

FICTION

Flora Annie Steel

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# The Potter's Thumb

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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FICTION

# THE POTTER'S THUMB

BY

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## **THE POTTER'S THUMB**

## CHAPTER I

'Tis only the potter's thumb, Huzoor.'

As she raised the parti-coloured rag covering the child's body, the noonday sun streamed down upon a pitiful sight. Yet her eyes, despite the motherhood which lay in them, accepted it, as the sun did, calmly. Emotion, such as it was, being reserved for the couple of Englishmen who stood by: and even there curiosity and repulsion froze the surface of pity, especially in the younger of the two faces.

In good sooth, not a pleasant sight for mankind, to whom sickness does not as a rule bring that quick interest born of a desire to aid which it does to most women. The brown skin was fair with the pallor of disease, and the fine, sparse, black hair showed the contour of the skull. The unnatural hollows of the temples emphasised the unnatural prominence of the closed eyelids, round whose ragged margin of clogged lashes the flies settled in clusters. Below this death's-head was an over-large body, where, despite its full curves, each rib stood sharply defined, and whence the thin limbs angled themselves in spidery fashion.

'The potter's thumb?' echoed Dan Fitzgerald interrogatively. He was a tall man, broad in the shoulders, lean in the flank, and extraordinarily handsome; yet the most noticeable quality in the face looking down at the very ordinary woman squatting upon a very ordinary dust-heap, was not its beauty, but its vitality. 'Is that a disease?' he added, almost sharply.

She gave the native cluck of emphatic denial. 'No! Huzoor. The child dies because it does not drink milk properly; yet is it the potter's thumb in the beginning. Lo! many are born so in this place. The doctor-sahib who put the *tikka* on the arms for smallpox said Hodinuggur was too old for birth--that it was a graveyard. I know not. Only this is true; many are born with this; many die of it.'

'Die of the potter's thumb--what potter?'

Her broad face broadened still more into a smile. 'The Huzoor doth not understand! Lo! when the potter works on the clay, his hand slips sometimes in the moulding. It leaves a furrow, so,'--her brown finger, set with tarnished silver rings, traced a girle round the baby's naked breast--'then in the firing the pot cracks. Cracks like these,'--here the finger pointed to the sherds among which she sate,--'so when children are born as this one, we say 'tis the potter's thumb. Sometimes there is a mark,'--again the finger softly followed the line it had traced before--'this one had it clear when he came; sometimes none can see it, but 'tis there all the same, all the same. The potter's thumb has slipped; the pot will crack in the firing.'

Her voice took a cadence as if accustomed to the words.

'What *is* she saying?' interrupted George Keene impatiently. He was a middle-sized lad of twenty or thereabouts, powerfully made, with grey eyes and white teeth gleaming in an aquiline, sunburnt face.

'Something ghastly,' replied Dan. 'It always is so, you'll find, my dear boy, when you dip below the indifferent calm of these people. It's like deciphering a tombstone. But come on. We are due already at the World, the Flesh, and the Devil's.' Then he paused, gave a short laugh, and flung out his hands in an impulsive gesture. 'By the Powers!' he went on, his face seeming to kindle with the fuel of his own fancy, 'it's gruesome entirely. This heap of dust they call Hodinuggur, as they call thousands of such human ant-hills all over India; for wherever when you dig, the bricks grow bigger and bigger till, *hocus pocus!* they vanish in the dust from which God made man--*that* is Hodinuggur; the old city, it means. What city? who knows! Then in the corner of this particular one a survival!--his eager hand pointed to the pile of buildings before them--not of those old days, for no Moghul in India dates beyond Timoor, and these people are Moghuls; but of that Mohammedan civilisation which overwhelmed the older one, just as we in our turn are overwhelming the Moghul--who in the meantime bullies the people by virtue of an Englishman's signature on a piece of parchment----'

'But I suppose we found the Diwan in possession when we annexed----' began George stolidly.

Dan scorned the interruption and the common-sense. 'Oh, 'tis queer, looked at any way. A mound of sherds and dust higher than the gateway of the palace. I'll go bail that reed hut yonder on the top is higher than old Zubr-ul-Zaman's tower. He lives up there winter and summer, does the old Diwan, looking out over his world and the strength of

it--that's what his name means, you know. His son, Khush-hal Beg, lives in the next storey. A Jack Falstaff of a man--that's why I call him the Flesh. Then Dalel, the Devil, roams about seeking whom he may devour.'

'A charming trio; and what part have I to play in the drama?' asked George with a laugh.

'St. George, of course.'

The lad laughed louder. 'So I am in baptism. George for short. Born on the saint's day--father a parson--fire away, old chap--don't let me pull Pegasus.'

'Sure! my dear boy, and aren't you sent to fight them all? Sent into this wilderness of a place to be tempted----'

'Oh, don't talk rot, Fitzgerald! I suppose you mean about the sluice-gate; but it's sheer folly.'

'Is it? My two last subordinates didn't find it so. Perhaps the potter's thumb had slipped over their honesty. So the authorities gave me you--a real white man--and said it was my last chance. Think of that now, my boy, and be careful.'

George Keene frowned perceptibly.

'That's a fine old gateway,' he said, to change the subject. As they approached it a flock of iridescent pigeons rocketed from the dark niches to circle and flash against the sky. It was a great square block of a building cut through by one high arch of shadow, and showing the length of the tunnel in the smallness of the sunlit arch beyond. On the worn brick causeway, as they entered, half in the sunshine, half in shade, lay the scattered petals of a pomegranate blossom which some passer-by had flung aside.

'By Jove, what a colour!' said Fitzgerald: 'like drops of blood.'

George Keene frowned again. 'If I had your diseased imagination I'd engage lodgings in Bedlam. Seriously, I mean it. Fellows like you are get rid of it in words--all froth and fuss; but if that sort of thing ever got a real grip on me--Hullo! what's that?' He flushed through his tan in sheer vexation at his own start. From the deep recesses, which on either side of the causeway lost themselves in shadow, came a clash as of silver bells, and something through the arches showed white yet shadowy; something of exceeding grace, salaaming to the *sahib-logue*; something sending the scent of jasmine flowers into the hot air.

'That is Chandni,' said Dan, passing on regardless of the salutation, 'she generally sits here.'

George, imitating his companion, felt the thrill still in his veins. 'Chandni!' he echoed, 'that means silvery, doesn't it?'

'Moonshine also. They call her Chandni-rat or Moonlit-night as a rule. If tales be true, there is a good deal of the night about her. She and Dalel--but here he comes, innocently, from a side door. The Devil loves moonshiny nights.'

The figure approaching them was not outwardly of diabolic mould, being altogether too insignificant. The oval face was barely shadowed by a thin beard curling in an oiled tuft on either side of the retreating chin, and the only Mephistophelian feature was the narrow line of moustache waxed upwards towards the eyes. The dress was nondescript to absurdity. A biretta-shaped Moghul cap, heavy with church embroidery, sate jauntily on the long greasy hair; a blue velvet shooting-coat, cut in Western fashion, was worn over baggy, white cotton drawers, and these again were tucked away into sportsmanlike leather gaiters, ending in striped socks and patent leather highlows. Such was Mirza Dalel Beg, the Diwan's grandson. Behind him came lesser bloods of the same type: one with a falcon on his wrist; all with curious eyes for George Keene, the new-comer.

'Hullo, Dalel sahib!' cried Dan in English. 'Keene, let me introduce you in form to his Highness.'

The Mirza thrust out a small, cold, clammy hand; but thereafter relapsed into such absolute inaction, that George found no little difficulty in finishing the ceremony.

'Ana, I see!' said his Highness jerkily, in a voice many tones too low for his chest measurement. 'Glad to see you, Keene. You shoot, I lend you gun or rifle. You hawk, we go hawk together. You hunt, you use my crocks. Come, see my stable.'

Dan's eyebrows went up expressively. 'Don't tempt him to-day, Mirza sahib,' he interrupted gravely. 'We are already due at the State audience with your grandfather. Aren't you to be there as heir-presumptive?'

Dale cracked with a high-toned laugh which did not match his voice. 'Bosh! My gov'nor is there in swagger dress. He likes. I am different. Good-bye, Keene. You must come often, and we will go shoot, hunt, polo, billiard, and be jolly. Ta, ta! I go to stables.'

The two Englishmen walked on in silence for a while. Then George Keene looked at his companion with a queer smile.

'So, that's the Devil?--that--that heterogeneous bounder----'

'Heterogeneous bounder is good--parlous good,' replied Dan, still gravely; 'but here is our reception party, so, for heaven's sake, look dignified, and don't shake hands, mind, unless they offer to do so. They know their own rank, you see; you don't know yours--as yet.'

The lad, as he obeyed orders, felt that he knew very little of anything in India; the fact being evident in the surprise with which he noted the squalid appearance of all things, save the ruinous masonry; even of the state-room where, on a cane-bottomed chair, set on a filthy striped carpet, a mountain of flesh awaited them. It did not need his companion's whisper to make him understand that this must be the heir-apparent Khush-hal Beg, for the fat man, coming forward to the appointed stripe--thus far and no further--held out his hand.

'The Huzoor is young,' he wheezed in a stately dignified voice. 'But youth is a great gift. With it even the desert need not be dull. 'Tis only as we grow older----' He paused and crossed his hands over his fat stomach with a sigh, as if to him the only consolation for age lay there. Dan shot one of his almost articulate looks at his companion as they passed on to a narrow stone stair where there was barely room for single-file order up the steep steps. Up and up it went seemingly in the thickness of the wall, with little loopholes sending a faint light at the turns; up and up, breathlessly, till the party emerged on the roof of the Diwan's tower, where, in a pavilion set round with arched arcades, they found the old man himself, backed by a semi-circle of shabby retainers, whose gay clothes showed tawdry in the pitiless sunlight.

Yet Dan's whisper of 'the World' provoked no smile in his companion, for there was nothing to smile at in Zubr-ul-Zaman, old and shrunken as he was. So old that those steep stairs cut him off from his kind; so old that his chin lay upon his breast, his palms upon his knees, as though both head and hands were weary of the world. What his heart thought of his ninety and odd years of life none knew. None could even guess, for the simple reason that Zubr-ul-Zaman had never showed that he possessed a heart. Of brains and skill he had no lack even now; but of pity, love, tenderness, only this was certain, that he had never sought them even in others. Yet the English boy had eyes only for that wrinkled, indifferent face, while Dan Fitzgerald, seated on one of the two cane-bottomed chairs set opposite the Diwan's red velvet one, explained in set terms why George came to be seated in the other. Not a pleasant tale altogether, told as it was with official boldness of expression. Briefly, the sluice-gate of the canal had been opened too often, and Government did not intend it to occur again.

When he ceased, the Diwan raised his head slowly, and George felt an odd thrill at his first sight at those luminous dark eyes; a thrill which continued as, at a sign from the old man, the court rhetorician standing surcharged with eloquence at the Diwan's right hand, burst into a stream of polished Persian periods which, hitting the keynote of the empty pavilion, roused a murmurous echo in its arcades. It reminded George of the general confession in his father's church on a week-day when the choir was absent; one certain note followed by faint efforts after repentance. The fancy, indeed, clung closer to facts than his ignorance of the language allowed him to perceive, as the speech dealt chiefly in regrets for the untoward events in the past which had made it incumbent on '*Gee Uff Keene sahib bahadur*' to languish in the wilderness of Hodinuggur, though doubtless the presence of the said '*Gee Uff Keene sahib bahadur*' would cause that desert to blossom like a rose, despite the want of water. These reiterations of his own name made George feel a sense of unknown responsibility, as of a baby at its own christening. He looked anxiously at Dan, his sponsor, but the latter was now conversing with the Diwan in the usual explosive sentences followed by the decorous silences due to dignity, while the attendants brought forward divers round brass trays covered with Manchester pocket-handkerchiefs and laid them at the visitors' feet. George's share consisted of three, one containing dried fruits and sugar, one of various rich cloths topped by a coarse white muslin *pugree*, the third conglomerate. A French clock, with Venus Anadyomene in alabaster, some pantomime jewelry, a green glass tumbler, a tin of preserved beetroot, a lacquered tray with the motto 'for a good boy,' and various other odds and ends. Among them a small blue earthenware pot. Was it blue after all, or did a gold shimmer suggest a pattern beneath the glaze? A queer, quaint shape, dumpy, yet graceful. That broad, straight ring around it should have marred its curves but failed to do so; strange! how these people had the knack of running counter to recognised rules, and yet---- Here George was recalled to the present by Dan whispering--

'Take it, man! Take it!'

Looking round he saw the latter removing something from a tray, and his own head being full of the blue pot, his hand naturally went out towards it.

'No! no!' continued Dan, in the same voice, 'the *pugree*.'

'But I've got one already!'

The instinctive greed of the reply made his companion smile as he explained that the *pugree* was put there on purpose. But, as he spoke, the Diwan signed to an attendant who stepping forward, transferred the blue pot to the tray of dried fruits.

'It is nothing,' came the courteous voice, setting aside all disclaimers; 'our potter makes them.'

'I did not know they could put such a good glaze on nowadays,' remarked Fitzgerald, yielding the point. 'A first-rate piece of work indeed; does the man live here?'

Khush-hal Beg turned to the speaker breathlessly. 'He is crazy, Huzoor. The Lord destroyed his reason by an accident. The old wall fell on his house one night and killed his daughter. Since then he lives away, where naught can fall, like the crazy one he is.'

The stress and hurry of the speech were evident, even though the fat man was still suffering from the stairs.

'Thank the Lord! that's over,' said Dan piously, when the last diminishing tail of escort left them with but one orderly to carry the spoil. 'I ought to have warned you about the *pugree*--but there! you might have done worse--the French clock, for instance. Come! let's strike home across the mound. I want to show you a dodge of mine on the canal cut.'

He plunged headlong, after his wont, into professional matters till even George, fresh from college technicalities, could scarcely follow him, and found himself wondering why a man of such vast capacity should have succeeded so indifferently; for Dan Fitzgerald was not a *persona grata* at headquarters. To be that, a subordinate often has to conceal his own talents, and this man could not even conceal his faults. Some folk are so self-contained that a burden of blame finds no balance on their shoulders; others are so hospitable that they serve as hold-alls both for friends and foes; and there was plenty of room both for praise and blame in Dan Fitzgerald's excitable Celtic nature.

'What's that?' cried George suddenly. With the best intentions his attention had wandered, for everything in that circle of dun-coloured horizon domed with blue was new to him. Dan paused, listening. An odd rhythmic hum came from the highest hut, which was separated from the others by palisades of plaited tiger-grass shining in the afternoon light like a diaper of gold.

'The potter's wheel!' he cried, his face changing indescribably in an instant. 'Come on, Keene, and let us see the man who made your first bribe!'

He gave no time for reply, but turning at right angles through a gap threaded his way past piles of pots and sherds until he ran the sound to earth. Literally to earth--a circle of the solid earth spinning dizzily in front of a man buried to his waist. At least so it seemed at first to George Keene's ignorance of potters and their wheels. A circle, dazzling at its outer edge, clearer at the centre where something beneath a steady curved hand shot up, and bulged; then, as the whirr slackened, sank into a bomb of clay.

'Salaam alaikoom!' came a pleasant voice as the worker sat back in his seat-hole so as to ease his feet. He was a mild-faced old gentleman with nothing remarkable about him save a pair of shifty eyes--the light hazel eyes seen so rarely in a native's face.

'Salaam alaikoom,' returned Dan. 'The little sahib has never seen a wheel worked. Will you show him?'

'Wherefore not, Huzoor? The sahib could come to none better, seeing we of Hodinuggur have spun the wheel of life for years--for ages and ages and ages.'

The words blent with the rising cadence of the wheel as he leant forward to the task again. Faster and faster upon the wheel with a swaying motion. Only the potter's hand poised motionless above the whirring clay which showed--as children say--like a top asleep. Then suddenly came the turn of the potter's thumb, bringing a strange weird life with it.

One protean curve after another swelling, sinking, shifting, falling. The eye could scarcely follow their swift birth and death, until the potter, sitting back once more, the slackening wheel disclosed the hollows and bosses.

'The clay is good,' he said, as if deprecating his own skill, 'and it fires well.'

'When the thumb does not slip,' put in Dan quietly. The potter turned to him in sudden interest.

'The Huzoor knows the sayings of the people, that is well; it is not often so. Yea! it slips--thus.' The wheel still span slowly, he shifted his hand almost imperceptibly and a deep furrow scored itself upon the biggest boss. 'So little does it,' he went on, 'a grit clinging to the skin--a wandering thought. It is Fate. Fuzl Elahi, the potter, cannot help it.'

'Fuzl Elahi? Then you are a Mohammedan?'

He shook his head. 'I am as my fathers were. The Moghuls call me so, the Hindus otherwise; but it means the same. By the grace of God, potter of Hodinuggur since time began. Lo! my fathers and my children are in the clay. I dug a grave in the dust for the boy; the girl dug hers for herself. It was deep, Huzoor. I search for it always; in vain, in vain.' The wheel set up its rhythmic hum once more, but the hands lay idle.

'Poor old chap,' said Dan aside, 'I suppose he is thinking of the accident; but by the powers, Keene, it is a situation. Seated here on a pinnacle--a crazy irresponsible creator----'

'Ask him if he made the pot, please,' interrupted George brutally. 'If I could get a pair, I'd send them to the *mater*. Those things are always in pairs, you know.'

'Pairs! you intolerable Philistine! A potter's vessel trying to be matched before it's broken in pieces. Think of the tragedy--the humour of it.'

'Will you ask, or shall I?'

Fitzgerald grinned maliciously. 'You. I like to hear you stuttering.'

George smiled, rose, and taking the blue pot from the attendant's tray laid it on the potter's wheel.

'Did you make that?' he asked, in English. His meaning was palpable.

'No, Huzoor.'

'If you did not, who did?' he continued, his triumph mixed with anxiety for the future; but the old man's thoughts did duty for an answer.

'Without doubt my fathers made it; since it is an Ayodhya pot.'

'Ayodhya,' broke in Dan, 'that means old, Keene; you'll have to send it back. I half suspected it was valuable, from that old fox's look. But he said it was made here, the sinner! Can you make pots like that, oh! Fuzl Elahi?'

The old man smiled. 'None can give the glaze, Huzoor, there is a pattern in it, but none can catch the design. Even I know it not; that is the secret of Ayodhya.'

'What is he saying? What is Ayodhya?' asked George irritably.

'Same as Hodi--old; it means here the half-forgotten heroic age. Well, as you can't get a pair, we had best be moving. Salaam! potter-ji, and don't let your thumb slip too often in the future.'

'God send it hath not slipped too often in the past,' he replied, half to himself.

An hour afterwards the two Englishmen sat on the low parapet of the canal bridge looking out over a world-circle of dusty plain, treeless, featureless, save for the shadowy mound of Hodinuggur on one side, and on the other a red brick house dotted causelessly upon the sand. A world-circle split into halves by the great canal, which eastwards towards the invisible hills showed like a bar of silver; westwards towards the invisible sea like a flash of gold, at whose end the last beams of the setting sun hung like the star on a magician's wand.

'*Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink,*' murmured Dan Fitzgerald discontentedly. 'Upon my soul, it must be rough on them watching it all day long, and knowing that if they could only get *you* to open the sluice *they*

would get rupees on rupees from the Rajah. That's how it stands, you see. It isn't so much for their own bit of land, but for the bribe. I sometimes wish the overflow cut had been higher up, or lower down; but we had to protect the big embankment against abnormal floods. Confound the thing! what business has it to put hydraulic pressure on us all?'

'Don't feel it much as yet,' said George cheerfully, with his eyes on the palace, which was gaining an unreal beauty from the dust of ages. For the village cattle were homing to the thorn-set folds, and the cloud from their leisurely feet lay in a golden mist between the shadowed plain and the shadowed mound rising against the golden sky. A lingering shaft of light showed the white fretwork of the Diwan's tower clear against the pale purple of the potter's thatch beyond.

'Perhaps not. You will, though. The wilderness plays the dickens with civilisation sometimes.'

'Does it? I don't believe it will with mine. Not that sort. I haven't your imagination, your sensitiveness, your poetical----'

'Pull up,' said Dan, laughing. 'You'll come to my vices soon, and as I've pet names for most of them, I object to have them scientifically classified. But I wish I hadn't to leave you there.' He pointed distastefully to the red parallelogram of a house with the initials of the Public Works Department stamped on each brick like the broad arrow on a convict. 'It isn't fit for a youngster like you. But as it can't be helped, there's the key. For my sake don't let the World, the Flesh, or the Devil wheedle it out of you.'

'All right,' replied the boy, pocketing the Chubb. 'If you are engaged to be married, go and do it right off. Promotion in due course guaranteed.'

Dan Fitzgerald, looking down at the sliding water, was silent for a minute. 'You've hit the right nail on the head,' he said at last. 'That's why I'm anxious; but by the powers! your work is cut out for you if you are to keep me from getting into hot water.'

'It isn't the water that does it,' muttered George, as they strolled off to dinner, 'it's the spirits.'

That was the truth in more senses than one. George had been living with his superior officer for two months at headquarters, and his cool, clear head had noted the fascination which stimulants of all kinds had for Dan's excitable nature. But he had said nothing, after the manner of men. Therefore it came as a surprise even to himself when that evening something made him say hurriedly--

'Better not, Fitzgerald; you've a long ride before you.'

Dan, his hand on the whisky bottle, paused, surprised in his turn; but George seemed to feel that key in his pocket outline itself against the thumping of his heart.

'Are you afraid I won't leave you any?'' asked the elder quickly. 'I'll send you a bottle by post, if that's it. Come! hands off, youngster; don't be a fool! That's enough.'

The angry red was not on his cheek only. It had spread to the boy's, as he stood back in a sudden flare of utterly unexpected dignity.

'Quite enough, Mr. Fitzgerald. I've been your guest for two months, I know; but you are mine now. This is my house, and that's my bottle. I'll trouble you to put it down.'

For an instant it seemed on its way to the speaker's head; then it was pushed aside scornfully; the next Dan held out his hand.

'Thanks. No one has taken that trouble for years. What made you do it?'

But the English boy's shame at his own impulsiveness was on George now, and he laughed uneasily. 'I--I believe it was that confounded key,' he began. Dan's smile was transfiguring.

'God bless the boy!' he cried, with the ring of tears and laughter in his rich brogue. 'So you're the Keeper of the Key of the King's conscience, are you? The saints protect you; for see! your sort don't know mine. We leave off the effort after virtue where you begin, and I spend more solid holiness in refusing a glass of sherry than you do in keeping all the Ten Commandments. Sure the sun's got into my head, and I must be off to the water cure.'

He was out of the room, out of the house, standing on the bridge abutment and stripping as for dear life before George caught him up breathlessly and asked if he were quite mad.

'Not yet!' came the joyous voice. 'I'm going to swim up stream till I'm beat, and come down with the current--an epitome of my life!'

The rapid Indian twilight had fallen into night, but the moon had risen, and the air was warm with the first touch of spring which in Northern India treads close on the heels of the new year. Fitzgerald pausing for a second showed like a white statue on the buttress; then his curved body shot into the shadow with the cry--

'I come, Mother of All!'

Tristram's cry when he sprang to 'the sea's breast as to a mother's where his head might rest,' thought George, watching with the vague anxiety inseparable from the disappearance of life beneath the water. Ah! there he was--safe; turning his head to call out 'Don't wait, please! Tell the syce to have the mare ready for me in half an hour.'

Yet George did wait, watching the arrowy ripple cleaving the steel-grey path which led straight up to the steel-grey sky where the stars hung sparkling. If, he thought, they were reflected in the still water ahead as they were in the still water below the bridge, Dan must feel as if he was swimming in the ether!

Decidedly, imagination was catching. George Keene was reminded of the fact again as he stood looking over to the mound of Hodinuggur, and listening to the last echo of the horse's hoofs bearing Dan away from the wilderness. There was a light in the Diwan's tower, another in the potter's hut. He wondered vaguely which was really the highest; then, to check such idle thoughts, began on the first duty of youth in a foreign land--home letters.

'Dear father,' he wrote fluently, 'I arrived at Hodinuggur, my headquarters, to-day. It is----'

Half an hour afterwards he tore up the sheet angrily and went to bed.

## CHAPTER II

It was band-night in the public gardens; mail night also; a combination of dancing and picture papers, ensuring a large attendance in the big hall, which had been built, gravely, as a memorial to some departed statesman. But now English girls hurried through its dim corridors to the ladies' dressing-room, intent on changing tennis shoes for dancing slippers. English women took possession of the comfortable nooks between the pillars where there was room for two. English boys lounged about the vestibule, finishing their cigars and waiting for the band to strike up. English men drifted to billiards and whist, or to their own special corner in the reading-room.

A weird-looking place even at noon was the big hall set round with paste and paper mementoes of the semi-historic festivals held beneath its high arched roof; with shields from the Prince of Wales' ball, flags from the Imperial installation, trophies from the welcome given to our soldiers after an arduous campaign. But seen now by the few lamps lit at one end it looked positively ghostly, as if it must be haunted by a thousand memories of dead men, and women, and children who had flitted across the kaleidoscope of Rajpore society. Up in the gallery the native band, after playing 'God save the Queen' to the Aryan brother outside, was tuning up for dance music. And by-and-bye a couple would come waltzing out of the shadows into the bright reflections of the polished floor, and waltz back again. Then three or four couples, perhaps ten or a dozen; not more. Viewed from the other end, where the non-dancers sat in darkness, the scene looked like a dim reflection of something going on in another world.

And outside, under the rising moon, the builders of the hall trooped home to the packed highways and byways of the native city, full, no doubt, of that silent, evergreen wonder at the strange customs of the ruling race which is an integral part of native life; that ruling race which, with all its eccentricities, rules better than even the fabled Vicramiditya himself!

In the far corner of the inner reading-room a girl stood looking at the new number of the *Scientific American*, keeping a stern watch the while on the present possessor of the *Saturday Review*. A tennis bat lay on the table beside her, and her workmanlike flannels and tan shoes showed what her occupation had been. For the rest, a well-made, well-balanced girl, looking as if she walked well, rode well, danced well, and took an honest pride in doing so. Her face was chiefly remarkable for a pair of beautifully arched eyebrows, and her best point was undoubtedly the poise of her head with its closely plaited coif of hair.

A sort of snore followed by a thud, told that people were passing in and out through the swing-doors of the outer room. Here, however, as befitted the abode of more serious literature, all was peaceful; almost empty in fact, and its only other female occupant was a medical lady deep in the *Lancet*.

'Oh Gordon!' called a voice from the outer room, 'have you seen my daughter?'

'Miss Tweedie is here, sir,' replied the young man addressed. 'She has been for the last five minutes trying to make up her mind whether to go and dance, or brain Dr. Greenfell for keeping the *Saturday* so long.'

'Really, Mr. Gordon!' cried Rose Tweedie aghast. 'No indeed not--Dr. Greenfell! I didn't really--I mean I was of course, but I don't now--Oh, it's awfully good of you.' Then as the apologetic little doctor moved away, pausing to say a few words to a tall grey-haired man who was entering, she turned aggressively to the offender: 'Why did you say that, Mr. Gordon?'

'Why, Miss Tweedie? Because you insisted yesterday that women preferred the truth, even when it was rude. And it was true. I suppose, as your father wants you, I have no hope of this dance; and I'm engaged for all the others.'

Rose Tweedie's eyebrows went up. 'How lucky for you--I mean, of course, how unlucky for me!' Then she added in more conciliatory tones, 'I'm not dancing to-night; these shoes won't do.' She thrust out her shapely foot with the careless freedom of a child.

'I can see no fault,' he replied artificially, putting up his eye-glass, 'they appear to me quite perfect.'

'Your knowledge of women doesn't apparently extend to their understandings,' she retorted quickly, her voice, as usual when she was irritated, showing a trace of Scotch accent. 'Oh father! if you want me to come home, I'm ready.'

Colonel Tweedie hesitated. A single glance at him suggested that the late Mrs. Tweedie must have been a women

of strong individuality, or else that Rose had reverted to some ancestral type.

'Not, not exactly, my dear. I only--wanted to--er--speak to you.'

'Good-bye, Miss Tweedie,' said Lewis Gordon, taking the hint. 'Oh! by the way, sir, if your daughter will remember I'm a personal assistant, and excuse shop for an instant--Fitzgerald came back to-day from Hodinuggur.'

Rose Tweedie's face lit up. 'Did he say how Mr. Keene liked it?' she asked eagerly.

'I'm afraid not; but he can scarcely be expected to like the desert after--Rajpore. I shouldn't--under the circumstances. That is all, sir; except that he reports everything satisfactory, so far.'

The Colonel gave a little cough; it was his way of starting the official machine inside the social one. 'I hope--for Mr. Fitzgerald's sake it--it--er--may remain so. The past scandals have been a disgrace--er--to the Department.

'Not to him, though,' broke in Rose hotly. 'I think he is quite one of the nicest people I ever met.'

'And what is more, the ablest man we have in our service,' added Lewis Gordon heartily. The girl's face softened at his tone. If he would only speak like that always, instead of simpering and scraping!

'Well, father, what is it?' she asked when he had gone. The other readers had drifted away, and the medical lady looked as if even the last trump would not rouse her from the post-mortem she was perusing, so to all intents and purposes they were alone. Colonel Tweedie gave another little cough; it was an unusual occurrence in private matters, and she repeated her question with quickened interest.

'I want you, my dear, to go and speak to--to Mrs. Boynton. I've--I've asked her to come into camp with us this time.'

'Why?'

Pages full of words would fail to give a better idea of Rose Tweedie's mental outlook than this simple interrogation. Briefly, she must have a reason, good, bad, or indifferent, for everything. Her father, being her father and knowing this, had several ready.

'Dacre's wife isn't strong enough to face the sand, and you must have a chaperon--I mean another lady--you never need a chaperon of course, my dear--but if anything happened--besides, we shall be very busy, and it will be lonely--I thought it better than leaving you at home--it isn't as if she were quite an outsider--she is Gordon's cousin, and he is my personal----'

'The widow of a cousin, you mean,' she interrupted with emphasis. 'A cousin he scarcely knew; and he never even saw *her* till he returned from furlough last year.'

'Didn't he, my dear?' said the Colonel feebly. 'Still, they are relations. Call each other by their Christian names, and--'

This time a laugh interrupted him; rather a hard laugh for a girl.

'What a number of cousins the Rajpore ladies must have!' she began.

'Not Mrs. Boynton, Rose; not Mrs. Boynton,' protested the Colonel with spirit.

'No, I admit it. She is perfectly lady-like. I don't really dislike her a bit.'

'Dislike! my dear Rose! who could dislike so--so----'

'I admit it again, father. She is charming. I catch myself watching her, just as if I were in love with her like all the nice men are.'

'Really, my dear Rose----'

'Well, dear, why not? She is perfectly sweet. Then she has such tact. Do you know she never allows an ungentlemanly man to fall in love with her? I often wonder how she manages it. It's awfully clever of her.' Rose, standing by the fire, shifted a log with her foot and the sparks flew upwards. 'Of course I would rather have had a girl; but I suppose it wouldn't have done. There! don't worry, dear! Go off to your whist. I'll settle it all.'

'My dear girl----'

She told him calmly that there was no need for gratitude, and Colonel James Tweedie, R.E., head of a great Department, slunk away abashed to the card-room. Rose was very fond of her father, though she understood him perfectly--after the manner of modern children; accepting him reasonably, with all his weaknesses, as the parent Providence had assigned to her. And why, if she would have him, should he not marry Mrs. Boynton? The mother, who had died when Rose was born, had been well remembered; the Colonel was still middle-aged, and when his daughter married might have long years of solitude before him. Would it be fair for her to object? It was another of Rose Tweedie's characteristics that this question came uppermost in her dealings with both friends and foes. No! it would not be fair; there was no reason against it. None.

So she walked off calmly to the big hall, waiting to see Gwen Boynton's graceful figure--paired with some worthy partner, of course--come swaying out into the ring of light. But she was disappointed; for the very simple reason that the lady she sought was sitting with Lewis Gordon in the most comfortable corner in the whole building.

'Miss Tweedie!' said an eager voice behind her, as she stood instinctively marking the rhythm of the dance with one foot. 'Have you seen Mrs. Boynton? I can't find her anywhere.'

She turned gladly. It was Dan Fitzgerald, representing, as he always did, humanity at its handsomest. 'So you're back! No, Mr. Fitzgerald. She is not dancing, anyhow; but as those are the last bars, that is cold comfort. What a pity! when you came down to the hall on purpose.'

He flushed up like a girl; and she pointed to the gardenia in his button-hole.

'You don't go in for decoration except on state occasions,' she continued, 'and then you weren't at tennis. I always keep a look-out for you there; that back-handed return of yours from the line beats me. I've been trying it with the *chuprassie* bowling at me, but it didn't come off somehow. You must teach me when we are in camp.'

'Of course I will,' replied Dan cheerfully. Lewis Gordon would have simpered and said, 'Delighted, I'm sure.' The remembrance vexed Rose by its very appearance; as if it mattered what Gwen Boynton's cousin said or did. And the vexation accounted for the phrasing of her next words.

'Mr. Keene sent me a message, didn't he? No! How stupid of him! It was about his *Nature*. I was to have it, and he was to let me know what he wanted me to do with it.'

Dan's face, which had showed perplexity, cleared. 'Ah, it's the magazine you're meaning. Sure you puzzled me entirely, for it is not nature you want, Miss Tweedie, though, 'tis true, one can't have too much of a good thing.'

It was a distinct compliment, or meant to be one, but Rose listened to it gaily, and five minutes after, despite her shoes, was whirling in and out of the shadows, full of the keen enjoyment which dancing brings to some people.

Lewis Gordon, lounging lazily in his dark corner, noticed her with a certain irritated surprise. It was a more inconsequent, therefore a more womanly action than he expected in a girl who annoyed him by refusing to take either of the two places he assigned to women folk in his Kosmos. There were those of whom wives and mothers could be made discreetly, safely; and those who would be utterly spoiled by the commonplace process. He turned to his cousin feeling no such difficulty in regard to her classification. Yet in the dim light nothing could be seen save the outline of a small head, a huge fur boa, and long curves ending in a bronzed slipper catching the light beyond the shadow in which they sat.

'Shall we not dance?' he asked. 'It is the best waltz of the three. Then I could bring you some coffee and we could rest--on our laurels.'

'No, thanks. I was engaged to Mr. Fitzgerald for the last, and I must give him time to cool down.' The voice was sweet, refined, careless.

'I believe you are afraid of Fitzgerald.'

There was a touch of hauteur in the sweetness now.

'It is the second time this evening you have hinted at that, Lewis. I suppose--being a sort of relation--you know something of that boy and girl entanglement before I married your cousin. Is it so?'

Her unexpected and unusual frankness took him aback into faint excuse.

'There is nothing to apologise about, I assure you,' she went on, regaining her carelessness. 'You may as well know the facts. I was engaged to Mr. Fitzgerald. We were both babies, and my people disapproved. Then your cousin proposed, and good sense came to us; for we were not suited to each other. *Du reste*, Mr. Fitzgerald and I are still friends, and he is the best dancer in Rajpore.'

There was a pause, before he said quietly, 'Why not be quite frank, Gwen, and say he is in love with you still? Surely that is palpable.'

'Perhaps. But I prefer to leave such questions alone, even with my cousin. Especially since that cousin has done me the honour of telling me many times that he is devoted to me himself.'

He smiled at her deft evasion.

'What is the use of any one being devoted to you, Gwen, if you are going to marry Colonel Tweedie?' he replied half jestingly.

'I did not know I was going to marry him; but I am certainly going to look after Miss Rose Tweedie in camp--if she will have me. Do you think I shall want a new riding-habit, Mr. Gordon?'

'I really cannot help you on that question, Mrs. Boynton.'

She leant towards him, so that he could see the laugh pass from her pretty eyes. 'Don't be foolish, Lewis. You have been too good and kind to me for that. You, who know my affairs as well as I know them myself, must see that I have scarcely any choice between marrying again, and going home to live with my mother-in-law, or starving in some horrid poky lodging. How I should hate either! I can't live without money, Lewis. I don't spend much--but it goes somehow. Then my pension as a civilian's widow is but genteel poverty. Clothes are so expensive to begin with; yet even your best friends don't care for you unless you are well dressed.'

The real regret in her tone made him quote a trite saying about beauty unadorned.

'Rubbish!' she interrupted, sinking into her cushions again. 'Beauty is like the blue teapot; you must live up to it. I must marry some one who can afford a well-dressed wife. I must indeed, in common honesty to my future creditors. Personally I should prefer it to the mother-in-law. Besides, if I went home I should never see you again, Lewis. I should not like that--would you?'

If the words in themselves were a direct challenge, they came from the shadow where she sat, so daintily, so airily, that half a dozen replies were possible without trenching on sober affirmation or denial. Yet her hearer hesitated. There must always be a time when a man settles whether or no he shall ask a certain woman to be his wife, and this was not the first time the idea of marrying his cousin had occurred to Lewis Gordon. He was not the head of a Department, but he was in a fair way to become one in the future. He had money of his own, and she liked him in a way. As for her? she was perfection as a companion. As a wife?----

'My dear Gwen! I should hate it,' he said fervently, being certain of so much. But when he had said the words, they sounded too little, or too much, so he took refuge in jest again. '*Faute de mieux* I should prefer the family party; that is to say, if you could induce your future stepdaughter, Miss Rose, to bear with my presence.'

The light on the bronze slipper shifted, showing an impatient movement of the pretty foot.

'Impossible, I should say,' came the voice, airy as ever; 'but as you seem to be imitating the barber's fifth brother to-night, why not settle that she should marry? Girls do, sometimes, especially in India.'

As she spoke a couple swooped out into the almost empty circle of polished floor. The waltz, nearing its end, gave them a swinging measure, and those two were dancers indeed. One could not choose but look, until, as the last chord crashed, they stopped as if petrified, to smile at each other, before hurrying away. Lewis Gordon watched them, his hands on his knees, a cynical smile on his face.

'By all means!' he said languidly. 'Suppose we say Dan Fitzgerald, and so get rid of our two *betes-noir* at once.'

Mrs. Boynton started from her cushions and gathered her boa together.

'What nonsense we are talking! Stupid nonsense into the bargain--which is intolerable. I am ashamed of myself. Come! let us have some coffee and forget our folly.'

Her companion rose to accompany her with a shrug of his shoulders. I beg your pardon, even though I fail to see the enormity of my offence. Fitzgerald, if he were once settled----

She interrupted him with a gay laugh. 'So you aspire to the barber's office in other ways; would like to *ranger* your friends. When I am duly installed as chaperon I must consult you on matrimonial questions; but not till then, if you please, Lewis. Ah! there is Mrs. Dacre, I haven't seen her for an age; not since I went to Meerut.'

He took his dismissal placidly, as men do in a society where they cannot claim the undivided attention of at least one woman. Besides, Gwen Boynton's chief charm lay in the impossibility of forgetting that--provided she did not wish to do something else--she would be quite as gracious to the person who cut into your place as she had been to you. Furthermore that he was sure to hold as good a hand, and know the game as well as you did; for Mrs. Boynton, as Rose Tweedie had remarked, admitted no inferior players to her table. Seen now in the full light of the coffee-room she showed slight and graceful in the soft grey draperies which she wore as half mourning for the late Mr. Boynton--a perfectly unexceptional man who, on the verge of retirement, had lost all the savings of a long bachelorhood in one unfortunate venture, and had died of the disappointment. Beyond a perfectly lovely mouth and the faultless curves of chin and throat, there was nothing remarkable in her face; nothing at least to account for her remarkable charm. That, however, was indubitable; even Lewis Gordon, sipping his coffee outside the circle which gathered round her quickly, kept his eyes upon her. So he noticed hers turn more than once to Dan Fitzgerald, who stood at the table waiting to replace Rose Tweedie's tumbler of lemonade. 'She is afraid of him,' he thought. 'I wonder why? Perhaps she hasn't got over her fancy either; that is the only thing I can think of likely to create a difficulty.' Then he went off to button-hole another Secretary about business, and forgot even Gwen Boynton.

Yet, if half an hour afterwards he had by chance wandered into that portion of the gardens devoted to zoology he would have seen something to confirm his suggestion. For the two figures leaning over the iron rail surrounding the ornamental water were those of Mrs. Boynton and Dan Fitzgerald. The moon shone on the water; the clumps of bamboo and plantains on the central island showed softly dark; masses of feathery tamarisk trees and the sweeping curves of a sandhill or two beyond the garden shut out the world. Otherwise it was not a suitable spot for sentimental interviews, by reason of the ducks and geese, whose sleepy gabblings and quackings were apt to come in unsympathetic chorus to lovers' talk, while the adjutants, standing in pairs side by side, their heads under their wings, were over-suggestive of Darby and Joan. The conversation between these two, however, was sufficiently sensible to stand the test of their surroundings.

'It is really absurd,' she said in (for her) quite a querulous voice. 'I accept a pleasant invitation to make myself useful to the Tweedies, who have always been most kind to me,--and my cousin. And why every one should jump to the conclusion that I am going to marry a man who is almost old enough to be my father I cannot imagine. Really the world is too idiotic.'

'You don't lump me in as the world, do you, Gwen?' he answered in a lower tone. 'Surely you make a difference--surely there's some excuse for me, dear? I haven't seen you for six weeks, Gwen; you've been away, remember. And I hurried so for that promised dance, which you forgot. Yes; we'll say you forgot it. Then every one is talking of your going into camp with the Tweedies, wondering at your giving up the pleasures, the society, hinting at some reason----'

'If you can't trust me, Dan, that is an end of everything,' she interrupted sharply. 'No, don't!--please, don't! One never knows who mayn't come this way. Do let us be reasonable, Dan. We are not boy and girl now, to squabble and make it up again. You tell me always that I love you--have always loved you--will never love any one else; and perhaps you are right. Isn't that confidence enough for you?' She tried her utmost to keep an even tone, but something made the unwilling smile on her lips tremulous.

'It is, dear, and it isn't,' he said, his face showing soft and kindly in the moonlight. 'If I were only as sure of the rest of you as I am that you love me! But it was so, Gwen, in the old days; yet you threw me over. I knew it then, and it made me go to the devil--more or less. For if I had had the pluck to say, "You sha'n't," you would have been happier. I spoilt your life as well as my own by my cowardice. And I'm as bad as ever now, Gwen,--afraid to make you poor. Why don't I speak up, Gwen, instead of giving in to the worst part of you?--instead of waiting for promotion and making you more extravagant by paying the bills?'

'You needn't have reminded me of that!' she cried hotly; 'I'm not likely to forget it.'

He stared at her for an instant in sheer downright incredulity. Then he laid his hand on hers sharply, and with the

touch something that was neither dislike nor fear, yet which seemed to alarm her, came to her face.

'Don't say that, Gwen! you don't--you can't mean it. For you know it is all yours--that I'd starve to give you a pleasure. Ah, Gwen! if you would only marry me to-morrow you'd never regret it. Why shouldn't you, dear? There's no fear; look how I've got on since you gave me the hope two years ago when I came to you in your trouble. If I had only had the pluck then to marry you straight away----'

'But it was impossible,' she broke in quickly, as if to lure him from the point. 'What would people have said? It was so soon.'

'What do I care? But now there is no reason--no reason at all. I'll get my promotion all right. Keene is there at Hodinuggur, so nothing can go wrong again. Gwen, why shouldn't you marry me to-morrow?'

'To-morrow!' she echoed faintly; yet for the life of her unable to repress that tremulous smile.

'Yes. Ah! my darling, you don't know what the uncertainty means to a man like I am. You don't know--you don't understand. If I only had you to myself, I would not fear anything. And you wouldn't, either, if I had the chance of teaching you what it means to a woman to have some one between her and the world--some one to hold her fast--some one----'

She shrank now from his increasing emotion.

'Don't! oh, don't! you frighten me. And don't be hurt or angry, dear. I've promised to marry you sometime--I have indeed. Oh, Dan, how foolish you are!'

She laid her delicately gloved hand on his arm, as he leant over the railings, trying to hide the bitter pain her look had given him; but he only shook his head.

'You can't make me different from what I am,' she went on almost pettishly; 'you can't, indeed.'

'I could, if I had the chance. That is all I ask.'

'And you will have it some day, Dan. Perhaps you are right, and I should be happy. Only, what is the use of talking about it just now? We have settled so many times that nothing can be done until your promotion comes. That will be next year, won't it? if nothing goes wrong at Hodinuggur. Oh, Dan, do cheer up. I have to go out to dinner, and it is getting late; but I'll drop you at the Club, if you like. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings; you know that; but you are so impetuous. Dan, do come! the geese are making such a noise, I can scarcely hear myself speak.'

It was true. Something had disturbed the peace of the pond, for a confused gabbling and quacking filled the air. Dan tried to fight against it for a minute, then with an inward curse gave up the struggle. As they walked back to the carriage Gwen felt grateful to the birds. They had saved the Capitol, for a very little more of Dan's hurt feelings might have made her promise anything. It was her way when brought face to face with pain. To make up for what he had suffered she was very gracious to him as they strolled along the winding walks set with English flowers, and the barred cages where big yellow tiger's eyes gleamed out of the shadows; gleamed quite harmlessly of course. But when she returned that evening to the rooms in the hotel which she occupied during the winter months her mood had changed; for Lewis Gordon had been at the dinner. She went over to her writing-table, took out a bundle of receipted bills and looked at it with a distaste seldom displayed towards such a possession. How foolish, how wrong, how unfair to poor Dan it had been to let him pay; and what a dreadful tie to her, for of course if he did not get his promotion she could not possibly marry him and then the obligation would be unbearable. Gwen, brooding over the situation by the fire, felt aggrieved. She was one of those women who, paradoxical as it may seem, gain the power of exciting passion by their own absolute lack of comprehension as to its first principles. To say she had no heart would have been an unkind calumny. She was really very fond of Dan; more fond of him when he was absent perhaps than when he was present, but she had not the remotest conception of what his love meant to him. So as she sat thinking of him in her seamless dress--Gwen's evening dresses always had a seamless look, and the lace about her fair shoulders always seemed pinned on with cunning little diamond brooches glittering and sparkling--she told herself that it all depended on promotion, and that, in its turn, depended largely on a boy whom she had never seen, who had gone to live in the desert with the sole purpose of forcing her to keep her promise. A queer tie indeed between that branded bungalow set in the sand, and her refined little sitting-room.

And at that moment George, pondering over a cigar in the verandah before turning in, was meditating, not upon the mysterious mound of Hodinuggur, with the light in the Diwan's tower challenging the feeble flicker in the potter's

house, but on something far more mysterious than either--his dinner. That dinner of six courses, compounded out of the desert fowl in various stages of existence, to which his factotum, a man whose imaginative faculty outran his creative power, had given such topsy-turvy yet familiar names. Wherefore? Why was it deemed necessary to feed a sahib on salt-fish concocted out of chicken and anchovy sauce, and then to give dignified support to the fraud by handing round the conventional egg-sauce? George gave up the puzzle and went to bed depressed by the consideration that if Hodinuggur was strange and unkenned to him, he was quite as strange and unkenned to it.

### CHAPTER III

Chandni was standing in her cool recesses of shadow at the farther end of the gateway which adjoined the little strip of bazaar leading past the palace. A bazaar but a few yards long, yet retaining in that small space a specimen of all the vices which in past times had made the Moghuls of Hodinuggur infamous. A couple of young men with uncovered heads were dicing on a string bed thrust under a patched, dyed awning stretched from balcony to balcony. A group of half-a-dozen more were quarrelling vilely over a quail fight beside the liquor-seller's booth, gay in its coloured bottles. Two or three of various ages, heavy with drugs, were sprawling and nodding in the gutters. Just across the street a sutara-player was twanging away, and above him a girl, powdered and painted, bent over the wooden balcony flinging snatches of hideous song on the passers-by, and shrieking with coarse laughter at a naked monstrosity who, as he begged, made capital of his misfortunes. On this girl, with her grease-smirched hair and Brummagem jewelry, Chandni, from her shadows, cast glances of scorn, which she transferred after a time to Dalel Beg, who sat crouched up against a plinth smoking a rank hookah and sipping a 'rajah's peg' of brandy and champagne. He had discarded European dress entirely, and the few clothes he wore smelt horribly of musk.

Against the darkness of the arch behind her the woman's tall figure showed like a white shadow. Not a scrap of colour anywhere save in her stained lips and the pomegranate sprig she twirled idly in her hand. Keeping time with it to the thrum of the sutara; keeping time also with a clash of the silver anklets hidden by the long gauze draperies of her Delhi dress.

'Yea! Dalel!' she said mockingly, and the creamy column of her throat vibrated visibly with her smooth round voice. 'Tis over true what the little sahib said of thy coarse attempts. The pack of us are fools. The sahib-logue's drink yonder steals what brains God gave thee; then Meean Khush-hal was never aught but a big belly, and the Diwan--Heaven keep him for the best of the lot--sits too high. There remains but Chandni the courtesan, and she----'

'Hath failed,' broke in Dalel with a forced explosion of malicious laughter. 'Lo! thou hast not had a civil tongue for others since he flouted thee. Sure the plant must be trampled in the dust ere it blossoms. Have patience, heart's delight.'

He was too weary even in his malice to seek the amusement of watching the rage grow to her face as she stood behind him.

'Whose fault----' she began hotly; then with a louder clash of the anklets ended in a laugh. 'Lo! 'tis past. And what care I? 'Tis naught to me, but if the treasure-chest of Hodinuggur be empty, 'tis good-bye to Chandni. She goes back to Delhi.'

'Nay! nay!' whimpered Dalel with a maudlin shake of the head, as he sought comfort in finishing the tumbler. 'We will succeed yet; but the boy hath no youth in his veins. I know not how to take him as the others. Yet have we done our best----'

'Best,' echoed the woman scornfully. 'Stale old tricks. A gold piece under his plate at dinner forsooth! That was soon over in a beating for the servant who should have seen it put there. A dish of oranges stuffed with rupees which the same servant, wise man, kept for himself. A gun he would not take! a dinner he would not eat! a horse he would not ride! Even a woman he would not look at. What care I? there be others who will. Stale old tricks indeed! insipid as uncooled water on a summer's day, or that thing yonder'--she pointed to the opposite balcony--'compared to me. Think not I did not see thee ere I came out, oh! Dalel. Not that I care. There be others, and Delhi is but a day's journey.'

'Mayhap the tricks are old,' he muttered in sullen discomfiture. 'Hast new to advise?'

She laughed. 'Not to thee; thou hast not the wit for it. And there is naught new. The crazy potter is right when he saith the world is in the dust. Sure every ploughman knows, that no matter what the surface be, the sand lies under all. Thou hast but to dig deep enough.'

She had moved forward to lean against the plinth. In the action her thin draperies clung to the long curve of her limbs from hip to ankle. Her right hand supported her head, which was thrown back against it, so that the arm framed her face. It was the attitude of the Medea in Pompeian frescoes; the face of a Medea also till the downward glance of her eyes met an upward one from the sutara-player. Then with a flash and a laugh the pomegranate blossom flew out into the sunlight and fell at the young man's feet. Dalel clutched at her savagely amid a volley of coarse English oaths.

'Let me go, beloved!' she giggled. 'Did I not say the sand lay under all? What! art jealous? jealous of Chandni the courtesan? Wouldst have me Dalelah since thou art Dalel? If that be so, I will put thee in good temper again.'

She snatched at an old banjo hanging on a nail, sank down amid her draperies like a cobra on its coil, and began recklessly to sing 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,' while Dalel wagged his head, but half mollified.

'Thou canst not dance it though,' he maundered sleepily. 'Not as 'twas pictured in the English papers at the Jubilee Institute. Thou art no good at all. I will change thee for a half-caste girl. Yet if there be no money in the treasury? Lo! Fate is hard, and I have done my best.'

