THE HERMIT DOCTOR OF GAYA

A Love Story of Modern India

I. A. R. Wylie

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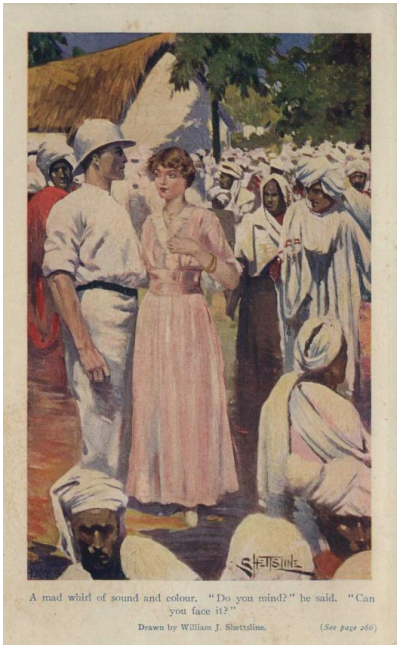
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A mad whirl of sound and colour. "Do you mind?" he said.

"Can you face it?"
Drawn by William J. Shettsline.
(See page 266.)

The Hermit Doctor of Gaya

A Love Story of Modern India

By
I. A. R. Wylie
Author of "The Native Born," etc.

"This kiss to the whole world"
Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

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CONTENTS

BOOK I

CHAPTER
I.—The Story of Kurnavati
II.—Tristram the Hermit
III.—Tristram Becomes Father-Confessor
IV.—The Interlopers
V.—A Vision of the Backwater
VI.—Broken Sanctuary
VII.—Anne Boucicault Explains
VIII.—The Two Listeners
IX.—Lalloo, the Money-Lender
X.—An Encounter
XI.—Inferno
XII.—In which Fortune Pleases to Jest
XIII.—Crossed Swords
XIV.—Tristram Chooses his Road
XV.—The Weavers
XVI.—A Meredith to the Rescue
XVII.—Mrs. Smithers Does Accounts
XVIII.—The Feast of Siva

BOOK II

I.—Mrs. Compton Stands Firm
II.—A Home-Coming
III.—Mrs. Boucicault Calls the Tune
IV.—Anne Makes a Discovery
V.—Crisis
VI.—"Of your Blood"
VII.—The Price Paid
VIII.—Return
IX.—For the Last Time
X.—Anne Chooses
XI.—Freedom
XII.—The Meeting of the Ways
XIII.—To Gaya!
XIV.—Resurrection
XV.—The Snake-God
XVI.—Towards Morning

The Hermit Doctor of Gaya

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE STORY OF KURNAVATI

"Thus it came about that, for her child's sake, the Rani Kurnavati saved herself from the burning pyre and called together the flower of the Rajputs to defend Chitore and their king from the sword of Bahadur Shah."

The speaker's voice had not lifted from its brooding quiet. But now the quiet had become a living thing repressed, a passion disciplined, an echo dimmed with its passage from the by-gone years, but vibrant and splendid still with the clash of chivalrous steel.

The village story-teller gazed into the firelight and was silent. Swift, soft-footed shadows veiled the lower half of his face, but his eyes smouldered and burnt up as they followed their visions among the flames. He was young. His lithe, scantily-clad body was bent forward and his slender arms were clasped loosely about his knees. Compared with him, the broken circle of listeners seemed half living. They sat quite still, their skins shining darkly like polished bronze, their eyes blinking at the firelight. Only the headman of the village moved, stroking his fierce grey beard with a shrivelled hand.

"Those were the great days!" he muttered. "The great days!"

The silence lingered. The Englishman, whose long, white-clad body linked the circle, shifted his position. He lay stretched out with a lazy, unconscious grace, his head supported on his arm,

his eyes lifted to the overhanging branches of the peepul tree, whose long, pointed leaves fretted the outskirts of the light and sheltered the solemn, battered effigy of the village god like the dome of a temple. A suddenly awakened night-breeze stirred them to a mysterious murmur. They rustled tremulously and secretly together, and the clear cold fire of a star burnt amidst their shifting shadows. Beyond and beneath their whispering there were other sounds. A night-owl hooted, a herd of excited, lithe-limbed monkeys scrambled noisily in the darkness overhead, chattered a moment, and were mischievously still. From the distance came the long, hungry wail of a pariah dog, hunting amidst the village garbage. These discords dropped into the night's silence, breaking its placid surface into widening circles and died away. The peepul leaves shivered and sank for an instant into grave meditation on their late communings, and through the deepened quiet there poured the distant, monotonous song of running water. It was a song based on one deep organ note, the primæval note of creation, and never changed. It rose up out of the earth and filled the darkness and mingled with the silence, so that they became one. The listeners heard it and did not know they heard it. It was the background on which the night sounds of living things painted themselves in vivid colours.

The Englishman turned his face to the firelight.

"Go on, Ayeshi," he said, with drowsy content. "You can't leave the beautiful Rani in mid-air like that, you know. Go on."

"Yes, Sahib." The young man pushed back the short black curls from his neck and resumed his old attitude of watchfulness on the flames. But his voice sounded louder, clearer:

"Thereafter, Sahib, the need of Chitore grew desperate. In vain, the bravest of her nobles sallied forth—the armies of Bahadur Shah swept over them as the tempest sweeps over the ripe corn, and hour by hour the ring about the city tightened till the very gates shivered beneath the enemy's blows. It was then the Rani bethought her of a custom of her people. With her own hands she made a bracelet of silver thread bound with tinsel and gay with seven coloured tassels, and, choosing a trusty servant, sent him forth out of Chitore to seek Humayun, the Great Moghul, whose conquering sword even then swept Bengal like a flail. By a miracle, the messenger escaped and came before Humayun and laid the bracelet in his hands, saying:

"'This is the gift of Kurnavati, Rani of Chitore.'

"And Humayun looked at the messenger and asked:

"'And if Humayun accept the gift of the Rani Kurnavati, what then?'

"'Then shall Humayim be her bracelet-bound brother, and she shall be his dear and virtuous sister.'

"And Humayun looked at the gift and asked:

"'And if I become bracelet-bound brother to the Rani Kurnavati, what then?'

"'Then will the Rani of Chitore call upon her dear and reverend brother, according to the bond, to succour her from the cruel vengeance of Bahadur Shah.'

"And because the heart of Humayun loved all chivalrous and noble deeds better than conquest and rich spoils, he took the bracelet and bound it about his wrist, saying: 'Behold, according to the custom, Humayun accepts the bond, and from henceforth the Rani Kurnavati is his dear and virtuous sister, and his sword shall not rest in its scabbard till she is free from the threat of her oppressors.' And he set forth with all his horsemen and rode night and day till the walls of Chitore were in sight."

"Well——?" The story-teller had ceased speaking and the Englishman rolled over, clipping his square chin in his big hands. "Go on, Ayeshi."

"He came too late." The metal had gone from the boy's voice, and the firelight awoke no answering gleam in his watching eyes.

"The Rani Kurnavati and three thousand of her women had sought honour on the funeral pyre. The grey smoke from their ashes greeted Humayun as he passed through the battered gates. The walls of Chitore lay in ruins and without them slept their defenders, clad in saffron bridal robes, their faces

lifted to the sun, their broken swords red with the death of their enemies. And Humayun, seeing them, wept."

Ayeshi's voice trailed off into silence. The headman nodded to himself, showing his white teeth.

"Those were the great days," he muttered, "when men died fighting and the women followed their husbands to the——" He coughed and glanced at the Englishman.

"But ours are the days of the Sahib," he added, with great piety, "full of wisdom and peace."

"Just so." The Sahib rose to his feet, stretching himself. "And, talking of wives, Buddhoos, if thou dost not give that luckless female of thine the medicine I ordered, instead of offering it up to the village devil, I will mix thee such a compound as will make thy particular hereafter seem Paradise by comparison. Moreover, I will complain to the Burra Sahib and thou wilt be most certainly degraded and become the mock of Lalloo, thy dear and loving brother-in-law. Moreover, if I again find thirty of thy needy brethren herded together in thy cow-stall, I will assuredly dose thy whole family. Hast thou understood?"

The headman salaamed solemnly.

"The Dakktar Sahib's wishes are law," he declared fervently.

"I should like to think so. And now, Ayeshi, it is

time. We have ten miles to go before morning. Give me my medicine-chest. I see that Buddhoos has a longing eye on it. Come, Wickie!"

The last order was in English, and a small, curious shape uncurled itself from the shadows at the base of the tree and trotted into the firelight. The most that could be said of it with any truth was, that it had been intended for a dog. Many generations back there had been an Aberdeen in the family, and since then the peculiarities of that particular strain had been modified to an amazing degree by a series of *mésalliances*. In fact, all that remained of the Aberdeen were a pair of bandy legs and a wistful, pseudo-innocent eye. Nevertheless, it was evidently an object of veneration. The village elders made way for it, regarding it with gloomy apprehension as it leisurely stretched itself, yawned, and then, with the dignity which goes with conscious yet modest superiority, proceeded to follow the massive white figure of its master into the darkness.

The headman salaamed again deeply and possibly thankfully.

"A safe journey and return, Sahib!" he called.

The Sahib's answer came back cheerily through the stillness. He looked back for an instant at the patch of firelight and the sharply cut silhouettes of moving figures, and then strode on, keeping well to the middle of the dusty roadway, his footsteps ringing out above the soft accompaniment of Ayeshi's

patter and the fussy tap-tap of Wickie's unwieldy paws. He whistled cheerfully. So long as the sleeping, odoriferous mud-huts of the village bound them in on either hand, he clung tenaciously to his disjointed scrap of melody, but, as they came out at last into the open country, he broke off, sighing, and stood still, his arms outstretched, breathing in the freedom and untainted air with a thirsty, passionate gratitude.

There was no moon. The luminous haze which poured out over the limitless space before them was a mysterious thing, born of itself without source, without body. Its pallid, greenish clarity stretched in a ghostly sea between the earth and the black, beacon-studded sky, distorting and magnifying, as still water distorts and magnifies the rocks and tangled seaweed at its bed. It lapped soundlessly against the cliff of rising jungle land to the right, and beneath its quiet surface the shadow of the village temple floated like a sunken island, its slender *sikhara* alone rising up into the darkness, a finger of warning and admonition. It was very still. The voice of the invisible, swift-flowing river had indeed grown louder, but it was a sound outside this world of shadows and phantoms. It beat against the protecting wall of dreams, unheeded yet ominous and threatening in its implacable reality.

The two men crossed the path which encircled the village and made their way over the uneven

ground towards the temple. As they drew nearer, the light seemed to recede, leaving the great roofless *manderpam* a shapeless ruin, whilst the *sikhara* faded into the black background of the jungle. The Dakktar Sahib whistled softly; a horse whinnied in answer, and the amazing Wickie bounded forward as though recognizing an old acquaintance. The Sahib laughed under his breath.

"We know each other, Wickie, Arabella and I," he said. "A wonderful animal that, Ayeshi."

"Truly, a noble creature, Sahib," Ayeshi answered very gravely.

A minute later they reached the carved gateway of the temple where two horses had been casually tethered. They stood deep in shadow, but the strange, unreal light which covered the plain filled the *manderpam* with its broken avenue of pillars, and threw into sharp relief the carved gateway and the figure seated cross-legged and motionless beneath the arch. Both men seemed to have expected the apparition. Ayeshi knelt down before it and placed a bowl of milk, which he had been carefully carrying, within reach of the long, lifeless-looking arms.

"For the God thou servest, O Holy One," he said, and for a moment knelt there with his forehead pressed to the ground.

The old mendicant seemed neither to have heard nor seen. He was almost naked. The bones started out of the shrivelled flesh, and the long, matted grey

hair hung about his shoulders and mingled with the dishevelled beard, so that he seemed scarcely human, scarcely living. Only for an instant his eyes, half hidden beneath the wild disorder, flashed over the kneeling figure, and then closed, shutting the last vestige of life behind blank lids.

The Dakktar Sahib bent down and placed a coin in the upturned palms.

"That also is for thy God, Vahana," he said, with grave respect. Receiving no answer, he turned away and untethered his horse, a quadruped which even the solemn shadow could not dignify. It must have stood over seventeen hands high and its shape was comically suggestive of a child's drawing—six none too steady lines representing legs, back, and neck. The Dakktar Sahib whispered to it tenderly and reassuringly: "Only ten miles, Arabella, on my word of honour, only ten miles. And you shall have all tomorrow. I know it's rotten bad luck, but then I have got to stick it, too—it's our confounded, glorious duty to stick it, Arabella, and you wouldn't leave me in the lurch, would you, old girl?" Then came the crunch of sugar and the sound of Arabella's affectionate nozzling in the region of coat pockets. The Dakktar swung himself on to her lengthy back. "Now, then, Ayeshi; now then, Wickie!"

The three strange companions trotted out of the shadow, threading their way through the long, coarse grass in the direction of the river; but once

the Englishman turned in his saddle and looked back. By some atmospheric freak, the temple seemed to have drawn all the green phosphorescent haze into its ruined self and hung like a great, dimly lit lamp against the wall of jungle. The Dakktar Sahib lingered a moment.

"They must have dreamed wonderfully in those old days," he said, wistfully. "To have built that—think of it, Ayeshi! To have given one's soul an abiding expression to wake the souls of other men thousands of years hence—to bring a lump into the throat of some human being long after one's bones have crumbled to dust. Well—well——"

He broke off with a sigh. "And you believe that tonight the Snake God will drink your milk, Ayeshi?"

"He or his many brethren, Sahib. He lies coiled about the branches of the highest tree in the jungle and on every branch of the forest another such as he keeps guard over his rest."

"No man has ever seen him, Ayeshi?"

"No man dares set foot within the jungle, Sahib, save Vahana, and he is a Sadhu, a holy man. He has sat before the temple for a hundred years, and none have seen him eat or heard him speak."

"You believe that, Ayeshi?"

The boy hesitated a moment, then answered gravely:

"Yes, Sahib. My people have believed it."

"Your people? Well—that's a good reason—one

of our pet reasons for our pet beliefs, if you did but know it, Ayeshi. There's not such a gulf between East and West, after all." He rode on in silence, and then turned his head a little as though trying to distinguish his companion's features through the darkness. "Who are your people, Ayeshi—your father, your mother, your brothers? You have never spoken of them. Are they dead?"

"I do not know, Sahib. I have never known father or mother or brethren."

The Dakktar Sahib nodded to himself.

"You are not like the other villagers," he said. "One feels it—one doesn't talk in the same way to you. Tell me, Ayeshi, have you no ambitions?"

"None but to serve you, Sahib."

The Englishman threw back his head and laughed.

"Well, that's a poor sort of ambition. Why, I might get knocked on the head any time—typhoid, cholera, enteric—I'm cheek by jowl with the lot of them half the days of my life. And then where would you be, Ayeshi?"

"I should follow you, Sahib."

"That sounds almost biblical. And what for, eh?"

"Because of this, Sahib——" Suddenly and passionately, he discarded the English language which he used with ease and plunged into his own vernacular. "Behold, Sahib, there is the snake-bite on my arm, the wound which the Sahib cleansed with

his own lips. Is that a thing to be forgotten? A life belongs to him who saves it."

"Pooh, nonsense!" The Englishman leant over his saddle. "For the Lord's sake, Wickie, keep away from Arabella's hoofs! Are you a dog or an idiot? Ayeshi, you don't understand. That sort of thing's my job—there, now, you've nearly run us into the river with your silly chatter——"

They drew rein abruptly. It was now close on the dawn, and the darkness had become intensified. The stars seemed colder and dimmer. Where they stood, their horses snuffing nervously at the unknown, they could hear the steady hurrying of the water at their feet, but they could see nothing. The Englishman patted the neck of his steed with a comforting hand. "In a year or two, there will be a bridge across," he said. "Then Mother Ganges won't have such terrors for us."

"Mother Ganges demands toll of those who curb her," Ayeshi answered solemnly.

"You mean, that no bridge could be built here?"

"I mean, Sahib, that the price will be a heavy one."

The Dakktar Sahib made no answer. Suddenly he laughed, not as though amused, but with a vague embarrassment.

"That was a fine story you told us tonight, Ayeshi. I don't know what there was about it—something that made one tingle from head to foot.

I've been thinking of it on and off all the time. Those were days when men did mad, splendid things—bad too—worse than anything we do, but also finer. Sometimes one wishes—but it's no good wishing. The Rani Kurnavati and her bracelet are gone forever."

"Humayun also is dead," Ayeshi said, in his grave way.

"You mean——? Yes, that's true, too, I suppose. But oh Lord"—he lifted himself in his saddle with a movement of joyous, fiery vitality—"though I'm no Great Moghul, worse luck, still, if a woman sent *me* her bracelet and she were being murdered on the top of Mount Ararat, I'd——"

"The Sahib would come in time," Ayeshi interposed gently and significantly.

The Englishman dropped back in his saddle.

"Well, anyhow, Arabella, Wickie, and I would have a good shot at it," he said, gaily. He turned his horse's head eastwards and touched her gently to a trot. "But it's no good bragging. No one's going to make either of us bracelet brother. That's not for the like of us. And meanwhile, we've got eight miles to go and the dawn will be on us in an hour. I wish we'd got the seven-league boots handy. But you don't know the story of the seven-league boots, do you, Ayeshi? I'll tell it you as we go along. A story for a story, eh?"

"Yes, Sahib."

They trotted off along the bank of the river,

Arabella slightly in advance, Wickie skirmishing skilfully on either hand, the Dakktar Sahib's voice mingling with the song of the waters as he told the story of the seven-league boots.

Behind them the temple had sunk into profound shadow.

Vahana, the mendicant, still sat beneath the archway. He took the bowl of milk and drained it thirstily. The coin he spat on with a venomous hatred and sent spinning into the darkness.

CHAPTER II

TRISTRAM THE HERMIT

"Of course, all that one can do is to hope," Mrs. Compton said, ruffling up her dark, curly hair with a distracted hand. "I don't know who it was talked about hope springing eternal in the something-something, but he must have lived in Gaya. If we hadn't hope and pegs in this withered desert——"

"My dear," her husband interposed, "in the first place, Gaya isn't a desert. It's the Garden of India. In the second place, no lady talks about pegs—certainly not in the tone of devout thankfulness which you have used. Pegs is—are masculine. They uphold us in our strenuous hours, of which you women appear to know nothing; they soothe our overwrought nerves

and prepare the way for a liverish old age in Cheltenham. Praise be to Allah!"

Mrs. Compton sighed and surveyed the curtain which she had been artistically draping. Her manner, like her whole wiry, restless personality, expressed a good-tempered irascibility.

"Anyhow, they keep you human and grant us luckless females a lucid interval in which we can call our souls our own. What you men would be like if you didn't have your drinks and your tubs and all your other multitudinous creature comforts—well, it doesn't stand thinking about. Archie, do you like the curtain tied up with a bow or—oh, of course, it's no use asking you, you materialistic lump." She turned from the long, lean figure sprawling on the wicker chair by the verandah window and appealed to the second member of her audience.

"Mr. Meredith, you're a clergyman, you ought to have a soul. Do you like bows or don't you?"

Meredith looked up with a faint smile on his grave face.

"I like bows, Mrs. Compton. I hope it's a good sign of my artistic and spiritual development?"

"Yes, it is. I like bows myself. Oh, dear——" She stopped suddenly. "But supposing she's a horror! Supposing she paints and smothers herself in diamonds, and gets hilarious at dinner, and has a shrill voice! Goodness knows, I don't boast about our morals, but we're immoral in our own conventional

way, so that it becomes almost respectable, and anything else would shock us frightfully. You know, I think we're running an awful risk."

Captain Compton guffawed cheerfully, and the smile still lingered in Owen Meredith's pleasant eyes.

"I shouldn't worry, my dear lady," he recommended. "After all, some of them are the last thing in respectability. It belongs to their profession. They're bound to be physically perfect, and physical perfection goes with morality. Besides, I understand that there can be genius in that sort of thing, and that she's a genius."

"Well, genius doesn't go with respectability, anyhow," Mary Compton retorted. "A professional dancer and a guest of the Rajah's! What can one hope for?"

Meredith compressed his lips and passed his hand over his black hair with a movement that somehow or other revealed the Anglican. A look of what might have been habitual anxiety settled on his square, blunt features, and he found no answer.

Captain Compton got up, stretching himself.

"The Rajah's the best guarantee we could have," he said lazily. "He's a harmless type of the little degenerate princeling who apes the European and lives in a holy terror of doing the wrong thing. He wouldn't set Gaya by the ears for untold gold. I know just what's happened. He saw Mlle. Fersen dance and he sent her a bouquet—very respectfully—and gave

a supper-party in her honour—also very respectable —and assured her of a warm, respectable welcome in Gaya should she ever visit India. Well, she's come—as why shouldn't she?—and he's trying to do the handsome and the respectable at the same time. You don't suppose old Armstrong would have written about her if everything wasn't quite all right." He pulled out his cigarette case and looked round helplessly for the matches. "My dear, you will find that she is not only a perfect lady, but that our ways will shock her into fits, and that we shall have to live up to her."

Mrs. Compton gave him the matches with the air of a nurse tending a peculiarly incapable child.

"You disappoint me horribly," she said, and went out on the verandah. A minute later she called the two men after her and pointed an indignant finger in the direction of the highway. "Look at that, Archie! How do you suppose anybody's going to respect us with that sort of thing running about! It's positively unpatriotic. It's a blow at the very foundations of the Empire——!"

"Why, it's the old Hermit," Compton interrupted, soothingly. "Don't worry about him. If there were a few more hermits—Bless the man! what's he doing? Ahoy, Tristram, ahoy there!"

In answer to the shouted welcome, the little procession which had aroused Mrs. Compton's ire turned in at the compound gates. The Dakktar Sahib

came first. He wore a duck suit with leggings, and carried his pith helmet in both hands as though it were a bowl full of priceless liquid. In its place, a loud bandanna handkerchief offered a slight protection to his head and neck. Behind him, at her untrammelled leisure; came Arabella, her reins trailing, her nose almost on the ground, her legs obviously wavering under the burden of her protruding ribs. Behind her again, in a cloud of sulky dust, waddled Wickie, forlorn and spiritless. The three halted at the steps of the verandah, and the Dakktar Sahib sat down on the first step without ceremony.

"I'm done," he said.

Mrs. Compton almost snorted at him.

"I should think so! What on earth were you walking for, you impossible person? What is the use of having a horse—if you call that object a horse—if you don't ride?"

"Arabella's dead beat," he explained simply. He put his pith helmet between his knees and stared down into its depths as though something hidden there interested him. "I know she's no beauty," he went on earnestly. "But she's an awful brick. Never done me or any one a bad turn in her lire. Can't say that of myself. And just because I paid fourteen quid for her, I don't see why I should put upon her. I suppose we three couldn't have a drink, could we?"

Compton shook his head. He came and sat down

on the step beside the big, travel-stained figure and looked cooler and more immaculate by contrast.

"Afraid not. If you weren't so delightfully absent-minded, Hermit, you would know perfectly well that we're not at home. Don't you recognize the old dâk-bungalow when you see it?"

Tristram turned and looked about him rather blankly. At that moment Mrs. Compton, who was feeling unjustifiably irritable, thought he was quite the ugliest man she had ever set eyes on.

"No—to tell you the truth, I was too dead to notice. I just tottered in. What's happened? The old place looks as though it had had its face washed. Who are you expecting?"

"Ever heard of Sigrid Fersen?"

Tristram returned rather suddenly to the contemplation of the mysterious contents of his helmet.

"Yes—on my last leave home. I saw her dance the night before I sailed."

"Well, she's coming here—world tour or something. The Rajah invited her to Gaya, and Armstrong gave us a hint to do the hospitable. Mary is all on the *qui vive*, hoping she'll do the high kick at a Vice-Regal function or something."

Tristram made no answer, and his silence was at once irritating and final. He seemed scarcely to have heard. Mrs. Compton, watching his profile with dark, exasperated eyes, suddenly softened.

"You *do* look fagged!" she exclaimed impulsively. "Has it been a bad time, Hermit?"

He looked up at her.

"Pretty bad. I haven't seen a white face for two months or slept in the same quarters for two nights running. There's any amount of trouble brewing out there in the villages. It's the drought—and the poor beggars can't get the hang of our notions. Anything might develop. I'm going back to Heerut tonight. I came along only to get fresh medical supplies. I left Ayeshi at the last village. He's a gem."

Meredith, who had been standing by the verandah railings, drew himself up, his swarthy face was brightened by his eyes, which were alight with a grave, sincere fervour.

"Yes, Ayeshi's unusual," he said. "He's different from the rest. I've often noticed him. I wish we could get hold of him, Tristram."

"Get hold of him?"

"Give him a chance. You know what I mean. It's that type of man we want. He ought to be encouraged to go ahead."

"Ayeshi's all right," Tristram remarked slowly. "He's happy. And he's a sort of poet, you know. I'd leave him alone, if I were you."

Meredith laughed good-temperedly.

"It's not my business to leave people alone," he said.

There was a silence which unaccountably

threatened to become strained. Mrs. Compton, wearied by her struggles with refractory curtains, drew a chair up to the steps of the verandah and sat down, ruffling her husband's sleek hair with an absent-minded affection. He bore the affliction patiently, his lazy blue eyes intent on the approach of a neat, slow-going dog-cart which had turned the bend of the high-road.

"It's the Boucicaults' turn-out," he said. "And little Anne driving herself, too, by Jove! I wonder what she wants round here?"

"Whatever it is, she must want it pretty badly," his wife remarked. "She hates driving—if the truth were told, I believe that pony terrifies her out of her life. Poor little soul!"

"No nerve," Compton agreed. "Broken long ago."

Meanwhile, with a lightness and agility that was unexpected in a man of his short, heavy build, Owen Meredith had swung himself over the verandah rails and walked down to meet the new-comer. The trio on the steps watched him in silence. Then Compton chuckled rather mirthlessly. "She'd make a first-rate parson's wife," he said. "If only——" then he broke off and became suddenly business-like and astonishingly keen. "Tristram—stop fidgeting with that damned helmet of yours. I know you're dog-tired, old chap, but I want you to go round to the Boucicaults before you return to the wilds."

Tristram looked up. The tiredness had gone out

of his face.

"Anything wrong—I mean, worse than usual?"

Compton threw his half-finished cigarette at Wickie.

"You don't know what it's been like these last two months. The man's mad, Tristram, or he's possessed of the devil. The whole regiment is suffering from c.b. and extra drill and stopped leave —for nothing—nothing. I oughtn't to talk about it, I suppose, but something's got to be done. The men are getting nervy and out of hand, and no wonder. There are moments when I feel ready to lash out myself."

"Can't something be done? Can't you get rid of him?"

Compton laughed shortly.

"You know what happens to men who complain of their superior officers. Besides, he's so devilishly efficient, and everything he does is done in cold blood. It's drink, of course, but it doesn't make him lose his head. It makes him deadly, hideously quiet. And it's not only the regiment, Tristram—there's his wife. We hardly ever see her—and when we do—well, they say——"

Mrs. Compton clenched her small brown fist and thumped her husband's shoulder in a burst of indignation.

"They say he beats her," she said between clenched teeth.

Tristram got up as though he had been stung.

"That's—that's damnable!" he stuttered.

"That's just the word," Mrs. Compton acknowledged gratefully. She looked up at him and admitted to herself that, after all, he pleased her profoundly. At that moment he was not ugly in her eyes. In one way, she recognized him to be magnificent. She knew no other man with such shoulders or who carried his height and strength with so natural a grace. But now even his face pleased her, red-bearded and unlovely though it was. In her quick, Celtic way, she imagined a sculptor who, in an inspired mood, had modelled a masterpiece, incomplete, rough-hewn, yet vigorous with life and significance. She liked his blue eyes, which usually looked out on the world with a whimsical simplicity and now flared up, dangerously bright. "Positively," said Mrs. Compton, "there are moments when I love you, Hermit."

Archibald Compton grimaced and pulled himself to his feet.

"Anyhow, after that brazen-faced declaration you might help us," he said. "You're a doctor. It's your business to interfere. Couldn't you drop a hint at headquarters—suggest long leave or something? Do—there's a good fellow——"

Tristram had no opportunity to reply, for Anne Boucicault her companion were now within earshot. Meredith walked at the wheel of her cart and was

talking gaily, his face lifted to hers, and, freed for the moment from its habitual expression of fervid purpose, was almost boyish. She smiled down at him, and then, glancing up at the group at the verandah, the smile faded and she jerked the reins of her pony so that the animal came to an abrupt stand-still.

"Major Tristram!" she exclaimed. "Why, I didn't know you were back—I thought——" She broke off, flushing to the brows. Her incoherency and that quick change of colour added to her rather touching sweetness. She was not pretty. Neither the dainty white frock nor the shady hat could help her to more than youth. But her youth was vivid and gracious. There was something, too, in her expression, in the look of the brown eyes, that had all the appeal, the wistfulness of an anxious, frightened child. There was nothing mature about her save her mouth, which was firm, even obstinate.

Major Tristram came to her and gave her his big hand.

"I'm back for only a few hours," he explained, "and then my victims have me again. But it's good to catch a glimpse of anything so fresh as yourself. Isn't the sun ever going to wither you like other mortals?"

The smile dawned shyly about the corners of her lips.

"I don't know. I keep out of it as much as possible. I don't like it. I only came out this afternoon because——" She hesitated and then added rather

breathlessly: "I knew Mrs. Compton was here—and I'm anxious about mother."

Mary Compton laid an impulsive brown hand on the white one which held the reins in its frail, ineffectual fingers.

"Well, here we all are, anyhow," she said, "and just dying to be useful. What's the trouble, dear?"

"Mother is ill," Anne Boucicault answered, with the same curious hesitancy. "I was frightened. Major Tristram, if only you could come——"

He did not wait for her to finish her appeal. He scrambled up on to the seat beside her, and took the reins from her hands.

"You look after Arabella and Wickie, Compton," he said, "and hand me up my helmet. No—not like that—for goodness' sake, be careful, man! Thanks, that's better."

"And I hope you're going to wear it," Mrs. Compton remarked, with asperity. "I suppose you don't want to arrive with a sunstroke or give Mrs. Boucicault a fit with that awful handkerchief?"

Tristram shook his head.

"Sorry, can't be done. It's occupied already. A patient of mine." He put his battered headgear between his knees and poked gingerly about the depths, producing, finally, amidst a confusion of straw and grass, a tiny bulbul. The little creature fluttered desperately, and then, as though there were something miraculous in the man's hand, lay still, a

soft, bright-eyed ball of colour, and stared around it with an audacious contentment.

"Its wing's hurt," Tristram explained. "Wickie bit it. In point of fact, Wickie and I aren't on speaking terms as a result. It's a subject we shall never agree upon." He soothed the little creature's ruffled plumage with a tender forefinger, and held it out for Anne Boucicault's inspection. She peered at it curiously and rather coldly.

"It's very sweet," she said, "but wouldn't it be kinder to put it out of its misery?"

"Rather not. Besides"—his eyes twinkled in Meredith's direction—"it's not my business to put people out of their misery. And I'd rather keep this little chap alive than some men I know of. He's one of creation's top-notes. He's a poem all to himself. He wants to live and he's a right to live, and he's going to. His wing'll mend. I've mended dozens. It's an instinct—mending. I've got a baby cheetah with a broken paw at my diggins——"

Compton laughed hilariously at his wife's grim disapproval.

"I don't believe you could drown a kitten," she said.

"Why on earth should I want to drown a kitten?" He put his *protégé* tenderly back in its impromptu nest. "I brought two tabbies from England, and there are a lot more now. The whole village looks after them. They believe they're a specially imported sort

of devil, and take every opportunity to propitiate them with edible offerings. It's great!"

Mrs. Compton looked helpless.

"You beware of that man, Anne," she said. "He's probably got a dyspeptic rattlesnake in one of his pockets. As to you, Tristram Tristram, I warn you that sooner or later you will get into serious trouble. You're a sentimentalist. There—go along. And, meanwhile, I'll let Arabella eat the grass tidy, and that so-called dog shall have a bone. Good luck to you!"

"I'm awfully obliged," he said solemnly. "Not a chicken bone, please. They stick in his throat."

"If I followed my conscience, I should give him poison," Mrs. Compton retorted, with her brows knitted over laughing eyes.

She had, however, no opportunity to carry out her threat. As the dog-cart turned out of the compound gates the disgruntled Wickie, who had been lying afar off, panting and disgraced, picked himself up, and, uttering a hoarse wail of indignation and despair, took to his bandy legs and rolled after the disappearing vehicle in a miniature storm of dust.

CHAPTER III

TRISTRAM BECOMES FATHER-CONFESSOR

So long as the gleaming, unsheltered roadway lasted, Tristram remained silent. His eyes were swollen with fatigue, and the sun blinded him. Through a silver shimmer of heat, he could see the undulating plain, yellow with the harvest, and his knowledge saw beyond that to the river and the rising jungle land, and the scattered hapless villages where his enemy awaited him. Cool and beautiful, Gaya lay above them, circling the hillside, the white walls of the bungalows sparkling amidst the dark green of the trees like the gems of a diadem. Tristram and his companion watched it thirstily. As they trotted at last into an avenue of flowering Mohwa trees, he drew rein and glanced down at the girl beside him. She was sitting very straight as though in defiance of the heat, her hands folded in front of her, her lips sternly composed. The youthful tears were not far off, yet, through a transient break in the future, he saw her as she would be years hence. And somehow the vision amused and touched him. It was as though the phenomenon reversed itself, and a stern-featured, middle-aged woman had grown young before his eyes.

"You mustn't worry," he said gently. "I don't suppose it's anything serious. Tell me about it. I don't want to worry her with questions."

"It won't worry her." He saw how her hands trembled as she clasped them and unclasped them.

"She wants to talk—it's terrible—that's why I was so anxious—I had to find some one who would listen—and—and soothe her. I really came for Mr. Meredith. She doesn't like him, I'm afraid, poor mother, but that's because she doesn't understand. He's so awfully good."

"He's a fine fellow," Tristram agreed.

"And I thought he might help her," she went on, earnestly,—"might give her strength. Trouble overwhelms her. She resents it. And she has nothing to fall back on—nothing to console her."

Tristram did not answer immediately. They were going uphill, and he gave the pony his head, letting him manage the ascent after his own fashion.

"It takes a lot to console a man when his machinery's out of order," he said at last. "And one somehow does resent it. And then, I must say, if I had the toothache, I shouldn't want Mr. Meredith."

She gave a little nervous, unamused laugh.

"You know quite well what I mean, Major Tristram."

"Yes, I do. And I'm wondering if, after all, Meredith isn't the man you want. He and I both concentrate on humanity, but we do it from different points of view. I'm the man who looks after the house and sees that it's hygienic and watertight and all that. Meredith puts in the furniture and the electric fittings and keeps them polished."

He glanced whimsically at her puzzled face. "I

mean just that the soul isn't my business," he added.

She raised eager, trusting eyes to his.

"I think it is, Major Tristram, I'm sure it is."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I think so too. I believe that the soul is the body and the body is the soul, and that one can't be healthy or unhealthy without affecting the other. But that's heresy, isn't it?"

A waxen, beautiful blossom from an overhanging mango-tree fell into her lap. Mechanically she picked it up and tore it with her restless fingers.

"It's not what we are taught to believe," she answered.

"No. You see, I'm a Pagan, Miss Boucicault. It's hereditary. My old mother—she's nearly eighty—she still totters up on to the mountain tops to say her prayers. As for me—" he gave a contented chuckle —"you hear that little chap chirping inside my helmet? Well, he's my consolation for every ache and sorrow I ever had—he and his like, and the trees and the stars and the flowers—even that mango blossom you're tearing up. To me they're just so many parts of God."

"Oh!——" She looked at the tattered flower in her lap and brushed it aside as though it suddenly frightened her. "I don't think that can be right. I'm sure you're not a Pagan, anyhow, Major. You couldn't be—and do the things you do."

They came out of the belt of shadow into the broad sunlight, and the blinding change covered his silence. A company of native infantry came up from a cross-road and swung past them amidst a cloud of slow-rising dust. The officers saluted Tristram. For an instant they seemed to throw off their weary dejection and to become almost gay. But the men did not lift their eyes. Their beards were white with dust and their faces set and sullen. They passed on, the beat of their feet sounding muffled and heavy on the palpitating quiet.

"They look pretty bad," Tristram commented.

"I'm frightened of them," she returned quickly. "Some of them mutinied last week, and father was nearly shot. I wake up every night and fancy I hear them firing on us."

"They belong to a regiment that stuck to us through thick and thin in 1857," he answered. "It's not like them to turn against us."

Her lips tightened.

"You can't trust any of them," she said.

By this time they had reached the first large bungalow of the European quarter. It was at once a sombre, pretentious building, evidently newly done up, and as they passed, a man on horseback turned out of the compound. Seeing Anne Boucicault, he saluted at once with a faintly exaggerated courtesy. The exaggeration matched the ultra-smartness of his English riding-clothes and the un-English flashiness

of his good looks. Anne Boucicault returned the salutation stiffly, not meeting his direct glance, which passed on with an unveiled curiosity to Tristram. The latter urged the pony to a smarter trot as though something had irritated him.

"That's a stranger, anyhow," he said. "Two months brings changes even to Gaya. I thought that place was deserted and haunted for all time."

"Mr. Barclay has it now," she answered. "He came six weeks ago. I believe he trades with the native weavers or something. He's very rich."

"He doesn't look like an Englishman."

"He's not—not really. An Eurasian. His mother was a native, and his father——" She broke off. "He makes it a sort of half mystery. He just hints at things—I don't believe he knows himself. Anyhow, we hate him and try to avoid him. It's awfully awkward."

"I seemed to know his face," Tristram said, half to himself. He heard her sigh, and the sigh roused him from his tired search after an elusive memory. "He doesn't bother you, does he?" he asked.

She shook her head, but he saw her lips tremble with a new agitation.

"Not exactly—only it's all going to be so different. We were like a big family, weren't we, Major Tristram—all friends, all of the same set, and now this man has come, and then—you've heard, haven't you—about this woman, this dancer——"

"Mlle. Fersen, you mean?"

"That's what she calls herself." There was a chilly displeasure in her tone, which made her seem suddenly much older. "What does she want here? Why does she come? She can't have anything in common with us. She may even be a foreigner—vulgar and horrid——"

"I don't think she's like that," he interposed.

She flashed round on him.

"You know her, then?"

"I've seen her—just once," he answered, slowly.

"Is she——" She seemed to struggle with the question. "Is she very beautiful, Major Tristram?"

"No—I think not—not at all."

"That's worse then." And then quickly, passionately: "Oh, I wish she wasn't coming! I don't know why the very thought of her frightens me. It's as though I knew she was going to bring trouble—a sort of presentiment——"

"You're tired and anxious," he interrupted, and smiled down at her. "Nothing will happen—or perhaps I'm sanguine because I shan't be there to witness the upheaval."

"You're going into camp again?"

"Tonight."

"For long?"

"Until I've got things straight."

He happened to see her hands, and how they were tightly interlocked as though she were holding

herself back. But her voice was quiet enough.

"Will you go on like that always, Major Tristram?"

"Until they push me on to the rubbish heap," he answered lightly.

"It must be very, very lonely."

He plunged his hand into his side-pocket and drew out a big bundle of letters. His blue eyes twinkled.

"You'd better not waste sympathy on me, Miss Boucicault. Look at these. I picked them up at the station—two by every mail. What do you think of that? And all from one woman!"

"A woman?" she echoed, stupidly.

"My old mother." He laughed with a boyish satisfaction. "We're the greatest pals on earth, she and I. A man couldn't be lonely with her in the background. We've got each other to live for."

"But she's in England. How she must miss you!"

He put the letters slowly back in his pocket.

"Yes. It's like a chronic pain. It hurts, but it weaves itself into the pattern of one's life. My mother's like that. My father was out here too, and they were often separated. She accepts it as inevitable."

"But you—your loneliness must be worse, out there in the wilderness."

"It's not a wilderness, it's peopled with all kinds of things—all kinds of"—— He caught himself up.

"And I have friends in all the villages, and my animals and my work."

"I know your work is wonderful—the noblest work in the world." She spoke with a grave, youthful wisdom. "But the loneliness must remain all the same, Major Tristram."

He was silent for a moment, and then shook himself as though freeing himself from a burden.

"It can't be helped," he said. "No one can share it with me."

"Many people would be proud and glad to share it," she answered. She held her head high, and there was a fervent simplicity in her low voice which raised the impulsive words above suspicion. He turned to her with warm eyes.

"Thank you," he said. "I don't think it's true, and I shan't ever put it to the test—but it's good hearing."

He turned the pony neatly into the gates of the Boucicaults' bungalow and drove up the shady avenue to the porch. A syce ran out to meet them and caught the reins, and a minute later Anne Boucicault had been lifted gently to the ground. "And we've chattered so much," Tristram remarked shamefacedly, "that I don't even know your mother's symptoms."

She made no answer, indeed did not seem to have heard him. She had lost all her vigour, all her faintly self-opinionated eagerness. As they stood together in the entrance hall she seemed just cowed

and broken, a white, frightened little ghost.

"My mother's in here," she said, scarcely above a whisper. She held the door open for him, and he went past her into a room so carefully darkened that for a moment he hesitated blindly on the threshold. Then a sound guided him. It was the sound of some one crying. Not passionately, not desperately, but with a terrible monotony. Then one salient feature detached itself from the shadows—a wicker chair drawn up by the curtained window, and beside it, huddled together, with her face buried in her arms, the figure of a woman. She wore some loose, dark-coloured garment, and was so small and still that she would have seemed scarcely living, but for the jerking sobs. Tristram checked the girl's anxious movement and went forward alone. He knelt down by the piteous heap and put his hand on her arm, and remained thus for a full minute. He did not speak to her, and she seemed unconscious of his presence. The sobbing went on unbrokenly. Then he picked her up quietly and effortlessly, and placed her in the chair, dexterously slipping a silk cushion behind her head.

"Mrs. Boucicault!" She did not answer. Her eyes were closed. Her small, white face under the mop of fair hair, fast turning grey, was puckered like a child's. Her little hands gripped the arms of her chair. From her place near the door, Anne watched with a frightened wonder. "Mrs. Boucicault!"

Tristram repeated quietly. Her eyes opened then. They were tearless and very bright. She stared straight ahead, her under-lip between her white teeth, and began to rock herself backwards and forwards. She was still sobbing. Tristram knelt again and took one of her hands and held it between his own. She looked down then—first at her hand, as though it puzzled her, and then at him. Suddenly, violently, she freed herself and tore open the heavily embroidered kimono. Her shoulders were bare. On the right shoulder was a black swollen stain bigger than a man's hand.

"Look!" she said.

Anne Boucicault caught her breath with a vague, vicarious shame. She saw that Tristram had moved very slightly. His square jaws looked ugly against the dim light of the window.

"Get hot water and bandages," he commanded. "Linen will do—and ointment—anything greasy." As she slipped from the room he drew the kimono gently over the poor lacerated shoulder. "You've had a nasty accident, Mrs. Boucicault," he said, levelly.

"It was no accident." Her sobs had stopped. Her voice sounded like the rasp of steel against steel. "*He* did it—my husband. It's not the first time, Major Tristram. It won't be the last. He'll kill me—and he'll kill her." She nodded towards the door. The words poured from her as though released from a long restraint, but she was coldly, violently coherent. "Yes

—he'll kill her—slowly, by inches. He'll break her. She'll go under fast. She's not like me—I'm wiry—she's hard, but she'll snap. For all her prayers and her church and her God, she'll go under." Something contemptuous and angry crept into her face. "Anne's cowed already. And it's not only us. His men—they tried to shoot him. Did you hear?"

He nodded.

"Yes."

Her eyes blazed.

"Oh, I wish to God they'd done it!" she burst out, from between clenched teeth. "Oh, why didn't they? He's goaded them enough. One of these days they'll murder us all for his sake. He's a devil. He's made life a hell. He likes to make suffering. He likes to see us wince. Oh, if he were only dead!" Suddenly the tense mask of hatred broke up into piteous lines of helpless misery. Two great tears rolled unheeded down her white cheeks. "Anne talked about bearing our cross, and prayer, and God's will," she went on chokingly. "But I want to be happy, Major Tristram, I want to be happy."

"You have an absolute right to happiness," he answered. "You've got to be happy, Mrs. Boucicault. I'm going to see to it."

She dropped back wearily among her cushions. Her grey eyes, now pale and faded-looking, rested on his face with a childish questioning.

"You talk as though—as though you could."

"Well, I can do something—I promise you. Close your eyes."

She closed them at once, and he took his handkerchief and brushed the tears from her cheeks. Then he resumed his kneeling position, her hand in his, soothing it much as he had soothed the frightened, broken-winged bird. Once she sighed deeply, as if released from some stifling weight, and thereafter her breathing sounded quiet and regular. By the time Anne Boucicault returned, her mother had dropped into a heavy sleep.

Major Tristram got up noiselessly, and motioned the girl to follow him. His movements were curiously light and noiseless, and brought no shadow of change on the sleeper's face.

"It's better that she should sleep," he said quietly. "I shall come in again tonight before I leave. I doubt if she wakes before then."

They went out together. On the mat the ubiquitous Wickie lay extended in a state of dusty misery. He rolled over as Tristram appeared, displaying much humility and a blood-stained paw. Tristram picked him up and hugged him. "You're not a dog—you're an ass, Wickie," he declared. "And I'll wager you consider yourself a martyr into the bargain, you assassin of innocent bulbuls. What do you suppose I'm going to do with you—carry you, I suppose?" He turned a wry, laughing face to his companion.

"Well, I'll be off now, anyhow," he said. "You'll see me tonight. Good-bye till then—and don't worry her or yourself."

She took his extended hand.

"Thank you. I thought it would be so terrible—for any one to know how things are with us. I haven't minded you a bit."

"I'm awfully glad."

He took up his impromptu bird's-nest from its place of safety in an empty fern-pot. The contents chirped defiance and terror, and Tristram looked up smiling. He saw then that Anne Boucicault's eyes were fixed on something beyond him, and that they were wide and stupid-looking with dread. He turned. A man stood in the sunlit verandah. Against the golden background he bulked huge and threatening, his features and whatever expression they bore blotted out by shadow. The switch which he carried beat an irritable tattoo against his riding-boots.

Tristram nodded a greeting.

"Good evening, Colonel."

"Good evening, Major." He bowed satirically and crossed the threshold. "This is a pleasant surprise. I understood you were out camping."

"I have been for the last two months. I am off again tonight."

"Then my daughter and I are indeed fortunate to catch this glimpse of you." He came farther into the shade, half turning to fling his helmet and whip on

to a table. The light fell on his profile, revealing the livid skin, the brutal line of the jaw. "To what are we indebted, Major?"

"I came professionally," Tristram answered.

"On Anne's behalf, I suppose?"

"No, for Mrs. Boucicault." He scrutinized the elder man deliberately. "Perhaps I could do something for you, Colonel. You're not looking well. You ought to take a year's leave."

Colonel Boucicault allowed a moment to elapse before he answered. He had the tensely vicious look of a hard drinker who is never drunk, and whose jangling nerves are always writhing under restraint. Finally, he seemed to take a stronger hold over himself. He laughed out, shortly.

"Thanks, I'm very well. I'll last the regiment another year or two—to its infinite satisfaction, no doubt. As to Mrs. Boucicault, your visit was kind but unnecessary. There's nothing wrong in that quarter but feminine hysteria."

"I don't think so," Tristram returned. He had coloured slowly to the roots of his ruddy hair, but his voice was even quieter. "I take a serious view of the case. I have ordered Mrs. Boucicault an immediate return to England."

There was another break. The two men eyed each other squarely.

"That is an absurd proposition which I cannot sanction," Boucicault said in the same tone of violent

self-restraint.

"I'm afraid you'll have to, Colonel."

The antagonism, whose note had sounded even in their greeting of each other, now rang out clearly. Boucicault's big hands twitched at his sides.

"Surely, Major, that is scarcely fitting language ——" he began.

"I don't care a damn for what's fitting," Tristram broke in. "Mrs. Boucicault's going to England with Anne. If she doesn't, I'll have you hounded out of the army even if I get hounded out myself in the doing of it. That's my bargain."

"By God, Major——" Boucicault took a step nearer.

By reason of his heavy build, he seemed to tower over the younger man. His eyes were bloodshot in their inflamed rims; his whole body quivered. "You'd better get out of here," he stammered thickly. "And take my advice—keep clear of this place—keep out of my way."

"Thanks." Tristram tucked Wickie more securely under one arm. "I'll be round this evening," he added.

He ignored the threatening gesture, and went leisurely down the steps and along the drive. At the gates he stopped, drawing his breath with a quick, deep relief.

Across the roadway, the stems of the trees stood out black and straight as the pillars of a great temple, whose red-gold lamp had been lowered from the

dome and now sank swiftly into an extinguishing pool of shadow. A breeze rustled coolly overhead, brushing away the sweet, heavy incense of many flowers and bringing the first warning of nightfall. A belated finch fluttered amidst the dense foliage, and then all was still again.

Tristram remained motionless, apparently plunged in his own thoughts, for he started when a hand touched his arm and turned almost angrily. Anne Boucicault stood beside him. She was breathless, her lips were parted, and the wind had blown the dark, curly hair from her white forehead, adding impulse and eagerness to her staid girlishness.

"I had to come," she panted, "to—to thank you. And then—you mustn't keep your promise. You mustn't come—it isn't safe——"

He shook his head. His eyes, after the first glance, had gone back to the fading light.

"I shouldn't hurt your father," he said, gravely.

"But you——!" she exclaimed. "No one knows what he might do to you."

"I don't think that matters," he returned, still in the same rather absent tone. "Anyway, if he's mad, he's not a fool. You mustn't worry."

She lingered. Her hand rested tremblingly on his arm.

"And I want to thank you, Major Tristram. You've helped poor mother—and I was so proud. No

one's ever faced him like that. I wish——" She faltered. "If we could only do something for you——"

He was silent for a moment, then, as though her words only reached him gradually, he turned with a quick smile.

"You can. Take Wickie in as a boarder, will you? He's lame, and my hands are full already. I couldn't take him with me. Ayeshi could fetch him in a week or two. Would you mind?"

"I'd love to have him." She took the unwieldy, protesting mongrel, and held him rather clumsily in her arms. "And your little bird?" she asked.

"No, he'll want special medical treatment. Thanks awfully, all the same." He bent and patted Wickie's black snout with an apologetic gentleness. "Don't fret your heart out, old chap. It's your own fault—and Ayeshi shall come for you, upon my honour he shall."

"I'll take care of him," Anne said.

"I know you will."

"Good-bye, Major Tristram." The sunlight was in her eyes, and they were very bright. The colour in her cheeks deepened. "And God bless you," she added, timidly but very seriously.

He smiled down at her.

"And you and Wickie and everybody," he said. "I'm sure He does."

He strode off, and at the bend of the road turned and waved.

But long after he had disappeared, she stood there gazing into the dusk, the unhappy Wickie pressed tightly against her breast.

CHAPTER IV
THE INTERLOPERS

Rajah Rasaldû was wonderfully, if not impressively, European. He wore a frock-coat and grey trousers, English in intention, French in execution. They were almost too perfect. The native, brightly hued turban, an unwilling concession, as he admitted, to local prejudice, came as a rather startling finale, though it suited him better than his Europeanism. He was a short, unmuscular little man, built in circles rather than in straight lines, and a determined course of Parisian good-living had added seriously to a natural tendency to embonpoint. His manner, even in sitting still, was restless and fussy. He had, in fact, neither the inscrutable dignity of the native nor the self-assured ease of the race he aped.

"When I look at you, Mademoiselle," he was saying, earnestly, "I forget that I am in this dreadful country, and I imagine myself back to London. I see myself in the darkened box, and you in all the brightness. I hear the music and the roar of applause. I feel at home—almost happy." He stared down at his

round, soft hands as though he were rather pleased with their severe lack of adornment, and sighed. The woman he addressed did not look at him. She was watching the little groups of white-clad figures dotted about the garden, with her head turned slightly away from him. Next her, Mary Compton and the Judge's wife were talking with the lazy earnestness engendered by tea and the cool shade of a flowering mango.

"But this is your country," Sigrid Fersen said. "You are surely happiest here."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I was born here. The Government has put me in a position of trust, and it is my duty to be at my post from time to time. But my heart is with you—with the West and Western civilization. And of all that, Mademoiselle, you are the personification."

She laughed a little, as though secretly amused.

"Tell me your impressions of Paris, Rajah," she said.

He told her. From time to time his brown, dissipated eyes shot irritable glances at the figure seated immediately behind his hostess. It was perhaps a somewhat startling figure, and though Gaya approved of companions and chaperons, and had indeed heaved a sigh of relief over Mrs. Smithers's existence, it had none the less been considerably startled by her personality. She was well past middle age, and, in spite of the

considerable heat, was dressed severely in black grenadine, and wore a mob-cap on a remarkably fine head of white hair, which she occasionally patted with a nervous hand. If it is true all human beings bear a resemblance to some animal, then Mrs. Smithers might easily have been associated with a bull-dog of exceedingly determined character. Her face was settled in wrinkles of challenging tenacity, but she never moved and never changed her expression. She sat there, bolt upright, and only her roving eyes betrayed the fact that she was alive. They expressed also the bitterest and most annihilating disapproval of everything existent.

Mrs. Compton accepted her third cup of tea from an engagingly youthful subaltern and went on talking.

"Of course he's mad," she was saying. "He hates Tristram worse than any one living, which is saying a lot. They had an awful row over Mrs. Boucicault just before Tristram went away, and now Boucicault is taking his turn. He refuses to forward Tristram's appeal for help—says the whole thing's a scare, and that Tristram is simply fussing for his own glorification. But it isn't true. Ayeshi came to my husband last night and told him. It's cholera—oh, my dear Susan, don't jump like that! Heerut's fifteen miles away, and we've the river between us, and Gaya's healthy when everything else is riddled. Besides, Tristram has got the thing in hand. He hasn't

slept for four days. Ayeshi said he didn't look human. Some of the natives went crazy with fright and got out of hand. But Tristram managed them—single-handed, my dear, and with not so much as a revolver. Ayeshi talked about him as though he were the tenth Avatar, or whatever they call it. Of course, he'll do that sort of thing once too often. *C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre*. But I love that man. I tell Archie once a day at least, and he's getting quite tired about it——"

"Of whom are you talking, Mrs. Compton?"

Mrs. Compton started, and the Rajah, who had been expatiating on French genius as revealed in the *Bal du Moulin Rouge*, went on for a minute, carried forward by his own momentum. Then he stopped and dropped into a silence, which would have been sulky in any one less anxious to appear civilized. As for Mrs. Compton, the question had come with such self-assured, if quiet authority, that she felt certain that, as a woman on her own ground, she ought to take offence. In fact, all Gaya, as represented in the old dâk-bungalow's garden, was in much the same position. Without performing the high kick at the club dinner or otherwise living up to the conventional reputation of her class, the newcomer had sailed serenely across all their unwritten laws, and not only had Gaya not been outraged, but it had been secretly delighted. And it was ashamed of itself for being delighted. Mrs. Compton was ashamed of

herself—ashamed that she, the untamable spirit of the station who had insulted Colonel Boucicault to his face should sit there and meet this woman with a smile of propitiating amiability.

"Major Tristram," she said. "He belongs to the Medical Service. You haven't met him yet, and I don't suppose any of us will see him for some time. He's fighting the cholera in one of the native villages."

Sigrid Fersen nodded thoughtfully. Then she got up.

"I heard you say just now that you were interested in old china," she said, abruptly. "I have a piece in the drawing-room which I should like you to see. Will you come?"

"I should be delighted——"

"Your guests, Mademoiselle," Rasaldû murmured. But his protest passed unheeded, and Mrs. Compton got up and left the Judge's wife without a word of apology. Mrs. Smithers had risen with equal promptitude and brought up the rear.

