbed, whole-hearted, dull-headed, the villagers went doubtfully about their business scarcely less confused than old Gopi between facts and fancies, realities and unrealities; tied and bound, as their like are in hamlet and village, by the allegories of a faith whose inner teaching has been forgotten.

But old Gopâl stayed with Surâbhi. His life was bounded by her. How he lived was one of the many mysteries of Indian village life. He did nothing but look after his cow, but he must have inherited some fractional share of the village land from his fathers, or been entitled, by reason of his race, to some ancestral dues, for twice a year at harvest time he would come back to the courtyard, like a squirrel to its nest, with so many handfuls of this grain and so many handfuls of that, so many bundles of wheat straw, millet stalks, or pea stems. And on these, and the milk she gave, he and Surâbhi lived contentedly. He was very old; if he had had wife and children in the past he had quite forgotten them. Yet it was typical of village life that no one forgot old Gopi or his rights. Whatever was due to him from well or unwatered land, even if it were only so many leaves of tobacco or chili pods, came to the courtyard as regularly as the sunshine.

And, regularly as the sunshine, too, the old man, after he had milked Surâbhi in the early dawn, would go with his solitary blanket and a little spud, and spend the whole day till sunset in gathering succulent weeds for the Great Milk-Mother's supper. It was his religion. And under the broad blue sky, edging a plantigrade path over the parched plain, leaving, like a locust, not a green leaf behind him, old Gopi's mind would be full of confused piety and mystical meanings.

This was the highest service of man, this was Faith, and Hope, and Charity all combined; since every one knew that Surâbhi was the World-Mother, and without her--

Here the old Brahmin's memory of words would fail him, and he would fall back on deeds, by digging at the biggest weed within reach.

From year's end to year's end he seldom fingered a coin, and if he did, it was Surâbhi who brought it to him. Her last calf had long since become an ox, and drifted away from the village to fill a gap in the great company of the ploughers and martyrs who give the coffer of the Empire all its gold and die in thousands--long before famine touches humanity--without a penny piece from that coffer being spent to save them from starvation. Yet she still, after the fashion of her race,

gave milk and to spare. The latter went, as a rule, to folk poorer still than the old Brahmin, especially to children; but when he sold it, part of the money was always spent on a new charm for Surâbhi's neck. And it might be noted that whenever, by looking over the old mud walls which separated the village courtyards one from the other, he found that Govinda's brown cow had a fresh bell or disposition of cowries round her neck, there was always enough milk over and above Gopi's wants next day to procure a similar adornment for the white one with its heavy dewlap.

The rivalry grew, by degrees, into a definite challenge between their owners, so that when, after a time, Govinda's beast fell off in her milk, Gopi's delight was palpable, and he scouted all reasonable explanations of the fact.

The cow, he said, was underbred. You could see by her hoofs that she had been accustomed to wander about and pick up her own living like low-caste folk; while Surâbhi bore token of her lifelong seclusion in every polished ring of her long-pointed black toes.

But before the question at issue could be decided, that came about which dried up every cow in the village, and made even old Gopi's brass *lotah* cease to brim.

There was no rain. Even in December and January, though the skies were dappled as the partridge's breast, the clouds carried their moisture elsewhere. Where, did not affect the villagers. It was not here, and that was all they knew. The autumn crop, which means fodder, had been a scant one, the cattle were thrown entirely on the still scantier growth of grass in the waste land; and when that failed, custom did not fail. The herds were driven forth from the thorn enclosures every morning to the wilderness and taken back from it at eve, just as if that wilderness were still a grazing-ground. What else could be done, seeing that when cattle starve it is not a famine? *That* is a time when help is given by the new master. God knows why, since the old masters never gave any.

Such time of help must come, of course, ere long, if the clouds remained dry; but meanwhile the flocks and herds went out to graze on mud, and if some failed to return in the evening, what else was to be expected?

So the long dry days dragged on. That spring-harvest old Gopâl's share of garnered grain was scarcely worth the bringing home. The squirrel's hoard in the little courtyard was scanty indeed, and very soon he had to stint his own share, and rise an hour earlier to go weed-grubbing, and return an hour later, so that Surâbhi should not low her discontent at short commons. For that would be shame unutterable, even though the brown cow had long since been driven from high-class seclusion to fend for herself with the common herd from dawn to eve.

Thus old Gopâl's lank anatomy was appreciably more lank, more skeleton-like, when one day the headman of the village, as he smoked his pipe in front of the house of faith where strangers were lodged, announced that the famine had really come at last. Over in Chotia Aluwala there were piles of baskets and spades. Some *Huzoors* were there in white tents, so doubtless ere long, God knows why, they would begin digging earth from one place and putting it in another, so that a distribution of grain could be made in the evening.

That was the headman's idea of relief-works, and his hearers had no other.

Now, Chotia Aluwala was ten miles at least from Surâbhi's stall, but of late Gopi had scarce found a weed within twice that distance.

So the very next day, when, backed by a pile of forlorn-looking earth on one side and a not much smaller pile of baskets with which the earth had, during the day's toil been conveyed to its present resting-place, one hungry face after another came up in file to the distribution of food, old Gopi's frosted head was among the number. But he was bitterly disappointed at his dole of cooked dough-cake. He had expected grain. Though more than enough for his old appetite, what would Surâbhi, with her seven stomachs, say to such concentrated food?

After his long trudge home he passed a miserable night seeking, by every means in his power, to supply the bulk necessary for the satisfying of those clamorous stomachs. He even chopped up the grass twine of his string bed and tempted the old cow to chew it by soaking the fibre in some of her own milk.

Thus, once more, he came off second best, for the milk should have been his share. So he could scarcely manage to stagger along with his basket next day. Not that this mattered, for already the Englishmen, who, in their khaki clothes and huge pith helmets were supervising the work, were saying tentatively, with a glance at the totterers, that it might have been better to start relief a little sooner. And down in one hollow Gopi saw a woman being carried away, while the babe which had been at her breast yelled feebly in an orderly's arms.

The sight did not affect Gopi in the least. He had thought out a plan which filled his confused old soul with a heavenly joy. So when his two dough-cakes were given him that evening he hurried off with them to the contractor in the background, through whom the *Huzoors* had arranged for this supply, and exchanged them--at a loss, inevitably--for the coarse husks, the bran, the sweepings, the absolute waste which could not be used even in famine bread.

The arrangement suited both parties, the contractor and old Gopi, who day after day trudged

home, hungry, with a bulky bundle of fodder for Surâbhi. It was a fair exchange all round; even with the old cow, who turned the fodder into milk. Not much, it is true, since the bundle was not over-large, but enough to keep Gopi's soul and body together.

And the soul grew if the body wasted. How could it be otherwise, when one was permitted to be the babe and suckling, as it were, of the Great Milk-Mother? The Great World-Mother, whose sacred work it was to nourish all things, even the little godlings?

The old Brahmin's eyes grew softer, more trustful, more like the eyes of a child, as the days went by; and as he milked her, Surâbhi's black frothed tongue often licked more than his shaven poll, as if she were concerned at the bones which showed through the skin of her calf.

Gopâl himself, however, took this licking as a mark of Divine favour; and, as for the thinness, were not all the babes and sucklings growing thin?

That was true. The Englishman in head charge of the Chotia Aluwala relief-work canal had that thinness on his conscience. But what could man do in a wilderness, without mothers, without milk?

He had it on his heart too, because he was a father; and because, despite a mother and milk, doctors and dosing galore, it was not two months since he had seen his first-born waste away mysteriously to death, as children will waste.

So his mind was full of it, when, for the sake of seeing a lonely wife and mother, he rode forty miles after nightfall to the little bungalow so empty of a child's voice.

"I've got quite a nursery of 'em now," he said grimly, "but they beat me. I can't get the men in charge to mix that tin-milk stuff right, you know, and the little beggars won't look at a teaspoon."

