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THE HOSTS OF THE LORD

THE HOSTS OF THE LORD

BY

FLORA ANNIE STEEL

AUTHOR OF "ON THE FACE OF THE WATERS," "MISS STUART'S
LEGACY," "THE FLOWER OF FORGIVENESS," ETC.

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THE HOSTS OF THE LORD



THE HOSTS OF THE LORD

CHAPTER I

A SHADOW

"Understand! Of course you don't. I don't, though I've been here two years. And what's more, I don't want to," retorted a rather undersized Englishman, whose white drill suit made him look like a stem to the huge mushroom of a pith hat which he wore. Despite this protection his face was brown exceedingly, and faintly wrinkled through sheer exposure to sun-bright, sun-dried air. The fact enhanced the monkey type of his features, and made his clear, light-blue eyes--so set that they were shadowless below and cavernous above--look quite aggressively cool, inquisitive, intelligent.

"So long as we don't understand them," he went on, "and they don't understand us, we jog along the same path amicably, like--well! like the pilgrims to the 'Cradle of the Gods,' and the telegraph-posts to the Adjutant General's office up the road yonder--and I'll trouble you to cram more space than that between two earthly poles! No! It is when we begin to have glimmerings that the deuce and all comes in--" He paused in the molten gold of sunlight, which made the yellow sand, the corn-coloured tussocks of tiger-grass still yellower and still more corn-coloured, to glance round, as if measuring the distance between the long, low line of mud enclosure they had left but a few hundred yards behind--yet which, already, was losing itself in an illimitable sand stretch beyond--and a bigger tuft in the sand stretch ahead; a tuft of spear-points and horses, bayonets and men, waiting beside the first faint semblance of a reed-paved road. Then he took out his watch. Apparently he found leisure at his disposal, for he walked on. "There's a nursery rhyme they taught me," he continued, "when my moral nature was at the mercy of any fool who chose to take an interest in it--'*But if poor Pussy understood, she'd be, indeed, a naughty creature!*' It didn't run so consecutively, of course; in fact 'creature' rhymed to 'teach her'--but I learnt it that way. Children do that sort of thing a sight deal oftener than their elders think."

The younger of the two men in uniform with whom he was walking laughed--the honest,

elated, conscious laugh of one who has not many good stories about himself, and happens on an opportunity for telling one of them.

"I used to say, '*Six days shalt thy neighbour do all that thou hast to do, and the seventh day shalt thou do no manner--*'"

"Shut up, Lance!" interrupted his elder companion with a laugh. "It is a ripping excuse for your intolerable laziness, but I don't believe--"

"Fact, I assure you," protested Lance Carlyon aggrievedly, "and considering I really thought that was the proper version for ten years of my life, I--"

Dr. George Dillon took off his mushroom hat suddenly, and wiped his forehead as if to smooth away the wrinkles which his smiles had brought to it. "Lordy! It's a queer world," he put in. "There is really no good in understanding most things. As for this place--! Great Scott! What would happen if my fifteen hundred scoundrels, whom you saw digging like babes in the open just now, were to understand that I--one Englishman in charge--had virtually no *force majeure*--"

"Don't insult us, Dillon!" remonstrated Captain Vincent Dering, a certain swagger underlying his jest. "Eshwara is a garrison town, remember, now; I'm commandant, and Carlyon's staff--"

He had, in fact, ridden that morning as far as Dr. Dillon's house in charge of a troop of native cavalry and some Sikh pioneers who had gone on, under a native officer, to take up their temporary quarters in the half-ruined Fort, just beyond the old town of Eshwara. And now, having thus secured their breakfasts, he and his lieutenant were on their way towards the horses and escort they had bidden await them at the boat bridge which lay between them and their destination. For George Dillon was in control of a large industrial gaol, whose inmates had for months been digging the head works of a canal, which was to take off just below the town, on the farther side of the river.

"Are you?" replied the doctor, with a look of pity; "then I hope you'll both forget the fact. We've got on all right without you, hitherto. So if you'll stick to marking out the Viceroy's camp, and generally preparing the way of the Lord-sahib, I'll be obliged to you. By the way, is he coming to open the canal on the 10th, really?"

"So they say. That is, if you are ready for the show by then. I believe he could put it off till the 11th or 12th. Dashwood said something to that effect."

"Then Dashwood's an ass. The 10th is bad enough. The place will be filling up even then."

"Filling up! How?"

"Pilgrims. But on the 11th and 12th! By George! you should see them! The 'Assyrians came down like a wolf on the fold,' is nothing to it; only these are the Hosts of the Lord, I suppose. And so Dashwood suggested the 11th or 12th--the *Vaisakh* festival, did he? Well, he is an ass! But that's always the way. We try to understand feelings, instead of trying to know facts. However, we shall be ready for the opening, never fear. Smith expects his C. S. I. over it, he says, and that's enough guarantee. You know Smith, don't you, Dering? Walsall Smith--I think his wife said she knew you."

"Yes," he interrupted, with rather unnecessary decision, "Mrs. Walsall Smith is a great friend of mine, a very great friend."

"Jolly for you, having friends in Eshwara," assented Lance, in uneasy haste. "I suppose they are about the only people here, eh, doctor?" he went on, changing the subject; but the latter's clear eyes and brain were occupied for a moment in taking stock of Captain Dering's singular, if a trifle *voyant* personal attractions; one of the most noticeable of which was the perfect curve of his throat and cheek.

"I beg your pardon--people, did you say?" asked Dr. Dillon, after the pause. "Plenty of people, if you count *padrés*--the place swarms with missions, you know. But if you mean polo--" He shook his head.

Lance Carlyon's honest young face clouded, then grew cheerful again. "Well! there must be a lot of black partridge, and I expect there's fish in the river. Besides, it's an awfully picturesque place--By Jove! it is, Dering, isn't it?"

They had reached the tuft of spear-points and horses, men and bayonets, and before them lay Eshwara, sun-saturate, shadowless, in the April noon.

So seen, across the still lagoon of water formed by the junction of the two streams, the Hara and the Hari, which edged the low-lying triangular spit from which its fortified, temple-set walls rose, Eshwara seemed at the very foot of the blue barrier of hill behind it, whose serrated edge, paler than the blue sky above it, claimed three-quarters of all things visible for this world.

That, indeed, was the noticeable point in the picture presented to the eye. As a rule Heaven claims the larger half of all perspectives. Here, the three elements, earth, air, water, lay across

the view in three broad bands of blue, curiously similar in tint; for the sky was pale with excess of light, the hills with excess of heat, and the water paler than either by reason of a white silt which it brought with it from the snows; a white silt which a recent flood had left in a fine film upon the sand stretches that showed here and there in the broad basin.

"It is a gypsum *detritus*," explained the doctor--"from the 'Cradle of the Gods'--the cave, you know, where the rivers rise. The pilgrims go, in fact, for this very stuff. Find it in the ice crannies, call it 'the clay of immortality,' smear themselves with it, and then die happy, in hundreds, of pneumonia! Those are the facts. I don't profess to understand them; and as I told you I don't want to. It's dangerous. As that cracked old Jesuit, Father Narâyan, admitted, with that unfathomable smile of his, when all the other parsons were at me for refusing to allow them access to a postulate or a catechumen, or someone of that sort, who was sent to my jail '*the Church has always admitted the value of invincible ignorance.*'"

"Father Narâyan!" interrupted Lance Carlyon eagerly, "I suppose that's the Father Ninian Bruce who has lived here fifty years, and has a sort of Begum in tow, a descendant of General Bonaventura's, who was the Nawabs' favourite. I want to see that old chap; he must be a character. My grandmother, old Lady Carewe, used to tell me about him; long yarns, though she hadn't met him since she was in her teens in a convent at Rome, and he was father confessor, I suppose--she's a Holy Roman, you know, and was a desperate flirt too."

"So am I," said Vincent Dering quickly. "I mean a Catholic--at least my people are. So I can tell you one thing, Dillon; Father Ninian isn't a Jesuit. I was talking about him at the Club, when I knew I was coming here, and Father Delamere was indignant at the idea--said he was a disgrace to his cloth."

George Dillon's dry face grew dryer. "Did he, indeed! I quite agree that *he* is, but I didn't think Delamere would have admitted the fact himself! As for Pidar Narâyan, as the natives call him, he--he--" here the dry face melted. "Bless the man," he continued, and the dry voice grew soft, "he thinks he knows more about doctoring than I do, and the worst of it is--" here a perfectly charming smile took possession of every wrinkle--"he does, in a way; for the natives believe in him, and the 'saffron bag' is the best of all remedies. You see, when he was younger, he used often to go with the pilgrims and try to pull some of the poor devils out of the fire--or rather out of the snow--for the 'Cradle of the Gods' lies yonder."

He pointed to where, faint and far, a peak showed paler than the rest.

"Why don't they smear themselves here?" asked Lance stolidly.

"Why? Because they don't. Besides, there isn't much to come and go upon for a robe of righteousness here. Look! the breeze is blowing it away already!"

In truth the sun, which with the other three elements of earth, and air, and water, give us, in all religions, the whole spiritual life of man--the world of his probation, the heaven of his hopes, the means of his purification, and the fire of his retribution--had scorched the fine film to dust, and the wind, blowing where it listed, was sweeping it away, leaving the sand stretches unregenerate as ever.

"An extra touch of pipe-clay!" laughed Vincent Dering, dusting his knee as he settled himself in his saddle. "Well! good-by, old chap. I shall see you again soon, for I shall be coming over to the Smiths' pretty often, and I suppose your regiment of ruffians leaves you off duty sometimes. Carlyon, make Dillon an honorary member of the headquarters mess!"

George Dillon, leaning with his hands in his pockets against the rail of the first pontoon, watching the little cavalcade start, nodded. "Thanks. I'm over pretty often at the Palace. Pidar Narâyan plays the fiddle, and the Begum,--as you call her,--Miss Laila Bonaventura, has a voice. Besides, Babylon--I mean Eshwara--amuses me."

"Why Babylon?" asked Captain Dering, stooping to straighten his stirrup.

The doctor laughed, as his lounge changed to a start homeward. "Means the same thing. Esh-dwarra--or in another tongue, Bab-y-lon,--is 'the Gate of God,' though Babylon stands for something else nowadays, doesn't it? That's why I say it's never any use to find out the meanings of things. They change so. Stick to facts; they don't. Well, ta-ta. I'll see you to-morrow, most likely, at the Palace. They have a sort of concert-practice--afternoon on Wednesdays--some of the Mission ladies sing jollily in parts--and the old man is sure to ask you. He sets great store on his ward's position; besides, I told him you were a nailer at the piano."

Vincent Dering made a wry face. "The deuce you did! My dear fellow, I couldn't play hymn tunes to save my life. I shall refuse."

"Pity," replied Dr. Dillon over his shoulder, as he swung off in strides which emphasized the undue shortness of his trousers, "for I heard Mrs. Smith say they wanted a good accompanist. She sings *alto*--rather well."

"Oh, does she?" said Captain Dering, in a different tone.

As they set their faces different ways, there was a smile on both, but the doctor's was scarcely a pleasant one; it would, in fact, have been wholly sardonic but for the touch of impatient weariness it brought with it.

So, through the sun-bright, sun-dried air, while George Dillon walked back to his fifteen hundred malefactors, the little trail of spear-points and bayonets, men and horses, drifted at a foot-pace across the frail bridge towards the town; drifted unsteadily, the yielding boats swaying, the wooden girders giving and groaning over their burden. Seen so, with but a plank between it and the milky water creased by the faint current, there was something unreal in the gay troop of colour and glitter making its way to the quaint, storeyed town, ablaze in the sunlight, which turned each golden temple-spike to a star. A cool breeze fluttered the lance-pennants, and brought that faint film of white to horse and man, warm flesh, and cold steel.

And far away on that pale peak, a little white cloud had rested, hiding the "Cradle of the Gods."

"There must be fish here," remarked Lance dogmatically. "I'll get out my rods to-morrow and try for a '*mahseer*.'" And the earnestness of his face, as he lifted his eyes skyward to watch a couple of cormorants, would have suited a knight-errant of old on the quest of the Holy Grail.

"It won't be half bad, I expect--for a time, at any-rate," assented Vincent Dering, still with that content upon his face. "We will get up some fun while the camp is here, of course; and after that--" he paused, and the content became greater--"we'll manage for the month or so we have to stop. At least I shall."

His voice was soft. He might have been another knight-errant of old, riding across to the enchanted castle of his beloved.

"I beg pardon, sir," said a voice behind him; a voice with a strong native accent, yet with a curiously English phrasing in it, "but by dismounting here you will reach the Fort in a few minutes on foot. The road is longer."

Captain Dering turned, as if surprised, to the speaker, a native officer who sat his horse at the salute; then smiled, and with a clatter of accoutrements slipped to the ground.

"Come along, Carlyon. I was forgetting that Roshan Khân is up to the ropes here. You belong to Eshwara, don't you, *risaldar sahib*?"

The man to whom he spoke had slipped from his saddle also, and stood, smart as uniform could make him, still as discipline could hold him. He was a good-looking young Mahomedan of about thirty, curiously English in his movements, curiously native in his exaggeration of martial airs.

"*Huzoor!*" he assented. "We are connected with the late Nawab's house."

He spoke with absolute indifference, but Captain Dering, as they left the bazaar, which led from the bridge, for a short flight of steps and a narrow alley cleaving its way through crowded, shouldering houses, remarked aside:--

"I believe that means he is about the nearest relation left. The Colonel, I know, wasn't sure about the wisdom of his coming here; but then the Colonel is that sort. So I insisted. One wants somebody who can tell you things in a new place. What's that, in there, Roshan?"

They had come to a long, high wall, with trees showing above it, which stretched away on their right hand for two or three hundred yards, until it ended in an arched tunnel through a massive block of buildings at right angles to it.

"The palace garden, sir; and that is the palace. There is no entrance this side."

"The women's apartments, I suppose?"

"*Huzoor,*" assented Roshan Khân once more. "The Miss *Sahib* lives there now, and the *Padré* has his chapel there too. The river runs along the side, and it is pleasant."

"Pleasant and cool," echoed Lance, as the shadow of the tunnel closed in on them. "I'd no idea it was so hot outside. By Jove! what a quaint place."

They were emerging on a wide, square courtyard of which the palace formed one side, the fort another, a flight of steps leading down to the river a third, while the fourth was apparently, a wing of the palace. All three walls were absolutely blank save for a low door at each of the four corners; and these were, so to speak, connected with each other by pathways raised two steps above the rest of the courtyard. A similar footpath crossed it in the middle and so completed the resemblance to a union-jack; for the pathways were of white marble and red Agra stone, the courtyard of purple-blue brick. These paths met in a round platform in the centre, where, on a stone carriage, stood an old cannon.

"That's a big gun," said Vincent Dering, when, with a quickened clink of his spurred steps he had reached it; so, laying his hand lightly on the cylinder, he vaulted to it, as on to a horse, and

stooped to read an inscription on the riveted band about the breech.

"Sanskrit," he said--"that stumps me! it's so confounded straight. Ah! here it is in Persian too--that's better."

There was a faint clash of steel on stone, for, as he read the motto aloud, Roshan's hand, stiffening on his sword-hilt, made ground and scabbard meet.

Captain Dering slipped to his feet again with a laugh.

"'Teacher of religion, and instructor of souls;' that's about a correct translation, isn't it, *risaldar sahib*? Well! I'd back a Maxim against old Blunderbore as a missionary agent nowadays. Hullo! they worship it still, do they?" He pointed to a faded chaplet of marigolds around the muzzle, and a red hand printed on the marble below.

The Mahomedan's face took on the expression of his race and creed; all unconsciously, too, he reverted to his own language.

"The idolators do that when they come to bathe; and they give alms to the saint, when he is inside."

"Inside!" echoed Captain Dering. "What! Inside the gun?"

Here Lance, who had promptly peered down the muzzle, came up from it excitedly, asserting that the saint was there now; he could see the brute's fuzzy head half way down, so he must have crawled in feet foremost--one of those naked brutes who smeared themselves with ashes, to judge by his *chignon*.

"Make a ripping mop," laughed Vincent Dering, after glancing down in his turn; "clean the gun nicely,"--then the *insouciance* of his face disappeared, its curves hardened--"and by God! I'll make him. I'm not going to have my guns worshipped! eh, Roshan?"

"*Huzoor*," assented the Mahomedan once more, this time joyfully, as--a decorous two paces behind--his spurs jingled in harmony with his captain's across the raised union-jack towards the river-end of the courtyard where, in a projecting bastion right upon the bathing steps, the low arched door stood which gave access to the Fort.

In order to reach it they had to pass the solitary visible occupant of the wide, sunlit courtyard. This was a man--of what rank, education, occupation, none could tell--who having raised a square of two-inch-high mud wall between his twice-born purity and the world, was preparing his daily food. Naked, save for his waistcloth, and the thread of the twice-born over his left shoulder, he was isolated even from his kindred. Alone with himself and his God.

Before him in the mud-plastered square, as he sat immovable, was the mud fireplace on which his wheaten dough-cake was cooking; beside him was a leaf-platter of curds, a brass vessel of milk; a sight to be seen a hundred times a day in India; one which should never be forgotten.

The noon was almost shadowless; yet, even so, as he led the way, Captain Dering, from sheer habit, swerved to step further from the sacred square. Doing so his foot slipped an instant on the lower step. He gave an impatient exclamation and passed on. A minute later the door of the fort clanged behind the little party, cutting short an English laugh.

Then, not till then, the man in that square of purity showed signs of life. He rose quietly, almost unconcernedly, took the half-baked cake from the embers, the leaf-platter of curds, the vessel of milk, and going down to the river's edge, flung his dinner into it, to feed the fishes.

In that stumble, the plume-like fringe of Vincent Dering's high peaked turban had sent a shadow to overtop the two-inch barrier between one man and his fellows.

CHAPTER II

"HE SHALL FEED HIS FLOCK LIKE A SHEPHERD"

The garden of the old palace at Eshwara had been rightly described by Roshan Khân as a pleasant place. Longer than it was broad, its shady walks and orange groves clung to the river,

raised above it by a balconied wall against which the current ran dimpling. On two of the remaining sides, a twenty-foot high barrier of sheer masonry, buttressed and bastioned, blocked out all curious eyes. On the third, separating it from the courtyard where the big gun stood, rose the palace. Seen thus intimately from within, the latter had changed its character. No longer severe, stern, giving a blank stare at the world from the narrow slits of infrequent windows, it had grown fanciful, almost fantastic, full of canopied turrets and inconsequent little latticed retreats.

At least in the two upper storeys; for the lower one was more solid, its chief feature being a wide, aisled passage leading right through it to a door which gave on the courtyard. Being exactly opposite the one in the corner of the Fort bastion on the other side, this door opened, as the latter did, on one of the slantwise limbs of the quaint union-jack of raised paths which centred in the cannon.

It was not necessary, however, to go round by this in crossing from one door to the other, as by keeping to the river steps, you could do so on the same level.

In old times the guardians of the frail beauties for whose delectation the garden had been made, had lived in the crypt-like vaulted rooms which opened out from this aisled passage; so keeping the gate against illegal wanderings. Since the only other exit from the garden, save by boat, was through the second storey of the women's apartments, and as this was by a door leading directly into the royal rooms (which were on the other side of the tunnel that gave access to the courtyard, and also divided the palace into two portions--male, and female), the butterfly prisoners had had no chance of fluttering to strange honey. In those days, therefore, the door had always been bolted and barred.

It stood wide open, however, showing a vista of green at the farther end of the passage, when Captain Dering and Lance Carlyon came over to it in reply to the intimation that Miss Laila Bonaventura was "*At Home for music on Wednesday afternoons,*" which had been brought to the Fort overnight by an old pantaloon. A very old pantaloon with a wizened face, a few sparse hairs--dyed flaming red--standing at right angles to his cheeks, and a marvellous livery, consisting for the most part of yards upon yards of tarnished tinsel cloth, twisted and twined about head and waist like Saturn's rings. The oldest of old pantaloons, with a back curved by a life-time of obeisances, a toothless mouth, still full of sonorous titles, and a wicked old eye, watchful for the least want of the master, be it good or evil. A pantaloon, with Heaven knows what history of unutterable things hidden in his old brain, such as is to be seen, even in these days, lingering round the ruins of a native court; a figure despicable enough, yet real; so in a way pathetic, by reason of its absolute lack of real interest in things as they are.

And now as the two Englishmen paused,--partly because the swift change from the glare without to the gloom within was startling,--this same pantaloon, with a white muslin robe superadded to the livery as a badge of his dignity as door-keeper, precipitated himself upon them from the shadows, with ancient skips of alacrity and loop-like salaams; then with crab-like sidlings led the way, the young men following.

"I must have that old chap on paper before I leave," said Vincent Dering; "he's too good to be lost."

So, their steps echoing cheerfully with their laughter, they went on until, towards the middle of the passage, the aisle to their left widened, and through a maze of pillars and arches, a glimpse or two of air and sunlight showed sharply.

Lance took a curious step towards them. "Opens on to the river, I expect; jolly cool it must be in the hot weather! By Jove! those old sinners knew how to be comfortable. Hulloo!"--he paused in a sort of horror--"I say, Dering! I believe it's a chapel. Yes! it is!" He took off his cap instinctively, and moved another step forward to see better.

But Captain Dering called impatiently, "Oh, come along, do, Carlyon! I didn't promise to go to church! Hymns are bad enough in all conscience."

Lance, however, stood rooted to the spot, cap in hand. "Hush!" he said in a low voice, "I believe they are having service." As he spoke a robed figure showed between the arches against the sunlight beyond them; showed with something in its lifted hands, then passed to some unseen altar.

"Oh, come along, do! there's a good chap, and let's get out of the way," repeated Captain Dering, sharply. "It's Father Narâyan, I suppose,--he's as mad as a hatter, and boshes the whole business--at least, so Delamere said. I told you we were a bit early, but you would start; still it's too bad of the old man to have his chapel in the front hall! Come along! and let us wait in the garden--it looks an awfully jolly one--awfully--"

He paused, perhaps at the change, this time, from gloom to glare, perhaps at the sudden sense of anticipation, the sudden quickening of the pulse of life, which made him draw a long breath involuntarily.

It was not unfamiliar to him, that sudden stir of vitality, of expectation; and with a curious smile on his face he crossed to the edge of the marble plinth on which the passage opened, and

leaning over the balustrade, looked down to a terrace below, and so on to the garden itself.

A perfect wilderness of common flowers, sown broadcast, lay at his feet, hemming in a shallow marble tank, which was nearly covered with the dewy leaf-cups of the lotus, and set round with mosaic arabesques. From this tank two aqueducts led to the edge of the terrace, and ended in steep slopes of fretted marble, where cascades had once wimpled and dimpled down to the water-maze which lay below--a shiny lake, cobwebbed over by narrow marble paths just wide enough for the bare, flying feet of a laughing girl. Beyond was scented shade, with glints of water-courses gleaming here and there; while here and there came a peep of a latticed balcony overhanging the river; a balcony just large enough for a laughing girl and her lover.

Yet there was not even a butterfly to be seen hovering over the flowers. All was still, all was silent, until Vincent Dering's careless laugh echoed through the stillness, the silence.

"Can't you imagine it--all lit up--they used to put coloured lamps behind the cascades, I'm told, and play 'Catch who can' up and down and all around the place! On the whole I expect they enjoyed themselves--better than the type-writing girls of to-day do, for instance."

"Got beastly sick of enjoying themselves before they had done with it, I expect," replied Lance, succinctly, "especially if there was always such a confounded strong smell of orange blossoms. Bah! I'd prefer a polecat; but," he gave a distasteful glance at his companion, "I believe you like strong scents."

"Why not?" laughed Vincent Dering, drawing out a handkerchief deluged with white-rose, and sniffing at it, "it's a harmless taste," here his jest passed to earnest, and his eyes took a half soft, half cynical expression,--"so's the other, in a way. It isn't altogether despicable to let yourself loose in Paradise without an *arrière pensée* of flaming swords. Especially if you can give pleasure to someone else thereby. One could act Romeo and Juliet nicely in this garden. And have your choice of balconies, too," he continued, returning to jest, "even if the young woman--"

He glanced back as if to verify his remark from the *façade* of the palace, but what he saw behind him brought a sudden straightening of his lounge, and rather an elaborate doffing of his sailor hat; for he was always a trifle ornate in his courtesy towards women, and the girl who stood within a pace or two of him was distinctly attractive, if--even at the first glance--a little too bread-and-buttery for his taste; too young, too clumsy as to waist, too massive in the contours of face and figure. For Captain Vincent Dering's taste had remained constant for the last three years to a different type of beauty; a type which, for the first time in his life, had made him sentimental, romantic, more or less unselfish. Still the girl was handsome, even in that babyish frock of starched white muslin, girt about with a yellow silk sash. The dress, he told himself,--for he was a connoisseur in *chiffons*, and had a pretty turn for painting in addition--would have been better soft, and creamy; but thank heaven! the sash was not blue, like the marker of the missal she carried in her hand. It might have been; for it was impossible to fathom the lack of all sense of fitness in some women. Yet the result would have been to take all the ivory tints from this girl's complexion, and leave it jaundiced. And the ivory was charming.

"I am Miss Bonaventura," she began in a set way, which convinced Captain Dering that she had been sent to say those very words, and none other; "my guardian, Father Ninian Bruce, will be here directly. Won't you come upstairs to the drawing-room? I am sorry we did not know it was so late."

"It is our fault; we are disgracefully early," put in Captain Dering. "I told Carlyon--" then he paused, feeling curiously at a loss before the girl's look of stolid gravity.

"Perhaps your watch is too fast," she suggested, "and then my guardian likes to go by the sun. He says it never needs winding up. But I think it is inconvenient, when everybody else has a watch. It is always better to do as other people do."

Her voice was very sweet and full; but a country-bred accent spoilt its beauty, and brought a grimace to Captain Dering's face, as he and his companion dutifully followed the speaker up one of the curved flights of steps, which led from the plinth to a wide loggia on the second storey. Like the room seen through its arches, this was lavishly decorated with fragments of looking-glass fashioned into flowing designs with gilt stucco. The afternoon sun, at this height shining full into the loggia, made it a veritable star chamber.

"What a charming place," went on Captain Dering in his best manner. "Doesn't it remind you of the Arabian Nights, Carlyon?"

A sudden vague surprise and interest came to the girl's face, lightening it infinitely.

"Have you read the *Alif Laila*?" she asked. "My *moonshi* brought it--I have to learn Urdu, you know, because my guardian thinks I ought to be able to speak to the people, as he does--and I wanted to read it, because it is my name, you see--Laila--it means 'night,' I believe--but my guardian did not wish it. He gave me the 'Mirror of Virtue' instead. It is a very, very long--"

Her almost childish garrulity ceased in a faint flush over the ivory of her face, and she reverted to her lesson, and her indifference--"The other people will be here directly; but they will come from the city, across the tunnel, and go straight into the drawing-room. Would you like to

come in there, or stay here?"

"Oh! stay here, please!" said Vincent, desperately. The young woman was getting on his nerves.

"Then perhaps you would like to try the piano?" persisted Miss Bonaventura. "My guardian has it brought out here on Wednesday afternoons, because it sounds well among the arches. Will you try it?"

Her hand--it was ivory also, Vincent observed, and had long filbert-shaped nails--held the cover of the keyboard open stolidly; and Lance Carlyon, feeling a bit desperate also, said appealingly:--

"Do, Dering. He is a nailer at the piano, I assure you, Miss Bonaventura, and he sings too."

"So my guardian--" she began, when Vincent's patience gave way and, with a perfect devil of exasperation roused in him, he sat down on the music-stool and with a crash burst into a naughty little love song he had picked up at Brindisi on the way out. He did it simply to soothe himself; so, to do him justice, he nearly fell off the music-stool in horror when, at the refrain of the second verse, a very full round *mezzo-soprano* joined in it with a *verve* and *abandon* far exceeding his own.

He scarcely knew whether to apologize, or go on; but Miss Bonaventura apparently had no doubts. She finished with a gay little *staccato* note which would have made her fortune at a music hall, and then turned to the accompanist with a smile which showed an absolutely flawless set of teeth. "What funny words; but I like them, and the tune too. What is it called? I should like to get it and sing it to my guardian."

Vincent, who had begun a stammering regret that he had not remembered her nationality, altered his phrase, with a sense of relief, to "You know Italian very well, I suppose, Miss Bonaventura?"

She returned to her indifference immediately. "My guardian and I speak it. He loves Italy and the Italians. He knew my grandmother there. She was a princess; but he never speaks of her, so I don't know very much about it. Only Mother at the convent said that my guardian--"

She was off, gaily, on the childishly confidential tack again, when the sight of someone coming up the stairs made her veer towards dignity once more. "There is my guardian," she said; "he is very sorry to have kept you waiting."

Evidently this was the last bit of her lesson, for she closed the piano with great decision.

The figure which came slowly towards them was that of a very old man, yet one older, by many years, than his looks. For he was still straight, save for a slight stoop in the neck; but this, by the backward poise of the head thus made necessary to enable his brown eyes to meet all things, after their habit, squarely, if softly, gave him an air of alertness. He was dressed in an ordinary black *soutane*, but wore a fine white embroidered muslin skull-cap, such as natives wear, instead of a black one. His grey hair showed, still luxuriant, beneath it; and the wide sash of faded lilac silk, with tasselled ends, which was tied in a bow about his waist, set off his still slim and still graceful figure.

"I hope my little girl has been doing the honours properly," he began, pausing a pace or two from the young men, and not offering to shake hands; but his voice was a welcome in itself, and had that nameless *cachet* of absolute good breeding which makes offence impossible. There was a slight hesitancy in it too, now and again, which was overcome by a look that took the listener into its confidence, and appealed for friendly forbearance--"but she is only just back from school at Calcutta, and the good nuns did not see much company, did they, Laila?" Then in an undertone of solicitude he added, in Italian, "Didst tell them, *cara mia*?--didst remember it all?"

Laila Bonaventura looked at him with a faint resentment. "I think so, guardian," she replied, in English. "Didn't I?"

The last came with such swift, almost savage, challenge of voice and eyes, that Vincent Dering, the recipient, felt glad of the diversion caused by the arrival, through the drawing-room, of some more guests to claim the attention of the host and hostess, and so leave him in peace.

"I say, that girl has got splendid hair, hasn't she?" he said in an undertone to Lance, as they stood a little apart, watching the new comers.

"That tall one, you mean--don't admire it. Puts me in mind of that devil of a chestnut who nearly killed me at polo; a chestnut with white stockings; awfully handy, but--"

He paused as Father Ninian came up to them. "You can scarcely know any of your neighbours as yet, Captain Dering," began the old man with the ceremony of a past age, "so perhaps you will give me the privilege of presenting you to some of our good mission ladies."

"Thanks," replied Vincent, hastily. "But I see my old friend, Mrs. Walsall Smith, coming in. I

must just go and shake hands. But I'm sure Carlyon--"

Lance shot a perfectly pathetic glance after his Captain, who moved off to meet a delicate-looking fair woman who at that moment came in with Dr. Dillon; the latter taken possession of and monopolized by an exceedingly pretty child of five, who had evidently inherited her mother's fragility.

"Delighted, I'm sure," murmured Lance, following his leader dejectedly.

"Miss Erda Shepherd, Mr. Lancelot--I am right, am I not--Carlyon?"

It was the tall girl with the red-brown hair, of course. She had bronze eyebrows, too, and bronze eyes--nice ones. He saw so much as he made his bow, while Father Ninian stood looking first at the girl, then at the young man; and as he looked his fine old hands were clasped as if they held something very precious. It was a habit of his.

"I hope you will like each other," he said in his kind old voice; and then, ere he moved away, his hands fell apart for an instant as if giving something. "Peace go with you, my children," he said with a smile.

Lance felt a queer, unaccustomed thrill travel from the nape of his neck to his boots, pausing by the way at his heart. It was an unusual method of introduction, certainly; yet somehow it relieved the shyness which generally beset him at such functions. He found himself looking frankly into the bronze eyes, and something in them made him say, almost involuntarily:--

"That was rather a jolly way of beginning to be friends. I mean--" The shyness came back with a rush; he blundered horribly.

"Very," put in the girl, interrupting him quite simply. "I hope it will be peace. I always hope that. You know I am a missionary."

"Oh," he replied, blankly. "Yes, there are a lot of you--I mean--of them, in Eshwara, aren't there?"

Her face set suddenly, her mouth grew almost stern. "Not enough, Mr. Carlyon; not half enough," she replied. And the militant ring of her voice, belying the peaceful professions of the previous moment, made him look at her curiously, recognizing that he had touched some quivering nerve of mind. "If you knew Eshwara as I know it," she went on, passionately, "you would say so too; I'm sure you would."

The bronze eyes, meeting his blue ones, though they gave nothing back but kindly, almost boyish, surprise, seemed satisfied. She turned suddenly and stretched her right hand over the river which slipped oilily past the wall below, as they stood beside the balustrade of the loggia. "Look!" she said, impulsively. "Do you see that straight white thing floating down the curve of the current yonder? It isn't a log; those others are; plenty of logs come down the rivers from the forests in the hills, for they don't catch all, you know, at the government wood-station. And so the people here catch the runaways in the backwater, and get paid for them. But that--" She paused and her other hand gripped the balustrade hard; then she turned back to him with a faint apology. "Why should I bother you? Let us talk of something else. There is no reason why I should talk of these things to you so soon, or, indeed, at all."

"I'd rather you did," he put in quickly. It was the truth. A sudden curiosity had come to him, a sudden desire to know more, to think more. He was less of a boy than he had been five minutes before. "I--I hope you will," he added; "really I do--I--I--" He felt his manhood as he had never felt it before, and yet, in a way, he was more forgetful of it. The girl opposite him was womanhood incarnate to him, and yet, in some mysterious way, beyond it, above it.

"You and I must be about the same age, I expect," he said, with a half-perplexed frown, "but you have seen a lot more than I have. I wish you'd tell me, please!"

The straight white glint in the water was just disappearing behind one of those balconies overhanging the river, where there was only room for a pair of lovers.

"It is a dead girl, Mr. Carlyon," she said in a low voice. "She was in my school. Her people were very bigoted--Brahmins in a temple--but they let her be taught to read, because she was betrothed to an educated man. Last year she was married--she was but a child still--and I have only seen her once or twice since. Then"--the voice paused a second. "She was very frightened, poor little Premi, at what was coming. 'I shall die, Miss-sahib, I shall surely die,' she said to me the very last time I saw her; so I promised--I am a medical missionary, Mr. Carlyon. But when the time came, they would not let me in. I--I went to the husband--he is an educated man--you may have heard of him--Rama-nund, a great speaker,--he writes, too, and all that--but he said he was helpless with the women; and I am not sure either if he wished it himself--they don't know their own minds. So poor little Premi and her baby--Oh!" she broke off with an infinite pain in her voice--"it is so hard--so hard for both."

Her face, set riverwards, was soft, yet stern; full of fight, yet full of pity, and Lance thought of a virgin martyr in the illustrated 'Lives of the Saints' with which his grandmother, Lady Carewe,

had been wont to still his boyish unrest on Sunday afternoons. Yet there was something beyond that self-concentrated devotion in this face; something that took him back further still to the days when he had sobbed out his childish hurts in his mother's arms.

"She was ill all yesterday and the day before--they told me there was no hope of either--they just let them die. And they always put them in the river--they have iron rings round their wrists and ankles to prevent them coming back to harm the men--" She paused and turned to Lance swiftly. "Isn't it true that there are not enough of us--that we want more women to teach them what--"

"But I does!" came a high childish treble, forcing itself irresistibly even on the attention of these two; "I 'ikes 'oo twenty 'fowsand times better than dad, an' I 'ikes Captain Dering ten 'fowsand times better too; an' so does 'mum--don't 'oo mummie?"

It was little Gladys Smith, who, clasping both Dr. Dillon's hands in hers, had swung herself back from him so as to toss her fair curls from her laughing face, as she looked up at him mutinously.

There was an instant's awkward pause, during which the eyes of a man and woman met for a second. Met and parted hastily; but not before the girl with the yellow silk sash, who stood between them, had looked from one to the other with a dim surprise unclosing her red lips, and showing the gleam of her white teeth between them.

Then Dr. Dillon said, carelessly, "And you like Akbar Khân better than any of us, you young sinner, because he gives you sweeties! Here! Akbar Khân, bring the Missy-*baba* some cream toffee!"

The old pantaloons, who, with his loose coat removed and a white duster tucked into Saturn's waist-ring was now helping to hand round coffee and cake, capered up with a voluble, but toothless,--

"*Ger-reeb--pun-wâz!*" (Protector of the Poor.)

Gladys helped herself discriminately, staring at the old servitor the while. "But I don't 'ike Akbar Khân. Do I, son of an owl?" she continued superbly, in the accurate Urdu which comes so daintily from lisping English babies. "Did I not say I would hate thee because thou wouldst not tell me why thou didst prostrate thyself before the soldier in the courtyard? And the *ayah* laughed, the base-born! She knew also, and would not say, and so did the soldier; so I hate you all!"

She stamped her little foot, and shook her curls defiantly.

"Gladys!" cried her mother, reproachfully.

"Hullo! What's all this about?" laughed Captain Dering, catching the child up in his arms. "One of my soldiers insulting you? Who was it?" He turned, with the absolute command of his race, to the be-ringed one, who stood, full of deprecatory mumblings and salaamings, his hands, holding the tray of sweets, trembling visibly.

"Who was it, Khân-*jee?*" asked Father Ninian, in a curiously even tone; one which, nevertheless, seemed a compelling one, for a murmured name came rapidly, followed by eager explanations.

Father Ninian frowned, and deliberately put on the gold *pince-nez* which always hung around his neck. He seldom used it, however, being, he would say playfully, in his native Scotch, too "well acquaint" with Eshwara and all in it to need such help after fifty years experience. So it had come to be an unfailing sign that he was face to face with something unexpected, something new. Naturally, therefore, it changed the character of his face, bringing back to it a strange look of youth; of hope and energy--the look of choice which age has not.

"Roshan Khân," he echoed, "why comes he here?" Then in sudden recollection he turned to Vincent Dering. "Of course, he comes with you. I knew he was in your regiment, but I did not think."

Captain Dering put down the child gently. "Is there any reason, sir," he asked decisively, "why he should not be here? If so--"

Father Ninian took off his eye-glasses slowly. He was back on familiar ground. "No!" he said, with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders; "none. He is welcome to come if he likes. He is a fine soldier, Captain Dering, and a good fencer."

"The best I have ever come across," put in Lance Carlyon.

Father Ninian laughed, a satisfied, vainglorious little laugh, and bowed, with his hand on his heart, in foreign fashion. It seemed almost as if something had brought back the manners of a different life.

"His master thanks you," he said gaily. "I taught him; but as Esmond said of the *botte de*

Jesuit--not all. We craftsmen keep something up our sleeve for our own use!"

Lance Carlyon's face grew eager. He had heard of Father Ninian's art with the foils, and took his opportunity. "That's what Roshan does to me. I took lessons from him, but he licks my head off with tricks. Perhaps some day, sir--"

Father Ninian's right hand and wrist, despite their age, flourished themselves with marvellous suppleness. "Of a surety! Of a surety," he interrupted, still in that gay, almost reckless voice, "and I will teach you '*L'Addio del Marito*.' I never taught that to Roshan--it does not do for savage natures."

"The husband's good-by! What a funny name," echoed Laila, curiously. "Why is it called that, guardian?"

The gaiety left the old man's face.

"Because the thrust is used, *cara mia*," he replied in Italian, and his answer came dreamily, half to himself, "when even those who have that greatest tie to life prefer to say good-by to it." He paused, then went on cheerfully: "But come! Music! Music! We lose time horribly. Laila, 'tis your part to begin."

The girl walked stolidly to the piano.

"What shall I sing, guardian?" she asked.

"Sing?" he repeated, reverting once more to Italian, and his voice had the dreamy tone in it again; "sing my favourite, child. Something hath taken me back to the old days--and sing it well."

Something in the pose of the girl, something in the faint defiance of her face as she stood turning over the leaves of the music, attracted Vincent Dering's fancy. He moved over to her, and asked if he should play her accompaniment.

"If you can," she said, ungraciously.

He smiled. "What is it? Oh!--Handel." He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes! I fancy I can play him--he is not very complex."

The next instant he had embarked, with a certain sense of pique lending perfection to his phrasing, on the prelude; but perfect as his tone was, it seemed to fall dull and dead before the voice which rose and echoed into the arches.

"He shall feed His flock like a Shepherd."

Pure, peaceful, free from every touch of passion; absolutely, utterly, beyond this world and its works, it rose and filled the garden; the orange-scented garden with its fretted marble cascades and water-maze, where the feet of laughing girls had chased each other, the latticed balconies where lovers had sat.

"And He shall gather the lambs in His arms."

It floated out over the river where the dead girl had drifted, making a light come to a pair of bronze eyes.

"Come unto Him all ye that labor."

Out beyond the garden, into the city, a faint far echo of the call made men and women pause in the struggle for life, and say, "They are singing in the palace."

"And ye shall find rest unto your souls."

The promise of all religions, the cry which makes all creeds one, rose and fell, as the afternoon sun, shining into the loggia, put a canopy of stars above the head of the singer.

Some of the audience said "Thank you," politely when she ended. Vincent Dering did not. He stood on one side, and, being musical to the heart's core, gave himself the luxury of silence. Only when Father Ninian, ever mindful of ceremonies and courtesies, crossed to acknowledge the services of the accompanist, he said briefly,--

"Who taught her that?"

The old man looked at him almost wistfully: "I heard her grandmother sing it, nearly sixty years ago. I have never forgotten it."

"I do not wonder," said Vincent Dering, and his eyes, forgetful of others, followed the girl whose dress ought to have been creamy and soft, instead of white and starched.

CHAPTER III

DRIFTWOOD

The river Hara, after skirting the fort, the bathing-steps below the courtyard, the palace, and the palace garden, continued its course, still hemmed in to swift current by a high bank on the opposite side, and on the near one by a wall set with spiked temples sacred to Siva; for Hara is one of his many names. But, on reaching the apex of the triangle formed by the city, the banks fell away, the river spread itself out to greater rest, until, at the uttermost end of a long spit of sandbank and tamarisk, it met the waters of its twin river, the Hari, in the broad placid lagoon which lay between Eshwara and the south; that is the dry stretch of desert, against whose barrenness Western ingenuity--aided by Dr. Dillon's horde of fifteen hundred ruffians--had been digging defiance for months. From the spit of sand you could see the result. A broad seam on the face of patient Mother Earth, a first wrinkle telling of millions to come from the ploughshares of men.

As yet, however, the canal was as dry as the desert around it; and was to remain so until the great Lord-*sahib* came in state, on his way to the hills, to open the sluices. There was to be a big camp, a big function on the occasion, and even sleepy Eshwara felt a vague excitement regarding it. For the older men remembered the days when the Hosts of the Lord-*sahibs* had regularly passed through the city, and had tales to tell about them; a fact which prevented the coming event from being too strange even to be thought about! Then the opening of the canal was another disturber of primeval calm. True, the idea of it had been with Eshwara ever since the first sod had been turned two years before; but now the thing stared it in the face. Within a few days the waters of the sacred rivers would have to lie in a new bed. Would they like it? Would the gods like it? Would men like it?

Those were the questions being asked from one end of Eshwara to another. Even outside it, on the long narrow spit of sand-bank set with sparse tussocks of grass and tamarisk which reached beyond the city's triangle into the rivers--and where, after a flood, the white gypsum silt lay like a robe of righteousness--they were being discussed; for the strange race who lived on it, shifting their wigwams of grass to the low-lying land opposite when the waters rose, lived by the river; by the fish in it, and the logs of wood which came floating down it.

So this question of the canal was in the mind of the naked man, attired in the complete suit of blue beads which marks an aboriginal race, who, in the dawn following, squatted on the highest curve of the spit. He was small, swart to positive inkiness, and his thin legs and arms shewed grey lights on their tense muscles, as if these were truly iron. Behind him rose a wigwam of reeds, at the entrance to which a spear was stuck in the sand in order to display the head of a bottle-nosed alligator impaled on its point. At his right hand was a reed basket, a rude net of reed twine. In front of him lay one of those small shark-like scaleless fishes which the learned call Silurian, and tell us are relics of a creation older than ours.

So might the man have been. So might have been the background of sand and reed, spear and wigwam, the foreground of net and fish. Yet the fisher was not all uncivilized. This little survival of an aboriginal race, shifting about in the shifting river-bed, had always had an attraction for the Missionaries, who, as a rule, find the inferior races easiest to deal with. Gu-gu therefore--his name being as primitive as his appearance, since it is the first effort of infant tongues--belied his looks. He had at any rate a civilized eye to business, a civilized notion of the relations between supply and demand, for he shook his head at the customer opposite him.

"Not a cowrie less, Khân-jee. 'Tis the only one in the market, see you; besides on this day the '*Missen*' miss comes to us folk, and she never haggles. She will pay the five annas gladly to be let read her book to my women."

The mumble--apparently a pious aspiration that the Most High would smite infidels hip and thigh--was the only recognizable point in the figure on the other side of the fish; for Akbar Khân, doorkeeper, messenger, assistant waiter, had not only discarded Saturn's rings--the loss of which about his head made his baldness something of a shock--but also every article of clothing except his waist-cloth. The reason for this was, in a way, like many another thing about the old sinner,

pathetic. Briefly he liked to dissociate his inner self from occupations which he considered were beneath the dignity of the Akbar Khân of the past. Therefore being, for the nonce, a bazaar coolie in search of fish for his master's breakfast, he got up for the part; so finding it, at once, easier to forget, and to remember that past.

He mumbled of it as he strenuously opposed the price.

"Everything grows dearer, every day," yawned the aboriginal Gu-gu. "Even women, as thou shouldst know."

Akbar Khân clucked a pious denial. "We spread no nets for that game in the palace nowadays. Those evil times are gone; we live sober and virtuous." The piety held a distinct flavour of regret.

"And as for fish," continued Gu-gu, "they will be dearer ere they are cheaper. When the deep water begins to run canalwards, the fish will run too. Then good-by to our trade, since the *Huzoors* allow us nothing in their waters without payment."

He whined, however, to the wrong quarter for sympathy, the old retainer's views on preserving being absolutely those of a Shropshire squire who is also a J. P.

"Neither did we," he replied, indifferently. "Thy like, Gu-gu, would have had to bring thy fish to the palace and be satisfied with our leavings. Out on thee for an upstart! Take thy four annas, and be thankful--slave!"

Gu-gu's ill-tempered face became aggressive. "Not I!--the Miss will give it; nay! six, mayhap, since the child is sick, and she will be wanting leave to dose it. So--hands off--eunuch!"

The title, once dignified, was opprobrious now, and old Akbar rose in a perfect fury, his bald head wobbling, the flaming fringe of red hairs about his face giving him a ludicrous resemblance to a toothless old man-eating tiger, face to face with his lawful prey, yet unable to injure it.

"Oh! for the bastinado!" he stuttered, impotently. "Oh, for the cutting off of bodily members! Oh! even, for the tying up of heels, and roastings and duckings. But the *Huzoors* have taken them from us, and gifted them to the police, who know not the proper methods. Yâh! Gu-gu, had I but had thee fifty years ago!" his anger lessened with sheer wistful regret. "Fifty years ago when the Nawab gifted me as body-servant to the new *Wazeer* Bun-avatâr^[1]-*sahib* because he brought him a bird that would sing of itself from Italy *wilayat*."

"But all birds do that," cavilled Gu-gu, feeling nevertheless a reverent curiosity about those legendary days.

Akbar gave a crackling, contemptuous laugh. "Not palace birds! they have to be wound up; and Bun-avatâr-*sahib* sent for this across the black water. So he kept favour with the Nawab. Birds that sing, and flowers that smell, and boxes that make music, and dolls that dance when you wind them. Lo! these, Gu-gu, are the pleasures of palaces; but how canst thou know, who hast not lived in them even, as I--"

The sense of his own superiority soothed him still more; he squatted down again, and hubble-bubbled for a space at the *hookah* which was an integral part of all his impersonations.

"Yea! those were times," he mumbled half to himself. "Even Pidar Narâyan--may Heaven protect him--could not say 'please God' to every mouthful, as he does now--as we all do now, and rightly, seeing that we have grown old." Once more the piety smacked of pity, and the old man, finding a listener, went on with a certain gusto. "Look you! he had to walk like the tongue among thirty-two teeth in those days, with Bun-avatâr-*sahib*, my master, like two peas in one pod with the Nawab. Except for women. Pidar Narâyan took his way there--mostly!"

The interrupting gurgle of the *hookah* gave time for an elaborate wink of a wicked old eye. Possibly this was due to the smoke, for the old voice went on as before almost dolorously.

"He had the money-bags, you see, and looked after the rents. But my master, Bun-avatâr--lo! thou shouldst have seen him when he came first--the picture of a man!--they say he was a prince in his own country, but fell into trouble; so came to make his fortune here with Pidar Narâyan--was called *Wazeer*. And let me tell thee, Gu-gu, it means something to be body-servant to a *Wazeer*! Lo! to think I might have been it still but for that jade, Anâri Begum!"

Despite the epithet, he smiled, and his pipe this time gave out quite a chuckling sound.

"As ill to keep within walls as a butterfly!" he muttered. "Up and down the garden, in and out the balconies, and the Nawab in two minds to use force, or put her in a sack. For she flouted him. The prettiest ones play that game for power always, and she was Walidâd, her brother's, last hope of favour. Walidâd, *Kanjara*, who had been king's caterer for years before my master, Bun-avatâr-*sahib*, came to make all the court cry sour buttermilk! Walidâd, who had once stood so high, that, in a drunken bout, the Nawab promised him his half-sister to wife. And he got her too! She wept on her wedding day, but we in the lower storey heeded not tears in the upper. For, see you, mine uncle was chief eunuch--we kept the honour thus in the family from generation to generation--so I was in and out, seeing what went on. Until somehow (mine uncle with the

bowstring round his neck--as was right, honest man--swore he knew not how) Bun-avatâr-*sahib* caught a sight of her! Some say it was a plot, from beginning to end, of Walidâd's; others that *his* enemies feared lest Anâri should succeed. There be balls within balls, even in a plaything, if the workmen are cunning! Anyhow, he saw her.

"And I, his body-servant, was able to come and go where Pidar Narâyan hath made his church nowadays. But there! what matters it? 'Tis all one. Love and the Faith are in and out of men's minds like a shelldrake in weedy water; a body cannot tell which way its head may be and which its tail! Nevertheless I felt a choke at my throat, Gu-gu, many a time, as I waited for him in the boat below the balcony; yet in the end, it was not my throat, but mine uncle's. He died in the faith, Gu-gu, cursing women. *His head was that way at the last!*--'Tis mostly so--*he-he*--"

The chuckle of his pipe was fiendish, yet his wizened face was wistful. "Still, God knows, one could scarce look on at such a wooing, and not beat the drum in time, as musicians to a dancer. And it runs in our blood, see you, to watch, and beat the drum. That is our profession; and, by mine ancestors! I deemed it enough for mortal man. But Bun-avatâr-*sahib*, see you, was not of our race. He was of Italy *wilayat* and a prince. So, one day, my liver dissolved hearing that the butterfly was over the walls! But, as I said, it was mine uncle's neck, not mine. Yet the game ended for me when Bun-avatâr-*sahib* died."

"They poisoned him, folk say; is't true?" asked Gu-gu. It was a point in the oft-told tale which was still discussed by Eshwara gossips.

"That is other folks' news, not mine," replied Akbar, discreetly. "May be, may be not. The *Huzoors*, anyhow, sent the Nawab to die in Calcutta on a *pinson*^[2] for it; but they have ever an excuse to take land! Pidar Narâyan had a hard fight to keep Bun-avatâr-*sahib's* grants--the Nawab was ever generous to his favourites, look you--for Anâri Begum's baby; ay! though he showed a writing of marriage, and had made the infant Christian after their habit. Still he got them, land and palace and all. So I stayed on serving my master's child, and when she died, her child, the Miss-*baba*, even to the haggling for fish. Lo! slave! it grows late. Give it to me and have done with it--Thou wilt not. Oh! for the devil that was in her grandmother Anâr to be in this Miss-*baba*, and for her to come to Bun-avatâr-*sahib's* rights as *Wazeer*--then would there be loppings and--"

"Or if Roshan Khân should come to his," sneered Gu-gu. "The canal *sahib's* ayah was telling me thou didst prostrate thyself in the dust as if he were indeed Nawab! Have a care! eunuch-*jee*, the police are agog nowadays to find disloyalty even in newspapers."

"May her gossiping tongue be slit!" stuttered the old retainer. "Can a body not do obeisance to his masters? For look you, Roshan is true grand-nephew to the Nawab through his grandmother, Walidâd's wife--ay! and for that matter, cousin to the Miss, through Anâri Begum, Walidâd's sister! I did but welcome him; I did but my duty--I did but show my manners--I did but what we have done from generation to generation." He moved away muttering, full of virtuous resentment that a suspicion of anything save sheer servility should have been imputed to him. After a lifetime of trucklings and bootblackings, to be credited with higher motives was too bad. To prove his innocence he would that very evening, he told himself, seek out Roshan, not at the Fort--that might be misunderstood--but at his grandmother's. His grandmother, who, though she had been upstart Walidâd's wife, was still the late Nawab's half-sister! His sister!! What could be nearer than that!!!

And he would prostrate himself again, and assure the family of his services. *That* was his birthright.

Meanwhile Gu-gu looked after him, and laughed. He was a clever fellow, was Gu-gu, and in a previous generation of scholars had been pet pupil in a little school started by another Miss from another *Missen*. He had got pennies for attending it, which had come in useful before he was big enough to face the river.

But now he was the best man on either the Hara or the Hari, save one. And he?

Gu-gu's beady black eyes, watching the curve of the current mechanically, gave a sudden flash. He was on his feet in a second. There was something dipping, diving, sidling, drifting, out yonder which might be secured for his wigwam before anyone else saw it! But as, silently, like a seal's, his black head came up from his first forge under water which was to give him a fair start from the shore without even a splash to attract notice, another black head showed to the right of him, a yard or two behind.

But it was *his* head! Am-ma's head! Am-ma, the frog-like, Am-ma, whose wide hands and feet looked as if webbed in the water. Am-ma, the only man who could touch him. He set his teeth, gave up silence, and surged ahead with an overhand stroke, his hand seeming to clutch and hold the water. It was a faster stroke than Am-ma's; for a time the swifter. Then with a backward glance he drew a quick breath, knowing it would be a race indeed, for the black head had gone, and only a faint wale on the smooth water told where his rival, avoiding the slight resistance of the air, swam like a fish. Dangerous tactics for most men, ending often in a sudden collapse, bleedings from nose and ears, or, at least, time lost in coming to the surface. But Am-ma was not as other men. Half-witted, except in river lore, uncouth, misshapen, he was practically

amphibious.

Gu-gu ground his teeth impotently as the faint wale crept up and up. The man must have air in his stomach like a fish! Ah! if the river had been in flood, if this had been a race with air bladders, indeed,--one black head of inflated skin under each arm, and your own in the middle--the issue would have been certain; for no one, in the whole tribe, knew the backward rip of a knife from below which would leave a rival helpless, lopsided, bound to seek safety on shore, so well as Gu-gu! But it was not flood time, so he must risk all. Like a porpoise at play the curve of his dark back disappeared, and now there were two wales upon the water side by side.

And ahead, sidling, dipping, diving to the current was a deodar log with the broad arrow of government on it, now visible, now out of sight.

It was a question of steering; steering without eyes, steering by instinct, steering by sheer experience of logs and their ways, of the meeting currents of the two rivers and their ways.

And over against them, to the right across the broad lagoon, were low brick buildings, and a horde of fifteen hundred ruffians with fascines and earth-baskets finishing a dam that was to alter the currents, and protect the canal! They looked like swarming ants in the sunshine.

The wales were neck and neck now, side by side, straight as a die on the log. Then suddenly, the right-hand one swerved outward. Only a yard or two; a yard or two nearer to the ants in the sunshine.

A second after the log swerved also--swerved to the right. The next, two black heads rose silently; but one of them was two yards to the left of that dancing, dipping prize!

Gu-gu, breathless as he was, gave an inarticulate cry of rage, and shook his fist at the swarming ants. Already their work was altering the currents he had known for so long. That it was possible to allow for this, as Am-ma had done, did not comfort him. He swam back sulkily, his wrath increased by the knowledge one glance had given him, that the log on which his rival was paddling to shore triumphantly bore its broad arrow so lightly, and so near its end, that a little dexterous manipulation would have left the runaway unmarked, and so given its captor the right, not merely of ransom, but of sale!

Truly, it was an ill world for the poor!

But Lance Carlyon laughed, as he lounged over his early tea and watched the river through his field-glass, in a balcony of the fort, dressed in a gorgeous ring-streaked sleeping suit which he could only wear when on outpost duty, as the regiment had tabooed it. In truth it made him not unlike Tom Sawyer's "Royal Nonsuch."

"The little 'un's got it! I say! Dering, I believe I shall like Eshwara. It's--it's--new--don't you know." His eyes rested, as he spoke, on the low, bastioned building, all hemmed in by temple spires, at the very point of the city's triangle, which Erda Shepherd had told him was the mission house. Truly, he thought, she was in the thick of it!

"New!" echoed Vincent Dering captiously, "I should have called it old. I thought that sort of thing had died with the pagoda tree."

"What sort of thing?"

Vincent nodded towards the palace with an odd, cynical laugh. "That; it's ghostly. Doesn't belong to the nineteenth century!"

Lance turned curiously. "I said that to--to Pidar Narâyan--I can't call him anything else, somehow--when he was showing me over yesterday. And--you know that inscrutable smile of his--he just pointed up to the telegraph wires--they go right across the garden you know--and said, 'There is half the news of half the world over our heads, anyhow.' It knocked me over, I tell you, to think of it; and by Jove! Dering, next week when the Lord-*sahib* comes--"

Vincent Dering laughed boisterously. "There'll be the millennium, of course. Come along, Lance! It's time we were off to prepare his way. Dashwood wants it done A1. They are going to lay on electric light, and all that. By the way, Mrs. Smith told me to tell you she expected you to breakfast."

Ten minutes afterwards they were riding over the boat bridge to superintend the laying out of the Vice-regal camp against the coming of the Lord-*sahib* and his hosts.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER-CURRENTS

Mumtâza Mahal, Roshan Khân's grandmother, lived in a queer little backwater of a house which had eddied itself away from the main stream of the town, and jammed itself against a wall of the palace as if seeking dignity thereby. For all that it belonged irredeemably to the city, and to its evil-smelling lanes. The word house, however, is misleading to western ears, since this was simply a well-like courtyard, with a great wooden bed set in the centre under a miserable attempt at a tree which was used as a clothes-peg, a rack for saucepans, and a variety of other domestic purposes. It fulfilled them to the perfect satisfaction of its proprietress, a roundabout old lady, plump as a button-quail, who, when she was not asleep inside the arcaded slip of a room on one side, passed her time on the bed in the scanty shade, keeping company with a sausage-roll of a pillow and a quilt, both covered in faded, greasy silk. As a rule she did nothing save eat *pân*; though sometimes, as a favour to Erda Shepherd, who came to read to her once a week, she would give a few more stitches to a knitted comforter which never seemed to get any longer. It had been begun, indeed, under the auspices of another "Miss," who had returned to England only to die, as so many do, from exposure, and overwork, and homesickness. For the rest, Mumtâza was an arrogant, yet good-natured old soul, who, despite those tears on her wedding-day, had kept dissolute Walidâd under her thumb, and his son also. Therefore, it was one of her pet grievances--and she had many--that Roshan, her grandson, should have defied her authority and entered the army. The great standing grievance, however, was that the "*pinson*" she received from Government because her husband had been deported with the Nawab to Calcutta, was not so large as one received by a neighbour and gossip whose husband had been hanged in the mutiny! The two old ladies came to loggerheads over their respective claims once a month, regularly, when pay-day came round; Mumtâza asserting shrilly that to die in a strange country was more painful than hanging, Ashrâf-un-nissa contending roundly that if Walidâd had had as much respectful affection for his widow as her husband had had for his, he could easily have caused himself to be hanged; since he had certainly deserved it.

Whereat there would be war, until some one in the alley, or round the corner did something outrageous,--threw slops over some one, or had twins, or imported a new mother-in-law! Then, friendly discussion becoming a necessity of life, the big wooden bed would once more hold two old ladies, two roly-poly bolsters, two quilts--also two tongues! But these confined themselves, for a time, to lesser grievances; such as the general decadence of the age, manifested by the reluctance of young people to obey the old.

There was, however, no sign of displeasure in the reception prepared for Roshan, when one afternoon, immediately after his arrival at Eshwara, he appeared to prostrate himself at the feet of age; at least so he had said in his letter of intimation. Mumtâza Mahal knew her duty towards men-folk better than to show temper at once; knew also the suffocating effect of ceremonials. So the tarnished treasures of past state had been dug out of the mounds of litter heaped up in all four corners of the arcaded room, and set about the courtyard. An old elephant-housing covered the wooden bed, and to it Roshan was conducted: his grandmother, despite her best green satin trousers, squatting below, on a mat.

The young soldier felt and looked thoroughly uncomfortable. Out of sheer funk of the old lady's remarks if he had appeared in his usual *mufti* of English tweed and a close-fitting turban, he had reverted to the airy muslins and embroidered smoking-caps of his forbears. He felt chilly, barely decent in them; and, indeed, the whole environment was absolutely repugnant to him. His grandmother's tramways could scarcely be otherwise to one who had gone ahead by express train like Roshan Khân. Thoroughly well-educated, he knew himself to be considered one of the smartest native officers in the army. A first-class polo player, a fair cricketer, able to handle cue and racket, and without equal at the foils, he had for years met Englishmen on equal terms in sporting matters. What wonder, then, that he sat looking inexpressibly bored beside the *hookah* which was the pride of his grandmamma's heart, in that it had belonged to many dead and gone Nawabs? He was simply longing for the solace of a smoke, yet he did not dare to use the silver cigarette case with his initials, "R.K." on it, which Lance Carlyon had given him at Christmas in return for the fencing lessons. Fortunately, however, boredom and yawns are correct during visits of ceremony, so Mumtâza Mahal crossed her little fat hands over her little fat green-trouser legs, and told herself the lad was improved in both manners and looks; was distinctly more like her brother, the late and sainted Nawab. The fact emphasized her regret that, after a brilliant career in a mission school, a career which must have led to a minor clerkship, her grandson should have taken the unheard-of course of entering the army! If he could even have gone as the Nawab's grand-nephew, with a dozen troopers or so as following, it might have been bearable; but, as Walidâd's extraction barred all claim to noble descent, enlistment meant something very different. The old lady, accustomed to obedience all round, when the dreadful defiance had occurred, ten years before, had called the stars to witness that it was all--that everything was--Pidar Narâyan's fault! And then she had fallen a-whimpering, knowing right well that but for the latter's intercession, she herself would have had no "*pinson*"; since Government

bars those who can be proved to be personally implicated in evil doings. And now, as she sat looking at her grandson, the same conflicting estimates made her irritable. Why had Pidar Narâyan ever put his finger in the Eshwara pie? Yet, without him, where would they all have been? Still, he need not have taught the lad to fence, and so turned him into a mean, common soldier.

Now, whether this was true, whether his skill with the foils had turned Roshan's thoughts towards a fighting life, or whether it was simply the result of natural aptitudes that way, the choice of professions had been wise. His Colonel--of the old school though he was--had admitted, when pressed, that the young Mahomedan, *given practice*, might be able to lead the regiment as well as a fresh-joined English subaltern. The newer school, again, playing the *Krieg spiel* against him at Simla, and finding itself in grips with a genuine gift for tactics, had shaken its head and confessed the hardship of such a talent being barred from finding its proper level. Still it was impossible to legislate for exceptions without upsetting the every-day army apple-cart.

Roshan himself, being sensible--above all, being of a nation which accepts limitations as a law of God--was, as a rule, satisfied with his future *risaldar* majorship, and, if he was lucky, *Aide-de-Camp to the Queen*, and a few other titles tacked on to it. Like all natives of India he lived largely on the approbation of his immediate superiors, and this he had without stint; besides, his whole line of thought had become too military for any subversion of rule and discipline to seem desirable.

Yet the curb made itself felt sometimes; never more keenly than at his grandmother's scornful look, when, in reply to her catechising, he named his income.

"Only that! *Bâh!* Tis the pay of a coolie!"

"Tis the pay of my rank, anyhow," he replied sulkily, "and I cannot expect promotion yet; the rules--"

She wagged her be-veiled, be-jewelled head cunningly. "Rules! What have rules to do with favour, either for men or women? Lo! thy grand-uncle, the Nawab, gave twice that to a coachman who had one eye black and the other blue because he fancied him! So, if thou art in favour, as thou sayest, ask for more. The *Huzoors* will give it, sooner than lose thee."

Roshan did not attempt explanation; he simply evaded the point by asserting that the pay was sufficient for his wants. In a way it was an unfortunate remark, since it precipitated the lecture lurking in the old lady's mind.

"And for the wife's that is to come?" she asked, not without dignity--the dignity of age reminding youth that its turn for duty has come. "And for the son's that has yet to be born? Why are these old arms still empty of thy children, Roshan?"

He had his answer ready; one that had hitherto baulked even the matrimonial desires of his mother, who, having gone to live with her own people, was backed up by sisters and sisters-in-law.

"Because the Most High decreed freedom for wife and son."

It was true. The wife found for him as a boy had died in child-birth.

But Mumtâza had made up her mind to refuse this excuse any longer. Matters were getting desperate. Here was Roshan past thirty, and never a child's voice to soothe the passion which seems to come back, vicariously, to Indian women in their old age. She had been brooding over an appeal ever since she had heard that, after ten years' absence, the lad was once more to be within reach of her tongue. So she edged closer to him, an almost pathetic authority in her face.

"That is but the skin of the orange, Roshan; I take not that as a gift! There be more wives than one, if the one die, even for the *Huzoors* whom thou apest. Nay! Light of the house! frown not," she continued, in sudden alarm at his look. "I did but mean that thou wert different from thy fathers. How canst help it? Think not the old woman cannot understand. Was I not young once? Was I not wedded with tears to thy grandfather--on whom be peace! So I know the heart hath fancies, and thine--listen while I whisper it--is--is for a wife like a *mem!* Wherefore not? Thou hast seen and talked with them--they have seemed better to thee than a cow of a black girl! What then? Have not *mems* married our people ere now? And with thee,"--she looked round quickly, to be certain of privacy, then leant closer still,--"with thee it would be easy--for there is thy cousin."

"My cousin?" he echoed stupidly.

"Yea! thy cousin, when all is said and done," she repeated, with faint scorn. "Is not the Miss at the palace Anâri Begum's granddaughter? Was not Anâri Begum thy grandfather's sister? If that is not cousin, what is it?"