They crossed the garden to the bungalow, and the little parties grouped lazily in the vicinity of the tea-tables became silent, and remained silent until Sigrid Fersen had disappeared. Then they went on talking. Very few of them realized that they had ever stopped, much less that they had been staring with the naïve directness of children. They certainly made no comment. Only Jim Radcliffe, the newly joined subaltern, who had the inexhaustible restlessness of a

fox-terrier puppy, became quiet to the point of thoughtfulness.

"By Jove, did you see her walk?" he said to Mrs. Brabazone. But the latter made no reply, being in a state of dudgeon and not inclined to appreciation.

Meantime, Mary Compton had become aware of a profound and very mysterious change in her own psychology. As she crossed the threshold of the darkened drawing-room she perceived that every earnest, painstaking effort of hers to make the place habitable and presentable had suffered a ruthless upheaval. The hours of patient questioning which she had spent on the to-be or not-to-be of the curtain bows had been so many hours wasted. Yet her fiery Celtic susceptibilities remained unruffled. She admitted at once that the changes were improvements,—small but effective strokes of genius. Moreover, various new items had been introduced—a piano procured from heaven alone knew where, a few rich embroideries, a vase or two, and a pale-tinted Persian rug. She was busy cataloguing these items, when her quick eyes encountered Mrs. Smithers. Mrs. Smithers had seated herself promptly on the chair nearest the door, and assumed her former attitude of unbending severity and disapproval. Her appearance somehow made a further reduction in Mrs. Compton's forces of self-assurance, and when her hostess, who had been busy with the contents of a carved chest, came back to

her, she was overpowered by an unusual sense of almost fatuous helplessness. Whatever this small woman meant to do, she would do. And therewith the fate of Gaya seemed sealed.

"There—you recognize it, of course."

Mrs. Compton forgot Gaya and her own lost prestige. In the ten years of her married life, there was one passion for which she and the easy-going, hard-working Archie had scraped and saved. It was a passion which was one day to find a fitting background in some English home, a place created almost daily afresh in their minds but always with the abiding features of spacious lawns and an orchard and stables, and within doors oak cupboards guarding the treasures of the hard years. But with all their savings and searchings, they had never possessed anything like this.

"It's Sèvres—of course—how beautiful! I'm almost afraid to touch it."

"Don't be. It's yours."

"Mine!" Mary Compton gasped—whether audibly or not, she did not know. She felt that there was fresh cause for offence coming and that she had no adequate forces with which to meet it. "But, of course not——"

"I bought it for you."

Mrs. Compton nearly regained her usual briskness.

"That's nonsense. We haven't known each other a

week. And you must have bought that in Europe."

"Yes—I did, years ago. But I bought it for you, all the same. I bought it for some one who would look at it and touch it as you did. And besides, I want you to have something of mine—I am selfish enough to wish to be remembered by those who have been kind to me—as you have been. It was the Rajah's invitation which brought me to Gaya, but only a woman could have welcomed me. Any one in my position makes enemies automatically, and without you I should have had to face a whole army of prejudices. But you paved the way—you made it possible to invite all these people without offending them—and this in spite of the fact that you thought you were probably introducing a firebrand." She laughed in her curious, reflective way. "And then it was your hands prepared this beautiful home for me," she added.

Mrs. Compton crimsoned and swallowed the delicate morsel of brazen flattery with a ridiculous pleasure. She made a last effort, however, to retire to her first position of friendly reserve.

"Of course, we did what we could," she said. "Gaya is rather proud of its hospitality. We wanted you to take back a good impression, Mademoiselle ——"

A quick gesture interrupted her.

"I'm not 'mademoiselle.' I'm English. My mother was a Swede, and I took her maiden name because—

there never has been a great English dancer, and in England what hasn't been can't be. It's just one of the Rajah's foibles to give everything a Gallic touch. But I'm just Miss Fersen—or Sigrid if you like."

The Celtic temperament works both ways. The only certain feature is its uncertainty. Mrs. Compton abandoned her offensive-defensive and with great dexterity managed to cling to the Sèvres vase and kiss the giver on both cheeks without disaster.

"I'd like it to be Sigrid," she said warmly. "And my name's Mary—and I'm going to take the Sèvres because I want it badly, and because I like you and I shan't mind feeling horribly grateful. And I hope you'll make me your master of ceremonies, and our bungalow your headquarters. You will, won't you?"

She thrilled under the touch of the cool, small hand on hers.

"Yes, I promise you. It's what I wanted. I shall need a friend. A great many people will hate me—men and women. I have seen it in the eyes of one woman already. And, besides that I want to get to know real human beings. All my life I have lived for and in the one thing. People have been shadows to me. Now I need them. But they must be real—good, honest flesh and blood. Not puppets." She sat down on the big divan drawn up against the wall and patted the seat beside her. "Tell me about this Major Tristram," she said.

And Mrs. Compton, whose rules of etiquette

were Gaya's social law, sat down and for half an hour talked about Major Tristram, whilst Sigrid Fersen's guests wandered unshepherded about her garden.

At the end of the half-hour Mrs. Compton found her husband near the gates, disconsolate and alone, guarding the rather shabby little turn-out which they called a dog-cart. He was in uniform, and had evidently been at some pains to escape notice.

"You said six o'clock and it's half-past," he commented, gloomily. "I shall be confoundedly late. What on earth have you been doing? And what's that you've got under your arm?"

She chuckled to herself.

"Can't you recognize Sèvres when you see it?"

"By George—what a piece!" His eyes opened with a hungry appreciation. Then he shook his head at her. "My dear girl, put it back! I knew we should come to this sooner or later—all collectors do. Put it back before it's missed. Think of the scandal. And a newcomer, too!"

She broke into a half-pleased, half-ashamed laugh and wrapped the precious trophy in the protecting folds of a rug.

"She gave it me—yes, she did. And she calls me Mary, and I call her Sigrid, and we've kissed each other, and I've given her the run of our bungalow." She climbed up into the driver's seat and took the reins. "You know how I *hate* those sort of sudden familiarities, Archie. But I've no explanation. Have

you?"

"Not one."

"She isn't beautiful. I'm better-looking myself."

"A dozen times, old girl."

She smiled down upon him with a rather absent-minded graciousness.

"I believe she's got electric wires instead of nerves and sinews," she said reflectively. "I felt them in her hand. It was like putting one's fingers into a steel glove covered with velvet. What bosh I'm talking. I believe I'm hypnotized. I shall go round and look up poor Anne and restore my self-respect. Mr. Meredith told me she looked as though she was breaking her heart over something. Of course, it's that brute! Why aren't you men plucky enough to shoot him——?"

"My dear girl——"

His wife cut short his protest by turning her pony out of the gates and up the broad avenue which led from the outlying dâk-bungalow to Gaya proper. The steep hill, her new possession, and various rather confused speculations accounted for the fact that her pony promptly dropped to a walk and was allowed to proceed in a leisurely fashion, which culminated in an abrupt halt. Mrs. Compton awoke then. She felt vaguely annoyed with herself, and her annoyance changed to something like consternation when she perceived that the stoppage was not attributable either to the pony's disinclination or her

own day-dreaming. A man stood at the animal's head and now came up to the step, his long, brown hand lifted to his topee in greeting.

"I called to you, Mrs. Compton," he said, "but you didn't hear me, and I took the liberty of stopping you. I hope I'm forgiven."

She stared down at him. Her confusion of warm disjointed musings chilled instantly to her usual trenchant matter-of-factness.

"If you wanted to speak to me, Mr. Barclay——" she began.

"I know—I might have called formally. But I ran the risk either of being refused or landing into a crowd of people. I wanted to see you alone." He waited a moment. His hand rested firmly on the side of the cart, and she could not have driven on without going over him. She saw also the dogged set of his dark face and waited with an angry resignation. "You've just come from Mademoiselle Fersen's At Home, haven't you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I used to know her," he said, "that is to say, I was introduced at some big reception in England. She wouldn't remember me. That was in my undergrad days. I was at Balliol, you know."

Mrs. Compton's fine lips twitched satirically. She was not feeling charitable, and this man was offering her his credentials in a way that incited derision. He must have seen her expression, for his brown eyes,

with their blue-tinted whites, never left her face. "I want you to do me a favour," he burst out. "I want you to introduce me again, Mrs. Compton."

Her smile faded. She was thoroughly angry, but some other less definable emotion confused her indignation to the point of ineffectuality.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Barclay, but I really haven't the right or the power to introduce any one to Miss Fersen without her permission."

"I know that—at least, your friends and acquaintances would be introduced naturally——" He broke off. The nostrils of his fine, aquiline nose distended, his whole face, handsome in line and profoundly brooding in its fundamental expression, was tense and strained-looking. He seemed like a man doggedly setting himself to a hated task. "May I be straightforward with you, Mrs. Compton?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"I know you are anxious to drive on—over me even," he said, with a flash from a smothered bitterness. "But you are the only person I feel I can speak to, and I mayn't get you alone again. Look here, Mrs. Compton, I'm an Englishman. My father was English—I was educated at an English University—I hold an English degree. I've got any amount of money. It seems to me I've got the right to demand—well, decent civility. So far—I've been here two months—I've been out of things. Of course, I don't belong to the military lot, and I haven't a

government appointment—but it seems to me-out here in an alien country—we English ought to hold together——" He was choking and breaking over his words like a man breathless with running, the fatal mincing accent betraying itself in his gathering excitement, and instinctively Mrs. Compton looked away from him. He was trembling, and somehow the sight filled her with an odd pity almost stronger than her repugnance.

"What do you want me to do, Mr. Barclay?" she asked.

"After all—it's not much. If your husband would put me up for the Polo Club—I'm a good player, and I've got some of the finest ponies in India. Gaya could beat any team you like with my ponies. Your husband's popular—he could easily do it—if he wanted to——"

"I couldn't ask him," she interrupted hurriedly. "It's not my business. I hate backstair influence with husbands." She took refuge in a cowardly compromise. "You ought to speak to Captain Compton yourself."

He laughed shortly.

"That means you won't," he broke out suddenly and violently. "It's the touch of the tar brush that's worrying you, isn't it? Yet you don't mind kowtowing to a full-blooded native. You'll have that dissipated degenerate Rasaldû at all your feasts, though he's not even accepted by his own people. His grandfather

was a village cow-herd, and the Government set his people up in the place of the hereditary heirs because they were likely to be more tractable. You know all that, and yet you'd lick his boots, whilst I, with your own blood in my veins——" He caught himself up, smoothing his working features with a desperate effort. "Look here, Mrs. Compton, I want to do the right thing. I want to serve my country loyally. But I've got to have a country—I've got to belong somewhere. Otherwise——"

She tightened the reins, moving her pony's head round so that she could go forward without driving over him.

"I'm sorry," she said, coldly. "I have no prejudices myself, but I also have no right to interfere with the prejudices of other people. You must make your own way. Please let me pass——"

The pony started under the cut of her whip, and Barclay instantly jumped out of danger. He stood then in the middle of the dusty road, his hands clenched at his side, his cheeks wet. He was crying with the helpless passion of a child. Meanwhile, the swift Indian nightfall had risen up out of the plain to Gaya's hilltops pouring its shadow army into the dâk-bungalow's neglected garden, veiling its rambling decay with an unfathomable, shapeless beauty.

The Rajah had been the last to leave, lingering clumsily and obsequiously to the limits of the law, but now even he had gone, and in the place of the

voices and subdued laughter there was nothing but a flutter of a night-bird among the trees, the hushed, mysterious rustlings and whisperings of darkness.

Sigrid Fersen had drawn her chair near to the verandah. A lamp burnt behind her, and she was reading intently in some old vellum-bound book. Mrs. Smithers sat opposite her, knitting a sock, which even now that the day's heat was over had a curiously smothering and woolly appearance. From time to time her faded, truculent blue eyes glanced across to the figure beneath the light, and their habitual expression of grim disapproval yielded to a wistful anxiety.

For half an hour there had been no sound but the turning over of the thick leaves and the click of the knitting-needles. Now Sigrid Fersen touched the soft-voiced silver bell beside her. The curtains at the far end of the room parted almost immediately in answer.

"Tell the syce to have the best horse in the stable saddled by daybreak," she said. "I am riding to Heerut. I shall need a guide."

There was a moment's perceptible hesitation. The ayah's roe-eyes were large with trouble.

"Mem-Sahib, there is much sickness in Heerut."

"I know."

"It may be, Mem-Sahib, that no guide will dare ——"

"He need not accompany me farther than the

river. See to it."

"It shall be done, Mem-Sahib."

The curtains fell noiselessly in their place. Mrs. Smithers dropped her knitting-needles.

"Oh, lawks a-mercy!" she said. "Lawks a-mercy!"

It was as though some solemn old Egyptian sphinx had broken into broad Cockney, and, having given vent to its feelings, relapsed into the historic pose of unfathomable and supercilious meditation. Sigrid Fersen closed her book. She rested her head on its smooth yellow surface with a curious tenderness.

"You mustn't be unhappy, Smithy, and you mustn't try to prevent me. One way or the other, my days are numbered, and each one of them has to be an episode, something definite and new, something to take with me or to look back on. Afterwards——" Her voice lifted from its veiled softness and rang clearer. "We have travelled a long, long way, Smithy, and now we are almost at the end. You have seen it all with your wise old eyes, perhaps better than I have, and you know what life is. What shall it be, Smithy?"

The old woman clasped her knotted hands together and rocked herself slowly backwards and forwards.

"I don't know—I don't know. It's just a nightmare. I wake up sometimes o' nights and ask myself if I've gone clean mad, or what we're doing here in this awful heathen country—you, the greatest

of 'em all, hobnobbing with ninnies wot don't know Taglioni from Queen Elizabeth, and me trying to be a lady by dint of keeping my mouth shut like a mouse-trap—me, that stood and waited for you night after night and 'dressed' you quicker than the smartest of them—lawks a-mercy, wot am I doing here?"

Sigrid Fersen got up slowly, putting her book on the table, and came and stood at her companion's side. She caressed the grenadine-clad shoulder lightly, affectionately. "You're here because I am, and because you've stuck to me through everything. You can't help sticking to me any more than I can help wanting you somewhere in the background. And I'm here because of this"—she laid her hand on her left side—"and this——" She opened a drawer in the table, and, taking out a little shiny-backed note-book, dropped it into the old woman's lap. "Open it. Now take the bottom figure on the right-hand column from the bottom figure on the left. What does it leave?"

Mrs. Smithers coughed apologetically.

"I never was a hand at figures, Sigrid."

"Never mind. Take your time."

"I don't know rightly—it looks to me like a thousand."

"That must be about right. Well, that's what we've got. No more. What would you have me do—teach dancing to loutish girls in some stuffy English suburb? No, Smithy. You wouldn't. In my art there is

no one greater than I—there never has been—and though I want to live I mustn't burn out like some poor candle. I must be a splendid rocket, lighting up all the country, and most splendid of all at the last. Then darkness."

The old woman put up her hand blindly.

"Oh, my dear, my dear——"

Sigrid Fersen seemed to have forgotten her.

"'To die in beauty.' That's Ibsen. It's the most wonderful thought in the world. It's the only prayer I know. Not squalidly, not in misery and decay and ugliness, but in beauty. That is the goal of life."

"I don't understand, Sigrid. And I can't believe it all. I can't. Never to wait for you in the wings—never to hear men shout for you—and see the women crying for love of you. Never to hear you silence them all so that they don't even seem to breathe. Lawks a-mercy, when I think of that there waltz—Chopin, wasn't it—the tune runs in my head now—I can see the faces in the front row, white as death, Sigrid, as though they had seen——"

Her voice cracked. Sigrid Fersen turned away from her.

"No—never again—or perhaps once more—just once——"

She went out on to the verandah and stood there motionless, her face lifted to the darkness.

CHAPTER V
A VISION OF THE BACKWATER

The Dakktar Sahib stepped carefully over the body of Ayeshi, who lay asleep inside the doorway, and went down the centre of the street. The village was silent and seemingly deserted. Even the grain-dealer, Lalloo by name, not unknown as a money-lender with Eastern ideas on interest—had deserted his wooden booth, and the lean dogs which were wont to nose hungrily in the gutters had gone elsewhere for their hunting-ground. The gutters themselves were clean; there was no cattle to wander haplessly in and out of the open doorways; the half-naked babies were hidden and silent. And in all this silence and garnished peace there was something ominous and dreadful. A mighty scavenger had passed through the village and swept it clear of refuse and misery and sickness and life itself. Heerut lay under the burning midday sun like a body awaiting burial, wrapped in the orderliness of death, silent, colourless, for all its piteous poverty, majestic.

Tristram's footsteps rang out loudly in the stillness. He alone was alive and bore the agony and stress of life stamped on his body. He was ugly with the ugliness of a soldier returning from the battle-field. His clothes were dirty. He reeled drunkenly, his eyes were bloodshot and swollen in their deep

sockets, and a month's growth of reddish beard covered his long chin. He might have passed for a spectre of Death itself, stalking through the place of its visitation.

He reached the village cross-roads. The pointed leaves of the council-tree hung limply, their soft mysterious voices hushed. Underneath, the earth was scarred and burnt by the bonfires around which the village elders clustered at nightfall, listening to the tales from the great past. There had been no bonfire for many nights, and the elders had gone their ways.

Tristram went on, out of the village, across the ancient half-obliterated path of Auspiciousness, through the coarse jungle grass to the river. It flowed broad and swift, swirling against its muddy, artificial barrier with sullen impatience, its farther bank lost in the blaze and shimmer of heat. Tristram went on, past the temple whose battered walls glowed warm and golden in the sunlight, to the clump of trees beyond. He entered their shade at a stumbling run like a man seeking refuge from pursuers, and burst through the tangled undergrowth with the whole weight of his body.

Here, beneath the branches of the stately Mohwa trees, the Ganges had built herself a backwater. Her waters, grey still with the snows of her mountain mother, had turned from their stern course and become clear as crystal and still as the surface of a mirror. They reflected softly the flaming

green of the overhanging foliage and the red and gold of the strange flowers growing on their banks. A lotus-flower floated like a fairy palace in a patch of subdued sunshine, its pale petals half open and delicately tipped with pink as though the light had awakened them from their white sleep to life. Beneath, in the shining, deceptive depths was a world of mystery, forests of twining, sinuous growths, the monster blossoms swaying in the under-current.

Tristram dropped down on his knees at the water's edge and then rolled over with his face hidden on his arm. He lay so still that a golden lizard flashed out from the long grass and lingered almost at his elbow and a water-hen gliding down on to the breast of the water preened herself in complacent security.

The patch of sunlight moved on. It left the lotus-flower in an emerald shadow, and rested like a bright, watchful eye on a patch of flaming poppies on the farther bank. The silence deepened. Even the gentle parting of the undergrowth behind the spot where Tristram slept brought no sound. With a noiseless strength the lean hands of Vahana, the Sadhu, pressed back the opposing branches. He came forward so slowly, so stealthily, that the foliage seemed rather to thin imperceptibly before him like a green mist, leaving him at last unveiled on the fringe of the clearing. Even then it was as though he had

been there always, not a man, not even living, but the dead twisted stump of some tempest-riven tree.

But the water-hen heard and saw him and rose with a whirr of wings. The lizard flashed back into his hiding-place.

Tristram did not stir. The emaciated, half-naked body glided towards him and bent over him. For a long minute Vahana remained thus, scrutinizing the half-hidden face of the sleeper, then he stood upright, tossing the hair from his wild eyes, his long, fleshless arms raised high above his head, with a gesture that was as a salute to some oncoming, resistless destiny. Then, in an instant, he seemed to shrivel, his arm sank, and with one swift glance about him he turned and vanished among the trees.

Tristram awoke suddenly, but not completely. He rested on his elbow, gazing at the blur of colour before him with heavy eyes, then drew himself up and, with the clumsiness of a drunken man, began to undress. Presently he slipped into the quiet water; the circles widened about him, and the lotus-flower rocked on the breast of the strange upheaval, but after that the intruder scarcely moved. He became as one of the giant weeds growing amidst the stones, upborne by the water, himself inert and quiescent. His head was thrown slightly back and his eyes had closed again.

Half an hour later, when he scrambled back on to the bank, the agony of exhaustion had been

washed from him. He held himself upright to the air and sun, his body shining white and splendid against the background of foliage, the joy of life in every muscle, in every firm and graceful line. Then, with a sigh of unutterable content, he began to dress leisurely, retrieved a battered cigarette case and a box of matches and crouched down, tailor fashion, amidst the grasses. For a time he smoked peacefully, watching the light changing on the water and the swift moving life that hid in the shallows and darted out between the stones and swaying weeds. The lizard, tempted by his quiet and perhaps some luscious prospect of supper, wriggled out and took grave stock of him, and he stared back as motionless and absorbed, until the forgotten cigarette burnt him, when he swore and the lizard vanished like a tiny golden streak into its fastness. The man laughed to himself and dropped back upon his elbow. A smile still lingered about his mouth, but his eyes under the big square brows had forgotten their amusement. They were fixed dreamily ahead, and what they saw smoothed out the last lines of tension from his features, and lent them a look of youth and tenderness. And presently he dropped back, and, with his hands clasped behind his head, stared up into the shadowing green, as though whatever dream he conjured up had taken refuge there.

He slept again, not heavily as before but on the border-land of consciousness where thoughts break

from their moorings, and sail out into a magic, restless sea of change whose bed lies littered with forgotten treasures. When the thud of hoofs broke on the stillness a dream rose up and shielded him, covering the sound with a fantastic picture, so that he slept on.

The patch of sunshine travelled upwards. It had forsaken the poppies as it had left the lotus-flower, and rested on the fair head of a woman.

Though Tristram saw her he did not move.

She stood scarcely five paces from him near an opening in the trees. One hand rested on the bridle of a tired horse, the other was lifted to her face, the forefinger to her lips, half in reflection, half as though hushing her own breathing. A pith helmet and the white coat of her simple riding-habit were fastened carelessly to the pommel of her saddle.

She stood quite motionless—as still and living as a bird resting among the flowers. It was that wonderful, restrained lightness in her that made her seem smaller and more fragile than she was. Her hair, of a gold paler than the sunlight and parted primly in the middle, waved down smoothly on a forehead that was high and too domed for beauty. Her face was small, more round than oval, with small features, exquisitely imperfect, demure, and resolute. There was something Victorian about her, and something vitally modern. It was as though a Botticellian Madonna had thrown off her serene and

lovely foolishness and stepped down into life with the mocking happy humour of a faun at the corners of her fine lips and the wisdom of the world in her eyes. And added to all this there was in her expression an odd touch of an impersonal, aloof pity and tenderness.

She stood there looking down at the man in the grass with her subdued smile, and he stared back at her. Then presently she spoke:

"How do you do, Major Tristram? My name is Fersen—Sigrid Fersen."

"I know," he answered. His own voice seemed to break a spell, for he shot up as though she had struck him, his hand flying to the neck of his graceless, unbuttoned collarless shirt. "I beg your pardon—I'm awfully sorry—I'd been asleep—and day-dreaming—I thought you were just—not real——"

"A sort of concrete vision?" she suggested.

"It sounds absurd, of course, but it wasn't an ordinary sleep. In fact, barring today, I don't know when I slept last. That makes a man queer——"

"Obviously." Her enigmatic kindly smile was like sunshine on her demure gravity. "For instance, you said 'I know' when I introduced myself." The blood welled up under the man's brown skin, and she went on lightly. "I saw you half an hour ago. The shade tempted me—I was hot and tired. Fortunately I came quietly. You had just come out of the water and stood there like a young Beethoven—'this kiss to the

whole world——'"

"I felt like that," he stammered. "It just expresses it—only——"

"Of course I went away at once," she said. "I felt you would be disconcerted if you knew—possibly very shocked. You may be now for all I know."

He looked down at his right hand, and then, as though it annoyed him, thrust it into his pocket.

"No," he said, "I'm not."

"I didn't think you would be." She led her horse down to the water, and, with accustomed fingers, unfastened the bit. "Please sit down again, Major Tristram."

He obeyed her instantly, and with his big hands clasped about his knees watched her as she came towards him. The blood was still dark in his face.

"I'm wondering how you knew me," he said abruptly.

"Gaya described you."

He burst out into a big laugh.

"My word! Did Gaya tell you I usually went about with nothing on or in these evil-smelling rags?"

"It is enough that I recognized you," she said primly. She added, as an after-thought: "They didn't tell me you were so beautiful."

"Me—beautiful?"

"As far as your figure goes."

"And my face?"

She looked at him whimsically.

"No, not exactly." She slipped down into the long grass beside him with an effortless, unconscious grace. "We're rather like each other," she went on, "both of us—how shall I say?—plain, and both of us quite lovely in our way. A perfect body is worth more than a perfect nose."

"Yes," he agreed. His voice sounded suddenly thick and tired and he looked away from her. "You're not alone, are you?" he asked.

"I have been. I've a faithful syce waiting at the bridge-head five miles up. He wouldn't come any farther. Perhaps——" She studied his hard-set profile with amused eyes. "Perhaps you're wishing I hadn't burst in upon you, or perhaps you share Gaya's dismay."

"Was Gaya dismayed?"

"Very. One or two are still. They thought I was an adventuress, partly on account of the Rajah and partly on account of my profession. And they were quite right." The laughter died out of her. Her voice sounded grave and eager. "I am an adventuress. I can't conceive myself being anything else. To live is to explore an unknown country, with every day a step forward. Some people shrink from it and cringe at home, and when they're taken by the scruff of the neck and flung out they're frightened and helpless. I'm not like that—you're not. Even my art was an adventure—the greatest. Every bar of music, every

step, every inspiration that came to me, was like a mountain peak scaled and a new vista into a new country. Do you understand?"

He turned to her, his sunken, red-rimmed eyes warm with a generous, almost passionate sympathy.

"I can understand your feeling like that—I do too, in my way, especially out here. Out here nothing lasts. Every day brings change—the very trees and flowers and fields and forests—I don't know how it is—one says good-night to them and in the morning it's as though new friends had taken their place—people whom one had to study and wonder at—and then——" He turned away from her again and stared down at his strong hands—"anything can happen—the most wonderful, impossible things——"

She did not answer him. When she spoke again it was after a long silence and more lightly.

"I don't believe you're an official at all," she said. "You don't talk like one. You haven't asked me what business I have here or tell me that I am a danger to myself and a nuisance to everyone else. Why haven't you?"

"I forgot," he answered quietly. "For one thing, I knew you were not afraid, and people who are not afraid have nothing to fear. And besides that, the infection is over in Heerut. The poor beggars are either underground or isolated miles away. I did that 'on my own,' and I expect there'll be lots of trouble about it."

"You've had a bad time."

"Yes," he said simply.

"Mrs. Compton told me. I was immensely interested, and made up my mind to call on you. The 'lone fight' has always thrilled me. I don't care whether the fighter is a murderer or a hero so long as he fights against odds."

He laughed.

"Well, I'm not a criminal or a hero," he said.

"You can't tell. We're all potentially one or the other—or both."

He seemed on the verge of protest, but, looking at her, dropped to silence. She leant forward, her chin in the palm of her hand, and he saw that she smiled to herself, her eyes intent on the shadowy water.

"Doesn't Brahma sleep in the heart of that lotus-flower, Major Tristram?"

"He did once—so they say. And it is the lotus-flower which encloses our world. When the pink-tipped petals open then it is dawn with us." He hesitated, and then added with a shy laugh, "Shall I fetch it for you?"

"No, why spoil it? It is loveliest where it is."

"Yes, I know—but if you had wished it——" He broke off. "Somehow I'm glad you didn't," he said almost inaudibly.

The quiet rose up between them. It was like a mist, veiling them from each other with a drowsy

peace. When she spoke again her voice sounded gay but subdued.

"Major Tristram, I'm disappointed—I meant to drop on like a bombshell—and here you sit next me as though it was the sort of thing you had done all your life. You don't even bother to talk to me. Do you think we were married in our last pilgrimage?"

The man turned his head away from her.

"Anything seems possible, here," he answered.

"Even hunger," she suggested gravely.

"Hunger?"

The dreamy unreality which had sunk upon them dissolved, letting through the light of every-day facts. She laughed at him.

"*I'm* hungry. I haven't eaten anything since dawn, and I didn't bring food because Mrs. Compton said you practically lived here. I was sure—after the first skirmish—that you'd ask me to tea."

He was on his feet now—less with eagerness than with a half-angry consternation.

"Mrs. Compton misled you——" he began hotly.

"She didn't—she didn't know I was coming. Are you going to let me starve?"

"I *do* live here," he went on stammeringly, "but in a native hovel like the rest of them. I can't take you there."

"Why not?" Her eyes were mocking, her lips pursed into a demure, ironic challenge. "Don't you want to?"

"It's not that——" His opposition collapsed and he faltered like a boy. "Only—well, I daresay you know what they call me—Tristram the Hermit. It's because I've had to live alone so much. No one comes out here. I've got accustomed to it. I'm like a miser with my loneliness."

"Then I had better go," she said gravely.

"No—not now. I want you to come. You'll understand better——"

He bridled her horse and brought it to her. For a moment they looked at each other with a steadiness in which there was a vague antagonism. Then the man stooped, hiding his face, and placed his hands for her to mount. She scarcely seemed to touch them. He looked up into her small face, flushed now with an eager colour. "You are lighter than the leaf on the wind," he said.

She laughed, but her laugh was more meditative than gay.

"And you, Major Tristram, are a poet in the wilderness," she answered.

CHAPTER VI
BROKEN SANCTUARY

He walked beside her, his hand light on her bridle, and silently they made their way through the long

grass, along the banks of the grey, wide flowing river, past the temple, and into the empty village streets. Only once did she speak to him, bending slightly towards him in her saddle.

"I have been wondering what your name is," she said, "your other name. I've been trying to fit you with one."

"Tristram," he said.

"Tristram Tristram?"

He nodded, and she repeated the name thoughtfully under her breath.

"That's a curious repetition——"

"Yes, my mother liked it. It's the only thing we've ever quarrelled about. I tell her she suffered from lack of imagination, and that she took a mean advantage over my helplessness. What could anybody expect of a Tristram Tristram?"

"And yet it suits you somehow."

"I'm not flattered," he answered laughing.

The magic sunlight had gone and the low thatched huts were grey and sordid in the rising tide of shadow. Here and there a golden patch lingered palely, and the council-tree at the cross-roads blazed in the full flood from the west.

"This is my home," Tristram said.

The hut from the outside was not different from its fellows, save for the big windows that had been cut in the mud wall. The rough wooden doors stood open. Sigrid Fersen slipped out of her saddle and for

a moment he barred her path. "You won't let me go forward to prepare the way?" he asked.

"No—I want to see what you are like, Major Tristram."

"It's as though I made you a confession," he said unevenly.

"I am woman enough to want to hear it."

He stood aside and she passed through the low doorway. At other times the contrast to the foetid street outside must have been overwhelming, but even now the dwelling's cool monastic purity arrested her on the threshold. A curtained doorway appeared to lead into a second apartment. There was scarcely any furniture—a chair, a table, a couple of Persian rugs on the uneven floor, a pile of cushions heaped into a divan against the wall. Nothing on the walls. Yet the old, exquisitely shaded rugs were probably priceless, and all the art and mysterious symbolism of India had gone into the carving of the great chair whose high back was Brahma the Creator and whose wide arms were pictured with strange fantasies of the Avatars. As her eyes grew accustomed to the twilight the woman saw beyond this dignity to details that brought a sudden laugh to her lips. A yellow ball that looked like a spotted St. Bernard pup rolled yelping off the cushions, displaying its teeth and a bandaged paw, and thereby rousing its bedfellow—a common English tabby, who stretched itself, threw an offhand curse at its

disturber, then advanced arching its back and purring stormily. Sigrid bent down to stroke him, but he passed on with the crushing disdain of his race and rubbed himself against Tristram's leg.

"That's Tim," Tristram explained. "He has a wife, but she's probably out hunting. To tell the truth, she does most of the work. There were half a dozen kittens, but they died, worse luck. Couldn't stand the heat."

"Anything else?"

"Wickie isn't here. And Arabella. Laid up, both of them."

"And pray what is Wickie and what is Arabella?" she persisted.

"*I* call Wickie a dog and Arabella a horse," he answered solemnly, "but I'm told the matter is open to dispute. Wickie's boarding out with Miss Boucicault."

"Ah, Anne Boucicault!" She echoed the name with an amused inflection of her quiet voice. "An odd little person who detests me. And she is so touchingly conscientious about it. Not in the least spiteful, only very religious and full of doubts and scruples——" She made a little gesture which seemed to brush Anne Boucicault into nothingness. "Go on with your menagerie, Major Tristram. Introduce that terrifying little growl-box."

He picked up the yellow ball by the scruff of its neck and offered up his fist to the ineffectual first

teeth as a sacrifice.

"A cheetah cub. I found him on the edge of the forest with his paw broken. He's nearly all right now, and will be able to go home."

"And start his criminal career," she suggested.

He laughed.

"Oh well, that's the risk the world runs every time a new infant is brought into it," he retorted. But he had become suddenly embarrassed, almost guilty-looking, and, after one glance at him from quizzical brows, she changed the subject.

"Am I at liberty to inspect, Major Tristram?"

"You must do whatever you wish." He stood at the entrance to the hut and watched her as she crossed straightway to the writing-table. His face, now in shadow, was set in grim resolution. There were two large photographs on the table, and one of these she picked up and held to the light.

"A fine old face—your mother, Major Tristram?"

"Yes," he assented briefly.

"She must be very beautiful."

"I think she is," he answered, with a sudden relaxing of his strained features.

"Not a bit like you."

He feigned a rueful discontent.

"Not a bit. I always tell her that she was jealous, and wouldn't spare me so much as one good feature."

"Whereat, I hope, she boxes your ears for your ingratitude, you mortal with the perfect body!" She

replaced the picture regretfully. "And this——"

She broke off. It became very still in the low-roofed room. Even the cheetah had ceased its infant growlings as though it felt the tension in the quiet about him. Tristram threw back his head, his chin thrust out, and did not speak. Suddenly she turned to him. Her lips were parted, in a wide, eager smile that was like a child's. Impulsively, ingenuously, she held out her ungloved hand to him, palm downwards.

"Is that your confession, Tristram Tristram!"

For one instant he wavered, the next he was at her side, had taken her hand and bowed over it and kissed it. Then he stood back, defiant, trembling, like a man who has committed a world-staggering enormity. But to her, it seemed, nothing had happened, nothing that she had not willed and desired. Still smiling, she turned away from him and, seating herself in the high-backed chair, placed the photograph where she could see it best. Then she became intent, absorbed. The brief incident and the man who watched her waveringly seemed to have been swallowed up in something greater, some passionate feeling. Without a word he left her and she did not hear him go. It was only when he returned presently and placed a cup and saucer before her that she looked up, colouring faintly.

"A poet in the wilderness and now Worcester! Major Tristram, I begin to think you are a rather strange and wonderful doctor!"

He smiled with frank pleasure in her pleasure.

"I love beautiful things," he said. "I fancy they are to me what wine is to some men. I'm like my mother in that. She understands. She saved and saved to buy me that cup. There's a teapot—not to match—I hate sets—but equally lovely. You shall see it when the water boils."

"And the chair—and these rugs! I know a Park Lane plutocrat who would sell his greasy soul for them. Was that your mother too?"

"No, the rugs are a gift from Lalloo the money-lender. His baby son had a bout of something or other, but got over it, and Lalloo wanted to shower blessings on somebody. He knows the markets for rare things and I have a shrewd, painful suspicion that he used unholy forces of financial coercion to get hold of these. Ayeshi carved the chair for me."

"Is Ayeshi a wood-pecker, or what?" she asked gaily.

He laughed with her.

"No—my aide-de-camp, orderly, servant, friend, all in one. Rather a wonderful sort of person. Heaven alone knows where he came from. He was brought to me by the man who 'owned' him, he was suffering from snakebite, and after the cure he stuck to me. Nobody minded. The people he lived with were afraid of him."

"Why?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know—he wasn't of their caste—any

one could see that. He is a Brahmin of the Brahmins, and believes in his gods. There isn't anything so disconcerting to conventional religionists as genuine belief." Tristram was on his way to the door of the inner room. He stopped a moment and looked back at her. "And he can tell the most wonderful stories," he went on slowly, as though overtaken by some memory. "One day you must listen to him as I do—by the firelight, with night overhead."

"I shall come," she answered deliberately. "And I shall see the snake-bite on his arm and think of the story of the man who saved him."

Tristram had gone. She laughed a little and then fell to her old brooding contemplation of the picture at her elbow. But when he returned with the promised teapot and a plate of sandwiches she pushed it impatiently from her.

"Tell me, Major Tristram, are you glad I've broken into your sanctuary?" she asked abruptly.

He poured her tea out for her with a hand that shook a little.

"I don't know——"

"That's ungracious, Major Tristram. But you're altogether unexpected. Even this room-it's not a man's room. Where are your guns, your skins, your trophies?"

He looked about him, flushing to the roots of his fair, untidy hair.

"I haven't got any—I never had a gun of my

own. I've got an Army pistol somewhere in the kitchen, but it's got rusty and I don't know what would happen if I fired it." He put the sandwiches near to her and then stalked across to the doorway and sat down cross-legged on the rug, his irregular profile cut sharply against the light. "I can't kill things," he said doggedly.

"Go on, Major Tristram. I am getting almost excited. A man who can't kill things!"

He heard the irony in her voice and winced, but did not look at her.

"Oh—I know it's ridiculous—laughable. Compton says I'm a sentimentalist—a freak. I can't help it."

"Is it a theory—Tolstoyism, Jainism——?"

He shook his head.

"I haven't any theories—it's just instinct—perhaps a kind of revulsion. My father was the finest shot in the Indian Army. Once when I was in Scotland I killed a stag. I felt—beastly—like a sort of cowardly criminal who couldn't be punished and knew it."

"Still go on. Tell me more. I came here to get to know you, Major Tristram, and I am a spoilt woman. Yes, you are a freak. I want to know how freaks originate. Tell me—no, not about your father—I have a fancy he was not freakish—but your mother——"

He stiffened, averting his head, his brows stern.

"My mother is different——" he began proudly.

"You have known me so long," she interrupted, "did you think I meant to joke at her? Haven't you understood better than that?"

He turned. Twilight had begun to invest them both. In the great carved chair among the shadows she looked almost luminous, a white spirit neither of heaven nor earth, aloof and radiant in fairy immortality and serene with a wisdom high above the man's painful plodding. Seeing her, he caught his breath; the anger passed from his face, leaving it with a curious look of bewilderment and pain.

"I'm sorry——" he said unevenly. "Of course I ought to have known. But I am a heavy, unpresentable fellow—rather ridiculous too—and I didn't want you to think I was like her." He turned away again, his eyes intent on the dark strong hands clasped about his knees. "As to my antecedents, there isn't much to tell. My father was a Captain in the Indian Army. He was killed out here in Gaya when I was a baby. No one ever found out how it happened. My mother was in England at the time. She had nothing but her pension. She starved herself to keep me fit and give me my chance." He broke off sharply. "I'd rather not talk about that. It means a responsibility that would be intolerable if I wasn't so proud of it—it would be awful to fail a woman who had starved for you."

"I can understand that, Major Tristram."

He seemed to listen a moment as though to an

echo of her low voice.

"All my people had been in the Indian Army," he went on. "I knew I should make a dismal failure of soldiering. It seemed to me—it's my nearest approach to a theory—that it's a man's business to make life more tolerable—not to destroy it. So I compromised with the I.M.S. And here I am."

"A hermit!" She leant forward, with her chin resting in the palm of her hand. "Is that also part of your law of life, Major Tristram?"

"I have my work," he answered. "It's a huge district, and I've got to be at it all the time. It is my life. But I'm a queer cuss—I have other thoughts too—absurd daydreams. I'm alone so much that it's natural enough—and if I came much among men and women I should be afraid——"

"—that the vision might become concrete." She waited a moment—"or fail you."

He shook his head.

"No—not that. But since I have got to be alone always I mustn't want anything too badly."

She got up suddenly.

"It is getting late," she said. "I promised to be at the bridge-head by nine. Mr. Radcliffe, who is in the adventure, meets me there and escorts me back to safety. We should be home by midnight, and tomorrow Gaya will have a new scandal. Mr. Radcliffe is very young. He will be so pleased."

"I will come with you as far as the bridge-head,"

Tristram returned gravely.

"I had expected nothing less."

For all her change of tone the suspense which had crept in upon them with the twilight remained unbroken. It lay upon the man like a quivering hand. As he led her horse through the black streets it vibrated on the hot obscurity. They came out on to the plain and it was there also, at his throat, suffocating him.

The full moon hung low on the horizon like a silver lamp. There was nothing hid from it. It revealed and transfigured fantastically; the very blades of the high-standing grass were drawn in separate delicate lines of shadow, but they did not look like grass. The great river flooded through the darkness—an endless winding army of ghosts whose murmur was never still.

Sigrid Fersen looked down at the man beside her. As distance brings out the significance of a rough sketch, so now the grey half-light threw into relief lines and hollows of his face which she had not seen before. They were as vigorous and ugly as they had ever been, yet their silhouette under the helmet rim conveyed to her a new impression—the thought of something chivalresque and simple, mystic and single-hearted—a Pure Fool on the Threshold of his Quest. She bent towards him, stroking her horse's neck with a gentle hand.

"And I too have a theory, Tristram Tristram," she

said, as though there had been no silence between them. "It is this—that there can be no going back for any of us. We climb from experience to experience, and grow or shrivel as our experience is a high or low one. There was a man sleeping by the backwater. He is gone, and in his place you walk beside me."

"Why should I not be the man by the backwater?" he asked. "He knew you also."

"Since when?"

"Since two years ago."

"Tell me how he met me—I have forgotten."

"You never knew," he answered. "It was his last night in England. He had said good-bye to all he cared for, and he felt pretty bad. He knew what lay ahead of him—lonely, hard years and perhaps no return. So he did what he had never done before, because money and pleasure had not come his way—he took himself and his pain into a theatre. And there he saw you."

"Well—and then?"

"That's all. There was wonderful music, and you explained it to him. You showed him a new beauty that he had never dreamed of, you unlocked a door, and he entered a new world. When it was over he got up and left the theatre. He behaved like a boy—he went and stood by the river until day broke."

"And the photograph."

"He bought it to take with him."

She smiled to herself, tenderly, ironically.

"It did not occur to him to ask for my autograph—to seek me out."

"No, then you would have been a reality to him—an unattainable reality. He wanted you as a dream he could live with and conjure up at will."

"As he did by the backwater."

"Yes." He pointed out towards the grey bulk of the temple lying against the forest. His voice lost its habitual unevenness, and grew full and clear. "One thing you danced—do you remember?—the ballet in *Robert le Diable*? The scene was a churchyard—an ugly thing of cardboard and clumsy carpentering until you came. But out there is a real temple. At night the moon plays through the great sun-window of the *sikhara* and fills the space between the pillars. And I have gone there at night-time and seen you dance."

"Shall you go again, Tristram Tristram?"

"I don't know—I don't know."

They went on in silence. There was no sound but the song of the water and the swish of the grass at their feet. Presently she drew rein.

"We are near the bridge; I can hear voices, and I want to say good-bye to you now. I want to thank you. I have made my experience, and climbed higher."

He looked up at her with a wistful smile.

"I don't know about that—I don't know what I

have done. I do know that I have grown frightened for you. I've been thinking of infection and cheetahs on the home road and all the horrors I don't believe in. I wish I could go with you to Gaya."

"There is nothing to fear, Tristram Tristram. And you will come to Gaya tomorrow or the next day or next week and I shall play to you Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms—all the most wonderful music in the world. I shall open new doors for you and new worlds——"

He shook his head.

"There's cholera out in Bjura."

"Still you will come——" she answered.

Her hand touched his. Then she was gone—a speck of moving light—into the darkness.

CHAPTER VII

ANNE BOUCICAULT EXPLAINS

It was Anne Boucicault's birthday—her twenty-second—and Owen Meredith had proposed her health in lemonade—a beverage which he was assured had no unlucky superstition attached to it. The rest responded in champagne. It was not Colonel Boucicault's champagne, though it was on his verandah that Gaya had gathered to celebrate. Jim Radcliffe, who, since his midnight ride with Sigrid and the consequent hubbub, had developed into a very debonair and self-confident young man, had produced a case-full with the satisfaction and mystery of a popular conjurer, and Mrs. Boucicault showed neither offence nor appreciation at this addition to her hospitality. She sat in the shade near the doorway and scarcely spoke. From time to time her hand rose involuntarily to the high collar which had been added to her elaborate gown, and rested there as though it hid something painful. When a remark reached her a fitful smile quivered about her lips steadied to artificial gaiety. But her pale eyes were wide and unsmiling, their sight turned inwards on to some ugly vision, and never lifted from their

unseeing watch on the avenue leading to the high-road. Anne sat on the arm of her chair and held her hand. She looked very young, and, whilst Meredith spoke, almost radiant. He had seen the colour creep back into her pale cheeks, and had become gay and eloquent and a little reckless. For all the lemonade, and the little chilly mannerisms of his calling, he was a passionate young man, and the sight of her fragile pleasure roused in him a fierce pity and tenderness. He betrayed himself, and did not know it. Afterwards, when he came and touched her long-stemmed glass with his tumbler, he lingered, looking down at her, his hazel eyes bright with a new purpose and an old hope suddenly and daringly set free.

"Anne—dear—before I go tonight I have something I want to say to you. Give me a chance, will you?"

She met his eager gaze for an instant, and then her own eyes faltered and dropped. She looked startled, a little frightened, like a child that has been taken unawares, but her colour remained unchanged.

"Of course—we shall be going into the garden. Come with me. I will show you our new rose-trees."

"Thank you," he answered. He stood back, others crowded to take his place, and she received their good wishes much as she had received him, with a shy graciousness that made her appealingly attractive. Only when Sigrid Fersen held out her

glass she stiffened, and grew suddenly much older. It was as though for an instant they had changed places, and the girl had become the woman defending herself coldly and bitterly against the threat of youth.

"And I can wish you nothing better than that you should always have some one like Mr. Meredith to wish you so much good, with so much fervour," Sigrid said lightly. She turned her head towards the man standing behind Anne Boucicault's chair, and her eyes in the shade of the big garden hat sparkled with subdued merriment and kindly mockery. "Tell me, is Mr. Meredith so eloquent in the pulpit?" she asked.

"You should hear him for yourself," Anne replied staidly.

"But then, I never go to church."

"That is a pity." She flushed a little, her mouth small and tight-looking. "It is especially a pity out here—because of the natives. But then, of course, you haven't our responsibility."

Meredith frowned slightly, not at Anne's words, but at the expression which he saw pass over the small face opposite him. It was still kindly, but the merriment had become ironic. Up to that moment he had felt nothing very definite towards her, recognizing, with an unclerical modesty, that he did not understand her. Now he thrilled with an odd dislike.

"I'm afraid my eloquence won't cure Miss Fersen's backsliding," he said, hurriedly good-humoured. "And, in the meantime, behold a new arrival, breathless with congratulations."

The new arrival proved to be Wickie, escaped from the compound, who bounced up the verandah steps and advanced among the scattered tables practising the ingratiating squirm with which the Aberdeen masks his real impertinence. He was received with acclamation, partly for his master's sake, partly as a tribute to his own irresistible ugliness. Anne whistled timidly to him, but he ignored her and sniffed at Sigrid's outstretched hand.

"It's almost as though he knew you," Anne said sharply.

"Well, we know of each other at any rate, don't we, Wickie?"

"How?" The question was rude in its abruptness and Anne's manners were always very gentle. Sigrid Fersen did not look at her. She bent down and balanced a generous portion of cake on Wickie's hopeful snout.

"Major Tristram told me about him," she said.

"But Major Tristram has not been in Gaya since you arrived."

"Nevertheless, we have met." She glanced across at Radcliffe who chuckled with boyish self-consciousness. "I paid Major Tristram a visit," she added.

"At Heerut?"

"Well, we had tea there—but we met by the river. Major Tristram had been bathing."

Anne Boucicault sat very straight and still and hard-eyed. Meredith saw that her hands were clenched so that they were white at the knuckles, and again he felt the passing of a sudden emotion which was this time a mingling of inexplicable pain and dread.

"That must have been an unusual—dangerous adventure," Anne uttered from between stiff lips.

"I had hoped that it might be—it proved to be nothing but a very agreeable afternoon," was the answer.

The dialogue passed unnoticed. Mrs. Brabazone was telling one of her only three stories, and trying to sort out the point. Gaya listened and waited reverently, and Mrs. Brabazone, being possessed of a fine sense of her own total lack of humour, finished with a round fat laugh which added a perfecting touch to her rotund figure and creaseless, elderly face.

"Anyhow, I do amuse you," she said triumphantly. "Nobody amuses you like I do. I don't believe you could get on without me. One of these days I shall have that story right, and then you'll see that it was worth waiting for it. You know, I always mix it up with the one about the Lancashire woman who——" She stopped, her mouth agape. "What on

earth was that?" she demanded sharply.

"Firing," Mary Compton answered. She raised herself from her comfortable lounging attitude on the long chair, and leant forward with a curious expression on her alert face. "What was it, Mr. Radcliffe?"

The boy got up hurriedly, ostensibly to refill his neighbour's empty glass. His fresh-coloured face, not yet burnt with the Indian sun, had turned a dull red.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Some silly ass over in the barracks. A rifle gone off by mistake. Or a sentry. The sentries have taken to firing at their own shadows."

"It may have been at the barracks," Mrs. Compton pursued, "but that wasn't a rifle, Jim Radcliffe. It was a squad firing, and you know it."

"And how do you know?" Mrs. Brabazone broke in. "Sometimes, Mary, I feel that you can't be really nice. You do know such dreadfully unwomanly things."

"I was shut up in Chitral with Archie when the regiment mutinied," Mrs. Compton retorted coolly. "I learnt to know the meaning of every sound—even to the snapping of a twig under a naked foot."

Mrs. Brabazone shook herself like a dog throwing off a douche of cold water.

"My dear, don't! You're trying to insinuate that we are on the verge of being murdered in our beds, and I know it perfectly well. I tell the Judge so every

night, and he says he's sure I shall die of a broken heart if I have to go off peacefully. But then——"

Her voice trailed off. For once her headlong garrulity failed to evoke a response, and the little group of men and women sat silent, avoiding each other's eyes. It was very still again. A drowsy late afternoon peace hung over the shady garden at their feet. Yet the sound which had fallen lingered among them like a long-drawn-out echo.

They lived lightly and gaily, these people of Gaya, most blessed of Indian stations. Polo and tennis, a drag-hunt here and there, a constant happy-go-lucky exchange of hospitality, a close fraternity which allowed for scandal and malice and all uncharitableness, and never failed at a pinch. And then for an instant a rift—a glimpse down into the thinly crusted abyss on which they danced—a tightening of the lips, a laugh, a call for a new tune, a fine carrying-on of their life with the secret knowledge that their pleasure and their brotherhood was other and greater than they had thought.

Mary Compton broke the silence. Her voice sounded light and careless.

"I don't think we're going to die just yet, anyhow," she said; "there's Colonel Boucicault. Perhaps he will condescend to tell us what Mr. Radcliffe won't." She gave the latter one of those penetrating glances which made her a rather dreaded little personality, and immediately afterwards,

catching sight of Mrs. Boucicault's face she flushed crimson. It was, as she afterwards expressed it, as though she had been caught eavesdropping or prying into a confession not meant for her reading. For Mrs. Boucicault had sunk together like a faded flower whose stem had been snapped. The elaborate lace dress and the jewelled hands in her lap added painfully to her look of broken helplessness. But it was in her eyes that Mary Compton had seen her self-betrayal. They were half-closed, and from under the heavy lids they kept watch as a dog watches who has been beaten past protest, even past subjection into a terrible patient waiting. She pushed her daughter's hand aside, and Anne smiled down at her with an attempt at careless ease which had its own piteousness.

Colonel Boucicault came up the verandah steps, his hand to his helmet with that exaggerated formality which made the greeting a veiled gibe.

"I trust I don't interrupt," he said. "Anne is celebrating, isn't she? I heard whispers of something of the sort, but I was not invited. In fact, I suspect that the entertainment was fixed for the afternoon in the hopes that my duties might keep me elsewhere."

He accepted the chair which his subaltern had vacated for him. "Thanks, Radcliffe, always the soul of correctness, and ever to be found where there is nothing more arduous going than champagne. Well, what are you all silent for? Mrs. Brabazone, you are

positively pale. Has anything happened?"

Mrs. Brabazone waved one of her podgy hands with a gesture that was probably an expression of an otherwise inarticulate rage. Boucicault laughed at her. Whether he had been drinking or not could not be said for certain. He never betrayed himself. His hands and his voice were equally steady. His complexion, sallow and unhealthy, added to the unnatural brightness of his pale eyes, which, like the mouth under the heavy moustache, expressed a deliberate, insane cruelty.

Anne Boucicault met his roving stare and tried to smile.

"We heard firing," she stammered. "We didn't know what it was. We were rather frightened."

"Frightened? Of course you were. You're given that way, aren't you, Anne?" He held out an irritable hand for the glass which Meredith had filled for him. "Well, you weren't the only one. Five more terrified wretches I never saw—why, I can't think. A transmigration at this time of the year must be rather agreeable."

Mary Compton turned her head sharply.

"The five men who mutinied," she exclaimed, "they were shot—-just now?"

Though the sunlight was still strong the garden seemed to have suddenly passed into a chilling shadow.

Colonel Boucicault nodded.

"Yes, before the whole regiment with the exception of this gentleman who had—what was it—the toothache?" He lifted his glass towards Radcliffe, whose boyish face had whitened under the taunt. "Allow me to congratulate you on your taste in champagne, sir. You should be invaluable on the mess committee at any rate."

Radcliffe's lips twitched but he made no answer, and it was Sigrid Fersen who spoke. She bent down, stroking Wickie's pointed ears with a deliberate hand.

"Wasn't the execution a trifle ostentatious, Colonel Boucicault?" she asked.

He stared back at her, an ugly smile at the corner of his lips.

"It was meant to be ostentatious. I'm afraid I cannot always consider the delicate female nerves."

"My nerves weren't upset," she returned levelly. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Indeed?" He seemed to meditate a moment, as though something either in her voice or appearance struck him, then jerked his head in Anne's direction. "My orderly told me there was a messenger for me. Bring him here."

"Here, father?"

"That was what I said."

Anne slipped from her place, and, motioning Meredith aside, hurried into the house like some frightened little animal. As she disappeared Mary

Compton started a conversation which was taken up eagerly but without more than a faltering success. It failed altogether as Anne returned.

"That's Ayeshi," Radcliffe whispered in Sigrid's ear.

She looked up. The young Hindu had salaamed gravely, partly to Boucicault, partly to the assembled company and now stood upright and silent. He was barefooted, and the white loose clothes were grey with dust. Yet there was that in the carriage of his slender body and in the dark, delicate featured face which was arresting in its dignity. To Boucicault, possibly, the boy's untroubled ease appeared as insolence. He frowned at him moodily.

"You are Major Tristram's servant," he asked in English.

"Yes, Sahib."

"Well, he has not taught you manners. But that was hardly to be expected. You have brought a message?"

"Yes, Sahib."

"Deliver it."

"It is by word of mouth, Sahib."

"Well, then, deliver it, in Heaven's name."

Ayeshi put his hand to his neck, pushing back the short black curls which escaped from under his turban. He seemed to become suddenly conscious of the attention centred on him, and his eyes, moving over the watching faces, encountered Sigrid Fersen.

He looked at her intently and then at the dog at her feet, and she saw that his lips quivered though not with fear.

"It is that there is cholera at Bjura," he said. "The Dakktar Sahib is hard pressed, and begs for help."

"He is always doing that. Tell him I have no one to send. Captain Treves is on furlough, and I should not dream of recalling him. The Dakktar Sahib must manage as best he can."

Ayeshi held his ground. His mouth had hardened.

"The Dakktar Sahib is ill," he said.

"Well, let the physician heal himself," Boucicault laughed.

"Colonel Sahib—it is urgent——"

Boucicault rose to his feet.