Perhaps it was his ride that had tired him. Anyhow, he crossed his hands on the table, and laid his head on them wearily.

He roused, however, at her touch on his shoulder.

"Let me come," she said; "I've--I've nothing to do here."

He looked at her for a moment, then turned his eyes away. "Will you?" he said in an odd voice; "that--that will be awfully jolly."

So in a day or two, armed with the dead baby's bottles, feeding-cups, God knows what, and such mother's lore as the dead child had taught her, she was at work in a white tent set in the shade of the only tree at Chotia Aluwala.

"I must have more milk," she said decidedly, and there was a new light in her eyes, a new tone in her voice, when they brought her yet another whimpering black baby. "That is the end of it; by hook or by crook I *must* have more milk. There *must* be some, somewhere. Send out and see!"

So, because when a woman is standing between death and children, her orders are the orders of "She-who-must-be-obeyed," they sent. And, of course, one of the first discoveries made by the native underling to whom the inquiry was entrusted, was Surâbhi. In other words, that an old Brahmin, in receipt actually of relief, was the possessor of a remarkably fine cow, if not in full milk, yet capable of supporting an infant or two. It needs the vicious *flair* of an underpaid *chuprassi* to find such chances for tyranny and extortion at the first throw off. But this one was found, and when Gopi returned that evening to the little courtyard, an official with a brass *lotah* was waiting for milk. It would be paid for, of course, by-and-by. Gopi could keep an account, and the *Sirkar* no doubt would pay, provided the *proper official* certified it by a countersign.

The old man was too confused, too tired to be ready with protest at a moment's notice. So that night he went supperless to bed. But in the white tent over at Chotia Aluwala, an Englishwoman's pale face had quite a colour in it.

"Fancy!" she said, "two whole quarts of the most beautiful, rich milk! I would reward that man if I were you, hubby. I am to have the same every day. It--it means four lives at least!"

Possibly, for a baby takes less to keep it alive than an old man.

Small tragedies of this sort are common enough in India, but it is difficult to give all their fineness of detail to English eyes.

Old Gopâl was at once cunning as a fox, guileless as a child; and through both the guile and the innocence ran that bewildered belief in Surâbhi as something beyond ordinary cows. He tried to escape the *impasse* by not milking her dry, so as to leave some for himself; but though Surâbhi resented any other hand finishing the task, it was impossible for an experienced onlooker to be deceived. The result of that, therefore, was abuse and blows. Then he tried keeping back one dough-cake from his daily dole for himself, and only exchanging the other for fodder. That reduced the milk in reality, but it also reduced Surâbhi to lowing; and his sense of sin, in consequence, became so acute that he was forced into going back to the old plan. But these tactics had, by this time, roused the petty official's ire. The *mem sahiba* had spoken sharply to

him because the milk had fallen off in quantity and quality; for he had not scrupled, despite old Gopi's tears and distracted prayers, to take away the Milk-Mother's character by filling up the measure with water.

And so he lost patience. Thus one day he avenged himself and attained his object by first reporting that Gopi, Brahmin, was wrongfully and fraudulently obtaining relief, seeing that he was, amongst other things, possessor of a remarkably fine cow, whose milk he was selling to the *Huzoors*, and then seizing Surâbhi, on the ground that Gopi, having no means of supporting her, was not fit to take care of so valuable an animal!

These two blows, followed by the sight of Surâbhi being walked off on her dainty toes into the rough outside world, quite upset the frail balance of the old man's mind.

He crouched shivering all night in the empty stall, feeling himself accursed. He was not worthy. Surâbhi had gone.

How long he remained there speechless, famine-stricken, yet not hungry, he did not know. It was early afternoon when the white garment and brass badge of authority showed again at the door in the low wall, and a voice said sullenly--

"Thou must come. Thy cursed cow is a devil for kicking, and the *mem* is a fiend for temper. My badge is gone if thou come not. My pony will carry two."

The sun was showing red behind the great piles of earth which in that wide level plain rose like a range of hills, when the oddly assorted pair rode into the shade of the Chotia Aluwala tree. There was no need to announce the arrivals. Surâbhi declared who one was, almost ere he stumbled to the ground, stiff, dazed, bewildered. All the more bewildered for that vision of something undreamt of, unseen hitherto in Gopâl Das' ignorant village life--a woman fair as milk herself, smiling at him gladly, calling with quaint, strange accent: "Quick--quick! we wait, we are hungry--are we not, babies?"

There were dark toddlers round the white dress, a dark head on the white bosom, and old Gopi muttered something about the Milk-Mother, the World-Mother, as, with a brass vessel some one thrust into his hand, he squatted down beside Surâbhi.

He scarcely needed to milk her; perhaps that was as well, for he was very tired. But the *lotah* brimmed, and another had to be called for, while Surâbhi's black frosted tongue licked the black frosted head between her "*moos*" of satisfaction.

And beyond, in the shadiest part of the shade, there was more satisfaction and to spare.

After a while old Gopi crept stiffly to watch it, squatting in the dust with dry, bright, wistful eyes fixed on the bottles, the babies; above all on the milk-white face full of smiles.

Until suddenly he gave a little cry.

"Me too, Mother of mercy! Great Milk-Mother of the world, me too!" he said, like any child, and so fell forward insensible with outstretched, petitioning hands.

But that was the end of his troubles.

When he came to himself, the Great Milk-Mother was feeding him with a teaspoon. Nor when he recovered his strength would she let him out of the nursery, for by that time the whole story had been told, with the curious calm acquiescence of villagers in such pitiful tales of mistake and wrong. Every one had known the truth, of course, but what then? The *Huzoors* wanted the milk for the babies, and Gopi was old--

"He is only a baby himself," interrupted a woman's voice indignantly when this explanation was being given; "why, this morning I made him as happy as a king by letting him suck one of the bottles! He said that there was nothing left now to be desired, nothing wanting, except--"

"Except what?" asked the man's voice.

"That he could see no little godlings like--like me."

Then there was silence.

After the discussion on a certain story told by the grey man had reached dissolution point from sheer want of coherence, I observed that the Major--though still standing in his usual place by the fire--was looking into the embers instead of warming his coat-tails at them. This fact, and the expression of his face, convinced me that he had forgotten the present in some past experience.

"The Major remembers a story," I remarked aloud. He looked up with a smile.

"I must have a very transparent face," he said, "but it is quite true. I have been wondering if I ought not to tell you something that happened to some one--to me, in fact--a great many years ago. It seems to me that I ought. You see most of you are inclined to scoff at the story we have just heard; unwilling to allow anything but a rational explanation of the mysterious summons. I am not, simply because I happen to have had certain experiences which most of you have not had. The question therefore arises as to whether I am not bound to give my evidence, and so, perhaps, prevent you from forming a hasty judgment?"

He looked inquiringly round the room, but no one spoke. We were so much accustomed to accept the Major's decisions as, above all things, equitable, that we were content to let him arrive at one unbiassed by our views. During the pause which followed, I found myself thinking that weight for weight, inches for inches, brains for brains, I knew no man who had made a better use of life than our Major. Not over clever, certainly not handsome, handicapped heavily by having to start at scratch in worldly matters, he had a distinct personality of his own which influenced every society he entered. You felt somehow that your estimate of that society rose from his presence, and that he brought an element of sound, healthy strength of heart and mind into the *mêlée* which you would not willingly spare from the struggle for existence. It came to this. Had he not been there the world would have been the worse for his absence; high praise, indeed, for any man.

"Yes!" continued the Major, after a pause, "I'll have to tell my tale like the Ancient Mariner; and if in so doing I bore you with a few uninteresting confidences about myself, I can't help it. You shall have as little of them as possible."

He was so long settling himself in a chair, pulling up his trousers in his careful, economical way, and poking the fire, that our attention had begun to waver, when his opening words startled us into renewed curiosity.