He had known these facts before, of course, but they had never presented themselves to him in this connection. Yet they came instantly, accredited by custom. His cousin; if so, his wife, if he chose, almost by right. And yet from custom also, he--too sensible not to have gauged the vast difference between his position as regards Englishmen, and his position as regarded their wives,

sisters, mothers--was conscious of distinct revolt. "Thou shouldst not say such things," he exclaimed almost angrily; "the Miss-*sahib*--"

"Miss-*sahib* indeed!" interrupted Mumtâza with a forced giggle. "Who knows she is that? Not even Pidar Narâyan."

"Wherefore?" asked Roshan coldly. "Her mother was Bonaventura-*sahib*'s child and heir. That is certain; else the Government would not have continued the grants given to him by the Nawab."

An expression of infinite cunning crossed the old lady's face; she tucked another budget of *pân* into her cheek, preparatory to a lengthy explanation.

"Not if it was payment for evidence given, by which Government could find excuse for seizing the rest, and sending innocent people to die in Calcutta? Thou knowest the tale, Roshan? How Pidar Narâyan said no word when everyone was searching, after Bun-avatâr's death, for Anâri Begum, who had disappeared, and how, when the land was being taken, he appeared with a baby, a baptized baby, and swore it was Bun-avatâr's lawful heir--that he himself had married them. Mayhap he did. But, look you, Anâri was in the palace *zenâna* ere she disappeared. Who is to say she is not thy cousin twice over?... I say not that she is, look you, but who can tell. Yet this is certain, Roshan; she hath Anâri Begum's eyes. For I have seen her; but a month ago the Miss who reads brought her, not knowing of these tales; for Pidar Narâyan keeps a silent tongue. Her name is Laila,^[3] and thine Roshan.^[4] Is not that a fate? and she hath thy grand-aunt's eyes; ay! and thy grandfather's land too; for would it not have been Walidâd's, if Bun-avatâr had not ousted him from the *wazeer*-ship with singing birds?"

Roshan Khân stood up feeling as if he was being suffocated. It was ten years since he had had experience of the fine-drawn meshes of vague, almost useless, conspiracy for which Indian women have such vast capability; it was ten years since, with eyes open to his own advantage, he had cast in his lot loyally with the Government he served. In that time there had not been wanting--there never is in India--others, less scrupulous, ready to trade on his connection with a dispossessed family, and his possible sense of injustice. He had known how to treat them. But this idea bit shrewdly at a feeling which men of his stamp have inevitably--the desire for a wife more suitable to their own culture than they can hope to find among their own people. He gave an uneasy laugh. "These be dreams, indeed, grandmother. To begin with, Pidar Narâyan--"

"Pidar Narâyan! Pidar Narâyan!" echoed the old diplomatist tartly, "Art turned Hindoo, that thou dost count Narâyan^[5] the Creator of all?" Then she suddenly clapped her hands together in absolute impatience and anger. "Yet is it true. He *is* the cause of all! But for him Bun-avatâr would have been as an over-fried fritter, a burst bladder, a drum on a hen's back! But for his teaching thee to fence--"

A quick frown came to her hearer's face. "Teaching! Ay! but only enough to make me fit for his skill to play with. I know that now. Well! let him try it again--" Roshan's sudden fierceness died down to sombre discontent--"but that is fool's talk. He is too old. I could not meet him on equal terms." He drew himself up proudly; yet he felt a vague regret at his own acquired sense of fair play. Below it lay a savagery that could rejoice in revenge at any price, and Mumtâza Mahal, watching him, thought him still more like his ancestors, and nodded approvingly.

"Think of it, at least, Roshan," she said, "and remember that it is not as if the girl were a real *mem*. Pidar Narâyan, for all he is so clever, was put to it to find a husband for the mother, the baptized baby! He took a poor creature from Martin's school at Lucknow, at last, who could not even speak English like a *Huzoor*--"

"Because he was Italian and a Catholic," put in Roshan, then shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "But thou canst not understand. 'Tis impossible! Dreams, grandmother, dreams!"

"Dreams come true even when forgotten, and torchbearers never see their own way," retorted the old lady, ending the discussion with proverbial wisdom as a clincher. "So think of it, since thoughts cost nothing, and tell no tales."

Roshan felt as if they did the former at any rate, as he strode back toward the fort, telling himself he would feel better when he had on his uniform once more. This was his *metier*, not marriage. The best soldiers, the really great soldiers--he paused, the knowledge that he could never rise to real greatness coming to make him clench his right hand as if on his sword-hilt. The tempest of revolt which swept through him left him dazed, for he had reasoned the matter out with himself thoroughly, and thought he had accepted the situation, thought that he had realized that his dignity in the regiment under the present system went side by side, and not behind, that of the English officers. Yet here he was at the mercy of something too strong for acquired wisdom. He walked on faster to escape into a more wholesome environment, and by sheer force of will succeeded in driving away all thought of the past interview save a triviality. That was the remembrance that her name was Laila, his Roshan. Light and Darkness, Day and Night. A fate indeed.

As he passed into the courtyard, however, on his way to the door in the river bastion, a group in its centre, round the old gun, brought his attention back to realities, and he went towards it, his slipper-shod feet making no martial clank, this time, on the union-jack of raised paths. The

group consisted of half a dozen or so of men listening to something which was being declaimed, with much gesticulation, by an ash-smearing *jogi*, whose wide-pierced ears, distended by conch-shell rings, and transverse bar of white on his forehead, showed him to belong to the sect which claims to have transcendental powers.

Apparently he had been making the claim, for a young man, whose costume smacked of Western culture, and whose face was acute, litigious, interrupted him impatiently.

"Yea, yea; possibly thou couldst come over the obstruction, Gorakh-nâth-*jee*; but the question is whether the obstruction be legal. Is it not so, Lala Ramanund?"

Lala Ramanund, whose dress was even more Western, and who had a certain air of distinction, due, evidently, to position, assented; adding, as a rider, and with some contempt, that at present they had only *jogi* Gorakh-nâth's word that any interference was intended.

Gorakh-nâth, a tall, muscular man, naked save for his grass-rope girdle, his wild hair twined and twisted to a tiara, his wild, half-insane eyes telling of drugs, shot a glance of absolute defiance at Ramanund. "Thy name, *pundit-jee*, is not likely to give friendly witness to mine," he began, alluding to the fact that they were respectively called after the founders of their absolutely antagonistic sects, "and yet methinks thou couldst, seeing--"

Here Dya Ram, the first speaker, alarmed in his lawyer's soul at the militant tone of the *jogi*, suggested hastily that they might inquire, say at the gate; or stay! there was the *risaldar* coming; he must know.

Once more, as he listened to the question put to him, the expression of his race and creed came to Roshan's face, hiding its culture.

"Of a certainty!" he replied haughtily. "The gun belongs to the Fort. It is not to be used as a shelter for--for saints!" His contempt was palpable.

"I deny your premise," put in Dya Ram eagerly. "The gun is the people's by prescriptive right. I can use it if I choose. The Government professes neutrality; therefore, no one has a right to interfere with my religion."

Roshan's face was a study. "Lo! Dya Ram, for thou art my old class-fellow surely, hast gone back to the old beliefs since the days when thou didst sign thyself at the end of thy essays, and in thy books, 'Dya Ram, Agnostic'?"

Dya Ram gave an uneasy cough. "It is a question of legality--" he began.

"And of money also," put in a new voice cringingly. "The pilgrims come hither to see the saint, and then bathe. But if there is no saint, many will not come, and I, who have my right on the steps as marker of the caste marks--"

"Right!" echoed the Mahomedan curtly. "Have a care, caste-marker, lest we do not claim the courtyard also."

Here Ramanund, who had hitherto listened indifferently, took up the cudgels. "That can scarcely be, *risaldar-sahib*," he said; "our pious folk have come hither to perform their offices since time began."

Gorakh-nâth turned on him at once. "Not so, *Vaishnava!*" he said. "Thou and thine know naught of the Beginning of Things. Come to us and Holy Shiv-*jee* for that! Thou art as far from the great wisdom as he"--here he pointed wildly to Roshan--"yea! further, despite thy pretence of purity! Despite thy hunger yesterday when, returning to thy lost faith, thou didst come here to eat as the twice-born should, and a shadow fell upon thy food! Despite thy deafness to this world just now,"--here he laughed jeeringly,--"which kept thee back from bearing witness to my truth, to the truth of Shiv-*jee's* servant!"

Dya Ram looked at him, then at Ramanund perplexedly. "What means he?" he said aside. "Didst thou really come hither?"

"My wife was dying," replied Ramanund in a low, rapid undertone, "and I--you understand--there--there is nothing certain, you see--and any chance--one goes back at such times--" he broke off almost desperately in his confession.

Dya Ram, who had signed himself Agnostic, nodded. He understood what it was to be rudderless in a familiar current, and came to the rescue of his friend's consistency by asserting that any such decision regarding the gun, if one had been made, would certainly be disputed. That he and his--though they demurred to its being counted against them for faith in the worshipping of mere matter--would, if necessary, carry the case to the High Court.

"Carry it to the Court of thy god Indra, if need be, Dya Ram," retorted Roshan, and as he strode off he spat deliberately in the dust. That also surprised him faintly, for he had thought he had learnt tolerance of the *Huzoors*. So, with a frown and yet with relief, he put his hand on the latch which would open the way back to a less disturbing environment. As he did so, another

hand was on it also. The door opened from within, and Father Ninian stood on the threshold barring it; but barring it with smiles.

"Ah! my pupil," he said in English. "I have been listening to your praises from Captain Dering, and from Mr. Carlyon too. He says you are the best fencer in the army. You and I must cross foils again sometime, eh, my pupil?"

Roshan, as he stepped aside elaborately to let the old man pass, drew himself up and saluted.

"If you please, sir; but I have learnt new things since--since those days."

His tone made Father Ninian pause to look at him for an instant; then he replied, "And I have not forgotten the old; that makes us equal."

Roshan gave a little hard laugh as he went in; if the old man liked to think so, let him.

But Father Ninian's face as he passed--a black shadow in the sunshine--across the level steps leading down to the river wore a wistful smile. Old and new, he thought. New and old. Senseless, useless words, fit only for humanity to juggle dreams from, since no man knew the unseen beginning, knew the unseen end; knew even his own birth and death. In the endless band of life, naught came first, naught last, and the things of to-day might be old, the things of yesterday might be new.

"*Margherita!*"

The name came soundless to the priest's lips, and a quick flush of youth, and hope, and joy seemed to smooth away the wrinkles of his face. A faint laugh, a happy laugh, went further towards a hearing than the name. It was sixty years ago, nearly, since he had left her. An old story indeed, and yet how new. The new wine of it ran in his old veins, thrilled to his old brain, and took him back absolutely to a palazzo on the outskirts of Rome, with the pale flood of the Tiber flowing beneath a marble loggia. He had never looked on running water since without remembrance, and now--his feet having led him unconsciously to the river's edge--he stood smiling at the pale flood of the Hari. For he knew that he had fought a good fight, that he had kept the promise he had made in order to still her soul; that he had kept her boy, Pietro Bonaventura, so far as he could, from harm, and his child, and his child's child, gathering them as lambs into the arms of Holy Church.

And then something in the last thought drove the tender human smile from his face. He murmured a "*Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,*" bent to the stream, and dipping his fingers in it, crossed himself.

"May Shiv-jee's blessing go with his holy water, *Baba-jee,*" said a voice behind him. It was Gorakh-nâth the *jogi*, who, his sympathizers having departed, had come to fill his gourd.

Father Ninian turned; so for a space they stood face to face; representatives of the two great supernaturalisms of the world; the one which has held the West, the one which has held the East.

The old man's face, at first, returned to kindly human tolerance; for his fifty years of Eshwara had widened his sympathies. But, as he stood before the *jogi* it hardened, and the priestly arrogance of the naked ash-smear'd figure, stretching a right hand in claim over the sanctifying power of the river, was reflected in Father Ninian's as he spread his left hand upwards, and turned on his heel with the words, "*Vade retro Satanas!*"

CHAPTER V

THE "DEE-PUK-RÂG"

"You are tired to death as it is--why should you fuss any more over a pack--"

"Ssh! sir; don't talk rubbish. I am all right; and Eugene is so anxious everything should be a success that I must. Besides I--I like it."

Mrs. Walsall Smith sent the hostess' gathering smile round her long luncheon table, and rose. So did Vincent Dering, who had sat at her right hand--a position due to his rank as commandant of Eshwara--and, as he did, he drew his chair aside to let the girl on his left pass, with his usual

somewhat *voyant* courtesy, though it was only Laila Bonaventura. He had met her several times during the past few days, and the effect which her singing had made on him had vanished before her general failure to interest him in the least. And to-day she actually wore a blue sash! In addition she had filled up the time between her monosyllables in methodically crumbling her bread and ranging the results in a pattern, until the inanity of it had got on his nerves, and he had felt inclined to beg her to desist.

And yet, as in passing her black eyes looked into his with one curious yet comprehensive flash, a memory of the extreme regularity of the curves and lines which had annoyed him, made him--quite irrelevantly--wonder hastily if he could have said anything to Muriel which--

He broke off in his own thought impatiently, and gave an apologetic glance after Mrs. Walsall Smith's fragile figure. There never was anything, never! Never a word said, never a deed done, which all the world--even Eugene Smith himself--might not hear and know. Vincent Dering felt a pulse of sheer virtue as he looked down the long table at his host, with the vague irritation which the possessors of women often arouse in those who are not their possessors. For Muriel Smith's half-playful, half-wistful rejection of sympathy had held that faint hint of dutiful martyrdom which seems so purely angelic to selfish man--unless he happens to be the wretch who inflicts it!

Curious, he thought; Eugene wasn't much of a gentleman, but he wasn't a bad sort, and he was fond of his wife, in a way. Yet he was blind to the fact that Muriel was not fit to go trapesing about his blessed old canal works with the pack of *padrés* and people he had got together to do honour to his skill. She would do it, of course, and get through with it, too! Here he helped himself to a glass of sherry, and felt incoherently that she was the dearest and best woman in the world--the one woman in the world, so far as he was concerned.

As he sat between those two empty chairs where those two women, so absolutely unlike, had fenced him in on either side, a faint wonder tinged his virtue in comparing the last three years with the time before it.

If anyone had told him, then, that he would write every day to a woman and expect her to write to him without a word or a deed--

"Please, Dering-darlin'," said an imperious small voice, "mum wants 'oo, 'tos pup'll go off, she says, wis' all a gemplemen, an' she wants 'oo to go off wis' a ladies!"

"All right, little 'un," he laughed gladly, finishing his sherry at a gulp, and, ere catching the little mite in his arms, giving himself that smartening pull together which was so characteristic of the man.

He looked very handsome, very happy, as he came up, with Gladys shaking her curls at him in outrageous flirtation.

"How kind!" said Muriel. "I don't know what I should do without you."

That was all; but it sent him off in absolute content to tackle the stoutest lady in the room.

"If *you* make the move, Mrs. Campbell," he said diplomatically, "everyone will follow, and I know Mrs. Smith is anxious we should start, as it will take some time to go round."

"Ay! that it will!" assented the good lady in a mournful Scotch accent. "'Deed if it were not for Dr. James--" she glanced fearfully at a tall man in a black frock coat--a man whose patriarchal beard had once been red and was now the colour of a carpet whisk--who was buttonholing Father Ninian; the latter, with his straight slenderness, looking almost youthful beside the other's burly bulk.

"I wouldn't go if I didn't want to," put in a sharp-featured lady who belonged to another black frock coat--a small one. "You spoil the doctor, Mrs. Campbell. As I tell *my* husband, I yield to him in spiritual matters--the mission, you know, and all that; but when it comes to realities--the housekeeping, and what we are to eat, and do, and that sort of thing--that is my province."

Mrs. Campbell turned her fat good-natured face on her neighbour's placidly. "Ay, my dear; but ye didn't promise to be a wife to Dr. James, an' I did. So, Captain Dering, if you can find my niece--"

"Miss Shepherd is quite safe, Mrs. Campbell. Carlyon's looking after her," interrupted Vincent, feeling another spasm of sheer virtue. He had seen the two sitting together at lunch, apparently interested in each other, and he had noticed how Lance, on entering the drawing-room, had made his way straight to those coils of red-bronze hair which had a trick of being the most conspicuous point in any group of which they formed part. So Lance would enjoy himself simply; he would not have to gain pleasure in complex fashion by dragging about a *posse* of uninteresting old ladies, for the sake of a lady who was neither. Vincent's face had a bored look as he began his task by piloting his charge into the verandah, and so on into the open.

It was hot work crossing the stretch of sand which lay between the bungalow and the red brick abutments of the canal head; but once there, with the broad still basin of the united rivers before you, a cool breeze blew pleasantly from that blue barrier of hills with the gold-spiked

temples of Eshwara enamelled against it, and a soft white mist hiding the feet of the far-distant snows; so hiding the "Cradle of the Gods! The floods had gone, however, and so had the robe of righteousness. The sandbanks lay bare, of the earth, earthy. The logs, too, were no longer dipping and dancing in the currents. Some were piled criss-cross on the spit, awaiting ransomers, and a few lay like straight shadows, half in, half out of the receding water.

"A log! not a bit of it!" said someone, stooping for a stone. "Look!"

The missile fell far short of the low streak of sand and shadow, but did its work. The shadow disappeared, as a bottle-nosed alligator slipped silently into the stream. Most eyes watched it, but Lance Carlyon's turned to Erda Shepherd. He had only met her once, casually, when he was out fishing on the spit, since the day when Father Ninian had introduced them, and they had seen something else in the river that was also not a log.

"Do you remember," he began impulsively, "the first time we met?"

A shadow slipped into her limpid bronze eyes also. "Certainly," she interrupted coldly. "It is not so very long ago--is it?"

She had fenced with his assumption of friendliness more than once already; feeling vexed with herself, the while, that she should do so. Since what did it matter? However much she might regret--and she had regretted with foolish unseen blushes as she had lain awake at night wondering what had possessed her--the almost indecent unveiling of realities in that first five minutes, she could not undo it. Besides, she had told herself, he had in all probability forgotten it in polo, and partridge-shooting, fishing, and such things.

But he had not, apparently; and he parried her fence with a still more friendly laugh.

"I didn't mean that, of course; but we won't talk of it, if you'd rather not. It isn't a very Mark Tapleyish subject, is it, for an afternoon party?"

The blush was to be seen this time. "So I have been thinking myself, Mr. Carlyon, ever since last Wednesday," she began, still more coldly, "and I am sorry--"

He interrupted her quite cavalierly. "I didn't mean that, either, and you know I didn't. However, we'll leave it alone. So you're not coming to the ball! Do you know, I think it's an awful pity; I'm sure you'd dance beautifully."

She felt outraged, in a way, and yet she smiled. He seemed so much younger than she was. Younger; but stronger and more vital. That calm assertion, too, that she knew she was playing feminine tricks with him, had been manly and dignified to quite a crushing degree. She could not help being at once meek and indulgent.

"I don't dance, Mr. Carlyon," she said quietly; adding, as a rider and salve to her conscience, "I--I think it wrong."

"I thought you might," he returned, evidently pleased at his own acumen, "but I don't see it that way. Of course if--if you go in for those ideas, you know, you can make it seem--well--awful low; but I--" he paused before even a possible sounding of his own trumpet--"you see I think it's awfully jolly; besides, it's such ripping good exercise, and I have to be careful, I tell you, not to put on flesh. I ride thirteen-four, as it is." His face grew grave over the confession.

"Is that much?" she said, her eyes caught and held by the splendid figure beside her. "You are very tall, surely." There was almost a pride in her tone, certainly a tenderness.

He shook his head. "Not so tall as my people are generally. We Carlyons run to size. My uncle, Sir Lancelot's, six-three, and his son is six-four; but he's a bit weedy. So when you're only six-one and a half you can't afford to wax fat; you've got to keep the body in subjection. That's right, isn't it?" His pride in his Scriptural knowledge made it impossible for her to be stern, though she felt she ought to be.

"Quite right, Mr. Carlyon," she assented, hurriedly, "but see! the others have gone on, and I don't want to miss--She stumbled, in her haste to end the tête-à-tête, on a loose brick, and for an instant was over-near the edge of the abutment.

"Take care!" he said, his hand on hers to give support; a cool, strong hand, with an insistence in its clasp which seemed to single her out from the world to stand so, hand fast in hand. "You were very nearly over that time," he said, smilingly, as he released her. "Now let's come on, or, as you say, we shall be too late for the fair. Smith's going to show off his electric light in the tents, you know."

Perhaps it was the slip which had made her dizzy, but she walked beside him feeling as if she were in a dream. And, in truth, the scene which grew upon them as they went on had a strange unearthliness and unreality. She paused, and gave a little gasp of pleasure and surprise. "It seems impossible!" she said. "A week ago, when I was here, it was all sand, sand; and now--"

Her eyes met the wide, flower-set walks, the stately white palaces of the Vice-regal camp with

absolute incredulity. "Did you do all this?" she asked, doubtfully. "Why, you've made a new world!" She felt inwardly as if he had, somehow, for her.

"Oh! Vincent did a lot of the decorations, you know. He's that sort. We--my fellows, I mean, and Dillon's gaol-birds--dug, and did the dirty work. But it looks all right, doesn't it?"

It did, indeed,--absolutely and entirely all right. So white, so straight, so disciplined; even to the very twist on the tent ropes.

"That peg's out of line," said Lance, pausing suddenly. "Here, sergeant!"

A following had gathered in their rear, bringing up the little procession of Englishmen and women, with a knot of dark faces, and from it a man in dust-coloured drill stepped, and saluted.

"Two inches, or, say, an inch and a half." Erda caught so much in the order given as she walked on.

Two inches, or, say, an inch and a half! No more than that wrong in this dream city; and over yonder? Her eyes travelled past the snowdrift of the camp, rising against the blue background of wide water, to Eshwara, rising against its background of blue hill.

"I thought so; a good inch and a half," said Lance exultantly, coming up with measured strides. "It makes a lot of difference though."

She looked at him critically. Older by some months than he, full of strong character, almost overfull of strong convictions, she was yet--as women must be until experience of work-a-day life teaches them, as it has taught men, the value of subordination--curiously undisciplined, curiously lawless. And this striving after uniformity impressed her.

"I suppose you learn that sort of thing in the army," she said, with a new respect.

He laughed. "I should think so; buttons and bootlaces all to pattern. It's an awful bore, but it keeps things going. Now, here we are! Now, you can see properly."

They stood in the centre of the camp, in front of the huge *durbar* tent, that wandering throne of an empire fixed and immovable as the stars. In front of them, rising out of a wilderness of roses, blossoming where nothing but sand had shown since the primeval sea receded from the hills, was the flag of that empire, its folds drooping round the mast. And beyond it, past the two brass guns pointing down the long vista, was an avenue of palms, bordered by green grass and beds of flowers, and intersected by broad paths leading back to the solid white squares of the tents. At the farther end, a quarter of a mile or more from the flagstaff, a triumphal arch at the entrance showed, until the palm-leaves cut it short, a legend:

"WELCOME TO THE LORD----"

and above it, far at the feet of those distant snows, lay that wreath of white mist hiding the "Cradle of the Gods."

Erda's eyes travelled to it, and from it to the other vistas, similar yet smaller, stretching to the right and left of her. Then to the orderly rows on rows of tents, looking like solid blocks of marble behind her. The whole shut in from the world by a high white wall; still, silent, empty, waiting for the Hosts of the Lord. A snow-drift facing that mist-drift on the hills. And between them? Eshwara, and all that Eshwara held of evil and of good.

The dreaminess left her eyes, startled at a band of dark figures which at this moment appeared rounding the corner of a tent--figures in scanty striped clothing with a broad arrow on it; figures with shaven, close-capped heads and leg irons clanking, as their bare feet threaded through the flowers. And behind them, half-hidden, as ever, under his mushroom of a hat, came George Dillon. He had noticed, as he passed with the others, that the roses were flagging a bit under the hot sun, and had gone back to summon a fatigue party of his criminals to water them.

"Bring another go, *mate*," he ordered, as the gang, filing past the flagstaff, emptied their earthen pots; "then go back to the road. And be quick. There's no time to lose. The Lord-*sahib* comes to-morrow."

They obeyed with grins; and Dr. Dillon, as he paused beside Lance and Erda, looked after them approvingly. "They like this better than picking oakum, and I've had to set some of 'em to do that, now the digging's done. I shall be glad when this show's over, and we move on."

"Move! where?" asked Erda.

"Where there is work to be done, Miss Shepherd. Satan finds mischief, you know, especially with his own hands." He paused and smiled. "They're a queer lot. Do you know some of them are in a blind funk because they think a percentage of them have to be sacrificed before the water will run." He grew grave again. "Poor devils!" he added, in a softer tone--"as if they hadn't paid tribute already. I lost over a hundred last year, what with pneumonia and malaria, but they don't

seem to count that--that is the will of the gods. But I say, hadn't you better be going into the tent if you want to see the light-up? Smith went off to his plant five minutes ago with his gang, so it's about time."

It was almost pitch dark in the huge tent, and as they slipped in through the closed portieres, Vincent Dering's voice called to them.

"Be quick, please; and, Carlyon, tell them to shut down the outer screens. We want to have a real flash-up, and I believe we are all here now."

Whether that was so or not Erda could not tell. The brief ray of light caused by their entrance had only shown her Captain Dering's figure beside his hostess, and given her a glimpse of Laila Bonaventura's white dress close by. So it was eerie, in a way, to wait in the darkness, knowing it to be full of people she knew; yet to have consciousness of nothing save their voices, since age, sex, position, even race, were alike awaiting this new light which was to make them manifest. Perhaps the eeriness struck her companions also, for the voices came clearly; not in a babel, but answering each other in the listening, waiting silence.

"We are all full of sparks, I assure you, Mrs. Campbell."

"I am weel aware o' it, Doctor Dillon; but it's too much like a brand snatched frae the burning to my taste; for Doctor James will have it--"

"Undoubtedly, my dear Ann. It appears to me, sir, and I trust it will to you, as a most interesting scientific fact, calculated to confound those who scoff at the possibility of eternal punishment in a fire that is not quenched--"

"Or to comfort those who believe in a cleansing one--who seek a place in the crown of stars about their Mother's head--who feel the flame of immortality." Its faint hesitancy betrayed this voice, as the dryness did the next.

"If I've got to generate my own heaven or hell, I prefer to pass; but if one could turn on a fifty-candlepower reflecting lamp during a *post mortem* or a bacillus hunt, it would be useful."

"Yes! Fancy being able to get up at night and see, at once, in all corners of the room if there were snakes!"

This brought a laugh till a fragile voice said plaintively, "That's just the worst of it. When one begins to see things too clearly, they are so apt to be nasty."

"That, my dear Madam, has always appeared to me as an additional argument against those who contend that Perfect Wisdom could not wisely have produced so imperfect a being as Man."

"Surely, Dr. Campbell," interrupted a tart voice, "the necessity for something on which to exercise our faith proves that; but then I am only a woman. I confine myself to realities."

"Then what a bore it would be if there were no delusions! By Jove! it would be dull. Who is it says the soul of man lies in his imagination?" Captain Dering's voice could not be mistaken.

"Just so--and nowhere else."

This came in an aside, and was followed in the same tone by the eager, hesitating voice. "Scoffer! When you men of Science spend your lives in listening--to the things which cannot be heard--looking for the things that cannot be seen-- Ah! doctor!--you can't impose on me. I know you--I have seen you."

The very darkness seemed abashed, and there was silence; till a new voice, young, full-throated, broke it. "But how can you tell if things are nasty till you have seen them--they may be nice. Ah-h-h!"

It had come like a creation, flooding all things with irresistible light.

A sort of sigh made itself heard; a sigh of vague relief. "By Jove!" said Captain Dering, "it will make a difference to the *durbar*. As a rule you can't see the diamonds and jewels; and they are half the show."

Palpably there could be no fear of that. To the uttermost corner of the vast tent, the pattern of its lining of shawls was visible; each boss on the parcel-gilt poles glittered and shone; the very legend round the arms of England above the Vice-regal chair stood out clear "*Dieu et mon droit*." And the expression on the two groups of dark faces, the one which had come by invitation to see, the other which had crept in at the further end, could not be mistaken. In the one, indifference struggled with curiosity; in the other assent was mingled with awe.

"What are they saying?" asked Lance, who, having come late, stood close to the latter group. "Something about *Dee-puk-râg*. What's that?"

Erda shook her head. "Father Ninian will know--he knows all these things--that is why they call him Pidar Narâyan, and let him do anything. Sometimes I wonder if it isn't the best way." The

last, spoken to herself, was interrupted by Father Ninian's echo.

"The *Dee-puk-râg!* Why, yes--of course!" He turned to the dark faces in sheer delight. "Yea! brothers!" he said in Hindustani, "ye are right! It is the *Dee-puk-râg*--the sign of kingship. Have I not told ye always that the Lord is with us--and with you?" Then he turned back to his other hearers: "It means the Song of Light--a charm--a spell which the great men of old knew. Is it not so, Ramanund?"

A half-reluctant voice from the invited replied, "The ignorant say so, sir."

A faintly sarcastic smile came to the fine old face. "And they believe its possession marks the born ruler of men--the God-sent guide; since, when it is sung, the light comes from the stars to help the world on its way--to dispel the darkness! Ah-h-h!"

It had gone! and in the black night which settled blankly on speaker and audience, a faint, far cry came from outside. More than one woman's voice echoed it with a little startled gasp of suspense.

"It is all right!" called Vincent Dering, "the thing is always popping in and out--I've seen it at Euston--it will come back directly." And then, in response to something he alone had heard, he whispered, "Don't be alarmed; Eugene will set it right in a moment--really--"

As he bent his head a scent of violets--the scent she always used--assailed him; and that half-heard appeal--"Oh, what is it, Vincent?" seemed still in his ears. Even in the darkness he knew she must be close to him. He felt the soft ruffle of the lace about her hand upon his wrist. It trembled, surely. Did it? Or was it only his own bounding pulse. A sudden imperious desire to know--to be certain--swept through him.

Then, with a sort of suffocating rush to heart and brain, came the knowledge that his clasp was answered by that small hand--so small, so clinging, so trustful--so dear--so absolutely dear--so dear!--so very dear!!

As he stood in the darkness, he knew that every mooring was gone, knew that this--this thing--would change--must change--the whole position. It was a light, indeed; a light showing the way--a different way! A sort of fierce exultation took possession of him. He knew, now, that he had been dreaming till then; that he had been blind.

"Ah! what a relief! That dreadful darkness was getting on my nerves," said a calm voice coming to him from out of the flood of white light which seemed to have rent their hands asunder.

Their hands--when she stood yonder? He turned, bewildered, to find a pair of grave black eyes fixed critically on him.

"I--I--he began.

"It doesn't matter," said Laila Bonaventura, with stolid indifference. "You thought it was her hand, of course. I quite understand."

Did she? Did--could--anyone? even he himself?

God! How content--how happy he had been--how certain--

"Dillon! Dillon! For God's sake, where's Dillon?" came an excited voice, as Eugene Smith burst into the tent, bringing the afternoon sunshine to war with that unearthly light. "Come along, man! There's been an accident in the workshop! I warned them not to touch--one--a mere boy--did. Got startled, I suppose, and fell over--onto the circular saw--it was going. His leg--I've tried a *tourniquet*, but I can't stop--"

The remainder was inaudible; the caller and the called, followed by Vincent, glad of any interruption to the intolerableness of his confusion, were already running as for dear life down the palm-set avenue towards the canal workshop outside the walls.

That it was for death, however, not life, Dr. Dillon saw at a glance; though, without a pause, he knelt down in the fateful, irresistible tide of life blood which was ebbing and flowing with such awful insistency, and set his teeth in fight.

Yet once he gave an upward glance to the long, low roof so full of driving bands and wheels and levers, so full of men's power, so empty of men's passion; and then a straight one to the circle of ignorant, awe-stricken, dark faces closing in round him. And as he did so, he muttered to himself:--

"I wouldn't have had this happen for a thousand pounds--and a high-caste man, too!"

Undoubtedly; the sacred thread showed on the shoulder under the broad arrow--for the twice-born are twice-born even in gaol.

"Lay him on Mother Earth to die, ye of his caste!" said a voice from behind. It was Father

Ninian's. His haste had driven the colour from his face; he stood breathless, yet calm, his right hand raised. In the awestricken circle none stirred; there was no sacred thread upon their shoulders.

"Give me a hand, please, Dr. Dillon," said the old man quietly; "he will not die easy there." So, between them, they shifted the slight figure from the wooden platform on which it had fallen, to the ground all sodden and stained with that tide of blood. A faint content seemed to come to the half-conscious face; the head nestled itself into the soft earth as if to rest.

The circle of dark and white faces fell back alike, leaving the doctor and the priest alone with death,--the doctor with both hands detaining that ebbing tide of life, the priest with the *viaticum* of another faith on his lips speeding it on its way.

"Lo!" whispered some of the circle. "Hark to his '*Ram Ram!*' He knows--Pidar Narâyan knows."

CHAPTER VI

ALPHA AND OMEGA

Am-ma was fishing. Breast deep in the water, which in the early dawn stretched like a shining shield to meet the pale primrose vestments of the coming day, his bodiless head and shoulders slid sedately over the surface like some strange kind of wild-fowl; for his hands, clasped at the back of his curly frizz of hair, held the apex of a conical, reed-distended net, shaped like a pair of wings. His eyes were closed, and, despite all lack of visible movement, the tenseness of every muscle, the strained look of every curve, showed that he was on the alert for something; that something, being the first hint of possible prey sent by his hidden feet as they felt, like hands, over the bottom. Felt lightly, buoyantly, with scarce more pressure than the water itself, until, at the first suspicion of a fish lying half-buried in the sand, they would fling themselves air-wards to change places with his head; and that, with the net twirled dexterously above it, would go down like an extinguisher over the suspicious ridge or furrow. Sometimes--most often, of course,--they proved to be nothing else; but sometimes, again, there would be a pause, during which the black legs would remain uppermost, and then, once more, the black head would come air-wards with a wriggling fish, held, if it happened to be a small one, in its white teeth. For Am-ma had not been provided by nature with a pouch, like the pelicans who were fishing hard by; and, being absolutely destitute of clothing and pockets, had to sidle sedately to the bank with each prize before seeking another, since both hands and feet were needed for its capture. Otherwise, his method of fishing was little removed from the birds,--the net being considered as his beak. If anything, it was the more primitive of the two, since the pelicans fished in companies, drawing a serried line round each likely shallow; whereas Am-ma had all the distrust of his fellow which marks man in his earliest development. For, even amongst his kind, Am-ma was held to be barbarian; though, Heaven knows! the six or seven millions of wild tribes and forest races in India which go to make up its two hundred and eighty, are primitive enough. Those six or seven millions, frankly, absolutely savage, who, as the census puts it, are 'not to be specified'; remaining, as they do, untouched by either the civilizations or religions with which they have come in contact. Six or seven millions, whose very superstitions are their own monopoly!

Some there were among these fisher folk of Eshwara who, like Gu-gu, were faintly leavened with latter-day learning, faintly amenable to latter-day standards; but Am-ma's dull brain was satisfied with what it had inherited; which included, amongst other things, sight, hearing, touch, keen almost beyond belief. So he opened his eyes at a sound which, to an ordinary person, would have been as inaudible as the swift coming of sunlight in the sky; and his sight told him immediately what it was in detail. A canoe was coming down the lagoon with two men in it. Now there was only one canoe in Eshwara, and that belonged to Pundit Ramanund. He had been over the black water, and learnt, amongst a number of other strange new things which were of no use, how to paddle a canoe--his own or another's! For what good was a canoe when you did not know the sandbanks? And how could you know the sand-banks unless you swam over them and dived down to them? Then, if you could do that, what was the good of a canoe? An air-bag, or even an earthen pot under the pit of your stomach, on which you could lie, was sufficient for all practical purposes.

Therefore one of the men Am-ma knew must be Ramanund; the other, by his turban, was a Mahomedan. Did *he* know the sand-banks? Am-ma shaded his eyes with one hand, and watched to see. Evidently not; the canoe stuck here, there, everywhere, yet still came on slowly. But if the

occupants wanted--as everybody seemed to want nowadays--to cross over to the other side--that other side where the red brick headworks of the canal showed like a plinth--to those strange, new white tents where the Lord was expected; then they would find the navigation more intricate.

Am-ma being conservative inevitably, smiled at the certainty, closed his eyes, and went on fishing; till he opened them again at a shout.

"Which way?" he echoed, his voice sounding hollow from its nearness to the water. "By the deep stream, always."

"And which is that, fool?" came Roshan's voice angrily.

"Where there is most water," returned Am-ma calmly. "Cease from paddling, and the canoe will tell you without fail. Such things know of themselves. They are wise."

"But we want to get over to the camp as quickly as we can," said Ramanund, interrupting an impatient retort of Roshan Khân's, with an aside to the effect that they had better not alienate their only hope. The river was lower than he had expected, or he would never have suggested crossing in the boat, as quicker than the bridge; yet there was not time to go back.

Am-ma smiled cunningly. "None will get quicker than he can, my masters; that much is certain." Being pleased with his own wit, he laughed, and kicking up his heels, ducked his head, to come up again a few yards nearer in shallower water, where he could stand and salaam.

"The noble people," he said gravely, "must surely follow the stream if they go in company; but if they will quit comfort, and wade, carrying their boat here and there, I, Am-ma, will show them. But it is annoyance. Without going with the stream there is always annoyance."

"It is better than going back or sticking still, anyhow!" remarked Roshan Khân to his companion; adding in Hindustani--"Then come quick--there is room for thee and thy net, and we will pay thee."

Am-ma shook his head. "There is weight enough for difficulties without me, my masters; and here or there is one to a fisher." So saying, he closed his net with one dexterous twist, slipped his arms through it so that it hung behind his back, and struck across the shallows.

"Yonder is our aim," he said briefly, pointing to a blue thread of smoke rising from the water's edge a good way down stream. "They burn a dead man there to-day; it is ever a good guide to the living."

"'Twill be the Brahmin lad the *Huzoors* killed by mistake with their *Dee-puk-râg*. Didst hear the tale?" asked Ramanund. Why, he would have been puzzled to tell, since he had no definite desire to foster ill-feeling or fear; but it had been the talk of the town till those small hours which end gossip, even in India, and the talk had confirmed the theory, which so many of his kind hold firmly, if vaguely, that the mass of the people feel the English rule to be unjust.

But Am-ma was not of the people. He was of the six million and odd barbarians. He turned, showing his broad white teeth in a grin. "Ay! 'Twas well done. Now, as in old days, folk will know who is true leader." There was no doubt, no fear in his mind. Had not his tribe always, of old, chosen as its chief and God the man who could hold a torch in each hand at arms' length, one lighted, the other unlit, and bid the flame pass from one to the other seven times? And as for a man's life, was it not always expedient that one should die for the people upon occasions?

Ramanund frowned; perhaps because Am-ma concluded by ordering the crew out of the boat, and the water was cold. It could scarcely have been anything else which brought annoyance, since he, like most of his kind, prided himself on being truly a British subject.

So, paddling and pushing, wading, and even carrying, they crossed from shallow to shallow, from sand-bank to sand-bank, led by Am-ma, swimming and diving like a duck, or walking on ahead unconcernedly, his eyes fixed in keen-sighted approval on that group close to the water's edge, towards which he steered.

Yet it was a gruesome group, in truth, which circled round that solitary and still more gruesome figure in the centre. A figure squatting like the rest (since, when wood is dear, funeral piles must be restricted) in full view, yet mercifully obscured for the most part by the heavy column of smoke which rose straight to a level with the leaping flames, then, tilting sideways before the intermittent breeze of early dawn, drifted westward, to hide those white tents upon the horizon.

"Above or below, fool!" called Ramanund, sharply, as they neared the shore. "I am no *Dôm*, like thou, to choose my way among dead men's bones."

The allusion to the semi-aboriginal tribe who earn their livelihood by streaking the dead, brought a frown this time to Am-ma's face.

"I am no *Dôm*, either," he retorted, "and were I one, thou wouldst be glad of my guidance to the fire some day, Pundit-*jee*!" Roshan Khân listened with the wholehearted contempt of his race

and creed. "Be quick, either way," he said, scornfully. "We have bare time, as it is."

Yet he, also, swerved from that gruesome group, which, as the two--dressed as Europeans, save for their turbans--stepped ashore and hurried off in the direction of the camp, stood up in a linked semi-circle to salaam, then squatted again with a clank of leg irons.

Am-ma, his task over, had paused in the deeper water, and was once more sidling sedately. The sun had risen with the inconceivable swiftness with which it rises from a dead-level, treeless plain, and shone reddish-yellow, like a fire, on his wet skin. The shadow of that dense column of smoke sidled sedately on the water also, shifting with the shifting spirals of the reality.

"Had he spilt blood?" asked Am-ma, suddenly, as that something, half-hidden in the smoke, seemed to dissolve, sending a great fountain of sparks, bright even in the sunlight, up into the air.

One in the semicircle clucked denial.

"A *jogi*--they say of Gorakh-nâth's monastery--had him for disciple. And there was *dhatoora* in the sweetmeats, for sure. Whether he was strangler, God knows! Perhaps. Yet such travellers deserved poison; who but a fool trusts a strange hand?"

A big man at the end of the semicircle, who had a sinister face despite his good conduct badge, looked round hastily to where, a little distance off, the two jail-warders in charge were dividing a smoke on the sly with swift mysterious bubbings; then lowered his voice.

"Ay! none but fools; and *he*--" (a nod towards that thing in the centre which was now dying down to red embers pointed his meaning) "is the first; not the last. I, Gopi, *gosain*,^[6] say so. Let fools wait and see. Wise men will not."

There was a clank of leg irons as if some stirred uneasily. "Thou canst talk," murmured a voice. "When thy 'tucket' (ticket of leave)--God knows how got!--is so nigh."

Gopi smiled comfortably. "Ay! To-morrow, and the next day, and the next. Then, once more, purification in the Pool of Immortality. Once more, sanctification at the 'Cradle of the Gods.'" He cast his eyes upwards unctuously, like an Eastern Chadband, so rehearsing the part of piety he meant to play once more on his release.

Am-ma nodded his bodiless head cheerfully. "There will be no Pool of Immortality for the pilgrims this year. So Gorakh-nâth says. The canal will drain the spring. But then, he is angry at being turned out of his gun. The people will not give so much--that is it!"

The *gosain's* face lowered at the news. "Turned out? Who hath done it?"

Am-ma's eyes were closed, for his feet had found likely ground; he paused a second, tensely alert--

"He who comes," he said, suddenly; "the Master."

As he spoke, the quick thud, followed by a lingering reverberation of the first saluting gun, told that the Viceroy of India was entering his camp.

"The Lord hath come!" said the circle of prisoners, in awed tones.

All save Gopi, the *gosain*. He sneered. "The Lord-*sahib*. Ay! he may be that--but the Master--no!"

Am-ma gave a contented little chuckle.

"He killed *that*, anyhow," he said nodding again, "and he hath the *Dee-puk-râg*. Is not that enough for poor folk?" Then his feet, feeling something far out of sight in the still deep waters, came air-wards, and his head went down.

When it came up again, the gang of prisoners were being filed back to gaol, leaving the still glowing embers of what had been a man to send a clear blue smoke into the clear blue sky.

"They have the *Dee-puk-râg*--that is enough," murmured the fisher to himself as he slid with the stream.

CHAPTER VII

THE WORLD'S DESIRE

The Viceroy's camp was no longer a city of dreams.

Its silence had gone, lost in that indefinable sense of sound which seems to come from the heart-beats, even, of unseen humanity; and the whiteness, the purity of it, was stained and smirched by the scarlet-as-sin coatees of the innumerable orderlies, who bustled about from tent to tent, with huge files of references, or lingered at the tent doors extorting shoe-money from the native visitors, who came in shoals to plead for patronage from one or another of the bigwigs belonging to the Hosts of the Lord-*sahib*. Groups of these petitioners, awaiting their turn for an interview, were to be seen at most tents; but they stood in crowds round one, in which the Commissioner of the Division was making the final arrangements for the coming *darbar*; in consultation with the Under Secretary to Supreme Government. It was a difficult task, involving as it did the classification of the aristocracy, plutocracy, and democracy of India, in one generally satisfactory Court-guide.

"It can't be done in this wurrd," remarked the Commissioner, in one of those suave, plastic, Cork brogues which might be made of Cork butter from the softness and lack of friction they bring to the English language. "An' what's more the Archangel Gabriel couldn't do it in heaven, though he'd have a better chance; for the Cherubim wouldn't be wanting seats at all! We are bound to displease somebody, so let's cast lots before the Lord; it's Scriptural, annyhow."

The Under Secretary looked a trifle shocked, being unacquainted with the Commissioner's methods.

"But we must,"--he began.

The other's keen face looked up from the lists for a second. "Of course we must--we govern India practically, by cane-bottomed chairs. Ye remember old Gunning. No!--before your time, I expect! Well! he kept two hundred miles of North-West frontier as quiet as the grave, for five years, by the simple expedient of awarding thirteen seats in his divisional *darbar* to each of his districts, and only taking twelve chairs with him into camp. The *mâlîks*, you see, never could tell which would be chosen odd man out, an' the fear of it kept 'em like sucking doves."

"Indeed!" remarked the Under Secretary, fidgeting with his lists resignedly, for he was under the impression that time was being lost. "I'm afraid that sort of thing wouldn't answer nowadays." The elder man looked at him gravely; just one short glance, as he dipped his pen in the ink and went on writing, revising, referring.

"Not a bit of it! They'd send down to Whiteway Laidlaw's and get Austrian bent-wood chairs by value payable parcel post! The Teuton, sir, is ruinin' British prestige by cheapenin' the seats of the mighty. There! that's done--block A's beautiful entirely. Now for block B. Who's your favourite, and why are you backing him?"

Once more the junior appeared a trifle shocked. "With reference to Roshan Khân," he began. "His Excellency desired me to ask whether it might not be possible to give him a step for being, as it were, in his own division. He belongs to Eshwara, I believe."

"The very reason why he can't get an inch more than his due. But you can tell H. E. that I've settled it. I've asked Dering to put him on duty, an' when he is in uniform there's no mistaking his place. And then we'll ask him in to the reception afterwards with the *sahib logue*. Who's your next--Dya Ram! what, the little pleader?--Why the blazes should he come to *darbar*?--attorneys don't go to St. James."

"Mr. Cox, the member of parliament--perhaps you may remember him--"

"A little red-haired fellow, was he? who wrote a book about India on the back of his two-monthly return ticket?"

"Mr. Cox is a man of great influence with his party, and he supports Dya Ram's--"

"Pestilential little fool," interrupted the Commissioner impartially, impersonally. "It wouldn't be bad, though--stop his scurrilous tongue for a bit. Favour does, you know. But I can't see my way to it. Old Hodinuggur would be refusing his '*atta* and *pân*^[7] again. He did it once, ye know, when some low-caste fellow was within sight of him. Said he didn't eat with sweepers; and if Crawford--he was Commissioner at the time--"

"Yes!" said the Under Secretary, still more resignedly. He had not yet grasped the fact that his coadjutor talked while he worked--

"Hadn't been six foot four and broad in proportion," went on his tormentor imperturbably, "so that the--let us call them the subsequent negotiations--diplomatic negotiations--it sounds well!--didn't reach the eye of His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, the Thakoor--one of our best men let

me tell you--would have got into trouble--more'd have been the pity."

"Yes," assented the man of Secretariats, "but about Dya Ram--"

"Dya Ram, is it now? Could we put him in under the head 'benevolence' think you? Did he ever vaccinate a baby, or breed a horse, or give anything to a female hospital? No! Then the devil fly off with him for complicating the problem of British rule in India. Why should he want to come to *darbar* at all? When people change their dress they should change their desires, but the only effect our civilization has upon some men I know, is to make them want to keep their hat and their boots on at the same time! Well, that's done! I've found a place for him where Hodinuggur can't see the tail end of him unless he squints. Now--who's your next?"

While this sort of thing was going on inside the tent, Dya Ram and the Thakoor of Hodinuggur were in full view of each other, outside it. The former, having scorned the sinful scarlet coatees even to the point of refusing to have his patent leather shoes dusted, was walking up and down in English fashion. The latter, in a wonderful parcel-gilt coach, was awaiting the effect of his ten-rupee tip with perfect patience and serenity; while his retinue, which consisted of a dozen ragged retainers carrying lances festooned with tinsel and yaks' tails, stared contemptuously at the two sentries pacing up and down below the flagstaff; who--to tell truth--seemed so monotonously part of the general show as to suggest that they also were under the charge of the two yellow-legged policemen who stood on either side of the rose-bed.

It was high noon, and the various departmental gongs had begun to give their version of the meridian, with that unbiased disregard for that of their neighbours which makes the time of day an absolute uncertainty in a big camp. But it was calling time evidently; for two superb red-coats, blazoned with gold, appeared in company with two big books and a silver inkstand, and disappeared with them into the *darbar* tent. And shortly afterwards an *aide-de-camp* sloped over to it, yawning.

Both Dya Ram and the Thakoor knew that this meant preparation for those, who, having the *entr ee* to the Government House, had the right to put down their names in those big books; but the fact itself affected their two types very differently. The old Rajput's visit of ceremony was of another sort. He, obeying definite orders, would come at a specified time, and get his specified salute with his compeers. But Dya Ram was like the wild tribes in one way; he was unspecified! He was neither fish nor fowl, flesh nor good red herring.

So, as he watched a young Englishman drive up in a bamboo cart, dash into the tent, and dash out again as if the place belonged to him, he felt aggrieved. He even went so far as to formulate his grievance in mental words, and then these appeared to him so apposite to a leading article, that he took out a note-book, and, after some corrections, stored away, for future use, the assertion, that '*the time will come when the colour of the hand which holds the pen will be no bar to its writing its name in the Book of---*?' He did not feel sure of the qualitative noun, and after trying Fate, Fame, Life, and Lord, left a blank instead.

Meanwhile carriages and dogcarts all of sorts had begun to drive up, their occupants disappearing into the tent for a second or two, then coming out with the smile of the elect on their faces. Father Ninian was one of the first, resplendent in a new *soutane* and sash, with Akbar Kh an in his orderly's get-up, oscillating between a palsy of delighted servility, and a catalepsy of dignity; the one for his superiors, the other for his equals.

And, after a while, in one of those mysteriously nondescript four-wheeled vehicles that defy classification, but may be said to come under the head "*phitton*" (phaeton) of which mission people seem to have a monopoly, came good Mrs. Campbell and her niece, Erda Shepherd; the former full of indignant, yet meek alarm, because Dr. James, having come across an old friend further down the avenue, had bidden her go on and write his name as well as her own.

"I ken weel how it will be," she asserted to her niece, "for I havena brought my specs, an' a body cannot but be nervous with a young man in a scarlet coat glowering at them! I shall put the doctor into the wrong book; for, you see, I canna write the two names ane after the ither like a marriage lines; for there is one big bookie for the women, and one for the men-folk, like a Puseyite chapel! Ay! an' for the matter o' that, like a divorce court--and I sou'd never hear the last o't if I evened the doctor to myself!"

"Let me do all three, Auntie," said Erda, with a laugh, as she got out of the carriage. "Really, there's no need for you to come,--I'll be back in a minute."

The blaze of sunshine blinded her for the darkness of the tent, and she could scarcely tell whose hand it was which stretched itself frankly, eagerly, for hers as she entered. Yet, even through her glove she knew the touch, before Lance Carlyon's voice said joyfully,--

"Come to write your name? I've just written mine. Funny our hitting off the same time, isn't it?"

The tone of his voice, joined to that startling recognition of his touch--which she could not conceal from herself--made her shrink, as if from actual intrusion. "I have to write my uncle's and aunt's first," she said coldly. "There was no use in us *all* coming in."

She walked on as she spoke to where the two books lay on a sort of lectern, while the *aide-de-camp*, seeing the visitor was a lady, came forward politely to assist.

"Not that book, Mansfield," remarked Lance, coolly. "Miss Shepherd wants--Miss Shepherd, will you allow me to introduce Captain Mansfield--to write her uncle's name first."

She looked back at him almost angrily, full of resentment at his persistence; but, even in the semi-blindness which was still hers, his face showed too kind for that; and as, at that moment, another lady came in with a flutter of laces and ribbons to appropriate Captain Mansfield's ready services, Erda had to allow Lance to find her a pen.

"That's right! Now for the other book," he said. The *aide-de-camp* had by this time gone to see the laces and ribbons back to their carriage, so the two were alone.

"Your aunt's first, you know." There was a suspicion of friendly chaff in his tone, this time, but it was gone in a minute as he went on quickly--"Erdmuth!--is that your name? Why!--it means earth-mood--or--or world's desire, doesn't it?"

She felt herself flush. "I did not know that you were such a German scholar," she replied, sarcastically. "Yes! my name is Erdmuth Dorothea. I was called so after--after some one you most likely know nothing about, Countess Zinzendorf. She was famous enough, though,--" she paused, feeling savagely desirous of snubbing him--"But I daresay you never even happened to hear of Jean Ziska, Mr. Carlyon?"

He smiled suddenly, broadly. "Jean Ziska!" he echoed. "Rather! We had a pony called Ziska at home--a Hungarian--used to eat thistles like a donkey!"

He stopped to laugh, and she was about to turn and rend him, when he continued, half apologetically, "Of course I have--only the name, you see, brought back such jolly old times. Ziska was the beggar who had his skin made into a drum when he was dead. I don't expect it's true, but it's a fine tale; the drum ecclesiastic with a vengeance, and no mistake!"

"Oh! but it is," interrupted the girl, forgetting her annoyance in her eagerness. "My grandfather--we are really Moravians, you see, and our name should be Schaeffer,--saw it when he was a child. He used to tell me that people said if it was beaten, everybody must--"

But Lance's attention had wandered. He was looking at her signature with a curious, almost wistful smile. "Erdmuth!" he repeated thoughtfully; then turned to her. "I say! you really ought to come to the ball with that name--do!"

He was simply, she told herself, the most distractingly irrelevant, yet at the same time the most appallingly direct, person she had ever come across. "Really, Mr. Carlyon," she began, with such heat that the *aide-de-camp*, returning, stared; until Lance coolly asked him if he didn't think Miss Shepherd very unkind not to come to the Bachelor's Ball? Whereupon he, having by this time had enough of laces and ribbons, and begun to recognize a distinct charm in the glistening coils of hair, half-hidden by a wide hat, promptly asked her for the pleasure of a dance.

Erda looked from one to the other aghast, and to her own intense surprise fell back upon the woman's all-embracing excuse, "I--I really haven't a dress." It seemed the simplest and easiest.

"Oh! anything does for a fancy ball," persisted Lance, argumentatively, as he followed her out. "A tailor in the bazaar would run you up a Greek dress in no time, and it would do awfully well. All white, don't you know--" his voice slackened and grew soft, as if he saw what he described, and the sight made him glad--"all straight folds with a little edge of red-gold like--" he paused, then went on boldly--"like the sunshine on your hair. And red-gold bracelets high up on your arms--and a red-gold apple in your hand--the World's Desire--" He stopped abruptly, with a quick catch in his breath, startled at his own words.

And she, too, held her breath before the vision; for she saw it also. Saw herself, as he had described her, and the glamour of it, the desire of it, assailed her, body and soul.

Yet she made a desperate, a passionately resentful effort to ignore them. "I didn't know you were so well up in *chiffons*, Mr. Carlyon," she said, with a forced laugh. "Did you ever think of setting up a milliner's shop? One is badly needed in Eshwara."

But the glamour of it had come to Lance Carlyon like a revelation, and the blood was leaping in his veins. "I will, if you--" he began.

She scarcely recognized his voice in one way. In another she knew it must be his; for all the vitality and strength, the single-mindedness and simplicity which she had seen in him so often, were crowded into it; brought into it by fancy, concentrated by a mere suggestion--of herself.

The magic of this seemed to encompass her; she sought shelter from it recklessly.

"I?" she interrupted. "I don't go in for that sort of thing, Mr. Carlyon. You seem to forget my work--work which I value above--milliners! Try Mrs. Smith--there she is coming in her victoria; she is one of the best-dressed women I ever saw."

She could not certainly have looked better than she did as, seeing Lance Carlyon, she called to him as her carriage drove up.

"Do you know where Captain Dering is? He promised--"

Here Lance, with guilty haste, interrupted her. He was just about to drive over and give her a message. Dering had had a touch of fever; he had been over at the palace arranging about the Chinese lanterns for the decorations till late the evening before, and--

"He might have sent a little sooner," put in Mrs. Smith. "I have been waiting; he said he would drive me in his dogcart." There was no vexation, only an almost pathetic surprise in her voice; and Lance looked guiltier still.

"I'm awfully sorry--it's all my fault--I was late to begin with, and then--" He glanced at Erda involuntarily,--compromisingly, it seemed to her.

"I am afraid I kept Mr. Carlyon," she said, haughtily; "most unwillingly, I assure you. Thanks so much, but I can get in quite well by myself."

As she drove off, however, her head was in a whirl; and as, when pausing to pick up Dr. Campbell, the whole panorama of the camp, the hills behind it, the distant temples of Eshwara, the busy place-seekers in the foreground, the scarlet-sin-stains of the *chuprassies'* coats against the dazzling whiteness of the tents, lay before her, one of those rare, incomprehensible moods came upon her when the soul retreats into its spiritual body, so that the sight grows clear, the touch keen, and you can feel the round world spin beneath your feet, see the shadow of earth stretching far among the stars.

The World's Desire! What was it?

Brought up to believe that the heart of man--that mainspring of the spinning world--was vile, she had never asked herself why this was so. She had read the story of Adam and Eve with unquestioning faith, yet never sought to know what had changed the good to evil.

But now, as her eyes rested on those far-distant peaks with that faint mist about their feet hiding the "Cradle of the Gods," and followed, as far as the eye could follow in the nearer hills, the climbing track worn by the weariness of that eternal search after righteousness, she asked herself what it was which kept mankind so long upon the road; asked herself, for the first time, what that first sin had been which had lost Paradise.

No lack of desire after salvation, surely. Generation on generation of Eastern pilgrims had worn that path out of the sheer rock, had agonized after good, and remained evil. A little shudder of memory ran through her at the thought--how evil! And now the West, with its white tents, its white face, its white creed, had come to show a newer, a better way.

Had it? But what had it done for itself? She had worked for two years in London ere coming out to India; and another shudder of memory swept over her of what she had seen there.

The World's Desire! Lance Carlyon had called her that--a woman with a red-gold apple in her hand.

The sound of angry dispute brought her back to realities. They were passing out of the camp under the triumphal arch, and one of its sentries was barring the entrance of an ash-smeared figure which was brandishing a stamped petition paper, as if it had been a card of admission, and yelling excitedly for "Justice! justice!"

"It is that pernicious fellow, Gorakh-nâth," remarked Dr. Campbell, sententiously. "He wishes, no doubt, to appeal against Captain Dering's order, of which I, for one, am heartily glad. A Christian government is bound to refuse sanction to the practice of a faith which, it is impossible not to see, is degrading in the extreme to those who hold it."

Erda's eyes were still clear; clear with what those who do not see, call dreams.

"Yet it seeks what we do--peace--forgiveness--the cradle of the goodness, the innocence it left behind--somehow."

Dr. James Campbell turned to her in dignified, amazed displeasure. "May I ask what has caused--"

"That's easy tellin'," interrupted Mrs. Campbell, comfortably. "It's yon hat with feathers, when she is accustomed to a pith one. An' she standin' in the sun talkin' to Mr. Carlyon! It's just got to the lassie's head. I was the same myself when I was young, Erda; but Dr. James thought it a duty--"

"And so I do now, my dear," put in her husband. "It is a distinct duty on the part of mission workers to take every precaution, and if her head is Erda's weak point, I shall warn David--"

Mrs. Campbell nodded hers and smiled, and almost winked. "Oh! Davie will take care of her, never fear; he is not a ninny!"

Erda flushed scarlet all over her face and neck. It seemed to her as if she had forgotten her cousin, the Reverend David Campbell, altogether. And yet she was engaged to be married to him as soon as he returned from a well-earned holiday in England.

A swift remorse left her pale again. Davie, who was so much in earnest, who looked to her as--

That vision of a woman with a red-gold edging to her white robe and a red-gold apple in her hand came to send the blood to her face once more.

CHAPTER VIII

FALLING STARS

The long *darbar* tent was packed from end to end with the cane-bottomed seats of the mighty; and in each sat its appointed occupant,--patient, grave, silent.

But in the two rows behind the Viceroy's still empty chair of state the Englishmen in political dress or uniform who sat in the front, and the Englishwomen in the latest Paris fashions who sat behind, were talking and laughing; in a perfectly well-bred way, yet, to the majority of those silent spectators, at the expense of decency, since a *darbar* is, like a West Indian ball, not for 'talkee.' There was, however, no disapproval on those indifferent dark faces. Such things were part and parcel of that general eccentricity of the *Huzoors*, before which it behoved calmness to remain calm. Yet those same faces would have been quick to notice and resent the faintest breach of etiquette in regard to their own treatment, or position. Those being correct, the rest was immaterial.

And now, the sudden strains from without of "God Save the Queen" sent those talking, laughing rows to their feet silently, with the proud alacrity so noticeable in India when the act is a confession of faith, indeed! But the mass beyond followed suit obediently, with a starry shiver of diamond-flash, a milky way of pearl-shine; for Eugene Smith's electric light was working full power.

Finally, as if wafted on the full chords, came a small man, with that inevitable look of coming into church which Englishmen consider dignity; possibly because public worship is, really, the only function in which they are not inwardly ashamed of taking part. The great gold chair, the great gold footstool, seemed all too large for everything about their occupant, save the diamond star, the ribbon on his breast. Yet, in a way, the scene gained by his inadequacy when, after a decent pause, a decent silence, he rose, small, insignificant, to give voice to Empire--in a strong Scotch accent, it must be admitted, which equalled the Commissioner's Irish one, when, its proper exponent, the Secretary, having a cold, he read a translation of the Viceroy's speech, and his soft brogue ran riot among the clamorous Persian vowels.

"Ai Mâhârâjâhân, râjâhân, nawâbân wâ sâhibân âlishân."

The diamonds and pearls sat too still for play, so the electric light contented itself with the white teeth of Englishwomen as they yawned. But even these failed it when, the speech ending, that front row began its file past; the civilians first, the soldiers next. A quick file, a formal bow as a rule; but, every now and again, a pause would come in the monotonous string of names, for a few words from the Viceroy, and another bow ere the recipient passed on. Muriel Smith, who sat behind--the best dressed woman there, as Erda Shepherd had judged her--watched her husband's tall gaunt figure approaching, and wondered if that pause would come to him. Her heart beat so when it did that she could hear nothing except "graciously pleased," "eminent services," "distinguished order"; but a whisper from her neighbor, "All right! C. S. I., not C. I. E.," left her sick and faint with relief. Even so, her eyes instinctively sought Vincent Dering's sympathy; but he, to her surprise, was looking at the tall gaunt man whose face was a "*nunc dimittis*" in itself, as he made his way back to his seat, forgetful even of his wife.

But he had forgotten her, amid a host of other things, for three whole years: forgotten them in a ceaseless effort, an untiring energy. And now that the necessity for this was over, sleep and rest were his first thoughts. He took both, apparently, in his chair, while the Commissioner, causing this time a fresh flashing of jewels, began on a fresh string of titles.

"Sri râja-i-râjân, furzund-i-khâs-munsoor-i-zamân-mâhârâj-dhirâj-rasâkh."

And, as they rolled on, the atom of humanity belonging to them--someone in faded brocade, with ropes of ill-shaped pearls and uncut stones wound about him, or a jauntier figure fresh and glittering from a Calcutta jeweller's shop--would be singled out by its political in charge, like a sheep from a flock, and guided dexterously to the exactly proper spot in the whole round world wherein obeisance and offering could be made with dignity to itself, and the recipient. Then it would be swept on, regardless of an invariable desire to break back, in an endless circle to its seat, while fresh titles rolled out, and a fresh owner was hemmed in and swept forward. For two whole mortal hours, this, and nothing but this; with, every now and again, that pause for a few words, translated now into Irish-Urdu, producing an expression as of a cat licking cream, on a face as it was was hustled back, blindly obedient, as sheep are with a collie they know and trust.

So, at last, long after everyone, even Dya Ram--who looked terribly disjointed between his frock coat, white tie, grey trousers, and the gold mohur which he persisted in holding after native custom in his gloved right hand--had passed, the politicals gathered in a knot, like churchwardens for the offertory plates, and the distribution of *atta* and *pân*, that sacrament of servitude and sovereignty, began. It, too, was exactly like an offertory; that is, a languid passing round of a plate by an official, and yawns for the rest of the congregation.

Finally, with a vigour savouring--like a voluntary--of relief, the band attacked "God Save the Queen" once more, the Viceroy retired, the *durbarees* trooped out, still calm and silent, yet satisfied, and the Commissioner, sinking into a vacant seat, said:--

"Thank the Lord! That's over without a hitch. So India's safe for another six months at the cost of a trumpety title or two."

"I don't see on what ground," began the Under Secretary, laboriously.

"Then ye don't read your Bible. Didn't Adam, when he was given dominion over the lower animals, begin by bestowing names on them? Ah! my dear Mrs. Smith, I didn't know ye were so close. A thousand congratulations, my dear lady."

"You don't mean it, sir," she interrupted, laughing. "Do you think I have forgotten the consolatory verses you wrote me last year when Eugene *didn't* get anything? You are a fraud."

"Not a bit of it; only an Irishman," put in Father Ninian, with an almost tender smile for the keen, whimsical face which had been friend to him, and foe to him, for many a long year. "Let us have the verses, Mrs. Smith."

"Say ye don't remember them, there's a kind soul," urged the Commissioner, persuasively.

"But I do:

"I dreamt, and lo, the stars fell from the sky
To blaze upon the breasts of naughty men;
And as I wondered, came this swift reply:--
'Each star is some soul's inmost aim, and when
The angels don't approve, it is returned
To feed the base-born flame by which it burned.
The nice, they keep until--life's struggle striven--
The owners find them at the gates of heaven.'"

"Striven--heaven!" groaned the Commissioner, amid the clapping of hands. "My dear madam, did I commit such a crime--I mean rhyme? But the poet's right. Ye can't go wide of the mark, anyhow, even in a song, but you're sure to find the fact again in the heart of a friend."

So, with that curiously light-hearted, almost reckless, frivolity of Indian society--a not unnatural recoil, perhaps, from the perpetual presence of the greatest social problem the world has ever seen, or is likely to see, that is, the mutual assimilation of East and West without injury to either--the little company of English men and women, empire makers and breakers, drifted out into the sunshine, and so on to the Viceroy's private enclosure, where the band, weary of national anthems, was already at work on a selection of street tunes, beginning with "Tommy, make room for your uncle."

So the pageant of power passed into a garden-party, and nothing remained to show the hand-grip which had made that garden out of a wilderness, to tell of the tireless effort to solve the problem, the ceaseless striving to be just, which underlay all the quips and cranks, the foibles and follies, of the great camp, save the premature baldness of a few heads, as their owners fought desperately at badminton; fought to prevent a child's shuttlecock from falling in the wrong court!