"You can go," he said. Then, as Ayeshi lingered, with a suddenness that was awful in its expression of released passions, Boucicault lifted his hand and struck the native full on the mouth. "Now will you go?" he said softly.

Mrs. Brabazone screamed, but her voice was drowned wholly by a more full-throated sound. Wickie, barking furiously and bristling with all the fighting fury of his Scottish forbears, broke from a long restraint and flung himself at the aggressor. Even his teeth, however, could not prevail against the leather riding-boots, and Boucicault kicked himself free. His passion had died down or had

become something worse, a cold still fury.

"What brute is this?" he asked. He looked at Anne, and she tried to meet his eyes and flinched.

"It's Major Tristram's dog—he gave it to me to take care of—it had a broken paw—it was shut up in the compound—I hoped you wouldn't mind, father."

Boucicault made no answer. He took the riding-crop which he had carried. There was a tight line about his jaw which betrayed the grinding teeth. He was very deliberate, almost ostentatious in his purpose. Anne watched him. She held out a hand of protest—then let it drop. Her pallor had become pitiful. Sigrid Fersen got up. She was so swift and light in her movement that no one realised what she was doing till it was done. She crossed the verandah and picked up Wickie in her arms, narrowly escaping the murderous descent of the riding-crop. Then she rose and faced him.

"I like Wickie," she said. "From henceforward, Colonel Boucicault, he is under my protection."

Boucicault drew back. His face was grey looking.

"You have some courage, Mademoiselle," he said almost inaudibly.

She smiled composedly.

"I am not 'Mademoiselle,' and you know it, Colonel Boucicault. Also, as I said before, I am not afraid. I killed a mad dog once, and since than I have been afraid of nothing." She turned carelessly. Ayeshi stood behind her. There was blood on his mouth and

on the hand which he had raised in self-defence. His eyes were full of a sick suffering which was terrible because it was not of the body. She laid her free hand on his arm. "You are hurt," she said; "please go to my bungalow. Mrs. Smithers will look after you—tell her I sent you. You mustn't mind what has happened——" She looked back mockingly over her shoulder. "Colonel Boucicault is a little out of temper. He would hit me if he dared."

There was a silence of sheer stupefaction. Mrs. Compton's temperament, usually leashed by her passionate care for her husband's career, bolted with her, and she laughed outright, and Mrs. Brabazone settled herself back in her chair with a subdued complacency of one who has seen herself fitly avenged. But Anne Boucicault had risen to her feet. There was a look on her face more painful than her fear, and almost reckless in its self-betrayal. For an instant she stood looking at the woman who faced her father, and then without a word she turned and slipped into the room behind her. Meredith followed. He did not speak to her. He knew where she was going, and the knowledge gave him an odd comfort, as though in her need she had remembered him and turned to him. Like a shadow she glided along the dim passages. The verandah overlooking the rose-garden was deserted and the garden itself already full of a cool twilight which added to its sad air of neglect and death. Roses grew well in Gaya, but they

did not grow well in Anne's garden. She loved them but not successfully. Meredith stood beside her as she lay huddled together on the old bench and waited. Though she was so still he felt that she was crying and the knowledge stirred him to a compassion that was not one of understanding. In truth he understood as yet very little—the mere surface of her grief. Presently he sat down beside her and drew her hand gently and resolutely from her face. It was wet with tears.

"Anne!" he said unsteadily. "Little Anne!" Loyally unselfish and modest though he was, yet at that moment he accused himself of a tender insincerity as though his grief and pity were masks covering his own happiness. The thing for which he had longed and prayed had come to pass, so swiftly and splendidly that in his warm faith he seemed to recognize the hand of the God he prayed to. "You mustn't grieve so," he whispered. "People understand—and we are all your friends. We know too what this country can do with a man's character—we can make allowances. And then, dear, no harm was done. Miss Fersen saved the situation for us all."

She withdrew her hand slowly and looked at him then, in spite of her girl's tears and the veiling twilight, he wondered at the unyouthfulness of her expression.

"Yes, I suppose she did. She saved Wickie. She was very brave."

"I thought so too."

"And yet I hate her." She made a quick gesture, silencing his involuntary protest. "I hate her—not wickedly. There is a hatred which isn't wicked—the kind of thing we feel for what is harmful and evil. I've tested myself over and over again. I know—I feel that she isn't a good woman—she has no faith, no ideals. She has done harm in Gaya already—she sticks at nothing—and because of that she wins, and people yield to her and let her poison them. That is why I hate her."

The man beside her was silent for a moment. He had no answer ready. He had felt nothing for Sigrid Fersen save a masculine admiration for her cool courage. Anne's passionate dislike, compared to what he hoped was coming to them both, seemed a little thing and yet it chilled him. The cold shadows of the neglected garden laid hands upon him, checking and paralysing the headlong impulse and joyous confidence with which men win victories. With an effort he tried to free himself.

"You may be right," he said quietly, "I don't know. I'm no judge of character. But the truth is, I haven't thought about her. I haven't thought of any but the one woman—of any one but you, Anne." He paused a moment. He no longer dared to look at her, but leant forward, his hands tightly interlocked, his eyes fixed on the on-coming tide of darkness. He did not know that his voice shook. "Anne, I haven't dared

boast to myself—and yet we have been so happy together—we love the same things and have the same faith; we look at life with the same eyes. All that is surely something. As to myself—God knows how little I have to give you—but I won't apologize for the rest—not for my work. That is the grandest, best thing I have to offer. I know you think so too."

"Yes, Owen." She put her small, unsteady hand on his arm. And for a second hope blazed up in him, dying down again to grey premonition. "And you weren't boastful to think I cared—I do—but not like that, Owen."

Something impersonal within himself marvelled at the banality of tragedy. People made fun of scenes like this—caricatured them. And he was sick with pain and weakness.

"Little Anne—you're so young—how should you know?"

"I do know," she answered.

Then he looked at her, driven out of himself by the simplicity and strength of her confession. She held herself upright and even though her face was full of shadow he could see the line of her mouth and it frightened him. He knew now what he had always refused to know. Ruthlessly, from the secret depths where we bury our hated truths, he drew out a memory and a fear and recognized them for what they were. The recognition was the end of the one hope of personal happiness he had granted himself,

and it staggered him. Then the man and the Christian in him rose triumphant.

"I won't pretend I don't guess," he said quietly and naturally. "I do. And, Anne, though I was selfish enough to want you myself—still, there was one thing I did want more. It isn't a phrase—it's honestly true. I wanted you to be happy. I think you will be—I think you are—so I haven't the right to grumble, have I?"

He tried to smile at her. Commonplace as his form of renunciation had been, he was not conscious now of any banality either in himself or her. He stood on that rarely ascended pinnacle whence men look down on their daily life and see in its tortuous monotony the weaving of a divine pattern. He felt for the instant glorified as some men are who stand before a miracle of nature, or a great picture, or listen to grand music. It was his vision of the Beautiful—willing sacrifice, happy renunciation.

But Anne Boucicault got up and stood beside him, very straight, her hands clenched at her sides.

"I am not happy," she said. "I do not think I ever shall be."

And she left him standing there in the twilight, a very human and tragic figure, with the grey ash of his vision between his hands.

* * * * *

Such was Anne Boucicault's birthday. Mrs. Compton,

driving home from the scene of celebration, met her husband at the barrack gates and forced the reins upon him in order that she might give herself over entirely to invective and lurid description, two pastimes for which she had an unlimited talent. Archie Compton chuckled at her picture of Sigrid's dramatic and triumphant intervention, but his chuckle was not all that she had expected, and she caught herself up.

"What a brute I am!" she exclaimed repentantly. "I had forgotten. You poor old boy! You must be feeling sick——"

"I am," he returned grimly. "It was damnable." His voice was lowered for the benefit of the syce balanced on the back seat, but it was no less vibrant with bitterness. "But that's how it is out here. We—you and I—men like Tristram—everybody—sweat out our lives, sacrifice every personal wish we've got, play the game from the Viceroy down to the new-fledged Tommy as, heaven knows, the game isn't often played on this earth—for what? Well, we don't talk about that. We just go ahead with our best. And then some blundering ass—some blackguard, is let loose among us and the whole thing is in the fire—we might as well never have been—or played the deuce to our hearts' content——"

She caught a glimpse of his drawn, miserable face.

"You think—things are pretty bad?" she asked,

gropingly. "Something will happen?"

"Sure." His grip tightened on the reins. "Something—God knows what—but something——"

CHAPTER VIII
THE TWO LISTENERS

It was typical of Owen Meredith that, as he left the Boucicaults' compound behind him, he put aside his own grief and turned sternly to the duty that lay nearest him. That duty concerned Ayeshi. Possibly, had Ayeshi been moulded in the common clay of his race, Meredith might have taken his duty with less seriousness, though his blood would still have burnt at Boucicault's wanton brutality—as it was, a long-considered purpose now took a definite form.

It chanced that, as Meredith trudged on his way to the Mission, the Rajah's English dog-cart swerved round a bend of the dusty road, and came down upon him with the best speed of a rather showy high-stepper. Rasaldû drove himself, the knowledge of animals being the one talent that he appeared to have inherited from his cowherd ancestry, and, recognizing Meredith, he drew up so smartly as almost to jerk his attendant from off his precarious perch in the rear.

"I have just come down from the dâk-bungalow,"

he explained. "I was to have taken Mademoiselle Fersen out with my new cob—beauty, eh?—but she was out. Happened to have seen her?"

Meredith accepted the fat brown hand extended towards him.

"I left her at the Boucicaults'," he said. "But that was some time back. It was Miss Boucicault's birthday, you know."

"No, I didn't." Rasaldû's face fell like that of an offended child, and Meredith hastened to add lightly:

"It was a very small affair—only a handful of Miss Boucicault's women friends and an odd male or two like myself. Miss Fersen was there as a matter of course. I don't think any affair in Gaya could get along without her."

The Rajah chuckled, flattered and reassured.

"No, I suppose not. A wonderful woman. Well, I daresay she had to go. Anything I can do for you, Meredith? Want a new schoolhouse or anything like that?"

"I want money, Rajah," Meredith returned promptly.

"Thought so. You shall have it. Let me have the list and I'll head it with as much as you like——"

"Hadn't you better hear what it's for?" Meredith suggested.

Rasaldû shook his head.

"Oh, I don't know; that's hardly my business."

"In this case, I think. It concerns one of your

own people, Rajah."

Rasaldû's smile faded. He looked oddly crestfallen.

"A protégé of yours, eh?"

"Yes, a very brilliant young man—much above his class. Though I've not been able to trace his parentage, I imagine he has good blood in his veins. Anyhow, I want to give him his chance, perhaps eventually send him to Calcutta University."

"Convert, eh?"

"That may come," was the grave answer.

Rasaldû was silent a moment, busy with the restless animal in the shafts. A rather supercilious smile flickered at the corners of his thick lips.

"Well, you shall have all you want," he said finally. "But send him to London—Paris. Paris is the place. It opens a man's mind—gives him ideas. We want that sort of stuff out here. Don't fuddle him with universities. Show him life. And there's nothing like Paris for that. It was there I met Mademoiselle Fersen, you know. A fine woman, eh? Fairly taken Gaya by storm, I fancy."

"She certainly does pretty well what she likes," Meredith admitted with a wry smile.

"I thought so. She was bound to win. At home she fairly walked over everyone—don't know why exactly. It wasn't only her dancing—I couldn't quite understand it myself—not enough of it or too much—and it wasn't her beauty. She isn't in the least

beautiful.... There were women in Paris I knew——" He caught sight of Meredith's face and burst out into a good-natured laugh. "Well, all that won't interest you. But you shall have your money. Keep clear of the wheels, my dear fellow—the brute's got the devil in her—good-bye."

He raised his whip in salutation, and a minute later was a speck in a rolling cloud of dust.

Owen Meredith trudged on patiently and interwove his thoughts of Ayeshi's future, and of the slow piling of stone upon stone which was to make a new temple in India, with the red thread of his own pain.

Meantime the subject of his anxious consideration sat on the top step of the dâk-bungalow and was ministered to by Mrs. Smithers. Mrs. Smithers had accepted him much as she would have accepted a herd of wild elephants if they had presented themselves in Sigrid's name. She brought hot water and bathed the blood from his face, and set food in lavish quantities at his side, all this—except for a single exclamation, "lawks a-mercy!"—without surprise or question or the slightest change in the expression of her grim features. Ayeshi seemed scarcely aware of her. Nor did he touch the food. He sat with his back against the wooden pillar of the verandah, his knees drawn up to his chin and shivered as though in the grip of a violent ague. Mrs. Smithers tried to cover him with a rug, but he thrust

her offering aside.

"I am not cold," he said.

"You're very ill, young man," Mrs. Smithers retorted.

He turned his half-closed, suffering eyes for a moment to her face.

"It is not my body——" he muttered.

Mrs. Smithers gave it up. Nevertheless, she drew up a chair on the other side of the steps and sat down with her hands folded in her lap and kept watch over him as though he had been a criminal given over into her keeping.

It was thus Sigrid found them half an hour later. The brief Indian twilight still lingered on the open roadway, but in the happy wilderness which was the garden of the dâk-bungalow it was night, and the figures of the two watchers were only shadows.

Sigrid stepped out of the white military cloak which covered her light dress and revealed the presence, under one arm, of a black-snouted, alert-eared something which in other days, when Aberdeens and their mongrel offspring were unknown, would have been taken for a baby dragon. Mrs. Smithers's unexpectant lap received Wickie, helplessly entangled in the cloak, and Sigrid knelt at Ayeshi's side. He had tried to rise and salaam, but she forced him back with a resolute hand.

"We've had enough of that sort of thing," she said almost angrily. "How you must hate us all!"

He gave a long shuddering sigh like that of a child which has exhausted itself with crying, and then was still.

"Mem-Sahib is very good," he said softly. "But he had the right——"

"He had not," she flashed back fiercely. "What gives him the right?"

"If Mem-Sahib were not a stranger she would know," he answered in his broken voice.

She struck her knee with her clenched hand in a storm of anger.

"There is no law——" she began.

"There is a custom, Mem-Sahib," he interrupted. "I think many of them were sorry, but had I turned on him and struck him they would have flung themselves on me. That is the difference."

"You are as good as he," she protested recklessly. "If you had a chance you would be more than he is. Major Tristram has told me——"

"There are barriers that Mem-Sahib would be the first to remember," he persisted.

But the fire of her outraged chivalry burnt fiercer in the wind of his opposition.

"You're wrong, Ayeshi. I shouldn't. There are no barriers—at least, none like that. Goodness knows, we're not born equal, but the inequality that matters isn't of birth or race, but of mind and soul. And you have a mind and soul above most. There are no barriers for you."

He bent his head.

"That is what Meredith Sahib has said to me. We are all brothers—that is the message of his God to us. Somehow, I do not think that Meredith Sahib is wise to bring the message—nor you, Mem-Sahib—and yet we who are athirst in the desert——"

He seemed to meditate and to have forgotten her. He rose stiffly and painfully to his feet.

"I go to seek Tristram Sahib," he muttered.

She also had risen with an effortless slowness which made even of the simple movement a kind of wonder.

"Tristram Sahib? Is Tristram Sahib here?"

He pointed vaguely out into the darkness.

"There—in an hour I am to meet him with the Colonel Sahib's answer. He would not come himself, for he is hard pressed, and if he met the Colonel Sahib——"

"There would be an end to his theories," she interposed with a little laugh.

"And to you also he sent a message, Mem-Sahib."

She turned to him. Mrs. Smithers, to whom the darkness was in the nature of an impropriety, had lit the high lamp in the room behind them, and the dim gold which flooded Sigrid Fersen's face seemed more the dawn of an expression than a reflected light.

"Give it me!" she said.

His back was to the light. He looked at her for a moment, his face a blank, featureless shadow.

"It is here, Mem-Sahib." From his tunic he drew out a little bundle wrapped in a thick silk cummerbund, and gave it tenderly into her hands.

"It was that which made me most afraid," he added.

"That!" she said, scarcely above her breath. She held the fragile china cup in both hands, her head bent. "I can't accept it," she said hurriedly. "You must tell him so, Ayeshi. It was his mother's gift—he valued it—he loves beautiful things—I couldn't take it——"

"Mem-Sahib"—the young Hindu's voice sounded rough and uneven—"the Dakktar Sahib goes to Bjura tonight. There is much terrible sickness in Bjura, and the Dakktar Sahib goes weary and single-handed. The cup was precious to him—most precious—and that was why he sent it to the Mem-Sahib who loves the beautiful as he does. He believed that his mother would have wished it." He waited and then asked: "What message shall I take to the Dakktar Sahib?"

"Wait—you must give me time to think, Ayeshi —or, no, why should I think?" Her laugh sounded low and unsteady. "Come, you must sit there in the shadow again. It is not yet time for Tristram Sahib. Wait—I will give him my message—sit there——"

She was gone noiselessly. Mrs. Smithers, who hovered gloomily about the drawing-room in search of the absconded Wickie, saw her go to the piano and throw it open. For many minutes she sat before

it motionless, seeming to listen, then her left hand touched the keys, and almost inaudibly, like the stir of a newly awakened wind, there sounded the first notes of the Andante Appassionata.

Mrs. Smithers no longer fidgeted. She stood in the shadow of the curtained window, her old, hard-set face to the darkness. Only her mouth had lost something of its grim severity, and had become tender. She did not see Ayeshi, though barely the breadth of the verandah separated them. She looked past him as sightlessly as he looked past her. Evidently he had turned to go. One foot rested on the lower step and his body was thrown back against the balustrade as though he had been arrested in the very act of flight. The dim light on his face revealed its look of wonder—almost panic-stricken wonder.

Mrs. Smithers continued to disregard him. But presently she turned and went across to the piano. Whatever momentary weakness had overcome her had gone and she was again her ruthless, uncompromising self.

"Sigrid—there's some one out there in the compound—under the trees—a man. Who is he?"

"Major Tristram—the Dakktar Sahib—a very poor and gallant gentleman—who is perhaps going out to die and now trembles on the brink of Paradise." She broke off and passed joyously into the next phrase and through its glowing crescendo her voice sounded with a light distinctness. "I can play

too, Smithy! And dance. I could dance to this and Beethoven would say I knew more of his soul than half the fools who gape in stuffy concert-halls. Think, Smithy, that man out there has never heard such music—only Meyerbeer's pompous little ballet—and after that he went and stood by the river until the daybreak—because of me——"

Mrs. Smithers shook her head sternly.

"You mustn't, Sigrid—you mustn't. It's not fair—you've always been fair. You know nothing can't come of it. You know yourself. You can't change your course——"

"I do know. But sometimes the wind shall blow me whither it listeth. Haven't I the right to that much?"

"Not at some one else's cost, Sigrid."

There was no answer. Sigrid Fersen lifted her right hand and touched her lips with her forefinger. It was as though she called the very garden without to a deeper stillness. Her left hand passed swiftly from chord to chord, from major to a wistful minor, resting at last on one deep lingering note of suspense.

"Hush, Smithy! Don't talk! What does anything matter? Now listen! Do you remember—the D minor valse—do you remember that last night—the grand-dukes and the princesses, what were they all?—was there anything but God and Chopin and I——"

Her fair small head was thrown back, her eyes

were bright, but not now with gaiety. Her mouth was slightly open, and she was breathing deeply and quickly with the glory of divine movement.

Mrs. Smithers turned away again and went back to the window. She was crying, her mouth stiff as though it could not yield, even to grief.

The man under the trees had taken a step forward and now stood still again. Between them Ayeshi lay huddled together on the top step of the verandah, his face hidden in his arms.

CHAPTER IX
LALLOO, THE MONEY-LENDER

It had come to be an accepted fact in Gaya that the old bungalow lying on the outskirts was haunted and therefore undesirable. Not that Gaya feared ghosts or anything else in heaven or earth. The average Anglo-Indian's nerve, strained by the subtle but immediate juxtaposition of frivolity and danger which shade so imperceptibly into each other, that the border-line can be crossed unconsciously and in an instant, cannot indulge in emotionalism or fancies. He has to close his mind both to the fascination and the veiled menace of Indian life, or be lost. It is for that reason that he is always the last to admit the fascination, except in regard to the social conditions, or the

danger, beyond the obvious ones of ill health and consequent retirement on a beggarly half-pay.

So Gaya's inhabitants locked up fear, and hid the key where it could not be found even by the most unbaked, fluttered newcomer, and the old bungalow with its ugly secret left them unmoved. But they never denied the existence of the blight which rested on the gloomy, tumbled-down building, and they avoided the place as unpleasant and depressing, and took care that innocent newly appointed officers and their wives, for whom so large and spacious a dwelling seemed eminently suited, should house elsewhere. It was owing to this circumstance that James Barclay had been able to obtain possession and a consequent but dubious foothold on the outskirts of Gaya's sternly fortified social life. The bungalow had been built in the dim ages before the Mutiny, and had been patched and patched till little was left of the original. James Barclay promptly renovated it from end to end, and added various bizarre additions of his own which, however, did not alter the place's fundamental characteristic of mouldering gloom and depression.

In the room in which he sat talking to Lalloo, the money-lender, everything of native origin had been rigorously excluded. The chairs were covered with English chintzes, the curtains were futurist in design and colour; there were copies of European masterpieces in heavy gilded frames on the walls,

and a new art bronze lamp suspended from the hand of a marble Venus cast a bright, garish reflection on the upturned, contemplative face of its owner.

It was curious, therefore, that, as little as he had been able to eradicate the gloom, as little had he been able to oust the indigenous element. The objects might be Western, but the atmosphere remained obstinately Oriental. Perhaps it was the irrepressible outbursts of colour-love betrayed by the chintzes, or perhaps Lalloo supplied the cause of this phenomena. He sat cross-legged on the carpet and stroked his grizzled beard with a dark hand, that seemed all the darker for the scrupulous whiteness of his *puggri* and loose tunic. Compared with him, Barclay looked almost blond, almost English. Yet Lalloo also accentuated what was un-English in him. There were lines about the old usurer's mouth and nostrils which were already dimly suggested in Barclay's face. There was a gulf between them, but there was also a bridge across.

"There is Seetul, who says he cannot pay," Lalloo detailed monotonously, and as though he were reading from an account-book. "He has owed us ten rupees these last six months, and still he says he cannot pay. But he has had many fine stuffs in his loom—and his daughter's hands have been busy with rich embroideries on which the Sahibs' wives have cast longing eyes. It would be well to claim your due, Meester Barclay, before it is too late."

Barclay nodded absently.

"Good. I can leave that to you, Lalloo," he said.

"It is well. Then Heera Singh—we lent him five rupees a year ago when the harvest failed. Twenty-five rupees is what I claimed from him two days ago, and he has nothing—that is to say, he has some fine cattle and this year the rabi has done well. Your claim would be a just one, Meester Barclay."

"You'd better make it quick, then, before the beggar sells out. Afterwards he'll come whining with some infernal lie. He's had rope enough."

"It is well." The old man continued to stroke his beard for a moment in silence, watching the face under the light with a blank intentness which revealed nothing. "Nehal Pal has paid in full," he resumed at length. "His daughter was given in marriage to Meer Ali a week since. Meer Ali is a very old man, and there was some difficulty, for in these degenerate days the tongues of the women wag to some purpose—but the marriage contract was very favourable to Nehal Pal. And he has paid in full." Lalloo patted his waistband and drew out a small jangling bag, which he set with an almost religious gravity at his patron's feet. "These and the other moneys of which I have already rendered account are now before you, Meester Barclay."

Barclay picked up the bag and weighed it negligently in his lean, brown hand.

"You've got an amazing head for figures, Lalloo,"

he commended. "And you're some business man, as our American friends would say. We shall want both qualities badly in the future. I want money—as much as I can get. I mean to rope in all the industries of every village within three hundred miles and make them paying concerns. At present, they're just in a state of straggling, unprofitable hugger-mugger, out of which nobody gets anything."

"I have done my best," Lalloo insinuated deprecatingly.

Barclay tossed the bag on to the polished oak table beside him.

"One man's best isn't enough. Nothing's of any good without organization, and to organize one must have the power to make others do what they're told. So far we've got most of the grain-dealers into the net, and by the next harvest they'll have to sell me their grain at my own price. But that's a drop in the ocean. The weaving—that's the thing. That's what's going to count. There are three hundred thousand weavers round and about Gaya, swamped by rotten fakes from Manchester. I'm going to change all that. It's Manchester that's going to be swamped. One of these days, I shall be a power in Gaya, Lalloo."

He said it with a mixture of arrogance, complacency, and appeal which elicited no more than an enigmatic "It may well be, Meester Barclay," from the expressionless Hindu Kara cross-legged on the carpet.

Barclay got up and stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his riding-breeches, his eyes roving from one to another of the expensive atrocities with which the room was crowded.

"I've begun here," he went on, in the same tone. "I daresay they would have fought me tooth and nail for possession of the place if they'd had the power. But they hadn't. Even in Gaya money spells the last word, and I had money. There isn't another bungalow like this in Gaya."

"That also is true," Lalloo assented. He turned his head for a moment, fixing an intent look on the curtained doorway as though it reminded him of something. "I know the place well. It was here in this room many years ago that I found the body of the great Tristram Sahib. He had been murdered. There was blood on the floor—almost where Meester Barclay stands now. The carpet hides the stain. We tried to wash it out, but the blood had soaked into the wood." He made a little regretful gesture. "It had flowed freely, and we came many hours too late," he finished. He gave his account as casually, tonelessly as he had recited his accounts, not noting the uneasy start of the man in front of him, but seeming to fall into a mood of profound retrospection. Barclay came nearer to the light again.

"Murdered?" he echoed. "In this room—by whom?"

The sharp brown eyes lifted for a moment.

"That is not known. One could tell, perhaps, but he has been long silent. The young and foolish swear he has not spoken for a hundred years, but that is vulgar superstition. I remember Vahana the Holy Man when he was young and handsome and loved a beautiful wife." He jerked his head significantly. "It was her body I found out in the garden well yonder," he added.

"Murdered, too——?"

Lalloo smiled subtly.

"Tristram Sahib was handsome and brave and lonely. It was said that he had a way with women—and he was Sahib. No doubt she came willingly. In those days, Gaya was not as now. She lived with him for a year before the—accident. There was a child, but that was never found."

"And Vahana?"

The smile, unchanged, gained in significance.

"He was on a great pilgrimage to Holy Benares, Meester Barclay." The old usurer put his hand to the neck of his tunic and pulled up something which hung there by a cord. The thing glittered yellow in the light. "See, this is what I found on her body-0an old bracelet—strange and wonderful in design, Meester Barclay. I wear it, for there is a saying that a murdered woman's jewels shield a man from the evil eye, and I, Lalloo, who believe in nothing, am cautious. There was a fellow to it, but that I gave to Vahana in remembrance of the wife he had loved. He

thanked me and went his way—some say to Kailasa, but there is no knowing, for since that day no man has heard him speak."

Barclay, who had bent down for a moment, let the bracelet slip from his fingers. He turned away and went and stood near the spot which Lalloo had indicated, frowning down at it as though the stain were still visible or bore for him some deeper significance.

"And so, because of a sordid tragedy, many years old, the place is boycotted by all save outsiders—such as I am. Is that the delicate point of your story, Lalloo?" he asked.

"They say a spirit dwells in this room," Lalloo answered indirectly, "—an evil spirit," he added.

"Or a living one. Ghosts, if there are any, are men's deeds which live after them. But there are no ghosts." He shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Look about you, Lalloo. A ghost couldn't haunt this room now. He'd lose his bearings. It's changed since those days, eh?"

Lalloo looked at the marble Venus with her lamp.

"It is indeed wonderful," he assented.

Barclay swung on his heel and came back. He was suddenly neither arrogant nor pleading, but utterly and rather terribly sincere.

"You don't think it wonderful," he said, softly and bitterly. "What you think, God knows, but at

least it's not admiration for me that you're hiding behind your damned impassivity. I'm your partner—a very rich partner. I'm Meester Barclay, that's all. But the youngest whipper-snapper with a pink and white face and a pair of epaulettes is Sahib." He stopped, trying to master himself physically. The lean brown hands were clenched at his side in the effort. "Why am I not Sahib?" he asked.

Lalloo spread out his hands.

"I speak to you in English. Is not 'Meester Barclay' the English way?" he asked with deference.

Barclay laughed. The muscles of his handsome features still quivered with the gust of nervous passion which had swept over him, but there was a certain satisfaction in his laughter.

"Well, you have always a soft answer—and I understood. I am simply not Sahib. They—your masters—have not recognized me, so you do not recognize me. But all that is going to change, and when you see me cheek by jowl with the best of them you will salaam and ask the bidding of Barclay Sahib." He paced restlessly backwards and forwards in his excitement, the mincing quality of his accent asserting itself. "You know the law, Lalloo. A man is what his father was. My father was English—I have got good English blood in my veins. I've always known it—it would be damned awkward for some of them if I proved it. But, at any rate, they've got to have me. I'm forging a gold key to their strongest

locks, and if that won't do, then——" He broke off again, changing his tone to one of trenchant decision.

"I've got to have money—money enough to swamp them. I've got to have those weavers. Once get a hold on the throat of the industries and the rest's easy. Start at Heerut, Lalloo. They've had an epidemic, and will be ready to sell their souls. You can give them easy terms—"

Lalloo got up leisurely.

"At Heerut—no, Meester Barclay," he said. "Not there."

"And why not?"

"The Dakktar Sahib lives in Heerut. He is a strange man. He has no love for my calling."

"Well, are you afraid of him?"

"No; he drove a devil out of my son," Lalloo explained, without particular emotion.

Barclay laughed irritably.

"That means fear, right enough. You think if he can drive out devils, he can also inflict them. I know your ways of argument. Well, in the name of the devil he exorcised, who is the fellow?"

"Tristram Sahib."

"Tristram——?"

"The son," Lalloo explained, his eyes on the spot near the curtain.

James Barclay turned on his heel and went over to the window. For a full minute he stood there

motionless and silent, seemingly intent on the sound of English voices which drifted towards him over the darkness of the compound. When he spoke again it was with a drawling heaviness.

"Tristram——the son? That's a curious coincidence. Still, I see your point, Lalloo. You could not very well oppose him. Leave Heerut to me. I shall manage. You can go now."

The old usurer lingered. He was watching the tall, stooping figure by the window, his head a little on one side, as though he, too, listened, but apparently to other sounds. Presently he slid noiselessly to the door and drew back the curtain.

A woman entered.

Lalloo greeted her with silent deference. He lifted his hand half-way to his forehead, looking in Barclay's direction, and the gesture was nicely expressive of a courteous equality. Then he was gone.

Barclay continued to stand by the window. He had noticed neither Lalloo's departure nor the woman's entry. Evidently the English party outside on the road had just returned from some entertainment. He could hear a fragment of a laughing reference to champagne, then an indistinguishable murmur pitched in a graver key, and a woman's exclamation of contemptuous disgust. Some one called good-night, a whip cracked, and a light-wheeled vehicle rolled on its way down-hill

towards the dâk-bungalow.

Barclay drew in his breath between his teeth like some one who has received a hurt, but he did not move. The woman came nearer to him. Her movements were quiet and graceful, and curiously typical of the whole of her. Everything about her was harmonious in a supple, boneless way. The big straw hat, made garishly ornate with artificial poppies, flopped over the dark little face and its untidy, beautiful frame of straight, jet-black hair. The light sprig dress revealed the yielding lines of her body, and was in itself pretty and badly made and carelessly put on. She had all the charm, all the lithesome fascination of a young animal, but there were also lines in her face, in her figure, which gave warning of a less lovely maturity.

As she came softly forward she clasped her hands, half in excitement, half in a childish appeal, and they were long-fingered, olive-tinted, and gaudy with bright rings.

"Jim!" she whispered. "Jim!"

He started. The moody dejection passed. He swung round, his features blank with the very violence of contending emotions. For a moment he stared at her, whilst the breathless joy in her eyes faded into hesitant questioning, then into fear. "Oh, Jim," she repeated helplessly.

"Jim!"

He strode up to her, catching her roughly by the

wrist, shaking her less with anger than in a kind of panic.

"Why have you come?" he stammered. "How did you get here?"

She cowered like a dog before threatening punishment, and her eyes, lifted to his face, were dog-like in their steadfast, wistful appeal.

"By train to Bhara and then I drove—for two days, Jim. But no one knew me. I didn't ask any questions—I didn't tell any one. Not a soul. I just found my way here. I had your letters and they described things so wonderfully, I felt I was coming home. Jim, how beautiful it all is! Much more beautiful than I ever dreamed!"

Partly she was trying to propitiate him, but partly the exclamation was sincere. Her brown eyes were wide and bright as they passed over the room's treasures, resting at last on the culminating vulgarity of the Venus. Barclay followed her gaze, then, without a word, he released her, and going over to the lamp, turned down the wick. It sputtered feebly, throwing up decreasing flashes of light on to the white, stupid loveliness of the goddess, and then died out. Through the darkness, Barclay's voice sounded thick with anger.

"Anybody might have seen us from the road," he said. "You must be mad, Marie, or bent on doing for my chances. Don't you know what I told you—or did you just choose to forget? Good God, don't whimper!

You're like a child. You smash something and then you cry as though you were the injured party——"

"I was so awfully lonely——" she broke in, piteously.

He was silent. She could not read his expression, but the quiet following on his first violence suggested a furious effort to regain self-control. She waited, not moving or speaking, and presently he took up her plea, scrutinizing it with the level coldness of suppressed anger.

"Lonely, you say? Hadn't you friends enough? You used to make me sick with your boasts about them. There were the Mazzinis and the Aostas—in our Calcutta days they lived with us, fed on us, borrowed from us. What's become of them? You had money enough to buy the lot. Lonely!" He exploded on the word, falling on it with a raging bitterness, then choked himself back to his pose of judicial deliberation. "It did not at all occur to you that I might be lonely, I suppose. It did not occur to you that whilst you were lolling comfortably in your rut, I was cutting new roads for us both through a granite opposition with not a soul to help me. You imagined me in a whirl of conviviality, no doubt—fêted, courted, the catch of Gaya——" He laughed out. "You fool!" he flung at her, in a paroxysm of exasperation.

She gasped, as though he had struck her across the face, but she was no longer crying. Her voice sounded flat and tired like a child's.

"I was lonely," she reiterated patiently. "I had the Mazzinis and the Aostas. I saw them every day, and they were very kind. But they were not you, Jim. I wanted you all the time, night and day, worse and worse. I thought I should have died, wanting you. And I did imagine things. I couldn't help it. I thought how brilliant and handsome you were, and I knew you'd win through and climb—ever so high—and I should be left behind. I couldn't bear it, Jim, dear. I had to come."

Barclay did not answer, but now his silence was no longer the tense, savage thing it had been. She could see his tall, slight figure dimly outlined against the paler darkness of the garden. Presently he turned and drew up, the Chesterfield to the shadow's edge.

"Come here!" he said authoritatively.

She came, groping blindly towards him and knelt down at his knees. She put her hands up, touching his face his shoulders, his whole body.

"Oh, Jim!" she whispered huskily. "Just to feel you again—just to know you're there—near me. It's like slaking an awful thirst—you don't know what it's been——"

"Hush!" he whispered back. She had flung aside her hat, and he bent and kissed her hair. A curious fragrance rose to meet him—Eastern, sensuous, intoxicating. He flung his arms round, dragging her close to him, kissing her eyes, her lips with a ruthless desire.

"And haven't I thirsted—haven't I wanted you? Do you think I haven't been lonely—among these strangers who turn their backs on me, shrink from me as though I were a leper? Hush, don't cry! I'm not angry now. I'm glad. We shall have these few hours together. Tomorrow——"

"Tomorrow?" she interrupted fearfully.

"Tomorrow you must go back." He laid his hand on her lips, stifling her involuntary cry of pain. His own voice grew clearer and less passionate. "You must. We can't let ourselves be carried away by our feelings like this. It would be ridiculous to sell the whole future for the present."

"We were happy before," she whispered. "What more can one be than happy?"

He made a little impatient movement.

"You were happy. But I—couldn't you see for yourself—I didn't belong there—not among your set or the set I'd been brought up in—poor, mean, petty folk, squabbling and wrangling over the degrees of their insignificance. Who was your father?—a rotten little clerk, sweating in a Government office, too poor to get an English wife. But my father——" He broke off, and then went on rapidly. "I'm different, Marie. I've got good blood in my veins—good English blood. It's restless in me. It won't let me rot like the others. I've got to get on. I've got to win through—back to my own people. Don't you understand?"

"Yes," she said dully, "and I am afraid."

He went on, with gathering determination:

"So you must go back and wait. I shall pull through, but you couldn't, and I couldn't help you. You'd drag me back. You must have patience and faith. When I've made my position safe here——"

"You will not want me," she interrupted gently. "You'll have climbed too high for me, Jim. That's why I am afraid."

He laughed a little. His hand brushed the tears from her hot cheeks, and passed on caressingly down her arm to her wrist and lingered there.

"You're tired and fanciful, Marie. Some one's been putting ideas into your head. You've got to trust me and help me——"

"Jim—what are you doing?" she whispered.

"The bracelet—the one I gave you—you're still wearing it——?"

"Always. Night and day. It's been like a bit of you——"

"I want it back——"

She tried to wrench herself free from him. "Jim—don't—don't, dear."

"I want it. Hush, don't make a fuss. You shall have it back, I promise you. Heavens—what a child——!"

She was crying now convulsively. He put his arms round her and pressed her closer with an impatient tenderness.

"It was all I had of you," she sobbed. "It was our

luck—a sort of link—now it's gone——"

"—into my pocket," he retorted, good-humouredly, "and in a week or two it'll be back on your wrist. I'll put it there if I have to come all the way to Calcutta. Hush, for God's sake; don't cry like that——"

She became suddenly very quiet. Instinctively she knew that he was trying to listen to something beyond her sobbing, and she too listened, intently, with the alertness of a frightened animal.

"Jim—what is it——?"

He freed himself deliberately from her arms.

"It's down at the dâk-bungalow. Some one playing. It's a long way off. The wind must be in the east——"

"The dâk-bungalow? Who lives there?"

"Sigrid Fersen——"

"A woman. Jim, do you know her?"

He got up. It was as though she no longer existed for him. The D minor valse came down to them on the breath of the night-breeze—maddening and exhilarating—a song of life at its full tide.

"Yes—I—I know her," he said.

"Jim, where are you going?"

He turned on her, thrusting aside her clinging hands with a cold violence.

"Stay there!" he said. "Don't let any one see you. Stay there——!"

He pushed past her and went down the

verandah steps. It was as though he had thrust a dog out of his path. She called to him, but he did not hear her—a minute later, he had vanished into the shadow of the trees.

CHAPTER X
AN ENCOUNTER

Ayeshi, with his face buried in his arms, had neither seen nor heard, and it was Mrs. Smithers who stepped challengingly into the man's path. Her old heart beat terrifyingly, but she held herself with a very dour and acrimonious determination.

"Of all the impertinence!" she hissed at him. "Go away with you, you nasty, maraudering heathen ——"

But it was then that Sigrid saw him, and the D minor valse broke off sharply, leaving a flat and drear silence, as though some splendid, glowing spirit had fallen lifeless. She herself had risen and stood with one hand on the keys, the other at her side. Her mouth was still a little open, but no longer with her wide smile of joyous living. She looked tired, and rather wan.

"Who are you?" she asked, breathlessly. "What are you doing here?"

"I beg your pardon." Barclay bowed to her. "I

assure you, I did not mean to interrupt your playing, but this—this lady caught sight of me and I had to present myself at once or be taken for a burglar. I hope I am forgiven?"

She shrugged her shoulder, studying him with an impassivity before which his suave manner faltered and became uncertain.

"I neither know you nor your business," she said. "When I have heard your explanation, it will be time to consider whether I can accept your apology."

"Meantime, I accept the reproof," he retorted. "But we are old acquaintances—at least, we have met before. That is the first paragraph of my excuse. We met at the dinner Lord Kirkdale gave in honour of your return, and I was introduced to you. My name is Barclay—James Barclay."

"There are many thousands of people who have been introduced to me and whose names and faces I have forgotten," she said, simply. "That does not warrant their walking into my drawing-room at odd hours of the night."

His smile, uneasily ingratiating, persisted.

"Haven't I apologized, and won't you make some allowances? I had missed you this afternoon at Colonel Boucicault's—business detained me—and was bitterly disappointed. Passing your bungalow, I heard you playing—I was mortally tempted—and, relying on the fact that we are in India and not in stiff-necked England, I ventured to present myself at

once."

"You relied on the facts that I am a dancer, that you once paid half a guinea for a stall to see me dance, that you cadged for an introduction where introductions were valueless, and that, once a woman ventures out into publicity, men of a certain type consider her fair game." She spoke quietly enough, but there was a whiteness about her distended nostrils which betrayed a rising anger. "Well, as you rightly say, we are not in England. The half-guinea stall is of no value here. My privacy is my right, and I beg of you to respect it."

He held his ground. His impulse had carried him into an *impasse* from which he could not possibly retreat with dignity.

"You are like royalty, Miss Fersen," he said fluently. "People whom you don't know, know you. It's the penalty of greatness. You can't be hard on us poor mortals who take the sunshine when they can get it. Besides, I have only forestalled events. Sooner or later, I should have met you——"

"I have lived in Gaya for two months," she interrupted, "and I have neither met you nor heard of you, Mr. Barclay."

She closed the piano, sighing impatiently. Had she looked at him at that moment she might have repented her only half-intended cruelty, for his insolent ease had become a desperate and rather pitiable humiliation. He had committed a blunder

which he had neither the art nor the social adroitness to cover over, and he looked to her to make his escape possible—decent. And she ignored him. Whereat what little self-possession he owned deserted him, leaving him to the mad guidance of a raw and quivering pride.

"You know very well who and what I am, Miss Fersen," he stammered, "or you wouldn't behave like this. If I'd been one of the others, you'd have welcomed me. You wouldn't have dared treat the merest subaltern as you've treated me. If Rajah Rasaldû, a full-blown native, from whom you accept ——"

She turned like a flash.

"Will you go, Mr. Barclay?" she said, scarcely above her breath.

He remained stubbornly unmoved. A minute before, he had been merely a tragi-comic figure, a victim of a midsummer night's ambition, and his own intoxicated senses. He might, to himself at least, have pleaded many things in extenuation—certainly a fundamental harmlessness and even a rather painful humility. Now he had become dangerous.

"I'll go at my own time," he said unevenly. Mrs. Smithers had once more intervened and he pushed her back.

"I can afford a scandal—you can't——"

It was at that moment that Tristram stalked in through the open verandah. Sigrid saw him first, and

laughed.

"So it's your turn to play *deus ex machinâ*," she said gaily. It was as though his advent had swept away every vestige of her annoyance. She looked at Barclay with bright, malicious eyes. "You've just come in time to show Mr. Barclay the way out," she said. "He was unable to find it for himself."

The two men stared at each other. At that moment either of them could have passed easily for the villain of the little drama, Barclay's quivering, passion-distorted features being balanced by the Englishman's general appearance, which was ragamuffinly, not to say ruffianly. His white clothes had been washed since Sigrid had seen him last, but had not been ironed, an unfortunate omission, since the result was one of soiled inelegance. The stubble on his unusual chin had become a reddish beard, in itself an unlovely object, and lent his countenance a look of aggression and truculence.

Barclay laughed. He was beside himself, less with anger than with panic before the inevitable *débâcle*, and he groped round for any weapon which might deliver him with a semblance of dignity.

"I appreciate my blunder, Miss Fersen," he jerked out. "I had no idea that I interrupted an—an appointment. I can quite understand your annoyance —and I apologize. I wish you both good-night."

Tristram blocked his way.

"Your name's Barclay?" he asked quietly.

"It is."

"I've heard of you."

"I daresay." The Eurasian's eyes narrowed. He looked into his opponent's face with a sudden curiosity. "I daresay we have met before, Major Tristram."

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps in a third person."

"I don't understand," Tristram returned simply. "But I have heard of you. Some time I'd like to have a little talk—about various things, which concern us both—notably about some friends of mine who have been hard pressed.——"

"I shall be delighted to meet you any time, Major Tristram," Barclay retorted. "I, too, may have matters of interest to discuss with you."

Tristram stood on one side.

"Shall we go together now?" he suggested. "Since we are both intruding——"

"Not you, Major Tristram," Sigrid interposed quietly.

There was a moment's silence. The way was now open to Barclay, and the three implacable watchers gave him no choice. He tried to insinuate into his bearing, into his exaggerated bow, a mocking ease, a cynical suggestiveness which might give him even a semblance of advantage. But he failed, and knew it. He stumbled out, blind and sick with the consciousness of defeat, of a hideous, self-inflicted

humiliation.

Mrs. Smithers saw him to the verandah steps as a policeman sees a doubtful intruder off premises specially recommended to his care. She adjusted her neat wig with dignity and a touch of wrathful defiance.

"In a brace of shakes, I'd have boxed his ears," she muttered ferociously. "Not but what my heart was beating about inside me like a fly in a bottle. The impudent blackguard! Called himself an acquaintance! What next! We shall have the sweep dropping in for tea and the butcher leaving his card ——" She caught herself up. "There, in another minute, I'd have forgotten I was a lady and said things. Shall I see about coffee for you, Sigrid?"

"Please, Smithy."

Sigrid Fersen stood near the middle of the room, looking out on to the dark garden, her hand raised to her small face in the familiar attitude of half-whimsical, half-sad reflection. Tristram glanced at her and then hurriedly away.

"I was dancing," she said suddenly, with a catch in her breath. "I don't think I'd ever danced like that before. And then he came. It was as though something vital in me had been snapped—a bird brought down in full flight——"

"Ayeshi came out and told me you were in difficulties," he said. "I was eavesdropping. I suppose I behaved like a cad, too."

She shook her head.

"I was playing to you—and dancing. I knew you would see me dancing."

"Then you knew——?"

"Ayeshi told me you were coming. I knew if I played you would come into the garden and listen. I wanted you to come. And you came."

He tried to laugh, and the laugh failed him.

"I am almost afraid of you," he said.

She considered him quaintly.

"Smithy would say you were quite right to be afraid. And Smithy would be right, too. I am dangerous."

"And I am a believer in the theory which bids us 'live dangerously,'" he retorted more lightly.

"But with you the theory would work out as self-sacrifice—with me it would mean the sacrifice of others." She drew a lounge chair out on to the verandah and sat down with a little sigh of relief. "How tired I am! The D minor valse always tired me—not my body—that doesn't matter—but the invisible spirit which makes a single step a divine thing. Mr. Meredith would call it the soul, if he could connect his speciality with anything so vulgar and mundane." She laughed and snuggled herself back among the cushions. "Anyhow, my soul has danced and my soul is tired," she announced contentedly.

Tristram remained standing. He was looking down at her profile with a puzzled intentness.

"Yes," he admitted, "very tired."

"That means—I'm looking ugly?" she suggested.

"No," he answered, abruptly.

At that moment, seated there with her back to the light, she looked elfish, something aerial and inhuman. Her fair hair, smoothed down with a delicious primness on either side of her small head, made an aureole in which her face gleamed white and transparent. Beauty and ugliness were terms inapplicable to her. As well have measured air and fire by the standards of a Venus de Milo. "Still, you're not well tonight," Tristram persisted obstinately.

"Feel that, then, Dakktar Sahib!"

He took her outstretched hand. For a second it lay in his, small, cool, amazingly soft and supple, then clasped itself round his fingers like a steel band made living by electric forces, and he looked up wincing and laughing, and their eyes met. She was smiling at him with a childlike satisfaction.

"You see, I am stronger than you, Dakktar Sahib!" she said gaily.

"That wouldn't be saying much tonight," he answered.

She still held his hand, but her hold had changed its character.

"I had forgotten—Ayeshi told us—you are ill ——"

"It is nothing," he muttered.

She became thoughtful in her silence. Wickie

made a scrambling rush up the verandah steps and flung himself, with an hysterical yell of triumph, against Tristram's legs. By what cunning he had eluded Mrs. Smithers's methodical but unpractised search cannot be told—but he was there, a wriggling, writhing, panting mass of delirious happiness. Tristram caught him up and hugged him.

"And how in the name of the Creator of Mongrel Puppies did you get here?" he asked.

"I commandeered him," Sigrid Fersen answered.

"I left him with Miss Boucicault."

"And Colonel Boucicault threatened to knock his brains out, so I commandeered him."

Tristram glanced down at her wonderingly.

"You bearded the Colonel? That was plucky of you. Anne must have been frightened, poor little soul."

A faint, malicious smile quivered at the corner of Sigrid's lips.

"A little, I think. But she had no time to interfere. I was nearest to the scene of action."

"I am awfully grateful. Wickie and I are old pals."

"I know. If I deserve reward, let him stay with me. What will you do with small dogs out there?"

"I don't know—would he stay with you?"

"Try him!"

He set Wickie on his short bandy legs and she called the dog by name. He came and sat in front of

her, beating the ground with his lengthy tail, his ears flat in an ingratiating humility. She bent and patted him. "You see!"

Tristram nodded. His silence became tense and painful, as though he laboured under a physical weakness, kept only at bay by a sheer effort of will. She looked at him critically, and saw that he was trembling.

"You are ill, Major Tristram. Sit down and rest. Smithy will bring us coffee—it will do you good to sit with me here in the darkness and quiet."

"I ought to be on my way," he answered unevenly.

"Well, then, if not for yourself—for me. I will admit that I am ill and that I need the Dakktar Sahib's ministrations. It comforts me to have you here. It is your duty, therefore, to remain."

"You are stronger than I," he answered, with an unsteady laugh. But he sat down opposite her, his body bent forward, his hands clasped between his knees. She could see nothing of his face, but the outline of his fine head, distorted a little by its mass of thick hair, trimmed by an amateur hand, lent his shadow a look of way-worn distress and physical disintegration. Yet it remained an indomitable shadow. She remembered him as she had seen him once before. Since then the Quixote had had his tussle with the windmill and now, bruised and broken, prepared himself for a fresh onslaught.

"Why do you do it?" she flung at him, almost angrily.

He looked up at her, as though waking from a dream.

"Do what?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I know. Ayeshi has told me. You're going into that hell single-handed and crippled. Boucicault has refused to get you help. Why do you let him trample on you? He is not in your service. Are you afraid of him, too?"

He met her taunt with a grave simplicity.

"No, I am not afraid. Up till now, Colonel Boucicault has blocked my line of communication with the authorities. That's over. There's going to be a tussle to the death between us, and he knows it. That's why I didn't come myself tonight."

"Then why need you go? Any one would exonerate you. Ayeshi said it might mean——" She recoiled from her own thought. "It's almost your duty not to go," she exclaimed.

"Do you want me to remain?" he asked.

She beat her clenched fist irritably on the arm of her chair.

"No—because it wouldn't be you then—because you are a fool, Major Tristram—a sublime fool whom one wouldn't have changed even to save him from destruction. Go, by all means, and sacrifice yourself to your duty. For that you were born."

He sank back in his chair, his face lifted to where the jungle of the neglected compound thinned before the night's luminous sapphire.

"I don't believe in duty and sacrifices," he said, "but in happiness."

"And isn't your happiness here?" she demanded, imperiously; "isn't this happiness—the thing you dreamed of?"

She saw his hands clench themselves.

"Yes—but a dream that can't be fulfilled—a secret corner of fancy—that isn't enough. In the end—if one lived on it, set it before one as the end-all—one would sicken and starve. The dream itself would die. I've figured it out—happiness is the consciousness of purpose——"

"What purpose can any one of us have?" she retorted scornfully, "we who are ourselves purposeless creations?"

He waited a moment. When he answered, his voice sounded clear and steady, though his words were faltering, groping efforts of expression.

"I don't know—I mean rather that I can't explain. I'm an inarticulate sort of fellow. It seems to me—ninety-nine days out of a hundred we don't worry as to where we're going or why. We do what we've got to do blindly. But the hundredth day is a day of reckoning. You were going to say just now that I might die if I went out there. Well, that doesn't seem to me so important. Death is the only visible goal we

have. What matters, what is vital, what is happiness is that we should reach that goal splendidly—as splendidly as we can. Surely happiness is this, that in our moments of reckoning, when we have to face ourselves, or when we reach the goal, perhaps suddenly and unexpectedly, we can look back on our course with the knowledge that, whether punishment or reward or nothing awaits us, we ran straight according to our lights."

"And 'running straight' for you means plunging into the sickness and suffering of others?" she asked moodily.

She saw him throw back his tired shoulders.

"What other 'running straight' is there that matters?" he returned, ardently. "Those poor folk out in Bjura—I'm the only hope they've got. Supposing I fail them? No one would blame me—-no one would say I hadn't run straight—but I should have broken the only law I recognize—I should have denied the only god I know. And more than that—I'm English. When I go out there, I carry my colours with me. It depends on me whether those colours signify to these people suffering or happiness, and whether, in the end, they signify happiness or suffering to us——" He paused, and then went on quietly. "And they must be held higher and steadier because others have forgotten."

"As Colonel Boucicault has forgotten," she put in.

"And is he happy?" he asked quickly. She was

silent, and he made a little gesture of apology. "I'm sorry—I'm like all lonely men—I've grown preachy and prosy. I've tired you——"

But she turned to him, her head high, her eyes brilliant with a suddenly revealed feeling.

"Why should you apologize? I also have my theories of life and death. Yes—to die splendidly—on the mountain top, in a palace of gold and silver, in the full tide of youth and strength, of one's own free-will, not knowing decay or suffering—to look back on a life without ugliness, without poverty or meanness—that is the goal—that is happiness."

"That is your vision," he said, smiling at her wistfully. "But you are fire and air, and I am heavy earth."

She got up and went to the steps of the verandah, and stood there with her back turned to him.

"Oh, your vision of me, Major Tristram—beware of it. Why do you make an idol of me?"

But he did not answer.

Ayeshi came out of the shadow of the trees, leading the grotesque Arabella and his own sturdy pony. Tristram half rose.

"No!" she said imperatively. "You have made me tired and wretched and angry. You, a physician! You have got to cure me before you go."

"What shall I do?" he asked humbly.

She was quiet a moment, her finger to her lips.

Her anger had gone, and she was once more the being of swift and joyous fancies.

"Look—the moon is showing between the trees. It has made a white pool at my feet, Tristram Sahib. Do you remember what you told me—how at night-time you sat by the village fire and listened to Ayeshi's stories of the great past? You promised that one day I should listen, too. Now I claim fulfilment. We will sit round the moonlight and warm our hands at it, and Ayeshi shall tell the story that his Sahib loves best. Shall it be so?"

"Yes," he answered.

Both Mrs. Smithers and the soft-footed native servant, whom she now marshalled in with a forbidding air of distrust, were waved imperiously aside.

"No—coffee and Smithy are civilized—and we are miles from civilization. We are on the borders of the jungle. If I listened, I should hear the howl of the jackals—so I shan't listen, for I detest jackals. There are monkeys overhead peeping at us and chattering soft insults—and birds pluming themselves for sleep. The moonlight will be on our faces, and it will be like the firelight. And the river shall make the music to Ayeshi's story."

She slipped down on to the stone floor and sat there, cross-legged, her chin cupped in her hand. The circle of pale silver reflected itself back on to her earnest face and painted faint, mocking shadows at

the corners of her composed lips. Ayeshi crouched dreamingly on the lower step of the verandah. On the other side of the little circle, Tristram sat with Wickie drowsing at his feet, his hands outstretched as though, to please her fancy, he warmed them at the firelight. Once, as Ayeshi told his story, he looked across at her and his face was haunted with weariness and suffering and famished desire.

Thus Ayeshi told of the Rani Kurnavati and her Bracelet Brother.

* * * * *

The moonlight faded. With Ayeshi's last words a chill darkness crept over them, hiding them from one another and silencing them. It was as though they had indeed warmed themselves at a fire which had gone out, leaving them to the grey ash of their dreams.

Silently Ayeshi had risen and untethered the horses and led them towards the gates of the compound. But Tristram lingered, standing on the steps of the verandah, his face turned from the woman who looked down at him.

She laid her hands on his shoulders.