And still the song of civilisation went on, full of incongruous barbaric intervals. The girl in the balcony retreated in a huff before an accomplishment unknown to her: the quail-fighters laughed at the noise. Only George Keene, wandering about one of the inner courts of the palace, seeking a good spot whence to sketch a certain blue-tiled mosque, found himself unconsciously whistling a refrain, and paused to listen in sickening suspense. Yes, it was! Fitzgerald was right when he said the country was being ruined by culture! What an inconceivable, unthinkable contrast to that great ruined courtyard, its blue tiles decorated in endless writing with the Attributes of God. At least how inconceivable it would have been six weeks ago, when he had first seen the mosque with Dan as his companion. For George Keene was becoming accustomed to being, as it were, depolarised. It would have made him very angry had any one told him that Hodinuggur had already altered his outlook on life, though it could scarcely have failed to do so. To begin with Dalel Beg's occidental follies, grafted on to a sound stock of ancestral vices, made him, as he leered over a billiard cue and tried to induce George to bet, quite a startling study. Not so disturbing, however, as the sober, gentle, inoffensive villagers with the confession, 'It is God's will,' on their patient lips. Content to toil and die, smiling over the fact. Surely, something ailed the terminology of religion if these were Heathen, and certain Western folk in his father's suburban parish were Christians? Then there was the mad potter in whose walled yard George listened to the oddest old-world tales, and the Diwan with whom the lad played chess. To tell truth, he never climbed up for that purpose to the tower without a breathlessness not altogether to be accounted for by the steepness of the stairs. Face to face with the old man, sitting still as a statue before the pieces, George felt himself face to face with something he could not set aside with a sneer. Yet he might have been playing with an automaton for all the interest Zubr-ul-Zaman displayed, while he, on his part, was agonising in anxiety. But once his hand had left the piece, the old man's would rise from his knee, hover over the board for a second, then swoop down unerringly with the murmur, 'My play is played.' And the move generally disposed of all George's deep-laid plans, for the Diwan was a passed master in chess. Yet the lad returned again and again for a beating, being dogged in his turn. He was, in fact, on his way from one when Chandni and the banjo started his thoughts along a familiar channel. Certainly they were an odd people, and somehow it was difficult to write home letters which should at once reflect the truth and give satisfaction to the British public.

Meanwhile Chandni, desisting with Dalel's first reliable snore, threw the banjo aside and reviewed the position. There was no mist of reserve between her and her profession. She had been born to it, as her forebears had been. Her success in it was rather a matter for pride than shame; her only anxiety being the future. Should she linger on as she had been doing in hopes that out of sheer conservatism Dalel Beg would attach her to him permanently by some of the many possible marriages? Or should she risk the life of a go-between in her old age, return to Delhi and amuse herself? The reappearance of the painted girl in the balcony decided her; she would not give way to such creatures as that until the emptiness of the Treasury was indubitable. Yet as she sat rolling the little pellets of opium for her midday dose between her soft palms she looked at her lover distastefully. He was no good, and if the sluice-gates were to be open that year she must bestir herself--she and the Diwan. So much was settled before she swallowed the dream-giver and threw herself full length on the bare string bed set deep in the shadows. Then the silence of noon fell on that sinful slip of bazaar. Even the quails ceased to challenge from their hooded cages, and the sutara-player with the pomegranate blossom stuck in behind his ear had forgotten the giver in sleep. But out in the fields the peasants were at work on their scanty crops, and George Keene as he entered the red brick bungalow paused to listen to a cry which never failed to impress him. The cry of praise to the giver with which the villagers drew water from the wells which stood between them and death. Truly in that wilderness of sand, water was the mother of all things. What wonder if it became the motive power in life? What wonder that, like the silver sword of the big canal, it cut the world into halves--the people who wanted, and the people who did not want the sluice-gates opened. With a laugh at his own fancy he went in to lunch, wondering this time what form the desert fowl would take: it certainly was the mother of all food! Hodinuggur might have its serious aspects, but on the whole it was farcical as well as tragical, and 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,' counterbalanced that cry of thanks giving.

And that same evening, while he was reading the last number of the *Nineteenth Century* in the verandah, Chandni had an interview with the old Diwan on his tower, which, had George been aware of it, would have seemed to him farcical beyond belief, though it was deadly earnest to the actors. She sat at the old man's feet so as to be within earshot of a whisper, since walls, especially in an Indian palace, have ears. That was why Diwan's chair was set out in

the open under the star-gemmed dome of the sky which paled to its circled setting of plain that, seen from the height, seemed in its turn to curve, cup-like, to meet the sky. The decent domino she had worn on her way was cast aside out of sheer coquetry, so that her supple figure, unadorned save for the heavy chaplets of jasmine flowers shrouding the filmy muslin, might stand outlined above the low parapet among the stars. For Chandni was shrewd. The ordinary jewels of her class might have aroused memories in the old man, and she wished to impress him with her individuality.

'Nay, daughter,' he said approvingly, 'I well believe failure was not thy fault. As for thy plan--speak.'

She drew her lips closer to his ear, and laid one hand on his knee, as if to hold his attention.

'Father! all men care for something. He cares not for what he has been given. Let us try others. If they fail, well and good. Now there is one thing such as he favour--God knows why?--but I have seen them myself in the bazaar at Delhi--sahibs who have come over the black water to buy ragged rugs and battered brass pots. Why? Because, forsooth, they are old! The crazy potter would say it was because they remember them. I know not. But this boy pokes about the old things--questions of the old tales.'

Zubr-ul-Zaman nodded approval. 'True, he favoured the Ayodhya pot; but he returned it.'

Chandni's eyes sparkled, then fell. 'So! that is one thing to begin with. Then he is of those who watch flowers grow and birds build their nests; who paint colour on paper for the love of it. Again, when the fowler fails in all else he baits the snare with pity, and sets a decoy-bird a-fluttering within the net. This boy gives quinine to the old wives, and fish-oil to the babes born with the Potter's thumb-mark.' Her laughter crackled joylessly.

'Words--words,' muttered the old man impatiently. 'What wouldest thou do?'

She drew closer, and the movement sent a wave of perfume from the jasmine chaplets into the air.

'Lend me Azizan for a week, and thou shalt see.'

Scent, so people say, is the most powerful stimulant to bygone memories; perhaps that was the reason why her words brought such a pulse of fierce life to the old face. 'Aziz! Nay! she is of the house.'

'Why not say of the race, father?' retorted Chandni coolly. 'Nay! in such talk as ours truth is best. Thinkest thou I am a fool when I go to dance and sing in the women's quarter? Is it not sixteen years since the potter's daughter disappeared on the night of the great storm!--hath not this fifteen-year-old the potter's eyes--Heaven shield us from them!' Her hand went out in the two-fingered gesture used to avert the evil eye in West as well as East.

Zubr-ul-Zaman scowled at her.

'There be other girls and plenty; take them,' he began. 'Besides, she is betrothed. I will not lose the dower.'

'Wherefore shouldst lose it? I said a week, and Zainub, the duenna, will see to safety. He will but paint her picture.'

The Diwan spat piously. 'And what good will such accursed idol-making do?' he asked more calmly.

'Twill bring the quarry within reach; he lives too far away now. Give me the girl, my lord, else will I know that the Diwan Zubr-ul-Zaman Julal-i-dowla Mustukkul-i-jung is afraid of the potter's eyes.'

'As thou art, daughter of the bazaars,' he retorted fiercely. 'Shall I set them on thee and thine?'

Chandni essayed an uneasy laugh. 'I will do her no harm,' she muttered sullenly. 'I will not even speak to her if thou wilt. Zainub shall do all.'

Half-an-hour afterwards Chandni, wrapped in her white domino, paused on her way home at the door leading to the women's quarters and knocked. After a while an old woman appeared at the latticed shutter. The courtesan whispered a word or two, the door opened, and the two disappeared down a dark passage.

'Tis Chandni come to dance.' The whisper ran through the airless, squalid rooms, causing a flutter among the caged inhabitants. Out of their beds they came, yawning and stretching, to sit squatted in a circle on the bare floor, and watch Chandni give a spirited imitation of the way the mem-sahibs waltzed with the sahib-logue. It was not an edifying spectacle, but it afforded infinite satisfaction to the audience. An audience which has to take its world at second-hand,

and in the process has grown careless as to abstract truth. The young women tittered, the old ones called Heaven to witness their horror, and then they all sat without winking an eye while the courtesan sang the songs of her profession.

But little Azizan's light eyes saw nothing at which to smile or to cry in either performance. She was young for her years, and very sleepy; besides, she was betrothed to an old man whom she had never seen, because, as all the other girls took care to tell her, she really was too ugly to be kept in the family. And that sort of thing takes the zest from life.

When the entertainment was over, Chandni sat and talked with Zainub, the duenna, until dawn, with that careless disregard of bed-time, which makes it quite impossible to foretell at what hour of the day or night a native of India will be asleep or awake.

But George Keene, over the way in the branded bungalow, was safely tucked up in sheets and blankets, whence nothing short of an earthquake would have roused him.

An earthquake, or else a prescience of the hideous caricature Chandni had been making of the *trois temps* over in the palace.

## CHAPTER IV

George Keene was trying to translate the cloth-of-gold sunlight into cadmium yellow, with the result that the blue of the tiles in his sketch grew green, and the opal on the pigeon's breasts as they sidled along the cornice, was dimmed to dust colour.

The courtyard with its blind arcades of Saracenic arches surrounding the mosque, lay bare and empty, as it always did save at the hours of prayer. He looked across it with a dissatisfied expression, noting the intense colour of certain tiles which were mixed up with those more modern ones bearing the Arabic letterings. The former reminded him of the Ayodhya pot, and set him a-wondering if he should ever have an honest chance of procuring one like his first bribe. The old potter, his authority in such matters, had told him they were still to be found, more or less broken, in the digging of graves, or the sinking of wells. Hitherto, however, he had failed to hear of one. Yet, the possibility remained, since those tiles, which must be centuries older than the *café chantant* sort of proscenium on which they were inlaid, had survived. The latter he saw clearly, now he came to draw it, had been added on to an older building behind; probably a Hindu temple. So, when all was said and done, that figure of a grave and reverend Mohammedan moulvie, which he had intended to put in the foreground, might not have so much right to be there as a priest of Baal. It was a confusing country!

When he looked up again from his work, he gave a start; for a totally unexpected model was squatting on the flags of his foreground. A mere slip of a village girl; and yet was she of the village? More likely a stranger--perhaps one of the southern tribes of whom the potter told tales--since her dress was odd.

It consisted of a reddish purple drapery, more like wool than cotton in texture, with a stitched border in browns and creams such as the desert folk embroider on their camel trappings. It was an admirable piece of colouring against that blue background, and he began upon it at once, reckless of the averted face; for he was accustomed to be thus watched furtively from afar, and knew that the least notice would end in instant flight, as of a wild animal. Besides, the faces were apt to be disappointing. This one, however, was not, and his first glimpse of it gave him quite a shock. Without being beautiful, it was most peculiar; a golden brown face, with a long straight nose, and a wide, curved mouth; golden brown hair under the reddish purple of the veil; golden brown eyes, and a golden brown arm circled with big bronze bracelets stretched out so that the hand rested on----!

He gave an irrepressible exclamation and half rose from his seat. Down fell his box and brushes, and over went the dirty water streaming across his hard-won sunshine. He mopped at it hastily with his handkerchief--as hastily as he dared; but when he looked up the girl had gone. He sat down and eyed the spot where she had been suspiciously; not because of her disappearance--there had been time for that--but because he was doubtful of his own eyes in thinking that her hand had rested on an Ayodhya pot. If so, what a rare chance he had lost; if not, he must be going to have fever, and had better go home and take some quinine. Go home, however, *via* the potter's house, and ask that inveterate gossip if he knew anything of an odd-looking child with light eyes--here George gave a low whistle, paused in his packing up of paint-boxes, and looked round again to where the girl had squatted, feeling that it was foolish of him not to have noticed the resemblance before. Doubtless the girl was a relation of some sort, though the old man had always strenuously asserted that he had none living. Perhaps he had meant no male ones; yet, strangely enough, Fuzl Elahi did not seem to share that contempt for girls which all the other natives of George Keene's acquaintance professed. He often talked about his dead daughter, and whenever he talked he became excited and restless; indeed, the fear of thus arousing him made George somewhat reticent in his description of the girl he had seen, which he confined as far as possible to the dress.

'She is not of Hodinuggur, Huzoor,' declared the old man confidently. 'They who wear wool live far to the south. They never leave the hearthstone where their fathers lie buried. 'Tis the old way, Huzoor, and we of this place did it also long ago.' Suddenly his eyes lit up, he let the wheel slacken and clasped his hands closely over the dome of clay in its centre. It shot up under the pressure like a fountain. 'Perhaps the Huzoor hath seen one of the old folk; they come and go, they go and come. I see them often; my fathers and their fathers, but never my daughter. She will not come, she will not come.' As his voice died away the cadence of the wheel recommenced, only to stop with a jar. 'Huzoor! Have *you* seen her? A slip of a girl with a fawn face tinted like a young gazelle's? Not black like these people--but sun colour and brown--all sun colour and brown with little curls on her forehead----'

For the life of him George could not help acknowledging the thrill that ran through him. The man was mad, of course, hopelessly mad; yet if he had seen the girl he could scarcely have given a better description. Perhaps he had

seen her, knew all about her, and only pretended ignorance, to serve his own ends; that overweening desire, for instance, to pose as one apart from commonplace humanity, at which George alternately laughed and frowned.

'Your daughter is dead, potter-ji, how can I have seen her?' he said rather brutally; yet what else was there to say with that glaring daylight shining down remorselessly on the squalid reality of the scene? It was an ordinary potter's yard, no more, no less; the kneaded clay on one side of the wheel, the unbaked pots lying on the other. In the outer yard a couple of children were playing in the dust, while their mother sought a satisfactory ring in one of the pile of ready-baked water-pots before bringing it with her to haggle and bargain over the price. Overhead a kite or two wheeled in circles, and down the slope, of course, lay the palace and its inhabitants; who were very ordinary examples of impoverished native nobility in its worst aspect. So George Keene meant to be brutal, his common-sense demanded it of him. But that evening, as he sat smoking as usual in the verandah, he saw a light flickering about the ruins, and told himself that, despite his reticence, the potter was in one of his restless moods, when he would seek for his daughter all night long, returning at dawn with a handful of dust, which he would knead to clay and mould upon his wheel into odd little nine-pins. Sometimes he would bury these in pairs upon the mound--George had seen him doing it--more often he would give them to the village children as toys. George had seen them, too, with sticks for arms and bits of charcoal for eyes, doing duty as dolls. He had laughed at the oddity of it all; but now in the soft darkness the thought sent that thrill through his veins once more. This would never do! He had been too long mooning about Hodinuggur sketching and playing chess. It was time to ride down the canal, bully the workman at the brick-kilns, and have a day or two at the bustard in the desert; so then and there he called to the factotum and gave his orders for breakfast to be ready twenty miles off the next morning. That would settle his nerves.

When he returned, after four days, absence, he set to work rationally to finish his sketch. The cloth-of-gold sunshine was brilliant as ever, the blue tiles glowed, the prismatic pigeons sidled along the cornices. He told himself that Hodinuggur was not such a bad place if you refused to allow imagination---

'The Huzoor gives medicine to the poor,' came a voice behind him. 'Mother is ill; I want quinine.'

It was the girl with the Ayodhya pot in her hand. George Keene laughed out loud in the satisfaction of his heart at his own wisdom.

'What is the matter with your mother?' he asked judiciously.

'She is sick, I am to get quinine,' repeated the girl. 'I came once before, but the Huzoor jumped up; so I became frightened and ran away. Since then I have come often, but the Huzoor was not here.'

George felt vaguely that he too had run away before something ridiculously commonplace and simple, and in the effort to bolster up his dignity, his tone became pompous and condescending.

'You are not frightened now, I hope?'

The queerest demure look came to her downcast eyes.

'Wherefore should I be afraid? The Huzoor is my father and mother.'

George had heard the saying a hundred times. Even now, incongruous as it was, it pleased him by its flattering recognition of the fact that his benevolence and superiority were undeniable.

'But, unfortunately, I don't carry quinine with me,' he began.

'If the Huzoor were to bring it to-morrow when he comes to put paints on paper, his slave could return and fetch it,' she interrupted readily. He looked at her more sharply, wondering what her age might be. 'Shall I come, Huzoor?' she continued, with a certain anxiety in her grave face.

'What else?' he answered quickly. It would suit him admirably, since he could come armed with rupees wherewith to bribe the Ayodhya pot from her, and with canvas and oil-colour more suitable to the portrait which, as he looked at her golden brown face and reddish purple draperies, he resolved to have. He would paint her against the dark mound of the ruins rising formless and void upon a sunset sky, and he would call it---

'You had better tell me your name,' he said suddenly, 'then I shall know to whom I have to send the quinine in case you can't come.'

Her white teeth flashed between the long curves of her mouth.

'I am Azizan, Huzoor. I am quite sure to come, and I will bring the pot for the medicine.'

It was almost as if she had divined his intention, he thought, as he watched her pass out through the gateway behind him. It was a queer chance altogether, all the greater because the name Azizan was familiarly commonplace. Briefly, it happened to be that of his factotum's wife. He had, of course, never seen that estimable female, but he had often heard her addressed in tones of objurgation when delay occurred between the courses, thus--'Azizan! egg sarse. Azizan! salt fish is not without egg sarse.' From which George inferred that she was responsible for the kitchen-maid's portion of the Barmecidal feast. The remembrance made him smile as he packed up his colours, resolving to do no more till he could begin in earnest on that most interesting study. He would have thought it still more interesting if he could have seen it slipping into the white domino which old Zainub, the duenna, held ready at the gate, where she had been warding off possible intrusion by the bare truth, that one of her palace ladies was within. For the custom of seclusion renders intrigue absolutely safe, since none dare put the identity of a white-robed figure to the test, or pry into the privacy of a place claimed by a veiled woman.

'Now mind,' scolded Zainub, as they shuffled back to the women's apartments, 'if thou sayest a word of this to the girls thou goest not again; but the old bridegroom comes instead.'

'I will go again,' said the girl gravely, 'I liked it. But the sun made my eyes ache without the veil. Yes! I will go again, amma-jan' (nursie).

To tell the truth, she had small choice. We have all heard of an empire whereon the sun never sets, and where slavery does not exist. Even those who shake their heads over the former statement, applaud the latter. But slavery, unfortunately, is as elusive as liberty, and when not a soul, save those interested in making you obey, is even aware of your existence, individual freedom is apt to be a fraud. This was Azizan's case. Born of an unknown wrong, she might have died of one also, and none been the wiser. The zenana walls which shut her in, shut out the penal code of the alien. If she had chosen to be prudish, the alternative would have been put before her brutally; but she did not choose; for naturally enough, as she said, she liked the masquerade, even if the sun did make her head ache. So she sat all that afternoon under the lattice-window, whence, if you stood on tiptoe, you could see the flags in front of the mosque, and thought of the morrow; naturally, also, since it was a great event to one who had never before set foot beyond the walls of the women's quarter.

Yet George had to wait a long time the next day ere she appeared and squatted down before him confidently. 'It was the black man who came with the Huzoor's things,' she explained quite openly. 'Mother would not let me come while he was here. The Huzoors are quite different; they are our fathers and mothers.'

The repetition of the phrase amused George, and tickled his sense of superiority. It scarcely needed stimulus, for, like most of his race, he was inclined to consider the natives as automata, until personal experience in each case made him admit reluctantly that they were not. So he wondered vain-gloriously what certain politicians at home would say to this candid distrust of the black man, produced the quinine, and then offered Azizan five whole rupees if she would let him draw a picture of her, as he had of the mosque.

'Is that the mosque?' she asked dubiously.

George's reply was full of condescension, which it would not have been had he looked on Azizan in the light of a girl capable, as girls always are, of mischief; for the sketch was accurate to a degree. It ended in an offer of ten rupees for a finished picture of that odd, attractive, yellow-brown face. It was now resting its pointed chin on the tucked-up knees, round which the thin brown arms were clasped; and the smile which lengthened the already long curves of the mouth George set down to sheer greedy delight at an over large bribe, which, to tell truth, he regretted. Half would have been sufficient.

'Then the Huzoor must really think me pretty.'

The words might have been bombs, the sigh of satisfaction accompanying them a thunderclap, from the start they gave to his superiority. So she was nothing more nor less than a girl; rather a pretty girl, too, when she smiled, though not so picturesque as when she was grave.

'I think you will make a pretty picture,' he replied with dignity. 'Come! ten rupees is a lot, you know.'

'I'll sit if the Huzoor thinks me pretty,' persisted Azizan, now quite grave. And her gravity, as she sat with the reddish purple drapery veiling all save the straight column of her throat and the thin brown hands clasping the Ayodhya pot, appealed so strongly to George Keene's artistic sense, that he would have perjured himself to say she

was beautiful as a houri twenty times over if thereby he could have made her sit to him.

She proved an excellent model; perhaps because she had done little else all her life but sit still, with that grave tired look on her face. So still, so lifeless, that he felt aggrieved when, without a word of warning, she rose and salaamed.

'I must go home now, Huzoor,' she said in answer to his impatient assertion that he had but just begun. 'I will come to-morrow if the Huzoor wishes it.'

'Of course you must come,' he replied angrily, 'if you are to get the ten rupees. Why can't you stay now?'

Azizan might have said with truth that a hand from the gateway behind the sketcher's back had beckoned to her, but she only smiled mysteriously.

George, left behind in the sunny courtyard, looked at the charcoal smudges on his canvas with mixed feelings. He had the pose; but should he ever succeed in painting the picture which rose before his mind's eye? To most amateurs of real talent, such as he was, there comes some special time when the conviction that here is an opportunity, here an occasion for the best possible work, brings all latent power into action, and makes the effort absorbing. Something of this feeling had already taken possession of George; he began to project a finished picture, and various methods of inducing his sitter to give him more time. Perhaps she had found it dull. Native women, he believed, chattered all day long. So when she came next morning, he asked her if she liked stories, and when she nodded, he began straightway on his recollections of Hans Andersen; choosing out all the melancholy and aggressively sentimental subjects, so as to prevent her from smiling. He succeeded very well so far; Azizan sat gravely in the sunshine listening, but every day she rose to go with just the same sudden alacrity. Then he told her the tale of Cinderella, and the necessity for her leaving the prince's ball before twelve o'clock; but even this did not make Azizan laugh. On the contrary, she looked rather frightened, and asked what the prince said when he found out.

'He told her that he thought her the most beautiful girl in the world, so they lived happy ever after,' replied George carelessly.

It was two nights after this incident that old Zainub the duenna paid a visit to Chandni in her shadowy recesses.

'What is to come of this foolishness?' she asked crossly. 'Twas a week at first; now 'tis ten days. She used to give no trouble, and now she sits by the lattice in a fever for the next day. That is the plague of girls; give them but a glimpse outside and they fret to death. So I warned Meean Khush-hal sixteen years ago, when the mother took refuge with us during her father's absence on the night of the storm; but he listened not when he had the excuse of the wall. Yea, that is the truth, O Chandni! 'tis well thou shouldst know the whole, since thou hast guessed half. Mayhap thou wilt think twice when thou hast heard. Ai! my daughter! I seem to hear her now; I would not pass such another year with this one for all the money thou couldst give. Nor is it safe for me, or for thee, Chandni, with those eyes in the child's head. Let be--'tis no good. Would I had never consented to begin the work! I will do no more.'

'True!' yawned Chandni, lounging on her bed. 'Thou art getting old for the place--it needs a younger woman. I will tell the Diwan so.'

Zainub whimpered. 'If aught were to come of it, 'twould be different; but thou thyself hast but the hope of beguiling him to some unknown snare within the walls.'

'An unknown snare is the deadliest,' laughed the other shrilly. 'What care I for the girl? 'Tis something to have him meet a screened inmate of the palace day after day; many things may come of that. If Azizan pines, tell her the wedding is delayed; tell her anything----'

'Tell her!' broke in the old duenna between the whiffs of the hookah whence she sought to draw comfort. 'Sobhan ullah! There is too much telling as it is. *He* tells her--God knows what!--not sensible reasonable things, like the tales of a parrot, about real men and women; but upside-down rigmables about beggar-maidens and kings and sighs without kisses. Lo! she hath them pat! But now, because I bid her hold her tongue from teasing me with them when I wished to sleep, she flung out her hands so, quite free like, saying if she might not speak them she would think them, since they were true words. He had told her, and the sahib-logue ever spake the truth.'

Chandni burst into high pitched laughter. 'So! the little Moghulani learns fast! 'Tis not strange, seeing the blood which runs in her veins. The cross breed hath but given it strength. Lo! if this be as thou sayest, she would not thank thee for stopping her ears with the cotton of decency. Thus, for the eyes' sake, Zainub, thou hadst best let well alone, and give the girl the rein--while thou canst.'

In good sooth the old dame felt the truth of Chandni's words, and knew herself to be between two stools. Either by interference, or non-interference, she ran the risk of Azizan's anger; more, perhaps, by the latter than the former. So the girl in her odd dress continued to steal out in the fresh mornings--for March had come with its hot glaring noons--to sit between George and the mosque, and to steal back again, obedient to that beckoning hand from the gate; Zainub's authority remaining sufficient for that, backed as it was by an ill-defined fear on the girl's part, lest the fate of Cinderella should befall her before the proper time. There was little conversation between the odd couple; chiefly because Azizan had none, and seemed to know nothing of her neighbours and the village. Her mother? Oh yes! she was better for the quinine. She was a purdah woman, more or less, and lived yonder--this with a wave of the hand palacwards. Yes! she had heard there was a potter, but she had never seen him. Oh, no! they were not related. Her dress? It was very old because they were very poor. Her mother had had it by her; it was very ugly. She would rather have 'Manchester'; but they--that is to say, her mother--would not give it her. The Ayodhya pot? That was old also. She had asked her mother, and she was willing to sell it. When the Huzoor had finished the picture her mother would come, if she were well enough, and settle the price. If not, the Huzoor might go 'yonder' and speak to her mother. The Huzoors were their fathers and mothers. It was not like a black man. This much, no more, George gleaned during the morning hours which passed so swiftly for them both. He in a novel absorption and pride in the success of his own work. She? It is hard to say. She sat listening, while the pigeons sidled and coo'd, the blue tiles glowed, and the blind arcades shut out all the world save George and his stories. They were of the simplest, most uncompromising nature; partly because his sense of superiority made him stoop, perhaps unnecessarily, to Azizan's level; partly because his knowledge of the language, though long past the stuttering stage, did not extend to niceties of emotion. But loving was loving, hating was hating, when all was said and done. Sometimes the crudity of his own words made the lad smile, as, by the aid of his own complexity, he recognised how entirely they dealt in first principles; and then Azizan would smile too, not from comprehension, but from first principles also. The woman's smile born of the man's.

It was different, however, when he laid down his brush with an elated laugh. 'There! that's done! and you have sat like--like anything. Earned your ten rupees and--Azizan! my dear little girl--what is the matter?'

First principles with a vengeance, and the sunlight turning tears to diamonds as they rolled down those sun-coloured cheeks! He rose, divided between pity and impatience, and stood looking at her almost incredulously. 'Come, don't cry--there's nothing to cry about. Look! how pretty you are in the picture; but it wouldn't have been half so pretty if you hadn't sat so still. I owe you more than the ten rupees, Azizan, and that's a fact. What shall it be--money or jewels? What would you like best?'

She did not answer, and with the same careless superiority he stooped and turned her downcast face to his; he was used to turning it this way or that at his pleasure. But this somehow was different; so was the sun-colour and brown he saw. Sun-colour indeed! He was only one-and-twenty, and the brightness and the glamour which seemed to fall in a moment on everything, as he saw the heart-whole surrender of her eyes, dazed him utterly; only one-and-twenty, and he had never before seen such a look as this that came to him from the sun-coloured face; but it was brown also! Truth is truth. It was not a sense of duty, it was a sense of colour which prevented him from kissing it then and there. So much may be said for him and his morality, that the difference between a brown and a white skin was the outward sign of the vast inward gulf between sentiment and sheer passion. The transition was too abrupt; for the time it shocked his culture, and brought a look to his face before which poor little Azizan gave a cry, and fled, just as she had fled on that first day when George had spilled the dirty water over the sunshine. He had spilled it now with a vengeance, and--over the sunshine of her face, sent shame--needless shame. 'Azizan!' he called after her, his pulses bounding and beating, 'Azizan!'

Then he paused, since she would not; and told himself that there was no need for pursuit. She would come back, for there, as she had left it, lay the Ayodhya pot. Yes! she must come back. He could scarcely think of her without it clasped in her thin hands; so silent--yet all the time----? He gave a little laugh, tender, half regretful. Dear little Aziz! What a brute, what a fool he had been to bring that look to her face! His brain was in a whirl; he could think of nothing save her shy, confident eyes, and ask himself if, when all was said and done, that world beyond the desert held anything better despite its palaver and pretension? Did it not come back in the end to the old ways, to the first principles? He laughed recklessly at his own thoughts more than once as, scarcely seeing the ground beneath his feet, he made his way homewards to the branded red brick bungalow.

The factotum was standing in the verandah.

'The mem-sahib is waiting for the Huzoor,' he said calmly,

'The mem! what mem?'

'This slave knows not. She came half an hour gone, and said she would await the Huzoor's return.'

'Wait! where?'

The man pointed to the sitting-room. 'In there, Huzoor. She has since fallen asleep in the sahib's arm-chair.'

George stared helplessly at the bamboo-screen which, hanging before the open door, prevented him from seeing inside. Who could it be? Rose Tweedie? The mere thought sent the first blush of the morning to his cheek, by bringing him back with a round turn to civilisation.

'Here! take these things,' he said, thrusting the picture and the pot hastily into the servant's hand; 'and see!--wipe my boots--they are not fit to be seen.'

And as the factotum carefully brushed the dust of Hodinuggur from George's feet, the latter had forgotten everything in wonder as to who the 'mem' could possibly be.

## CHAPTER V

It was a lady, whom he had never seen before, fast asleep in his arm-chair; *the* arm-chair of bachelor's quarters, which, having served as a deck lounge on the way out, brings a solitary luxury afterwards to the bare sitting-room.

Its present occupant appeared to find it comfortable, for she did not stir. It must be confessed, however, that there was not much to disturb even a light sleeper, for George's entrance was shy, and his surprise sufficient to petrify him for a time. She was dressed in a riding-habit, and a pair of neatly-booted feet rested on the only other chair in the room. Evidently she had made herself quite at home, for a helmet and veil lay with her gloves familiarly beside the cup and saucer set out on the table for the young man's breakfast. Altogether there was an air of easy proprietorship about the figure which lay with throat and cheek sharply outlined against the Turkey red cushions; one hand tucked behind the fair, rumpled hair, the other resting slackly on the knee. It increased George Keene's shyness by making him feel an intruder even in his own room, and without a word he turned, instinctively, to leave it. As he did so a glitter on the floor at his feet made him stoop to find a diamond pin. He stepped aside to lay it out of harm's way on the mantelpiece, and in so doing caught a closer view of the half-averted face.

When he slipped out again into the verandah, he stood with his hands in his pockets and whistled softly; it was a habit of his when taken aback. A most surprising adventure indeed! An Englishwoman--a perfectly beautiful one into the bargain--at Hodinuggur alone! How on earth had she come there? From Rajpore, seventy odd miles of sheer desert to the north, or from the south? The Chief's camp had arranged to cross the sandy strip in that direction, perhaps on its return to look in on Hodinuggur, but that did not account for her being alone.

The factotum having disappeared into the cook-room, George, in order to avoid calling, strolled thither, intent on further information. In so doing he became aware of his groom at work on a strange horse. The Huzoor was right, said the man with a grin, it was the mem's, and was it to have three or four pounds of grain? George, noticing the little Arab's hanging head, suggested a bran mash, and went on feeling as if he had tumbled into another person's dream. Yet no more was to be discovered. The mem had come, sent her horse round, and gone to sleep in the sahib's arm-chair. Furthermore, what did the Huzoor mean to do about his breakfast?

George, who, to tell truth, was beginning to feel the pangs of hunger, hesitated between awaking his guest and taking his bath. He chose the latter alternative, moved thereto by the remembrance that he would be none the worse for a clean collar and what he termed 'all that sort of thing'; but half an hour afterwards, when he returned to the verandah with the refreshingly clean look of a newly-tubbed young Englishman, the situation had not improved. It had become worse, for, while the lady still slept, George felt ravenous; nor could he turn to his pipe as a palliative lest she should wake suddenly to find him reeking of tobacco--for he had always been a bit of a dandy, and fastidious over such things. This did not prevent him from feeling injured. No woman, be she ever so beautiful, had a right to take possession of a fellow's breakfast as she had done; and yet it was not so much her fault as the detestable Indian lack of pantries and larders, which led to every plate and knife, every eatable, save the desert-fowl in the cook-room, being, as it were, under the immediate guardianship of the Sleeping Beauty. Even if the store-closet had been in the bedroom, he might have 'vittled free, off sardines and captain's biscuit. And still she slept. At last, in sheer desperation, he determined to wake her; and, raising the screen, was beginning a preparatory cough, when the sight of the breakfast-table suggested the possibility of a raid. The next instant his shoes were off and the boyhood in him uppermost, as he stole in, his eyes on the sleeper. 'A good conscience, and no mistake,' he thought, as he annexed the loaf and a tin of sardines. 'One of the Seven Sleepers, surely!'--this as he passed more leisurely to a pat of butter and a knife and fork; these he piled on the loaf, with a spoonful or two of marmalade. Apparently she had no intention of awakening for days! This thought led to a cup and some tea from the canister, finally to a milk jug; the latter proving fatal, for in retiring backward with his spoil through the screen, its contents dribbled on to his best suit, and the effort to prevent this, overbalanced the spoon of marmalade, which fell with a clatter.

Some people wake to the full enjoyment of their faculties, and with the first glance of those grey-blue eyes, George saw that concealment--with half the breakfast-table clasped to his bosom--was impossible. He blushed furiously, and began to apologise; which was foolish, since excuses, if due at all, were clearly owed by the sleeper. She did not, however, make any.

'How kind of you not to disturb me before, Mr. Keene,' she interrupted in a charming voice. 'Have you been in long?'

Her coolness increased his apologies, making him assert on the contrary, he had but just returned. Only being rather in a hurry for his breakfast----

'Apparently,' she interrupted again. 'Dear me, what a very miscellaneous meal it would have been! But, as I am awake, hadn't you better put it all down before the marmalade runs into the sardines? Then, as I am quite as hungry as you can possibly be, you might tell the man to bring breakfast.'

George, if a trifle taken aback by her nonchalance, felt grateful for the opportunity, given with such easy grace, of getting at his shoes again before beginning explanations. On his return he noticed that she, also, had made use of the time to tidy her hair and restore a general daintiness of appearance. As he entered she was stooping to look under the table as if to seek something she had lost.

'It is a little diamond pin,' she said; 'I left it here with my gloves.'

'No,' he answered quickly, off his guard. 'It was on the floor--I mean--I--I think it is on the mantelpiece.'

'Thanks, so much!' She took it gravely ere going back to the arm-chair. Then she looked up at him archly.

'Was I snoring dreadfully when you came in first, Mr. Keene?'

For the third time since he had become aware of her presence he blushed.

'Snoring?--oh dear no,' he began angrily.

'That is a relief. I was afraid I must have been, to make you perjure yourself so. As if any sane woman could believe that you went about Hodinuggur in that costume! I believe you have been in for hours and hours, and I'm so sorry, Mr. Keene; but you will forgive me when you hear my tale of woe.'

George, with an odd little rapture at the thought, told himself he could forgive her anything because she was so beautiful.

'I'm Mrs. Boynton,' she went on; 'you will have heard of me, I expect, from Rose?'

He told her that he had heard of her from most people at Rajpore, which was the truth; but he did not say, which was also the truth, that their praises of her looks seemed to him miserably inadequate. No doubt, however, she saw this in his eyes, though she had too large an acquaintance with the expression to take any interest in it. Nice boys always admired her immensely, and this one looked very nice, with the beauty of cleanliness on him from head to foot, so she detailed her adventures with that confidence in sympathy and help which is such a charm to very young men. To say sooth George deserved it, for he was one of those who are born to stand between their womenfolk and that necessity for taking the initiative which--*pace* the strong-minded sisters--most women cordially detest, and which is the cause of half the nervous exhaustion of the present age. So after a very short time he took possession of her future even more decidedly than she had taken possession of his bungalow. Briefly, the case lay thus. Colonel Tweedie's camp, owing to the increasing heat, had changed its route slightly, and was due, as the incoming post would doubtless let George know, at Hodinuggur next morning. To do this it had doubled up two marches across the desert into one, so as to include some inspection work before turning at right angles along the canal. Owing to this and some good sport on the way, every one had started by daybreak through the Bar; that is to say, hard waste land dotted with tufts of grey caper-bushes, and stunted trees, just high enough and thick enough to prevent one seeing more than twenty or thirty yards in any direction, since beyond that the clumps became a continuous hedge shutting out the world. Colonel Tweedie and his immediate staff having ridden on in haste, the shooting party, beguiled by the prospect of bustards, had spread themselves through the jungle on one side of the track, followed by their horses and grooms. Mrs. Boynton, however, preferring such road as there was, had been walking her horse along it in the expectation of being rejoined, when the sudden firing of an unseen gun made her Arab bolt. First along the track, then missing it at a bend, the beast had swerved into some bushes, where a thorny branch had caught in his long tail, making him perfectly unmanageable. After a mile or more, he had apparently broken into the track again, and sobered down to a walk, much to her delight. Then a solitary native traveller had passed, and assured her, as she imagined, that she was right for the sahib-logue's camp; so she had trotted on, until, fearing she might lose the track once more, she had been foolish enough to walk her horse back on its traces, thus completely losing all her bearings. Finally, at a fork in the almost invisible path, she had been forced to confess that she had not the least idea in which direction her destination lay, north or south, east or west; the sun, therefore, being of little use to her as a guide. (Here her pretty smile growing a trifle tremulous, made George profusely indignant with the desert.) Then, regaining her head, she remembered to have heard Mr. Fitzgerald--who, as Mr. Keene would know, had of course joined the camp on its entrance into the division--say that the more open

country lay eastward, and so she had ridden as straight as she could into the shadows, that being her best chance of steering aright. (Here George grew clamorous over her courage.) Nevertheless, it had almost failed, she said, when on a sudden the great silver streak of the canal had appeared from among the bushes, and she had ridden along its banks till she came to a treeless waste with a big mound looming in the far distance.

'I knew it must be Hodinuggur,' she finished with a sort of caress to her own comfort among the pillows, 'by Mr. Fitzgerald's description, and I knew you from Rose Tweedie's, so I felt it was all right. And now, Mr. Keene! don't you wonder I didn't snore, considering I had been in the saddle for eight hours?'

George protested it was virtue itself for her to wake at all; but that she would have the whole day to rest, as it was manifestly impossible for her to return to the camp; absurd also, since the latter was to come on to Hodinuggur next day. So he would send to the Diwan and borrow a camel sowar, who would ride over with a note telling of her safety in the bungalow, and asking for anything she might require. For the rest, all he had was at her service.

'But I shall be turning you out of house and home, shan't I?' she asked kindly.

The young fellow's eyes softened. 'I don't think I ever thought of it as a home before,' he said with an embarrassed laugh at his own words; 'but won't you come to breakfast? It's awfully nasty, I'm afraid----'

'Then we can fall back on the sardines and the marmalade,' she interrupted gravely. This gravity was with her a perfect art, and gave a great charm to her gentle raillery.

Perhaps the food was nasty; if so, George, for one, did not mind except for her sake. He thought of nothing but her comfort; of how he could welcome her to take possession of everything, himself included. Was she not the most beautiful, the most fascinating, the most perfect woman he had ever seen? Did she not deserve the best he could give her? So, while she was writing the note for the camel sowar, George slipped away to give instructions to the factotum. The bedroom must be swept and garnished, and the things pitched away anywhere. The drawers must be re-papered, a towel put on the dressing-table, and---- What a beastly hole it was, he thought ruefully as he left the man to his own devices; but half an hour afterwards his face cleared; for the factotum, having been in good services, had risen to the occasion. Not only was there a towel on the dressing-table, but two empty beer-bottles had been modestly draped into candlesticks, with the gilt ends of the pugree he had received from the Diwan, while the remainder of the muslin was festooned about the looking-glass. Azizan's portrait stood on the mantel-shelf with the Ayodhya pot in front, and two dinner plates on either side, the arrangement being completed by two of his best ties knotted in bows about his hunting crop, and the kitchen fan. A tinsel veil, borrowed from the compounder of *egg-sarse*, did duty as a bed-spread, supported by his Cooper's Hill tennis muffler as an antimacassar. In the middle of the room the factotum still lingered, benign and superior, one hand holding a hammer and tacks, the other a pair of striped silk socks, with the decorative effect of which he was evidently enamoured. In addition, a figure swathed in white sat modestly behind the dressing-room door.

'It is my house,' said the man, with a large smile. 'Since it is not to be tolerated that the abode of princes should lack a female slave, the woman, at my command, takes the part of ayah. The Huzoor may rest satisfied. Azizan's knowledge of the mems equals this slave's of the sahibs.'

Azizan! The smile left George's lips at the name; and before leaving the room he thrust the portrait into a cupboard, replacing it by an illuminated text which was lying neglected under a pile of wire cartridges.

'The Huzoor is right,' declared the factotum cheerfully. 'The mems have them ever in their rooms. Lo! nothing is amiss.'

George, as he turned at the door for a last look, felt that the advice, 'Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together' emblazoned in Gothic characters, holly, and mistletoe, which a maiden aunt had sent him as a Christmas present, did indeed put the finishing touch to the solitude of the wilderness.

'But where are you going?'

asked Gwen.

'I? Oh! they'll give me quarters in the palace, I expect. Perhaps I'd better go over now and see about it. Then I've inspection work, and--and a heap of other things. So perhaps I'd better say good-bye. I've told the servants about lunch and all that sort of thing. And your traps will be here before dark.'

A very nice boy, indeed, thought Mrs. Boynton, and showed her thought. So George went over to the palace feeling quite intoxicated because he had been instructed without fail to dine in his own house; and after he had settled

about his quarters with Dalel, and had ridden off on his fictitious tour of inspection, he dug the spurs into his pony out of sheer lightness of heart, and went sailing away over the desert, careless even of the direction in which he went.

Dalel meanwhile had repaired to the shadowy arches in a state of boastful superiority. His friend Keene was coming over to stop in the palace. They would play cards, and be jolly, and drink. And the lad always carried the key of the sluice-gate on his watch-chain.

'It is a chance indeed,' said Chandni, with a queer look. Then after a time broke in on Dalel's vapourings by snatching the banjo from the wall and breaking into a respectable and plaintive love-song.

'Lo! thou hast thy way, and I have mine,' she laughed recklessly. 'Let us see who succeeds best.' So slipping on the decent white domino, she set off for the palace, and turned down the dark passage leading to the women's apartments. Doubtless it was a chance which must not be neglected.

Between his desire not to disturb Mrs. Boynton's kindness too early, and his dislike to becoming a prey to Dalel at the palace, George in the end had to gallop his pony the last four miles, and then found himself with but ten minutes in which to dress. But he dashed up the narrow stair leading to the odd little arcaded room placed at his disposal by the Diwan, feeling confident in the factotum's forethought; and, sure enough, on the silk coverlet of the high lacquered bed lay his dress-clothes and white tie complete. Nothing else, except his sleeping-suit; so, choice being denied him, he flung himself into ceremonious black, discovering as he did so that two or three jasmine blossoms and a sprig of maidenhair fern had been pinned into the button-hole of his coat. The factotum was evidently determined he should play the right game. As he ran down the stairs again he wondered whence the man could possibly have procured the fern, and then remembered having seen a few fronds clinging, far down on the masonry of his well, into which the canal water filtered. The seed of this hill-born plant must have filtered with it; just as these strange items of knowledge--the shibboleth of dress-clothes and button-holes--filtered into the brains of these odd people. Life in Hodinuggur was really very amusing, and full of delightful surprises. Yesterday he had been waiting--without a collar!--for a Barmecidal feast, to-day in swallow-tail and a button-hole he was going to dine with the most beautiful woman in the world! and there, like a fairy tale, was the branded bungalow illuminated out of all recognition. And inside were more wonders in a table set out with flowers, and Mrs. Boynton coming forward to greet him with a bouquet of jasmine and maidenhair amid the soft ruffles of her white dress. It was humiliating yet still amusing, having to confess it came, not from his courtesy, but the factotum's sense of duty. Then the very sight of the man himself, in spotless raiment, lording it over Mrs. Boynton's kitmutgar was pure comedy. In fact when, dinner being over, George was left face to face with three napkin-swathed black bottles hung with foolscap tickets of port, sherry, claret, engrossed in the village schoolmaster's best hand, he gave one look at Mrs. Boynton before exploding into laughter, while she vowed to keep the *menu* to her dying day, if only to show the folly of allowing facts to interfere with fancy.

By and by, when coffee came in--the factotum diffident over the breakfast cups but triumphant over the under-footman with hot milk and sugar on a dinner-plate--they laughed again; yet the laughter brought a moisture to George Keene's merry grey eyes. In a vague way the boy knew what had happened, knew that the most beautiful woman in the world had not only taken possession of house and home, but of body and soul; and he was glad of it, despite the moisture in his eyes--glad to the heart's core as he chattered away confidentially, while she listened graciously, thinking what a charming boy he was, and what an excellent husband he would make by-and-bye for any girl. What an admirable son-in-law, in short, he would have made if she had had a daughter and he had had money; for women of her sort view mankind chiefly from the matrimonial point of view, and seek to give variety to the question by importing into it all their female friends.

'That reminds me,' she said, as she listened to the hope that she was fairly comfortable which George tacked on to his good-night. 'You have the most fascinating blue pot on your mantelpiece. Where did you get it?'

'Do you really like it?' he asked eagerly; 'if so, you can have it.'

'My dear boy!' she laughed, 'I don't mean to appropriate *everything* you possess.'

He looked at her with shining happy eyes. 'But it isn't mine as yet; it belongs to some one, though, who wants to sell it, and if you would give it to me, now, I'd finish the bargain to-morrow morning and you shall have it back by breakfast-time if it is to be had for love or money.'

Love or money! The old formula came carelessly to his lips.

Azizan meanwhile, crouching behind one of the palace arcades, and wondering when she would hear his foot on the stairs, was echoing the thought in another language. She was trembling all over from excitement, and fear, and

hope; of what, she scarcely knew, she did not understand. They had dressed her in her best beneath the flimsy white veil which pretended to conceal the finery it really enhanced, and surely, she thought, if he had deemed her pretty when in that dreadful old shroud, he would be still kinder now. They had bidden her ask for the Ayodhya pot, and take him to settle the price with her mother. But of doing this she was not sure; she was sure of nothing save that she must see him again--must see him to make certain that he was not vexed. And then she would tell him that traps were being laid for him--at least she might tell him--but come what might she must see him; ay! and he must see her as she ought to be seen.

It was not a very safe interruption for George to have found awaiting him in the long moonlit shadows of the arcades had he been in the same mood as the girl; not even though all the plotting and scheming would have seemed incredibly absurd to him at any time, and in any mood. Indeed, even by the dim light of the cook-room, where the factotum was putting away a copy of the *menu* among his certificates as proof positive of his acquaintance with the appetites of the ruling race, Chandni's snare would have met with the derision it deserved; but in the dark intricacies of palace politics it seemed simple enough, especially to one of her vile experiences.

But as it so happened George never went near the palace. He sat on the canal bridge till dawn, smoking one pipe after another, and looking aimlessly, dreamily at the dark windows of the bungalow. No one could have foreseen this, not even the lad himself. He had no intention of out-watching the stars when the balmy air and a feeling of measureless content first tempted him to pause and set aside the forgetfulness of sleep for a time--or would it have been sleep when *she* was in the desert alone, with God knows what ruffians about? A rage grew up in him at the thought of Dalel and his kind, until the palace itself became distasteful. So, almost before he realised that he was on the watch, the gurglings of many camels and the thud of a mallet told him that the advanced guard of the big camp had arrived, and sent him across to the camping ground to warn the tent pitchers to be as quiet as possible. 'May the angels of the Lord pitch their tents around us this night, used to be the favourite bidding prayer of a certain Scotch divine when he ministered to a volunteer congregation, until one day a veteran happening to be there said audibly, 'Then I'm hopin, they'll no mak muckle noise wi' the tent-pegs.' A tale which shows the danger of imperfect local colouring; a fact which was to be brought home that night both to Dalel and Chandni, for even then George did not return to the champagne and the snares. That incomprehensible love of the picturesque on which the latter had counted, kept him engrossed in the novel sight of a canvas city rising like magic from the bare sand. First came an autocrat with measuring tape and pegs mapping the ground into squares; then, one by one, in its appointed place, a great ghost of a thing, flapping white wings against the purple sky, to rise stiff and square above? fringe of even silvery ropes.

It was not until a saffron-coloured glint in the east startled him into the thought that he was a confounded ass, that George, out of sheer lightheartedness, ran all the way back to the palace, stumbled up the steep stairs, and threw himself into the high lacquered bed to fall asleep before the saffron had faded into daylight. Perhaps it was as well, since even the Hodinuggur sun, which had been at work since the beginning of all things, might have stared to see a masher in dress clothes knocking into a Moghul palace with the milk. It stared instead at a more familiar sight; at a girl, face down on a bare string bed in the women's quarters, sobbing as if her heart would break.

## CHAPTER VI

Naturally enough George overslept himself. Naturally also he woke to feel himself hustled and bustled, for he was due to meet the incoming camp at the borders of his district at a certain hour; a feeling he proceeded to vent on the factotum for being late with the early tea which that worthy had had carried over from the bungalow in an odd little procession, tailing off to some of the large-eyed village lads and lasses learning betimes the customs of their rulers. In addition, George had promised Mrs. Boynton an answer about the Ayodhya pot, and now, even by hurrying, which he loathed, he could scarcely find time to seek Azizan in the old place. Still he did hurry, and leaving the camel which he was to ride gurgling in the courtyard, wasted five minutes in tramping up and down the flags in front of the mosque; finally, in vexation, returning by the short cut through the bazaar. In these early hours it had a deserted, yet still dissipated air, the few loungers looking as if they had been up all night. Only the quails challenged cheerfully from their shrouded cages. In the arched causeway, however, he came on Dalel Beg, most offensively European in costume and manner; for he too was bound on reception-duty.

'Aha! Keene, old chappie,' he began with a leer, 'you sleep well after burra-khana (big dinner) with the mem. By Jove, you keep it up late.'

George could scarcely refrain from kicking him then and there. But the thought that these people had possibly put their own construction on his absence from the palace made him feel hot and cold with rage and regret. To avoid the subject--the only course open to him--he hastily held out the Ayodhya pot which he was carrying, and asked the Mirza if he had any idea to whom it belonged.

Now the Mirza's oblique eyes had been on it from the first; but at the question they narrowed to mere slits of compressed cunning.

'Ah, so! very good. I know. Yes, yes! it belong to you, Keene, of course. Bah! it is worth nothing. I hate old trumpery matters. You are very welcome.'

'You mistake, sahib,' retorted George haughtily, 'this does not, did not belong to your grandfather; it belongs to an old woman who lives near the palace. She promised to sell it to me, and now I'm rather in a hurry to complete the bargain. Mem Boynton sahiba wants it, and they leave to-morrow or next day.'

Dalel Beg, who had been turning the pot over and over in his hand, laughed.

'So you say it is another----'

'Certainly it is another,' interrupted George, annoyed beyond measure by his manner; 'it belongs, as I said, to an old woman. She has a daughter called Azizan----' he paused, doubtful of putting Dalel on any woman's track.

'Azizan!--the Mirza signed his attendants to fall back with unwonted decision before he went on,--'Azizan! tell me, Keene, a young girl? with eyes of light like potter's?'

Evidently he knew something of, and was interested in, the girl, and George, now that it was too late, regretted having mentioned her name.

'Can't wait any longer now, I'm afraid,' he replied, glad of the excuse; 'just send one of your fellows up to my quarters with the pot, will you? Thanks, I've no time to lose.'

Left thus cavalierly, Dalel Beg scowled after the young Englishman; then with a compendious oath turned back to the side door whence he had emerged, and, stumbling in his anger up the dark stairs, appeared again in Chandni's presence. He almost flung the pot beside her as she lay curled up on her bed, and then, driven to words by her arrogant silence began a volley of furious questions.

What mischief had the woman been up to? How came it that the English cub had seen Azizan? Azizan, who after all was his half-sister, one of the race, though they did keep her out of his sight. And that oaf, that infidel---- His wrath was real, for beneath the veneer of modern thought the fierce jealousy of the Moghul lay strong as ever.

Chandni gave a jeering laugh, 'Thou art too handsome for the maidens, O Dalel; too wicked also even for the race. Thou needest one like me to keep thee straight. Lo! there is nothing to know, nothing to tell. Hadst asked last night, the

answer might have been other. I set a snare and it failed; for thou wert right--the boy is no boy, but a milksop. May fate send him death and us a black man in his place, else I stop not here!

Her jingling feet struck the ground with a clash and she yawned again. In truth she was tired of Hodinuggur, and longed for the Chowk at Delhi. Dalel, with a sneer adulterating his frown, looked at her vengefully, 'Wah! thou art a poor creature, putting the blame on others, after woman's way. Thy wiles are useless, forsooth, because the boy is a milksop. Then a strange mem comes and he sits drinking wine--my wine, look you, for his servant required it of me--until the dawn; then comes home tipsy after losing himself among the tent-pegs.'