"I don't suppose," he began, "that any of you know I am a widower; but I am. My wife died a year after our marriage; and the child too--a girl. If you search the whole wide world through you won't find a more desolate creature than a boy of two-and-twenty coming back alone in a strange country from the grave of his wife and child. Perhaps, as Rudyard Kipling says, he has no business to have a wife and child. Anyhow he feels a mistake somewhere in the universe when he tries to behave like a man in the little drawing-room she made so pretty. The twopenny-halfpenny fans put up to hide the bare walls--the little dodges to make the sticks of furniture look nice which seemed to you so clever, and over which you have both laughed so often--the unused basket thing done up with lace and frills over which she was so happy that last evening, while you sate by wondering if it could be true, and that your child would lie amongst the dainty furbelows. Well! I suppose it has to be sometimes, but it drove me mad. I was like the boy in another of Kipling's tales, and could think of nothing but death to end it all; just to creep away and die by myself somewhere. I did not want so much to be dead, but to be quite alone--by myself. You see I had lost everything--for ever--and the rest of the stupid world drove me wild with impatience.

"So I went out on leave to the old Salt Road, which ran right across the loneliest part of the district. Perhaps some of you don't know what a Salt Road is? Simply the Customs line which in old days used to be patrolled day and night in order to prevent smuggling. The cactus hedge had been cut down when the protection system was given up, but the road behind it was still passable, and the patrol houses, more or less dilapidated, stood at intervals of ten or twelve miles. I had seen some of them when out on shooting expeditions, and the remembrance of their desolation came back on me now with a new sort of fascination.

"After I settled to go I used to lie awake wondering which of them would be the place. Not the first. That was within hail of other people and help; besides, I could not so soon get rid of the servant whom I had to take with me in order to avoid suspicion. My plan was to send the man on early with orders to do two stages, and have everything ready for me at night in bungalow Number Three; then I should have all the day to myself. Would it be bungalow Number Two, at noon, I wondered? As there were five patrol houses in all, it would most likely be Two or Four; but if I liked any of the others better I could easily find some excuse for getting rid of the servant.

"This may seem unnatural, but I was really quite mad with a sort of rage and spite against everything and everybody; so utterly absorbed in myself that I felt as if I were taking a revenge on life by quitting it. My own pain being the axis of the universe, the world must surely be the loser by its removal. In fact, my mental position at this time might be fairly represented by that of a man quitting a pleasant society because some one has been rude to him. I had no hopes of bettering my condition; I simply wanted to show my resentment.

"I don't believe I ever slept sounder in my life than on the first night after leaving

cantonments. Perhaps it was the change; but I remember being disappointed and disgusted with myself when I woke to find broad daylight streaming in through the broken windows of Number One. My servant, according to his orders, had started at dawn, for the weather was still hot enough to make early marching necessary. He had, however, left me a bottle of cold tea and some provisions, which I ate with appetite. And now comes a curious thing. Though I had quite made up my mind to face death, and all the dangers it might bring, I positively hesitated about starting for a ten-mile walk in the sun from fear of heat apoplexy. It was very unreasonable, but it shows the force of habit. After I had decided on remaining where I was till the evening, I walked round the tumble-down mud building, wondering if it would do for the final tableau. It did not please me, so I lay down and slept, feeling that I ought really to have remained awake and brooded over my grief. But an unconquerable drowsiness was upon me, making me sleep like a child. How well I remember the ten-mile walk to the next bungalow! The afternoon shadows lengthened across the half-effaced road as I tramped along in solitary silence. I had nothing with me save my revolver and a small writing-case with which to inscribe my last words of defiance. My thoughts were full of what these should be, for I had now quite made up my mind that bungalow Number Two was to be the place, and that a very short time would rid me of all my foes. I felt distinctly easier than I had done before, and being, as it were, wound up to tragedy pitch, the cheerful appearance of Number Two as I came up to it in the sunset disappointed me. In cutting down the thorn and cactus hedge they had, as usual, left the *kikar* bushes, and these had grown into trees, forming an avenue, while a few more shaded the house itself. This was also far less dilapidated than Number One; not only were the doors and windows intact, but at a few of them still hung the usual reed blinds or *chicks*. As I wandered round the house before entering it, I noticed what one might call the graves of a garden. Broken mounds of earth giving a reminiscence of walks and beds, with here and there a globe amaranth doing chief mourner. Evidently bungalow Number Two had been the permanent residence of a patrol. It annoyed me to find myself wondering if he had had a wife and child, so I hastily entered the centre room, determined to put an end to all useless sympathies without delay. To my surprise it contained a few half-broken sticks of furniture; but telling myself that it would make my last task easier I laid my revolver on the table and, taking out my case, sat down to write. Again I felt curiously drowsy; more than once I rested my head on my hands and rubbed my eyes in the endeavour to collect my thoughts.

"A sudden increase of light in the room, visible even through my shading fingers, made me look up. The *chick* was turned aside, and holding it back with one chubby hand stood a little child about three years old. I think, without exception, the loveliest little girl I ever saw. Great mischievous brown eyes, and fluffy curls of that pale gold which turns black in after years. She raised her hand from the door-jamb, and placed her finger to her lips, brimming over with laughter.

"*Hush!! Ma-ma's a-teep. Dot's 'un away.*'

"Such a ripple of a voice, musical with happiness. I was always fond of children, and this one was of the sort any man would notice--perhaps covet. I laid down my pen, forgetful of interruption.

"Dot has run away, has she? That's very naughty of Dot, isn't it? But as she has run away she had better come in here. You are not afraid of me, are you?"

"She was already in the room; then I noticed for the first time that she was in her nightgown--a straight white thing like they put the angels into, and her small bare feet made no noise on the floor.

"Dot's not af'aid. Dot's never af'aid. Dot's a b'aave girl. Dada says so.'

"She spoke more to herself than to me, and the words were evidently a formula well known and often repeated.

"Who is Dada?' I asked, feeling the first curiosity that had had power to touch me for many days.

"Dot had raised herself to the level of the table with her tiny hands, and now stood on tiptoe opposite me. Her fair curls framed her face, as her laughing brown eyes fixed themselves on my revolver.

"Dada's?' she said coaxingly. 'Dot wants to make a *puff-puff-boom!*'

"The childish words evoked a quick horror, why, I cannot tell; but a sudden vision of myself as I should be in that lonely room after the dull report rose up and blinded me. Somehow the coaxing babyish phrase filled me with an awful revulsion of feeling. My head sank into my hands; when I raised it the child had gone.

"I went into the verandah uncertain what to do. The room next mine had a *chick* also, so that I could not see in from the outside, but from within came a low crooning song like a lullaby. Every now and again little bursts of a child's voice. Dot, no doubt, recaptured and soothed to sleep. It was evident that the bungalow was occupied by others beside myself, for in the gathering dusk I thought I saw some white forms flitting about the servants' quarters. I wondered faintly at the

latter, for I had a half recollection of noticing that the huts were entirely in ruins. My mind, however, had now reverted to its original purpose with increased strength, and I returned to the room considering what had best be done. The child's words, '*Dot's not afraid! Dot wants to make a puff-puff-boom,*' would not keep out of my head. After all, was it not only another way of phrasing my own desire? I was not afraid. Not afraid of what? Amid these questionings one thing was certain. It could not be bungalow Number Two-- I would not frighten the child Ah, no! I could not frighten Dot for ever with the awful *puff-puff-boom* I had set myself to make.