A fight which was watched with blank courtesy, as a further exhibition of sheer eccentricity, by those of the jewelled and brocaded owners of titles who had the *entrée* to this Holy of Holies.

Roshan Khân, however,--who looked splendid in his uniform,--fought with the best; and won, too, though Laila Bonaventura, who played on his side, stood still, taking, it is true, the shots which came within reach dexterously enough, but never stirring an inch for one beyond. And, as

he played, the curious chance which had brought him into her company made his blood run fast.

Captain Dering had bidden him join the set; bidden him curtly, almost savagely, as the best player available, in answer to a challenge from Muriel Smith to play her, her husband, and the Commissioner. And this challenge had come curtly, also, because Captain Dering was standing beside Laila Bonaventura, to whom he had been giving a cup of coffee. Not because it gave him pleasure, but from sheer determination not to let his mistake in the darkness count for anything. Yet, as the girl's hand took the cup from his, he had remembered with a thrill the gladness, the content it had brought him. Though he refused to acknowledge the fact, the puzzle of this mistake had been his chief thought ever since it occurred, and a smouldering resentment regarding his past relationship with one who was still to him the best and dearest of women was the result. He felt vaguely that she, as well as he, ought to have known that their sentiment, their monopoly, as it were, of friendship, could only mean--what it had meant to him during those few moments of blindness which had, paradoxically, opened his eyes. So he had felt bitter, and she had known it instinctively. If she had ever faced facts, this alone might have opened her eyes also; but she was too good a woman, too helplessly bound by her woman's cult of love, to disassociate it from friendship. So, without bringing a doubt even, the jealous desire of appropriation which draws a line clear and clean as a sword-cut between the two, had risen up in her from the absence of the sympathetic look she had expected from Vincent Dering. So she had challenged him, and so it came to pass that Roshan Khân played badminton with Laila Bonaventura. She took no notice of him beyond a casual inspection of his uniform; still the mere fact of being her equal within the white lines which separated their badminton court from the realities of life seemed a fate. When the game was over, his eyes followed her closely, and he, himself, at a respectful distance; and as he followed her, his desire to speak to her grew as he pondered on his right to do so. After all, as his grandmother had said, she was his cousin.

And fate was on his side once more. A well-bred crowding round a table where some photographs of the camp were being shown, brought him so near her that she caught sight of his yellow, silver-laced uniform behind her, and turned quickly. Turned with a look in her big black eyes which dazzled him.

It vanished, however, in a second; yet her words, spoken with a faint resentment, made the memory of the look give rise to a swift pulse of angry suspicion.

"I thought you were Captain Dering," she said. "Why do you wear the same uniform? I thought natives couldn't be officers."

The assumption, in his present state of mind, made all his fierce temper flash to his face; but ere he could choose English words to express it, she laughed, and, after her fashion when amused, became confidential. "You are angry at being called a native; but you *are* one, aren't you? Then it is so foolish. You are like my guardian. He can't bear the bazaar people to call me '*Begum-sahiba*'; but they do sometimes, you know, because I own a lot of their houses and lands, and my grandmother was a native princess. I know that, though my guardian never speaks about it. He is ashamed, I think--like you are. I'm not. I didn't choose my grandmother. Why should one fuss about such things? If they're true, it can't be helped, and if they're not, what *does* it matter? Besides, it must be rather nice to be a real Begum. You haven't seen any, of course; they wouldn't let you, would they? That must be horrid. How could you like people if you didn't see them? Besides--" she added, with an access of demure, pious conviction, "it would be wicked to marry them, you know. You should never marry anyone you don't love. Even the Sisters told me that."

Her voice had deepened, broadened; her eyes, occupied with his uniform, not his face, had grown soft. Hitherto he had been too much at a loss before her sudden garrulity to interrupt; now, that vague suspicion recurred, making him feel inclined to say brutally, "I am your cousin; I claim you." The very thought of her outraged face attracted him. But English words were inadequate for such emotions, so, as he paused, she went on:--

"As you are here, I suppose you'll be asked to the ball, also. It is to be in my palace, you know, because Captain Dering thinks it the best place. He says the gardens will be beautiful all lit up--" She smiled as if at some secret mystery, then continued: "Of course, I don't know yet; I haven't seen it, but I think it will be lovely. Only I wish my dress was different. I am Beatrice--Dante's Beatrice--and I think it stupid. But my guardian chose it because--" she smiled again with the same secret amusement--"I don't know, of course, but I expect it is because my great-grandmother went as Beatrice to some ball long ago. It is generally that. I think he must have been in love with her--isn't it funny?"

"Laila," came Father Ninian's voice from behind, "I have been looking for you everywhere. It is time to go."

His usually kind old face was stern. He gave the curtest of recognitions to Roshan Khân, and, as he carried his ward off, said sharply, "Who introduced you to that native?"

"No one," she replied, indifferently; "I thought he was Captain Dering; their uniforms--" she broke off to add, with more animation, "I do like the gold and silver lace. Though of course the jewels, like the rajahs wore, look best."

He interrupted her in Italian, giving a quick gesture of dissent. "Say not so, *cara mia*, they

would look ill on--on Englishmen. And listen, child! You should not speak to strangers; and I would rather you did not speak to such natives at all. They--cannot understand--quite--for they look on women differently from what we do."

Laila's eyes narrowed sullenly. "Very well, guardian," she said resignedly, "only I suppose they must know what their women are really like--and--perhaps the native ladies prefer it."

The old man looked at her, startled, but said nothing.

When he had gone to find Akbar Khân and the carriage, Vincent Dering, seeing her alone, came up--so, at least, he told himself--out of sheer politeness, to ask if she wanted anything. Yet something in her face sent him beyond mere courtesy at once; something almost childishly apparent.

"I'm afraid you haven't been enjoying yourself," he said kindly. "Why not? I thought it rather pleasant."

"Very pleasant!" she assented wearily. "Only my guardian has been telling me not to do things; and I don't know why, but I always want to do them at once--don't you?"

He could not actually deny the fact. "Sometimes. One has to pretend--"

She raised her eyes to his blindingly; he caught a glimpse in them of the lawless approval Roshan Khân had seen, yet of something else--a lawless disdain. "Why must one?" she asked. "I never mean to, never! If I want to do a thing I'll do it. I don't mean wicked things, of course--" she returned here to demure, almost plaintive piety--"I don't want to do them, and nothing can be wrong when it seems right to you, and it is real--ever so real, and you give yourself to it, every bit of you, without thinking, and--and--ask nothing--nothing at all--"

Her vehemence, her passionate assertion, roused a quick response in him. "Would you do that?" he asked, his voice vibrating. "Would you--really?"

She smiled slowly. "Of course I don't know," she said, "I haven't tried yet; but I never pretend. I don't even pretend to like my dress for the ball. It *is* so stupid."

He felt annoyed at being led into a burst of emotion, and then balked. "You will look charming, I'm sure," he said in his worst manner. "And if you don't like it, change to something jolly after supper. Lots of people do."

"Will Mrs. Smith?" she asked quickly.

He flushed angrily. "I really don't know," he began. Her eyes were on him curiously.

"That's funny," she said. "I thought people--not that it matters," she went on, "for I can't. I haven't a dress. Do you know I never have anything I really like--never."

The girl's voice was absolutely touching in its listless, dull confidence, and he could not help consolation. "You'll have the ball, I'm sure; you will enjoy it awfully, and--and you mustn't forget that you've given me the second waltz, and the first extra after supper."

She did not answer for a moment. "Have I?" she asked. "I didn't know it; but I will. That will be nice. And you are coming to decorate to-morrow, aren't you? That will be nice, too."

Her tone lingered in his ears long after she had gone. It was with him even when he was driving Mrs. Smith home, and, of course, making up their little misunderstanding by the way; possibly, because of this making up, since, for the first time, the elaborate *éclaircissement* irked him. It seemed so unnecessary unless the whole affair meant something, which was quite out of the question.

For instance, when driving Lance Carlyon back to the Fort afterwards he did not desire an explanation of the latter's moodiness. When a chum was evil-dispositioned, you waited calmly for him to come round. That was friendship.

"I'm sorry Miss Shepherd couldn't come," said Lance, suddenly, his eyes on that spit of sand, with its hovels and logs, below the town. "I wanted her to, awfully, if only because she's never seen a *durbar*; but"--he smiled--"I expect someone else wanted her instead. By George! Dering, you don't know how that girl works. Sometimes I feel it's a shame, and sometimes I think it's splendid--though of course it don't matter a dash what I think."

And that--Vincent Dering asked himself--was that love?

Laila Bonaventura's voice came back to make him certain of one thing. That would not be her version of the old, old story; and the knowledge made him, somehow, more content with his world.

Meanwhile another man in yellow and silver lace was being haunted by a girl's voice, which had spoken of things which no decent woman of his own race would have mentioned; yet which had spoken to him with an equality which no Englishwoman would have allowed herself. And as

for Englishmen! The recollection of Father Narâyan's face as he carried the girl off made Roshan Khân curse under his breath.

But the girl herself had been different. He literally did not know what to think; and the desire for someone else's opinion grew so strong that, finally, with a curious mixture of reluctance and triumph, he forsook the straight road to the Fort, and turned his horse's head towards his grandmother's house. She was at least a woman; she might understand and judge better than he.

His first sight of her, however, in unprepared toilette, *minus* the green satin trousers which gave such dignity to her rotund little figure, *minus* all pretence at pomp, dirty, untidy, unkempt both in her surroundings and herself, made him feel what a fool he was. The more so when she began by resenting his summary visitation, especially in uniform, which, she asserted, made her feel, even at her age, as if she were committing the indiscretion of seeing a stranger!

What could a woman like that know? Yet having come, he might as well go through with his errand; so he cut short her upbraidings by saying without preamble:

"I have seen my cousin. I spoke to her, and--and she spoke back again."

Mumtâza Mahal looked at him for a moment incredulously, then she cracked all her finger joints over his head, or as nearly over it as her height would allow.

"Said I not so?" she asked prophetically. "And when will the wedding be?"

"Wedding!" he echoed petulantly; "there is no talk of wedding. I have but seen her."

"But seen her!" echoed the old lady in her turn. "That came after in my time; but God knows how things go nowadays. Then what didst speak about?"

He had to give a Bowdlerized version of what had passed; yet, even so, Mumtâza Mahal looked shocked. "A bold hussy; but thou wilt bit and bridle her."

He burst out angrily--for his own recital had shown him the folly of castle-building on so slight a foundation--"I am a fool," he said, "and so art thou for all thy years!"

Her little black eyes flashed angrily. "Not I! Did she not say she would like to be a *Begum?* and if that means not--"

"And could I make her one?" he interrupted fiercely. "I--a *risaldar* on a bare pittance--with no prospect of rising. Dost dream me Nawab, fool?"

The old lady's face grew cunning in a second, the instinctive love of intrigue roused by the mere suggestion. She leant towards him eagerly. "And wherefore not, Roshan? Are all things fixed? Do rulers never change? I live here in a corner, nothing but a poor woman: yet I hear more, it seems, than thou dost. I hear of discontent, of desires, of things that call for change. But to-day, they spoke of men being killed to make light for these infidels, and Gorakh-nâth, *jogi*, hath sworn a miracle."

He turned on her with a bitter, reckless laugh. "Is that new? Is there not always talk? The wise listen not."

A vast importance, a real dignity came to her in an instant. "If the *Huzoors* had listened to such talk in '57."

A thrill ran through him; the thrill of secret curiosity, almost of expectation regarding the great Rebellion from which so many things date, which young India always feels in the presence of their elders, who passed through it.

"Thou dost know, of course," he said, catching his breath; "thou canst remember."

"Ay!" she replied sternly, "and there was no more talk than there is now. 'Tis not a question of words. It is fate. Something happens, and then--then the *risaldar* may be Nawab--as his fathers were."

She had gone too far, and recalled him to himself. "Then let us await the happening," he said curtly.

"Wait!" echoed the old lady, reverting to the main point. "Thou canst not wait. Having gone so far, the negotiations cannot drop. Thou must send the gift, and see what comes of it."

"A gift!" he repeated. "What gift, and wherefore?"

Mumtâza Mahal looked round as if for approval, tucked a packet of *pân* into her cheek, and chuckled. She was on familiar ground now.

"Leave that to me. I know what girls like. I have them still. Ay! a dress that her grandmother wore--good as new, being for a tall woman--and jewels. 'Tis no harm, at least, see you; since if they like it not, the gift is returned."

He stood doubtful, half pleased, half shocked at the suggestion. She could certainly send the things back, and he had many a time seen English women wearing native jewelry; ay! and decorating their rooms with native dresses. And he could write that they were from her cousin and servant.

That would be easier than telling.

CHAPTER IX

OUT OF THE PAST

"I feel as if I had this moment arrived," said Muriel Smith, as she looked down into the garden from a balcony which jutted out upon one side of the wide flight of marble steps that led upwards to the loggia of the palace. "Yet I know I've been here for hours. I wonder when the sheer beauty will cease to--to take my breath away. *You* understand, don't you?"

"Yes!" assented Vincent Dering, half grudgingly. He would rather not have understood more than others. But he did; that was the worst of it.

He was looking his best in the old cavalry uniform of grey, and silver, and cherry colour, all laced, embroidered, and glittering with epaulettes, sabretasche, and high stock,--the uniform of a hundred years ago, when adventurers ruled half India, and Englishmen were demi-gods. It seemed to have brought something of their pride and recklessness, something of the dreams they dreamt into his whole bearing, as he stood leaning over the balustrade gazing fixedly at the scene before him. It was beautiful indeed! Beautiful with that unearthly stillness which only comes to illuminations in a windless Indian night. The lines on lines, the curves on curves of tiny lights which outlined each pillar and arch, each buttress and recess of the palace, the battlemented wall of the garden, and the turreted town rising above it, were steady as the stars. The fine fret of the acacia trees, showing white against the purple of the sky, was still as if carved in stone. There was no flicker in the soft radiance, which made the solid marble seem translucent, illumined mysteriously from within.

The very shadows slept. Such scented shadows, clinging to the burnished orange trees, hidden in the wilderness of roses, dreaming on the perfumed cushions of the quaint balconies and cupolas which overhung the river.

But *it* did not sleep. *It* moved, sliding on and on ceaselessly.

So did the water which dimpled and tinkled--after Heaven only knew how many sad years of silence and decorum--over the fretted marble water-slides.

How it laughed and babbled to the cunning coloured lights placed behind it! And the fountains below, rising out of the water-maze,--where there was but room for the flying feet of a laughing girl on the marble ledges between the lotus-leaves,--laughed and tinkled, also, as they sent showers of diamonds back on the pale blossoms.

The "jewel in the lotus" indeed!

There was no colour to be seen anywhere. Only that soft, steady, white radiance, those soft, sleeping, black shadows. Except in the drifting water-maze, and the drifting men and women around it.

Restless, both of them; going on and on. Whither, and wherefore? It was an idle question, Vincent told himself, if the move brought, as it did here, fresh laughter, fresh colour.

"*On such a night did young Lorenzo*," quoted the Commissioner's brogue from the flight of steps where, in the guise of a French cook, he was fanning Laila Bonaventura, with whom he had been dancing; the latter sitting still and silent as the shadow in which she was half hidden. A crackling laugh betrayed Dr. Dillon's whereabouts. He was perched on a balustrade above, his legs dangling, his trousers, as usual, displaying his thin ankles; for he was dressed in his ordinary evening suit.

"And old Lorenzo also," he scoffed. "The disease is nonprotective, contagious, and marked by extraordinary vitality in the virus, which after long years may spring to fresh life from a dress, a

bit of ribbon, a lock of hair."

"Oh! have done with such blasphemy!" interrupted the Commissioner, joyously, "and me racking me brains which of all the beauties of this *hareem* I'd better fall in love with! Dering, you're a steward, I believe. Turn that man out for obtruding the exigencies of everyday life--including a swallow-tail coat--into Paradise."

"I've objected already, sir," said Vincent Dering, laughing; "but he declares he is a malarial bacillus."

"A what?" remonstrated the brogue.

"A malarial bacillus, sir," explained the doctor; "as I have failed hitherto--like everybody else--to recognize the gentleman, even through a microscope, I am naturally at sea as to the proper costume. And you will, of course, admit the universal rule: 'When in doubt, play a dress suit.'"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Lance Carlyon, who, mopping his face, had joined the group, "what a ripping idea. Wish I'd thought of it instead of this kit." He looked regretfully at his mailed limbs; for he was dressed as Lancelot-du-Lac, a costume which had been chosen for him two years before, at Simla, by a grass widow who had aspired to the part of Guinevere; but who, retiring before the young fellow's absolute unconsciousness of her intention, had left him saddled with an expensive fancy dress which he felt bound to wear out; for all his spare cash was kept for guns and polo ponies.

"I'm glad you didn't, Mr. Carlyon," protested Muriel Smith, consolingly. "You look very nice in it. Only those things on your legs--I forget the proper name--must be difficult to dance in."

"Greaves--the well-greaved Greeks, me dear madam," put in the Commissioner. "Plural of grief. Ah! ye should have seen him come to it just now with the general's wife. Your chance of promotion's gone, me dear boy--the marble floor resounded."

"Well, it isn't half so inconvenient as my husband's dress, anyhow," continued Mrs. Smith, persisting in her mission of sympathy, when the laugh at Lance's expense had subsided.

"That's all you know, my dear," remonstrated Mr. Smith, sleepily, from a quiet nook in one corner. "I never said Robinson Crusoe was a good dancing dress, but I claim it isn't bad to sleep in, especially out of doors. Soft and furry--and--"

His voice sank into dreamful ease.

"And it can claim solitude, anyhow," added the doctor, mournfully. "Think of the disgust of an old established microbe, like myself, when his swept and garnished home is invaded by a party of seven strange devils."

"How rude you are!" exclaimed Mrs. Smith. "Besides, we aren't seven, and I believe Robinson Crusoe discovered this island before you did!"

"I think the French cook takes the cake, though," said poor Lance, who had been following up his own grievance. "Shirt sleeves must be an awful pull when you are dancing with a *burra mem*." [8]

"True for you!" assented the Commissioner, sympathetically. "That's the very reason I took to it, me dear boy, when me own merits and me advancing years doomed me to all the stout ladies in India. Besides, me paper cap rids me of two of me reports anyhow. Ye see I always have to wear two caps; one before, and one after supper. Otherwise I find the contints get mixed, and make me statements unreliable; and then me enemies say it's the champagne. I feel it coming on me now, but--" he sprang to his feet, light as a boy--"by a merciful providence there's the band at the 'Roast Beef.' Now, are ye coming in to supper with me, Mrs. Smith, or are you one of those who have to change their identity?"

"Not I," she declared, taking his arm, "I'm quite content with myself, thank you!"

She might well be, since her costume of water-nymph could not have been improved upon. It enabled her to show off her long, rippling, pale gold hair, and the filmy green and white, the feathery weeds, the iridescent shells, matched her delicate face, which seemed almost overweighted by her water-lily crown.

"Besides, Undine can always do quick-change artist, and assume a soul," suggested the Commissioner, as he led her off; adding, in mock alarm: "Me dear madam! I apologize profoundly. Miss Bonaventura, Captain Dering's waiting for you, I'm sure."

Laila, who had risen also, stood silent, looking taller and slimmer than usual in her guise of Beatrice. It seemed to have brought out the fact that she had some of the best blood of Italy in her veins. Vincent Dering had recognized this fact--which Father Ninian had taken care to communicate to him as soon as the latter had found out that, nominally at any rate, the former was a Roman Catholic, and therefore a possible lover--when he had gone up to apologize to the girl for having missed that second dance, owing to his duties as steward. The recognition had him

vaguely sorry for the girl; sorry also for the old man who, evidently, dreamt such idle dreams. He did not mean to marry a Begum!

He crossed over to her now, offering his arm, but she refused it, saying she did not want supper.

"But you are enjoying yourself, surely?" he said.

"Oh, yes! thank you," she answered; "only it isn't real, of course. It doesn't mean anything."

Dr. Dillon, who was within hearing, looked down at her sharply. "Perhaps, my dear young lady, it is as well it doesn't. So let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die!"

She looked up at him quite shocked. "Oh! I didn't mean that, of course; that is wrong. I only meant that things don't match--the place and the people, I mean. Except one or two--those for instance." She pointed out Roshan Khân who, dressed as himself, was taking advantage of the emptiness of the garden during supper time, to go round it with old Akbar Khân as guide, the latter in the wildest antics of alacrity.

"Did you ever see such a funny figure?" continued the girl, with an odd little laugh. "He is quite crazy with joy. He told me to-day this was the first time for forty years that he had been himself! That he has been bewitched."

"I believe I've been bewitched too," said Vincent, suddenly. "Let us all go back forty years."

Dr. Dillon swung his feet further over, and dropped to the ground almost between them.

"That would effectually annihilate two of the company, and reduce me to cutting my teeth; and I want the use of them at supper. Come along and have something solid, Miss Bonaventura; there is nothing so indigestible as fancy sweets."

But she was firm, and moved away to where a small staircase led from the balcony to the upper storey. She did not care for supper, she repeated, and she had to mend her dress; someone had trodden on it, and she would not be able to dance till it was mended.

"Don't forget ours--the first *extra*," called Vincent after her. She turned where the narrow stair, after climbing the outside wall, against which it clung like a swallow's nest, ended in the shadow of an archway. "I shall be back in plenty of time," she said. Vincent thought he had never seen her look so nice, so young, so fresh, so smiling.

"That's a queer girl," remarked the doctor, as he lounged off, "not half bad. That is just it, in fact; she is a clear case of atavism, and as her ancestors seem to have been either saints or sinners, there you are! For it's the same tissue absolutely; indeed, there's precious little difference between the two when you come to analyze."

"I never do," interrupted Vincent, shortly. The doctor's cynicism bored him, especially here, where a man might at least be allowed to escape the brutal realities. Here, where even the houses in the bazaar beyond the garden wall--those houses that were by the common light of day so squalid, so unsavoury, so full of mean, miserable detail--showed like star-palaces against the sky!

A sudden comprehension came to him. How blind of the girl to say all this meant nothing! How crassly idiotic of himself to think of going back forty years to enjoy this! This was the same yesterday, to-day, for ever! It was the love of physical pleasure, the desire to appropriate, to have and to hold, which had civilized the world, and made man out of a monkey.

"The Cradle of the Gods,' did you say, my dear lady?" said a courteous old voice from the stairs, breaking in on his solitude. "Just so--the pilgrims go there every year. It lies--let me see--I think I can point it out to you. Ah! Captain Dering!" continued Father Ninian, finding the balcony into which he had stepped *en passant*, occupied. "We don't disturb you, I hope; but Mrs. Palmer was speaking about the 'Cradle of the Gods.' It must lie--don't you think so?--over there." He pointed beyond the star-palaces.

"I should fancy so, sir," replied Vincent, "that is about due north."

"Then I am wrong," smiled the old priest; "the cave is northwest, and the passage to it is difficult--almost incredibly difficult."

"Yet you have been there several times, haven't you?" said Mrs. Palmer.

Father Ninian shook his head. "Never to the cave itself, madam. I am not quite sure whether I ever really meant to go so far,--and bow in the House of Rimmon! It would have been interesting no doubt--but--" he glanced down almost boyishly at his black *soutane*--"my cloth, my dear lady, has to be considered. As a matter of fact, something always hindered me. I went as a medicine man, you see; and so many fall by the wayside. I wonder, indeed, how any reach it." He paused, and a wistful smile made his face look dreamy. "Some say none do. A *jogi*--Gorakh-nâth, Captain Dering,--he whom you turned out of the gun--claims to be the only man who has ever seen the real cave; the rest have seen--*illusion!*" He paused again, and his smile changed. "'Tis a claim,

madam, made by more than Gorakh-nâth; who, by the way, promises to defy you, Captain Dering. Padlock or no padlock, he is to get in and out of the gun as he chooses while the pilgrims are here."

Vincent laughed contemptuously. "I don't think miracles go down, even in India, nowadays, sir."

The old priest's face grew grave. "I cannot give my assent to that; I who have seen the blood of a saint turn crimson and flow. Faith, Captain Dering,--that is, the belief of man in a power beyond his own,--is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever!"

Vincent Dering bowed politely, and kept his shrug of the shoulders for the old man's back, as he followed him upstairs to the supper room.

The same yesterday, to-day, for ever! True, in a way. There were two stabilities amid the chances and changes of this mortal life. The Garden of the Palace. The Cradle of the Gods. Faith and Love--for it came to that in the end.

Here the familiar sight of a ball supper in full swing ended his rare reflections, and he slipped into a place beside a lively vivandière, who welcomed him with entreaties to join in a comic opera she was going to get up at Simla. The last new rage in London; she had written home for the rights.

He was in a new atmosphere in a moment, and straightway forgot the garden; forgot everything but that the supper was excellent, his companion gay. Even the Commissioner's high voice, as he talked nonsense, seemed far from the gravity even of conferring titles, and it seemed incredible that the small man who sat surrounded by a host of departmental heads was really representing a whole Empire.

When the band downstairs, by beginning on Strauss's "Lovelong livelong day," warned him of his engagement to Laila, he passed to it half reluctantly. She would be sure to dance badly: that make of girl always did. So he was relieved to find the ball room, and the wide loggia into which it opened, almost empty. Only a couple or two were spinning slowly, idly, in and out of the resounding arches.

He went on, therefore, to the balcony beside the stairs. If the girl was there it would be an excuse for sitting out. If not, he could always say he had waited for her. Either way, he would have time for a cigarette.

As he went down towards it he met Lance Carlyon coming up, and called to him: "Supper's A1; so's the wine. It's going awfully well, isn't it?"

"Suppose so," replied Lance, "but I'm going to cut. These togs are awful; but if I go now I'll have time to change and have a shoot down the river. Am-ma says the ducks sit like stones before dawn. They won't miss me, as a bachelor, I suppose?"

Vincent looked at him compassionately. "A bachelor," he echoed. "It's about your last chance, I take it. However, if you want to kill something--it's a common symptom--go! I shall stop till the bitter--or sweet--end! One doesn't get into a streak like this once in a blue moon! I feel fit for anything."

As he sat down for a smoke in the corner vacated by Robinson Crusoe, this feeling was strong upon him, and sent the blood tingling to his finger-tips.

The band had by this time ceased piping to unwilling dancers, so the still, warm, scented air was left to the tinkling ripple of the water, the rippling tinkle of distant voices; for supper had almost emptied the garden also. The better for its picturesque effect. Now the imagination could people it--as Laila Bonaventura (the girl had sense) had phrased it--with figures that matched; real figures.

A chiming silvery clash above him made him turn to look upwards to the archway where Laila Bonaventura had disappeared. It would be a bore if she were returning to interrupt his cigarette; though, in truth, she had been, he remembered, almost attractive.

Almost--

He gave an exclamation, and rose to his feet. She was coming, indeed, but not as she had gone.

There is no dress in the world which is at once so dainty and so sensuous, as the court dress of a Mahomedan lady, and Laila Bonaventura was wearing one as she came slowly down the stairs towards him, a radiant white figure against the radiant white marble.

The folds of her long silver-gauze skirt--so cunningly fashioned that it trailed in rolling shimmer-crested billows behind her, yet left no beauty of her round limbs hidden--clipped her about the waist like a serpent's skin. So hiding, yet revealing, was the soft film of fine muslin over the scented, ivory-tinted corselet, which fitted close to the full curves of her figure. So was it with

the silver-streaked veil, through which the jewels in her dusky hair, the bracelets on her fair arms, shone undimmed. So was it even with the chiming fringes of her silver anklets, as they slid merrily to cover and uncover the small feet, tucked so carelessly into the little silver-tipped slippers.

To hide and to reveal, that was the note of all!

As she came nearer, too, he saw that her lips were reddened, her dark eyes darkened artificially. And yet her face did not correspond to all this. It was curiously grave, dignified, almost anxious.

"Do you like it?" she asked, suddenly pausing a pace or two from him to stand still, heaped round by those shimmer-crested billows, and so, with one hand, gather the straight folds of her veil to curves over her arm. As she did so, he saw, with a curious throb at his heart, that her wrists were fettered to each other by long trailing chains of scented jasmine flowers.

A dainty prisoning indeed! The suggestion of it set his head whirling.

Like it!--His very admiration kept him silent.

"It makes it feel more real," she went on, "don't you think it does?"

Real, or a dream? He did not know which. He felt a fool to stand so silent; yet no words--as she would phrase it--came to match. None, at least, that he dare use to her unconscious dignity.

"Only I can't dance, you see," she continued, bending to look at the billows about her feet. "Besides,"--she looked up suddenly, her whole expression changed, she flung her fettered hands forward almost into his face. The strings on strings of scented flowers looping themselves in ever widening curves, hung like a screen between him and her laughter.

"I'm a prisoner--yours, I suppose." He fell back for half a second, then caught the hand in his.

And then, in an instant, it came back to him--the measureless glad content of that mistake in the dark! He had told himself ever since that it had come, then, by mistake--incomprehensible, it is true, horrible to a certain extent, but still in error. But this was no mistake!

"Yes!--my prisoner," he said. "Come, and sit down, and let us talk." He wanted time to think.

She shook her head. "Not here, please! No one is to see me but you, only you. That is why I waited till I saw you were alone. I only put it on for you to see."

A sudden remembrance of something she had said to him--"When it is real, and you give yourself--everything, and ask nothing." The certainty that she was doing this now made him say quickly:--

"Don't be afraid--they shall not see. Come, let us go into the garden--those balconies by the river--"

She shook her head again.

"They are not safe, and my guardian would be so angry. Though it isn't really wrong"--she added, with her odd vein of piety; "but when somebody sent me the dress, I thought it would be fun, and I wanted you to see."

"Sent you the dress?" he echoed hotly. "Who?"

She looked at him vastly amused. "Are you jealous? But I'm not going to tell you. That is just like the novels, isn't it; but what is the use of making people angry?"

"How do you know I should be angry," he asked coldly.

She smiled like a Sphinx might smile. "I'm certain. Come! Perhaps I'll tell you when we get to a safe place. There's one close by. My guardian wouldn't have it lit up because--he always has the same reason for everything, you know, and it *is* so dull--because something happened there long ago. As if it mattered!"

As she spoke, they had been passing down the marble steps, her silver anklets chiming; and now, as they paused an instant on the edge of the water-maze, they chimed still. But to a new, curiously provocative measure, and her face, her figure, her very voice, changed as if to keep time with it.

"I used to run all over it, in and out, when I was little," she chattered mischievously, "and old Akbar used to run after me and tumble in! I could do it now, and you could chase me, if I hadn't all this--" she gave a little mutinous kick at her sweeping skirt. Then suddenly she laughed. "Poor old Akbar! I'd like him to see me, but I don't see how it could be managed. And nobody else must--but you. So come--come quick!"

She drew him after her by one hand, like a child at play. Across the marble plinth, right to the

wide arched passage in the lower storey; and when, having gained in the race, he would from habit have gone straight on towards the courtyard, she pulled him back with a peal of laughter.

"Not that way, stupid! Here--it's a dear little balcony all by itself with steps down to the river and a boat."

"Perfect!" he exclaimed with an answering laugh, as he disappeared after her.

But in that instant's pause two figures had passed into the other end of the long passage from the chapel. Two figures, one of which, half-disdainfully, half-regretfully, had been going round the beauties of the palace; the other, gambolling sideways by reason of its curbing deference its urging servility, engaged in garrulous tales of past glory.

"Yea! *Ger-eeb-pun-wâz*," it was saying, "Bun-avatâr used to meet Anâri Begum here. She liked him best in uniform, and she wore--"

It was then that, framed in the distant archway, seen clear against the radiance of the garden, that vision of a laughing girl, a flashing uniform appeared.

Old Akbar Khân gave a faint mumbling petition to be preserved, and fell back, his teeth chattering.

"Anâr--Anâr--herself," he muttered. "And he--God help us all! Why did they light up the garden?"

But Roshan Khân knew better. His eyes were younger. And he had the key--the key of that shimmering silver dress.

"Fool!" he said sharply. "They are no ghosts. 'Twas Dering-*sahib* and--and--" he gave a bitter laugh--"one of his *mems*. They do such things often."

But as he walked on, his hands clenched themselves to the tune of the words which sang in his brain, "God smite his soul to hell! God smite his soul to hell!"

The two great stabilities, Love of God and Love of woman, had joined hands, as they always do.

A formidable combination.

CHAPTER X

THE PIVOTS OF LIFE

Lance Carlyon was not, as a rule, given either to loss of spirits or temper, yet both were at vanishing-point as he flung off the garb of his namesake of the lake; swearing as he did so that he would never wear the blessed thing again. It cramped him all over; body and soul. And then--for he knew his Tennyson well, as one of his name could hardly fail to do--his memory raced swiftly over the love-loyal knight's career; until suddenly he laughed at a phrase which had always tickled him. "*So groaned Sir Lancelot--not knowing he should die a holy man.*"

If he had?--what would have been the result? Would he simply have refrained from remorseful pain, or from the honour rooted in dishonour which caused it?

With a mighty stretch of his sound young muscles at the relief, Lance caught up his Indian clubs, and went elaborately, conscientiously, through his daily series of exercises before putting on his dust-coloured shooting-suit, and swathing himself with the necessary plentitude of belts, cartridge-boxes, and gaiters. The latter--being, after Indian fashion, simply a couple of bandages neatly twined--were, as a matter of fact, much tighter than his discarded greaves; but the clip of them about his calves was familiarly reminiscent of many a day spent out in the jungle alone, or at most with some companion of Am-ma's type. A man whose only claim to be called one in these later days was his undoubted dominion over the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the beasts of the field. How jolly it had been! And how the deuce could a fellow like Vincent Dering--

Lance, sorting cartridges systematically with an eye to a possible snipe, whistled a tune which Vincent was always asked to sing at the Smiths', "*Sweet is true love--and sweet is Death.*"

Well, he preferred the Death. So, catching up his gun, he made his way to the crypt-like flight of steps which, half way down the straight river-edged wall of the Fort--between its northern bastion where the stream turned hillwards at a sharp angle, and the southern one beside the bathing-steps--led to a tiny landing-stage. Here the canoe, which he had hired for such excursions from Ramanund (whose last experience of boating had rather sickened him of its pleasures), lay moored.

Keeping the paddle ready for steering, he let the stream, which here clung swift and smooth to the wall, take him with it; partly because he had no wish to be seen by any revellers in the palace. But the sight of the latter made him slip the paddle-blade into the sliding water, and send the canoe swerving out for a better view.

It was wondrously beautiful, seen from the river, with every line and curve of light reflected almost as clear as the reality. The sight held his attention, so that he was abreast of the bathing-steps ere he remembered his desire for secrecy, and, in his haste, the canoe--answering to his swift stroke--almost spun round, bringing him, in an instant, within an ace of collision with the hard brick. As it was, he heard a faint grating sound.

"By Jove! that was a near shave," he muttered to himself.

Out of the darkness of the courtyard, for the unilluminated block of the palace rose between it and the white radiance, came a voice:--

"Is't thou? Hast brought the tool--we must get the job done ere dawn and--"

The rest was inaudible as the river slid him on. What were they up to? he wondered idly; taking advantage, doubtless, of the absolute desertion of the courtyard, the entry to which had been blocked for the night, the main entrance to the palace having been prepared for the reception of the guests. Were they meddling with the padlock Dering had put on the tampon which stopped the muzzle of the old gun? Time to see to that in the morning.

He was now steering his way just on the edge of the shadow cast by the wall on the water, and in front of him jutted out a balcony smaller than the rest, and nearer the river. Those upper ones, he knew, were part of the chapel; but this--

He looked at it narrowly, wondering if he had ever noticed it before, then let the paddle sink idly across the boat, and sat staring at what he saw. Dering, of course! But the woman! Who on earth was she? A native? Hardly; and yet he did not remember seeing anyone at the ball whose dress was in the least like this; even in the dark it glittered.

"Do you call that love?" came a voice echoing softly over the water. "I don't. When I love, I mean to give, not to take; and the more I give, the more I'll have to give; because, you see, love will come back--it must."

By all that was incomprehensible, Laila Bonaventura! And, if there was any certainty in these shadows, Dering's arm--

Phew! Lance knew his Shakespeare also; had, in fact, a curiously ingenuous and human acquaintance with even the exact words of the great master. So as he drifted on, leaving those two in the balcony, a line drifted with him:--

"She whom I love now
Doth grace for grace and love for love allow.
The other did not so."

He felt a righteous relief at the idea, for he was eminently virtuous. Poor old Vincent! This was better than the other--he paused doubtfully--Well! different people had different tastes. He, for instance, had never admired Mrs. Smith. And then Dering, good chap as he was, had, everybody knew, a touch of the tar-brush himself. Only a touch, still it made a difference; for one had to consider the children. For instance, when *he* married--Why a vision of a child's head he had once seen, far away in the north, covered with soft, waving curls of sun-bright red-gold hair, chestnut--yes, chestnut hair, the very colour of that beast of a pony who boshed him at polo--should have come to him at that moment he did not know; but he fled from it, bashful as any girl over her first fancy, and, bending forward, sent the canoe racing the foam-bubbles on the swifter current with all the strength of his young arms.

That was the mission house, ending the long curve of the city. The mission house, where *she* slept--the boat raced harder here--where *she* lived in the thick of it--God bless her! Here the boat slackened, partly because the spit was reached, and in the darkness, made visible by that soft white radiance behind him, he must not miss Am-ma's hut. Am-ma, who had dominion over wild duck, among other things in that munificent gift of the Creator to His own image. Am-ma, who must come out and show those who had fallen from their high estate through civilization how to lure the birds to their death.

"Sweet is true Love though given in vain,

The refrain came back in this connection, and Lance's voice, as he sang it, if not musical, held a hint of something beyond the mere maudlin expression-stop of the ordinary song-singer.

He need not, he told himself, have feared to overlook Am-ma's wigwam; for there, not far from the point of the spit it stood, all lit up; circled round closely with a row of little lights like those at the palace. Were the primitive folk down here aping their masters and having a ball of their own? Smiling at the thought, he ran the canoe on shore and walked up to the reed hut. Then he saw that the circle of lights was broken by a dark patch. It was Am-ma himself, squatting on his heels. To one side of him, firmly fixed in the sand, was a freshly-killed crocodile's head, its jaws ingeniously distended by a thin cane to which a string was attached. By pulling this the dead mouth seemed to open and shut, as the pliant rattan bent under the strain and sprang back again. In his other hand he held a bloody spear. Despite these fearful preparations, however, the first glimpse of an approaching figure set him visibly trembling with fright; until, on its coming nearer the lights, he sprang to his feet with a sudden blubbering shout of relief.

"I thought--this fool, this atom of dust, thought--the *Huzoor* was the devil!" he explained, capering and chuckling to make much of the joke, now that the fear of its being a reality was over.

"The devil!" echoed Lance. "What the dickens should the devil come here for?"

Am-ma looked half-grave, half-important. Did not the *Huzoor* know, he explained, that when life was coming into the world, all the demons in it wanted to get hold of the new-born thing? Hence the lights, hence the crocodile's head and the spear; also his own valiance. Hence, also, the impossibility of his accompanying the Presence after duck. If he, the father of the thing to be born, was not there to fight the demons, what hope could there be for the son?--and here this quaint, broad, ugly face grew wistful--for it must be a son, surely, this time. No! he had no children; the demons had taken them all, every one; though he had left nothing undone, though he had sought out one medicine-man after another. What did it matter? he asked pathetically, if the charm were of one faith or another, if it brought a child. He had tried all. His own and everybody else's. But they all died, the children, girls and boys; died when they were born. The demon somehow slipped through the lights; the charm was not strong enough; that was all. So this time, when he had seen that the *Huzoors* had the *Dee-puk-râg*, the sign of kings, that they were, indeed, light-bringers, as his people had been of old, he had sent for the Miss-*sahiba*, and she had come. She was there in the hut, even now, fighting the demons.

Lance gave a quick catch of his breath, and stood silent. Right over the miserable reed hut, clear against the violet of the moonless sky, rose those palaces of stars lit up for pleasure. It almost seemed to him that the slight breeze, which was beginning to whisper of the dawn, held in it the faint rhythm of a distant waltz.

And here, at his feet, was this hut, lit up for pain. He heard that also, in a faint moan, which sent a shiver through him; the shiver of one who finds himself bare of accustomed covering, out in the open, far from any shelter from the cold sky.

"Of course you can't come, Am-ma," he said, moving off. "Well! I hope the Miss-*sahiba* will--will keep the devil away. I--I--expect she will!"

As he floated a little further down stream, vaguely obeying the instructions which Am-ma, regretful for all his anxiety, had shouted after him, he told himself that if anybody could, she would. If a fellow married her, for instance--

He drew the canoe on to the sand-bank, Am-ma had spoken of, somewhat sooner than his directions warranted, in order to stifle thought by action. And it needed every sense on the alert to tell in the darkness if one was keeping a fairly straight path. That scarcely audible "*lip, lip*" on the right meant that the water was close by, running an inch or two below a sheer yet crumbling edge of earth. That yielding softness on the left meant the ridge of dry sand. His way was between the two. Every now and again a watchful quack, a distant flutter, told him that the ducks were not far off. And in the east the faintest lightening of the purple warned him he was none too soon, since the dawn in India comes quickly.

But this must be the place; a sort of bunker right at the end of the bank. Here, cuddling down almost luxuriously into loose dry sand, still warm from yesterday's sun, he waited for that hint of light in the far east to grow strong enough for him to see.

It is always an experience to sit and wait for daylight, ignorant, helpless till it comes, of what lies close at hand. Lance Carlyon, crouching in that still warm sand, felt a sudden forlornness, a sense of having parted with something.

But, almost on the heels of this, came a sense of having found something; of strange, quick, new, yet familiar companionship. It seemed to him as he watched that faint grey lightening in the far east, that he did so, not as Lance Carlyon, but as an atom in the great, round, spinning world whose curved edge grew darker against the coming light.

He laid his gun beside him, and, kneeling in the soft, still warm sand, rested his arms on the edge of the bunker, ears and eyes alert as any wild creature's. He could hear the soft rustle of feathers in the dark, the soft swish of the water as something stirred in it, the soft sob with which an inch or two of that tiny, unseen sand-cliff gave way to the stream, the softer gurgle, as of laughter, with which the water took its toll of earth.

So, thinking not at all, simply as a sand grain in the sand around him, the mystery, the certainty of dawn held him, as it held all things.

The curved line of the world darkened, the shadow of it deepened, as the grey of the sky grew tender as the eye of a mother watching her child asleep. But only for a space. Then the grey hardened, and a trumpet call from a whistling teal told that the great fight of dawn had come.

So, for another space, the Dark and the Light faced each other, waiting for that second trumpet call.

It came, borne on a faint rustle of wind which crept over the edge of the world from the footsteps of the coming day. The shiver of it swept through the shadows; they broke into battalions to face the foe. So into companies, till, as the red spear-points of the sun showed over the horizon, they rallied darkly, desperately, behind each hint of rising ground, in each hint of sheltering hollow. Rallied in vain, for below the spear-points a glittering curve, as of a golden helmet, came resistless.

Then Lance Carlyon stood up, hastily, gun in hand. But he was too late. The mystery of Dawn had held him helpless, as it had held the birds; and now they, too, were freemen of the conquering day.

He fired a couple of shots after them, more as a salute to the victor than in any hope of slaughter; so, with a laugh, turned homeward.

The canoe shot against the stream gaily, but, as he neared the spit, a sudden desire to go home by land assailed him. Am-ma could take the boat back; there might be a chance of a snipe, in that low-lying bit below the mission house, and--

He blushed, even in solitude, at his own moral turpitude. Why not tell the truth; to himself, at least?

He found Am-ma, worn out by his night's anxiety, with his head between his knees, fast asleep; leaving the crocodile, at the agony point of an unending yawn, in sole charge of the little circle of flickering lights. Some of them had gone out, the rest looked trumpety in the growing blaze of day. But what matter? Since, half an hour before, Erda Shepherd had come out of the wigwam with a living child, wrapped quite daintily in an orthodox square of new flannel.

"It is a son, Am-ma, and I think it is very like you," she had said, with a laugh at the wrinkled, wizened old face peering out at its new world.

But Am-ma had grovelled on the ground with tears and cries of blubbering joy. He had been right. The *Huzoors* were kings. They knew the *Dee-puk-râg*. They were the light-bringers, the life-bringers.

He had never asked after his wife, but when Erda had gone inside again, he sat, and in his anxiety to keep the devil from those inside, had twitched away at his string so fiercely that the crocodile's head lost its ferocity in what appeared to be a fit of laughter, until sleep, from sheer relief, overtaking the puller, the laugh had ended in that steady yawn.

Am-ma was on his feet, alert in a second, however, at Lance's touch, like a wild beast.

"'Tis all right, *Huzoor*" he grinned broadly. "'Tis a son." Then once again the exuberance of his delight made him grovel in the sand at the feet of the Master.

"And the Miss-*sahiba*? Hath she gone?" asked Lance, blushing once more, now that his own self-deception became impossible.

"Nay, she remains inside," asserted Am-ma. But a look which he gave in the hut proved him wrong. She must have gone out the other way while he slept, he confessed, sheepishly; but there was nothing wrong. The devil had not won a way in; both mother and son were dozing peacefully.

Lance, his hope of walking back with Erda gone, felt inclined to take to the canoe again. Then a savage desire to kill something, at least, suggested the possibility of a snipe in the little swampy bit below the city wall, not far from the mission house; so bidding Am-ma take the canoe up at his leisure, he walked off, feeling, for him, in a very bad temper.

He forgot his quarrel with fate, however, in a second, when, the bit of swamp reached, something buzzed up to fall slantwise like a stone; something which, on picking it up, he found to be the rare Sabine snipe, painted, absolutely beautiful, in its delicate harmony of colour. And the luck did not come singly, for from behind a clump of tiger-grass came Erda Shepherd, a trifle alarmed at the possibility of being shot if she did not show herself.

Lance walked up to her, swiftly, the dead bird in his hand. "You must be awfully tired, being up all night," he began--

He had a way of rushing things, Erda thought, which was disconcerting when one was anxious to keep on the surface. "And you too, Mr. Carlyon," she interrupted; "did you enjoy the ball?" She felt pleased at this able evasion.

"Who--I--Oh! dear me, no," he replied, absently; then he smiled. "I say, wasn't Am-ma pleased. He slobbered and blubbered with joy all over my boots, and yet--" he paused reflectively, "I don't think a little Am-ma could be a very pleasing object."

For the life of her she could not help a smile. "It was not," she confessed frankly; "in fact I think it was the ugliest baby I ever saw. Poor little thing," she added in quick self-reproach. "Anyhow it seemed beautiful to them--it is the first--the first that has lived, I mean." She pulled up short, wondering what possessed her to be so confidential with this strange young man.

"So Am-ma told me," said Lance. "He called you the Life-bringer. It is a nice name."

She fought against the tenderness in his tone. "And you are the Death-bringer," she retorted lightly, pointing to the painted beauty in his hand. "So you and I are at opposite poles, Mr. Carlyon."

He stood looking at her for a moment with a smile. "I don't know, Miss Shepherd. '*Death and Birth are the pivots of the Wheel of Life.*' I remember reading that, in Sanskrit, when I went up for my higher; for I've passed it, you know. I'm really not bad at languages when I try."

It was the first time she had ever heard him claim credit for anything, and the fact touched her more than she cared to own. Touched her so closely that she sought instantly for cover.

"I wish I were," she said, moving on, though, as she had known he would, he moved on also. "I'm afraid I shall find it a great trouble having to learn a new one."

"A new one," he echoed quickly, in response to something in her voice. "Are you going to leave Eshwara--soon?"

She paused for a moment ere replying. "Sooner than I expected, Mr. Carlyon; most likely in a day or two. I don't know whether you have heard," she continued, looking him in the face, "but I am engaged to be married to my cousin--Dr. Campbell's son--David Campbell. He is a missionary--as I am--and--" she hesitated. "He is at home,--or was. We did not expect him back for two months, but he has had a good offer of a splendid place where there is any amount of work to be done. The letter telling us this came yesterday--by the same mail as--as he did. He is travelling up country now; and then--"

"And then?" said Lance, quietly. With his gun over his shoulder, he looked what he was, a soldier; and since she began to speak, he had, insensibly, pulled himself together and fallen into a disciplined ordered tread.

"My aunt wants the wedding to be from the mission station in the low hills where they go every summer," went on the girl. She was trying not to look at her companion, not out of pity, but from dread of her own admiration. "So as David"--she felt better after the semi-appropriation of the Christian name--"is in a hurry to start, she thought of going there as soon as the camp leaves--in a day or two. So--so--we shall not see very much more of each other, Mr. Carlyon; shall we?"

He gave her his first look of reproach, being unable, in his absolutely honest humility, to conceive of the vague regret which forced her to the useless appeal.

"I--I hope you will be very happy," he said, quite simply. "Take care, please; that bit is boggier than you think." For the second time in their short acquaintance she felt his hand, not as a friend's, but as a helper, a protector. This time the blood left her face pale.

"I hope so, Mr. Carlyon," she replied, and her hands clasped themselves tightly as if to hold some resolve. "It is what I have always hoped for, thought of." Then suddenly she smiled at him almost appealingly. "I am a bit of a soldier too, you know--I love the fighting."

"You are in the thick of it here, anyhow," he interrupted, pausing.

They had climbed by a flight of steps through the city wall into the small courtyard on which the mission house, which had once been an outpost of the Fort, opened on its inner side. The outer, with its wide overhanging verandah, forming part of the actual city wall. But the remainder of the courtyard was set round by a perfect congeries of small temples, each rearing its upright stone spire--the stone of Baal worship--about the central tank which occupied the middle of the square. It was quite a small tank, and absolutely dry; so that you could see the four or five worn stone steps which led down to the patch of earth, not six feet square, at the bottom. A dozen or more children, boys and girls of the streets, were playing a sort of hop-scotch on these steps, and as Lance looked, one of them slipped and fell into that patch of earth. In a second the others had quit their game, and fallen pell-mell, too, struggling, kicking, shouting, screaming with laughter.

"Is it a game?" he asked, looking at his companion, amused.

"Yes!" she said, suddenly, her face stern as he had seen it that first time he met her. "It is the game of Life and Death! That is the 'Pool of Immortality,' Mr. Carlyon! The pilgrims come here to bathe--there must be a secret siphon somewhere, for the water only comes when it is wanted. Three years ago the barriers put up to prevent accidents gave way--it was no one's fault. The crowd got in--a man slipped--and--and when the police managed to clear the crush--the--the tank was full up with dead bodies! The children *play* at it now!"

But they had spied more amusement, and in another second were hanging round Erda's skirts.

"Sing to us, Miss-*sahiba*--sing to us before you go in."

She looked apologetically at Lance. "I generally do," she began.

He raised his cap, almost obediently, with a brief "Certainly," and passed on; but as he left the court on his way to the Fort, the first note of her voice made him turn, for a second, to look.

She was seated on the top step of the tank, the children grouped inquisitively round her, and she held her head high--almost defiantly.

*"The Son of God goes forth to war,
Who follows in His train?"*

The words were distinctly audible, following him as he passed on, the gun on his shoulder, the dead bird in his hand, and something between blessing and cursing in his heart. But above and through all, he seemed to hear a never-ceasing voice that said, "*The pivots of Life are Birth and Death. Death and Birth.*"

CHAPTER XI

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

"Half a minute, Dillon!" said the Commissioner abruptly, as the doctor, ushered in by a scarlet-sin-stain of an orderly, entered the tent where the former was working. "I must attend to these gentlemen first."

These gentlemen were Dya Ram, Ramanund, and a third very different sort of person, obtrusively Hindoo in face, figure, attire.

The Commissioner's manner, as he returned to the business in hand, changed from careless familiarity to an elaborate courtesy.

"I quite understand, *pundit-sahib*," he said in English to Ramanund, "that you are, as you say, actuated by no personal motive. A man of your attainments and culture can scarcely feel a keen interest in *jogi* Gorakh-nâth's--that is the name, I think--domicile in a gun barrel!"

The sarcasm was lost on the hearer, who smiled, satisfied. "Quite so, sir," he replied. "It is merely, as my friend Dya Ram postulates, a question as to the legality--"

The Commissioner interrupted him suavely. "In that case it is a matter for the courts, surely."

"Unless your Honour should, as magistrate, act under Section 418 providing for emergencies," began Dya Ram; whereat the official sat back in his chair resignedly.

"Of course," he answered, his brogue running riot, as it always did, when he was contemptuous, "I have that power. But do ye really think, sir, that this present matter is of such paramount importance to the stability of the British Empire, that I should be justified in running counter to the ordinary course of law and justice?" Here the futility of his own sarcasm seemed to come home to him. He paused to consult a file, and when he looked up again, he spoke in Hindustani--evidently for the benefit of the third party. "There is no record whatever," he said briefly, "of any previous claim to the gun. It has been worshipped, of course; but that is a different matter. The military power has no intention of interfering with this habit. I may add that

a counter petition, praying me not to allow appeal on the ground that this *jogi* is a man of ill fame, and a public nuisance, has been filed by the *mohunt* (guardian of shrines) at the Pool of Immortality."

The obtrusively Hindoo figure which had remained standing, though his companions were seated, here folded his hands as if in prayer, leant forward, and began garrulously:--

"*Huzoor* it is malice--malice of hereditary nature. They hope to gain money--"

"Exactly, *Mohunt-jee*; your money! if the pilgrims haven't the attraction of a live man in a gun close to your shrine your trade will suffer," interrupted the Commissioner, with brutal truth. "I am afraid I can do nothing. Of course," he continued, reverting to English, "if you bring a suit to claim prescriptive right, you may," here his patience gave way finally, "but God bless my soul, gentlemen! Surely men like you have something better to do than bolster up your countrymen in a preposterous business like this!"

"Pardon me, sir," protested Dya Ram, litigiously, "but if it is prescriptive right, vested in citizens, then--"

"Then, sir!" interrupted the stern, high voice, "the British Empire will have no choice but to allow *jogi* Gorakh-nâth to be a son-of-a-gun till the day of his death! So good-morning to you; unless--" here the suavity returned in full force--"there is any other subject you wish to bring forward."

There was not, apparently; and as the trio were ushered out, the Commissioner sat still further back in his chair, tilting it with his feet against the table, and ran his fingers through his hair in an exasperated fashion.

"Pon my soul, it's inconceivable," he said; then, reaching forward, took up a newspaper that was lying on the table, and began to read.

"If we are asked what we, the educated natives of India, claim, we reply boldly, all things that Englishmen of equal culture possess by right of birth. We refuse flatly to be lumped in with the crass ignorance of our fellow-countrymen who have, alas! not yet risen to a pitch of desiring that liberty of which John Stuart Mill speaks in such glowing terms in his valuable pamphlet."

"Hark to that, now!" he commented, flinging the paper back. "That's Mr. Dya Ram's last, and it goes on, as per usual, to abuse. They asked me to put a name to it, and I've just been telling the confidential department that, barring a horrible misuse of synonym, there's no sedition, no harm in it whatever! And there isn't, Dillon. The son-of-a-gun business is ten times as dangerous. Dering's within his rights, but I wish to blazes he'd left the brute alone; or he might have put a blank cartridge in and fired a salute by mistake when Gorakh-nâth was inside! But ye can't keep the military in subjection. The department's aimin' at a fight, and small blame to it! I'm spoiling for one myself this instant moment; so come along, doctor, an' let me hear what your criminals have to say. There's a pretty sheaf of complaints for ye, ye hard-hearted murderin' slave driver!"

He took up a bulky file of papers as he spoke, and passed them to an orderly in exchange for his hat, which the man held ready.

"Yes! it's pretty good," assented the doctor, placidly, as, keeping step, the two passed out of the tent, so down the palm avenue towards the gaol, which the Commissioner was going to inspect. "It comes of their being idle. Wait till I get them digging again. I'll work the mischief out of them. When are we going on; and where?"

His companion shook his head. "Can't get an answer out of the Public Works. Is there anything you would like done, meanwhile?"

Dr. Dillon laughed sardonically. "Pretty considerable, rather! Only it would take months to get sanction. But, if you pass it, Smith says he could put a wire on from the Fort easily in a day. It would save sending by road if there was trouble, and the great thing is to hit back as quick as you can. The mutiny taught us that."

"Ay," said the Commissioner, musingly, "that's the straight tip; and that's why steam and electricity rule India. One can be ready without letting people know. If that had been the case in the mutiny--" he shrugged his shoulders, then went on--"these things come so easily; a touch starts them; but you mustn't show that you know it. Still, if you thought there would be any difficulty--I mean if you mightn't be able to hold your own till they came from the Fort--we might make some excuse for quartering a troop closer."

Dr. Dillon shook his head. "It isn't worth it. I believe myself they'll settle down when that big brute, Gopi, I told you about, gets his ticket to-morrow. If I didn't want to get rid of him I'd put him in cells for six weeks. And there's a warder, too,--or perhaps more. But there's no fear. I could hold the whole 'biz' myself, till the brutes managed to get off their leg irons, and as I keep every tool *extra mural*, I don't believe there's a bit of iron within the walls--except the shackles themselves. So I should have an hour or two, anyhow--"

"Now, here you are," he continued, with pardonable pride, as they passed under the mud

archway which led into the gaol; a long archway with a massive door at either end, tunnelling a square block of flat-roofed building. "You'll find everything spick and span, I can tell you, for I've been making the beggars polish their own leg irons, so as to keep 'em a bit busy."

It was, indeed, spick and span, as only an Indian gaol can be, where everything, including the prisoners' beds, is freshly mud-plastered every week. Spick and span in a mere monotony of mud and lack of colour. The prisoners, fifteen hundred of them or more, stood in four long, straight rows, naked save for their waistcloths and the eared caps on their shaven heads; their blankets, folded to a small square under their feet, giving them a strangely wooden appearance, as if they stood on stands, like the figures in Noah's ark.

A couple of policemen fell out and drew their truncheons to walk close behind the Commissioner; but Dr. Dillon waved his pair back.

"Never show you expect anything," he said laconically, "and as I've always refused a guard, I can't take one now."

Nor was there any apparent need for one. Some faces scowled at him, but most were occupied with the Commissioner, who, when a prisoner raised his hand, paused to take the written petition which, nine times out of ten, was ready for presentation.

"There must be a good many warders in it," remarked the Commissioner, dryly. And the doctor nodded.

"Now there's only the hospital," said the latter, when the solitary cells had been inspected, the cook room interviewed, and the dinner to come tasted. "It won't take you long. There was only one case in this morning."

But as they entered the long open ward, like a cloister, mud-plastered as all else, but with iron beds looking strangely at variance with their surroundings, two of these were occupied, and at one, a hospital dresser was standing, looking somewhat scared.

Dr. Dillon gave a hasty exclamation as he stepped up to the bed and looked at the sick man.

"When did he come in?" he asked briefly.

"Ten minutes ago, *Huzoor*; the *baboo* hath given him--"

"Never mind what he hath given him," interrupted the doctor, holding up his hand in warning, "go on with it, and tell the *baboo-sahib* to come to me for orders--at once. Now then, sir, that's all--and a bit too much too--" he added in a lower voice, as they passed out together, "for it's a case of cholera."

The Commissioner looked grave. "That will complicate matters, won't it?"

"Can't say. You never can tell. They may take it as a dispensation, or there may never be another case. That fellow's done for, anyhow--he'll be dead in an hour."

"That's quick, isn't it?" asked his companion, calmly.

"Rather. I've seen a man go out in ten minutes, though. The worst of it is," he added, with a frown, "if there really is some conspiracy at the bottom of the discontent, it is as likely as not the devils who are working it, may take advantage of this--I don't mean of this death--*that* goes without saying. But when cholera is about, poison is hard to detect, and even if I stamp out the *disease*, which I mean to do, they may simulate it." He bit at his thumbnail viciously as he strode on, thinking and muttering. "By God!" he murmured, "if I could catch 'em at it! However," he added aloud, "it's no good fussing. If the thing comes, it comes, and I've kept you here too long as it is, sir. Do you know it's close on half-past ten?"

"Be jabbers!" exclaimed the Commissioner, "only twenty minutes to bathe, shave, breakfast, and put on me gold lace continuations. Well, ta, ta! I'll see you at the show, of course."

Dr. Dillon looked puzzled for an instant; the puzzledom of a man whose thoughts are recalled from afar. "The show? Oh, yes! I was forgetting. Rather, sir. Why! it is as much my canal as Smith's, for we've done every inch of it together; besides, I have got to drive his wife down."

"Where the deuce is Dering?" asked the Commissioner, quite ingenuously; but George Dillon flushed up. It was visible even under his leather-like tan.

"I really can't say, sir; otherwise engaged, I presume."

His elder turned to him, surprised, yet with instant apology. "I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said it; but I really meant nothing."

Dr. Dillon gave a dry, sardonic laugh. "Oh! it is all right, sir. I quite believe you didn't. Nobody does mean anything in that sort of connection. It's left for the doctors to face facts as they are really; and then you call us brutal." He turned back, as he spoke, to the hospital.

Half an hour afterwards, however, having in the interim provided for every contingency he could foresee, including the bare possibility of his carrying infection, he appeared in Mrs. Smith's drawing-room, looking--for him--quite smart and spruce; since, as he had said, this end to three years' work was an event in his life also.

He found her, dressed in her daintiest, in a rocking-chair; and as he entered, his quick trained ear took in the petulance of the recurring push of one daintily shod foot. The room was darkened, and full of the scent of flowers. It was a familiar room to him, yet he never entered it without a glad recognition of the extreme feminine refinement shown in its every detail; for its mistress was one of those women whose fragility comes less from physical delicacy than from sensitiveness of mind.

She was leaning back in her chair listlessly; yet the white ringed hands which clasped the fair curls on her forehead showed an almost passionate strain of muscle.

"I believe you'll have to go without me," she said, as he approached, "I've such a racking headache. I don't believe I can face it--I'm sure I can't."

He passed on to her side, and laid his hand on one of hers for an instant, while his quick eye took in the details around him. A note had slipped from her lap to the floor. It lay face up, and the words "Dear Mrs. Smith, so sorry--" showed in Vincent Dering's writing. So, not content with the message of excuse sent her by the offender through him, she must have written! That was a dangerous development of the situation. He stood looking down at her indulgently, as he might on a fractious child who did not understand. And she did not--poor soul!

"You're nervous," he said. "Let me give you half a whiskey-and-soda before we start. It'll make you all right."

"Nervous!" she echoed irritably, her foot setting her chair a-swing to match her tone. "I'm never nervous--you know that is not one of my failings--is it?"

"No," he replied, "but you are a bundle of nerves for all that. You wouldn't be the woman you are if you weren't. And you are nervous at this moment. Nervous, despondent, out of heart. Come! make an effort!"

She gave a petulant little giggle of impatience. "You speak as if I were a Mrs. Dombey; but I'm not that sort. Besides, it killed her. I am not coming. It doesn't really matter, you know; nobody will miss me--it will be all right."

George Dillon, watching her, felt sorry, for once, at the correctness of his own diagnosis. He knew her so well that it seemed imperative to give her a hint of the reality. The danger of a final *éclaircissement* with Captain Dering seemed imminent, and the shock of it might lead to anything, if the knowledge of her own weakness came to her in the presence of the man she had cheated herself into calling a friend.

"Your husband would. It is a great day for him," he said, laying his dexterous surgeon's hand full on the raw. As he expected, the answer came passionately, and gave him an opening.

"He! O, he is quite happy as it is! He wouldn't miss me a bit. Why should he? I am not complaining, mind you--but why should he? He has interests enough without me."

Dr. Dillon deliberately sought for the nearest chair, drew it close, and sat down beside his patient in professional fashion, his eyes on her face, his hands on his knees.

"My dear lady," he said, "don't talk--excuse me--rubbish. Try and remember what women are always forgetting--that they *are* women, and that, while Eve swallowed her portion of the fatal apple, his stuck--thank God for it!--in Adam's throat."

She ceased her rocking, to sit and stare at him with a growing resentment, which belied the words that came at last, almost sullenly.

"I don't understand what you mean in the very least. What has Eve's apple to do with--my headache?"

"A very great deal," he answered coolly, "and with more than your headache, which, by the way, is only a symptom, not a cause. The real evil is--is something different. If you do not understand--though I think you do a little--" she shook her head--"I can only repeat my advice about the whiskey-and-soda; for I cannot explain to you crudely what I mean."

She interrupted him angrily. "You have no right to hint at things you dare not say."

Her very indignation betrayed her, and he smiled kindly. "Perhaps not," he said. Then he paused, hesitated, finally leant nearer, with a look of resolve in his queer, intelligent face. "But I will tell you what I can do. I can sacrifice my self-respect and tell you a bit of my personal history which I never meant you to know, but which may help to cure--your headache." His voice, usually so dry, had a softness in it, though he went on without the faintest emotion. "Mrs. Smith, I have done myself the honour for nearly three years, of considering you as near perfection as a woman

can he. Allow me to finish, please! I have done more. I have been, as the phrase runs, in love with my ideal of perfection; but I think you will admit that I have never allowed my feelings to give you, myself, or anyone else a--shall we say, a nervous headache? Now, after that, don't you think we had better start?"

He rose in quite a matter-of-fact way, took up his hat, and waited for her answer.

He had to wait some time, while the petulance of her renewed rocking ceased gradually in a determined rhythm, and he felt his courage going down to his boots. It was heroic treatment, but she was a healthy subject, and her anger would pass. Anything was better than letting her perfection suffer.

The even creak of the rocker ended at last, and she rose, as he had risen, calmly, and faced him.

"I quite understand now what you meant, Dr. Dillon," she said freezingly, "and why you did not care to explain. I shall, of course, never be able to forgive you for daring to dream such a thing possible, but--"

"But," he interrupted, without a quiver, "you will take that half whiskey-and-soda. Here! *qui-hi! Whiskey sharâb belâtee pani la'o juldi; mem-sahiba jata hai.* (Bring whiskey-and-soda; the *mem* is going.)"

Perhaps the command of that assertion helped her to a decision. At any rate she did not countermand it, but spent the rather awkward pause which inevitably ensued in a perfect field-day of her hat-pins among her curls and veil. Whereat George Dillon, despite a certain bruised feeling, smiled, telling himself she was a true woman.

Nevertheless when, as she was stepping into the dogcart, his friendly help came necessarily to the fore again, she reverted to her dignified resentment. "I ought," she said stiffly, "to have thanked you for--for your good opinion of me, and your evident desire to be kind. I do so now. But I fear it will be quite impossible for me to forget or forgive the delusion."

"That is quite a minor matter," he put in, gleefully. "Now, cheer up, Bacilla, you brute, or we shall be late," Bacilla being his term of abuse for a pony which required a little stick.

They were only just in time, no more. Five minutes after they had joined the company gathered on the red-brick masonry of the canal head, under a canopy of waving garlands and gay bunting, with that inevitable British flag as the centre of all, the small man with the big star on his breast took a step forward, raised a handle, and, as the first drops of water trickled through a sluice, declared, in a violent Scotch accent, "that the Victoria-Kaiser-i-Hind" canal was open. So, keeping time as it were, slowly, majestically, to those (also inevitable) strains of "God save the Queen," the outer floodgates swung back, allowing the river to have permanent possession during good behaviour, of the walled basin between them and the inner ones. Thus, slowly, with a gurgling of water seeking its level, the surface rose till the half-open sluices in the second gates were reached, and a thin curve tipped over to fall with a splash, and send a tiny scout of a stream to find out what this new straight road might mean. Only a tiny scout, since the earthworks beyond had to be accustomed by degrees to their new tenant.