"And you who go out very gallantly, perhaps to meet the end which you fear so little—have you nothing to ask first of life, nothing you desire, no fulfilment of mad dreams dreamed by the river and by your fireside—nothing that I might not grant?"

He made no answer. She felt him tremble under her hands. Her laugh was subdued, pityingly triumphant.

"Oh, Tristram Sahib, do you think I don't know —do you think I haven't read your heart?" she said.

And bent and kissed him.

CHAPTER XI
INFERNO

He pitched his tent outside the village in a paradise of brilliantly painted flowers and high grass, whose bright emerald shone luminously where the dying sun touched it. A pool in the shadow of the trees wore a score of lotus-flowers on its still breast, and the ghosts of yellow blossoms from the overhanging mango shimmered tremulously beneath among the tangled undergrowth.

But there was no living thing. The sand at the water's edge was unbroken by the familiar *pugs*, and the trees and the long grasses were empty and silent. Death and over-abundant sensuous life lay side by side. The very soil, rich and moist, gave out an aroma of sickly sweetness tainted with corruption.

The native bearers shook their heads and crouched down near their sleeping quarters, awaiting the loathsome, invisible thing with the fatality of

their race.

But Tristram shouldered his case of medicaments and sought the road leading to the village.

The road was ankle deep in a fine powdery dust, which rose at each step and hung in the dead air long after he had passed. There were treacherous ruts which the dust covered, zig-zagging through what had been slimy marsh-land and was now a crumbling, sun-baked bed of miasma. Here, too, the stillness was absolute. The village roofs rose out of the flatness like irregular ant-heaps, deserted by their once restless workers. The night which came striding over the plain was a stifling mantle, choking out the last breath of life under its smothering folds of darkness. The quiet itself was eerie, unnatural, the terrible quiet of a suffering which has passed protest.

Then at last there came a sound—a whimpering, inhuman cry—and the man stood still, peering through the darkness. A form lay by the roadside and held out thin arms of appeal towards him.

"Siva! Siva! Have mercy!"

He came nearer and knelt down. Once it had been a woman, but the mysterious spectre which had laid hold of Bjura had laid hold of her and twisted her out of human semblance. A child lay under her side, round-limbed, smooth-cheeked, as sweet as the lotus-flower growing out of the poisoned waters of the pool. The bloated, shapeless horror slobbered and whispered over it.

"Siva—my little son—have mercy!"

Perhaps some knowledge of another, gentler faith had reached her that she appealed for mercy to a power which knew none. Tristram bent over her and drew the child away from her clawing, swollen hands.

"I am not Siva. I am the Dakktar Sahib come to help you. Do not be afraid!"

"Have mercy, Sahib!" She lay on her back staring up at him through the gathering gloom with terrible eyes. "Have mercy!"

"Give me your child. I will take care of it. It shall come to no harm—I promise you. Trust me!"

She gaped at him with the chill non-comprehension of gathering insensibility. Only the piteous appeal hung perpetually on her lips like a maddening refrain. He took the child and freed it from its filthy rags, and gave it to Ayeshi standing near him, impassive and watchful.

"Take it back to the camp and do the best you can," he ordered.

"And you, Sahib?"

"I shall go on—presently."

He went back to the woman and knelt down beside her, taking the terrible head upon his knee, and forcing a sedative between her lips. A nauseating odour of disease rose up to him, but it did not nauseate him. He knelt there and waited for the first sign of relief. And presently the laboured, agonized

breathing softened; she half turned, and her palsied, distorted hand fumbled over his coat, groping its way down the sleeve to his wrist. She took his hand and pressed it against her burning cheek, against her lips. And he bore with her, holding her closer as she neared the brink, whispering to her in her own tongue, a medley of all the words of comfort that he knew. And all at once she sighed deeply, and was quiet, with the quietness which was more than sleep.

He got up and straightened out her poor body and covered her with her rags, and went on towards the village.

It was night now. A smouldering fire from behind the first hut threw up a sullen glow against which the low, ramshackle building stood out spectrely. Tristram passed it, and a gust of foetid wind goaded the flames to a sudden brilliance, so that he saw upon what it was they fed themselves. A gaunt, naked figure crouched near the hideous embers, and, turning as though to see whence the wind came, saw the Englishman, and leapt up, wild-eyed, and fled, shrieking, into the black fastness of the village.

Now the silence was gone, and in its place there were whisperings and the pattering of naked feet. A woman's scream came from afar off. Tristram stumbled over a body which neither moved nor cried out. He stood still, knowing that he was no longer alone. The eye of the electric torch which he carried

flashed through the pitch darkness and rested upon distorted faces, turned to him in an agony of dread. And behind them, through the yellow haze, he caught a glimpse of bodies heaped together in the gutter, of cowering figures, faces hidden against the mud walls, of gaping doors, blacker than the pervading gloom, and threatening a nameless horror. He himself stood out in the dim light, tall and white and spectral. He moved, and the faces bowed before him like the heads of corn in the wind, and a voice went up wailing, piteous:

"Oh, Siva, it is the end—the end——"

The man whom he had seen crouching by the fire leapt suddenly out at him, and he felt the cold breath of steel against his cheek. He warded off the blow, and the madman came on again and again, and each time he defended himself patiently and without aggression. The circle of faces closed in. His light was out, but he could feel how the air about him grew hot and stifling. They waited—stupidly, hungrily, with a frenzied lust of death. If he fell—though they believed him God—still it would be the end.

Even then he did not strike out. The last time, the delirious fanatic stumbled and went crashing to the ground. Tristram bent over him, turning his light on to the foam-flecked old face.

"He'll come round all right," he said calmly. "But we've got to get him shut up somewhere before he

does damage. Help me, some of you."

His voice sounded loud and clear amidst their low, formless whisperings, but they did not move, and he picked the old man up as though he had been a child. "Make way there!" he commanded.

They let him pass, but on the threshold of the hut he came to a halt, arrested by a stench which was like a blow, staggering his senses. With his free hand, he sent the light darting about the corners of the hut, and then turned and came quickly out. There was nothing to be done. Death, most hideous, had leered at him in triumph from a dozen frozen distortions of the human body.

For one moment, as he stood there, choking down his physical sickness, he may have known the agony of helplessness and isolation. But only for a moment. He looked round, noting the gradual relaxation of the fear-drawn faces about him.

"It's a pretty bad go," he said cheerfully, "and what your headman was doing not to let us know before I can't think. However, we'll make the best of it. Two of you go and pile up that fire I saw as I came in. And I want at least five who aren't stiff with funk to carry these poor devils out. There's not got to be a body left in this village by daybreak. We'll get the rest out into the air where they can breathe, and I'll soak you and the place in carbolic." They still hesitated, and deliberately he turned the light on to his own face.

"Bless you, I'm not Siva. I'm the Dakktar Sahib—sent by the great English Raj to put you all straight. But, by the Lord, if you don't do what I tell you in a brace of shakes, Siva will be a joke by comparison."

The panic broke. The old headman crept out and cringed before him, offering excuses. Tristram waved him on one side.

"Get on with it!" he said, between his teeth.

He went from hut to hut, directing, ordering, disinfecting, patient and imperturbable, infinitely gentle. And all night soft-footed processions with their grim burdens made their way out to the monstrous funeral pyre which grew higher and higher. All that night and all through the burning, blinding day to another night, and beyond that again, Tristram drove Death back step by step from his mauled and helpless victims, bringing peace into a hell of suffering. Three nights and three days. And on the fourth night he reeled back to the encampment beneath the trees and dropped down with his face in the long grass, and lay there inert as death itself.

And for three days and nights again Ayeshi sat beside him, tending him and listening to the muttered reiteration of a woman's name.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH FORTUNE PLEASES TO JEST

The Rajah Rasaldû was in his element. By sheer force of merit, he occupied the stage to the almost complete exclusion of every other player. Gaya hung on his movements, gasped—as much as Gaya ever gasped—over the reckless twists and turns of his wonderful ponies, and applauded the grace and apparent ease with which he broke the defence and sent the ball spinning between the posts. For, strange to relate, Rasaldû could play polo. Flabby and unheroic as he was on all other occasions, once in the saddle, he developed into an iron-wristed, cool-headed strategist. What was more, he played for his side and not for himself. Men who went into the game disparaging his fatuous conceit and equally fatuous humility, loved him after the first ten minutes of brilliant, unselfish play, and the glow of affection usually lasted for twenty-four hours after he had won for his side. Then they tolerated him again until the next challenge came along.

Rasaldû revelled like a child in Gaya's good graces. There was something almost winning in his wide smile of pleasure, as after the first *chukka* he came over to the select group under the awning and received feminine Gaya's congratulations. Had he not played such a daring game he would have cut rather a comic figure. His riding-clothes, taken in juxtaposition with his dark chubby face, were

wonderfully and terribly English, and his brown boots, very new and very brown, shone almost too beautifully. Between him and the turbaned soldiery crowded against the ropes there was a gulf of false Europeanism of which the latter seemed curiously conscious. They alone had not applauded, him in his bold assault on the enemy, and they stared at him now with an expressionlessness which, translated, equalled distrust and contempt.

Meantime, Rasaldû chatted with the volubility of success and self-confidence. He chose to address himself chiefly to Mary Compton, but from time to time his moist brown eyes shot an eager glance at Sigrid Fersen, seeking her smile, a meed of well-earned admiration. He was a little afraid of her. She was not in the least beautiful, and she undoubtedly owed her position in Gaya to his generous patronage, facts which of themselves should have sustained him in her presence. But the quiet, imperious self-belief with which she had silenced alike criticism and opposition and compelled rigid Gaya to accept her and her standards, shook Rasaldû's self-complacency. It was for that very reason, and also because Gaya had mysteriously collapsed before her, that Rasaldû hovered about her with the helpless and protesting infatuation of a moth for a naked light.

And now today there was added to this emotion the heat and intoxication of his own prowess, and the consciousness that, if she was not beautiful, she

possessed something much more vital than beauty—the mysterious force of temperament which through all time has made plain women more dangerous, more powerful in the destiny of nations than women endowed with all physical perfection. Rasaldû had no talent for analysing temperaments, but he could analyse certain obvious factors in her charm—the pale gold hair, the perfect skin, unprotected by powder, the svelte, tiger-like grace and strength of her reposing body. Above all, he could analyse clothes. Gaya's women-folk, none too well blessed with money, lived in London's last year's creations and the clumsy imitations of the native tailors. But this simple white dress of some clinging, shimmering material, unknown to Gaya, and this simple straw hat almost unadorned, came from Paris. Rasaldû, who knew his Paris, knew that much. And, as a man worships a token from his native soil, so he worshipped Sigrid Fersen.

And presently he ventured to address her directly.

"Now you have seen what is best in India!" he said.

"The Rajah Rasaldû playing polo?" she asked, smilingly.

"You are unkind, Mademoiselle," he answered, with the hurt sensitiveness of a snubbed child.

"I did not mean to be unkind. There are so many wonderful things in India, Rajah, that I hesitated a

moment to endorse your opinion. Still—yes, it was a fine sight. You should always play polo, Rajah. It suits you better than fêting prima ballerinas in London restaurants."

He looked at her and saw that she was serious, and her seriousness mitigated the dubiousness of her compliment. He would have preferred it in the reversed sense, but he had to take what was offered him.

"I was not really alluding to myself at all," he said, naïvely, "but to the game. The game's the thing."

"Yes—and the man who plays it," she answered. She was smiling faintly, and he indulged in a flattered self-consciousness until he realized that the smile was a reminiscent one, and that she was looking through him to some invisible picture of her thoughts. Whereupon, Rasaldû hastily reverted to Mrs. Compton, whom also he feared, but in a lesser degree. Her tongue was sharp, but at least she did not attract him, and consequently her powers of offence were of a less painful order.

Sigrid Fersen did not notice his dejection. She was looking at Meredith, who at that moment had entered the awning. He still wore his clerical clothes, having come straight from the little chapel, where every afternoon he held his service. It was rare that more than one person should represent the congregation. Sometimes he managed to collect a

few convert school-children, but always Anne Boucicault was there, devout and trembling, her brown eyes following his every movement with the reverence of a passionate believer in the initiated and anointed priest. That hour in the day was very dear to Owen Meredith. He believed that it was a religious ecstasy which flooded him as he listened to her low voice give the responses—or at least a pure joy in their fellowship in the one faith. He had not realized how lifeless and empty his own prayers could be without the inspiration of her presence. Now a kind of fear oppressed him—a fear of himself, a doubt in his own spiritual integrity. For this afternoon, she had failed him and he had failed himself. He had held the service, according to the law which he had made for himself, sparing no detail, but his heart had been dead. Now, as he saw her, it started to life again, to the knowledge of pain. She sat beside Colonel Boucicault, and there was that in her attitude which reminded Meredith of a frightened animal cowering under the threat of the lash. All the charm of youth had been twisted out of her by some invisible, iron-handed suffering. And without that charm, she was a drab, colourless little soul, almost ugly. But Meredith did not see that she was ugly, only that she was ill and unhappy. He thought he understood. As he came and sat beside her, she shot a quick, frightened glance at him.

"Father did not wish me to come," she said, in a

hurried whisper. "He was fearfully angry about some letter——"

More she could not say. And even that much would have been dangerous, had not the man beside her been sunk in a sullen, inattentive brooding. She dared say nothing of the appalling scene which had followed on the receipt of that ominous official document, and which had left them stupefied and bruised and sick. In the final phase, Boucicault had forbidden her chapel attendance, not because he disapproved, or cared, but because he knew that she wanted to escape him. And all the afternoon he kept at her side, taking an ugly delight in her wincing, broken subservience, and in the knowledge that he held her with him in his self-created atmosphere of fear and hatred.

But Meredith believed he knew more of her pallor than she even hinted at.

"I met Ayeshi on the way here," he said. "He gave me the news. Tristram is on his way back."

"Yes—?" she queried, dully.

"He has been very ill. Ayeshi has come on ahead to prepare quarters for him."

She was looking down at her hands. He could see how she fought to control their trembling.

"If only we could have put him up—but we can't —father wouldn't—oh, it is terrible to be so helpless."

"I told Ayeshi to bring him to my bungalow. I

will let you know how he is—and perhaps, later on, you could help. I know what a fine little nurse you are——"

"You are very, very good, Owen——"

"I would be glad to do anything for him," he answered, without significance. Then chancing to look up, he found that Sigrid Fersen's eyes were fixed on him, and guessed that she had heard, or had wanted to hear badly. For an instant, on behalf of Anne, he hated her again, and the next he warmed towards her. She met his half-resentful stare as frankly.

"I am so thankful he is safe," she said.

Mrs. Compton thereupon chimed in.

"If anything happened to Major Tristram, I should die of a broken heart," she said, "—even if Archie divorced me for it."

She paid no attention to the laugh in which even Anne joined timidly. She was looking at Colonel Boucicault, who had shifted his position like a sleeper unpleasantly disturbed, but the remark which seemed on the edge of her compressed lips was not destined to be uttered.

At that moment a bell announced the next *chukka*; a stir passed round the enclosure and Mrs. Compton, who, in spirit, played a magnificent game for Gaya, forgot Boucicault and Tristram in her stern concentration on the field.

Rasaldû braced himself and turned with a smile

to Sigrid. He felt more confident. In a minute she would be forced to look at him, to admire him, to acknowledge that he also "played the game."

"Wish me luck!" he begged cheerily.

"Return victorious!" she returned, in mock heroics. "For the victors, Mrs. Compton and I have prepared a mighty feast in the gardens of the dâk-bungalow, and the vanquished shall sit afar off and partake only of the crumbs of our graciousness. Be not among the vanquished, O Rajah!"

"To win the place of honour, I will make a goal every five minutes, or perish," he boasted elatedly.

He swung himself on to the back of the pony which his groom held ready for him, and with a flourish trotted to his place on the field.

Boucicault awoke then completely from his black brooding. He bent forward, staring straight into Sigrid Fersen's face, his clenched teeth shown in a smile that had in its mirthless, contained fury the elements of insanity.

"You are a very great friend of Rajah Rasaldû, Miss Fersen," he said.

She looked at him steadily, measuring the quality of the challenge which he had thrown down.

"Does friendship follow on acquaintance?" she questioned back. "In that case, you and I should be friends, Colonel Boucicault, for I have met you more often than the Rajah."

"Then he has marked his joy in your

acquaintanceship with remarkable generosity," he retorted.

"Is generosity your translation for hospitality, Colonel Boucicault?"

"The Rajah's hospitality is well known. He gives liberally. He expects a return. And he is impressionable. There is such a thing as love at first sight, Miss Fersen."

He was watching her with a hungry anticipation, but she neither winced nor turned from him. Her calm gaze met his, and there was no change in its rather sleepy placidity. But the enigmatic smile which he remembered quivered at the corners of her mouth.

"And there is also such a thing as contempt at first sight," she remarked casually, "and that is much what I felt for you, Colonel Boucicault."

"You are an outspoken enemy," he answered, with a quick drawing in of his breath. She looked down for an instant and saw that his big, brutal-looking hands shook.

"You have remarked on my outspokenness before."

"Yes, and I even admire it. But my admiration, Miss Fersen, cannot influence my sense of duty. I am chief in command in Gaya. The social as well as the military authority rests in me. And where I see that a certain individual is lessening our prestige, corrupting our morals, or even upsetting the routine

of our social life, then I have the power to expel that individual—to make Gaya and India impossible——"

"If, to speak clearly, you refer to me, Colonel Boucicault," she interrupted, "then perhaps I shall have the pleasure of travelling in the same boat with you to England."

His bloodshot eyes remained blank and stupid-looking for an instant, then lit up with an insensate fury of understanding. He stumbled to his feet.

"You—you——!" he muttered. She saw his clenched fists, and knew that, for all his position and the crowd of witnesses, he had come within an ace of striking her. She looked up at him over her shoulder and laughed.

"Keep that sort of thing for your family, Colonel Boucicault," she advised lightly.

Boucicault turned and pushed through the knot of spectators behind him. He made his way across the paddock where the ponies were being rubbed down, and out on to the high road. His orderly, seeing him, ran after him, and he turned on the man with a curse.

"Take the buggy back to the stables. I shall walk."

"And the Mem-Sahib——?"

"The Mem-Sahib can walk, too," he answered, grinning.

The man saluted, his face hard-set, his eyes meeting Boucicault's with military steadfastness. But

for an instant the muscles about his mouth had quivered, betraying that there was that beneath the surface which even his native stoicism could not wholly master. And Boucicault saw and understood.

He strode on down the centre of the dusty, sun-baked road. He had drunk heavily that day, but there was more than drink fomenting in his inflamed brain. There was that letter with its bold, humbugging politeness—after so many years of service—an inquiry—certain charges—what charges? —by whom brought? He muttered aloud, dwelling on a name with a sneering hatred. Well—they should inquire—he could answer the lot. But then there was Anne cowering before him—why had God cursed him with a cowardly girl——? and that man—— There had been a time when, as a mere captain, his regiment would have followed him through the gates of hell—and now—now—if he went into action tomorrow—what then? He saw the soldier's face again and re-read its significance. Strong men made enemies, and he had always had enemies, but he had also had friends in the past. They had gone. The men who had believed in him—adored him—gone. He felt himself haunted by spectres of what was and what had been. They came out of the black abyss of his soul, whirled up by ugly, incoherent passions—regret and remorse, self-loathing and self-pity twisted out of recognition and melted down to one vast, corroding hatred. Every other emotion came too late.

Only hatred remained to him—the last link between him and his fellow-creatures—that and the power to hurt, to inflict suffering—as he suffered.

Thus carried forward and half-blinded by the glare which emanated more from his brain than from the blazing roadway, he left Gaya behind him. He came to a bend in the roadway where a thin belt of trees curved down towards the plain, and there stood still, arrested by an unclear recognition. At first he scarcely knew what had attracted his attention; then little by little the red haze cleared, and something within him started awake, some dormant desire as yet unnameable.

Wickie lay on the fringe of shadow, his black snout between his paws, his ears pricked, his brown eyes, showing the whites, expressive of alert curiosity. A piece of broken cord attached to his collar testified dumbly to a determined and skilful evasion of Mrs. Smithers's coercive methods of adoption.

For a moment or two the man and the would-be Aberdeen considered each other. Probably in a spirit of good-natured triumph in his own prowess, Wickie had greeted Boucicault's appearance by a tattoo executed by his tail on the dusty road, and his eyes had twinkled an invitation to participate in the joke. Now he lay motionless, watchful, distrustful.

Boucicault called him. He did not know why he called him nor as yet what he wanted with the dog.

The tumult within his brain had died down. He had become calm and deliberate. The letter, the menacing future, the jumbled vision of failure which had been vouchsafed him in Anne's cringing body and in the eyes of his orderly, had given place to a sense of purpose, controlled, extraordinarily calculated, but as yet veiled even to himself. He called the dog again, and showed no signs of impatience when Wickie remained unresponsive. Underneath his own calm he felt the stirring of a curious pleasure, of a fierce thirsty joy which must be gratified only with an Epicurean restraint. And for that he held it back, curbing it, spurring it to the limit of his control, tasting its anguished appeal for freedom with a cruel delight in his own mortification. Then, without hurry, without show of passion, he came forward, and, catching hold of the trailing rope, dragged Wickie to his feet. The dog struggled and growled ominously, and Boucicault smiled, showing his set teeth. There was a broken stick of bamboo lying at the roadside, and he picked it up and tested its suppleness leisurely against his boot. The animal snapped at him, recognizing the enemy, and perhaps the impending danger; but Boucicault continued calmly resolved. He was like a morphia-maniac who, with the passionately desired drug in his hand, prolongs the delicious agony of desire. He tied the end of the cord round the stem of a young palm and stood back a moment looking

down at his captive. Wickie sprang at him, and then, suddenly, terribly, he struck with his improvised weapon, bringing it down with a sickening thud on the animal's long back. The scream that answered him was half human. Boucicault drew in his breath. Like lava under a thin crust of restraining earth, his murderous hatred welled up in him, choking him. This cringing brute, its brown eyes turned on him in dumb horror—was Anne, Anne who always cringed, always truckled to him, whom he had so often wanted to strike down. And then Anne vanished from the whirling circles of his thoughts, and it was Tristram and that pale-haired woman—these two who, in their different ways, had thwarted and defied him, brought him face to face with himself. It was his wife, the officers of the regiment, the men—all with that smouldering, unspoken loathing in their eyes. And he struck like a madman, blow after blow, slaking his thirst for vengeance, making with each stroke a fresh breach in the wall behind which men imprison their infamous insanities. And sometimes the dog whined and sometimes, like a human being, set its teeth in stoic fortitude, and sometimes, as the pliant stick fell across its body, screamed uncontrollably.

It was one such scream that Tristram heard as he rode up from the plain towards Gaya. He hung in the saddle like a man whose backbone has been snapped, and the reins trailed from Arabella's weary neck. It

was fortunate that the road was familiar to her, for Tristram neither knew his destination nor cared about it. Some one had helped him into the saddle, and there he had remained instinctively; but his mind was empty of all purpose, even of knowledge of himself. The scream roused him a little, but only for a second. There were so many strange sounds and scenes in his brain that he trusted none of them. It was only when Arabella jerked to a standstill and stood trembling with pricked ears, that he began to believe in the substantiality of what was before him. Even then he sat hunched together in the saddle, gaping stupidly. He had begun to realize, but there seemed to be a hiatus in his mind—a gulf between thought and action which he could not cross. Then Wickie screamed again, and he rolled off Arabella's back and stood there rocking like a drunken man.

"Colonel Boucicault!" His own voice sounded like a shout in his own ears, though in reality it was little more than a whisper, but it reached Boucicault, who turned round. Tristram knew then that what he saw was not a distortion of his fancy. "Colonel Boucicault!" he repeated heavily. He found nothing more to say. His inability to think coherently had become an acute suffering. He saw Wickie make a desperate effort to reach him, and the sight roused him to another effort. "Let my dog go!" he muttered.

Boucicault passed his hand over his forehead and laughed.

"You've just come back in time, Major Tristram," he said. "If you really lay claim to this cur, you can stay here and see it thrashed within an inch of its life. A dangerous brute——!" He kicked it, yelping, back against the tree. He had made an excuse and was ashamed of it. It spoilt his pleasure in his own untrammelled, inexcusable cruelty.

Tristram reeled forward, intercepting himself between Wickie and his assailant in time to receive a blow across the arm. The sting of it was like a tonic, driving the blood faster to his brain.

"You've no right—let my dog go!"

"Your dog—my dear Major! Stand out of the way. I am master in Gaya. If I may offer advice, I should suggest a bath and a change of clothes. You look—if I may say so—not quite worthy of your position. I doubt if even your admirers would care to recognize you."

"It would take more than a bath and a change to put me right," Tristram managed to return, and then, with the dull obstinacy of a sick man: "Let Wickie go!"

Boucicault's momentary self-restraint broke down. He lashed out savagely:

"Take it yourself then, you sneaking cur——!"

Tristram flung up his arm. Instinctively, for his sight failed him, he warded off the blows which rained about him, but no more than that. His mind was working now, very simply, in the two

fundamentals of its make-up—two vast forces fighting for supremacy, the one long dormant, suppressed, scarcely recognized, at the throat of his soul—-his faith. So long as the blows fell on him, the latter remained triumphant. He shielded Wickie—that was what he had meant to do. He felt as yet no animosity towards the man whose discoloured face seemed to fill his vision. He felt very little pain—only a queer, alarming tightening of his muscles. Vague fragments of memory came to him—his passionate love of all things living—even to this man, his simple conception of duty—of life itself. They upheld him; they kept the vital part of him quiet and peaceful in the face of a gathering force of sheer physical revolt. His smarting body cried out for vengeance, but it had no power to move him. He stood there, taking the punishment patiently, almost listlessly.

Boucicault drew back from him a moment. He was breathing noisily between his teeth. In him the fundamentals had gone to pieces, and he was being carried forward on a flood-tide of ungoverned, monstrous passions. His mind, in the midst of its disruption, reasoned with the swiftness of insanity. This hulking, stupid giant who had set out to ruin him—who bore insult and pain with less spirit than his dog—he could be ruined, too. An inquiry? Good—let there be one—a court-martial—cashiered, both of them. But first this block had to be roused.

Possibly he was mad, but he had a madman's instinct and deep knowledge of the secret madness in others. He stepped suddenly on one side. The end of his stick was sharp and jagged. With the steel-wristed strength practised on many a day's pig-sticking, he lunged forward, driving the spike straight into Wickie's body.

Tristram had seen too late. He heard the yelp, broken and ending piteously in a child's whimper. Then it was done. Something in him snapped. Mind and body, instinct and reason leapt together. He struck out with all the terrible strength of his great shoulders, with all the force of his outraged love of life, with all his pity—struck to kill.

It grew very quiet. He had been battling in the midst of a titanic natural eruption, and now suddenly the violently aroused elements had dropped exhausted, leaving him standing in the midst of ruin. The tide which had flowed through his veins receded, and he became oddly tired and weak and helpless. The old blindness was creeping over him. Yet some things he saw in a kind of vague bigness. He did not bend down, but the man lying stretched in the dust seemed quite near to him—an austere, sinister shadow floating on a grey mist which rose higher—close to his face.

A faint sound reached him—a dull, soft thudding. He found himself on his knees, muttering incoherently.

Wickie lay full length, his short, crooked paws stretched out, seeking relief. There was blood on his brindle side. One brown eye looked out of its corner, half-puzzled, half-reassuring, a little glint of the old solemn humour showing through, as though the joke at Mrs. Smithers's expense still lingered in the fading brain. The tail beat the dust softly, and into that feeble movement there was compressed a love and understanding, almost a pity which defied death and rose above all language.

Tristram took the head on his arm. He saw that his hand was wet and knew that he was crying. Wickie turned a little, licking his hand feebly.

"Old fellow—dear old fellow—if I hadn't cared so much—if I'd been able to drown a kitten—it wouldn't have happened——" He bent lower, kissing the black snout. "My best pal!"

He went on talking under his breath. He did not know that he talked. Some one quite close whispered the words into his ear. He was not conscious of thinking. It began to grow very dark.

Presently Wickie sighed and stretched himself wearily, contentedly, as though it were no more than sleep that were coming—sleep by the camp-fire after a long day's march. Then lay still.

Tristram dragged himself to his feet. Out of the deepening blackness of things, an instinct asserted itself dimly.

"Help—we've got to get help—somehow——"

He said it aloud. It seemed to him that it had been shouted by the invisible monitor at his side. He stumbled over the prostrate figure lying so simple and still in the dust, reeling back from it, his face turned from Gaya. Then he began to walk. He walked long after the blackness had become impenetrable. He was no more than the one instinct, tragically dominant over the body which had betrayed him. His body was dead. He could not feel it. It was a machine that he willed to go straight forward to some dim, vast punishment.

He walked through hours and nights of darkness. At last there were lights in front of him—great yellow balls of haloed flame, which danced in ecstasy to a passionate rhythm. He heard voices—a sea of whisperings which surged towards him on a great wave, breaking over him in one hushed sound. He tried to cling to it through his fading consciousness. It became a face, gazing down at him, serene, triumphant, pitying—it became a hand which touched him, held him in its iron gentleness. He could feel it holding to him surely, as all else broke from him, flinging him down into a bottomless silence.

CHAPTER XIII
CROSSED SWORDS

In reality, he had not gone more than half a mile. But things had happened to him of which he had had no knowledge—twice he had retraced his steps and once fallen to his knees and groped his way through the dust in a blind circle. The eternities had been less than an hour, the darkness no more than the clear nightfall, the lights a dozen lanterns twinkling from the trees of the dâk-bungalow. His consciousness had been a dull, distorted thing, presenting the reality to him in shapeless exaggerations. He had heard music. It had sounded to him like a huge, throbbing symphony in which these nights and days in Bjura, the passions which had swept him out of his path, were mercilessly reiterated motives. In reality, it was just Carreño's unsophisticated little waltz which Sigrid Fersen drew out lightly from a Steinway already much the worse for its Indian sojourn. He heard voices. It was young Radcliffe lounging in the shadow of the trees, making a gloomy assault on the susceptibilities of the latest sweetest thing from England, the while his real deeply embittered self was in the drawing-room scowling at Rasaldû, who,

still crowned with laurels, leant against the piano staring at Sigrid unrestrainedly and with a very naked passion.

The last voice that Tristram heard, the first and last face that he had seen, had been Sigrid's, but that was because she had swamped all other realization. It was Mrs. Smithers, roaming like a dutiful policeman through the compound, who found him lying huddled together just inside the gates. She made no sort of outcry. Having ascertained that he was alive, she did not even hurry herself. She went and stood primly at Sigrid's side, her mittened hands folded in front of her, her back to Rasaldû, whom she openly detested.

"He's there," she said, jerking her head towards the compound; "lying in a dead faint, poor dear. I guess it's your fault—you'd better do something, hadn't you?"

After one swift glance at the grim face, and without a word either to Smithers or Rasaldû, Sigrid had got up and gone down the steps into the darkness where Tristram lay. She knelt down beside him and touched him on his dry, burning forehead, on his throat, gliding down to his powerless hand. She spoke to him, calling him by name, and she knew that he heard, and recognized her. For a long minute she remained thus motionless, tasting her power to probe beneath his physical consciousness to the self in which he kept his dreams, his quaint

beliefs, his simple, world-embracing love of things. And she knew that if he saw her, it was because her face lived in his inner vision, and that if he felt her hand it was because the memory of her touch was seared into his very flesh.

She granted him and herself that moment, and then she called for help. It came quickly, noisily. But though others intervened, she remained at Tristram's side. Her instinct told her that he knew she was there, and that she held him back from the abyss towards which he was drifting. They laid him between the faintly scented sheets of her bed. It was her order. The shaded lamp threw a subdued glow on the room's costly loveliness, on the scattered, cunningly grouped treasures of five continents, on fragmentary, priceless testimonies to a rare and varied taste. They exercised a curious influence on the grieved and troubled helpers. It was like a subtle intoxication, as though all that these things represented crept into their blood and fought there for mastery. And in silent, austere contrast was the man lying dimly outlined beneath the white sheet, the rugged, unkempt head tilted slightly back against the pillow, the thin, suffering features composed in a passing phase of grave serenity.

They knew whence he came and what he had accomplished, and the rarefied atmosphere of exquisite Paganism jarred on them. It was a challenge, a kind of sneer at his whole life. They did

not reason about it, they could scarcely define it. But it made Meredith's manner cold to the point of antagonism as he turned presently to where Sigrid stood in the shadow, her eyes fixed on the old Italian vase which she had picked up casually. He hated her again—she was so calm, almost indifferent. He came and stood beside her, hushing his full voice.

"I think we've done all we can. He's pretty bad, I'm afraid. I'll have a wire sent to the next best station for a doctor and a nurse. Of course, he can't stay here—we'll try and move him tomorrow."

"I prefer him to stay here," she said, without looking up.

He frowned, wishing that Rasaldû had not been one of those to help carry Tristram and to share in the unconventional intimacy of the scene. It revolted him that he should stand there, watching and listening. The old ugly suspicions which he had sternly repressed in himself awoke again. They were not justly roused—it was only that he was human and incensed.

"I don't think Tristram would wish it," he said, and unconsciously his voice took on its heaviest Anglicanism. "He would not wish you to be put to any trouble. After all, he is almost a stranger to you."

"I know him very well," she returned. "I think he has known me all his life. He would leave the decision to me."

"At least, he would not wish you to be burdened

with the—unconventionally——" He stammered, half expecting the vivid contempt with which she turned to him, and conscious of deserving it.

"Oh, you priest! You would rather your friend died than that your fetish of Other People's Respectability should be insulted." She waved him aside and flashed past him to the doorway, pulling the curtains noiselessly aside. In the second room, half-boudoir, half-dressing-room, she found Mary Compton and Anne. The rest of the guests had discreetly evaporated, or at most hovered afar off waiting news of the man whom, oddly enough, they loved without intimacy. He had lived so much his own life, they had so often laughed at his oddities, and it was something of a revelation to them that, now the inevitable disaster had overtaken him, they were sick and afraid and dumbly remorse-stricken.

Captain Compton stood at the compound gates under the dying lights of the lanterns with a couple of his brother officers, and smoked fiercely.

"Poor old Tristram—good old Hermit. It was bound to happen. No human being could go on like that and not crock up. Damn it, we oughtn't to have allowed it. We took him too much for granted. It's always the way. Good Lord, why doesn't some one come? What's Rasaldû doing in that *galère*, I should like to know? And what the devil is that tearing down the road——?"

Rasaldû meantime, delightfully conscious of his

utility, had followed Sigrid and Meredith into the room where the two women waited. Mary Compton had remained boldly. She sat upright in her chair under the lamp with a rather bleak look of authority and ready-for-anything alertness, which had made her an adored terror in the grim days at Chitral. Her evening dress, an antiquity cunningly revised, fitted her badly, as though it knew she hated it and meant to pay her out. She jerked her shoulders as Sigrid entered, seemingly exasperated by the garment's stiff, restraining influence.

"Well?" she demanded. "How is he?"

"I don't know yet," was the low answer. "But I think he is very ill. I have only seen one person die—it was like that." She turned her fair, smooth head towards Owen, but did not look at him. "Mr. Meredith wishes him to be moved. He is afraid my reputation might suffer—or that there might be a scandal in his parish."

Mrs. Compton considered the young missionary with a cold curiosity, giving him an almost ludicrous consciousness of the oft-denied but very profound sex solidarity of women.

"How idiotic! Men are just like babies in a crisis—always fussing about the unessentials. Of course, Major Tristram must stay—at any rate, until he is out of danger. And, Sigrid, as a sop to a hopeless passion, let me help nurse him."

"We'll pull him through together," Sigrid

answered.

"Mr. Meredith, don't you think with Mrs. Compton and Mrs. Smithers on guard, the situation should pass muster?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. He was looking at Anne—Anne whose white, tear-stained face peered out of the shadow like a pitiful, frightened ghost's, and somehow the sight filled him with a cold anger.

"My suggestion was well meant," he said. "I made it for Major Tristram's sake as well as for yours. I thought he would prefer to find himself among old friends."

"He could have come to us," Anne said, in her thin, broken voice. "I have nursed so much—and mother understands sickness, too——"

Sigrid Fersen glanced at her.

"I suppose Colonel Boucicault is an old friend," she said. "Colonel Boucicault, who has helped to kill him——"

There was a second of strained silence. Anne's face had changed from white to red, and then to a deeper pallor. She dropped forward with a little moan, her face hidden in her hands, crying helplessly. Meredith took a step forward, as though to protect her. The veins on his low, broad forehead were swollen.

"Surely——" he began hoarsely.

Sigrid made an imperative gesture.

"I cannot be bothered with your loves and hates," she said. "I'm going to save Major Tristram—that's all that matters to me. You can stay here if you want to—both of you—but on my terms."

It was like the cut of a whip across the face. Meredith found no answer for a moment. He was sick with horror at the tide of anger which swept over him. His primitive instinct was to strike back physically. He knew now that all Anne's distrust was justified. The woman was dangerous—dangerous, above all, to Anne's happiness. He had the right now to combat her—to set himself squarely against her power in Gaya. He wanted to assume the authority now, but it was too late. Moreover, at the bottom, he knew he could not touch this enemy. She was of another world, impervious to the penalties which his could inflict.

And Compton stood on the threshold—Compton, whose face was a sufficient warning—and behind him Ayeshi. Both men had reached the verandah steps at the run, and now Compton had pulled up, meeting his wife's stare of reproof with a hurried apology.

"I'm sorry—-I didn't mean to make a row or startle you. Ayeshi has just come with bad news. Miss Boucicault—I think you ought to go home at once. Your father has been badly hurt——"

"My father!" She sprang to her feet, her eyes wide with an incredulous fear. "My father—hurt

——?" she echoed.

"He was found half-an-hour ago, unconscious. Some one must have attacked him. Of course, now Tristram's done there's no doctor. We'll telegraph at once. Radcliffe's got his gig—I thought you might go with him."

He was now honestly conscience-stricken. What happened was only terrible to him because of its significance. It was like a signal of the first break of the storm—the thing for which he had waited. That any one should care personally for the injured man—least of all the girl whose youth he had trodden underfoot—seemed incredible. Yet she stood there, white and shivering with shock. He tried to apologize again, but she did not seem to hear; only, as Meredith came to her side, she turned to him like a panic-stricken child.

"Please take me home to him, Owen—please take me home."

Compton made way for them both. He beckoned to Rasaldû, who obeyed the summons reluctantly.

"We'll clear out and leave you the field. Ayeshi can bring us the news to the club. Suppose I shan't see you again for a bit, old girl."

"Not till my job's done here. Get the ayah to bring round some reasonable clothes."

"Right-o! So long, old girl."

He came up to his wife and kissed her shyly. She patted him.

"So long. Not too many pegs."

The room emptied. Neither Meredith nor Anne had said good-bye nor looked at Sigrid. Rasaldû bowed over her hand, but even he realized that she was not conscious of him. As his broad, fat back vanished down the verandah, Mrs. Compton got up, shaking herself.

"Now we can get to business. God defend me in my last hour from sentimentalists of Anne's make. Can I borrow a dressing-gown, Sigrid?"

"Do. Smithy will give you one."

"Thanks. By the way, I expect Boucicault's not the last to go. It's the first bubble on the water, and soon we shall all be in it, and boiling nicely." She made her exit on this rather light-hearted prophecy; but Sigrid, who had made a movement to follow her, lingered for a moment. Her eyes were cast down as though in thought, but in reality they were fixed on Ayeshi's hand. When she raised them suddenly, she found that he too, was watching her. There was nothing insolent, nothing inquisitive in his scrutiny. His expression was grave and reticent. It made him seem much older. He was no longer the boy who had cried on her doorstep. He looked at her with a man's eyes, with a man's understanding and stern power of secrecy.

"Was it you who found the Colonel?" she asked.

"Yes, Mem-Sahib."

"He is badly hurt?"

"I think so. The blow was a terrible one. It seemed to me that he was conscious. Once he looked at me, but he could not move or speak."

"Do you think it was one of his men, Ayeshi?"

"I do not know, Mem-Sahib."

She turned away from him.

"There is blood on your hand, Ayeshi."

He salaamed imperturbably.

"I will wash it away. It is a cut—a little thing."

He followed her into the next room with the unobtrusive decision of one whose right to enter could never be challenged. Mrs. Smithers had moved the lamp behind a screen, but Ayeshi, standing at the foot of the bed, looked down through the veil of shadow as though the sleeper's face was an open book in which he read intently. Then he looked at Sigrid. She had taken her place close to Tristram's pillow, and one hand rested lightly on the coverlet. There was a caress in that touch. Her fair head was bent in grave, pitying contemplation that was yet touched with a curious detachment, as though she looked down from a great distance. In the half-light, she seemed unreal, fanciful, the very spirit of that beautiful æsthetic Paganism which the room breathed.

Ayeshi shivered a little, and his slender, dark hands resting on the carved wooden bed, tightened their grasp.

"Mem-Sahib!" he said, softly.

"Yes, Ayeshi?"

"Mem-Sahib—I have seen so many die of late. Death at its best is sleep. The Sahib sleeps deeply. Perhaps it is the will of his God that death should come to him now that he has given so much for those he loves. Is there not a saying in your Book, Mem-Sahib—-'Greater love hath no man than this, that he layeth down his life for his friend'?"

Sigrid Fersen lifted her head.

"Yes," she answered steadily.

"Meredith Sahib taught it me. I have forgotten much, but not that. It was true of him. Others—those who come here to teach us—preach to us, but he lived. He did not believe—no, not as Sahib Meredith believed. He believed in the flowers and the birds and the wind and the mountains—he believed in us." He put his hands to his breast, and his eyes glowed in the darkness. "I was his brother—his younger brother," he said proudly.

"And he loved you, Ayeshi."

"He loved all men—even the worst." He came a step nearer to her. "Mem-Sahib—a woman died out in Bjura—died horribly. He stayed with her to the end. She was hideous, and he took her head on his knee and comforted her as though she had been his mother. There was a little child, and he took it and promised he would care for it. She died happy."

Her head was bent again.

"That was like him, Ayeshi."

"Mem-Sahib—if the end comes now it will trouble him that he cannot keep his promise."

"He shall keep his promise. I will keep it for him. And you, Ayeshi—stay with me."

But he drew back, and the light died out of his face.

"This is the end, Mem-Sahib. His and mine. I loved him—I, too, would have given my life—remember that of me, Mem-Sahib."

She looked up at him, and the naked agony in his eyes was something that she indeed remembered long afterwards.

"I think he knows," she said.

He salaamed deeply.

"I will go and guard the door, Mem-Sahib."

He was gone without a sound. A shadow seemed to have passed from the room. His very voice had been so low, that now the silence flowed over it as though it had never been. Yet what he had said lingered.

Sigrid Fersen drew her chair close up to the bedside, and sat there chin in hand watching. The dim light of the lamp threw the shadow of Tristram's profile on to the white-washed wall beyond. Ugly enough—the pointed beard thrust out under the broad, unshapely nose—the big forehead made grotesque by the outline of disordered hair. But even the shadow gave a hint of what the face itself revealed in its unconsciousness. The mouth, tender

and strong as a woman's may be, passionate and austere, laughter and the joy and love of life in the corners of the closed eyes, and over all, like a veil, pain. Quixote with a grain of English humour—Quixote at the end, vanquished and conquering.

He stirred a little in the first uneasiness of coming delirium, and she laid her hand on his and he grew still again.

Mary Compton came in presently. With Mrs. Smithers, she had been preparing a special fever antidote of her own, and there was an air of resolve about her neat, kimono-clad figure which made death seem afar off. She came lightly up to the bedside, stirring the contents of a malicious-looking medicine glass.

"Now, if we can only get him to take a few drops, they will help to keep him quiet. Of course, we don't know what in the world's the matter with him. It may be the ghastly thing they had in Bjura; but I don't think so. He wouldn't have come back. Are you afraid?" She glanced down at her companion, and Sigrid met her close scrutiny deliberately.

"No."

"Well, you've been crying, anyhow."

"That's possible."

"What for?"

Sigrid's lips were twisted with a wry smile.

"I don't know—I was touched about something, I

suppose. I think it was because I never thanked him for something he gave me—I never gave him anything to take with him when he went out there—I've just remembered."

"H'm! How many times have you two met?"

"Twice—no, three times, and the first time counted most of all."

"Are you in love with him, too?"

"I've been trying to decide—yes, I think so."

Mary Compton poured out the medicine into a tea-spoon.

"Do you mean to marry him? Because, if you do, you will."

"No, I'm not going to marry him."

"Why not?"

She made a gesture, brief, impatient.

"My dear, can't you see? We live at the opposite poles of things—he, the unbelieving Christian, I, the believing Pagan. Look at his life—look at mine. Look at this room—these things. You have a *flair* for what is precious and beautiful—can't you see?"

Mary Compton continued to balance the spoon. Her bright hazel eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the other's face.

"Yes, I see. And I love you, Sigrid, as Gaya does, without caring who or what you are, or what you mean to do with us. But just sometimes I'm afraid—sometimes I think it would have been more merciful to have let us go on our own old, stodgy way."

"You mean—him? He sought me out. I believe he brought me here. There are more things in heaven and earth, Mary, than are dreamed of in your philosophy. And even if that weren't true—he knew as well as I did what I was—what I wanted—-adventure, knowledge of the finest and the best in life and in men—a last splendid hour—he would not have denied it me."

The last words had sunk below the whisper of their brief conversation, and Mary Compton did not hear them. Very skilfully she forced the opiate between the unconscious man's lips.

"At any rate, we're a nice couple of nurses chattering over poor Tristram's head. Will you watch for a little? Mrs. Smithers and I will relieve you."

"If you want him to live leave us alone. I shall not sleep tonight."

"In those clothes?"

She glanced down at her quaint, gold-brocaded dress.

"Yes. He loves beautiful things."

"He may think he is in Paradise and you an angel," rather satirically.

"Or perhaps men so near death see clearer——"

Mary Compton sighed and bent and kissed her.

"Good night, then. If there is any change, send for us. Ayeshi is at the door."

"Goodnight."

Now the last sound was gone. Even the man's

shallow, irregular breathing became for the moment quieter, as though peace had crept into his troubled oblivion. Sigrid sat motionless at his side. The light touched her with a dim brilliance; it dwelt on the smooth gold hair, on the gold of her dress, on the rich living whiteness of her arms and shoulders. She shone subduedly like an image on an altar-shrine—an image of life and of life's splendour faced with the shadow of death.

Presently Tristram stirred and muttered to himself. The words were at first thick, indistinguishable, but suddenly he roused himself. She caught sentences, rapid, fever-stricken—the incoherent risings from the depths of the man's soul. It was his credo—a fragment of that faith of which Ayeshi had spoken, perhaps never before formulated, now poured in a molten stream of delirious sincerity.

"I believe in all things living—I believe in beauty —I believe in the goodness of men and in their immortality. I believe in the immortality of the flowers, of the trees, of the grass in the wind—I believe in God who is all things, who is myself and her. I believe in the sacredness of all life——" An intolerable agony crept into his voice. He repeated the last phrase on a rising inflection. "Oh, God, I believe in the sacredness of life——"

She bent over him. She laid her hand on his forehead and suddenly his eyes opened. They rested full on her face, but she knew, for all their

extraordinary brilliance, that they did not see her. It was not to her that he spoke, but to the vision of her. "You must go, you too—everything. A man who has broken faith—there is a curse on us—an awful curse. We kill what we love—we kill what is holy, unfathomable—every day of our lives—for pleasure, because we must. We're doomed to destroy. We try not to—we try to save—but the curse is on us—the curse of Cain——" His voice had dropped; it broke now with a groan and the brief glimpse of coherent thought was over. He began to mutter again—isolated words, a name, constantly a name. Still she remained bent over him. Her small face had lost colour, and something of its aloof pity. She was breathing quickly, through parted lips.

"Tristram!" she whispered.

He raised one burning hand and pushed her back.

"No—not now—you must go—for pity's sake. I've carried you here—here—so long—through the burning days—since that night. You don't know—no other woman—there had been fancies—the flowers by the waterside—the lotus there in the shadows—-the lizard in the long grass—you were the golden corn swaying in the wind, the flowers—the stars, the mountains, the slender trees in the storm—great ships sailed down the river—you came in and out of their ghosts flying over the water—I watched you till dawn—you were the dawn—dancing over the

world's grey roofs—you were nature, life, God——" He raised himself on his elbow in a frenzied ecstasy. She put her arm round his shoulders trying to force him back. In a minute his voice had changed—grew dry and harsh and imperative. "Separate the living from the dead—no flinching—it's a miracle, this life—a mystery—sacred—fan the flames—the dead, too, are sacred—fire is pure—now it is over—finished—I can sleep—" He sat upright, head thrown back as one awaiting thirstily release, then lifted his arms high up in a gesture of despair. "The colours—down—down in the dust—a blow straight in the face of God—the goal missed—in a minute—oh! God!—if I cared less——"

He fell back exhausted, broken, his breathing so hushed that for a moment she believed that it had ceased for ever. She still held him, her arm crushed under his great shoulders, and she called him by name, recklessly. He turned over a little on his side.

"Wickie understood," he whispered. "Wickie knew I couldn't help it—but my mother—don't let her know—not yet. She's old—so old—one long sacrifice—and now to have failed——"

"She shan't know—I promise—I promise——"

He did not, could not have heard. His head tossed restlessly on the pillow. The collar of his shirt was open, and she caught a glimpse of a red swollen line across his chest. She drew her breath quickly—staring at it.

"You must go back, Sigrid—you must. You are not a dream—not now. Back up on to the mountain-top—to your golden palaces—where there is no meanness—no poverty—no sin—you could not go with me where I am going——"

She knelt beside him, holding, him with all her strength, his head pressed against her bare shoulder.

"I am going with you, Tristram Sahib—tonight at least I'll go with you wherever you go—tonight. I'll try your way of loving and dying—just this one night, Tristram."

There was a blue, unfamiliar shadow about her lips. The room with its dim treasures was no longer part of her. She had lost her serenity, her easy detachment. Not the triumphant quality of her power. This man was dying—not of the body, but of the soul. She could feel him sinking, and she went down with him—down into the vortex of his unknown struggle, fighting as she had danced and lived, with her whole will, with all the splendid vitalness of her being.

And his eyes, glazing already, were turned to her and saw her. They became peaceful—content. Whatever message she had willed to pierce the dense cloud of delirium had reached him. He sighed, and lay still in her arms.

Presently she saw that his eyes were closed. A faint moisture glistened on his smooth forehead, and the wild muttering passed into the quiet of an

exhausted slumber.

Still she did not move.

The night sank into deeper darkness and stillness. The hours crept on their way, monstrous, heavy-footed. She measured her breathing to his, she held him in arms that had lost all feeling. The shadow about her lips crept over her whole face, blotting out its youth.

The dawn came at last, creeping in between the parted curtains, mixing pallidly with the dying lamplight. The rich embroideries and the glittering curios faded, the high carved chair by the dressing-table became spectral, unreal.

Ayeshi entered noiselessly, passing like a ghost to the quiet bedside. Tristram had turned over, his face to the coming day, his head resting in the curve of his arm. So Ayeshi had often seen him—by the camp-fire, after the day's work.

And beneath, on the great tiger-skin, huddled and still, a golden-clad, incongruous figure, which even in that moment retained something imperious, conquering, exultant.

Ayeshi bent down and touched the pale, disordered hair. He leant across and kissed the man's unconscious hand—lightly, as if it had been a sleeping child's.

Then, noiselessly as he had come, glided across the room to the open window and thence out into the morning.

CHAPTER XIV
TRISTRAM CHOOSES HIS ROAD

Dr. Martin from Lucknow had made his examination, and now he sat opposite to the woman on whose husband he was about to pass sentence, and told her the truth with all the delicacy at his command. He was a civilian with a considerable practice among women, and a corresponding belief in his understanding of the sex. But he did not understand Mrs. Boucicault. Possibly the long journey, partly on horse-back, partly on a bone-racking bullock-wagon, had upset his nerve and that nice balance of mind which made a correct analysis possible. He had felt oddly and ridiculously sickened by the man whose bedside he had just left. There was something revolting in that great hulk of over-developed, ill-conditioned strength, inert and helpless, without power of speech or motion, with nothing living in it but the eyes. Dr. Martin had seen a great many ugly sights in his career, but nothing uglier than those desperately living eyes in the dead body.

Now the wife sat opposite him and smiled at him—a slow, unending smile which might have pointed to a mind deranged by grief if she had not been so eminently practical and calm. She was

dressed girlishly in white, with a red rose stuck gaily in her belt. The grey fluffy hair had been carefully yet loosely dressed, and there was a faint tinge of artificial colour on her cheeks. Her restless fingers glittered with valuable rings. It was still early in the day, and Dr. Martin had pronounced a sentence which was practically one of death, and he felt that the whole situation was horrid—a kind of *danse macabre*. The only person who gave him the remotest sensation of preserved decency was the daughter. She sat apart from her mother with her head bowed, her hands tight clasped in her lap, and he had seen a tear fall. He thought her rather pretty and feminine. With the rapid, constructive reasoning of his sex, he placed her in the catalogue of good daughters of adoring fathers and heartless mothers.

"And so," said Mrs. Boucicault, summing up, "you don't think that there is much hope. He may live a long time of course—but like that—quite conscious, but helpless. On the other hand, the end might come suddenly. Isn't that what you mean?"

Dr. Martin fidgeted. He felt tact was wasted on her.

"Those are the two extremes of the case," he admitted. "But there are intermediary possibilities. He might get back a certain amount of activity—speech, for instance. It all depends on the treatment. All that I can advise for the present is that he should not be worried or alarmed. Get him a long leave—

don't talk of retirement—keep him here, at any rate, for the present. That's the best you can do."

"It is what I intended," Mrs. Boucicault returned deliberately.

Again the little doctor felt himself vaguely upset. It was as though just as he was bowling smoothly along a familiar road, some one came and madly jolted him into an uncomfortable rut. He clung obstinately to his course.

"I can't say how I sympathize with you," he said. "No one can appreciate more than I do the courage of our women here in India. Literally we all go more or less with our lives in our hands. Of course, the vast majority of the natives are loyal, but in so many millions there are bound to be one or two degenerate fanatics with a grievance. I understand there has been some question of sedition in the native regiment—at least, a good deal of discontent. We had rumours of it even in Lucknow."

Anne Boucicault looked up. She had certainly been crying, but now her brown eyes were bright, and her lips straight and firm.

"It wasn't any of father's men," she said on a low note of defiance. "I'm sure it wasn't. Father is a fine soldier. When he was captain they used to call him the Bagh Sahib because of his fearlessness. They worshipped him. One of the older men told me—I know they wouldn't have touched him."

Dr. Martin smiled. He felt relieved and

pleasantly moved by the quick and passionate championship of the hulk he had just condemned. He had, moreover, heard something of Colonel Boucicault's past and something of his present. For the latter he was prepared to find some explanation in the grey-haired, bedizened figure of indifference opposite him.

"One would be glad to believe that you are right, Miss Boucicault," he said courteously. "If only the dastardly coward could be got hold of——"

"I believe I know who he is," she interrupted in a hard quick way, which was new to her. "Ayeshi, Major Tristram's servant, has disappeared. He had some money which the Rajah gave him for his education, and he has stolen it and gone. I saw him that night when he came and told us that father had been found. I saw blood on his hand."

Dr. Martin hesitated an instant, as though in two minds as to his answer. Finally he looked up with a professional twinkle.

"Feminine intuition again! Well, since you've got so far on your own, Miss Boucicault, I might as well tell you that your surmise is shared by others. I met Captain Compton at the dâk-bungalow, and he told me there's a hue and cry after this said Ayeshi. Only it's to be kept quiet. I understand the boy was a sort of protégé of Major Tristram's, and there's a general opinion that, unless it's necessary, the latter is not to be told. He's pretty weak still, and it's something of a

shock to get one of your pet theories bowled over in that way."

Anne's eyes sank to her clasped hands.

"Is Major Tristram better?" she asked.