"It must therefore be Number Four, so I packed up my writing things and set off to rejoin my servant at Number Three. How childish we are! As I trudged along I caught myself smiling more than once over the recollection of Dot's mischievous face at the door. My servant was patiently awaiting my arrival beside the dinner he had cooked for me. Supposing I had not turned up-- according to my original plan--he would have waited calmly all night long, keeping his '*clear soup, chikhun cutlet, custel pudden*' hot for a dead man. I must have been less mad, for the humour of the idea struck me at the time, and I laughed. He gravely asked why I had not brought on my pillow and sheets, and I laughed again as I told him I meant to do without them in the future. Everything was clear now. Fate had settled on Number Four, so there was nothing to worry or hustle about. I bade him call me early, determined this time to have all the day to myself. Then I fell asleep to dream the night long of Dot and the revolver. Indeed my thoughts were so full of her, that even when I woke I fancied, more than once, that I heard her voice in the verandah, though I knew it could only be a trick of fancy, for the bungalow was a perfect wreck, and even the room I occupied had but half a roof.

"It must have been about eleven o'clock ere I reached Number Four, which stood off the road a little and was much smaller than any of the other bungalows. Indeed it consisted of but two rooms opening the one into the other. It looked the very picture of desolation, planted square in the open with a single *kikar* tree struggling for life in one corner of the enclosure. Yet it was the best preserved of all the patrol-houses; perhaps because of its smaller size and greater compactness. Anyhow it needed little to fit it for habitation, and as I found out afterwards it was constantly used by the civil officers when on their tours of inspection. At the time, however, I was surprised to find signs of recent occupation about it in the shape of earthen pots and half-burnt sticks in a mud fireplace. Going into the outer room I found it contained, like Number Two, a few bits of furniture, and feeling weary I sat down by the table without looking into the other room, only a portion of which was visible through the half-closed door.

"Once more I laid my revolver beside me, and took out my writing materials. I had just begun my task when a deadly disgust at the whole business came over me, and I resolved to end everything without further delay. My hand sought the revolver, and fingered it mechanically to see if it were loaded. A sense of strangeness made me look at it, when, to my intense surprise, I found it was not my own weapon. This was an old-fashioned heavy revolver, and one of the chambers had evidently been recently fired. As I laid it down, astonished beyond measure, I saw my own on the table beside it!

"Whose then was the other? Did it belong to some one else in the bungalow? Was I once more to be disturbed? I rose instinctively and pushed open the door leading into the inner room. To my still greater surprise I found it littered with half-open boxes and various things lying about in great confusion. A few common toys were on the floor; on the bare string bed a bundle of bedding; on the table a heap of towels, and a basin of water ominously tinged with red. The fireplace was on the other side of the room beyond the table, and crouched beside it on the floor was a woman closely huddled up in a common grey shawl. She held something under its folds on her knee; something that drew breath in long gasping sighs, with a fatal pause between them.

"'I beg your pardon,' I stammered, intending to retire. Just then the woman looking up, showed me a young face, so wild with grief and terror that I paused irresolute.

"'Will no one come!' she wailed, seeming to look past me with eyes blind with grief. 'O God--dear God! will no one ever come?' Then, as her face fell again over the burden on her lap, she moaned like an animal in mortal agony. But above the moan I could still hear that curious gasping sigh. 'Can I not help?' I asked. She gave no reply, so I went up and stood beside her. Still she seemed unconscious of my presence, for once more came the wail. 'Will nobody come? O my God! will nobody come to help?' 'I have come,' I answered, touching her on the arm. She looked at me then, and a curious thrill made me feel quite dizzy for a moment. Perhaps that was the reason why both face and voice seemed to me changed and altered. Her eyes met mine doubtfully.

"'You did not come before,' she said. 'No one ever came--no one, no one.'

"As I removed my hand she bent once more over her burden with the same piteous moan.

"Evidently she was stupefied by horror and suspense, so I gently raised her shawl to see what was the matter.

"Great heavens! What a sight! After all these years I seem to see it now. Fair silky curls dabbled in blood that welled up from under the handkerchief which the woman held convulsively to the little white breast. One chubby hand thrown out stiff and clenched; great brown eyes glazed and dim; grey lips where each gasping sigh sent a tinge of red.

"Dot!" I exclaimed, dropping on my knees the better to assure myself of the awful truth.

"The familiar name seemed to rouse the wavering life.

"*Dots not af'aid. Dot--only--wanted to make--a puff-puff-boom.*"

"The words seemed to float in the air. I heard them as in a dream; and as in a dream also came an insight into what had happened. Dada's revolver within reach of those tiny hands. O Dot! poor little brave Dot! I felt helpless before the awful tragedy. Once I tried to take the child, but the woman resisted silently, nor could I get her to listen to my entreaties that she should at least move to an easier position. At last, seeing I could do nothing, and acknowledging sorrowfully that nothing I could do was likely to be of any avail, I contented myself with waiting beside her in silence, until the end. And as I waited a coherent story grew out of what I knew, and what I guessed. They had come on early that morning, the father on his way further afield, the mother and child to remain in the little bungalow till his return. Then all in a minute the accident; and then the only servant had been sent forth wildly for help whilst the wretched woman waited alone. Yes! that must have been it. So clear, so simple, so awful in its very simplicity.

"There was not a sound in the house save at intervals the woman's moan. 'Will no one ever come! O God; will no one ever come!' and always distinct above it the child's gasping sigh with a soft rattle in it.

"How long this lasted I cannot say. It was like some hideous nightmare, until suddenly the sighing ceased, and I became conscious of an immeasurable relief. Yet I knew the silence meant death.

"The woman did not move or notice me in any way, so once more I touched her on the arm.

"'There is no need to watch longer,' I said; 'Dot is asleep at last. It is your turn to rest. Give me the child, and believe me there is nothing to be done now.'

"As before, she raised her face to mine, and the same thrill came over me as I recognised an unmistakable change in features and voice; a deadening of expression, a hardening of the tone into a certain fretfulness.

"'But there is a great deal to be done,' she replied rapidly. 'Oh! so much. How can you know? We must dig the grave under the *kikar* tree and bury her in the sand--for it is sand below, and it creeps and creeps into the grave and will not leave room for Dot. And the night must fall--oh, so dark!--before her father gets home. There will hardly be time to dig the little grave before sunrise; and it must be dug--you know it must--'

"Her words seemed to me wild and distraught. To soothe her I repeated that there was plenty of time.

"She frowned, closed her eyes with one hand, and again replied in a curiously rapid, even tone.

"'No! no! there never has been time. It is always a hurry. Out in the dark digging the grave, and the sand slipping, slipping, slipping till there is no room. I have done it,--oh! so many times.'

"I was puzzled what to do or say. The wisest course seemed to leave her to herself until help arrived. So after one or two ineffectual attempts at consolation I went outside in despair to see if the assistance so sorely needed was not in sight. Surely it could not be delayed much longer. I was surprised to find how late it was: noon had long passed, and cool shadows were stretching themselves athwart the parched ground. One, darker and cooler than the rest, lay eastward of the solitary *kikar* tree. Here it was that the little grave was to be dug if the mother's wish were fulfilled. Quite mechanically I strolled to the spot, impelled by sad curiosity.

"As I approached, the fragments of a low railing, half standing, half lying, in a small oblong, made me wonder if the enclosure had already been a resting-place. That might account for the mother's wish. Yes! there was a grave; a tiny grave no bigger than little Dot's would be, with a roughly-hewn cross as a headstone.

"I bent to read the inscription:--

HERE LIES

OUR LITTLE DARLING DOT.

1840.

"Dot! I stood up with heart and brain in a whirl. Dot! 1840. Five-and-twenty years ago, and Dot had died but half-an-hour before. What did it mean? *What did it mean?*

"A sudden fear of the solitude and silence of the place fell upon me. But for shame I would have turned tail on it then and there. As it was, scorn of my own suspicions made me return to



the house. How still it was! how desolate. I remember standing at the outer door listening in vain for some sound within; I remember seeing my revolver and writing-case on the table in the outer room; I remember nerving myself to push open the inner door, but I remember no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

"They told me in hospital that I must have tripped over the broken flooring between the two rooms, and in falling have cut my head against the lintel.

"Perhaps I did. Perhaps I didn't. I only know that something--God knows what--stood between me and my madness, so that when I came to myself it was gone for ever. In its place had grown up a craving to live--to hear, to see, to know, to understand.