Still the new way was open, and the current of the river hesitated in the old one.

"Bravo, Smith!" cried George Dillon, coming round, when the cheering and general congratulations were over, to slap his colleague on the back, metaphorically and actually. "We've done that; and now perhaps, old man, you'll have time for other things."

"Yes," assented the tall, gaunt man, dreamily; "now I shall have time to settle that point about the searchlight."

"The what?"

"Search-light. There's been a correspondence in the *Engineer* about it; and as I've all the electric plant here, lying useless, now the show's over,--until it's wanted for something else, of course,--I am going to see if I can't overcome their difficulty in concentrating all the power on a sufficiently narrow area. I believe I know how to do it."

George Dillon looked at him with fierce, humorous exasperation. "Believe!" he echoed. "I know you can! You are the most intolerably circumscribed, self-concentrated, narrow-minded machine of a man I ever came across. Heaven help you!"

As he drove Mrs. Smith home again, it was his turn to sit mumchance until, womanlike, she relented faintly, and, exaggerating her own powers, trusted she had not been, *etc.*, though of course, *etc.*--

"Not in the least, thank you," he replied. "I was only meditating if I should tell you that I think Eugene has softening of the brain."

"Softening of the brain!" she echoed, horrified. "Oh, doctor, do you think it's that?"

"Well, it isn't softening of the heart, anyhow," he said grimly. "But I'm not joking. If someone doesn't get a hold on some portion of that man--I don't care what it is--heart, brain, stomach, anything--and prevent him from killing himself with work, India will lose her best engineer. What he wants is someone to--to give him a nervous headache!"

"We will leave that subject alone, please," she said loftily; but when her husband joined them in the verandah, she went over ostentatiously to him and pinned a carnation in his buttonhole, hoping he would like it better than the rose she gave him the day before, which--this was in a louder tone for the doctor's benefit--he had forgotten to put in!

"Did I, my dear?" replied her spouse. "Oh, yes! I remember you put it in my minim glass because I was working in my shirt-sleeves. Then I wanted the glass. So it got withered and the head snapped off."

Dr. Dillon laughed--his usual dry laugh. "That is one of the many tragedies which come from the delusion all women have that flowers can't be out of place."

CHAPTER XII

THE CHURCH MILITANT

When Roshan Khân had joined those two great stabilities, Faith and Love, into one passionate desire for Vincent Dering's damnation, he had meant to follow the English etiquette on such occasions, and keep his aspiration to himself.

But it had been impossible for him instantly to rejoin the society in which he found himself; that is, a society which shared that fundamental crime--which more even than any definite jealousy had roused his anger against Captain Dering--of being alien to his creed, his customs, his code of conduct towards women. So he had wandered off into the garden again, shadowed by old Akbar's incredulity, curiosity, and sympathy; until, partly from sheer impatience, but mostly from sheer inherited habit of employing such as Akbar Khân in anything approaching an intrigue, he had made a clean breast of the situation.

Even the latter, however, had, as it were, shied at the extreme novelty of the idea when it was first mooted; but, by degrees, its vast possibilities of advantage to faithful old retainers overpowered his abject terror at the bare idea of Father Narâyan suspecting such a thing. The old master, he told himself, was old, indeed! God only knew if he would last a year or a day; therefore it would be well to ensure the favour of the new mistress. And there could be no harm in sounding her as to what course that favour would follow. One could never tell with a woman; and his wicked, experienced old eyes had caught many a hint of Anâri Begum in Laila's childhood. Perhaps she had changed since she went to Calcutta. He could but try.

So when, on the morning after the ball, Laila, in obedience to her pious resolve to do nothing really wrong, had bidden him--with threats of vengeance if he betrayed the fact of their having come at all--remove and return certain trays of clothes and jewels which had been smuggled by someone into her room, he had fallen at her feet, confessed falsely that he was the offender, and besought her not to impose so unmerited a disgrace on his employer, who had been actuated by the ordinary rules of native etiquette which prescribed some recognition of his cousin, the head of his family.

Naturally enough, this brought the girl's curiosity, long restless, to his aid; and she sat listening to the many things he had to tell her, with that faintly mysterious smile of hers. And as she listened, she watched a pigeon, all jewelled about its bosom in rainbow hues, and with a dainty little pair of silver jingles about its jasper feet, which was coquetting and pirouetting to attract the attention of its neighbours on the wide marble sill of her latticed window. For Laila had a room in the upper storey all painted, carved, and set with little balconies, which was worthy of any king's favourite. And Father Ninian, mindful lingeringly of the fine ladies' boudoirs of his youth in Rome, had filled it, against her return from school, with all the prettiest spoils of the palace. Sèvres vases, rare old cabinets, quaint carved tables which had been brought thither for the dead Nawabs; treasures that were also, inevitably, of the king's-favourite type,--therefore unlike the owner of the room, as she sat in her white muslin frock, heavy-eyed, almost fallow, from the last night's dissipation.

"So she--my grandmother, you say--was a dancing-girl--a real dancing-girl?" Even her surprise

and curiosity were listless. Yet the next moment, while Akbar was protesting the superiority of Anâri Begum over all the dancing-girls of his vast experience, she had burst into a sudden laugh, uncovered one of the trays with kicks which sent first one, then the other of her bronze slippers flying, seized on a pair of silver anklets, and there she was centring a Persian rug spread on the marble floor as if she had been born to it. Coquetting, pirouetting, with a challenging clash, a half-impudent jerk of the jingles, for all the world like the pigeon on the window-sill.

Like something else also; so that old Akbar felt a shiver run through him, lest, after all, his first impression should prove right, and this be no more than a *simulacrum*,--a ghost, a changeling, come to possess the usually indifferent lazy Miss-*baba*. Yet when, all of a sudden, she raised her white muslin skirt high in both hands and began to sing, at the top of her voice, the wicked little love song which Vincent Dering had sung the first day she met him, old Akbar's dread turned to sheer wonder. This was not a ghost, but a devil; reckless, unrestrained, with a fling of white arms, a kick of white feet, all held to rhythm by the outrageous frivolity of the song, until, with that last staccato note, she threw herself in a chair, breathless, gurgling with laughter and sheer mischief.

"Lo! Akbar," she gasped, "my grandmother never danced like that, did she? I don't believe she was my grandmother! I believe you are telling stories!"

Akbar looked wise, and thrust out his folded hands in cringing protest. "The most noble says true, Anâri Begum never danced thus. But there is the grandfather, Bun-avâtâr-*sahib bahadur*, to be accounted for also."

Laila frowned. The reminder brought back the other side of the story, to which she had listened so often from her guardian's lips, while her pretended indifference masked a real pride. Of her grandfather's gallantry, his good looks, his love of adventure. And of someone else, also, who had always had a secret attraction for the girl. That most beautiful woman in Rome, the companion of princes, the divine singer, the best, the dearest--

Laila's laughter failed her; she rose, and going over to the window looked out absently, startling the pigeon into flight. The sun turned its breast purple, and green, and gold, as it fluttered down to renew its pirouetting on a cupola below, just above the river. And below that again was the roof of the balcony where she had sat with Vincent. The girl's eyes grew soft. She understood now. That best, that dearest, that most beautiful, must have loved her guardian. That was the secret of his remembrance. How could one ever forget that one had sat in a balcony hand in hand? So content, yet saying so little--only feeling. But *he* had said some things. He had said she was beautiful, that she ought always to wear that dress, and she had told him she could not,--that she *must* send it back--that he *must* learn to like her as much in her ordinary clothes--that he would never see her in that dress again. But, after all, why not--if--?

She turned suddenly to the go-between. "There is no need to take them back to-day," she said, sharply; "but thou canst tell the person who sent them--he who claims cousinship--that I will not keep them, that I know nothing of them; that he must send and *take* them away."

Akbar, with an inward determination to do nothing so palpably foolish, salaamed down to the ground. The Presence, he said, in doing this showed her dignity; it was undoubtedly the right course to pursue. But, in the mean time, would the Begum-*sahiba*--she must excuse a tongue which could not always bear with the paltry present, which remembered the facts of the past, the possibilities of the future--not temper her noble severity with the usual courtly favour? Her cousin's grandmother, a most virtuous princess, sister to the late Nawab, was still alive. Her memory of Bun-avatâr-*sahib* was still so green that doubtless she would be able to tell the Begum-*sahiba* many things of which a mere mean slave could not be cognizant. And this most virtuous, most interesting one, had long been anxious to return a visit which the Begum-*sahiba* had graciously paid her, in company with a *missen*-miss--

"What! That funny old fat woman!" interrupted Laila, with a laugh. "That dirty old thing? I remember, she *did* claim to be a relation of the Nawab's. And when I asked her why she wore such dirty clothes she was angry, and said she had beautiful ones all tied up in bundles! I don't believe she had, though--"

"The dress the Begum-*sahiba* wore last night is one of them," interrupted Akbar, quietly; "it belonged to Anâri Begum, *Huzoor*, and there are plenty more like it. And all are really the *Huzoor's*; no one else's." Laila looked down on the trays with a new interest. "Did it really belong to--to *her*?" she asked; "and the jewels also?"

"The jewels also. There are plenty of them. And if Anâri Begum was really the Begum-*sahiba's* grandmother, then the jewels are hers by right."

"She can come if she wishes," interrupted Laila, impatiently. "I see thy craft, Akbar, but I care not for that. Yet it will be fun to receive her as--as a Begum. And no harm either, since the *missen* ladies receive her, I know, and her like--when they will come! It will be at night, of course, to ensure her privacy, so Pidar Narâyan need know nothing. Only"--she paused, a change swept over her face, leaving it dimpled, cunning, full of mischief and cajolery. "I do naught for naught! If I please thee, thou must please me! If thou art their messenger, thou must be mine also; or I tell Pidar Narâyan!"

Akbar-*khân's* wicked old eyes positively leered approval; he waggled his head and chuckled. Wherefore not? Was there a better, more careful messenger in the world than he, or one more capable of deft arrangements?

"I want none," she put in with a quick distaste, a shrinking from his manner. "'Tis but to take a note to Dering-*sahib*; he must know somewhat before he comes with the other *sahib logue* this afternoon. There is no arrangement needed, no fuss."

How could there be, she asked herself, as, after the old sinner had gone off, charmed at this renewal of a once familiar occupation, she sat on the window-sill looking down on the roof of the balcony where she had been so content. For what could be simpler than to make it quite clear that you were real, that you did not pretend, that you were not even afraid? That, briefly, you were not like Mrs. Smith, who took so much--one could not help seeing that!--and gave so little--one could not help seeing that, also! For what was a "Thanks! many, Captain Dering," in return for all the trouble he lavished on her?

So it came to pass that when Vincent Dering went to the palace that afternoon, some words were haunting heart and brain, as Juliet's words must have haunted Romeo's. No more; no less. But they slid into and filled up the blanks between some words of his own which he had spoken carelessly, not five minutes before he had first seen Laila, and which came back to his memory unbidden. "It isn't altogether despicable to let yourself loose in Paradise without an *arrière pensée* of flaming swords, especially if you can give pleasure to someone else thereby! One could play Romeo and Juliet in this garden nicely."

Well, he had played it for an hour or two, swept off his feet by chance. Whether he would continue to play it was unsettled till her note came. That ended his vague reluctance, and he went over to the palace, eager as any lover could be for the interview she suggested in "*the old place when it grows dusk, and the people will mostly have gone.*"

For those of the camp who were bound to follow the Viceroy's whim of riding by the old road--the pilgrims' road--while the big camp went round by the longer, easier route, had promised to look in on the palace on their way past it, for a cup of tea, a good-by. Since already, the functions over, the dream-city had begun to melt away; the Hosts of the Lord-*sahib* were passing on.

"Glory be!" said the Commissioner with heart-felt gratitude, "we've done our worst and leave you to take the consequences. That's sound policy. Anyhow, we are ahead of everybody on the road to heaven, and the pilgrims will have to swallow the dust of our feet! I wonder how they'll like it." He was in wild spirits, like a schoolboy escaped from school; yet as he paused to shake hands with Dr. Dillon, he said aside, "Any more cases?"

"Two," said the doctor, laconically, "both dead. It is a bad type."

His hearer's face was unmovable as he turned to Mrs. Smith, who stood close by. "Good-by, my dear lady," he said cheerfully, "remember me house is yours if you, or the child, want it. Doctor, couldn't you conscientiously recommend change of air to the hills? Couldn't ye swear the close proximity to an open canal and a gaol is unwholesome? If ye could, you'd oblige a grass-widower, whose wife is at Baden-Baden--or is it Marienbad?--living prodigally, while he has to fill himself with husks which no self-respecting swine would eat. Faith, me dear madam, I'd bless you if you'd come and kill the cook. It's a woman's work; not a man's."

Dr. Dillon, with a quick look, backed him up instantly. "Certainly. I told Mrs. Smith a long time ago that she and Gladys had had enough of Eshwara. Indeed, as her doctor, she would be doing me a personal favour if--"

Muriel Smith swept round on him sharply. She was looking her very best, in her very best gown; white, mystic, wonderful, with a faint gleam of silver embroidery about waist and hem. And she had been obtrusively, unnecessarily friendly with Vincent Dering all the afternoon; even now she was standing with him attached to her apron-strings.

"I don't think nervous headaches are dangerous," she said, eying Dr. Dillon coolly. "But thanks all the same. I should love to kill somebody; even a cook. Perhaps I may, by and by, when *all* the nice people leave. I'm so sorry *you're* going, but we are still to be quite gay, aren't we, Captain Dering? And that reminds me we have to settle when that riding party is to come off. Good-by--good-by!" She waved her hand to the departing Commissioner, and carried Vincent Dering off, with a defiant look at the doctor.

He, knowing her, smiled indulgently; but Father Ninian, who had come down to see his guest off, looked after her with a wistful pain in his kind old face.

"That is a mistake," he said briefly; then the wistfulness grew into a puzzled look, and he added, half to himself, "It need not be, surely; there is something wrong. I can't understand--"

Dr. Dillon, catching the end of the remark, gave a cynical laugh and turned on his heel. "No one does," he said as he went off. He would not discuss her even with dear old Pidar Narâyan. For the rest, though he was keen to get back to his jail, he would wait till she tired of her game, and then drive her home himself to her idiot of a husband, who was too busy over his blessed search-light to see things that were going on under his very eyes.

Captain Dering, however, was already impatient. It was growing dusk; the shadows were claiming the garden bit by bit, and as the glint left the varnished leaves of the orange trees, the white flowers stood out like little stars against the gloom and sent a bewildering perfume into the darkening air. He could see no hint of Laila anywhere; Laila in that detestable white muslin garment which made him long vainly to get rid of the surroundings which suited her so ill, drive all that civilized crew from the garden, and claim it as his own--and hers! She must have gone to the balcony already. She must be waiting for him. And yet a soft-heartedness for this other woman with whom he had been friends, whom for a few days he had imagined he loved (it had come to *this* now) forbade him from leaving her cavalierly. So it was long past dusk, and the short Indian twilight was hovering on the edge of night, ere he made his escape; and, full of anxiety lest Laila should have lost patience or hope, hurried down to the wide archway, and so, by the turn riverwards, to the right, into the balcony. Most girls, he told himself, would by this time have taken offence; but she was there.

As he entered, her figure showed dimly against the light beyond.

"I'm afraid I am awfully late," he began, then paused; for, as she turned, there was a faint clash of silver, a faint gleam of it too. His heart gave a great throb of glad recognition. It was Laila! Laila indeed! the Laila of that dream last night. And she had risked *this* to please him!

"Are you?" she said. "I thought *I* was late; for *this* took time; but I wanted to be the same--always the same to you, always--always!"

She stretched her hands to him, but he set them aside, took her in his arms, and kissed her passionately.

"Yes! Laila! always Laila--my Laila!"

She gave him back his kisses joyfully. "I knew you would come," she said. "Love comes to love, you know."

He called her Juliet then, and many another lover's name. She took them all, and gave them back again without reserve, until, as they stood there, someone passing outward from the arched passage to the garden, paused to listen at the half-heard sound of voices. For Father Ninian--who had come down to his own rooms for a pair of foils wherewith to give Lance Carlyon a lesson in the "*Addio del Marito*," until Captain Dering should choose to come out of the recesses of the garden and allow of their going back to the Fort together--knew of none likely to use, or even to be aware of, the balcony. So he turned thither curiously, then stood arrested, so that the clash of the foils on the stone, as he purposely lowered their points, came as a warning to those two that they were observed. Laila, with a catlike noiselessness, withdrew in a second. She, a yard or two away, in deepest shadow, stood leaning in a careless, easy attitude over the balustrade. Her only possibility of escape lay, she felt instinctively, in showing no desire to do so. Vincent, for his part, turned to face the old priest, prepared to brazen it out; for his blood was running like wild-fire in his veins. Yet scarcely so fast as the heart's blood had once leapt, and was even now leaping, in the old man who came forward, facing him also. Came forward slowly, shortsightedly, a foil in each hand. If he had held out one, bade him take the button off and fight for his life, Vincent Dering would scarcely have been surprised, would almost have been pleased. It would have raised him in his own self-esteem. For he knew perfectly well he had no right to be there; that, as yet, he was not sure of his own footing.

But Pidar Narâyan did not. He paused, as he generally did, a few paces away, a slender, straight shadow in black, girt about with that pale sash, on which, and on his pale face, such light as there was fell softly. For there was no anger in the latter; only an almost passionate regret and pity. Even so, his words startled the young man, who stood prepared for defiance.

"Oh! Captain Dering!" he said courteously, "it is you, is it? You have found a pleasant place, indeed! But scarcely a very safe one for your companion--" he turned to that faint gleam of white and silver in the arched shadow.--"The air grows chill, madam, so close to the river," he continued, his voice taking a tone almost of command, "and you are lightly clad. Will you not be wise, and leave us?"

Vincent's surprise had passed by this time into a rush of vexation, almost indignation, for he had grasped the old man's mistake. For an instant he felt bound to undeceive him, then the impossibility of doing so held him silent, feeling a coward indeed; so, desperately, he could only join his voice to Father Ninian's. It seemed the only way out of the *impasse*.

"Perhaps you had better go--"

Laila did not need more. Already, under cover of the shadow, she had dexterously slipped off her silver jingles, lest they should betray what really seemed to her her worst, nay! her only offence;--the taking and wearing of Roshan Khân's present. And now, wrapping her veil about her like a cloak, gathering her trailing skirts to orthodox length with an appalling presence of mind, she was off with just the little uneasy laugh which might well befit the situation.

She left her companion bewildered, yet still facing the old man recklessly. Since he could not explain, he did not mean to be hectored. Yet, once again, the old voice took him unawares.

"Memory plays strange tricks with us at times," it said slowly, but with a suggestion of the fateful, hopeless rhythm of a Greek chorus in it. "She has taken me back, this evening, nearly sixty long years. The river before us is the yellow flood of the Tiber, the woman who has just left us is the woman I loved--sixty long years ago--I had kissed her, as you have kissed her. I had told her I loved her, as you have just told her--and then, like an echo from the river below where a boat was moored, came to our ears, the same words, 'I love you.'--They were spoken, Captain Dering, by a boy, barely in his teens, to a waiting-maid. The boy was her son. She had been married, as they marry them in Italy, almost before her girlhood, and I, the boy's tutor, was nearer her age than his father--a better man, too, Captain Dering! But those words--'I love you'--parted us once, and for all. They mirrored the truth for us--the truth of the love which hides in balconies--in pleasure boats--" he took a step forward, and his whole presence changed. He raised his hand, priest to its finger tips. "Let it mirror the truth to you also, my son--leave this poor lady to her duty, as I--"

Vincent Dering broke in on him haughtily, his pride in arms, impatience at the falseness of his position making him discourteous.

"You don't understand; you are absolutely mistaken--I refuse to explain, but I really must ask you not to interfere."

The old man's whole bearing changed again. He drew himself up, and, foils in hand, bowed, as fencers do at the salute.

"Were I the lady's husband, sir, I would *make* you answer. As a priest of God, I must warn you that I will speak, if--"

Vincent Dering interrupted him again. "I can't prevent that--but you will wrong us--her at any rate--the best, the kindest woman--"

He paused, for Father Ninian had come close, laid a hand on his, and the touch seemed to bring silence.

"It is sixty long years, Captain Dering," he said, and his eyes seemed to pierce through the darkness, "since I have laid my hand on my fellow-men save in the hope of healing. It was a fancy of mine after--after we kissed, and parted. But I touch you as a second self, a fellow-sinner; for she too was the best--the kindest--" His old voice failed.

Despite his anger at the whole miserable mistake, Vincent was touched; but despite his emotion, his annoyance strengthened.

"Possibly," he broke in, "but I must really refuse to discuss the matter further. Shall we end this, sir,--unless--" he gave a reckless laugh and pointed to the foils--"you would like to fight it out?"

Once more Father Ninian bowed, as fencers bow in the salute, the priest, the wise counsellor, lost in an older entity than these; in the high-born Scotch student, who, for a while, had forgotten his vocation to ruffle with the best blood in Italy. "I have not the privilege of being the lady's protector," he answered hotly. "If I were,"--He paused, then said courteously, "Shall we come upstairs? I came down for these foils in order to teach Mr. Carlyon the thrust we spoke of once. '*L'Addio del Marito*,' they called it in my youth--I doubt if the name has changed now. He will be wondering what has become of me, and--and it!"

As Vincent followed him, he felt a thrill at the savageness of the old man's tone, and told himself that here was the Church Militant indeed.

He might have said so with still more reason ten minutes after, when Father Ninian was left alone. For the hour proved too late for lessons, and Lance Carlyon--who had been out of sorts ever since his walk at dawn with Erda Shepherd--was obliged to give in to dinner, grumbling the while, that Vincent was the worst chum he ever came across. Never to be found when he was wanted, then turning up when dear old Pidar Narâyan looked as if he could have licked creation.

Possibly Lance might have repeated this assertion, also, with greater fervour, could he have been witness to Father Ninian's actions, when, his last guest gone, he went to put the foils back in the armoury next the chapel.

For he would have seen him, with head bowed over the crossed foils he held, repeating a "*mea culpa*" as he passed the altar; but ere the second foil matched its fellow on the armoury wall, he would have seen as pretty a bit of sword-play as could well be seen. Many a dexterous turn of wrist, many a quick imaginary parry, many a sharp *riposte*, following each other accurately, as if memory held each attack, each defence of an unseen foe; until finally, swift as a flash, would come a falter back, as if from a blow, then a thrust forward.

There was a little silver bell--such as men put to a falcon's hood--no bigger than a sixpence, shaped like a man's heart, upon the tassel of a resting lance beneath the solitary foil. And the tassel swayed gently in the cool river breeze.

Yet at each thrust the heart-shaped bell chimed a feeble protest under the button of the foil,

making the Church Militant smile cheerfully.

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE GATES

The darkness which holds the dawn was, as a rule, silent as the grave in the sand-stretches beyond the river, where the wide cut of the canal, the huge mud-heap of the gaol, with its scattered workshops and houses, showed as mere spots and lines on the illimitable plain. But on the night after the band had played "God save the Queen," while the first drops of sacred water trickled over the chink of the sluice into the dry bed of the canal below, its silence was broken by unfamiliar sounds.

First of all, by the now ceaseless splash of the thin, glassy curve of water on its way to find out this new road to the sea. It had a sort of dreamy whisper in it, as if it were telling its first impressions, its hopes, its fears, to the river it was leaving behind.

And on this background of ceaseless sound came two others intermittently.

The first--a muffled hammering from the darkness which hid the Viceroy's camp--told of departure, letting the night know that another white-winged tent was flitting, and that the dawn must be prepared to find its place empty, the dream-city in ruins, the Hosts of the Lord-*sahib* gone.

The second told of arrival. It was a strange cry, soft, almost musical:--

"*Hârâ--Hârî--Hârâ--Hârî!*"

Then every now and again in a sort of chant: "*Râm--Râm--Sita--Râm!*"

It was the pilgrims' cry, their call on the Creator, the Destroyer, their appeal to the godhead in man and woman; for the forerunners of the great host to come were already nearing Eshwara on their road to the "Cradle of the Gods."

But there was a fourth sound, inaudible--by reason of that ceaseless noise of water through the chink of the sluice--except to those close by it, like George Dillon, as he stood on the hand-bridge above the closed gates looking down idly into the darkness which prevented him from seeing the cause of the sound. He had been up all night. On his return,--later than he had intended, owing to his determination not to be defied by any woman,--he had found that in his absence cholera had been hard at its work. So he had buckled to his, expecting one of those awful nights which live, even in a doctor's memory, as a horror, as a warning to those best fitted to stem the stream of death, that they are but straws on its surface.

But he had been mistaken. True, for an hour or so, cases had come in quicker than they could be attended to; then, suddenly, they ceased to come in at all. That had been eight hours ago. Too short a respite for certainty, but Dr. Dillon, being no novice in such work, had his hopes; the more so because the disease, from the very outset, had become steadily less and less virulent. Even so, seven dead bodies lay awaiting the first glint of dawn; therefore, as ill-luck would have it, there would be seven columns of smoke on the river's edge for all to see!

It was inevitable, however, nor could he do more to prevent others coming. So he had been on his way back to his own house for a few hours' rest when the dreamy splash of the water made him pause to lean over the hand-rail and listen to it, as he finished his cigar in the open.

Then it was that he heard a faint tap, tapping, as of a ghostly hand on a door. What was it? It was quite distinct, though almost as low as the "*lip, lipping*" of the water, made restless by that glassy curve against the gates.

A curiosity to know seized on him. There was already a glimmer of dawn in the east; he might as well wait and see.

It was not long before a streak of something faintly white made him call himself a fool. The cause was a log of wood. He might have thought of that. Even that faint setting of a stream towards a new way must have drifted it here. The thought made him frown, for this fulfilment of the river-people's prophecy was annoying; the more so from its absolute unlikelihood. Years

might pass without such a chance coming again; yet it had come the very first day! It was too bad. The stars in their courses were fighting against him. In a pet he threw the remains of his cigar from him, and was striding off, when a faint glimmer, as of a candle, made him turn sharply and look down whence it came.

The lighted end of his cigar had fallen on something dry, inflammable, which had blazed up. But it was only for a second; the next found darkness, save for that still, faint, glimmer of white. But the brief gleam had told him it was not a log which had drifted astray--

It was a corpse.

That *tap, tapping* he had heard had been from the dead feet seeking vainly to pass through the chink of the sluice, swerving with the side current, coming back, again and again. He stood, grasping the rail, staring down at the dim outline almost incredulously, and feeling, despite himself, a trifle shivery.

Then the remembrance that this was a thing which must be seen by none, which somehow, and as quickly as possible, must be set on its right road again, made him hurry back to where he knew some coils of rope, which had been used for bunting at the ceremony, were lying. Seizing one--still gaily decorated--he tied a brick to one end, and hurried back to the bridge. By dropping this weighted rope over the dim white streak he was able to edge it gradually to one side, until it lay moored against the wall of the basin. Kneeling down for a closer look, he could see, in the fast-growing light, that it was the corpse of a woman. He could even guess the death she died, and if proof was needed, it could be found in the hands folded at full stretch down the body; the thumbs, pointing upward, linked by an iron ring. To this iron ring had been looped a little tuft of the tri-coloured hank of cotton which plays so large a part in marriage ceremonial. Dr. Dillon stood up and swore under his breath.

The fates were, indeed, inexorable in their spite. Of all things unlucky for the changing stream to claim, a corpse seeking union with Mother Ganges was the worst; and of all corpses, this--the cursed one, which had held two lives and could send one back to haunt men--was the worst.

He must get rid of it somehow, if he could.

Fastening the rope, so strangely out of keeping, all hung as it was with gay colours, to the iron ring which showed about the ankles, he proceeded to tow the body back along the basin, past the first gates, and so to the river itself. Thus far was simple. But how was he to get it afloat on a current strong enough to sweep it beyond danger of its returning to tap at the gates once more?

The dawn was hastening with great leaps of light that shot in broad bars from the darkest spot in all the dark horizon; the spot which would soon be the brightest, ablaze with the sun himself. Already the broad shield of the river was changing its heraldry--the sable was turning to steel, sign that the world would side with the light.

What was to be done?

He looked over the wide waste of sand and water, with a perplexity which vanished suddenly in a smile, as he caught sight of a round shadow like a man's head dipping and dancing on the surface. He walked on to the last dry spot of land and shouted--

"Ai! fisherman! Ai! Gu-gu! Am-ma! anybody! Come and earn a gold *mohur*!"

It was Am-ma. Luckily, perhaps, since the idea of even towing a dead body such as this might have been too much for semi-civilized Gu-gu. Am-ma, however, had not ever borrowed his neighbours' superstitions. In fact, ever since he, the Miss-*sahiba* and the *Dee-puk-râg* had bested the devil between them, he had felt himself to be invulnerable. So, he assured Dr. Dillon affably, were the *Huzoors*; therefore he obeyed them. Consequently, less than five minutes after the call, with a vague wonder as to what sixteen rupees would feel like, all at once, in a man's palm, he was heading hard to the nearest stream capable of carrying the thing he had in tow back to the path of purification. This happened to be towards Eshwara, and beyond a sandy point set with tamarisks which jutted out above the canal head. There was, of course, a certain stream against him, and to save himself exertion and finish the job--as he had agreed to do--before dawn, he swam for the most part under water, only coming up, after his habit, for air.

Now it so happened, also, that Gu-gu had thought fit to set nets for wild-fowl, and was even now dozing, while he waited for the result, in the same tamarisk jungle. But the sound of something swishing through the water against the stream roused him in a second, and even without the glimpse, which the coming dawn gave him, of a long streak parting the river with a curved ripple like the prow of a boat, his experience told him what it was sure to be. Briefly, someone of the river people,--Am-ma for choice, since who but Am-ma had the luck of such things--had happened on the chance of stealing a log from the piles about the canal workshops. He was now, after time-honoured precedent, towing it to the stream where, having set it adrift, he would recapture it, and, of course, claim his reward for so doing!

But two could play that game. When secrecy made it necessary for a thief to swim for the most part under water, it was easy to swim under water too, across the track of the robber, cut his prize adrift, and put your weight on the rope instead.

Then you could either choose revenge, and let an enemy tow you home--which was a side-splitting trick,--or you might wait till your adversary came up breathless, and dash after the prize yourself. Even if you could not secure the whole, half profits were generally possible.

Therefore, slipping noiselessly into the stream like an alligator, he was off across the track in a second; swimming, of course, under water. He came, up once for air, and smiled to see how far he had come; so, fearing lest the holder of the unseen tow-rope might chance to come up at the same time, his black head went under once more.

When it came up again, it was within a few yards of the long white streak. He gave one look at it, let loose a yell of abject terror, and almost turning a somersault in his haste to escape, his head went down again, his feet went skywards, and though his lungs nearly burst in the effort, he came up no more till he felt certain he must have put a screen of tamarisk between him and the horror. He had; but his teeth chattered, his eyes were half out of his head when he scrambled, hands and knees, on to the bank, and lying face down on the dry sand, moaned and shuddered. What else could a man do who had seen a cursed corpse breasting the stream on its way back to Eshwara? To whose house? That, however, was quite a secondary consideration to a man who was already as good as dead; since what man had ever survived the sight of a *churail*?

The certainty of his own fate, after a while, made him absolutely, recklessly, calm. He gathered up his nets, wrung the necks of the few birds he had caught pitilessly, and went with them, as usual, to the bazaars. Not only for profit, however. Other men should taste of his fear. Other men should know that they too might have to die!

Am-ma, meanwhile, having seen nothing when he came up wondering what the sound was which had filtered to his ears through the water, had gone on his way unwitting, found the stream, cut the corpse adrift himself, and gone back to his fishing.

It was not until he also went into the bazaar with his basket, that he found it ringing with the direful portent; yet for all that going its way buying and selling, squabbling over the uttermost part of a farthing; since portents are ever with an Indian bazaar. At first, when called upon to verify Gu-gu's story, Am-ma, remembering his promise of secrecy, gave it stout denial; but when the real truth of what had occurred dawned on his slow brain, the opportunity for piling agony on to his rival was too strong for him, and he burst into details, all of which made Gu-gu's chance of escape still more remote. The corpse had shot after him with a speed only equal to the fire-boats in which the *Huzoors* came across the black water; it had sat up, and beckoned, and called "*Gu-gu! Gu-gu!*"

"But if thou hast seen all this, thou, too, must die!" remarked the syrup-seller round whose shop the talk was loudest.

Am-ma laughed vaingloriously. "Not I! The devils are afraid of me. See you, I have taken the *Huzoors* for my God; I am on the strong side."

"Hark to him!" jeered another of his own tribe who was also selling fish. "He cannot balance his basket on his head, he holds it so high since the wood-*sahib* up the river hath bidden him guide their big raft,--as if he was a whit better than the rest of us!"

Am-ma smiled peacefully. "That is true, brother. I go for the raft this very day. But I leave a son in my house, if the luck goes against me. That is the *Huzoors'* doing. They have the *Dee-puk-râg*. They are the Light-bringers, the Birth-bringers!"

A tall man, in curiously crumpled clothing, who had just joined the group, gave a hollow laugh. "Birth-bringers!" he echoed. "Ay! and Death-bringers, too. They took seven in the gaol last night. I have it from a sure hand." That might well be, seeing that he was none other than the *gosain* Gopi, who, scarcely an hour ago, had been given his ticket-of-leave and the clothes in which he had been convicted two years before. They had since then been rolled up, and ticketed with his name and number; hence the creases.

"The doctor cuts a hole in their heads," he went on calmly, "takes out their brains, and puts the bit back. Then 'tis cholera. That is why they burn them in their clothing and their *caps*, so that none may see. But they *say*, 'tis for the safety of the living; as if that did not lie with the Gods!"

"Hark to him!" said approving voices. "Yea! hark to him, the pious one!"

The long bazaar lay flooded with sunshine and life. The quails were calling from their hooded cages, the sacred monkeys were chattering about the sweetmeat-sellers' shops, men and women were going about eager on their own affairs, and a group of schoolboys on their way to a mission school came along, their books under their arms,--a quaint collection, for the most part. A copy of the Gospels, Sa'adi's *Gulistan*, and the *Hitopadesa*, certainly; a treatise, in English, on the latest theories of mind and matter, equally so; selections from general literature, probably; with Burke's speeches and Addison's *Spectator*, possibly.

One or two of these boys paused in their school talk to listen, as a voice said fearfully:--

"'Twill be for '*moma!*' they want them. Folks say they are running short of power."

Gopi shook his head. "That may be; but these are to grease the slots of the canal sluice; without it, water will not run. One brain--his, that they killed with the light--opened it but one inch; as all can see if they choose. And these seven will not go far. What matter? There be plenty more where they came from."

The gossipers looked at each other. "Yea! that is so. It opens but an inch, and there are many prisoners," they said, with that curious faculty for giving heart-whole assent to the truthful foundations of a lie which makes the latter go so far in India.

The boys went on. There was nothing about the dynamic and hydraulic power of a man's brain in their treatises; but, after all, the statement was scarcely so strange to ignorance as many another held in the books under their arms.

"The times are bad," remarked someone, chiefly to give a fresh fillip to the flagging horrors. "They say the 'Pool of Immortality,' will be dry to-morrow."

A trail of saffron-robed pilgrims who were passing, under the charge of a priest, looked at their guide doubtfully. If this was to be so, what was the use of having given him a rupee each to be admitted thereto at the most auspicious moment?

"Lo! 'tis easy to father that falsehood!" cried the priest in charge, venomously eyeing a similar figure to his own, which was also followed patiently, trustfully, by a band of men and women and children, all in their saffron robes. "When folks have had their own miracle stopped, they would fain stop other folks' also. Have no fear, my children! The sacred water will rise as ever, and send your souls blameless to the 'Cradle of the Gods.'"

It would have been easy enough for his rival to throw doubts on the genuineness of the pool miracle, had it been sound policy to do so; but before those patient, trustful faces, desirous only to save their souls alive at any cost, it was unwise to sap at the foundations of faith. So the reply contented itself with assertions that there was no fear either, for them. Tampion or no tampion, *jogi* Gorakh-nâth had promised to be inside the gun as ever. And that would be a newer, a better, miracle, than any other in Eshwara!

Here a fresh voice put in its word; for the syrup-seller's shop, being at one corner of the central square or *chowk* of four bazaars, no one who had any errand of any sort in Eshwara could fail to pass it sooner or later. Therefore, Dya Ram and some other pleaders, on their way thus early in the morning to the tahsil court, were bound to overhear the priest's boast.

"But most undesirable, nevertheless," expostulated Dya Ram, quickly. "We have duly appealed against the order to the higher court, and our legal course is to await the result."

The priest looked at him, sullenly scornful; for such as he are no favourites with the hereditary Levites of India.

"The *jogi* hath appealed to the Gods," he retorted, "and they will give judgment without the help of such as thou, pleader-*jee!*"

"Hark to the pious one!" murmured the crowd again, admiringly responsive, as ever, to a hint of religious sentiment.

"But it will confuse issues--it is irregular--and I who drew up the petition object *in toto*," began Dya Ram in angry protest, when a friend interrupted him consolingly in English.

"True. As it has been said, it is impossible to serve God and Mammon; yet seeing that miracles are, as Herbert Spencer proves, *ipsi facto*--"

The ludicrous inadequacy of logic to the mental caliber of those around him, struck one of the little party of progress keenly, and he broke in, as he passed on, "What is the use of combatting such ignorance? It is for us--who represent the intellect of India--to pioneer the way--"

The rest was lost as the little party went on discussing their own position.

"Mayhap 'twas to Ramanund's house the *churail* was coming; there was such a corpse went from it a week or two since; and they return from far," said an old man, looking after the last speaker.

Gopi, the *gosain*, laughed. "This one, I'll wager, was sent back because of the canal. Mark my words, Mai Gunga will return them all now. 'Tis the *Huzoors'* doing."

A curious shiver ran through the crowd of men. To have your women against you, to feel in your heart that they cannot help being revengeful, that their blood is on your head, is ever the greatest of dreads. And so many lives held the possibility of this revenge.

Am-ma, philosophically seated on the outskirts of the group, trying to sell his fish, laughed vaingloriously again.

"Only for fools! The miss-*sahiba* and the lights, and I, can defy devils."

Here he stood up, and, with frightful grimaces of joy and uncouth salaams, greeted the appearance of Erda Shepherd, who, in the mission-lady's uniform of blouse and skirt, white pith hat, green veil, and bag of books, came out of a neighbouring alley.

It was not a becoming dress, Lance Carlyon told himself, as, on his way back from escort duty to some lingering bigwig of the camp, he, at the same moment, came cantering up the bazaar towards the Fort.

She could not say the same of his. It was the first time she had seen him in uniform, and the sight of the scarlet and gold, the buttons, the fal-lals generally, took her breath away. There are, in fact, few women whom they do not impress.

Yet, curiously enough, her impulse was to pass on without speaking; his, to do what he did, namely, pull up, dismount, and shake hands. And still more curiously, the reason for both these impulses was the same; the presence beside Erda of a tall, rather weedy-looking man, with a long, black coat and a long, red beard.

"Let me introduce my cousin, the Reverend David Campbell," said Erda, with great dignity, somewhat marred by a fine blush.

"I thought it must be," rejoined Lance, coolly. He might have said he was certain of it; that a fellow could scarcely feel a desire to murder another fellow at an instant's notice, unless that fellow was your rival.

Yet, still more curiously again, this notion of rivalry had come to Lance in an instant also. Before he caught sight of Erda and her *fiancé* he would have sworn that though he had been a bit cut up at hearing the nicest girl he had ever met was already engaged, he had never had the remotest idea of fighting against the fact. But the first glance at the two walking together had changed all this. Here by God's grace was the one maid for him. And another man had--

Not a bad looking chap, certainly. Better dressed, too, than most missionaries. That was because he was fresh out from England. Any fool, though, could be that with an English tailor. Yes, not a bad sort; but not the sort for *her*.

"You've been out on your rounds, I suppose," he said, pointing to Erda's books.

"Yes," answered the Reverend David, with eager assent, and the benevolent smile which includes the smiler's own virtue in smiling; "and I have been privileged for the first time to see somewhat of the noble work Englishwomen are doing for their Indian sisters. It is no easy task, Mr. Carlyon, for delicate--"

"I like it," put in Erda, with a faint frown at the missionary-report style of her cousin's enthusiasm. "So there is no use wasting your pity on me, David."

"Pity!" he echoed, in appropriating approval. "I did not even pity you when they called you evil names." Being of the new school of Free church ministers, he put all possible ill into ev-il like any ritualistic curate.

"Do they call you names?" asked Lance, sharply.

Erda gave a vexed look at her cousin. For the first time in her life the militant joy at persecution of the true proselytizer failed her.

"Sometimes, not often," she said, quite apologetically. "They happened to do so to-day, and David heard it; there are so many strangers about, you see, who don't know me."

"And what did you do?" Lance's eyes were on the Reverend David this time.

"Do?" repeated the latter, in faint surprise. "Nothing, of course. We missionaries hear such things joyfully--for--for the Work's sake." There was dignity in his tone and manner.

"By Jove!" said Lance, softly, under his breath, "if I'd been there, there would have been a row. Besides," he added, quite argumentatively, "if I believed in my work as you do I'd be hanged if I let anybody '*krab*'^[9] it--or me--for it's the same thing. Not at least, without trying to make 'em answer for it all I know."

The Reverend David Campbell shook his head. "That is not our view. Erda, the meeting is at nine, and it is already the half-hour. To-morrow, you see, Mr. Carlyon, is our field-day, and we have to arrange our forces."

Once more the flavour of the missionary report made Erda shrink, but Lance nodded.

"A field-day for most of us. I expect to be in the saddle all day. Good-by, Miss Shepherd."

But something in the girl rose up in revolt at parting with him thus. When he had been out of sight, she had faced the probability of never seeing him any more with equanimity. Now she felt that she must tell him she was leaving Eshwara the very next day, or the day after; that she must make this a *real* good-by.

"I have to see another old woman in an alley close by first, David," she said. "You had better go on and let me follow."

Yet when he had gone, after another joyously militant pæan over the work, she stood silent. It seemed somehow too sunshiny for words. Then she looked up at Lance, and her heart sank. For something in his face told her, in an instant, that she had been too long in letting him know of her engagement to her cousin. The fact, by rousing her indignation,--since it was impossible to go about proclaiming that you were not available for idle people to fall in love with,--helped her to be hard.

"You need not have been so fierce just now," she said, with an unreal little laugh. "People won't have many more chances of calling me names in Eshwara. I told you, didn't I, that I was going; but it will be sooner than I expected--to-morrow, or next day."

"Then I shan't see you again?" He grasped the meaning to him in an instant, and the wondering pain in his voice awoke an echo in her heart.

"I suppose so; for Mr. Campbell's appointment will be at the other end of India; unless, indeed--" she could not withstand his look--"my Aunt has asked a few friends in to tea this afternoon to say good-by. If you, or Captain Dering, cared--"

"Of course I'll come," he interrupted quietly. "Now which way are you going, for I am going too?"

She looked at him helplessly. "But you can't," she began.

"Oh, yes, I can! I'll finish the smoke you interrupted, while you polish off the old lady. They're not going to have a chance of--of abusing the *work* again."

He had a most ingenious way of appealing to her sense of humour, and though it was partly at her cousin's expense, she laughed as they set off together--a most incongruous couple. He had little time for his smoke, however, for he had barely left off watching the point where she had disappeared, for any hint of felonious calling of names, when she reappeared in company with Father Ninian, the latter looking almost pope-like, yet also curiously native, in the white washing *soutane* and skull-cap which he invariably wore in his visitations. His face was rather stern, and he had his spectacles on.

"Ah! Mr. Carlyon," he said, surprised in his turn, "I am glad. Will you take Miss Shepherd home? I want to go over to Dr. Dillon at once; and I have advised her not to visit in this quarter to-day. There are many lodging houses for the pilgrims, and--"

"Did they call names?" asked Lance, belligerent at once.

The old man looked at him sharply, almost angrily. "No one ever called me names, sir; still less a lady who was with me. But excuse me--I am pressed for time."

"Now, that's a man!" said Lance, enthusiastically, as he looked after the hurrying white figure. The comparison was too obvious.

"Father Ninian is not a missionary," she said coldly. "It is easy for him--" she paused, turned to her companion, and held out her hand. "Good-by, and thanks; but I really can go home by myself, Mr. Carlyon."

"Good-by," he echoed; then, holding her hand still, a sudden resolve seemed to come to him. "But--I should like to tell you something first, please."--

She felt her heart beating everywhere but in its proper place.

--"Not that it matters, but I'd like you to know it. I had some news by the mail this morning--bad news."

She felt her blood everywhere but in its normal course, now, in sheer shame at her own imaginations. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"So am I," he went on thoughtfully; "though it isn't bad in a way for me. Do you remember my telling you about my cousin? a weedy chap, six-four. Well, they sent him round the world for his health, and he died two months ago, it seems, in Australia. And the shock was too much for my uncle; he was an old man, and this was his only son. So--so I am Sir Lancelot now. It doesn't make any odds, of course, but I thought I should like you to know, first."

She looked up at him as he stood beside her, so tall, so strong, so young, so kind; and though she only said, "Thanks, Sir Lancelot, it won't make any difference to--to our friendship, I'm sure," she knew in her heart of hearts that it did. Though how, she had not yet had time to discover.

CHAPTER XIV

MIRACLE MONGERS

Roshan Khân flung his cigarette away, and walked up and down his quarters in the Fort like an Englishman; he felt rather like one, also, in his vague distaste for something which refused to fit in with his previous experiences.

"So she will see my grandmother," he said, at last. "That is a step, certainly, but--" he turned quickly to Akbar Khân, "it seems impossible!"

The quondam chief-eunuch giggled like a girl. "Nothing is impossible with women, oh, Protector of the Poor!" he said; then, with a jaunty air of self-satisfaction, went on, "and this dust-like one has experience. She will see the female relation to-night after approved custom, and, since this is after the habits of the *sahib-logue*, she would perhaps see the--the Nawab-*sahib* tomorrow."

Roshan wheeled again in his walk at both the title and the suggestion, half indignantly, yet with a reluctant eagerness. "See--see me! Did she say aught of it?"

"A woman's wishes for a lover go not near her tongue, *Huzoor*; they keep to her heart," replied Akbar, still with his jaunty craft; "but if this visit of the female relation be auspicious, as God send it, then there would be no hindrance to the asking; and even if she said nay--"

Something in his hearer's face warned the old sinner he had to do with some novel code of conduct, and he paused, while Roshan continued his pacing.

He was disturbed beyond bounds. The foolish dream of a foolish old woman had come to be so far a reality, that the jealousy which had blazed up instinctively at the sight of Laila in that dress--so like a woman of his race--alone with a strange man, had come to be deliberate. More than once he had felt inclined to tell Pidar Narâyan what he had seen, even to write an anonymous letter of warning. He would have done so had he seen any subsequent hint of intimacy between these two. But he saw none; on the contrary, they seemed to avoid each other in public; and though this might be a blind, on the other hand Roshan had seen too much of some English women's ways not to know how trivial an offence against the proprieties it was to sit out dances in a balcony! Undoubtedly, however, this girl, who had taken his presents on the sly, who would receive his ambassadress on the sly, was not one whom it was necessary to treat with great ceremony. She was what the English language called a flirt; his own a stronger term. Not that it mattered, since no wife of his would have a chance of amusing herself.

So, after a while, he paused to say--with a scowl for the toothless grinning survival of a past society--"I would I knew if it were wise to trust thee? Why shouldst thou take the trouble thou dost? What is the affair to thee?"

Akbar's face was a study in sheer dignity. "'Tis but my duty, Cherisher of the Poor!" he said, almost pathetically. "For what other service were such as I am created?"

The hateful tragedy of this confession of degradation passed Roshan by; he saw nothing in it but an appeal to facts which gave him confidence.

"Yea!" he said, "I was forgetting. Such arrangings are meat and drink to thy sort. So take thy price. It shall be trebled if she bids me see her to-morrow, but--" here he laughed, half at himself,--"thou must needs work miracles for such favour to come so soon!"

Akbar, as he capered off, the rupees jingling in his pocket, to more legitimate and less lucrative pursuits, winked and leered to himself over his own surpassing wickedness and wisdom. Miracles! Ay; but it was nature worked them, not he. Given youth, proximity, a touch of surprise, a flavour of the forbidden, and the result, in his evil experience, was sure. In the meantime his part was to keep the ball from falling until the players took to playing the game for themselves; then the fun was over for the true go-between. He had to take a back seat and watch--he! he! he!--the miracle! A pretty miracle, indeed! The idea tickled him so that he could not keep it to himself, and as he passed through the bazaar, doing his daily marketing, he used his new avocation of miracle-monger as a reason for good bargains. The shop-keepers, however, shook their heads. Miracles paid the priests, and might suit such as he, but for their part they considered that there were too many miracles in Eshwara. What was the good of the pilgrims coming at all if all their money went to the temples, and they had not a pice left for a relic, or even a toy to take home to the toddlers whose feet were not yet strong enough for pilgrimage? Whereupon they would look discontentedly round the baskets of Brummagen brass gods, the

Belgian-made rosaries, the patent Swedish self-lighting joss sticks, the machine-cut oblation cups, with which almost every other shop sought to attract custom. Baskets where a pious pilgrim could purchase a whole pantheon, and secure a modicum of divine favour--all duly trademarked by Christians--for a few farthings.

"'Tis not our fault, brother," suggested a decrepit old Brahmin, with a wrinkled forehead all seamed with white markings, who--squatting in the gutter--was extolling the virtue of the sacred *sâlig râmâs*, made unblushingly out of the ball stoppers of soda-water bottles, which lay exposed for sale on a handkerchief in front of him; a Manchester-made handkerchief, printed in the best style with the loves of Krishna. "We get no more than in the old days; nay, less. For, see you, the third-class ticket takes so much. And that is the *Huzoors'* fee. They send it all over the black water to make a mountain of silver in the streets of their big city, London. Oh, pious ones! Buy! Buy a sacred sin-expeller!"

The monotonous cry was caused by the appearance of a priest-led band of pilgrims; for, as yet, the great throng was not, when the whole narrow street would be a sea of heads, when even the saffron robes would be lost to sight, and the only thing visible would be the patient, anxious faces seeking redemption. That would come on the morrow,--the great day.

Meanwhile, reverent eyes turned to the bottle-stoppers, and one or two hands wandered to the little hoard set aside for regeneration, which was diminishing so rapidly under the claims of chaplets, lights, caste-markings, sprinkling, and miracles.

"There be too many, I say," reiterated a radical seller of drugs. "If the *Sirkar* puts a tax on my medicine for the body, why not on thine for the soul?"

"Nay, *pinsari-jee!*" chuckled the privileged wit and gossip of the bazaar, a cobbler who sat--by reason of his low caste--at a decent distance even from the crowd of customers which was awaiting a patch on the coverings of feet already worn and weary with their search after righteousness; "'tis a miracle when folk buy of you; and that comes not too often."

Even the pilgrims laughed; for laughter at a ready gibe comes easily in India. Yet they, too, felt inclined to agree with the drug-seller. One can get *blasé* even in miracles.

Therefore, naturally enough, when there was a choice, they chose the newest ones. And the newest of all was *jogi* Gorakh-nâth's promise of defying tampions, and locks, and chains, and, as in other years, blessing the crowd of worshippers from his self-inflicted penitentiary, inside the "*Teacher of Religion.*"

And what was more, he had kept his promise. That very dawn, as a kind of walk over the course, he had performed the miracle before a select band of pilgrims, mostly *jogies* of his own sect who were now engaged in telling the tale to all and sundry in the city. What had occurred was briefly this. He had received his followers squatting on the stone steps in front of the gun, and had treated them to a dissertation on the mysteries of Yoga. Other less eminent practitioners in the art of miracles, he said, might have found it necessary to withhold the sight of the sacred person from devoted eyes. He, however, meant to show them his absolute independence of the body. He would leave it lying there, dead, while his soul went inside the gun, and blessed the pious ones. Accordingly his jaw had dropped; he had become rigid, callous apparently to the prickings of pins with which his assistants strove to make him wince, and, just as one of them withdrew a dagger, covered, of course, with gore from his very heart, a muffled voice of blessing had come from the very bowels of the gun.

If that was not a miracle, what was?

Anyhow, it caught on, so that as the day grew, the growing tide of pilgrims passed by the side-shows run in connection with the Pool of Immortality by its priests, and drifted off to the opposition show, leaving the *impresarios* behind them in a state of rage and despair. Rage, for if this sort of thing continued on the morrow they would lose their year's harvest, since the Host of God-seekers were ever the natural prey of priests; despair, because exposure of what experience told them *must* be a fraud, would only result in counter exposure. There must be honour among thieves to make the profession a lucrative one.

So they met in conclave, each with his miserable earnings in his hand, to point the dire urgency of action, and agreed on the wisdom of finding a cat's-paw to filch their chestnuts from the fire.

Thus it happened that Vincent Dering came over to Lance Carlyon's quarters half an hour before the time they had settled to start for the mission house, and asked him to look sharp, and send round to Roshan Khân to come along also, as he had private information--here, with a laugh, he threw a letter on the table--that miracles were being illegally performed in cantonments, and he expected some fun. Lance laughed also as he read the following:--

"To the Major General commanding. This is to give notice to all concerned that illegible miracles is now being performed by bare men in belly of great gun, contrary to astringent orders issued by my lord god. Therefore your petitioners pray for correct diagnosis of same, and removal from Cantonment boundaries with exhibitions not to miracle any more."

"By Jove!" he said, "our petitioner is a medical man--hospital dresser, I expect. Not to miracle any more!--h'm." His tone changed, his honest blue eyes clouded, for, ever since Erda Shepherd had told him what her future life was to be, the young fellow had been painfully aware that Eshwara had wrought a miracle on him; that he was no longer content to take life as he found it; that already he had begun to look forward and think of what life would be by and by. "I expect that would be a difficulty in Eshwara," he went on; "it's an awful place for upsetting the proper odds. Seems to me impossible to--to make a safe book on anything."

Vincent Dering shrugged his shoulders. He had been in the highest spirits for the last few days. "A safe book! The dullest thing in creation. That's why I like Eshwara. As I remember telling you, one can't count upon anything in the topsy-turvy place--not even one's self. They talk of the mystery of the East! By George! one is in grips with it here; so come along, Lance! and remove miracles from Cantonment boundaries at any rate!"

They found the union-jack of paths obliterated by an orderly crowd; for every hour, almost every minute, of the day had brought fresh units to that weary-footed, eager-eyed host of pilgrims. Here and there amongst them was to be seen the high-twined, badge-set turban of a policeman, ready, truncheon in hand, to assert the rights of law, but not many; since the rush of bathers had not yet come, and there was small danger to be feared from anything save that keen desire to be cleansed, which showed on almost every face. As the two Englishmen entered, however, followed by Roshan Khân, on whose features that fierce intolerance of his race for idolaters was written clearly, a murmur of tense anticipation ran through the packed courtyard. The miracle turn was evidently on.

It was. *Jogi* Gorakh-nâth lay as if dead on the raised stone platform in front of the gun, and two assistants were prodding him with pins.

"I've seen that in London," said Vincent, forcing his way rapidly through the yielding crowd, "so I can hardly object to it here; but if there is hanky-panky with my gun--"

At that instant, a bloody dagger, fresh apparently from the *jogi's* heart, was held up, and a curious hush fell on the courtyard. It was broken by a muffled voice, unmistakably from within the gun, and that was lost in a great roar of applause.

"A miracle! a miracle of the gods!"

Captain Dering, who with the others had now reached the centre, waited for the roar to subside a little, and then his voice rose and seemed to crush it.

"*Risaldar-sahib* You have the key of the padlock. Take out the tampion, and see who is inside."

As he spoke, his eyes were on the assistants, and something in their defiant assurance warned him that he was on the wrong tack, and made him cover possible discomfiture with the words,-- "If there is no one, then someone here has the art of throwing his voice where he will."

As if in assent, the muffled blessing came, louder, this time, from the now un-tampioned gun, so that Roshan's face showed somewhat scared, as, with a salute, he announced as the result of his inspection, "There is no one, sir, I can see clear down the metal, but--but the voice is there."

A sound of such fierce approval ran through the crowd who were within hearing, that Captain Dering saw instantly that it would not be wise to court another failure.

"Close up the gun again," he said loudly. "So long as my orders are not disobeyed, and people keep their bodies out of my gun, their voices are welcome to it! Come along, Carlyon," he added, in English, "it's ventriloquism, of course, and I'd dearly like to catch the beast who does it, but we had better leave it alone for the present."

Lance, who, in sudden remembrance of the sound he had heard as he drifted past the bathing-steps in his canoe on the night of the dance, had been vainly overhauling the padlock and chain for signs of their having been tampered with, nodded his head, and let the chain swing back on its staple. The sudden jerk threw a new light on the matter. For the staple came out, disclosing the fact that it had been neatly filed through at the shank, and then replaced by means of a drilled hole and a pin.

The proof of tampering was clear, but nothing else.

"I have it," said Lance suddenly coming up with a red but triumphant face from a prolonged inspection down the huge muzzle, "they've shoved in a false end, and there's someone behind. Roshan! go back and fetch me my long gaff, and Roshan--my cleaning rod."

"And tell the guard to come out at once," added Captain Dering, heedful of the rising note of movement amongst the crowd, sign that it was growing restless.

"Stay! I've got a ripping idea!" cried Lance again, his face all abeam with delight--delight so catching that the crowd stilled as he turned to it. "Look here," he said confidentially, in Hindustani, "there's a boy in this gun. It must be a boy, and rather a small one, for there isn't room for anything big. Now isn't there a boy anywhere about the same size who'd like to come

and draw him? He will be heads this way, and you will be able to get a good grip of his hair, and he will get a grip of your's, and--and it will be--be jolly!" The untranslatable word needed no translation. That something in the perfection of careless youth which touches the hearts of all mankind, put Lance and his audience in touch instantly.

A group of tall, grave-eyed Sikhs laughed uproariously, and nudged a lad beside them. "Go on, brotherling," they said, "thou art the best wrestler of the school. Go! show the *Huzoor* how thou canst hold thine own."

It needed no more. "Yea! try thy luck, brotherling," said a dozen voices, "and if thou canst not we will find a champion!"

That settled it. Five minutes afterwards Lance Carlyon found himself arranging the conditions of the draw, surrounded by half a dozen lads, each backed by eager supporters. By this time Roshan had returned, and with the aid of the gaff and one of the smallest of the guard, Lance's guess had been proved to be true. A neatly fitting disc of metal, cup-shaped to increase the resemblance to the end of the barrel had been withdrawn, leaving a head visible.

"It is beautifully tousled, and you'll get a good grip," said Lance, regretfully, as he helped the Sikh champion into the gun, "but it is bigger than I thought for, and you'll have your work cut out for you."

Then ensued the quaintest scene imaginable. The whole crowd, but five minutes before ready, almost, to fight for the truth of their miracle, were swaying breathless, excited, in sheer childish delight over the tussle to expose it.

"Lo! he comes--I see his toes--bravo, Gurdit! Nay, the other hath strength left! Sho! sonling, let not go for thy life! That is well done--Bravo! Bravo!"

So backwards and forwards, like a terrier and a badger, the draw wavered, Lance, watch in hand, calling time.

"Half a minute more! Go it, Gurdit!" he shouted. The encouragement had its effect. Gurdit's toes, his ankles, his calves showed beyond the gun; only his knees remained, giving him grip still.

"Wait for his knees. Wait till he loses grip!" shouted Lance--"twenty seconds more--fifteen, ten--f--there you are! that's it, fair!!"

Fair it was; the knees, pressing outwards steadily, every bronze muscle of them showing the strength of the drag, lost grip, and with a great yell of delight, half-a-dozen bearded Sikhs had hold of Gurdit's feet with such a vigorous pull, that Lance had to shove his knee forward, in a hurry, to prevent the boy from falling on his face; since both his hands were locked desperately in the tangled hair of a disciple so big that he came out of the gun with a cloop like a cork!

"It was the most sporting draw I've seen for years," said Lance enthusiastically, when, after much laughter and congratulation, the crowd parted with smiles to let the Englishmen pass, "and I'm glad you let the beggar off, Dering. It wasn't his fault, and he must have been beastly uncomfortable. Now, if you could have quodded the *jogi*--"

"I hope to do that by and by," replied Vincent significantly, "but it was just as well the crowd should laugh to-day. These religious gatherings are always a bit risky--and, as you know, Dillon is having trouble over at the gaol. 'Pon my soul, I don't know which is worst to manage--fifteen hundred scoundrels, or a hundred and fifty thousand saints."

"A hundred and fifty!" echoed Lance, "will there be as many as that?"

"Quite. So it is as well they should laugh; for even with the extra contingent of police we should find it a bit hard to manage them if they didn't."

True; but unfortunately the laughter of the many involves the discomfiture of the few; and in this case, these were the most unscrupulous men in Eshwara.

CHAPTER XV

OH! DEM GOLDEN SLIPPERS!

"If I were a man--I would fight."

The words were spoken by Erda Shepherd as the two young men entered the drawing-room of the mission house.

"Let me fight for you!" said Captain Dering, in his most ornate style, as, in the pause following on the interruption of their arrival, he went forward to shake hands. "My sword is always at the service of the ladies."

Then a certain feeling, as of electricity in the air, a certain look on the faces round him--for most of the mission workers had already arrived--warned him that this was no jesting matter, and he continued in better taste, "I trust there is nothing wrong?"

"Wrong!" echoed Erda, who in a mechanical, absolutely indifferent manner was shaking hands with Lance; "Yes! grievously wrong!"--her voice was almost strident in its decision--"hideously wrong!"

Here Dr. James Campbell, who had been laying down the law to a group of other black coats, came up and put the telegram he was holding into Captain Dering's hand.

"Perhaps you can explain this," he said severely, "we generally have to thank the military authorities for such interference."

"Not in this case, so far as I am concerned," replied Vincent, after a glance at the first sentence. Then he read on, everyone else in the room silent, expectant.

It was from the Commissioner, saying, that from private information given him, he regretted that, in the interests of peace, he must, as magistrate, forbid any street preaching or public profession of faith during the next two days. Feeling was running high in many ways, and it was necessary to be extremely cautious.

"I can assure you, sir," said Vincent, handing back the telegram, "I am not the informant. At the same time"--here he faced about to the room generally--"I think the Commissioner is right. Our government is neutral--"

"Neutral!" interrupted the Reverend David Campbell, whose blonde face was flushed with excitement. "If it were neutral we would not complain. But does this prohibition extend to the priests of other religions? No! a thousand times, no! It is only another instance of the fact, that we, who have the strongest claim on a Christian government--"

"Possibly," put in Captain Dering, "but I am only a soldier. I do not ask questions. I obey."

"And we are soldiers too," said Dr. Campbell, weightily, "and our orders are to be instant in season and out of season."

A little murmur of approval ran through the company. There was a militant look on every face, a militant ring in every voice, as they discussed what ought to be done. The women workers, with Erda at their head, went solid for defiance,--only Mrs. Campbell making the reservation "if James approved." So did some of the men, notably David Campbell, who passed from one group to another, his pale blue eyes a-glisten with enthusiasm.

Erda's followed him with such approval, that Lance crossed over pugnaciously to where she stood, with a pretty flush on her cheeks, listening.

"It is a pity you haven't got Jean Ziska's drum, Miss Shepherd," he said. "By Jove! how you would bang it! Then, right or wrong, there would be a high old row, and that would just suit me!"

"There can scarcely, Sir Lancelot,"--she paused on the title with a strain after contempt which did not somehow come off,--"be a question as to right or wrong in this case."

He gave a kindly, almost indulgent laugh. "There never can be, really, of course. One is bound to be right, the other wrong. The mischief is to know t'other from which! Now I expect the sixty thousand nobles, and the grand-master who were left dead on the field, and the two thousand poor devils who got drowned in the river besides, and all the others--you know about 'em, of course, and you must admit he was a bloodthirsty chap at any rate!--had got a musical instrument of some sort, too. You can't fight without a band, Miss Shepherd, specially drums and fifes. But Jean Ziska was blind; so he could only hear his own music."

"And I hear it, too," she said superbly, with all the more defiance, because his words touched her innate sense of justice, as they did so often.

As she spoke, the not unusual sound--considering that one side of the mission house gave on the city--of a native *tom-tom* drifted in through the open window, causing Lancelot's eyes to brim over with smiles.

"That isn't it, anyhow, is it, Miss Shepherd?" he said. "I saw that drum-banger as I came past just now--the funniest old dried stick of a Brahmin you ever set eyes on. And you know those '*round the mulberry bush*,' fairy-ring, endless circles of men and women hand in hand we used to

cut out of newspaper when we were kids? Well, he was using gilt paper, and trying to make a miracle out of the 'biz'! One god, he said, in many; the outline being the same, and the eye of faith sufficient to fill in the details of divinity! The people were buying them by dozens for the half of nothing. I asked 'em why, and they said as toys for their children. So I expect it will be the endless circle of boys and girls again--don't you? For, you know," he went on in the confidential voice which, dimly, she recognized was for her alone, "I've never been able to find out the least difference in kids. I talk to the little beggars when I'm out shooting, you know, and--well! the boys are just as much boys as I used to be--"

Used to be! Yet once again, for the hundredth time at least since they had first met, barely a month ago, his youth, his boyish, whole-hearted, healthy zest in life made her eyes soft; made her feel, with all the true womanhood in her that, if she ever had a son, she prayed he might be like this. And something else she recognized--not for the first time, either; namely, that boyish, almost thoughtless as he was, puzzling himself not at all with the problems of life, you could never dip below the surface without finding him, as it were, there before you; finding him clear-eyed, ready to treat the shady side of things as he treated the light side; that is, with an absolutely limpid honesty.

So, as she stood silent, checked in her desire to check, Father Ninian, who had just entered with Laila, came up to greet her, and having done so, turned to Lance with kind eyes and voice.

"Captain Dering has just told me that we have to call you Sir Lancelot Carlyon. I am sorry for the cause, since your uncle was a man who made the world better by being in it;--as--as you will. It is a fine old name, Sir Lancelot! It carries with it a fine inheritance of honour; therefore I can wish no better wish for the world, as well as for yourself, than that you may hand it on to your son. So, peace be with you!" His clasped hands unfolded themselves for a space as he passed on, leaving those two once more standing together with that sense of being singled out for friendship which had come to them in the beginning.

And this was to be the end of it? Even to her it seemed impossible. To him it made the impossibility certain.

"Miss Shepherd," he said suddenly, "I have something I must say to you this afternoon. Come into the verandah, after you have done pouring out the tea, and let me say it."