This was Dalel's version of the incident. It interested his hearer into provoking details by denial.

'It is a lie,' she said calmly.

'Daughter of the bazaars, 'tis true! did I not wait till nigh three with champagne and devil-bone, yet he came not? Did not his servant tell me but now I had stinted them in wine? Did not the tent pitchers say he wandered as a madman among the pegs? Was he not at me, even now, to get this pot for this mem, this woman?' So far his anger had swept him past its first cause; now he remembered and harked back to it. 'How came he by the pot, I say? how hath he seen a woman of our race?'

'Ask the Diwan,' she replied coolly; 'for me that measure is over, I will dance to another tune.' And as she spoke, though her feet scarcely shifted, a new rhythm came to these jingling bells. 'Tis odd,' she murmured in a singing tone, as she lifted the pot and held it out at arm's-length, 'we come back to this old thing at every turn, and now his mem wants it. Leave it with me a space, O Mirza Dalel Beg. I will set it yonder in the niche where I take the seed of dreams; it may bring wisdom to them.'

Dalel gave a contemptuous grunt.

'Thou art no better than an old spay-wife with thy dreams and omens and fine talk. Sure the Hindu pig, from whom I took thee, hath infected thee with his idolatrous notions----'

'See, I go not back to them and him,' she interrupted quickly, 'leave it, I say, if thou art wise. If the sahib seek it of thee, say one of thy women knows the owner and makes arrangement. Tis true, and thou lovest the truth, O Dalel.'

As usual, her recklessness cowed him, and when he had gone and she sat rolling the opium pellets in her palms, the Ayodhya pot lay in the niche. Something had declared in its favour, and wisdom lay in humouring the mysterious will which nine times out of ten insisted on playing the game of life in its own fashion. Then she lay back half asleep, half awake, her hands clasped behind her smooth head, her eyes fixed on the shifting pattern beneath the glaze. The sun climbing up sent a bar of shine through a chink in the balcony roof. It slanted into the recesses, undulated over her curved body and reaching the niche made the Ayodhya pot glow like a sapphire. But by this time Chandni was dreaming, so she did not hear the merry laughter of a cavalcade passing through the Mori gate on its way to the canvas city in the camping ground. A cavalcade of aliens, with Rose Tweedie on a camel, her English side-saddle, perched on the top of a native pad, giving her such height that she was forced to stoop.

'Another inch, Miss Tweedie,' cried George gaily, 'and you would have had to dismount; you will have to cultivate humility before trying Paradise!'

'Sure Miss Rose is an angel already,' put in Dan Fitzgerald.

But Lewis Gordon rode gloomily behind; partly because he himself was in a shockingly bad temper, partly because the camel he rode was a misanthropist. And these two causes arose the one from the other, since it was not his usual mount. That, when Rose Tweedie had taken advantage of Mrs. Boynton's absence to desert the dhoolies which were the only alternative conveyance across this peculiarly sandy march, had been impounded for the young lady on account of its easy paces. He remembered those paces ruefully, as, with low-pitched indignation he wondered why she could not have stuck to the more ladylike dhooli. Yet she looked well on the beast and rode it better than most men would have done on a first trial; than he would, at any rate. But these were aggravations, not palliations, of her offence; still, when, on dismounting, she came straight up to him, her natty top-boots in full evidence, the huge sola hat, borrowed from her father, making her slim upright figure show straighter and slenderer than ever, he was forced to confess that if she did do these horrible things she did them with infinite *verve* and good taste.

'I'm so sorry, Mr. Gordon!' she exclaimed eagerly, 'indeed I didn't know of the exchange father made till we had started, or I'd have stuck to the dhooli--indeed I would. What an awful brute it was! I saw it giving you a dreadful time.'

Do let me send you over some Elliman?'

'I'm not such a duffer as all that, Miss Tweedie,' he began.

'I didn't mean that, you know I didn't; but if you won't have the Elliman, take a hot bath, it's the next best thing I know for stiffness. You can tell your bearer to take the water from our bath-fire. And thanks so much, I enjoyed the ride immensely. Mr. Fitzgerald raced me at the finish, and I beat by a good head.'

'A particularly good head, I should say,' he replied, out of sheer love of teasing, for he knew how intensely she disliked his artificial manner with women. The fact annoyed him in his turn. It was another of her unwarrantable assumptions of superiority; nevertheless he followed her advice about the bath.

Indeed Hodinuggur for the rest of the day claimed suppleness of joint, in the mind at least. We all know the modern mansion where, entering a Pompeian hall you pass up a Jacobean staircase, along Early English corridors, and Japanese landings to Queen Ann drawing-rooms; mansions of culture, where present common-sense is relegated to the servants' attics. Hodinuggur was as disturbing to a thoughtful person unused to gymnastics; perhaps more so because a certain glibness of tongue in slurring over chasms and ignoring abysses, became necessary when, as fell to Lewis Gordon's lot, most of the day passed in interviews. Solemn interviews of State, then personal interviews with an ulterior object, finally begging interviews *pur et simple*. The other members of the camp, however, had an easy time of it, their attendance not being required. Dan Fitzgerald passed most of his day in vain hopes of a *tete-a-tete* with Mrs. Boynton, for he was on tenter-hooks to explain the feeling with which, on returning late to the camp, he had found it in commotion over her loss; but Gwen, who always dreaded Dan when he had reasonable cause for emotion, avoided him dexterously, chiefly by encouraging George, who was nothing loth to spend his day in camp. At first the lad felt no little vexed to find himself shy and constrained among so large a party; but this feeling wore off quickly, and when he came, ready dressed for tennis, into the drawing-room tent at tea-time it seemed quite natural to be once more amid easy-chairs and knick-knacks, to see the pianette at which Rose sang her Scotch songs with such spirit littered with music, and to find her busy at a table set with all manner of delightful things to eat. He was boy enough to try so many of them, that Dan had to apologise for his subordinate's greed before they trooped out laughing to the very different world which lay beyond the treble plies of the tent--that mystical veil of white, and blue, and red, which, during the camping months, hangs between India and its rulers, giving rise to so much misunderstanding on both sides. It is the fashion nowadays to accentuate the faults of the latter, but much of the bad name given by superficial observers to Anglo-Indian society, is the result of that curious lightheartedness which springs from the necessity for relaxation, consequent on the gloveless hold India exacts on the realities and responsibilities of life. The saying, 'Let us eat and drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die,' is hurled unfairly at pleasure-seekers all the world over, simply because merriment has become associated with a low type of amusement. If we change the verbs, the blame vanishes; since to live happily is the end and aim of all morality. For happily means worthily to those who have any moral sense. Then in India the pursuit of pleasure must needs be personal, for there are no licensed purveyors of amusement. You cannot go to a box-office, buy seats, spend the day seriously, dine at a restaurant, and take a hansom to the play. As a rule you have to begin by building the theatre. So it is in all things, and surely after a hard day's work in bringing sweetness and light (and law) within reach of the heathen, even a judge with a bald head may unbend to youthful pastimes, without breaking the Ten Commandments!

But Colonel Tweedie was not bald, and he played tennis vigorously in what Rose called the duffers' game, with Mrs. Boynton, the under-secretary, and Lewis Gordon who pleaded shortsightedness as an excuse for not joining the Seniors against the Juniors, where Rose and George challenged all comers. Yet he owned it was pretty enough to see the former sending back Dan's vicious cuts with a setting of her teeth ending in a smile either at success or failure. Pleasant to see the alertness, confidence, confidentialness between the boy and girl; to hear his quick 'Look out,' evoke the breathless 'I've--got it,' as the ball whizzed to some unguarded spot. It was a fierce struggle and the wide-eyed villagers who had trooped out to see the strange doings on their ancestral threshing-floor, gathered instinctively round the harder game.

'Ari, sister!' murmured a deep-bosomed mother of many to her gossip, as they squatted on one of the heaps of chaff which had been swept aside from the hard beaten floor. 'That one in the short skirt is a *budmarsh*.<sup>[1]</sup> Her man will need his hands.' Yet an unrestrained chuckle ran round the female portion of the audience as Dan, over-running himself in a hopeless attempt after the impossible, scattered a group of turbaned pantaloons, who, retreating with shaking heads to re-form further off, muttered in wondering rebuke, 'Hai! Hai! does not shame come to her.' But a third section, ranged in rows, gave an exotic 'hooray!'--a ridiculous, feeble little cheer, started by a young man in a black alpaca coat, and accompanied by still feebler clapping. This was the village school and its master, claiming its right to be a judge of 'crickets.'

'You have the better half of creation on your side, Miss Tweedie,' remarked Lewis, when, the games being over, the men were resuming their coats. 'What is more, the rising generation of the wiser half also. The boys were unanimous for the "Miss"; we miserable men being left to the support of past ages. India is doomed. Another decade will see woman's rights rampant.'

She turned on him readily, as she always did. 'The boys applauded because the rising generation, thank heaven, is being taught to love fair play--even towards women.'

'At it again!' interrupted Mrs. Boynton plaintively, 'really I must get you two bound over to keep the peace.'

'Then I shall have to hire another camel for my luggage,' said Lewis gravely, 'for Miss Tweedie knocks me and my arguments to bits.'

Gwen turned aside impatiently, saying in a lower voice, 'How foolish you are, Lewis! One would have thought you would have tired of it by this time.'

'On the contrary,' he replied in his ordinary tone: 'the bloom is perennial. I wither beneath the ice of Miss Tweedie's snubs, and revive beneath the sun of her smiles like--like a bachelor's button.'

And Rose did smile. Her contempt always seemed to pass by the man himself, and rest on his opinions. Even there, much as she loathed them, she was forced to confess that they did not seem to affect his actions; that it was impossible to conceive of his behaving to any woman, save as a gentleman should behave. Yet this thought aggravated the offence of his manner by enhancing its malice aforethought, and made her frown again.

'Come! there is light enough for a single yet, Mr. Keene,' she said imperiously, and George, with one regretful glance at Mrs. Boynton, obeyed. Lewis Gordon looked after them, shrugged his shoulders, and strolled off to the messroom-tent.

'It really is shameful of Lewis to tease Miss Tweedie as he does,' began Gwen, who, finding herself unavoidably paired with Dan, instantly started what she thought a safe topic of conversation. He looked at her with absent eyes.

'A shame, is it? but when a man likes a girl he is very apt----'

She broke in with a petulant laugh. 'Are you asleep, Dan? What could induce you to think that?'

'What? Why, love of course! Set a thief to catch a thief. A man can't be in love himself without----'

He certainly was not asleep! but she managed to double back to safer ground. Yet his words recurred to her that evening during the half hour *tete-a-tete* which she accorded with the utmost regularity to Colonel Tweedie in his capacity of host; Rose meanwhile singing songs to the younger men who gathered round the piano, leaving those two decorously to the sofa.

'There is a little song I want Mrs. Boynton to hear,' called the Colonel during a pause. 'I forget its name--you haven't sung it for a long time, and I used to be so fond of it. A little Jacobite song--really a charming air, Mrs. Boynton.' Rose flushed visibly--at least to the feminine eyes in the party--and shook her head.

'But you must remember it, my dear,' persisted her father; 'do try.'

'Oh yes! please do try! I should so like to hear it,' echoed Gwen curiously, her eyes full on the blush. Rose, conscious of it, felt herself a fool, and looked still more uncomfortable.

'Talking of Jacobite songs,' remarked an indifferent voice beside her, 'I wonder, Miss Tweedie, if you know a great favourite of mine, called "Lewie Gordon"--don't laugh, you boys, it's rude. If so, please sing it. I haven't heard it for years; people are always afraid of making me vain.'

She gave him a quick, grateful look, as, with a nod, she broke into the song.

'O send Lewie Gordon hame,  
And the lad I dauma name,  
Tho' his back be to the wa',  
Here's to him that's far awa'.'

She sang with greater spirit than before, a sort of glad recognition of his kindly tact leading up to the decision of the climax:

'That's the lad that I'll gang wi'.'

Yet after all, amid the chorus of thanks, she heard him say in his worst manner, "'The lad I daurna name!" how like a woman!' And he added to the offence; for, when the little under-secretary remarked diffidently that he had always understood that the song referred to Charles Edward, though whether to the old or the young Pretender he could not say, Lewis, as he dawdled away to his nightly task of breaking up the *tete-a-tete*, murmured that at any rate it referred to a *pretendu*. But Rose had caught Gwen's appealing look from the sofa also, and rising, closed the piano with a bang and suggested a round game. If her intention was to punish the offender, who hated that form of amusement, she failed ignominiously; for he sat on the 'Stool of Repentance' with perfect nonchalance, and, when it came to her turn, paid her such double-edged, charmingly caustic little compliments, that she had to join in the laugh they raised. It was, in fact, past midnight ere the Colonel, with many allusions to the delight of such company, said they really must go to bed, and they trooped in a body out of the big tent to seek their several quarters.

'I'm glad not to make a casual of you to-night,' said Mrs. Boynton softly to George.

'Almost wish you were,' he replied, giving a rueful look towards the red brick prison on the farther side of the canal. 'This is home; that is exile.'

Dan nodded his head sympathetically. 'I know that feeling. It comes from jungle stations. And the bungalow does look cheerless in comparison. Odd; for one naturally associates a camp with wars and tumults, battles, murders, and sudden death; all the evils of a transitory world, in fact. But you must have noticed, Mrs. Boynton, the extraordinary air of peace, security, almost of permanence which tents have in the moonlight. Look! might they not be solid blocks of marble fastened by silver cords?'

'I noticed it last night when I was watching them being put up,' began George unguardedly. Mrs. Boynton looked up quickly. Rose, who was leaning against a rope by the door of her tent which stood next the mess, glanced along the line of the camp.

'Silver cords and marble blocks,' she echoed. 'Yes! but it sounds like the New Jerusalem.'

'I always thought,' remarked Lewis Gordon argumentatively, 'that it was the tents of Midian. I'm sure some one told me so when I learnt hymns. Or was it hosts of Midian and tents of Ishmael? Anyhow, they had nothing to do with Paradise, and I for one have been prowling round long enough. So good-night, Gwen; don't grow wings in the night, please; it would be so disconcerting. Good-night, Miss Tweedie.'

Being close beside her he held out his hand.

'Good-night; I hope you are not very stiff.'

'I almost wish I were, for then you would sympathise with misfortune--like a woman,' he replied in a low voice, and as he passed to his own tent next hers, she heard him quote the lines--

'Tho his back be to the wa',  
Here's to him that's far awa'.'

She looked after him, her face showing soft in the moonlight, then, with a good-night to the others, disappeared in her turn.

George lingered, giving still more rueful glances at the bungalow. 'I suppose I must be off too. Oh! by the way! it's all right about the Ayodhya pot. Dalel Beg tells me his women know the owner, so you will have it to-morrow. Good-night, Fitzgerald.'

Dan, thus left alone to walk two tents-length with Gwen, felt that fate was on his side at last; more probably *she* was, since her fine tact told her it was never wise to ignore his passion entirely. Besides, something in her shrank from treating him always as a mere outsider.

'I've been longing for this chance all day,' he began at once in a tone that was in itself a caress.

'Do you think I am quite blind?' she interrupted, a trifle petulantly; 'the only wonder is that every one in the camp didn't see it also. You are so reckless, Dan! Of course you wanted to tell me how you felt when I was lost, and all that; as if I couldn't imagine it!' she gave in to a smile that was almost tender as she spoke--'Why, Dan! I can see you! with a face yards long, and the whole camp, Chief and all, under orders in half a minute. Fire-escapes, life-preservers, first aid to the wounded, everything mortal man could devise to avert disaster, ready before the rest had time to think! Do you suppose I don't know what you are, Dan?' The odd, composite ring in her voice sank as she added, in a lower tone, 'sometimes I almost wish I didn't.'

They had reached the place where their ways separated; hers to the last tent forward, his to the second row, and she held out her hand with a smile to say good-night. His heart beat hard at her half-reluctant admission of praise; besides, Gwen Boynton was not the sort of woman who could smile thus, and yet expect to end the interview then and there; perhaps, again, she did not wish it so to end. In her relations with this man, she often found it difficult to know what she did, or did not, desire.

'Gwen,' he said eagerly, standing close, with his warm nervous hands clasping hers, 'did you think of me--then?--when you knew you were lost, I mean--did you, Gwen?--I don't often ask anything of you, my darling--you might tell me--It isn't much to ask--Did you, Gwen?'

She gave something between a laugh and a sob. 'Did I? Oh! Dan, you know I did. There, that is enough--you said that was all you wanted. Good-night, Dan.'

He went over to his quarters happy as a king. As for Gwen, the personal influence his immediate presence had over her passed away quickly, and that which his real absence from her life invariably produced did not come to soften the curious dread with which she recognised, that in her trouble of the day before, her first thought had indeed been for him. How foolish she had been in letting him re-enter her life at all! but he had come back in her first loneliness when the future had seemed very black. Now it was different, now it was once more that choice between poverty and comfort which she had made in her girlhood. With what pain, none--save Dan, who, alas! always understood--would believe. And if the choice was necessary then, what was it now with her acquired habits, her knowledge of the world? They would both be miserable if they married without money. Then the thought of the bills came, as it always did to remind her of the tie they imposed. Even if Lewis, whom she liked and respected, were to make up his mind to marry, she could not accept him without dismissing Dan. Yet how could she dismiss him, even for his food, until that money was repaid? Poor Dan! he loved her dearly, and in a way she cared for him as she had never cared for any of her other lovers. Yet the decision which had turned out so comfortably ten years before was still the right decision. Many of those lovers had been as devoted to her; and yet they had recovered from their rejection. Then the remembrance of George Keene's admission that he had been out watching the stars made her smile. He was a nice boy, who already deemed her an angel; but Lewis objected to wings, and of the two that was the most convenient view for the woman.

While she was coming to this conclusion George had been looking after her interests, for on his return to the bungalow he had been startled by the sudden uprisal of a veiled female from a shadowy corner of his verandah.

'I am Azizan's mother,' said a muffled voice. 'The Mirza sent me. I have been waiting the Huzoor's return. There is the pot if the Huzoor will give ten rupees for it. It is much, yet the pot brings luck.'

'Ten!' echoed George in delight, taking it from her. 'Yes! you shall have that; then I owe Azizan also. Shall I pay you?'

'My daughter is as myself,' replied the voice. 'It is ten for the picture, and ten for the pot.'

George fetched the money and counted it carefully into the shrouded hand.

'That is all, I think?' he asked.

'Huzoor, that is all. May the blessing of the widow and the fatherless go with the merciful Protector of the Poor.'

But while he was thinking, as he undressed, how pleased Mrs. Boynton would be, the veiled figure was pausing in the moonlight to speak to the factotum.

'You have seen nothing, you are to say nothing. And the Diwan sends these to the servant-people.' Then came twenty careful chinks, this time into a clutching hand, and Chandni, hurrying back to the city, laughed silently to

herself. The idea of bribing the little sahib's servants with his own rupees would please Dalel, and put him into a good temper again; so if this plan matured, her future would ripen with it. As she passed the sleeping camp she paused, wondering in which tent lay the mem who had succeeded so easily where she had failed. The lights were out in all save two, and the double row of glistening white roofs struck even her insensibility with a savage recognition of undeserved peace and security. They were no better than she; no better than those shadowy crouching figures of the village bad-characters set out here and there to keep watch and ward, on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief; a plan which at least secures a deserving criminal should thefts occur. For it was in the East that the strange hybrid between altruism and egotism which we call a scape-goat was invented by mankind.

## CHAPTER VII

One of the lights Chandni saw came from Lewis Gordon's tent. He was hard at work, not altogether from sheer industry. Sleep with him--oddly enough in one claiming such serenity of temperament--had to be approached discreetly, and for many days past a disturbing current of thought had required the dam of good solid official business before he could trust himself safely to the waters of Lethe. He had not been constantly in his cousin's company for six weeks without learning to appreciate her infinite charm. She was emphatically a woman to ensure a husband's success as well as her own. A man would never have to consider enemies with her at his side, whereas with many others--Rose Tweedie for instance--it might be necessary to fight your wife's battles as well as your own. This comparison of the two arose from no conceit on his part in imagining that any choice lay with him. Simply, he could not avoid comparing the only two women in his daily surroundings. At the same time he was fully aware that Gwen would marry him if he asked her, and the question which had at first assailed him in the hall at Rajpore, recurred again and again, disturbing him seriously by alternate attraction and repulsion. He had seen too much of fascinating wifedom to care for possessing a specimen himself, yet Gwen would marry him because she considered it would further their mutual interests; and that, surely, was a more reliable foundation for a permanent contract than a girlish affection. Quite as pleasant, too, as the hail-fellow-well-met liking, which seemed to be Rose Tweedie's notion of love. George Keene and she were like a couple of boys together. The remembrance jarred, though he went on working with a smile at the thought of her eager readiness to take up the glove on all occasions.

Rose, meanwhile, lay awake next door frowning over the same readiness, and then frowning at her own frowns, since what was it to her if Lewis Gordon were nice or nasty? He himself did not care what she thought, and would end by marrying his cousin, though in his heart of hearts----

Rose sat up in bed angrily. What did she know or care of Lewis Gordon's heart? *Dieu merci!* Gwen Boynton was welcome to it, but she should not drag George Keene captive as she seemed welcome to do. George was too good to hang round a pretty woman, like Lewis----

This was intolerable. To escape the tyranny of thought she rose, slipped on her white dressing-gown, lit the lamp she had extinguished, and sat down to read a stiff book till she felt sleepy. The process was not a long one, for she was really fatigued, and ten minutes saw her turning down the lamp once more.

What happened next she scarcely knew; only this--a glare of light--a feeble crash. Then fire in her eyes, her face, her hands--fire at her feet, licking along the thin carpet, soaking up the folds of her filmy dress. The bed lay close at hand; she was on it in a second, wrapping the blankets round her, and beating out the runnels of flame, with eyes, brain, and body absorbed in the immediate personal danger. When that was over, and she looked up, she sprang to her feet on the bed with a cry. The fire was everywhere, creeping up the sides of the tent, filling it with suffocating smoke. She wound her trailing skirts round her and made a dive for the first outlet--for her only chance of escape! The thick wadded curtain swinging aside let in a wind, making the smouldering cotton flame; but the next instant she was outside, constrained to pause, wondering if by chance it was nothing but a bad dream. For the camp lay serene and peaceful in the moonlight; not a sound, not a sign, even from her own tent. She stood positively irresolute, staring back at what she had left. Was it a dream? Then, suddenly a faint drift of smoke rose through a crevice in the cloth.

'Mr. Gordon!--Mr. Gordon!' She burst through the thick, guided by the light in his tent to the nearest help. 'Your knife--quick! my tent is on fire! Quick, or the whole camp will catch!'

The blood was flowing from a cut over her forehead, one arm showed bare through scorched muslin, the draperies caught round her were singed and blackened, the stamp and smell of fire was on her from head to foot. Lewis, starting to his feet, stared at her.

'Oh, quick! please, quick! Your pen-knife--anything! Cut down the tents--Mr. Fitzgerald said it was the only----'

He had grasped the position ere she could finish, snatched up a hunting-knife and was out; she, with a pen-knife, close at his heels.

'Good God! how the wind has risen,' he muttered, as they ran. 'No, not mine!--The mess-tent first; the wind is that way.'

As they flew past her tent, the scene seemed peaceful as ever; but ere the guy-ropes of the next were reached, a

swirl of smoke and flame, prisoned until then by the outer fly of canvas, swept straight up into the sky in the first force of its escape; then bent silently to the breeze. So silently!--not a roar, not a crackle--just a pyramid of fire splitting the taut canvas into long shreds, which the wind flung in pennants of flame on the mess-tent as those two hacked silently at the ropes. There was no time for words; no time for thought. A quiver came to the solid-looking pile, a shimmer in the moonlight. Another rope--another--then a sudden sway, a crash of glass and china from within. Down! but with a creeping trail of fire within its folds!

There was no lack of helpers by this time. Knives, hatchets were at work right and left upon the ropes lest the message of fire should find the tents taut. Colonel Tweedie was shouting confused orders in front. Dan Fitzgerald, after a quick inquiry if all were safely out, was back in the rear row, where the danger grew with delay. The din was deafening, yet the flames made no noise; it was the dark humanity yelling, as it capered over the big tent, treading out the curling snakes of fire. Seen against the glare of a burning pyramid behind, the figures showed like the demons in a mediaeval Judgment beating the lost souls down to the worm which dieth not.

Rose, standing to rest, now that abler arms were at work, felt a hurried touch on her shoulder, and turned to see Lewis Gordon holding out an ulster which he had fetched from his tent.

'Put it on,' he said unceremoniously, 'or you'll catch cold.'

She flushed with surprise, then, as she complied, realising for the first time the havoc fire had made in her dress, continued to blush with an odd feeling of resentment.

'Where is Mrs. Boynton?' she asked quickly, to cover her confusion. 'I suppose you--I mean, she is safe, of course?'

'Of course. I haven't seen her though; but I heard your father calling to her. She must be with him. I'll see.'

'Mrs. Boynton? God bless my soul, isn't she with Rose?' cried Colonel Tweedie, who was still shouting excited orders to the crowd of coolies. 'She answered me and her tent is down. She must be out.'

'Mrs. Boynton! Has any one seen Mrs. Boynton?' Gordon's cry ran down the line without response.

'Gwen!--Gwen! the fools must have cut the thing down on top of her!' He had dashed up to the mass of ropes and canvas lying without beginning or end, in hopeless chaos. 'Gwen! Gwen!--are you there?'

A muffled cry was audible now in the hush of the workers.

'Not stunned, that's one thing,' he muttered to himself before shouting encouragement. Rose was at his elbow and caught his whisper.

'The sparks, for God's sake, Miss Tweedie! I trust you. If the tent smoulders she may suffocate before we--Coming, Gwen, coming directly!'

But no obstacle against eager help was ever more successful than that tortuous heap of heavy canvas, full of blind folds and entangled ropes, stayed fore and aft, and still fastened beyond possibility of removal to the bamboo-strengthened sides and the yet uncut guys. The seekers dived into the folds again and again to find themselves meshed; while Rose, with a sickening fear at her heart lest she should miss one, watched the sparks and shreds drifting by in clouds settling here, there, everywhere, and needing swift command to the little band of helpers. 'Quick, quick!--yonder by the corner. Another there! Stamp it out--quick! Well done!'

'What is it? what is it?' A new voice rose above the turmoil as Dan Fitzgerald came running from the rear grasping the truth as he ran. 'No, no?' he panted. 'No use, Gordon--too long. Get to the guys, for God's sake--the thickest--half a dozen men. Colonel, the right corner, please, sir; Gordon, the left; Smith, round to the back. They are not cut there, and see that the pegs hold--they *must* hold. Miss Tweedie, put a man to each stay as the front rises. I want the doorway--the door *must* show. Brothers,' he continued in Hindustani to the men who were fast falling into place, 'we have to raise the tent again. *Remember, the tent rises at the word!* Gordon, are you ready? All ready?----

He paused, gave a rapid glance at the sparks, and lowered his voice. 'It has to be done sharp, Colonel, or----' Again he hesitated between fear of letting the prisoner know her imminent danger, and fear of not enforcing the necessity for speed. Rose understood, and racked by anxiety as she was, felt a thrill of recognition at Dan's quick thought which, even in such a moment, enabled him to remember that, as Mrs. Boynton knew but little Hindustani, he could continue in that language. 'The tent is certain to catch fire, but it may be smouldering now; so we must risk it. Remember that I

*must* get in and out before the canvas yields, or---- So be sharp. Gordon! you give the word!

There was an instant's silence, broken by a voice. Then a shout, a heave, and Rose straining at a rope as she never strained before, felt, rather than saw, something rise, pause, sink; rise again fluttering, swaying.

'Higher! higher!' shouted Dan, standing close in, ready for a dive at the door. 'All together, Gordon. Shah-bash, brothers! My God! it's caught already!'

A blot of shadow near her showed the coming doorway, and, half clear as it was, she saw Dan dash into it with the cry, which was echoed from outside as a little runnel of fire quivered up the half-stretched canvas.

'Stand fast! stand fast!' shouted Gordon at the guy. 'Run in, half of you, to the bamboos; they may hold longer than the stays.'

Rose was at one in a moment and clung to it, seeing nothing, thinking of nothing, but that irregular square of shadow. When would he come through it again? The tangles within! how would he thread them? For the pole having slipped from its supporting pegs had slid along the ground and would not rise more than half-way; so the inner fly-sides must be hanging in a maze--a maze of smouldering canvas. Horrible! a burning pall! Ah! would he never come?

Suddenly came another cry, as a great sheet of fire ran up the right ridge and the men at the rope fell backwards under the slackened strain of the parting canvas; yet still the corners held. But for how long! Oh! would he never come out?

'Mr. Fitzgerald! Mr. Fitzgerald! be quick, oh please be quick.'

It was a foolish, aimless little cry, yet somehow it raised a new idea in her mind. What if he had lost his way in that hideous tangle? She was at the blot of shadow in an instant calling again and again. Too late! surely too late, for the bamboo lintel to which she clung so frantically swayed. Not down yet--yes! down, and she with it, half kneeling still. She heard a cry from Lewis bidding the others run in on the fire and stamp it out; but as she staggered to her feet still holding on to the lintel something else staggered out beside her.

'All right,' gasped Dan, before the great shout of relief rose up drowning his voice. When it had passed and they crowded about him, he had set Gwen's feet on the ground and drawn the folds of blanket from her face, though his arm was still round her as she clung to him, scarcely believing in her safety.

'Only frightened--half suffocated,' he went on, struggling to get back his breath. 'Couldn't some one bring her a glass of water--don't move yet--they will bring it to you here. It is all over--except the shouting.'

Rose standing aside, giddy with sudden relief, could hardly believe it could be over. Yet the coolies were rubbing themselves and laughing over their sprawl in the dust when the tent collapsed, and the tent itself was blazing away unheeded on the ground. Yes! it was over, and so quickly that George Keene, roused by the crash of the messroom-tent, came too late for anything save sympathy. He gave that to the full; not unnecessarily, for in truth the condition of the camp was pitiable. Lewis Gordon's tent, being the only one to windward of the original outbreak, was left standing; the rest were either smouldering in ashes or severely damaged beyond the possibility of re-pitching without repair, while the extent of other injuries must remain unknown till dawn brought light, and time allowed the fires to die out undisturbed; for any letting in of air while the wind remained so high might cause a fresh blaze.

Colonel Tweedie, looking a perfect wreck in his striped flannel suit, fussed about uncertain and querulous, while George and Dalel Beg, who had arrived from the palace, competed for the honour of putting up the ladies during the remainder of the night; Dalel, minus the least vestige of European attire, being re-inforced after a time by Khush-hal Beg, breathless but dignified, bearing the Diwan's urgent prayer to be allowed the honour of helping a beneficent Government in its hour of need.

Dan with an impatient frown on his face waited for decision till his patience failed. Then he buttoned-holed Lewis--who amid all the wild costumes looked almost ridiculously prim in his dress suit--and expounded his views vehemently, the result being that the Chief concluded in favour of the palace. If, as was possible, they might be forced into halting for several days, the old pile would hold them all, and a regiment besides. So, after a time, odd little square dhoolies, smelling strongly of rose-attar, came for the two ladies, and in them, duly veiled from public gaze, they were hurried along, much to their amusement. The gentlemen after a raid on Lewis Gordon's wardrobe, following suit, all except the under-secretary, who, coming last, found nothing available save a white waistcoat and a pair of jack boots, in which additions to a pyjama sleeping-suit he looked so absurd that the others sat and roared at him, as men will do at trifles

when still under the influence of relief and excitement, until George carried him off to his bungalow, promising to return him next morning clothed and in his right mind. Thus the night ended in comedy for all save Mrs. Boynton. To her, clothes were anything but a triviality, and as she lay among silk quilts and hard roly-poly bolsters in the little strip of a room to which she and Rose were taken, pending the preparation of a state suite upstairs, she mourned sincerely over the probable fate of her wardrobe. Had it remained in the leather trunks escape might have been possible, but, knowing they were to halt for a day at least, she made the ayah hang up all the dresses round the tent. Poor Gwen seemed to see them, like Bluebeard's wives in a row, getting rid of their creases, and the thought of under-garments which might be uninjured gave her no consolation.

Rose was more calm, remembering that her riding-habit had, as usual, been moved in order to be brushed, and would most likely be produced next morning. Besides, she was worn out by the excitement, and forgot even the smart of a large scorch on her arm in the memory of that five minutes during which she had waited for Dan to come out of the fiery maze. Despite her boasted nerves, the stress and strain of it all came back again and again, making her set her teeth and clench her hands. Yet Gwen, who had so narrowly escaped a dreadful death, was grumbling over the loss of her dresses. Rose, lying in the dark listening to the plaintive regrets, felt scornfully superior, not knowing that her companion was deliberately trying to forget, to ignore, a like memory--the memory of her own feelings when Dan fought his way to her at last. If that sort of thing went on he would end by marrying her in spite of her wiser self; and then they would both be miserable. She was not a romantic fool, and yet--a very real resentment rose up against him as she remembered her own confidence, her own content. She felt vaguely as if he had taken advantage of her fear, and that something must be done to prevent a recurrence of this weakness on her part. If she could only pay back the money he had paid for her, matters would be easier to manage. As it was, even Lewis, with his easy-going estimate of women, would not stand the knowledge of her indebtedness to another man, so something must be done, something must be changed. That, oddly enough, was the underlying grievance which found expression in petulant assertions that Fate was doubly hard in making her fair; had she been dark like Rose, the part of Eastern Princess she would have to play until another consignment of civilised dresses arrived from Rajpore would have been fun. As it was, she would look a perfect fright.

She did not, however. Had she not been aware of this fact ere she made her appearance next morning in the long flowing robes and veil of a Delhi lady, she must have gathered it from the looks of her companions. But she had appraised herself in one of the big mirrors in the suite of state apartments halfway up the stairs, and decided that she would wear a similar costume at the very next fancy ball.

This in itself was sufficient to chase any save immediate care from a mind like hers. In addition, even a stronger character would have found it difficult to avoid falling in with the reckless merriment which had seized on all the other actors in the past night's incident. Partly from relief at its comic ending, partly because the charm of absolute novelty, the zest of the unexpected, enhanced the pleasure of extremely comfortable quarters--for Lewis in his capacity of personal *aide* had decided against the dark state suite of apartments on the second storey in favour of the roof above, with its slender balconies, long arcades, and cool central summer-house open on all sides to the air. Here, high above the sand swirls, safe from the sun, they would be far better off than in tents during the growing heat of the days Gwen, leaning against a clustered marble pillar, looking down on the red-brown slant of windowless wall spreading like a fort to the paved courtyard below, said it was like living on a slice of wedding-cake. A solid chunk below, above a sugar filigree; whereat George, delighted, assured her that the whole palace itself viewed from afar had always reminded him of the same thing. Filigree or no filigree, she said it was charming, and the central hall of the twelve-doored summer-house was a marvel of decoration; fast falling to decay no doubt, yet losing no beauty in the process, since the floriated white tracery overlaying the background of splintered looking-glass was so intricate that the eye could scarcely follow the pattern sufficiently to appreciate a flaw. Seated there in coolest shadow you could see through the inner arches to the long slips of vaulted rooms on all four sides; through them again to the blue sky set in its rim of level plain, save to the north where the view was blocked by the Diwan's tower rising a dozen feet or more from the terraced roof, with which it was connected by a flight of steps barred by a locked iron *grille*. Thus the roof lay secure from all intrusion except from the courtyard, whence an outside stair, clinging to the bare wall, gave access to the state rooms below, and thence, still slanting upwards, to the lowest terrace of roof. Rose, leaning over a balcony looking sheer down to where the servants, like ants, were running to and fro over the preparations for breakfast, declared she would use one of the four little corner-rooms of the summer-house as her bedroom. All it needed was a curtain at the inner arch, when it would be infinitely preferable to those dreadful rooms downstairs all hung with glass chandeliers and silvered balls, which made her inclined to hang herself in sympathy. In the hopes rather, suggested Lewis, of improving the style of the decoration; a remark which brought the usual frown to the girl's face. In truth, Rose Tweedie in her trim riding-habit did not suit her surroundings half so well as Gwen Boynton in her trailing tinsel-decked robes. On the other hand, Colonel Tweedie would have done better in not yielding to the temptation of playing 'Sultan' to Mrs. Boynton's 'Light of the Harem'; for native costume does not suit an elderly Englishman. But the opportunity had been

too strong for him.

'My dear father,' said Rose helplessly, when she first caught sight of her parent in a khim-khab coat and baggy trousers. She might have said more, had not Mrs. Boynton's grave compliment on his appearance sent the girl away impatiently to lean over the balcony once more, and wonder if they were ever going to bring breakfast.

To her, when he appeared, went Dan Fitzgerald, without even a look at the others.

'Thanks, Miss Tweedie,' he said in a low tone. 'I hadn't time to say it last night. I *had* lost myself, and your voice--- However, it can be only "*thank you*," and you have that.'

Rose, with a smile, let his hand linger in hers for a second as their eyes met; honest, friendly eyes.

And George Keene also passed straight to her.

'Better! That is all right. By Jove, you were bad, when I found you outside the fuss when it was all over. You would have fainted, if it hadn't been for the whisky and water--which, by the way, I stole from Gordon's flask----'

'You didn't tell him?' interrupted Rose quickly.

'Not I! I knew you wanted it kept dark about the scorch. It's better, I hope? Why, you have curled your hair over the cut on your forehead. What a dodge!'

His young face was overflowing with a sort of pride in her pluck, when Mrs. Boynton came up. She was in a mood which craved attention, and some of her slaves had passed her by to give Rose the first word.

'What are you two discussing so eagerly?' she began. 'Good-morning, Mr. Keene. How delightfully commonplace you look in exactly the proper breakfast costume for a young Englishman!'

George blushed. He would have given worlds to say that she looked anything but commonplace, but was too young to venture on it. But he looked the sentiment, and Gwen smiled bewilderingly back at him. She was made that way, and could not help it.

'Isn't it quaint up here?' she went on, leaning over the balustrade and looking, as Rose had been doing, at the servants filing up the steps with silver dishes of sausages and bacon, and all the accessories of an orthodox English breakfast, regardless of the feelings of their pig-loathing hosts. 'I declare, I have fallen in love with everything.'

'Yourself included, I hope,' added Lewis, joining the group; or, to put it politely, you have fallen in love with everything, and everything has fallen in love with you. And no wonder. The fact is, Gwen, that you do suit your present environment to perfection. I should not have believed the thing possible--but so it is.'

As he sat on the coping with his back to the landscape, he bent forward looking at her critically--'No!' he went on; 'I should not have thought it possible, but you look the part.'

'It must be awful, though, to be a native,' remarked George fervently. His eyes were on Colonel Tweedie as he spoke. That conspicuous failure was, however, only partly responsible for his opinion. In a more or less crude form the childish hymn of gratitude for having been born in order to go to a public school survives wholesomely amongst young Englishmen.

'I don't know,' dissented Gordon languidly. 'A civilised conscience is a frightful interference with the liberty of the subject. Personally, I object to the native views of comfort, pleasure, and all that. But I can imagine some very good fellows preferring them. They are not nearly such a strain on the nervous system. For instance, Gwen, were you really the Shah-zadi you look, there would have been no necessity for sending back those brocades over which I found you weeping half an hour ago. You would have appropriated them without demur. Wouldn't she, sir?'

The Colonel gave his little preparatory cough, and looked grave.

'It wasn't a brocade, Colonel Tweedie,' protested Gwen. 'It was simply the most lovely piece of old-gold satin in the world. It stood up of itself, and yet was absolutely invertebrate in its folds. Perfect! The same on both sides too. I had half a mind to be double-faced myself, and take it when Mr. Gordon's back was turned.'

'Why didn't you?' retorted the latter cynically. 'You are the only one of us who would not be criminally responsible

for the action. Isn't that so, sir?' He was mischievously amused by his chief's evident dislike to the subject.

'Should I be responsible?' asked Rose, surprised.

'Your father would be, for your action. Wouldn't you, sir?'

This was too much even for reticent dignity.

'I--er--don't--I mean, doubtless; but--er--it is not--er--a subject which comes within the range of practical politics.'

'I should hope not,' cried Rose. 'My dear dad! fancy your being responsible for my actions. It isn't fair!' Her face of aggrieved decision made the others laugh.

'Perhaps it isn't, Miss Tweedie,' remarked Lewis gravely; but I can assure you that we officials are all responsible for our female relations in the first degree. A merciful Government has, however, drawn the line at cousins. So Mrs. Boynton could only lose her own pension, if she were found out.'

Gwen made a *moue* of derision.

'That is not much to risk. I wish I had known this before. Lewis! do you think you could prevail on them to give me another chance with the satin?'

'What on earth is delaying the breakfast?' fussed Colonel Tweedie, moving off. He hated *persiflage*, especially between his guest and his secretary.

'Coming, sir, coming,' said George, leaning over to look; 'there is a regular procession of silver dishes filing up Jacob's ladder.'

'Oh dem silver dishes,' hummed Rose gaily, leaning over to look, too. 'How funny it is, isn't it?'

'Funny!' echoed Dan, 'it is simply appalling.'

Perhaps the sudden sense of the utter incongruousness of it all accounted for the silence which followed, as they stood on the balcony, which clung like a swallow's nest to the bare walls. Below them, beyond the courtyard, lay the shadowy arcades of the bazaar and the great pile of the Mori gate. Beyond that again the bricks and sand-heaps of Hodinuggur, with the village creeping up to be crowned by the grass palisades where the potter sat at work.

'Talking of bribes, said Dan absently, after the pause, 'I've often wondered how a fellow feels when he has been informed that her gracious Majesty has no further need of his services. They seldom go beyond that nowadays, but that must be bad enough.'

'Very much so, if the bribe has been insufficient, assented Lewis,

'Mr. Gordon! how can you?' began Rose, pausing, however, at the sight of his satisfied smile.

'You should adopt the sun with the motto "Emergo" as your crest, Miss Tweedie. It would suit both your thoughts and deeds,' he replied teasingly.

'Don't mind him,' put in Dan; 'he always was weak in his grammar, and doesn't know that rise must be the correct present tense of Rose.'

'But, really,' persisted Lewis, when the laugh ended; 'if a man *had* taken a bribe, the first thought to one of his *genre* would naturally be if the game was worth the candle. If he *hadn't*--why, dismissal from the public service is not always misfortune. There is the disgrace, of course, but, personally, I have never been able to understand the sentiment of the thing; it appears to me strained. Half your world, as a rule, dislikes you; it believes you capable of murdering your grandmother at any moment. Yet the fact doesn't distress you. It is inevitable that some people should think ill of you. So why should you care when they invent a definite crime for you to commit? It doesn't affect your friends.'

'Well, I don't know,' said George Keene sturdily. 'That's all very philosophical, but I believe I should shoot myself.'

'No! you wouldn't, old chap; unless you wished people to consider you guilty.'

'This conversation is becoming gruesome,' put in Mrs. Boynton; 'let us change it; though Lewis is right, for

Government service seems to me a doubtful blessing----'

'But an assured income,' interrupted Dan, with a laugh.

Lewis Gordon turned on him quite hotly. 'I like your saying that, Fitzgerald--you of all people in the world. Why, man alive! if I had your power I would chuck tomorrow, and die contractor, engineer, K.C.I.E.' and the richest man in India!'

Gwen Boynton looked up in quick interest. 'Really! do you mean that *really*, Lewis?'

'I won't swear to the K.C.S.I.' or the superlative, but Fitzgerald knows perfectly that I always say he has mistaken his line of life. We want hacks. People to obey orders, not to give them.' As he spoke he glanced meaningly at Colonel Tweedie walking about fussily, and then at his friend's face.

Dan swung himself from the balustrade where he had been perched. 'Some one must give orders, and I mean to stick on for my promotion. It must come next year. So that is settled. Are you not coming to breakfast, Mrs. Boynton?' She met his smile without response as she turned away.

'Dear me! the others have gone in already, and I was so hungry. But one doesn't often get the chance, Mr. Fitzgerald, of considering an old friend in a new character. It was quite absorbing--for the time.'

So the balcony was left to the sunlight, and some one who had been watching it from an archway in the bazaar, withdrew to the shadow where she rolled the little pellets of opium in her soft palms and prepared for her midday sleep. The burning of the tents had been a real piece of luck, the mem--that was she no doubt in the native dress--would be in the palace for two or three days, and women were women whether fair or dark. This one, too, looked of the right sort. Chandni's dreams that day were of a time when she would have the upper hand in Hodinuggur and become virtuous, for it paid to be virtuous under the present Government. Dalel should start a women's hospital. Then the Sirkar would give him the water every year, and the necessity for scheming would disappear. In the meantime they must not be niggardly. That did not pay with women, since, if they were of the sort to take bribes, they were of the sort not easily satisfied.

## CHAPTER VIII

'Come and see our mad potter before you go home, Miss Tweedie,' pleaded George Keene, 'he really is one of the shows, isn't he, Fitzgerald?'

They had been doing the sights of Hodinuggur as an afternoon's amusement; tennis in a riding-habit having no attractions for Rose. Mrs. Boynton, however, on the plea of being a zenana lady, had elected to remain on the roof, Colonel Tweedie keeping her company until the time came for his return visit of state to the Diwan on his tower. Lewis might have made the same choice had he been given it; but he was not. So he had preferred loafing round the ruins to toiling after problematical black buck with the sporting party, and made a pleasant companion, as even Rose admitted; being ready with information on most points, and between the references talking affably with Dan regarding the respective merit of *Schultze versus* brown powder; thus leaving the younger couple to themselves. So his change of manner stood out with unusual distinctness as Rose turned to him for consent to George Keene's invitation.

'As you please, Miss Tweedie; we are your slaves. A mad potter sounds cheerful; he is the man, I suppose, who made that jolly little pot Keene sacrificed to my cousin's greed this morning. When you are as old as I am, my dear fellow, you will really keep the pretty things out of the sight of ladies. I always do, nowadays. There was a little woman at Peshawur, I remember--she had blue eyes--who wheedled----'

'Mrs. Boynton was most welcome to the Ayodhya pot,' blurted out George hastily.

'*Cela va sans dire!* It is just because we love to give the pretty things to the pretty creatures that it becomes unwise to let the pretty creatures see the pretty things.'

'Then it is your fault, to begin with,' interrupted Rose hotly.

'Exactly so. I'm sure, Miss Tweedie, you have heard me say a dozen times that we men are to blame for all the weaknesses of women. They are simply the outcome of our likes and dislikes; and they will remain so until there is a perpetual leap-year.'

'For heaven's sake, Keene,' said Dan, laughing, 'lead the way to the potter's or there will be murder done on the King's Highway! Don't mind him, Miss Rose! He "only says it to annoy because he knows it teases." He doesn't really believe anything of the kind.'

Lewis, his eye-glass more aggressive than ever, murmured something under his breath about the inevitable courses of nature, as Rose, with her head held very high, followed George Keene into the potter's yard.

It was a scene strangely at variance with the party entering it. Indeed, old Fuzl Elahi, who had never before set eyes on an Englishwoman, would have started from his work had not George detained him with reassuring words:

'He tells his yarns best when he is at the wheel,' he explained as he dragged forward a low string stool for Rose. 'And I want you to hear an awfully queer one called "The Wrestlers." You know enough of the language to understand him at any rate.'

'Miss Tweedie is a better scholar than most of us,' remarked Lewis Gordon curtly from the seat he had found beside Dan on a great log of wood; one of those logs so often to be seen in such courtyards--relics, perhaps, of some ineffectual intention of repair long since forgotten. This one might, to all appearance, have fallen where it lay in those bygone days of which the potter told tales, when the now treeless desert had been a swampy jungle on the borders of an inland sea.

The afternoon sun, slanting over the grass palisades, played havoc with the humanity it found gathered round the wheel by sending their shadows distorted to long lengths across the yard, and tilting them at odd angles against the irregular wall of the mud hut beyond. Altogether a conglomerate pyramid of shadows, with the potter's high turban dominating it as he sat silent, spinning his wheel. And as the clay curved and hollowed beneath his moulding hand a puzzled look came to the light eyes, which, usually so shifty, were now fixed with a sort of fascination upon that strange figure in the riding-habit.

'It is not there,' he muttered uneasily, 'I cannot find a clew.'

George gave Rose the triumphant glance of a child displaying a mechanical toy when it behaves as it ought to behave. The potter was evidently in a mad mood, and might be trusted for a good performance.

'Now, Fuzl Elahi, we want "The Wrestlers," please. The Miss sahiba has never heard it.'

'How could she?' broke in the old man sharply. 'She does not belong to that old time. She is new. I cannot even tell the old tale if she sits there in the listener's place. I shall forget, the old will be lost in the new; as it is ever.'

'Change places with me, Miss Tweedie,' put in Lewis with a bored look. 'I am not regenerate out of the old Adam, am I, potter-ji?'

But as he rose the pliant hand went out in a gesture of denial. 'There is room on the log for both, and crows roost with crows, pigeons with pigeons. The big Huzoor can sit on the stool if he likes. I know him. I have seen him many and many a time.'

'Only once, potter-ji,' protested Dan, as he and Rose changed places and the wheel began to hum.

'The post is going from Logborough junction to St. Potter's burgh,' murmured Lewis discontentedly. 'If we are going to play round games I shall go home.'

'Do be quiet, Gordon!' put in George eagerly; 'he is just beginning, and it really is worth hearing.'

But Lewis was incorrigible. '*Proxime accessit*,' he went on, to Rose, 'what crime in your past incarnation is responsible for your being bracketed with me in this?'

'Oh, do listen,' protested George again.

'Listen! Who could help listening to that infernal noise?--I beg your pardon, Miss Tweedie, but it is infernal.'

It was startling, certainly. A shrill moan coming from the racing, rocking, galloping wheel as the worker's body swayed to and fro like a pendulum. It seemed to rouse a vague sense of unrest in the hearers, a dim discomfort like the remembrance of past pain. Then suddenly the story began in a high-pitched persistent voice, round which that racing, galloping rush of the wheel seemed to circle, hurrying it, pushing at it, every now and again sweeping it along recklessly.

'It was a woman seeking something,  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, she sought for something.*

The wrestlers who own the world wrestled for her,  
On the palm of her right hand wrestling for her,  
"She is mine, she is mine," said one and the other,  
*While over hill and dale, through night and day, she sought for something.*

"O flies? you tickle the palm of my hand,  
Be off and wrestle down in your world."  
So they brought flowers and grass as a carpet,  
Wrestling on as she sought for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.*

"Your carpet is hot, be off, you flies."  
So they brought her trees and water for cooling,  
Wrestling on as she sought for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.*

"The grass grows long with the water," she cried,  
"Be off, O flies, and tickle your world."  
So they brought her flocks to devour the grass,  
Wrestling on as she sought for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through day and night, seeking for something.*

"They have trodden my palm as hard as a cake."  
So they caught up a plough and ploughed her hand,  
Wrestling on while she sought for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through day and night, seeking for something.*

"You have furrowed my palm; it tickles and smarts."  
So they brought a weaver and wove her lint,  
Wrestling on while she sought for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.*

"Foul play! Foul play! Look down and decide,"  
"Not I, poor flies, I must search for something."  
So they caught up a town to watch the game.  
"He is right! He is wrong!" cried old and young.  
"He is wrong! He is right!" And so war began.  
While they wrestled away and she sought for something,  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.*

"What a noise you make; I am tired of flies."  
So she swept them into a melon rind.  
"Be quiet, flies! lie still in the dark."  
She clapped her palm to the hole in the rind.  
"I'm tired of it all, I will go to sleep;  
When morning comes I will seek for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, I must seek for something.*"

She rested her head on her palm, and slept,  
Down in the valley close to the river;  
Slept to the tune of the buzzing flies,  
Wrestling and fighting about fair play.  
And while she slept the big Flood came,  
And the melon pillow floated away.

And all within swarmed out to the sun--  
Grass, and herds, and ploughs, and looms.  
People fighting for none knows what.  
"I have made a new world," she said, with a laugh.  
"A brand-new world; and the flies have gone.  
But the palm of my right hand tickles still,  
May be it will cool when I find what I seek."  
So she left her new world down by the river,  
Left it alone and sought for something--  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, seeking for something.'*

The galloping wheel, which had responded always to the mad hurry of the recurring refrain, slackened slowly. Rose gave a sigh of relief, and glanced at Lewis Gordon to see if he too had been oppressed by that shrinking recognition of a stress, a strain, a desire, such as she had never felt before; but he was leaning forward, his chin on his curved hand, intent on listening, so she could not see his face.