"As I got better I used to lie and cry like a woman. Then the other fellows would say it was all weakness, and that I must be a man and bear up. And sometimes I would lie and smile. Then they said I was a trump with more pluck than they had. And as often as not I wasn't thinking of myself or my own troubles at all, but of brave little Dot and her desire for a *puff-puff-boom*.

"They sent me down the Indus to Bombay, so as to avoid the rattle of the train, for my head was still weak. We stuck on a sandbank at Sukkhur, being made unmanageable by two flats we were towing. They were laden mostly with cargo, but carried a good many third-class passengers. I don't know why I had risen from my sick-bed full of a great curiosity, but I had. Somehow I never seemed to have looked at life before, whereas now everything interested me. So I went down to the flats and talked to the people. There was a cabin on one, carrying a few second-class passengers, and as I was walking along a gangway between some bales I saw an Englishwoman, holding a child on her lap. The crouching attitude struck me as familiar; I stopped and spoke about the weather or something. She looked up, and then I knew where I had seen that attitude, for it was Dot's mother. I don't think I should have recognised her--for she was an old woman with grey hair--but for the remembrance of the changed look which, as you may recollect, she had when I roused her in the bungalow by touching her arm.

"'Is that your child?' I asked courteously, for, poorly dressed as she was, her face was unmistakably refined.

"'No!' she replied; and I recognised the somewhat querulous voice. 'It's my granddaughter, but I am as fond of her as if she were my own--almost.'

"As she spoke she shifted the child's head higher up on her arm, and I saw a mass of fluffy light gold curls.

"'Perhaps she reminds you of your own,' I continued at a venture, anxious only to make her talk.

"A faint curiosity came to her worn face.

"'It's funny you should say so--just as if you had seen our Dot. So like--so wonderfully like. Sometimes it seems as if she had come back again, yet it is five-and-twenty years since I lost her.'

"'That is a long time.'

"'A long, long time to remember, isn't it? And I've had so many and lost so many. But I never forgot Dot--she was so pretty! Ah, well! I daresay it would have been against her, poor lamb. 'Favour is deceitful and beauty is vain.'"

"She lulled the child on her lap to deeper slumber with a gentle rocking. It seemed to me as if she were soothing regret to sleep also.

"'She had curls like this one?' I remarked, cruelly anxious to keep her to the subject.

"Once more she looked at me with that oddly familiar bewilderment.

"'I can't think where I've seen you before,' she said after a pause. 'I never met you in those old days, did I? Ah, well! I've lived so long and travelled so far that I can't remember it all. Sometimes I seem to forget everything except what I see--and Dot. I never forget her. Only last month I was coming down the river not far from the place where the little dear shot herself--she was playing with her father's revolver, you know--and I seemed to go through it all again. Her father--he left the Salt soon after--was downright vexed with me because I fretted so. He said no good could come of remembering grief so long. But I don't know. I've heard it said that there is only so much sorrow and happiness in the world; then if one person gets a lot there must be less trouble left for others. I've held on to my share anyhow, though maybe, as father says, it isn't any good.'

"Her tired eyes sought the distant sandhills wistfully and her mouth trembled a little.

"Just then the whistle sounded, bidding all stragglers go on board the steamer.

"'Good-by,' said I, holding out my hand. 'To-morrow, if I may, I will come again and tell you what your unforgotten grief did for me.'

"But next morning I found that the flat had been left at its destination during the night. That is all."

There was a long pause.

"And your explanation?" asked a somewhat tremulous voice from a dark corner.

"Gentlemen," said the Major, "I have none to offer. What I know is this. Somehow--God knows how--I saw that mother's unforgotten grief, and it saved me from shirking my share."

## **THE DOLL-MAKER**

"Christmas Eve!" echoed Mrs. Langford. "Yes! I suppose it is; but I had forgotten--there isn't much to remind one of it in India--is there?"

As she paused half-way up the verandah steps she glanced back at the creeper-hung porch where the high spider-cart, in which she had come home from the club, waited for its owner to return to the box-seat. He seemed in no hurry to do so, and his glance followed hers as he stood on the step below her. He was a tall man, so his face was on a level with hers, and the two showed young, handsome--hers a trifle pale, his a trifle red.

There was a stretch of garden visible beyond the creepers. It was not flowerful, since Christmas, even in India, comes when the tide of sap, the flow of life, is at its lowest; yet, in the growing dusk, the great scarlet hands of the poinsettias could be seen thrusting themselves out wickedly from the leafy shadows as if to clutch the faint white stars of the oleanders blossoming above them; and there was a bunch of Maréchal Niel roses in the silver belt of the woman's white tennis dress, which told of sweeter, more home-like blossom.

"And it is just as well," she continued, with a bitter little laugh, "that there isn't, for it's a deadly, dreary time--"

"All times are dreary," assented the tall man in a low voice, rapidly, passionately, "when there is no one who cares--"

"There is my husband," she interrupted, this time with a nervous laugh. The answer fitted doubly, for she turned to a figure which at that moment came out of the soft rose-tinted light of the room within, and said in a faintly fretful tone, "You don't mean to say, George, surely, that you've been working till now?"

"Working!" echoed George Langford, absently. "Yes! why not? Ah! is that you, Campbell? Brought the missus home, like a good chap. Sorry I couldn't come, my dear; but there was a beastly report overdue, so now I've only time for a spin on the bicycle before dinner, for I must have some exercise. By the way, Laura, you'd better send off your home letter without mine. I really haven't had time to write to the boys this mail."

He was busy now, in the same absent, preoccupied, yet energetic way, in seeing to the machine, which a red-coated servant held for him; but he looked up quickly at his wife's reply--

"I haven't written either."

"Haven't you? That's a pity," he began, then paused, with a vaguely unquiet look at her and her tall companion, which merged, however, into a good-natured smile. "Well, they won't know it was Christmas mail anyhow. 'Pon my soul I'd forgotten it myself, Campbell, or I'd have made a point.... But there's the devil of a crush of work just now, though I shall clear some of the arrears off to-morrow. That's about the only good of a holiday to me!" He was off as he spoke--a shadow gliding into the shadows, where the red hands of the poinsettias and the white stars of the oleanders showed fainter as the dusk deepened.

But he left a pair of covetous, entreating hands and a white face behind him in the verandah, between the rosy light of comfort from within and the grey gloom of the world without.

"It cannot go on--this sort of thing--for ever," said the man, still in that low, passionate voice. "It will kill--"

"Kill him? Do you think so?" she interrupted, still with that little half-nervous, half-bitter laugh. "I don't; he's awfully strong and awfully clever, you know."

The owner of the dogcart turned to it impatiently.

"You will come to-morrow at eleven, anyhow," he said, bringing the patience back to his voice with an effort, for it seemed to him--as it so often seems to a man--that the woman did not know what she would be at. "It will be a jolly drive; and, as they are sending out a mess-tent, we need not come back till late. Your husband said he was to be busy all day."

He waited, reins in hand, for an answer. It came after a pause; came decidedly.

"Yes; at eleven, please. It will be better anyhow than stopping here. There isn't even tennis on Christmas Day, you know; and the house is--is so deadly quiet." She turned to it slowly as she spoke, passed into the rose light, and stood listening to the sound of the dogcart wheels growing fainter and fainter. When it had gone an intense stillness seemed to settle over the wide, empty house--that stillness and emptiness which must perforce settle round many an Englishwoman in India; the stillness and emptiness of a house where children have been, and are not.

It made her shiver slightly as she stood alone, thinking of the dogcart wheels.

Yet just at the back of the screen of poinsettias and oleanders which hid the servants' quarters from the creeper-hung porch there were children and to spare. Dozens of them, all ages, all sizes, belonging to the posse of followers which hangs to the skirts of bureaucracy in India.