There was so much of command in his voice that she might have resented it, had not Father Ninian's voice risen at that moment; firmly, yet with its usual faint hesitancy, in words which made everyone in the room pause to listen.

"I, and I only, am responsible, Dr. Campbell. I gave the Commissioner the information on which he has acted," here he raised his hand against interruption. "I have been fifty years at Eshwara; fifty times have I seen the pilgrims pass to the 'Cradle of the Gods' listening peacefully to your preaching. But this year there is something new." He paused to put on his spectacles, yet the keenness they brought to his face was dimmed by wistfulness. "I cannot quite tell what it is. There is something beyond the things I know, though these are many--small, it is true, but cumulative. Still, this is certain; the pulse of the people beats irregularly to-day, and that means danger to the body corporate. It may pass; yet the faintest stimulus may upset the whole balance of the organism. So, my friends, as our cause is eternal, as we have time--"

"Time!" interrupted David Campbell, passionately, "but now *is* the appointed time. Think, sir, how many of these poor deluded souls, striving after salvation, may die upon the road to their false gods--none can know how many better than you, who--"

The old priest looked at the young one with a whole lifetime of sad wisdom in his face. "Yes!" he said, softly, "for I am very old. I have seen half a world die upon its road to the 'Cradle of the Gods.' Die--though we have not the courage to say so,--with their faces set to the eternal goal of humanity; to the finding of something we have lost. And something keeps us all back. What is it? Have we the secret more than they, who say, as we do, that it is sin?"

His voice had fallen into a strangely musical rhythm, so that Dr. Campbell's, following it, seemed harsh indeed.

"We know we have. We have the certainty--we are missionaries of that certainty--"

"And I--to my shame be it said," interrupted Father Ninian, with a curious return to worldly courtesy as he removed his spectacles, "have never tried to make a convert; therefore I can scarcely hope to persuade you; but if, gentlemen, I might be allowed to talk the matter over with you--"

"A most sensible suggestion," assented Dr. Campbell, looking round on his younger, less experienced colleagues; "I should be loth to act hastily, and give occasion to the scoffer. Mamma, will you send our tea into the dining room?"

The pure practicality of the last words seemed to relieve the general tension, and Vincent Dering--who had been looking horribly bored--seeing the piano open, sat down to it, as the dissentients moved off into their cave of Adullam, and began to play, "*La Donna é mobile*;" saying, with a laugh:--

"*Cherchez la femme!* Depend upon it, Mrs. Campbell, there is a woman at the bottom of it. I know from personal experience that she is always fatal to my peace and pulse on any road."

Erda Shepherd, holding her head very high, crossed over to pour out the tea; whereupon Vincent, being mischievously inclined, suddenly changed the tune to "Where'er you walk," which he played daintily, purely, altogether charmingly, so causing Muriel Smith, who had lately joined the party, to relax her faint frown at his remark.

"Miss Shepherd objects," he went on provokingly. "She doesn't believe in men fighting for women. She scorned the offer of my sword in favour--excuse me for having overheard--of some drum or another. What was it, Miss Shepherd? I really only heard Lance say you would like to bang it."

Erda flushed all over her face. "I was only alluding to Jean Ziska's drum, which was sounded to call the Hosts of the Lord to arms."

Mrs. Campbell gave a fine, hearty shudder. "My dear," she said, "why can ye not leave that gruesome tale alone? For it's just an awful tale, Mrs. Smith. As if he could not be content with doing his duty in this life, but must leave his skin behind for the next generation."

"We have biblical warranty for that sort of thing, Mrs. Campbell," said the sharp-voiced lady who owned the small black coat. "Elijah left his mantle."

"Hoots!" interrupted Mrs. Campbell, scornfully. "We all have to leave our body-wear, but a skin's different altogether. It sou'd just have gone to the grave with him, honest man, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. I've often heard Dr. James say there was nothing in the world for tying the hands o' the leevin' like dead men's dispositions. They're just a mortification indeed to a' concerned."

There was always something about the good lady's comfortable common-sense which made further discussion difficult, and the talk wandered into less rugged paths until, the time for leisure from Erda's duties as tea-maker being close at hand, Lance went out deliberately into the verandah which overhung the river, or rather the spit of sand-bank which jutted out from this, the turning-point of the city's triangle. On the right, the wall, set with its temple spires, trended away to meet the bridge, on the left to join the line of the palace, the bathing-steps, the Fort. In front of him, as he stood leaning over the balustrade at the western end of the verandah, lay dull streaks of sand, bright gleams of water, and beyond them--dim, mysterious--was the great level plain of India, on whose scarce distinguishable edge the sun was setting behind a bank of deep purple cloud. It was a long, low, almost level bank, outlined sharply against the sea of golden-green light above it. There was scarcely a hint of sunset fire save in a trailing chain of little fleecy golden flocks, which stretched away from the purple of the clouds into the deepening purple of clear sky overhead.

Lance, waiting, watched that clear, almost level, outline, until, as clouds do when gazed at fixedly, it took shape for him as the body of a dead warrior half-covered by a pall. The straight sweep yonder was the shield, still held upon the arm, the peak of shadow below it was the mailed feet. There was the curve of the throat; the head thrown back; the feathery plumes of the helmet. The whole world seemed his bier; the stars, just trembling into sight, the watch-lights round it.

"Do you see?" he asked, as Erda joined him. "*From the great deep to the great deep he goes.*"

She recognized the quotation; and though she had come out full of determination to deny the glamour of their mutual comprehension, it claimed her in a second.

"Yes!" she answered quickly, and pointing to the trailing drift of cloudlets, added, "*bound by gold chains about the feet of God.*"

He turned to look at her then, forgetting fancy in a sudden certainty.

"I thought I had something to tell you," he said, "but I think you know it already, don't you?"

"Yes!" she answered, held captive still by that inevitable understanding. "I think I do."

He paused a moment; then going back to the now fading likeness of that dead "King of the Dead," continued: "Then that ends it so--so far as I am concerned. But it remains as an excuse for my asking a question. Miss Shepherd, why are you going to marry your cousin?"

She had known this was coming. "For a great many reasons," she began boldly; then paused, wishing for the first time that these reasons had been fewer, feeling that the possession of but *one* would have made speech easier. "To begin with, it has been the dream of my life."

He turned on her with an amaze which was almost ludicrous. "What! to marry him?"

She frowned angrily. "No! To work--to help--to give my sympathy--to stand hand in hand with someone who, as he does, gives himself, as I do, to the great work. To someone whose life will be mine--whom I can respect and admire and--and love--in the best sense of the word--" Her voice, gaining confidence from its own statements, rose almost passionately.

Lance looked at her with his clear eyes, and nodded. "Yes! I quite understand. But what has that to do with marrying him? How will the--the great Work be furthered by your having to look after the house and all that? And it isn't as if you couldn't give the help and sympathy without marrying a fellow. Even the love--at least I think so. Now, I want to marry you, because--"

"Yes,--" she said severely, as he paused--she felt glad to change places with him in the witness box--

"Because, to begin with, it doesn't seem possible for me to live my life--I mean my everyday life, trying to rub along, you know, without doing any harm; keeping things going as--as my people have always kept them, unless you help me. And then--" he paused again--"from the first moment I saw you, you reminded me--" he paused so long this time that a faint wonder as to what he was going to say next made her heart beat, as she watched him leaning over the balcony, looking dreamily at that fading likeness of a dead 'King of the Dead.'

"I don't suppose anyone had a happier, jollier childhood than I had," he said suddenly, "though I was an orphan. I lived at Tregarthen, you know." He turned to her as he spoke, and smiled. "You should have seen my grandfather and grandmother, Miss Shepherd. They were like the double Christmas number of an illustrated paper! She used to boast that she never saw a naughty child; and she never did, for the dear old lady always walked out of the room promptly when we tried it on. I remember it used to take the starch out awfully, having no audience. But it was the same in everything. It beat even a boy to be really bad in that house, somehow. Yes! we had jolly times! You would have liked it--you would like it now"--he turned swiftly and held out both hands--"Come to it!--Come, and be Lady Carlyon as she was! People may say all that means nothing, but it means everything to a woman to be able to count on an inheritance like that for her--" he broke off as some of the others came out into the balcony, and bending closer to her, went on in a low voice, "I've said nothing of my love--you know all that--and I think--Yes--" his voice took a note of certainty--"I think you--you like me well enough--don't you?"

There was something so truth-compelling in his face, his voice, that she felt thankful for the tepid word *like*--

"I like you very much, Sir Lancelot," she said, trying not to let her voice betray the absolute tenderness she felt, "but, as you told me just now, that is no reason why I should marry you."

"It is at least as good as yours for marrying *him*," he broke in quickly. "At least it has to do with you--with me--with our happiness--with mine at any rate! Do you remember when you first told me your name--The World's Desire I called it--the woman with the red-gold hair, the red-gold hem to her garment, the red-gold apple in her hand--you are that to me--Erda! give me my heart's desire--"

His voice--low, quick, passionate--thrilled through her. She saw herself as she had seen herself then.

"Yes! it has to do with you, with me!" she echoed desperately, "but only we two."

"No!--" he interrupted--"with more than that, surely!"

In the pause which followed, one vision faded in another, and her own wish, that if she ever had a son he might be as this man, came to make her remember Father Ninian's words, "I can wish no better wish for the world!"

But Father Ninian could not have said so to her. *She* could do better for the world in the other life, the other work. The very self-sacrifice of it attracted her, vague though the sense of that was, as yet.

"Sir Lancelot," she said at last, "I am very sensible of the honour--"

"Don't--for heaven's sake," he interrupted. "That is--excuse me--bunkum."

She felt glad of the faint resentment which came to her aid. "I am, all the same," she continued; "but it is impossible. Perhaps if I did not look forward as I do; perhaps if I only sought happiness; but--" she clasped her hands tightly and the militant look came back to her face--"I am sworn to another work--the noblest work of all--to bring light to those that sit in darkness."

Lance gave an odd little laugh, full of bitterness. "You leave me out in the black night, anyhow," he said.

True enough, in one way, for the quick dusk had closed in around them; but as he spoke, a great white shaft of light like a moon-ray shot, almost as if in denial--widening on its way, from the shadowy stretches beyond the river; shot waveringly, as if uncertain, until, focussing itself full on the verandah, it turned the dusk to day.

"The search-light!" cried Mrs. Smith, clapping her daintily gloved little hands. "Eugene will be so pleased. He couldn't positively swallow a mouthful at lunch because, when he thought all was right, something went wrong. That's why he didn't come, Miss Shepherd," she added, for the light had effectually joined the scattered groups into one. "I positively couldn't tear him away, but

I made him promise to turn the thing on here if he succeeded. And he has. Isn't it splendid?"

Mrs. Campbell looked doubtful. "It's just too much like the last day, comin' unawares, and makin' a' things manifest, for my taste. An' I wonder what Dr. James will say to it?"

"I wonder what the natives will say to it?" said Vincent Dering, looking across at Lance.

"Say!" echoed the tart lady. "I know what they should say--that, of course, we know a great deal more than they do."

"And, besides," added a new and gushing voice, "it is so beautifully, suggestively true. We have the light, we can light them."

"Oh! but that *is* such a bother," came Laila Bonaventura's full-throated tones. "I hate having to see things I don't care to see. I much prefer to have my own candle, don't you?"

She had been finding it dull work waiting for her guardian's return from the dining room, even though Vincent had, now and again, found opportunity for a word or look. He took advantage of one now to say, "It will be pleasanter by and by, won't it? We must settle the time before you leave."

"What time?" asked Muriel Smith, who happened to overhear his undertone. She had been vaguely curious at their apparent avoidance of each other, their occasional lapses into familiarity, ever since she had challenged them at the Viceroy's party.

"Time!" echoed Vincent, coolly. "Of that new song, of course. Come in, Miss Bonaventura, let us decide about it."

The girl swept up her long lashes solemnly. "I should think a twelve beat would be best, really. It is safer when there are so many accidental notes."

His face, as he led the way to the piano, was a study. If she had lived her life in a vaudeville at the *Folies Bergères* she could scarcely have been more at home in intrigue, yet her absolute sincerity and unconsciousness of wrongdoing was as palpable. On the whole, he felt vexed; the more so because the vaudeville dialogue proved unnecessary, since a sudden concentration of the party to hear the verdict of the Adullamites, who at that moment came out of the dining room, would have given them ample time for more dignified conversation.

Erda was in the front rank of the eager little crowd, her hopes, her enthusiasms, heightened by the deliberate choice she had just made, when Dr. Campbell, as the recognized head, began to speak. They had come unanimously to the conclusion, he said, that absolute revolt at this late hour would be unwise. Whether Father Ninian Bruce was justified, by the circumstances, in his adverse report was another matter. Personally he denied it; nor did he propose that they should sit down quietly under the interference. They were only forbidden to preach in Eshwara. Therefore they had come, again unanimously, to the resolution of leaving Eshwara for the time in a body. It would be a solemn protest; and they could thus render both to Cæsar and to God, since they could preach at other pilgrim stations on the road. It would be a noble protest which was certain of proving blessed.

The words roused no little enthusiasm, mingled with undoubted relief in most cases; but Erda, standing beside her cousin, said in an undertone, "Did you assent to that, David?"

"I suggested it," he answered, in a louder voice, not without some self-satisfaction. "It appeared to me to meet the exigencies of the case admirably, and it will be very useful, let me tell you, at home. It will emphasize the difficulties and dangers we have to contend against. It will show our meek reasonableness, and then--" he looked round with a jubilant smile--"it seems to me such a beautiful idea that the only result of this attempt to gag us will be that the thousands of poor benighted souls will have a chance of hearing the Truth in many places instead of one."

But Erda's voice broke in on the hum of applause almost harshly, filling the room with its defiance. "I think it cowardly; I would fight--if I were a man."

"You would beat Jean Ziska's drum!" laughed Vincent Dering, rising from the music stool where he had been holding Laila's hand under cover of the new song--an occupation which always made him feel as if all the wine of life had gone to his head. "You refused my sword just now, Miss Shepherd, so I place my drumstick at your disposal."

So, with a reckless gaiety, he seized on a painted tambourine which good Mrs. Campbell had hung as an ornament on the wall--it was bedaubed with two white lilies and a butterfly rampant--and catching up a teaspoon from the table, he began to sing in his pretty, light-comedy voice, "Oh! dem golden slippers!" while the tambourine, under his skilful drumming, throbbed to the words:--

"Golden slippers on a golden stair,
Golden slippers on my tired feet,
Golden slippers dat we all mus' wear
Becos' dey are so sweet."

He sang well, he played better; and both voice and drumming echoed out through the open windows.

"They are singing in the *missen*," said the people in the courtyard to the pilgrims, who were still gathering to the miracles, like moths round a candle. "It is not wise to listen; folk become as they are, if they do."

Some of the pilgrims laughed and some stopped their ears; but even so, the throbbing of the tambourine was in the air.

"Golden slippers on a golden stair,
Golden slippers on my tired feet,
Golden slippers dat we all mus' wear."

CHAPTER XVI

ECHOES

If the twopenny-halfpenny tambourine--which had been bedaubed with its white lilies and rampant butterfly by a suburban maiden lady for a mission sale, and, remaining over from that, had been bought in at half price by Mrs. Campbell for the adornment of her drawing-room,--had been indeed Jean Ziska's famous drum, Eshwara could hardly have been more restless than it was on the night after Vincent Dering had sung, "Oh! dem golden slippers!" to its accompaniment. The tune had occurred to him in an instant, without thought, simply as one he had sung more than once when doing bones and tambourine in a nigger troupe at a soldiers' sing-song. He had meant nothing by; it and yet the words,

"Golden slippers on a golden stair,
Golden slippers dat we'se got to wear,"

fitted their environment; that atmosphere of effort after something beyond, above the real, the actual; the inevitable climbing of a golden stair, the inevitable wearing of the golden shoes, the inevitable search after the golden gates which, found, will open upon Paradise. True, the Paradise differed to each pair of yearning eyes and weary feet; but the longing for it as a personal gain, spiritual or bodily, was identical.

For Paradise is the Desire of the World still; whether men find it in the good they lost, or the Love which lost it for them.

And in Eshwara that night the desire rose strenuously, militantly.

Erda, packing her boxes in haste, since she and her aunt had arranged to start with the others at dawn, felt as if she had, at last, closed her hand firmly on the plough. There could be no looking back now. The golden slippers were on her feet, the golden stairs before her, the golden gates within sight. She had said good-by to Lance without a quiver. She even smiled softly, tenderly, as she set an unopened deal box to go with her others. It was one which the Reverend David had brought with him from England, and which had been made over to her, not without nods and winks, smiles and suspicions of tears, from her aunt. For it contained the wedding dress. It was a Moravian wedding dress of the old style, to suit Erda's fancy; and she had been quite anxious to see the delicate white muslin robe and the quaint little cap, with its bunch of orange blossoms, which was to mark her as both bride and matron. But it had seemed a pity, in careful Mrs. Campbell's opinion, to unpack it only to repack it, and run the needless risk of crushing its daintiness. So there in its box it lay still, untouched, unseen.

There would be real orange blossoms and to spare, the girl told herself with a smile, in the garden at Herrnhut; for so the summer resting-place of the mission had been called in deference to the Moravian extraction of those who had built it and started the Christian settlement in the tiny valley in which it stood. This lay some thirty miles up the Hara, beyond the first range of hills; and the river, fresh from its mad rush from the snows beyond, ran through it slackly, peacefully, before beginning its long, swift, yet smooth, slide down the dark ravine which cleft the outer range, until it ended in the plains at Eshwara.

It was at Herrnhut that, every year, in turns of two months during the hot weather, the missionaries exchanged work in the bazaars for the lighter labor of the agricultural settlement. Naturally, therefore, it was looked on as a sort of holiday house; but this year it would be something more. It would be the headquarters of fight, the centre of the resistance which was to use the Commissioner's order to cease firing as an excuse for a more determined skirmishing. For it stood right on the pilgrims' road. Indeed, Erda and the other rebels would have to travel a good eight-and-twenty miles along that very road itself before coming to the slack water where they could cross the river by a ferry, and finish their journey through the level fields on its further side to Herrnhut, with its homelike, peaceful surroundings. The memory of them came to Erda, making her sense of that inevitable climbing of the golden stair after righteousness more acute; since she had to face a good-by to them also. And sooner than she had expected, for the breaking up of winter work a week earlier than usual, owing to this secular interference, had made David, eager to begin anew, plead for a speedier wedding. So there were only two or three days left, at most.

The knowledge, however, brought her no doubt; it helped her, rather, to a greater certainty.

She had done right. Her feet were indeed upon the golden stair!

And in the other houses of the mission, where everyone was disregarding sleep in the striving after something that was more to them than sleep, the atmosphere was electric also, the thoughts militant.

So they were in the streets, the alleys of the town; for on the bridge of boats--that bridge which spanned the broad expanse of water between the city and the great plain of India--the pilgrims were passing, now, in an unending stream--to take up their places as near as might be to the Pool of Immortality, where, with the dawn, the water would rise miraculously for the cleansing of sin.

"*Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ! Hârî!*"

The cry was almost incessant, but the eye could see little, for the moon was young, the night dark.

"*Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!*"

Hour after hour it came, that cry on the dread Creator, the dread Destroyer. Monotonous, patient, almost indifferent, yet absolutely insistent.

The golden-shod feet of the pilgrims, after whose souls the missionaries yearned, were on the golden stair also, and their golden gates would open at the 'Cradle of the Gods'; must open, hidden though the goal was by mist when it was day, by darkness when it was night.

What matter if it was hidden? For the gold-shod feet might falter and fall ere that goal was reached; but the hidden spring of cleansing at the Pool of Immortality was theirs. It would rise at dawn; rise as it did always, every year.

"*Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!*"

What matter Birth or Death, if the finding of that lost paradise of purity was certain.

Out on the bridge, whence the cry came oftenest, there was no doubt regarding this certainty; but as each weary pair of feet stumbled on the first stones of the town, it stumbled into an atmosphere in which nothing seemed sure, save that there was change; that Eshwara was not what it had been.

To begin with, it held soldiers. Wherefore? And why had dead women been sent back to it by Mother Ganges to curse the men whose love had killed them?

But what wonder, when the very logs, the fishes, were stolen from the river nowadays; and from the people also. Then what of this strange new light? The light which fed on men's brains!--that came and went at pleasure--that was quite small at first, when but seven or eight men had been sacrificed, but which, only an hour or so ago, had showed in a huge ray, feeling here and there through the darkness for God knows what, then settling on it, making it impossible to hide aught, prying into the very Holiest of Holies! Had it not shot into Mother Kali's very temple, and shown the worshippers that two of her mighty arms were stuck on with sealing wax! What God would stand that! And how could the very Gods themselves work miracles if everybody could see how they were done?

They had already refused to work them for pious *jogi* Gorakh-nâth. What wonder? The Gods did not like laughter, especially the laughter of *M'Iléchas*.^[10]

Therefore, who was to tell if the spring would even rise in the Pool? So those who were wise would make certain of at least a modicum of salvation, and go straight to the bathing-steps; since the river, anyhow, must be there.

This suggestion of a cautious hedge was diligently spread by the bathing-*ghat* priests among

the new arrivals; who listened patiently. But so they did also to the other priests whose business it was to scorn the possibility of failure, and to deny the displeasure of the Gods. To say that *jogi* Gorakh-nâth had been found out by the *Huzoors* in one of his usual tricks; that was all. So that people who wanted the genuine article, and a real, good, old crusted miracle, had better come as usual to the Pool.

The weary-footed, anxious-eyed climbers of the golden stairs listened patiently, silently, even when the antagonists began, in vehement quarrel, to bandy threats, and hint at worse portents to come. To their experience, their hope, it seemed impossible even to dream their pilgrimage in vain. The dawn would show, anyhow. So hour by hour, minute by minute, the tide of pilgrims set citywards till it brimmed over with faith and hope. And these are dangerous things when charity depends on them, and there are antagonistic claims to every alms. So Eshwara was restless.

Over in the gaol, also, by which the golden-shod feet passed so closely with their heart-stirring cry, it seemed as if Vincent Dering's thrumming, following as it did on the heels of Eugene Smith's success with the search light, had set what Dr. Dillon called his Hosts of the Devil in commotion. Indeed, that thrumming was still going on when George Dillon had gone raging over to conjure the experimenter, with oaths, to turn off his confounded bull's-eye at once, or the prisoners would go out of their judgment with thinking of the number who would have to die that night in order to keep up the supply of brain power!--just too, as he had been congratulating himself that the cholera scare was over. Seventy-two hours, and not a case! It was too bad!

Eugene, whom he found on the roof of his house playing with coils, batteries, accumulators, had suggested eagerly that if there was real trouble, he might end it by turning his light bang on to the gaol, and so reducing it to a paralysis of sheer terror. Dr. Dillon, however, had sworn violently that he would not have the poor wretches frightened unnecessarily, especially when that triumphant cry of those who were free to defy the devil by seeking sanctification before death reminded them that *they* could not--that they must die defiled, helpless, hopeless! That fear was, he said, in a way dignified, worthy of consideration. And he did not anticipate trouble unless there was treachery inside or out, though perhaps he might, as a precaution, ask Dering for an extra guard. But when the latter happened to come in, as Mrs. Smith's escort home, while the doctor was still there, Dr. Dillon apparently changed his mind. Anyhow, he pooh-poohed Captain Dering's offer to send one, saying, the more you could keep a gaol to yourself the better--or for the matter of that anything else! So, with a curt good-night to Mrs. Smith, he went back to his work, leaving Vincent to remark, carelessly, that Dillon seemed in a bad temper. At which Muriel smiled. There was something in the air, she said, conducive to bad temper. She, herself, felt she must soon have quarrelled with the doctor's assumption of knowing better than anyone else; so it was as well he had not stopped to dinner. Her quarrelsomeness did not, however, extend to Vincent, who did; indeed, she made herself so tenderly charming and unconsciously friendly towards him that he began to accuse himself of having been too irresponsible of late. The fact of being in love did not preclude friendship for someone else, if, indeed, he was really in love with Laila Bonaventura? In one way he knew himself to be so; but the idea of treating this love of his on conventional lines was still repugnant to him; the thought of her, as his wife, barely attractive.

So, after a time spent pleasantly enough for those two, Eugene Smith went off to his coils, and accumulators, and batteries, half-sulky, half-bored, and wholly ill-used at having to switch off, when he had at least half an hour's electricity all ready stored for use.

He was grumbling over this fact when Vincent called good-night to him before starting to drive back; and he answered that but for fools, who were afraid of going to their proper place, he might have given Dering electric light on the road.

"No, thanks!" cried Vincent, gaily, "there's enough electricity in the air to-night without that. I believe your machine has leaked, Smith! I feel as if I should give out sparks if anyone touched me!"

As he drove across the bridge Eshwara looked as if it were doing that, too. There were lights everywhere, twinkling, little, restless lights. The very spit, usually dark with the darkness of primitive life after sundown, was alive with them; for the pilgrims were camping there, as elsewhere. Nor were all the fisher folk abed as usual, for that, surely, was one of them paddling up stream on a dug-out,--just under the last span of the bridge. He saw the man distinctly, not five yards from him in the flash of the lamps as he drove past overhead, and wondered what the mischief the fellow was doing at that time of night, going up stream.

Something to be ashamed of, no doubt, else why should he have sent the dug-out beyond the circle of light with a swift stroke?

Truly Father Ninian was right; Eshwara was not normal. Its pulse beat irregularly, and things were going on which should not be going on--

A sudden shame made him glance at the shadowed pile of the palace looming above the shadowed town. It was all dark, save for one row of restless, twinkling lights. Those were the little latticed windows of Laila's sitting-room, that was fit for any king's favourite. He had seen it already, might see it again at twelve, if she was in one of her reckless moods when she would risk anything for his sake.

Truly! there were things going on!--

But this was between themselves; this could hurt no one. By and by, of course, he would insist on a commonplace engagement, and a wedding. Yes! a commonplace wedding. He had, despite his vague repugnance to her origin, made up his mind to that. No one but an utter cad could take what he was taking, and then shake his bridle rein and ride away. But for the present, it was the most absolutely perfect bit of romance in his whole life. He could not, would not give it up. Laila was right! This was the essence. As a rule, people mixed love, diluted it, were vaguely ashamed of its absorbing influence. But when you came to analyze even the diluted feeling, its virtue lay in this irrational content, this desire for nothing better than this best of pleasures--this paradise of a woman's or a man's love.

He laughed, suddenly, at the memory of Laila's quick grasp of his meaning when Muriel had overheard his remark about the time. Such quickness, in the latter, would have made him revolt from it; but with Laila it was different. A passionate gratitude to the girl to whom fear, remorse, the very possibility of change seemed unknown, rose up and claimed him. Dear little girl! She was so absolutely single-minded in her love for him. How could anyone expect him to forego the luxury of such love yet awhile?

In thinking Laila single-minded, Vincent thought the truth, so far as he was concerned. If love, passionate as Juliet's, and far more innocent in one way, far more *rusé* in another, ever existed, hers was that love. Nevertheless, its very integrity made her curiously cunning in regard to anything which threatened to disturb that idyll in the garden. So, at that very moment, when Vincent looked up at her windows asserting her absolute lack of pretence and single-mindedness, she was pitting her wits against old Akbar Khân in a manner worthy of her grandmother, Anâri Begum; since Akbar, far more than her guardian, was to be feared. The latter, honest man, went to his bed, beyond the chapel, at ten of the clock precisely; but Akbar, who from ancient habit was given to prowling about at night, and napping in odd corners, had many chances of discovery. During the last few days, however, when she, for her own purposes, had let him talk, he had become so garrulous regarding his past that she had recognized in him an unscrupulous confidant, with whom, in face of the possibility of requiring one, it was wise to remain on terms.

So, as she lounged on the sofa, she listened to his endless talk with tolerance.

"Nay!" she interrupted at last. "If, as thou sayest she will, she brings me more dresses and jewels, she may call me Begum, and hint at my being one, really, a thousand times over! Why not? Begum and Princess are the same, and my great-grandmother in Italy was that. Pidar Narâyan told me so to-day."

The memory of the old man's voice, when, with new-found courage, she had questioned him concerning those old days, made her eyes soft. Yes! he would, he *must* understand. So, by and by, when Vincent and she were tired of playing Romeo and Juliet (the story of the star-crossed lovers had been her only reading since Vincent had taken to quoting so much from it) they would make Pidar Narâyan play Friar Laurence, and marry them on the sly. That would be so much more amusing than a regular wedding. He could not refuse, since he had once loved as she loved. You could hear that in his voice; after how many years?--fifty or sixty! And the Princess had, of course, loved also in exactly the same way. Laila felt sure of it. That curious, inexpressible feeling had come to her also. Laila, trying to formulate that feeling, slipping her heel idly in and out of her dainty little bronze shoe as she lounged, suddenly remembered Vincent's song to the tambourine, and laughed. That was it!

"Golden feet upon a golden stair."

That expressed it exactly. Two pair of feet going side by side up a golden stair, to golden gates. So contented. Ah, God! how content! Seeking something, claiming something, yet still content. That feeling came, sometimes, when you were saying your prayers. A sort of yearning *for*, a sort of satisfaction *in*, something that was not you; so, surely if it came *then*, there could be no harm in it.

Harm! The very sisters allowed that you must love the man you were going to marry. And she and Vincent would be married by and by and live happily, for that was better than having a "*statue of pure gold*" erected to you! In the meantime, secrecy, so long as Vincent wished to play Romeo and Juliet, was her cue; therefore, the more she could blind old Akbar, the more he could be turned on a wrong track, the better. Especially when the turning was so delightfully ridiculous!

She managed, however, not to laugh her childish love of mischief into Mumtâza Mahal's very face when, after much shrinking into white sheets held up as screens, and quick cuddlings into corners at the faintest suspicion of a possible peep, that good lady, in her very, very best pink satin continuations, was ushered in through the dark deserted passages of the palace, to Laila's boudoir. For, despite the amusement, the girl's heart was beating fast with determination to climb her golden stairs without interruption. So she allowed herself to be *kow-towed* to, and called Begum-*sahiba* and she accepted the new dress and jewels without protest. Eagerly, in fact, since they were far more gorgeous than the first, and caught her taste better. The former, indeed, had been Roshan Khân's own choice, dictated by his acquired knowledge of the sort of

things *mem-sahibs* admired; these latter were her grandmother's, purely, entirely oriental. The difference was great. Put briefly, *this* was the costume in which Anâri Begum had flouted the Nawab, the *other* that in which she had caught Bun-avatâr's fancy.

Laila took up one of the heavy, gorgeous, glittering garments. It smelt strongly of musk, attar of roses, and jasmin, and she snuffed at it with a smile. That was ever so much better than the dull lavender water, which was the only scent her guardian said a lady could use. Vincent would like that; he, like she did, loved strong scents. If only the stupid old frumpish thing would go away in time, she would put on that dress at once, and so give him pleasure. That was all her thought.

As she sat, with a happy smile, her face half-buried in a tiny, three-cornered corselet of scarlet net embroidered in seed pearls, Mumtâza and Akbar Khân winked at each other; and Laila's sharp eyes, catching this, brimmed over with laughter. She felt glad the rest of her face was hidden, until she was grave enough to reply graciously to the hints, the suggestions; for Mumtâza had been bound over by oaths not to go too fast, and she obeyed her instructions.

Even so, Akbar Khân, listening with folded hands in a mantis-like attitude, his angles all crushed together into humility, wondered if he was standing on his head or his heels, as he heard Laila admit, gravely, that she was certainly, in a way, the head of the family, in that she possessed its land; but that, of course, Roshan was really the heir. That it had given her great gratification to see how thoroughly he had adopted English ways. That, of course, it would be impossible for him to marry an uneducated cow of a girl. Here, for a moment, she had relapsed to sincerity in order to remark that it must be impossible to love a person you had not seen, and that for her part, she knew in an instant if she was going to like or dislike people. If the latter, she tried never to see them, really, again. Then, remembering her part, she had resumed it hastily by saying that no doubt she would see more of her cousin,--who, by the way, was very nice-looking,--in the future, as he was quite in society.

Old Mumtâza had hard work at this juncture to prevent herself from cracking all her finger-joints over the girl's head for luck, and wishing her a numerous offspring; while Akbar gave a gasp that was not all pleasure. He felt that he was being rushed, that the crisis might come before he was ready for it. At this rate, Pidar Narâyan would have no chance of dying. At this rate, Roshan Khân's castle in the air must topple over from sheer lack of foundation to such a lofty structure.

As he trotted back beside Mumtâza's curtained *dhooli* to that little parasite of a house against the palace wall, where he knew Roshan was waiting for the upshot of the interview, his one consolation was that bow-strings were out of fashion!

In truth, there was no more restless man in Eshwara that night than Roshan Khân. The desire for this paradise had grown overwhelming, and as he listened to his grandmother, while Akbar pointed each triumphant appeal of the old lady's with a helpless "*Gereeb-pun-wâs*," his face grew pale with emotion; until, at the mention of his good looks and Laila's desire to see him, he turned fiercely to the go-between, and bade him fix a time; the sooner the better!

Akbar felt inclined to tell the truth then. To admit that he had never breathed a word of Roshan's pretensions to the Miss-*sahiba* and that, so far, the negotiations only existed in his own imaginings. But the look on Roshan's face--he had seen it often in his youth in connection with women, and sacks, and bow-strings--reduced him to protestations. He would do his best, he said, but with Pidar Narâyan it would be difficult to manage.

Roshan strode about the little courtyard like a wild beast in a cage, biting his mustache, and thinking. Then he turned to the old phrase-monger.

"I have settled it. Before dawn to-morrow--not this dawn, that is too nigh on us now--but the next, thou shalt let me into the garden. Thou knowest the little balcony which was not lit up? I will stay there, waiting, till she come for an early walk among the flowers. That can be managed. Then, if the coast is clear, we can meet and talk. If not, there is no harm done, for I can slip into the stream and swim back. That will be best, since it is not possible by day, and at night the *mems* do not receive visitors, as we do, without reproach."

Roshan's knowledge of etiquette was sound, yet at that very moment Laila, ablaze with gold and jewels, was meeting her lover's eyes with a happy laugh.

"What's in a dress?" she paraphrased, "it is no part of me!"

Was it not? Never had Vincent seen her look like this; so absolutely desirable, so perfectly adorable.

He caught her in his arms and kissed her. The heavy scent upon her dress assailed him. She looked up into his eyes and laughed.

"*But trust me, gentleman, I'll prove more true*," she whispered, "*than those who have more cunning to be strange*."

"Juliet!" he whispered back, lost in his own mad passion. "Juliet!"

Their gold-shod feet were upon the golden stairs; the gates of Paradise were before them.

CHAPTER XVII

THE POOL OF IMMORTALITY

"Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!"

The cry was incessant now, for there was a glint of light in the east; and the hosts of pilgrims to the 'Cradle of the Gods' were cramming, almost to solidity, each street and alley in Eshwara which could be said, by however long and tortuous a detour, to give access to that small tank where, at dawn, the miraculous waters of cleansing would rise, as they always did on this, the great Day of Atonement. In the sea of slightly upturned faces, upturned in the vain hope of seeing over the heads of those in front, the most noticeable thing was the expression of mingled eagerness and patience. And this was most noticeable in those who stood nearest to the bamboo railing which had been erected (in a square some four feet from the first step downwards) as a precaution against a dangerous rush on all sides; and in consequence, a dangerous crush on those steep steps. The only entrance to them, therefore, was by a sort of double sheep-pen at the end nearest the town, by means of which, when the time came, some fifty bathers would be admitted to the railed square from the inner pen, their places in which would be taken by the fifty in the outer one; their places, in turn, being filled by fifty from the general crowd. By which double check no more than fifty could stand at one time with no barrier between their mortality and immortality! The railing itself was guarded every two yards by a yellow-legged constable, and at the sheep-pens stood the two European police-officers in whose hands the peace and order of the vast crowd lay. Their assistant stood at the exit gate at the other end, and their three white helmets showed strangely conspicuous amongst the bare or saffron-turbaned heads.

The two at the sheep-pens were talking and laughing to each other as Englishmen will before business begins; talking and laughing London talk, for one of them was fresh from home furlough, and had only been detailed for this special duty, on his way up country.

"Yes! I had a jolly day," he was saying. "The dear old Heath was looking just as it always did. It was like being born again to come back to the whole caboodle--Aunt Sallies, Tommy Dods, Welshers, and the lot--and then the enclosure--" A sudden sway in the crowd made him look round hastily at his own. It was all correct; so many yards this way, so many that, with yellow legs marking the yards, and those three white helmets marking the limits within which regeneration was legal.

The sway ceased. The moment had not yet come, though slowly, surely, the light grew, to give the great mass of bronze faces a greyish, corpse-like tint, while, half way up the sky behind them, the serrated edge of the sacred snows grew pale, and cold, and stern, like the very face of Death itself.

"Hârî! Hârâ! Hârâ! Hârî!"

There was a note of anxiety in the cry now; for the shadow thrown by the tall houses which hemmed in the wide courtyard was growing paler, and in another minute, at most, the twelve-foot square of cleansing water, which was all the Gods vouchsafed, must surely begin to rise and show at the bottom of those worn stone steps--worn by generations on generations of golden-shod feet seeking immortality.

"Stand back, please! Not yet!" came an English voice, inaudible for the rhythmic roar of the multitude; but the raised riding whip was sufficient. The eagerness died out for a moment from those nearest faces, lost in a cheerful obedience, a respectful *salaam* or two, a general acquiescence.

"I wish those devils of priests would turn on the tap," remarked the other Englishman with a yawn.

"Yes!" answered the first speaker; "if you are on duty, next year, I'd insist on the curtain being rung up at the bill time. It is rough on the audience; especially when they don't cat-call!"

He gave an imitation of a London gallery's sign of impatience, which made some of the golden-shod ones stare; for the rhythmic roar had died down in one of those sudden silences which seize

upon humanity even when in masses. So that a faint "*rumpa-tum-tum-rumpa-tum-tum*" was distinctly audible from far. It was the *tom-tom* of the old Brahmin, whom Lance Carlyon had seen selling the endless circles of cut papers as a whole pantheon of Gods.

It is an eminently disturbing sound, that ceaseless, insistent throb of a *tom-tom*, which has no end, no beginning; which holds ever in its beat the necessity for something more; for another repetition, and yet another.

So, on its ceaselessness, broke in again that swaying, pulsing roar of many voices.

"*Hârî! Hârâ!* Life-Death-Creator-Destroyer!"

"Something must have gone wrong with the ball-cock, and as usual, the plumber will be '*in directly from another little job,*'" said the man who had just come out from England, reminiscently. He had gone there to settle his wife and bairns in a jerry-built villa near London; so the memory of something beyond the iniquities of the plumber--those Borgias of modern life, dealing death unchecked, undiscovered--made his eyes pass beyond the crowd, pass the spires of the clustered temples, and settle on the still dark, western sky, over whose curved edge lay the goal of *his* solitary feet, the end of *his* pilgrimage, the cradle of *his* divinities.

"Stand back, please! not yet!" came his order again; and once more eagerness died down to obedience. Once more that cry on the Creator, the Destroyer, ended in that insistent, restless beat of the old god-selling Brahmin's drum.

It was a strange scene. Above, was the growing light of day; below, the square stone font of immortality, and between them a clamouring crowd, a careless few.

And between *them* what?

A light railing of bamboo, the dignity that doth hedge an empire. That was all.

And now, with a sudden access of light, came the quick indrawing breath of thousands to voice a sort of sharp, short sob, followed by an instant's silence.

Then, long, soft, with the hush in it of some huge wave far out at sea which swallows up a lesser one, the out-going breath of those thousands voiced a sigh.

For the pool was still empty, though the dawn had come.

Something was wrong.

Seriously wrong, to judge by one English face, as it turned to give a look round, then settled on another English face. "There's something up--God knows what--the Commissioner feared a row, you know. You'd better go to the Fort and ask Dering to send us down every man he can; men, you understand, not sabres--as yet. And tell Pidar Narâyan, he's a host in himself with these pilgrims,--Ramanund too, you might get him,--we want anyone who can help the crowd to keep its temper, though I don't expect he'd be much good--and there's no one else. Inspector!" here the police officer turned to a silver-laced turban beside the outer pen, "leave that in charge of Govinda and Suchet--Stay! Shiv-deo will be better; he is a high-caste Brahmin. And you go and send every twice-born constable you've got, *and can trust*, to every alley and street that leads here; for there will be an awful crush when those in front don't move on. And--" he wrinkled his forehead in hasty thought--"have we anyone connected with the temple priests, someone they can trust? Ah! Annant, of course,--the very man! Send him to find out if there is anything really wrong; and--" he lowered his voice, "if it is anything to do with the siphon, or whatever it is, get workmen and set it straight--pour water down--anything! Only there *must be a miracle*. And be quick. If this crowd gets impatient--God help it!"

The last was to himself as he looked round the solid packed mass of humanity. There was no sigh of impatience in it as yet; only eagerness.

"And mind," he added, "no truncheons drawn till I myself give the order."

The word passed in a low tone round the square of authority, and that done, the head of it pulled out his cigar case. He might as well smoke while he could.

The crowd watched him, vaguely interested at his lack of interest in what was coming, until a faint forward sweep, a half-hearted shout came from behind; from those upturned faces which could not even see an Englishman lighting his cigar.

"Not yet! Stand back!" said the latter again, as the pressure on the sheep pen grew. And they stood back, all save a miserable-looking, dirt-clad, wild-eyed mendicant, who had wormed his way to the front, and now feared to lose it.

"Lo! brother," said big Govinda, a Sikh from Patiala, as he thrust him back gently, "have patience awhile. Give the Gods time. There is not water to wash a babe yet."

Shiv-deo, taller even than Govinda, a Saraswati Brahmin, if ever there was one, at the other side of the pen, twirled his mustache airily, and laughed. "Nay, Govinda," he called, "let the

beggar in. He seeks but to drown vermin."

The rude jest served its turn, after the manner of policemen's jokes all over the world. The crowd close at hand tittered, caught up the cue, amused itself with additions; and those behind forgot the great question in curiosity. But not for long.

"Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!"

The roar of relief rose up tumultuously, the mass of people swayed with that curious sidelong motion of a forward crowd, as, in the clear light, a trickle of water showed through the crevices of the paving stones at the bottom of the tank.

"Look out!" shouted the Englishman; but remonstrance in words was useless in that storm of sound. So big Govinda promptly snatched two intruders out of his pen, like puppies, by the scruff of their necks, one in each hand; and Shiv-deo, choosing out the nearest low-caste man unerringly, caught him in his arms like a baby, and literally tossed him on to the heads of the crowd, with a shout which, even in that uproar, could be heard of some in that nearest crush.

"Brahmins first, washerman! Thy sort can bathe in the suds of our clothes!"

And those who heard, ducked, and when the victim--who was *not* a washerman--fell amongst them, hustled and silenced him, and nodded to the big man whose claim to dignity was writ so plain upon his face.

But despite ready wit and sheer strength, one determined fellow would have made good his entrance, and so served as a bell-wether to that overwhelming flock, if a white hand and arm with silver buttons on the cuff--holding a silver-mounted hunting-crop, clubbed savagely short--had not come down-glinting in the first sunray like a sword--clear on the bare head as it ducked under the barrier.

The intruder, a big burly devotee, dropped on his face like a stone; then, to the striker's relief, sat up, and apparently howled; apparently, because that rhythmic roar smothered all individual sound.

"Hârâ! Hârî! Hârâ! Hârî!"

Suddenly, as it had begun, it stopped; for that faint inrush of water had stopped also; stopped, hesitated, then sunk out of sight again with a sort of drowning gurgle that came as an accompaniment to the only other sound; the insistent throbbing of the old God-maker's drum in the distance.

"Not enough pressure!" murmured the police officer to himself, judging that an attempt had been made to fill the tank in some new way. Then he frowned. There would be pressure enough and to spare among the crowd soon, most likely. What could be done to prevent it?

"Halt! by your right--single file!"

The order came, far back, from the widest street, and it was full ten minutes ere Lance Carlyon, with a following of Sikh pioneers, armed with spades and picks, could edge through the crowd, though it still yielded room to authority without a murmur. He had been on his way with a fatigue party to finish clearing the camp, when the assistant superintendent of police had met him, in the bazaar, and told him he was wanted.

"Send four of your men to clear the mud from the crevices of the stones," said the police officer, seizing on a possible diversion gladly, "it will serve to keep the crowd amused till Dering brings his men down."

As the four stalwart pioneers stepped to their work of making miracles, a stir of expectation ran through those first rows who could see. "Surely," they said to each other, "if the Masters took the job in hand, the Gods must needs send the water."

"Of a surety!" said Shiv-deo, catching the comment. "Do not the Gods always befriend the bold? Do not we, of Harriana, find the sacred river which the devils hid, though we have to dig three-hundred-feet wells to find it?"

This allusion to the extraordinarily deep wells dug by the peasantry in the almost rainless tract beneath which, so the legend goes, the river Saraswati still runs, passed from mouth to mouth consolingly.

Yea, if devils hid water, men found it.

Why not these men? since nothing was impossible to a miracle.

The sun was shining broadly now, as if it had been up for hours, and showed, far as the eye could reach down every lane and street and alley, nothing but that sea of upturned faces converging to one centre; wonderfully still, wonderfully patient.

"I wish someone would stop that cursed drum," said Lance, suddenly, "it's enough to give

anyone the fidgets. I feel myself--" he broke off, and his memory going back to his jesting remark to Erda, his young face clouded. Was it possible he should never see her again? Was it possible that the Reverend David was to claim his paradise? He felt savage at the very thought, impatient, full of an almost righteous anger at everything, especially the drum-banger for making such an infernal noise.

And now, far back as before, an English voice could be heard giving an order. It was to loosen scabbards this time, and the police officer looked up hastily. It meant that, for the first time, the crowd must be hesitating in its quick obedience to command; perhaps because most of the troopers were Mahomedans.

"I hope they'll get through without using them," said the man responsible for peace and order, "but, steady! please, in case of a rush. Remember that if we yield more foot-room, someone *must* fall; then there will be the devil to pay. At present they are so tight packed they can't."

That, indeed, was the position. So long as authority could prevent those few yards of clear space about the pool being encroached upon, there was safety. So the barrier of men waited anxiously.

But no rush came; the reason of this being made clear when the file of troopers appeared, led by old Pidar Narâyan, who had joined the party at the crucial moment, and piloted them through the crowd, which gave way to his well-known figure with absolute alacrity. He turned at the entrance, to hold up his hand in priestly fashion.

"Patience, my children!" he said sternly. "Tarry ye the Lord's leisure! Let Him do what seemeth Him good!"

The idea, familiar to the least of them, brought instant assent and a sort of relieved sigh from those who heard it. Here was something they could understand. A man, set apart from others by his dress, his life, his invariable assumption of authority, his unquestioned claim to be mediator between the dim, inaccessible Creator and his creatures, to be interpreter of the hidden Mind.

But the police officer heaved *his* sigh of relief over the appearance of more matter. His barrier could now be one of men, standing shoulder to shoulder.

And such a barrier would soon be needed, since this latest contingent brought discouraging news. The priests were helpless. The secret supply had somehow been tampered with, but where, not even they could tell without help. And though they had sent, long before dawn, to both Amma and Gu-gu--the only two men likely to know anything or be able to do anything--neither could be found.

"And won't be," interrupted Vincent, suddenly remembering, as he listened, what he had seen the night before. "They are most likely in the plot; one of them, at any rate, was going up the Hâri in a dug-out late last night."

"Not Am-ma," put in Lance. "He started before that to go up the Hâra and pilot down a raft for the forest officer. I met him as I came back to dinner."

"Well, he is not get-at-able anyhow, and that's all we have to consider," said the police officer. "Briefly, the miracle is off the bill. Now, how the deuce are we to get the audience to go away peacefully?"

"Perhaps if I, as a fellow-countryman, and a Brahmin, were to address them--" began Ramanund, who had come down with Pidar Narâyan, feeling important at being summoned.

The latter turned to the man, whom he knew had long since rejected the faith of his fathers, and, so to speak, thrown the Almighty overboard to lighten his ship.

"You cannot argue with that, my son!" he said gently, pointing to the sea of patient, yet eager, faces. "No one of your sort ever has, in all the history of the world. *That* does not reason. It feels. Show it another miracle, and it will worship. Give it a cause, and it will espouse it. Give it a lead, and it will follow; but words--never!"

"Well, I hope to God no one will supply it with the wrong lead!" put in the police officer. "For the rest, we must hold the fort, I suppose. Inspector! when is the show--the miracle, I mean,--supposed to end?"

"Not till sunset, sir," said the man, *salaaming*.

"And it's now about six, I suppose. Eleven hours!" He took out his cigar-case and counted. "Yes! I'll last through. Inspector! Close your men in, and let them stand at ease. Captain Dering, if you can spare yours till then, I shall be obliged."

"Certainly. I left a troop with Roshan Khân, and orders to send word of any disturbance; and I wired to Dillon in case--"

Father Ninian shook his head. "There is no fear till this is settled." He pointed to the Pool.

And he was right. All through the long hot hours the crowd waited. Sometimes the cry, "*Hârâ! Hârî!*" burst out, to be followed by a faint rush. Sometimes the great mass stood silent, listening to the insistent throbbing of the old God-maker's drum in the distance, but through it all the note was patience. And it was patience, also, in the square enclosure of authority. Sometimes a would-be intruder would be lifted like a puppy, and chucked back to his fellows. Once or twice an English arm would go up, and come down on some more wilful head; but that was all.

And far away at the Fort the gong chimed the hours regularly up to twelve, and begun at one again.

But there was no fuss, no noise. The crowd stood their ground, giving no inch, and authority stood its ground and yielded none, since in that lay safety for all.

So, with a horrible slowness, the day dragged on, until at last the red sun sank behind the levels beyond the gaol; and the strain was over!

"I'll take a biscuit in my pocket next time," said the police officer, cheerfully, as, bit by bit, the stones of the courtyard began to show between the golden-shod feet. "Inspector! send your men to quarters, and let them eat their food." Then he walked over and looked down into the deep empty tank.

"It might have been full up," he said. "We couldn't have stopped them for a moment if they had had any sort of a lead over. And from what you told the Commissioner, sir,"--he turned to Father Ninian--"I was afraid of one."

The old priest stood watching the crowd disperse for a moment in silence.

"So was I," he said, "but I was mistaken, so far. Still, there is danger in the air. I feel it. I hear it."

And as he spoke, above the hum of the crowd, silent no longer, rose that insistent throbbing of the old God-maker's drum.

CHAPTER XVIII

ADRIFT

Erda Shepherd stood in her bedroom, under the wood-shingled house at Herrnhut, looking at a heap of white muslin and delicate embroideries which lay upon her bed.

It was the wedding dress. She had just unpacked it; partly because she felt *décœuvré*, partly in the hope that the sight of it, ready to be worn so soon, would still the vague disquiet of which she was conscious. Yet if anyone had ventured to suggest, when she had said good-by to Lance Carlyon the evening before,--said good-by almost carelessly, by reason of the fervid enthusiasm which absorbed her,--that within twenty-four hours the wisdom of the farewell should seem logically doubtful, she would have been desperately angry.

But she was too honest to deny that the doubt had come. Come in a moment, wildly, passionately, when they had thwarted her desire of joining in the crusade over the other side of the river along the pilgrims' road. She had meant to go with David, who was to take up his position at a camping-ground some six miles off, and she had fought hard for the privilege. But they had quoted Scripture at her to prove that a wife, or a wife to be, must needs hamper a man more than any other woman, even his sister. David had been kind about it, almost too kind. She flushed a little at the recollection of his words, his look; for that sort of thing had scarcely come into her calculations. But Dr. Campbell had pompously reminded her that her future profession would be wife, caretaker, sympathizer, and general bolsterer--up to a worker. Nor need she think the task small; it was the noblest one a woman could have. He had gone on to comfort her with instances of such general support from his own life and those of his friends, until, with a flash, that unexpected questioning had come to the girl's mind. She had asked herself what difference there was in the nobility of being one man's wife or another's--provided the man was worthy and his work in the world good?

Father Ninian's words, "*I can wish no better wish for you and for the world,*" had come back to her then, as if in answer to her questioning.

And, even now, they echoed in her heart. The house was very quiet, very shadowy, for the sun left the little oasis of valley set in its circling wilderness of hill, long before a fraction of light faded from the sky above it. She could hear Mrs. Campbell's voice down the little ladder-like stairs, conferring with the cook over the wedding cake, and, in a side-issue, exhorting him to be sure and have the soup hot in case the workers might return exhausted, and require something to eat the moment they arrived.

Erda sat down on the bed beside the white muslin, and fingered the quaint little cap idly, as she told herself that such things would be a part of her duties in the future.

But only a part. Life was no unknown country to this girl, who had spent years in a medical mission. She was no ignorant baby, standing, in a fashion happily past, on the verge of she knew not what. She looked ahead calmly, taking the world as the Creator made it. She thought, without a flush, as good women do, of the children she hoped might come; and as she thought, she frowned, not from any revolt of her spiritual or physical nature, but because, once more, the question arose: "Was not Lance right? Was not this the essence? Was it not everything to be sure of the inheritance?"

She started up at the sound of her aunt calling her, glad of the interruption.

Had she not better, the good lady suggested, try on the dress, now she was about it, since if there was anything amiss, the sooner the tailor set to work to rectify it the better.

Undoubtedly. Besides, she told herself, the mere putting on of this, the sign of her new profession, would be healthful. It would give her the feeling of being set apart for the life which she had chosen deliberately, chosen with her eyes open, though, maybe, focussed too much on that mental companionship. Too much? Impossible! Lance was wrong. That was the crowning glory of marriage; and even if it seemed hard to have to stand aside from actually fighting the good fight, the victory would be hers--hers almost more than her husband's, since the effort would be greater, the work more against the grain.

Yes, she would try on the dress; and if it did not fit perfectly, what matter?

Was anything in the world perfect? Yet it should be as perfect as she could compass; even the little cap should not lack its bunch of orange blossoms! As she told herself this she was for the time womanhood incarnate; womanhood playing, with dainty little tendernesses and conceits, about the abyss for which it is responsible. So, with the smile of an angel, she passed into the garden, the old militant feeling at her heart. Her feet were on the golden stairs. She was going to regain the lost Paradise hand in hand with one of those whom she had driven from it. They were going to forget all the consequences of that mistake. They were going to be--what?...

The vague confusion did not prevent her feeling that she was absolutely certain she was on the right path. Indeed, the only regret of which she was conscious was one that she was not on the other side of the river, on the pilgrims' road, with the rest of the mission.

She stood looking over to the frowning cliffs from the little wooden landing-stage, built out at the bottom of the garden into the wide shallows of the river, which here showed scarcely a streak or dimple of current. She could see the mission boat lying moored on the other side, against the fighters' return.

Yet the very idea of fight seemed impossible, she thought, in that utter peacefulness and stillness. The rim of dark hills circled the jewel of the sun-bright sky tenderly, as if it sought to keep in the heavy, sweet perfume of the orange blossoms which starred every tree in the wide, fruitful garden. They were famous oranges, those in the Herrnhut garden; grafts brought by a missionary from Malta. Mrs. Campbell, notable woman as she was, made a steady income for good works out of the sale of the great red-skinned, red-hearted fruit, and prided herself in keeping them later on her trees than anyone in India. Indeed, in the shadier, colder alleys some were still hanging side by side with the new blossoms. A sort of example to these novices, showing them what their real work in the world ought to be! Erda, smiling at her own conceit, stroked one of the warm yet stainless petals in the bunch she held as if it were a sentient thing. Perhaps it was. Who knows!

As she turned to go back, warned by a softening of the sky that the time was later than she thought, something showed rounding the smooth, silver bend of the river above; and she paused, shading her eyes with her hand, to see what it was.

A raft. The first of the rafts of wood which at certain seasons were floated down the river to Eshwara. Am-ma's raft, most likely, which he had told her he had to pilot.

Yes! There he was on the quaint contrivance which the river folk used for journeys down stream. A common string bed, no more, no less, supported between inflated bladders of skin. The sight of it gave her a pang to think that she would never more go bobbing, sidling, dipping, racing on one of them, as the mission folk always did when they wanted to stay the last possible minute of holiday at Herrnhut, and get back to Eshwara as quickly as they could. For it took half the time of the winding road, when the river, as now, was quiet and manageable. And Am-ma was the most dexterous manager of the singular craft. There he was, paddling for dear life; now leaping to his great pile of timber, steering it with his paddle round a bend, then back to his

string bed with the tow rope, to haul the rudderless mass to a straight line again.

If she had time, she thought, she would have asked him to take her, just once more, as far as the ferry, two miles below. Then she might have walked back through the fields. She had often taken the pleasant little trip with Am-ma. There was no danger so far; but after that, when the river began to slip and slide, even he had sometimes to cut a raft adrift and trust to catching it again in smoother water; since it was not pleasant to have such a crushing neighbour in the eddies and swirls of a lasher.

As she stood watching him, she saw him pause, looking towards her, then leap from the raft and come paddling down stream. He had evidently seen her waiting on the landing-stage, and thought she wanted him; so she shook her head and began to walk back to the house. As she did so an orange caught her eye under a tree, whence it had fallen from sheer red-gold ripeness, and, knowing how Mrs. Campbell mourned a single loss, she gathered it up and took it with her.

Back in her own room, she began to pin her bunch of blossoms in her cap hurriedly, for she had lingered longer in the garden than she had intended, and there was a chance, only a chance, that those much to be envied Church-militants might return and claim her attention.

Still, hurried as she was, she knelt down beside the bed for a moment or two, and, with her clasped hands laid almost caressingly among the soft muslin, prayed that she might wear this symbol of her entry into a new profession worthily.

So, scarcely looking at herself in the glass which, indeed, was too small to show her more than a rather pale face smiling under a quaint little cap, she dressed hastily. Her aunt would be able to tell her if there was anything wrong in the lighter rooms below; here, under the roof, it was already a little dark. Then catching up the orange, she ran downstairs, wondering if the bridal blossoms always smelt so overpoweringly strong, and thinking that, if it was so, they must make the trying ceremony still more trying to one who disliked to have strong scents about them, as she did.

Her aunt was not to be seen in the dining room, so Erda parted the heavy curtains which, in Indian fashion, divided it from the drawing-room, and looked in to see if she were there.

It was at all times a dark room, especially in late afternoon, as now; but the light from behind her sent a shaft straight to the pier glass which stood--the joy of Mrs. Campbell's heart--just opposite the curtains; so making--as the good lady used fondly to say--the room look much larger than it really was to those entering it.

But what the girl saw in it to-day was no illusory enlargement of actualities, no idealization of fact. It was something real, something not to be explained away, exaggerated, or minimized. It was a woman, tall, slender, robed in white; a woman with red-gold hair, edged by the light behind her; a woman with a red-gold apple in her hand.

She stood arrested before herself; helpless before the memory of a voice--

"All straight folds--the sunshine on your hair, and a red-gold apple in your hand--the World's Desire!"

And she had refused him *his*. She stood for a second, not thinking at all; simply, with a rush, feeling the truth, feeling herself.

Then with a queer little cry which might have been his name had it been articulate, she broke adrift. Broke, for the time, from all moorings, and possessed with but the one idea that she *could* not do one thing, that she *must* do another, she turned to the garden, and,--the red-gold fruit still in her hand,--hurried breathlessly through the waning light, through the dead-sweet perfume of the blossoms, till she found herself, she knew not why--save that she must have air, have space--upon the edge of the river.

There was something now swaying idly against the landing-stage; a rude craft buoyed up by air! And there was a rude sort of man in it,--comprehending, yet uncomprehending,--primitive, simple, expectant. "*Huzoor!*" he said, with broad smiles and outstretched hand. "I have been waiting the *Huzoor's* pleasure. The Presence will go whither?"

Whither?

Even in her excitement the quaint coincidence struck her as absurd, and yet it seemed to sweep her further still from her moorings.

Whither?

She gave that queer little cry again, and this time it was "Lance! Lance!"

"Whither did the Miss-*sahiba* say?" asked Am-ma gravely.

The cry turned to a strange laugh. "To Eshwara--where else does the river go--where else?"

The strange, frail boat was sidling against the landing-stage in the pulse of the river; her

stranger, frailer self was adrift on the greater river of life. And a hand, heedless, seeing nothing strange in either, careless of all the fine-drawn niceties of culture, had hold of hers.

"So, straight to the centre, *Huzoor!* I have placed the seat correctly. That is right! The Miss-*sahiba* recollects the old rules; we shall be in Eshwara before dawn!"

She sat down mechanically, feeling only that she was adrift--adrift on the river that went to Eshwara--where else--and that she was glad; glad because she could not stay, because she could not face--

And then the thought came of facing something else--*his* glad delight when she came floating down the river--not dead, like the Lily Maid to Lancelot--but alive--a woman with a red-gold apple in her hand--

She sat staring at what she held, as if hypnotized by its colour, absolutely unconscious of anything else till Am-ma's voice came stolidly.

"We must pick up the raft first, *Huzoor*. This slave let it drift while he waited for the Miss; but we shall find it at the ferry."

At the ferry! The familiar idea startled her from dreams to the reality.

How came she there? What had she done? What did this mean? A flush of intolerable shame swept to her face; she rose to escape. But Am-ma's warning hand was on hers in an instant; that hand, so heedless of so many limitations, so certain here that there was no escape from *these* limitations.

"The Miss-*sahiba* forgets," he said deferentially. "When one is in the stream there is no change possible; but if the place is not right we can alter it at the ferry."

She sat down again, telling herself this was true. She could alter it at the ferry. She could walk home through the fields. No one need know (the quaint craft, rocking itself back to balance, made her feel giddy), her dress was only muslin, she could remove the cap; if necessary, borrow a shawl from the bible-woman near the ferry, saying she had not thought it would be so chilly.

She buried her face in both her hands in a sort of despairing revolt at the duplicity, so, with the red-gold fruit in her lap, sat trying to think. But she could not. The scent of the orange blossoms seemed to cloud her senses. So she raised her face again, and stared at the river. Why had she done this? Why had she put this thing, that she must always conceal, into her life? There would always, now, be something she could not say straight out; and yet if she lived to be a hundred the memory of it would never fade; it would be as fresh as it was now when she died, with David's hand in hers!

The intolerable humiliation of it stung deep; the instinct to escape rose fiercely.

"Be quick!" she cried, seeing Am-ma idle, letting the current do the work. "I want to get there as soon as possible. I must, or something worse may happen. There isn't a moment to spare!"

Am-ma bent towards her from his seat astride a skin air-bag. "Did they kill anyone?" he asked, in sudden interest. "Did the prisoners escape as it was arranged? And was it Carlone-*sahib* they killed?--they swore it should be he, because he laughed at the miracle."

"The prisoners--Carlone-*sahib*--killed!" she echoed stupidly. Then with a great throb of the heart she realized that here might be something of more importance than her self-humiliation. Had Father Ninian been right? Had there really been some conspiracy afoot, and had Am-ma heard?

"I have had no news from Eshwara, Am-ma," she said boldly, "what is this about prisoners escaping, and the *sahib-logue* being killed? Who was going to do that?"

Am-ma looked crestfallen. "I thought the *Huzoor* had heard--that *that* was why she was going. It is nothing. Idle talk. It is always talk. And the *Huzoors* have the *Dee-puk-râg*. They must still be kings."

"Am-ma," she interrupted sternly, "you must tell me about this. If you do not, I will take my hand off your son's head--I will never--"

He almost dropped his paddle in absolute terror. "*Huzoor*" he said helplessly, "it is talk, idle talk. It is always so. All day long, and all night long in the bazaars, and the Masters have the *Dee-puk-râg*. There is no fear; but this slave will tell."

They were almost opposite the ferry before he had finished his tale, and she had grasped the whole tissue of trivialities which yet went to make up so formidable a possibility.

The discontent and dread regarding the canal, the strange lights, the deaths in gaol, the return of the cursed corpse, Gopi--the ticket-of-leave man's--talk of revenge if the cleansing water should fail.

Much of this was new to her, but it hung together with what she already knew; and yet it seemed incredible! What could be the object? What could they expect to do? Here Am-ma had smiled inscrutably, and said the Miss did not know bazaar talk. Everything was possible to it. Had they not even spoken of making a new Nawab out of Roshan Khân, the *risaldar*? indeed, had not the *jemedar* at the palace already treated him as one?

And the Pool of Immortality? Had it risen or not? Am-ma could not say. They had asked him with bribes and threats to do the job--that was only the priest's revenge, but it would serve other purposes too--but he had refused, partly because he had to come away, and partly because he was the servant of the Light-bringers. As to when the prisoners were to escape he could not say. To-day, perhaps to-morrow, most likely never; unless something really happened. It was talk. The Miss need have no fear. The *Huzoors*, having the *Dee-puk-râg*, must needs be safe, and Carlone-*sahib* was a real hero; none braver, none stronger.

That decided her. She had been counting costs as she listened. An hour, say, back to Herrnhut. Even if anyone were there, which was uncertain, half an hour at least to start a messenger. Then the boat might be at the other side of the river. Then all those miles, on a rough road at night!

"When shall we get to Eshwara?" she asked.

"At the turn of the night and day if the river is kind," said Am-ma, but he looked doubtfully into a copper tint that remained in the sky, though the sun must have set behind the mountains. It had a curious effect, that copper-coloured dome above the rim of almost black hills, with the river, dark, mysterious, already beginning to slide towards the narrowing ravine. It did not strike her that she herself, adrift on that river in what was to be her wedding dress, with prehistoric, aboriginal Am-ma as pilot to her and a lumber raft, would have had a still more curious effect to a spectator's eyes. But there were none, and it was already almost dark.

"Am-ma," she said, "I will give you fifty rupees, and keep my hand on the son's head, if you will leave the raft here, and take me as quick as you can to Eshwara--to the little steps below the forty-five whole rupees!"

He shook his head and grinned, partly at his own superlative honesty. "We should not go so fast, *Huzoor*, now the slide is near," he said; "for, see you, the raft is the wood-*sahib's* new shape. It is a good shape; it came down the rapids above the valley like a boat, faster than *this*, when the paddle cannot be used. It will take us with it. I will fasten *this* behind, and steer. Then in the slacker water when the paddle is possible, we will leave it; if the Miss-*sahiba* is in a hurry. But there is none. The *Huzoors* are Light-bringers." He had already paddled alongside the raft,--a boat-shaped mass of huge logs rising towards the back--and, leaping to it, came back, after a moment, with the tow-rope.

"It shall do the work," he said, with another grin, as he fastened the air-buoyed bed to a ring placed for the purpose in one of the logs. Then he clucked emphatically. "Lo! who would grudge men's brains to the Masters when they are clever as the Gods themselves? The Miss will see how fast this goes. We shall be at Eshwara before the night turns to day."

Something in his tone warned her that the recurrence of the phrase was not pure chance.

"That is when the prisoners were to escape?" she said quickly.

He did not affirm or deny it. "So many things happen in the fight of Dawn," he said affably. That was all; but she thought rapidly. The rising, or whatever the conspiracy aimed at, could scarcely have happened just after they left Eshwara the night before. In that case the news must have followed them on the road. Therefore, if it was to happen at all, if this were not all talk--and Father Ninian's words came to make her doubt its being so--it would happen in a few hours. So she must be there in time to give warning.