'By the powers,' came Dan Fitzgerald's voice above the softening hum, 'the old chap has made an Ayodhya pot--the same shape, I mean.'

'He always does when he tells this story,' broke in George, quite pleased with the success of his entertainment. 'I don't think he quite knows why he does it, however. Sometimes he says the woman was looking for one; sometimes that she always carries one in her left hand to balance the world in her right. But he always takes the unbaked pot to the ruins and buries it with two of those odd little ninepins, he calls men and women, inside it. He is as mad as a hatter, you know.'

'Several hatters,' assented Gordon fervently, 'but it is an interesting theory of creation.'

'Now don't,' protested Dan, sitting with his long legs crunched up on the low stool close to the potter. 'It is too human for dissection by the Folklore Society. But I'm surprised at one thing. The wrestlers--they are persistent figures in Indian tales, Miss Tweedie--are generally represented as giants. They are pigmies here.'

'The Huzoor is right and wrong,' replied the potter in answer to an inquiry; 'the pailwans were neither pigmies nor giants. They were as the Huzoor--two and a half haths round the chest--neither more nor less.'

'That's a good shot,' remarked Dan in English, 'forty-five inches according to my tailor. You have an accurate eye, potter-ji,' he added in Hindustani, 'only half an inch out.'

'Not a hair's-breadth, Huzoor,' replied the old man mildly. 'The measures of the pailwans is the measure of the Huzoor. I have it here; my fathers used it, and I use it.'

He sought a moment in the little niche, hollowed, close to his right hand, out of the hard soil forming the side of his sunken seat, and drew from it a fine twisted cord of brown, red, and cream coloured wool. It was divided into measures by small shells strung on the twist and knotted into their places.

'Hullo!' cried Gordon eagerly, 'that must be hundreds of years old. Those are sea-shells, and very rare. Simpson at the museum showed me one in fossil the other day. I wonder how the dickens the old man got hold of them?'

'Two and a half haths,' repeated Fuzl Elahi absently, 'the potter's full measure for a man in the beginning and the end.' He leaned forward rapidly as he spoke, passed the cord round Dan Fitzgerald's chest, and drew the ends together. The curled spirals of the two shells lay half an inch apart. 'So much for the garments,' he muttered. 'Yea! I knew it. The measure of a true pailwan to a hair's breadth.'

'And what am I, potter-ji?' asked George, laughing.

The puzzled look came back to the old man's face. 'The Huzoor may be a pailwan too. Times have changed.'

'Rough on a fellow, rather!' exclaimed the boy, still laughing. 'Here, Fitz! chuck me over the thing. Is that fair, Miss Tweedie?'

She laughed back into his bright face, as he pulled his hardest to make the two second shells meet, then shook her head.

'Not on yourself, Mr. Keene. You are more of a hero than that, I should say.'

The potter's eyes were on her, then back on George. 'Everything is changed,' he muttered again, 'even the measure of the pots.'

'Then you measure them, do you?' asked Gordon, to whom George had handed the cord, and who was now examining it minutely.

'Surely, Huzoor. The first one of each batch. Then the hand learns the make.'

'Try what make you are, Gordon?' suggested Dan.

'Not I. Here, potter-ji, catch. Miss Tweedie and I, according to the best authority, are abnormal; we are not ordinary pots, so I, for one, decline to be measured by their standard. And now, if some of us are to be in time for such trivialities as dinner, we ought to be going.'

The potter rose also and stepped out of his hole. Seen thus at full length, he showed insignificant, his hairy, bandy, almost beast-like legs, contrasting strangely with the mild high-featured face, with its expression of puzzled anxiety, as he laid a deprecating hand on George Keene's sleeve.

'Wants bucksheesh, I suppose,' murmured Lewis. 'I have some rupees somewhere, if you want them, Keene.' But it was not money; it was only leave to speak to the 'madr mihrban.'

'That's a nice name for you, Miss Rose,' said Dan softly--'Mother of mercy--a name to be glad of.'

She blushed as she went forward a step, asking, 'What is it? what can I do for you?'

He stooped to touch her feet with his supple hands ere replying. 'Huzoor! it is a little thing. Fuzl Elahi, potter of Hodinuggur, has a daughter somewhere. Perhaps she has gone to the Huzoor's world; it is new, I do not know it. If the "madr mihrban" were to see her, she might tell her to come back--just once--only once. I would not keep her. But now I have no answer when my father says: "Where is thy little Azizan?"'

'Azizan!' echoed George quickly. But the old man seemed almost to have forgotten his own request. He stood looking past the strangers, past the village, past even the ruins, into the sunset sky.

'I will send her--if I see her,' said Rose gently, with tears in her eyes; for George had told her the story of the lost daughter, and the sudden, diffident appeal touched her. Yet the vast gulf between her and the old man touched and oppressed her still more, as she left him standing alone beside his wheel.

'Well!' said Lewis Gordon, when in silence they had reached the road again. 'You may call that amusement, Keene, if you like; I don't. When I get home, I shall have a sherry and bitters.'

'He *is* rather a gruesome old chap,' admitted George cheerfully. 'I felt a bit creepy myself the first time I heard that song--by the way, Miss Tweedie, talking of creepiness, did I tell you about the Potter's Thumb? I didn't! Oh,--that is really a grand tale.' He told it, happily, as an excellent sequel to the show, while Dan, in one of his best moods, piled on

the imaginative agony about Hodinuggur generally, until Lewis announced his intention of returning to the palace by the longer way. He would be late, of course, but that was preferable to having no appetite for dinner!

'By Jove! seven o'clock,' cried Dan, looking at his watch. 'And you and I, George, have to get over to the bungalow. We must run for it.'

Rose watched them racing down the path, laughing and talking as they ran, with a troubled look.

'Fine specimens, Miss Tweedie,' remarked Lewis after a pause. 'I don't think you need fear their cracking in the fire.'

'I--I--' faltered Rose, taken aback by his comprehension.

'Am Scotch! That's sufficient excuse. I notice we seldom get rid of our native superstition. Besides, it was uncanny--the yard-measure and the Potter's Thumb, and that horse-leech of a woman, who was never satisfied. I felt it myself.'

She knew he was speaking down to her as a nervous woman; yet she did not resent it, because it was a distinct relief not to be taken seriously.

'I wish they had not been measured, for all that,' she persisted. 'You will own it was odd, won't you?'

'Not so odd as Dan himself! He has been cracked ever since I knew him. And Keene is one of the sterling sort, certain of success; besides, he measured himself! Now, before you go upstairs to dress, if your Scotch blood is still curdling, as mine is, have a half of sherry and bitters with me. Crows roost with crows, you remember.'

His friendliness beguiled her into playfulness.

'Crows indeed! then I've a better opinion of you than you have of me. I thought we were meant for the pigeons.'

'To bill and coo?'

If she could have boxed his ears, it would have relieved her feelings. As it was, she raced upstairs, in a fury, without vouchsafing one word of resentment, and paced up and down her tiny room with flaming cheeks. Could a girl be expected, for ever and aye, to be on the outlook for such openings? Of course Gwen Boynton would have laughed easily--would not have minded, perhaps; but then Gwen was charming--everything apparently that a woman ought to be!

Rose looked at herself in her dusty habit. She would have to go down to dinner in it, and challenge comparisons with Gwen in her silks and tinsel. Why should she? No one would care, no one would have a right to care if she did stay in her room with a headache. The next instant she was ashamed of the impulse. What did it matter?--they were welcome to their opinion. As for her, she would adopt no feminine excuse; she would leave those little devices to men's women. So she brushed her habit, and went out, with a heightened colour, to join the others.

## CHAPTER IX

Rose Tweedie's sneer against men's women lacked point, since it so happened that Mrs. Boynton, in the opposite corner-room of the pavilion, was, at the very moment, setting aside the temptation of pleading a headache as an excuse for not appearing at dinner. And she had more reason to seek quiet than the girl, though a new dress lay ready on the bed; for Gwen loved to dazzle her world, and had spent some of her leisure in instructing a native tailor how to run up a web of coarse native muslin bought in the bazaar into a very decent semblance of a fashionable garment. But the pleasure of the trick had gone out of it. Something had happened. Something incredible, yet, given the surroundings, natural enough. Something about which she must make up her mind. It seemed scarcely a minute ago since she had passed in swiftly to the solitude of her room in order to think. She, Gwen Boynton, in native dress, with a white scared face and something in her hand. Now she had to pass out of that room again as an Englishwoman, and the transition left her oddly undecided. Indeed, as she paused for a moment ere taking the plunge, with one hand on the embroidered draperies doing duty as a door, it seemed almost as if she were awaiting some command, some voice which would relieve her of responsibility. Then she smiled and passed on to meet the surprised admiration of her little world; for she had never looked better in her life, and she knew it. The creamy muslin suited her in its careless folds, her excitement showed itself becomingly in flushed cheeks and bright eyes, and the chorus of wonder at her cleverness made her gracious beyond compare. They had been away so long, she said, airily, that she had had to amuse herself somehow, and were there not miles of muslin to be bought in every bazaar, and many men to put stitches into it? Any one could have done it. Rose, listening with a certain contempt in her look, told herself that Gwen said truth; any one could have done it who thought it worth while to take so much trouble for the sake of personal effect; yet a regret rankled somewhere, mingling with the resentment which came as Gwen called attention, somewhat garishly, to more of her good works. Did they not admire the room? When Colonel Tweedie had gone off to the Diwan she had consoled herself by pulling about the furniture; and did not the Ayodhya pot look sweet on the corner-stand she had improvised out of three bamboos, a brass platter, and a yellow silk scarf?

'You should have packed it away in your box at once,' remarked Lewis coolly. 'Keene may repent his good-nature, or some of us may steal it. The colour is admirable.' As he spoke he walked over to the stand as if for closer examination.

'Don't touch it, please,' cried Mrs. Boynton hastily. 'You--you will spoil my draperies.'

'A thousand pities, when they are so artistic,' put in Colonel Tweedie, glad of the opportunity. 'That is dinner, Mrs. Boynton. I've had it laid in the small pavilion so as to keep this as your drawing-room.'

'Thanks! but everything is delightful; simply fascinating! In spite of what Mr. Keene said this morning, I begin to wish I were a native.'

'For the sake of the satin?' asked Lewis, who was following close behind with Rose. Gwen flashed back a brilliant look at him.

'No! not the satin. That game would not be worth the candle.'

Apart from the question of satin, Mrs. Boynton had excuse for admiring the *mise en scene*. The violet sky, spangled with stars, seemed made apparently but for one end--to hap and hold that terraced roof which was clearly outlined against it by the light streaming from the pavilions on to the fretted white marble balustrades. At the corners were shadowy cupolas, and there in the arched summer-house at the farther end, close upon the velvet darkness, was a table set with silver and glass, fruits and flowers. At one side, so as to divide the ladies equally, was Rose, in her habit, doing the duty of hostess with a little air of gravity and preoccupation; at the other, Gwen, in her soft clouds of muslin, keeping the men in a state of admiring gratification through their eyes and their ears. They gathered round her too, when, dinner being over, they adjourned to the balconies for coffee and cigars. It was deliciously cool; a faint breeze stirred Rose's hair as she sat a little apart from the others watching the twinkling lights go up and down the stair which formed the only tie between that world on the roof and that world in the courtyard below.

'We ought to go to bed early,' said Lewis, Coming to stand before her. 'You are half-asleep--no wonder, after last night!--and Gwen is what superstitious Scotch folk call "fey." Then, if we have to join that detestable hawking-party to-morrow morning, we shall have to get up at five.'

'You needn't go unless you like,' she replied curtly. 'Mrs. Boynton has cried off.'

'I am not Mrs. Boynton's personal assistant, Miss Tweedie; I happen to be your father's--so duty calls.' As he spoke he seated himself on the balustrade and leant forward, his elbows on his knees, to watch the group on the other side of the arcade.

'If I didn't know that Gwen despises that sort of thing,' he went on in dissatisfied tones, 'I should say she had rouged this evening. Her way of showing fatigue, I presume; though, of course, neither of you have the common-sense to confess you are tired. Women are all ascetics at heart; at least they believe in the virtue of martyrdom. They have different ways of showing it, that's all. Gwen spends her fatigue in dress-making and conversation to please, and you, I'll go bail, haven't even a proper bandage on that scorched arm----'

'Mr. Gordon!'

'Yes! I saw you imagined I was blind--suppose we say like to imagine it; but I really had my eye-glass, Miss Tweedie. Besides, it doesn't require microscopic sight to see some things.'

'What a profound remark!' interrupted Rose, to hide her pleased surprise at his unusual consideration. At the same moment Gwen's gay laugh rang out, soft yet clear. Either the sound or the speech annoyed the hearer on the balustrade, for he frowned as he slipped his dangling feet to the floor.

'As profound as I can make it this evening, for I'm not ashamed to confess myself dog-tired. Couldn't tell a crow from a pigeon; so I shall be off. Good-night, Miss Tweedie, I wish you would persuade Gwen to go to bed. It is easier to give good advice than to take it.'

Rose remained looking at the twinkling lights, and wondering if Lewis were really jealous of his cousin, till seeing the others go back to the central summer-house she followed suit.

'Tired!' echoed Gwen sharply, in reply to her information that Lewis Gordon had stolen away. 'Are we not all tired? I feel as if I had been up since the beginning of time seeking for something I could not find. My bed, perhaps. Good-night, Rose.'

They were an odd couple, as they bent to kiss each other in that mirrored room, where the oddness was reflected again and again in the myriad scraps of looking-glass on the walls. Each curved fragment giving and taking an eternity of Gwen's and Rose's bending to kiss each other.

'I am tired of it all, I will go to sleep;  
When morning comes I will seek for something,  
*Over hill and dale, through night and day, I must seek for something.'*

The remembrance evoked by Gwen's chance words sent a little shiver through the girl; and with it came a sudden pulse of sympathy for the woman who, now that she saw her close, did indeed look haggard and worn.

'No wonder you are tired,' she said gently. 'Even I feel as if I could sleep for days.'

'But you are coming to hawk surely,' broke in George. 'Do, please! it won't be any fun without you.'

'Not a bit,' assented Dan. 'Gordon ordered your horse, I know, and told them to take you your tea at five punctually.'

'You must go, Rose,' put in Gwen with a shrug of her white shoulders. 'Diana *Chasseresse* mustn't disappoint her votaries. I'm glad my habit was burnt.'

She did not look it, and Rose, as she went off to her corner room wondered if Gwen could be jealous of her. The idea was absurd, but pleasing; and she fell asleep placidly over variations of the possibility.

But just over the way with that dark mirrored room between them, Gwen lay awake, with one hand thrust under the pillow where she could feel a tiny paper parcel. Should she keep it, or should she not? Should she say anything of the scene burnt in on her memory, or should she not? She seemed to see it as a spectator, not as the only actor in it. To see a woman in native dress in that room set round with eyes; the Ayodhya pot in her hand, and in her tinsel-edged veil the jewels which had fallen from its false bottom. Jewels which if sold would buy her freedom, perhaps save her, and Dan too, from a great mistake. It was a chance. A chance most likely unknown to any one in the wide world save herself, for

who would have knowingly sold a pot containing three huge pearls and an emerald for ten rupees? Nor was she bound to give more to the seller. Land was bought so, but if the mines were found afterwards, that was the buyer's good luck, even if he had guessed. Facts like these, accepted apparently by the honest and honourable, go far to give such as Gwen immoral support. No one could possibly know; she herself would not have known save for that chance slip, and the eyes made keen and eager through fear of some slight injury to the treasure.

It was a chance of escape from the danger which had come home to her sharply in the past twenty-four hours. The danger of yielding to her own weakness about Dan made clear by his actions; the new danger, suggested by his words, of her losing her hold on Lewis. Could the latter really be attracted by Rose? The events of the evening gave colour to the possibility. If so, there was no time to be lost. She must be free; free to do as she chose. No one would know. Nobody would dream of bribing one so powerless as she. And if the jewels had been put there knowingly, it was only her risk. No one else was responsible--Lewis had said so---

So she argued, coming round always to the same thought, till the first glint of dawn brought sleep, as it so often does to weary eyes. Perhaps in the thought that the sun will rise, the world go on, no matter what we do, or think, or say.

She slept so soundly that all the bustle of the hawking party failed to disturb her; and when that was over the long stretch of terraced roof lay empty of all sound or sign of life, save for the green parrots shrieking and swooping about the carven work. A pair of them had built in a loophole, whence the young ones kept up a simmering, bubbling noise, like a boiling tea-kettle; a comfortable homely sound out of keeping with the bare beauty of stone, and sunlight, and hard blue sky.

Down in the courtyard below, two badge wearers in scarlet and gold lounged on the stairs, barring the roof from intrusion, chatting to the passers-by, and discussing the news which had just been brought in by the camel which was crouching beside a pile of fodder in the centre of the yard, while its owner stretched his limbs, cramped with riding all night across the desert, in front of the cook-room. Halfway up the stairs on the landing leading to the state-rooms, Mrs. Boynton's ayah squatted, combining business with pleasure, by being within reach of a call and her forbidden hookah, at one and the same time. A bundle of letters lay beside her, intended as a peace-offering against the possible smell of smoke.

The sun climbed up silently, shifting the shadows on the silent roof. That was the only movement, until suddenly a figure in a white domino peered through the *grille* which barred the flight of steps leading to the Diwan's tower. Then came the grate of a rusty key in a lock, and the figure flitted, silently as the shadows, to the summer-house, and paused in the mirror-room. Perhaps the transformation which Western taste and Mrs. Boynton's clever fingers had wrought in its adornment, was pleasing, perhaps the reverse. The *burka*, however, is of all disguises the most complete, since it blots out form, colour, expression, even movement. The figure showed indeed like a white extinguisher in the centre of the room, until, with a swaying of ample folds it glided over to the corner stand where the Ayodhya pot stood out from Gwen's artistic drapery. Then something slid out, still shrouded in white folds, from the extinguisher, raised the vase, shook it slightly, replaced it, and slid back again in a horrible invertebrate protoplasmic sort of movement, calculated to send a shiver through a spectator. But there was none. The thing had the whole roof to itself save for that fair-haired sleeper in the corner room who lay with one hand clasping a little packet hidden under her pillow. Her face was turned to the doorway in full view of those latticed eye-holes belonging to the *burka*, which after a time came to look in on her from the half-raised curtain, and let in with a shaft of sunshine, a vista of blue skies and marble balustrades with two red and green parrots pecking at each other. It may have been the light, more probably the disturbing effect the dim consciousness of other eyes fixed on our own has upon most people, which roused Gwen Boynton. But she opened hers suddenly and started up in bed, her heart throbbing violently, though the curtain had fallen and not a sound was to be heard.

'Comin', mem sahiba, comin!', came in immediate answer to her imperative call as the ayah, thrusting her hookah aside, snatched at the letters, and shook what smoke she could from her voluminous garments. A trifling delay, but enough to allow the thing up-stairs to flit round the summerhouse again; even to pause a second at the *grille*.

'It makes too much noise. I will leave it open,' it muttered as it disappeared up the steps with the rusty key held in its formless clasp.

'Where were you?' asked Gwen, her heart still throbbing. 'And who was that who looked in on me from the door? There was some one: I'm sure there was some one.'

'Me, mem sahiba,' grinned the woman readily. 'Me, ayah. Look in several time. Mem always neendi par; sota! sota!'

like baba.<sup>[2]</sup> Ayah waitin' close to bring dak. Many letters for mem sahiba.'

Mrs. Boynton looked at her doubtfully. It was not the ayah whom she had seen; of that she felt certain. On the other hand, if the woman really had been sitting outside it was more than probable the whole thing was a dream. No harm had come of it, anyhow; so five minutes after she was dividing her attention between early tea and a long epistle from an absent admirer. Gwen's victims were always excellent correspondents, perhaps because of that gracious indifference in which lay her great charm, since a letter had quite as good a chance as a man of whiling away her kindly, sympathetic leisure.

But when the ayah was brushing at the pretty hair Gwen's mind reverted to the question which had kept her awake. As so often happens--the learned say by unconscious cerebration--it appeared to have settled itself. Independently of Dan, or any secondary matter of that sort, money would be useful. Most useful, seeing she had just lost the best part of her wardrobe and had a season at Simla in immediate prospect. Now she came to think of it, Hodinuggur owed her some reparation for the loss it had inflicted upon her. Besides, it would be wiser to wait and see if the presence of jewels in the pot were suspected by any one or not. If the latter, it would clearly be flying in the face of a good Providence to mention her discovery. So, by the time she was ready to face her world, that world seemed quite simple and easy to face.

Chandni thought the same thing as she sat at the Diwan's feet in the big balconied room of the tower overlooking the canal, telling him in whispers of the success of her plan so far. The jewels were no longer in the pot. The mem must have them, for, as she had found out through a khitmutgar, the mem had been alone during many hours, and had been making a mess in the room with trumpery platters and pots.

'She may send it back yet,' said the Diwan cautiously. 'Lo! I am old, and this I have learnt through long years: Trust not a woman not to change her mind till she be dead.'

The courtesan laughed. 'Tis as well for some men she is born so, father. But a night's thought is as death to a woman. Life is too short to give more to such things. And that night is over without a sign. Give her yet one more, an thou wilt; after that, say that Chandni hath dug the channel. 'Twill be thy task to turn the water into it.

## CHAPTER X

Among those things which come by Nature and are not to be taught, may be reckoned a pretty seat on horseback. One may be a good rider without it, a poor one with it; but when grace and skill are combined a man certainly shows at his best on horseback. It was so with Lewis Gordon. He sat his lean little country-bred as if it belonged to him; not as the usual phrase runs, as if he were part of his horse. For that is a description which ignores the essence of the thing to be described; which is, surely, the mastery a man has over something which is *not* himself. Part of his horse! The very words conjure up a man paralysed to the waist and jelly above, agonising over a cavalry seat.

If Lewis Gordon were grateful to Providence for anything, it was for making and keeping him a light weight, and thus rendering him independent of Australian or Arab mounts. The fourteen-hand pony which he had picked up--a mere bag of bones--at a native fair, had to be hard held when trotting alongside of Colonel Tweedie's big Waler, yet she had only cost him a tenth of the price. As she forged along, quivering with impatience, Bronzewing was a pretty sight, the sunlight shining red through her wide nostrils, and shifting in golden curves over the bronze muscles which were almost black in shadow. Rose Tweedie always admired it immensely, and, illogically enough, felt inclined to be more lenient on the rider. She told herself it was because he wore spectacles on horseback, and they were less offensive than the eyeglass, which permitted variations of method in his outlook. She did not even fall foul of his indifference when he dawdled about, a picture of aimless dejection, at the hawking party; in fact, she had a sneaking sympathy with his feelings. It was dreary work watching unfortunate grey partridges beaten up from one bush by coolies, only to be pounced on by a hawk ere it could reach the shelter of the next cover. She also shared his disgust at Dalel Beg, who, in top-boots, red coat, and doe-skins, took a keen interest in the gorging of young hawks on the entrails of the still struggling victims, and gave shrill 'yoicks' and 'gone a ways' at each fresh flutter. Khush-hal Beg watching the sport from a bullock-cart on which he reclined among cushions was purely comical; his son purely offensive.

'I think,' remarked Lewis slowly, 'he is the worst specimen of civilisation I ever met; and I think this is the deadliest entertainment I ever was at. And both those facts mean something.'

Rose laughed, and suggested that it would have been different had they come across bustard. They, she had heard, were worth hawking. Her companion shook his head.

'I've seen it on the frontier at its best. You lose the essence of sport; that, I take it, lies in pitting your strength, or skill, or endurance against the quarry. In hawking you ride behind the skill; and as the country is easy, the whole thing resolves itself into the pace of your horse; in other words, what you paid for the beast.'

'Not always! I'd back Bronzewing against the field any day,' cried Rose impulsively.

He looked up with quite a flush of pleasure. 'Well! she should do her best to win the gloves for you, Miss Tweedie.'

The reply came as naturally as the remark which provoked it, but it made the girl feel suddenly shy and say hastily-

'She looks as if she wanted to be off now; how that partridge startled her!'

'Not a bit of it. She is only longing, as I am, for a hunt.'

'A hunt?'

'Yes! a partridge-hunt. Have you never seen one?' He gave a rapid glance round. 'There are too many bushes here, but Keene may know of some fairly-open country, with perhaps a thorn-hedge or two for you to jump--that is to say, if you have had enough of this festive scene.'

Five minutes after, George Keene, Dan Fitzgerald, Lewis Gordon, and she were sweeping along in line across low sand-hills in order to dip down into a harder plain among stretches of level, dotted sparsely with low caper-bushes, with here and there a patch of cultivation showing vividly green against its whitey-brown frame of desert, and here and there a bit of plough ready for the summer crop.

There is nothing more invigorating in the world than riding in line at a hand-gallop across such country in the

freshness of early morning, especially when the party has gay hearts and light heads. Rose felt that it was worth all her purely feminine amusements put together, and, with a flush of enjoyment on her face, besieged Lewis Gordon with high-pitched questions as to what they were going to do; he calling back his answers, so that their voices rose above the rhythmical beating of the horses' hoofs.

'We are going without dog or coolie, gun or any lethal weapon whatever--as the code says--to ride down and capture the grey partridge or *Ammoperdix bonhami*! Have you seen it done, Fitzgerald?'

'Heard of it only. The pace must be good.'

'Racing speed; no less. Therein lies the fun.' He gave a quick glance at Rose's tackle, and frowned. 'You should have a stronger bit,' he began when she interrupted him.

'It is the same as yours.'

'Perhaps. But a lady can't ride like a man, especially in this sort of work. If I had noticed it before, I----'

'Nonsense! I always ride with a snaffle, and Shahad is as steady as a house.'

'That is no argument. In my opinion a lady should----'

The rest of the wrangle was spared to the company, for at that moment a partridge buzzed out of a bush at their feet, Bronzewing's equanimity gave way, and with a snort of eagerness she burst after it, Shahzad following suit; both beasts heading straight as a die after the quarry, heedless of their riders or their discussions.

'Give him his head, Miss Tweedie,' shouted Lewis, as he shot past. 'He has done it before and knows the game! Off we are!'

Off indeed, helter-skelter, behind the grey-brown buzz of wings showing against a blue sky.

'Ride it! Ride it! Keep an eye on it! I'll do back,' came Lewis Gordon's voice, boyishly excited, as, with hands down, he veered the mare a point or two by main force, until, as she caught sight of a heavier clump of bushes comprehension came to the game little beast, and she headed straight for it.

'Where? Oh! Where?' cried Rose distractedly to Dan Fitzgerald, who was now racing beside her.

'Right ahead--there--don't you see?'

Just a brown speck against the blue sky still, but skimming faster and faster to meet the brown horizon. There still, no--yes--

*Gone!*

Rose gave a cry, which was echoed by an exclamation from Dan, as instinctively they reined up, feeling the chase was over. George, hurrying up from behind, where his pony had been playing the fool, found them staring disconsolately at the bushes.

'Lost it, I suppose,' said Lewis, as he rejoined them. 'It is always difficult to keep it in sight on the horizon. However, you have had a good burst, Miss Tweedie. See! we started there--a good mile back. Have you any idea how you got here?'

'None! I suppose I rode; but I saw nothing but a sort of big bumble-bee buzzing in front of me. Shahzad did the rest.'

'As I said, not for the first time, which confirms me in saying he is only a Gulf Arab, for partridge-hunting is a Persian sport. Only don't tell your father, please; he would never forgive me.'

As he turned in his saddle, resting one hand on the mare's quarters in order to speak to Rose, voice and face full of almost boyish enjoyment, the girl felt that this was a new development of his character, and that she liked it better than the old ones.

'Now, as we go along, I'll explain. That bird took us by surprise,' he went on eagerly. 'Four is an ideal number, though I've had rare fun riding partridge single-handed. Number one ought to make the pace, keeping both eyes on the

bird. Number two keeps his on the going, so as to save Number one from coming to grief over rough country. Number three rides cautious, landmarks the flight, and is ready to turn if the bird breaks back—you can't when you are going full speed, unless the bird towers. Number four rides cunning, cuts off curves, and heads for likely covers. The whole aim being to press the partridge so hard that it has no time to settle in shelter, but, after skimming down to a bush, runs through it, and takes to wing again on the other side.'

'And gets away, I suppose,' muttered, George Keene, still out of temper. 'Don't see the fun of it.'

'Wait a bit,' retorted Lewis gaily. 'Now you must remember that the *role* you have to play depends on how the bird breaks. There is no time to settle. The nearest in must ride it, the rest choose their parts as best--steady, mare, steady!'

It was only a faint '*te-tetar--te-tetar*,' in the far distance, but Bronzewing started, and even George's pony cocked its ears; while humanity went on breathlessly in line, the horses' feet at a walk giving out a hollow sound on the hard soil, the yellow sunshine casting hard shadows.

'Look out!' cautioned Lewis, in a whisper. 'There's a partridge running on ahead; by you, I think, Fitzgerald.'

'Don't see it?'

'Farther to the left. The mare sees it. We must trot a bit, or it won't rise fair. Steady, lass, steady!'

'I see it,' came in excited tones from George, 'by the big bush, Miss Tweedie.'

'That's another,' cautioned Lewis again. 'Take care and don't----'

*Whirr, buzz! Whirr, buzz!*

'Ride it! Ride it!'

The cry came from two quarters; but Shahzad was already extended, and Rose forgetful of everything save those brown wings low down against the horizon. She was closer on them this time, for she could see their skimming swoop as they neared a heavy clump of cover. Yet she felt she must lose them, as she had done before, when to her relief she saw Lewis shoot ahead.'

'All right,' he shouted, 'I'm on. Look out for yourself.'

There was a cut of his thong against thorns as he rose Bronzewing to a hedge which Rose had not seen. But she had scarcely steadied herself in the saddle from the half-considered leap in his wake before the partridge was down and up again at right-angles to its first flight; Lewis meanwhile bringing the mare round all he knew, and shouting, 'Ride it, Miss Tweedie! ride it!'

Shahzad, still steadied by the jump, was in hand, and, therefore, on the track in a second, snorting in mad hurry and excitement, and the bird was not quite so fast this time, or Rose was riding straighter, for she saw the last skim of the wings change to running feet as it touched the grey brown earth which tinted so perfectly with its plumage.

'Not there! not there!' came that warning voice from behind. 'It's run on. The next bush--put Shahzad over it.'

A leap, a scurry, a flutter, and the quarry was up again, heading in its hurry for an impossible open, backed by bare plough. Bronzewing being now alongside, Rose found leisure to glance round for the others.

'Gone after the second partridge,' said Lewis. 'I was afraid of it. There's a hedge twenty yards ahead, Miss Tweedie, I'll mark.'

They were over it, almost in the stride, and now the bird was below the horizon, a mere shadow of darker brown against the plough.

'I've lost it! I've lost it again!' The despairing cry came from Rose's very heart as she tugged vainly at Shahzad. When she succeeded in bringing him up, she saw that Lewis was slipping from the mare.

'AH right!' he cried cheerfully, dropping his white handkerchief on the ground, 'it's somewhere about! That's the place I marked; now for sharp eyes.'

Up and down the bare furrows he searched, followed by Bronzewing, her reins dangling. Up and down, with such

patience, that Rose, gaining confidence, began to search also. Only, however, to lose hope, as minute after minute brought no result.

'I don't believe it's here,' she remarked at last; and with the words saw Lewis Gordon stoop to pick up something she had passed by, thinking it was a clod of earth.

'Your first partridge!' he said with a kindly laugh, as he placed the bird upon her lap. There it lay unhurt, wide-eyed and motionless as it had lain among the furrows.

'Why doesn't it fly away?' asked Rose, with a little catch in her breath, as she gently stroked the mottled back.

'It will, soon. At present it's winded. Give it five minutes, and we could ride it again; but we won't. It flew game, and I needn't ask if you enjoyed it.'

No need, certainly. The very horses panting, nose down in each other's faces, seemed discussing past pleasure.

'It is safe from kites now,' said Lewis. 'Throw it up, Miss Tweedie.'

The next instant a skimming flight had ended in a covert of thorns and Lewis was on his mare ready to start.

'It wouldn't head for the open again, I bet, he said, 'they get as 'cute as an old fox after a time. To your left, please, that rise yonder is Hodinuggur.'

'But we might ride again, surely? It would give the others time to come up, began Rose, fiercely bitten with the game.

'Best not. The ground here is bad going; all littered with bricks. And you could barely hold Shahzad that last time. A snaffle is hard work--for a lady.'

Rose refrained from open retort. Lewis had given her a morning's amusement, and she owed him something; for all that, she made a mental determination to ride partridge as often as she chose with a snaffle. His objection was only part of that wholesale depreciation--here a partridge buzzed out of a bush, and partly from impulse, partly from sheer opposition, she gave Shahzad the rein. A bit of bravado in which she reckoned without the excited horse. Ere she had gone fifty yards, she realised it had the bit between its teeth. What was worse, she saw that Lewis realised it also.

'Look out for bricks,' he called, spurring Bronzewing alongside for a moment, 'and don't try to follow when the bird breaks back, as it is sure to do, for cover.'

The words were still on his lips, when the partridge towered and turned. Shahzad, no novice at such tricks, pulled up short, nearly throwing Rose over his ears. Then, with a bound, he dashed off sideways, catching Bronzewing on the flank as she swerved, and throwing her rider's foot from the stirrup. The mare staggered, pulled herself together smartly, set her hoof on a loose brick, and came down heavily; while Rose, tugging vainly at her beast, went sailing away to the horizon, with the memory of that crashing fall seeming to paralyse her strength. When she did manage to turn, Bronzewing was on her feet; but her rider lay where he had fallen. The girl's heart stood still an instant in that utmost fear which will come first--was he *dead*? Yet, as she galloped back she told herself, fiercely, that it was impossible; people fell so often, and did not hurt themselves. But not, surely, to lie as he lay, with eyes wide open and one arm under him as if he had pitched head-foremost. Rose had never seen an accident before, and at first all her helpfulness seemed lost in a senseless desire to gather him up in her arms and hold him safe. Then the thought of her own foolishness came to her aid. He had been right! Women were no good! A man would have known what to do, and as she thought these things, she searched, comically enough, in his pockets for a flask, as if unconsciously reverting to the first resource of the male animal; but she could find none, and there was no water. What was to be done, save to chafe his hands and call to him vainly, while a perfect agony of negation clamoured against her growing fear. He could not be dead! He was such a good rider. He must have fallen before and not been killed. Why should he be killed this time? He could not be killed on such a bright sunny morning--when they had been so happy--when he had been so kind. Ridiculous, trivial little thoughts, such as make up the sum of such scenes.

Finally she rose, resolved by her very despair. Water and help she must have. If no nearer than the palace, then to the palace she must go. Shahzad had taken advantage of liberty to seek a wheat field, but Bronzewing would carry her with the stirrup over. The mare, however, distrusting strangers, sidled off, still circling faithfully round her master. Then the girl's hopes and fears centred themselves on the immediate necessity for success. She coaxed, wheedled, cajoled, forgetting all else, till all of a sudden Bronzewing paused to whinny, and Rose, looking round instinctively, recognised

the magnitude of her past despair in the light of her great relief as she saw Lewis Gordon, raised on one elbow, looking at her in a dazed sort of way. She was on her knees beside him in a minute, confessing the past fear she had so strenuously denied while it existed.

'I thought you were dead!' she cried. 'I thought you were dead.' She was trembling and shaking all over, quite visibly, and he gave an unsteady laugh.

'Thumped the back of my head; that's all. No!' a spasm of pain passed over his face as he sat up. 'My collarbone's gone. Well! it might have been worse. The ground is uncommonly hard.'

Worse indeed! Rose could not speak for a lump in her throat; but the loquacity of escape was upon him.

'Must have pitched on my shoulder; luckily. I don't in the least remember how it happened. We were partridging, I suppose; but my mind is an absolute blank. No wonder! my head is just splitting; but I can walk home all right.'

And when she proposed riding Bronzewing for help, he negatived it firmly on the ground that the mare wasn't broken in for a lady; a man never having such a strong hold on his individual quips and cranks as when he realises that he has been within an ace of losing them altogether; whence comes the proverbial captiousness of convalescents.

So she had to be content with giving him a hand up and walking beside him, feeling a sad trembling in the knees joined to a general sensation of having gone to pieces. He, on the contrary, talking and laughing in magnificent, manly fashion.

'You had better tell me how it happened,' he said, as they neared the palace. 'People make such a fuss, that it is as well to be prepared. Did you see me come to grief?'

Rose hesitated for a moment to own up; then she did it wholesale.

'You told me not to ride because of the snaffle, but I did. I lost control of Shahzad; he charged Bronzewing. She put her foot on a loose brick, and--and I'm very, very sorry.'

'Stupid little beast,' he said, looking round at the mare, who was following them like a dog. 'I expect she wants re-shoeing.'

The evasion was kindly meant; but she regretted it. It seemed somehow to set her aside. But this was her portion in all things, for with Lewis in his room, scientifically bandaged by Dan and nursed by his cousin, Rose's part resolved itself into doing audience for her father's fussing. He had a capacity for it at all times, but Fate had provided him with special reasons for it now. Another delay! and when it was absolutely necessary that he should hold a Canal Committee at Delhi early in the week, how was he to manage without his personal assistant? Then there were private reasons for annoyance which he did not confide to Rose, but which that clear-sighted young lady fully understood. If Lewis had to remain a few days longer at Hodinuggur, his cousin would remain also; in which case Dan Fitzgerald would stay to look after them. Now Dan, ever since the fire, had been in the Colonel's black books. He had, as it were, thrust himself forward and made himself conspicuous. Finally, any woman must feel gratitude to a man who had saved her life. It was all of a piece--all the result of disobedience to his superior wisdom. Why had Rose set fire to the camp? Had he not warned her a hundred times against sitting up to read? Why had she charged Lewis? Had he not begged her fifty times to ride in a more reserved and ladylike fashion?

Rose could only fall back on George for comfort, and he, for reasons of his own, was utterly unsympathetic. A broken collar-bone, he said, was nothing--except an awful nuisance to every one else. To tell truth, the only person in that up-stairs world who was satisfied at the new turn affairs had taken was Gwen Boynton. It suited her admirably in more ways than one. So she sat after lunch and talked with Colonel Tweedie in the balcony until his ill-humour vanished in a bland flood of conviction that this eminently charming woman really was full of sympathy for his difficulties, and thoroughly impressed with his responsible position. In fact, when she had apologised for returning to duty and her patient, he came and let loose his satisfaction upon his daughter. Nothing was more useful to a man having authority than the companionship of a really sensible woman of the world. It enabled you to do justice to yourself, to adopt the course you considered best without undue hesitation. Therefore he would start for Rajpore, as he had always intended to do, on the following day, taking Mr. Fitzgerald with him to supply Gordon's place. He knew something of the current work, and it would be a kindness, serving to show--er--that--er--there was really nothing against him at headquarters.

'That was very considerate of Mrs. Boynton,' interrupted Rose quickly. She saw the meaning of this manoeuvre so

far that it roused her resentment, even though, after all, it would be better for Dan than dangling about with a sore heart while Gwen nursed the sick man. Better for George also, since the *partie carree* could not well consist of three and a dummy. George should talk to her, and so be kept from dangling also.

Thus Dan himself was the only one to look blank at the proposal, and even he admitted its reasonableness when Mrs. Boynton pointed out the many advantages it would have. This was during the *tete-a-tete*, in a bell-shaped cupola, which she allowed him over their tea. To tell truth, Gwen always behaved with the strictest and most impartial justice to all who had claims upon her, and she would have felt herself unkind had she allowed poor dear Dan to go away feeling aggrieved. She was very sorry he had to go, or rather, to be strictly accurate, she was sorry that common-sense dictated that he should go. Had all things been consenting, there was no one in the wide world she would so gladly have had for a husband. Now, when a woman of Mrs. Boynton's type, which is at all times kindly disposed to lovers, has an idea of this sort firmly fixed in her mind, she can be very kind indeed, even in her dismissals. So Dan was perfectly happy after he had sat beside her, and given her a second cup of tea, and handed her the bread and butter, though he made wry faces over her lecture on the necessity for subordinating his opinions to Colonel Tweedie's.

'And, Dan,' she said, when the *tete-a-tete* had lasted long enough, 'as you are going to Delhi, you might take a parcel for me to Manohar Lal, the jeweller's. It is quite small, but you might just send it round--the shop is in the Chowk--by the bearer. I wouldn't trouble you, but it is a chance, as you are going that way. It won't bother you, will it?'

'Bother,' echoed Dan in the tones which men in his condition use on such occasions.

'Then, I'll give it you now. I was going to send it by post, so it is addressed, and all the instructions are inside; but it would be safer if you took it--as you happen to be going.'

She repeated the phrase as if to convince herself of its truth. Yet when, on returning with her commission, Dan seized the opportunity of taking the parcel to kiss the fingers which held it, she felt something of a traitor. Even though, in sending the jewels she had found to be appraised, she told herself she had no other intention beyond, if possible, getting enough money to repay the loan she had so unwisely taken. That was all; and this chance of sending to Delhi by a safe hand had decided her so far--no more.

'Good-bye, dear Dan,' she said; 'I always miss you so much when you go away.'

That night Chandni reported progress to the Diwan. The mem's ayah had let out that the big Huzoor, Fitzgerald sahib, was the greatest friend the mem had. She must be a regular bad one, if all tales were true. And the big sahib was going to Delhi, the most likely place in which jewels would be sold. She would write to her craft, who were good clients of the goldsmiths, and bid them keep a sharp look-out. It would at least do no harm.

'Thy father must have been the devil,' said Zubr-ul-Zaman admiringly; 'yet will I reward thee, as thou hast asked, if all goes well.'

'Does not all go well?' laughed the woman. 'The fire, and the fall?'

'And the girl?'

'Oh, naught of the girl!--the lance-player hits not the peg first time. That part is done, that tune played, for good or evil. The bridegroom, they say, comes next week. 'Tis well; we want no evil eye to change the luck.'

## CHAPTER XI

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

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

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

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

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

So the tragedy down-stairs was completely hidden from those up-stairs. It is so often in India. Occasionally we gain a glimpse behind the veil; for instance, when the periodical scare as to the number of human brains required to keep up British prestige seizes on some cantonment. A scare which it may interest the 'Peace with Dishonour' party to know is apt to follow on any lowering of the Lion's tail. Then there are two simple syllables, known doubtless to many readers of this veracious story as they are to the writer of it, which if uttered casually--say in dinner-table conversation--will of a certainty lead to your servants leaving your service without delay. These things sound unreal, farcical, no

doubt; so would George, as he handed their bread and butter to the ladies up-stairs, have deemed the fear which prompted old Zainub's wheedling words as she crouched by Aziz's bed plying her with greasy sweetmeats.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rose flushed into health at once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I have no headache,' she replied coldly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a while the stars carried a new sight; a girl in a strange dress crouching by the bed. The lightning shimmered keenly over this group several times, bringing into glittering relief something held by the crouching figure, and something held close to a flushed cheek by the sleeping girl. The one was a knife, the other a photograph of a young man in an immaculate coat and an irreproachable tie. Different things, indeed, yet the girls who held them differed little. They were both in dreamland; for Azizan, as she crouched beside Rose, felt that she was in a new world. The

whiteness, the stillness, the solitude, guarding the pure sleep of girlhood--the refinement, the peace, made her think involuntarily of the dead laid out for their last rest. She gave a quick little sigh; her hand relaxed its grasp, then tightened again, as a flash showed the photograph clearly. It was a picture of some one. If it was his picture, why then--

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

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

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

'I am Azizan, Huzoor.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Mai Zainub! Mai Zainub!'

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

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

An hour after, when the storm had passed, and a faint greyness told that the dawn was at hand, a feeble light began to flicker about the ruins: up and down, up and down, as if it sought for something. It was Fuzl Elahi, the potter of Hodinuggur, looking for his dead daughter. He had looked for her after every storm for sixteen years; and this time,

with the Miss sahib's promise to send her back lingering in his memory, he sought in hope.

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER XII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His manner changed in an instant.

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

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

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

'She does everything beautifully,' replied Rose coldly.

It was not a good beginning for their drive together; but it was always so, and as she watched the carriage taking her companion on to his quarters after it had set her down, she told herself disconsolately that they seemed to have a bad effect on each other, and to show to the very worst advantage in each other's company. She, at any rate, was never so painfully uncompromising in her condemnation of other people's foibles; perhaps because she did not care whether they existed or not. But she did care dreadfully when Lewis was in question; that was the worst of it.

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

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

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

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

'Gordon sahib salaam deta.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

George, having tea with her next day, thought her if possible gayer, brighter, more charming than ever; especially when his talk turned on his hero, Dan Fitzgerald. Now, no one had ever heard Mrs. Boynton say an unkind word of her neighbours; indeed, the peculiar *cachet* this gave to her personality made her remembered in after years by all admirers, not so much as a beautiful, as a perfectly gracious woman. To George, accustomed chiefly to the high-spirited freedom of sisters, this virtue seemed divine, the more so, because the world generally disapproved of Dan--of his recklessness and want of reverence. Gwen Boynton, on the contrary, found nothing to regret, save that Mr. Fitzgerald was not the

finest man *out* of the service, instead of *in* it; since, as Mr. Gordon said, he was too good to slave among men years his junior. Whereupon George, his young face full of importance, informed her as a dead secret, that the reason Dan stuck to his colours was that a girl had promised to marry him whenever he got his promotion. That would be in the next spring at the latest, since, as he, George Keene, was in charge of the sluice no prejudicial *contretemps* could possibly occur. And Gwen with an actual smile at the mystification--which so many women dearly love--reminded him that even when folk did their best, slips came between cups and lips.

The lad laughed joyously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He interrupted her quickly. 'How is it not fair on you, Gwen? I don't see it. You do not like any one else as much as you like me; you know you don't. And if this half promise to me holds you back from marrying some one you do not

like as you like me, why, then,' his voice lowered to tender gravity, 'I thank God for it as I should thank Him for any good He sent into your life.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What is it?' she asked languidly.

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

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

'The agent, Huzoor. Shall I tell him the mem sahiba is going to eat the air in her carriage? It is but to say something about a pot, he bade me mention. A pot that the Huzoor fancied.'

Gwen stood up, holding to the table.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER XIII

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

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

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

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

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

All this amused George Keene hugely at first. He drew caricatures of it for the rectory, and sent a very impressionist sketch of his world to Mrs. Boynton. It consisted of a dust-storm, a caper-bush, and a rat-hole. She put it on the mantelpiece of the pretty drawing-room in the little house among scented pine-woods, where she was just beginning to appreciate the soothing effect of having a decent balance at your banker's. Her lady-visitors laughed and said it was very clever, but some of the men looked queer and muttered 'poor devil' under their breath. Not that George looked on himself in that light. On the contrary, Hodinuggur amused him. Its dreary antiquity was all new to him, and as he went through the cool, dark passages of the old palace on his way to play chess with the Diwan, he learnt to admire some things about it; notably the thickness of its walls, through which the sun never filtered, though it soaked piteously into his red-brick bungalow. Upon the roof Zubr-ul-Zaman shrivelled under the heat almost as much as a certain figure which still lay huddled up on the landing of the secret stair in the thickness of the tower beneath him as he sat at chess. Below that again Khush-hal Beg lay stark naked, like a huge baby, in a swinging cradle, which was pulled to and fro by a drowsy coolie, while a bheestic supplied the fat carcass alternately outside and inside with tepid water from his skin bag, and as the latter shrank, Khush-hal swelled visibly--horribly.

Yet further, in the bazaar by the Mori gate, Dael Beg, abandoning Europe-fashion under the stress of climate, slept

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

'It was easy, with my cousin a jeweller; and we of the bazaar know a trick or two with goldsmiths. Manohar Lal hath the pearls, sure enough. All thou hast to do is to offer him a rupee more than he gave the mem (which will not be half their value). The Hindu pig will take it, seeing it is better than having the yellow-trousered ones<sup>[3]</sup> set on him as a receiver of stolen goods.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'It is I who cough, Huzoor,' he went on, still moving away. Pity of God, how I cough! And I have fever, too. Mercy of the Most High! fever always with mutterings hard to understand. But 'tis no matter. The potters of Hodinuggur do not die; we go and come, we come and go.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The post in due time brought Mrs. Boynton her letter. She read it with great interest, and then promptly put it into the fire; her favourite maxim being, that the keeping of letters was, at any rate, one reason for the slow progress of humanity; since improvement was dangerous when you were tied down in black and white to past opinions. And the postman, after leaving the snug little house in the pine-woods, came on to Colonel Tweedie's with a packet for Rose. Half-an-hour afterwards the girl was sitting with the contents of the parcel on the table in front of her, puzzling her brains why any one should have sent her back the Ayodhya pot, or one exactly like it. There could be no doubt about it, however. She took up the wrapper more than once; but the clear print, if unmistakable, was also unrecognisable. She felt carefully inside, hoping for a scrap of paper, a hint of any kind; but there was nothing save a few bits of crumbling clay, leaving a rough rim near the bottom of the pot. And all the time her first impression remained unaltered. There was a mistake; it had been meant for Mrs. Boynton. Undoubtedly it was meant for her. Under ordinary circumstances Rose would most likely have taken the Ayodhya pot over to the little house without more ado, but, though she did not acknowledge it to herself, she could not treat its occupant in an ordinary way. Besides, there was an element of mystery

in the whole affair, and Rose hated mystery. The memory of her dream on the night of the storm at Hodinuggur annoyed her. She had slurred it over at the time, merely mentioning it as part of a feverish attack; but now she wondered if the Diwan, or some one else, could really have arranged a theft. And gradually there grew up in her one distinct dislike to the whole business. She would have nothing to do with it. She would say nothing, but simply send the thing back whence it came. She would not even suppose that George had sent it; she would return it straight. After all, it might be another pot, and if she made a mistake in thinking this, they would know the truth at Hodinuggur. A knock at the door roused her, and she slipped the vase behind another on the mantelpiece ere she said 'come in.'

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

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

'Then *au revoir* till dinner. How comfortable your little snugery is! It and Gwen's drawing-room are the two prettiest rooms in Simla.'

There was a hard, almost angry look on Rose's face as she repacked the parcel. Gwen's pretty room should at least be none the prettier for the Ayodhya pot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the worst type of jungle fever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'You--you *beast*, Dan!'

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

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

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

Dan laughed.

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

'Don't be a fool, Dan.'

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

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

'Which you don't follow yourself.'

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER XIV

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

'It was a woman seeking something,  
Over hill and dale, through night and day she sought for something.  
"Foul play! foul play! look down and decide."  
"Not I----"'

The chant stopped in a start. There was a grip on one shoulder, a thin brown hand over the other pointing accusingly at the wheel.

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

'I lied not, heart's delight.'

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

She set his deprecating hand aside roughly.

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

The old man's forehead wrinkled in perplexity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It suited her to deceive the old man. When she had first realised the position, she had been too weak to do more than wonder at it. Then, by degrees, while she still lay helpless, the potter's talk, her own recollections of old Zainub's

hints, joined to the extraordinary similarity in those extraordinary eyes, had given her a shrewd guess as the truth. And with it came a fierce savage delight in her inheritance of witchcraft. It meant revenge; revenge and safety. The potter deemed her a ghost from another world; the village folk should think the same. So she hid herself away in the dark hovel, spending the long hot days in dreaming of a time when she could creep out on some moonlit night and frighten the wits out of the world which had wronged her; for her whole nature was jangled and out of tune. She hated everything and everybody, herself included; at least so she told herself as she sat idle, listless, brooding over revenge. It was not difficult for her to avoid observation. To begin with, the village folk were afraid of the potter's eyes at the best of times, and of late strange tales had been told. Finally, Mai Jewun's longed-for son had been born with a distinct thumb-mark, and had died. The only person, in fact, who could have allayed these fears lay shrivelling into a mummy with the heat on the old secret stairs; so Azizan might have wandered through the village had she chosen without fear of anything save sending all the women into hysterics, and making the men give themselves up as doomed to die. She did not care to wander, however; she cared for nothing save to sit crunched up at the lintel of the hovel door and stare into vacancy until the dawn sent her back to the darkness within.

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

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

The girl's breath came faster.