Here, as the lights of the dogcart flashed by, they lit up for an instant a quaint little group gathered round a rushlight set on the ground. It consisted of a very old man, almost naked, with a grey frost of beard on his withered cheeks, and of a semicircle of wide-eyed, solemn-faced, brown babies--toddlers of two and three, with a sprinkling of demure little maidens of four and five.

The centre of the group lay beside the rushlight. It was a rudimentary attempt at a rag doll; so rudimentary indeed that as the passing flash of the lamps disclosed its proportions, or rather the lack of them, a titter rose from the darkness behind, where some older folk were lounging.

The old doll-maker, who was attempting to thread a big packing-needle by the faint flicker, turned towards the sound in mild reproof: "Lo! brothers and sisters," he said, "have patience awhile. Even the Creator takes time to make His puppets, and this of mine will be as dolls are always when it is done. And a doll is a doll ever, nothing more, nothing less."

"Yet thou art sadly behind the world in them, *babajee*," put in a pale young man, with a pen-box under his arm, who had paused on his way to the cook-room, whither he was going to write up the daily account for the butler; since a man must live even if he has a University degree, and, if Government service be not forthcoming, must earn a penny or two as best he can. "That sort of image did for the dark ages of ignorance, but now the mind must have more reality; glass eyes and such like. The world changes."

The old man's face took an almost cunning expression by reason of its self-complacent wisdom. "But not the puppets which play in it, my son. The Final One makes *them* in the same mould ever; as I do my dolls, as my fathers made theirs. Ay! and thine too, *babajee*! As for eyes, they come with the sight that sees them, since all things are illusion. For the rest"--here he shot a glance of fiery disdain at the titterers--"I make not dolls for these scoffers, but for their betters. This is for the little masters on their Big Day. To-morrow I will present it to the *sahib* and the *mem*, since the little *sahibs* themselves are away over the Black Water. For old Premoo knows what is due. This dust-like one, lame of a leg and blind of an eye, has not always been a garden coolie--a mere picker of weeds, a gatherer of dried leaves, saved from starvation by such trivial tasks. In his youth Premoo hath carried young masters in his bosom, and guarded them night and day after the manner of bearers. And hath found amusement for them also; even to the making of dolls as this one. Ay! it is true," he went on, led to garrulous indignation by renewed sounds of mirth from behind; "dolls which gave them delight, for they were not as some folk, black of face, but *sahib logue* who, by God's grace, grew to be *ginerâls* and *jedges*, and commissioners, and--and even *Lât-sahibs*."

The old voice, though it rose in pitch with each rise in rank, was not strong enough to overbear the titter, and the doll-maker paused in startled doubt to look at his own creation.

"I can see naught amiss," he muttered to himself; "it is as I used to make them, for sure." His anxious critical eye lingered almost wistfully over the bald head, the pincushion body, the sausage limbs of his creature, yet found no flaw in it; since fingers and toes were a mere detail, and as for hair, a tuft of wool would settle that point. What more could folk want, sensible folk, who knew that a doll must be always a doll--nothing more, nothing less?

Suddenly a thought came to make him put doubt to the test, and he turned to the nearest of the solemn-faced, wide-eyed semicircle of babies.

"Thou canst dandle it whilst I thread the needle, Gungi," he said pompously, "but have a care not to injure the child, and let not the others touch it."

The solemnity left one chubby brown face, and one pair of chubby brown hands closed in glad possession round the despised rag doll. Old Premoo heaved a sigh of relief.

"Said I not so, brothers and sisters?" he cried exultingly. "My hand has not lost its art with the years. A doll is a doll ever to a child, as a child is a child ever to the man and the woman. As for glass eyes, they are illusion--they perish!"

"Nevertheless, thou wilt put clothes to it, for sure, brother," remonstrated the fat butler, who had joined the group, "ere giving it to the Presences. 'Tis like a skinned fowl now, and bare decent."

Premoo shook his head mournfully. "Lo! *khângee*, my rags, as thou seest, scarce run to a big enough body and legs! And the *Huzoor's* tailor would give no scraps to Premoo the garden coolie; though in the old days, when the little masters lay in these arms, and there was favour to be carried by the dressing of dolls, such as he were ready to make them, male and female, kings and queens, fairies and heroes, *mem-sahibs* and *Lât-sahibs* after their kind. But it matters not in the end, *khânjee*, it matters not! The doll is a doll ever to a child, as a child is a child ever to the man and the woman, though they know not whether it will wear a crown or a shroud."

So as Christmas Eve passed into Christmas night, Premoo stitched away contentedly as he sat under the stars. There was no Christmas message in them for the old man. The master's Big Day meant nothing to him save an occasion for the giving of gifts, notably rag dolls! There was no vision for him in the velvet darkness of the spangled sky of angels proclaiming the glad tidings of birth; and yet in a way his old heart, wise with the dim wisdom which long life brings, held the answer to the great Problem, as in vague self-consolation for the titterings he murmured to himself now and again: "It is so always; naught matters but the children, and the children's children."

And when his task was over, he laid the result for safety on the basket of withered leaves which he had swept up from the path that evening, and wrapping himself in his thin cotton shawl, lay down to sleep in the shelter of the poinsettia and oleander hedge.

So, the Christmas sun peering through the morning mists shone upon a quaint *crèche* indeed--on the veriest simulacrum of a child lying on a heap of faded red hand-like leaves and white star-like blossoms. Perhaps it smiled at the sight. Humanity did, anyhow, as it passed and repassed from the servants' quarters to its work in the house. For in truth old Premoo's creation looked even more comical in the daylight than it had by the faint flicker of the lamp. There was something about it productive of sheer mirth, yet of mirth that was tender. Even the fat butler, on his way to set breakfast, stopped to giggle foolishly in its face.

"God knows what it is like," he said finally. "I deemed it was a skinned fowl last night, but 'tis not that. It might be anything."

"Ay!" assented the bearer, who had come out, duster in hand. "That is just where it comes. A body cannot say what it might or might not be. Bala Krishna himself, for aught I know." Whereupon he salaamed; and others passing followed suit, in jest at first, afterwards with a suspicion of gravity in their mirth, since, when all was said and done, who knew what anything was really in this illusory world?

So the rag doll held its levée that Christmas morning, and when the time came for its presentation to the *Huzoors* there were curious eyes watching the old man as he sate with his offering on the lowest step of the silent, empty house, waiting for the master and mistress to come out into the verandah. Premoo had covered the doll's bed of withered flowers with some fresh ones, so it lay in pomp in its basket, amid royal scarlet and white and gold; nevertheless he waited till the very last, until the smallest platter of sugar and oranges and almonds had been ranged at the master's feet, ere he crept up the steps, salaaming humbly, yet with a vague confidence on his old face.

"It is for the child-people," he said, in his cracked old voice. "This dust-like one has nothing else, but a doll is always a doll to them, as a child is a child to the man and the woman."

Then for an instant the rag doll lay, as it were, in state, surrounded by offerings. But not for long. Some one laughed, then another, till even old Premoo joined doubtfully in the general mirth.

"The devil is in it," chuckled the fat butler, apologetically; "but the twelve *Imâms* themselves would not keep grave over it during the requiem!"

"By Jove, Laura," cried George Langford, "we must really send that home to the kids. It's too absurd!"

"Yes," she assented, a trifle absently, "we must indeed." She stopped to take the quaint travesty from its basket, and as she did so one of the red hands of the poinsettias clung to its sausage legs. She brushed the flower aside with a smile which broadened to a laugh; for in truth

the thing was more ludicrously comical than ever seen thus, held in mid-air. George Langford found it so, anyhow, and exploded into a fresh guffaw.

She flushed suddenly, and gathered the unshapen thing in her arms as if to hide it from his laughter.

"Don't, George," she said, "it--it seems unkind. Thank you, Premoo, very much. We will certainly send it home to the little masters; and they, I am sure--" Here her eyes fell upon the doll again, and mirth got the better of her gravity once more.