As she thought this, a sudden strain at the tow-rope, a quick dip of the boat-shaped prow of the raft, a louder swish of the water as it curved out from its rising stern, told her she was adrift, indeed, on the way to Eshwara! It seemed almost more incredible than what had gone before. But there was nothing to be ashamed of here. It was the only possible thing to do under the circumstances. Her journey might prove unnecessary, but it might not; and supposing anything should really happen--to--to *anybody*--she would never be able to forgive herself if, knowing this chance of danger, she had not done her best to avert it.

CHAPTER XIX

JULIET

The copper-coloured glow, into which weather-wise Am-ma had looked, distrustfully, as it domed the little valley set in its rim of hills, had replaced that of sunset in Eshwara also, and Pidar Narâyan's eyes, weather-wise as the fisherman's, looked at it as doubtfully, as he walked home with Lance and Vincent Dering when the long strain at the Pool of Immortality was over.

"If it were not so early in the year, I should predict a dust-storm--a real electrical dust-storm," he said.

Lance, whose hands were full of cut-paper Gods--for in obedience to a sudden impulse, he had stopped on his way through the crowd to buy up the old Brahmin's whole stock in trade, and give him an extra eight annas to go away and not drum any more--looked up also, and filled his broad chest with a great breath. "Perhaps that is it. I've felt choking all day--horrid!"

Vincent Dering laughed. "I don't choke--I tingle; and it is rather jolly. Yes, sir; there is a lot of electricity in the air, and I shouldn't wonder if we had a regular black snorter. Glad it didn't come in the middle of the miracle '*biz*', for, as a general smasher-up of ordinary experiences, commend me to a real electrical dust-storm! It seems to attract the earth, earthy, in everything. In fact, if there is such a thing as the Devil, and he ever gets the upper hand, it is then--"

Father Ninian turned to him quickly, and then to the crowd, through which they were still cleaving that curiously acquiescent way which white faces still cleave through dark ones--"Then I trust, my son," he said gently, "that for your sake and *theirs* the storm may not come."

"Or that there isn't a Satanic majesty!" retorted Captain Dering, cynically. "That, sir, is the easiest way out of the difficulty."

Lance had looked round on the crowd also. "Well! if there is," he said, "and I had to paint him, I'd take that man's face as my model for Lucifer." He pointed to a *gosain* who was forming the centre of a group of gossipers round a syrup-seller's shop, and added--for he knew his Milton as well as his Shakespeare--"*The superior fiend who gives not Heav'n for lost!*"

"Looks a bad lot, I admit," remarked Vincent, carelessly. "Have an idea I've seen him before; in gaol, I believe. Yes! I'm sure of it. He is the fellow Dillon told me was going to get his ticket-of-leave for good conduct. He looks scoundrel enough for that! But really, sir--" he turned to Father Ninian again--"I think we may count on their behaviour now." He indicated the crowd. "If there was going to be a row it would have come off before this; now they will settle down, you'll see, and go on to the next camping-ground to-morrow morning as if nothing had gone wrong. They are such creatures of habit; you could see that from their sticking on in expectation of that footling old miracle all day!"

Father Ninian, in that curiously irrelevant way he had, put on the gold *pince-nez* which always dangled over his black soutane, and looked round him again. "They will settle down," he said quietly, "if nothing new crops up to give them a lead into new ways. That is always the danger; and a very small thing does it, sometimes, in India."

They had reached the courtyard which lay between the palace and the Fort, and with a wave of his hand in farewell, he passed along the wall to the former, while the others, striking across the raised union-jack of paths, made for the latter. The yard was crammed with pilgrims on their way to bathe on the river steps.

"Who the deuce are those fellows?" said Vincent, angrily, as half a dozen figures slipped out through the door in the bastion, as they approached, and mixing with the crowd, got lost in it, while the door was closed behind them by some unseen hand. "I'll talk to Roshan about that. He was complaining only this morning that the men were breaking out of barracks. What else can he expect if he doesn't look out. By Jove! I'll teach 'em!"

His first words, indeed, as he entered the outer courtyard of the Fort, was to order a sentry down to close the doors against all comers without a written pass from him, and as he went by the guard-house he gave rather a sharp reprimand to Roshan Khân, who happened to be outside, for not having kept his eyes open while in charge of the Fort during his absence. No one was in future to use the small door; the key was to be brought to him, and all passes were to be stopped for that night.

"Roshan looks in a demon bad temper. I wonder what's up?" remarked Lance, casually, as he passed on through a wicket in the massive closed gates to the inner courtyard, where the officers' quarters lay, hugging the river wall. It was quite a citadel, a distinct fortification of itself, with no entrance or exit except through the outer yard, or by the little flight of steps leading down to the river, at the foot of which Lance moored his canoe.

"He has been sulky as a bear with me these last few days," replied Captain Dering, with a contemptuous smile. "I believe the old Colonel was right after all, and coming here has put wind

in his head. I shall have to teach Mr. Roshan that, good man as he is, he is only a *risaldar*, before long."

"Poor devil," said Lance under his breath. "I'm always a bit sorry for Roshan. He would be a fine fellow--if--if he wasn't so--so civilized."

"Civilized," echoed Vincent, with a laugh. "You haven't seen him fight. I have. Talk of devils; he has got one in him, if you like!"

He certainly had at that moment, when, having gone straight to his quarters after Vincent's reprimand, he found himself alone, and free to show his feelings.

And yet, had he been calm, he could scarcely have told wherein the grievance lay which for the moment clamoured for--no--not redress--revenge.

It was not the first time that he had had to ignore hints, innuendoes, suggestions of Heaven knows what impossible intrigues, as he had had that very afternoon. It was not the first time that, in his position as intermediary between the ignorance of the native soldier and the ignorance of the English officer, he had had to '*ca' canny*,' so as not to alienate the confidence of either. Indeed, the consciousness of the necessity for this, by enhancing the value of his services, had always been a pride to him hitherto. And these particular intrigues were so childish; especially if--he paused in his angry pacing of the room, and smiled complacently. Why should he give a thought to an impossible plan, when a possible one lay ready to his hand? If he married Laila, the land, almost the title, would be his of right. It would be easy anyhow to regain. Then with a fresh frown, he remembered Vincent's order. That would upset his plans. He had meant to slip out by the bastion gate just before--say an hour before--dawn, and cross over to the palace. Akbar Khân had arranged to be there to let him into the garden. Now he must make other arrangements. He must find the old eunuch, change the hour and the place; since nothing--no! not all the tyranny in the world--should prevent his carrying out his intention of seeing his cousin, and claiming her as his--his by right. So he must settle this at once; settle it before there was any chance, he told himself bitterly, of his superior officer coming out of the mess--where no doubt he was guzzling swine's flesh and bibbing wine--(that faint amaze at the presence in his own mind of such antiquated half-forgotten ideas assailed him again at this point) to encroach further on his liberty, his privileges.

He had to pass the troopers' lines on his way to the main gate, and the quick *salaams*, the ready smiles given him by the men, as they lounged and smoked after their long day on duty, soothed his pride.

The Captain had certainly said they had behaved well--kindly, and discreetly; but whose merit was that? The Englishman's who gave the word of command, or his, who had drilled them to obedience, who lived with them day and night? Without such as he, a native regiment could not be managed, if he chose to give the word. He would not, of course, but if he chose--

He set his teeth as he walked out of the Fort, and met at its very gate that surging tide of patient, eager faces drifting on, and back again, aimlessly.

He need not, as a matter of fact, have feared any further interference from Vincent Dering, for the latter, being very tired after the long day in the sun, and having reason to know that part of the night time, at any rate, which is usually given to sleep would be employed in something better, had, after staving off hunger with what the cook would produce at a moment's notice, and postponing the dinner hour, gone to sleep deliberately, advising Lance to do the same.

But the latter had, rather to his own surprise, found this impossible; not even over a cigar in the balcony above the sliding, rushing river, the sound of which was as a rule sleep-compelling, would sleep come; not even in the cool darkness which was settling on Eshwara, despite the curious hint of glow lingering in the sky.

The air was too electrical, he decided. And then--Erda! He had slept the night before, after she had said good-by so carelessly, without realizing that the good-by was for ever. And he had not had time to think all day. But now, at rest in the cool darkness, looking from his lounge chair down the river to that other balcony, he did realize it. For ever! Yes! that regret was in his life for ever. And he was so young. Only twenty-five.

Why had this come to him?

Erda! Erda,--his heart's desire.

He sat there voiceless, sucking mechanically at a cigar, long since gone out; but that was as much the cry at his heart as if he had allowed himself a fine frenzy of despair in older fashion.

And he imagined her as he had seen her--this way, that way, every way, in an unending torture of visions--until he exhausted reality, and fancy showed her to him in her wedding dress. And then he felt as if he could kill the Reverend David Campbell without shame or fear. He was vaguely ashamed of the lack of shame, however, especially when his fancy led him into endless mishaps which might befall a man, especially a missionary, before his wedding day.

"There they ate a missionary--"

Yes, sometimes; but there was not much time left for that sort of end--

What a brute he was, when the only thing that mattered was that she should be happy and content.

But would she be so?

It went on and on and on, the controversy between himself and that other self, so that he felt worn, and harassed, and dirty, and altogether undesirable, when Vincent, about nine o'clock, reappeared, dapper and scented as usual, in his mess kit, and expressed surprise at finding his companion still undressed. He was hungry as a hunter, he said; besides he wanted to have a decent interval between dinner and turning in. And *that* must be early, for he had just heard from the police authorities that though everything was quiet for the night, absolutely quiet, they thought it would be safer to have the Pool guarded again at dawn, in case of accidents; since none of the pilgrims, though apparently quite resigned, had as yet gone on.

"They never do till the next day; Pidar Narâyan told me so," commented Lance, crossly. "Why should they rake us up at such an unearthly hour? Why can't they let the people have a row if they want one? I'd like it; give a fellow something to do in this beastly hole."

He went off to dress moodily, wishing savage wishes, so adding, perhaps, to that electricity in the air. And Vincent gave it his quota of desire also, in his reckless determination to regain Paradise, as it was lost, through a woman. And that play of Romeo and Juliet in the scented garden--Juliet, whose bounty was "as boundless as the sea"--was a bit of pure paradise to him. He had never, he thought, been in love before. He had never known what love was. Those other loves of his had been mean, ungenerous, calculating.

So he was at his best, his brightest, during dinner. Lance, on the contrary, was at his worst, his dullest; and Vincent made this his excuse for going to his room betimes. He was not due at the palace till twelve, but he was anxious to ensure the coast being clear, and Lance seemed just in the mood when a fellow sits up sulkily, out of pure cussedness, and drinks whiskey-and-water if he can find a companion on whom to vent his cavillings.

In truth Lance would have liked to do so. He wanted to feel miserable; but after Vincent had gone, and he was left alone in the balcony, sleep began to assert itself. He found even his despair becoming dreamy, and being obstinate, tried to fight against the fact. The result being that he finally fell asleep in his lounge chair with a soundness and unconsciousness usually reserved for bed. Fell asleep, and promptly relaxed into content with happy dreams of Erda's return to him; for his, left to itself, was a healthy soul.

And so were the vast majority of those which, through patient yet eager eyes, were looking into the scarce-lit darkness of the streets, as the pilgrims, crowded into an almost solid mass, seemed to slide with a slow, almost unseen movement, through them. They were waiting for the dawn. If nothing new came before then, they would pass on towards the 'Cradle of the Gods.' So, scarcely seen, restless yet restful, their feet on the next rung of the golden stairs, they waited.

And overhead the young moon had risen with a copper-coloured edge to its crescent of light. For the glow was still in the sky, and the troopers in the Fort, resting, after their long day, in Indian fashion by sprawling on their beds and gossiping, had dragged these beds into the open and discarded most of their clothing, since the night was strangely still and warm. So even the wonder what had become of the *risaldar-sahib* was languid.

For Roshan Khân had not returned. And yet, as he sat in a quiet courtyard of the city, with closed doors, realizing how late it was growing, he had no fear of further reprimand. On the contrary, his pulses were bounding with the certainty that he would gain praise. And there was something beyond this mere desire for personal advantage in the keen-witted diplomacy with which he listened, with which he suggested, with which he led the talkers on to tell what it was of the utmost importance that he should know, not so much to himself, as to the Government he served. For his vague discontent had vanished, his well-reasoned, well-founded loyalty returned at this, the first hint at anything beyond the wild, aimless intrigue with which every Indian bazaar teems. But here, in this definite plan, by the collaboration of his troopers, of liberating fifteen hundred scoundrels,--or, at least, desperadoes,--of aping the stroke of action which made the great mutiny of '57 possible, was something tangible. Something which, when known to the uttermost, must be told without delay to his superior officer. A vast pride swept through him, as, when the gongs were striking one,--short, yet with lingering vibration in the dull, still air,--he made his way, fast as he could, back to the Fort. Without him, and such as he, faithful despite limitations, what would the Masters know?

Hours before, as he went out, he had arranged with Akbar Khân that the palace door giving on the great square between it and the Fort should be on the latch only, so that he might slip in at any time and take his chance of hiding in the garden, his chance of seeing Laila before the dawn came and he had to go back to the Fort. The old sinner, indeed, had jumped at this indefinite arrangement, which bound him to nothing; which made it unnecessary for him even to broach the subject of an interview to his mistress. Since what was easier to say than that it had been

impossible; as, indeed, it was! Perhaps Roshan Khân had himself grasped this fact; perhaps in insisting on this entry to the garden he had been backing more than his own luck, and had been meditating a *coup d'état* of his own. However that may have been, all was forgotten in his newly recovered loyalty, his keen ambition, as he hurried back to the Fort intent on but one thing--the forewarning and forearming of those whom he had long ago deliberately chosen as his masters.

Some of his men were still lounging about on their beds, and he spoke a word to them as he passed, warning them to be ready if wanted. So, leaving them in sudden vague excitement, he passed on to the inner court. Here, where Lance Carlyon's small band of Sikh pioneers were quartered in the long, low building in which the fortified gateway stood, no one was astir. And no lights were visible in the opposite building where Lance and Vincent lived. Doubtless everyone was in bed.

He passed on, therefore, swiftly to the room he knew to be his Captain's, and knocked. There was no answer. He opened the door and looked in. It was empty. A vague wonder assailed him, and he passed on to Lance Carlyon's room. It was empty also, and the vague uneasiness died down. They must be sitting up still in the balcony overlooking the river, where they sat every day after dinner. Stupid of him not to have gone there first; and yet, surely, it was late. Perhaps they were uneasy; perhaps they had already heard! An open letter "*On Her Majesty's Service*" lying on the dinner table as he passed through the mess room (which was still lit up--sign that the servants had gone to sleep awaiting their masters' call) attracted his attention. He glanced at it, half fearing to find himself forestalled by the police authorities. No! It was from them, as he had seen at once; but it was only that notice for dawn. Ah! what was this? this tiny scrap of paper, which had been twisted to a cocked-hat note, lying caught in the fold of the foolscap, with the two words--"*twelve o'clock*"--written on it?

In a woman's writing. Roshan knew enough of invitations from Englishwomen to be sure of that.

The vague uneasiness returned, as he went on to the balcony beyond the dining-room. There too, the swinging lamp still burnt, and showed him Lance Carlyon fast asleep in a lounge chair; but no one else.

Where was Captain Dering? Captain Dering, who had the key of the little door in the bastion; Captain Dering, who had had a note with "*twelve o'clock*" in it?

A sudden thought struck him. If--if there was anything in his vague fear--then, by taking the canoe, which lay at the bottom of the stairs, he could slip down stream, and see--

Forgetting everything else, Roshan stole softly past the sleeping Lance, and went down the stairs.

The canoe was not there.

Then Captain Dering must have taken it and gone--whither?

There was but one place whither he was likely to go alone at that hour of the night; one place, a stair like this leading up to a balcony over the river where he had gone once before with a woman, a woman in a dress which marked her for what she was, really--a dress that marked her secluded--which made *this*, shame unutterable!

Roshan's impotent fury rose hot at the inexpressible humiliation. The thought of Captain Dering and Laila alone in that balcony meant but one thing to his inherited ideas. No glaze of romance was possible. It was shame unutterable, irredeemable. Shame that must be revenged without delay. So, forgetting everything else in the world except this, he passed the sleeping Lance once more, hurried back to his quarters for his revolver, and only stopping to see that one chamber at least was loaded, made his way to that door which he knew would be on the latch.

That patient, eager crowd was still thronging the courtyard as he crossed it, pausing a moment beside the great gun which centred the union-jack of raised paths.

The "*Teacher of Religion!*"

Ay! they needed a teacher, needed a lesson; these aliens, these usurpers, these depravers of women.

Yet, in sober truth, Vincent Dering, at that moment sitting in the little balcony alone with Laila Bonaventura, felt quite virtuous. They had just come in from the garden, where they had been strolling and whispering, and now, as they sat together, without a word, scarcely a thought, in the faint light of the young moon and a red jewelled hand-lamp--which Laila, with that unailing instinct of hers for all that matched the passionate mystery of the place, had set in a carved niche, where it looked like a votive offering to the unseen image of a saint--Vincent could feel the warm ivory of her cheek against his own, hear the soft chink of her jewels as they slid towards him, following the soft warm curves on which they lay. The red light of the lamp glittered faintly in red stars on the myriad facets of looking-glass with which the vaulted roof above them was adorned. It fell, reddening the red lights on the gold-stiffened crimson waves of her dress, that sent such a bewildering perfume to cloud his senses with passionate content.

A vast tenderness, a vast triumph, surged through him at the thought of her. Who dared to judge her by the narrow standards of to-day--she, who had gone back boldly to realities!

This was what poets had sung since time began; *this* was what the world had exchanged for Paradise!

Juliet! Juliet!

And if he was the "*god of her idolatry*," she was to him the "*dearest morsel of earth*."

He bent and whispered the name to her with a kiss.

And as he did so, a step, swift, bold, masterful, sounded in the passage above; the step of one with a right to be there.

Vincent, startled, sat listening; but Laila was on her feet in a second, with a reckless laugh.

"Father Laurence!" she cried. "Well! let him come. I'm not afraid! For he loved *her*. He *must* remember!"

So, as a dim figure showed, half seen, in the archway, she stood like a queen, her hand raised, her head thrown back; a sight never to be forgotten.

"There is no use in being angry, guardian," she called, in her full-throated voice. "It is too late for that. Remember--" She paused, gave a slight scream, and flung herself before Vincent.

There was a flash, a second scream, and then the arches rang with the echoes of a pistol-shot.

"Laila! Laila!"

"You damned scoundrel! You've killed her!"

"Laila! Laila!"

There were two voices echoing the woman's name, but only that one pistol-shot. Then two useless clicks of a trigger, before, with an oath, Roshan Khân flung the revolver from him and fled.

CHAPTER XX

TRAPPED

But that pistol-shot, as it pierced the hot, sultry air in the vaulted archways, was caught by a sudden blast of warm wind, sweeping God knows whence, to God knows where! and was blown out riverwards, citywards. Blown by that sudden blast, like the hot breath of someone's anger, which always heralds an electrical dust-storm. One moment there is the stillness of the uttermost void brooding over the deep; the next, causelessly, God knows why! the spirit moving palpably.

And so it is always when the ever-recurring struggle for the right road to that lost Paradise, for the right method of regaining that bartered birthright, begins afresh among the sons of Adam. When the Hosts of the Lord,--fighting, as men always fight, under the banner of Right, for what they think good and true, for what seems to them to bring them nearer to the golden gates--change armed peace for war.

It was so now; and Lance Carlyon, waking to the familiar, yet unfamiliar sound of that pistol-shot, woke also to the knowledge that someone had already resorted to that last argument between man and his fellow.

Who was it? And why?

As he stood, still half dazed by sleep, listening, as one does instinctively, for another shot to follow the first, a new sound distracted his attention.

Was he still asleep and dreaming? or was that really Erda Shepherd's voice, rising towards him from the sliding, unseen river?

"I will come back to you directly," it said in Urdu. The half-heard promise of the words took him by storm, making him forget the strangeness of the language. Yet even that made his bewilderment more utter. And all around him, about him, a mist--or was it a cloud, or what was it?--had sprung into being. A wreath as of smoke drifted past the wide arches of the balcony, blotting out the pale shimmer of the young moon.

The swinging lamp above his head darkened, reddened, as the dust-atoms leapt from the earth into the air, obedient to the call of that mightiest force in nature which holds the world together, and guides it on its way among the stars.

Pidar Narâyan had been right! The electrical storm had come!

But Erda had come with it. He could see her now, standing at the top of the river steps, dimmed by the dust-atoms that glittered faintly in the clouded ray of the lamp; could see her--tall, slim, white--with a red-gold ball in her hand.

So it was only a dream; he was asleep still!

The certainty of this, the knowledge that he would wake soon, made him yield to impulse, to emotion, as he would never have done otherwise. He held out his arms to the gracious vision, his voice rang with passion.

"Erda! Erda! You have come back to me!--the world's desire--my heart's desire!"

And then, suddenly, his heart a-tremble for the first time, he drew back from his own fervour almost apologetically; for the scared look of the face seen through those earth-atoms had brought it home to him that this was no dream. This was Erda Shepherd herself, the woman who was the "*dearest atom of God's earth*" to him. And she had come back, for what? Not to listen to his passion, anyhow.

"What is the matter?" he asked briefly, sternly; for it came home to him also that the cause must be grave.

She gave a little shiver; the hearing of that first greeting had upset her calm, her courage, at last. Yet they had been firm till then; and, Heaven knows! the long hours of slipping through the rapids in the wake of that heaving, plunging mass of logs had been trying enough to anyone. Then for the last half hour, since Am-ma had cut the raft adrift to follow them at its leisure through the slacker currents, and, in obedience to her order, had forged ahead with his paddle, her anxiety had risen to fever-pitch; since the night, so far as she could judge, must be waning fast, and her errand would be useless if she were not in Eshwara before the dawn. For, as she had listened to Am-ma's garrulous talk while he steered, the conviction had grown that the danger to peace and safety--if there was any--lay in the future, not in the past; that this dawn, and not yesterday's, was to be the signal for the insensate, almost incredible attempt to wreck authority. An attempt which yet--incredible, insensate though it be--might bring death to--to one she held very dear.

She admitted so much now to herself, and, pulling that self together, looked that dear one in the face. "There is a good deal the matter," she said. "You had better call Captain Dering to hear it, too; it will save time."

He nodded acquiescence, but ere he left her, the instinct in him to guard his "*dearest atom*" to the uttermost from others, made him set a chair for her, and, glancing round for a wrap, take the mess jacket he had laid aside for a smoking coat, and fold it round her. For the air had grown suddenly chill, as it always does in a sand-storm.

"You must be cold in that dress," he said. As he did so the daintiness of it struck him, the scent of the orange blossoms made him turn pale. Despite his hurry, his certainty that something serious was ahead, he paused to ask sharply: "That is your wedding dress, isn't it?"--

"I am not married, if you mean that!" she answered as sharply. Then she flushed up angrily, more at the comprehension shown in her own answer than the meaning in his question, and burst out: "What does it matter if I am--or if it is? Go! I tell you, and call Captain Dering!"

Yet, when he was gone, she lay back in the chair and shivered again; all the more because of the unaccustomed touch about her throat of the gold lace on a mess jacket. How red it looked against her white dress! And what a lot of little gold buttons there were at its edge: foolish, useless, little ornamental gilt buttons, round and red-gold, like--

The comparison brought back Lance's cry of welcome, and made her realize that, quite mechanically, she still held in her hand that useless, foolish, unnecessary orange!

That, of course, was what had made him remember; had made him say those words which had come like the writing on the wall to remind her of her own guilt.

She flung the fruit from her, hastily, into the unseen river beyond the arches. Only just in time, ere Lance reëntered, with a puzzled face.

"I can't find Dering anywhere," he said vexedly. "He is not in his room. Hasn't been to bed, either; though he turned in early saying he was half asleep. I wonder what is up? Can he have heard already, do you think? Scarcely; and he would not have gone without waking me." His surprise seemed to absorb him.

"Then I must tell *you*, for there is no time to be lost," interrupted Erda, impatiently. Yet, even in her strenuous desire to make him understand quickly, she did not fail to explain, breathlessly, how she came to be dressed as she was. She had been trying on her wedding dress to see if it fitted, and had gone into the garden for--for--flowers, when Am-ma and his raft had come floating down the river.

And was not that all true? she asked herself passionately, as she told the tale. It was all of the truth, anyhow, that he or anyone else was ever to know.

So she had come to warn them, as she was.

A great joy at her courage filled Lance as he listened, for to most men the possibility of a woman acting as a man might act comes as a wonder.

"It was awfully plucky of you," he began; but she cut him short with a question as to what was to be done now.

"Warn Dillon, first of all," he said readily. "We have a wire laid on, you know. I only hope this infernal--I beg your pardon--dust-storm won't interfere with the connection. You had better come over with me to the office; it is just across the yard, and I don't like leaving you alone. Do you mind?"

"I'll come, of course,--but I must make sure of Am-ma waiting first," she added, with a ring in her voice; the ring of a vigorous vitality which finds itself face to face with action. "He said the raft couldn't overtake us for half an hour. But he must not go, anyhow, and he will want to. I had difficulty in getting him to leave it, as it was. But I had to make him. I had to be in time!"

"And you are--loads of time!" he called, as he ran down the river steps before her, to give the order. "It isn't two o'clock yet, and--" he paused abruptly, on seeing, to his surprise, that only Am-ma's strange craft lay sidling against the bottom step, over which little waves were curving hurriedly, to reach up the wall, as if the water-atoms were as restless as those of earth, as eager to seek a new element. For the air was growing darker, thicker every instant with the intruders. He looked round hastily, but there was no sign of the canoe anywhere. Yet he had seen it moored to its ring before dinner!

Vincent must have taken it. Whither? An answer leapt to Lance's mind, and he flushed up, even in the dark, redly. If this was so--what the deuce was to be done?

There was an added confusion, an added responsibility in his face as he ran back to where Erda stood waiting him, and, catching up a lamp from the mess table, started with her close at his heels for the office. "That is the first thing, anyhow!" he muttered, half to himself. "Dillon must be warned--"

"And perhaps Captain Dering will be back by then," she suggested cheerfully, as, with the mess jacket worn as it should be for greater convenience of action and greater protection (she had slipped her arms into it, deliberately, while waiting for Lance), she followed in the little halo of dull, red light cast by the lamp through the dust-mist.

The courtyard was still without sign of life; for there was nothing to guard here. The massive gates of the citadel once closed, and a sentry outside the wicket, there could be no fear of secret comings and goings.

"I hope to God he may," said Lance, ahead, and his tone made the girl wonder.

His face, too, surprised her, as, sitting down to the instrument, he signalled for attention. No doubt when time is an object, there must always be a sense of strain in that pause before the answering tinkle comes to tell that a human hand and brain is at the other end of the thin wire which means so much, but there was more than that in Lance Carlyon's frown.

In truth, as he waited, he was not thinking so much of what would happen if the communication was interrupted, but what was to be done if it was not. Thinking that he must, somehow, warn Vincent. Thinking how awkward it would be for *him* if there was a row, and he absent, as it were, without leave!

So it was Erda who recalled him to the wider issue. "What are you going to do, if Dr. Dillon doesn't hear?"

She had to raise her voice a little, for something--either coming wind or far-distant thunder--had brought a curious, faint reverberation to the air.

It seemed to come from all quarters, scarcely distinguishable, yet unmistakable, like the roll of a half-muffled drum, or a deep organ note quivering into silence.

The darkness all about them grew thicker and thicker. Lance, close beside her in that red lamp circle, showed as if seen through gauze. How unreal it all was! Herself, most of all, in a mess jacket, and, of course--but this thought came second--her wedding dress! And then it struck her that she, herself, was more unreal than anything else. To be there at dead of night, feeling no fear, only a sort of savage interest--

"But if he doesn't hear," she persisted, "you will have to go down the river and warn him."

He nodded. And yet his thought went first to the fact that, if he had to do this, if Roshan Khân had to be left in charge of the relief, it would be still more awkward for Vincent Dering.

Tring-a-tring-tring!

The answering tinkle brought a little breath of joy to them both; but Erda felt inclined to stamp her feet at the slow precision with which Lance--who had to remember each equivalent sign--spelt out his message. He could not be quicker, of course, and yet surely he might! She longed to snatch at the handles herself, though she could not signal at all.

"There, that's done!" she cried, as a continuous short rattle followed from the other end, which Lance translated into--"*All right, await you.*" "Now! what is to be done next?"

"Roshan Khân--he'll get the men together," answered Lance, already on his way to the wicket in the gate. To his surprise, it was closed. He knocked, no answer came. Erda, holding the lamp, looked at him startled.

"Sentry!" he called. "Sentry! Open the door! *Miracle!*"

It was the password for the night, given by Captain Dering in contemptuous memory of the day; but it produced no result. The wicket remained obstinately closed.

"They've locked us in!" whispered Erda; the lowering of her voice being due to a swift instinct that the less fuss made the better; the less chance of interruption.

Lance bent his ear to the keyhole to listen. Those dull, muffled reverberations--either distant thunder, or faint, ineffective explosions of electricity close at hand--were louder now; but he could hear no sound above them. He shook his head.

Erda had the lamp on the ground in a second, and was beside it, her red-gold hair in the dust, as she peered through a three-inch iron grating between the iron-rimmed door and the iron lintel.

When she rose up her face was like the iron also.

"They've trapped us!" she whispered. "There is a sentry outside--I saw his feet. Come away, and let us settle what to do. And say something, something angry--you know what I mean."

"Damn that brute!" said Lance, cordially, in a loud voice, "where the deuce has the sentry gone to? I'll have it out with him to-morrow, the infernal--"

Erda, ahead with the lamp, turned to look back, and put her finger on her lips reproachfully. "That's quite enough," she said; but she said it with a smile. That vigorous delight in action which some women feel was making her blood race through her veins.

"Now what's to be done?" she said swiftly, as she put the lamp down on the mess table again. "Let's think hard."

The gate was closed against interference with--with--*something!*

That was evident. Proof positive, therefore, that Am-ma's tale was true.

So it followed that the most urgent need for help was at the gaol.

But how to reach it, and with whom?

Lance's thoughts turned instantly to Roshan Khân. Was he--could he be in the plot? Surely not. Yet with or without his knowledge, the outer court was in the hands of rebels who thought their English officers were caught like rats in a trap; for, of course, they did not know Dering was absent.

And so it was. He and his pioneers--twenty or thereabouts--were in a trap. What could they do to get out of it? Their arms, scaling ladders, everything, were in the outside courtyard. What would be the use, either, of trying to force the door? Mere waste of time. The thing required was to prevent those fifteen hundred men with a criminal past being let loose on Eshwara, let loose--as men like them had been in the Mutiny--to give a lead over.

And that--how was that to be done?

He looked across to Erda, and took sudden comfort in the quick intelligence of her face.

"You had better take my place with Am-ma," she said sharply. "Go down stream to the spit, cut

across by the mission house, and chance getting over to the police camp."

He had thought of this before. The extra police, with their two officers, who had come over to see the festival through peacefully, were encamped above the boat-bridge and though, of course, most of the men would be scattered on duty through the town, even some help would be better than none. Yet how to leave Erda, not alone even, but with twenty men whose loyalty would depend largely--as it always did--on action, on their having someone to fight?

"But you," he began--

"I'll stay here. They won't try to come in--yet a while. I am not afraid of being alone."

"I wouldn't mind your being alone," he put in, "but my Sikhs--

"Your Sikhs," she echoed. "Are they here? Then why--?"

"They have no arms--I could find some, perhaps--"

--His words--both their words--jostled each other in sheer haste.

"Yes! then why don't you call them?"--

"How can I use them--trapped like a rat. They--they might be worse than useless, without something to do--without a lead over--don't you see?--and there is nothing--"

--"Nothing!" she echoed, almost savagely, as she clasped and unclasped her hands, dragging the fingers through each other, in sheer straining after some thought on which to clutch, in cruel whipping and spurring of her wits against that inaction.

Nothing! Nothing! The word seemed to fill the world.

Nothing in earth or air or fire or--

"Stay!" she cried, with a gasp. "The raft! The raft! Am-ma shall fetch it--it must be close by, now. There will be room. It can float down to opposite the gaol."

He stared at her as she stood in her white, and scarlet, and gold.

"By Jove!" he said softly "by Jove, you've got it!"

The next instant he was off to rouse his men, and she was on the bottom step giving Am-ma his orders, short, sharp, clear.

But when Lance came back again to look out what arms and ammunition he could lay hands on, he found her, in his room, sorting cartridges as if she had done it all her life; and her face turned to him all aglow and splendid.

"We shall manage it! Am-ma's gone. He didn't want to, but I told him I'd kill the baby if he didn't. I suppose it was wrong,"--though her woman's tongue sought speech, her woman's hands stuck to their work--"but I couldn't help it. I felt so savage."

"You are very brave," he said simply.

"Brave!" she echoed. "Why not? People talk as if women always had to try and not be afraid; but we are not all like that. Some of us want to fight. I do, always."

She looked it, as, when all was ready, she leant, straining her eyes into the darkness for a hint of Am-ma's return. "He must come," she muttered to herself, "he shall come!"

And he did. A bigger wave came sweeping up to the wall as a herald, and then a voice calling for a rope. Half a dozen were ready posted in the men's hands from various points of vantage. They flew outwards; one, from Am-ma's hands inwards to a group holding a lantern on the steps. So, with a silent haul, the pioneers had the raft stopped, and sidling slowly back to mooring against the wall.

Then Lance turned to Erda hesitating, divided between his loyalty to Vincent, and to her.

"The palace ought to be warned," he said briefly--"if I go there ahead on Am-ma's craft, I could pick you up on your way down. Could you manage?"

She gave a look round on the men, eager with the sudden excitement, with the rush, with the very novelty of it all, and laughed--positively laughed. "Manage? Yes! of course I can manage--*havildar!* see those cartridges are put well back out of the wet--stay! bring down that table, someone, and give it a lash--"

Yet, despite this absolute lack of fear, despite the fact that she evidently wanted and desired no more consideration than a man, Lance felt a wild dislike to leaving her there alone, as he stepped on to Am-ma's skin craft, and, edging his way along by the wall, prepared to drift down to the palace balcony. It was mirk dark now, and he had no fear of being seen by the crowd on

the bathing steps and the courtyard, though he punted his way with the paddle shaft within a yard or two of the shore; for he wanted to judge how far excitement had spread, how far the crowd was aware of what was coming at dawn.

To judge by appearances, not at all. There was no more restlessness, no more movement than was inevitable in such a concourse of men, women, and children. Here and there files of shadowy forms drifted about, but the most of them, seen by the little lights set on the ground beside each group, were in heaps, like the heaps of dead on a battle-field, huddled up on each other, sleeping, resting, indistinguishable, shrouded in their shawls, waiting for the dawn to come.

And, above the soft, yet increasing murmur of the still windless storm, came a softer murmuring of prayers, a weird low chanting.

The Hosts of the Lord had not yet risen to battle. The Spirit had not moved; the Word had not been made manifest.

The palace, also, lay as yet undisturbed, unseen, in the darkness. Except for a glimmer of red light just above the river, a paler glimmer closer at hand.

The red light must be by the stairs for which he was steering.

The other?--

He did not know, but as he slipped past it another murmuring as of prayer seemed to come from within. It must come from the chapel; if so, then Pidar Narâyan must be awake also. He felt a certain relief at the thought when he caught sight of the canoe at the bottom of the steps. Then Vincent, as he had feared, was there; but not on the errand he had feared, if Pidar Narâyan knew of it. So, mooring his strange craft to the canoe, he ran up the stairs eagerly.

CHAPTER XXI

MARGHERITA

Father Ninian had been awake all night. He had been vaguely uneasy all day, conscious, with that fine perception of his, that something was amiss. But it was no fear of what *might* happen which had kept him watching when others slept. It was the memory of something which *had* happened; for, by a coincidence that for more than fifty years had never lost its mystical significance for Ninian Bruce--sentimentalist as he was to his finger tips--the night of the *Vaisakh* festival, when the pilgrims watched for the dawn to guide them on their way to the 'Cradle of the Gods,' was to him, personally, the saddest and gladdest of the whole year. Since it was the night on which he had sinned the great sin of his life, and repented of it, even in the sinning.

And that sinning, that repenting, was no slight thing to him. It was the man himself; for the passion that was in him in his youth was in him in his old age. It had only changed its dwelling-place. It had fled from the senses, and found refuge in the emotions. In a way, indeed, by thus seeking freedom from it, he had fallen into a greater thralldom, so that his whole life had been as much swayed by this renunciation of a woman as it would have been by her possession.

Old as he was, this very night had brought him--with the thought that Death could not delay much longer, and that next *Vaisakh* festival might find him no lonely watcher--that thrill of self-absorption in another self, that claim for all, which is the essence of passion. For this woman, waiting for him in the land where there is no marrying or giving in marriage, was still a woman; still the one of all God's creatures whom he claimed, and who claimed him, even as the first woman claimed the first man in Paradise.

So he had passed the night watches of the Festival of Spring: as he had always passed them. Partly in his room, that room made holy by her presence in his heart, partly in the chapel, made holy by the Bodily Presence of Him for Whose sake he had renounced her. The two holinesses were inextricably mixed in Pidar Narâyan's mind.

He had finished one of the masses for the repose of a sinning yet sainted soul, and, before repeating the next, was confessing his own repentance in his room, when that hasty footstep along the passage, which alarmed those two lovers in the balcony nearer the garden, had resounded through the arches. It had disturbed, but not startled him, its very boldness reassuring

him of its right to be there. Probably it was some messenger from the police camp or the Fort. So he had risen from his knees calmly and passed into the chapel, which lay between his room and the balcony, in order to see who it could be. For the candles were lit on the Altar and sent a faint light into the vaulted passage beyond.

It was as he paused, in passing, to do homage to that Bodily Presence upon the Altar, which was ready--as he was in his robes--for the service of love which was to him, as a priest, his duty, as a man a joy unspeakable, that the pistol-shot came clamouring through the arches, followed by those despairing cries.

What they were he could not distinguish, but that they were urgent was unmistakable, and had he been young as he had been on that night long years ago in the balcony above the pale flood of the Tiber, he could not have been quicker to reach the armoury, seize the long rapier, which he had not used, save in play, since those ruffling days in Rome, and run out into the wide, dim passage whence the sound had reached him.

None too soon! Someone was already flying down it. He pulled himself up for attack, but the figure ere he could lunge at it was past him, desperate, indifferent, flinging him against the wall as it continued its reckless way to the outer door, where, with swift opening and closing, it disappeared into the crowded courtyard, out of sight--beyond recall!

He stood for a moment, stupefied. What was Roshan Khân doing there? For that faint light from the Altar had given him a glimpse of a familiar, dark face, Roshan Khân's without a doubt!

"Laila! Laila!"

The cry was clearer this time and the blood left his fine old face in sudden doubt as he turned swiftly to his left. Turned, and saw a faint red glow through an arch far down the passage.

That was the arch leading down into the balcony that was never lit up--that was never to be lit up because of something that had happened there long ago--because of the something which had *begun* a tragedy.

Why was it lit up? A stronger fear caught at his heart. Could Laila?--No!--impossible!

He ran on, and the next moment was realizing that some tragedy had *ended* in that balcony.

But what?

Who was the woman in native dress who stood with a man's arm around her--a man in a scarlet and gold mess jacket? Ah!--that was Captain Dering, undoubtedly. But the woman? The woman in scarlet and gold also--God in Heaven!--had the dead--

As he stared, the long, supple limbs, so clearly outlined under their cunningly contrived draperies, seemed to lose themselves in the colour, the glitter of rich stuff; one white arm, losing its hold on a cuff of scarlet and gold, swung back helplessly, and Vincent Dering, with a passionate entreaty to his darling not to be afraid, to look up, and tell him where she was hurt, sank to one knee the better to support what he held.

And so the face, tilted backwards over his shoulder, came in view.

Laila!

For an instant Ninian Bruce stood bewildered. Then all his youth, the pride of birth, the dash, and the fire which had made that youth what it had been, rose up in him. The blood surged back to his face in wild anger, in savage sense of insult, and desire for revenge.

"How dare you!" he cried, clenching his hand on his sword. "You shall answer for this, sir! How do you come to be here, at this time of night, and why?"

Vincent, who at the first word had given a hurried glance to see who the speaker was, then returned to his task with the indifference of one absolutely preoccupied, held up his hand passionately against more.

"Don't--and don't preach, for God's sake, old man!" he cried recklessly. "Come and help, if you like. Some brute--Oh, curse him! curse him!"

His one trembling hand, for the other was round her, supporting her, was busy with the quaint, jewelled clasps of the scented corselet, which was crimsoning deeper with another dye. "It's too late for preaching," he muttered, half to himself,--"too late! too late!"

The words seemed to stun his hearer into silence. He stood bewildered. Too late for what?

And now, roused by that pistol-shot also, another old man, who had carefully hidden himself away from the possibility of being found by Roshan Khân, on the rage for an impossible interview; who had counted, with malicious cunning, on the cooling effect of a useless waiting in the garden till dawn should make it necessary for hot-blooded lovers to return to the Fort, stole like a thief to the balcony. What could have happened? The only likely trouble which had

occurred to his vast experience had been the possibility of Roshan Khân seeking the interview upstairs. And for that very reason had not he, Akbar Khân, felt it his duty to sleep outside his mistress's door? What more could faithful servitude be expected to do?

But this! What was this? His charge had stolen a march upon him. Old as he was in the care of frail womanhood, he had been imposed upon! Then, as he crept round a pillar craftily, the sight of Pidar Narâyan, in his priestly robes, made the old sinner throw up his hands and grovel in the dust.

"This slave knew nothing!" he mumbled, gasping. "This was unknown. And for the other, I told him it was too soon, too soon,--far too soon."

Too soon, and too late! What did it all mean? Father Ninian stood helpless, paralyzed; but Vincent caught at the words.

"The other!" he echoed. "You black devil! who was the other? Who was that man? Curse him!" He paused, for Laila opened her eyes.

"It was Roshan Khân," she said, with a smile, that half-amused, half-mysterious smile. "He gave me the dress, you know, and I think he wanted me--to marry him. Hush! what's the use of being angry--now?" She checked his incredulous outcry, and her hand hesitated up to his trembling fingers, and held them back from their task. "Don't," she went on; "I'd rather--you didn't waste time. I want you to look at me--only me--me, myself. Ah! that's nice!"

There was an instant's silence; then her eyes wandered to his cuff as it rested on her corselet, and she smiled again. "We match, don't we? I'm glad. Besides, it won't stain much. I expect--that's why soldiers wear red, isn't it?"

The deadly realism roused Vincent to a sort of fury at his own helplessness. But what could a man do, caught in a second by Fate to be chief actor in a scene like this, where he was lost,--lost utterly? And those two fools looking on--doing nothing!

"At least, in common charity, you might help. You're something of a doctor!" he cried passionately. "We can settle scores afterwards, you and I, can't we? But now you might help *her*."

"What did she say?" asked Father Ninian, tonelessly. He had caught a word or two, and their triviality, in the face of what had happened--a triviality common in those who have been struck down as she had been, almost painlessly--had but increased his bewilderment. "What does it mean? How do you come here? I must know, first."

The girl had turned her face quickly to the new voice; and, after vainly trying to rise, lay back breathlessly. "Tell him, Vincent; he's Father Laurence. Remember--he must know--and--and I--can't--"

"Then here it is, sir!" broke in Vincent, brutally. "If you will wait to know, when every moment is precious. We love each other--you've done it in your time, I'm told! I've been coming here, night after night, to see her; she wears that dress to please me--there! Now you've got it! And to-night, some devil--she says Roshan Khân, but she's dreaming; what can he have to do with it?--stood there and fired--at me, I think; but she flung herself--Ah! Laila, my darling, why did you? Now, will that satisfy you--you--you--"

"Hush!" came Laila's voice--"there is no use in being angry. Besides, he understands; he knows what it is to be in love quite well. Don't you, guardian? You loved her, didn't you? Margherita, I mean--"

She wandered off into Italian--the language they always spoke, and her rich voice dulled, died away, as the faintness returned.

"For God's sake, sir, bring the light, if you won't do anything else!" cried Vincent, wildly. "She has fainted, I think--I can't see--it is so dark. For God's sake, sir, the light at least!"

The light at least! As Father Ninian mechanically took the red lamp from its niche he felt that he needed no more light than those words, "he understands," had sent into his very soul. Yes, he knew what love was. But he knew also--it came home to him in a second--that his love, even after all these years, differed not at all from this girl's. He heard it in her voice--that voice so strangely like that other voice--which he remembered--oh! so well!

"Take off the shade," said Vincent, "it makes everything so--so red--you--you can't see the truth." He shivered as he spoke.

But that first look at the girl had been enough for Pidar Narâyan. It had roused him, his apathy was gone. He thrust the lamp into Vincent's trembling hands without a word, and his own steady ones--the hands which had not touched their kind, except to heal body or soul, since they had said farewell to a woman--took up the task.

So for a few minutes there was silence, but for the old pantaloons' ceaseless mumblings as he rocked himself backwards and forwards. He had meant no harm, he protested--he had conducted

more affairs of the kind to a decent ending than he could well remember--no one could be more discreet--accidents would happen--

"She is shot through the lungs," said Father Ninian, breaking the silence. "There is very little to be done--I--I--" He would have said "*fear*," but for Vincent's face of anguish. What right had he to feel sorrow?--he, the man who had brought this about. "Still, I will try. Akbar! bring the candles from the altar. Stay! she had better go there. It will save time. You two can carry her."

But Vincent had her in his arms, with a brief "Where?"

"The chapel--the lights are lit. Lay her on the cushions before the altar. I will be with you again directly."

When he returned from his room with lint and bandages she was lying there as he had directed, her long red skirt trailing down the white steps.

"The candles, please--the smaller ones, Akbar--and place them at her head. They will give me a better light."

Vincent shivered again at the sight; she looked already dead, with those tall tapers about her. Ah! what did it all mean? Was he dreaming? How was it possible? The wild improbability of it stunned him; when not three hours ago he had had a sherry-and-bitters before dinner! The curious irrelevance of his thoughts made him feel as if he must wake soon. Yet there she lay. Laila, whom he loved!

"Is she--is she--" he began.

"Not dead, if you mean that," replied Father Ninian quietly. "But she will not live an hour."

There was no mincing matters between these two men--nothing but the brutal truth; yet this time it was the old priest who held up his hand against a passionate outcry. "Don't make a fuss. Be brave, at least, and don't disturb her. She is coming to herself again."

To herself certainly. To the old half-amused, half-mysterious smile, as her eyes caught the tapers, the lighted altar beyond, her lover kneeling at her side. "It is the wedding, I suppose," she said--there was a catch in her breath now--"but why have they put the candles like a bier? To save time, I suppose. But it mixes things up; and--" she gave a little impatient sigh--"Oh! tell him to be quick, Romeo, for--for we always meant to be married in the end--didn't we?"

The words cut Vincent like a knife. Yes! He had meant it. Not always. Not till, even to one with his past, the perfection of this idyll in the garden would have suffered without that promise to himself. And now, death should not cheat him, should not leave a stain, a regret, on the one perfect romance of his life. He stooped suddenly and kissed her; kissed her with more passion than he had ever kissed her before.

"It won't be long, Juliet; he is just going to begin," he whispered, then rose to his feet unsteadily.

This at least he could do for himself. And for her? A sob, almost of gratitude, of admiration, came to his eyes as he realized that it would never, never--even if she had lived--have mattered to her really. But it had been a part of the play; part of her as Juliet. So it should be. His wild revolt at the sequence of improbabilities--for after all that idyll in the garden had been, bar its environments, commonplace enough--which had landed him in--*in an Adelphi drama!*--(he could not help the thought, though he despised it)--should give way to this. The play should end with a wedding. Juliet should have the '*statue of pure gold*' in the eyes of the world. He could ensure this by a word; and the word should be spoken.

He touched Father Ninian peremptorily on the shoulder, as he bent, busy with his instruments.

"I want to speak to you. Hush! she must not hear. Father, you say she is dying. Well, I claim my right. I am a Catholic--I have sinned--we will say nothing about her--that lies between us. I wish to marry her while I can. I ask it as my right, of you, a priest. Do you understand? I ask you to marry us."

Ninian Bruce looked for an instant as if he could have killed the man who stood before him; then he drew himself up, priest utterly.

"Have you the right to claim it?"

"I claim it as a right," replied Vincent, fiercely. "That is enough, surely."

"It is not enough. I will ask her." And Pidar Narâyan knelt down beside the girl. "My daughter," he began, "Captain Dering tells me--" Then he gave way--"*Cara mia*," he whispered, laying his hand on hers, "tell me--I have never been unkind, surely--tell me--your old guardian, who has loved, who loves--must I marry you to--to *him*?"

Laila looked into his face with a faintly-wondering reply. "Must!" she echoed dreamily. "It's

just as he likes, of course. I don't mind. I only want him--where is he?"

"I'm here, sweetheart." Vincent knelt down again and took her in his arms.

The faint querulousness left her voice. "That's nice," she murmured. "Tell him to begin quickly, Vincent, for I don't want to waste time. I want you--you, yourself, and me--me, myself--nothing else."

Father Ninian gave a sort of cry, and turned blindly to the altar. If this was not Love, what was?

Then, monotonously, his voice began the marriage service.

"Have you a ring?" he asked, when he came to stand by those two, the girl supported in Vincent's arms. The latter shook his head. "Go on without it," he said sternly; "she is failing fast."

But there was one on the old man's finger; one that had never left it since it had been put there by a saint in Paradise. He took it off now, and gave it to the man whom at that moment he hated and despised more than any man on earth.

So, swiftly, the prayers went on, and old Akbar paused in his rockings to say "Amen" with the others. He had learnt *thus* much in these latter days of grace.

The last one came as a step resounded down the passage; Lance Carlyon's step as he sought the light he had seen--sought his Captain. He seemed to bring a breath of fresh air into the passion-laden atmosphere, a solid reality into the shadows.

"Vincent!" he cried, as he caught sight of the scarlet and gold. "Thank God! you're here. The troopers have seized the Fort--" He paused suddenly, horror-struck at what had caught his eye. "I beg your pardon--I didn't know--is she--is she--hurt?--"

Vincent stood up suddenly. "Hush! that has nothing to do with it. Leave that to me. The troopers have risen? When?"

Lance, with his eyes still on that pitiful sight, shook his head.

"There was a pistol-shot--you must have heard it!"

"Heard it!" echoed Vincent, wildly. "Yes! I heard it. Go on! What then?"

"I don't know--I know nothing in this infernal nightmare that's got hold of us all!" cried Lance. "I only know that if we don't get to the gaol before they do--they've gone to set the prisoners free--there will be the devil of a row. So you must come at once, Vincent--you must come at once!"

Captain Dering gave an irresolute look at the dying girl. She had saved his life--he loved her--could he leave her? Was anything worth that sacrifice?

"You *must* go!" said a stern voice. It was Father Ninian's, who had taken Vincent's place and was now holding Laila in his arms. "You must go, Captain Dering, and prevent worse from befalling; if you can--if you can!" There was almost a triumph in his voice.

Lance looked from one to the other in sheer despair. "Well! if you won't come, I'm off--oh! come along, Vincent, and don't be a fool! It--it isn't worth it; it never is!"

Vincent Dering stood still irresolute. "You'll stay, sir," he said, "and--and look after--"

Father Ninian drew the unconscious girl closer to him. "I will look after--*Margherita*."

The last word came in a half whisper to himself and his eyes met Vincent's with a curious dazed defiance. The latter gave the defiance back, as their owner stooped for a second over Laila's indifferent face, and kissed it.

"Good-by, *Juliet*," he said; and the last word came also in a half whisper to himself.

The next moment he was following Lance down the dim passage, full of a vague relief, and realizing for the first time that the mist, which for the last half hour had dimmed the reality of all things, was due, not to any aberration of his brain, but to the simple fact that an electrical dust-storm was in full blast.

He realized it with relief. That was at least real, tangible.

Almost too much so; and as the hot wind, charged with those aspiring atoms of earth, met him fiercely, he realized also that the storm would fight against him in his efforts to prevent worse from happening. If, indeed, anything could be worse than what had happened; worse than Laila's-

He broke off in his thought, incredulous. It could not be true. He would come back to find her better--well!--

But that other dream was true. His men had risen. The one thing necessary, therefore, was to get to the gaol before any decided action took place; and this he realised still more clearly from Lance's curt explanation as they ran down the river steps. Once there, the sight of the canoe he had left suggested the feasibility of getting to the gaol in it. His personal influence might avail. If that failed, he would at least be able to save time by choosing a suitable place for the raft to come ashore. The great thing was to be on the spot, to be within reach of action at once; to wait for the raft meant needless delay.

So, a minute after, the faint splash of his paddle was lost in the rising hum of the storm, and Lance was left looking anxiously for sound or sight of the raft, which, if all had gone well, should by now have started.

But neither came, so, seeing from the light he had snatched up as he passed through the balcony that the air was growing darker, more impenetrable than ever, he shoved off his strange craft, to wait further out in the stream where there was less chance of the raft passing him unseen, unheard.

For this reason also, he paddled up along the wall a bit into the faint glow of light which showed still from the arches of the chapel. And as he lay in it, his ears and eyes strained for the least sound, he could hear as a kind of background to that muffled drumming of the storm, the sound of the pilgrims chanting as they waited for the dawn. The dawn which would bring--what? Who could tell?

The sound of other prayers, echoing from the chapel, made him shake his head, feeling that it was hopeless to look forward--or backward for that matter! Why had Roshan shot the girl--if he had! And why had Pidar Narâyan called her Margherita, and Vincent called her Juliet?

The whole thing was exactly as he had said--an infernal nightmare!

Then a faint sound in front of him made his strong arms sweep the paddle through the stream as he shot into the darkness in search of the raft; in search of Erda.

Not that she needed him, really. The memory of her in that red-and-gold mess jacket above her wedding dress, giving orders to the men squarely, came back to make him smile.

God bless her! She could do well enough without him. That was one comfort. And Dillon could hold his own too, without much help, for a time--that was another; for what with this and that, help was bound to be over-long in coming.

CHAPTER XXII

A MONOPOLY

Lance Carlyon was right in trusting Dr. Dillon's power of doing without help until Providence chose to send some. This was the easier task, in that he had made up his mind deliberately beforehand as to what his best course of action would be should an alarm of this sort occur. Therefore that imperative *kling-kling* of the telegraph bell which roused him in a second from his bed, where, ready dressed for any such emergency, he was sleeping the sleep of the just, found him alert, prepared for anything and everything.

So it has come, he thought, as he hastily wired back the comprehensive reply, "*All right, await you.*" He felt as a doctor does when a dangerous symptom which he has foreseen as a possibility, shows itself. He had been on the lookout for this for days, but as the dawn would end the period during which it might be expected, he had, as in the outbreak of the cholera, had hopes that danger was over. His last thought, as he slept, had been this; he woke to find that the complication must be faced. Woke with a strong regret, but a stronger instinct of fight. So he slipped his feet into his shoes, jammed his big mushroom hat on his head out of pure habit, and so, armed *cap-à-pie*, with a brain quick to work, and a body ready to follow and obey, he ran across the sandy road to the Smiths' bungalow, realizing as he did so that a dust-storm was just beginning. That would delay both attack and relief. On the whole, this would be an advantage, since, once things were secure, half an hour or so would make no difference in the latter; whereas, he wanted every minute he could get now for preparation.

He had not warned Eugene Smith of his fears. There was never any use alarming people by

mere probabilities, unless by so doing you could forearm them. And this was not the case here; since the safest--in fact the only--place of refuge for Mrs. Smith and the child, should trouble arise, was the semi-fortified roof above the gate of the gaol; and that he knew to be ready for use. He had, therefore, only to wake them, as quietly as might be, so as not to give the alarm to the servants. Fortune favoured him in this; for, just outside the verandah, he ran full tilt upon Eugene himself, tall, gaunt, in his sleeping-suit, carrying a roll of bedding on his back like a snail's shell. The heat of the evening had enticed him to sleep outside, as he preferred, *à la* Robinson Crusoe, and the dust-storm was sending him in.

"Hello, Dillon!" he cried, "what's up?--nothing wrong with my wife or the child--I hope--No!--" he gave a sigh of relief, "then it's the beastly dust-storm disturbed you, I suppose. Isn't it sickening to think how many times in the next six months we shall have to take up our beds and walk."

"H'm! Hope I shall have the chance," replied the doctor, dryly, recovering his breath. "No, it isn't the storm. They're going to try a row, Smith. Just had a wire from the Fort. There's a plot on, to come here and set the prisoners free, and that's dangerous. So, till the troops come, I think you'd better bring Mrs. Smith and Gladys to the gate--it's the safest place, and I've got everything ready. It mayn't be much; but the devils, whoever they are, might turn and rend you--especially if they fail with me."

Eugene Smith had dropped his snail-shell and sat down on it, aghast, in surprise; but he was up again before the doctor finished.

"By Jove!" he said rapidly, calmly as the doctor himself. "That's a taking up one's bed with a vengeance. I'll have 'em both ready in a jiffy--anything else?"

"No. I'll rummage round till you return--one forgets things to the last, sometimes. And I shall want your Remington and such like--I know where to find 'em."

A moment after he was striking a match to light the tall floor-lamp in Mrs. Smith's drawing-room. She had turned it out herself a few hours before, thinking, as she looked round the room, full of soft rose-shaded light, how pretty, how cosey it was. It had the same air of refined security now. Everything, down to a copy of the last '*Queen*' lying on an inlaid table by her favourite chair, was so exactly what one would have expected to find in her room; the room of a delicate, cultivated, civilized, society woman.

And now?

Now the delicacy, the culture, the civilization, the society, and the security belonging to them, had been invaded in an instant. By what?

The dust--you could almost see it springing into the air in these sandy stretches--had already settled thick over the dainty furniture, and as Dr. Dillon, standing by the table in the pink glow of the lamp, asked himself the question, he yielded to the imperious fascination which a smooth sand-surface has for humanity. But he did not write his name upon it; only the idle answer to the question.

"God knows."

The writing lay upon the table beside the latest fashions, staring up into the pink paper shade, after George Dillon had passed rapidly to Eugene's office to choose this, that, and the other, and make them into a bundle with a table-cloth.

When he returned to the drawing-room, Muriel Smith was standing by that writing in the sand: a fragile figure in a blue dressing-gown, all frilled and embroidered like the pictures in the paper. She looked more forlorn than frightened; forlorn and pathetic.

"Is it warm enough?" said the doctor, as he entered. "Your dress, I mean. There's a storm on, and it generally brings rain."

"It is flannel," she answered, and he nodded.

There was no excitement, no heroics. Only that. That, and the writing on the sand, and her forlornness--the forlornness of a delicate Dresden shepherdess set to drive a flock of real sheep to the shambles. But the needlessness, the pity of it, made Dr. Dillon set his teeth.

"Eugene will be here directly with Gladys," she said. "We thought it best not to wake her, and he said we had better start at once; for you see I can't walk nearly so fast as he does."

There was no trace of fear in her voice, but there was none of resistance either, and she turned at the door to look back with an almost reproachful acquiescence.

"Poor room," she said softly, "it seems so strange--such a pity; but I suppose it can't be helped." She turned to the darkness again with a little shiver, and went on, "Vincent sent the wire, I suppose."

"I didn't ask," replied Dr. Dillon curtly; then, repenting him, added, "I suppose so. He will be

here directly I expect. And--and we will all take care of you and Gladys, as long as we can. You know that; and we can't do more--can we?"

She smiled quite tenderly. "Of course you will. And I am really not a bit afraid--except of being in the way."

She seemed to accept the necessity of this; perhaps rightly. For the storm itself was no joke in these desert stretches, where the sand rose in choking clouds, yet left enough to make each step a toil. Muriel stumbled along breathlessly, but so slowly that, when her husband joined them, striding along with Gladys, still sleeping, wrapped in a blanket in his arms, the doctor bade them come at their leisure and wait until he gave the signal before entering, then ran on swiftly to the gaol. For there was no time to lose; though, on the other hand, there was very little to be done. The less the better, if his plan was to be successful; since that involved the utmost quiet, and the keeping of the prisoners from all knowledge of what was going on as long as possible.

As he faced the choking darkness, the hot blasts of causeless wind, blowing all ways at once, George Dillon reckoned up his chances fairly. The storm would certainly make it easier to keep such knowledge from those within, and make it more difficult for those without to establish communication with the former. So far, good. On the other hand, no amount of the light at his command would enable him to see, even from his coign of vantage on the gateway roof, what was going on, either outside or inside. And darkness was the diggers' best friend; while digging was the recognized enemy of mud walls. Especially of those inside walls which divided the gaol into sections. Yet the best, the only chance of keeping the prisoners quiet, lay in preserving their segregation into companies.

For the gaol was of the cart-wheel pattern. That is, a huge circle of outside wall, thick as an earthwork, the felloes of the wheel, as it were. Then a small central cylinder of brick, like a lime kiln, the nave of the wheel, as it were. Between these two the spokes. Spokes of twelve feet high mud wall, dividing the whole into seven wedges of prison, absolutely distinct, blank, apertureless, save for one heavily stanchioned door in the apex of each wedge, leading into the central tower. Exit or entry was therefore impossible to six of these wedges, except through the tower; that is the citadel, the key, as it were, of the gaol proper.

The seventh wedge, however, gave, at its wider end, on the entrance-gate, which was a square, semi-fortified building, pierced by a tunnel, gated at each end, and further protected by an outside yard, or roofless porch, also gated. The inmost of these three gates opened on to a small courtyard, and this narrowed again into an alley which gave access to the central tower. Briefly then the whole gaol consisted of six wedges opening, by a door in their narrow end, into the central cylinder; and a seventh wedge split in two by an alley leading between high mud walls from the gateway to that central tower; the key to the position.

In the two halves of the split wedge lay the warders' barracks, the solitary cells, the cook rooms, the hospital; and the entry to these was by a door on either side of the little courtyard, just beyond the inner gate. From the corner of this, also, rose the outside stair leading to the roof of the square, brick gateway.

Thus the fifteen hundred prisoners were broken up into companies of about two hundred each, and were absolutely without possibility of communication so long as the central tower was in the hands of authority. Unless there was time to undermine the mud walls, and tools, also, wherewith to work. Of these, however, there were none in the gaol. Nothing, even, that could be used to take their place, except in that seventh section which held the executive of the gaol; and there Dr. Dillon meant to leave no hands to use them, if he could compass it.

As he pulled up to regain his breath before walking up to the gate and giving the countersign, the whole place lay quiet and dark. So far, good. There was the risk, however, of the plot being known, and of the sentry refusing him entrance. It was not, however, and the next moment, calmly as if he was merely on one of his not infrequent rounds of unexpected night inspections, Dr. Dillon passed from the outer porch to the tunnel, and told the sentry at the inner gate to light the lamp in the little office room to one side.

"Call the superintendent," he said to the first man, "and you can tell him I am going to inspect the solitary cells."

He added this because he knew it would give time, since the superintendent would be sure to give a private look round, first, to see all was in order, and remove possible traces of tobacco or opium,--those luxuries out of which so much money can be made by gaol officials.

No sooner, however, had the first sentry gone through the door to the left section, than he sent the second one on a similar message to the right, where the hospital lay. Then, the coast being clear, he rapidly unlocked the private safe in the office which held his set of keys in case of accidents, and locked both the right and left doors. Secure for a moment, therefore, from interruption, he ran outside, saw that the tool rooms, etc., were closed, gave the signal to Eugene Smith, hurried the refugees up the stairs; and then, after unlocking the two doors again on his way back to the office, sat down in his usual chair and began to look over a register.

He was engaged in this calm occupation when, a minute or two after, the native

superintendent--a big, dignified person, in a blatant undress due largely to his bulk--arrived breathless.

"*Darogah-jee!*" began Dr. Dillon, instantly, and the mere tone of the title made the man quiver, "I've had constantly to complain of the tobacco and opium smuggling that is going on among the warders, and I mean to stop it. I've had information to-night which will clinch the business. So take the night guard, rouse every warder, bring everyone here, even those on guard in the sections--the hospital orderlies--everyone, in fact, who is free to go out of the gaol. They are to come at once. No time allowed for arrangements. If they are not all here in five minutes I shall think you are in league with the smugglers."

The *darogah's* fat flesh shook, yet he winked as he went off. If the doctor-*sahib* expected to find anything in this fashion except, maybe, a smell of the forbidden drugs, he was mistaken. On such a night, too, when the dust was in everyone's eyes. Well! it might have been worse; for, though he knew nothing definitely of any plot, he could not fail to know that there was more to excite men in the gaol, that night, than tobacco or opium! So he went about his summons with a sigh of relief, and before the five minutes were over had his posse of minor officials together, including a file of unfettered prisoners, with good conduct badges, who were used as gang leaders. He himself finally coming down the alley, with a stupendous bunch of keys, followed by the little group of night warders he had collected from the other sections.

"All here?" asked Dr. Dillon, lighting a cigar. "The register, please, *darogah*. They will answer to their names, pass out through the wicket into the porch, and stay there until I've tallied the lot. I'm going to have it *pakka*^[11] this time."

Some of the men grinned, some looked uneasy, and some few frowned; but all obeyed, though they cuddled themselves into their blankets as they slipped through the wicket, and faced the whirling, swirling storm in the open porch, the doors of which were barred, not solid.

"Kishen Rao?" came Dr. Dillon's voice, after a long series of names, followed by brief "*presents!*" and swift exits. There was no answer. He turned to the *darogah* for explanation.

"Absent!" explained the latter, timorously.

A little more decision might have saved him the quick question, "With or without leave?"

"*Huzoor*" palpitated the fat man, "he went out to bathe in the Holy Pool by permission this morning. He is of the utmost sobriety. A Brahmin, promoted by your Honour to, as your Honour knows, general head ward-keeper. He is not to be suspected."

"Leave till 5 P.M.," commented the doctor, looking over the register. "Mark him down absent without leave. Go on."

So, rapidly, the last man ducked under the wicket.

"Is that the lot?"

"Everyone, Protector of the Poor," protested the burly official, with smiles. "The prison is empty of the unfettered."

"Then let it remain so for the present," said Dr. Dillon, coolly, as he stepped forward, closed the wicket, slid the bolt to its place, and turned on the *darogah*, all in one swift sequence.

"Now, then!" he went on sharply, "you and I have to settle a bit of business. Your keys--" he took out a revolver, and laid it on the table beside him--"every key you have; duplicates, triplicates, everything! I'm going to keep this gaol myself for a bit. Do you understand?"

"*Huzoor!*" bleated the man, helplessly, putting his big bunch on the table.

Dr. Dillon smiled sarcastically. "Won't do, my friend. I want the lot by the list. Where's the register?"

When it came he ticked them off rapidly by it. "Sections B and C, warder's duplicate; where's that?" he asked.