'Leaves? Wherefore?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Five minutes after, trembling half with weakness, half from sheer hurry, Azizan was on her way through the village wrapped in a white sheet snatched from the hut. What she was going to do she scarcely knew, just as she scarcely knew whither she was going. Though within a stone's-throw of her birthplace, the path down which she stumbled was as unfamiliar to her feet as the tempest of emotion was to her mind. A fever of excitement, anger, mistrust of everything and everybody surged through her veins. The road was silent, deserted; but even had it been thronged, the girl would not have hesitated. Amid all the confusion, but one thing was certain: Chandni must tell the truth; she must be found and made to tell the truth. But where? Yonder was the Mori gate; she had seen that before through the lattice, and that, at any rate, was a landmark. She would go there first and see. As she came within ear-shot of the tunnelled causeway, a woman's voice rang out in shrill laughter from the dark recesses to the right. Her first instinct was to pause; then second-thought made her keep straight on her way as if to pass through, till at the farther end of the causeway she turned suddenly to the left and sank down behind a plinth. It was as if a shadow had disappeared. A minute to regain her breath, and then she crept farther into the darkness, where, unless some belated gossipers should choose that side of the arch, she was secure. From over the way a clash of anklets and a low full voice, contrasting strangely with those high trills of laughter assured her that she had come straight upon her quarry. The rest was patience, till, sooner or later, the woman would be left alone. Sooner or later the laugh must cease; sooner or later even wickedness must tire and turn to sleep. So the girl sat crouched into herself in the curiously impassive attitude of her race, her thin arms round the thin knees whereon her small chin rested. Not a very startling sight outwardly; though, to describe what lay within

is wellnigh an impossible task with an audience of Western ears; for Azizan's knowledge would be to such ears incompatible with her ignorance, her jealousy and passion with her patience. Such an audience must remember an upbringing foreign to all their experience, and imagine her, still as a statue, though the blood raced like liquid fire in her limbs and throbbled like sledge-hammers in her temples. The moon, sinking slowly, sent a slanting yellow light through the dust-haze, visible beyond the arched causeway; the village dogs ceased one by one the nightly challenge to their fellows; yet, still the laugh went on. Would wickedness never tire? The wonder, and her own heart-beats lulled the girl to a drowsier patience. She woke to silence, and, standing up, strained eyes and ears into the shadows. Not a sound. She stole softly across the causeway, slipped into the recesses at the right, and listened again. A low breathing from one corner made her feel a way towards it, and her touch, light as a breeze, hovered over a figure on the ground wrapped from head to foot in a sheet like a corpse; yet she knew it could scarcely be Chandni, for she would not choose so airless a spot. But there must be rooms above, and a roof above that, and they were worth a trial before going on to the bazaar. Slowly, for she knew nothing of where she was, Azizan groped her way to some winding stairs, thence to a suite of low chambers, empty of all save the pigeons rustling and cooing at her step in the dark. Upwards again till, at a turn, an archway gave on a terraced roof not six feet square; and there, lying on a string cot, which, from its narrow resting-place, seemed suspended in mid-air, she saw the soft curves of a woman's figure outlined against the moon-lit dust-haze beyond. It was not a place for a sleep-walker's slumbers; not a place even for a restless one; but Chandni slept the sleep of the unjust, which, nine times out of ten, is sounder than that of the just. Her conscience never troubled her; and in addition she belonged to a race apart from the customs and creeds of the people. A race born to the profession of pandars and prostitutes, openly, shamelessly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

shameful memory drove her from her resting-place to stumble on recklessly in the direction of a twinkling light upon the mound. That must be the potter's house and he must be watching for her; there she would at least find shelter. But it was not the house; it was the potter himself seeking for her among the ruins. His face, by the light of the cresset he carried, showed haggard, and its anxiety soothed her, even while it sent a new pain to her heart. He was unhappy at losing her, and she? O God! how her own heart ached! Must it always be so when those you loved were lost? Then would *he* feel so if he had to turn away from the mem? Would it send that pain into *his* heart?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She interrupted him eagerly.

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

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

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

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

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

'It has been found again, Huzoor.'

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

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

back to the mem.'

George stared at her, unable to believe his ears.

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

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

George gave a low whistle; then a sudden grimness came to his face. 'And you say it is in that parcel they sent addressed---- By Jove, if it is,' he added in English as he rose hastily. A minute after, when he returned from within, his face was still more grim.

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

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

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

'Salaam Alaikoom, Huzoor.'

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

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

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

## CHAPTER XV

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

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

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

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

Those ten days, therefore, passed like wild-fire. George knew no more how he had spent them than how he had spent all his money. Chiefly, it may be said, on sweets at Peliti's, kid gloves, and new ties. It was the first time the young fellow had ever been let loose on equal terms in the very best of society--a society, moreover, bent on amusing itself. That he should follow its example was a foregone conclusion; and it must be owned that he certainly got his money's worth in solid enjoyment. There is always one particular period in the life of every man and woman when the sun seems to stand still in the heavens on purpose to make pleasure perpetual. This had set in for George, and it had its usual effect in giving a fine-drawn, eager expression to his face. Small wonder, perhaps, seeing that, as a rule, he never went to bed till three in the morning, and that the days passed in one ceaseless round of amusement. It seemed incredible, even to himself, that, not a fortnight past, he had been agonising at Hodinuggur on beef-tea and barley-water. But then Hodinuggur itself was incredible; almost as much so as the fact that he had proposed to wear his old white shirts, washed by a desert-washerman at Simla! They were thrust aside in a bottom drawer now, and their place filled by brand-new ones from a Europe shop; for how could one dance with the most perfect woman in the world in a shirt that had no deportment? How, in fact, could you do anything without reference to the certainty that your unworthy self would form a part of perfection's environment? That is what it comes to, when a steady, honest young fellow like George falls down on his knees to worship a pretty face and a gracious smile. No doubt it was not a very admirable

occupation, but it seemed so to him, as it seems to that majority of mankind which does not ask itself questions; simply because he had been taught, as we have all been taught, to look on sentimental love between the sexes as something almost divine. Thus, the real issues being hopelessly confused, this new feeling of passionate worship had all the effect of a new religion upon him. So other things besides old shirts were thrust out of sight. Among them Azizan's picture. The idol should not see it till the depths of deceit regarding the Ayodhya pot had been fathomed, lest in any way perfection's ears should be sullied by a queer story. By and by, when, on returning to Hodinuggur he had time to unravel the mystery, he might send the portrait to her as the best piece of work he had ever turned out; but now? Why now, as usual, it was time to ride over on the hired pony--of whose mane and tail you were inwardly ashamed--to the pretty little house among the pine-woods, and there, in Paradise, try to forget that but three days' more leave lay between you and purgatory. Certainly not an admirable occupation; but the novelty, the excitement, the supreme pleasure had gone, like wine, to the boy's head, producing that exalted condition of mind and body, which has been described as leaving one in doubts whether to have another whisky and water, or to say one's prayers and go to bed.

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

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

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

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

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

And, to say sooth, Dalel was not nice, outwardly or inwardly. Even the best tailor in Simla could not make him look aught but intolerable in his elaborate riding-gear, as he paused on his way to the racecourse before a small shop in the bazaar; a dark hole of a place, squalidly bare of all save a sign where, in crooked lettering, it was announced that 'MUNAHRLALLOFDELHIJEWLERGOLDWORKS' was ready 'TOBYANDSELL.'

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

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

A measured shuffle of footsteps and a gay laugh arrested the deprecating voice. It was Mrs. Boynton, carried by four men arrayed in white; she herself being a vision of angelic spotlessness. Beside her, his hand on the shafts of her

*dandy*, his young face intent on hers, came George Keene. It needs great ignorance or great experience to walk in this fashion, without appearing either ridiculous or unseemly. George looked neither; only supremely happy.

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

'Dale Beg. He bowed to me.'

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

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

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

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

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

'I'm not on duty to-day,' replied a handsome man to Gwen Boynton's inquiry why he was not as usual in the tent. 'A contingent of bad lots brought their ponies up and rushed the meeting. They do it sometimes, and then it isn't good enough for old stagers. All we stewards can do is to keep 'em as straight as we can, and that isn't easy. Weight for weight, inches for inches, Mrs. Boynton, I'll back an Indian gymkhana, where nobody has any money to pay, and all the subalterns think they know something about a horse--especially their own--to lick creation in sheer crookedness. And when the profession come down like a wolf on the fold, as they have done to-day, it is crookeder still. And all about a *pari mutual* for the most part.' The look of disgust on the speaker's face was almost comical.

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

'I wish he wasn't.'

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

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

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

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

His face sobered at the very thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A short man standing close by laughed.

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

'Very.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was almost as excited as George, who was craning forward to catch a last glimpse of the trail of bright colours skimming round the farthest turn behind some trees.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Utterly deny, I--I--it is impossible----' stuttered Green and Blue together.

He looked back from the door. 'Exactly so; I leave you, gentlemen, to settle how Mr. Crosbie got that red paint on his left knee, when, according to you, he was hugging the post with his right. It is an interesting question, and I shall be glad to hear the judges, decision, when they have arrived at it.'

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

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

He thrust a card into her hand--

'MANOHAR LAL, FROM DELHI.'

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

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

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

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

## CHAPTER XVI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'And you?'

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

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

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

He smiled condescendingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Aha, you here! Hi, you kitmutghar, bring me champagne cup. Jolly, Tweedie, ain't it?' The Colonel's face belied the proposition, but the new-comer was not one of those who look for support to surroundings; he was a law unto himself only. 'You see I wear swagger clothes like you, Mrs. Boynton. Rajah Sahib old-style man, so I come as native of India to

please him. He is neighbour, Mrs. Boynton, by Hodinuggur, down waste-water canal cut. You give him water, sir; he give you lakhs on lakhs.'

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

'I regret,' began the head of the Department loftily, but Dalel's mind was full of one thing only, and that was himself; his immense superiority over the Rajah Sahib, his equality with the sahib-logues.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I'll take care she doesn't make off with it,' interrupted Rose, wilfully unsympathetic, as she moved away at a walk. A hundred yards or so along the broad ride--which had been cut for the occasion in the hill-side from the high road to the picnic place--a zigzag bridle-path led down into the valley. Rose had never ridden that way, but she knew that, once at the stream below her, a recognised short cut would take her direct to her destination. At the worst, she might have to dismount and lead her horse for a while, and there was something decidedly fascinating in a downward path at all times, more especially when every step showed something new stealing into vision out of a blue mist. In addition, she

would avoid the rush of people, and of late Rose Tweedie had found a large proportion of her fellow-creatures very tiresome; perhaps because humanity is only gifted with a certain capacity for liking, and she expended too much of hers on one person. The first mile or so fully justified her choice; the path, if steep, was safe, and, after passing over a small bridge, she was about to follow a track, apparently leading down the right side of the ravine to the road below, when she heard a faint shout behind her to the left. With her experience of the Himalayas, she stopped instantly, knowing she must be on the wrong track, and retraced her steps, expecting, after a few turns, to come on the shepherd or coolie, who, having seen her from above, had raised the warning cry. Instead of this she came on Lewis Gordon, riding at what was really a breakneck pace for the style of the path. He pulled up suddenly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'And--and--I only had a snaffle,' said Rose with a tremulous laugh not far removed from tears. She felt it imperative, if she were to be calm, that they should descend to commonplace at once, being aided in this by Dalel Beg, who having reined in at the sight of a disaster for which he was partly responsible, was now standing by Gwen's *dandy* oblivious of apology.

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

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

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

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

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

'His watch,' called Rose after him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As she lay awake that night in defiance of her own wisdom, thinking over the matter in all its bearings, she told herself that he was safe for more than a week. Every one was safe. At the worst, Dan might lose his promotion, but even that would be no unmixed evil if it forced him into independence. Indeed, if he knew of her worries, of the snare laid for her, of the covert hints about an *esclandre* involving both him and George Keene which were wearing her to death, he would gladly sacrifice something for the sake of safety. If by any chance the sluice were to be opened during that week of absence, how it would simplify the whole business! And, after all, what had she done? nothing. Surely a woman might go and see her dressmaker sometimes and leave her *dandy* outside? Was it her fault if the dressmaker lived in a house close to the bazaar in full view of Manohar Lal's shop? Was it her fault if the coolies slipped away to smoke their hookahs? Was it her fault that the key of the sluice was behind the cushions of the *dandy*, and that Dalel Beg knew it was there? What had she done? What had she said? Nothing. Had she not set aside the Mirza's suggestion that she should look in on Manohar Lal's new jewelry on her way home, by saying that she had no time, that she must go to the dressmaker's? Had she not hitherto refused to listen to hints or threats? Had she not even defied Manohar Lal? And now would it really be her fault if any one had taken advantage of her absence? Gwen turned her face into the pillow and moaned helplessly, telling herself that never was woman before so beset by misfortune. She had meant no harm, yet George had given her the pot, and Dan had taken the jewels to Manohar Lal's. There was no proof, of course, but the *esclandre* would kill her, and that must be averted at all costs.

## CHAPTER XVII

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

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

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

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

'Start? Where?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

her and swept her from her feet.

'Oh, George!' she cried, coming a step nearer and thrusting her hands into his as if to hold him fast and make him listen. 'It was a mistake! I meant no harm--no harm to any one--least of all to you.'

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

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

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

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

There was a dead silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Is that all?' he asked wearily, when she had told him of everything save the empty *dandy* waiting outside the dressmaker's shop. His question came more from the desire to help her along should there be more to tell than from

curiosity or fear. Since, from the very beginning, he had been vexedly conscious of his own relief in remembering that she had returned his watch and chain before she had even reached home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'And after?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

angles and arches, the red carpet in the porch, the red streak of baize climbing up the white stairs.

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

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

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

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

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

He stood watching her go up the stairs; up and up, until the last trail of that hem disappeared amid the coloured lamps and flowers. That was the end of it all!--of all save Hodinuggur and the desire to kill somebody. First of all, however, there must be safety for her; and that might be secured by money. During that three miles' ride his thoughts had been busy over possibilities, and one of them made him turn the hired pony's nose towards Manohar Lal's shop instead of homewards. There was no power in India like the power of rupees, he thought; and they--with the Club still open and half a dozen young fellows as reckless as oneself ready to back the chance of one living to pay just debts--were not difficult to borrow for a month or two. Especially when there was something--not much--but still a few hundred pounds or so to come when the dear old governor---- George choked down a sob in a curse at the hired pony for stumbling over the ill-paved alley.

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

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

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

An hour afterwards, when the sun tipped over the lower hills to make the morning glories, festooned from rock to rock, open their eyes, they opened them upon the coffin-like dhooli going rapidly down hill to the accompaniment of shuffles and grunts, and recurring protestations that the sahib was '*do mun puccka*.'<sup>[4]</sup> If the heaviness of heart could have been measured, George might have weighed a ton.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was an epigrammatic flavour about the remark which, to the Colonel's ears, completely covered its absolute want of sense. He felt vaguely that he had said something clever, and that it might be as well to let it close the subject, which he did by answering the previous question as to whether he would go to the Grahams'. Certainly, if it did not rain; but the barometer was falling fast, and a telegram had come to the office that morning to say the monsoon had broken with unusual violence at Abu. It might be expected north at any moment. On which the two men fell to talking about dams and escapes, inundations, cuts, and such like things, while Rose sat silent, indignant with Lewis, yet disturbed at the confirmation his hints gave of her own fears. George had been reckless, there could be no doubt of that. Had not one of her partners last night told her that he had left George playing poker at the Club but half an hour before? George who had declared he had not time to put in an appearance at the ball!

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

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

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

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

Still she was safe, and even if anything happened nobody could blame George. Now she had had time to consider the whole bearings of the matter she told herself such blame was impossible; while as for Dan----! If he would only leave Government service and make money, she was ready to marry him to-morrow! She had woven a conscience-proof garment for herself out of the old hair-splitting arguments long before George's dhooli had reached the level plain. When it did, the clouds had banked themselves against the higher hills, shutting out the boy's farewell glance. As he

climbed into the country gig in which forty miles of dusty road had to be covered, the barometer was falling fast, and the driver remarked cheerfully, that when the rain came, the cholera would increase. It had been bad at the third stage that day, and one of the coolies belonging to the Government bullock train had died on the road about five miles farther on. The sahib might perhaps still see the body lying there.

## CHAPTER XVIII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yea! it is played indeed.'

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

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

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

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

'Is--is he dead?' asked George, standing dazed, looking incredulously at the sheeted figure, dimly visible by the flickering rushlight. He had seen the man sleep thus dozens of times. At the question another sheeted figure, which had crept from the hut into the circle of light, broke into a gurgling cry: 'Ohi, *mere adme mur-gya--mere dil mur-gya--mur-gya,*'<sup>[5]</sup> and one or two later arrivals, in like disguise, crouched beside the voice, joining in the strange low whimper of the conventional wail. George fell back a step or two, repelled to his heart's core, shocked out of speech.

'Weep not, oh widow!' snivelled the water-carrier, who, being the only Mohammedan male present, felt impelled to the duty of consoler. 'Didst not give him beef-tea? Ay! and barley-water likewise? even as the Huzoor when he was stricken. And did not the master arise to health thereby? Wherefore, is it not the will of God, plainly, that thy man should find freedom? Therefore place thy heart on comfort--- He will be buried at sunrise, Huzoor, so that the sahib will have no more annoyance; and by the fortune of the Most High, there is even now to be had without delay a servant who can cook--the one that is dead is as nothing to him--faithful to salt, having many certificates, mine own wife's cousin, a----'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ah! that was better! The room did not seem quite so dreary after the whisky and soda! Then he took another, and after that the outlook itself seemed less dreary, and he told himself that Dan had been right in saying that he, George, did not know the temptation of stimulants. Temptation?--if they brought you up to your bearings with a round turn in this fashion--Why! he felt twice the man he had been five minutes ago. Now he could think; now he could reason; now he could see clearly and decide what ought to be done. To begin with, she was safe. Those papers, joined to little Azizan's confession of having stolen the Ayodhya pot, made it quite impossible to prove she had ever known about the jewels. As for himself, that did not matter; though, as a fact, he was quite as safe as Dan. That is to say, the palace devils might raise a scandal, but the breakdown of their case in regard to her would show it was no more than revenge for their failure; for they would fail, of course. So far, nothing had happened. There was no water in the overflow cut; he had made sure of that as he rode along. And now that he was on the spot he could do quite as much, off his own bat, to prevent treachery as any one--the Colonel and all the Department to boot--could have done had he reported the whole affair. To-morrow the guard would be changed, and doubled to provide against any violent attempt; an unlikely event, as such an assault would take time, and he meant to pitch his tent down at the sluice so as to be on the spot at night, and during the day he could watch from the bungalow. Against other and more stealthy treachery he was also provided absolutely--so absolutely that he gave a short laugh as he drew a couple of Chubb's keys and a lock from his wallet. That would puzzle them if they came thinking they had hit on the old fastening. But that also was for to-morrow; there remained only to-night. No! not to-night; since already it was past one o'clock. What wonder that he was tired--did any one in the wide world know or care how tired? He stood up sharply, every vein tingling now; his whole mind aglow despite his weariness. He must have something to eat first, of course--his very determination insisted on that; but not from those plague-stricken purlieus out yonder--cautious civilisation insisted on that. There must be biscuits or something of that sort in the cupboard, and as he crossed over to it the memory of his raid while *she* slept among the red cushions returned to make him laugh again.

'And when she went there  
The cupboard was bare.'

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

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

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

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

#### 'HATH NOT THE POTTER POWER OVER THE CLAY?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Undoubtedly he had taken more whisky than usual; not perhaps without excuse, he added, as memory began to

return. The next instant he was at the door. Yellow haze and yellow heat, and through it a silver streak steering for the south!----

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'The usual time, I suppose.'

As well this fool as another--as well to-morrow as to-day. Everything was trivial of course, and yet the trivial commonplace interruption had somehow brought home the reality of what had happened to the lad, and his head sank

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

'*Gwen.*'

The sound, barely a whisper, scarcely stirred the sodden air. After a while he pushed back his chair slowly and crossed to stand once more looking out over Hodinuggur.

It seemed to have a fascination for him; yet his mind held but one thought--a desire to get away--to find some place where there was neither truth nor lies, where he need say nothing--need think nothing. That surely would settle it.

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

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

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

Maybe a fiery furnace and a >>>ed-hot bungalow are overtrying even to the best of clay when it is fresh from the moulder's hand; but that is neither here nor there.

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

## CHAPTER XIX

Azizan was waiting for darkness, like many another woman in India; waiting for the veil of night to destroy the veil of man's contriving. Not so much because she dreaded to show her face in the daylight, but because it suited her to keep up the mystery of her appearance. Waiting, however, for the last time; since once her work of warning was done there need be no more concealment, no more playing like a cat over a mouse with the palace folk. Once that was done, she meant to forget caution and kill some of them; for she felt that her own death was nigh, and revenge would sweeten the end of life. As she sat, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, Azizan had no very distinct plans for that revenge, save that the Ayodhya pot which she had taken from its hiding-place in the stair of the old tower and kept in her bosom must be her chief aid. With its secret bribe of jewels, it would prove to the sahib that there was truth in the tale she had gathered during her nightly wanderings as a ghost about Hodiunggur. When that was done, she would be free in some of those nightly wanderings to kill the Diwan or his son, the man who killed her mother. Perhaps she might be able to kill both, and yet have some strength left for Chandni--Chandni who had told her so many lies. For there was a fire now in Azizan's light eyes, which quite accounted for the consideration which the courtesan had shown the girl when, more than once, Chandni had awakened to find them looking at her. Of course, by and by a stop must be put to this masquerading through the village, but at present it would be unsafe, when so much depended on good luck, and thus Azizan had hitherto been unmolested. Indeed, Chandni herself had taken malicious pleasure in countenancing current tales of the return of the potter's dead daughter; and once when Khush-hal Beg, during his son's absence, had deemed it well to single her out for favour, she had sent the hoary old sinner back to his swinging cradle like a quaking jelly from abject fear of what he might meet by the way. Still it was only when she was on the roof with the old Diwan that she ventured to speak in whispers of a time when this mad girl should be taught her own impotence for good or evil.

So in the meantime, the freedom from interruption, and the dread which the mere thought of her existence roused in the simple village folk, conspired to increase Azizan's faith in her own supernatural power, and as she sat in the growing dusk no doubt of her own success assailed her; for the little sahib had returned--during the night. At least so said the old man, who, with all his craziness, was to be trusted. Therefore, in less than an hour, he would know all, since the day was dying down quickly; smothered in a hot haze-like smoke. There was not a shadow anywhere; only a dull darkness growing momentarily as the dull darkness had grown upon her mind day by day. For all that she had the power; the potter might mould the clay, the palace folk might plot and plan, but she, the woman with the evil eye, was stronger than they!

'Aziz! Oh! thou art there still, Heaven be praised!' The cry roused her from a sort of dream to find the old man beside her, breathless as from running, his mild face, seen dimly in the darkness, full of piteous entreaty. 'Go not from me this night, oh Heart's-joy! Leave me not again in the storm!'

'The storm! What storm, poor fool!' she asked indifferently.

He laid his trembling hand on her arm. 'Listen! Thou canst hear the noise of many waters. They came before, so the fathers sang, and made a new world. Down yonder at the palace, where thou goest, 'twill run like the race of a river, and the stones of the old wall where thou liest will be crumbling into it. Go not there to-night, oh, Light of mine Eyes! It is safe here on the heights.'

'There is no water,' she answered, with a short laugh, 'there will be none; save in the canal. The sahib will see to that now he hath returned.'

'How can he see when he is dead----'

'Dead,' she echoed. 'Bah! thou liest! He is not dead. There is no water, and there is no death----'

She broke off suddenly, silenced by his look as he stood with one hand raised as if listening. In the breathless air a strange whispering reached her ear, and like an arrow from a bow, she flew to the gap in the palisade, whence she could see the dip between the ruins and the canal bank, and beyond that silver streak again to the bungalow dotted down upon the level plain.

*'Dohai! Dohai!'*

The Great Cry--the blind human cry of her race for justice burst from her instinctively. The next moment found her

bare-faced in the open on her way to prove if the old man spoke truth in death also.

'Azizan! go not! Leave not the House of Safety! It is the Flood of the Most High! Go not, oh! go not!'

His unavailing plea came back to him unanswered from the night which had fallen suddenly, as the dust from below sprang electrically up to meet the dust above and hide everything from sight. But through the thick veil that rush of water rose louder and louder as the girl sped on her way. It was true what the old man had said, and she had seen it. There was a river by the old palace. Was the other thing true also? Was the sahib dead? Had they killed him? The darkness lightened a little as she ran over the bridge so that she could see a great swirl of yellow water shooting past the piers not three inches below the keystone of the arch. Lower down it had found the open sluice-gates, hurled them from their foundations and carried them with it as it burst through the embankment weakened by the new-made cuttings of the villagers, and had raced in a mad river to fling itself against the mound of Hodinuggur, tearing down yard after yard of crumbling sand as it turned abruptly from the collision, to try conclusions by a flank movement. Azizan saw none of this; nothing but the dim white arches where she had waited once before.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

No answer, and in her eagerness she crouched down at the closed door, tapping softly.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

There was only a quarter-inch planking between them, that was all, for they had left him as he fell till some other white-face should come to accept the responsibility of interference. Yet it did the work as effectually as all the barriers of custom and culture which had divided them in life.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

Could it be true? It must be true that he was dead; otherwise he would surely hear her cry!

'Sahib! Sahib!'

As she crouched she might have put out her hand and taken his, but for that trivial quarter-inch of wood between them; but he did not hear. Because he was dead? Perhaps, yet even in life he had not heard, he had not known. The light in the potter's yard, lit by her passionate love and care, had only served to arouse his contempt. Better darkness, he had thought, than such a light as that.

'Sahib! Sahib!'

At last she rose and stumbled across to the servants' quarters, seeking the certainty which she must gain somehow. A light glimmered behind the grass palisades, sacred to her namesake's modesty, and from within came the eager yet subdued tones of gossiping women. Azizan crept close, and crouching in on herself held her breath to listen.

'Lo! I content myself with goodwill towards all men,' came the widow's voice self-complacently. 'Yet, O Motiya! wife of Ganesha the groom, I make bold to aver that this is no more or less than a judgment on----'

'What! Dost think it to be really the Flood of Destruction?' broke in Motiya, whimpering.

'*Ai fool!* Who cares for the water? It flows south, not north; so we are safe. No! 'tis the sahib's death. Mayhap 'twill teach other folks' relations not to be in such a hurry to thrust themselves into other folks' service against the custom----

'But----'

'*Ai teri!* wouldest deny my right--the widow's right? *Ai! mere adme,* thy sahib is dead, and there is none to see justice done and employ thy relations! *Ai! mere dil murgya! murgya!*'

As the renewed sense of her wrongs rose in the familiar wail, the women from within joined in it dutifully. Without, the girl, with her hands clenched and her wild eyes straining into the shadows, seemed to be caught and carried away by it also, and her shrill voice echoed theirs instinctively.

'*Ai! mere sahib murgya. Ai! mere dil murgya! murgya!*'

The women, scared to death at the unexpected aid, stopped suddenly, and the young voice rose alone.

*'Ai! mere dil murgya! murgya!'*

The sound of her own wailing brought home to her the truth, rousing her passion, her grief, her anger, to madness; and in one swift desire for revenge she turned and ran.

*'Mere sahib murgya!'*

The wail echoed over the wild swirl of the flood-water as she crossed the bridge once more. It was trembling now before its doom as the water rose inch by inch. And could that be rain? that large warm drop upon her hand, so large that it ran down between her fingers? Another on her upturned face, blinding her. If those were raindrops, and many of them came, it might, indeed, be the deluge of the Most High. And if it were? Had not the end of all things come to her already? Yet as she ran she looked curiously into the sky. Not a cloud was visible; only an even haze of grey vapour, through which now and again a great drop splashed down upon her, warm and soft.

*'Ai! mere sahib! mere sahib!'*

No more than a sob now; yet even that she hushed as the Mori gate showed black before her. Should it be Chandni? No, not yet; but for Dalel and the hopes of him, the woman would have cared nothing for water or no water. So she passed on through the causeway. One or two villagers, hurrying, like her, through the darkness, talking in scared whispers of the strange flood, fell back from her path terrified. A knot of men in the bazaar huddled aside as she slipped by like a shadow; even in the courtyard of the palace the watchmen, gathered round one pipe for the comfort of companionship in such uncanny times, gave no more than an uneasy glance at the half-seen figure which they did not care to challenge.

Should it be Khush-hal Beg in his swinging cradle? He had betrayed her mother, and the knife she carried was long enough to reach through the fat to his heart, long enough to do the mischief, when held in reckless hands, even if aid came to the unwieldy body. No! it should not be Khush-hal either. Let him wait a while since he had done little to harm the sahib. The true quarry lay higher in the old man up yonder in his nest like a bird of prey; seeing all things with his keen old eyes, plotting and planning with his wise old brain. But for him, the others had not been; but for him the sahib would have been alive, and now he was dead. Each step of the stairs as she laboured up them seemed to need that cry of 'dead! dead!' to help her on her way; and they left her breathless on the first platform of the roof, where those huge drops of rain were falling in audible thuds upon the hard plaster. Faster and faster. This was not rain. Something must have given way in the sky, and, as the old man had said, it was '*Tofhan Ehlai*.' So much the better for her purpose. In the arcades on either side faint figures glimmering white in the shadows showed where some of the servants were sheltering. So much the better, also, since she might find the old man alone; not that she cared for that either, save in its greater assurance of success. He would not be in the pavilions at this time, but in the room to the north end of the tower, of which she had heard the women speak. The room with the big jutting balcony whence you could see north, east, and west, everything except Hodinuggur itself.

By this time the raindrops, falling faster and faster, had become a sheet of water streaming down straight with such curious force that she staggered under it. A little sun-baked fireplace against which she stumbled dissolved to sheer mud ere she had recovered her balance, and a loosened brick on the last step upwards rolled down, beaten from its place ere her foot touched it. It was the Great Flood indeed, though every moment the sky grew lighter and she could now see her way clearly.

*'Mere sahib murgya! murgya!'*

She kept the wild fire glowing in heart and eyes by the murmur, until through an open door she saw what she sought--an old man seated at a chess-table, still as a statue. With a cry she darted forward, snatching at the knife in her girdle, then paused abruptly. Where was the hurry? he could not move. So with a half laugh of exultation she turned back deliberately to bolt the door--a strong door, as befitted one giving on the favourite sleeping-place of despotism. It would need time to force an entry there; more time than she would need to do her work. Meanwhile she must look at this arbiter of her fate ever since she was born--this tyrant whom she had never seen. What! was that all? that wreck of a man, with his head upon his breast? but as she came nearer, the light, such as it was, from the wide-arched balcony, aided by a cresset smoking in a niche, showed her something of the youth in his eyes. Perhaps it showed him something of the age in hers, for the Diwan paused in his first haughty challenge, then began again.

'Hast come to frighten me, as thou frightenest the villagers, oh! Azizan, daughter of the potter's daughter?' he asked coldly. He was defenceless, and he knew it, save for craft of the brain.

'Nay! I have come to kill thee, Zubr-ul-Zaman, Diwan of Hodinuggur,' she replied; 'to kill thee as thou hast killed the sahib.'

A sound which might have been a laugh reached her as she took a step nearer, brandishing the knife; perhaps it was that which made her pause again in her turn; for laughter was hardly what she expected.

'I did not kill the sahib, fool. He killed himself for love of the mem sahib: the fair mem who took the Ayodhya pot.'

The girl fell back the step she had taken, and the hand bearing the knife went up to her forehead in a gesture matching her sharp cry of pain. The truth struck home; yet she caught at denial desperately.

'Thou liest! She did not take it. I took it once--twice. I have the pearls--the Hodinuggur pearls. I--I--not she.'

One of those curious spasms of life came to the wreck of a man, as it turned to look at the girl more closely.

'So! Thou also hast brains. 'Tis the woman's *yog*<sup>[6]</sup> nowadays. My son, and my son's son, have none. Thou shouldst have been my granddaughter, Azizan, had I but known. Thou mayest be now.'

His granddaughter! Of course! she had suspected so all her life, had known it to be so for months, yet she had never realised the fact till now; and an odd, inexplicable sense of kindred rose up in her against her will.

'I shall kill thee, no matter who thou art,' she cried quickly.

'Wherefore? What harm have I done to thee, Azizan? 'Twould have suited me better had the sahib fancied thy face. Thou hadst thy chance.'

Something in her shrank back abashed before the naked truth of the old man's words. She had had her chance, according to her world, and she had failed. She had failed utterly; and yet---- Something else in her, strange, incomprehensible, clamoured against the verdict, and the deadly weariness, the passionate apathy she had so often felt before came over her. The knife dropped to her side, and half mechanically she looked out through the arches of the balcony to where the red-brick bungalow should stand. There was nothing to be seen but sheets of water streaming from above, while from below came a rush and a roar. Suddenly as she listened came another sound; a *pit-pat pat-pit* on the floor in half a dozen places. The rain had conquered the thick-domed roof.

'It is "*Tofhan Elahi*," she said, and even as she spoke a babel of voices rose at the closed door.

'Open! open! The river saps the foundation. *Ari bhai!* is he dead, that he hath no fear? Beat it down!--Oh, Diwan sahib!--Oh! servant, who hath closed the door?--Open! open!--Nay! without a smith 'tis hopeless--And I tarry not!--Listen! there goes more of the wall--Open, fools! open!'

Amid the roar and rush, the vain blows and shouting, the old man's eyes were on Azizan's, not so much in appeal as in command. He could not move and his faded voice would never reach through the clamour, so his only safety lay in her obedience. But she shook her head, then crouched down--as if to wait till they should once more be alone--in her favourite attitude, her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to her chin, the knife still clasped in her hand ready for use. A louder roar came from without, a rattle as of bricks, mingled with cries of caution and alarm. Then gradually the blows and voices dwindled away from the ceaseless clamour of the rain and the intermittent rumblings of falling masonry, as the smallest crack widened beneath the pressure to a breach until, bit by bit, the solid walls seemed to melt away.

'Why didst thou not open the door, fool?' The words in the greater silence were just audible to the girl.

'Because I did not choose.'

Again the odd sound like a laugh came from that bent figure.

'The woman's reason. Why didst thou not choose, Azizan?'

There was no anger, scarcely a trace of anxiety even, in his tone. He was no novice to the ways of women, and the girl's face told him that his chance of life was almost gone. What must be must, and death came to all; to the mad fool in her turn. The sombre fire of her eyes met his sullenly; but she made no answer, save to lay the knife down quietly on the sill of the arch against which she leant. The steel rang clear upon the hard red sandstone.

The old Diwan's wrinkled hand hovered for a moment over the pieces on the board, then fell back upon his knees. So they sat staring at each other silently in the bow of the balcony. There was nothing more to be said. She had chosen; why, she knew not. And as the clamour of the rain and the rush of the river rose higher and higher, Zubr-ul-Zaman's head sank upon his breast with the old formula--

'Queen's mate; the game is done.'

The woman's reason, or unreason, had conquered the Strength of the World. But that was no new thing to the Diwan's wisdom.

But to the people outside in the open, huddling together under the pitiless downpour for safety's sake, it was more or less of an amusement to wonder how long the old tower would hold out against the mad stream sapping at its foundations. Not long; for already the ruined wall had gone, disclosing a portion of the secret stair, where Zainub, the old duenna, lay parched up almost to a mummy. A hideous sight, no doubt, had there been light enough to see it; but there was not, and the refugees upon the higher ground could discern nothing but the block of the old tower and the swirling water below. A faint light came from the balcony of the room where the Diwan was known to be; and, as they watched it, people speculated how the door came to be fastened. Perhaps it had swung-to, perhaps---- Well, he must be dead, or would soon be dead, since rescue was impossible; and, after all, he had lived his time. Khush-hal had been saved from his swinging cradle, and then there was Dalel away up at Simla. Rulers enough for a poor country-side, if God spared it from the Great Flood; and if not, why then the old man was at least better off than they, exposed as they were to the elements. Far better; both he and the outcasts in their straw huts, which would hurt no one even if they fell. So the first in the land was as the last, and the last first. '*Sobhan ullah!*'

As the rain slackened the night grew darker, until even the block of the tower ceased to show against the sky, and the little company of watchers could only hear the thunder of its fall.

'God rest him,' muttered a peasant, muffled into a formless bundle in his blanket. 'He was a hard master, and the new one may be harder still. There will be a good crop anyway.'

And down on the very edge of the boiling stream, when the rain ceased, a light went twinkling up and down, up and down. It was the potter looking for his dead daughter as the *debris* of the old wall, beneath which she had been buried sixteen years before, crumbled away bit by bit before the furious stream.

## CHAPTER XX

The dawn broke upon a new world as far as Hodinuggur was concerned. Where the desert had stretched thirsty and dry, lay a shoreless sea. Where the streak of silver had split the round horizon into halves, the double line of the canal banks looked like twin paths leading to some world beyond the waste of waters. They steered straight out of sight on either side, almost unbroken save for the great gap where the sluice-gate had stood. There the stream still swept sideways to circle round the island of Hodinuggur, which bore, like an ark, its company of refugees from the surrounding levels; a little company which straightway, taking advantage of the coming sun, began to wring out its wet garments and spread them to dry, until a general air of washing-day reduced the tragedy of the past night to the commonplace. And after all, what had happened? An old woman or two had been drowned, the Diwan and his tower swept away. But the world held too many old women and more than enough of nobles. For the rest, it had not been the Flood of the Most High; and though Death came to all in the end, and the loneliness of it must be dreary, still it was somehow more terrifying to die in batches, wholesale.

So, clothed in their white, new-washed robes like the elect, they went down after a time in companies to see the extent of damage done to their belongings, and test how far it was possible to wade through the water towards the village homestead or two which rose above the flood. Canal-wards, of course, passage was barred, would be barred for days until the stream ceased flowing or a boat was brought. So the horseman whom they could see picking his way flounderingly along the northern bank might be the only survivor of the big world beyond, and they be none the wiser--for the time. It was Dan Fitzgerald who, after an enforced shelter at the half-way village, was wondering who could have taken the responsibility of anticipating the telegram he carried in his pocket by opening the sluice-gates, and so, in all probability saving the big Sunowlie embankment farther down. For the sluice had been opened; that was evident to his experience at once, since without the lead of the current to cut, the flood would have swept on to do its worst elsewhere. Well! whoever had done it, be he watchman or Diwan, deserved something at the hands of the Department, and be the past record a bad one or not, this act should have its reward--its just reward--if he could compass it.

Ten minutes after, he had driven the chattering servant from the room, and grief-stricken, yet convinced into a sort of calm acceptance of the inevitable, had lifted the poor lad's body tenderly to the bed. He scarcely even thought of a reason for the tragedy; perhaps there was none, for Dan in his rough and ready life had seen such a thing before; had known the useless search for some adequate cause. And was there not cause enough here for a sudden loss of balance? That race down from Paradise to Purgatory!--the intolerable journey--the horrible homecoming; and then the cursed bottle he had left. The remembrance sent his whole mind into useless regrets. If he had only ridden faster, if somehow he could have been there in time to prevent the loneliness, the awful desolation of it all! for he had been through such loneliness himself, and knew what it had meant to him. Perhaps, taking his own excitability as a standard, he over-estimated the effect on George's nature. At any rate, as he stooped mechanically to pick up the revolver round which the boy's dead hand had still been closed, he felt that, given the necessity for sudden return, the rest might be inferred. And then, beside the revolver he saw the open locket, with Gwen's smiling face staring up at him. *Gwen!* Great God! what did it mean? His own locket, of course, and yet---he sat down at the table white as death, looking first at the pretty face, then at the still figure on the bed, now decently shrouded from the glaring light of day. And by degrees the colour returned to his cheek. No! it could not be so. She was not cruel, only careless; and ah! what a grief this would be to her! Besides, George was not one to put a life-long regret of that sort into a friend's life. So pondering, he realised that among other incidents of the home-coming had been that of learning who his sweetheart really was. That, then, did not happen at Simla, so that could not have been the cause of the lad's sudden return.

Why, then, had he come? The new lock and keys lying on the table, gave him a clew, and his quick wits suggested danger to the gates. Then it came to him in a flash confusedly, almost irrationally, that it had been done for his sake and hers, and he was on his knees by the bed in a minute.

'Oh! George! George! why did you do it?'

So with the answering silence came a decision, impulsive, yet immutable. Such blame as could be taken he would take. No one should know or dream of failure. No one should ever say--'Ah, poor fellow, he shot himself; must have been something wrong, you know.' Rapidly he counted the costs, the possibility of silence. Hodinuggur, separated from him by an impassable stream, could not be taken into account, so he must accept the risk there. It would not be much, if the servants' tale was true, that they had only discovered their master's death when the storm began, and had done no more than send word to the palace. No one, then, could have seen the body save those four or five servants, who loved their master, and worshipped rupees, and, above all, desired peace and quiet, and not the dangerous rakings

up of the past which always followed on the advent of the police. Then for the Department itself. What he had said in his ignorance was true. Whether George had opened the sluice when, as the servants said, he went out in the middle of the day, or whether the palace folk had done it, the Department, in either case, owed the opener a debt of gratitude. If the latter, the Moghuls would be glad to keep silence; if the former, even if they set up a claim for compensation for damage, they would have been due so much had he, Dan, arrived in time to carry out his orders; thus no injustice would be done.

So half an hour afterwards, one of the servants started along the path to the outer world with a telegram to headquarters, and that evening, when the flood had subsided a little, Dan chose out the driest spot he could find in the sandy compound, and read the Church service over his friend's body. No one, he told himself, should know the truth; except some day perhaps, Gwen, when she came there as his wife. Then he would tell her, the pity, the needlessness of it all; and yet the needlessness had this virtue in it, that it made concealment possible; for the flood had swept away the error, if error there had been.

The telegram reached Colonel Tweedie next morning, among many more telling of disaster and death along the line of the great canal. Yet none was more pitiful than this one which ran thus--

*'Opening of sluice-gate, as ordered, saved Sunowlie embankment, but palace injured. George Keene died yesterday of cholera. Very prevalent here. Details by post.'*

'Dear! dear!' fussed the Colonel. 'How very sad! What a blow to poor Mrs. Boynton. She is so tenderhearted, and really, she was almost unnecessarily interested in that boy.'

They all thought of her; even Lewis Gordon, as yielding to that odd desire to see for oneself which besets us all when bad news comes by telegram, he sat looking at the flimsy message of evil; yet his first words were of Rose.

'Your daughter will feel it also, sir; feel it very much, I'm afraid.' Then he paused, to resume in more ordinary tones. 'I had, I think, better start at once, sir. I can report all along the line, and wire if your presence seems necessary. I hardly think it will be, and it is useless inconveniencing yourself for nothing.'

Colonel Tweedie bridled. 'I am not accustomed to consider my own convenience as against the public service'--he was beginning pompously, when Lewis cut him short.

'I'm afraid I wasn't thinking so much of you, sir, as of Miss Tweedie. This will be a great blow to her.' He thought so honestly, and as he jolted down the hill in a tonga half an hour afterwards he told himself he was glad to have escaped the necessity for seeing her grief, even while he was conscious of a curiosity to know how she would take the news. There was no such difficulty in imagining Gwen's behaviour. He could almost see the pretty pathetic face keeping back its tears, and hear the soft voice saying with a little thrill in it that George was the nicest, dearest boy she had ever met, and that she would never forget his kindness and goodness to her--never! never!

As he thought of this his expression was not pleasant, for Gwen had, in his opinion, done her level best to turn the lad's head, and so must surely know that she was talking bunkum. A man would know it; though perhaps it was not fair to judge a woman by a man's standard of truth, and Gwen, doubtless, was as genuine as she knew how to be; as genuine, anyhow, as Rose Tweedie, with her pretensions of utter indifference to all sentiment. Well, poor girl! she was face to face with realities now, for she had certainly cared a good deal for George, even to the extent of trying to keep him from Gwen's wiles. Poor George! a fine young fellow, who, for one thing, had been saved a bad heartache.

He had intended passing on as quickly as possible to Hodinuggur, but being delayed by the necessity for settling endless requisitions for repairs, had barely reached Rajpore ere Dan Fitzgerald returned, reporting that there was no reason for him to go out. Permanent repair was impossible till the rains should be over, as every lesser flood must run down the channel cut out for it by this deluge, and everything to ensure the further safety of the palace had been done. Barring the Diwan's tower, there had not after all been much damage, as the jewels and treasure in the vaults below had been saved: besides, the bumper crops which would follow on the inundations would more than compensate for any loss. There was, however, a certain anxiety in Dan's face as he said this.

'Well, even if they were to claim,' replied Lewis complacently, 'the saving of the Sunowlie bank would be dirt cheap at a few thousands. It cost us over two lakhs, and I was in an awful funk about it, thinking we must be too late. I tried to

intercept poor George with a wire, knowing he would take the order quicker as he was already on the way.

Dan's whole soul leaped towards the possibility. 'Then he got it after all. I was wondering----' he paused, angry at his own imprudence.

'Wondering what?' asked Lewis impatiently. 'I was going to say I missed him, and then I didn't see how you could possibly get there in time. By the way, when did you get my wire?'

'About an hour after you sent it off,' said Dan uneasily. He did not care for Lewis Gordon's sharp, practical eyes on these details.

'That is, say, ten o'clock on the morning of the 6th, I suppose. Good riding, indeed! And that reminds me. The report from the Rajah's people, which came through your office, says that the water first ran through the cut about middle day on the 6th. Manifestly impossible. You had hardly left Hodinuggur. It's a trifle, of course but you had better stamp on the inaccuracy, and show you are on the watch, or they will go on to cooking generally.'

'Yes----,' replied Dan slowly. This simple difficulty in concealing the discrepancy of time had escaped him before; but he was fully alive to it now. Most men in his place would have set the question aside, at all costs, for further consideration, and risked the possible consequences of the evasion. But Dan's mind was of finer temper; he could trust it to thrust home at any moment. This is the true test of power, and it is only the second thoughts of the commonplace which are better than their first. So he took advantage of the occasion calmly, knowing his man.

'But they are right. I did not open the gates. I believe George did, but even of that I am not sure. However, you shall judge for yourself. I don't ask for confidence, of course. I haven't the right; but I expect you will give it all the same.' Then boldly, plainly, yet with one reservation, he told the tale of what he knew and what he surmised. George had shot himself--of that there was no doubt. The sluice had been opened, in his opinion, by treachery, of which George, at Simla, had received some hint, and which he had arrived too late to prevent; though this also was mysterious, since the gates had not been opened till long after George's arrival. The guard at the sluice had been drowned or had disappeared, and the new Diwan, Khush-hal, professed pious ignorance. In fact, only this much was certain, that the Sunowlie embankment had been saved, that George had taken the responsibility on himself even to death, and that the flood had made it possible to keep his memory from stain. For the sake of his friends alone, was not this desirable? This hint, no more, he gave of the inner tragedy connected with the locket. Yet as those two men sat looking at each other across the office-table littered with papers, their thoughts, all unknown to each other, flew to the one woman; but the memory brought tears to Dan's dark eyes, and left Lewis's hard as the nether millstone in the conviction that Gwen was at least morally responsible for George Keene's death. It came to him as a certainty, and yet a contemptuous tolerance came with it. She had not meant, of course--women never did--to play fast and loose with the boy's head. Yet she had done so. He had spent too much money, he had been careless; honest, perhaps, though even that might not be so, no one could tell. Why then should they try to find out now, when it was all irrevocable, when no harm could come out of silence? And George had been a good sort; too good for such an end; besides, even for Gwen's sake silence was best. He felt very bitter against her, very sore; yet such things must not be said about his future wife as might be said if the truth were really known.

'I suppose it had better remain as it is,' he said at last, moodily. 'Cholera has served its turn in such a case before--one of the advantages of living in a land of sudden death. Poor George! I daresay there was treachery.'

Dan, shading his eyes with his clasped hands, was silent a moment. 'If there was, he had no part in it. I wonder if you remember a conversation in the balcony at Hodinuggur about what a man would do in such a case. "No, you wouldn't, not unless you wanted to be thought guilty." Do you remember saying that, Gordon?'

Lewis nodded; it was not a pleasant memory.

'I can't tell you the whole. But I am convinced George shot himself to save me. He knew'--what, perhaps, you don't--that I was engaged to a woman----'

Gordon pulled some papers towards him impatiently, and took up a pen, as if to end the subject.

'I suppose it is always "*cherchez la femme*"; yet it does not seem to me an agreeable factor in existence.'

'*Cherchez la femme!*' echoed Dan. 'Why not? They are our mothers and sisters, our sweethearts and wives, after all. And have you ever thought, Gordon, what it must be like to look back over a lifetime, and see next to nothing that you would rather have left undone? Or, if you're pious, to take a sort of pride in pillorying yourself for a cross word or a

tarradiddle? There isn't a man in a million with that record, but half the women one meets--ay! half the women one patronises--have it. Perhaps it is small blame to anything but fate; still they have it.'

'Or think they have--which has the same effect! You remind me of a countryman of yours, a doctor, I knew once. "The sex," he said, "can't do wrong, and when it does it's hysteria." However, let us leave that poor lad to rest in peace; in a way that is more worth than the happiness of any woman who ever was born. And, look here, make the tale of reports complete, send them to me, and I'll consign them, dates and all, to a pigeon-hole. That is the beauty of official mistakes; you *can* pigeon-hole them and no one is the wiser, unless, indeed, some personal motive crops up. But that is not likely. So far as I can see, it is to no one's interest to make a row--not even if there is a woman at the bottom of it all.'

There was a concentrated bitterness in his tone, due to no cynicism, but rather to an intensity of pain; for if Rose Tweedie belonged by birth to that strange latter-day feminine development which unconsciously sets passion aside both from mind and emotion, and will none of it spiritually or physically, Lewis belonged to that still larger class of men who have driven it from the mind: who say openly that it is despicable; but that the world cannot get on without it; who insist in a breath in its unworthiness and its necessity. Gwen, he said to himself after Dan had gone, was very woman, capable of ruining any man in a week if she chose, and then being sorrowfully surprised at the result. Still it would be unkind to wound her needlessly by telling her that result; the more so because she would certainly tell other people, and Rose Tweedie might break her heart over it. Even if the pigeon-holed mistake were found out, they might get up a fiction about the telegram having reached George after all. The compensation might have to be given; but even in that case he could see no need for raking up the mud, since the claim would be a just one.

Nevertheless a week after, when he and Dan were once more seated opposite each other at the office-table, he felt vaguely uncomfortable. For a schedule of the dead lad's debts lay between them ready for the Administrator-General, and that showed an item of six thousand rupees borrowed on George's note of hand, backed by some youngsters on the very day on which he had left Simla.

'It was a first holiday, you know,' said Dan regretfully. 'And Hodinuggur is such a hole. There were the races, you know, and--and----'

'*Cherchez la femme*,' quoted Lewis; 'I don't blame him, not a bit. But if there had been an inquiry, Fitzgerald?-----'

Dan shook his head and sighed fiercely. 'Yes! I know. For all that, he was straight--straight as a die! My only regret in keeping the thing dark is that some one has to go scot-free.'

## CHAPTER XXI

A shivering woman in one pannier; in the other, such things as a breathless fugitive can gather together in one hurried half hour. Between them the hump of a camel, a camel which every instant seems as if it must split into halves as its long splay legs slither and slide in the mud that covers all things.

Such was the method of Chandni's flight from Hodinuggur. Not a comfortable one, but under the circumstances necessary; nor was she altogether unprepared for that necessity. People of her trade know what to expect when they are attached to petty intriguing courts, where one ruler's meat is invariably the next ruler's poison. Besides, in this case she had to reckon on Khush-hal Beg's anger at the repulse she had given him on more than one occasion; given him, of course, with a view to future possibilities with his son Dalel, but that rather increased than diminished the offence. And now her patron, old Zubr-ul-Zaman, was dead, Khush-hal had supreme power, and what was more, three pearls were amissing from the Hodinuggur necklace; three pearls which could easily be traced home to her safe keeping, *and no further*, if needs be. So, at the first hint of inquiry, Chandni had deemed it wiser to seek the protection of the only man who knew something--if not all--about the intrigue which had ended so strangely in Providence setting aside the necessity for any intrigue at all. If Dalel chose to remain at Simla, where, no doubt, he was amusing himself hugely, she would not interfere with his amusements; that had never been her plan. She would only resume her empire over his weak, worn-out wickedness. And yet the flight entailed horrible discomfort. The splaying camel was to her what a bad passage across the channel is to a fashionable lady, and as she clutched wildly at the sides of the pannier, she decided that life was not long enough for a repetition of such experience. If she returned to Hodinuggur at all, it must be in a position which would ensure a different style of locomotion. Even the night journey by rail, cooped up behind iron bars in the wild-beast-cage-like compartment, labelled in three languages for 'modest women,' was, in comparison, comfort itself. Huddled up decently into a shapeless white bundle, she could at least think over the odd turn affairs had taken, and make up her mind what had best be done. The first thing, of course, was to bring Dalel to her heel. That ought not to be difficult, for though--the water having been procured--he might, like his father, find it convenient to underrate her services in the matter, she had one or two good cards to play in her adversary's strong suits which might with care save the trick. At any rate they ought to prevent any reckless disregard of her claims. First, they wanted the pearls back, and now that the Diwan was dead, she was the only person who could tell them the ins and outs of that transaction. Next, they wanted payment of the heavy *douceur* promised by the Rajah for good offices in making it possible for the water to irrigate that basin of alluvial soil to the south. But here again now that the Diwan was dead, they would find difficulty in proving that anything had been done--that the flood was not responsible for all, unless she chose to help them with her evidence.