Half-an-hour afterwards, however, as she stood alone in the drawing-room, ready dressed for her drive, the gravity had returned as she looked down on the quaint monstrosity spread out on the table, where on the evening before the rose-shaded lamp had been. It was ridiculous, certainly, but beneath that there was something else. What was it? What had the old man said: "A doll is always a doll..." He had said that and something more: "As the child is always a child to the man and the woman." It ought to be--but was it? Was not that tie forgotten, lost sight of in others ... sometimes?

Half mechanically she took the rag doll, and sitting down on a rocking-chair laid the caricature on her lap among the dainty frills and laces of her pretty gown. And this was Christmas Day--the children's day--she thought vaguely, dreamily, as she rocked herself backwards and forwards slowly. But the house was empty save for this--this idea, like nothing really in heaven or earth; yet for all that giving the Christmas message, the message of peace and goodwill which the birth of a child into the world should give to the man and the woman:--

"Unto us a child is born."

She smiled faintly--the thing on her lap seemed so far from such a memory--and then, with that sudden half-remorseful pity, she once more gathered the rag doll closer in her arms, as if to shield it from her own laughter.

And as she sat so, her face soft and kind, her husband coming into the room behind her, paused at what he saw. And something that was not laughter surged up in him; for he understood in a flash, understood once and for all, how empty his house had been to her, how empty her arms, how empty her life.

He crossed to her quickly, but she was on her feet almost defiantly at the first sight of him. "Ridiculous monster!" she exclaimed, gaily tossing the doll back on the table. "But it has an uncanny look about it which fascinates one. Gracious! Where are my gloves? I must have left them in my room, and I promised to be ready at eleven!"

When she had gone to look for them, George Langford took up the rag doll in his turn--took it up gingerly, as men take their babies--and stared at it almost fiercely. And he stood there, stern, square, silent, staring at it until his wife came back. Then he walked up to her deliberately and laid his hands on hers.

"I'm going to pack this thing up at once, my dear," he said, "and take it over this morning to little Mrs. Greville. She starts this afternoon, you know, to catch the Messageries steamer. She'll take it home for us; and so the boys could have it by the Christmas mail, which I forgot."

The words were commonplace, but there was a world of meaning in the tone.

"I-I thought you were busy," she said indistinctly, after a pause in which the one thing in the world seemed to her that tightening hold upon her hand. "If you are--I-I could go...."

There was another pause--a longer one.

"I thought you were going out," he said at last, and his voice, though distinct, was not quite steady; "but if you aren't, we might go together. My work can easily stand over, and--and Campbell can drive you out some other day when I can't."

She gave an odd little sound between a laugh and a sob.

"That would be best, perhaps," she said. "I'd like the boys to have this"--she laid her other hand tenderly on the rag doll--"by the Christmas mail I had forgotten."

Old Premoo was sweeping up the withered leaves and flowers from the poinsettia and oleander hedge, when first one and then another high dogcart drove past him. And when the second one had disappeared, he turned to the general audience on the other side of the hedge, and said with great pride and pomp--

"Look you! The scoffers mocked at my doll, but the *Huzoors* understand. The *sahib* himself has taken it to send to the little *sahibs*, and the *mem* packed it up herself and went with him, instead of going in the Captain *sahib's* dogcart. That is because a doll is always a doll; as for glass eyes and such like, they perish."

And with that he crushed a handful of withered red poinsettias into the rubbish basket triumphantly.

## THE SKELETON TREE

The engine was conscientiously climbing to the level plateau which stretches between Bhopal and Bandakui, when I heard this story.

Ten minutes before, apparently for no other purpose save to supply the first-class passengers with their early cup of tea, the mail train had stopped at a desolate little station which consisted of a concrete-arched, oven-like shed, made still more obtrusively unfitted for the wilderness in which it stood by a dejected bottle-gourd striving to climb up it.

Here a wistful-faced old man in spotless white raiment had appeared in the dawn with a tray of tea and toast. There were four cups of tea and only two passengers; myself and a man who had already been asleep on one side of the carriage when I took possession of the other at Bhopal. So we saw each other for the first time as we sat up in our sleeping suits among our blankets and pillows. As the train moved on, in a series of dislocations which sent half my tea into my saucer, we left the wistful old face looking at the two unsold cups of tea regretfully, and I wished I had bought the lot. It seemed such a pathetic group to leave there in the wilderness, backed by a European oven and a climbing gourd.

And it was a wilderness. Miles and miles of it all the same. Piles of red rocks, blackened on the upper surface, scattered, as if they had been shot from a cart, among dry bents and stunted bushes; curious bushes with a plenitude of twig and a paucity of leaf. Here and there was a still more stunted tree with a paucity of both: a rudimentary tree, splay, gouty, with half-a-dozen or so of kidney-shaped lobes in place of foliage, parched, dusty, unwholesome.

Not a level country, but one dented into causeless dells, raised into irrelevant hillocks; both, however, trending almost imperceptibly upwards, so that the eye, deceived by this, imagined greater things on the horizon.

But there was nothing. Only here and there a bigger patch of charred and blackened bents, telling where a spark from a passing train had found a wider field for fire than usual, unchecked by the piles of red rocks. That, then, was the secret of their blackened surface.

It was too still in that hot windless dawn for flame, but as we sped on, we added to the dull trails of smoke creeping slowly among the stones and bushes, each with a faint touch of fire showing like an eye to the snaky curves behind. A sinister-looking landscape, indeed, to unaccustomed eyes like mine. I sat watching those stealthy, fire-tipped fingers in the grass, till at a curve in the line, due to a steeper rise, I saw something. "What on earth's that?" I cried involuntarily.

"What's what?" returned my unknown companion, in such a curious tone of voice that, involuntarily, I turned to him for a moment.

"That--that tree I suppose it is," I began; "but look for yourself."

I turned back to the sight which had startled me, and gave a low gasp. It was gone. On more level ground we were steaming quickly past a very ordinary dent of a dell, where, as usual, one of these stunted rudimentary trees stood on an open patch of dry bents, seamed and seared by fire trails.

I looked at my companion incredulously. "What an extraordinary thing!" I exclaimed. "I could have sworn that I saw--" I paused from sheer astonishment.

"What?" asked the other passenger, curiously.

"What?" I echoed. "That is just the question. It looked like a tree--a skeleton tree. Absolutely white, with curved ribs of branches--and there were tongues of flame." I paused again, looking out on what we were passing. "It must, of course," I continued, "have been some curious effect of light on that stunted tree yonder. Its branches *are* curved like ribs, and, if you notice, the bark *is* lighter."

"Exactly," assented my companion. Then he told me a long botanical name, and pointed out that there were many such trees or bushes in the low jungle, all distinctly to be seen against the darker kinds, distinctly but not blindingly like that curious effect of dawn-light I had seen.

I had, however, almost forgotten my vision, as, thus started, we talked over our tea, when he suddenly said, "Going on to Agra, I suppose?"

"No," I replied, "I'm globe-trotting for sport. I'm going to spend all I can of my return-ticket in these jungles after leopard and tiger. I hear it's first-class if you don't mind letting yourself go--getting right away from the beaten track and all that. I mean to get hold of a jungle tribe if I can--money's no object, and--"

I ran on, glad to detail plans for what had been a long-cherished dream of mine, when my companion arrested me by the single word--

"Don't."

It was in consequence of my surprise that he told me the following story:--

"I surveyed this railway ten years ago. The country was very much the same as it is now, except that it was all, naturally, off the beaten track. There were two of us in camp together, Graham and myself. He was a splendid chap; keen as mustard on everything. It did not matter what it was. So that one day, when he and I were working out levels after late breakfast, he jumped up like a shot--just as if he had not been tramping over these cursed rubbish shoots of red rocks for six hours--at the sound of a feeble whimpering near the cook-room tent.

"'That devil of yours is at it again,' he said, 'and I won't have it, that's all!'