"Fine. Well round the corner. But I fancy it must have been touch and go with him. That fair-haired woman—Miss Fersen, isn't that the name?—seems to have fought every inch of the ground." He reflected pleasurably for a minute. "Well, that's the sort of nurse a man wants on his death-bed—a real fighter and worth looking at to boot—something to make life worth struggling for. Great dancer, isn't she? Well, I'm a sort of back-number that never catches up, and there's always a different star on the horizon when I get home on leave, and even then I only get a glimpse. My people hang out in a God-forsaken spot in Yorkshire." He rambled on for a time with a man's affable, crushing indifference as to whether his listeners are bored or otherwise, but finally, chilled by Mrs. Boucicault's enigmatic smile and Anne's white silence, he got up.

"Well, I'll be getting along to the club——"

Mrs. Boucicault remained seated.

"Would you spare me a minute, Dr. Martin? A little trouble of my own—a bruise, a mere nothing, still perhaps you would look at it. Anne, run away, would you?"

Dr. Martin, a little irritated by this fresh and probably petty call on his services, wondered at the

girl's dignity. It must be galling at her age to be told to "run away." He scented tragedy, and sized it up and turned to its creator with professionalism and small sympathy.

"Now, Mrs. Boucicault, if you could just tell me ——"

Anne heard the last words and smiled bitterly to herself. She went out on to the verandah and stood there looking down into the sunlit garden with eyes that were blind with misery and anger and contempt. In that quiet room, listening to the doctor's pleasantly modulated voice, she had been through purgatory. She knew that the ways of God were inscrutable—it was the all-covering explanation of her creed—but they were sometimes hard to tread. Why had He given a bad woman the power to save the life of a good man? Why had He allowed Evil to creep in and take possession of peaceful Gaya? Was it perhaps a trial, a test of their strength? That seemed possible. At least she did not doubt the working of God's hand. She had seen it strike—strike terribly. In a few hours it had brought a miracle of change in her little cosmos. The figure of terror had gone down like some monstrous clay-footed idol, and become pitiful and pitiable. She no longer feared it—no longer hated. She yearned towards it as towards a sinner whose punishment has been meted out with an implacable justice. He was a symbol of Divine wrath, an awful admonition, but beyond man's hate

or censure. He had become almost sacred to her. But her mother had drifted from her, had wilfully stood apart in that solemn moment, with that hateful smile on her lips had seemed to deny the very existence of God Himself. Anne shuddered. It was as though a mask had fallen from the grey-tinted, childish, wrinkled face, and that Anne saw her as she was, petty, cruel, mean-souled—a hard, unlovable woman who had perhaps driven her father to his destruction. Her father had been a great man—a fine soldier, brave, daring, much beloved. She thought of him with a dim, uncertain pride which grew stronger and clearer. But her mother sank into a shadow. She was little and selfish. In this awful hour when Death hung over them, she thought of her own petty ailments—of a trivial bruise, keeping Dr. Martin back to discuss herself with a nauseating self-pity.

In that moment Anne's heart turned towards her father with an overpowering tenderness, a kind of comradeship of understanding.

How long they were! Presently she heard her mother's voice, high-pitched and steady. Mrs. Boucicault led the way out on to the balcony. She was toying with the red rose, smelling it with a deliberate epicureanism.

"I am so glad you are able to stay on a few days, Dr. Martin. I am giving a dinner and a little dance to the Station next week, and of course Miss Fersen will be of the party. She is rather a friend of mine. You

will meet her then. Good-bye for the present, and ever so many thanks."

Dr. Martin muttered something. Even then Anne wondered at him. He took no notice of her, and went stumbling awkwardly down the steps like a man shaken out of his composure. His face was white and rather sickly looking.

The two women stood side by side, and watched him clamber up into the dog-cart and drive off. Even after he had disappeared they remained motionless as though both feared the first move, the first break in the long silence between them. Or perhaps it was only Anne who was afraid, for when she turned suddenly she found her mother's gaze fixed absently on the distance, her smile lingering at the corners of her mouth like the forgotten grimace of an actor who has suddenly ceased to act.

"Mother—you didn't mean it—it was a mistake—I didn't understand you, of course—it isn't true about the dinner——"

"Why not?" Mrs. Boucicault turned her faded blue eyes to her daughter's face. "Yes, it's perfectly true," she said.

Anne was shivering with an almost physical sickness.

"It isn't possible," she said breathlessly. "You can't realize—with father so ill—so terribly ill. How can you think of such a thing? It's wicked—cruel! What will people think?"

"I don't really know. But they'll come. Sigrid Fersen will come, I know. I wish she would dance—just once. I have never seen her."

"That woman! You mean to have her—now?"

"I thought you'd be glad. She seems to have saved Major Tristram's life."

"The Rajah's mistress!"

Mrs. Boucicault laughed lightly.

"My dear little daughter, how grown-up of you! Is that the sort of thing your religion teaches you?"

Anne made no answer. She was ashamed and sorry, but also full of a bitter resentment, as good people are when they have been goaded into an unjustifiable aggression, an ugly, unchristian outbreak. Yet she recognized her share of the fault with contrition, and in penance sought to retrace her steps, to bridge the widening gulf between her and the woman who one short week ago had been her companion, her half-protected, half-protecting comrade. She came and laid her hand gently on her mother's.

"It was horrid of me to say that—it was uncharitable. But I am so unhappy——"

"Unhappy—are you?" Mrs. Boucicault smiled vaguely down at the caressing hand as though it amused her.

"Why?"

"Mother—isn't it obvious?—Isn't it the most terrible thing that could have happened?"

"It doesn't seem to me terrible at all."

Anne held her ground. She was trembling with a kind of painful excitement. In her own mind there was a picture of herself fighting to bring this shallow little soul up to the heights of realization, to some dim perception of the real tragedy.

"It is terrible," she affirmed patiently. "Even if you don't love father any more you must see how awful it is to be struck down like that in a minute, without time to make his peace with any of us—and now to lie there dumb and helpless, never able to tell us things—never able to make up for anything. Isn't that pitiable? It's the very coldest way one can look at it. But you must feel more than that. After all, you did love him once. Of course he was different then, but you must try and remember him as he was in those days——"

Mrs. Boucicault patted the hand on her arm.

"That sounds quite pretty and nice, Anne. But I haven't time for remembering."

"Not time? You've got all your life. You must try and make a new picture of him. I shall. I shall think of him as the handsome, brave Tiger Sahib and learn to love him. We've got to hold together, mother, and make this awful trial bearable for him. After all, we can't tell—it may be a kind of test of us all—it may be the saving of him—of us——"

Mrs. Boucicault shook her head like a playful, obstinate child.

"I don't look at it like that at all. I'm free. I'm going to have a rattling good time."

"Mother!" She still retained her affectionate attitude, but it had become official, perfunctory. All the warmth in her died out, leaving a chill horror. "Mother—you can't mean what you say! If you do you must be mad or very wicked."

"I daresay both, my dear. I really don't care. I'm free—that's how I feel about it. I'm going to make up for lost time——"

Anne shrank away from her.

"It's awful—horrible——"

Mrs. Boucicault threw her rose petulantly into the garden. She had only worn it a short time, and it had already withered.

"I guessed you would feel like that. If you don't like it you could go down to Trichy and stay with the Osbornes. They are your father's relations, and they always hated me, so you'll get on. Of course I don't want to persuade you. I'm very fond of you, Anne. I should like you to stay."

"And watch you make a mock of my father's misery?"

"No, Anne—only having a good time."

"It would make me sick to see you."

"Well, then—of course you must go."

The two women considered each other for a moment. There was no pity, no relenting to be read on the older face, only an inflexible purpose softened

by a childlike look of gay anticipation. Anne turned away.

"I couldn't bear it—I couldn't bear to live with you——"

She ran down the verandah steps into the garden as though flying from a revelation of evil.

Mrs. Boucicault looked after her, watching till the light-clad figure had disappeared among the trees. Then, plucking a fresh rose from the trellis-work, went back into her boudoir. A few minutes later she entered her husband's sick-room and motioned the nurse to leave them. In that simple action there was an authority, an easy self-assurance that seemed, to change even her appearance. She held herself well, with lifted head as a prisoner does who breathes the free air after many years.

Boucicault saw her. He could not turn his head, but she stood well within the range of his roving eyes. He stared at her, and she too studied him, the while scenting her rose delicately. He had changed almost beyond belief. The muscles of his face were withered so that it looked much smaller and weaker. The consuming, unappeasable temper was still marked about the mouth, in the black puckered brow, but now it was merely pitiable. It could never make another man or woman cower. It could never make *her* cower again. Perhaps some such reflection passed through both their minds. Boucicault turned his eyes away like a sick animal. It was almost the

first sign he had given of understanding. Hitherto, though obviously conscious, he had refused all response to the code of signals which Dr. Martin had planned for him, in his bitter humiliation of body seeming to cling to the utter isolation of his mind. Now, though he could not move, he appeared to shrink into himself, to cringe before an encroachment which he could no longer avert. His wife came and stood close beside him. She was playing idly with her rose, twisting the stem between her fingers. Her eyes were bright, wide open, with two sharp points of light in them which seemed to dance. There was real colour in her cheeks. She was not smiling now, and yet her face, her whole body, radiated a fierce vivid amusement.

"I've just seen Dr. Martin, Richard," she said. "You'd rather I told you the truth, wouldn't you? He says there's no hope of your getting well—not really well. Perhaps, after a long time, you may be able to move a little, but you might also die suddenly. No one can do anything for you. You'll just lie there. I thought I'd tell you. I'm going to have a good time. Anne doesn't think it quite proper, but I'm sure you'll understand. I haven't had much fun in the last few years, have I? And I was awfully gay before I married you. You don't object, do you, Richard? Do say so if you do."

She grew bigger—taller, like a bird of prey spreading itself over its maimed and helpless victim.

The soldier's whitewashed room, blank of all beauty, made a simple frame for the artificial brilliancy of her. The man whose dead body outlined itself massively under the thin covering, burned and withered in it. His eyes met hers for an instant in understanding and mad defiance.

"Of course we'll do all we can, Richard. We shall stay in Gaya. Dr. Martin advises it, and I want to. It will be nicer for you too, because if we went to a new place—or to Cheltenham or something of that sort-nobody would bother about you. Here, of course, people are bound to take notice of you. They'll drop in and tell you about the regiment and all that. I shall come in every day, so that you shall hear all I am doing. I expect I shall be very busy."

She paused deliberately, assuming an attitude of closer interest. "Have you tried to tell any one who killed you? I wonder. Perhaps you don't want to. I expect it was something discreditable. Besides, even if he or they were caught and hanged it wouldn't help you much, would it? You couldn't see it done—unless we dragged you out in a long chair or something——" She laughed, and bent over him—a pale-tinted, delicate, very sinister figure. "Am I tiring you? You look tired. Smell that rose—isn't it beautiful?—you can smell still, can't you? But I forgot; you don't care for flowers. You wouldn't let me have any in the house. Well, perhaps you will grow to care for them. I will tell nurse to put some in

a vase for you." She touched his cheek lightly with the flower and laughed again. "Well, good-bye for today, Richard."

She pirouetted on her heel like a girl, and went to the door. He could not see her, but he heard her give a little gasp and then utter a name. His eyes opened to the full—he began to breathe quickly and laboriously. The veins on his dark, wizened-looking forehead stood out in the frightful effort to break through, to move, to speak——

"Major Tristram—what a shock you gave me! I thought you were at death's door. You oughtn't to be here, I'm sure. I hardly recognized you."

"Yes—I am a sight, aren't I? Still, I'm not dead—not by some lengths. May I speak to your husband?"

"Oh, yes, you may speak to him. You won't mind a monologue, will you? You've heard about it, I expect—spinal column affected or something—but I'm so stupid about these things. Do come and talk to me afterwards, won't you, Major? I should like to hear all your news."

The door closed. Boucicault lifted his eyes. They were sunken—so black, so lightless that their expression could not be guessed at. It might have been an appalling hatred—anything.

Tristram did not return the gaze. He stood at the sick man's side, rocking on his heels, fighting a purely physical battle, then suddenly crumbled up on the edge of the bed, his shaking hands to his face.

Thus he remained for a minute whilst Boucicault's eyes rested on him with mute, unfathomable intensity.

Presently Tristram raised himself, and the encounter had taken place, almost actual in the poignancy and force of the memory which flared up behind the mutual scrutiny. Neither man flinched.

"I had the deuce of a business to get here," Tristram said at last quite simply. "I had to humbug and dodge any number of people, and get my own legs to crawl which wasn't easy. But I had to come. I've got to speak to you, Boucicault. I'd have come sooner, but I've been a raving lunatic most of the time and this was my first chance. You may think it damnable of me to hound you down when you can't hit back, as it were, but I can't help that, I've got to have it out." He paused a moment, running his hand over his close-cropped head. He seemed to be struggling for coherency. Boucicault's stare never wavered. "It's not very much I've got to say. I won't waste time and breath telling you what I feel—I've done something worse than murder you. I smashed you up when I ought to have realized that you were a man with a sick brain. I was a sick man myself and —and couldn't think clearly. I just heard poor old Wickie scream—well, we won't go into that—it's too beastly. But I've just come to tell you that I'm not going to give myself up to what some people would call justice. That's what I meant to do at first—but I

see now that it was sentimentality and cowardice—the sort of thing that drives some people to confess—a kind of shaking off one's burden of responsibility on to some one else. I'm rambling—it's so infernally difficult to keep one's thoughts clear." He passed his tongue over his cracked lips. Boucicault's eyes closed for an instant. "Can you understand what I'm saying?" The eyes opened again to their full stare and Tristram went on more clearly. "Of course, it's possible you may get all right or even be able to denounce me without that. I shan't deny anything. I shall be jolly glad, I daresay. But until then I'm going on with my work. We're men, Boucicault—and I won't mince matters—you've smashed up a good many lives in your time—men in the regiment, your wife, Anne—and you and I have smashed each other but that's the end of it. You may or you may not believe me—but I'm not going to be dragged into disgrace if I can help it—for my mother's sake. She's old—very old—she can't last long—-she's had a rotten time, and the last year or two—well, I shall protect them with all my strength." He straightened his shoulders as a man does who, groping through darkness, suddenly sees his way clear. "That's what I conceive to be my duty. You hate me, of course, but you're clever enough to know the sort of man I am and you know quite well that whether I'm punished or not, I've done for myself. That ought to satisfy you for the present." He got up. "So I'm going back to my

work. I don't know whether you'll understand what I mean when I say that I'm going to try and balance the misery you and I have brought into this world—I've got your responsibilities as well as my own to shoulder because I've smashed your chance of making good. And there's something else—if it lies in human power I'll set you on your feet again. If I succeed I shall tell my mother the truth, and I think somehow that then she will feel differently about it—it won't be quite the same sort of failure. Of course you'll want other doctors—you mayn't trust me—but no one else will fight for you as I shall. Give me some sign. If you trust me close your eyes once. I shall understand."

In the long silence which followed the two men held each other in a gaze so ardent, so penetrating that it was like the physical grappling of wrestlers, one of whom at least knew no pity. The sweat of weakness and recent effort showed itself on Tristram's forehead, but his features wore a weary serenity.

Presently a change showed itself on Boucicault's face. There was a shadow at the corners of his stiff, powerless lips—a kind of smile, malicious, calculating, ironic. His eyes closed once.

Tristram nodded.

"That's all I have to say, then."

He made his way from the bungalow, circuiting the front verandah where he guessed Mrs. Boucicault

would wait for him, to the compound gates. There Sigrid Fersen with the Rajah's dog-cart awaited him. She bent towards him, her face white with anger.

"How could you, Major Tristram! I guessed somehow you had come here and followed you. How could you do it?"

"I had to," he answered. He came up to the step of the cart, trying to support himself against the shaft unseen by her. "I had to," he repeated.

"A professional visit, I suppose?" she flashed scornfully.

"In a sort of way—yes."

"Well, anyhow—try and climb if you've the strength. I'll drive you back to bed."

He looked up at her and she frowned and bit her under lip to keep back an exclamation.

"Please—will you do something for me?"

"What is it, you madman?"

"Drive me to Heerut."

"Heerut—are you really insane? Do you want to die?"

He smiled wistfully.

"Oh, Lord, no—I've jolly well got to live. But I'm going back to work."

"You can't—it's absurd—I won't be responsible."

"You wouldn't be responsible," he interrupted earnestly. "Listen—I've got to go—there are my poor beggars in quarantine—all sorts of things—believe me, it's urgent, it must be—if you don't help me, I

shall walk or get some one else."

"You know that Ayeshi has gone—gone to Calcutta."

He averted his face.

"Yes—Compton told me."

"And Wickie—disappeared. You'll be all alone."

"Yes," he agreed simply.

She bent a little lower. She was smiling as one does at an obstinate, unhappy child.

"In a few weeks I may have to leave Gaya. My time is almost up. Are you flying from me?"

He remained patiently, doggedly silent, and she sighed and drew back.

"*Kismet*! So you make Fate for us both. I won't try to thwart you. I will take you to Heerut. But I make one stipulation."

"Yes?"

"It is that before I leave Gaya we spend one day together—a kind of farewell picnic—a high and solemn feast to the end of all things. It is to be where and when I want it. Do you promise?"

He did not answer. He was still looking away from her—down the white line of dusty road which wound past the clustered barracks. A far-off, long-drawn-out bugle-call fluttered out on to the hot stillness. She looked down and saw his hand clenched on the splashboard, and the impatient mockery faded from her lips.

"I won't make any stipulation. You are too ill to

be bargained with. And, after all, it lies in my power to seek you out when I choose—as I have done before"—her eyes became veiled and intent—"in and out of the ship's ghosts over the water—dancing over the grey roofs of the world——"

He frowned perplexedly, following her words through a labyrinth of memory and fancy and finding no end.

"Is that a quotation?"

"A sort of one——"

"It seems to express something——" He paused, meditating. The bugle sounded again, louder and more metallic and now in answer came the subdued hurrying of feet, the jangle of steel. Suddenly he faced her, fiercely, almost violently, like a man throwing off an obsessing weakness. There was a fire of energy in the throw-back of his great shoulders, in the clear passionate desire of his regard. She faltered under it. It swept her from her light fantastic dominion over him into deep, fast-flowing waters which engulfed her, stupefied her, shook her calm supremacy to its foundations. She did not know what had happened—what had wrought the change in him. He who had fought grimly and knowingly with the realism in the lives of others had somehow come to grips with reality in his own. He had ceased to weave dreams. It was not as a vision and a visionary that they faced each other, but as a man and a woman. A flash of lightning had burst through the

unsubstantial mists of their relationship. And behind the figure of the dreaming Stoic there loomed the stark, primeval human being, vital, virile, armed with all the white, burning power of unsoiled, sternly guarded passions. They flared in his blue eyes which held hers for the first time with full recognition, with a daring, reckless revelation of their own existence. And though inwardly she faltered, her gaze was as steady as his own. She dared not turn from him. She felt that if she did she would come face to face with herself—as fiercely, as terribly awakened.

They spoke very quietly, very naturally to one another.

"I'll promise," he said. "A last day—no one could grudge it me?"

"No one." She held out her hand to him and it did not tremble. "Come, now I will drive you to Heerut."

CHAPTER XV
THE WEAVERS

Barclay rode past the Boucicaults' bungalow on the afternoon when Mrs. Boucicault gave her garden party in honour of the regiment's new commander and his wife. It was a very grand function, and rather gruesome if one stopped to think what lay inert and

listening in a room somewhere at the back, but to stop and think was a mental pastime in which no one in Gaya indulged willingly. Mrs. Boucicault had been right. Gaya was not in the least outraged. It was not even very upset when it found that without a word of farewell Anne had gone south to Trichy to pay her father's people a long visit. In its casual, easy-going way, Gaya understood both points of view and sympathized.

The regimental band was playing a waltz and Barclay drew in his slender-limbed thoroughbred to listen. A little band of natives with a saffron-robed Sadhu in their midst coming round a bend of the white road, he drew out a gold case from his pocket and selected and lit a cigarette with an exaggerated deliberation. The procession drew on one side and the leader saluted the Sahib respectfully. Barclay took the salute with a curt, indifferent nod, but something in the episode must have changed the nature of his thoughts. He threw a glance towards the garden, walled from his view by a circle of high palms, and his black eyes were alight with a childish satisfaction. He heard voices intermingle with the music and two young men in immaculate tennis-clothes lounged out of the compound gates. They looked after the procession, and one of them laughed.

"It's nothing—you'll soon get fed up with that native stuff. When you've seen the festival at Heerut

next week you won't want another dose for years—these sort of fellows with their humbugging old fakir will be pouring in till the place is like an ant-heap. Talk about self-governing India—oh, Lord!"

Barclay, a notable figure enough on his beautiful mare stood not three yards away from the speaker, yet he appeared to pass unnoticed. Neither of the two looked at him. He drove his spurs into the animal's silken sides, curbing her at the same instant with an iron hand, and set her at a nervous, tortured canter down the road. His tight mouth under the black moustache was curved with a deliberate pleasure as he felt her sweat and tremble under his mastery. He kept her at the pace for a mile through the blaze of sun which poured down upon the unsheltered plain and then, satiated, allowed her to drop to a quivering, resentful walk.

He reached the bridge-head half an hour before sunset. A D.P.W. man with a party of assistants was taking soundings for the new traffic bridge which was to link up Gaya and the administrative centre three hundred miles away with the never-ending chain of villages of which Heerut was the first and largest. He had had a bad afternoon of it with Mother Ganges, and he stared savagely at Barclay, who drew rein.

"Getting on?" the latter asked.

"Damnably. The river's never the same two days running."

Barclay showed his white teeth in a smile.

"That's her speciality. You'll never build that bridge."

"Won't I?"

"The natives have a superstition against it. No white man will ever bridge the Holy Place. This *is* the Holy Place, you know—the spot where the sacred serpents come down from the jungle and take refreshment." He spoke with much the indolent amusement of the two young men outside the Boucicaults' compound. He aped it deliberately, not knowing whence came his smarting satisfaction. The Englishman mopped a moist and irate forehead.

"No, I didn't know," he snapped. "I'm not a native. I haven't got any damned superstitions. Perhaps you'd like to have a shot at it."

Barclay made no answer. The smile passed from his lips. He sat his horse motionlessly, staring at the faintly swaying native bridge in front of him. The Englishman, unconscious of his own success, stumped off angrily towards a fresh point of vantage.

Presently Barclay crossed to the farther side of the river, turning his horse from the path, rode through the long grasses to the temple, and here, within a few feet of the carved gateway, he dismounted, and, tossing the reins over the battered post which was all that marked the old Path of Auspiciousness, he strolled through into the Manderpam. The place was empty. Its usual

inhabitant had vanished. Barclay stood a moment, looking about him with the detached, unfeeling interest of a tourist. The attitude was deliberate, as were all his actions. He was setting the gulf of race and tradition between himself and this austerely sensuous beauty. He held himself an alien, walking idly, but with loud steps over the grass-grown stones, humming to himself, and beating time with his crop against his riding-boots. But the silence, heavy with old dreams and drowsy, bygone meditations, the stately avenue of roofless pillars, daunted him. He came to a halt in the entrance to the *antarila* and stared round furtively, peering into the purple-tinted shadows, listening as to a sound which troubled and escaped him. A little red-cheeked bulbul fluttered from its nest high overhead on the summit of the crumbling walls, and he watched its flight through the oblique bars of alternate light and shadow with a curious anxiety. It was as though he sought to rivet his attention on something trivial, so that he should not have to face whatever lay beneath the surface. The bulbul came to rest in some hidden rock among the deep-cut, fantastic reliefs of the frieze, and the soft, tender beating of its wings, like the last throb of a dying pulse, passed under the weight of a brooding, deathlike silence. Barclay turned and went noisily into the *antarila*. But here his footsteps rang with a different and startling resonance. They echoed among the broad, stunted pillars and died sullenly in

a gloom which shrouded the place in unfathomable dimensions. Barclay, raising his hand instinctively, touched the roof, but its dank solidity could not remove the impression of a monstrous nightfall, of a sky black and unlit, stretching up into infinity. On either hand, his knowledge might have told him, were thick walls, but they too carried no conviction, and the darkness went on and on in narrow, endless passages leading down into the bowels of an unholy mystery. The faint gleam of light in front of him, the soft gold of the courtyard behind, were like ghosts, painted luminously on the solid blackness, themselves bringing no light, no relief.

Barclay stopped, and, with his insolent deliberation, lit a cigarette, afterwards holding the match overhead. He saw that his hand shook and the tiny flame quivered an instant and went out as though a secret breath had blown against it. Barclay cursed and bit his teeth together as the echo gibed at him from its invisible lurking-place, and then went on, hushing his footsteps so that they should not follow him. In the Holy of Holies there was neither light nor darkness, but a haze which at once hid and revealed all things. It was like a pall shrouding the sun, or a gauzy, luminous veil of sunshine thrown over nightfall. It came filtering down from the great sun-window which, high overhead in the slender *sikhara*, looked out eastwards whence at daybreak Laksmi, surrounded with the golden-haired divas of

morning, rises up to meet Vishnu, who watches for her. It fell softly on the gigantic, monstrous effigy of Vishnu himself, cross-legged on his altar, in either hand a writhing serpent, his black eyes fixed in cruel, aloof contemplation on an existence which knew neither joy nor sorrow, neither humanity nor its desires and prayers. As in the old days when men and women had passed worshipping through his temple, so now that the worshippers were still and the courtyard empty and his altar bare of offerings, he remained indifferent and omnipotent. Men, generations, and religions pass, the temple crumbles. But so long as death remains, so long are the gods immortal. The knowledge of its immortality was graven into the image's mocking mouth, into the sightless, all-seeing eyes.

Barclay stood with one foot on the altar steps, and stared up into the frigid face and blew rings of smoke into the wide, cruel nostrils. There was more than a sightseer's insolent disregard in the action. It was a sneer and a defiance. He spat on the altar-step. But when a hand striking invisibly out of the darkness sent him staggering to the wall he screamed like a child whose nerve has snapped suddenly under a long, agonizing tension. His mouth was open, changing the character of his whole face. The cigarette had fallen and lay like a tiny burning eye on the stone flags. Vahana, the Sadhu, ground his heel upon it. Whether he had been kneeling in the

shadow or whether he had crept after the interloper could not be told. Gaunt and naked, the bones of his chest and ribs starting out under the straining flesh, the wild grey hair tossed back from his face, he sprang up before the idol, protecting it with outstretched arms whose long, attenuated lines flung the shadow of a huge cross on the wall beyond.

Neither man spoke. Barclay bent down and picked up his helmet, which had been knocked off, and, obeying the Fakir's imperative gesture, went out of the Holy of Holies through the priests' place into the columned, sun-lit outer court. There he laughed.

"You're a pretty custodian," he said loudly in English. "Enough to frighten a harmless globe-trotter out of his five senses. What sort of tip do you expect after that? Or does one pay extra for the thrill?"

There was no answer. Vahana went past him and squatted down in his accustomed place by the gateway. The fierce outburst was over, and he seemed to have forgotten Barclay's presence. The latter stood beside him, propping his shoulders against the lintel, and searched fumblingly for his cigarette case.

"I suppose it's allowed here, eh? You should put up a notice, 'No smoking.' Oh, I forgot—a vow of eternal silence is your speciality, isn't it? You needn't keep it up with me. I shan't tell." He laughed again. "You old humbug! I *could* tell a tale if I chose. What about that evening I caught you sneaking out of

Gaya? Been having a compensating orgy, no doubt."

The Fakir shot a rapid upward glance which Barclay caught with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Well, you understand English, anyhow, which is a good thing because I want a word with you."

He lit his cigarette deliberately, and, folding his arms, surveyed the wide stretch of plain before him. Save for the high grass, it was barren to the river edge, but beyond that broad, swift-flowing barrier it became rich with pasture and golden harvest. Barclay's eyes narrowed at the still ardent sunlight, but beneath the heavy, drooping lids there was a gleam of some smouldering passion, triumph—resentment.

"Not much of that crop that isn't mine," he said loudly. "They needn't call me Sahib—not yet—if they don't want to—but I'm lord here, for all that. I've got the whip hand, and that's what matters."

The Fakir paid no heed to an outburst which was indeed not intended for him. He bent forward from the hips and whistled softly, on one monotonous note, the while swaying from left to right with rhythmic precision. In a minute the tangled growth which, like the first low waters of an incoming tide, spread out from the jungle and lapped the temple walls, rustled, parted, and a black glistening body writhed out into the sunshine. There it paused, listening, its arrow-shaped head lifted out of the tight coils, and moving to the measure of its

enchanter. Barclay looked down and started and then laughed.

"Practising for the great show, eh? I suppose it'll keep the old story going—the jungle of serpents. Lord, how you must hate us, with our education and uplifting of the masses. One of these days I'll clear the jungle and build a factory, and you can go out of business. That old trick——!"

Still laughing, he crouched down on his heels and hissed gently, his black eyes intent on the reptile's poised and swaying body. Vahana continued to whistle. They had entered into a competition which to Barclay was a mere jest. But the serpent had grown still, attentive, its ugly head drawn back in an attitude of cold deliberation. From time to time its lithe, evilly forked tongue shot out and then an expression seemed to dawn on the flat face—a kind of satanic pleasure. Then, suddenly, as though arrived at a decision, it uncoiled and came gliding towards Barclay. Barclay no longer called to it. His eyes were clouded and stupid-looking. He glanced up at Vahana and found that he was being watched. Between the old man and the uncannily moving adder there had developed an affinity. The Fakir's face seemed to have narrowed and sharpened. From the wide cheek-bones down to the chin there were two straight converging lines between which ran the cruel curve of the mouth. The eyes were hard and dead as a basilisk's. But, like the reptile's, they

expressed something—a sinister amusement, a soulless, ageless wisdom.

Barclay made a fumbling gesture.

"Look here, I didn't know—call the brute off—I never tried——" He was stuttering. The defiant arrogance had gone out of him. He had become curiously afraid. Vahana whistled again, and within a foot of Barclay the adder recoiled, hissing resentfully, and swung to one side. Vahana held out his wrist and the sinuous body twisted itself about him in a monstrous bracelet. Barclay watched, with a sick fascination. His fear had been neither physical nor passing. In some odd way the incident had shattered his self-assurance, even his self-control.

"I didn't know——" he began again. "It must just have been chance. I had never tried——"

His voice failed, and died into a shaken silence. The reptile, lying with its head on the back of Vahana's fleshless hand, held the Eurasian in the malevolent circle of its watchfulness. Its beady, unflinching eyes neither appeared to move nor to be fixed on any definite object, yet when Barclay shifted his position they did not leave his face. Thus they remained, staring at each other. Vahana had sunk into an apparent apathy of meditation. But it was no more than an appearance. Between the three there was now a living, feverish communication.

Barclay roused himself at last.

"Look here—I didn't come here for this

tomfoolery. Look at this. It was my mother's. Some one—Lalloo the Kara—told me a tale about it. Said it belonged to—to your wife. I want to know. I want to know who the devil I am. If it's true then I shall know."

Vahana glanced at the gold circlet held out towards him. The adder hissed furiously and he whistled it back to its sluggish content. But he had nodded in assent, Barclay drew his breath between his teeth.

"So that much was true. I've got to think this out. I'm not your son. I've good English blood in my veins, I've known that since I was a kid. If it was Tristram, senior——" He stopped. Vahana had lifted his head, and the change in him struck Barclay silent for a moment. Then, gathering his determination, he added rapidly, scarcely above a whisper—"whom you murdered."

But it seemed that the Fakir had not heard, or that if he had heard the words reached him only as an echo, a shadow of something terrible and actual. The change in him was indefinable. He had scarcely moved. Yet Barclay stared at him stupidly, and a moment looked round to follow the gaze of the fierce expressionless eyes. Then he, too, became silent.

A horseman rode along the river-bank. Evidently he had come some distance, for the nose of his amazingly lean, steed grazed the ground and he himself hung in the saddle. As he passed he turned

his head towards the temple, but either the sun, setting with long upward striking rays behind the hills, blinded him, or the watchers were too well hidden in the shadow of the gateway. He did not see them, and, coaxing the dejected quadruped to a canter, disappeared presently in the direction of Heerut.

"Tristram Sahib by the grace of God!" Barclay muttered. "Tristram Sahib!" He repeated the name, pressing into it a restrained bitterness which suddenly burst from him in a wild incoherent deluge. "Sahib—Sahib! Good God—and what am I—with blood as good as his—his blood—Meester Barclay, eh?—damn him—damn them all. What right has he got to treat me like dirt—or any of them? What right? Aren't I one of them? Have I got to pay for their low, mean sins—their little, back-door intrigues? I'm English too—it's their law—why don't they keep to their laws, damn them——"

His voice quivered. He broke down pitiably. It was as though a garment which he held jealously about him had been torn from him and with it his manhood, his mincing, insolent, yet timorous pride. As he crouched there, the tears of mortification and rage on his cheeks he underwent a mysterious change. The over-perfect English clothes no longer disguised him. They had become grotesque.

Vahana looked at him, looked long and intently, and then at the bracelet lying between them. He

touched Barclay on the arm, and with his forefinger began to write in the thick dust.

CHAPTER XVI
A MEREDITH TO THE RESCUE

In the belt of fertile land about Heerut the work of irrigation for the *khareef* had already begun. Half-naked men and women in gay-coloured *chudders* laboured in the slanting ruts which stretched down from the river and criss-crossed over the wide fields in a maze of intricate cunningly calculated lines. They worked in complete silence, like a colony of ants, hurrying backwards and forwards, their lean, fragile-looking bodies bent under crushing burdens of freshly turned earth, their faces set in patient acceptance. So much depended on the *khareef*—a meagre sufficiency or a dearth that was always complete—an avalanche of famine sweeping whole communities from existence. Not that life or death was of much significance. They fought for life half instinctively, half because the Sahibs willed it so. It was a hard business either way, and that much they realized dimly.

Tristram drew rein to watch them. Beyond the river the white ungarnered corn lay in its silver fields awaiting its long-delayed hour. He remembered how

in the winter months all Heerut had laboured at its irrigation—even as they laboured now—thinking of the harvest. And now the harvest was there and had begun to rot. Disease and the dreaded, docilely accepted quarantine had stayed the hands which should have gathered it. Now those who survived turned to the more pressing task—to the crumbling canals which were to bring life to the summer rice-crop. What was lost was lost. The past was past; but the grim, forbidding shadow of the future remained always.

Therein lay the tragedy of the unresting, patient figures—the labour that was so often foredoomed to fruitlessness, the struggle against an enemy who could never be wholly vanquished, the hope of a victory that could never be more than a breathing-space, a mere margin of life. But the greater tragedy was their patience, their passive acceptance of life as suffering.

It was that tragedy which Tristram saw as he watched them. For him it blotted out what was lovely and full of promise in the scene—the gay colours, the rich, deep sunlight on the fruitful fields, the semblance of prosperity. It made his greeting to those who passed him somewhat grim and less cheery than was its wont. The men and women nodded to him and smiled gravely in return. There was no formal, deferential salutation such as the Burra Sahib would have expected and received. He

was less and greater than any of the Sahibs who ruled their destinies, and they merely smiled at him. No other man was to them what he had become. Rough and ready of tongue, imperious sometimes, occasionally ruthless, he yet was never the representative of a ruling race. Other Sahibs they feared and worshipped—the great warriors, the myth figures of the rulers beyond the unknown, but Tristram was the man of their daily lives, of their great sorrows and little happinesses, the man who sat under the council-tree at night and listened to the last village scandal, or to some wonderful tale told by the village story-teller, who tracked his way down the contaminated stream of their faith to its pure source and drank with them. And they who had known little of pity and less of love came through him to a dim, faltering knowledge.

Through the busy stillness there sounded a shrill trumpeting and the rustle and crack of the high grasses before swift and headlong passage of an elephant. Tristram drew Arabella to one side. Already in the distance he had seen the glitter and flash of the Rajah's gaudy howdah, and was not unprepared for the procession which, now bore down towards the river. There were five elephants in all, the first showily caparisoned with a mahout in splendid livery, the others more seriously equipped for the hunt. Rasaldû and his guest, the new Colonel, whose face was overshadowed by his helmet, rode in

the first, and, seeing Tristram, nodded with a cheerful condescension and held up two fat fingers to indicate the success of their expedition. Then the procession rumbled past like a noisy, gorgeous carnival of life leaving a cloud of sullen dust and the grey bed-rock of reality.

An old man who had taken refuge under Arabella's lee put up a palsied hand and pointed in fierce scorn after the disappearing Rajah.

"His father—a cowherd——" he stammered. "His father served mine and betrayed him to the English."

Tristram nodded.

"And the Rajah who then was?"

"Dead, Sahib."

"He left no heirs?"

The sunken eyes were lifted for a moment.

"Sahib, there are things we do not even whisper among ourselves." Then his expression changed. It was as though a vizor had dropped over his shrivelled features. With bowed head he shuffled towards a group of villagers who had gathered farther off, and Tristram, becoming uncomfortably aware of a third presence, turned in his saddle. He saw then that, under cover of the procession's passing, he had been overtaken by a second horseman whose delicately built Arab showed traces of hard and recent galloping. The rider lifted his brown hand in formal salutation.

"I was loafing round the temple when I saw you

pass, Major," he said easily. "It occurred to me that our long-planned interview might take place now and here. Are you agreeable?"

"If you wish it."

"May I ride with you?"

"Are you going to Heerut?"

Barclay showed his white teeth in a brief smile.

"I hope so."

There was a moment of uncertainty on Tristram's side. He stroked Arabella's long neck thoughtfully.

"Still, I think we'd better say what we want to say now. Your mare looks pretty winded—mine's all in. It won't hurt to breathe them both."

"As you like," Barclay answered. His manner was touched with a certain tremulousness which might have resulted from his rash gallop through the treacherous grass. But otherwise there was no trace of the man who had broken down at the temple gateway. "Look here," he began abruptly, "do you think you're playing the game, Major Tristram? What's your idea? What have I done to you? We don't need to beat about the bush. I know quite well whom I'm up against. I tell you straight—I've got a short way with people who oppose me—I smash them. But I don't smash till I've tried reason. Why don't you let my affairs alone?"

Tristram stirred impatiently in his saddle.

"I'm not interested in your affairs, Mr. Barclay,

except in so far as they concern my friends."

"Friends!" Barclay laughed out with a forced good-humour. "And what have I done to your friends, pray? Look around you. Look at these rotten crops. Well, I've lent good money on these crops—lent it to your precious protégés. When am I going to see my money back?"

"When you want to," Tristram returned. "Next harvest, or as soon as the poor devils get a cow they can call their own—and fifty per cent. into the bargain."

Barclay shrugged his shoulders.

"Fifty per cent. covers the risks—no more."

"Then it's a pity you bother yourself."

"That's your idea of humour, no doubt, Major. But I'm dead serious. I know what you've done. You've set these people against me. You've used your influence to prevent my doing business with them. I've no doubt you used your power to terrify them."

Tristram laughed gaily.

"I did that," he admitted. "I believe they think you're the devil himself."

"And you think that's fair? What right had you ——?"

"I don't care to see people paying fifty per cent. interest."

"Very well. But what's going to happen? You're so damned thoughtful for your friends—perhaps you'll tell me what's going to happen to them. Those

weavers—at Heerut and Bjura and all round—they're smashed. No one will touch their stuff for a year at least. Are they going to starve—or are you going to advance them money out of your screw?"

Tristram looked up, his blue eyes resting calmly and even with a certain amusement on the other's dark and bitter face.

"In a sort of way—at least I'm getting the Government to take a hand."

"You—you did that?"

"I'm trying to. You're quite right. I've done all I can to keep you and your agents out. I'm a doctor, and the material conditions of my people concern me. I've seen some of your business methods, and I think you're unhealthy, Mr. Barclay."

Barclay contained himself with a desperate effort.

"My word, that may be truer than you think. I'm unhealthy to people who get in my way. Look here, Major Tristram—I don't want to use the screw—after all, we're Englishmen in a foreign country, and it's our infernal duty to hang together—but I won't be kicked out of things like that. I give you fair warning to leave my preserves alone, and I'll tell you why. I know things—I know something that would——" He stopped short. Tristram's eyes were still on his face. They had neither flickered nor lost their quizzical good-humour.

"Well, what do you know? It's rather funny, but

we both seem to have found out something detrimental about each other. For instance, though this is only our second meeting, I'm convinced that you're a thorough-paced blackguard, Mr. Barclay."

"That may be. My father was one."

"I'm sorry."

"You have good reason to be sorry." His lips were quivering. He burst out ungovernably. "You have your share in him."

"Mr. Barclay——"

"Tristram—that's what my name should be. Your father was mine——"

"Is that your attack, then?"

Barclay put up his hand as though to hide his unsteady mouth.

"No," he said. "It is not. But it is the truth. I can prove it. I guessed it some time back, but I wasn't certain. Your—our father, lived in my bungalow. It was there he was murdered—he and my mother by her husband. How much you know——"

"I didn't know that," Tristram put in quietly. He looked away from Barclay, and the latter, watching him with a fevered anxiety, saw that the fine hand lying on Arabella's neck had lost its absolute steadiness. "You must prove it."

"I can do so."

"If it's true—then I'm sorry—sorry I spoke as I did. You've had the beastliest luck—I beg your pardon."

He lifted his head again. The white gravity of his face lent the rather boyish words a sincerity which Barclay recognized with an inward faltering of his anger. For a vivid instant the two men touched spiritually, or met on some common ground of emotion—then broke apart.

"I don't want pity," Barclay exclaimed childishly, bitterly.

"I didn't offer you pity. Or if I did—I meant it for us both. It's not as bad—but I was rather proud of my father. My mother—we'll leave that out. And, anyhow—I suppose it's a small thing compared to what he did to you. It was a pitiless thing to do." He hesitated, and then added, with a shyness which sat quaintly enough on his big manhood: "I suppose we're brothers, then?"

Barclay drew back from the outstretched hand. A mad impulse had almost driven him to grasp it and kiss it, but he crushed it under, shivering from head to foot in the violence of the revulsion.

"So you acknowledge the relationship?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"We'd better look the thing in the face. I'm an Eurasian, and illegitimate at that. Are you going to own me before your friends?"

"Yes. I don't care what you are by circumstance. Illegitimacy and race are nothing to me. A man's a man."

"That's not the law," Barclay returned sneeringly.

"And I don't care a fig for the law either," Tristram said with a faint smile.

Barclay was silent. A dull anger was kindling in him. It was a deeper, more dangerous passion than that which had driven him to strike before he had intended. It had its roots in their fundamental antagonism of character as it revealed itself now, in Barclay's failure to strike hatred out of a man he hated. For a moment whatever was fine in him had flashed up in response to Tristram's simple humanity, but that was gone, and there remained nothing but the galling recognition of an inferiority which was not that of race or circumstance. And with that recognition the little light he had within him went out.

"That's all very well," he said at last, "but it's just talk. It won't help me. If you did recognize me, neither of us would get anything out of it. I should have to leave Gaya, and you'd get into trouble. That's not my game. The only brotherly act I ask of you is to leave me alone."

"I have told you already I don't want to interfere. I've got to."

Barclay gnawed at his thick under-lip, holding himself in, calculating.

"Look here," he began again, "I guess I've inherited something from my mother besides my infernal colour—a sort of instinct—a knowledge of people. That night I met you at Sigrid Fersen's I

found out something about you. I knew what was going on in you though you didn't know it yourself. I know what's wrong with you now. Well, I'll do the brotherly first. If you treat me fairly, you'll have nothing to fear from me—and besides that, I'll give you the straight tip—I know something of Sigrid Fersen. She wants the cream of life—it's a sort of religion with her. In London there wasn't a man or woman who could stand up to her in magnificence. There were the wildest stories told about her, and they were truer than most stories. She wouldn't stand this sort of thing—not if she were dying of love for you. Take my word for it—you'll want money—any amount of it—then you'll stand a chance with her ——"

Tristram, urged by a sudden disgust, and an intolerable unrest, turned Arabella's head and touched her to a walk. But Barclay was beside him, leaning towards him, talking rapidly.

"Well, you can have money, Tristram"—and now he was using the Christian name with a deliberate purpose—"you can have as much as you need. I tell you this country is like an unworked mine. I'm going to work it. I'm going to be as rich and powerful as the pioneers in South Africa. These Anglo-Indian officials treat India as though it was a sort of toy—a kind of game against heavy odds. There isn't a business man among them. I'm a business man. And I'll take you into partnership—a sleeping partner

with a quarter share and nothing to do but to sleep hard. I swear to you that in a year or two you can marry any one you please—I tell you she's hard up ——"

Tristram pulled Arabella to a standstill.

"Don't talk like that," he blazed out. "I don't want to think you a scoundrel. If there is any blood common to us both I don't want to loathe it. You've had rough luck—it doesn't need to make you a cad."

"Doesn't it? I'm not so sure. What do you expect me to do?"

"Throw up this slave-driving business. I'll stand by you. I'll see you through, Barclay—whatever one man can do for another I will do——"

"Will you? Will you come and live with me in Calcutta—with my people—the only people who won't treat me as though I were a nasty cross between a human being and an animal—blowsy, feckless, shiftless outcasts—will you? Well, you might—you're credited with queer things of that sort, but it would do for you. Your white blood wouldn't stand it. Nor will mine. I've got to get away from them. It's our father in me. But there's nowhere for me to go. I've got to make my world—make it in blood and sweat if needs must. When I've money enough to buy up Gaya, Gaya will accept me fast enough."

Tristram shook his head.

"You said just now that we behaved as though

we were playing a big game," he said. "You may be right. And good sportsmen can't be bought."

"Can't they? Well, we'll see. Meantime, if there's a word of sincerity in all you've said, either come in with me or keep out of my way. I can make you a rich man, Tristram; don't forget that."

"You're asking me to visit the sins of your father and mine on to thousands of these luckless people."

"Put it that way if you like. I'm going forward, whatever you do."

"Then I shall fight you with every atom of influence and power I have."

Barclay tore at his horse's mouth, dragging the animal round on its haunches so that he faced Tristram. Both men were breathing heavily as though the struggle between them had become a physical one. Barclay thrilled with a savage satisfaction as he saw that the man before him was as shaken as himself, black-browed, hot-eyed, with a mouth set like a vice behind the short beard.

"Then I'll smash you, Tristram—I've got reason enough to hate you without that—you've got everything—now I'll smash you—I can and I will ——"

Suddenly Tristram's face relaxed. He broke into a big unaffected laugh.

"We're like two villains out of old Adelphi melodrama," he said. "We've made each other unacceptable offers and threatened each other, and

now I suppose it's to be a fight to the finish."

Barclay nodded. The laugh had been more bitter than a blow. He turned his head away so that Tristram should not see the treacherous weakness of his mouth. Then with a muttered exclamation that was half a curse, half a sob of ungovernable passion, he gave his trembling mare her head and galloped recklessly back the way he had come.

Tristram looked after him until Arabella, of her own accord, resumed her patient amble towards Heerut. The darkness began its race over the plain and swept up the little shadows of the field workers as a wave sweeps up driftwood. They came together silently; in a weary, dejected stream resumed their trudge along the rough tracts, bearing Tristram on his gaunt steed in their midst like the high effigy of a god. Thus they brought him to the doors of his hut and there left him, each man creeping in the same ghostly silence to his own hovel.

Owen Meredith was seated at Tristram's carved table, reading by the light of an oil-lamp. Tristram had seen the reflection beneath the ill-fitting doorway, but first had settled Arabella for the night, talking cheerily to her and lingering over his task as though deliberately avoiding the moment when he should meet his unknown visitor. Now seeing Meredith, his face expressed something akin to relief. The two men greeted each other quietly, sincerely, but without effusion. They were men of equal moral

rank but of a different spiritual race. They respected each other, but real intimacy was not possible between them.

"I thought you wouldn't mind my dropping in on you like this," Meredith said. "I've been doing a round of the villages, and it was too late to go on. Besides, I was dog-tired. I daresay that's my real reason." He closed his pocket Bible as he spoke and laid his hand on it. He had not spoken the whole truth, but of that fact he was not even dimly conscious. He told himself that it was only right to look in on this lonely man. Tristram nodded absently.

"I'm jolly glad to see you. I've got a shakedown for visitors. You won't mind eating off one plate, will you?"

"Thankful to eat anything."

"That's good." He began to rummage in his little kitchen at the back of the hut and returned presently with the plate and some preserves. "It's not much," he apologized ruefully. "I always forget about food until I'm hungry. And then I want to kick myself."

"I expect we'll manage. You're all alone now."

"Yes. No indoor patients. It's quite queer not having a paw or a wing to bandage up."

"You've never found poor Wickie."

The man seemed to shrink a little.

"No. I guess if the next life allows it, he's not far off, poor old chap. He wouldn't be happy in Paradise

without me."

Meredith winced. It was the more painful to him because Tristram was obviously quite serious. To Meredith he seemed like a big, unconsciously blasphemous child.

"And Ayeshi—you must miss him, too."

"Yes." The answer sounded curt, but Meredith persisted. He had the feeling that, though Gaya's suspicions had been kept quiet for Tristram's sake, the latter knew more than he betrayed.

"It was rather queer of him, the way he went off in the middle of your illness. You thought he was so devoted."

"He was." Tristram spread out an old newspaper over the table. "You got the Rajah to subscribe for his education. Well, I suppose he's gone to be educated. It's what you wanted."

"I didn't expect him to go when he did."

"He had good reason. I trust Ayeshi. But what your education will make of him Heaven knows. A rotten, dissatisfied little clerk in a Government office, I suppose. A hundred years ago he would have been a king."

Meredith sighed wearily.

"I know you resented my interference. I've got to do what I can in my own way, Tristram."

"I know. But I wish you'd make Christians of our own people first. If you did that thoroughly, you'd find my villagers would come of themselves. They

hear a lot about Christianity. They don't see much of it."

Meredith's eyes flashed in answer. He leant forward across the table with his hand clenched on the black-bound Bible.

"You are quite right, Tristram," he said, with restrained passion. "We have failed badly hitherto. We have acted like cowards, whispering and murmuring of our religion as though we were half-ashamed of it. Who can believe in cowards? This people has got to see Christianity as the Romans saw it, apparent weakness pitted against the majority and triumphant. They have got to see what our faith means to us. Out here we are the early Christians. We must pass through the same ordeals, we must pay the same price. Therein lies our only hope of salvation, for ourselves, for these, our brethren for whose souls we are responsible to God."

"I don't know much about their souls," Tristram returned quietly. "I'm responsible for their bodies. It's quite enough. What do you mean to do?"

Meredith threw back his square head. There was something vivid and dominating about his personality at that moment which lifted mere fanatical rhetoric to real grandeur. In some such spirit Luther might have flung down his immortal challenge.

"Testify to my faith before Cæsar, Tristram."

"And who is Cæsar?"

"The people. When they go down to the river to worship their gods—at the Feast of Siva——"

Tristram got up, pushing his food from him.

"You must be mad," he said hotly. "What should we do, civilized though we are, if at Easter some Brahmin insulted Christ from our altar?"

Meredith met him without flinching.

"Yours is the wretched toleration of our age," he said. "There can be no righteous toleration of lies and wickedness."

"You know what will happen? There'll be rioting —bloodshed——"

"Possibly. I believe it to be necessary. I don't shrink from it."

"That's good of you." Tristram ruffled his shock of reddish hair in a fit of angry humour. "What the rest of your victims feel about it doesn't matter, of course. Martyrs you'd call them. They wouldn't be martyrs. If a horde of infuriated fanatics descend on Gaya, it will be a slaughter stage-managed and engineered by yourself. You and your like would be chucked out of India, and serve you right. Gaya doesn't want to testify to its faith. I doubt if it knows what its faith is." He stalked over to the open door with his back to Meredith. "Well, I shall warn the authorities," he finished.

There was a silence. Meredith considered his companion with a gradual relaxation of his intensity. He got up at last and laid his hand on Tristram's

broad shoulder. There was something shy and uncertain in his manner, like a school-boy who has been caught in heroics.

"You won't need to inform the authorities," he said. "I dare say I'm a pompous idiot. There won't be any slaughter. We're miles from Gaya. Their enthusiasm won't carry them that far. They'll duck me, and that'll be about the extent of it."

Tristram looked down at the dark eager face, and, catching the lurking humour in Meredith's eyes, laughed.

"Oh, well, if only you and I are going to be massacred, it's of no consequence whatever," he said. "There, man, finish your supper!"

But he himself left his food untouched. He went over to a little roughly carved cabinet and produced a tobacco jar and an old disreputable pipe. Meredith looked away from him, playing absent-mindedly with the knife which formed Tristram's dinner-service. His pulses had begun to beat faster. He was dimly aware now that he had come to Heerut with a purpose that he had cherished secretly and painfully for many months past.

"I suppose you've not seen Boucicault lately?" he asked suddenly.

Tristram did not answer at once. He seemed absorbed in the accurate filling of his pipe-bowl.

"Yes," he said, at last. "I saw him today."

"Any change?"

"None. I'm beginning to be afraid there never will be."

"Poor Anne!" Meredith said, scarcely above a breath.

Tristram came over to the table and sat down on the edge. He lit his pipe, and Meredith, alert now for every guiding sign, saw that the hand with the match shook.

"Why 'poor Anne'? It's been ghastly, of course—but then, what was her life like before? At least, there's no one to cow the spirit out of her. She's free."

"You don't understand Anne. I've known her so long. Perhaps, as a clergyman, I had a deeper insight into her mind. Boucicault terrified her, but she loved him. It seems odd, doesn't it, but at the bottom he was a kind of hero to her. She thought of him as he once was—Tiger Sahib—a daring, handsome leader of men. That's what's uppermost in her now. Everything else is forgotten and forgiven. So you can see for yourself what she is suffering. It's the pitiableness of the man's utter helplessness in the face of her mother's amazing attitude——"

Tristram swung himself off the table and began to pace the room with long, impatient strides. Meredith watched him unceasingly.

"I approve of Mrs. Boucicault's attitude," Tristram said, in angry challenge.

"A great many people do. They think she's well rid of a ruffian. But, as I've told you, Anne loved him.

She has a rare and wonderful spirit, Tristram, and she has forgiven. Her mother's flaunted happiness and frivolity were unbearable. She fled from it, and now she's longing for her father. She hasn't a penny of her own. It's a ghastly situation. The devil who did for Boucicault did for Anne."

Tristram stopped short. He was staring down at his pipe, which had gone out.

"You're confoundedly sure of things," he said brutally. "You know her so well. Why don't you marry her?"

"I asked her to marry me two months ago," was the answer. Meredith's hands were clasped on the table in an attitude which, but for his level voice and composed features, would have suggested an almost intolerable suffering. "She wouldn't have me, Tristram."

"I don't wonder," with a rough laugh. "What woman would care to share your life or mine?"

"You don't understand—it wasn't that. She'd be glad and proud to go into the desert with the man she loved. I wasn't the man. That's all." He was breathing thickly, and suddenly he got up with a gesture that even then Tristram recognized as poignant. "My God, man, why don't you go in and win?" he burst out.

They stared at each other through a long minute of silence. The pipe slipped from Tristram's hand and fell with a crack on the hard floor. He bent down and

picked it up. The stem was broken. He tried to piece it together with a sightless persistency.

"Are you—you trying to be damned funny?" he stammered.

"Do you think I should make a jest of a thing like that?" was the fierce retort. "What I've done would be the action of a cad if you weren't the man I know you to be. It hasn't been easy—you can guess that. But I wasn't going to see Anne's happiness break up or want of a little sincerity. I believed you cared. I've been watching you. I was almost certain tonight. I understood your principles—you wouldn't ask a woman to share your life—but I know what Anne feels—she'd stick by you, Tristram——" He faltered, the thread of his argument lost in a sudden ugly sense of uncertainty. He saw Tristram's face in the shadow, and its sheer expressionlessness frightened him. "I suppose I've behaved like a fool," he said. "A man who cares as I do is liable to become obsessed with an idea. Forget it——"

Tristram started a little, as though awakening from a deep mental abstraction. He came and stood at Meredith's side, laying the fragments of the old pipe on the table with a mechanical care.