For the rest, give her Dalel and a bottle of champagne to herself for one hour. If in that space he did not come back, as he had done a dozen times before, to her empire of evil, she would have none of him. He would be dead to all she had to offer in fullest perfection. He would be beyond her influence, as it were, and so useless for her purpose. She was not going to marry a fool in order to wear a veil and live with a lot of women.

By this time two coolies were carrying her up the hill from Solon, in a thing like a bird-cage slung on poles; so small, so square, that she had to sit in it cross-legged and bolt upright. But though she could not sleep, even with the aid of opium, and though the hill-sides, after the first rush of the rains, were clothed with tinted blossoms, and the winding valleys green as emeralds with young rice, Chandni never parted the thick patchwork curtains shrouding her from the public gaze, until the setting down of the dhooli warned her of an opportunity for a gossip and a pipe. Then her feet came over the side with a challenging clash of their silver bells, and a quick stir run round the sleepy, sun-sodden stage where travellers, and coolies, and sweetmeat sellers lay huddled together in the shade. Even the cowboy driving his cattle from the bales of fodder on their way up for the sahib-logue's ponies, paused to look at her with a grin, while his beasts ate on. The bees were flitting from flower to flower, a golden oriole flashed through the green transparency of the walnut-trees, and below the branches the great emerald hearts of the yam leaves outlined themselves against the sapphire distance of the valley, which was divided from the sapphire distance of the sky by the glittering pearly spikelets of the snowy range. Sapphires and pearls echoed and re-echoed in ever-receding distance by the white clouds dividing one sea of ether from another.

But in all this world there was nothing worth a look, apparently, save Chandni, the courtesan, swinging her silver anklets over the edge of a dhooli; to judge at any rate by those human eyes.

She did not go straight to her destination, but paused at a house in the bazaar where such as she were all too welcome. There was never any mincing of words or thoughts with Chandni. To one end she had been born a courtesan,

and to this end she lived to the best of her ability. So she paused to clothe herself in clean clear muslins, and hang great garlands of tuberose and jasmine about the column of her massive throat; to redden her lips, and give a deeper shadow to her eyes; looking at herself the while in the thumb-mirror worn on her left hand. No more, no less intent upon appearing at her best than many a person who has not been born to that end; many a decent, respectable person, who would be dreadfully shocked at having her innocent half hour before the cheval-glass evened to Chandni's most reprehensible occupation. Perhaps the difference lies in the size of the mirrors; at any rate it is not palpably apparent elsewhere.

Mirza Dalel Beg was living, she knew, in a European house, as the upper ten of natives love to do. Why, is, in five cases out of six, a mystery. The sixth, no doubt, has acquired exotic tastes; the remaining five, no doubt, consider it good style to pretend them. So, after paying roundly for the privilege of toilet-sets and dinner-services, they prefer the water-carrier with his skin bag to a lavatory, and a big platter on the floor to all the neatly-laid dining-tables in creation.

A curious example of the fascination which useless comforts have for some people came to light during one of the many Embassies from Cabul which British diplomacy, or the want of it, has inveigled into India. During its stay there, district-officers were instructed to provide the whole horde of barbarians with house-room in European fashion so as to avoid invidious distinctions. As a rule, the local Parsee was invited to furnish a requisite number of empty houses with the necessary repp curtains, French clocks, Britannia-metal teapots, and German prints, needed for the night's hospitality. Next day, so runs the tale, there never was a soup-plate to be found. Occasionally the guests packed up a French clock; once, it is affirmed, a sponge-bath went amissing, but unless they ate them, that Embassy must have gone back to Cabul with some hundreds of dozens of soup-plates stowed away among the official presents of watches that won't go, and guns that won't fire; and soup is not a national dish in Afghanistan.

So Dalel Beg had rented a house which he got cheap, because three of its previous tenants had died of typhoid fever. It was a pretty place enough, shut in somewhat by the ravines which furrow the lower part of the ridge, but with an outlook beautiful beyond belief over the plains. The single dahlias--refuse run wild from many a garden above--found foothold in every cranny of the rocks, and great sheets of morning glories climbed over the broken rails fencing the narrow path from the steep declivity, which seemed to leap at one bound to the pale blue of the valley below. Chandni, stepping out of her dhooli, looked at it all distastefully, reached forth a strong, ring-bedecked hand, appropriated a yellow dahlia, which she stuck behind her ear, and called. Then the bells clashed again as she walked with a free step over to the verandah of the house, raised the chick, and looked in, while the dhooli-bearers squatted down beside the railings, and apparently resumed a conversation begun in the bazaar. For the rest, sunshine and silence.

Chandni, dazzled by the glare outside, could at first see nothing clearly; the room, though to her unaccustomed eyes crammed full of useless things, seemed empty of what she sought. Then suddenly there came a shrill, unformed voice--

'Go away! We don't want you. Mam-ma, send her away. Go, I tell you! The Mirza is married now; I am his wife.'

The girl who came forward was not more than fifteen by the look of her, with a frizz of hot-pressed light hair over her forehead, and a skin which gave one the impression of being bleached, perhaps because of the coal-black eyes set in the narrow sharp face; yet with a certain attractiveness about the figure, dressed as it was in the height of fashion, with sleeves to the ears, and a waist requiring the surgical bandage of folded silk to prevent it from breaking in two.

His wife! Chandni, from her full height and magnificent development, looked at her as distastefully as she had looked at the view from the terrace. Neither were to her liking: they both appealed too much to the imagination. This other woman who came in answer to the call was better, though past her prime and pulpy; drowsy, too, from the snooze she had been enjoying on the sofa. Still with a torrent of capable, tell-tale abuse for the intruder.

'Ari!' laughed Chandni contemptuously, when the fat lady paused for breath. 'So thou too hast been of the bazaar? But I want not thee, or that half-fledged thing who calls herself a wife. I want Dalel--where is he?'

'Mamma!' cried the unformed voice in English, breaking down over its own feeble passion. 'Send her away, I tell you! The Mirza will be back soon, and she must not be here. Don't fool with words. Call the servants. *Ai! budzart!* (base-born). I will throw you down the *khud!* (hill-side).'

Chandni laughed again--laughed louder as, in response to the girl's cry, a face showed itself behind her.

'Salaam, oh *bhai!* (brother),' she said, nodding her head at the new-comer. 'Ah! 'tis thou, Mohammed? look you, this image saith she will fling me down the *khud*. If it came to force, my pigeon, I know which would have the Mirza;

but I will not fight for him thus, he is not worth it. So, he fancies thee? God help him. Sure, thy mother is the better woman.'

'Come, come, mother Chandni,' urged the servant in response to shrill commands. 'This is no place for thee now. These are mem's. And he hath married her,' he went on fast and low. 'Yea! 'tis true, the *nikka* hath been read, so abuse is vain. Come, thou canst see him elsewhere.'

'Nay! I will see him here--here with his mem,' retorted Chandni airily. Then she turned swiftly on the elder woman, who, going to the door, was about to call for further assistance. 'What harm shall I do thee, fool, who art as I am with a piebald skin, or as this one, who would be as I am had God made her a woman. Lo! ask thy servants who Chandni the courtesan is, and what she has been, ay! and will be--if she chooses.'

It was an odd scene. The room decorated into bastard civilisation; the girl depending on a lack of pigment in her skin for all her claims to mem-ship, that being the only trace of her unknown European father; the mother without even this distinction, yet clinging to her taint of 'Western blood, as to a patent of nobility; clinging to it farcically, in fringe and furbelow, in fashion generally. Before them, as it were, against them, stood Chandni, in her trailing white Delhi draperies and massive garlands, a figure which might have served as model for some of those strange solemn-eyed statues, half Greek, half Indian, which are found buried in the sand-hills of the frontier. There was a little crowd of dark expectant faces at the door now, towards which she nodded familiarly.

'Go back! oh brothers! I do no harm. 'Tis not my way with women folk. I wait the Mirza's return. Then, if I am not wanted, I will go. Lo! Chandni the courtesan hath no need to keep a man in a leash; she hath no need to have the *nikka* read, my little pigeon, as thou hast. Ari! so the pictures in the papers Dalel used to bring me are true, and 'tis a beauty to have no body and a big head.

Beatrice Norma Elflida D'Eremao, presently her Highness Mrs. Dalel Beg, gave a little scream of rage, and stamped her tiny high-heeled shoes upon the floor. Mrs. Lily Violet D'Eremao, her mother, known in her time by many a *sobriquet* until she settled down to sobriety and the education of a fair daughter, screamed too, in voluble abuse; but they were both quite helpless before the white-robed figure standing between them and the sunlight with a laugh on its red lips, which did not leave them when into the midst of the scene came Dalel Beg, got up in his dandy riding gear; only the folded pugree remaining to tell the tale of his birth. Perhaps because the ideas within the head it covered needed some such excuse for their existence. His face was hideous in its sheer malice, livid, not with passion or fear, but from that hatred of opposition which belonged to his race. And Chandni, recognising this, swept him a low salaam, graceful to the uttermost curve of each finger, a salaam which would have made Turveydrop die of envy, a salaam such as one sees once or twice in a lifetime. A minute before she might have given it in derision; now she yielded it to the lingering majesty in this pitiful representative of a long line of tyrants.

'Long life attend my lord,' she said, in those liquid tones of set ceremony, which her class pride themselves on acquiring. And even among them Chandni had a silver tongue: none near her, so the report ran.

Dalel Beg's eyes saw, his ears heard. They would not refuse their wonted office, and yet as he took a step nearer, he raised the hunting crop he held.

'Go!' he cried. 'Go! Mohammed! Fuggu--turn this scum of the bazaars from the door!'

'Which scum of the bazaars?' she asked coolly. 'This--or that?'

It was not scorn exactly, it was an indifferent contempt which seemed to leave no denial possible, and which held action arrested.

'Which is it to be, Mirza sahib?' she asked again, crossing swiftly to where the girl stood as if to measure her height against that small insignificant figure. 'There is not much to choose between us, except in the outside--and thou hast eyes!'

'Fuggu! Mohammed! Dittu! Scoundrels, turn her out! call the Kotwal! Turn her out, I say!' shrieked the Mirza, fast losing all dignity in a sort of animal admiration for this woman, who, he knew, would come back to him at a word. A word he dare not give,--which he did not wish to give, as yet.

'Softly! softly! oh, my brothers,' came that liquid voice. 'There is no need to touch Chandni the courtesan. The master hath his right, and I will go. I only ask a word, and sure my words are better for the ear than theirs.'

It was incontestably true, for mother and daughter were now at the highest pitch of the Eurasian accent aggravated by hysterics, and the men stood uncertain, siding, every one of them, with that which was familiar.

'The word is this,' she went on boldly, 'I have done my part. Is there to be payment?'

Dale's face lost its last trace of dignity and settled down into mere spite.

'So! it is payment. Lo! mother-in-law, hold thy peace! 'Tis nothing but a bad debt, a debt without a bond! Payment! Go, fool, and ask it of the old man--the old devil who was drowned. Ask not here--here we need all the money we can get.'

Then in his delight and content in this opportunity for malice, he forgot a suspicion of fear which had been with him hitherto, and turned to the girl with a leer and a laugh: 'Aha! we want the *oof* ourself, don't we, Tricks? Lo! I give you gold watch and chain to-day. I give you gold bangle to-morrow, if you're good girl. But that one--nothing--nothing.'

He echoed the last words jeeringly in Hindustani, cutting with his whip towards Chandni as one cuts at a dog to frighten it from the room. Perhaps he was nearer than he thought; anyhow, the uttermost end of lash touching the silver bells on her ankle set them jingling. A slight thing to make two women cease their cries, and half a dozen men or more hold their breath involuntarily; yet it did, commanding silence for that clear voice.

'Lo! thou hast given me something, oh Mizra Dalel Beg! which no man hath given before to Chandni the courtesan. It is enough. I go.'

So far dignity went with her. But at the door she turned to give the women back in kind and with interest the abuse which they had given to her. Even with a despicable cheat like the Mirza, there was a reputation to keep up--he was at least the descendant of worthy men who had done their best for such as she; but with those two women, even as herself, but without her claims, why should she be silent?

Yet ere she was half-way back to the bazaar she had forgotten them and their abuse; forgotten everything save that clash of the silver bells. That was an end--an end for ever to Dalel. In a way she was glad, for he was unendurable when sober, and not much better when he was drunk. Now nothing remained save the necessity for compensation and revenge. If the Moghuls would not pay, there were others who would. The mem, for instance, who had taken the pearls. And those who had spread it abroad that the little sahib had died in his bed, they would not care to have their truth impugned. They had bribed the servants no doubt, the Diwan was dead, and they had held the water sufficient inducement for the others. But she? She had had nothing, and she meant to have something. And then when she had got her money's worth for silence, she would go and sell that silence to the Rajah, unless indeed by that time the Moghuls had bidden higher for her speech. Without her evidence the question as to whether the bribe were honestly due for favours done could not be settled. She would begin with the mem; not by demanding money, but the pearls, since most likely they had been disposed of and the difficulty of getting hold of them again would, as it were, increase her power of screw. If at the end of a month the sahib-logues defied her, she would offer her silence or her speech to the highest bidder, and give her evidence for either. After that, a merry life, even if it had to be a short one; for the mere taste of comparative freedom she had had that morning in the wooden house in the Simla bazaar, had aroused the old reckless instincts, and before the evening was over the news that Chandni, singer and dancer from Delhi, had come to the place, was on the tip of every native's tongue.

## CHAPTER XXII

Mrs. Boynton had behaved very much as Lewis Gordon had anticipated on hearing of George Keene's sudden death from cholera. She had wept honest tears over the dear lad, even while she could not help feeling happier than she had done for months; happier because of the flood which had come and gone, sweeping away with it all her difficulties, all her troubles. Yet it brought her one unavailing regret that she should so unnecessarily have put the bitter pain of hearing her confession into those last days, and that he should have gone down to his death not thinking ill of her exactly--the dear lad would never have done that--but hurt, disappointed, unhappy. She would have liked him to have seen a certain letter which lay in a drawer of her writing-table. A letter addressed, sealed, stamped, ready for sending, which she had only kept back one day. Only one; yet, but for that lucky chance it might have fallen into Dan's hands while George was ill and brought needless pain into another kind heart; for there was, thank heaven! no more need for humiliation and confession and promises of restitution. She had torn open the letter in order to read it again, and had been quite satisfied with its straightforward avowal of responsibility and firm intention, should difficulties arise, of taking the whole blame on herself. Then she had put it away again as a perpetual witness to her repentance and amendment. And surely these virtues had a right to forgiveness? One person, she knew, would do more than forgive if he knew all, and this conviction joined to the sense of loss which his prolonged absence from her environment always produced in Gwen Boynton made her think very tenderly of Dan, who wrote her such kind, sympathetic letters from Hodinuggur about the dear lad. He was not jealous, and full of evil imaginings like Lewis, whose temper had certainly not been improved by his visit to the plains. Though she did not consciously feel the need of something stronger than the cousinly affection she had for him, there is no doubt that the shock of her own lapses from strict honesty, joined to that of George Keene's sudden death, had made her disinclined for final decision; so the fact that Dan would, from pressure of work, be unable to get leave that year, and Lewis, from the same cause, was not likely to be urgent in love-making, suited her capitally. She would have time to recover her tone. To this end she proceeded, with a curious strength of purpose, to dismiss the nightmare of the past from her mind. It was over. What had been, had been. She would 'reach out to the things which were before'; no! not reach out! She would not again be premature; she would let fate and luck have their say to the full.

One small fact showed her state of mind exactly. She dismissed her ayah, giving her as a parting present most of the articles which Manohar Lal had forced her into buying from him. The woman sulked, yet held her tongue, no doubt knowing through her patron, the jeweller, that so far as he was concerned the mem was safe; besides, when all was said and done, the bucksheesh was sufficient; under no circumstances could more have been expected. So, on the whole, life went quite smoothly in the pretty little drawing-room where poor young George had sat with his head on the table dazed and stunned by his bitter pain.

Over the way, however, in Colonel Tweedie's house, things were different. Lewis Gordon, up to the ears in endless calculations, yet found time to notice that grief suited Rose very ill. And grief, forsooth, for a boy who had not cared a pin for her, who had run into debt, and gambled and lost his head completely over another woman; who, if the truth were known, had shot himself because--to take the most charitable view of the matter--he had not the pluck to bear disappointment. Naturally a young fellow felt being fooled--more or less--by a woman, because certain instincts were the strongest a man had--as a man. But one expected something more--or less--in a gentleman. And there was Miss Tweedie, who depended for attractiveness on the *beaute du diable*, looking pale and worn, over a mere sentimentalism; for she herself would be the first to deny that she had been what he, Lewis, would call 'in love' with George. Finally, though he, knowing to the full Gwen's responsibility for the boy's suicide, had every right, if he chose, to be hard on his cousin, why should this girl, who knew nothing, stand aloof and show her disapproval so plainly?

'You don't understand girls,' said Gwen easily, in reply to some hints of his to this effect. 'Dear Rose can't help huffing me at present. I should feel the same, I'm sure, towards any one who had, to my mind, stood between me and my dear dead.'

Lewis shifted irritably in his chair, and wished to goodness she would talk sense.

'Sense! Why, you yourself are always blaming me in your heart because that poor boy thought me the most perfect woman in the world! You know you are! As if it was my fault. As if I ever encouraged such an idea in any one, or set up for being perfection.'

It was true enough. She never posed as anything but a woman *pur et simple*. That was one of her charms in his eyes, and the injustice of cavilling at what he really liked made him say more gently--

'I don't suppose you could help it, dear; and perhaps Miss Tweedie can't either. I don't pretend to understand women--have enough to do in trying to understand the atrocious English men put into their reports. But I wish you could come over sometimes as you used to do. The girl oughtn't to be allowed to eat nothing and grow so disagreeably thin.'

Gwen gave an odd laugh. 'Well, I'll invite myself to luncheon to-morrow. It is bad for the girl--and so useless, into the bargain.'

The common-sense of the last remark lingered in Lewis Gordon's mind comfortably as he went home. In more ways than one it was quite useless to dwell on George Keene's unfortunate death. No doubt Rose, if she knew all, would judge Gwen very harshly, and not only Gwen, but those who, knowing what they did, went on as if nothing had happened; but Rose Tweedie, the fates be praised, was not his judge.

And yet when he passed the window of her room on his way to his own, she was in sober truth sitting in judgment on the figure she saw for a second between the draped curtains. He had been over as usual to Mrs. Boynton's--to the woman who had been the last to see George Keene, and who would say so little of that interview; the woman who no doubt was to blame if, as her father said, George had run into debt, and gambled, and lost his head. Lewis must know all this, perhaps more, yet he went on approvingly. By and by he would marry this woman--for they were engaged, of course, even now. Was not that enough to make any one unhappy who cared for him as she cared? Rose leant forward over the book her eyes were studying, and tried hard to bend her mind also to its consideration.

Despite these thoughts she received Mrs. Boynton on the next day without a sign of disapproval; for Rose, like most unmarried girls at the head of a house, was intensely proud of her position. In society, if she did not care to speak to Gwen, she would not speak; if she did not care to have her in the house she would not ask her; but if she came, as she did now, uninvited, she was nothing more nor less than a guest to be treated as a guest should be treated. Perhaps Lewis Gordon had an inkling as to the cause of her graciousness, but Colonel Tweedie saw nothing but a renewal of those amenities the loss of which he had helplessly deplored during the past fortnight. It had put him out terribly, and left him completely puzzled as to its cause. Certainly not to any change in his mind, for the coolness had checked a steadily growing conviction that he would not only like, but that he also ought, to ask Mrs. Boynton to marry him. Rose was too much alone; she brooded, as the former had kindly pointed out, over life, and fancied herself in love with subordinates. She was too sensible for that sort of thing to be real, but the constant companionship of a woman of the world was a necessity to a young girl. It is surprising how many second marriages are inspired by sensible considerations; still more surprising why such prudence should then be thought virtuous, moral, blameless, yet be deemed *anathema maranatha* in first marriages. There are some things which, as Dundreary said, 'no fellow can find out,' and one is the curious ethical code which has quite obscured the real issues of marriage, and made it possible for quick-witted husbands and wives to quarrel desperately with each other about things that have nothing to do with the tie between them. Colonel Tweedie, however, treated his secondary reasons with the greatest respect, and beamed pompously round the luncheon table as he announced his infinite regret that the duties of his responsible position made it necessary for him to leave such pleasant company sooner than he would otherwise have done. Mrs. Boynton, however, would readily understand that Councils of State were paramount to the public servant. Whereupon Gwen, after her fashion, took the edge off his anguish by saying that she also had to be at home early, seeing she had promised to interview some dreadful Madrassee creature who had been recommended to her as an ayah.

'Why did you send old Fuzli away?' asked Rose suddenly. They had risen as they were speaking, and she had been standing by the window listening with a certain weariness in her face to her father's ornate regrets.

'The old reason, "*I do not like thee, Dr. Fell,*"' laughed Gwen. 'I suppose it is very illogical--therefore, as Lewis would say, very womanly!--but I can't help disliking my world by instinct.'

'That is monstrously unkind,' broke in the Colonel, eager as a boy over the opportunity, 'when your world can't help doing the reverse.' There is something very satisfactory apparently in a compliment to the person who makes it, and the Colonel felt and looked quite lighthearted over his.

'When you have got rid of us all, Miss Tweedie,' said Lewis Gordon in a low tone which yet covered Gwen's little laugh, 'you should go out and have a jolly ride. I'm not using Bronzewing--she frets at waiting--so she is at your service, if you care----' he paused in quick surprise--

Such a very little thing upsets a woman's balance at times; and Bronzewing had been the one subject over which she and Lewis had never quarrelled since the day of his accident. It was foolish, but the look on her face made him turn hastily from the window to his cousin, and catch at the first thing likely to give the girl time to recover herself.

'I believe your ayah's coming here, Gwen; at least I see one of those little covered dhoolies descending from your house, and if there are to be *purda-nishin* women about, sir, it is time we men were going.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Lewis. It is somebody going to pay a visit to the khansaman's wife. The ayah wouldn't be *pardah*, and she wouldn't dare to come here; and if she did, I am not going to make a zenana out of Colonel Tweedie's drawing-room.'

'But you could go into Rose's sitting-room, of course,' protested the Colonel; 'couldn't she, dear?'

'But indeed, good people,' began Gwen, laughing, 'it can't----'

Just then a servant, entering stolidly, announced a woman waiting to see Mem Boynton sahib.

'I told you so,' cried Lewis joyfully, 'and, as a matter of fact, we ought to be off, sir. It will take us a good twenty minutes to the Secretariat.'

'Show the woman into the Miss Sahib's office,' cried the Colonel fussily. 'Rose, my dear----'

But the girl had taken the opportunity of escaping through the open French window.

'Please don't mind,' said Mrs. Boynton. 'I know my way about this house--at any rate I ought to, seeing how hospitable and good you have been always. Good-bye. I hope your interview will prove more pleasant than mine is likely to be.'

Their ponies were waiting, and she stayed to see them start and give a parting nod as they rounded the last visible turn of the path leading to the Mall. Gwen always added these pleasant friendly touches to the bareness and business of life. They came to her by instinct, and she herself felt cold and cheerless without them.

Then, very well satisfied with herself, she crossed the long matted passage which ran from end to end of the house, separating the portion Colonel Tweedie reserved for his own use from that occupied by the office. Here, beside her father's private room, was Rose's little study, and beyond that again Lewis Gordon's quarters and the big glazed verandah where the clerks sat designing. It was quite a small room, and, as Mrs. Boynton entered it, seemed to her over full of perfume, possibly from the vase full of wild turk's-cap lilies on the table. The window was shut too, and Gwen as she made her way to the most comfortable chair, with scarcely a glance at the white-robed figure standing in the shadow of the curtains, gave a quick yet languid order to set the glazed doors wide open.

'They are best shut if the Huzoor does not mind. I have that to say which requires caution.'

Those round, suave tones, with almost the nightingale thrill in them belonged to no ayah, surely! Gwen looked round hastily. That was no ayah's figure either, tall, supple, unabashed. Instinctively the Englishwoman stood up and confronted her visitor, more curious than alarmed. Even to that ignorance of native life which is so typical of the mem-sahib--an ignorance not altogether to be deprecated--the woman's trade was unmistakable. That was writ large in the trimness and cleanliness, the spotless white, the chaplets of flowers, the scent of musk and ambergis filling the room; all the more reason for surprise at her presence there. Yet, even so, curiosity outweighed indignation and resentment in Gwen's cold questioning.

'Who are you? What do you want?'

The answer came quick, so quickly that it left the hearer with that breathless sense of pained relief that the worst is over, which comes with the clean sharp cut of a surgeon's knife.

'I am Chandni of Delhi. I want the Hodinuggur pearls which the Huzoor took out of the Ayodhya pot.'

There was no mincing of the matter here; none of that beating about the bush which, as a rule, Gwen loved. Yet the directness did not displease her; it seemed to rouse in her a novel combativeness, taking form in similar effrontery and cool assertion.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' she said indifferently, 'and I don't want you. Go!'

Her Hindustani, though limited, was of the imperative order and suited the occasion; yet it evoked one of Chandni's shrill mocking laughs.

'The mem sahiba mistakes. She is not as I am, a daughter of the bazaars, and if it comes to words Chandni hath two to her one. So I come quietly to ask reasonably for my rights; not to dispute after the manner of my kind. There is no need to tell the mem sahiba the story. She remembers it perfectly. She knows it all as well as I. But this she does not know: The pearls are mine, and I will have them back, or their price in revenge.'

'I think you are mad!' cried Gwen more hastily. 'Go! go instantly, or I will call the servants.'

'That were not wise! Lo! I know all about the papers of safety, which Manohar Lal gave in exchange for the little sahib's rupees. But the pearls went not once, but twice.'

'Twice!' The involuntary echo had a surprise in it which angered the courtesan.

'Yes, twice! The mem knows that as well as I do. The Ayodhya pot----'

'Was stolen from me in the palace,' put in Gwen; 'you stole it, I dare say.'

Again Chandni laughed. 'If I did, what then? The mem got it again and sent it back through the post for more pearls. But we did not send it thus; we sent it by the little sahib, who gave it to the mem, and she sent the key in return. The papers are about the first pearls. These are the second, and there is no safety paper about them.'

'It is not true!--it is a lie--he never took them--he never gave them to me,' cried Gwen, her courage, oddly enough, falling before what was to her an absolutely novel and unfounded accusation. 'I will not listen! Go! or I will call.'

Chandni took a step nearer, lowering her voice. 'What! wouldst let the truth be known; when thou canst conceal it--for ever! Give me the pearls and no one shall know--no one shall cast dirt on the mem, and on the little sahib--no one shall know how he took the bribes for you--no one shall know thou didst beguile him as men are beguiled.'

'I--I did not--it is a lie, I----' faltered Gwen, falling back till Chandni's hand closed like a vice on her wrist.

'Wah! What use to deny it to me? Do I not know the trick? A word, a look, no more. What! do men send bullets through their hearts as Keene sahib did for no cause? Ari, sister! we know better.'

The jeering comradeship was too much for caution even though the story of poor George's death passed by her as a wanton lie. Gwen, struggling madly, gave one scream after another for help, and, breaking from her persecutor, turned to fly. At the same moment Rose, who had been into her father's study for a book, burst through the door and stood bewildered at the scene.

'Send her away! She tells lies--lies about me and George--lies about everything. Oh! have her sent away, Rose. Please send her away.'

The girl, clasping the hands with which Gwen clung to her, turned on the intruder angrily, and an indescribable hardness and contempt came to her face, as she took in the meaning of the figure and its dress.

'How dare you come here? Go this instant! Put on your veil, hide yourself, and go! Impertinent! Shameless!'

There was no answering laugh now. 'The Huzoor speaks truth,' replied the courtesan quietly. 'I have no business here. I came but to see the mem, bethinking me she might listen better in the house of those who were friends to the little sahib----'

But Gwen's immediate terror had passed, leaving her face to face with future fears.

'Don't listen, Rose!' she interrupted in English. 'You should never listen to what women of that sort say about any one. She frightened me at first with her lies, but the wisest plan is to send her away. I'll call a servant.'

Chandni, listening to the quick whisper, smiled.

'The mem sahiba wants silence,' she said, nodding her head; but silence is ever unsafe unless tongues are tied. And mine will wag if not here, elsewhere, unless I get the Ayodhya pot.'

Rose gave a quick exclamation, but Gwen's hand was on her arm, her voice full of passionate entreaty.

'Don't, Rose! don't speak to her. I can tell you all. It is all lies; some rigmarole declaring that after the pot had been stolen at Hodinuggur it was sent back to me here at Simla, and that I returned it again. There isn't a word of truth in it; I

never----'

But the girl set aside her detaining hand with an impatient gesture, and crossed to where Chandni stood watching them.

'You have made a mistake,' came the clear unfaltering voice. 'The Ayodhya pot was not sent to the mem sahiba, it was sent to me; and it was I who returned it. What then?'

The frank admission brought a curiously similar expression to those two listening faces; it seemed to leave both, abashed, uncertain, so that Rose had to repeat her clear question before it gained reply.

'What then?' echoed the courtesan at last, somewhat sulkily. 'How can I tell if this be so; and if it be so, how can I tell what came? Only this I do know: the pot went to Keene sahib the day he left. He gave it to some one. Let that some one answer. I care not who 'tis, so I have my pearls that were hidden in the pot.'

'Pearls! There were no pearls in it when it came to me,' cried Rose quickly; then remembering the jagged edge of clay she had noticed inside, she turned to Gwen: 'Did you notice anything like a false bottom when you had it before?'

The face into which she looked paled. 'You don't understand!' said Gwen petulantly; 'the woman says that these pearls were put there after it was stolen, so how could I notice anything when I tell you I never saw, never heard of it again? I told the woman so just now. I will tell her again before you! then I must, I will have her sent away, she has no business here.'

But Chandni's recklessness had grown. 'I care not who has them. See! there are three of us here in this room who have handled the pot. Let her who hath it and its hoard speak truth, and save the little sahib. For he had it, sure enough; of that there is proof.'

'Three of us!' repeated Rose absently, as if struck by a thought. Then obeying a sudden impulse, she went over to a portfolio standing in one corner of the room. 'You mistake,' she continued, her eyes full on the courtesan. 'There are not three, but four of us. Look! Keene sahib painted that.'

Chandni fell back, averting her face from the portrait of Azizan, which Rose placed against an easel on the table.

'The evil eye! the evil eye! God save us from the witch,' she muttered, thrusting out her right hand in that two-fingered gesture which is used against a baleful glance in both East and West. But Gwen pressing closer looked at the picture with a dawning light of relieved comprehension in her face.

'Did he paint that--how pretty it is! And it explains--it explains--a--a great deal. He gave her the pot, I suppose-- Well! it is a pity, but one ought not to be----'

'Ought not to be what?' interrupted Rose fiercely, with a fine scorn in her face, scarcely less concealed than the contempt with which she turned to the other woman.

'You both seem to know or understand this picture better than I do,' she said superbly. 'Perhaps you can tell me whom it represents?'

'My dear Rose,' expostulated Gwen, aside; 'don't for pity's sake ask that creature. What would your father say if he knew? You may mix yourself up----'

'Whose picture is it, I ask?' repeated Rose, unheeding. Then in the silence of Chandni's smile, and Gwen's frown, she turned passionately to the portrait itself. 'Why don't you speak and shame them? You look as if you could tell the truth, and if he made you so, it was true!' The very vehemence of her own fanciful appeal imposed on her, and she paused as if waiting a reply. It came with a laugh from Chandni.

'She was another of the little sahib's friends. The miss saith true. There are three of them here. Which will give back the pearls and save him?'

'Save him from what?' cried Rose, disregarding Gwen's appeals for her to leave the mad woman to the servants. 'What has Keene sahib done that you can dare to threaten?'

The girl's bitter contempt roused all Chandni's savageness. After all she was the mistress, and this girl, despite her courage, in her power too; and what is more she should learn it.

'From what? from the shame which comes to the sahib-logue when their pretence of honesty is found out--from the shame of having friends--the shame of taking jewels for those friends--the shame of being untrue to salt--Ask the mem how 'tis done, she knows--the shame of sending the key of the sluice-gate so that the water----'

Her voice had risen with each sentence; now it ended in a gasp and a gurgle.

'Open the door, please,' said Rose to Mrs. Boynton, who gasped also in the intense surprise of the girl's swift action. 'Don't struggle, fool!' she went on in the same hard tone, only the dead whiteness of her face and a catch as she drew breath telling of the wild passion surging in her veins. 'I won't choke you if you hold your tongue.'

Once before Chandni had felt a girl's grip on her throat; a hot, straining grip. This was neither. It was the grip of a strong healthy hand made vigorous by constant use. Those fierce fights over bat and ball with the dead lad had had their share in the sheer muscle of her defence of him, before which Chandni's large softness gave way, leaving her not even a slandering tongue.

'Put the veil over her face, please! I won't even have it known who dared to come here!' continued the girl, forcing the woman backwards step by step till they reached the door. Then she pushed her from it magnificently. 'Now go! and tell what lies you like elsewhere.'

But her face changed as she turned when the door was closed and bolted to Gwen Boynton.

'Is it true? For God's sake tell me if there is a word of truth in it, and I will find the money.'

Gwen dissolved into helpless tears at once; tears at once of vague remorse, and a very real sense of injustice. 'True! oh, Rose, how can you ask? Of course it isn't true. I wouldn't have done it for the world. Indeed and indeed I never saw the Ayodhya pot again, and I don't believe George did. He was the soul of honour, and so good--so good to me. It is all wicked, wicked lies, unless, indeed, that girl--but there, I daresay she was bad like that horrid creature. Perhaps they stole the pot between them and are now trying to blackmail us.'

'Stole the pot!' repeated Rose slowly, for the first time remembering her dream on the night of the storm at Hodinuggur. 'Yes! that is possible, and yet----' She looked at Azizan's picture, and then back at Gwen, who was dabbing her eyes with a soft pocket-handkerchief. 'You are sure?' she began again.

'Of course I am quite sure,' retorted Gwen, whose remorse had vanished in grievance at this impudent attempt to amend and enlarge the text of a past incident. 'I never saw or heard of the pot again. I may be weak, I may have done things for which I am sorry in the past, but whatever you may think, my conscience is clear. And as for the sluice? Dan opened it by order; besides, there was the flood. It is all an attempt to blackmail me, and I won't be blackmailed. I have done nothing they can take hold of, nothing--nothing.'

Rose gave a sigh, almost of dissatisfaction. If it really was a case of blackmailing, payment would be but a temporary relief. Perhaps, as she had also suggested, the girl in the picture was in league with Chandni. She did not look that sort either. Nor did she look as if--- Rose glanced from the pure oval of the cheek and the fine long curves of the mouth to Mrs. Boynton's tear-stained face and frowned.

'Some one has the pearls,' she said, 'and George's memory must be saved--somehow.'

## CHAPTER XXIII

'Come in!'

The words were given in an impatient tone, for Lewis Gordon was busy, and he hated being disturbed; especially when, as now, he had taken his coat off, literally as well as figuratively, before a difficult file.

The garment hung on the back of his chair, which, in obedience to a fad of his, was the only one in the office; a second one, he declared, being easily sent for if required, while its absence shortened many a trivial interruption. Otherwise it was a comfortable enough room, with a large French window set wide on a magnificent view of the serrated snows resting on the wall of blue distance, and framed by the curved tops of a forest of young deodars. The day was bright as a morning in the rainy season can be; bright by very contrast between the brilliant lights and shadows in earth and sky; bright as a rain-cloud itself when the sun shines on it. A fresh breeze came in with Rose Tweedie through the opening door and blew some papers off the table.

'I beg your pardon,' came in duet as Lewis fumbled blindly for his coat; his eye-glass having deserted him in the surprise, after the manner of eye-glasses. As he did so, he felt injured. Not that he was such a crass idiot as to be outraged by a pair of shirt sleeves in himself or others. But he knew quite well that no man can look dignified, when struggling, even into a lounge-coat, and he liked to be dignified, especially with Rose Tweedie. His irritation, however, hid itself under a different cloak; that is to say, annoyance at a most unusual intrusion. Perhaps she read the expression of it in his face, for her first words were an excuse.

'I came here--to your office, I mean--because I want to ask you something, and I didn't want you to feel hampered--not as a friend, you know.' Her eyes met his in confidence of being understood so far, at any rate, and he gave rather a stiff little bow.

'You are very welcome. Won't you take a chair--the chair, perhaps I ought to say? I've been sitting all the morning, and shall be glad of a change; unless you require some time. If so, I will send----'

'No, thanks, I prefer standing also,' she interrupted, with a quick flush. 'I only wanted to ask you a question. It is about George Keene.'

'Yes----' he replied coldly, unsympathetically; and yet he was noting her anxious eyes and haggard face with a sort of angry wonder why she should make herself so unhappy. Rose's fingers held nervously to the edge of the table by which she stood.

'Have you any reason--I mean, is there officially any reason to suppose that the Hodinuggur sluice was opened before the flood came down, or before Mr. Fitzgerald?'

She paused with her eyes on Lewis's face. She had lain awake almost all the night thinking of Chandni's threats and hints, and with clear sight had seen that their worth or unworth depended largely upon the official report of what had actually happened at Hodinuggur. To her father she could not go without danger from his want of judgment; there remained Lewis, who was always just, always to be trusted in such matters.

His heart gave quite a throb of dismayed surprise at her question, and forced him by contraries into still greater chilliness of manner.

'I'm afraid I can't quite see your right to ask me such a question--as yet. Perhaps if you could give me a reason----'

'Oh yes! I can give you a reason,' she interrupted, with a ring of scorn in her voice, 'though I think you might credit me with a good one where George is concerned, surely? Only if I have to tell, you had better send for the chair. I thought, perhaps, you would understand, for once.'

The bitterness of her tone did not escape him, and accentuated his annoyance. As he handed her the chair and leant negligently against the table, his hands behind him, he told himself that he was in for *mauvais quart d'heure* with this girl. Man-like she would expect to know all, womanlike she would expect sentiment to outweigh official integrity. These thoughts did not serve to soften his heart towards the dead lad even at the beginning, and as her story unfolded itself, his face grew sterner and sterner. Hers lightened. It was an infinite relief to have his advice--his help, and she told

him so frankly, even while she appealed for it.

'You needn't even answer my question, Mr. Gordon,' she went on earnestly. 'You will know so much better than I do what had best be done. I thought of going to see the woman myself----'

'You didn't go, I hope?' put in Lewis hastily.

'No! I made up my mind to ask you first. You see, if there is no truth in all this--no truth whatever----'

'That is unlikely, I warn you,' interrupted Lewis. 'These women Really, Miss Tweedie, if you follow my advice--much as it may pain you at the time--you will leave this business alone, absolutely alone. It is not one with which--excuse me for even alluding to the fact--a girl such as you are should meddle. Unfortunately, we men have to face these things, and they are not pleasant, even for us.'

'You speak as if you thought George was guilty,' said Rose hotly. 'What right have you to do that?'

'I may have more right than you suspect. Believe me, Miss Tweedie, I am heartily sorry--especially for you; and, so far as is compatible with the facts, I will do my best to avoid official *esclandre* should this matter really crop up. In the meantime, I am afraid I must decline to interfere in what Mrs. Boynton, you tell me, stigmatised as an impudent attempt at blackmailing. She has her faults, no doubt, like everybody else; but she has, excuse me for saying so, more knowledge of the world than you have. In fact, you could scarcely do better than take her advice on this point.'

The girl, with a frown on her face, rose from her seat slowly.

'Then you refuse to find out the truth? You are content to let this suspicion lie upon--upon me and upon your cousin?'

Lewis smiled. 'That is rather far-fetched, Miss Tweedie, surely. The idea of suspicion with you is simply absurd; and as for Gwen! Well, I know you are ready to admit she has her faults; but she has called this claim impudent blackmailing, and you must excuse me if I incline to believe her.'

'And for George Keene? Do you suspect him? Are you going to allow his memory to be smirched?'

'I have told you I will do my best. For the rest, he must take the consequence of his own acts, I'm afraid. Indeed, I am sorry, very sorry,' he added hastily, impelled to it by the look on Rose Tweedie's face. It had grown ashen pale, yet she stood steadily before him, her eyes on his unflinchingly.

'Then there is truth in it? You had better tell me. It would be kinder to tell me--if you can.'

Perhaps, after all, it would. Perhaps, if this scandal had to come to light, it would be better she should be prepared. Even if it did not, was it not wiser she should know the real truth about George Keene, and so be able to judge him fairly? Not a bad boy, of course. That talk of bribery was no doubt false, and he had done no more in other ways than hundreds of boys in a like position. Even at Simla he had only run wild a bit, and for that he was not the only one responsible. Still, when all was said and done, he had shot himself, and that alone made the task of whitewashing him an impossibility if these women chose revenge.

'Yes! there is some truth in it,' he said gravely. 'If you will sit down again, I will tell you everything I know, and then you can judge for yourself. I should like you to understand, however, that in spite of appearances, I don't believe George lent himself to anything more than--what you would--not you, perhaps--but most of us would expect in a young fellow of his age and his position. Life is--is rather intoxicating to--to some of us.'

So, leaning against the table, he told her the truth, trying to do his task calmly and kindly, yet beset by a certain impatience at the still figure seated in his office chair, its elbows among his files, the coils of its beautiful hair showing beyond the hands in which the face was hidden. What business had it there? What business had the thought of its pain to come so close to him? closer even than his own reason, his own sense of justice?

'And you have known that he shot himself from the beginning?' she asked, raising her head suddenly to look him full in the face. He assented with a distinct self-complacency.

'Then what did you think made him do it? What did you think then--before you knew anything about the death or the opening of the gates?'

The self-complacency vanished. 'There are many reasons or want of reasons, for that sort of thing, Miss Tweedie,' he said evasively. 'I did not--I mean it was impossible to say absolutely, and that is why I acquiesced in Fitzgerald's plan. It was more convenient to every one concerned.'

'Much more convenient,' echoed Rose sharply. 'And you have known this all the time, and not----' she broke off, as if incredulous of her own half-uttered thought.

'Certainly, I have known it, and we would have kept the secret too, Fitzgerald and I, but for this unfortunate business,' he retorted, and his tone was not pleasant.

'Ah! *he* is different; *he* did not know! *he* thought George had done it for his sake, to screen him. But you? What did you believe?' The girl's very voice was a challenge.

'I must say, Miss Tweedie, that I scarcely see how my belief affects the question; or, pardon me, what it matters to you,' he replied, taking refuge once more in his indifference.

'Do you not? Then I do. Not that it matters now,' she added in sudden passion, 'for I will have my own way in the future. If you won't help me, I can't help that; but I will have the truth. I will go down to this woman in the bazaar and make her tell me. Whether her story is a lie or not, there shall be no more concealment. I will not have it.'

'And George Keene's memory?' he suggested, angered almost beyond his self-control by her unmistakable defiance. 'My advice is unwelcome, of course, but if you took it, and Mrs. Boynton's--only that is unwelcome too--you might save all scandal. I cannot say for certain that it would, but as I have told you, I would do my best. Officially even, I would do my best. That seems to be an offence also, for some reason, but I would do it as much for the sake of the Department as for the boy's. You--I know--think only of him----'

She turned upon him like lightning, carried out of herself by her scorn, by her passion.

'Of him! I was not thinking of him at all! I was thinking of you--of you only, as I always do. Why should you not know the truth? You will not care a pin whether I think of you or not. And I? I care for nothing--nothing so long as you do not blindfold yourself wilfully--so long as you are just and honest. Ah! you may think I am mad--perhaps if what you believe about men and women is true, I am--but it means everything--everything in the world to me that you should be so--just and honest; because what you are is more to me than all the world beside. That is the truth.' The last words came slowly as the fire of her passion died down; yet there was no uncertainty in them. 'I suppose I oughtn't to have said this,' she went on, turning from him to lean her elbows on the table, and rest her head on her hands wearily. 'But you won't mind, and I don't care. It can't hurt any man to know that he is loved--it can't.'

'Loved!' The word sent a thrill through the man such as he had never felt before. 'Loved!' was that what she meant? The thought broke through even his armour of surprise. He stood for an instant looking down at her, then turned slowly and walked to the window, to return, however, in a second, with quick clear steps breaking the silence of the room.

'What do you mean!--I can't believe it. What do you mean?'

His impatience would not wait for a reply in words. Her face would give it truly, that he knew, and he stooped over her, taking her by the wrists, in order to draw her hands apart. She turned to him then bravely enough.

'Rose!'

It was almost a cry, as, stooping lower still, he knelt before her, his eyes on hers incredulous, yet soft. Then suddenly, still clasping her slender wrists, he buried his face upon them on her lap, muttering--

'Oh, I am sorry!--I am sorry!'

Never since, as a child, he had said his prayers at his mother's knee, had Lewis Gordon so knelt to man or woman. And something of the child's unquestioning belief in an unselfish love came back to him, joined to a perfect passion of the man's clear-sighted remorse and regret for long years of past disbelief.

'Don't,' she said, gently bending over him; 'please don't. There is nothing for you to be sorry about--indeed, there isn't.'

Nothing to be sorry about! Once more he echoed this girl's words to himself with that strange thrill, as, recovering

his self-command, he stood straight and stiff beside her, conscious only of one vehement desire to care for and to protect her.

'What is it you want me to do?' he said at last unsteadily. 'Tell me, and I'll do it.'

Then, woman-like, she began to cry; it is a way the good ones have when they succeed in imposing their own will on those they love.

'I don't think I want you to do anything--particular,' she answered, trying to conceal her tears. 'I don't know; besides, I would much rather you did it your own way.'

If the uttermost truth could be told about a man's emotion in such scenes, as it can be regarding a woman's, it would have to be confessed that Lewis Gordon came very near to crying also over this foolish unconditional surrender on Rose Tweedie's part. For he understood the irresolution of a generous nature before its own success, and what is more, the woman's desire to give the man she loves the glory of justifying her belief in him. He felt quite a lump in his throat, and had to seek escape from the tenderness of one sex in the decision of the other; for in nine cases out of ten these are but different methods of showing the same emotion.

'I will go down and see this woman to-day; and then----' He paused, not in order to think over his next move--that undoubtedly would be to see Gwen Boynton--but to overcome a dislike to mentioning her name at all which suddenly assailed him. Why, he scarcely knew, except that it seemed mean, unmanly. Rose, however, saved him from the necessity by again repeating--this time almost abjectly--that she would rather not know; that she would be quite content to leave the matter in his hands.

'Thank you,' replied Lewis, in such a very low tone that it was almost a whisper. It did not lead, however, as might have been expected, to a silence, but to a louder, more aggressive gratitude. 'I have to thank you--for many things. I won't affect to ignore or set aside what--what you did me the honour of telling me just now. That would be sheer impertinence on my----'

Now, when he had got so far in a perfectly admirable sentiment, calculated to soothe both her feelings and his, why he should suddenly have found his hands in hers again, his heart full of an unpremeditated assertion that he was glad she loved him, cannot be explained logically; but so it was. Yet before the scared look in her eyes his own fell, he loosened his clasp, and the appeal died from his lips. There was no place for him or his questionings in her avowal. That hedged itself about from intrusion with a dignity he recognised. So what remained, save to pass on with as much of the same quality as he could compass to the work assigned to him.

'I will come in and tell you what I have done this afternoon about five o'clock,' he said quietly; 'that is, if it is convenient.'

'Quite, thank you.'

The baldest, most conventional of tones on both sides. The baldest, most convenient holding open of the door for her to pass out--to pass out from a scene that would linger in his memory; in nothing else. The descent to normal diapason comes sooner or later, no matter how highly strung the instrument may be to begin with, and melodrama fades into padding. In real life it generally leaves some of the actors dissatisfied with the way the scene has played. Lewis Gordon felt this distinctly as he was left looking at his own chair, as if he still saw a girl's figure seated there, her elbows resting on the litter of official papers, and the great coils of her burnished hair showing beyond the hands which hid her face.

'It can't hurt any man to know that he is loved.'

She had said so; but she was wrong. It did hurt confoundedly. So that was what she meant by love, was it?---

If any of the trivial interruptions which Lewis Gordon so much dreaded had come during the following five minutes, they would have found the coveted chair vacant, though the owner's face was buried in his hands among the files of memorandums and reports. Apparently he gained little consolation from them, for when he resumed work he looked about as upset and disordered as a tidy man can do when he is cool and properly clothed. Nor did they gain much from him during the next hour, which ticked away remorselessly from the chronometer by which Lewis loved to map out his day. He thrust them aside at last impatiently, and ordered his pony, thinking that may be when he had been through that visit to the bazaar he might feel less of a fool, and not quite so much depolarised. And yet she had said there was nothing to regret,--that he would not care,--that it would not matter to him if she thought of him or not!

It was a queer world! He set his teeth over it as he rode reluctantly between the shingled arcades of the big bazaar, and then through a narrow paved alley, pitching, as it were, sheer down into the blue mists of the valley below; and so on to the balconied house where, from inquiries at the Kotwali, he learned that Chandni was lodging. The task before him was a disagreeable one, and he swore inwardly as he thought that but for his abject capitulation Rose would have attempted it herself. Rose! of all people. He began to understand that the feminine world could not be divided into two classes, since there was a third composed of one specimen. As he went on into the house the very cleanliness and order, contrasting so sharply with the dirt of surrounding respectability, struck him offensively on the girl's behalf, the giggling in the lower storey gave him a vicarious shock, and the obsequiousness of his introduction into the higher one, where Chandni sat secluded, actually made his cheek burn.

'It can't hurt any man to know that he is loved.'

He set aside the haunting words angrily, and began his task so soon as the patchwork drapery at the door fell behind him, leaving him face to face with white-robed salaaming grace.

'See here, my sister, this is for the truth. 'Tis not often thy sort are asked for it; but I ask nothing else. I will take nothing else.'

Checked thus in her languid welcome to the unknown guest, Chandni looked distastefully at the hundred-rupee note thrust into her hand, then at the giver; though both were to her liking. The latter she recognised instantly, having seen him among the party at Hodinuggur. So her seed of slander had taken root already.

'My lord shall have that which he requires, surely. Wherefore else are there such as I?'

The cynical truth of her answer showed him her wit at once, and he acknowledged it frankly when, half an hour afterwards, he felt himself baffled by the calm simplicity of her story. Most of it he had already heard, and the rest showed still more unpleasant details to have raked up should the worst come to the worst. Azizan, he was told, had been a palace lady, with whom George had had clandestine meetings, over which he had first become mixed up with the intrigues about the water. The key of the sluice had been sent from Simla, whether by the Mem or the Miss, or the sahib himself, Chandni did not know, could not say. Was she not telling the Huzoor the bare truth she knew to be true, and nothing else?

'And how much do you want to keep all this quiet?' he asked calmly, when she had finished. It was as well to know her price, at any rate.

For an instant the immediate temptation to take the bird in the hand made the courtesan hesitate. Then she struck boldly for higher game.

'The pearls, Huzoor! The pearls, or my revenge!' This man, with the cool, refined face and the contempt which made her involuntarily remember the Miss sahib's also, affected indifference now, and would most likely offer her some paltry sum. She could afford to wait for the change which was sure to come; for she was not in the least afraid of anything Lewis could do, and, without being absolutely insolent, took care to show him the fact as she lolled about at her ease, chewing betel ostentatiously. She had nothing to gain here by affecting delicacy, so he might see her at her coarsest and worst; it contrasted better with his brains.

The result being that Lewis Gordon came into Gwen's Boynton's drawing-room for his next interview looking depressed; partly because he had been riding through a tepid shower-bath. For recurring rain had washed away the bright promises of the morning and was falling drearily over the rank, dank grasses and beating down the fringes of delicate ferns growing upon the dripping branches of the oak trees, until they lost shape and became nothing but a green outline against the grey mist.