The official grew green. "Kishen Rao--" he began--"but he is of the utmost--"

Dr. Dillon turned on him like lightning. "You're a damned scoundrel, sir! What else is missing?" He ran over the rest swiftly, then looked up suddenly with a scowl that made the man literally collapse. "So that's it, is it? Duplicate of B and C sections missing, and duplicate of the alley doors. A pretty little game!" he laughed sardonically.

"Kishen Rao--" gurgled the *darogah*--"by your Honour's promotion--of the utmost--"

"But it won't play, my friend; it won't play!" went on the doctor, with a curious elation. "I hold the thirteenth trump, now. You go in there,"--he pointed to an inner store-room behind the slip of an office; a windowless place, pitch dark, where the clothes in which the prisoners arrived awaited their release in piles--"and thank your stars you're in such good quarters."

All but that brief order, "You go in there," was spoken in English, as a sort of outlet for the intense satisfaction which was filling him at his own success,--*so far*.

The next minute he had turned the key on the *darogah*, and was up the stairs calling Eugene Smith in a low voice to come down and help to bolt and bar; but to come as quietly as he could.

"I've got rid of the lot," he said joyously, after he had explained the position in a few rapid words; "there isn't a soul in this section except the solitary cellers--who, of course, are ironed--a few sick people, and the assistant surgeon; but *baboo-jee* is an agnostic, and is so confoundedly afraid of the possibility of a future life that he may be trusted to go into green collapse if he hears a shot fired."

So, rapidly, the two men set to work, undisturbed by more than a protesting "*Huzoor*, what shall we do?" from the posse outside the first gate, and a low knocking at the wicket.

There were double doors here, however, and of the sort which it would need time to negotiate, without powder.

"They will hold out for an hour, at least," said the doctor; "then there will be the inner one, and after that the alley door--unless--" he remembered Kishen Rao, and frowned. That was the only weak spot in his armour. "We can count on an hour and a half, at least," he continued, carefully allowing for the worst; "longer, perhaps. Now then, Smith, for the toughest job! I've got a couple of crowbars here. Those first six steps--eight if we can--of the stairs must come down. There aren't enough of us to hold them."

So, for fully a quarter of an hour, no sound was heard above the curious vibration of the storm except the grinding and crushing of the bricks as they were rapidly eased out, one by one, from the mud mortar. The light of one of the office lamps, set on the ground, showed by that time a sheer drop of eight or ten feet, and Eugene Smith, working above, jammed his crowbar into a crevice of the wall against which the steps clung like a swallow's nest, and gave Dr. Dillon, who had been working below, a rope and a hand up.

The latter set down the keys and the lamp he had brought up with him, and deliberately dusted the knees of his trousers.

"There, that's done," he said. "Couldn't be better."

"Yes, it seems pretty safe," assented Eugene Smith, a trifle dubiously.

"Safe!" echoed the doctor, enthusiastically, "I haven't felt so safe for the last fortnight. Hullo! what's that?"

That was a sudden bugle-call. The doctor's face fell. "What, already! I didn't expect relief so soon. However, it can't be helped. I'll just go up and tell Dering what I've done, so that he may be prepared for the locked out ones!"

He took the light in his hand and crossed to the outer parapet.

"Hello, Dering!" he began, peering down. Then a couple of shots whizzed past his head and he ducked. At the same moment, as if roused by the concussion, the first crackling thunderclap of the dust-storm, sounding muffled through the thick air, followed like a roll-call, and reverberated dully, sluggishly, through the black darkness.

When it passed, Dr. Dillon's voice rose quietly.

"There will be no relief, Smith; those are the troopers, and they're against us. So now--we've got it to ourselves, Smith, for some time."

There was a certain satisfaction at the monopoly in his voice.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SEARCH-LIGHT

The sound of those two shots greeted Vincent Dering as, after infinite difficulty, owing to the

darkness, the fitful gusts of wind, and the sand-banks, he drew up the canoe against what he knew must be the high bank below the off-take of the canal.

It had only been by trusting the stream to guide him, and refraining at times from the use of his paddle, that he had managed to steer his way at all.

So he knew he was late; felt, indeed, that he must be too late to use his influence with the men, and yet, despite this knowledge, a keen disappointment filled him when those shots proved him to be so; since by long experience he knew that once open resistance began, there could be no more question of words.

What then, was there for him to do?

If he, in his light canoe, helped, wherever possible, by every atom of strength his arms possessed, had taken so long to come down that mile or two of stream, the raft could not possibly arrive for another half hour.

He could not sit still for half an hour; he felt, indeed, as if he could not sit still for half a minute. A passion to act, to sweep away the past, to forget, was upon him. He had had time during his strange journey--so often idle perforce--to realize his position; time to piece the still stranger events preceding his journey into a reasonable sequence; so that he had, by now, arrived at a fairly accurate guess as to the cause of much, that, when it happened, had seemed causeless.

For instance, Laila's dress, "*given her by someone.*" That, joined to the knowledge that she was connected with the late Nawab's family, of which Roshan Khân might with justice claim the headship, had brought the latter's action within the bounds of credibility. Jealousy! revenge! these were potent causes. Laila, then, must have been playing with Roshan's pretensions. Playing like a child with a toy; playing, rather, like a woman who hesitates at nothing for the sake of the man she loves. And she had hesitated at nothing; not even at this, to give him pleasure, to make things match with his passion! The thought, the remembrance, made him for a moment feel inclined to fling up his hands, and let the canoe take him where it chose; take him down stream utterly. Then a half choking, yet wholly strenuous desire to escape from the whole story, a wild instinctive effort for a more wholesome atmosphere, like that of a drowning man for a breath of fresh air, had sent the canoe bounding on *his way*; *his way* and none other's, in swift obedience. With a rush, he had grasped that there was more in life--that he had allowed himself to be a slave! But that was past,--he would shake himself together--he would forget the thralldom of sex--and he would forget the past.

Yet, as he cast about in his mind for the best method of applying the half hour's leisure, the remembrance of a woman came to him, as if to mock at his resolution. Muriel, and dear little Gladys who called him "Derin' darling"; where were they? His eyes grew soft in the remembrance, stern at the probability of their being in danger. Why had he not thought of it before? How could he ever have paused, wondering what to do?

He set the red light, which he had taken from the fateful balcony, carefully in the canoe--though, even should some gust of the rising wind not blow the light out, it could scarcely be of any use in that outer darkness--as a signal to the raft should it, by an off chance, drift past in his absence, then struck across the sand in the direction in which he knew the Smiths' bungalow must lie; that was, a little to the rear of the gaol.

The storm, as he faced it, was so fierce that the doubt rose inevitably if an unwieldy raft could make way against it. If so, then there would be no help. The only thing would be to defend himself and others until the end came; the end which would at least end the past.

He had almost to feel his way, the darkness was so intense. It was a relief to stumble against something which he knew must be the low mud fence of Muriel's garden; that garden in which she tried to defy Providence, and rear English flowers. He knew his feet must be crushing her treasures as he passed on towards a faint glow, a red glow. But everything that was not the blackness of outer darkness to-night seemed red--blood red.

A minute after, with a vast relief at the silence, the solitude, he was in Muriel's pretty drawing-room. The pink-shaded lamp was still alight, showing red through the fog of dust. He passed to it instinctively, and as he did so, noticed the writing on the table. But many an earth-atom had fallen on that confession of ignorance since George Dillon had made it idly, and so, as Vincent Dering bent quickly to see if by chance it was some message left for those who might come after, he also had to frown and say, "God knows!"

Was it possible that Eugene and his wife were still asleep? The doors stood open, but that was to be expected at that season of the year, unless someone had been awake to close them against the storm. He must make sure, however.

But there was no one to be found in any of the rooms. It occurred to him, then, that they must have taken refuge in the gaol, and he told himself he was a fool not to have thought of that before. Dillon would, of course, have seen to that. He, Vincent, might have remembered so much, at least; might have remembered that he himself was not the only slave. Then he gave an odd, bitter little laugh. Was it never possible to get beyond a woman's apron-strings?

And here he was wasting time over the question, when he ought to be doing something better.

But what?

Go back and wait for the raft, or on to the gaol? There was a big tamarisk tree at the end of the garden. Only two days before he had pointed it out to Muriel and said that an active man accustomed to *trapeze* work might swing himself from it astride the high mud wall of the gaol, and so gain the roof of the gate. Dillon had denied it; and she had said, laughingly, that no one ever tried to break into a gaol, only out of one.

Curious; still, if it had only been light, it would have been worth the risking. But it was impossible now in the dark.

So, suddenly, a remembrance came to him. The search-light!

Was it only last night he had been dining here, in this house, after bringing Muriel home from the Mission, where they had seen that huge ray piercing the shadows? Was it only yesterday that he had listened to Eugene's lamentations over his unused electricity, which was sure, he said, to vanish into space from his rude contrivances. Was it only yesterday that, in obedience to that pathetic look of martyrdom on Muriel's face, which still seemed--to one part of Vincent's nature--to call for instant sympathy, he had, to appease the honest inventor, shown an interest in search-lights which was purely fictitious, and learned a variety of facts about buttons and stop-cocks? And had all this happened yesterday on purpose that to-day, when he was in need of light--

He was up on the roof with the thought. If only the blessed thing had gone enough for that! As he picked his way rapidly through the litter, three or four cigar-ends, a half-finished whiskey-and-soda, seen by the flash of the hurricane lantern he had sought out and lit, told him that Eugene must have been at work over his new toy till late. So much the better for his chance--for everybody's chance; since a signal like that might make all the difference to the raft; all the difference to Dillon in the gaol--

George Dillon was, indeed, beginning to realize this himself. His almost triumphant mood had passed; it had come home to him that the unexpected revelation of the troopers' complicity in the plot, whatever it was, had changed the whole aspect of affairs. Now, there was no question of keeping the gaol quiet until help should arrive. He was face to face, now, with the fact that he must not rely on any aid at all. What had really happened, he could not guess. For all he knew, the troopers and pioneers might have risen and killed their officers, killed everybody who would be likely to help. His aim, now, was to sell his life, and--and hers--as dearly as he could; but in the dead darkness, like a rat in a hole, what could be done? Except wait--wait for the walls to be dug through, the gates to be mined, that poor eight or ten feet drop at the foot of the stairs scaled. Then a rush, still in the dark, and--the greatest Darkness of all!

Not even the chance of a shot; and he had plenty of ammunition. It would at least have passed the time to take pot-shots at the devils; and though these would have brought retaliation, there would have been no need for exposure. The parapet walls were high enough, and properly loopholed.

So, for a few minutes, he sat almost sullenly beside those, for whom alone he now felt responsible, in the little turret, which, as is always the case in India, rose at one corner of the flat roof giving fair shelter for the time. In his first hurried recognition, which had come with the shots, that not help but attack lay outside, he had blown out his light, fearing lest Eugene Smith might also be exposed to similar attentions; so it was pitch dark. And the now almost constant reverberations, which seemed to send the sand-laden air in pulse-beats on your face, deadened all other sounds into vague confusion. But he knew that the warders within the porch, the troopers without, were trying to force the barred gate. That would not take long; though the two doors blocking the ends of the tunnel would be a tougher job.

And he heard, closer at hand, a sleepy whimper from the child, a low comforting from a mother's voice.

The sound made him set his teeth.

God! if there was only light to kill withal.

And then, in a second, as if by a miracle, it came. A great flood of shining light, contemptuous, at that short distance, even of that outer darkness. For it was electricity against electricity; a house divided against itself.

The first thing he saw by it was that fragile figure in its dainty blue frills, a child's golden head; and so, naturally, the next instant found his hand on a rifle.

"The search-light! by all that's lucky! Well! everyone has not been killed, anyhow," cried Eugene Smith.

"Killed," echoed Dr. Dillon, savagely. "No one has been killed yet, but it won't be long before

they are."

It was not; for a trooper engaged in staring stupidly at the velvety black circle out of which the intruding light seemed to spring, suddenly threw up his hands, swirled round, and fell face upwards in a crumpled heap.

There was an instant's scare in the crowd, in that hundred and fifty or more of troopers and conspirators, thrown into black and white relief, like a shadow pantomime, about the outer gate. Then the startled murmurs of "the light--the *Dee-puk-râg*" which were passing from lip to lip, changed into a yell.

The fight had begun in earnest.

"Shoot straight," remarked Dr. Dillon, a few minutes after, "we shan't have such a good chance long. The gate is almost gone. Then most of the game will be out of range--too close to the wall. And once they get into the tunnel we shall have to sound *cease firing* until they come out on the other side; but then we ought to do decent damage, if the prisoners don't get at us first." He paused, and shot on steadily till, with a hoarse shout, the attackers surged inwards. Then he laid his rifle aside, remarking that it would be as well to keep an eye gaolwards, in case of complications.

So far as could be seen in that curious chequering of dense darkness and sharp glittering light; light which was palpably an intruder, which seemed absolutely apart from the things it showed--even from the dust-atoms--there was none as yet. At least the uppermost portion of that vast wheel of wall stood out, perfect, unbroken. The roof of the Smiths' bungalow, where the light stood, being, however, but little higher than these walls, much of what lay below in the sections themselves was necessarily hidden in shadow; especially on the side nearest the light. But the narrow alley leading up to the central tower, being in straight line with the ray, showed clear as daylight, save just under the citadel itself. So did most of the little courtyard, with its doors opening to the right and left. George Dillon gave a sigh of satisfaction at the sight, since, whether the foe elected--when once inside the gates--to rush the roof, or press on to liberate the prisoners by those six doors in the round tower, there would be fair chance of a good bag, for a straight shot!

Or, even if the convalescents in hospital were to set free the solitary-cell convicts--a contingency which had occurred to him too late for any plan of minimizing the danger--and were to swarm into the courtyard to help against the last gate (which, of course, was partly barred from the inside), he could settle their hash also. And that, now, was his one idea. The idea of all brave men when they find themselves in a tight place--to kill before being killed.

As yet, however, there was no sign of life even within the vast wheel, with its rims and spokes of light, its centre of shadow. It lay dim, curiously still behind the dust-atoms that danced in the ray, like motes in a sunbeam.

There was not a sound, not a sign within. Only the tumult of voices, the intermittent shots without, rising above the dull, muffled hum in the air.

Stay! that was something. Half way round the circle, where the shadow of the tall tamarisk tree in the Smiths' garden cut a jagged gap in the white rim of wall, there was some change, something that had not been there a moment ago.

The gap had moved; had changed place and form, though for a time the air was still with one of those breathless, suffocating pauses, when the dust above seems to sink on the dust below, and fill one's very lungs. And now the gap was back again, as it had been before. But it had left something clinging for a second to the wall like a limpet: the next astride it safely.

"Reach me over my rifle, Smith," said the doctor, briefly; "there's a brute trying to sniggle along the wall; must have come up that tree in your garden. Wish I'd taken Dering's advice and cut it down. Thanks! I don't want to take my eye off him, for fear he means to drop into a section. I'll shoot, if that seems his game; if not, I'll wait till he comes closer."

He leant over the parapet, waiting. Just below him, the inner wall of the gate against which the stair clung, and which was prolonged into the turret where Muriel and the child were sheltering, joined the circular outside wall of the gaol. The man, thought Dr. Dillon, trusting to their being occupied in front, must be trying to steal a march on them, slip down the stair, and take them in the rear. There was plenty of time to prevent that, however.

Muriel Smith, roused by the sound of Vincent's name from the sort of lethargy into which she had fallen,--since she was not wanted either by her husband or the doctor,--rose to her knees and peered over the parapet cautiously.

"From the tree in the garden," she said, dreamily. "Yes! I remember. You said it couldn't be done, and I said no one would ever want to do it, and he said he could--" she paused, and gave a little cry--"It is Vincent himself!" she gasped; "don't shoot, doctor! It's Vincent! I know it! I feel it! I knew he would come, if he could! Vincent! Vincent!"

"What's up?" asked Eugene, still firing steadily at all that was to be seen.

"Only your wife says the man is Captain Dering; and--and, by Jove! I believe she is right."

"Of course I'm right," she sobbed, half hysterically--"I knew he would come--I knew he wouldn't leave me to die alone!"

Eugene Smith laid down his rifle, and crawled over in cover deliberately, with an odd look on his face.

"Yes! that's Dering; plucky fellow. He's swung himself up. I always knew he was a nailing gymnast."

There was no grudge in his voice, only a curious challenge as he looked at his wife, then laid his big hand on her shoulder. "Keep more down, please--your head's showing. He'll get here, all right, never fear; we'll lower a rope to him when he comes alongside."

"But I would rather look--I'd rather see *anything* happen--" she moaned; "it seems so unkind not to watch--not to be there--with him--" She was shivering all over, the patient self-control, the steady acquiescence even in her own danger which had been hers till then, gone utterly.

George Dillon felt a great pity, a vast impatience.

"So you were right, Smith," he broke in hastily, to cover her sudden break down. "They aren't killed; now we shall have a chance of knowing what's at the bottom of all this foolery!"

But when, five minutes later, Vincent Dering reached the roof in safety, the doctor felt vaguely that the explanations only added to the general incomprehensibility; and that something was being kept back. What, he asked impatiently, had started the show?

Of course there were plots. Pidar Narâyan knew of them, but, as such things generally did, they had seemed abortive. What, then, had upset the apple-cart?

Vincent gave a gesture of despair. "What does it matter?" he cried. "We can think of that--if we *can* think--when it's over! And if we can't--what does it matter?"

"You can bet your bottom dollar on one thing," said Eugene, who, in this pause for a council of war, was methodically loading various weapons for future use. "It is either the sex, or sin. This world would be a paradise of peace if people didn't want virtue or vice,--I don't say which is which, mind you." He spoke suddenly, harshly; and once more George Dillon came to the rescue.

"As Dering says, it doesn't matter. But the fact that the pioneers are staunch, and may be expected before long, alters our tactics a bit, Smith. We must husband our ammunition, and stick on as long as possible--don't you think so, Dering?"

Vincent, kindly always, had stooped to take little Gladys, who had crept over to him, in his arms; and now the child, her arms round his neck, was cuddling close to him. "I'm so glad oo's come, Derin' darlin'," she whispered. "And so's mum--aren't 'oo, dearest?"

Vincent unclasped the soft, little, clinging hands almost resentfully, and pulled himself together.

"Yes!" he said briefly, "we've got to hold out. So it will be better to reserve ourselves, and try to keep the gaol itself quiet. It will take the brutes some time to force those gates unless they get help from within, and then there is the alley, and the doors. Still, we shall want every minute; for, unless the storm lessens, Carlyon will scarcely get the raft here before dawn. It was awful on the river."

It was, indeed.

Even Am-ma had lost himself utterly, while Lance, after paddling, and drifting, and shouting after a dozen false hopes, was still as far from finding the raft as ever.

What could have become of it? Had it started sooner than he had expected, and passed down before he had found Vincent? Or had it never started at all? Had the men, after he left, turned round on *her*?

This fear had come to him early in his search, and he had felt inclined then and there to paddle back to the Fort, and satisfy himself it was not so. But the thought of her face, if he allowed care for her to cause delay, had kept him to his task steadily, till he could no longer doubt that something had gone wrong.

But what? And what was he to do?

Then, in a flash, had come back her words after she had bidden him think hard. "You must go down to the spit, cut across it by the mission house, get round, if you can, to the police camp."

That had been her verdict, involving her being left to take her chance.

And now either the raft, the relief for the gaol, had started, or it had not. If the former, he might, of course, by a stern chase overtake it; but Erda was there and Vincent would meet her; they could do without him. But if it had *not* started, what then? Then matters were exactly as they had been, when she had bidden him leave her.

So, with a feeling that, if this were so, he cared little what happened, he steered, so far as he could judge, for the sand-banks of the spit to the right.

Am-ma, on the contrary, steered instinctively to the left, towards the high bank, the deepest stream. It would at least float his logs to their destination, and that was something. Kings had come and gone, and battles had been won and lost, but the logs had always had to go down the river, whatever happened.

And among the men, also, an apathy seemed to have settled, as they drifted on and on in the dark. Erda, crouching in a dry spot beside the ammunition, alert to the uttermost for the least hint of Lance, realized this from the very tone of their voices as they talked under their breath to each other. She felt instinctively that the inaction, the darkness, the lack of a leader, were lessening the value of those twenty men each minute.

If Lance would only turn up! What could have become of him? The time seemed interminable; she felt sure that they must already have drifted past the gaol; she began to wonder if Am-ma was not playing false. For the darkness, the uncertainty, had its grip on her also. It was like some horrid nightmare, to drift on and on, hearing the muffled drumming of the storm, feeling the strange vibration in the air, the sharp sand tingling on your face, and to know nothing--nothing at all, save that you were there.

"Am-ma!" she cried sharply, at last, certain of but one thing, that she must act,--"I believe we have passed the gaol; steer to the right, do you hear?"

A laugh, not exactly insolent, but tolerant, came from the group of men. "Tis easy to give orders, Missy-*baba*," said a voice; "but not so easy to obey them, when the Lord is against your side, and sends darkness!"

Erda's heart gave a great throb, not of fear, but comprehension. That was the beginning; a minute or two more and these men would be out of hand.

"Am-ma!" she called again, "do what I tell you. Remember the child! Remember we have the *Dee-puk-râg*."

Another laugh came from the men. "If you have the *Dee-puk-râg*, send it now. We need light, for sure, and--"

The voice ended in a gasp--

For it was there! A long ray of light, showing them that they were, indeed, just opposite the gaol.

"Am-ma!" came Erda's voice again, and there was a hush and yet a triumph in it, "to the right--steer to the right."

The raft edged slowly towards the ray, but the soldiers still crouched inactive; awed, yet not certain.

Then suddenly that quick crack of George Dillon's first shot echoed over the river, then the yell, then the answering shots.

And following on their heels rapidly came a stir among those crouching figures, and one of them stood up excitedly--"It has begun!--see you, Prag! Lehna, give the boatman a hand! Lo! do as the Miss-*baba* bade thee, quickly, son of a pig! Steer for the light--they have begun!"

Erda gave a sigh of relief. *That* danger was over.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEYOND THE SHADOW

The fact that the quarrel had begun did not, however, have the same effect upon Roshan Khân.

In the first tempest of rage and hate which the sight of Laila and Vincent in the balcony had roused in him he had simply let himself go. He had not thought at all. Had his revolver held other cartridges, he would have gone on shooting at Vincent, Pidar Narâyan, at everybody, till he could shoot no more. He had run *â-mak*; that curious phase of the Oriental mind when once it oversteps the hard and fast lines of custom in which it moves and breathes and has its being.

The very fact that his revolver did not contain more possibilities for death, that he had no other weapon, emphasized his wild revolt.

He was helpless--impotent--before these strangers, who had stolen everything! Everything, save bare existence. This thought, as he burst into the open, into the lurid darkness of the new-come storm, had made him laugh bitterly; for it was only that bare existence which *he* wished to steal! They might keep the rest; but *that* he would claim from them somehow, in fair exchange.

The time was ripe for such exchange too,--for fair exchange. (The epithet "fair" haunted him, trying to still the keen remorse for that shot in the dark; for one part of him knew it to have been cowardly.) Yes! this useless plot, with foolish mischief hidden in its heart, to which he had just been listening with loyal intent to frustrate it, could be made to serve his purpose without delay. His men would follow him anywhere. He had but to say the word--the word so many of them wanted. Then, those thieves of all that made life worth living would learn a lesson. They would fight and win, of course; but the lesson that without such men as he--men whom they thwarted and repressed at every turn--they could not rely upon their regiments, would have to be learnt. And in the learning, one thief would learn something else.

So, without more thought than this desperate clashing of jealousy and despair, he had dashed through the crowd of pilgrims who were waiting for the dawn, gone back to the Fort, and given the word.

In the excitement which followed, spreading swiftly from his own, he had not--and it was typical of the man that he did not--forget Lance Carlyon's friendliness; a more equal friendliness than that of most. There was no need to drag him into the quarrel, the more so because the disloyalty of the Sikh pioneers was doubtful. They might complicate matters at the beginning. So he had locked and barred them into the inner courtyard, out of the way.

But Captain Dering, he knew, was outside! Let him be alone with his troopers, as he, Roshan would be alone with them! Let them both try their influence; let them try conclusions on these terms. That was but fair.

This first step, however, necessitated others. The original plot, with its waiting for the dawn, its cumbrous mechanism of keys, and pilgrims, and God knows what, was not to his liking. He meant to fight. And if, as the conspirators had asserted, some of the warders were friends hand and foot, his men could crack the nut of the gaol in half an hour. The sooner the better.

Pidar Narâyan, he knew, had recognized him, and he was a fox for wiliness. Then, Captain Dering must be after him even now. And Dillon-*sahib* might be on the alert any time. So the *coup de main* must come at once. As to what might follow, that might be after the fashion of Meerut in '57, or not. Who could tell the end of anything? The beginning would be an opportunity for fair fight between him and a thief. Once more the epithet "fair" scorched and shrivelled him with vague remorse, not for Laila--she was but a woman, a woman who had played him false and who deserved the worst--but for that shot in the dark.

For there were two Roshans, warring fiercely in heart and brain.

Then, after his mad, reckless ride to the gaol, the first realities had come to him in the sight of Dr. Dillon, standing with the light in his hand to welcome friends; and in the sound of those two snap-shots proclaiming foes.

Why? The question had come swiftly. What quarrel had he with Dr. Dillon? Or with Eugene Smith, whose tall, gaunt figure showed behind the other? Eugene Smith, who must have brought his wife, his child, with him!

The horror, the terror of what might come, swept through the quondam prize pupil of a mission school; the horror, the terror, in the remembrance of the Great Mutiny, which is, alas! a legacy of wrong to young India. Which ties her hand and foot; which makes those who are worthy of the name shrink instinctively from anything which may rouse the underlying savagery--the unavoidable savagery--of their countrymen.

Could he hold his troopers? Could he be sure? He had come to curse. Was it too late to bless?

Then the memory of Laila--the whole hateful tale which was irrevocable--struck him hopeless. He was damned utterly; he could not escape.

He sat rigid as a statue on his horse for a second; then with a wild fury gave the orders for his troopers to dismount and force the gates.

"Your slaves, *Nawab-sahib!*" had come the answer, making him smile proudly. *That*, at any rate, could not be stolen from him *now*. *Now* he could fight and die in what should have been his real position.

Yet, once more, when the search-light had come to throw that group of excited men hacking and hewing at doors closed by authority into significant black-and-white relief, that doubt had returned; that desire to be on the side, once more, of men like Dr. Dillon, whose bold resolve to be alone responsible for his gaol, which the warder's tale revealed, filled him with admiration.

But that sudden throwing up of a trooper's hands, that sidelong stumble into death, had left Roshan cruel as death itself; for the man thus killed had been to him as a brother.

So he had gone on with a fresh impulse towards revenge, and for a time found forgetfulness in the excitement, the action. For though the first gate, that one giving on the open sort of porch, had yielded, almost at once, to the troopers outside and the warders within, the second, barring the arched tunnel, was a tougher job. It was not until this had given way, and the attacking party were completely sheltered from the fire of the little garrison on the roof, that there was leisure for that thought to return: "What am I doing? Why am I doing it?"

No man, it may be said broadly, ever fights without feeling that the battle is an appeal to a tribunal beyond himself, and Roshan did not feel this. Then the remembrance of the woman, the child, upstairs came persistently, burdened by the weight of that past tragedy which, in India, it is impossible to forget. And this was a woman who had always been courteous to him, a child to whom he had given toys.

What was he doing?

The men were at work on the last, the strongest gate, with every tool they could find. Not many, for Dr. Dillon's forethought had left them before barred doors everywhere. The delay had already been great; would be greater. They must be close now on the lines of the original plot, at which Roshan had laughed, for the dawn was showing faintly--a mere promise of light to come--in the east. And the storm was passing. The dull reverberations of faint thunder were lost now in the cries, the blows of those at work trying to batter down the iron bars.

A sudden distaste--more than regret or repentance--came to Roshan as he stood silent, watching blow after blow; a sudden doubt.

Which was the right? No man worth calling a man ever fights for anything else; every man worth calling one fights for that. But which was right? Those men, hacking and hewing, or the little garrison upstairs?

There were no such searchings of heart there, at any rate; no question as to what they were doing, though at that exact moment they were engaged in the trivial occupation of drinking tea.

Muriel Smith had made it, at Dr. Dillon's suggestion, against this very pause; this "*cease firing*" which he had foreseen. And in the making of it she had used a continental tea-basket which more than once had been her companion on the Brindisi *route*. Dr. Dillon had laid hands on it in his foraging, and as she had boiled the kettle, the rush and roar of a train racing through the peaceful French champagnes had seemed to be in her ears, instead of that rush and roar of blows and shouting which was now rising from every part of the gaol; though the prisoners were still helpless for evil in their sections.

So the three men, haggard, anxious, drank their tea in silence, hastily; yet with a curious insistence, as if the triviality gave them a hold on things familiar, things beyond this midsummer-night's dream of madness. But the child chattered as she munched a biscuit; chattered of the charms of this strange picnic on the "*woof, in the dark with oo's nighty an' s'ippers only.*"

The unconscious little voice struck a chill to the men's hearts, but the woman smiled, as mothers can do when they wish to guard that blessed unconsciousness to the last; the unconsciousness of which they are guardians by right.

"We are doing as well as could be expected," remarked Dr. Dillon, suddenly, with a quaint professional reminiscence; then added, "I wish to God, though, I knew what my prisoners were up to--those solitary cellers are on my mind--I believe the convalescents could dig them out with the cook-room platters and ladles. I ought to have thought of that. But, as I say, we are doing very fairly well--your light, Dering, was a godsend."

Eugene Smith looked up sharply, almost as if he meant a disclaimer; then he gave a brief assent. "Yes! but *that* will be more of a godsend still--it is the dawn!"

He pointed to that faint promise of light in the east, and Vincent Dering's eyes followed his hand with the doubtful look of one sick to death, as he watches the long weary night merge once more into another long weary day of certain pain. There was an utter hopelessness in it.

"Yes," he echoed slowly, "that is the dawn."

"Carlyon said the attack was planned for dawn, didn't he?" asked the doctor, deliberately

helping himself to another lump of sugar, deliberately trying to keep the pulse beats of those around him as near normal as might be--and there had been something beyond it in Vincent's voice. "They must have meant to use the keys that brute Kishen Rao made off with. I wonder what it was that started the show prematurely?"

"Do you think it was premature? Why?" put in Eugene Smith.

"We should have had some of the townspeople, some of the pilgrims otherwise."

"Perhaps the storm"--began Vincent.

The doctor shook his head. "If they had meant to come they would have come. Of course now, with the wind blowing straight off us, they can't possibly hear."

He paused and listened, for a sudden silence had fallen on the turmoil beneath, and out of it came an all too familiar sound, the clank of leg irons. Some of the prisoners, therefore, had managed to break out of their dormitories; or were these the solitary cellers?

"I wish Carlyon would turn up," he muttered, almost petulantly, "it's our only chance--"

But there was to be another; for, from below, a voice rose loud and clear.

"Dr. Dillon! I have no desire to hurt you or yours, but I warn you that, if you persist, I am not responsible. Open the gates, and you shall have a safe conduct--for--for everybody."

George Dillon was on his feet at once, but Captain Dering stopped him; his eyes ablaze.

"What shall I tell him, Dillon?" he said sharply. "I'll take my orders from you--you're in charge; but that man is under mine. What shall I say?"

Dr. Dillon gave one glance at the woman and the child. "Tell him to be universally damned," he answered; and Eugene Smith, husband and father, nodded acquiescence.

Roshan Khân was standing in full view as Vincent Dering stepped up to the parapet. His face was raised; there was almost an appeal in it. But every atom of that, every atom almost of humanity, vanished as he recognized his captain. His hand went instinctively to his revolver.

Then a thought seemed to come to him. He drew himself up proudly, and waited for the answer.

It came, keen as a knife.

"*Risaldar!* draw off your men and return to barracks, or I'll shoot you as a mutineer."

There was half a second's silence; then a wild laugh: "Close up, men, rush that gate--forward!"

The words and the crack of Vincent's revolver--the bullet of which, aimed too high, passed through Roshan's turban--were almost lost in the answering yell. But the *risaldar* stood his ground for a second, then coolly sought shelter.

That was over! They were quits now for the fair fight. And fate had been kind. He had unwittingly offered this man--his greatest enemy--a safe conduct; and it had been refused, luckily. Well! let Vincent Dering take the whole consequences. The blood of one woman was already on his head; so would be the blood spilt here. He, Roshan, would need have no further scruples.

So, as if it had gained strength from the brief respite, the turmoil recommenced; and now Roshan Khân's voice could be heard urging the men on. And there were answering shouts from different parts of the gaol.

George Dillon frowned. "They mean business now. And I fancy I hear pounding at the left section door. If so we shall have the solitary cell men--my worst lot, of course--out in the courtyard before long. Dering--can you hear anything?--there's such a confounded noise--"

Vincent, who was standing at the top of the stairs which led to the ten-foot drop, ran down a few steps and listened. Then he looked up quickly and nodded.

"They are there. The door's shaking. How many of them are there?"

"Two dozen or thereabouts; and the convalescents, of course. That's nothing--if they haven't got their leg irons off! We ought to settle most of them before they can help with the door. Still, I wish Carlyon would turn up."

A sudden hurry and urgency had come to the struggle, and Dr. Dillon passed restlessly to the other side of the roof. The sky was lightening faintly. More because the dust had sought dust again, the earth earth, than from any increase of light; and so the broad ray of the search-light, widening as it went, lost itself in the distant darkness, and there was nothing to be seen riverwards. But close at hand two men--one in a warder's uniform--were running towards the gaol, shouting.

The doctor was back to the inner parapet in a second. "Look out! they've got the keys now--not of this door, but some of the sections--and the alley. The game's up unless Carlyon--Mrs. Smith, please--you had better go into the turret--we shall be shooting free--"

Eugene, who had been standing beside her, laid his hand on her shoulder. "Yes, dear!" he said gently; "go inside--it will be better for Gladys--and for me--"

Muriel turned white, but stood quite firm, quite calm. "Come, little girlie," she said, holding out her hand to the child. "You've had your tea--it's bedtime--I can't have you sitting up all--" she broke down a little, partly because she was passing Vincent, and he, busy loading various rifles and revolvers, kept his eyes studiously from her. But Gladys did not choose to pass her friend in this fashion. She paused, a dainty little figure in a blue dressing-gown, like her mother, and with the same fluffy golden curls about her coaxing, delicate little child's face.

"Dood-night, Derin' darlin'," she said. "I'm so glad 'oo's here, an' so's--"

Something that was not all desire to check that formula made the man pause, too, to lift her gently, and kiss her.

"Good-night, Gladys. You mustn't be frightened at anything, you know. You've got to be a brave girl--haven't you?" The coaxing face was close to the haggard, haunted-looking one.

"If 'oo's goin' to be brave, Derin' darlin', I'll be brave too. Is 'oo, dearest?"

The haggardness vanished.

"I think so, little one. Good-night." He put the child down hastily, at a crash. The moment for courage had come.

"Shoot as straight as you can!" shouted the doctor. "The section door's gone. Let 'em have it!"

The door had gone, indeed; and in a second the courtyard beneath them was half full of naked, desperate men; the worst characters in the gaol.

"Pick off the ones nearest the gate--don't let 'em touch the bolts--it's good for another ten minutes if we can keep them from it," came the doctor's voice in jerks, as he leant over the parapet just above the centre of the door below, and carried out his own orders with deadly effect; though his heart sank when he saw that some of the prisoners were unironed--or rather unironed on one leg, and that they were armed with the other iron; a deadly enough weapon at close quarters. Besides, it meant more treachery. It meant a previous filing of the ankle-fetters; and if others in the remaining sections were as free--

He shot quicker, steadier, while Eugene Smith and Vincent, one above the other on the top of the stair, did the same, taking the intruders on the flank. It was growing lighter every instant, the air was clearer, the breeze of dawn was sweeping the smoke of the rifles riverwards, the great white wheel of the gaol was growing broader in its outlines, the shadows were shrinking. But the storm seemed still there, in the ceaseless reverberations.

"They're up to something in the far corner!" called Eugene. "What is it, Dillon? You can see better."

The doctor ceased firing for a second, and ran farther down the parapet.

"The keys! the keys!" he shouted back. "They are trying to pass in the keys! Shoot the devils--those in the corner! Don't let 'em--or the gaol is gone!"

So, for the next minute, it was deadly work down in that corner by the crevice through which some unseen hand was thrusting something. Three times a man, clutching at the prize, fell in a heap ere he touched it. Then a fourth pitched forward against the doors with the keys in his hand, and a fifth, groping for them, rolled over on his side with them hidden under his dead body. And from outside the gate came rendings, and crashings, and yells; from above, that call, "Shoot straight, or the gaol's gone!"

Muriel crept out from shelter, possessed once more by that frantic desire to see to the very end, and stood looking down on those two on the stairs. She gave a faint cry when Vincent flung his rifle away, and ran down to that ten-foot drop for revolver practice. At the sound, her husband gave one quick look up, and followed suit.

But their own success was against them. The growing pile of the wounded formed a barricade, behind which a man, squirming with covetous hands among the dead and dying, found what he sought.

"He's got them! Stop him! stop him!"

There was a fusillade, the man dropped; but the keys were in another hand--another--another--passing outwards from the crush--outwards towards that low door at the end of the narrow alley.

Without a word, Vincent, revolver in hand, let himself drop on the heads below.

"Oh, don't, Vincent, don't!" came a woman's voice; and at the sound, another man gave that swift look up once more, and followed suit.

"Let them be!" said Dr. Dillon, sharply. "Let them do what they can; it is about the only chance." And still, as he spoke, he kept singling out a foe and firing.

The chance, even with his help, was a poor one in that crowd, where there was always another dark hand to snatch at the prize, and pass it nearer to the door--that door which was the key to so much!

Yet, the crush through which they fought lessening, those two Englishmen found themselves with the straight alley before them for a race. A race against three men, without arms, but without irons; and with a fair start. While close behind was the crush--the crowd!

It was nothing but a race, now, since the revolvers had done their worst, had fired their last shot; a race with the hope--if Vincent could come up with those three--of using a Goorkha *kukri*, which he had thrust into the yellow silk sash he wore instead of a waistcoat beneath his red jacket--thrust it therewith an ugly frown as a last argument for his foes, when he had seen it lying among the pile of miscellaneous weapons Dr. Dillon had foraged from the Smiths' house. It had a dainty ivory handle--Vincent had given it to Mrs. Smith himself, and its last use had been to cut the pages of a fashion paper--

It had a sterner job now.

But Vincent was behind; a yard or two--no more. He had fired one more shot before beginning the race, and Eugene's legs were longer. Yet the yard meant all things, and he knew it; so as he ran, his hand sought the knife.

"Look out, Smith! look out!" he called. "I'll chuck you my *kukri*; get on and job them; I'll keep the others back--a bit."

As he spoke, a glittering curve sped from his hand to the other man's feet.

Then he pulled up and faced the crowd behind with his clubbed revolver.

The lane was very narrow. Three men could barely breast it shoulder to shoulder. Surely one could bar it by swift blows and slow retreat! For a time, at any rate--time for the opening and shutting of a door! He could but try.

"Oh! what is he going to do?" gasped the woman who was watching.

"I appose he's going to be brave, mum," said the child, who clutched at her hand, watching, too, with great, wide, uncomprehending eyes.

But the man beside them held his breath.

So retreating, step by step, Vincent Dering kept the crowd back, lured the crowd on, safe--so far! For these, the first, the swiftest, were naturally the unironed, therefore, the unarmed. But there were others, forcing their way to the front, who would be harder to deal with.

Vincent threw his head back and wondered how Eugene was faring; for he dared not turn his face from his task even for a second.

Had those three been caught up? Had the *kukri* helped?

It had. And one of those three had fallen before a flash, as of light.

And another!

But the third had the key in the door; had turned it, when Eugene struck him from behind. With a wild yell he flung his full weight on the door; it burst open, and the two fell headlong into the tower beyond.

But only for a second. Eugene Smith was up again, had the key out, and in on the further side.

"All right!" he shouted; "make a rush for it! I'm ready!"

Vincent Dering gave one sharp look round. The door was not four yards from him, but the crowd was not one. There was no time. "Shut it," he called, "I'm all right."

Eugene Smith stood uncertain; the door ajar.

The keys! ah! what could he do with the keys if he went back to help--and if not--

"Oh! please shut it, Smith! there's a good fellow; please."

The four yards were two now, were one. Then slowly the door closed, and Vincent had his back against it.

"Oh, Vincent! Vincent!"

The agonized cry echoed above all other cries, but only for an instant; the next, George Dillon's hand was gagging the lips which uttered it.

"Hush!" he said fiercely. "Can't you let him forget for these last few minutes that there is such a thing as a woman in the world. Hush! I say."

And a great hush came. The sound of blows, of iron clashing on iron, and falling with a dull thud on something softer, seemed to fill the world and leave room for nothing else.

Nothing except a softer sound still. A shuddering moan, as a woman slipped to her knees, and covered her face with her hands; then slipped lower still to the ground, in a heap.

But the child looked at her mother, surprised.

"Doesn't 'oo like Derin' darlin' to be brave, dearest?" she asked, in a concerned little voice.

CHAPTER XXV

DAWN

Had an hour passed, or twain? Ninian Bruce could not tell. It seemed to him that he had been kneeling for a lifetime, there on the altar steps beside the dying girl, with the glittering red-and-gold drapery trailing to the white marble, and opening to a white breast stained red--a brighter red!

A long lifetime; long as his own; that long life in which he had seen, had felt, so much.

For as he waited for her inevitable death, his mind had followed that long life of his own, year after year, day after day, hour after hour. And everywhere it had seen a woman's eyes, a woman's soul, looking back from a soul, from eyes, that should have been a man's.

Yes! the keynote of that long life had been the love of a woman. Passionate love, absorbing mind as well as body, claiming its reward in kind; as such love always does.

In kind!

There lay the whole difference between *anathema* and *beata*. They were both *karma*, or desire!

One of the girl's white feet slid with a silvery jingle of its anklet to the next step, and, as he replaced it to a more comfortable position, a chill struck to his heart as he remembered what such chiming had meant in the past history of the world. The measure which that provoked was--*anathema*. That--disguised, palliated, refined in a thousand ways--was one kind.

And the other?

The memory of his own past surged to his brain as he bent over the girl's whitening face and scanned it narrowly. How like the face was to that other one, now that coming death had sharpened the full, youthful curves. He had noticed the likeness often--it had been clear when Laila had worn the old Italian--Beatrice's--dress. But not so clear, not half so clear, as when in this--this almost shameless one--she had said--"I only want--him."

It might have been Margherita speaking,--Margherita, who had wanted a man's soul.

And she had had one.

That was the other kind. But both were desire; the desire which drove humanity from Paradise, and keeps it vainly seeking for one still.

Saturated as he was with the mysticism of the East and West, these thoughts came to him, dreamily, making him feel curiously aloof from himself. The pity of it filled him, and brought a pity for the dying girl also; the girl who had failed to find a paradise in this world, and was seeking a new road to it; seeking it alone. The only thing she craved in all God's earth to make

that paradise-gone! Priest as he was, the humanity in him rose in passionate hope that she should not wake to the consciousness of this. What good would it do? Let her enter the shadows in peace.

But as he wished the wish, her head, which had been resting on his arm, turned to the touch of it, and her smooth cheek nestled closer to what it found.

"Kiss me, Vincent," she said, and her voice came back full, rich, round, to make the claim. "Kiss me before you go, dear!"

The old man gave a slight shiver, and was silent.

"Vincent!" came the voice again; "you *are* there, aren't you? You wouldn't leave me--now--surely?"

There was another silent pause, and then, silent still, Father Ninian stooped, and the old lips and the young ones met in a lover's kiss. And as they met, he knew that in that kiss lay the great renunciation of his life; that henceforward there would be no woman waiting in Paradise for him; that the spiritual presence had gone from his life like the bodily presence. That Margherita was Juliet, and Juliet, Margherita!

"That's nice," murmured Laila, softly; "that's nice."

Her head settled to his arm again, and the silence went on. On and on, till he stooped lower to listen for an unheard breath; then lower still to shift that head from his arm to the ground. For the need of a human touch, a human sympathy, had gone forever.

He made the sign of the cross over the dead body, rose to his feet unsteadily, and looked about him, dazed, uncertain. In truth, he felt all his years for the first time; felt that his last hold on life had somehow gone from him in that kiss; that something more than one woman lay dead before him.

Then the sight of Akbar Khân, still rocking himself backwards and forwards, a perfect pendulum of protesting innocence and helpless remorse, roused the old priest to the present. He took up the rapier he had laid aside in crossing the chapel, and passed over to where the old eunuch was bemoaning the high-handedness of fate. It was a tyranny, indeed! Who could have foreseen such an ending to a very ordinary intrigue? Who could even have dreamt of it? Had not men and women loved and met, thus, since the beginning of time?

So, to the sinner's outraged experience of life and love came the saint with his, and with the face and sword of St. Michael and All Angels.

"Tell me the truth," he said sternly; "and tell it quickly, for there is no time to lose."

In truth there was not much to tell. It was all so simple, viewed as a whole; so complex in detail. And, as he listened, the anger left Pidar Narâyan's face wistful, wondering. More so than ever at the last mumbling excuse.

"It all comes, *Ge-reeb-pun-wâz*, from the Almighty having made the Missy-*baba* so like her sainted ancestress--Anâri Begum--on whom be peace."

Anâri Begum! On whom be peace! Her sainted ancestress, on whom be peace!

He stood for an instant looking towards the Altar, towards the dead girl; then he echoed under his breath, "On whom be peace!"

That was the end.

Peace on those women who had loved and died; and on the men who had loved them--lived for them--perhaps died for them.

But for the rest who lived and loved still? A quick life seemed to come back to him at the thought of these, a desire to save them from death.

"Follow me," he said briefly to the old retainer; "it must be close on dawn--I must see what I can do."

So, still in his robes, with the blubbing old pantaloons--apostle of another cult--at his heels, he passed down the arched passage to the door at its end which opened on to the courtyard between the palace and the Fort. And as he went, his brain, confused as to the past, clear as to the present, was busy making plans for peace. So far as helping those at the gaol went, he knew himself to be powerless. Physically, a couple of old men--mere shadows of men--could give no help, and he could not hope for influence there, among the Hosts of the Devil. But here in the city, among those Hosts of the Lord--the pilgrims for whom he had always had a secret sympathy, who knew him, at least, by reputation--with whom, at least, he stood on common ground--he might have some. He could but try; try to persuade some, at least, of the great mass of seekers after the "Cradle of the Gods" to go on their way in peace when the dawn came; try to save some of them from following a wrong road.

The door was slightly ajar; he widened the chink and looked out with a sinking heart over the courtyard with its raised union-jack of paths. Much larger than the yard about the Pool of Immortality, it was crammed from end to end now with a crowd, the first look at which told him that his chance of a hearing was small indeed, for the dawn was closer than he had thought for amid the shadows of the chapel, and the grey glimmer of coming light showed him once more a sea of upturned eager faces. But the patience of the previous dawn was gone. They were restless now, restless with the vague, uncertain restlessness which is so dangerous in a crowd, which tells that the fuel for the flame is only awaiting a match, any match, to fire it. And there were many only waiting to be struck. The next instant might bring one. Father Ninian felt this instinctively, felt that here in this courtyard lay the mine which the returning troopers, the desperadoes from the gaol, were to fire first. All Eshwara might rise afterwards, but the great danger lay here, must be grappled with here. But how?

Not by words. The ear of a crowd is always difficult to gain, unless the eye is taken first, and a man had both already. For aloft, on the barrel of the big old gun which centred the square, *jogi* Gorakh-nâth was expounding their wrongs to the pilgrims, their inevitable damnation if the wrath of the Gods was not instantly appeased. His wild, weird figure, in all its nakedness, its austerity, could be seen above the little circle of lamps which his immediate supporters held upwards at arm's-length. And above his head, like a canopy, drifted the wisps of tired earth-atoms which were being driven sideways by the breeze of dawn as they fell in their search for rest. For the storm was over, their brief ambition for something beyond mere earth was past. Wisps, which, as they swept over the circling lights, took a lurid glow, then faded into the dim shadows again.

And something else caught the light redly. The chaplet of human skulls, the dread Mother's necklace, which the *jogi* swung from one hand to the other as he called for blood--for blood to appease Her--the Mother of all--the Eternal Womanhood!

Since without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.

The tenet of all religions echoed into the ear of the crowd, the strange demoniacal figure, in its lurid setting, held its eye. What chance was there for a single voice? None.

Yet something must be done. For the dawn was nigh. Every instant the light grew. Any moment might bring that inrush of evil from the gaol which would breed violence among these still peaceful folk; the ignorant, helpless folk who were being held captive by words against the coming of that inrush.

Suddenly, for a second, the attention of the crowd wavered. A tall man in the white dress of a Europeanized native had been hoisted to the shoulders of some others, not far from the *jogi*, and so, from this coign of vantage, prepared to harangue the people.

"'Tis Ramanund," said someone close to where Father Ninian stood in the shadow of the door. "He is Brahmin, and a scholar above scholars. Mayhap he will tell us what to do these times, when all seems wrong. There is no harm in listening."

Nor good either. For the first words of that appeal of culture to ignorance were drowned in a fiendish laugh, a frenzied rattling of the dread chaplet, a loud defiance.

"Hold thy peace, *Baboo-jee!* What is blood to thee, who hath no God to whom thou canst give it? But we have, brethren. These be Her drinking-cups, the skulls of men like ourselves. Let us give Her pleasure, brothers, and have blessing from Her hands; not cursing, as thou hast had, Ramanund, whose head should still be shaven, whose touch unclean from the loss of a woman."

The allusion to the death of Ramanund's wife roused an instant murmur of assent from those who were of the city, and they passing the tale on to others, the murmur swelled to a roar which effectively drowned the rest of Ramanund's advice.

But Father Ninian, still at the door, still uncertain, could hear a man who had been buckling on his pilgrim's sandals as if for a start, say, as he stood up and thrust them back to his waistcloth:--

"Well! I, for one, go no further without remission, or the blood which brings it. As *jogi-jee* saith, no man should risk the woman's cursing. No man can hold his own against that."

"He hath a young wife in his house, see you, and all know what that means," sniggered a neighbour.

But a third voice broke in gravely, "Young or old, what matter? Women sit ever on the knees of the Gods, as we men have sat on theirs, seeing they are the mothers of us all. So, mother or wife, we cannot escape them."

"*Baba-jee* speaks truth," assented another bystander, "and *jogi-jee* also. If She needs blood, She must have it, seeing She is Woman. As for *him*? Let him be silent. He hath no God. No blood sacrifice, no remission of sins. Let *him* speak who hath them."

There was a faint sound as of the closing of a door, and beyond it, in the darkness of the arched passage, an old voice said, with a curious note of gladness in it, "Follow me, quick, Akbar;

there is not a moment to be lost. The dawn has come!"

It seemed to have come to Pidar Narâyan's face as he knelt hurriedly once more beside the body of the dead girl, to fold her dead hands decently as if in prayer, to cover the dead feet with the crimson draperies, the dead face with the flimsy, glittering veil--the veil which hid nothing of its beauty--which struck the keynote of the whole.

"On whom be peace!" he whispered as he rose, stretching out his thin old hand in benediction; and as he said the words, the vision came to him of a whole world which had loved, and sinned, and gone on its mysterious quest for something beyond love. A world to which he had said farewell with a kiss.

He passed on to the Altar, and with swift, steady hands opened the sanctuary, and took out the treasure it contained; a star-shaped, star-rayed pyx, set with jewels, relic of the days when singing-birds that sang of themselves, and such like things, with many another, had come to Eshwara from Italy.

"Take the candles from the altar, Akbar," he said, "and walk in front--just in front, you know--as you used to walk."

The old courtier mumbled "*Ge-reeb-pun-wâz*," with a caper of alacrity. In his confusion, his resentful remorse, it was a relief to return to pomp--to servility.

So, with that Bodily Presence which, till then, had always brought the thought of the lost paradise of a woman's love with it, in his hands, Father Ninian and his strange acolyte, priest of another cult, passed swiftly out of the chapel, leaving the Altar dark, bereft of its treasure; leaving the dead woman, bereft of her treasure also, lying in a glitter of gold and crimson on the Altar steps. Passed on a mission of peace to the living; on the chance of gaining the ear, the eye, of that waiting crowd outside in the courtyard.

As he went rapidly, yet with the faltering step every now and again of one wearied by long journeying, down the arched passage, Ninian Bruce scarcely thought of success or failure. There was a wistful triumph in his face--he looked as a slave might look who dies in making himself free. He did not think even of the strangeness of the little procession. The night had been so full of strange things; but the dawn had come, and he had a message to give those waiting souls outside--the souls who were being kept back from the "Cradle of the Gods" by that fear of the Eternal Womanhood.

"Set the door wide, Akbar," he said, and then his voice merged into the "*Salutaris*."

So, as the crowd turned at the sound of the opening door, the sound of the chanting voice, it saw, raised above it, dim against an arched shadow, seen by the grey light of daybreak and the flicker of two tall tapers, a strange star-rayed cup shining in the clasped hands of a man. An old man in a strange dress, chanting a strange song. And the sight, by its very strangeness, its claim to something beyond familiarity, was not strange to that restless crowd, waiting for a sign, waiting for something not in themselves.

"What is it? What means it?"

The whisper came like the soft hush of a wave; and above it the chant rose clearly.

"'Tis Pidar Narâyan and his God!" said those of the city who knew, as they fell back instinctively from the raised path. And those who did not know followed suit in awed bewilderment, till the way was clear, and the little procession passed on slowly above the jammed mass of humanity, above the sea of upturned expectant faces.

"'Tis Pidar Narâyan, who went with my father," said one here and there. "Mayhap he goes now--let us see."

"Yea! let us see!" answered others.

That slantwise limb of the union-jack of raised paths which crossed from one corner to the other of the courtyard--from the door in the palace to the wide archway through which the pilgrims always passed on their way to the "Cradle of the Gods"--cleared itself by common consent, edged itself with a thicker throng of curious faces. Only in the middle it was barred by the big old gun, by the "*Teacher of Religion*" as its legend boasted, and by the man who claimed to be its mouthpiece.

For *jogi* Gorakh-nâth, recognizing his adversary, recognizing the danger of his influence, had slipped from his post above, and now stood before the gun, full in the path, defending it with frenzied wavings of his chaplet of skulls.

"Listen not, brothers!" he yelled. "*Jai Kali Ma!* Blood! Blood! Without blood is no remission of sins."

And now a new curiosity, a new interest, came to that crowd of mere men. What would happen? What would these two, mere men like themselves, do? Which was backed by divine

authority? That both claimed that authority was clear. It held its breath, partly from the desire for a sign from God, partly because of the desire which humanity always has for a sign of the best man. Let the two try which was the better.

So it waited, ready to approve either, till those two, the Eastern and the Western sacerdotalisms, met face to face, within two yards of each other, in the centre of the courtyard, on the platform before the "*Teacher of Religion*."

Then, not till then, Pidar Narâyan ceased his chant, shifted the pyx to his left hand, and with his right drew the rapier hidden till then by his long robes.

"*Aha, A-ha-a*," sighed the crowd approvingly. There would be a bodily as well as a spiritual fight, for *jogi-jee's* chaplet of skulls swirled dangerously for both attack and defence; since a swinging blow from it would kill a man, and its circling sweep keep him beyond sword-point reach.

Which would be the better man--the better weapon?

But Pidar Narâyan did not attack. He only stood, the pyx in one hand, the sword in the other--alternatives as it were--and called in a loud voice--

"Let me pass, *jogi* Gorakh-nâth!

"Let me pass I say!

"For I carry my GOD!"

Over the whole courtyard, waking now from shadow to light under the coming day, the claim echoed sharply; and the arrogance of it, the strength, the certainty of it, sank deep into the souls of those who heard it.

There was not a sound, not a movement; only a vast, breathless expectancy, and Pidar Narâyan's fine old face set like the nether mill-stone. Everything that had ever been in him--love, passion, faith, worldly wisdom, sympathy--the grit of the whole man--rose up and claimed the crowd.

"Let me pass!" he cried again, in absolute command, and this time the rapier, twisting like a snake, caught the chaplet of skulls in its upward swirl, a dexterous unexpected turn of the old fencer's wrist followed, sending it flying from the *jogi's* hand.

The next instant (the rope on which they were strung severed by the strain, by the rapier's edge), the skulls were clattering, bounding like balls, like useless toys, on the stone platform.

"*A-ha! A-ha!*" came from the crowd; but the sigh was but half content, and men looked at each other wonderingly. Since, no matter which priest was the better man, these were Mai Kali's drinking-cups.

The *jogi*, however, had fallen back a step, and Pidar Narâyan was in his place by the old gun. Pidar Narâyan and his strange God were now the "*Teachers of Religion*." What had they to say?

The crowd had not to wait long, for Father Ninian's voice, with that nameless ring in it which makes the orator and makes the audience, was already in its ears.

"Listen! Listen to me, for I carry in this cup the Blood of Sacrifice. The Victim required by your God and mine, by all the Gods, is here!

"We are free, brothers! you and I. The Eternal Womanhood hath had Her toll, in full. The Great Mother is appeased. There is no fear.

"Lift up your eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh your help, and follow me and my God, to find yours."

He pointed with the sword--as he paused a second for breath, for strength--to the mountains; to those far peaks which, now that the storm had ended, the earth-atoms returned to earth, had begun to show spectral in the dawn. To show shadowy, yet clear, with never a wreath of mist or a wandering cloud to hide the hollow whither the feet of millions had journeyed seeking righteousness, and journeyed in vain.

Faint and far they showed against the faint, far sky, but as Father Ninian pointed to them, a ray of light from the still unseen sun below the visible horizon of this world, a ray of light seeking perhaps another world among the stars, found the heights of the holy hills in its path, and dyed their snowdrifts red--blood red!

At the sight a roar rose from the crowd.

"*Jai Kali Ma!* She gives a sign! The sacrifice is there! She is appeased! He speaks the truth. Let us follow him and his God!"

"Ay! as my father did," cried one.

"And mine!"

"And mine!" assented some, while others forgot all save pilgrimage in the shout--

"*Râm, Râm, Sita Râm!*"

"*Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!*"

So, on that babel of sounds, Pidar Narâyan's voice rose steadily as, preceded by that ambling figure--strangest of all acolytes--he walked on, chanting the 121st Psalm:--

"*Levavi oculos meos in montes; unde veniet auxilium mihi.*"

The words were in an unknown tongue, the rhythm strange, but the spirit, the idea, were familiar. It was the song of someone seeking the "Cradle of the Gods," as they were.

"He carries his God, and that means all," said an old man, pushing his way to follow. "The other had none: how could he lead the way?"

"That is true," assented many, following suit.

And some, shrugging their shoulders, said, "He is mad. God has touched his brain. Then he goes the way our fathers went. They lingered not beyond the second dawn. Why should we?"

"*Râm! Râm! Sita Râm!*"

Thus, swiftly, the footfalls gathered in strength behind the little procession, and no one dared to stop it; not even the Mahomedan sentry at the Fort gate, to whom some of the agitators ran in their disappointment. He only laughed contemptuously; though his gravity returned somewhat at his recognition of old Akbar Khân.

"Lo! that is a new walking for him!" he muttered, in an awed voice. "Truly, folk are right when they say there is magic in these idolaters. Who would have deemed him pilgrim? Well! let him go, he and his mummery. We soldiers can do without priests and Hindoos!"

He twirled his mustache fiercely, and wondered when his comrades would return victorious from the gaol, and give the word for plunder. That was all he cared for.

"Ay!" assented an angry voice, joining the group, "we can do without the fools. There be plenty of wise men left."

"Plenty," put in another; "but their mood is different. See how they wander!"

It was true. The crowd had broken into groups, and from these, pilgrims, singly, or in smaller groups, were drifting after the lessening sound of that chanting voice. Not so much from any belief in Pidar Narâyan, not even because of his lead over, but because it was the old way; the way worn by the feet of their fathers, and their fathers' fathers.

So *jogi* Gorakh-nâth, who, now the coast was clear, had sprung aloft on the old gun, once more attempting to regain his empire, failed egregiously. The crowd passed him by till a big countryman, with a lumbering jest, asked him if he was sure he had picked up the right skull to put on his own shoulders. Then it laughed uproariously.

"Best come on to the Pool of Immortality," suggested a conspirator, consolingly, as he hurried past. "'Tis no use here. The fools have followed after strange gods and men. But at the Pool there are tens of thousands to one here; and they are weary waiting. Besides, 'tis nearer the gaol. Between the two success will lie."

"Yea," added another, "that was the first plan--the soldiers and the Fort spoilt it. But the Pool and the gaol remain."

Jogi Gorakh-nâth, with a scowl, gathered up his skulls to a bundle and followed hastily. He would at least be out of hearing of that chanting voice.

It had reached the last verse of its Psalm now, and faltered a little over the words:--

"*Dominus custodiat introitum tuum et exitum tuum:
ex hoc et usque in saeculum.*"

But the echo of the footsteps behind filled up the blanks.

CHAPTER XXVI

FOILED

On the gaol or the Pool of Immortality lay the hopes of those whom Pidar Narâyan had so far discomfited by his arrogant claim to stand between heaven and earth; in other words, to be in personal relations with the Great Awarder of gaols and immortalities, forgivenesses, and punishments.

But the stars in their courses, hidden though they had been by the storm-darkness, had used that very darkness to the due maintenance of law and order as they wheeled serenely to meet the coming dawn.

When Lance, for instance--his heart torn in twain by his desire to follow Erda's fate at all costs and his knowledge that, if he was to do the best for others he must leave her to face it alone--had struck down stream on Am-ma's strange craft, his sole intention had been to rouse the police camp, and secure what help he could for the gaol.

But the darkness set him another task. For, after drifting past the spit, whence he had meant to cut across by land to the bridge of boats, and so, creeping past the city, find the camp beyond it, he had lost himself absolutely in the maze of sand-banks and shallow channels which, when the river was low, as it was now, lay like a network between the deep stream of the Hara, and the deep stream of the Hari. Lost himself so utterly that, realizing his own bewilderment, he had called himself a fool for having lost himself!

A curious discouragement came to him. Yet it made him more dogged and persistent, even while the hopelessness of finding his way grew every second. Surely, thought he, he could not be such a fool as to fail!

Sometimes a sudden belief that he really had had some faint indication of his bearings would make him put all his young strength into the paddle, until once more a soft, yielding, yet irresistible, impact came to tell him that he had failed again, that he was on another sandbank, and another, and another! The dull concussion of them seemed to pass into his brain; he found himself fumbling on almost aimlessly, despite his doggedness, his mind busy with imagining the things which might be happening in the dark around him.

For all he knew close by--

There lay the sting! It was suffocating to be set, as it were, in the solid darkness like--he thought of a fly in amber, the birds he had limed in his boyhood, finally of a death mask. That was more like it--he felt as the corpse must feel--clogged, hampered, helpless!

In such conditions minutes seem hours; and Lance, in reality, had not been drifting about for half of one before the certainty that his mission must inevitably be useless unless he could fulfil it more expeditiously, made him resolve on trying conclusions with the river at first hand. He was a good swimmer. As he told himself this, the first pulse of gratitude he had ever felt for the big bully who had chucked him, a small boy in his first term at Harrow, into "Ducker" to take his chance, came to him; for those few minutes of despairing effort had taught him more than mere swimming; they had taught him to trust himself in water.

More, at any rate, than in a beastly contrivance made of beds and footballs, with no stem, no stern, and a devilish habit of spinning in every eddy like a teetotum!

The mere condemnation of Am-ma's craft, being a prelude to better things, raised his spirits. He flung off his clothes, and, knowing he could not hope to keep his revolver dry, improvised a waistcloth out of the silk sash he wore instead of a waistcoat, in which to stick the hunting-knife that was his only other weapon. As he did so, he thought of the deer the knife had killed; as men think idly, irrelevantly, of such trivialities when their attention is really concentrated on something that is, as yet, outside experience. And Lance, as he slipped into the water, knew himself prepared to swim or wade, but knew nothing else.

So, doggedly as before, and infinitely quicker, he went on through the darkness; sometimes feeling himself in the cool water, sometimes finding his feet on warm sand, sometimes parting a way, he knew not where, through the low tamarisk and high grass marking an island. If he could

have guessed which island, or even known which way his face was set, these light swishing touches might have been guides; but he knew nothing.

Until, after a time, a faint far glow, a mere suspicion of something not outer darkness, showed on his left. Even so, he could not guess whether that meant the gaol side, or the city side of the rivers. If the former, could the gaol have been fired by those devils?

The thought made him set his teeth, and, dry sand being beneath his feet, run on recklessly towards the glow.

Only for a yard or two, however; then he pulled up short, amazed to find that it was not far, but near; that it came from the ground, from a leaping fire of tamarisk branches within a stone's throw of him. A step or two more, in fact, showed him a cooking-pot, the remains of some food, a familiar fishing-net, and a chrysalis-looking figure wrapped in a blanket and half-buried in the sand. One of the fisher folk, by all that was lucky! If anyone could tell, they could.

It was only a slender stem of tiger-grass which snapped under his feet, but the noise was sufficient. The sleeper sprang to his like a wild animal, the blanket falling from him, one lithe arm making for the long spear stuck in the sand beside him.

Gu-gu! The missing Gu-gu!

Lance had him back in his sand-bed before hand and spear met. There was no struggle. Gu-gu, knowing himself helpless, lay limp, slack, every muscle proclaiming capitulation; in so far showing himself something less than a wild animal, which struggles till it dies, reckless of odds. But, in truth, Gu-gu, with the certainty of speedy extinction before him, due to that cursed ghost, had given in to fate utterly, all round. Death would come when it came. All that remained, therefore, was to make others suffer if he could. Especially those who were responsible for altering the currents of the river. With one of these on top of you, this was impossible; but time might bring opportunity.

"You devil!" cried Lance, throttling the abject jelly by way of emphasis, "you know all about this business, of course; but now I've found you, you'll have to do mine,--or I'll kill you. Do you understand? Now, which way is the town?"

Gu-gu pointed in the direction whence Lance had come. The latter frowned, realizing that it was impossible to know if the brute spoke truth, but that, unfortunately, he must be trusted.

"Then get up," he said curtly, taking care to keep the jelly within reach of his knife, "and show me the way there. I'll give you a hundred rupees if you do; and if you don't--" He gave the yielding flesh an explanatory prick.

"Does the *Huzoor* mean the Pool of Immortality?" asked Gu-gu, affably; and the words made Lance remember that fruitless waiting for the water.

"Ah! you *did* manage that swindle, did you?" he replied savagely, "and of course you were camping out of the way. I see! No! I don't want to go there yet. To the bridge! So quick, march! or swim; you can tell me about the other as we go along. It may be useful."

Another prick with the knife he held in one hand, while his other clutched firmly on Gu-gu's hemp-strung waist-belt of blue beads, started them. So they went on till the sand grew colder, less resistant, changed to water beneath their feet; then Lance's two hands--and the knife--came down on Gu-gu's bare back. "Strike out," he said briefly; "I'll help."