"That's the only foolish thing you've said," he remarked, gently. "I don't believe any one ever forgets anything. It's just a sort of comfortable phrase — You did quite right—you clergymen have a kind of insight into things—you—you see where the shoe

pinches—don't worry—I'm awfully grateful. Even now, I see what a fine thing you've done—I shall realize it much better later on. You've lived up to your faith—you've made me respect it. It's a case of the old Pagan and the early Christian. No, I'm not jeering. I'm in deadly earnest. There, turn in and go to sleep. I shan't want my bunk tonight. I've got to think things out—get clear with myself. So many things have been sprung on me—I've got to be alone. But don't worry. You've done the right thing. Good night."

He held out his hand, and now it was quite steady. Meredith took it and wondered at the strength of it. In the dull, bitter reaction from sacrifice, he visualized the fervour of Tristram's happiness.

"Good night. Don't let Anne guess——"

"Never—on my word."

He went out. The night was dark and oppressive. A hush of exhaustion hung over the village. Afar off a jackal howled dismally, and was answered nearer by a prowling pariah dog. Tristram crossed the deep gutter which lined the uneven roadway. Though he could see nothing, he knew every stone, every turn; he could have named the invisible huts and their owners as he passed them. The pariah dog came snuffing round his heels, and he threw it a crust which it was his habit to carry in his pocket for the starving strays of the village. He heard the snap of its

famished teeth, and a hurried scamper through the darkness.

At the cross-roads a breeze came down from the west. It rustled through the mysterious, never-silent leaves of the council-tree. It seemed to him that their whisperings were the ghosts of familiar voices now still. He stopped to listen. He could hear Ayeshi's voice, low-pitched and meditative, the harsher notes of the headman:

"Ah, those were the great days—the great days ——"

The headman had been swept away in the last epidemic. Ayeshi was gone. He would never sit again by the red firelight and listen to the story of the Rani Kurnavati. He would never lie and stare up through the fret-work of peepul leaves and dream his boyish dreams of her. Gone—all gone.

He walked on rapidly. He had no consciousness of distance or any purpose—only a desire to be always moving. But at last a sound broke through to him—the dull, menacing roar of unseen water sliding past him into the darkness. He knew then that he had reached the limit of his respite. The menace was for him. This was the end of drifting—of all dreams. Here was the reality—the whole future to be faced.

He stood there listening—bracing himself....

It was close on daybreak when he returned. The lamp still burned dimly. Meredith lay on the camp-bed, fully dressed, apparently asleep. Tristram

glanced at the composed face and then stumbled over to the table against the wall and sat down. The struggle was over, but it had left him exhausted, broken, his mind blank save for odd distortions of memory. He thought he heard Wickie patter over the floor to meet him—Ayeshi's soft and friendly foot-fall —a voice in his ear—-"I could make you a rich man —you could marry whom you pleased——" He heard a woman speaking gently with a subdued triumph —"Is this your confession, Major Tristram?"

But Meredith was not asleep. He had spent the night in a bitter conflict of uncertainties, in prayer, in alternating thankfulness and dread. Up to now, his growing purpose had been a light in his path, brightening as his eyes strengthened to the prospect it revealed. He had hugged sacrifice to himself and grown peaceful in his surrender. Now that his sacrifice and surrender had been made full and complete, he had lost his vision.

On Tristram's return, he had feigned sleep instinctively. Now the big, powerful figure huddled by the table fascinated him. He watched through half-opened eyes, painfully aware that he was eavesdropping, spying, but unable to turn away. Something was to be shown, made clear to him. He saw Tristram pick up a photograph which had stood hidden in the shadow and hold it before him. He remained thus motionless for many minutes. Meredith tried to speak to him, to hinder at all costs

the self-betrayal which was to come. But it was too late. Without a sound, Tristram had dropped forward, hiding the portrait with his body, his face in his arms.

Thereafter Meredith lay still, with closed eyes, sick with an unformed sense of disaster.

By daybreak Tristram had disappeared. He left a brief note. He had been called to the next village—a case of fever. He hoped that the eggs would be all right for Meredith's breakfast. All very matter-of-fact and natural.

But the portrait on the table had vanished with him.

CHAPTER XVII

MRS. SMITHERS DOES ACCOUNTS

As she would have been the first to admit, arithmetic was not one of Mrs. Smithers's intellectual strongholds. Figures baulked her. They were an inexhaustible enemy which, when aroused, flung themselves upon her in serried legions and battalions, eluded pursuit, barricaded themselves behind mysterious lines, multiplied themselves into preposterous quantities, and utterly refused to "come out" and surrender to Mrs. Smithers's somewhat individual laws of subtraction and addition.

On this particular afternoon, she had determined on a grand assault, and had armed herself with a large sheet of paper, a pencil sharpened to a nicety, removed her mittens, straightened her wig, and figuratively rolled up her sleeves. Having made these preparations, which were probably intended more as a demonstration of impending "frightfulness" than as an actual assistance in her task, she took up her position in the dâk-bungalow dining-room and opened fire.

She had fought unflinchingly for an hour, when the curtains at the far end of the room were pushed aside with an impatience which Mrs. Smithers seemed to recognize. Before she even looked up, she turned the sheet of paper, with its pattern of astonishing hieroglyphics on its face, and set her mittens upon it with an air of fixing a tombstone over the body of her enemy.

"Why, lawks a-mercy, Sigrid, I thought you were sleeping!" she exclaimed.

"The punkah-coolie had a nap instead. It was so hot—oh, Smithy, what an annoying person you can be! I've been hunting for you for the last hour."

"In which case," Mrs. Smithers commented, with a judicial flavour of speech culled from the law reports, "you must have looked under all the chairs and tables. I can't see how anybody could hunt for anything in this nasty barn of a place without running into them in ten minutes. Not a decent door,

not a corner where you can get a moment to yourself —let alone escape from those crawling black things ——"

Sigrid Fersen sighed. She had been standing in the doorway, one slender arm, from which the sleeve of her pale green tea-gown had dropped back, raised to hold aside the curtain. Now she came forward, moving restlessly and noiselessly about the room, picking up one ornament after another and putting it down without apparently having looked at it.

"You never will let me wipe my boots on you, Smithy," she complained. "I've trained you to be a doormat ever since I was an infant in arms, and you still show not the slightest aptitude. One of these days, I shall lose patience and send you flying." She caught the line of contempt at the corner of Mrs. Smithers's prim mouth and came over and pinched her ear with real severity. "I saw that sneer, you horrid, disreputable old tyrant! You think I can't get on without you. I wish I could, just to spite you——"

She stopped short, as though losing interest in her train of thought, and stood at Mrs. Smithers's side stroking the latter's withered cheek with a light, absent-minded hand. Mrs. Smithers accepted the attention much as a cat would have done, without gush or undignified gratitude, but with sedate I-fully-deserve-it satisfaction. "Smithy, do you realize that we shall have to pack up soon?"

"And a very good thing, too. A nice sight you're

getting to look in this oven of a place."

"Am I? I thought so myself this afternoon. It quite frightened me. Smithy, make an effort and tell the truth. Am I showing signs of—of wear and tear?"

Mrs. Smithers unbent. She took the hand on her shoulder and kissed it abruptly and shamefacedly.

"Steel doesn't rust, Sigrid."

"Doesn't it? That shows what you know about steel. Also it proves you've been reading penny novelettes again. Still, there is such a thing as poetic licence, and as a compliment it will pass. No, I shan't rust, Smithy—I'd rather snap like the good blade of your metaphor——" She drifted along the currents of her thoughts for a moment, and then added abruptly, "So it's hey for England and the end of things."

"The beginning, my dear."

"I don't know. We're almost at the end of our tether."

"Well, you knew that would happen."

"Yes—I suppose I did. I remember making admirable, lucid plans to meet the event. Nothing particular has happened to upset them."

"Nothing at all, my dear."

"By the way, the Rajah has asked me to marry him."

Mrs. Smithers laughed. Her amusement was usually of a more restrained kind, and the laugh had a rusty, disused sound.

"That's a good joke."

"Isn't it? I don't think he would have offered me anything so respectable if he had had more pluck. He's terrified of me and of Gaya. He imagines Gaya would make him impossible if he insulted me. I've outgrown his original intentions altogether."

"What did you say?"

"I told him he wasn't rich enough. It was horribly vulgar, but it's the sort of thing he understands. I've never seen a man more humiliated. If I had told him he was a blackguard, he wouldn't have minded. It's wonderful how he has assimilated our Western ideals."

"Sigrid——"

"Yes, I know—I'm in a detestable mood. I'm upset, Smithy. I've always controlled my life, moulded it into the shape I wanted. I was so sure that I could never be beaten by it. I thought there was only one real catastrophe we human beings were afflicted with—ill-health—and that I was prepared to master in my own way. But now——"

Mrs. Smithers picked up her pencil and tapped the table with a judicial air of summing up.

"You're out of sorts, Sigrid. Look at things straight. Two years ago we started off on a wild-goose chase. I knew it was a wild-goose chase, but you had to be humoured and so I just let you run. Besides, you had a grain of horse-sense in you. If you couldn't find what you wanted in those two years, you'd take the next best thing. Well, you haven't

found it——"

"How do you know? What about the Rajah?"

"Sigrid—your mind wants a good spring-cleaning. It's full of cobwebs and horrors——"

"Or Major Tristram?"

Mrs. Smithers seized upon her mittens and folded them up into a tight ball and smacked them viciously down on the table.

"Of course, you're in love with him, the poor benighted, footling ninny. That's the whole trouble."

"And you're dying for me to marry him. That's why you're always insulting him."

She moved away from Mrs. Smithers's side and stood at the open window looking out on to the garden, her hand to her cheek in her favourite attitude of meditation. "Yes, I am in love with him in a superficial sort of way. It's his absurdity, his unreality, his utterly impossible conception of life. And his love of me. Just as absurd as the rest of him. A fantasia. Two years' worship of a woman he saw dancing for ten minutes before a vulgar, gaping, unseeing mob! Think of it. It's sheer worship, Smithy. He sees something miraculous—divine in me. That's the wonderful part of him. He's right. He's gone right through me to what is divine—my art. He saw me dance—he was just a country-bumpkin who didn't know Beethoven from Bizet—and he didn't worry about my beauty or the shape of my limbs, or wonder whether my pearls were real or who gave

them to me. He saw God in me. I knew that when I found my photograph on his table. In a kind of flash. It wasn't a silly, stage-door infatuation. It was real—a perfect understanding." She threw out her arms with a gesture of freedom, of spiritual expansion. "Oh, it tasted good, that understanding. I couldn't have done less than love him." She seemed to sink into a deep, brooding contentment, and Mrs. Smithers did not move or speak. "But I shan't marry him. I am not young any longer. I have built my house and have lived in it too long. I need space and splendour, magnificence. I should stifle in his hovel. I am no sensualist. I belong to the best of the old Greeks. No vulgar display of wealth, no ugliness of poverty—but absolute Beauty—that's my religion—the most austere religion of the world. He understands, but he cannot follow. He doesn't know it, but he has chosen the road of the Galilean—not the Galilean of the Cross, but the simple man who loved the sparrows and the lilies—and I follow Diana and Apollo——" She broke off with a sigh and turned away. "So that's the end of that. We shall pack our trunks, and one day it will be just an episode. But today—don't let any one worry me today, Smithy. There's some one coming up the drive now. Tell them I'm ill—anything—only don't let them worry me——"

She touched the old cheek with her lips, and then soundlessly, like a flash of pale light, had vanished.

Mrs. Smithers unfolded her mittens and put them on. Apparently unmoved, she was about to resume her offensive against her enemy, when Mary Compton made her appearance on the balcony. Whereupon Mrs. Smithers postponed her attack in order to settle first with the intruder. Her manner, however, was almost gracious. She liked Mrs. Compton. She liked her especially this afternoon because she was wearing one of Sigrid's frocks—by no means an old one—which Mrs. Smithers had altered with her own hands. This detail formed an unbreakable link of affection and fraternity.

Mrs. Compton did not wait for an invitation. She dropped into the nearest chair, discarded her garden hat, and flung her parasol on the floor, proceeding thereafter to ruffle her grey-threaded curly hair with an exasperated hand.

"Oh, the heat! Smithy, for pity's sake, don't tell me I've faced it for nothing. Sigrid's in?"

"She's in, Mrs. Compton, but she's not at home."

"Not even for me?"

"Not for a living soul."

"She's—she's not ill?"

"Not that I know of." She shot a glance at Mrs. Compton's crestfallen countenance, and relaxed her official attitude. "You can have a cup of tea if you like."

Mrs. Compton laughed.

"Well, it's a poor substitute, but I'll take it. I

should expire on your doorstep if you didn't give me something to revive me. I met that brute of a Barclay on the road and he offered me a lift. The mere thought of it will keep me on the frazzle for days. I only hope he isn't coming here."

"He'd better not," Mrs. Smithers observed, with grim significance. There was a moment's silence, and then she jerked her head in the direction of the curtained doorway. "It's the heat," she explained. "It's just wearing her to ribbons. The Lord be praised, we shall be going back to civilization soon."

Mrs. Compton sat bolt upright, red with consternation.

"She's not going back to England?"

"I hope so, I'm sure."

"It's—it's an engagement, I suppose?"

"H'm, a sort of one."

"Smithy—and it's just as though she only arrived yesterday. What shall I do? Everything will be nothing without her. What did she come for? Just to make us all hate each other, just to show us what a silly, colourless world we live in? Smithy, this means a divorce for me. I shall desert Archie. I shall live at stage-doors and spend my fortune on front seats in the pit. I shall see her dance at last——"

The very poignant feeling which underlay her desperate humour touched Mrs. Smithers to the quick. At all times she was inclined to treat facetiousness seriously, most of life's jokes having

been made at her expense, and she saw more of Mary Compton's grief than the latter knew.

"My dear, don't you do nothing silly. You wouldn't see her dance."

"In London."

"No."

"In Paris, then——"

"Not in Paris—nowhere."

"But, Smithy——"

"If she did, she'd——" Mrs. Smithers took her tongue between her teeth. She leant across the table, her stiff old body quivering with menace. "Don't you breathe a word—don't you let on—if you do, I'll—I'll ——"

What Mrs. Smithers would or would not have done Mrs. Compton never knew. In a state of uncomprehending consternation, she almost welcomed the diversion created by the entry of a frightened-looking servant.

"Mem-Sahib—if you please, Mem-Sahib——"

His announcement was also lost. He was pushed roughly aside and James Barclay entered. At sight of his tall, perfectly clad figure Mrs. Smithers was on her feet, and for a moment Mrs. Compton believed she intended a personal assault—a belief which Barclay himself appeared to share, for his attitude became more deferential though not less resolute. He bowed gravely to his opponent, including Mrs. Compton in the greeting. Mrs. Compton ignored him.

"I am sorry to be forced to intrude in this way," he began with a certain dignity. "It seems to be fated that I should have to burgle my entry. But I was practically certain that an ordinary appeal for admission would be ignored. So I just followed on your butler's heels. May I speak to Miss Fersen?"

Mrs. Smithers drew a deep breath of indignation.

"No, you may not. She's not seeing any one—much less you—you blackguard——"

Mrs. Compton jumped at the sheer vigour and audacity of the attack, and then, as she saw Barclay's face, was conscious of a pang of the half-angry pity which he had caused her once before. A peculiar pallor showed under his olive skin. He was no longer smiling, and his eyes had a sick, stricken look like that of an animal badly hurt. The next minute he was himself again, cool, resolute, without that insolence which stamped most of his actions as weak and fundamentally diffident.

"I am sorry you think of me like that, Mrs. Smithers, but I won't argue about it. I must see Miss Fersen——"

"Do you want me to throw you out with my own hands?"

"No, I don't," he returned, with perfect gravity. "All I ask of you is to give Miss Fersen this letter. It was written in case she refused to see me. It is a business matter."

Mrs. Smithers wavered, obviously nonplussed by the man's quiet resolution. In despair, she appealed to Mrs. Compton.

"What shall I do with him?"

Mrs. Compton stared out into the garden.

"You'd better take the letter, hadn't you? It gives Sigrid a chance to decide for herself."

"Oh, very well." She snatched the letter from Barclay's hands and made her exit with what sounded like the challenging snort of an old war-horse. Barclay maintained his position quietly. He made no effort to speak to Mrs. Compton, who continued to ignore him. But, without knowing it, his restraint began to trouble her, and she resorted to the mannerism of stage heroes when confronted by the villain and a painful situation. She opened a silver case on the table beside her, selected a cigarette, and began to smoke with an insulting satisfaction. Had Barclay offered her the lighter which she was certain he possessed, she felt that she would have infallibly struck him; but he stood stroking his moustache, and apparently as unconscious of her as she pretended to be of him. The silence became intolerable. Furiously conscious that he had beaten her on her own ground, she got up and went out on to the balcony, only to realize with increased annoyance that she had been beaten by a second. Mrs. Smithers had returned. She did not look at Barclay, and addressed her message to the

opposite wall.

"You can go in," she said.

He bowed, showing no sign of elation or surprise, and the door closed behind him. Mary Compton returned, and the two women busied themselves with the tea-things which had been brought in, paying the function more intent interest than was usual. They were both nervous. For all Mrs. Smithers's excessive clatter, they could hear voices, muffled and continuous, and something in the sound paralysed their initiative. Neither wished to listen, but they found nothing with which to cover their compulsory attention. When Mrs. Smithers spoke at last it was with a breathless tremulousness.

"I don't know what Sigrid did it for," she said. "She didn't want to see any one, and now this creature comes along. Just because he met her once at some reception he'd managed to wriggle himself into—she can be so idiotically good-natured—it was a begging letter, I'm sure: the nasty, cadging blackamoor."

Mrs. Compton did not respond directly. She had what, for all men say, is a quality equally rare in both sexes, a profound reverence for the reticences and secrets of her friends, and she wished to avoid the confidences which might be hovering on Mrs. Smithers's unsteady lips.

"I hate meeting that man," she said, by way of an answer. "He frightens me. I always think of him as an

English sin come home to roost—a bird of ill-omen, not necessarily bad, just foredoomed to evil. I wish he hadn't come to Gaya."

"I wish he'd leave Sigrid alone," Mrs. Smithers muttered.

Mary Compton knew now that Barclay had been at the dâk-bungalow before, and wished she did not know. The knowledge troubled her, increasing an inexplicable uneasiness. Something was going on in that next room. Though she could not and would not have heard the words, the voices persisted in attaining her consciousness. Their tone was neither angry nor excited, but intensely earnest. Business? What business could James Barclay have with a woman he scarcely knew? She could not avoid the question. Then came a silence infinitely worse than the voices—it was so sudden and prolonged.

Mary Compton became almost panic-stricken in her effort to escape from the fascination of that silence. She turned her attention to Mrs. Smithers, who had deserted her tea and gone back to her figures.

"Are you drawing patterns?" she asked hurriedly. Mrs. Smithers shook her head.

"Sums," she explained. "Never could do them even in me board-school days, and that's some time ago. Are you any good?"

"I wrestle with accounts once a week—not successfully. But that's not the fault of my arithmetic.

It's Archie's pay. Can I help?"

Mrs. Smithers sat back and folded her hands.

"What I'm trying to find out," she began, "is, what income would one have if one had two thousand pounds?"

"It depends on the rate of interest."

"What rate of interest can one have?"

"Well, three-and-a-half per cent. if you're rich, and five per cent. if you're poor. If one hasn't much, it's a case of sink or swim."

"Let's split the difference—say, four per cent. Here—you can have the pencil——"

Mrs. Compton laughed.

"I can manage that in my head. Eighty pounds would be about your income."

"Lawks a-mercy!" said Mrs. Smithers under her breath. She brooded over this information for a minute, in which her companion became aware that Sigrid was speaking again—very quietly. If she had spoken angrily Mary Compton would not have felt her heart beating against her ribs in an absurd, horrible excitement. "It's amazing what a little a lot of money is," Mrs. Smithers philosophized gloomily. "I've done a powerful lot of saving, and two thousand pounds seems a powerful lot to have saved, but what's eighty pounds a year? A mere drop in an ocean. One couldn't keep oneself in boots and shoes with it."

Mrs. Compton stared. Mrs. Smithers's elastic-

sided foot-gear did not suggest eighty pounds' expenditure, or anything like it.

"No—I suppose not," she ventured.

"And two thousand pounds, for that matter," Mrs. Smithers continued, with increased contempt. "What's the good of that? One couldn't live decently for six months on it."

"I could," Mrs. Compton assured her with a smouldering twinkle in her bright eyes; "but, of course, I'm different. I say, Smithy, are you going on the bust—painting Gaya red and that sort of thing? Do include me in the invitation if you are. I'd just love to do something outrageous." But Mrs. Smithers remained coldly unresponsive, and she got up with a sigh of discomfort. "Well, I'm off. I can't stand that man's voice, and I don't want to see him again. Tell Sigrid I've been, and implore her to come round to dinner. Archie and I are bored stiff with each other." She paused on the edge of the verandah, driving the point of her parasol in between the flags and becoming violently slangy. "I say, Smithy dear, you know I look upon you as a sort of guardian angel to Sigrid. I just wanted to say—if there's anything wrong—any one who's in need of a kicking or—or anything of that kind—or, in fact, if Sigrid wants a body-guard physically or otherwise—just drop us the wink. Archie and I are on."

She was blushing hotly. Mrs. Smithers cleared her throat.

"I shall certainly drop you the wink," she said, in her best manner.

Mrs. Compton nodded, opened her parasol, and set out to face the stretch of hot road back to her own bungalow.

Ten minutes later the door between the two rooms opened. Mrs. Smithers did not so much as look at Barclay, her only intimation that she recognized his passing being a sudden stiffening of her long back. Barclay bowed to her, still very calm and unchallenging, and went out.

Mrs. Smithers waited until she heard the crunch of wheels fade along the drive, and then sailed indignantly into the next room. She was trembling a little and desperately anxious to appear merely angry.

"I can't think how you did it, Sigrid. There was Mrs. Compton wanting to see you, and instead you talked and talked to that nasty half-caste. I was ashamed—I was really—"

She stopped, at the end of artificial fury, but still trembling. Sigrid stood by her writing-table. A long beam of evening sunshine rested lightly and lovingly on her. In her delicate shaded gown, her slender body tensely still and living, she looked like a huge butterfly, wings half-spread, poised for flight. Her head was bent a little, and she still held Barclay's letter in her hands.

"I'm sorry, Smithy. It was important. It seems

there's a kind of matrimonial epidemic in Gaya. He has asked me to marry him."

Mrs. Smithers burst into loud and uncontrolled laughter.

"I shouldn't have thought it would have taken you all that time to give him his answer—the creature——"

"I didn't give him an answer. I didn't know—I've got to think things over."

"Sigrid——"

It grew very still. Mrs. Smithers's withered hands fluttered up to her breast and rested there in a helpless weakness. Sigrid began to tear the letter across and across.

"Why are you so upset, Smithy? After all, it's just what we planned—just what you wanted. He's rich—very rich. He was explaining to me how rich. And I need money—a great deal of it—to live and die beautifully——"

"Sigrid!" The cry snapped the palsy which had laid itself on Mrs. Smithers's tongue. She came out of her weakness strong and fierce and outraged. It did not matter that her "h's" flew to the winds. There was nothing comic in her as she stood there, stemming the disaster with her utter disbelief. "You can't mean it—it would be a wicked, wicked thing. It would be a crime—a dirty crime—you'd be selling yourself—yes, I shall say it, Sigrid. I've stood by you through thick and thin, I 'ave; I've been like a dog that's never

questioned, never thought if what you did was right or wrong—I've licked your hand through everything —but you'd be no better than—than a woman on the streets——"

"Be silent!"

"I won't. This isn't what we planned. It's different. I'll fight you, Sigrid. I'll fight you every inch. I've got my share in you—I won't 'ave it spoiled and moiled. I won't." She paused an instant, drawing her breath deep and strong. "I'd kill 'im first," she said, between her teeth.

Sigrid half turned. Her face looked small and white, as though something withering had passed over it. The wry, unsteady smile at the corners of her blue-shadowed lips was like light on something dead.

"Not if I didn't wish it, Smithy. I daresay I shan't do it—I don't know yet; but, in any case, you can't get away—you'll lick my hand, as you call it, to the very end."

They eyed each other like enemies, battling will against will. The old woman wavered piteously.

"Sigrid, my dear—'ave pity—just because it's true—because I can't fight you—because I belong to you—'ave pity on yourself. Don't do it, my dear, don't do it, Sigrid. I've got a bit of money saved. You can 'ave it—every penny of it. I don't want it. It's your money—what you've given me. An old woman like me doesn't want much. Take it, Sigrid; it'll keep you for a bit, until—until——"

"It won't do, Smithy—I want money—a great deal of money. It costs so much to live magnificently —" She spoke with great slowness and deliberation. Suddenly she turned. There was a kind of panic in her eyes. "Life's not got to be too strong for me—I've got to go on as I will—stick to me!"

A wave of delicate, youthful colour swept up into Mrs. Smithers's cheeks. Her whole life, lived selflessly, loyally, in another's splendour culminated in this moment—in this appeal. She held out her arms, holding the half-yielding half-defiant figure in an embrace which challenged heaven and earth.

"As though I shouldn't" she muttered fiercely. "My dear, as though I shouldn't——"

CHAPTER XVIII
THE FEAST OF SIVA

They came, so it seemed, from all the corners of India—from the east and west, north and south—thin streams of life trickling across the fields and down the mountain sides, till they converged in a broad, sluggish river which poured ceaselessly, irresistibly towards the place of its dreams and prayers. They had appeared miraculously, as though at a signal they had sprung up on the edge of the horizon and began their pilgrimage, as a conquering army bears down from all sides on a helpless citadel. But in reality they knew nothing of each other, and there was no order in their advance. Some had come from the neighbouring villages, some from villages hundreds of miles away. Some had packed up with wife, child, and household gods the night before—some many months ago. They had come over the mountains, down lonely passes, through wild tracts of country where dangerous and desperate marauders, man and beast, preyed on their defencelessness. They had borne hunger and thirst and much sickness. Many of them had dropped by the way. But there had been no lamentation, no

turning back. They had no interest in each other. Humanity, brotherhood, a common faith—these things were without meaning for them. Yet, where danger threatened, little groups had herded together, driven by fear and instinct rooted deep in the trackless jungle of humanity's beginnings. They knew no pity. A pilgrim died by the roadside, and they looked at him indifferently, as at a commonplace, and he himself watched them pass with patient, unexpectant resignation. Suffering and death were part of the scheme of things. They lived under the shadow of a Juggernaut, and today it was this man's turn to go under, tomorrow another's. They had no hope and no clear faith. Their imaginations could not conjure up much to hope for—a child perhaps, the fulfilment of a curse against a neighbour, sufficient harvest—and there were so many gods. And yet they came, mile after mile, footsore and hungry, gravely or passionately intent on a mystic goal whose significance they could not formulate even to themselves. The gods knew, and the priests perhaps; but the gods were silent in these days, and the priests kept their counsel.

Tristram stood on the outskirts of the village and watched them come down through the glory of the sunrise. They rolled past him in a cloud of dust and a blare of harsh-throated instruments and the rattle of native drums. The bright morning rays picked out a hundred glints of colour from among them—here, a

gay woman's *chudder*, there a rich *puggri*, or the glitter of gold ornaments, carried secretly and at great risk through the long journey, or the saffron robe of a holy man. All the stages of growth and decay were there—Youth restraining its steps to the halting measure of age, rags and tatters and gaudy finery, gentle, mysterious-eyed women, lithe-limbed boys and half-naked, pot-bellied babies rolling bow-legged at their parents' side, comic as young puppies. Last of all, grey-bearded and scarcely human, a fakir crawling on hands and knees through the rising dust. So his oath bound him. Years ago, he had started out on this pilgrimage. Now the end was in sight. He glanced up as he passed, but his face was without expression. Perhaps in those years he had reached his goal—indifference, Nirvana, where there is neither desire nor hope, pain nor happiness.

An odd misery laid hold of Tristram as he watched them. It was a pageant of life, all humanity struggling on through the heat and turmoil of years, driven by a secret, fathomless impulse, obeying the behests of self-created gods, seeking a self-created goal out of the desperate need of their hearts. And tricksters and men of God, fanatics, conventionalists, bread-and-butter priests, preying on each other, trampling on each other, pushing always forward in pretended knowledge of the Force that drives them.

But, to the man standing at Tristram's side, it was just a tiresome business. He was a captain in the

native regiment, and was there with a handful of men to keep order if order could be kept.

"I daresay there'll be a shindy by nightfall," he remarked. "There always is. Can't think why we put up with it. We shall have a Holy Place on every inch of the river if we go on encouraging them like this."

"I suppose they've got to have a religion," Tristram observed absently.

"Well, I wish they'd have a nice, quiet, Sunday-go-to-meeting one like mine. Besides, it doesn't mean anything to them. It's just their way of taking a summer holiday."

Tristram laughed and turned away.

"Oh, well, if there are any bones broken, you'll know where to find me. And keep your eye on Meredith. His religion isn't the quiet, unobtrusive kind you favour."

"Good old Meredith!" the other man rejoined comfortably.

Tristram made his way along the fringe of the procession back to his own quarters. When he closed the door he shut out the light and dust, but not the noise, and for that he was conscious of a vague thankfulness. The quiet of the place had begun to haunt him. Rather than help him forget, it reminded him of what was no longer there. He was always looking round involuntarily for Wickie, peering into his favourite hiding-place in the shadow, as though the bright brown eyes would have to answer his

appeal, with their solemn, impudent contemplation. Or he would rap out an order to Ayeshi—and catch himself up only to realize the heaviness of the silence which answered him.

And there were other things that troubled him—the carved chair where Sigrid Fersen had sat and looked at him with her disturbing eyes. At the time, she had seemed unreal, a vivid day-dream, a white glowing figure of his fancy, and now she was there always, dominating his consciousness. The place where the picture of the dancer had stood was empty, too, yet he saw her—the radiant head, with its crown of vine-leaves, thrown back, the mouth a little open, as though even in that moment of deliberate pose she breathed the ecstasy of living. That was what mattered, what made her most wonderful, and the poise of her body, stereotyped enough and within the compass of a ballet girl, a thing of Supreme Art.

He turned resolutely away from the empty place, allowing the tumult from without to pour over his vision of her, and went to his day's work. A subdivision of his little kitchen formed a combined laboratory and chemist's shop, and he set about cleaning his instruments, tidying up the bottles, noting failing supplies. That had been Ayeshi's job. He thought of Ayeshi as he dipped the instruments into the sterilizer, wondering vaguely what he was doing, what he thought. Ayeshi, he knew, had found

Boucicault and Wickie's body, and probably had buried the latter out of sight. He had shielded Tristram. Probably, too, he now sweated in the Calcutta University with bitter thoughts of a man who had prated so much of life and half-killed a fellow-creature for the sake of a dog. The idea did not hurt Tristram. He ached for the comradeship of the mysterious, romantic boy, but he had no sentimental reverence for himself. He had never realized that he had ever been so much as an ideal—idealizing in his own life too ardently to consider himself at all.

He hummed as he worked. To others, the tune might have been unrecognizable, for at the best of times his voice had an uneven quality, and in singing it escaped control altogether. But in his brain the melody ran smoothly and beautifully. In the midst of it, he heard the latch of the door fall, and went out with his sleeves rolled up to meet the newcomer.

The door was wide open and framed her as she stood with her back to the sun-flooded village street, smiling at him.

"I heard you singing," she said, with subdued mockery. "It was irresistible."

He strove to answer her, denying the savage, joyous leap of his pulses. A kind of stupid deliberation settled on his brain. He found himself wondering whether she had removed her helmet because she knew the light would be shining on her

hair.

"Did you come all the way from Gaya to listen?" he asked at last, with a brief laugh.

"No, I came for the fulfilment of a promise," she answered. "For my day out."

"It was a bad—an impossible day to choose."

"It was my last day."

He was silent for an instant. He had tried to adjust his tone to hers and had failed. Now he ceased to try. He spoke roughly, rather brutally.

"Then you're leaving Gaya?"

"I don't know—perhaps. It all depends. At any rate, this was my last chance."

"I don't know how on earth you got here."

"On horseback. I've put my steed with Arabella. You don't mind?"

"It's not safe for you here—on a day like this."

She smiled again, and for the first time he realized something new in her amusement—a kind of repressed earnestness.

"I'm not afraid. Do you want me to go away?"

"No—you don't know how glad——" He broke off painfully, but she did not look at him or seem to notice that he had faltered. She bent down and put something which she had been carrying to the ground. It was a round yellow something which unrolled itself and developed four short legs, a stumpy tail, a sharp little head peering out of a mass of fluffiness, and a strenuous, defiant yap.

"I don't know what it is," Sigrid said gravely. "Perhaps God does—I don't think any one else could even guess. But I thought you'd like it."

"I don't understand," he said gently. He picked the little creature up and rubbed its black nose against his cheek. Then, looking at it, he burst into a big roar of real amusement. "My word, what an absurdity!"

"Yes, isn't it? And utterly forsaken. Mr. Radcliffe found it somewhere with a rope and a brickbat round its neck. That's why I thought you'd like it. At first, I meant to get you something first-rate—a thoroughbred with a pedigree—and then I thought you'd like this better. You see, it's a sort of memorial to Wickie. You know what people do when some one dies whom they love—they build something or endow something—something the dead person would like. Well, I think Wickie would like you to adopt that puppy."

He looked at her. There was a real tenderness in her eyes as they met his. He fancied that her lips were not quite steady.

"If you say so, it must be so," he said. "Wickie loved you. You knew all about him."

"We knew all about each other." She hesitated and then asked, "You'll keep my puppy?"

"Rather! It's been horribly lonely—I've wanted someone to give my scraps to——"

"The best bits! Oh, I know you, Tristram Sahib!"

They both laughed. And suddenly the constraint between them had gone. He busied himself eagerly, preparing Wickie's old sleeping quarters, filling the tin feeding-plate with recklessly collected puppy dainties.

"Wickie'll be jolly glad," he said, in his boyish way. "He'd hate me to be lonely. And it's been lonely without him."

"Yes, I know." She went and stood by his table, playing idly with the letters which lay heaped upon it. "And there's something I want to ask in return—a sort of farewell gift. Make this a real day for us both—give me a good time—humour me. Let us be real with each other—sincere, just as we really are and feel. A sort of feast of honesty and fellowship. Will you?"

He stood beside her, looking down at her from his great height.

"Our day of days?"

"The day of our lives."

He flushed deeply under his tan, but he met her eyes steadily. A subtle change had come into his feeling for her. He could not have explained it—it was an odd sense of quiet nearness, of understanding. And she, too, seemed different. At other times she had been in earnest, but not as now. There had always been that curious detachment in her, as though she stood apart and laughed at life and herself. Now for a moment, at least, she had

ceased to be an onlooker.

"Very well—we'll make each other a present," he said. "A day off from the world—something we won't account for to anybody." All at once he became recklessly happy. "I'll go and collect food," he said. "The pup can stay here and play *locum tenens*."

He came back presently from the kitchen. His sleeves were still rolled up, but he carried a basket under one arm and wore his helmet rakishly at the back of his head. Seeing him, the gravity passed like a mist from her eyes.

"Oh, you caricature of Hercules!" she jeered at him. "Tell me, have you ever worn decent clothes in your life?"

"Sometimes. I have to squeeze into regimentals on occasions—or into a frock-coat. You wouldn't know me—I look a regular freak."

"H'm! and what do you think you look like now?"

"Ariel shouldn't mock at Caliban," he retorted gaily.

"Even when Caliban throws Ariel's portrait out of the window." She pointed to the empty place on the table. "Have I sunk so far below your thought of me, Major Tristram?"

He became serious in a moment, but without embarrassment. She had a sudden pleasure in him as he came and stood beside her—in his bigness, in his sheer unconsciousness of himself and his strength.

She felt oddly compassionate, too—the awestruck compassion of a Brünnhilde for a young Siegfried.

"No," he said. "But I was a boy, at least, in thought and feeling—and you were a boy's dream. Now I am a man and you are a reality. It would have been an impertinence of me to have kept you."

She shook her head.

"There's more in it than that, Tristram Sahib."

"Yes," he assented gravely. "A great deal more."

They remained together an instant, looking down at the empty place as though it held a secret significance for them both; then Tristram turned to the door and made a little grandiloquent bow of introduction. His eyes had lost their seriousness and laughed at her. "Behold, the day awaits us!" he said.

They went out side by side into the glowing morning. The stream of pilgrims had grown denser and filled the street, beating up against the mud huts on either side and spilling over into the open doorways. And there was a thrill and fever in the air which gathered force, as at the cross-roads one stream poured into another and swirled and eddied in the effort to break a passage. Shrieks and cries, the beating of drums, the harsh calls of the mendicants, the tramping of thousands of feet, the swirl of dust which could not rise for the pressure of the struggling bodies—a mad whirl of sound and colour. Tristram turned to the woman beside him.

"Do you mind—can you face it?"

She laughed a little, with a repressed exultation.

"This is the tarantella as I danced it—the beginning before the madness comes—the rising of the tide. Can't you feel it beating in your blood?"

A fresh band, headed by a swaying banner, pushed its way through the leaderless crowd, and after that, carried on the shoulders of four sweating, staggering men, the image of the Triumvirate.

The sun poured down over the roofs and glittered fierily on the three faces of the god. They had been gilded afresh for the occasion, and the hand which had laboured at their features had not failed in its simple craftsmanship. Benevolence, cruelty, and an unutterable serenity stared over the heads of the tossing multitude. The idol swayed from side to side in its passage, and, as it caught the rays of the sun, gleamed with a living, sinister brightness. There were wreaths of faded flowers on the base of the altar, and there was white dust everywhere. The crowd surged closer, holding up its hands to it in greeting. Their lifted faces showed neither reverence, nor fear, nor hope, but a kind of frenzy seeking its outlet.

Slowly, triumphantly, the image rocked on its way towards the river, a spot of sullen fire on the breast of an ever-changing sea of colour. Like a dangerous backwash, the mob closed in, sweeping it forward and leaving behind a sudden relaxation—a breaking-up of the sea into a hundred drifting

particles. It was the passing of a mad dream. The sun blazed on to the peaceful bustle. The note of frenzy died down. The old fakir had crawled on his knees into the shade and held out his wooden bowl, bleating monotonously.

"Alakh! Alakh!"

A merchant came out from his hiding-place in a cowshed and exhibited his wares. The hovel opposite revealed itself as a cook-shop, where the hungry could buy pulse-puffs and dough-cakes and sweets of a hundred kinds. A sherbet-seller pitched his tent a few doors lower down and clinked his coloured glasses alluringly. An ascetic, with the face of a mediæval saint, sold gilt-papered corks from champagne bottles as sacred charms of marvellous efficacy.

Sigrid Fersen looked up into her companion's face and they both laughed, scarcely knowing why, but swept away by a childish pleasure in the swiftness of the change, in the naïve *volte face* of these simple folk, who a minute before had trampled upon each other in a paroxysm of religious frenzy and now wandered wide-eyed and eager amidst all these bewildering fascinations.

And perhaps, as the deep secret source of their pleasure, was the knowledge that the day was young and wholly theirs.

"I want to buy something," she said gaily. "Why should we be superior? It's our feast, too. And who

knows if their values are not as good as ours? if their faith in champagne corks isn't as effective as our superstitious belief in the mysterious horrors compounded by an honourable Dakktar Sahib!" She shot him a demure, malicious glance. "Come, I am going to buy recklessly!"

A bright-eyed boy beckoned them to the tray behind which he watched cross-legged and eager, like a handsome, bewitching spider. It was not in vain that he had bright eyes or that he sold wares dear to the hearts of women. The merchant in cheap stuffs from Manchester, and even the sherbet-seller, watched him sourly as the soft-footed, timid women hovered about him pricing his coveted treasures.

Now he looked up, showing his white teeth in a smile of innocent welcome.

"Gifts for the Mem-Sahib—and gifts for him whom Mem-Sahib loves."

Sigrid knelt down in the dust beside his tray, and rummaged through the medley of his stock. Ear-rings, bracelets, amulets, glass beads, vulgar trophies of Western taste—paste diamond brooches stuck on cardboard and labelled rolled gold—these last displayed with almost passionate pride, and here and there a scornfully suppressed relic of days when Manchester and Birmingham were not. Tristram stood beside her and watched her. He had the feeling that all this had happened before, years ago, and that this companionship of a day was just a link in a long,

unbroken chain of days. It was so simple, so natural. He felt no constraint, scarcely any excitement, just an all-pervading peace. They had always known each other, always shared their days, their thoughts, and desires. He did not think about it. It filled his senses with a well-being, a rare and exquisite content.

She gave an exclamation and held up something in the palm of her little hand. He took it from her. It was a bracelet made of seven threads of seven different colours and bound with a silver clasp. The boy-merchant shrugged scornfully.

"It is nothing—nothing, Mem-Sahib."

"Do you remember?" she asked.

He nodded—not looking at her now.

"The Rani Kurnavati——"

"Yes—that night when we sat by the moonlight and Ayeshi told us her story——" She laid an extravagant sum on the tray. "There, that is all I want."

The amazed merchant gasped his blessings after her. She walked on, threading her way through the aimless crowd, inspecting her purchase with a thoughtful pleasure.

"I wanted to give it you," Tristram protested, aggrievedly.

"And I didn't want you to," she retorted. "You have given me enough, Major Tristram."

Her solemn reversion to his title amused him. He watched her smilingly as she snapped the bracelet

about her wrist.

"What have I given you?"

"The cup. Have you forgotten? I was so miserable because I forgot to thank you. I'd never been remorseful in my life before, but I was remorseful about that."

"I'm sorry. Remorse is ghastly. And I hadn't expected thanks."

"You didn't expect to live. Ought I to give the cup back?"

"No."

"But your mother——?"

"I have told her," he said gravely.

They reached the confines of the village. The high grass had been trampled down under the passing of a monstrous animal. Through the dazzling blaze of sunlight they could see a black mass swarming along the banks, a huge, writhing octopus whose tentacles groped towards the temple with greedy, hurrying persistency. And in the midst of it, like a restless, menacing eye, the Triumvirate flashed backwards and forwards in evil, delirious triumph.

"They're bringing up their offerings now," Tristram said, rather grimly. "The Snake God and his retinue will have food enough for months to come. It's a queer thing—no one has seen these serpents in the memory of man, and yet it's true enough that native sceptics who have ventured inside the jungle have either never returned or come out raving

madmen. There is madness connected with the whole thing—a kind of delirium which we English don't understand. It's in their blood, just as it's in the blood of some families to respond to supernatural influences which others don't even feel. Anyhow, we'd better keep clear of them today."

"I have made my plan," she answered, with sedate authority.

He knew now where she was going. They made their way in silence down the length of the river, touching the monster only there where its tentacles reached up to the temple, and came at last to the green-shadowed backwater. Tristram held aside the branches of the trees for her to pass through, and their eyes met.

"Isn't this a fitting place to celebrate our day?" she asked, "—here, where a certain romantic Hermit beheld a vision and was not afraid?"

"Visions are not terrifying," he answered.

"But the reality——?"

She did not seem to expect an answer. The boughs of the trees had swung back into their place. They stood together at the edge of the water, looking down into its tangled depths, listening to the silence. Nothing had changed. It was as though time had fallen asleep, and they were still living in that first day of their meeting. The dense foliage of the trees walled them in from the heat and glare and tumult. The dull murmur that came to them from time to

time seemed no more than the soughing of a rising wind. The peace of it laid itself upon their senses like a cooling hand.

They sat down in the fresh grass, talking softly and only a little, fearing to disturb the sleeping spirit of the place. Tristram unpacked his basket and produced the day's provisions, over which they laughed subduedly. It appeared that he was cook as well as doctor, and she made wry faces over the probable ingredients of his dough-cakes. For her humour had lost its keenness and had become very young and a little tremulous. He responded loyally and easily. There was no constraint between them, no sense of trouble. They were comrades together, responding light-heartedly to the appeal of the sunlight, and the flowers burning brightly in the cool shadows. They did not know as yet that their real life lay beneath the surface of that easy comradeship in a great stillness where their own voices did not penetrate.

But that stillness mastered them at last, flowing quietly and mightily over their broken, careless talk. The sunlight, falling aslant through the trees touched the green stem of a high palm and began its upward journey. Tristram watched it. He had slipped lower down the bank, where he could see his own bulk shadowed darkly in the water and the pale, ghostly reflection of the woman behind him. At first, he had lain full length on his elbow looking at her frankly,

fearlessly, as she sat above him, her hands clasped about her knees, her fair small head bent a little from the light, so that her eyes seemed dark and more serious than her lips. Now he had turned away from her and watched the passing of the sunbeam. A kind of panic had gripped him. The time was passing. He had begun to realize dimly that what they had set out to do was impossible—a defiance of the law of life. A day cannot be set apart from its fellows either for joy or sorrow. It is bound up with them by whatever menace or promise they hold, and the menace of yesterday and tomorrow touched him like the breath of a chill wind.

He pointed out on to the water and saw that his hand shook. His pulses had begun to beat heavily, thickly.

"The lotus-flower has gone," he said.

"It is dead. It's so long ago—it seems only yesterday to us. Do you remember asking me if I wanted it? You were glad because I let it live out its life."

"How did you know that?"

"I knew that you loved living things."

"Isn't that a love common to us all?"

She gave a short laugh out of which the joyful irresponsibility had died.

"Men love ideas—the fetishes of their intellects. Or they love their cabbage-patch, or their country. Life and humanity are nothing to the majority. But

you cared—for everything." It was a long time before she spoke again, and then her voice had changed. It sounded languid—indifferent. "It must be terrible to kill," she said.

He stirred, drawing himself up.

"The unforgettable sin," he said.

"Unforgettable? Have you ever known any one who had killed——?"

"Yes. It was worse than killing. He smashed his man—crippled him for life."

"Perhaps he didn't care."

"He cared desperately. He thought of life as I do ——"

She laughed again.

"Another Tolstoyan! Well, he was punished, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, he was punished. Not by the law. He had no belief in that Fetish of Justice—an eye for an eye. His life was of value—to another. Of what use would it have been to have smashed it with the rest? He found the only way to make good the damage he had done—and he took it."

He spoke firmly, as a man does who has fought through to a clear issue. He heard her move—he fancied that she had held out her hand as though to touch him, and that her hand had dropped.

"Perhaps he was mistaken," she said. "Some one once said to me there is a curse on us—that we are damned to destroy. Perhaps the life he took was

justly taken—perhaps it was a bad, valueless life ——"

He turned impetuously, with an intensity of feeling far removed from his previous impersonal deliberation.

"You can't tell," he said. "That's the ghastly part of it—you can't tell. You find a piece of broken glass on your road. You grind it under foot or throw it away and think you've done your fellow creatures a service. And then a child comes along crying for its lost treasure. It doesn't matter that you were justified. The thing had its value, after all, and you smashed it. You hurt someone——"

"Some one is always hurt," she interrupted.

A mist of passionate introspection passed from his eyes, and he saw her face—very pale, with a blue shadow about the lips. He started, almost touching her.

"You're ill—tired——!" he stammered.

"A little—it was the heat and the crowd——"

He looked at the light on the green stem of the palm, as though to a warning hand. It had reached the end of its journey and had grown dim. He got up, holding himself desperately erect. "It's the end of the Feast," he said, "the end of our day."

But she shook her head broodingly.

"You can't tell that either—only the gods know the end, Tristram Sahib."

* * * * *

Something had wrapped itself about their senses. They had talked of impersonal things and—save for that one break of his—without emotion. But the emotion had been there, below the surface, crushed out of sight by an effort of the will which left them no physical consciousness. It walled them within themselves as the trees and dense foliage walled them in from the heat and tumult.

Thus the storm broke on them without warning. It had risen little by little with the dull boom of an angry sea. They had heard nothing. But there had been a silence so tense, so prolonged that they looked at each other, wondering, waiting, though they did not know it, for the scream that ripped through, tearing down the barriers of their unconsciousness, forcing a breach through which the full fury of the sound bore down upon them.

Sigrid had risen instantly to her feet.

"Tarantella!" she breathed. "Tarantella!"

He did not wait to speak. He pushed through the undergrowth, not knowing that she had followed him. On the fringe of the coppice he turned and found her at his elbow.

"Something's happened," he said briefly. "We can't stay here—we've got to get back to the village ——"

She nodded. A minute before she had looked ill,

almost broken. Now the colour burnt in her cheek, she held herself lightly, strongly, and her eyes shone as they swept the scene before them.

"Shall we get through?"

"I don't know—I don't know what's happened. It may be nothing——"

"You don't believe that yourself. It is something. Anyhow, we've got to try for it——"

The fear was in him, not in her. Even then, striding at her side, bracing himself for whatever lay before them, he wondered at her, thrilled at the joyous adventurousness in her. Her head was erect and she was smiling faintly. The howling of the frantic, demented mob which swept backwards and forwards across the plain did not seem to touch her. He felt how, with the coolness of a general, she was measuring the distances, their chances. He saw the tightening of her lips and that she had measured rightly.

"If it's us they're mad with, it will be a close finish," she said, with a low laugh.

He scarcely heard her. He was watching the men and women who overtook them and ran past. Their faces were unknown to him. They looked back at him—-with the wild-eyed curiosity of animals. As yet it was only curiosity. They were as ignorant as himself as to the passion which had broken through the crust of restraint and now raged in a mad whirlpool between the temple and the river. But the

infection of frenzy was upon them. They muttered as they ran past—broken sentences in a dialect which he could not understand. They were pilgrims from distant provinces. He knew that they were in the majority and that he could have no hold over them. They would sweep the rest with them—even his own people.

The sprawling mass of life which had hugged the bank of the river turned and rolled back. In an instant, it had blocked the narrow passage on which he had based his hope of escape. He could see the golden effigy swaying madly above the crowd like a bright, sinister barque on a black, raging sea, now flung back, now forward, but still drawing steadily nearer. Through the wild uproar of voices the dull thud of a drum persisted. It was as though in that frenzied movement there was a purpose—a blind, demented will to an end.

He stopped short.

"We can't go on—it's too late—we must make a dash back and try for the bridge——"

"It is too late," she answered simply.

He saw then what she had seen. They were cut off. From left and right, the streams of hurrying men and women converged upon them, sweeping them forward as an Atlantic roller tosses driftwood on its crest. For an instant they were separated. He fought his way savagely back to her side, and caught her to him with the roughness of panic.

She looked up at him, smiling tranquilly, inscrutably. "Afraid, Tristram?"

"Yes—horribly—hideously—if I had lost you ——"

"You didn't. I'm not afraid."

"I can't forgive myself——"

"Why should you? I am very happy."

"We must keep together. Give me your hand."

She gave it him. He remembered how it had lain in his once before, how the splendid vitality and strength of it had thrilled him. It thrilled him now, it burnt like fire through his nerves. They stood facing each other, holding their ground, swept into a moment's oblivion of all else but themselves. There was exultation in that grave, brief contemplation. The panic had died out of the man's eyes. He no longer pitied her or feared for her. He felt the joy of their new, fierce comradeship.

"If it were only myself—I could be glad——"

"Be glad!" she cried back. "Isn't it worth it?"

A wave of frantic humanity forced them forward. They held together. He heard her laugh—the eager, triumphant laugh of men in the glory of battle. "No one can separate us now!" she said.

"No one!" he answered gladly.

He knew it was true. Nothing, so it seemed to him, could break the steel link of their hands. But he had grown calmer. He had got to save her. The instinct which damns the weak acceptance of

annihilation burnt up clearly in him. He gave ground to the force behind him, keeping his feet with the utmost exertion of his strength, striving to force a passage towards the village. It was a vain effort. Faces were turned to him. He read their expression. The mere curiosity had become distrust—a furtive antagonism as yet unarmed with purpose. A fakir, wild-eyed, bespattered with filth, his emaciated arms flung up in imprecation, leered up at him.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

It was no more than a whisper. But it passed from lip to lip. They were pushed on, the circle about them tightening in a strangling noose. For all her courage, he knew that the woman beside him was weakening. He heard her voice, strained and breathless.

"Don't let me go under—don't let me go under ——"

He knew the horror that had forced the appeal from her—the terror which can change a man's heart to water—the horror of those pitiless trampling feet —of those mad mob rushes under which a human body can be stamped out of recognition. He threw one arm about her. He no longer resisted. It was better to go on—to be forgotten. But the stench of those hot, dust-laden bodies sickened him. It was the smell of hatred—of madness. It sapped his strength. It was like the breathing in of a hideous poison.

They swept on. They had reached the densest

part of the crowd. Above them he could see the golden image, swaying dangerously from the shoulders of its staggering bearers. A ray of red light from the sinking sun was on the face nearest to them. Its frozen cruelty seemed to have drawn life into itself—to be sucking up a horrible vitality from the very passions to which it had given birth. To Tristram's blurred vision the eyes blazed—the mouth gaped with a grotesque lust of hatred.

It was then he saw Meredith with his shoulders to the base of the altar, his arm raised, shielding his face. A half-naked fakir sprang at him and dragged the arm down, and Tristram saw what had been done. The face was blotted out with blood. The lips were moving. In one clenched hand was an open Bible. Through the hellish pandemonium Tristram caught a single sentence:

"Father, forgive them——"

Tristram flung the man in front of him aside. He had felt the tense revival of strength in his companion like an electric current through all his nerves. They had got to stand together—to go down with the man of their race, for good or evil uphold him.

"We're coming!" Tristram shouted. "Hold on!"

Meredith turned his head in their direction. Perhaps he saw them through the veil of blood. He made a gesture urging them back, and in the same instant the man whom Tristram had flung aside

revealed his face.

It was Lalloo, the money-lender.

"Dakktar Sahib!" he said.

"Damn you—let me go past——!"

The old man smiled imperturbably, shrugging his shoulders. The whisper, "The Dakktar Sahib," ran like an undercurrent of sound beneath the screams and curses of the swaying, tossing multitude. A woman spat in Meredith's disfigured face. Tristram lurched forward, but already they had lost ground. Some new force had them in its grip. They were bound in a revolving circle of which Lalloo had become the pivot. Tristram looked about him. He recognized faces which seemed to have sprung from nowhere. There was Mehr Singh, the corn-dealer, and Seetul the weaver, Peru the village ne'er-do-well —men with whom he had lived and suffered. He cursed at them in their dialect, and they regarded him stolidly. He shook Lalloo fiercely with his free hand.

"Let us get out of this—I've got to get back to my friend—do you hear. I've got to help him—do you hear, you lying, grasping old man?"

Lalloo shrugged his shoulders.

The circle rolled on. Meredith and the shining figure of the three-faced god had gone down in the black tumult. The roar of voices began to fade like thunder, rolling faintly in the distance. A breath of fresh air fanned their faces. The circle broke

suddenly scattering in all directions.

Tristram still held Lalloo by the shoulder.

"You—you saved us," he stammered thickly. "You saved us—didn't you know me better than that ——"

Lalloo rubbed his thin dark hands and smiled vaguely.

"What have I done, Sahib?" he said. "What have I done?" And with an amazing facility freed himself and glided into the shadow of the deserted village.

They went on, not speaking, not looking at each other, sick with the horror of that which they had left behind them. At the door of Tristram's hut a man came running towards them. It was the captain of the native regiment, cursing volubly.

"Tristram—where the devil have you been? What's happened! What set them off?"

"Meredith—preaching the love of God to Siva."

"Oh, damn the parsons!" He mopped his face in helpless exasperation. "Well, I've had a nice time of it. Men vanished into thin air. They've been queer for months—now they've gone. Anyhow, I shall have to stick to it—overawe them with my presence and all that." Even in that moment, his English good-humour prevailed. "Give us a hand, Tristram—you've influence with them. What's happened to Meredith?"

"I don't know——"

"Well, we'll try and get him out. Miss Fersen, you stay quietly in there. There's no getting away

just yet. If neither of us get back, there'll be relief from Gaya as soon as they get wind of this shindy. Come on, Hermit!"

Tristram held open the door for her.

"You won't mind my going? I may be able to help——"

"I want you to go. I am not afraid."