Within, however, by the light of a blazing pine-wood fire, Mrs. Boynton looked bright yet soft, like a pastel painting, or a figure seen in a looking-glass; for she soon recovered from her emotions, and took pains to hide their effects even from herself. So the fact that she had lain awake half the night wondering if by chance Chandni's impudent lies had been prompted by any flaw in the chain-armour of security which George and the flood had forged for her, did not show in her face. For they were lies; even that tale of the dear lad's death, which had given her such a shock at the time, was nothing but the vile woman's wicked, cruel invention. Rose had evidently heard nothing and still knew nothing of it; besides, Dan did not know, and even if he had wished to keep the pain of such knowledge from her, Lewis, with his jealous blame, would have been sure to point a moral; a pointless moral at best, since George could have had no cause for despair. Had not the flood come to end even his anxiety? unless, indeed, there was any truth in the tale about the portrait. Yet why should truth be supposed in one incident when causeless wicked lying was evident

in all the others? No; it was an impudent attempt at extortion, and must be met by denial. Therein lay safety, both for her and for poor George Keene's memory, since the conspirators would never face the evidence of those papers which they knew she held. So, as her cousin came in she greeted him with a smile changing to sweet concern at his ill looks.

'I have a headache,' he replied curtly. 'No wonder; the smells and general abominations of the bazaar are enough to kill one, and I had to go down there. Besides, I'm damp, and I've had no lunch. Isn't that a long enough catalogue of ills? No, thanks; don't order anything for me. I'd rather have a cup of tea by and by.'

It was the worst thing for him, he knew that. Nothing but a quiet cigar and a man's drink would have restored his balance. But he told himself captiously that he had been in a melodramatic atmosphere all the morning, and might as well go through with it to the bitter end. He felt demoralised, and so, almost out of contrariety, put himself at a further disadvantage by rushing at his fence.

'Gwen,' he began abruptly, 'I've come to ask you for the truth.' He did not hand her a bank-note as he had to the other woman; yet the thought had crossed his mind bitterly that one of sufficient value might be useful. He had set it aside, of course, as utterly unworthy since, in common justice, he had no more right to prejudice Gwen's implication than he had to prejudice Rose Tweedie's. There was, no doubt, the fact of George Keene's suicide against the one; but that was no new thing. She had been judged on that count before, and he had decided to save her from the pain of knowing it; to that decision, also, he meant to keep if it were possible.

Gwen's heart gave a great throb; she understood in an instant that the crisis had come sooner than she expected. Yet she was prepared for it.

'I suppose Rose Tweedie'--she began coldly.

'Yes; Rose Tweedie asked my advice, and I've been down to that woman in the bazaar. She sticks to her story. So now I have come to you----'

'If you had come to me first, Lewis,' she interrupted with a vibration of real anger in her voice, 'I would have warned you not to waste your time in playing Don Quixote at Rose Tweedie's bidding. The woman is an impostor, and should be treated as such. I would have sent the police after her yesterday, had I thought it wise to take even so much notice of her lies. And now you have been to see her! It is too foolish--too annoying! And all because Rose went crying to you, I suppose, about her lover. Her lover, indeed! You are very soft-hearted, Lewis! Perhaps some day your desire to console will lead you into taking his place.'

He stared at her; that sort of thing being so unlike Gwen's usual sweetness; but his surprise did not equal his confusion, while his common-sense showed him her possible wisdom.

'Miss Tweedie did not cry over her lover, I assure you, he began, feeling in very truth that the young lady in question had meted out more blame than sympathy; and I did not choose to allow such tales of you to pass unnoticed.'

'So you listened to them again?' retorted Gwen in rising anger, which she wilfully exaggerated. 'Listened to what a common woman in the bazaar had to say of me! Really, I am obliged to you, Lewis! And she, I suppose, told you that I had stolen the pearls and the pot, and then taken it and a fresh bribe from poor George? Well, since you have come to me at last for the truth, I tell you, as I told Rose--who, perhaps, did not repeat it--that I have never seen the thing since the night of the storm at Hodinuggur. So I have less to do with it than she, since she confesses it was sent to her, and that she sent it back on the sly. Did she tell you that? and have you been asking her for the truth also? Or am I the only one who has to be questioned like that creature in the bazaar.'

Gwen had never looked better than she did at that moment, with the unwonted fire of real indignation lighting up her face, and Lewis Gordon felt vexed that it awoke no thrill in him. Was he really allowing Rose Tweedie's open mistrust to bias him? The idea made his reply more gentle than it might otherwise have been.

'Perhaps you are right to be angry with me,' he said quietly. 'I beg your pardon, if I have hurt you; but, indeed, it seemed best to me at the time. Perhaps, as you say, it would have been better to wait a while; until, for instance, I can consult with Fitzgerald. I wired him today to come up on three days' urgent private business. He knows a lot.'

Gwen gave an odd sort of laugh, not unlike a sob, and her face softened.

'I'm glad he is coming,' she cried passionately; 'very glad. He always understands, and he knows.' Yes! he knew

and trusted her--he would stand by her even if he knew that one fatal mistake. Whereas Lewis would treat her as a Magdalen; as if she, Gwen Boynton, were a fit subject for a penitentiary!

'Yes,' she repeated slowly, 'I am glad he is coming. You did the right thing there, Lewis, at any rate.'

So, with this small consolation, he had to make his way back to give in his report to the girl who had told him that she loved him. Another delicate task, and he felt himself detestably awkward over it, the more so because Rose herself met him as if nothing unusual had occurred.

'Well,' she said eagerly, 'what news?'

He told her briefly that there was none. He had had three versions of truth--her own, Chandni's, and Mrs. Boynton's--and there seemed nothing to be done save wait for Dan's arrival. He might be able to throw some light on the subject--he was the last person, at any rate, who was likely to do so.

'You forget the girl--the girl of the portrait, I mean,' suggested Rose quickly. Lewis frowned.

'She disappeared, they say, just before we reached Hodinuggur. I should like, by the way, to see the picture, if you don't mind.'

He stood looking at it in silence for some time.

'And that, you say, was the face of your dream?' he asked at last.

'The face, the dress, the pot clasped so to her breast. I seem to grow more sure of it every hour. And I am certain now it was she who said, "I am Azizan."'

'That sort of certainty grows upon one unconsciously,' he replied, after another pause. 'I confess it is odd; but you can hardly believe it really was the potter's daughter! She has been dead these sixteen years. You think it was her ghost, perhaps; but did George paint the ghost?'

Rose stood silent, her hands clasped tightly.

'Who knows?' she said slowly. 'One knows so little. When I think of it all--of that strange old man with his refrain, "We come and go--we come and go," I seem to feel that odd, uncanny sense of helplessness which one has during a storm at sea, when you realise that the waves are not moving on at all, but rise and fall, rise and fall for ever in the same place. It is the ship which drifts within their power, giving them their wrecker's chance once more. And now--you will say that I am superstitious; but I almost regret that you should bring Mr. Fitzgerald into this business at all. You remember the potter's measure? Think of it, and how poor George himself----'

She paused, her eyes full of tears.

Lewis, watching her, told himself he would never understand women-folk. Here was a girl, overflowing with fanciful sentiment in some ways, who yet apparently had none to spare for the one subject round which sentiment was supposed to cling--love and marriage. In addition, here were two women, both of whom he desired to help, and yet they were at daggers-drawing about the best method of giving that aid. If he pleased one, he displeased the other; and anyhow, he got no comfort out of either.

## CHAPTER XXIV

'Nay! thou hast given me enough, oh Mizra sahib. More than a free woman cares to have,' said Chandni, with a shrug of her massive shoulders. 'Thou hadst thy chance to pay me fair.'

Dalel Beg, clad in his European clothes, and perched in all the isolation of an esteemed visitor in the cane-bottomed chair of state, felt he would like to be on a level with those jeering lips as he used to be at Hodinuggur. Not for the sake of desire only, or for the sake of revenge, but for a mixture of both. As usual, the very audacity of her wickedness fascinated him, yet, now that wickedness was directed against himself he could have strangled her for it.

'Pay thee! How can I pay thee,' he whimpered, 'when those low-caste white swindlers with whom I betted will not pay what I have won? When those white devils of women turn the place into a museum until every Parsee in the bazaar threatens to summon me to court?'

It was not much more than a week since he had defied Chandni in the presence of the said white devils; but the interval had not been pleasant. Beatrice Elflida Norma's mamma knew all about Chandni's long years of hold on the Mizra Sahib, and he was totally unaccustomed to the nagging of wifely jealousy. Besides, something had happened which had opened his eyes to the danger of allowing the courtesan to have a free hand. A proposal had been made by the Canal Department to allow water to run permanently along the sluice-cut; the Rajah who owned the land to the south, having spent a whole season at Simla in order to work the oracle, and the flood having come opportunely as a warning to the experts that it might be wise to provide a more satisfactory outlet for the surplus water. Now, in this case, Hodinuggur, which, being for the most part barren desert, would benefit but little by the plan, might by judicious application of the screw make the Rajah pay for its consent, as a considerable portion of its best land would have to be taken up for various works. This sort of secret intrigue, these almost endless ramifications of rights and dues, underlie the simplest transactions in India, and are recognised by its people as an integral part of administration. Besides, Hodinuggur itself, in lieu of compensation for damage done--which for various reasons it had not yet claimed, one being a delay on the part of the Rajah in paying the promised fee for the opening of the sluice--might manage by the same judicious diplomacy to secure some trifling hold on the water-supply; something, in short, which might be used as a screw for the extortion of a perpetual, if small revenue. But for this, silence as to the past was necessary. Such considerations, to European ears, may seem almost too fine-drawn to be worth notice; but to Dalel Beg and Chandni they were quite the reverse, for he came from a long line of courtiers born and bred in such intrigues; men whose trade had passed with the corrupt courts of other days, while the memory of it survived in their title. Diwans of Hodinuggur; not Nawabs or Nizams, but Diwans, that is, in other words, prime minister. And she? Every atom of her blood came from the veins of those who for centuries had woven a still finer net of women's wit around the intrigues of their protectors. It is this extraordinary strength of heredity which, in India, makes the cheap tinkering of Western folk, who are compounded of butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers, so exasperating to those who have eyes to see. If English philanthropists would spend their motley benevolence on the poor, the diseased, and the drunken of their own country, it would be better both for it and for India, where the death-rate is no higher, drunkenness is practically unknown, and poverty is neither unhappy nor discontented.

Thus Chandni and Dalel were well matched as she lolled back in her cushions with a laugh.

'So she spends money! Lo! since thou hast married a "*vilayeti*" wife thou canst advertise, as the sahibs do, in the papers, that thou art not responsible for her debts. There is no sense in stopping half way as thou hast done. Thou shouldst have gone to a "mission" and been baptized instead of making that half-caste girl repeat the "*Kulma*" on promise that thou wouldst not in future claim the right of the faithful to other women. Yea! yea! I know the trick.'

'If I have,' muttered Dalel, vexed yet pleased at her boldness, her shrewdness, 'such promises are easily broken. Divorce is easy.'

'If thou hast money to pay the dower to her people--not when thou hast none! Lo! 'tis a mistake to try new ways of wickedness instead of keeping to the old ones.'

So she dismissed him, feeling on the whole contemptuous over her adversaries so far; the Miss Sahiba's arms had been strong, for sure, but the men were worth nothing! nothing at all.

Dan Fitzgerald, dangling his long legs disconsolately from Lewis Gordon's office-table two days after, said as much himself. 'The fact is, I ought to have killed her; only I didn't feel up to it to-day, after my journey. Oh, you may smile,

Gordon!' he went on more eagerly, his face losing some of its dejection in his love of the extravagant, 'but it's true. That sort of woman doesn't belong to our civilised age; and we are absolutely at a disadvantage before her. There was I, as the mad old potter said, with a hero's measure round the chest, driven to words and threats of a policeman. I couldn't, even at the time, but think of that old sinner Zubr-ul-Zaman and what her chance would have been with him--just an order, a cry, and then silence. Sure, one feels helpless at times when one stands face to face with that old world. What's the use of strength--what's even the use of brains nowadays except to make money? There was I, with that woman, I give you my word, at the end of her tether, but 'twas the hangman's rope to me if I went a step closer, and so I didn't.'

'If *you* didn't,' remarked Lewis grimly, 'there isn't a civilised man who will; so we had better try something else. Still, unless that woman is silenced, we must face an inquiry, and then the facts of poor Keene's death must come out. By the way, Miss Tweedie knows them, but we have agreed to keep them, if possible, from my cousin. There seemed no use---

'I'm glad of that,' interrupted Dan, with a sudden quiver of his mouth. 'I should be sorry to have that memory spoilt.'

He was pacing up and down the room now, his hands in his pockets, the brightness of his face absorbed as it were by a frown.

'Gordon!' he said abruptly. 'I'd give everything I possess if I could lay my hands on that cursed pot. Not that it would satisfy the horse-leech's daughter unless it contained the pearls--which isn't likely, for I believe the whole story to be a myth. But the thought that it is somewhere visible, palpable to the meanest fool on God's earth, is maddening. Or even if we could say to that she-devil, "do your worst." Oh! why didn't you send that wire sooner, and save poor George from his needless death?'

'Why didn't you tell the truth about it at first? you might as well ask that. It would have been better, as it turns out, if you had; but who can tell? As it is, I'm quite ready, as I told you before, to burke everything I can, in conscience; but, so far as I can see, it will do no good. If that woman breaks silence, the main facts must come to light.'

'I wish I had killed her,' said Dan regretfully.

'And I wish she were dead,' replied Lewis cynically, 'that is the difference between us. You are active, I'm passive, but we don't either of us seem to be of much use.'

That was the honest truth, and they had to confess as much to Gwen Boynton that afternoon. She looked a little haggard as she listened even while she protested bravely that in her opinion the vile creature would never dare to put her lies to the proof. So they sat and played at cross purposes; for she could not tell them of the papers she held in absolute disproof of what would be the first accusation, and they wished if possible to save her from the knowledge of George Keene's suicide. Perhaps if they had set their own feelings aside and told her the truth, she might even then have confessed her lion's share in the blame. But only perhaps; for she was a clever woman, capable of seeing that her confession could do no good now, and that she had, as it were, lost her right to save poor George from suspicion. Besides, she had brought herself to believe in the duty of denial; for, like many another woman, she required a really virtuous motive before she could do a really wrong thing; in sober fact--even in her worst aberrations from the truth--never losing hold of a fixed desire to be amiable and estimable. To this self-deception, as was natural, Lewis Gordon's half-hearted belief was gall and wormwood, while Dan's wholesale confidence was balm indeed. She could not refrain from telling him so when the former, pleading stress of work, left the latter alone with her beside the cosy little tea-table glittering in the firelight; for Gwen was one of those people who will never have been more comfortable in body and soul than they are on their death-beds.

'Now, don't spoil it all, dear, by wanting me to marry you to-morrow,' she said half-laughing, half-crying. 'We are all too busy for such talk, and too sad--at least I am. He was so good to me--you don't know how good. I shall break my heart if this vile creature succeeds in sullyng his memory.'

'It will not be your fault, dear, if she does; that is one comfort.'

A chance shot may hit the quarry truer than the best aim, and Gwen turned quickly towards him with a little cry.

'Dan! you will prevent it, won't you? You are so clever, and, really, it is for my sake as well as for his. For my sake you will, won't you?'

'I do everything for your sake--you know that,' he answered simply.

Gwen stared at him as if she had seen a ghost. Perhaps she did; the ghost of a dead boy who had said those very words to her in that very room not a month ago.

'Gwen! what is it?' came Dan's voice sharply, anxiously. 'What is the matter?--tell me.'

Yes! The past was repeating itself. *He* had begged her to tell him also, and in her selfishness, her fear, she had yielded, and put a needless pain into his life at its close. She would not yield again; in denial lay her duty.

'Nothing is the matter,' she echoed, 'save this--that you say we can do nothing. I do not believe it. God will never let these lies prevail--He will never let my poor lad's memory suffer--never, never!'

If her mind could have been taken to pieces and strictly analysed as she gave utterance to this burst of real feeling, it would have afforded fruitful study to a whole college of psychologists. Yet the mental condition described as 'sitting in a clothes-basket and lifting yourself up by the handles' is quite common to humanity of both sexes, though women are as a rule the greater adepts in the art. Mrs. Boynton was really a firm believer in a Providence which was bound by many promises to help the virtuous, and George, therefore, had a claim to its assistance. The fact that Providence might possibly have appointed her as its instrument was a totally different affair, and did not interfere with the confused good faith and good feeling which made her voice thrill as she went on fervently, in answer to Dan's doubtful yet admiring face.

'Oh, you mayn't think so--you perhaps don't believe as I do, Dan, in a Providence "which shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may"--you don't----'

'Don't I?' he asked, catching fire, as it were, more from his own thoughts than her words. 'Oh, Gwen! my dear, it's little you know of me, then, if you think that. Don't I see it?--who but the blind do not--in everything? Isn't it that which makes me content to go on as I'm doing? Gwen! it's because I know that it is bound to come--that sooner or later you will take my hands in yours as I take yours just now. Yes, Gwen! it's Fate--but when will it be, my dear? When will it be?'

She was never proof against this mood in the man, this tone in his voice.

'Oh, Dan!' she cried, in a petulance that was all feigned, 'didn't I say you would be asking me to marry you to-morrow if I was so rash as to tell you that you were a comfort to me? As if that had anything to do with it.'

'Sure it has everything to do with it!' replied her lover fondly. The future, in truth, gave him few fears: it was the present, with the chance of annoyance if that venomous woman remain unscotched in the bazaar, which caused him anxiety. On the other hand, it was the future over which Lewis Gordon frowned, as he sat trying to make up his mind about his own feelings, for though the present was palpably unpleasant, it seemed clear that the future would be worse, since they must face the possibility of a scandal boldly in the hopes that Chandni's story would break down; except perhaps as regarded George, and he, poor lad, had brought it on himself. And then, when all this was over, he--Lewis--was going to marry Mrs. Boynton. No doubt about it; for it was too late now to judge her for that other fault--far too late. He had condoned it with full knowledge of what he was doing, and the fact that Rose Tweedie's subsequent scorn had awakened a tardy blame did not alter the past. At the same time, he had an insane desire that Rose should be brought to see this as clearly as he saw it. In fact, the idea of talking over the matter with her, and perhaps taking her advice upon it, had an attraction for him; and though he heaped contumely on himself for the mere thought, it lingered insistently. It was partly that which made him pause to knock at her sitting-room door on his way to the drawing-room before dinner. She would be glad to have the last news of the miserable affair, he told himself, but in his heart he knew that was not the real reason--that he himself scarcely knew what the reason was. Reason? there was none! Only a foolish curiosity to understand better what this icicle of a girl meant by love. It did not seem to hurt her, at any rate. But as he entered to see her sitting by the fire, the reading-lamp on the table lighting up her dress, but leaving her face in shadow, he seemed to forget all these thoughts in the friendly confidence of her greeting.

'I'm so glad you have come. I was wondering if you would. What news?'

He shook his head. 'None. We have all had our chance, and failed.'

'Not all,' she answered quickly, pointing to Azizan's portrait, which showed dimly above the mantelpiece against which he leant. 'You forget the girl--she has not said her say.'

The unreality, the strangeness of it all, struck him sharply, not for the first time, as he replied after a pause--

'And never will. She is dead. Fitzgerald managed to get that out of the woman to-day. She must have been hidden

away--as a punishment, most likely--in some dungeon of the old tower, for her dead body was found among the ruins--by--by the old potter. Yes! I know what you are thinking of; but that is impossible. He was always searching about, you see, and so he was more likely than others to find anything that was to be found. It is a coincidence, I admit; but the fact of the death seems undoubted. The woman let it out in her anger--Fitzgerald is not a nice cross-examiner, I expect--and tried to gloze it over afterwards. Perhaps it is as well. That story may be best unknown.'

'I don't agree with you,' said Rose quickly. 'I have been counting on her help--perhaps more than I realised--and now that her chance has gone----' The girl's eyes filled with tears, and her voice failed for a moment, 'it seems as if we could do nothing more to save him.'

'I'm afraid not. You see, once we begin to question outsiders we show our hand. There is no alternative between the silence and defiance which Gwen advocates so strongly, and a bold and open inquiry. In my opinion it is time for the latter. You see, my cousin is not quite a fair judge. She does not know that Fitzgerald and I have so far concealed George Keene's suicide, and that from purely personal motives we, or at least I, cannot have this scandal sprung by an outsider. He would take the risk, he says; but I, in my position, conceive that it is not my duty to do so. He, however, has suggested that we four shall meet and talk it over finally before I take any action, so I took the liberty of asking Gwen to come over tomorrow morning. It is Fitzgerald's last day, and something must be done before he goes down. I don't see the use of this meeting myself--we have all, as I said, had our chance--but it can do no harm, and it may satisfy Gwen--and you.'

'I am satisfied already,' she replied gently. 'You could have done no more than you have done; I see that now.'

'I am glad,' he began, and then stopped, realising that he was not in the least glad of the evident finality in her meaning. Was she contented that things should end as they had begun? Had her passionate interest in him died down with his obedience to her orders? A sorry reward, surely! A most perplexing result of his repentance!

'I *shall* be glad,' he corrected himself, almost angrily, 'when we can get out of this muddle. Of course I have heard before of such intrigues, but I never came in personal contact with that sort of thing before. It is maddening. I scarcely seem to know whether we are in the nineteenth century or the ninth. Ever since we went to Hodinuggur we seem to have got mixed up in some antique dream; the whole thing is absurd--scarcely credible.'

As he spoke the dinner-bell rang, and he held the door open for her to pass from the consideration of these things to the well-appointed table worthy of a house in Belgravia, where the dark-skinned, white-robed servants handed sherry with the soup, and vinegar with the salmon quite as naturally as Jeames or John in their plush liveries. But heredity was here also; Jeames or John's father may have been a day labourer or a gentleman at large, but not one of these could not have answered truthfully--'Huzoor, my father was servant to so-and-so or so-and-so in the great mutiny time, and his father served such and such a sahib in the Sutlej campaign, or in Cabul, or somewhere else.' Faithfulness or unfaithfulness to salt being, of course, a different question; though that also might possibly be one of heredity. Such thoughts strike one sometimes after years of complacent blindness, and on this evening they increased the sense of unreality which had already taken possession of Lewis Gordon. Nor did a remark of Colonel Tweedie's on his daughter's improved looks during the past few days amend matters. He felt that he might be living in that twenty-ninth century, when humanity may reasonably be supposed to have educated itself out of some frailties as, in the necessary glance at the young lady's face required by decorous assent, he met a perfectly unconscious, happy smile, so full of friendly confidence, that a positive gladness glowed at his heart that she should be content with him.

Nevertheless he made one more effort to get back finally to the every-day world by riding over to the Club after dinner and listening to the gossip of the day. But there was nothing wrong with the world; it was going on, he found, as usual. He played a game or two of pool, talked gravely with Major Davenant over some new rules intended to prevent such another fiasco as the last race-meeting, heard the latest official canards, and listened more patiently than usual to some boys--who had to go down from leave next day--bemoaning the general beastliness of the country as a residence for an English gentleman. It was only, so the verdict ran, fit for niggers.

Yet even this demonstration that life in the main was commonplace as usual, did not restore Lewis Gordon's general indifference. And the knowledge that this was so made him more than ever determined to carry his point when next morning the four met in Rose Tweedie's room, to settle the course of events.

The rain after a downpour during the night had ceased, or, perhaps, had become too light to make its way through the thick white mist which had settled down like cotton-wool upon everything, blotting out the world. There was not a breath of air, not a sound save occasionally a soft pit-pat, as the vapour condensing on the roof dropped into the hearts of the rain lilies which fringed the verandah with their upturned orange cups. Yet it was neither dark nor dull as

on a cloudy day. The whiteness of the mist was almost luminous, and through the wide-set windows sent a faint glow, like that from newly-fallen snow, on the faces of poor George Keene's four friends, and showed still more clearly on the even surface of Azizan's portrait as it stood upon the mantel-shelf. Rose stood beside it, looking beyond everything in the room, beyond the row of orange lilies, into the cotton-wool mist which seemed bent on suffocating the house and its inhabitants. There was silence in the room--the silence which comes to a discussion when the last objection has palpably fallen through, and a conclusion absolutely satisfactory to no one seems inevitable. Gwen, a flush of excitement on her cheek, lay back among the cushions of her easy-chair, nervously turning and twisting the rings upon her fingers. Dan Fitzgerald, who was seated close beside her, had evidently been the last to speak, and was now leaning towards her, his eyes fixed with kindly encouragement and sympathy on her face. Lewis Gordon, apart from the others, his elbows resting on the table, looked half regretful, half resentful,--the look of a man who knows he must take the initiative in a singularly disagreeable duty.

At last through the silence came Rose Tweedie's voice reluctantly, yet with a sort of challenge in it: 'I suppose that is settled, and that we can none of us suggest any other reason why we should delay longer?'

'I have told you before,' broke in Mrs. Boynton, 'that I have every reason to believe that no action will be taken by the woman; that she will never court inquiry.'

'I did not mean that,' replied Rose, still with the same note in her voice. 'I meant that if none of us have any further knowledge beyond what we have already discussed, then Mr. Gordon's plan for a private yet open inquiry with my father's knowledge seems best. I, for one, have none. I know nothing, absolutely nothing, in favour of delay. Nothing that would prevent the possible danger to George Keene's memory.'

Lewis Gordon followed fast on her words in swift, vexed comprehension of her challenge.

'I fancy we are all able to say the same, Miss Tweedie. If we agree, I may have to speak of something I should not otherwise mention, but it is no reason for delay. On the contrary, it is a reason why open inquiry will be the safest, even for George Keene's memory. I know nothing better;--I wish I did.'

'Nor I,' said Dan Fitzgerald, then paused, and rising from his chair crossed to the open door, whence he looked out, as Rose had done, beyond the rain lilies to the mist. 'I know better than any of you what poor George was; I know better than any of you what he did. If this is settled, I, too, will have to tell something to his credit; something that will make inquiry the better for him. Yet I'd give all I possess to save the necessity for it. But I'm lost,'--he stretched his hands out impulsively into the mist--'lost, as one might be out yonder--lost, as the lad's own explanation is lost in the mystery of death. It's hard to say so, George, but I can't help it.'

He spoke as if to some one out of sight, and Gwen Boynton sat up suddenly, nervously, with a scared look in her eyes.

'I think you are all wrong,' she said querulously. 'The woman must know that proof is against her story; but you will not believe it, and so I cannot help it. I cannot, indeed.'

Her voice died away to a sort of sigh, and she sank back again, clasping her hands tightly together. Rose let hers fall from its grip on the mantel-shelf. Dan's tall figure leant more loosely against the lintel, and Lewis Gordon mechanically turned the pages of a book lying beside him on the table. The tension was over, and the relief of decision, even of helpless decision, held them silent in the silence for the moment. They had done their best. They had played their part in the strange play.

Then suddenly out of the mist came a quavering, chanting voice--

'It was a woman seeking something  
Through day and night----'

'Listen!' cried Dan, his face ablaze. Rose's hand went up again to the picture hurriedly, and Lewis started to his feet; only Gwen looked from one to the other bewildered:

'O'er hill and dale seeking for something.'

The voice grew clearer as if the singer was toiling up the unseen path below the lilies.

'Foul play! foul play!--look down and decide.'

'The mad potter!' cried Dan, with wonder in his tone.

'Azizan! it is her turn at last,' cried Rose, with a hush in hers, which sent a thrill through Lewis Gordon--though he only said prosaically--

'I'll go and see who it is.'

But Dan had forestalled the thought, and, vaulting the railings, had disappeared into the mist, whence they could hear him hallooing down the path to the unseen singer as they stood waiting by the lilies. Then came a quick greeting, a low reply, and so, clearer and clearer--though they could see nothing--every syllable of eager questioning and slow answer until, as if from behind a veil, the strange couple stepped into sight--Dan, eager, excited, towering above the bent, deprecating figure of the old potter.

They had heard so much, those three in the verandah, that Rose without a pause could step forward and strike at the very root of the matter with the question, 'What is it? What is it that you want of me?'

The shifty, light eyes settled on her face with a look of relief before the old man bent to touch her feet.

'Madr-mihrban,' he said. 'Madr-mihrban--that is well!'

He was still breathless from his swift climb beside Dan's long stride, and, as he straightened himself again, his long supple fingers, busied already about a knotted corner in the cotton shawl folded round him, trembled visibly.

'Lo, I sent it before,' he went on in low excuse; 'but it returned, as all things return at Hodinuggur. Then she was vexed and could not rest. "Send it back! send it back," she cried all night long. Pity of God! what a fever; but now she sleeps sound----' He paused, to fumble closer at the knot.

'You mean Azizan, your daughter?' suggested Rose softly, while the others stood silent, listening and looking, the whole world seeming to hold nothing for them save this tall girl with her bright, eager face, and that bent old man trying to undo a knot.

'Huzoor--Azizan!' came the quavering voice. 'I looked for her so often till the Madr-mihrban came. Then I found her with the pot clasped to her breast, but the bad dreams would not let her sleep. "It is not mine; it is hers." It kept her awake always. So when I found her again, lying asleep by the river with it still in her bosom, I said to myself, "I will not set a writing on it, and put it in the box with a slit as I did last time, trusting it to God knows who, after the new fashion. I will take it myself in the old fashion and give it to the Madr-mihrban's own hands, and pray her hold it fast so it return not to wake the child; for she sleeps sound at last in the dust of her father's.'"

The knot was undone. The shaking fingers held the Ayodhya pot for a second, the white glare of the mist shining in a broad blaze of light upon its intense glowing blue. The next it had slipped from the potter's hand and lay in fragments on the ground!

Still fragments of sapphire colour--moving fragments of milky white, rolling hither and thither like drops of dew on a leaf seeking a resting-place for their round lustre.

Pearls!--the Hodinuggur pearls!

And Gwen's voice, with a triumphant ring in it, became articulate above the old man's cry of distress and the low exclamations of the others.

'So Azizan stole them, after all!'

Rose turned on her sharply. 'Who knows. This much is certain, she has brought them back, and saved George when we could not.'

'Yes! she has saved him,' assented Dan; 'we have that she-devil on the hip now!'

Lewis Gordon stood silent a moment; he had grown very pale. 'You are both right, I expect,' he said quietly. 'It settles--everything.'

Gwen drew a long breath of relief, but Rose seemed lost in thought.

'No! not everything,' she said absently, half to herself. 'It does not tell us why George shot himself.'

She scarcely knew she spoke aloud; she had forgotten everything but the dead boy.

'*Shot himself!* The words came back to her in a sort of cry. '*Shot himself!* What do you mean? What does she mean?'

Gwen stood as if petrified before those regretful faces. Then, as the truth struck at her, beating down her shield of self-deception, she turned at last, forgetful of all else, to the shelter of Dan's kind arms. 'Dan! Dan! it isn't true--it can't be true! say it isn't true.'

He drew her closer to him, looking down into her agonised face with a perfect passion of tenderness and kissed it; forgetful in his turn, of everything save that she had come to him at last.

'It is true, my darling; he did it to save me and you. Gwen! Gwen! it wasn't your fault--My God! she has fainted!'

'I'm sorry,' began Rose, feeling paralysed by surprise, but Dan's kind smile was ready even in his distress.

'Don't worry. It's best over, for I must have told her. You see we have been engaged for years, and George knew it. If I carry her to your room, Miss Rose, she will be better there. 'Tis the shock, and she was so fond of him, dear heart.'

Lewis Gordon, left alone in the verandah while another man before his very eyes carried off the woman to whom he supposed himself to be engaged, felt that the world had broken loose from its foundations altogether. So that was the explanation! And then a low murmur of moaning from the potter arrested his attention, which, as is so often the case after a shock, had lost its airt and become vagrant.

The old man, still crouched beside the fragments of the Ayodhya pot, was rocking himself backwards and forwards, and muttering to himself, 'She will be angry; the Madr-mihrban will be angry, and then Azizan will not sleep.'

Lewis walked up to him and laid his hand reassuringly on the thin, bent shoulders. 'I don't think the Madr-mihrban will be angry. I'm almost sure she won't.' His own words made him smile, until, as he looked at the old man's shifty, bright eyes raised to his doubtfully, he remembered the young sad face which George had painted. 'And Azizan is asleep,' he said gently; 'she will not wake again.'

As he stooped to gather up the jewels his eyes were dim with unwonted tears--why, he scarcely knew.

When Rose came back ten minutes after, leaving Gwen to Dan's kind consolations, she found Lewis leaning over the railings looking at the rain lilies through his eyeglass as if it had been a microscope. He turned to her with the air of a man who has made up his mind.

'You thought I was engaged to my cousin, Miss Tweedie,' he said. 'So did I. Apparently I was mistaken. So let us set that aside, once and for all, and think over more important matters. There is no lack of other surprises, thank Heaven.'

The semi-cynicism of his words did not sit ill on him, and Rose recognised that he had certainly chosen the most dignified way out of the difficulty. At the same time it left her free, unexpectedly free, to consider the position as an outsider, and all involuntarily, yet naturally enough, her first thought expressed itself in words:

'I wonder what father will say?'

This was too much both for temper and dignity, fortunately, also for humour. He gave her one indignant look, then relaxed into a smile.

'Really, Miss Tweedie, in this Comedy of Errors I am only responsible for my part; and that, believe me, is rather a sorry one.'



## CHAPTER XXV

Whether Lewis Gordon spoke truth or not regarding the part he had to play, there could be no doubt that Dan found his anything but sorry. A subdued sort of radiance softened yet brightened the man as he came out to ask Rose for the loan of her *dandy*, Mrs. Boynton being anxious to get home as soon as possible. There seemed no need for words; the situation explained itself, and even Lewis, looking at his rival's eager face, could not help acknowledging that Dan was more likely to give Gwen the support she evidently needed than he was. Besides, the sudden change for the future seemed lost sight of in that, which the opportune arrival of the Ayodhya pot had on the present, and on Chandni's impudent claim. It was of course clear evidence against the truth of the story so far as Gwen was concerned, but whether it would prevent the woman raking up the true facts of George Keene's death, out of sheer wanton malice, was another thing. Lewis felt himself rather helpless before the phenomenon of such a nature as hers, and confessed as much when Dan came racing back, breathless and excited after seeing Mrs. Boynton safely home, for a council of war. He brought a quick decision and intuition with him. The sluice had been opened by treachery of course, and now that he was free to speak of his engagement, Dan told the story of the open locket, which to him seemed proof-positive that George had voluntarily taken the blame on himself when thrown off his balance by the discovery that the happiness of the man and the woman he loved best in the world depended on Dan's getting his promotion. How the sluice had been opened was another matter. Chandni had always said by means of a key made after an impression sent from Simla; but this was manifestly impossible unless some servant had done it. Indeed he had never paid much attention to this assertion, for the woman in making it had contradicted herself more than once, and evidently had no definite story as to how the impression had been secured. In his own mind he had decided that the key itself had been stolen from the boy while he slept so heavily, and that the knowledge that this was so had had the lion's share in bringing about his self-sacrifice. So that even if the real facts came out, nothing beyond carelessness could be laid to George's charge, now that the potter was there to prove that Azizan had had the Ayodhya pot all the time, and that they were there to prove that the pearls had remained in the pot. So much for Chandni and the only possible cause of further action--a woman's wanton cruelty. For the rest, the old Diwan was dead, Khush-hal seemed to be out of it, and Dalel had everything to lose and nothing to gain by a scandal. Finally, these intrigues were always as a house of cards; remove one support and the whole structure disappeared.

'Nevertheless,' said Dan, looking across the table with a grim smile, 'I'm not going to take you down as a witness to my interview with that she-devil this afternoon. You are too fine for the work, and that's the fact.'

'Can I lend you anything peculiarly barbaric in the way of a knife?' asked Lewis. 'I've a Malay crease in my room which fills most people with terror, though personally I should funk a woorali dart more than anything.'

'Ah! you may jeer; but 'tis true. Sure! our fineness is at the bottom of half our mistakes in this country. Even in our kindness we treat these people as we would like to be treated ourselves--a poor philanthropy compared to treating them as they would like to be treated. And when we come to mere justice! Why, we might as well give a child who has disobeyed his mother the right to appeal against her in court. What chance would the child have to begin with, and then what good would it do? and what good is our complicated system of procedure save to put power into the hands of the educated few who naturally clamour for more? But there! This has nothing to do with Chandni. She wouldn't care a tinker's dam for what you'd say to her, because you would be regulating yourself by codes and sections instead of by the way she is made. I won't. I don't mind stooping to her level to get my will. So let me go with the old mad potter and his eyes, and see if between us we can't make a settlement. And then, please God, we will have done with the whole bad dream from beginning to end. So if you have three thousand rupees you can spare on a loan, I'll just have them handy in my pocket as a salve to her wounded feelings when I've got my own way.'

What really happened at the interview Dan resolutely refused to say. On his return from the bazaar he asked for a whisky and soda and a hot bath to take the taste of it out of soul and body. Yet he returned triumphantly with a written declaration signed by Chandni, stating that she herself had stolen the key from George while he slept.

'It isn't true, of course,' said Dan with a rueful look at Lewis, 'but upon my soul, no one could tell if it is, or not. My mind seemed a vast cobweb with lines going everyway into the outside world, but all beginning in that woman, and the only way was to smash through it. She has done worse things--that's one comfort. Maybe the pearls should have gone back to Hodinuggur direct, but she will make her bargain there, never fear, and by God they deserve----'

He broke out then with curses into the tale of Azizan's birth, which it seemed had been his strong card--that and the potter's eyes. He had played the one against the other till he wormed the story out of his enemy, while the old man

waited below, ready, if Dan failed to be told the truth, to bring his evil glance to bear on the question. That fear had really settled the matter; she had acknowledged the part Azizan had played in bringing her plans to naught, and confessed the wisdom of dancing to a different tune in the future.

'We parted on the best of terms. She offered me cinnamon tea and fritters, and I took some as a sign of peace,' said Dan with a shudder. 'And now I must be off and tell poor Gwen 'tis all settled for ever.' He lingered a moment as he rose, to add with a half shy, half happy smile, 'Were you very much surprised, old man?'

'Very,' replied Lewis with dignity. But Dan still lingered.

'I wonder what on earth the Colonel will say?' he remarked apprehensively after a pause.

Then Lewis laughed; he could not help it. And actually the idea of playing second fiddle to Colonel Tweedie's disappointment in the eyes of the world, helped him materially in the interview which he had with his cousin next morning. Even without this, however, he would have felt it difficult to be severe, for he found her full of remorse and self-abasement; rather vague, perhaps, but still real. She would never forgive herself, she said, not so much for her indecision about Dan, for she had always loved him, and Lewis was well quit of her selfish regard. No! it was about poor George! She had sided with Simla in turning the boy's head, she had made too much of him and behaved most unwisely--really Lewis must let her say what she knew to be true--she had been over friendly, over confidential, and had asked him to do too much for her. All this and his foolish fancy about being the keeper of Dan's conscience, of which the latter had told her, had been too much for the dear, dear, lad's kind, sensitive heart. Then the terrible home-coming after all the pleasure and spoiling! Was not that enough, more than enough, to upset the balance? She was so insistent on this point that Lewis had to confess his assent to it, and finally went away feeling that she had more heart than he had given her credit for in the past, and that he might even be in a measure responsible for not having appealed to this better nature while he had the chance. Dan seemed to have done it successfully, for she had evidently given up all thoughts of a mercenary marriage. He understood her, she said plaintively, he knew her faults and yet he loved her; while Lewis--he must excuse her for saying so--had always treated her as if she had no heart, no sentiment; had always committed the unpardonable mistake of making her remember that she did not love him. Of course she had behaved abominably to everybody--far worse than they would allow, for they were all too good for her--but in the future she would have Dan, who was a tower of strength to her.

In fact, like many another woman of her type--many a man also--Gwen Boynton had taken refuge from the greater remorse in the lesser one--if indeed there was a greater one?--if indeed the real limit of her sinning had not been that over-confidence to which she had confessed. Not in detail truly; still she *had* confessed it with tears to Dan, and he had forgiven her *en masse*; as, no doubt, he would forgive in detail if she had thought it right to tell him what she had told George. But what right had she to put this pain into another man's life, or speak of that vague fear which even Chandni's confession of having stolen the key would not smother utterly? It would be worse than foolish! it would be wicked; and this dreadful doubt was her cross, her punishment, which she thoroughly deserved for doing as she had done. And when she had got thus far, remorse was once more in a clear open channel where it could spread itself out and lose its chill under the sunshine of Dan's kind consolations.

Thus it really turned out that, after all, the person most upset by the unexpected *denouement* of affairs was Colonel Tweedie.

'Engaged for years,' he said angrily, in reply to his daughter's information. 'Well! I am surprised. A most extraordinary proceeding which er--er--complicates--the--er--If you had said "of late," I might have seen some sense in it, for during the last week or so even Gordon, who is generally to be relied upon, has been absent over his work--er--not to say--er--somewhat negligent. And of course being his cousin--the--er--interest----'

Rose hastened to confess that the engagement had only, as it were, been a definite one during--here she hesitated a little--the last few days. Which tribute to his perspicacity soothed the Colonel's dignity, and encouraged him to further ventures in the seer's path by a suggestion that no doubt his daughter's improved appetite and appearance, which he had observed during the same period, was due to the proverbial interest which women took in the matrimonial affairs of their neighbours. Though for his part he must say that the friendly admiration he had had for Mrs. Boynton had been very considerably impaired by--er--the lack of judgment she had displayed in engaging herself to an assistant engineer, a man whose promotion, he believed, could not possibly come before the following July--if then. He went off to consult the departmental lists with portentous gloom, leaving his daughter defenceless before the truth. Certainly she had been much happier since Lewis had known her feeling for him, and what is more, Mrs. Boynton's decision in favour of Dan was a great relief in one way, though in another it was disturbing--confusing; for despite her theories Rose felt that the fact of his freedom to make other ties did make a difference in her relations with Lewis Gordon. It

ought not to do so, of course; she was angry with herself for admitting the fact, but she was totally unable to juggle with realities, or escape, crablike, from a difficulty sideways. No thought of marriage or what she was pleased to call sentimental rubbish had marred the self-forgetfulness of that unpremeditated appeal she had made to her belief in him. No such thought existed even now, and that the fear of it should creep in was intolerable, absurd. No! she must feign the virtue of unconsciousness, even if she had it not, and by an increase of friendly confidence, combined with a strict attention to prose, prevent the awkwardness of the position from falling on innocent Lewis, and show him clearly that the altered situation had made no change in her, yet was not expected to make any change in him. Only by these means could she show him, what was really the truth, that her past avowal of interest was not mere sentiment.

Lewis, for his part, also tackled the position with a boldness which he had denied to himself while he was still engaged to his cousin, still smarting under the curiously mixed sensations which the knowledge of the girl's real feelings had aroused. Then he had felt bound to conventional modes of thought, and, to tell truth, had been more or less afraid lest on inquiry a sentimental love for Rose might pop up somewhere like a Jack-in-the-box. For her confession had affected him in a perfectly incomprehensible way, and the only other explanation of it he had been loth to admit, since it ran counter to all his pet theories. What feeling could there be between a man and a woman save the one feeling? This warmth at his heart when he thought of her praise, this pain at the thought of her blame, could only be the old, old story; and yet he had been in love before, and this was not the same experience. Well, it might be milk-food suited to babes and women, but it was not strong meat for strong men; withal it was strangely satisfying, strangely final, so that when a return to commonplace diet became possible, he found himself in two minds about taking to it. She evidently had but one; she evidently had given him all she intended to give, and the only return he could make was by showing her that he did understand this, and that he did not think it necessary to salve over her wounded modesty by making love to her. Wounded modesty! The very thought seemed an insult. He could not agree with her theories altogether, but he could at least respect them.

So for the next month, while Gwen was slowly recovering her shock, and all Simla was divided into factions over the surprise of her engagement to penniless Dan Fitzgerald, a very pretty little comedy was being enacted in the big house where Rose, as hostess, treated Lewis Gordon as a friend, and he returned the compliment in kind. There was absolutely no humbug, no effort about it at all. They were not in love with each other, they were not restless or moody or excited, but absolutely content and happy with things as they were. A state of affairs accentuated by the relief from anxiety, the improving weather and the charming gaiety and *verve* of the society in which they lived.

Thus it happened that Rose Tweedie had her chance of being wooed in the only possible way in which girls of her type can be wooed. One sees dozens of them nowadays in society; one will see more and more year by year, as the unnatural disproportion in the number of the sexes tends to intensify the present seclusion of the nicest girls from the men. It is not the fault of the latter. In a bevy of several hundred young ladies, the fortunate possessor of the handkerchief naturally throws it at some of those who press forward into individuality, or at some fair face which even a crush cannot hide. So the choice for a wife falls on beauty or brass. The latter may be too hard a term, yet the girls who are likely to make the most faithful wives, the most devoted mothers, are not those who are the readiest to attract and assent. On the contrary they do not fall in love, and men have no time to give them friendship. Friendship! They are engaged--nay, married--before the mere thought of such a thing crops up.

So the younger generation of women is rapidly dividing itself into the girls who dress and the girls who don't dress. In other words, those willing to attract men by one certain if seamy side of their natures, and those who are not willing. Who does not know the opposite extremes of these two factions? The girl who forces you instinctively to think of a looking-glass, and the girl who makes you wonder if there be such a thing in her room. The girl with not a hair out of place, and the girl with a hiatus between her soul and her body, as the feminine phrase runs. Rose belonged outwardly to neither factions, yet in her heart she strenuously resented the old-fashioned theory that marriage was the larger half of a man's life and the whole of a woman's. Truthfully, though she was three-and-twenty, she had never felt the slightest desire to marry anybody, not even Lewis, and she felt in consequence proportionally grateful to him for behaving, at any rate, as if he believed the fact.

Yet, even so, they sometimes found each other out, as for instance one day when he came back from his cousin's full of unexpected news. Dan Fitzgerald had sent in his resignation to the Department, and accepted an offer of employment from Australia.

'I'm as glad,' said Lewis heartily, 'as if I had had the chance myself; partly because I couldn't make anything of it! Brown--that is the man who has wired for him--was out here contracting one of the big railway bridges. A bloated mechanic; began life as a riveter sort of fellow, but with a knack of making money and a keen eye beyond belief. I remembered his telling me that Dan was too good for us, and that if ever he came across a job in which he wanted help, he would try and steal him. This is some huge irrigation scheme--private--down South. If Dan succeeds, and he will if

any one can, there will be millions in it.'

'I suppose your cousin is delighted?' said Rose.

'Gwen? Never saw a woman more relieved in my life. For, mind you, though she is awfully fond of Dan--fonder than I personally should have thought she could have been of any one--the idea of the poverty was telling on her. You know it is absurd to think of her as an assistant engineer's wife. It is really not an environment in which she was likely to shine, and when all is said and done on the romantic side people ought to consider surroundings in making a settlement for life. Besides, I am sure she is relieved to get away from us all and make a fresh start. She feels it more than I should have expected.'

'Mr. Gordon,' said Rose suddenly, 'I'm very sorry I judged her so harshly that--that time. I've wanted to say so often; but *then* it seemed foolish. As if it could have mattered what I said or thought.'

'I don't think it did really matter,' he replied frankly. 'Rather the other way round, I expect. Yet I doubt if you did judge her as harshly as she judges herself now; so it is far better she should leave all these associations behind. If he and she had had to go inspecting at Hodinuggur, or even if she had to meet Dalel Beg and his wife--did I tell you I saw her at the vice-regal squash yesterday, a perfect child in the most awful get-up?--why, then, it would revive the old affair. And if, by chance!--he paused a moment--'One never knows what mayn't crop up, and Dan is a queer chap in some ways. He works by instincts, as it were, and hitherto they have led him right. If they didn't, and he found it out, I don't know what mightn't happen. He is not what I call a very safe man unless he is successful. So they are both lucky to get out of the uncongenial atmosphere which Government service is to him and poverty is to her. They start in smooth water, and I must buy my wedding-present, for they are to be married next month.'

'So soon?'

'He has to leave at once. The wedding is to be at Rajpore after we all go down. No bridesmaids, and I'm best man. If you want to know the wedding dress, ask Gwen; she is sure to have settled it long ago. Women always do.'

'I haven't,' protested Rose hastily. 'I shall be married in my every-day things.'

She tried hard to be grave while Lewis roared with laughter, but in the end she joined in the joke against herself. For they never quarrelled now. What was there to quarrel about?

It was on another of these pleasant peaceful days, that he came to lunch, with the news that Dalel Beg was even now detaining her father by abject apologies for past old-style misdemeanours at Hodinuggur, and profuse promises that in future it would be the abode of all the civilised virtues. Khush-hal Beg it appeared had died of apoplexy, brought on no doubt by the unrestrained orgies with which the fat man had celebrated his accession, and in consequence Dalel was king.

'I don't quite understand it all,' he said thoughtfully. 'He is a fool, and yet he is playing his cards well. Do you know, I shouldn't be at all surprised to hear that Chandni was back again as chief adviser. She is a very clever woman. It seems that there is a scheme on foot for establishing stud farms or grazing paddocks for Government remounts. It is supposed to be cheaper and better in the end to buy them as yearlings and let them run loose, instead of being tethered heels, heads, and tails, in native fashion. And as the water supply is to be constant at Hodinuggur now, Dalel proposes that Government should utilise some of his waste land there, and put him in charge, or partly in charge. Of course it would bring him in a steady income if he gets his finger in the pie.'

'He ought to get nothing,' interrupted Rose hastily; 'I believe he was at the bottom of all that intrigue. We shall never know what went on exactly, but there was intrigue, and that sort of thing should be punished.'

'Undoubtedly; but as I said before, Dalel is a fool--except about a horse. It was the old man and Chandni; they belonged to that age. This man tries to break the Ten Commandments in two languages, and misses the idiom in both. But he does know the points of a horse, and as Government must keep up these old families and try to civilise them, it is as well to get some work out of them.'

'Hodinuggur civilised! I can't imagine it,' echoed Rose. 'When I think of the old potter, and that mirrored room on the roof--of Azizan and the Ayodhya pot--it seems like some old dream of life into which we nineteenth century folk strayed by mistake.'

'With disastrous results,' put in Lewis thoughtfully. 'Well! with half the *dramatis personae* of the play dead, and

the other half married, it ought to have come to an end now like a decently behaved melodrama. Not a very moral one, I'm afraid, Miss Tweedie, and virtue must be its own reward.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You and I have been left out of the prizes altogether; but then, as the potter said, we didn't belong to his world.'

'I wish you had not reminded me of that scene,' she interrupted hastily. 'I cannot help thinking of how Mr. Fitzgerald sat smiling at me while the old man measured him; just as George did when he measured himself, and he is dead.'

'What a woman you are when all is said and done!' he replied, smiling at her. 'Still I do think that poetic justice has not been meted out all round. Gwen, for instance, has everything she wants, and I am out in the cold.'

'Do you feel out in the cold?' asked Rose aggressively.

He hastened to assure her that on the contrary he was quite warm and comfortable, but in spite of this the conversation languished till Colonel Tweedie came in, full of his intention of recommending Dalel Beg's plan strongly to the authorities.

To call it Dalel Beg's was, however, as Lewis Gordon had suspected, to credit that gentleman with too much sense. It was Chandni's. When Dan Fitzgerald had left her after partaking in friendly fashion of cinnamon tea, she had put the pearls away in a safe place, and set herself, as she had been doing ever since she came to Simla, to amuse herself. She had looked after Dan as he rode away without the least malice, saying that there was a man indeed; one of the old sort like the Diwans. If he had had her in the old days, say at Hodinuggur, there would just have been one order, and then silence. She nodded her head and smiled over the thought. But now she had three thousand rupees and the pearls. She could not sell them of course, could not at present let any one know she had them. They were too well known, these Hodinuggur pearls, for Chandni to traffic in them without fear of being accused of theft. By and by, perhaps, she might trade them off on Dalel; but nothing of that sort was safe as long as Khush-hal was alive. So long too, as they thought the mem had them they would not dare to move in the matter, now that there was all this talk of a permanent water-supply; for Chandni, in the wooden-balconied house at Simla, heard all the latest talk, and had quite a bevy of respectable native gentlemen who drank sherbets at her expense. She heard also from a friend at court of this taking up of waste land, and as she listened to all the stir of intrigue after this thing and that thing, felt a pang of regret for that vanished dream of some day being a motive power in Hodinuggur. This court-life was as the breath of her nostrils, and if she had been in the place of that half-caste girl down in the house with the dahlias, she would not have been half starved and beaten; for if bazaar rumour said sooth, Dalel Beg had carried his occidental estimate of the marriage-tie to this almost incredible length.

Then one day, after a rich Hindu contractor had roused her wrath by claiming her more or less as his special property, by reason of the money he had chosen to lavish on her, came the news of Khush-hal Beg's death in the odour of court sanctity. She could imagine it all down in the ruined palace out in the desert--the old ways, the old etiquette; poverty-stricken may be, yet still courtly. And why, in these pushing days when fat pigs like that Hindu made money, should they remain poverty-stricken? yet even so, it was better in a way to be Chandni of Hodinuggur, than Chandni of a bazaar, especially as one grew older.