The two pair of legs and the one pair of hands forged ahead into the darkness none the less rapidly because the second pair of hands were resting,--with something in them--on yielding flesh. The fact indeed, or something else, seemed to make Gu-gu confidential. If the *Huzoor*, he said, with a shameless comprehension which made Lance inclined to use the knife then and there, wanted to give the alarm at the police camp, he was taking a long road to it. He, Gu-gu, could show him a shorter, if the *Huzoor* would trust him.

For a second Lance hesitated. He could not see the man's face; but there was a sort of cunning anxiety in the tone which was doubtful. Then, remembering that, short or long, he was equally at the man's mercy if he *chose to brave results*--though there seemed to be no reason why he should--he said quietly,--

"I told you to take the shortest."

"The *Huzoor* can dive?" asked Gu-gu. "He should, since he swims so strong."

"Dive!" echoed Lance. "Yes, why?"

Because the short way, Gu-gu explained, was by an underground passage which could be only reached from the river. Undoubtedly the *Huzoor* was right, the passage had to do with the miracle; but there must have been more than one miracle in the old days, since there was quite a network of canals and caves, which could be more or less flooded at will. All the river people knew of them, but few ventured in; there was nothing to be gained by doing so, *as a rule!* And the

dive to reach the passage was long and awkward. But if the *Huzoor* would trust--

"Go ahead!" broke in Lance, sharply. He *had* to trust; and time meant everything. Besides, even in diving, he could have his revenge on that sleek, yielding back!

For answer, Gu-gu altered his course with almost suspicious alacrity; though, once more, Lance could see no reason for treachery. A hundred rupees was a big bribe to a man who evidently had no personal interest in the matter; else, why should he have been on the island instead of in the row. But then Lance did not know of that call to death.

So, through the dark, the one pair of hands and two pairs of legs forged ahead till a sudden arrest of the former gave Lance a dull shock once more. But this time Gu-gu's voice came quite cheerfully: "The city wall, *Huzoor* This slave must feel if he goes up or down."

Apparently it was up, and after a few minutes of crablike edging Gu-gu's voice came again:--

"The tunnel is below, Protector of the Poor. Let the most noble take the longest breath he ever breathed, then strike down till this mean one's legs cease moving. The most noble one's must cease also. The rest will this dust-like one accomplish. Save the breath. *That* is in the *Huzoor's* own keeping. Therefore let him take time for filling; and when he is ready let him signal this slave with--with a knife-prick if he chooses!"

The cool grasp of the position made Lance smile, though the situation, he knew, was grave enough. That breath to be drawn might be his last; all the more reason why he could have wished it less full of sand!

For the storm was now at its fiercest. Even here out on the river, over the water, the air seemed solid. And it had a vibration that could be felt on the bare skin. As he drew in that long breath before trusting himself to the unseen man whom he held within reach of the grim signal--and something sharper should there be sign of treachery--Lance told himself that the water could scarcely be more suffocating than the air. Then--the sleek skin under his hand shrinking from the knife-prick--the two pairs of legs and the one pair of arms struck down.

It was almost a relief at first to get rid of the stinging dust in one's face; almost a relief not to breathe. But when, after a few seconds, the legs in front of him grew rigid, and nothing was left to be done save to hold on desperately to a waist-belt of blue beads and one's own breath at the same time, the sense of suffocation returned, and the question, "How much longer?" seemed to throb in his brain.

He gripped everything he had to grip tighter. But his own body seemed to grip his mind tighter still. He could feel the clutch of his veins--a whole corded network of them--could see them! A corded, pulsing network edged with prismatic light, sending stars into the darkness, beating time to the singing in his ears, to the fierce duel between the desire to gasp and the determination to hold on,--beating time to the confused rush of thoughts which ended in one--"This is drowning!"

It made his clutch tighter. Gu-gu, at least, should drown too. That was the last conscious thought. It merged into a frantic, insistent clamour for air! air! air! till something cold hit him full on the face and forced him into a quick, gasping cry, that left him senseless.

When he came to himself, as he did a moment or two afterwards, he was still clutching the waist-belt of blue beads, and the touch of it lulled him to an instant's sheer relief. The dive was over; they must be in the cave; the cold that had hit him in the face must have been the air.

But what was he lying upon? Surely rock! And the hand he moved to feel it brought the blue beads with it unresistingly.

Gu-gu! where was Gu-gu?

Gone! And the knife too. It had been used to sever the hempen string of the belt.

Curious. It might have been used for a different and more deadly purpose; but you could never count on what fellows would do--even when they were treacherous.

Lance thought this dreamily, before he realized more than the fact that he was alive; not drowned.

Then he sat up hastily and faced the truth that he was alone once more; alone in that network of underground passages and caves of which Gu-gu had spoken.

Was there any chance of his getting out of it? Not by the dive, certainly. Without help that was impossible. He set himself to remember what his guide had said in reply to the questions with which he had been purposely plied.

First, as to light. If Gu-gu was to be trusted the materials for this must be close at hand. Lance rose cautiously and felt about the ledge on which he lay and the walls of rock about him, and ere long came on what he sought. Flint and steel, a box of tinder, a bottle of oil, and a rag torch hung in an old bit of fishing-net to a peg that was driven into a crevice.

So far, good; and after a minute these enabled him to see that he was in a sort of vaulted well, half hewn out of rock, half built in with brick. It was filled to some three feet or so with water, except in one corner, where the flooring shelved down to an archway. There it was deeper. This must be the opening of the tunnel through which they had dived, and through which, doubtless, Gu-gu had escaped; for he was not likely to have braved the intricate passages without a light. This thought made Lance look to see how much oil the bottle contained.

There was only a mere dribble at the bottom. Plainly, therefore, he could pause no longer; so, instantly, without further thought, he waded across the pool and ran along the only passage which led from it. He had to stoop as he ran, and from the feel to his feet he guessed that the passage led upwards first, then downwards; apparently, too, in a perfectly straight line. The river, therefore, must be behind him, and he tried to make this point a fixed one, so as to give him some notion of his bearings.

After a hundred yards or so he emerged into a second cave or chamber, also nearly waist-deep in water. From this several passages opened, some too small to admit of a man passing through them. These, then, must be the canals of which Gu-gu had spoken; one of them, possibly, that which should have supplied the Pool with Immortality. The memory of that crowd of eager, patient faces, disappointed by such a miserable trick, made Lance feel pitiful; then his pity brought a sudden practical suggestion. Why not open the sluice, or whatever it was, now, and give the miracle? It would at least keep *some* of the crew quiet when it came, at dawn; the dawn which might be so fatal to quiet--the dawn which must, surely, be close at hand.

He raised the torch and saw, close beside him, a foot or two above the present level of the water, a clumsy closed stone conduit with an iron handle. It was a rude primitive tap, no doubt, by which the levels could be raised. Without further thought, he turned it, and smiled to find himself right, as water poured out, filling the vaulted chamber with sound. Then, without further pause, he passed on down the biggest of the passages leading from the chamber; since that seemed the most likely one. After a while, however, the passage narrowed, seemed in danger of ending altogether; so he harked back.

There was no longer any sound in the chamber when he returned to it, and the level of the water had risen almost to the floor of the passage in which he stood, wondering which of the other outlets he had best try. The choice was a case of sheer chance, of course, he told himself; a mere backing of one's luck. But, as he paused to make it, something cold struck on his feet, causing him to look down in sudden surprise.

The water was still rising. That must be stopped, anyhow, unless he was to be drowned out like a sewer rat.

He stuck the torch into a cleft in the rock beside him, hung the net to it, and swam over to the conduit, which was already submerged. But the handle which had turned so easily was stiff now; possibly because of the pressure of the water, possibly because there was some other rude mechanism of which he was unaware. Anyhow, after a few trials he realized that he was helpless until the water had found its own level.

But what was that? Who could tell? Would it rise, and rise, and rise, till it filled the whole place?

Who could tell?

It was not fear which clutched at his heart--only a vague self-pity; almost an amused wonder that this Immortality for others might bring Death to him.

He looked up into the vaulted arch above him, then to the, as yet, dry passages which he could just see, as darker arches of shadow.

Unless one of them rose abruptly to a higher level--and the chance that one did, or that he should find it, was remote--he would be wiser to stay here, and see what happened. The roof was at least higher.

He swam back to the torch and, holding on to the crevices of the wall, waited.

Still rising. He shifted the torch to a higher crevice and waited again, a dull curiosity taking possession of him.

Still rising. He wondered, suddenly, whether it would not have been better for him to have gone back the way he had come. The passage had certainly seemed to ascend, and it was a question of levels. That was all. A mere question of levels.

He shifted the torch again. It was dying down now, the rags showing charred, cindery. But as he fed it with oil and it flared up and smoked, the thought came to him that it was using air needlessly, making suffocation more imminent.

He blew it out deliberately. If a man had to die, he might as well die in the dark. He was glad, a moment later, of the darkness. It shut out reality and left him to dreams; to vague hopes, to kindly forgetfulness, to Erda's face. How plucky she had been! Well! even if he *had* to be drowned

like a rat in a sewer, he must not be behind her. The pathetic comfort of kindly memory, which with strange unreason--since it enhances the value of the life that is being left--makes the face of death seem less stern to poor humanity, came to him and absorbed him. If he died and she lived, she would not forget him; he knew that.

And still the water rose.

It must be rising now, he thought, in the Pool of Immortality, and the eager, patient faces that had been waiting for it so long must be showing glad in the grey light of the dawn.

For the dawn was coming to the world, though he would not see it. Strange, incomprehensible thought, even though the reality of it was so certain, so close. Incomprehensible? Say rather, impossible; frankly impossible! He could not be going to die!

He shifted the unlit torch to a still higher crevice--almost a ledge in the rock--and waited incredulously for the water to rise.

And as he waited in the dark, someone else in the grey dawn, to whom death was more familiar, to whom, in a way, it was the one great certainty of Life, was feeling the same frank incredulity at the thought of the immediate future.

For Dr. Dillon, when he found himself alone on the roof of the gaol gate with an unconscious woman and a child, knew that the end could not be far off. With Vincent dead, and Eugene cut off by the stern necessity for keeping that door shut, he could not hope for more than a brief, savage resistance--and then? Failure, inevitable failure, unless help came; and that seemed far as ever.

As yet, dazed by that closing of the door, that desperate, triumphant death of the man with his back to it--a death which had gained them nothing--the prisoners were still huddled together, crushed out of further action, at the far end of the alley. So the courtyard was clear, free from assailants. But that could only be for a minute or two. There was an ominous rending and hewing at the gate below; ere long those outside would be inside, and with a leader who would know what to do. So life could only be an affair of moments; yet it seemed incredible, more than incredible, that all his strong will and determination would not avail even to save those helpless creatures in his charge. He stooped hurriedly and lifted the still unconscious woman in his arms, carried her into the turret, closed the door on her and the child--frightened now for the first time at her mother's silence--and returned to wait and watch. It was all he could do for them, unless fate gave him a chance of appealing for them to Roshan Khân. But even then there could be no bargaining, no compromise, no surrender!

A sharp crash, a sudden rise in the babel of voices below, warned him that the gate had given, partially at least. The next instant a soldier or two, ignorant of that dead man with his back against the closed gate, ran lightly down the alley calling on the prisoners to make way. One of them was Roshan Khân; but George Dillon did not waste a cartridge even on him. He was reserving his fire for that storming of the broken stairs which must come when the assailants found themselves still foiled.

In truth Roshan Khân had this same storming in his mind as all he cared for, since it would pit him against his rival, against Vincent Dering, who he knew was on the roof. And so, with that odd acquired sense of honour, fair play, God knows what, he had been planning, as his men battered down the gate, how best to compass those fair odds which were necessary alike to his sense of justice and injustice--for the injustice of his own position cried aloud for proof that he was worth a better one. So he had settled to complete that liberating of the prisoners which, with the help of the keys, ought already to be in hand. This done, the general rabble would be eager for freedom, eager for plunder, eager to get to the town and raise it, eager for all things for which he cared no jot. Then would be his time. Then--he did not even try to formulate how--he could find himself face to face, at fair odds, with Vincent Dering. Wild memories of duels he had read about in western books, duels with others, who had nothing to do with the quarrel, looking on, occurred to him.

Yes! that would satisfy him. To have it out, till death!

He set his teeth as he forced a peremptory way through the crowd at the end of the alley, which hid the closed door until one actually stood beside it.

Then he stood transfixed, for he saw Vincent Dering's dead body still backed by that closed door, still guarding it, unarmed. There was a curious look of content in the dead face, and Roshan, grasping its meaning by intuition, turned from it with a curse, knowing himself forestalled, cheated.

"'Twas not our fault, *Khân-jee*," protested a voice, quickly; "the swine fought till the other one had locked the door in our faces, and so--"

Roshan struck at the voice fiercely. Not forestalled, not cheated, only; but outdone, conquered! His rival had died a hero's death, and he--he might live to be hanged!

A rage of despair, of despite, seized on him. His one real object gone, the whole hideous folly of the rest made him fling up his hands passionately as he dashed back to the gate, neither knowing nor caring what he was going to do next.

Storm that feeble garrison on the roof? those broken stairs, every crevice, every foothold in which stood out clear, easy, in the light of the search-ray? Was that a man's task?

Confused, dazed, he ran on, followed instinctively by the crowd, wondering what he would be at.

George Dillon, seeing the rush, covered the first foothold of the broken stairs with his rifle, and waited for a man to show on it.

But none came.

Just as the rush reached the courtyard, Eugene Smith's search-ray, having exhausted itself, went out, leaving, not darkness, but the grey mystery of dawn, in which for an instant all sound, all movement, seemed arrested. There was one utterly peaceful second, and then, from behind the splintered gateway, from the shadows of the tunnel, came a breathless voice:--

"Close the outer gate, sergeant; if you can, you have them in a trap! a regular trap!"

A trap!

The word reached those who had followed Roshan in his causeless retreat. Had he foreseen this? Was he escaping from the trap? Their eyes flew to the tunnel, but the light which, till then, had lit up its darkness, the swinging lamp by which the batterers of the gate had worked, was dashed down by someone's hand--a small, white hand--and there was nothing to be seen. Only that voice to be heard repeating, "They're in a trap; keep them there!"

Keep them! Not if they could fight their way into the open! The cry rose in a second:--

"A trap. Yea! a trap! Out of it! Outside, brothers, outside, where we can fight free!"

Roshan, who would have paused at this chance of fair resistance, was caught in the rush from behind, and found himself through the gap in the gate fighting desperately in the crowd, calling on his men to rally. But they had construed his half-frenzied flight from that look on Vincent Dering's face into a lead, and they were mixed up inextricably with the horde of undisciplined conspirators who, having been till now safe under cover of the tunnelled archway, yelled for the open, not so much in which to fight, but in which to run away.

The mere handful of men, whose number was fortunately hidden by the darkness, could never have prevented the rush, but a quick wit amongst them seized on a possibility, and the breathless voice called, "Let them pass--let them pass!"

So, in a second or two, amid confused yells, and mad slashings at friends and foes alike, the positions were reversed. The inside was out, the outside in, like Brian O'Lynn's breeches; and Dr. Dillon's first hint at what the amazing turn of affairs below him meant came with the words:--

"Barricade that gate. Sharp as you know how. They won't give us long."

"Is that you, Carlyon?" he called doubtfully, leaning over the parapet and peering into that grey mystery of dawn.

The figure he saw, a woman in a white dress and a scarlet mess jacket, made him doubt the evidence of his own eyes. But the answer in a woman's voice, with a quick breath in it, sent his back in something between a laugh and a sob.

"Then he isn't here! Oh! what can have become of him?"

There was no doubt that this was a woman!

CHAPTER XXVII

L'ADDIO DEL MARITO

Once outside, where they could discern friend from foe, the troopers instantly realized their mistake, and rallied round Roshan.

But it was too late for that now. As he stood, centring them, there was a wild contempt, a vague relief, in his face. He knew now where his sympathies lay. Not with these men, treacherous to their salt, but with those who could hold--who *had* held--their own against all odds. Yes! even with that dead figure, still with its back to the door that must not be opened.

The thought stung and seared like hot iron.

No! Not with that! not with that! That was--What?--

He could have killed himself for the unwavering testimony which every scrap of him gave to the heroism, the defiance of such a death. He knew he would give everything to die one like it; and he knew he could not--not *now*. He knew he must die a useless death, to save himself from a worse one.

"There is no real harm done, *Khân-jee*," broke in his lance-*duffadar* in hurried excuse, seeing the expression on his face. "We can get in easily again. Those holding the horses say there were but a score of them all told--the cursed Sikhs--God knows how they got out of the Fort! I thought we had them safe. And there was a woman with them--a Miss-*baba*"--he laughed savagely. "Well! if they be brave as men, these infidel women, let them die like men--the hell-cats!"

Roshan Khân looked at the man, whom he had known for years, as if he had never seen him before. And the thought of another woman--with his own blood in her veins--who had been brave also, and who had died--died by his hand--returned to sweep him from every bearing, from every landmark, eastern or western, and leave him rudderless, drifting, in a storm of sheer despair. He laughed suddenly--an insane laugh--at the hideousness, the hopelessness of it all. Laughed like the madman he was for the time, at the horror which drove him mad.

"Kill her, if thou wilt, fool! I have done my share of that," he cried brutally, striking out at the voice as he had struck at the other which had told him of Vincent's victory. Striking as he felt inclined to strike at anything and everything; most of all at the hateful confusion in himself, and in his world. So, without another word, he broke through the circle of troopers, dashed to where his horse awaited him, and was off like a whirlwind; that strange possession of the Oriental races, which, in a way, claims kindred with the Berserk rage of the north, thrilling to his finger-tips; yet held in check, diverted from sheer, mad, uncalculating desire to kill, by that acquired sense of fair play.

"He goes to rouse the city," said some of his men, following him hurriedly.

"And time, too!" assented some of the conspirators. "The dawn is upon us, and if the pilgrims drift away, our hope is gone!"

But most of the crowd, troopers and conspirators alike, felt vaguely that the dawn had indeed come, that the midsummer night's dream of madness was over; that those who were wise would try, while they had the chance, to escape from its consequences.

And that such a chance existed, even now, was patent. The very madness of the night, its lack of reasonable explanation, were in their favour. And its darkness, the outer darkness of the storm, which had sprung up in a minute, must have hidden much. Who, for instance, was to say--except those impenitent ones whose evidence, if given at all, must be doubted as the evidence of condemned men seeking to drag others down to their fate--whether such and such a one had been a rebel at first? Provided, always, that there was no doubt about his staunchness at the last; that is, now that the dawn had come--the dawn which showed doubt, almost a surprise, in so many faces.

What had come to them? Why were they there?

"*Kuchch saiya pur gya!*" (some shadow fell on me) muttered one man below his breath, as he sheathed his sword.

And another, with an oath, said boldly, "This one is for the winning side," then gave the cry, "To the rescue, brothers, to the rescue! Cut down the mutineers"--so, promptly, began operations on the nearest defenceless prisoner.

Thus, almost before those who had galloped in hot haste after Roshan's lead were out of sight, the prisoners, even the resisting warders, had been driven into the portico, and penned like a flock of sheep between the troopers outside and the pioneers within.

"The Lord is King," said the lance-*duffadar*, piously, to a neighbour,--he had started back from Roshan's blow with a scowl, and watched his retreat resentfully,--"the Handle-end of His Sword is safest! Lo! Have at them, brothers!"--he added aloud--"have at the evil-born ones who would have killed the *mems* and the *baba-logue* as such scum did in the Great Breathing, making the faces of the soldiery black for all time! Show them our mettle. Forward! 'Gord--save--the--Ka-veen!'"

"Gord--save--the--Ka-veen!"

The cry grew to a shout, and Dr. Dillon, who, with a great incredulity lessening the values of all he saw and heard, had promptly swung himself down into the courtyard, looked through a crevice in the barricade--which was fast taking form under the willing hands of the pioneers--to see what the noise meant.

"It is all over," he said slowly, his face pathetic in its bewilderment; "the troopers are siding with us!"

He stood for a moment as if unable to grasp the reality, and his keen, inquisitive eyes seemed to search almost reproachfully for some cause, some hint of reason, in his surroundings. In the splintered door, in every cranny and foothold of the broken stair, and so, past the parapet, they continued their question to the lightening sky, against which, faint and far, those distant peaks where lay the "Cradle of the Gods" had begun to show dimly.

"All for nothing!" he muttered to himself, almost petulantly. "Poor Dering!" So, swiftly he passed down the alley,--swiftly, but hopelessly; for he knew what those iron shackles meant on a man's bare head.

He drew the body to one side with tender care, then knocked at the closed door and called to the man within. "Smith, open the door! You'd better come out--I think it's all over now; be quick, please."

There was a pause, then a fumbling at the bolts and bars. So, in that grey, cold light, a figure stood at the open door, tall, gaunt, with a hunted look in its eyes, almost a terror, as they looked down--down to the threshold--down for what they knew should be there.

"Dering?" asked Eugene Smith, rather hoarsely; then, seeing what lay to one side, covered his eyes from the sight with a cry like a woman's, and trembled all over. That strain of patient, idle inaction had been awful.

"Oh, God damn them!" burst out the doctor, fiercely. "And all for nothing--for nothing. At least I think so. Come on, Smith, and make sure."

For nothing! For nothing!

The words were echoing in Roshan's brain also, as with loose rein, recklessly, he galloped over the frail bridge of boats, making it quiver and thunder beneath his horse's hoofs, and send curved waves of light and shadow over the clear, steely surface of the water, seen like a polished shield in the dawn. The air was clear also; the distant hills steel grey as the water, the sky steel grey as the hills. And there was the bright keenness as of a glittering sword in the chill breeze that swept from west to east. But Roshan did not feel it; he was absorbed in himself, in the useless battle of his life.

For nothing! For nothing!

He did not even hear the soft yet sonorous roar, beginning like the rush of a big breaker on a beach, ending with a wild, musical note, like the wail of new-weaned lambs and their mothers on a lone hillside, which suddenly echoed out over the water, making those who galloped behind look at each other and whisper joyfully:--

"'Tis all right, *Khân-sahib*," said one, urging his horse alongside; "the pilgrims are waiting still--hear you not their cry? They grow impatient!"

Roshan looked at him with lack-lustre eyes. What were the pilgrims to him, or their impatience? What was salvation, immortality, to one whose only desire was death--death and forgetfulness? He dug his spurs into his horse, savagely glad to give pain, and rode on.

"*Hârâ! Hârî! Harî! Hârâ!*"

The roar was articulate now, and those behind looked doubtfully at each other.

"If it should be the miracle?" suggested one conspirator; but another shook his head, "How can that be? None know the trick save those two, Gu-gu and Am-ma, and they are safe."

"Unless it *be* a miracle," put in a third, almost timidly. "God's club makes no noise, and the night has been full of marvels."

So an uneasy silence fell upon the rest.

"*Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!*"

There was no mistaking the cry now. It rose exultant, yet with that wailing note in it still, which lingers always in humanity's claim to have found its lost Paradise, its lost purity.

Yet there was no trace of doubt in the almost frantic joy on every face in the dense multitude which stopped the little cavalcade, as it entered the square around the Pool of Immortality; stopped it hopelessly, as if the moving, breathing, living mass had been a dead wall.

"Hârâ! Hârî! Hârî! Hârâ!"

It was almost a yell. The patience was gone utterly, and far as the eye could reach, in all the wide square, in every street and alley converging to it, there was the restless ineffectual movement of the sea, when, on a summer's day, it beats itself calmly yet persistently--rising and falling--upon a sheer cliff, against the impossible. There was no one to check the crowd now, to prevent it from finding Death and Immortality at the same time. What matter? What were a few hundreds of crushed bodies, when the soul found what it sought?

The riders behind Roshan threw up their hands at the sight. No hope here for the littlenesses of life; for principalities and powers, even for political liberty.

This was the bed-rock; this, in its unalterable aspiration--not for something better, but for the best--neither culture nor conspiracy could touch; this was as much beyond the control of kith and kin as of strangers and aliens.

"Come, *Khân-sahib!*" they called to the figure with the lack-lustre eyes which sat its horse like a statue, staring at itself, at its world, conscious only of the hideous discords which were, perforce, the music of its sphere. "Come! *Nawab-jee!* There is still a chance with the '*Teacher of Religion.*' The *jogi* will have held *his* folk, for sure. They will be ready for blood, since Mai Kâli"--the speaker spat his Mahomedan contempt for the idolatry ere he went on--"lets none go. She's a true woman for that!"

So, by back alleys and crooked ways, Roshan--why he did not know, since he meant nothing by it--led the cavalcade past the palace, through the archway into the courtyard with its union-jack of raised paths.

And found it empty.

Empty of all save the *jogi*, Gorakh-nâth, who was busy, resignedly, in rethreading his chaplet of skulls, ere starting to seek safety over the British border in some far recess of the holy hills, whence, when this affair had blown over, he could swoop down with added sanctity on some other religious fair.

"He and his God stole them from me not the saying of a rosary past," he said cheerfully, after he had explained the position. "They went by yonder door to the old road. So what matter! They are in it. They will come back to Her by and by. It is so always. Men follow other leads, other loves. But they do not find what they seek; so they come back to Her, to the many named Woman. *Jai! Kali Ma!*"

Those behind Roshan looked at each other.

"It is the end," they said briefly. "Come, *risaldar-jee!*" the change of title was significant--"we shall have to ride far and fast if we are to live."

Once more, every atom of the man, soul and body, seemed to strike out furiously at the voice, at the truth and the untruth in it; at the assertion of failure, the linking of his need with theirs.

"Ride for your lives if you want them," he cried fiercely; "I seek death."

They left him, after unavailing protests, and rode helter-skelter on to the Fort, warning their comrades that the game was up, so, on towards safety. And the *jogi*, naked but not ashamed, still swinging his chaplet of skulls, followed them leisurely; for he knew himself safe in the superstition and the devotion of every woman in India. Since he, Her servant, could not fail of shelter in every Hindoo homestead, far or near, in which a woman's hand closed on a man's, holding him tight for herself alone, as the Great Mother holds all men.

Roshan, thus left alone, rode his horse on slowly to the central plinth, dismounted, and, hitching the bridle over the muzzle of the "*Teacher of Religion*" stood staring out dully at what lay before him; so quiet, so commonplace!

Nothing changed from the day, barely a month ago, when he had stood beside the old gun with Vincent Dering and Lance Carlyon, contemptuous of the ignorance of others, satisfied with himself.

And now?--what had come to him?

The madness, which his wild gallop from the gaol had calmed somewhat, returned in a fierce rush, and with it that one desire for revenge; for something by which to show the contempt, which was not now merely for the ignorant; but for those others, self-righteous, tyrannical, who had dared to touch him--dared to make him what he was--a prey both to ignorance and wisdom, savagery and culture--a laughing-stock even to himself!

And who had begun the fooling? Who had taught him as a boy?

Pidar Narâyân! Who else? Who else had begun the game giving some things, withholding others? And who else was within reach? Who else could be followed up and forced to fair fight? Forced to admit that the pupil was ahead now of the master.

He laughed a laugh of absolute exultation; and a wave of purely childish satisfaction swept through the mind in which there were still so many depths of childish ignorance and misconception; unavoidable depths in the culture of a bare score of years. Leaving his horse tethered to the old gun, he ran hastily across to the palace, so, finding the door open, the whole place quiet, went on down the arched passage. It was still dark there, but a glimmer of light showed the entrance to the chapel, and to the armoury beside it, which was his goal.

He had no other thought except for that armoury, until, with the tall tapers burning at the head and feet, he saw the dead body of the woman who had deceived him lying on the Altar steps. Then the pitifullest clashing of satisfaction and despair, of desire and disgust, came to him that ever rent a man in twain. For a moment he fought for bare reason between them, then with a savage cry, he flung himself beside the dead girl, caught her to him, covered her with frantic, cruel kisses, and, almost flinging her from him again, ran on into the armoury, the red of her dress, her bosom, in his eyes--the red of blood!

The armoury! Where he had had his first lesson in the foils! There they were, harmless in their buttons, crossed on the wall, and above them something more murderous; the dangerous delicate rapiers to which those others were but the prelude. No! one was gone! One Father Ninian had used against the *jogi*! One he must have with him. So much the better!

He tore down its fellow, and passing the dead girl without a look, dashed out into the courtyard again, his last trace of sanity gone.

The next instant his horse's feet were echoing madly along the pilgrims' road. His enemy must have a quarter of an hour's lead, but that was nothing; he could overtake him, anyhow, at the first station in the pilgrimage,--a temple under a vast *banyan* tree at the foot of the first rise, where the pious must pause to make offerings.

The road was almost empty at first; for the news that the miracle had only been deferred had spread instantly through the unrestful town, so to a space beyond it, making those who heard the tale turn back to see for themselves. But after a few minutes' wild gallop, he came up with those who had been beyond recall, who had gone on content with that strange lead of a strange God; of a saint, a sinner. Yet, after a time, forgetful of that leadership utterly. For they needed it no more. The danger of novelty had passed with their first step along the beaten track which their fathers had followed. Father Ninian, wise with the wisdom of long years, of secret sympathy, had known this; had counted on it in his forlorn hope of leading them into familiar bondage. He had told himself that he need only go as far as that first station; that then, during the pause for offerings, he might return, as it were, to realities, to something more consistent with the nineteenth century! But to him, also, as he led the way, chanting his offices for the day, had come a strange peace, a strange desire to go on to the end of the pilgrimage; a strange desire to leave those realities behind him in a world from which he was taking nothing, not even his love.

Surely it was time. Surely he was old enough to claim rest. No! not rest. It was something more than that. Surely, now that he had left every atom of earth behind him lying with a dead woman on the Altar steps, he also was free to find the "Cradle of the Gods"!

"*My soul fleeth unto the Lord! before the morning watch I say, before the morning watch,*" he chanted; he had gone on blindly from psalm to psalm intent on the desire to lead those voices behind.

"Have a care, *baba-jee!* thou and thy God!" said a half-tender, half-jesting one as he stumbled among the stones, and a dark hand stretched itself out to steady the old priest, and a dark face turned to nod approval at other saffron robes; since here was a true pilgrim, a true madman, forgetful of this world, to judge by the face lifted towards those distant hills.

Yet the desire in him to reach them seemed to the wise old heart something that must be set aside. He must return. Yes! he must return. To do what? What could an old man do who had left life, a useless life, behind him? He crushed down that thought also, and stumbled on.

"*Man is like a thing of nought, his time passeth away like a shadow!*"

His voice spent itself tremulously on that one certainty, and those behind him joined their testimony to his all unwittingly, as they called on Hârâ or Hârî; on the Creator, the Destroyer, as One and Indivisible.

And in the rear again, Roshan in his search for Death, for annihilation, bore witness also, as he came, cursing those who stood in his way, his horse slithering among the stones in its effort to obey whip and spur, and sending a dry clangour of hoof-beats through the little stony valley to startle the sleepy snakes coiled on the distant rocks, and drive them back to their crannies with a hiss.

So, every instant, the distance lessened between the old man and the young one, both weary of life. It was broad daylight now, though the sun was still low on the horizon. The mystery of dawn had left the world, the very pilgrims, between their recurring cries, were chattering, laughing, over the every-day details of life which would make to-day as trivial as yesterday, to-morrow as trivial as to-day.

There had been a "Breathing" in the night, they told each other. Some shadow had fallen. Some God or Devil had had power. But the shackles of custom, of familiarity, were back again, the despotism of detail.

Only in those two strangely different minds in the van, in the rear, the mystery still clouded the reality.

And the distance between them lessened as Roshan drove his way through the saffron robes recklessly.

Yet, fast as he went, when he reached the end of the dry watercourse up which the last part of the rough track had wound, and stood in the hollow, backed by a further rise of the hill, where the quaint, dumpy, black temple hid itself under the huge blotch of the *banyan* tree--the only green thing visible, far or near--the figure he sought was not to be seen among the crowd.

Akbar Khân, indeed, he saw, utilizing one of the tall tapers as a pipe-light before casting himself on the ground to suck contentedly at the screwed *banyan* leaf full of tobacco which he had gathered by claiming a pinch in return for the loan of that same light to others. But with a curious shame Roshan avoided him, and passed on in his search among the jostling crowd, the continuous babel of trivial talk; for this was resting-time, when men and women could be men and women, and forget that they were on a pilgrimage; when they could even dream themselves back in the village under the familiar shelter of some village tree, asking no more than the familiar round of life.

But above the babel came every now and again the insistent clang of a bell, telling that some new petitioner was seeking a favour of the Gods, and making a golden oriole, which sat in the green leafage, flit to another bower with a sudden fluting note, full, joyful, mellow.

"What dost seek, *Musulmân?*" cavilled a saint, drawing back from Roshan's shadow, as he gabbled invocations, all he knew, on a rosary, ere solacing himself with the pipe which his disciple had prepared. "If 'tis the madman and his God--he hath gone yonder."

He pointed to a side track, which was a short cut to the road above.

Roshan flung himself from his horse without a word, and followed.

The distance lessened at every step now, for the old priest's breath failed him at the steepness of the rise.

Still, it would not delay him long, he told himself, to take that one look at the soft, white cloud which generally hid the goal of pilgrimage, before he turned back over the hill, as best he could, to find what task remained for him in the world.

He might have that one look, surely!

So, reaching the summit of this first bulwark of the unattainable, he sat down, breathlessly, beside an upright black stone which showed strangely distinct amid the redness of the surrounding rock; a plain black stone, not three feet high, chipped rudely to a blunt point. Father Ninian did not need the scattering of dead marigolds and dry basil leaves about its base to tell him that it was a fragment of an older faith than that of the temple below; a faith sterner, purer, founded on a clearer perception of what humanity needed in that search for the lost Paradise; on a closer memory of the cause which lost it.

He laid one hand on the stone almost caressingly, as, holding the pyx in the other, he sat down facing the distant peaks. But there was no cloud upon them. The day had dawned clear and still, and as he sat looking wistfully over the valleys on valleys, the hills on hills, which lay bathed in light between him and the "Cradle of the Gods," a sunbeam--still slanting from the curved edge of the eastern plains--caught the jewelled star of what he held, and stayed there.

It was peaceful beyond words. The hurry, the strain, not only of that long eventful night, but of the whole long eventful life, seemed over. All things seemed behind him. The passion, the pride, the courage, the manhood--all things that had made Ninian Bruce what Ninian Bruce had been--where were they?

Only wisdom, only a tender knowledge, seemed to remain.

The clank of steel upon stone roused him, the clank of Roshan's spurs upon the rocks; and Father Ninian turned to see him, a yard or two on the path below, outlined clearly against the distant view of Eshwara, against the world in which Ninian Bruce had lived and loved--the Ninian Bruce whom he had left behind.

Behind!

No! It was Ninian Bruce and none other who was on his feet in a second, a flush on his face--the face that was like the nether mill-stone in its stern passion, and pride, and power. For, in a second, the old man's soul was back in a world where a dead woman belonging to him lay waiting for revenge. His hand was on his hidden rapier, as he flung his first word of defiance at the man

who had killed her.

"Murderer!"

"Your pupil at that, even!" gasped Roshan, "you began it!--your pupil whom you taught--curse you--"

The words failed him--he paused inarticulate--but the keen eyes and ears opposite him took in his meaning with the swift comprehension which had been Pidar Narâyan's always. A sort of contemptuous pity fought with the passion of Ninian Bruce's face.

"My pupil, certainly," he assented. "Have you come to ask me for a final lesson?"

Roshan glared at him. "You understand--you always did--that is the worst. Yes! I have come"--here he laughed wildly--"for what you taught me--fair play and no favour--and I mean to have it." In his fierce excitement he pressed closer, flourishing his rapier.

"Pardon me," came a cold, courteous voice; "I did not teach you that method of assassination, surely? I thought you desired fair play. If so, you might allow me to meet you on equal terms."

Roshan drew back with a flush from the figure which had stood its ground, which looked at him with bitter disdain. He scarcely seemed to recognize it. No wonder! For this was Ninian Bruce himself. Ninian Bruce as he might have spoken to an over-hasty antagonist in the days when he was the most reckless swordsman in Rome, when the world held him body and soul.

The years, his very priesthood, had slipped from him.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" muttered Roshan, standing aside. There was a savage satisfaction in his heart. This man was not old, the odds were equal; there was enough fire and passion here to please any opponent.

So, after a pause to lay aside the pyx--it found a strange resting-place on the blunt summit of that upright black stone--a slim, still elegant figure, divested of its priestly robes, took its stand, its back to the hills, its face to the world.

Still upright, still active, with its black *soutane* caught up and tucked into the sash to give free play to its limbs.

"Now, sir," came the courteous voice, "I am ready."

Something in the proud grace of bearing, the reckless contempt, made Roshan follow suit.

"The sun will be in your eyes," he said, "let us fight lengthwise to the ridge."

"We *will*--by and by!" came that icy voice, as the speaker, without moving, stood on guard. "We can omit the salute. If you are ready, I am."

For an instant Roshan hesitated, realizing what the life that he meant to take had been, what the man himself whom he meant to kill had been and was. The man whose figure stood out like a black shadow against the distant blue of the hills; and as he realized the fine fibre of his enemy, a sense of powerlessness to touch, to harm him, kept Roshan motionless.

"Shall I count five, and give you a start?" The question came with a shrug of the shoulders.

The taunt told. Roshan pulled himself together, and stood on guard also. But the sense of powerlessness was intolerable; he lowered his rapier for a word more--a word to raise his own self-esteem.

"I warn you," he said haughtily, "that the sun is in your eyes. That I have learnt more than you ever taught me--that *this* is to the death."

"It could scarcely be anything else, could it?" came the instant reply, in a voice that vibrated harshly, like a harpstring struck to its fullest, "with a dead woman between us! Engage, you devil, or I will kill you as you stand!"

Roshan gave a short, sharp cry, like a wild beast. The next instant the curious hiss of two meeting blades sliding along each other was the only sound. It is a strange sound, which, to the listeners, the onlookers, seems to say "hush" to the whole world.

"*Hush--hush--sh--sh.*"

Then, short and sharp as that cry of Roshan's, came another sound; the beaten, baffled clash when steel meets steel instead of flesh.

Roshan, with an inward curse, gripped his rapier closer. He had almost been disarmed,--disarmed in that first encounter. Strange that he should have forgotten his foe,--forgotten the deadly insistence of the master's blade, slack as a snake in curves, firm as a vice in grip. Then that almost invisible turn of the wrist which had so nearly done for him. He had forgotten--these,

in years of meaner adversaries. He remembered them now, and would not forget again. And he had such things; ay! and more, in reserve for himself.

So had his master; in reserve for both of them, if needful. And the knowledge that it *would* be needful came to Ninian Bruce at the first touch of his adversary's sword; for there was that in it which told the old hand that the young one was a master's also.

"My pupil has improved," he said quietly, as, abandoning the attack, he parried Roshan's furious onslaught with scarcely a motion of the hand, held level to his heart.

That he could do. But the other must surely come in the end, since he was old, and Roshan young. If in the end, therefore, why not now? The sooner the better.

A minute after the sun was no longer in Pidar Narâyan's eyes. As he had said, they were fighting lengthwise to the ridge; and he drew back, choosing his ground, until under his feet he felt the dead marigolds, the withered basil leaves that lay about the upright stone,—that strange pedestal on which the star-shaped pyx stood as on an altar, glittering in the sun-rays.

He seemed to see it, to feel it, standing there between the world below and those faint, far peaks. And the eyes which had seen so much felt they need see no more.

"*Sta' alerta, Signor!*" he cried jibingly, flinging himself savagely forward. "And may the Lord have mercy on your soul," he added in a lower tone; as, in an attack which held in it all the wildness, the fire, the passion of his youth, he drove Roshan back a step,—one step down the faint slope on which he had counted.

A fierce lunge or two, a swift parry, and then,—then an inch beyond safety—given purposely—yielded room for the *riposte* he sought from that other rapier.

It came with a quick cry of triumph, as Roshan felt that thin, cold steel slide silently on through a dull, faint resistance. A cry that ended in a gasp, as the hand which held the rapier dropped for a second, then flung itself upwards.

For Pidar Narâyan had given the *reprise*; and '*L'Addio del Marito*' had done its work.

So, for an instant—held upright by the lingering force of the old man's hand—the two stood within a sword's length, their faces glaring at each other,—stern, implacable, the one in death, the other still in life.

Then the strength, the life, ebbed; the balance between it and death wavered, and Ninian Bruce, overborne by his enemy's dead weight, sank to his knee, then backwards.

But his hand still gripped the rapier. So Roshan Khân's body, as it fell forward, slithered down the sharp blade, sending a little jet of crimson blood backwards, till it stopped with a dull thud upon the hilt.

So he lay, face downwards, beside the old man, whose face looked skyward; whose head rested among the withered marigolds and the sweet, dead leaves of the basil, which generations and generations of pilgrims had offered to an unknown wisdom on their way to the "Cradle of the Gods."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE TRUTH

"And to look at it now," came the Commissioner's rich, round brogue, "you would think butter wouldn't melt in its mouth!"

He waved the cigar he was smoking towards Eshwara. It looked sleepier, more sun-saturate than ever, as it lay reflected in the still lagoon between it and the tent in which he was sitting; a double-poled, Commissioner's tent, which two days before had swooped down like an avenging angel with broad white wings to take possession of the just and the unjust in the name of Victoria *Kaiser-i-Hind*.

It was pitched on the site of the Viceroy's camp, for the convenience of being close to the gaol

where the late disturbers of the public peace had taken up their residence. In fact, the mast from which the royal standard had floated, still reared itself, bare, undraped, from its roundel of roses. But the flowers were withered, dead. Even the palms, their work of welcome over, were wilting fast; but they still gave a doubtful shade to some groups of manacled men, who, guarded by yellow-legged constables, were placidly awaiting the Commissioner's leisure and pleasure; both being, at the time, occupied with lunch and Dr. Dillon. So, the wide white wings of the tent being set open and supported with bamboos to let in the breeze, the representative of law and order could be seen--his feet on the table among his law books--drinking an iced whiskey-and-soda.

Dr. Dillon--he looked careworn chiefly because in his care for others he had, as yet, been able to take no rest--nodded.

"Yes; and it doesn't, as a rule. A more peaceable spot never was. You can't account for these sudden idiotic outbreaks. One reason is as good as another. And so old Mother Campbell, with her assertion that it all came because Miss Shepherd would talk about Jean Ziska's drum--"

The Commissioner smiled. "Yes, the good lady has an endless circle of unfounded beliefs, all dependent on each other for support. It's the most comfortable way of getting through life. An' miracles are like drams--ye can't stop them, once you begin. Besides, on me soul, it was queer--even Carlyon said--"

"And if it *were* true," interrupted the doctor, "we shouldn't be any 'forrader'! We shouldn't understand. And that's our position now. You can't, in fact. It's better you shouldn't; in India, at any rate. Just accept them, ignore them, smash them, hush them up"--here his face clouded--"and in this case there is a good deal that had better be kept dark--you'll do your best, I hope?"

The keen whimsical face hardened. "I shall follow the usual official routine, sir," he said cynically; "for, look you, there never was a row like this in India but there is something in it about a woman, which we've got to hush up. An' that's God's truth. Yes, we pay a heavy toll--" He broke off, took up a pen as if to write, threw it down impatiently, and stared out into the hot, yellow sunshine.

Dr. Dillon sat twiddling his mushroom hat round and round in his nervous fingers, and staring out into it also. A sense of being face to face with an unpleasant truth was on them both. Suddenly he laughed harshly.

"We ought to have got accustomed to the fact by this time, anyhow," he said, "for it began early enough in the history of man. Well, I'm off; you won't want me, will you, this afternoon, now those men have turned Queen's evidence?"

"Don't think so. Let's see." The Commissioner drew a list towards him, and ran his eye over it. "I've condemned three warders and seven prisoners to death for poor Dering's murder; so I daresay penal servitude will see through the rest. Then there's *jogi* Gorakh-nâth and his *gosain*. They ought to be hung, but we haven't caught them, and we never shall; the wild ass that snuffeth up the east wind isn't in it with a Hindoo ascetic in eluding captors! So the lot out there are really small fry; for the other ringleaders are either dead or departed--even that amphibious brute, Gu-gu."

Dr. Dillon looked up cheerfully. "By George! I'd have given something to see that water-fight between him and Am-ma! By the way, what are you going to do for that queer fish? But for him, we would never have seen Lance Carlyon's face again."

The Commissioner's expression was curious. "It's a bit hard to do anything for a man who wants nothing but earth, air, and water, and has got all three; besides--" he drew a paper out of a file, looked at it, then looked at the doctor--"besides it wasn't altogether Am-ma!" He paused, smiled an infinitely kind smile, then went on: "I was a brute, entirely, to talk about a heavy toll just now. We get its worth back, me dear fellow, over and over again. See! here is Am-ma's *affidavit*. I took it this morning, and upon me soul, Dillon, I should be obliged if you would tell me whether to hush it up, or inform the party concerned." So saying, his brogue took possession of the sun-bright, sun-dry air--

"I, Am-ma, of the river folk, solemnly affirm that, knowing the *Dee-puk-râg* to be in the power of the *Huzoors*, I several times warned Gu-gu not to follow other masters. But he had learned books, and become ignorant. He could not even feel when a current changed its course; and then he thought he must die, because of the ghost, and that made him wild. So when I refused, and set off, as ordained, for the raft, he took the Brahmin's money and stopped the miracle. Of a surety, the Awarder of Justice is right. This slave knew what was to come. He did not tell of it because, where the *Dee-puk-râg* is, there is victory; so there was no fear. Yet when the Miss-*sahiba* bade me help her, I obeyed, because she has power over devils, and my son, *Huzoor*, is still in the first week of life. Therefore, for that reason, I guided the raft. But when I saw that the Light-bringers had smitten the darkness of evil-doers, and that the raft would be needed no more, I went on with it to the place appointed by the Wood-*wallah-sahib* whence it could float of itself.

"So I returned to my home and ate my bread. And the day was quiet, as the *Huzoor* knows; only the folk reviled, because I had no fish to sell.

"But, at night, at the waning of the sunset stars, about the third jackal cry, came the Miss-

sahiba to my hut."

Dr. Dillon ceased twiddling his hat, and looked up in sudden interest.

"To my hut," reiterated the reading voice. "I deemed it because of devils first; but it was not. It was because of Carlone-*sahib* who could not be found,--only his clothes and pistol on my craft, stranded on a sand-bank by the mid-channel.

"'He has not been killed,' said the Miss-*sahiba* 'He would not have fought with his clothes off. Nor did he go to fight. He would not have left the pistol if he had. He has gone swimming, to get quicker and find help. So he is drowned. He is in the river still, and I cannot think of it. Am-ma! you know every inch of the river. Find him! Find him!'

"Then I said: 'Yea, Miss-*sahiba* I will find him when his body rises. No man can find a dead one in the river till then.' But, as I spoke, the son at his mother's breast left sucking, and cried aloud. The Miss-*sahiba* said it was but the gripes, but we--my house and I--knew more than that. We knew it was the devils, winning a way because the Miss was not content. So I said: 'I will find him while his beauty is still on him, for you to see again,'--since that is in the heart of all women, O Awarder of Justice. Thus at the dawn--the dawn after the dawn of darkness--I, Am-ma, set out with my nets, seeing that fish, anyhow, could be found, and the market would be dear, because none had come to the bazaar during the commotion. So, remembering where my craft had stranded, I went first to mid-channel; thus, working up, came to where it had stranded once before. Then, seeing footmarks, I followed them, till in an island, eating his bread, I found the evil-begotten Gu-gu.

"He had a knife in his bead belt, at the sight whereof I gave glory to gods and devils alike, for I knew the handle of it. It was Carlone-*sahib's shikar* knife, and I had been his *shikari* many a time.

"So I said, 'Where gottest thou Carlone-*sahib's* knife, Gu-gu?' thinking to startle him. And it did. He said no word, but came at me with it.

"So we fought. His right hand and mine on the knife, and our left arms round each other's throat, choking us; and our legs wrestling. Till the water grew too deep. Then we swam with them. But he said nothing, nor did I. There was no need. We understood, as dogs do, that it was foe and foe. So it came to the deep stream; his right hand and mine, with the knife between them, and our teeth fixed in each other's shoulders,--till I bethought me of his ear.

"Then he yelled, and let go; but I was after him as he dived. It was a long race. Wherefore not? since we are the best swimmers in the river. But I felt the cleave of the water from his foot at last, and spent myself in one stroke. So I laid hold of his leg and ran my hand up till I found his back. Then I used Carlone-*sahib's* knife on him, and he sank; and I sank too, with the blow.

"And when I came up, leaving him there, I found how long the race had been, for my right hand struck the city wall. Then it came to me what the Miss-*sahiba* had said, of Carlone-*sahib* wishing to go quick; and I bethought me of the secret passages, and the knife, and Gu-gu's fear. And I said to myself someone must have restored the miracle. Not Gu-gu; else why was he hiding? What if it be Carlone-*sahib*? But most of all I thought of my little son, and the devils longing for him, and for a woman longing for the sight of a man's beauty, and I knew I must go and see if it lay there. So I dived, and found him, as the Awarder of Justice knows, sitting high up, with the water about his feet, waiting for death, and brought him back as I promised. And Gu-gu is dead, for his body was drifting by the tunnel with Carlone-*sahib's* knife in the back as we came out. So the Miss is pleased, and the devils do not come near my son."

The brogue ceased, and there was a pause. "Well! what do ye say, Dillon?" asked the Commissioner, fretfully.

George Dillon rose and put on his hat deliberately. "Nothing. Except that I must really be off. I've to see Smith first, and Carlyon--that sprained ankle of his, which he got trying to climb up beyond the rise of the water, will be the deuce and all if he uses it too soon. And then, if I can, I want to get round and say good-by to--to the Miss-*sahiba*. She's off to Herrnhut again this evening. In fact, Campbell didn't half like her waiting for the funeral, he is in such a blessed hurry to get to his new field, as he calls it; thinks of nothing else. They are to be married on Monday, I believe."

The Commissioner laid aside Am-ma's *affidavit* with a soft "damn," and Dr. Dillon paused on his way out at the sound.

"Quite so,--I entirely agree with you," he said sympathetically; "but, unfortunately, there is only one person who has a right to tell that story, sir--and she won't!"

"Why not?" interrupted the Commissioner, militantly--"why the blazes shouldn't a woman tell the truth?"

"Because women don't know it," broke in the doctor, "or men either, for that matter. Because we men and women have got ourselves on such false lines, into such an absolutely false position towards each other, that the only course consistent with propriety and *les convenances* is to--to hush the thing up! So hush-a-bye baby, sir, to your heart's content. So long as the mother can tell

her blessed infant that she is a lady, what does the real fact matter?"

He spoke with a concentrated bitterness, an almost fierce resentment, and the Commissioner nodded, finished his whiskey-and-soda at a gulp, and returned to work, tossing his papers about recklessly.

"It's a quare world, certainly," he murmured, with a lack of originality which sat ill on him. Then, catching sight of something in a file, his humorous, kindly self returned. "Listen to this now, for quareness," he laughed, beginning to read:--

"The petition of Mussumat Mumtâza Mahal--that's Roshan Khân's grandmother, you know--'sister,' etc., etc., 'humbly sheweth that she has endured grievous wrong and hurt, by loss of her grandson in the late deplorable mutiny (of which she was utterly incognizant, being helpless, veiled, old woman perpetually confined in house). Therefore prayeth that whereas one Mussumat Ashrâf-un-nissa, her neighbour, is in receipt of pension rupees twenty-five *per mensem* for similar bereavement of male protector and head of family lost in '57 mutiny, therefore her pension of rupees twenty *per mensem*, only, for exile of husband to Calcutta, be commuted to similar sum of twenty-five, seeing that your poor petitioner is in floods of tears and wholly heartbroken through this most nonregulation, premature death of promising young scion of her noble house, on whom, as on blessed Victoria, Queen, her hopes were fixed. Said petitioner being able to prove *alibi*, absolute incomplicity, and continuous remaining at home during late devilish disturbances."

"Poor old soul!" laughed the doctor, "give it to her if you can, sir. And as for remaining at home, everybody except the actual conspirators did that. Even Dya-Ram, the disaffected--though he has preached armed resistance to tyranny in his paper for years. He barricaded himself in with his printing-press. Fact; jammed his fingers in so doing, and came to me in a blind funk for a professional certificate that the wound could not have been caused by any lethal weapon. As if anyone could ever have suspected him of taking part in raising a row, or even in settling one! His sort are simply negligible quantities."

"But Ramanund seems to have attempted a lead," put in the Commissioner, judicially.

"Exactly. Attempted, and failed. His sort are negligible quantities also, sir, I'm sorry to say, and will remain so until they learn, amongst other knowledge, to believe in something besides themselves--" here the hard eyes softened, the hard voice paused. "That is another thing I should like to have seen--dear old Pidar Narâyan--"

The hard voice found even softness too loud; and in the silence which fell between the two men, only the Commissioner's pen could be heard.

"You'll look in at the palace, perhaps, and see all is right," came the brogue, after a bit, "and give my love to old Smith. I'm not sure but that I'd rather have seen him behind the door than anything else, for it must have been the hardest job--"

"Considering the circumstances, yes!" put in the doctor; so, with the pith hat turning him into an animated mushroom, he passed out into the blaze of dry yellow sunshine, on that dry yellow sand.

The sky above was molten with light and heat, the gaol positively shimmered in the glare. Not a sound, not a sight, told of that midsummer night's dream of wild, useless revolt, save when one of the shackled prisoners awaiting trial sought a better bit of shade under the wilted palms, which, not a week before, had welcomed the Hosts of the Lord-*sahib* on their way to the hills.

The whole thing seemed incredible; yet, as he crossed the road to enter the Smiths' compound, the footsteps of those other Hosts who had passed on to the hills also remained to dimple the dry yellow sand.

The Smiths' bungalow lay calm, peaceful; the drawing-room, as he entered it, struck him with the old, familiar sense of refinement, indexing the refinement of its mistress. Only one change caught his observant eyes. Vincent Dering's photograph was no longer on the mantle-piece, whence it had always looked out with a certain challenge in its very prominence. Where had it gone? What matter? There was no need for such defiance now, thought George Dillon, with that curious half-cynical, half-resentful smile he kept for one subject only. She might keep the photograph where she chose, now, and none would blame her.

So thinking, he set aside the curtain which hung at his patient's door, and as he did so, resentment, cynicism, vanished in quick sympathy.

"Ah! fever again, I see,--that's a bore," he said, going over swiftly to the bed where Eugene Smith's long length lay visibly shivering; for something,--the exposure, the excitement, the strain, perhaps, of that awful inaction behind the door against which Vincent Dering was making that heroic stand,--had knocked the big man over, a prey to an old enemy--malarial fever. "When did it come on?"

Muriel Smith, who sat on the bed, her hand in one of her husband's shaking, trembling ones, looked up. She was very pale, but very calm.

"Half an hour ago. It is a pity. We hoped it was broken, didn't we? But he will fret himself so, Doctor--" Her eyes, on Dr. Dillon's, were telling their tale, so that it scarcely needed the rambling, quivering voice to show that the fresh onset of fever had once more clouded the sick man's brain.

"How can a fellow help fretting," murmured Eugene, his teeth chattering, "when he waits like a coward behind a door, where his best friend--"

The woman beside him winced, but interrupted him bravely. "But I tell him, Doctor--and it's true, isn't it?--that it was hardest for *him*--and that--that Vincent would rather have had it so--because he had to leave no one, and Eugene had Gladys--and me."

Her voice seemed to bring comfort, and the glistening, feverish eyes closed.

"Go on with the mixture," said the doctor, vexedly conscious of a lump in his throat. "This will wear itself out in a day or two; and--you can't do more than you're doing."

"I suppose not," she replied listlessly.

But the tragedy of her face remained in his memory as he drove over the creaking, groaning bridge to Eshwara. The bazaar was full as ever with drifting humanity, busy in the details of every-day life. There was no hint anywhere of the past storm; not even in the palace. It lay, as ever, silent; its blank walls seeming to hold the sunlight back from some secret within--from some veiled, hidden beauty. The door was closed, but old Akbar Khân came capering at his call, his back roached, in bowing, like a caterpillar's.

"The tomb is finished, *Ge-reeb-pun-wâz*," he mumbled, in blubbering importance. "*Ala!* the sad day! But this slave, knowing all customary things, hath remained insistent on the workmen; therefore all is befitting the noble people, as the *Huzoor* will see."

So, down the shadowy passage he led the way, crablike, to the chapel; for hither, long years before, Father Ninian had brought the body of Pietro Bonaventura, and here, just in front of the Altar steps, he and Pietro's granddaughter--the last of the old priest's charges--had been buried the day before. The masons had been busy, building up the vault again; but, as Akbar Khân had said, the work was finished, the chapel restored to its original state, swept, and garnished. Even the candles were lit on the Altar, and four of the tallest tapers had been placed, one at each corner of the stone slab on which two more names would have to be cut; while from these tapers long strings of jasmine flowers, such as native women wear, had been hung in drooping chains to form an enclosure. On the slab itself great bossed yellow marigolds were laid to simulate a cross.

Dr. Dillon turned to the cringing figure beside him sharply; but there was something almost pathetic in its simper of conscious merit, its certainty of satisfaction.

"Did you do that?" he asked.

"*Ge-reeb-pun-wâz!*"

There was a world of pride and of servitude in the voice, and in the folded, prayerful hands which shot out under the bowings.

"This slave made it! The *Huzoor* will notice it is, fitting. Even the '*crass*'--" he pointed his prayerful hands to the marigolds--"is not forgotten. Has not this dust-like one spent his life in preparing amusements and spectacles for the noble people? He knows that tombs require flowers, as women do."

Through the arches behind the old pantaloon Dr. Dillon could catch a glimpse of the garden, ablaze with colour, could smell the perfume of the now fading orange-blossoms, could see the water-maze, with its marble ledges, among the lotus, just wide enough for the flying feet of a laughing girl.

The words, the contrast, held him, as the old man went on with an orthodox whine of petition in his voice:--

"So, since the *Sirkar* will doubtless appoint a guardian of tombs, seeing there is none to inherit the palace, if the Protector of the Poor would intercede for this slave with the Commissioner?--if the *Huzoor* would say that the dust-like one has provided the pleasures of palaces all his life long for the noble people; yea! from the cradle to the grave. If he will say that--" he flourished his hands towards the slab--"both in the making of garlands and the making of '*crasses*,' there is none equal--"

"*For tombs require flowers, as women do!*" The phrase asserted itself again, and Dr. Dillon looked at the wicked old face, so comic, so pathetic, with the hopeless recognition of the humour of tragedy which comes to all save the invincibly dull.

"You would do as well as anyone," he said gravely. "I'll mention your name."

"*Ge-reeb-pun-wâz!*" The title prolonged itself abnormally, and Akbar Khân, a mask of toothless smiles, darted, in instant assumption of his anticipated office, to remove a fallen jasmine flower from Dr. Dillon's path as if it had been a deadly reptile. Indeed, he paused in the

midst of his parting *salaams* to ask if it was in order that the populace be admitted to the sanctuary, since the *missen-miss* (his accent of disdain, tempered by reverence, was delicious) had announced her desire to enter it that afternoon for farewell; had, indeed, asked him to be there at four to open the door.

Dr. Dillon turned so sharply that the old courtier began instantly on asseverations that, without orders--

"Have everything ready, of course," interrupted the doctor, impatiently; so strode off across the courtyard, his head down, his hands in his pockets, with a jerk, as of irritation, in his walk.

He found Lance Carlyon in the balcony over the river, very apologetic at being caught there against orders. But it was so dreary keeping to one's room, he said; especially when there were a lot of dismal things to think about; and he really had been most careful--had made two of his pioneers almost carry him.

"Doesn't seem to have done much harm!" admitted the doctor, gruffly, as he sat feeling the ankle and looking at Lance with the oddest air of impatience, irritation, and kindness. Yet there was nothing strange in Lance's wholesome young face, save that it showed a little older, a little graver.

"It *must* be beastly dull, too," went on the doctor, loudly, suddenly. "You--you might get them to help you over to the palace garden this afternoon; about four, you know, when it gets cool. That would be a change."

Lance positively gasped. "Rath-er! Why! you told me yesterday I wasn't to move a muscle for ten days!" Dr. Dillon positively blushed, under the brown. He got up vexedly, walked to the parapet, looked down the river towards the mission house, and came back again.

"No more you are!" he said fiercely. "Not what *you* call moving. But gentle exercise and--and congenial society--and all that! You know the treatment! Besides the Hutton-Wharton-Hood school don't believe in rest. And--and--look here!--I'll put you on the stiffest starch bandage ever made--and--Oh! confound it, man, one must risk something sometimes, you know! Here, orderly; go over to the *sahib's* washerman and tell him to make me double-extra-white-shirt-front-starch, and if that doesn't counteract the--the indiscretion--why--why--I wash my hands of the whole business!"

He was at work undoing the bandages already, and the last part of his remarks came, argumentatively, to himself.

"If you really think it might injure me permanently," began Lance, soberly, in some surprise.

Dr. Dillon paused, and looked up with a vast resentment. "If you mean your foot, I don't think it will, and that's all I'm responsible for--thank God!"

But as, half an hour after this, he came out from saying good-by to Erda Shepherd, he paused as he passed the Pool of Immortality, and looked down into it as if he felt some need of salvation.

"*If I be not damned for this!*" he quoted softly, shook his head, and went back to his prisoners.

So it came to pass that when Erda Shepherd--after laying the wreath she had brought as a sort of crown to Akbar Khân's '*crass*'--went into the garden for a last look at the familiar places, she found Lance Carlyon comfortably settled in one of the balconies overhanging the river.

"This is luck!" he cried, forgetting the starched bandage until reminded of it by a sudden twinge of pain. "I thought I was never to see you again, and it seemed a bit rough--on--on us both; considering what a lot we did together, you know. I've been writing you a letter, to say how disappointed I was at not being able to get over and see you all this morning."

"That was very kind of you," she said feebly, conscious that the surprise had made her feel a little limp. Though, of course, she regretted nothing; nothing at all!

"I've been wanting to know such a lot," he went on. "Of course I heard about the others, but not about you--you needn't go away immediately, need you?" he asked, as he watched her face,--"if--if you could stop a bit, it would be so jolly."

The frank wistfulness of his tone was too much for her. "Yes! I can stop," she said quietly; "what is it you want to know?"

"Lots of things; but about yourself first of all!"

Herself! That would be the hardest task, she felt; and the memory of that senseless flight from her own reflection in the mirror came back to bring a quick flush to her cheek.

"Of course, if you'd rather not--" began observant Lance.

"I was only thinking there was very little to tell," she put in quickly. She was not even going to

allow that, in keeping this incident to herself, she was giving it any importance. She had told herself during the last few days that it had been unfortunate, that was all. Otherwise it was trivial; since it did not, could not, alter her decision. On the contrary, it strengthened it; just as a temptation resisted always strengthened that resistance.

So, in the balcony where lovers had sat and talked of love, those two sat talking of that midsummer night's dream, of everything but love. Of Vincent Dering's song, of the raft, of Lance's experience as he clung to the highest crevice, and felt the water stop steady between his knee and his ankle. Of his incredulity when Am-ma appeared, and his immediate lapse into unconsciousness; chiefly, he supposed, because there was no need for further endurance. Of how he had no notion of anything till he found himself lying on a string bed in the sun, right away on the other side of the town, whither Am-ma had brought him, by Heaven knows what secret passage.

So, as the shadows grew long, they seemed to invade Lance's face, and bring a doubt to it.

"I haven't seen Am-ma since," he said, "so I haven't found out yet why on earth he came to look for me?"

Erda rose and held out her hand. "We were all looking for you, Mr. Carlyon," she said quietly, "and we were all very glad to find you. And--and I am very sorry to--to lose you."

He rose too, stiffly, and, taking her hand, held it while he looked into her face steadily.

"Good-by, Miss Shepherd--I'm--I'm sorry it has to be that--but you know best. And thank you for telling me--so much." He paused, and his hand tightened on hers a little. "Thanks all round, for *that!* It has been the truth between us, hasn't it, always? And so--though it has been a bit rough--Good-by!"

There was a pause, a curious pause.

"Good-by," she echoed dully, her face grown very pale. His hand left hers gently. She turned and faced the garden, where the shadows were invading the blaze of colour, and the coming cool was sending the scent of the orange-blossoms into the air. The water-maze, with its marble ledges, where there was but room for the feet of a laughing girl, lay still and glistening before her. The palace, with its fanciful nooks, its illogical recesses, its suggestion of elusive pleasures beyond the pale of solid reality, rose up into the sky.

And something in the scene came home to her with the sense that all this, in its way, was real also. That this was part of the truth. The truth which she had not told.

"It has been the truth between us, hasn't it, always?"

She turned suddenly to where Lance stood; turned to find him leaning over the balcony, looking down into the water with a listlessness he had held in check till then; and a great wave of remorse swept through her.

"It has not been the truth between us!" she cried impulsively, recklessly--"not quite--but, I will tell it now--if you like."

He looked up, startled. "If you think I--I ought to know."

She gave a queer, half-impatient laugh. "Ought! How do I know? Yes! I suppose so--as it's true--absolutely true. I can't help that, can I?"

There was a forlornness in the confession; almost a despair.

"Then tell me, please," said Lance, deliberately making room for her to lean over the balustrade beside him. His heart was beating fast at something in her face, and yet his uppermost thought was for her; for that forlornness, that despair. "I can forget it afterwards--if you want me to," he added consolingly.

She came to the place beside him, and looked down, hiding her face from all but the sliding river; and he, seeing her desire, looked into it also.

"It was about my starting on the raft," she began with a little sob. "I didn't tell you the truth about that. I--I didn't come to give the warning at first--I--I was coming to you."

"Yes!" he said quietly; but his hand found hers and held it. "You were coming to me, dear--why?"

That touch seemed at once to help her, and to make her desperate.

"Because--oh, Lance! it was so foolish! I saw myself in the glass--all in white with the orange in my hand--and I thought of you--of what you said--of--of the World's Desire, and--and I felt I couldn't--so--so I was coming to you--first--when Am-ma--don't you see--"

There was a long pause. His hand, firm, strong, did not tighten, it simply held hers as they

both looked down on the sliding river.

"Thanks!" he said after a time; and then there was another pause until he added, "It will be a bit rough, I'm afraid, on the Reverend David, but I don't see how we can help that--do you?"

And this time his clasp tightened. Erda said nothing; she felt there was nothing more to say, now that the truth had been told between them. So while the sinking sun flared red on the "Cradle of the Gods" another man and woman consoled themselves for the lost Paradise.

FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): Bonaventura.

[Footnote 2](#): Pension.

[Footnote 3](#): Night, or darkness.

[Footnote 4](#): Light, or day.

[Footnote 5](#): Narâyan, in the Hindoo mythology, is the creative spirit brooding on the waters.

[Footnote 6](#): Another kind of religious mendicant.

[Footnote 7](#): The ceremonial hospitality offered at levees.

[Footnote 8](#): Big lady.

[Footnote 9](#): Abuse it.

[Footnote 10](#): Lit.: outcasts, used as a term of abuse for Europeans.

[Footnote 11](#): Certain.

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