"I know."

They avoided each other's eyes. For one moment at least they had expected death—perhaps willed to die—and in that moment had dared to live.

She went past him, closing the door after her.

Night came on. It rose blackly out of the far corners of the hut, creeping stealthily and soundlessly up the walls, as water rises in a closed lock. She had sat and watched it and listened to the deep, encircling silence beyond which was sound—indefinable, subdued, continuous. Once it had come nearer and instinctively she had sprung up, bracing herself—then rolled back again with a thwarted, muffled murmur.

She had fed the stray pup and put it to sleep on Wickie's old bed. A disreputable, ill-bred-looking tabby had crept slyly in through the open window and had eyed the intruder with disapproving curiosity, then settled herself down as one accustomed to eccentricities. Sigrid had laughed a little at the interlude. It had seemed grotesque and humdrum, a kind of satire on that which the sound

painted on the gathering darkness.

Presently it was quite dark. She got up and lit a candle, and held it high above her head. The flame threw a pale circle of light down on the surface of the still black waters which eddied round her. It gave life to an eerie procession of formless, soft-footed shadows. She watched them slide past, from darkness to darkness. Then she went back to the table and sat there with her chin in her hand, her wide eyes fixed broodingly on something far beyond the tiny pillar of light.

An hour passed. She got up and moved restlessly about the room. In the struggle, her helmet had been knocked off and her hair loosened. She let it down and smoothed its fair softness with her hands. There was no glass in the place. She took the candle to the carved table against the wall, and knelt down so that she could see a faint reflection of herself in the glass of the big photograph. She began to do her hair with fastidious, delicate carefulness. When it was done she took the photograph and held it to the light. There was a pile of letters on the table. The envelopes bore the same handwriting—strong and clear, yet not with the strength and clearness of youth. It had an indefinable affinity with the old face that looked out at her with its serene, smiling wisdom from the wooden photo-frame. She counted the letters, lingering over them, as though their touch brought her secret knowledge.

The cat, sleeping by the wall, lifted its head. A minute later, it got up, arching its back, its fur bristling, its eyes blazing in the darkness. She glanced towards it, aroused by its soft, menacing hiss of anger and fear. Then suddenly the silence around her shivered and broke. She turned and slipped into the second room. There was an old hunting-knife lying among the debris of their hastily prepared picnic. She snatched it up and ran back, placing herself against the wall with the light between her and the door.

The sound that rushed down upon her was a new thing—more terrible than the roar which had beaten persistently against the outer wall of her consciousness. It was like rain and wind and water tearing through a narrow gully. It came on swiftly, gathering speed and violence. It came with a rush down the village street—nearer and nearer—the patter of countless running feet—the gasp and groan of hard-drawn breath, stifled mutterings, the shrill scream of a woman breaking off into a choking gurgle. Nearer—in a headlong torrent—right to the closed door. She drew herself up, her lithe body tense and prepared—and it swept past. It raced on in a ceaseless torrent. She heard the jolt of a heavy body sent reeling against the walls of the hut—and a little whimpering sound that was like a child's crying. Behind the deluge there was a fresh sound—the clatter of horses' hoofs at the gallop.

The door opened and closed. She had taken an involuntary step forward to meet whatever was to come, the knife clenched in her right hand; but, as she saw Tristram, she relaxed with a short, shuddering sigh and her hand sank. He stood leaning with his shoulders against the door, staring at her. His clothes were torn and blood-stained. There was something wild and violent in his face which she had never seen before—the look of a fighter straight from a struggle in which every nerve and sinew has been put to a dire test—in which all the primitive passions of men have risen like wolf-hounds tugging at the leash. The sleeve of his shirt had been ripped to the elbow, and she saw the grand curving line of his shoulder, expressive of an immense, tutored strength.

The hot colour raced through her pallor. She looked back to his face. His eyes had dropped to the knife which she still held—they met hers now and blazed back her fierce and sombre admiration. They remained thus watching each other through a moment of shaken silence. Then he lurched forward, dropping down on the chair by the table, sprawling like a man overtaken by a sudden exhaustion, his bleeding hands clenched before him.

"I am sick—sick of bloodshed!" he muttered.

She laid the knife quietly on the table and stood looking down at his bent head.

"Meredith——" she began.

He threw back his shoulders with a bitter laugh.

"Did you ever know of any one who set out to sacrifice himself and who didn't sacrifice everyone else first? Meredith's safe—but my people—my poor people—they didn't mean any harm—they saved us —you and me. Even though one of our kind had spat in the face of their religion—they didn't forget. You don't know what it meant to them to be so calm and loyal in all that frenzy. Then—then the troops came from Gaya. There was a stampede—no one meant to hurt any one—but they went under—dozens of them —stamped out of recognition—old Seetul and Lalloo's little son, whom I nursed once——" He broke off with a harsh, dry sob. She knelt down beside him. She drew his head down to her shoulder, soothing him like a child.

"Tristram—you mustn't mind so. Things happen like that. We don't mean to harm each other—we don't realize or we can't help ourselves. Some one has to go under. We're always trampling on some one. It can't be helped. The crowd is too great—we have to fight for ourselves first. We were made like that——"

He made no answer. He leant against her with closed eyes. The hurricane of galloping hoofs rolled past. She kissed him lightly, tenderly—"Tristram ——"

His eyes opened. Their faces were quite close. Their gaze became fixed, intoxicated, deepening in intensity till it seemed as though they held each

other, were drawn closer and closer in an embrace of fire which burnt out every intervening thought and consciousness. Suddenly, violently, he sprang up, pushing her from him, and lurched towards the door.

"I've got—to—see after things—there'll be an escort for you at the bridge-head—later—I'll keep guard outside——"

She also had risen as swift and soundless as a panther. She stood by the table upright and exultant, a point of light shining in her eyes.

"Stay here—here with me. If you go, it is because you're afraid——"

"Afraid——?" He swung round, his hand still on the door. "Of whom?"

"Of me—of yourself. You promised to be honest with me. This was to be our day of days for which no one should demand reckoning. It is not ended yet. You were honest once. That was when you thought we were going to be killed. Then you dared to own to what I know already—that you belonged to me—as I perhaps belong to you—to our fate—a fate neither of us can escape, Tristram——"

He remained motionless; she could see the rise and fall of his great chest.

"It isn't wise to be honest," he said thickly. "I'm afraid, if you like—afraid of myself. You'd better let me go."

"Back to your dreams? But they're gone. You were just a grown-up boy, playing with a fancy. Now

you are a man and I am a woman. We've got to deal with the reality now."

"That's true." He came slowly towards her, reeling a little in his stride. "I want you—body and soul."

"I know—you told me——"

"When——?"

"The night you lay unconscious in my arms."

He put up his hand to his throat, as though something suffocated him.

"You had better let me go," he repeated doggedly. "We're both thrown out of our course. At my best, I'm not much—I've learnt that—if I resist—things it's because I don't care. And tonight——"

"You do care."

"Yes," he said, between his teeth.

"Why should we resist what is the most splendid thing in us?"

"Splendid?" he echoed. "My—my dreams were splendid. As you say—they've gone. And the reality—can there be any reality between us—between a divinely gifted woman and the loutish fool who dreams about her? If I'd thought so—I'd have gone away—but it seemed to me that you were just kind and pitying—amused even—and I dared go on. And it is impossible—we belong to different worlds—life isn't the same thing to either of us."

"We stand on different peaks of the same mountain range," she answered wistfully. "There is

the same sun and sky and stars for us both. It seemed to me that we could have watched the sun rise together."

He held out his hand as though to touch her, and then drew back, his face drawn and hard with the bitterness of mastered passion.

"You don't know what you're saying, Sigrid," he began harshly. "Nor what you are offering me——"

"Myself," she flung in, with joyful fearlessness. "My love for you."

He began to pace the room backwards and forwards, in and out of the light, his hands clenched at his sides.

"I can't—oh, my dear—it's hideous, so hopeless." His voice shook with rough suffering. "Even if things were different—if I were cad—enough—you see, I am being desperately frank now—don't you realize what it would mean—can't you realize what you'd have to pay?"

She watched him patiently. Her first fierce energy had died down. The colour had faded from her cheeks, leaving her with a look of pathetic weariness.

"I've never bothered about the price of things. It's been a curse in my life, I daresay; I shall never be able to sink into a safe, comfortable mediocrity. I've burnt my boats too thoroughly for that. But, instead, I've had the highest and best in life. I've always dared to live to the utmost, Tristram. I wanted to be perfect

in my art, and I gave my soul to it. I lived more austerely than a nun, more grandly than an empress. Men wanted to love me, but I never thought of them. There was only one thing for me then—it was like a mountain that I had sworn to climb. I climbed it. And then—then it was over. You can't understand—but I had paid the price to the last farthing. Now, before it's too late, I want the greatest, most splendid thing that perhaps a human being can pray for—the happiness of loving."

Her voice had dropped gradually, as though she had forgotten him. He stood still, frowning at her with a hopeless misery in his exhausted eyes.

"Sigrid—if I'd asked you a month ago would you have been my wife?"

She started a little, seeming to shrink from what was to come.

"No, Tristram—not then."

"And now—if things were different—if it were possible——?"

She shook her head.

"No—now least of all." She heard the sharp, painful catch in his breath. "It isn't possible—that's just it," she added wearily.

He resumed his restless pacing backwards and forwards.

"Then it was just a moment in your life you were offering me—I was to be part of a new and splendid episode——" He strode up to her and gripped her by

the shoulders. "Oh—I'm not proud—you're a creature of fire and air, and I'm one of the earth. You could have walked over me and I'd have been content. And yet—I don't know. I might have cared too much. Perhaps I do care too much—but there's something besides that now. I'm not a moral or even a strong man, but there's only to be one woman in my life—-the woman I marry."

"Yes," she said listlessly.

"And Anne has promised to be my wife."

She looked up at him for an instant. It grew very still.

"I might have told you that before. But it was to have been our day—with no one between us—no one to demand reckoning. I cheated myself. I'm a rotten sentimentalist, dear—and I've ended by doing something mean and low, like a thorough-paced cad. I deserve to lose—all that I have lost."

She shook her head. Something of her old detachment, a little of her demure humour, tinged with satire, shone in her eyes.

"It's almost funny—your blaming yourself. I hunted you down—and I am going to marry Mr. Barclay."

He swung round on his heel, white to the lips.

"That man——!" he burst out.

"That woman——!" she retorted cynically.

He fought desperately for self-control.

"Anne is a good woman——"

"Is she? A better human being than Barclay? Have you started to lay down the standard of values like the rest of us?"

For an instant they confronted each other as antagonists, then he made a gesture of despair, of fierce self-loathing.

"No—you're quite right. I don't judge—I can't. I seem going down-hill fast with my theories—my—my infernal humanity. I can't believe it—everything seems to have gone at once—you didn't care—it wasn't love you felt for me——"

"Aren't you glad—doesn't that relieve you of all responsibility?"

She watched him for a moment in silence. Then her face softened. He was standing against the table, his hand pressed upon it as though he held himself upright only by an effort of will. She laid her hand on his, diffidently, pityingly. "Tristram, we're both mad with pain, but don't let's hurt each other more than we must. It's no one's fault. We pick up threads in our lives carelessly and without a thought, and from day to day they weave themselves without our will into a pattern—into tragedy. That's all there is to it, Tristram." He nodded silently, and she turned away from him, sighing. "It's quite quiet now. I'll go back to Gaya, Tristram."

He went out beside her into the empty moonlit street. A black shadow lay huddled against the wall, and involuntarily he bent and touched it.

"Dead!" he muttered.

"The feast of Siva!" she said. "He who destroys!"

Her small pale face was lifted to the great silver disk above her. It seemed to his aching eyes that she was no more than a frail white ghost—a haunting spirit of the haunted moonlight.

"Sigrid——!" he whispered.

"Hush—it's no good. We've got to go on—Tristram Sahib——"

He walked beside her as she rode out of Heerut. It was very still—-no sound but that of her horse's hoofs and the soft swish of the long Arab tail. They went out across the plain. The conflagration of the day had burnt itself out, leaving grey ash and a few stains on the white fields. The temple lay sinister and watchful beneath the shadow of the jungle. It was as though all life had been swept away in a deluge of destruction.

He looked up and saw how bravely she held herself.

They came within a hundred yards of the bridge-head, and she drew rein. They could hear voices and the jangle of steel. He stood close to her, touching her, feeling the warmth of her, drinking in a faint elusive perfume which was her own. His brain reeled. He was sick and faint at the nearness of the end.

Suddenly she bent down and took his hand. He felt something clasp itself about his wrist.

"I can't give you up—not altogether—I can't, Tristram. I want to keep you in my life—the dream of you—to haunt you a little—to claim you a little—in this world and the next—for good and evil—my bracelet-brother——"

She was gone. He stood there, listening to the thud of her horse's hoofs.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

MRS. COMPTON STANDS FIRM

"Among all the noble, disinterested, selfless things I've done—and my life is full of them—this is the noblest, most disinterested, most selfless."

Mrs. Compton stood back and surveyed the dainty Dresden figure perched on the shelf with the dignity of renunciation. Mrs. Bosanquet sniffed. It was an uncorrected habit of hers when confronted with the incomprehensible and absurd.

"I don't see what you're so upset about," she commented from her large and comfortable pose in the most accommodating chair of which the rather shabby-looking room boasted. "Why, I've seen things just as pretty as that in sixpenny bazaars. I'm sure

Anne won't like it. Anne's my type. We both have our spiritual homes in a London suburb—not a garden-suburb, my dear, with nasty modern folk in sandals and *djibba*—but in the old kind, with good old Victorian plush everywhere. It's just a tragedy that we should have to live in India with queer specimens like the Judge and Tristram." She chuckled. The serene detachment with which she regarded her own weaknesses and the weaknesses of her fellow-creatures had made her an institution in Gaya, and was a good substitute for a talent. Mrs. Bosanquet could not make a joke or tell a funny story without disaster, but she could hold up mirrors for herself and her friends and grimace into them with most excellent results, as far as the gaiety of the station was concerned. It was whispered, however, that the Judge's somewhat halting progress towards higher honours was not a little due to his wife's passion for showing plain but superior people just what they looked like.

Mary Compton continued to regard her treasure with wistful tenderness.

"Tristram will like it, anyhow," she said.

"H'm, poor Tristram!"

"Why 'poor Tristram'?"

"Oh, I don't know—a kind of inspiration. Anne did want him so badly, and now she's got him. It's a real triumph of goodness. Now she can pull long noses at dear, disgraceful Eleanor and be sentimental

over dear, disgraceful Richard. Also she can make the place too hot for—for that woman. Altogether a wonderful strategic position for any one quite so harmless as dear, respectable Anne."

There was a distinct and unusual note of asperity in Mrs. Bosanquet's review of the situation, and Mary Compton turned to her with apparent puzzlement. But her eyes were bright and rather defiant, as though she was preparing for a long-expected engagement.

"Whom do you mean by 'that woman'?" she asked, not very steadily.

"My dear, there's only one 'that woman' in Gaya as far as I know. The rest of us are—what are we—ladies! or is that Victorian again?—in fact, I mean 'that woman,' and you're just pretending not to know whom I mean."

"I won't pretend." Mrs. Compton steadied to the attack. "If you mean Sigrid——"

"I do, my dear."

"Then I think it's mean and disloyal of you. You were one of the first to kow-tow to her——"

Mrs. Bosanquet settled herself back fatly and serenely unoffended.

"I did—I don't deny it. I kow-towed. Figuratively, I licked her boots. She could have walked over me if she'd had a fancy for mountaineering. She could have done a high-kick under the Viceroy's nose and I should have

applauded to poor George's everlasting undoing. She could have eloped with that puppy Radcliffe. She could have become Rani of Gaya and worn a nose-ring. My ample bosom would still have welcomed her. But that man! No. It's not only the man, but it's what must be in her to be able to touch him with a fire-tongs. There's a rotten streak in her—there must be. And even if one got over that—well, it isn't feasible. One can't swallow her without him, and it's too big a mouthful. Can you imagine sitting down to dinner with him?"

Mary Compton faced her visitor. She held herself very straight, and her brown, alert face had a rigid look about it which boded trouble.

"Yes, I can," she said quietly. "It's a possibility everybody will have to face who comes here."

"Mary!"

She nodded confirmation. She lost her first rather tremulous aggressiveness and became quiet and resolute, her hazel eyes sparkling with the zest of battle.

"Yes, Archie and I figured it out as soon as we heard. We don't understand—we don't pretend to—and—and we hate it. Nobody can loathe it more than I do. I've run counter to that man, and I can guess what we're in for. But we're going to stick to her. We didn't become her pals on the understanding that she was to marry one of our nice select circle. She was just Sigrid. Well, as far as we're concerned, she's

Sigrid still. Her husband's her business."

"Then," said Mrs. Bosanquet gravely, "you're in for a fight with the whole station—and, what's more, with an unwritten law which is based on sound principles. 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.' But they do meet occasionally, and it's then the trouble begins. We can do with a Rasaldû because we're not responsible for him—it's like watching a foreigner eat peas with his knife—but Barclay, no—he's a scandalous, illegitimate relation, and the more he claims us the more uncomfortable we get. My dear, we shall fight to the last ditch, and you'll be beaten, and badly beaten. You'll damage yourselves, and that's about all."

"Are you going to help beat us?" Mary asked quietly.

Mrs. Bosanquet pursed up her fat, good-natured lips.

"I can't help myself. I'm really sorry——"

"Rubbish! If you were sorry, you wouldn't do it."

"I've got to think of the Judge——"

"Well, I've got Archie. He's got his career, too."

"He'll get into trouble with the regiment."

"It's more than likely. We're not going to—to behave like cads on that account."

Mrs. Bosanquet got up, leaning heavily on her gold-topped stick. She had reddened slightly, but otherwise remained benignly unruffled.

"Quite right, my dear. I applaud. The trouble is

that the majority of us are cads at the bottom—that is, we think of our own safety first. I'm sure I do. The station will ostracize Sigrid—has begun to ostracize her already. I can't stem the tide, and I shan't try."

Mary Compton smiled bitterly.

"How pleased Anne will be!"

"Eh?"

"How pleased Anne will be," she repeated.

Mrs. Bosanquet paused on the threshold of the verandah. She had become suddenly very angry.

"You're a very annoying woman, Mary Compton. You said that just to upset me. You know I can't bear Anne. In a previous existence, I believe we were next-door neighbours in our suburb, and that she played hymns on a pianola. Please don't mention Anne to me."

"And you're fond of me, and you were fond of Sigrid," Mrs. Compton persisted, not without malicious amusement. Mrs. Bosanquet turned round as sharply as her bulk would allow.

"She's driving up now," she said helplessly. "My dear, for goodness' sake, get me out—I don't want to meet her—I haven't made up my mind—I'm really not in a fit state—have pity on an old woman with a weak heart and an Indian liver—let me out by the back—do, there's a dear—I'll think it over—I will really——"

"You can go out by the back," Mary Compton allowed coldly. "You'll probably give the butler a fit,

but that doesn't matter. By the way, we're giving a dinner next week. We hope you and the Judge will honour us."

Mrs. Bosanquet glared from the doorway.

"I dislike you intensely," she said, "and I won't be bullied."

"Nor will I," Mrs. Compton retorted, and then with an uncontrollable burst of venom. "You nasty old woman!" The curtains fell with a furious rustle and Mary Compton returned to her Dresden shepherdess. Her interest was either very intense or very artificial, for she did not appear to hear the dog-cart which rattled up the drive, and started guiltily when she was called by name.

She turned and saw Sigrid standing on the threshold. The latter still carried her lace parasol over her shoulder, as though she were not certain of coming in, and the tinted shadow which veiled her head and shoulders afforded a delicious contrast to the unrelieved whiteness of her dress. Mrs. Compton, not given to poetic comparisons, was driven in the first breath to the memory of the cool, intoxicating seductiveness of a narcissus flowering in the fresh winds of an English spring-time. But, in the second breath, she was realizing, not without a little twinge of unreasonable disappointment, that the muslin dress was not English but Parisian, and that the graceful lines of the unpretentious garden hat represented an expenditure which would have

covered the greater part of Mrs. Compton's yearly outfit.

"Can I come in, or are you not at home?" Sigrid asked. Her head was a little on one side and her eyes and mouth were quizzical. Mary Compton promptly kissed her and took charge of the parasol, which she handled with an almost masculine awe of its amazing daintiness.

"Sigrid, I'm just thankful. I didn't know it was you. I didn't recognize the cart."

"It wasn't mine." She hesitated for a second and her mouth was uncontrollably wry. "Jim brought me in."

"Oh!" For the life of her, Mrs. Compton could think of no better answer. She drew her visitor to the chair which Mrs. Bosanquet had just vacated. "Anyhow, you're just the person I was longing to see," she added lightly.

Sigrid's lips quivered.

"Am I? Well, that's more than Mrs. Bosanquet would have said! Poor lady, how she must have hurried. Which way did she go? Out through the servants' compound?"

"My dear Sigrid!" Mrs. Compton turned to her Dresden shepherdess to hide the fact that her face was suffused with the red of sheer panic. "Don't be so absurd! Mrs. Bosanquet and I have been 'having words,' as Mary Ann would say. She was too cross to face anybody."

The smile lingered about Sigrid's lips, as though some secret thought amused her. Her eyes, dark shadowed and rather wistful, were fixed absently ahead. Mary Compton trusted she had not noticed her own confusion. Suddenly, though she did not look up, she held out her hand.

"What have you got there, dear?"

Mrs. Compton responded thankfully. She came like an eager child, kneeling at Sigrid's feet, the Dresden shepherdess held up reverently for inspection.

"My pet shepherdess. I don't think you've seen her before, I've made up my mind to part with her. I've been almost in tears over it."

"Have you?"

Mary nodded. She was convinced that her visitor was not listening, but she rattled on determinedly, set on holding off an inevitable crisis.

"Yes. You know, our little bits of china are just like children to us. In fact, they're substitutes—only much nicer. They don't get the measles, they don't become increasingly expensive and unsatisfactory, they don't live to curse your grey hairs. On the contrary, they become increasingly valuable and lovable. You see, when Archie and I married, we were desperately in love, but we hadn't a single high-class interest. We adored dancing and tennis and theatres and expensive food at expensive restaurants. There were times when we felt we hadn't a soul

between us. You don't know how it worried us, because we do want to go on existing and having good times together in the next world, and we felt we never should if we didn't cultivate our higher selves or something. We thought of children, but you know we don't like children a bit, and we've forty cousins between us, so that there's no chance of our families dying out. When we found we both loved beautiful china, we almost wept for thankfulness. We knew then that there was something in us above food and drink. And there's our most precious bit. Isn't she a gem?"

Sigrid took the shepherdess and considered it gravely.

"Yes—a real find. Tell me, what were you and Mrs. Bosanquet quarrelling about?" She waited a moment, and then, as Mrs. Compton, very red and almost sullen in her aggrieved sense of thwarted diplomacy, remained silent, she went on quietly: "You were quarrelling about me. You were discussing whether to cut me or drop me gently; isn't that so?"

Mrs. Compton looked up with a sudden resolution. "We were quarrelling about you."

"That's good. That's frank of you, Mary." She put the shepherdess on the table and took the elder woman's hand tenderly between hers. "What did you decide?"

"There wasn't anything to decide where we're concerned. You can do what you like, Sigrid. Archie

and I are far too much in love with you——"

Sigrid laughed.

"Don't get me into worse trouble by making out that I'm a husband-snatcher. So you're going to stick to me. And the others——?"

"I don't know, dear."

"And you—you're both awfully shocked and horrified."

Mrs. Compton's mouth tightened with the struggle. She did not flinch under the steady, penetrating eyes.

"We don't understand—that's all."

"You loyal soul!" She was thoughtfully silent for an instant, and then went on: "But you must understand—at least a little. It's only fair, since you're going to fight my battle. If you'd decided differently, I shouldn't have told you. I'm an adventuress, Mary—I've never pretended to be anything else—not in a bad sense. I've lived very straightly in some ways, but I've always staked my all on a day. I've lived fabulously—like a Roman empress, Mary. And one day there was nothing left to stake. In ordinary language, I was bankrupt—or near it. So I took what was left and set out round the world—husband-hunting——"

"Sigrid!"

"Yes, that doesn't sound very ideal, does it? But in reality it was rather a wonderful quest. I was looking for a man who could give me all that I

conceived necessary for life—who would share it with me in understanding and whom I could care for —deeply." She smiled in self-mockery. "That sounds better, doesn't it? But, unfortunately, I never found him."

"Never?"

There was significance in Mary Compton's eyes —a challenge.

"No, never. And three months ago, when Mr. Barclay asked me to marry him—I had one hundred pounds and my passage left me in the world."

Mrs. Compton sprang to her feet, her hands clasped in consternation.

"Why didn't you tell us—you could have come to us. Oh, no, I know that's nonsense—we're poor as mice. But you could have gone back—you could have danced again and in one night you would have made enough——"

She stopped short, arrested by something that passed over the other's face—a shadow, a wince of physical, deadly pain. "Sigrid, couldn't you——"

"Yes, I could have done that. And the money would have paid for a gorgeous funeral."

"Sigrid—don't joke—be serious——"

"I am serious——" Her voice hardened. "Horribly serious. One night's triumph, if you like—and then the end. That's what I came to tell you. No one else knows except Smithy. It's my secret. It's yours now."

Alary Compton stood transfixed. The colour had

faded from her face, leaving it sallow with fear and grief. She bit her lips, trying desperately to hold back an overwhelming rush of tears. She hated tears. Now they choked her. Through a mist, she saw Sigrid lay her hand lightly on her side. "A little affair of the heart—*c'est tout*."

Mrs. Compton dropped on her knees. Reckless of the expensive gown, she buried her face on Sigrid's breast, clinging to her with a defiant fierceness.

"Oh, my dear, my dear—and we didn't know. I can't believe it—you so strong—so perfect——"

"Yes—almost perfect." She passed her hand caressingly over the grey-flaked, curly head much as though the grief was not her own. "Perfect in my Art—almost perfect in body. But the 'almost' was the price I paid. Oh Mary, just once again to glide out into the lights, to hear the music—to lose the sea of gaping faces—to rise right up on the crest of living——" She drew herself erect, her eyes burning. "Oh, my Art, the greatest Art of all! Scientists, musicians, painters—just so many lopsided distortions! But I was the soul and the body, the perfect union. I was music and poetry and speech. I was a miracle greater than the dreams of science. I was the perfect human body with an inspired soul——" Her voice failed. The life died out of her eyes. She sank back, laughing brokenly. "Isn't that absurd—funny—for I am going to marry Mr. Barclay."

There was a long, heavy silence. Both women

faced the tragedy, the one with the bitter knowledge that her understanding could only be dim and incomplete. She roused herself at last, disengaging herself gently from the enfolding arm, rubbing the tears from her cheeks.

"Sigrid—there were other men—good men—of one's own blood——"

"Oh yes, I know. There was one in England. I meant—but things happened. I can't explain. You've got to take that much on trust. Mr. Barclay offered me more than money."

"You mean——?"

"Silence."

Mary Compton rose slowly to her feet. She was quiet now and very grave. She gazed at the woman in the chair and realized for the first time a change in her. The old serenity, the laughing, godlike attitude towards life had gone. She had the wan dignity of a fighter who, from a post of easy vantage, has gone down into the arena.

"I don't want to know any more. I do take you on trust."

"And there was more in it than that," Sigrid went on, following the train of her thoughts. "It was a bargain. I, too, had something to offer. That suited my pride. I could do for him what I could not have done for another man. I could give him what he desires, I believe, more than life——"

"Position——?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Compton shook her head. Her seriousness was now business-like, scarcely touched with emotion.

"And you think you are strong enough?"

"I don't know. I must be. Everything that matters to me now depends on it."

"If you went away—to another part of India—oh, I don't want you to go—I'm trying to think only of your good——"

"It would be useless. I have won my position here. I have friends. Anywhere else I should just be his wife."

"His wife—you! Oh, it's hardly bearable! Just because we are your friends it hurts worse." She ruffled her hair with an unhappy hand. "Sigrid, you can count on us, of course. I believe you may count on Mrs. Bosanquet, and the Judge follows automatically. She's furious just now, but she has a regular schoolgirl rave on you and it will be too strong for her. I daresay the other women will follow. Even Anne——" She saw Sigrid move restlessly in her chair, and hastily swung off, moved by she knew not what consciousness of pain. "It's the men who'll be the hardest to fight. They'd forgive you most things—things we wouldn't forgive—a vulgar intrigue, an elopement with somebody else's husband—but this is against their code. Men are conventional, women moral. It's the one vital

difference between the sexes. And then there are other troubles. Things are rocky in Gaya. We know that the regiment is disaffected. The new Colonel makes no headway. Boucicault's work was too thorough for that. Then there's Rasaldû. He regards your engagement as a sort of insult—and, weak tool though he is, we've got to keep him in hand. All that counts against you. Oh, it will be a fight, though we shall have Tristram. He's always ready for a lost cause——"

She stopped again. Sigrid had risen to her feet. She seemed not to have heard the last sentence. She picked up the Dresden shepherdess with a light, reckless hand.

"How pretty it is! Why are you parting with it? Who's the lucky recipient——?"

"It's a wedding present." She felt a sick misery creep over her. "For Anne and Tristram——?"

"Ah, yes—of course—for Anne and Tristram ——" Her voice was very level and matter-of-fact, rather indifferent, as though she were echoing mechanically something that scarcely reached her intelligence.

Then a shadow fell across the sunlight patch on the worn matting, and both women looked up. James Barclay stood on the verandah. He raised his hand in a military salute.

"I've come for Sigrid, Mrs. Compton," he said. "She was such an unconscionable time, and one is

naturally impatient. Please forgive, if you were discussing secrets."

His dark eyes were on Mrs. Compton's face, intent, curious, vaguely appealing. The thrill of loathing and contempt which had passed through her gave place to a bitter amusement. He was so wonderfully, correctly dressed, so desperately at ease. She stared back at him, burning with her first instinctive revolt against his presence. Then she remembered. She glanced at Sigrid, who was still toying idly with the Dresden shepherdess. Something in the resolute submission of that proud, self-reliant figure set fire to all the chivalry in Mrs. Compton's blood. She turned again. She heard herself speaking:

"We're very pleased—won't you both stay for tea? And—and I was just saying—I'm giving a dinner next week—to celebrate—your engagement—if it suits you——"

It was done. She felt as though she had cut through a dam, and that the torrent was on her. She saw Sigrid look up swiftly and then glance at the man by the window.

He bowed gravely, but she caught the triumphant flash in his eyes.

"It is very kind. We shall be delighted—this afternoon we've an engagement, haven't we, Sigrid?"

It was all Mrs. Compton remembered clearly. Looking back on the scene, she had a vague recollection of her own voice flowing on ceaselessly

over a seething inner conflict, of a pale face watching her, half in pity, half in gratitude. Presently, when they had gone, she flung herself down by Sigrid's empty chair and cried with misery and humiliation. And, when the last tears had been shed, she picked up the Dresden shepherdess and put her back in her place in the glass cabinet, and turned the key with an air of locking up evil genii. Then she thought of her husband for the first time.

"Poor old Archie!" she muttered remorsefully. "Poor Archie!"

Meantime, Barclay drove his showy cob towards the dâk-bungalow.

"So you've managed it," he said. "You've really managed. You're wonderful—even more wonderful than I thought."

She drew farther away from him.

"I have kept my part of the bargain."

He laughed.

"Which is fortunate for everyone concerned."

"Keep your part!"

He made her a little bow, his face suddenly flushed and heavy-looking.

"As much as it lies in human nature, dear lady," he answered.

CHAPTER II

A HOME-COMING

Mrs. Boucicault welcomed her daughter with the affable irresponsibility which had become her habitual mood. She bore no grudge—not more than a steam-roller bears towards the stones it has ground into acquiescence. She had got what she wanted and was quite pleased that Anne should have been equally successful. No one witnessing the warm, rather absent-minded embrace could have guessed at a very bitter parting or at a wedding at which the bride's family was conspicuous by its absence. As a matter of fact, the bitterness had been on Anne's side and the wedding had been so recklessly hurried on that Mrs. Boucicault's excuse that she could not leave poor Richard at such short notice sounded acceptable. Gaya knew perfectly well that the Governor-General's visit and its attendant gaieties was the real reason, but extended a charitable sympathy, and endeavoured to keep Anne in happy ignorance, guessing that her understanding would be altogether of a different kind.

Mrs. Boucicault kissed Tristram on both cheeks, putting her hands on his shoulder in order to pull herself up to the necessary altitude.

"My dears, how well you both look! Really, I believe you got married just for a month of the hills. How I did envy you! We've been positively baked alive. I nearly bolted, but of course your poor father

could not have been moved. It was terrible."

She began to wander about the newly furnished room in a restless, over-excited way, giving neither the time to reply. "You must come and admire everything. We all did our bit. I had some furniture sent from Lucknow. Don't you like the chairs? They're a home product. Mrs. Bosanquet gave such a lovely tea-service. My ayah smashed a cup in the unpacking, but these accidents will happen. I hope the servants will be all right. You both know how they steal." She led them through the length and breadth of the bungalow, whose decoration had the charm of haphazard good taste. As Mrs. Boucicault had said, everyone in Gaya had taken a hand in Tristram's home and given of their best, attaining an unconventional success. But Anne followed silently and without expression of approval. Her natural composure of manner seemed to have developed. She looked very well and much older. Her girlishness had been completely swallowed up in a rather self-conscious womanhood, and much that her girlhood had promised had been fulfilled. The line of her mouth had stiffened. Her very clothes, well-made but severe, expressed a character already set within definite and inelastic boundaries. Once or twice she glanced back at her husband and her eyes were full of a half-timorous, half-proprietary tenderness.

"Do you like it all, Tris?"

He nodded, smiling down at her.

"It's first-rate. I don't know how they managed it."

"Yes—it's quite nice. Of course, we shall have to rearrange things. It's all so patchy, isn't it?"

He did not answer. Mrs. Boucicault came back to the drawing-room and gave them tea. It was then, seated, facing her with her back to the light that Anne noticed the too-vivid red of her mother's lips, the tinge of artificial colour on the grey cheeks. Her own eyes hardened a little.

"Is father better?" she asked coldly. "Is there any change? I asked you to write to me, mother, but you never did."

Mrs. Boucicault helped herself daintily to cake.

"There's no change—at least, not for the better. He had Sir Gilbert Foster here to see him. He happened to be in Lucknow, and, of course, I've spared no effort—no expense. Sir Gilbert agreed that there was very little hope. Sometimes I think it would be more merciful if the end came. He is so utterly helpless. He just lies there and broods. Even the official attempt to get at some clue with regard to the man who attacked him doesn't seem to rouse him—and Richard was always so anxious to get square with an enemy, wasn't he? Of course, I go and sit with him every day and tell him our doings. It's very dull for me, but one has to do all one can. Didn't I write? I'm so sorry. I meant to, but we've been so busy——"

"I've no doubt," Anne interposed, with contemptuous bitterness. "Gaya has been quite gay, I hear."

Mrs. Boucicault smiled happily.

"Yes, quite gay. And very upset into the bargain. It's like living on an eruption or a volcano or whatever it is I mean. I suppose you've heard, Tristram? The regiment is just seething with sedition. Poor Richard kept the lid on wonderfully, and now he's gone we're all waiting for the lid to come off with a bang. Colonel Armstrong is a dear, but he's got beautiful democratic ideas, and bullies and distrusts his equals more than any one I ever knew. So we're all waiting. And things have been made so deliciously worse by the advent of Mr. Barclay. You've heard of that, too? He's going to marry Sigrid Fersen in two months. Awful, isn't it?"

Anne turned her eyes to her husband.

"It's revolting," she said. "He's the kind of man a woman of her type would choose. The least she can do is to leave Gaya."

"She's not going to, though. The whole station is a divided camp and armed to the teeth about it. Half of us want to cut her and half want to swallow him for her sake. Mary Compton and Mrs. Bosanquet are for swallowing—and so am I. I don't see why people shouldn't do as they like."

Anne's lips curled.

"You would choose the easy way, mother."

Mrs. Boucicault shot her a glance, which was not entirely free from malice.

"Hardly easy in this case. Think of the complications! Think of Rasaldû going about like a comic thunder-storm! Think of our pet official snobs. Oh, we shall live to see exciting times. More tea, Tristram?"

He shook his head and placed a half-emptied cup on the table. Throughout Mrs. Boucicault's garrulous chatter he had been watching her narrowly and almost as though he were listening to something beneath her words. Now he turned and met his wife's eyes with an unflinching directness. It seemed to check an impulsive answer. She got up sharply.

"I'd better go and help the ayah unpack," she said. "I'll drive round and see father tonight, mother. Let him know."

"Of course, dear. He'll be so delighted. I'll go home now and leave you two to settle down. Tell the syce to bring round the cart, will you, Tristram?"

On parting, she kissed them again with her new absent-minded effusiveness and patted Anne's shoulder. "It's so nice to see you happy at last, child. By the way, you've never asked after poor Owen—and he's so devoted."

A faint flush crept into Anne's cheeks. For an instant, at least, her composure wavered.

"I hadn't forgotten. How is he?"

"Dreadfully disfigured, poor fellow—and his

sight affected. But he goes on with his work just the same—like a real martyr. It's such a pity the natives don't appreciate it. They pretend he has the evil eye, and run away from him. Terrible, isn't it?"

"I shall have to look him up," Tristram observed.

"Do—you're so clever." She took her place in the dog-cart with the lightness and ease of a much younger woman. Then as the syce jerked the reins, she bent down. "Tristram, will you be coming round, too, this evening?"

"Yes," he answered gravely.

"Well—when you've seen Richard—will you have a talk with me—a professional talk? I believe I'm getting an Indian liver, and the natives seem to have such a holy terror of your concoctions that I'm sure they're effective. Will you?"

"Rather!" He laughed, though the blue eyes remained seriously intent. "And I'll bring my deadliest blue pills with me," he promised.

As the cart swung through the compound gates Mrs. Boucicault turned her head and looked back. Tristram waved, but Anne gave no sign. Her face was set and hard as Tristram turned to her. He slipped his arm with a rather shy affection through hers.

"Aren't you satisfied, dear?"

She looked up at him smiling, but perfunctorily, as a grown-up smiles at a child, concealing her real feeling.

"Oh, so satisfied with you and the home, Tris.

But I wish mother hadn't welcomed us. She makes me sick to the heart the way she talks about father. I don't want to hate her—and yet sometimes I can't help myself. And I didn't want our first day here to be spoilt by hatred. It's like a bad omen."

He was silent for a moment. Had she been looking at him she might have seen the faint change which passed over his features. It was a change that had come to them more than once during these two months among the hills—a kind of troubled perplexity—of uneasiness.

"Anne, I'm not satisfied with your mother," he began suddenly. "I don't like the look of her. I believe she's hiding something from us——"

She interrupted him with an impatient, scornful gesture.

"It's just her way. She's always imagining there's something the matter with her. When father was almost dying, she worried the doctor about a petty ailment of her own. I think she does it to cover the way she behaves——"

"Aren't you a wee bit hard on her?"

"Hard? Tris, surely it's right to be hard sometimes? One can't be lenient towards what's wrong. And it is wrong to be cruel, and our duty is towards the sick and sorrowful, no matter what they've done. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," he answered thoughtfully. "Perhaps our only duty."

She shook her head.

"Our first duty is to God." Then, with a quick movement that was an instant's reversion to her girlhood, she slipped her hand into his, pressing it, and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "Tris, that sounded as though I were criticizing. I didn't mean it. You're so good-natured and tender-hearted—perhaps too forgiving. But at the bottom we think and feel the same about things, I know. Only you're too good for me."

"Don't let's talk about our respective goodness," he implored lightly. "We shall quarrel. Let's go and prospect for your rose-garden instead."

They went down the steps together, her hands linked over his arm, and followed the path of sunlight through the wilderness of wild-growing flowers and high luxuriant trees which Gaya perhaps deliberately had left untouched.

"We shall have to make it trim and neat," Anne said, sighing. "My roses will never grow in all this shadow. Besides, it's so untidy. Those big palms ought to be cut down, too, don't you think?"

She always appealed to him differently, yet as though his agreement was an assured thing. He looked up, catching a line of azure between the foliage. It seemed to him that for an instant he breathed the scented virgin air of the forests, that soon night would be creeping in stealthily between the slender trunks of the trees and that he would lie

full length by the camp-fire and watch the distant beacons flame up in the violet darkness. It was a picture flashed from his memory, perhaps in contrast to those smooth, cool, civilized days among the hills. He closed his eyes to it.

"You must have things as you like them, dear," he said. "I want you to have everything—everything that makes you happy."

"Really? Do you mean it?" There was a breathless eagerness in her voice, no mere acknowledgment. He paused an instant and looked down into her earnest face. In a vague, instinctive way she had often resented his eyes—or rather the something which their clouded introspection held from her. Now she thrilled under them. They were clear, intensely, fiercely living.

"Yes, I do mean it," he said passionately. "Anne—if I thought you happy, I should be content. If I knew of anything that would give you only a moment's pleasure, I wouldn't rest till I brought it you. I want you to be happy—more than I can say."

She flushed girlishly.

"Do you love me so much as all that, Tris?"

"Isn't that proof?" he asked back.

"You are very, very good to me." Still she held her ground, watching him with her strange mingling of diffidence and conscious power. "Tris—I do want something awfully—something that will make me perfectly content——"

He smiled.

"Then it's yours, if a poor Major can squeeze it out of his official fortune."

"I want my father here—with us." She saw no change in him, and yet, absorbed as she was in her own appeal, she felt the sudden check in his breathing, the tightening of the muscles under her hand. She became reasonlessly frightened. "Tris, is it too much to ask?"

He turned and continued to walk on.

"No—I meant what I said just now. Only—I don't understand, Anne—in the old days—before the accident—you were so afraid of him. You dreaded him—I think you hated him——"

"Don't!" she interrupted. "You can't think how it hurts to be reminded of all that. Yes, he frightened me. He made us all unhappy. Now he is helpless—broken. Sometimes, looking back, it seems to me that we were to blame—that perhaps mother was not the wife for him—that she didn't understand——"

He crushed back the exclamation that had risen to his lips. He dared not admit even to himself that it had been one of bitter impatience.

"That doesn't seem quite fair, Anne. He may have been ill, mad, if you like. It's the best one can say."

"He was considered a fine soldier," she returned, rather primly. "His men worshipped him."

"You live in the past, dear," he persisted.

Something had risen between them, a pulsing, quick-breathing irritation. She pressed his arm.

"You don't understand," she said forgivingly.

"No, perhaps not." They had reached the gates of the compound, and, arrested by sounds whose thrill for ever outlives familiarity, they stood still, their faces turned to the open high-road. Amidst the rattle of drums, and the shrill call of the fifes, the regiment slogged its way sullenly back to the barracks. The dust rose in silver columns under the tramping feet. The red sun, lying already westwards, fell aslant the dark, brooding faces and made a quivering stream of fire of the fixed bayonets. The new Colonel rode at the head of the column, chatting with his Adjutant. He had a resolute serenity about him, an unimaginative contentment. Tristram, saluting, knew that for him there was no significance in that fiery line winding its way up the hill in black silence—no hint of the future. Only the common, daily routine.

He heard Anne's voice at his side, broken and piteous.

"Oh, if only father were there—at the head of his men—if we could only bring him back——"

"I can't do that," he answered gently. "If I could, I would. I never realized how much you cared. It's taught me a lot about life—your caring. But if you think he wishes it—he must come to us, whatever it may cost."

She smiled at him through her tears.

"I know he would wish it. Mother is cruel to him —I know she feels cruelly. He will be happy with us. He will get to understand that we both care—oh, Tristram, I can't thank you enough. I promise you it shan't trouble you."

A scarcely perceptible line deepened about his fine mouth.

"Don't promise rashly, dear. And remember, I said, whatever it costs——"

It became very still about them. The tramp of feet and the rattle of drums grew muffled and rumbled into silence. They could see the column wind its way up in and out of the broken avenue of trees like a monstrous glittering serpent. The dust sank back peacefully in golden particles, and with the deepening silence there came a sense of relief, of healing. The vague spirit of irritation and opposition laid itself.

Tristram drank in the silence. In that subconscious self where no thought or desire is formulated, he prayed for its continuation. He held himself motionless so that no movement of his should rouse his companion from her seeming abstraction. For a moment, she had relaxed her hold of him and he shrank back into himself, into a loneliness where he seemed to draw breath, to lay down a burden which he never acknowledged, and to stretch his cramped soul in exquisite relief. The perfumed air, the golden lights and splendid purples

of a brief twilight penetrated below his senses, and with light, magic fingers opened the closed doors behind which he had imprisoned all that the woman beside him could not understand, all that was repugnant to her. They came out, these ghostly figures of his fancy, and played before him. At first they had been pale and wan, but as they drew in light and air, they regained their youth and glowed with their old splendour. He watched them, fascinated. His blood began to move more swiftly. A thought shaped itself out of the depths—the thought of the nights and days out there on the fringe of the jungle—of the work that would claim him back—of life as it might still be to him. Service! that remained.

He felt Anne's fingers tighten on his arm.

"Look!" she said.

The scorn and anger in her voice stung him. The lights grew suddenly dim and the fancies faded. He looked the way she pointed, and his pulses stood still. Two riders were coming slowly down the hill towards them. Their white-clad figures shone ghostly in the shadow of the trees. They came on, up to the gates. Tristram's pulses resumed their beating, heavily, suffocatingly. His hand went up to his helmet, and the fair-haired woman on the Arab bowed with grave indifference. The man beside her smiled, showing his white teeth. Then it was over. He heard the man's voice break on the silence—he

was making some ironic comment—and then the beat of horses' hoofs at a mad gallop.

Anne's eyes were on his face.

"Tris, how could you!" she said bitterly.

He turned and looked at her. He felt stupid and heavy, as though some one had struck him between the eyes; but even then he realized her expression, the unbreakable will showing through the mask of her femininity.

"What should I have done?" he asked, and was conscious of a wry amusement. Beneath the surface their wills grappled together. She was so small, so strong. He would be so utterly beaten.

"I don't know—You didn't even wait for her to bow. It's not for me to dictate—surely it wasn't necessary to know her—she's outside the pale—and that man—oh, it was sickening, horrible——!"

Her voice quivered. He put his arm about her shoulders,

"Did you want me to—to cut them?" he asked.

"Why not? I think it would have been better to do what we must do right from the beginning. We can't *know* them, Tris."

"I must," he responded deliberately.

He felt her whole body stiffen.

"Why?" Her voice was very low now, subdued so as to cover its real timbre. "Why?" she repeated.

"Because I have no reason not to," he returned.

"A half-caste and an adventuress——"

Something tortured and leashed within him leapt up flinging itself savagely against his self-control.

"What is an adventuress, Anne? A woman who ventures? What better thing can any of us do?" He spoke half-jestingly, striving to ward off the issue that was to arise between them; but there was no pity in the hard eyes which she lifted for a moment to his face.

"Are you going to be one of those who are prepared to sneer at our morality—at the whole prestige of our race?" she asked.

Even then he marvelled at her. She had been so young, so childish. She challenged him now with a mature fixity of outlook and of character. She might have been an old woman. And he knew that it was no sudden development. It had been there always, a deep-rooted inheritance of her kind.

"I cannot be other than I am," he said steadily. "As to prestige—doesn't it belong to our English greatness to shoulder our responsibilities? We're responsible to a man like Barclay. He belongs to us more than any man of our own blood. Don't you realize—he's our fault—we've flung him into his position. We've made him what he is. He had an English father—Anne, and he has a claim on me I cannot and will not ignore."

He saw the curl of her lips. It was an answer straight from those past generations stronger than all

reason.

"We must stamp out our sins—not foster them. And that woman—do you expect me to meet her—the Rajah's mistress—this man's bought property ——"

"Anne!" A sick horror surged up within him—horror of his own passionate anger—horror in some dim way mingled with a vicarious shame. He turned away from her. But the instinctive chivalry which prompted the action was unnecessary. She held her ground with the resolution of justification. "Anne, you're speaking recklessly. I know that what you say is not true. And even if it were—I can't judge other people—it's not in me—I feel no right in me to judge. There's only one distinction I can make between men and women—the happy and the unhappy, the blessed and the cursed——"

"The good and the evil," she interrupted stonily. "There is only one morality, Tristram——"

He drew himself to his full and splendid height. The red sunlight glowed on his impassioned face, in his blazing eyes. For an instant he forgot her—became free, breathing in the glory of his faith.

"—That ye love one another," he exclaimed with happy triumph. Her eyes sank. For that instant her instinct told her that she could not touch him—that he had passed beyond her reach. But, behind their lids, her eyes were bright with a bitter resentment.

"Do you love Sigrid Fersen, Tris? People said you

did——"

He came slowly back—down to the level, arid country where he was to live his life. He stared down into her white face. "Do you, Tris?"

He caught her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. Her eyes were sullen and unhappy. Their unhappiness shattered his anger, changing it to a burning remorse and pity.

"You're my wife. There can be no other woman for me but you. That's my little fragment of morality. Isn't that enough?"

"You stand up for her——" she persisted, with a sudden break in her hard voice. She put up her hands, clinging to him. "Oh, Tris, you make me afraid——" she cried miserably. "I couldn't bear to lose you——"

He held her with a desperate tenderness. He had groped his way to the source of her outburst, and the dawning knowledge threw a pitiless light into his own heart. All the antagonism had gone. In the moment's revulsion he saw her as justified.

"If it was because I loved her, I shouldn't fight for her," he said hoarsely. "Don't you understand—it's not only her—it's Barclay, too—it's everyone. I'd trample on every feeling I had for your sake—but not on my religion—don't you understand?" He knew she could not, that the word "religion" had rung like blasphemy in her ears. But she leant against him, crying wearily like a tired child.

"And this is our home-coming, Tris!"

"It makes a mockery of all my promises!" he answered sadly. "What shall I do to make you happy again, little Anne?"

She bent and kissed his hand. "Oh, Tris, if we could only go away from here—from Gaya—somewhere where we should get away from everyone-everyone who makes me afraid—couldn't we? We could start afresh with no one to come between us——?"

It had grown very dark. Though she was watching him again, she could not read his expression. And he was looking past her, straight into the vision which she had called up before him. But it was a vision of all that had been. He saw the old landmarks—the river and the long, broken roads, the camping-place beneath the trees, the familiar faces whose solemn trustfulness he had fought for with his best years, with all the ardour of his youth. He saw the dreams he had dreamed—the hours tight packed with action, with all the glory of battle and victory. And now to begin again—to cut new paths through the waste tracts, to call up fresh springs of faith and hope from desert ground. He felt himself suddenly old and very tired.

"It should be easy enough," he said gently. "I could get a new district—I'm not popular and they've just left me here—but they'd do that for me, I daresay. Yes, we will go away and start again, Anne."

She was silent for a moment. She was breathing quietly and contentedly. In a flash of knowledge which he despised and hated, he knew that they had fought together and that she had won.

"You're so good, Tris, so good to me. Sometimes we don't quite understand each other. But we're husband and wife, and that's all that really matters, isn't it?"

He nodded. The tiredness stupefied him, bewildered him. He fancied he saw something white glide in among the trees—a slender figure that moved like a very spirit of Life. He fancied there was music in the stillness—afar off, intoxicating.

"All that matters, Anne——"

CHAPTER III

MRS. BOUCICAULT CALLS THE TUNE

The male-nurse had put the carefully shaded lamp on the table behind the bed and gone off to take an unobtrusive share in the festivities. Colonel Armstrong had lent the regimental band for the occasion, and what with the music and the superabundance of champagne and the pliability of the native character, the male-nurse recognized golden opportunities for a break in the tedium of his duties. Possibly he was quite justified. It was a dull

business nursing a patient who could not even curse at you. Moreover, there was nothing to do. What could be done for a log that lay day in, day out, staring sightlessly up at the white ceiling, whose every desire, if desire still lived behind that appalling silence, had to be guessed at?

So the male-nurse threw a professional glance round the scene of his activities, noted the perfection of orderliness, and went his way.

Boucicault continued to stare upwards. The shadows were massed against the ceiling like sultry, motionless clouds. They loomed over the withering body stretched out beneath them in the rigidity of death, their stifling intensity loaded with an overpowering perfume. There were flowers everywhere—on the table, at the foot of the bed, on the chest of drawers, on the shelves, lighting the room's barren simplicity with fierce, burning colour. Their vividness seemed a part of the music that came light-footed into the sombre hush—an echo of the murmuring voices, the merry jangle of harness, the patter of naked feet, the clink of glasses. The room was like a white-cliffed, deserted island in the midst of a moonlit, tossing ocean of life. The wave slapped the walls, and rolled back from them as from something alien and repellent.

Or again, but for those eyes staring up at the ceiling, the place might have been a death-chamber. There was the same orderliness, the same white

silence, the many flowers. And the long, shrivelled body outlined on the bed was quieter than any living thing.

A voice broke from the distant murmur and came nearer. It was a woman's voice, rather strained and high-pitched. Something white and shimmering fluttered against the darkness on the verandah.

"I'm sure it's awfully nice of you, Tristram. He'll be so pleased. I usually go in, but this evening I was too busy. Don't stay too long——"

The eyes distended and then closed. Perhaps the brain behind them became conscious of a vital change in the stillness, for a moment later they opened again and rested full and direct on the man standing at the foot of the bed. They stared at each other dumbly. The eyes became ironic and cruel in their knowledge of power. But, as the man moved and came nearer, they followed him, showing the whites like those of a sick animal.

Tristram sat down on the edge of the bed. The light from behind the bed drifted on to his face. He looked weary and composed, and there was no trace of discomfort under that watching enmity.

"I had to come, Boucicault," he said quietly. "It got on my nerves—the thought of your being alone like this. You may not want to see me, but, on the other hand, it may give you some satisfaction. I don't carry my secret very well, do I?" He spoke without bitterness or sarcasm, and the eyes gleamed. "And

then there are things I have to talk to you about," he added.

The regimental band glided into a Viennese waltz, and the intoxicating measure came swaying through the silence. The eyes winced, and then steadied angrily, scornfully. Tristram stretched out his hand and touched the coverlet. There was something groping and passionately seeking in the movement—an articulate appeal.

"Boucicault—it's rotten perhaps to come and preach—don't let it eat into you—all this. Don't judge harshly. I'm not speaking of myself, you know that. I'm thinking of your wife. You lie there dumb and helpless—I don't know what's going on in your mind. I can't understand. Well, it's like that with most of us. Words and actions don't matter much. We just hide behind them. But if we could get down to the motive of each other's cruelty, there would be neither hatred nor condemnation—at the worst, pity." He was silent an instant, his strong hands clasped between his knees. He had spoken sadly and with a certain abstraction and unconsciousness of his hearer, which lent his appeal force and took from it all hint of patronage and mockery. "I say all this because you must think a great deal—lying there—a great deal of the past. For your own peace, it would be better to judge gently a woman you must have cared for. Sometimes, behind our worst frivolity, there is a great bitterness——"

The eyes sneered. Tristram met their ferocious gibe unflinchingly.

"That is one thing I had to say. And then—there's Anne. When I asked her to be my wife, I didn't know what you would feel about our marriage and I didn't care very much. You had made her pretty wretched, and I didn't consider at the time that what had happened between us made any difference. You had been considerably less than a father to her—and besides, you were knocked out. I understand Sir Gilbert treated you like a brave man and was quite honest with you. He doesn't believe in your recovery—nor do I—chiefly because I've done everything for you that science can do—and failed." He paused again. His sentences had been clipped and hard, the words almost brutal. But his attitude was not that of a strong man talking down from the height of his strength and well-being to a broken victim. The eyes under the straight fair brows revealed pitilessly what lay behind the dogged jaw, the composed and resolute exposition. There can be no sentimentality between suffering and suffering, only equality.