That same afternoon a patchwork-covered dhooli went jolting down to the house with the dahlias, which was a miserable spot now; deserted, forlorn. A miserable room also, whence the indignant Parsees had reft the French clocks and the *bric-a-brac*. A most miserable pair of women too, reduced to cooking their own food at the drawing-room fire, lest their over-looking neighbours might see them in the degradation of the cook-room--since the deepest degradation of all in Eurasian eyes is to be servantless.

'Don't be a fool,' said Chandni to Mrs. D'Eremao's shrill abuse, as the former walked in upon them unceremoniously, and, squatting down, went on calmly chewing betel. 'You have nothing to do with the business. But, if she is wise, she will listen.' Beatrice Elflida Norma looked at her shrewdly and said, 'Be quiet, mamma, there is no harm in hearing what she has to say.'

It was not much, but to the point. No doubt, if they appealed to English justice, they could force the Diwan to support his wife. But how? At Hodinuggur under lock and key. It would not be nice, and Chandni had tales to tell which made Mrs. D'Eremao's hair stand on her head even while she protested that *she* was a freeborn British subject. Doubtless; but then they must give up all hopes of the position for which the girl had married such an atrocity. (Here Beatrice Elflida dissolved into tears.) Besides, that was not the way to treat a Mohammedan gentleman, an offshoot of

the great Moghuls; but *she* knew how to treat him, and for a consideration, was quite willing to use her influence with Dalel to set things straight. She did not want him, and had flouted his proposals of peace a dozen times, but she was quite ready, *for this consideration*, to make herself useful. Briefly, that consideration was a free hand if she could get it, no cabals against her position, and an assignment, in case of Dalel's death, of a good slice of that state pension, which, in such case, would be given to the wife. If there were children, so much the better, since the pension would be larger. In addition, they had to remember that refusal would not amend the position, since Dalel would no doubt bribe her back in some other way.

So a week after this, her Highness Beatrice Elflida Norma of Hodinuggur's name appeared on the list of donors to a certain Fund, opposite no less a sum than one thousand rupees, and she herself appeared at the next viceregal squash in full native costume, with her hair quite straight, and many shades darker in colour. She sat and talked affably to a stout English matron about her husband's great desire to assimilate the lives of Indian women more closely to those of their European sisters; so that, on her return home, the stout English matron mentioned to her stout English husband, who happened to be a Commissioner, that the Hodinuggur creature seemed to have ideas and should be encouraged.

And that evening, Dalel said to Chandni, ere he left the little balconied room where so many grave and reverend gossip-mongers sat drinking sherbet, 'Thou wilt return to Hodinuggur as thou hast promised.'

'I will return; but not as before. I am free to come and go. And see that thou pay me back that thousand rupees out of the first batch of horses. Else Chandni goes, never to come again.'

## CHAPTER XXVI

It was a hot October. The rains coming early had stopped early, giving Lewis Gordon and Rose that charming sunshiny month on the Hills, of which mention has been made. A whole month of almost idyllic happiness and content.

And now, after the usual hiatus of a visit or two for Rose *en route*, and a hasty tour for her father round some outlying canals, they had settled down for the cold-weather life at Rajpore. Perhaps it was only the rather unusual heat which made it seem less pleasing than usual to at least two of the party. And this was more evident to Lewis Gordon than to the girl, since she had the occupation and distraction of preparing for Gwen's approaching marriage. Naturally, it was to be a great function, for, while her admirers were legion, Dan's friends were many; besides, as everybody admitted, the bride and bridegroom alone would be worth going to see, worth remembering as a pattern pair of lovers. So the Tweedies were lending their house for the breakfast--which was to be a real breakfast, since the marriage was to take place so as to allow of a start by the cool morning mail; the regiment was lending its band for the wedding-march, and, on this tepid October afternoon, every garden in the place was sending white oleanders and hibiscus to the odd octagon church which had once been a Mohammedan tomb. Nay more! one devoted though disappointed lover far down by some distant canal had sent, by special messenger, a great basket of belated white lotus lilies, with a request that they might be trodden on by the bride's happy feet.

Gwen, as she bent over this offering, sniffing at the faint almond scent of the huge, jewelled flowers, was a gracious sight to look upon. She had quite recovered herself, and in sober truth felt absolutely content. 'How nice of the dear thing!' she murmured sweetly.

And so it was; very nice. One might give it another epithet and say it was almost heroic. But of this Gwen Boynton had no conception, and never would have one. That side of human nature, its passion, its tears, its temptations, its triumphs, had been left out of her composition. She roused it in others, she played with it prettily, she even spoke warily and discreetly about it; yet Rose Tweedie, despite her girlish disdain, had more real sympathy with it than she had.

Dan, meanwhile, in Lewis Gordon's office, disregardful of the lack of chairs, was kicking his heels as he sat on the table, declaring loudly that he would of a certainty break down in replying to the toast which was to be given at the Club dinner in his honour that night. What the dickens did the fellows mean by giving him a dinner? What had he ever done for any of them? What had he ever been but a reckless, insubordinate, unsteady, loafing brute, who ought to have been kicked out of the service years ago?

'I expect they know their own minds,' replied Lewis rather wearily. He had a headache; and he was telling himself it was liver when he knew quite well it was not; a most unsatisfactory denial since there is no phase of depression so unendurable as that when even a blue pill fails to hold out cheering hopes. Yet he spoke kindly and patiently also; for he must have been of base clay, indeed, who would not have recognised that Dan, transfigured as it were on the summit of his hopes, was a worthy sight in this work-a-day world, and that, in a measure, it was well to be there on the hill-top with him. 'Besides,' he added, 'I think I overheard Simpson saying something about a sick baby----'

'Oh! bad cess to the baby,' interrupted Dan, seeking refuge in an excess of Celtic recklessness. 'Sure it's a boy now, and one can't see a child die for the want of ice when your pony has four legs. More by token, it had but three for a month after, poor beast. But what's that to do with it? It isn't so much that I'm too bad. It's the world that's too good for me, and that's a fact. When I think of all you fellows who have been so good and so patient with me, my heart's broke about it entirely--and when I think of George! sure, it's only Gwen's kind face that comforts me. Oh, Gordon! what have I done that she should be going to marry me to-morrow?'

So he ran on, as many another man has run on; as most men, good and true, do run on when they are just about to marry the woman they love.

And Lewis Gordon sat listening to him with a headache and a pain in his heart; for the most part thinking that if Rose could only see this man, only hear him, she might not be quite so disdainful of it all; might acknowledge that, be it bad or good in its essence, this feeling did step into a man's life for the time and claim him body and soul, to the detriment of neither.

And by the by,' said Dan suddenly, 'I've been meaning to ask you for a long time, but I wasn't sure if you'd like it. And now that I'm going away for good and all, and you can't get out of being my best man, I'll risk it. When are you

going to marry Miss Tweedie?'

'Never,' replied Lewis firmly, roused into instant resistance. 'What put such a fancy into your head now?'

'Now?' Dan's face was a study in tender humour 'It's been in my head for the last year, and in yours too. I told Gwen so, I remember, before we went to Hodinuggur that time, and I could see by her manner she thought so also.'

Lewis looked at him with an odd expression. 'Then you were both mistaken, that's all.' And Fitzgerald, if you're quite done talking about yourself--I've a lot of work to finish, old chap----

Dan laughed. 'Well! I'll go; but it is true, Gordon, and what is more, she likes you; any one can see that.'

True! absolutely true. Lewis knew it right well, none better, and the remembrance of the affection she had given him unasked filled him as ever with a glow of intense satisfaction. And yet he had to confess that he was not happy. That idyllic month spent in each other's company had been charming, but that fortnight of absence had been the reverse. And what he felt now was something very different from that calm, contented confidence in their mutual friendship which remained, thank Heaven, untouched by this new passion. For it was that, and nothing else. He had felt it before, for other women, this moody, restless, selfish desire of appropriation, and if Rose would not marry him he would probably feel it again for some one else. In a half-hearted way he almost regretted that it should have obtruded itself in this, the most perfect idyl of his life, and yet, call it what hard names he would, there it was, a palpable factor in the future. Rose was the best of friends; but she was also a very charming girl into whose company he had been thrown, and he had fallen in love with her; naturally enough--only it complicated matters.

He gave a queer little grimace and began to add up a column of figures, telling himself that no doubt he would get over it as he had got over similar attacks before; and that at any rate he would wait and see. Anything seemed better than the risk of paining Rose by letting her think that after all he had failed to understand the absolute unconsciousness of her regard for him. And that she might think so, seemed more than likely, since with all his experience, all his knowledge, he was only just beginning to realise that this passionate love was indeed a thing absolutely apart from his affection for her. So much so, that it almost seemed to him that it would have been easier to tell her of the former, if the latter had not hedged her in with reverence and tenderness. It came to him, with a smile, that indeed and in truth it would have been easier had he been able to send the barber round with proposals to her father in native fashion; after all, there was an immense deal to be said for that side of the question.

And then, in his careful methodical fashion, he began to add up the column of figures again. This time the total was different; a trifle to be easily set right, yet he was not used to such aberrations of intellect, and it annoyed him. He did it again, this time allowing no thoughts of Rose or anything else to obtrude themselves, and a new set of figures rewarded his perseverance. He laid the pen aside and faced himself resolutely. Yes! he had been doing atrocious work of late, he had been thinking of Rose all day long, he had not been able to settle steadily to anything, and, unless this could be stopped, the sooner he took advantage of the many changes in the Department--consequent on Dan's going and the usual cold-weather returns from furlough--in order to give up his present position, the better. There was nothing like breaking loose from one's surroundings at once, and he was due some promotion. But if he had to do this, Rose ought to know the reason. Why should she live in a fool's paradise? Why should she not face the facts of life as well as he? If she had been like other women he had known, he would have made love to her and proposed as a matter of course; but she was not like others; or rather what did he know of the matter, save that never by word, or look, or sign had she shown her knowledge even of the most elementary facts in life. How could you go to a girl like that and ask her to marry you straight off? What could you do save gloze over the question by phrases, by mixing it up with other things, even with that perfect, angelic, absolutely unselfish affection and regard which she had given him, and which he, apart from all this, felt for her. Still, it had to be done; in common fairness to her and to himself, he must tell her that he was a fool, and that life was quite unendurable without her; he must tell her, if only because there was no other earthly reason why he should give up the Secretaryship. And if this had to be, if he had to tell her, then there was no time like the present, when the necessity for action seemed clear to him.

So ten minutes after, he walked into the room where Rose sat making wedding favours as for dear life, surrounded by a perfect *chevaux de fries* of white satin ribbons, bows, and blossoms. The windows were set wide open on to the verandah where great baskets of white flowers lay awaiting her final visit to the church. On the table stood the lotus lily offering with a note from Gwen to say it was too good to be trodden on, and would Rose see the pretty things were put on the altar, where they would look quite sweet. The girl in her white dress with her brisk hands flying about scissors, needle, and thimble, and her mind busy with the coming marriage, seemed, like her surroundings, in unsympathising connection with his purpose; and the perception made him say discontentedly as he paused beside her to lean against the table--

'I thought you didn't approve of wedding favours?' It was an opening of the siege at the very furthest outworks of the position which she frustrated by a laugh.

'Oh, it doesn't matter! other people seem to like them, and I've made you such a beauty. There it is, beside you on the table--take care! you're almost sitting on it. Smell it, it's real orange-blossom.'

There was apparently not a vacant chair in the room. They were all occupied with white wreaths and true lovers' knots--but with a cross here and there he was glad to see--so he continued to lean against the table, smelling perfunctorily at his own favour, and thinking of the utter inconsequence of the feminine mind, until a certain irritation came to his aid.

'I wish you would put that work down for a minute, Rose,' he said quietly. 'I have something I want to say to you.'

Her hands paused, arrested among the white ribbons, her mind on one word; for he had never before called her by her Christian name. So she sat looking at him doubtfully, with the light from the windows behind her edging the great coils of her hair with bronze.

'I have come to tell you that I'm a fool,' he began almost argumentatively. 'At least, I suppose it's foolish. I am quite ready to admit, if you like, that it is so; but the fact remains. I can't go on as we are--as we have been, I should say--any longer. Don't think it is because I cannot understand. I do--at least I think I do. You are my friend, Rose, and will be that always, I hope. I don't say the best friend I ever had, or ever shall have, because that has nothing to do with the question, and, besides, there aren't any degrees in friendship--you have taught me that. So I think you may admit that I understand you. The question is, if you will understand me.'

He paused, and Rose's kind shadowless eyes noted with a sudden shrinking back from the sight, that his usual calm was broken by a palpable effort to steady his voice. He felt, indeed, that he had not the least clew to the girl's mind; that he was absolutely taking a leap in the dark. And that what he had to say now was, in reality, so foreign to every single word they had ever said to each other before, that even if she consented to marry him he could not be sure if she meant it--if she really understood the difference which he saw so clearly.

'Rose,' he went on, 'the fact is, that I've fallen in love with--with you; and if you don't really want to marry me, I had better go away. I would take an out-district for a time. I've had enough--perhaps too much--secretary work.' He seemed to take refuge in details from the main point.

'Why--why should you go away?' asked Rose in a low voice. 'We were very happy, weren't we?'

Her eyes, which had sought her hands among the white satin bows, came back to his face anxiously, almost fearfully.

'Why?' he echoed passionately, and as he went on his words, his voice, his manner trembled in the fine balance between the humour of the thing and its gravity. 'Ah, Rose, that is the question! Because I'm a fool, say you; because I'm a man, say I. Because I love you, Rose; because I think of you when I ought to be thinking of other things. Because I'm an idiot, and have gone all to pieces. Because it's torture to think you may go away and marry some one else. Because I can't even add up a column of figures without wondering what you will say now--now when I ask you to marry me? Because--yes! have it so--because I am a fool!----'

He had held out his hands towards her, and hers were in them in an instant.

'Oh, Lewis, what a wretch I've been!' she cried; 'but why didn't you ask me before?'

'Why--didn't--you--ask me--before,' he repeated slowly. The favours which had fallen from her lap lay round about their feet, and those on the table were squashed remorselessly as he seated himself upon its edge with the air of a man who requires some physical support, and still holding her by the hands, drew her down beside him silently. 'I shall never understand you, dear--thank God!' he said at last in an undertone: then went on in a different voice--'It is a little confusing, Rose, you must admit. All this time, ever since you told me that you----'

She interrupted him quickly, eagerly--'Ah, but that was a totally different thing altogether!'

'Totally different,' he echoed meekly. 'Yes, of course!' And then he paused again with his eyes on hers. 'I suppose you would rather I didn't kiss you?' he began irrelatively, with a half smile of infinite tenderness.

'Oh, I don't mind,' she put in hastily; 'it doesn't really matter--if you wish--only don't talk nonsense, Lewis; please

don't. I do hate it so; it makes me feel inclined to put my head in a bag.'

'Then I won't; I can't afford to lose sight of your dear face just now.'

'Lewis!'

'But if I don't say that sort of thing, what *are* we to talk about?' he asked, only half in jest. 'The weather--the news? Not very interesting subjects either of them to a man when the girl he loves has just promised to marry him--for you have promised, haven't you, Rose?'

She took no notice of his question.

'Talk about,' she echoed, her kind eyes growing a little absent--surely there are heaps of things to talk about besides you and me. There is the house we are going to have, Lewis; such a nice house! The prettiest drawing-room you ever saw; I will have it so. And a study for you, all to yourself, sir, where you can go when you're tired of me. And then the dinners, Lewis! That's one blessing of my having kept house for father. I know all about it. There won't be any cold mutton, Lewis; but the nicest little dinners.' She paused to nod her head wisely.

'Well,' said Lewis, 'please go on; this is really most interesting.'

'And the garden. I'll make you gardener, Lewis. I don't believe you know the difference between a carnation and a chrysanthemum now; but I'll teach you, and you shall tie them up for me--I hate tying up flowers. And I'll copy your reports for you, and keep the house quiet. And then, and then, everybody will be so hungry, Lewis, and there will be so many bills to pay; but it won't matter, for every one will be happy, and the children will brag about their home to all the other girls and boys----'

'Go on, dear, go on!' There was a little tremble in his voice now, and as they sat ruining the wedding favours, his right arm drew her closer to him; but she seemed not to notice it. A half smile was on her lips, a certain sadness in her eyes.

'And then, dear? Who knows--who can tell? There are so many things, and death comes--even to the little ones.' She paused, then went on more lightly--'And I'll grow stout; yes, I'm afraid so, Lewis. I'm the sort of girl, you know, who is apt to get stout. And you are sure to grow bald. Then I'll be cross, and you'll be cross; only it won't so much matter, for we will both be cross together--and no wonder, with the boys wanting cricket-bats, and the girls clamouring for music-lessons! So there will be more bills than ever. Then you and I will begin to get old, Lewis; and the girls will want me to sit up till three in the morning at balls, and I shall be so sleepy; but you shall stay at home and smoke, dear. And then the boys will get into scrapes--boys always do, don't they, Lewis--for they're not like girls, you know. And when they come to me to get them out of their trouble, I shall say: "No, dears, go to your father, he will understand; for he--for he is the best man I ever knew."'

Her voice ended in a little sob; he could feel it, hear it, as if it were his own, for her face was hidden on his breast.

'Rose! Rose! my dear, my dear!'

It was almost a cry. He would have liked to kneel before his love, as he had done before the other, but with her there so close to his heart, he could only hold her fast and tell himself passionately that, in those long years to come, it should be even as she had said, and that never, in word, thought, or deed, would he sully her pure ideal.

So they sat silent--for, to tell truth, other words seemed to him sacrilege, and she had said her say--until with a half apologetic smile she drew herself away.

'I'm sure you are sitting on your favour, Lewis, and I've such a lot more to make; besides, I promised to go down to the church at half-past five. It must be that now, and I've wasted all this time.'

'I've been here exactly seven minutes and a half,' he replied, gloomily taking out his watch; 'for I looked just before I came in.'

She laughed. 'Well, that was very methodical of you; and I think, on the whole, dear, that you managed very nicely. And now, as I hear the carriage coming round, you might just help me to put in the flowers. Aren't the lotus lovely?'

There was no help for it. She was hopelessly back in realities, and Lewis had to accept the position. After all, as he watched her drive off, like a bride herself in the midst of her white flowers, he told himself that she had managed to

compress a great deal into those seven and a half minutes; a whole dream of life which must, which should come true. It would be more difficult for him than for her, of course; perhaps that was one reason why he was still thinking over it long after she had forgotten everything else in the fervour of a free fight with the parson, who objected on principle to lotus-blossoms in the chancel. They were a heathen flower, sacred to unmentionable beliefs and rites, and could not be admitted beyond the body of the church. It was but an offshoot of an old quarrel between these two, which renewed itself every Christmas and Easter-tide; but Rose, who by instinct understood the story which these particular flowers had to tell, opened up the whole question of symbolism hotly, finally marching off with her lilies in a huff to the lectern, whence, she told herself, their message of love and sacrifice might fittingly go forth. And while she worked away under the echoing dome of the old tomb, the band in the bit of public garden close by was clashing and bashing away at 'Rule Britannia, and 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,' much to the delight of ayahs leading sallow dark-eyed children by the hand, and a motley crowd of servants and shopkeepers from the neighbouring bazaar.

Sometimes a palki gharry, like a green box on wheels, with four or five specimens of Tommy Atkins and a black bottle inside, would come rattling past, drawn by an anatomy of a horse, and leave a shower of gibes and greetings behind it for those other green boxes on wheels which were drawn up beside the road, while their gaily-dressed occupants chewed betel or strolled about with clanking feet among the long shadows thrown by the flowering shrubs. Light, and laughter, and noise; a whole eternity of time and space between this life and the girl under the dome, decorating the Bible with lotus-blossoms.

'There's going to be a big shadi (wedding) in the girja ghur (church) to-morrow morning,' said one of the occupants, dressed in tight mauve silk trousers and a yellow veil, as she clambered back into the green box where a figure in white lay listening lazily. 'They are doing all sorts of pooja there to-day. It is that big, long sahib in the canals and Boynton sahib's widow. Ai, the sorry tale! Making a fuss of shadi about a woman who has had the misfortune to kill one man.'

Chandni sat up suddenly. 'Tobah! a sorry tale, indeed! So she is to marry him! Lo, there is a man, indeed! but I wonder what he would say if he knew what I know now?'

'Dost know aught? Dost know him?' began the other enviously.

'I have seen him. He was down at Hodinuggur a week ago putting up a white marble stone to the young sahib who died there of the sickness last rains. They were friends, see you, great friends. Lo, tell thy driver to go on, Lalu; this wearies me, the folk have no manners.'

They had not far to go; only to the Bedami bazaar, with its current of life below and its latticed balconies above. The full moon rose through the golden-dust haze to hang like a balloon above the feathery crowns of the palm-trees; the clatter of horses, hoofs bearing their owners home to dinner died from the Mall hard by; and Rose stood at the door of the tomb looking back into the shadowy dome, where the huge lilies showed like the ghosts of flowers. It would look very nice, she thought, in the cool light of early morning; and she would have it decorated in the same way when she and Lewis were married.

But Chandni, as she paused to think of the future, thought of the past also.

'He fought me fairly,' she said to herself; 'and for his beauty's sake, I could bear more than he gave. That is our way. But she! Lo, she is even as I, and he shall know it. I will put that in the platter as the wedding tribute, and it will help him to pay her back for me. 'Tis almost as well I had not learnt the tale from Dalel in those days. It comes better now.'

So, as the night fell, she wrapped herself in the white domino of respectability, sent for another green box on wheels, and drove in the direction of the house where Dan was living. That was not difficult to discover; all that was necessary being a word of inquiry from the general merchant who sold everything heart could desire in the shop below the balcony. And the night was warm. She would as lief sit in the moonshine behind the hedge of white oleanders and talk to the gardeners, as stay in the stuffy bazaar with its evening odours of fried meats and pungent smoke.

## CHAPTER XXVII

'I was never so happy or so sorry in all my life before, and I thank Heaven that I'm enough of an Irishman still to say so without being afraid of being laughed at.'

He stood at one end of the table looking his best, as a gentleman always does in his evening dress—a curious fact, since there is no more cruel test for the least lack of good breeding. But this man stood it triumphantly, and not one of those other men seated that night round the long table but carries to his grave a remembrance of Dan Fitzgerald's look when he was bidding good-bye to his friends. The eager vitality of the man, always his strongest characteristic, seemed to have reached its climax.

'I'm not going to say anything of her,' he went on, the rich, round voice softening. 'There isn't any need, since you all know her. Besides, though you have all come here to-night—why, I can't for the life of me tell—to wish us good luck in the future, it isn't so much of the future I'm thinking as of the past. It has been so happy, thanks to you all. And it's over. That is the worst of it. I suppose it isn't quite what a man is expected to say on these occasions; but the ladies—God bless them!—would, I'm sure, agree, if they could only be made to understand that marriage is the end of a man's youth. It doesn't alter the case at all that it may be the end of the woman's also, or that we get something that may be as good in exchange. What has that to do with the past?—the merry, careless past, which I've enjoyed so much, and to which I'm now saying good-bye. Well, Heaven help those who say good-bye to it without a solid reason, or have a sneaking intention of not really saying good-bye to it at all? for their lines are in evil places. And that sounds like a sermon, and you never heard Dan Fitzgerald preach before, and you never will again. It isn't only that I'm off with the morning to the other end of the world—to a new world, if it comes to that, worth this old one and the past and all of you put together, if you'll excuse my saying so—it is because even if I were stopping here I should be out of the old life as surely as if I were dead and buried. To begin with, I shall have to think of every penny I spend, so that I may have enough to pay for paradise! The world is full of paradoxes for me to-night; and I'm the greatest of them all myself; for I don't want to say good-bye, and yet I wouldn't miss having to say it for the world. Then it seems to me to-night as if I'd solved the puzzle; and there's Doveton—the old bachelor—grinning as if he knew I was a fool, and that I was making the biggest mistake of my life. I don't think so—I don't think I ever shall think so; I hope not, anyhow. And so, good-bye to you—goodbye! And may none of us, married or single, live to know the pain of a "heart grown cold, a head grown grey—in vain!"'

Down the disordered table with its litter of glasses and flowers, its atmosphere heavy with the odours of dinner and drink, a hush lay for a second; not more. Then some one laughed, and with a roar of applause the general tone—varying from concert pitch to normal diapason according to the taste of the owner—struck into the old chorus; the refrain which, touching as it does the lowest and the highest ideals of humanity, has provoked more mixed sentiment and emotion than any other in the language:

*'For he's a jolly good fel-low. For he's a jolly good fe-el-low.'*

Love, admiration, assent. But to what? That lies in the creed of the singer.

And Dan, as the chorus went swaying and surging about in the discords and harmonies, was left alone, silent—as it were on a pinnacle.

Lewis Gordon, feeling responsible for his man, and noting his growing excitement, inveigled him out after a time for a quiet cigar on the verandah, and then suggested he should go to bed; whereat Dan laughed softly. Did not his best man see that the idea was palpably absurd when life itself was a dream—a dream that only came once to a fellow? When you hadn't a wish ungratified, save of course that some others he wot of might have as good luck as he.

'If you mean me,' replied Lewis stolidly, 'I'm all right. I'm going to marry Rose Tweedie whenever she can spare five minutes from your wedding to arrange mine.'

'You don't say so! By the powers, what a good matchmaker I am! And so it's settled. I say, Gordon, do you think there is any chance of her being up still?' put in Dan all in one breath.

'Couldn't say; she had a lot of favours to make and remake when I last saw her, certainly,' replied Lewis, with an inward smile at the remembrance; 'but you can't go and call on her now; it's half-past ten at least.'

'Can't I? There is nothing I couldn't do to-night, it seems to me. And *you* are yawning. Oh, go to bed, old man! or you will spoil the show to-morrow.'

'And you?'

'I'm off too, but not to bed! No, you needn't be afraid. I'll turn up again in time.'

The glamour of the soft Indian night was on Lewis also; even on those who one by one drifted from the laughter within to stand for five minutes, arrested by the peace without, before going on their way. And if this were so to men in the slack-water of life, what must it have been to Dan on the flood-tide of his threescore years and ten? To Dan with his vivid imagination, his soft heart, his excitable, impulsive nature. As he rode along noiselessly at a foot's pace through the sandy dust which looked hard as marble in the glare of the moon, he and his shadow were the only moving things in that world of light. No darkness anywhere! Not even in the distant arcades of trees. Only a soft grey mist of moonlight blending all things into the semblance of a mirage seen from afar. A fire-fly or two showed against the flowering shrubs in intermittent glimpses of light. Here, and then gone, as it were, upon the soft quiver of the insistent cicadas in the air.

Was not life worth living, indeed if only for such a night as this!

*'On such a night did young Lorenzo!'*

But Dan Fitzgerald had passed beyond that flood-mark on the shore. Passion counted for much in the elation of mind and body which was the apotheosis of both; but love counted for more. The memory of a thousand griefs and pains with pity hidden in their hearts came to fill the mystic cup of life which the Unseen, Unknown Hand held out to him from Heaven--the Sangreal of Humanity--the sacraments of Birth and Death. The child dying of the potter's thumb-mark in the dust--that other in loving arms with the ice chilling even death's cold touch--George with the bullet piercing the friendship in his heart--Rose with her pure wisdom fearless and unashamed--these and many another remembrance seemed to blend sorrow and joy into peace, even as the moon-mist blent the world around him into vague beauty.

And there was Rose herself! He could see her, as with the easy friendliness of India he paced his pony through the open gates of the garden, and so passed the house. She was still at work among the white flowers beside the door which was set wide upon the warm balmy night.

'Is that you, Mr. Fitzgerald?' she called, pausing at the faint sound of his coming to look out into the flood of moonlight clear as noonday.

'It is I, Miss Tweedie.'

He had slipped from his pony and stood beside it welcoming her with outstretched hands as she came forth, eager with some message for the morrow which he might deliver.

'Lewis has told me, and I'm so glad,' he said, breaking in on her words. 'It is the best wedding present I've had yet, and I came along on the chance of seeing you. I've something to give you. I meant it for to-morrow, as a parting gift--just a remembrance of your kindness to us both. But I'd rather give it to you with our best wishes.'

He unfastened something from his own wrist and put it, soft and warm, into her hand. It was a native amulet cunningly twisted of silk thread and pearls, with a triangle of some blue stone strung in the centre.

'Tis only a glorified ram-rukhi,' he went on half-jestingly, 'the bracelet sisters give their brothers to bring them good luck. Only it is the other way round with you.'

Rose looked at the blue of the triangle doubtfully, then at his kindly face.

'Yes! it's a bit of the Ayodhya pot--the only bit that wasn't in pieces. And it has my name on the back, and--and George's.'

'And George's?' echoed Rose softly.

'Ay! He would have liked it, I know--for you were kind to him--kind to us both, always!--Madr-mihrban, as the old potter called you. And we two, George and I, are one part of the story; I was thinking of it as I came along just now----'

She put out her hand with a sudden gesture. 'Don't think of it, Mr. Fitzgerald! Forget all about it. Go away and

forget.'

He gave a happy laugh. 'Why should I? I don't want to forget anything to-night--except my sins. The rest is all good. Let me put that on for you--so--goodnight! We'll say good-bye to-morrow.'

So out on the deserted roads with the same happy unrest in his heart. He would go down and see the old familiar places in the garden opposite once more--even the pond where the ducks and geese had quacked and gabbled him into silence! Then through the hanging tassels of the grey tamarisk trees, round the gleaming white road to the blue-tiled minarets of the old watch-tower standing causelessly upon the level plain where four ways met, and so back stationwards to the stunted dome of the church. The throbbing of tom-toms proclaimed the nearness of the bazaar, but the building itself stood unassailably silent and deserted on its high white plinth, save for some one lying on a string bed set in a shadow by the door. Dan slipped from his pony again, and hitched the reins to a broken iron clamp in the stone-work of the steps. The door, he knew, would be open to let in the cool night-air, so he would look in--'go round the course' as a horsey friend of his had said when discovered doing the same thing before his marriage. The remembrance made him smile as he stepped into the dark building and paused, arrested by the strangeness of what he saw. For the dome was full of fire-flies brought hither in the flowers; full of a causeless glimpsing of pale green fire showing every instant the white heart of some blossom. And the air was burdened with scent; distinct, through all, a faint, deadly smell of bitter almonds. That must be from the lotus Gwen had mentioned, and there they were, in the upper shaft of moonlight through the upper window, standing like sentinels over the lectern.

*'Om mani padma hom.'*

What did it really mean, that invocation used by so many millions? What was the mystic jewel in the lotus? Something fair but far, no doubt, such as all religions promise. And then with a rush came the thought that Gwen would stand beside them on the morrow, fair and near!

The echo of his pony's galloping feet made that throbbing in the bazaar pause an instant as if to listen. Pause and go on when he had passed. The darkened houses of his friends rose up beside him and were left behind; the Club with its still twinkling arches, the garden where Chandni sat gossiping and waiting her chance to kill his faith wantonly. All these he passed. Awake or sleeping he must be near Gwen for an instant--must bid her goodnight before the day came.

The chiming, echoing gong from the secretarial office rang twelve, clear; then the others began. Here and there from the various centres of law and order, many-voiced from the massive pile of the distant city. He was too late then, yet not too late; for there was a light still in the little front room, despoiled of its prettiness now and littered with boxes. She was awake, busy like Rose over the morrow.

'Gwen!' he called to her softly, for the chick was down, the door half closed.

'My dear Dan!' Her voice, as she opened it and came hurriedly into the verandah, was full of amused horror and half-vexed kindness. 'Do go away, there's a dear! I never heard of such a thing, never! And the hotel is crammed full of people!'

'It's only to wish you many happy returns of the day, dear!' he whispered fondly. 'When I've done that I'll go content. Who wouldn't be content with you, Gwen? And yet I wouldn't spare an inch of it all--I couldn't. Gwen! do you remember the day your bearer was cleaning the lamps out here, and we were sitting on the sofa?--odd, isn't it, how one remembers these things all in a jumble, the one with the other--and I said to you--the very words come back to me, dear, every one of them--' 'You might be bankrupt of everything, Gwen, of everything save yourself, and I'll give you credit for it all the same.' 'Do you remember, dear? Well, I've come to take the promise back. You've spoilt me, Gwen, I can't do it.'

'I--I don't understand,' she said faintly. 'I wish you would go, Dan. We can talk of it to-morrow--afterwards.'

'To-morrow! Why's it's to-day already, our wedding-day! And if I can't keep the promise, am I not bound to take it back while I can? Not that I'm afraid--that is why I've come, to tell you, selfish brute that I am--that is why I want it all--every scrap of your beauty, your goodness. I'll take nothing else, dear, now; for I know it's yours, and what is yours is mine by right!'

She had grown very pale, and a sort of terror came into her eyes.

'Ah Dan! what is the use of talking? I give you all I can. My best--I can't do more--it isn't kind----' she broke off almost impatiently, and yet she did not move from his clasp.

'Not kind, when I know what the best means? And yet, Gwen, it just comes upon me now that I couldn't stand it--if it were not so--not after this midsummer night's dream--of madness, if you will! Yes, dear, I'm going--I am indeed. But, Gwen--it's an idle fancy--and yet if there was anything it would be better to tell me now. You're not angry at the thought--it's only a thought. See, give me one kiss--just one, to be an answer for always.'

What right, she asked herself fiercely, had she to hesitate? What possible right, standing as she did on the threshold of a new life, *where no one could possibly know?* And so she was back on the low levels among the ordinary considerations of convenience and safety as she kissed him. But the touch of her lips sent his blood surging through his heart and brain; and without another word, another look, he turned and left her--content, absolutely content. Love, pity, friendship, passion, had all combined to raise him to the uttermost limit of vitality. He might come near it perhaps in the future; he was not likely ever to reach it again--not even without Chandni waiting to tell him the truth on his return to the odd little house at the other end of the station.

He neither knew nor cared where he was going; but his pony, tired of these incomprehensible wanderings, set its galloping hoofs on the shortest road home--that is to say, through the densely-wooded grounds of the Residency. Along a grassy ride or two, across a short cut they sped. Dan forgetting even his joy in the keen effort of steering a runaway through the trees; a runaway unheld, free to go as fast, nay, faster than it chose, yet obedient to that grip to right or left. It was a mad ride, a mad rider--yet a masterful one, wrestling imperiously with that other will, when the gloom grew as the trees thickened, and darkness and danger came together in the hot night, prisoned by the dense foliage above. Dan, looking down at the pony's heaving flanks as it paused, wearied by its short, sharp, unavailing struggle against his strong hands, felt flushed and hot. Not wearied,--he could not be that on such a night,--but glowing, palpitating, excited; drunk almost as if with wine. But yonder stood a remedy in that long, low-thatched roof, supported on brick pillars, and hung round with heavy bamboo screens. Dan laughed as he slid to the ground, thinking of the twelve feet of clear cool water running fresh and fresh into the big swimming-bath at the one end, and out at the other to irrigate the green levels of the garden. Fresh and fresh all through the scorching summer weather, when life held no greater pleasure than to feel that cool water close in round the hot limbs. Frequented then, morning and evening, though deserted and empty through the colder months. Only the day before Dan's smooth dark head had come up from its depths rejoicing, and now the thought of it was luxury itself when the blood was beating in his temples, and racing at fever heat through his veins. More than once coming home at night, after careless, reckless enjoyment, he had stopped here, as he did now, to try the water-cure--as he had tried it in the canal at Hodinuggur.

'I need it to-night if ever I did,' he said half aloud. 'Tis the wine of life has got into my head.'

It was dark--almost too dark inside; that was because the fools had put down all the screens, when, on the contrary, they should be opened by night to let in the fresh air. He told himself that he would speak to the Secretary of the caretaker's neglect; yet how would that be since he would never see him again?

Yes! it was the last time! and how many times had he not gone down red-hot from the spring-board as he would do now, to come up out of the dark water a new man, with all the evil tempers and the prickly heat quenched out of him?--sure, as a regenerating element, fire wasn't in it with water! A leap in the dark indeed! But that was what life was, and he was not afraid of it.

The little bars of moonlight shining through the chinks between the bamboos came so far on the smooth white floor, then the soft depth of darkness where the cool water should be, and above it Dan poised for a second.

*'I come! Mother of all!'*

The oft, old-repeated cry rang joyously up into the roof, followed by a strange, dull thud, and silence--dead silence.

The bath had been emptied that morning for the cold weather, and Dan Fitzgerald was lying face downward on the hard cement with a broken neck.

Dead! Dead, without a word, a sigh, or a regret! And Chandni, growing tired of patience, went home to the bazaar, grumbling at her ill-luck, telling herself she might still write, if it were worth while.

But Dan was beyond her spite, beyond other things which, even without that spite, might have killed the best part of him.

Yet even in romance the sixth commandment outweighs all the others. The novelist may maim and degrade, may bear false witness against his own creations and filch from them the very characteristics which he has given them, in order to make degradation happy, but he must not kill; death in the verdict of the world being the only real tragedy.

So at any rate seemed the opinion of most people when in the early morning the gardeners coming to their work found Dan's pony drowsing, half asleep, still tethered to a hibiscus bush, whose great blossoms--in topsy-turvy fashion--showed rosy-red in death and snowy-white in life.

It was terribly sad, they said; an unredeemed tragedy, cruel, needless; altogether a manifestation needing much true Christian faith; one of the accidents of real life, so exasperating because so causeless, so inartistic because so unnecessary. These and many other comments the mourners made as, when the funeral was over, they returned home; and so, it being Sunday morning, went to church, where they sang 'Jerusalem the Golden' piously.

Only Rose lingered, her kind, soft hands laying the half-dead lotus like sentinels on the grave; for Gwen's pure white cross of gardenia had, at her request, been buried on the coffin.

'I can't somehow be so sorry,' she said to Lewis, between her sobs. 'He was so happy that last night. I seem to see his face still.'

But the man caught his breath in hard. There was a verse which would ring in his ears, his heart; for he had helped to lift poor Dan, and it had come to memory then--

'Broken in pieces like a potter's vessel.'

Yet, after all, what did it matter? but Rose must never know. In such things he would stand between her and needless pain.

And Gwen? She, as the phrase goes, bore up wonderfully. Not that she did not love the dead man dearly, but because she did love him. For odd as it may seem--topsy-turvywise, perhaps, like the hibiscus flowers--she had the same consolation as Rose Tweedie.

'I did not tell him,' she said to herself as she lay in her darkened room. 'He was happy to the last. I did my best--I did my best.'

So she cried softly; and so, once more, she escaped from her own remorse, and was comforted.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

Both for the reader's and writer's sake it is never fair to end a story as you would end a play in a situation, for the former tries--vainly it may be--to present life even in its trivialities, the latter only in its more dramatic moments. So, though there is little more to tell, save what might easily be filled in by the reader's own imagination, it would give a false impression of the real value of poor Dan Fitzgerald's tragic death, were the curtain to come down upon the rest of the *dramatis personae* in the first bewilderment and sorrow which such unexpected and causeless accidents must always arouse. As a matter of fact, there is no grief which passes sooner from the daily life than that caused by death, especially when a real and unselfish love has existed between the dead and the living. The mind, after the first physical sense of loss has spent itself, refuses to believe in the extinction of a feeling which, in its own experience, has survived death, and so is comforted not by forgetfulness but remembrance. Besides, it is false art to end any history embracing the life of more than one person with the balance in favour of pain. For were this so in reality, pain would cease to be pain and become pleasure, because it would then be the normal condition of life; since it is clearly to be demonstrated physiologically and psychologically that it is in the disintegration of reminiscent habit that the phenomena of pain arise. Indeed, in the mind, pain is incredible, impossible, unless we have first formed the habit of pleasure; since it consists essentially in privation.

Therefore the novelist who wishes to give a true picture of life will always leave his puppets content. Nor does this limit the field unduly, since it is clearly as much the duty and privilege of the writer to present new sources of content to his readers, as it is for him to present them with scenes, or situations, or characters of which they have no previous knowledge. Because Jones thinks the soul of bliss is incarnate in roast-beef and plum-pudding, is that any reason why the more ethereal Brown should be denied his cup of nectar? or that the philosophic Robinson, seeing that birth and death are alike inscrutable phenomena, should refuse empirically to believe that the one is joyful and the other sorrowful?

But the public seems to think differently; 'Oh don't kill him, or her, or them,' it says cheerfully, 'let them enter into life halt, and maimed, and blind. What does anything matter so long as they have the average number of breakfasts, luncheons, and dinners allotted to humanity, and can thus go down to their graves in the fulness of time with the pleasing consciousness that their funeral *cortege* is followed by a Noah's ark, consisting of the ghosts of the animals they have devoured?' For the world sides with Esau, who bartered away his birthright for a mess of pottage. And good pottage is, no doubt, warming, comforting, consoling. Yet some people who have it not are happy; for instance, the two hundred and odd millions of India--but then to them Birth and Death are alike the pivot on which the wheel of life spins.

So thought the potter of Hodinuggur. So had thought his fathers who lay buried in the dust beside him, and though the old man had no son to step on to the treadles when his feet slipped from them, the wheel span steadily, and the women of the village, as they rung the temper of the water-jars before they bought them, nodded their heads saying--'Fuzl is a good potter. Look you, it comes with a man's birth. When he goes, we shall have to send for another. Meroo thinks he can make them, because the Sirkar taught him when he was three years in jail for cattle-thieving. But it takes more than three years to make a potter.'

Still Fuzl Elahi showed no signs of going; on the contrary, he seemed to have a firmer hold on life than ever, as if Time had stood still for him. Rose Gordon remarked on the fact to her husband as they sat side by side one day on the old log. They had been married nearly a year, and he had brought her out for change of air on one of his inspection tours--for he had given up the Secretaryship on his marriage in favour of greater quiet and more freedom.

'It is so strange, Lewis,' she said, 'you and I coming back, so changed. And so many things have changed! even the palace scarcely looks itself with that dreadful sort of Swiss chalet Dalel has built for Beatrice Norma tacked on to the ruins of the old tower. And George and Dan are dead, and the water is running in the cut yonder as if there had never been any tragedy about preventing it from running. Yet the village, with the potter sitting in the topmost house, is just the same.'

Lewis Gordon smiled. 'You never read Megasthenes' account of his travel through India in the year B.C. 300 or you wouldn't be surprised. It might have been written today; for these people do not change except under pressure from without, and then they disintegrate suddenly. But the old man seems to me more sane than he was--more at rest. No doubt Azizan's death----'

The familiar name caught the potter's ear and he looked up from his work.

'Yea! she sleeps still, Huzoor. The breaking of the pot did not disturb her at all. She was weary, see you, after sixteen years of waking. So now when my fathers say, "Where is Azizan?" I can answer, "Hush! she sleeps! she will waken when she is refreshed." Lo! it is well the pot broke. It was accursed; bringing ill to all.'

'There you see, Lewis!' began Rose eagerly----

'It did not bring it to me, dear,' he replied, interrupting her, 'and a man can but judge from his own experiences. And then, as I have often told you, we really know nothing for certain----'

'Except,' put in Rose obstinately, 'that poor George----'

'Don't you think we ought to be moving?' he asked quietly. 'Remember you promised Mrs. Dalel to have tea in the chalet and inspect the son and heir, and you are tired enough as it is.'

'But you said you wanted to go and see some slope or another, and I'm not in the least tired,' she insisted when they had left the yard and reached the road. 'Lewis! you never used to fuss this way. I wish you wouldn't.'

'It is only another method of showing my real views on the mental and physical calibre of women. You must have read, my dear, of the wonderful recuperative power which the lower animals have of reproducing another tail when----ahem--by the way, this is not a safe spot! I remember saying something of the same sort on purpose to annoy when we were here before----'

He paused, and looked down the narrow alley of the village to where the palace was beginning to share the unreal beauty which the dust-cloud from the feet of the homing cattle gave to the whole scene, by hiding the dull plain in a golden mist that gave distance and height to the low sand-hillocks behind which the sun was setting cloudlessly. A glorious sight, the dignity and calm majesty of which lingers long in the memory of those who have seen it in India, day after day, month after month; lingers to claim a higher place in the imagination than the more varied and complex sunsets of the West with their stormy contrasts and passionate beauty.

'Leave me here,' she said suddenly. 'I should like it. I'll sit on that pile of old potsherds, and wait till you come back. It will rest me.'

It was peaceful enough of a certainty, and silent too. Only every now and again the tinkle of a low-toned bell from some leader of the herds below chiming in on the musical moan of the potter's wheel heard over the low wall.

'It was a woman seeking something.'

The rhythm came back to her, stirring the old sense of curious unrest. Stirring it in others of her sex also, if one might judge by the eyes which, seeing the stranger alone, began to peer from the neighbouring hovels. Eyes followed by figures; deep-bosomed mothers most of them, with a slim girl or two doing nursemaid to other folks' babies.

Nearer and nearer they came, attracted by the great feminine quality, until in answer to Rose's nod of welcome and encouragement they squatted near, yet far, gathered in as it were upon themselves, apart even from that other woman; even from her, with the cares of coming motherhood writ clear upon her, and causing her to look at those other mothers with kindly, friendly eyes.

'Ari bahin!' said one with a nudge to her neighbour. 'Tis for sure she who played bat and ball last year like a boy. Wah! that is over; she knows her work now.'

'I trow not,' replied another shrilly. 'She hath been sitting with the potter's eyes upon her this half hour past. She is bad, caring but for her pleasure.'

'Mayhap she knows not,' said an older voice, 'and they have no mothers, these ones, nor mothers-in-law. Yea! 'tis true. My man went to dig for the sahibs the year there was no corn in the land, and he hath told me. They marry of themselves and there is none to see to them that they fall not into ignorant mischief. It is fool's work.'

'No mothers-in-law?' tittered a bold-faced lump. 'Ai teri! that is no fool's work.'

But the elder woman had risen, to stand a few steps nearer Rose, looking down at her with dignified wonder.

'May the Lord send a son,' she began, going to the very root of the matter without preamble.

'I will take what He chooses to send me, mother,' replied Rose, smiling.

'Tsi-si-si!' The matron's pliant forefinger wagged *sideways*, in that most impressive gesture of denial never seen out of India.

'Mention not such things, my daughter,' went on the grave voice, 'lest He take thee at the word. Then what wouldst say? And see! Go no more to the potter's yard. It is not safe. Wouldst have the son come to thee with his mark on the breast? I trow not.'

They had come forward one by one to cluster round the speaker, their dark assenting eyes on Rose.

'Tis not to be helped, though,' put in another. 'Do I not know? I, Jewun, whose son died of it this year; yet I remember the old ways and my mother's counsel. Lo! it is Fate; naught else. And 'tis better to crack and be done with it. Then folk know. Not like my new milk-jar this day. Sound to sight and touch, yet six good quarts of milk spilled on the ground, as it crumbled like sand ere a body could get a hand to it. The old man shall give me another in its place. It is not fair.'

'Nay! Mai Jewun,' put in a third, 'a pot comes to pieces ever; if not one, then another way, when it is tired of going to the well for water. Thou hast naught to complain about. Ai sisters! hither returns the sahib! He will be angry that we have spoken to his mem.'

'He will not be angry,' protested Rose; but the thought was beyond them. They were off swiftly, yet sedately, only the elder woman pausing to waggle her finger again, and say, 'Go not to the potter's. It is not well. I, Junto, mother of seven, say so.'

There were tears in Rose's eyes when Lewis came up and in consequence he did look angrily at the retreating figures. She was pale and tired, he said, and must send an excuse to Mrs. Dalel. He would not have her knocking herself up with other folks' infants. So they went back quietly to the two white tents standing beyond the Mori gate, where the pigeons, as of old, circled iridescent round the dark niches. As of old, too, the clash of silver anklets came from the shadows, since Chandni was back again in her old haunts; but with a recognised position, for her Highness Beatrice Elflida Norma was a shrewd little person, and knew that she would need help to hold her own amid the intrigues of that surely-coming long minority which lay in the future. It is a recurring fraction that long minority, in the problem of our dealings with petty principalities and powers; for civilisation does not conduce to longevity with the native nobleman, and Dalel, with the income from the stud farm, was diligently burning his feeble little constitution at both ends. On the sly, however, for virtue, to all outward appearance, reigned at Hodinuggur. Only that morning Rose had inspected a female school with rows of nice little girls with very clean primers and brand-new slates. A brand-new visitors' book, too, in which Rose had, with some misgivings, inscribed her name at the end of a trite little remark on the blessings of education; for she was only just beginning to make up her bundle of opinions, and was not quite sure of them.

But that night, as he was carefully guiding her steps through the maze of ropes and pegs to the door of the sleeping-tent, she paused suddenly to say to her husband--

'Lewis! I'm glad we came here. I thought it would be so painful seeing George's deserted grave and reviving the old memories; but it has only seemed to make it all more natural, to make everything, somehow, more simple.'

This, then, was what the years were bringing to Rose. She and Lewis were very happy; though sometimes, especially when they were out in camp together, alone, he would enter a feeble protest against her lack of sentiment. When, after work and dinner were over, they sat beside the roaring stove--the mingled lamplight and firelight making the tent cosy beyond belief--and he, laying down the volume of Thackeray from which he was reading aloud, would remark, for the hundredth time, that Rose was like one of his favourite heroines.

'If you say those stupid things, Lewis,' she would reply, 'I will make you read shilling shockers, and then you can't--or I hope you won't.'

'Oh! it is all very well to scoff,' he would continue in injured tones, 'but I am the victim of an unrequited attachment. You are the heroine of my romance always, and you never had a romance at all.'

'Well, dear! that is better than having one with some one else, isn't it?' she would reply placidly, and Lewis's hand

would reach out to touch the one which was so busy with needles, and thimbles, and threads--just to touch it for an instant, in a certain shamefast, deprecatory acknowledgment of her wisdom. For he knew quite well that he, like most men, had had several romances in his life, and that the possibility of several more remained in him. Whether the climax of Rose's dream of the future ever came about, and the boys got into scrapes, cannot be told; for the simple reason that Lewis himself is still within the torrid zone of life. But he does his best to prepare for the crisis, and he follows his wife's lead in this; that he finds life more simple and less sad as time goes on and he faces its facts less egotistically.

Gwen Boynton, however, found it quite the reverse. She married Colonel Tweedie two years after Dan's death, having, she said, buried all thoughts of personal happiness in the grave of the only man she had ever loved. This, as usual with Gwen's remarks, was true in itself, and yet left her free to marry for position without remorse; or rather, accurately speaking, to utilise her regrets as a motive for doing what she wanted to do without remorse. So she made Colonel Tweedie an excellent wife, much to his delight and comfort, for as Rose acknowledged, he sorely needed some one to keep him from fussing when she had gone to perform the same kind office to Lewis. Nevertheless, Gwen Boynton, when she came back to society after the shock of Dan's death, had lost some of her charm, and, from being a fascinating woman, had become elegant and interesting, as befitted one with a history. Life, she said, was so mysterious. Humanity a mere shuttlecock in the hand of Fate beaten backwards and forwards by devastating passions! Altogether the world was a sad sojourning in which a vague mysticism was the only anodyne for the sensitive.

She became a half-hearted disciple of Madame Blavatsky's, and reached what may be called the climax of her kindly, absolutely untrustworthy nature, when with tears in her eyes and much gentle mournful resignation to the mysterious inevitable, she would tell the story which she had heard from Rose, of how Dan Fitzgerald and George Keene had been measured for heroes in the potter's yard, and of their sad deaths within the year. Of course it was incredible; and yet----?

Thus, none of the actors in the little drama ever knew the whole truth about it. Gwen had the best chance so far as facts went, but she, being handicapped by her method of vision, failed to see her real part in the tragedy; for she resolutely set aside the possibilities of that hour during which her *dandy* waited outside the dressmaker's.

Besides, she knew no more than the rest of the other key to the position which lay in Azizan's love for George. And this was hidden even from him, though every night, winter and summer, an odd little light--like a lost star--twinkled on the summit of the shadowy Mound of Hodinuggur. It was the oil-cresset which the old potter put nightly on the girl's grave to prevent her from having bad dreams. The branded brick bungalow was empty and deserted now that the sluice-gate required no guarding, so there was no one to see its feeble yet persistent light; still it could be seen distinctly from the little enclosure where, on a white marble slab, the legend ran--

'St. George Keene, aged 21,  
Who died alone at his post.'

And between the two graves the gleaming streak of the big canal lay like a sword splitting the world into East and West.

**THE END.**

## FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): Literally, *evil-walker*.

[Footnote 2](#): On sleep--sleeping, sleeping like a child.

[Footnote 3](#): The police.

[Footnote 4](#): Full two maunds.

[Footnote 5](#): My man is dead, my heart is dead--is dead.

[Footnote 6](#): Reign.