"As he went off I followed, for I did not relish Graham's justice when it disabled the cook.

"But this time I owned that the brute deserved punishment, for a more forlorn little tragedy than that which was being enacted among the pots and pans I never saw.

"Mohubbut Khan, chief villain, was seated--naked to the waist, bald as to head, after the manner of native cooks at work, on a low reed stool, brandishing a knife in one hand, while the other held a skrawking leggy white cock.

"Exactly in front of him was a group more suggestive of monkeys than men. It consisted of a very old man, wizened, bandy-legged, bandy-armed, whose white teeth showed in animal perfection as he howled, and a child of the same build, clinging to him convulsively, all legs, and arms, and shrieks.

"Between them and the cook stood Graham. He was a big fellow; fair as you are. In fact you are rather like him. There was a moment's pause, during which the old anatomy's voice rose in plaintive howls of resignation.

"'Lo! sonling, be comforted. Death comes to all, even to white cocks. It is but a few years. And grand-dad will hatch another. It is a sacrifice. Sacrifice to the *sahib logue* who bring death as they choose!'

"Well, it turned out, of course, to be a case of wanton cruelty. It always is. For hopeless inability to be considerate commend me to a native jack-in-office. There were fifty other fowls in the neighbouring village, but nothing would serve the underling whose duty it was to collect supplies, but that this wretched child's pet should serve for the *Huzoor's* dinner. The old man's joy when it was released was purely pitiable. He would have reared another for his grandson, he asserted garrulously; ay! even to the hatching of an egg from the very beginning, with toil by day and night. But only the Great God knew if the child's heart would have gone out to the chick as it had to the cock, for the heart was capricious. It was not to be counted upon, since the Great God made some men, yea! even some *Huzoors*, different from others. He looked from Graham to me as he spoke, and somehow I felt small. So as Graham was evidently master of the situation, I slunk back to my work.

"There were sounds of woe thereafter from the cook-room tent, and Graham himself supervised the dinner that night, in order, he explained somewhat apologetically, that I might not suffer from his conceptions of duty.

"It was two days after this, and we had shifted camp fifteen miles, when, having occasion to go into Graham's tent after dark, I stumbled over some one sitting among the corner tent-pegs. It was the grandpapa of the white cock, and he explained to me in his lingo--for he was one of the jungle people--that he had come in exchange for that precious bird. One life or another mattered little. Grim-*sahib* had spared the child's heart's joy, which was now living with him in the maternal mansion. There being, therefore, no necessity for the occupation of hatching eggs, he, Bunder--yea! of a surety, it was the same name as that of the monkey people--had come to do service to the *Huzoors* instead of the white cock.

"That was absolutely all I could get out of him. So for days and weeks he followed us. He was useful in his way, especially to Graham, who had a passion not only for sport, but for all sorts of odd knowledge."

I remember interrupting here that that was half the pleasure of new surroundings, to which my fellow-traveller replied drily that he had expected I would say so, as I really reminded him very much of Graham.

"This passion of his, however, led him into being a bit reckless, and as the hot weather came

on he began to get touched up by fever. Still, he continued working during the off days, and seemed little the worse until one evening when he went to bed with the shivers after a leopard hunt. Then old Bunder crept over to my tent.

"Grim-*sahib* must go home across the Black Water at once, *Huzoor*,' he said quietly, 'or his bones will whiten the jungle. He has seen the Skeleton Tree.'

"That was, in essence, all he had to say, though his explanations were lengthy. It was simply a Skeleton Tree, and it was always seen where fire fingers met; but those who saw it became skeletons in the jungle before long unless they possessed a certain talisman. There were such talismans among the hill tribes, and those who fell sick of fever always wore one if they could compass it. That was not often, since they were rare. He himself had one, but what use was it when life, from old age, had become no more worth than a white cock's? So his grandson wore it; wore it as he fed the joy of his heart peacefully in the ancestral home; thanks to Grim-*sahib*!

"But how do you know he saw the Tree?' I asked.

"It was when we had crawled up nigh the end of a dip, *Huzoor*,' replied Bunder. 'He looked up and said, "What's that?" And when I asked him what he had seen, he said: "It is gone. It must have been that stunted tree. But it looked like a skeleton, and there were fire fingers round it." So I knew. Send him home, *Huzoor*, away from its power, or his bones will whiten the jungle.'

"During the following days I really began--though I'm not an imaginative chap--to feel a bit queer about things. Graham couldn't shake off his fever, and more than once when he was delirious in the evenings he would startle me by saying, 'What's that?' But he would laugh the next moment, and add, 'Only a tree, of course; it was the light.'

"There was no doctor within miles; and, besides, it was not really such a bad case as all that. At least it didn't seem so to me or to Graham himself. Only to old Bunder, who became quite a nuisance with his warnings, so that I was glad when, after a confused rigmarole about white cocks and sacrifices, he disappeared one day and was seen no more. Partly, perhaps, because we moved back to a higher camp in the hopes of escaping the malaria.

"But we didn't. Graham grew appreciably worse. He was fairly well by day; it was at night that the fever seemed to grip him. I used to sit up with him till twelve or one o'clock, and then turn in till about dawn, when the servants had orders to call me, and I would go over and see after him again.

"But one day, or rather night, it was still quite dark when my bearer roused me with his persistent drone of '*Saheeb, saheeb!*' and I knew in an instant something was wrong. Graham, shortly after I left him, had got out of bed, dressed himself in his shikar clothes, taken his gun, and gone away from the camp. His bearer, a lad whom he had promoted to the place in one of his impulsive generous fits of revolt against things unjustifiable, had failed to take alarm until his master's prolonged absence had made him seek and rouse my man. The latter was full of apologies; but what else, he protested, could be expected of babes and sucklings promoted out of due season? The babe and suckling meanwhile was blubbering incoherently, and asserting that he was not to blame. The *sahib* had called for Bunder and Bunder had come; and they had gone off together.

"Bunder?' I exclaimed. 'Impossible! He hasn't been near the camp for days. Did any one else see him?' But no one had. And as there was no time to be lost in inquiries I dismissed the idea as an attempt on the boy's part to relieve himself from responsibility, and organised the whole camp into a search party.

"It was a last-quarter moon, and I shall never forget the eeriness of that long, fruitless search. At first I kept calling 'Graham, Graham!' but after a time I felt this to be useless, and that he must be either unconscious, or delirious, or determined to keep out of our way. So I pushed on and on in silence, through the bushes and bents, expecting the worst. But after all it was the best. We found him at dawn lying under one of those stunted trees fast asleep. So sound asleep that he did not wake when we carried him back to camp on a litter of boughs. So sound that it was not until the afternoon, when he stirred and asked for beef-tea, that I discovered he wore round his neck a plaited cord of dirty red silk with a small bag attached to it.

"How the deuce did that come there?' he asked drowsily, putting his hand up to feel it. How, indeed? He could never explain; and the bag held nothing but a bit of blank paper folded into four. He took the thing to England with him when he went home on sick leave the next month, and so far as I know is no wiser than he was then as to how it came round his neck."

Here my fellow-traveller paused, as a whistle from the engine told we were pulling up again. "Well," I said, a trifle plaintively, "but why should not I?"

He was already standing on the platform among a miscellaneous pile of belongings, such as Indian travellers delight to carry about with them, ere he replied:--

"Good-by. Glad to have met you--for you remind me awfully of Graham!"

I sometimes wonder if I should have taken his warning seriously or treated it as a traveller's



tale. As it was, I had not the chance of testing its truth. For, at my destination, I found a telegram recalling me to England on urgent business. So, beyond that passing glimpse of the Skeleton Tree, I have no experience.

## FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): *Ghâzie*-religious fanatic.

[Footnote 2](#): The natives call Freemasonry Lodges by this name.

[Footnote 3](#): The Mutiny.

[Footnote 4](#): Violet.

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