"But there was one thing I hadn't understood," he said, "and that was Anne's love for you. Frankly, I thought she would be freer, happier without you. But I was mistaken. It didn't matter that you'd made her wretched. She only remembered that you were her father, the Bagh Sahib, the fine soldier who had done

great things. She cared intensely, and all this—this sort of life smashed her up. If she ran away from it, it was because she felt it as an insult to you—a deliberate cruelty. She just ate her heart out about it. When I realized how matters were there was only one thing on earth I wanted to do, and that was to come along and give her every mortal thing I could to make her happy—you included—everything she'd missed. It seemed to me pitiable to consider your feelings or any conventional notions of—of propriety, as I suppose you'd call it. She needed some one to look after her—some one who cared. Well, I cared. Now that I have the right, I shall live for her as far as one human being can live for another. It is my most passionate hope to make her happy. I don't know whether I shall succeed—that's another matter. I shall do my best."

He got up and stood at his full height. The evening regimentals which he wore did not become him. They looked indefinably grotesque on his bigness—like a child's toy uniform on a grown man. The short Eton coat exaggerated the breadth of his shoulders, the black trousers the narrowness of his hips, the length of limb. The gold and red clashed with his tawny hair and the rugged, weather-tanned features. He needed a background of forest, of action, of stern living. His body needed the freedom of rough clothing.

"Anne wants you to live with us," he said. "That

is what I have come to tell you. If you both would be happier, I should be glad, too. There is a great deal I might be able to do to make things more tolerable for you—at least, I should try. I have given up my quarters at Heerut. It is for you to decide."

The eyes sparkled. It seemed to Tristram that they were blazing with satiric laughter. He had a reasonless, overwhelming sense of near disaster. "Give me some sign, Boucicault. If you consent, close your eyes or——"

Slowly, as if weighed down by disuse, the withered arm lying on the sheet lifted itself from the elbow. It remained upright for an instant, throwing a sinister shadow on the wall, seeming to point upwards with menacing significance, then sank slowly to its place. The eyes were mad with exultation.

Tristram was back to the bedside at one stride. He laid his fingers on the savagely beating pulse. With rapid, skilful movements, he began to test the muscles and nerve of the now motionless arm. He was breathing quickly. The weariness, the painful deliberation had gone from him. He was himself again—the fighter on the vast field of suffering, the physician glorying in the greatest of all triumphs.

"By God, Boucicault, you don't know what that may mean! It's what we'd hoped for. Look here—can you do it again?"

The arm remained inert, the eyes were,

momentarily veiled and insignificant. "How long have you been able to do that?" He was still busy with his examination and scarcely troubled about an answer. He had plunged back into a world where there were no passions or conflicts, but only huge immutable laws, no personal desires or unreal dreams, but only facts, unending chains of cause and effect, a thousand paths converging on one great end. It was not till he had made every experiment complete that he remembered. He looked up. The eyes were turned into their corners, resting on his face. Their exaggerated expanse of white gave them a look like that of a vicious dog. They did not move save when Tristram lifted himself slowly from his half-kneeling position, and then they followed him with a malicious fixity. The rest of the face was dead —a crumbling mask—but the life in those eyes was inextinguishable, titanic in its will to continuation.

He had to escape from them. He went over to the wide-open balcony and stood there with his back turned, staring out into the darkness. For a moment, his brain refused to face this reckoning with the future. He listened to the music which poured through the scented stillness like the drowsy, delicious murmur of running water. A man and a woman came down the pathway which led from the front of the bungalow. He could hear their voices—the man's deep-pitched and earnest, the woman's silvery and ironic. The light from a Chinese lantern

shining softly among the branches drew a subdued gleam from the gold on the man's collar, from the woman's white, uncovered shoulders. Suddenly the man bent down, and they stood together through a tense, suffocating moment of silence. Then the woman spoke again—breathlessly, the ironic lightness gone.

Tristram drew back. He felt as though he had been drawn out into the night's delirious sweetness; as though in defiance of that silent, menacing figure his pulses had leapt forward, his blood had clamoured for the fulfilment of its elemental demand on all this wealth of living. He was young still—young in his purity of feeling—young in the unsatisfied forces of desire. Youth flung itself on him with its imperative behests—now when he reeled under the knowledge of its passing. For it was over. He reasoned clearly enough through this storm of primitive emotion. Boucicault would live. He might come back into life—he, Tristram, would bring him back to life. It was the task which his creed set him—not the creed of his profession but the deeper, sterner creed of his blood.

And what if his blood lied, what if his creed were a mad, senseless paradox? Was not the happiness of the majority the only good, its preservation the only morality? This man had set himself against the law. In a ghostly, tragic procession, those whom he had hunted out of their

rightful heritage passed before Tristram's memory—young officers, those six men in the full glory of manhood standing in the barrack yard, their backs to the wall, their faces to their brothers, and the death which was to be dealt out to them; Eleanor Boucicault grey-cheeked and wild-eyed pursuing the phantom promises of life; Anne, cowed and broken, haunted now by a remorseful treacherous memory; a death-stricken little mongrel dog, most harmless, most pitiable of all, with glazed eyes, seeking to understand the black mystery of human cruelty.

Tristram put his hand to the stiff military collar as though it choked him. The foundations on which he had built his life were crumbling under his feet. Was he to give this criminal mind the power to act, to drag his escaped and maimed victims back into the net of his authority, to add others to that pitiable procession? Tristram recognized the issues with an appalling clearness. His trained intellect grappled with them with the same stern impartiality of judgment as he would have used in tracking the source of a disease. With regard to himself, he discarded all false sentiment. As men judge, the blow he had struck had been unfortunate but just. Was he to heap an outrageous punishment upon himself, upon Anne, upon an old woman who had known no happiness save her joy in him? Would it not be a strong and logical following out of his sincere belief if he made no effort to fan this evil flame to life?

As yet he was not conscious of any direct temptation. He was only facing the issues—weighing one life against another, as it had happened a hundred times in his professional career.

He turned slowly and came back into the room. The eyes followed him, but their malicious knowledge no longer reached him. The fight was not now between himself and this man, but between two fundamental and opposite conceptions of life. There was a little table at the foot of the bed, crowded with the paraphernalia of sickness. He stopped before it, because its interest offered a fresh delay, and idly picked up one of the glass-stoppered bottles. He opened it and smelt its contents. The faint, sickly perfume flashed its significance to his brain.

Men were given the power to kill——

He looked up. The eyes burning in that white mask were on his hands. Their expression had changed—had become more horrible. It was the very spirit of fear and triumphant evil.

Tristram put the bottle back in its place. He came and stood by the bed.

"I don't want you to hope too much, Boucicault," he said, coolly and professionally. "In the best of cases, it will be a long job. I shall come tomorrow and go over you again and see what's to be done. If Sir Gilbert is still in the land, we'll have him over. And you must do all you can to help us. As to me—I quite realize I have landed myself in an impasse from

which there is no possible escape. I don't know what Anne will feel or think. But she'll be so thankful to get you back, the cost won't matter. At any rate, I shall not speak of all this again to you. My business with you is to give you back to life. The afterwards is my concern. Good night, Boucicault."

As he had spoken, his eyes on the mask of bitterness and hatred, something rushed over him. It was like the melting of a frozen stream under the first warm sunshine. It seemed to him that he had looked straight down through those eyes into the very heart of human misery, and had understood. He remembered his own words: "There is only one distinction between men—the unhappy and the happy, the cursed and the blessed." They blazed now with a real significance. Men were pitchforked into this world with distorted bodies or distorted souls—what did it matter which? They deserved neither hatred nor condemnation—they were the awful mystery of humanity, the visible symbol of the curse under which humanity totters. "Here, but for a wild incalculable chance, go I, Tristram."

He bent down and laid his hand on Boucicault's arm. He did not stop to think whether or not his touch might be repugnant to the other man. He acted out of an imperative instinct.

"You mustn't worry," he said gently, and almost gaily. "You'll live to do for me yet, Boucicault! Good night again."

The eyes closed as though they had burnt themselves out. Tristram moved quietly to the verandah. He had a sudden sense of freedom, of physical relief, which was like an awakening from a suffocating nightmare. He went down the steps into the garden. It was then, as he stood there listening to the music and the distant voices, that he saw Sigrid Fersen come towards him. His eyes could not have recognized her face, for it was dark and she was moving quickly, like a pale mysterious light, through the shadow of the trees. But he knew her. Was it her step—the lithe, familiar motion of her body—or something deep-hidden within himself which irresistibly went out to her? He could not have told. He waited for her. She came on unseeingly to the edge of the faint reflection from Boucicault's room, and then stood still, staring at him. Her small, white face had an aghast look. He tried to speak to her and could not. His throat hurt him.

He knew now that he had never known her, never, even in his dreams of her, realized her potentialities. He knew that she had deliberately thrown down her weapons to meet him in the stern simplicity of his life. She had been too proud, too self-assured perhaps to fear to show herself to him physically at her least. Now he saw her at her highest—the priceless, polished stone in a rare and exquisite setting.

A languorous breath of night-wind ruffled the

smooth gold of her hair and lifted the flimsy scarf from her shoulders. It fluttered out behind her like a pale mist. He saw the single string of pearls at her neck. He fancied he could see the passionate life beating beneath them. And through all her brilliancy, her burning vitality, there was a strain of quaint Victorianism, a demure elfishness—like the interweaving of a minuet with the riot of a bacchanal.

He could not have spoken to her, and at last a smile dawned at the corners of her mouth. He knew that she had been afraid, and it flashed upon him that in the bitterest moment she would retain her humour, her zest of life.

"You quite frightened me, Major Tristram," she said. "I have never seen you in uniform before."

"Does it become me?" he heard himself ask back.

"No. You look as though you were rather stifled by so much magnificence. And you've never seen me in full gala either, have you?"

"No."

"It suits me, doesn't it? That's the difference between us. I'm in my natural element. Will you take me back, Major Tristram? I came out for a breath of fresh air and to escape Mrs. Boucicault. Mrs. Boucicault asked me to dance. I think she fancied it would be a good method of rehabilitating me in the eyes of outraged Gaya. But I didn't want to. What's the use of marrying if you have to go on working for your living?"

He walked silently beside her. He did not know this woman with the hard voice—he felt that she did not want him to know her. Her hand rested lightly on his arm. He looked at it. It was like alabaster on the red sleeve. "We're going to be married shortly," she went on. "Mr. Meredith is trying to refuse his services. He doesn't approve. He wants us to leave Gaya. It's so absurdly Christian, isn't it? My husband's business will be in Gaya and I like the place——" They had turned the curve of the path and came within sight of the softly-lit garden. They could see shadows of the dancers gliding through Mrs. Boucicault's rooms to the rhythm of the latest American distortion. Little groups had gathered round the tables on the verandah and there was much laughter and the subdued clinking of glasses. The Chinese lanterns shone like bright warm eyes amid the trees.

Sigrid stood still an instant. He heard her draw a deep, unsteady breath. "How gay it all is—fairy-like! One can scarcely believe that there is such a thing as reality. Perhaps there isn't. Mrs. Boucicault is a daring hostess. It requires nerve to dance with a dead husband in the house."

It occurred to him then to tell her what he had just discovered. He held back. He was afraid of troubling the surface of their relationship. They did not know one another. The man and woman who had faced each other that night in Heerut belonged

to a different life. They were shadows—or had become shadows.

"By the way, Major Tristram, what has happened to the Wickie Memorial? Is he still among the living?"

"He lives and rejoices in the name of Richard," he answered lightly.

"Do you sometimes let him out of the compound?" she asked.

He did not answer her at once. Her voice had sounded casual enough, and yet he knew that there had been something deliberate in her words—a deliberate desire to hurt, to thrust down through his seeming tranquillity to a raw and open wound.

"How did you know?" he asked curtly.

"I don't know—I guessed."

"My wife doesn't like animals about the place," he said steadily. "I do what I can for the little chap. You see, in Heerut it was different—and I don't live at Heerut now."

"Of course not. You have become so civilized." They had reached the verandah steps and she turned to him with a laugh. "So civilized. The old landmarks have gone—the beard, the disreputable clothes, the wild-man-o'-the-wood's hair—and heaven knows what else! Is there anything left of the Dakktar Sahib, or is he smothered under the respectability of Major Tristram?" Her eyes ran over him—mockingly. He raised his right hand—he could not have told why. It

was at once a movement of pain and self-defence. Then he saw that her eyes were on his wrist. "I'm sorry——" she said, gently. "I am intolerable. There are things one must believe in or perish—Forgive me. And, for a wedding-present, will you give Richard back to me? I think he would be happier."

He nodded. He had the feeling that therewith something for which he had fought had been finally surrendered. He followed her silently up the steps. At the top they were met by Anne. She went up to her husband and put her hand on his arm. She did not look at Sigrid, and the deliberateness of her disregard betrayed how keenly she felt the other's presence. Her obstinate mouth was compressed and unsmiling.

"I have been wanting you, Tris," she said sharply. "Where have you been?"

"With your father," he answered. "I'm sorry. I did not know you were looking for me."

"You might have told me——" Her voice sounded pettish and breathless. "I should have come with you. And you haven't danced with me once."

He laughed. He felt rather than saw that Sigrid had turned away and joined one of the parties of the verandah. He heard Radcliffe offer her his place and the sulky deference in the boy's voice. It gave him a sudden knowledge of the fight she was waging.

"I can't dance—not even as well as a polar-bear," he said. "You've married a loutish barbarian, Anne."

"Your barbarism seems to appeal to some people," she flashed back. He knew then that she had listened. But he could feel no resentment. She looked ill and almost old. Her home-made evening dress did not become her, and the Indian sun had begun to drain the colour from her cheeks. As though remorse-stricken, she pressed his arm, looking up at him pathetically. "Tris, I didn't mean to be cross and horrid. I wanted to go home with you——"

"Weren't you enjoying yourself?" he asked.

"I couldn't—Tris, don't you see——?"

He looked past her into the brightly-lit rooms where a few couples were still dancing. He saw then what it was that had driven her out to seek him. Mrs. Boucicault danced the tango with Barclay. They were both conspicuous. Barclay was the only man in civilian dress, and, thanks to Rasaldû's angry absence, his deeper isolation was made more manifest. But he danced well—perhaps too well. Mrs. Boucicault gave a fierce little laugh of pleasure as he guided her swiftly across the room. She herself was an outrageous figure in her youthful, almost childish dress, high at the neck and loaded with jewellery. Her fluffy grey hair looked tossed and disordered, her cheeks were painted. But as she suddenly broke off and came towards them leaning on Barclay's arm, Tristram saw that there was nothing artificial in her shining eyes.

"Now, what do you think of me, Tristram?" she

exclaimed. "Isn't there life in me yet? Don't you admire me?"

He felt Anne shrink closer to him. He bowed gravely.

"With all my heart," he answered.

"Oh, it's been splendid! I've been chasing the years and catching them up. Mr. Barclay dances so wonderfully, Anne: you should try your step with his ——"

Barclay made a little movement forward. He only glanced at Anne. His eyes fixed themselves on Tristram's face.

"I haven't the pleasure," he said, in his soft mincing way. "Perhaps you'd introduce me to your wife, Tristram——"

"I don't care whom I dance with as long as our steps match," Mrs. Boucicault continued, with reckless ecstasy.

There was a moment's silence. Barclay had heard. His eyes narrowed a little and his nostrils dilated with his quick breathing. Tristram turned to Anne. She stared straight up at him. Her face was sallow and pinched-looking.

"Will you please take me home, Tris?"

She slipped her arm through his and turned to go. Barclay held his ground. His lips were trembling. The little vein of success that he had had with Mrs. Boucicault had intoxicated him, but many things had happened that evening. It was as Mrs. Bosanquet had

said—Gaya was fighting to the last ditch.

"I don't think Mrs. Tristram understands," he said huskily. "We're sort of relations, aren't we? Won't you do the brotherly, Tristram?"

He had not meant to say it. It was the look on Anne's face which had goaded him—the hundred petty pin-pricks which he had endured patiently, the sudden realization of the impossible gulf between him and the tall standing uniformed figure before him.

Anne gave a little laugh. It was tremulous and disgusted.

"I really think we'd better go, Tris."

"I'm not drunk," Barclay said. "It's true. You'd better ask him. Captain Tristram was my father right enough——" He swung round. "Why don't you own up to it, damn you——?" he burst out.

The little group nearest him turned to look at him. He was only conscious of Tristram and Sigrid. The latter had half-risen from her place. He saw her face as a white blank. Some one came and touched him on the arm. That was what he wanted—to come to grips with them, to choke them with some of the humiliation that was like dry dust in his throat.

"Look here, Barclay——"

"It's perfectly true," Tristram said suddenly. "Mr. Barclay is my half-brother. I understood that he did not wish it known—or I should have acknowledged the relationship before. I do so now."

There was a silence. He had spoken simply and very naturally. It was as though a bomb had been thrown into the room and he had picked it up and proved it an empty shell. Still more, it was as though a child had burst out with some weighty, wonderful secret and had been met by cool, indifferent laughter. The whole situation seemed to have lost point—become tiresome and ridiculous. The man who had interfered drew back, muttering an apology. Mrs. Boucicault laughed.

"How silly it all is!" she said, half to herself. "What does it matter?"

But Barclay turned and crossed the crowded verandah and stumbled down the steps. Afterwards he ran like a madman. He had not seen Tristram's detaining hand. He thought he heard some one laugh, and the sound was like the cut of a whip on an open sore. He ran till his breath jarred from him in aching sobs. He ran till the last light had vanished among the trees, till there was no sound but his own tortured breathing. Then he stood still swaying on his feet, his hands pressed to his wet face.

He remained thus many minutes. Then he walked on. He was hatless and coatless. As he turned into the gates of his own compound, a light fell on his face and it showed piteously wild and stupid-looking, like that of a hunted animal.

Something moved in the shadow of a tree and came out and stood in his path. Barclay jerked to a

standstill. He passed his hand over his eyes.

"Who the devil are you?" he muttered.

"Ayeshi. I've been here waiting for you."

Barclay gave a little unsteady laugh.

"I don't know you. You're not Ayeshi. Ayeshi's gone to the devil. You'd better clear out——" Then he was silent, staring at the face which turned itself deliberately to the light. "Good God!" he muttered.

"Vahana sent me to you. I've not tasted food for a week. I didn't dare go to the villages. They're still hunting for me. Are you going to give me up?"

"Where have you been?"

"Calcutta."

"What did you do there?"

"I learnt things."

"What things?"

"I learnt that I had been a fool. Hatred, too——"

"You mixed with the students?"

"Yes."

"What else——?"

"I know who I am."

Both had spoken in English, and each accent had its own quality. Barclay peered into Ayeshi's face. He was breathing, quickly, with a smothered excitement.

"You're ill, aren't you?"

"I am dying."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know yet. Are you going to give me up?"

Barclay looked back over his shoulder into the darkness. He was shivering.

"No," he said. "I'll not give you up—not to them."

He made a sign, and they went up towards the bungalow, keeping to the shadow of the trees.

CHAPTER IV
ANNE MAKES A DISCOVERY

Anne had given a little tea-party. A tea-party was a favourite function of hers. Mrs. Bosanquet, fond of developing her ideas, set it down to a tendency inherited from the suburban days when Anne had played hymns on a pianola. Anne liked tea-parties because they were inexpensive, and sober. She liked to be quiet and to talk gently and seriously. Gaya had other ideas of amusement, but came nevertheless and sat on the cool verandah and talked gently and seriously, till there was no character in the station that was not in ribbons. And this was not because they were venomous, but because they were bored and their Anglo-Saxon bodies yearned for violent exercise.

A week before, Tristram had set out for a brief round of the nearest villages, and the tea-party was a method of filling in a few hours of his absence. Anne detested his absences, and gradually he had reduced the camping-out days to the least possible number. She had never pleaded with him. Her pressure had been almost imperceptible but persistent.

Gaya had accepted her invitation to the last

available man. They had had a vague idea that they were thereby "backing up" the poor old Hermit, whom they vaguely pitied. Only two people in Gaya had been ignored, and it was on their account that Mrs. Bosanquet and the two Comptons lingered after the rest of the company had excused itself homewards. Mrs. Bosanquet sat on one side of the prim, muslin-frocked figure and Mary Compton on the other. Archibald Compton took up his place on the verandah step and smoked innumerable cigarettes. Knowing the probable trend of events, he felt wretchedly uncomfortable.

Anne chatted about her servants. She did not quite approve of Mrs. Bosanquet, who was too irresponsible for her size and years. On the other hand, she was the Judge's wife, and what she did not know about native cooks was not worth knowing. So Anne related her woes, and in the very midst of them Mrs. Bosanquet blundered in with her attack, for all the world like a squadron of cavalry through a picnic.

"You know, Anne, you're not playing the game," she said. "That's my feeling about it. You're setting a bad example. We can't go on like this. It's our duty to hang together—not to build nasty little coteries and cliques. We're not living in London, where there's plenty of room for everybody's morals. We've got to put up with each other and pretend we like it. I do my share, you must do yours——"

Mrs. Compton nodded decided agreement. Her husband hunted for his cigarette-case.

"Them's my sentiments," he declared vulgarly.

Anne had started a little. Now she looked from one to the other and finally at the unhappy Archibald. Her lips curled.

"Of course, I know whom you mean," she said; "but I didn't think you would take that point of view, Captain Compton. I thought men were so strict about that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" Mrs. Compton asked, elbowing her husband from the field of discussion, where he was not likely to distinguish himself.

Anne's smile persisted. She was not in the least angry, though the war-signals had been in the other's eyes from the outset. She was prepared to discuss the question reasonably and gently. She felt a queer, suppressed little exultation throbbing beneath her reasonableness.

"Colour," she said.

Both Compton and Mrs. Bosanquet grimaced involuntarily. But Mary Compton was too accustomed to her advanced position to feel any particular smart.

"You mean, because Mr. Barclay has native blood?" she asked. "It's ridiculous. Of course, we none of us like it. We don't even like him. But he's going to marry one of us——"

"Not one of us," Anne interposed with a quick,

upward flash of the grave eyes.

"One of our blood," Mary Compton persisted. "And—and, speaking for Archie and myself—one of our friends. We can't have them ostracized by half the station like this. The scene the other evening was intolerable, and it would never have taken place if you had behaved reasonably. You don't involve your heavenly salvation by bowing to a man."

Her fiery temper, which had been severely tested during the last week, had taken the bit between its teeth during her expostulation, and the knowledge that she was now at a disadvantage did not help her to recover it. Anne's mouth hardened. The memory of that scene still rankled.

"One has to draw the line somewhere," she said.

"I daresay. Still, it would have been wiser not to have drawn the line at one's husband's brother."

"He is not Tristram's brother." Her voice quivered, and Mary Compton had the satisfaction of seeing the tears rise to the brown eyes. "They're no relation—no legal relation. These dreadful things happen—but one doesn't acknowledge them or talk about them. It was absurd and unkind of Tris to have behaved as he did. He has such ridiculous notions. Anyhow, just because it's true, it's all the more impossible for us to have anything to do with him—or his wife. Surely you can see that, Mary." She paused, and then added: "Everyone else does, you know."

It was true. Mary Compton acknowledged it to herself with an angry, sinking heart. Sigrid had not been strong enough—not strong enough, certainly, to balance the consternation, the uneasy sense of insulted tradition which had punished Barclay's outburst. Mary Compton looked gloomily at Tristram's wife, and wondered if it was only a sense of outraged propriety which gave her naturally girlish face that expression of old and set resolution.

Archibald Compton created a merciful diversion.

"It's a rotten business," he said, in his drawling way; "and I can tell you one thing—it's not going to be settled quite so easily as some of you people think. Barclay isn't just an ordinary, feckless Eurasian. He's not going to be snubbed for nothing. He's got Tristram blood in him. I believe he's got a touch of the devil, too—which Tristram senior may or may not have had—and a lot of dangerous explosive stuff in his head which might go off any minute. We've seen that. And I'll tell you something more—some natives are jolly touchy about that sort of thing. I've no doubt Tristram senior got the knife for his little escapade, and a grudge dies hard. Besides, this fellow has an awful hold over the natives. They've pretty well mortgaged their souls to him. He can make himself jolly awkward if he chooses." It was the longest, most dogmatic utterance Compton had ever been guilty of, and he got up and groped for his helmet on the chair behind him. "I

guess we'd better be clearing, old lady," he said awkwardly.

His wife forgot to reprove him. She felt a glow of passionate affection mingle with her general indignation.

"I'm sure we deserve whatever happens to us," she said. "We're the pettiest, meanest lot of God-forsaken, benighted idiots that ever made the word 'humanity' ridiculous. Anyhow, I shall do what I can. You can all come to our dinner or you can stay away. I've asked Sigrid and Mr. Barclay, and they've accepted. It's in their honour. So now you know."

She looked at Mrs. Bosanquet, and the latter lady got up with a fat sigh of resignation.

"Oh, I suppose I shall come," she said, "and George, of course. It seems to be his luck, poor dear, always to be on the wrong side."

Anne said good-bye to them with her composed little smile. It was amazing how self-possessed, how deliberate she had become in those few months of married life. It was as though her character had been kept deliberately in flux until her mate had been chosen, and had then settled into hard, predestined lines. After the routed deputation had waved its farewell, she went back into the drawing-room and began to rearrange her wedding presents for about the fourth time. They never quite satisfied her. Gaya had divided its treasures in the true Christian spirit. The family that had two silver candlesticks gave one,

and so on, and the result was distressing for any one with a sense of symmetry. She sang softly to herself as she worked, and when she came across the Dresden shepherdess she put it in a drawer and turned the key on it with a quiet satisfaction. After that, she found an old foul-smelling pipe hidden behind a vase. She smiled at it affectionately, disapprovingly, as at a child's broken toy, and placed it in the waste-paper basket. Then she rang the little silver-tongued bell and a soft-footed servant slid into the room, and, in obedience to her slight gesture, the waste-paper basket and its doomed contents disappeared.

It was at that moment that she noticed the shadow of a man on the verandah. His back was to the light, and at the first glance she did not recognize him. Nor did he make any movement to recall her memory. He stood there looking at her.

"Why—Owen!" she said. "Owen!"

She ran to him with a joyful relaxation of her staidness, both hands outstretched. He waited for her to come up to him. There was something at once proud and humble in that deliberate waiting. He held his head well up like a soldier, challenging nothing, fearing nothing.

It was the first time that they had met since the day when he had seen her off on her way to Trichy. Between then and now there had been the Feast of Siva and her marriage. She looked up at him, her

hands in his quiet grasp.

One side of his face had no resemblance to the other. It had been smashed and mended into a grotesque hideousness—into a leering distortion. The eye was completely closed. The whole face looked like a divided mask—one half human, the other devilish. It was intensely, cruelly pitiable.

Anne neither winced nor changed colour. She looked up at him steadily.

"Dear Owen!" she said. "Dear Owen!"

The one half of his poor twisted mouth smiled.

"I've been hesitating outside for about an hour—listening to your voices. I didn't like to come in—I was afraid of startling you. I suppose you knew—but one can talk about things one can't face."

He lisped a little, but the lisp could not weaken his simple, unconscious dignity.

"You should have come before," she answered. "I have thought so much of you."

"I couldn't come. It took a long time to tinker me up, and then I tried to go back to my work. It's been rather difficult. The poor beggars think I've got the evil eye or something."

She made him sit down in Tristram's long wicker chair and sent for fresh tea. There was a gentle solicitude in all her movements that was very touching. When she came near him to bring him his cup, he saw there were tears on her lashes.

"Anne—it's awfully sweet of you to be so sorry."

She smiled at him with unsteady lips.

"I don't think I am sorry. It isn't a matter to be sorry about—one can only be very proud."

A boyish flush crept into his cheek.

"There's nothing to be proud of either. I thought perhaps you'd be angry, as the others were."

"Don't you know me better than that? Were the others angry?"

"All of them, pretty well. They talked about the risk. Tristram said I'd endangered their lives."

She considered a moment.

"It isn't like Tristram to be afraid," she said.

"Not for himself. My word, no. He came into the thick of that scrum like a lion. You know how big he is. He seemed to grow a lot bigger. He fairly picked me up by the scruff of the neck and hauled me out over their heads. How he managed, I don't know. It was a marvellously brave thing to have done." He laughed. "I've had a kind of hero-worship for him ever since," he added shyly.

"You don't need to have. What you did was just as brave. It was throwing yourself single-handed against all the forces of evil. I was proud, Owen. It made me feel that some of us are still ready to prove our faith at whatever cost. It was as though one of the old martyrs had come back to shame our indifference, our wicked toleration. It gave me new hope——"

The colour glowed vividly in her cheeks. He

glanced at her, and then turned away again, revealing the distorted profile. There was a moment's crowded silence. She could see his hands working nervously on the arm of his chair.

"I was awfully afraid," he said at last, and she knew by his voice that he was living his bad hour of fear over again. "And yet I had to go on. I had never understood how real the voice of God can be. It's easy enough to keep up the ordinary jog-trot service until the summons comes to you—then you must either obey or give up your mission. One can deceive one's conscience—not God."

"And God saved you," she said eagerly.

She said it with her eyes set on his tortured face. He nodded, and laughed whimsically.

"And with a strange instrument—a man who cursed me in all the languages for doing the devil's work."

"Tristram, you mean?" There was no amusement in Anne's eyes, but a shadow. "Poor Tristram, he just doesn't understand. He hates sacrifice—I don't think he knows what it means. He wants people to be healthy, and have plenty to eat, and lots of pleasure. He thinks that's all that matters. He doesn't understand the significance of the Cross. Perhaps he has been too happy."

Meredith did not answer. He was thinking perplexedly of the man who had lain stretched motionless across the portrait of an unknown

woman. It was a glimpse of memory which never wholly faded. It blurred his conception of Tristram's happiness. Then he looked at the woman opposite him and forgot. He saw her goodness, her purity, her steadfastness of soul. He saw that she had developed. She had been a girl, she was now a woman, strong and self-reliant. A thrill of sheer adoration ran through his senses. She looked back at him steadily. With a passionate thankfulness, he regained those moments of communion when she had knelt before him at the altar and they had been one in worship and understanding.

"You are very happy, Anne?" he said gently.

"Very happy."

"I am glad. I wanted to see what a true marriage can mean——" He hesitated. There was something that he had come to tell her. It sickened him, and yet it pleased him, as he knew it would please her. "Miss Fersen and Mr. Barclay were married this afternoon," he said.

She looked up. The sun had gone down behind the high trees in the compound, and the room was full of fast-deepening shadows. They were in her eyes, and he could not read their expression.

"You married them, Owen?"

He heard the subdued reproach in her voice.

"I couldn't help myself. What power had I to refuse? But I confess I hated it. It seemed horrible to me—as though I had taken part in an ugly farce. It

was quite private—no one knew about it. The banns have been up sometime."

Her lips were set in a hard line.

"Perhaps they were ashamed," she said. "I only hope they will leave Gaya. It is terrible to have them here. I think she wanted to get hold of Tristram. Wasn't she with him that day at Heerut?"

She spoke carelessly. He wondered if she knew or only guessed.

"Yes—she went out to see the festival."

"She would like that kind of thing—she is that sort of woman." A spark of passion flashed in her quiet voice. "I always distrusted her. Don't you remember, Owen?"

He nodded. He remembered everything that had ever passed between them. He knew that he could not forget. He did not want to. He hugged his sorrowful happiness close to him. He loved her intensely and purely. He knew that no other human love could ever come into his life, and there was no evil in the knowledge.

It had grown so dark that their faces were white ghostly blanks. A native servant brought in a lighted lamp and set it noiselessly at the far end of the room. Meredith got up slowly.

"I must be clearing," he said. "It's done me good to be with you. You've always understood so wonderfully, Anne."

"I wish I could help you," she answered.

"You have helped me."

Their hands met in a long clasp.

Tristram rode up through the shaggy, unkempt avenue. It was still light enough outside for his amazingness to be apparent to the two standing together on the verandah. He wore his helmet at the back of his tawny, unkempt hair. Three days' stubble was on his chin. He was collarless, and his soiled shirt gaped at the neck. His long legs were out of the stirrups, and dangled absurdly along Arabella's sides. Arabella had grown, if anything, a little leaner and she exhibited her favourite mannerism of trailing her nose when tired of things in general, and camping-out in particular. They were a wonderful pair.

Tristram sang as he rode. His soft, rather hoarse baritone struggled with a translation of the melody that was running through his brain. It failed, and he knew it, but he continued to sing. He had been three days in the open—three days skirting the grey, sombre-flowing river, ploughing through harsh jungle grass and following rough tracts through forests where life lurked and rustled and fled with a hundred distinct, familiar footfalls. For three nights he had camped under the stars. He had seen the moon rise like a silver lamp held aloft by a giant peering down on a sleeping, pigmy land. He had sat under the council-tree and smoked his pipe and listened to the grumbles of the headman, the latest scandal, and many an old legend. He had scolded

and bullied and laughed and triumphed. He had touched life again, and regained his grip and his clear vision.

He laughed as he swung himself out of his saddle.

"You didn't expect me, did you?" he asked gaily.

Anne ran down to meet him. She kissed at first rapturously and then with a little shudder of irrepressible disgust.

"Oh, Tris, a beard again! And you smell horrid—of horses and—and natives and things—you look a perfect sight. What have you been doing?"

"Not washing, anyhow. You remember that bath I had just before I went? Well, it was my last. Been too busy for such foibles of an effete generation. Hullo, Meredith. Glad to see you. Not going, are you?"

"I must; I've been here hours."

"Anne was jolly glad of your company, I expect. I'm coming round some day to give you the benefit of my medical genius. I believe I know more about things than a lot of your high-brow Calcutta folk."

"I don't fancy even you can do much," Meredith replied. "I'm a bad job. But it's good of you all the same. Good night."

"Good night."

Anne would have watched till the white-clad figure had disappeared, but Tristram put his arm about her and drew her into the room. He was

momentarily serious.

"Poor old Meredith!" he muttered. "They have messed him up. It must be almost unbearable."

She drew herself gently away from him. The feel of his arm, with its ripple of steel muscle, had been wont to thrill her. Tonight he jarred on some raw susceptibility; his strength repelled rather than fascinated her senses.

"I don't think Owen feels about it like that," she said. "It's not awful to him. He recognizes it as a cross which he is glad to bear."

He shrugged his big shoulders with good-humoured impatience.

"Why should one be glad to bear crosses? It's that sort of spirit which makes crosses possible. Our business is to get rid of them—to blot out the very memory of such a thing——"

"A holy symbol!" she interjected eagerly.

"I don't see anything holy in it. It's a symbol of man's cruelty to man. If I believed in a devil, I should say he created it and put the idea into our poor heads that it was a thing to be cherished." He chuckled. "Well, I shall have a shot at lightening Meredith's cross whether he likes it or not, though he doesn't deserve it——"

"Why not?" she asked. He was moving about the room, evidently searching for his lost pipe. She watched him coldly. She had been very happy only a little time ago—very peaceful, very conscious of her

own soul. It was as though a dishevelled giant had burst into her world, pulling it about her ears, trampling on her treasures. She loved him, but she was not blind. She saw, almost for the first time, that he was vitally of the earth. "Why not?" she repeated.

"Because through him lives were lost and endangered."

"Sigrid Fersen, for instance?"

The little sneer did not reach him. Having failed in his search, he produced a briar of disgraceful antiquity from the depths of a trouser pocket. He began to fill it with a lover's tenderness.

"Lots of decent fellows I knew were trampled to death on that particular afternoon," he said simply. "Some of them had saved my life."

"You saved Meredith," she put in loyally. She wanted to be just to him—to admire him, to stifle that feeling of intolerant disgust.

He laughed.

"Why, yes, I suppose I did. It was an inspiration. I just shouted at them that he had the sunstroke and didn't know what he was talking about——"

"Tris!"

"It was the best way. I had to fight like mad as it was. I didn't want to have to kill any of my people." He stretched himself out on the long chair and held out his hand. "You don't mind if I rest a bit before I wash up? I've been ten hours in the saddle. Don't be cross. Of course, I didn't mean that about Meredith.

He did what he thought was right, and so it was right. I'd do anything I could for him."

She gave him her hand and sat down on the edge of the chair beside him. She had herself well under control now. She spoke gently and almost affectionately.

"You could help him if you wanted to, Tris."

"Well, I do want to. Tell me how."

She bent her head, stroking the brown hand on her knee. She did not know that she was stroking it. The action was purely instinctive.

"You could use your influence for him with the natives."

His vivid blue eyes rested rather anxiously on her face. He sat up a little and drew her restlessly caressing hand into a strong grip.

"I couldn't do that, Anne."

"Not even for me?"

"I'd do most things for you—chuck my work even. But as long as it is my work, I've got to do it as I think right."

"Isn't it right to help people to be better and happier?"

"Of course. Only it doesn't seem to me that smashing their faith is going to help them."

"We can give them a better faith——"

He shook his head.

"Not till we've lived it ourselves."

She got up abruptly and moved away from him.

She felt as though a chasm had opened at her feet. Or had it always been there? Had she been blinded by her girlish worship of his strength and almost feminine gentleness? She did not know. She felt a physical nausea creep over her.

"You promised to make me happy. You don't when you talk like that."

He thought a moment.

"I do want to make you happy, Anne. It's not an exaggeration to say I'd give my life for you. But—I was thinking it over whilst I was alone out there—happiness isn't a thing you see in a shop window and buy for a price. You have to have it in yourself if you're going to give it to others. I shouldn't be happy if I pretended to be any one else but myself. I should stifle and have no power to make you happy. I can't humbug—I don't want you to, either. We've both got to be free, or it's the end of everything." He waited a moment, watching her. "Anne, do you know whom I've seen?" he asked, with a complete change of tone.

"No."

"Sir Gilbert Foster. I heard that he was tiger-hunting this way, and I tracked him down. I wanted to see him and tell him about some favourable symptoms I have noticed in your father's condition. Also I wanted to make a suggestion. Well, he agrees with me. It means an operation—a pretty dangerous one. I wanted him to perform it, but he can't. He's got a Conference somewhere or other. He thinks I'm

the man to go ahead with it."

She turned swiftly, suspiciously. She saw the flame under the fine brows—perhaps glimpsed how deep and passionate was his desire for her happiness, how eagerly he had planned this moment. She came back to him and knelt down, her trembling hands on his shoulders.

"Tris—does that mean—he might get well?"

"He might. It's a fighting chance."

"Oh, Tris—if it were only true——!"

He smiled gravely down at her.

"You'd pay any price for it to be true, Anne?"

"Any price!" she answered joyfully.

He put his arm round her.

"We'll do our level best, dear."

They remained silent for many minutes. She half crouched, half lay with her head against his shoulder. Her antipathy had died down. He was again the strong and perfect hero of her fancies. She loved him. The arm curved about her shoulder was again a thrilling force. She looked down tenderly at the slender, powerful wrist. Then she laughed.

"Tris, why do you wear that silly, common bracelet? It's cheap, and so unmanly."

She felt his body grow suddenly tense. He answered without effort, almost lightly.

"It was a great gift—a gift of friendship."

"From whom?"

"A friend."

She drew herself up. At no time was a sense of humour strong in her. She resented his lightness.

"You might tell me——"

"I can't."

"Is it a secret?"

"I suppose so—yes."

"Husband and wife ought not to have secrets from one another."

He laughed.

"Oughtn't they? Why not?"

"They're one."

His eyes darkened. He saw that the anger was mounting in her and strove to silence it. But an immense weariness lamed him. All the life and hope which he had gathered to himself out there on those wild fastnesses died out of him.

"They're not, Anne—heaven forbid. Because you and I are to live together all our lives—because we care for each other, our personalities don't cease to exist. We have both our secrets—our very thoughts are secret. We can't help it. I'll wager you don't tell me everything you think about me. Do you?"

She got up slowly. She went and stood by the light, her head averted. She was very truthful. She recognized the truth of what he had said. She could not have told him then what she thought.

"I daresay—you're right. It was silly of me." But an immense desire possessed her—a primitive desire beyond her control and based on she knew not what

knowledge—the desire to hurt him. "By the way, Sigrid Fersen was married this afternoon," she said.

He did not answer for a moment. She heard him re-light his pipe. The stem was evidently choked, for it drew badly and noisily.

"Well, that was to be expected," he said. "My word—I am tired—just dog-tired."

She kept her eyes averted. She was stifled by an emotion that was half shame, half anger. Presently the shame predominated. She turned to him, a word of reluctant kindness ready on her lips.

His head had fallen back among the cushions. His outstretched hand still held the pipe, which had gone out again. She saw the great muscles of his bare neck—of the half-exposed chest. His eyes were closed and he breathed deeply and smoothly like a child.

The pipe slipped from his hand and fell on the mat with a dull little thud. She crept nearer and picked it up, her lips drawn together in ungovernable disgust.

CHAPTER V
CRISIS

The Comptons had rushed into debt with their eyes open and their teeth clenched. More than one piece of valuable Sèvres had vanished from their collection

and its place been filled by a judicious rearrangement of the remaining gods. Colonel Armstrong never met the Captain without dropping a hint as to the inexpediency of opposing oneself to the feelings of a touch-and-go community like Gaya. The Comptons persisted recklessly on their course. Archie Compton, no military genius, was a fine soldier, prepared to fight to the last cartridge and go down with his superior officer, colours flying.

His superior officer in this particular affair was one Mary, his wife, and the last cartridge was about to be fired at her command.

It could not be said that she faced this last encounter with perfect equanimity. Throughout the day she had felt her heart beat loudly and heavily. At the approach of the fatal hour, woman-like, she had arrayed herself in her very best, her courage trickling back to her in the measure that she discovered herself still presentable. The look of awed admiration which her husband threw her from time to time gave her strength to meet the advance-guards of the enemy forces.

Were they enemy forces or was it a capitulation? At any rate Gaya had not turned its back, and that was something to be thankful for. Mrs. Bosanquet, with George in tow, was the first to arrive—probably an intentional move on the part of that good-natured and loyal soul. She kissed Mary on both cheeks and squeezed her hand.

"*Morituri te salutant*," she whispered. "My dear, you have done things wonderfully. I had hardly recognized the place. What are you giving them to drink?"

"Champagne—the very best," Mary Compton replied grimly. "Twenty rupees a bottle, and unlimited supplies. I've borrowed a cook from the Prevets at Lucknow. He's supposed to be a wonder. We may pull it off."

"We may," Mrs. Bosanquet agreed. "Gaya isn't an ass. It would be a dull station without Sigrid, and it knows it. Unless anything unlucky happens they'll give in gracefully—especially after dinner. But why on earth did these two go and get married like that? It adds a kind of scandal——"

Mrs. Compton sighed.

"That man wanted it. He was finding the half and half situation too trying. They both wished it to be quiet—Sigrid especially. I think she thought we'd rather be out of it——"

"I don't wonder——" Mrs. Bosanquet began and checked herself. She was in the unfortunate position of doing something whole-heartedly of which she equally whole-heartedly disapproved.

A fresh influx of guests sent her adrift. Everybody who had a right to be considered in the first flight had been invited and had accepted. They came in with more formality than was usual with them. It was as though they recognized that the

occasion was in the nature of ceremony—a kind of symbolic festival. If they swallowed Mrs. Compton's dinner it was only to be understood that they swallowed the Barclays with it. Mrs. Compton's manner, if not her actual invitation, had made that clear.

Mrs. Compton heaved a sigh of relief when Colonel Armstrong and his washed-out-looking wife made their appearance. He paid her a little old-fashioned compliment, and she understood from his manner that he had reached toleration, if not approval. Mrs. Boucicault swept both out of her path. She was radiant. Even the painted cheeks and reckless display of jewellery could not detract from the wonder of her vitality, her irrepressible joy of life. It was as though all the winds of heaven had blown in with her.

"I passed the Barclays as I came along," she said. "Mr. Barclay has such wonderful horses. He told me he has the finest polo ponies in India just eating their heads off. Won't it be splendid if we win the cup? Do look at Tristram, Mary! Doesn't he look odd in uniform? Anne, of course, loves it. She would, wouldn't she? She made that dress of hers. It's not economy. She has a sort of idea that it's wicked to be beautiful. And Anne is so good." She gave a little malicious laugh. "I don't know how she came to be my daughter."

She rambled on erratically, but Mary Compton

heard her only as a vague murmur. That moment of which she had been so painfully conscious for the last week had come. She drew her breath sharply between her teeth. She had seen Sigrid—Sigrid and her husband. The little groups went on talking, but there had been a general, involuntary movement. It was not hostile. They turned towards her as they had always done, scarcely knowing that they did so, drawn by the magnetism stronger than either good-breeding or dislike. And tonight it was not easy to turn away. There was something new about her—something more arresting than either beauty or even the vivid life which had made her powerful amongst them. They could not have defined it. She was not radiant, not triumphant, not challenging. The gold hair was smoothed down on either side of the small, erect head. Her face was colourless, the mouth composed, unsmiling. The eyes were wide open and intensely bright. There was a touch of gold on the white, full-skirted dress—on the slippers, on the small, perfect feet. She was a study of a burning pallor—a white flame. Barclay came behind her. He looked proportionately dark and very handsome. The cut of his evening clothes proclaimed Bond Street. He wore a red silk button in the lapel of his coat—an order given him by King Leopold in recognition of short but effective service in the unhappy Congo. He glanced about him with a sombre distrust.

Gaya hesitated. Even a gathering of well-bred

English men and women can be swept by an invisible wave of panic, and Gaya was panic-stricken, torn between a headstrong admiration and an instinctive, inherent dislike. Moreover, it was not easy to take the initiative, and the most seasoned among them wavered.

But before Sigrid and her companion could reach their hostess Tristram had left his wife's side and gone to meet her.

"I wish my bracelet-sister all happiness," he said in a low tone. He held her hand for an instant and then turned to Barclay and greeted him frankly as though nothing had ever passed between them. But Barclay's hand hung at his side. He bowed with an exaggeration that was a veiled sneer.

But the ice had been broken, if not dispersed. Others came forward, murmuring incoherencies which, they thanked heaven, no one could wait to disentangle. They tried earnestly, and they believed successfully, to include Barclay in their welcome, and they would have been surprised to learn that the most any of them accomplished was a sightless nod in his direction. Perhaps, at the bottom, they were of opinion that their resignation to his presence was enough.

But it all looked well enough from a distance, and there was colour in Mrs. Compton's cheeks as she kissed Sigrid.

"We've won," she whispered. "You've won, dear."

She gave Barclay her hand with a little vacant smile. "You've got to take your wife in, Mr. Barclay," she said. "You two are the guests of the evening, and must lead the way. I'm sure we're all ready."

Then another little rush of misery and panic swamped her. She had gone over the points of precedence very carefully. It had seemed to her best and most courageous to take the bull by the horns, to drive the nail home with all her strength. The Barclays were not to slip in—they were to be the people of the evening. Gaya had got to accept them whole-heartedly and with its eyes open. Now she realized the horribleness of theories when applied to human beings. She saw that she had made a blunder and had set one person at least an almost intolerable task. Sigrid laid her hand on her husband's arm. The entrance to the dining-room was immediately opposite her—half a dozen yards away, Gaya between. It was like running the gauntlet. An almost imperceptible spasm passed over the dead-white face. For an instant Mary Compton thought she faltered. Then the two incongruous figures made their way slowly across the room.

But Mrs. Compton had seen that scarcely perceptible change. She forgot her guests. She stood there, lost in misery and helpless speculation. For what was this intolerable price paid? Was this the splendour of living for which a woman might sell herself? What silence could be worth such galling

humiliation? If Sigrid had committed a crime, surely it was not in this way she would have chosen to escape?

Then Mrs. Compton, finding herself on the verge of tears, became exasperated and seized the arm of the man nearest her.

"Please—please take me in," she said imperatively.

He obeyed, perhaps aware of the nearness of disaster, and thereby the order and decorum of the evening went to the winds. Gaya, however, itself ill at ease, accepted the situation, and followed haphazard, the two forsaken and ill-assorted partners joining forces in good-natured resignation.

Only Compton himself lingered. He had excused himself to Mrs. Bosanquet, who had fallen to his lot, and whose understanding of the situation was probably more poignant than his own. As a rule, he knew what his wife let him know and saw what she pointed out to him, but not much else. He had not the vaguest idea why she had, as he expressed it, "stampeded," but he did realize, as a painstaking host, that one guest had been forgotten—and that guest a personage who would be unlikely to accept the oversight gracefully.

Compton set himself to wait, therefore, with as much patience as he could muster.

It was not till ten minutes later that Rasaldû made his appearance. Unpunctuality was with him a

fetish. On this occasion his ordinary habit had been exaggerated by circumstances which he explained elaborately as he smoothed his sleek black hair before a glass.

"Only got back this afternoon—marvellous fine shooting—two tigers and a cheetah. I got the tigers myself—magnificent specimens. The biggest made a devilish fine fight; if it hadn't been for my mahout I mightn't be here now. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Not a bit of it," Compton assured him in his languid, incoherent way.

"Seems a special sort of affair. Anything up?"

Compton stroked his little moustache. There were times when the Rajah's Anglo-Saxon brevity jarred on him. Moreover, for other reasons, he felt disinclined to be communicative.

"No—nothing special," he said.

"All right. I'm ready."

For all his apparent good-humour, Rasaldû was in a sulky mood. The tiger-hunt had been the expression of an incoherent rage and sense of unforgivable humiliation which Gaya had found amusing and not at all serious. But to Rasaldû the whole matter had been serious. He had dispensed European hospitality the while retaining an entirely Oriental mentality. Sigrid Fersen had been in part his guest. Her marriage was therefore an insult and a gibe. She had made fun of him. In his own language,

"she had made a fool of him." And he was not given either to forgetting or forgiving.

And now a fresh slight had been put on him. They had gone in without him. They had deprived him of that sense of grandiose arrival which was the most pleasing part of any entertainment. It made him, at least for a moment, the person of paramount importance.

His round face was therefore creased with sulkiness as he reached his place at the Comptons' table. Not even the beauty and promise of the display soothed him. Mary Compton had borrowed and been within an ace of stealing in order to produce a result which would soften the bitterest opposition. But she had counted without the Oriental character. Rasaldû merely bowed in her direction, then, before seating himself, he looked round, making the most of his moment.

Barclay sat immediately opposite him in the centre of the table, with Sigrid on his right hand. Outwardly he had borne himself coolly enough, accepting his conspicuous place of honour with an air of rather insolent ease. But below the surface the whole man had been tense, agonized, quivering with memories of past humiliations. In every glance, in every word, he read the disparagement which his instinct knew was still in arms against him. He had won. He could look down the length of the table and tell himself that these people were here to meet him,

to do him honour. He could remember the hour when his hostess had left him standing in the dust of her cart-wheels. He could look at Tristram and recall that twilight scene by the temple. Best of all, there was the woman beside him. He could turn to her white, quiet face with the memory of a night when these two had watched him slink out before them like a beaten dog.

Yes, he had won. He had broken through the invisible barrier of their caste. He had fought his way into their citadel, and yet——! It was as though he had grasped at shadows and they had eluded him. He knew that he had never been further from them—never more the stranger and pariah. The English blood in him arose against him in triumph. It showed him what otherwise might have remained hidden—what Rasaldû could never have seen—the hearts of these people, their splendid isolation, the impregnable aloofness, their blank denial of himself. As he sat there listening to their quiet, self-certain intercourse, the bandages which he had wrapped about his bleeding pride were ripped off and with them every trace of healing. The sweat stood out on his dark forehead. He hated them. He desired them. He wanted to spit in these serene, immaculate faces. He would have grovelled to them for one word of fellowship. He had as yet scarcely touched the wine before him, but his blood was in an uproar, warring against itself.

Then suddenly he looked up at Rasaldû across the table, staring at him.

Perhaps that silent, deadly exchange lasted no more than a second or two, yet the unbridled ferocity of it rested like a chilling hand on those nearest and passed on down the table so that the last murmur sank into an appalled quiet. Something tigerish had leapt up in the breasts of both men. On the one side the Oriental, wounded in every susceptibility, threw off the mask of English breeding; on the other, the English blood, fevered by the maternal heritage, boiled under the insult of those eyes, broke from its own frail bondage of self-control, and by a mad paradox became native blood, native hatred.

The seconds passed. Then Rasaldû, with an insolent little movement of the shoulders, bent down to Colonel Armstrong on his right and spoke to him in an undertone. The unhappy Colonel listened, tugging painfully at his moustache. Mrs. Compton had half-risen, but Barclay forestalled her. He got up, leaning across towards Rasaldû.

"What's the matter with you?" he said.

Rasaldû's thick lips curled. He looked at Sigrid with the bloodshot, hating eyes of a thwarted animal.

"I don't eat with half-castes," he said.

Barclay seized his glass and threw the contents full into the Rajah's distorted face.

"You swineherd upstart!" he gasped thickly.

Then, with a glance that swept the table, he turned and strode out of the room.

The silence continued. No uproar could have been more terrible than its unendingness. The Rajah stood there quite still, his mouth open, the wine trickling from his face on to the immaculate shirt-front—a ridiculous, sinister figure. Mrs. Compton tried to master her voice, to say something, but it was as though a gag stifled her. She saw Sigrid get up—very slowly.

She stood there looking round her—and then across at Tristram. He made a movement as though he would have risen, but she lifted her hand slightly, imperatively, and he sank back, not looking at her. Her lips were a little parted with an odd, pathetic little smile. It seemed, as she stood here, that she was trying, not to speak, but to grope her way to some thought, to some answer.

Nobody spoke to her or tried to stop her. But at that moment she belonged to them, was one of them —for the last time. Sheer futility lamed all movement, all expression of what they felt. It was as though a frail, beautiful ship had broken from its moorings in a great tempest and they stood there and watched it drift out seawards beyond the reach of their voices, of their help or pity.

Only Mrs. Bosanquet cried openly—the tears rolling down her fat cheeks.

Sigrid went out through the silence. She found

Barclay already in the driving seat of his dog-cart and without a word clambered up beside him. He glanced at her and brought the whip down savagely across the horse's head. The animal did not need the blow. It felt the madness in the man's hand and broke into a wild gallop. They swung through the compound gates out on to the white moonlit road. For an instant they seemed to hover in mid-air, and then, with a grinding jar, the off-wheel came back on to the ground and they raced on, down through the black belt of the palm-trees and out again into the silver road, pursued by their own frantic shadows.

Only once did Barclay speak, and then it was to himself between clenched teeth:

"Now I know," he whispered. "Now I can see clear."

She did not answer. She sat very still, gazing steadily ahead into the half-light which ran before them, and encircled them with odd, treacherous shapes, so that now there seemed a barrier where there was none, and now a clear road where suddenly it curved and dipped. He drove well. Once the horse shied violently at an overhanging branch, and with a turn of his wrist he brought the animal to a baulked, fretting submission. Sigrid gave a short laugh, and he glanced sideways at her. Perhaps in that moment a grim admiration one for the other rose between them. At least neither had shown fear.

A syce, drowsing on the steps of the old

bungalow, ran out to meet them and caught the restive, sweating animal by the head. Barclay threw him an order in Hindustani and then, without a glance at his companion, led the way to the room where the amazing Venus held her lamp. He crossed straight over to the wide-open windows and pulled the curtains to.

The door behind Sigrid closed softly.

Still Barclay did not look at her. He opened a cigarette box with a theatrical affectation of deliberation, but when he struck a match she saw that his hand shook. The tiny flame near to his face betrayed new, ugly lines cut deep about the mouth and nostrils.

"I'll tell you something queer," he said, glancing up over the lighted match. "Tristram Senior was murdered in this room—just here, where I'm standing. There's a stain under the carpet. The place is supposed to be haunted."

She lifted her eyebrows. Her eyes were very steady and watchful.

"Yes?" she queried.

"He was murdered by my mother's husband. You see, he had betrayed her. It was a sort of insult to my people." The match went out almost at his finger-tips. He threw it away. "Strange how things happen, isn't it?"

She made no answer. Her cloak had slipped from her bare shoulders and she put her hand up and

drew it back, holding it across her breast. He began to move restlessly about the room.

"And now Tristram Junior is in love with my wife."

"You do not know——"

"Oh, I know well enough, I've seen it. What was—is. I imagine a man doesn't forget you for that puling little saint. How he must wince! Or have you told him? Well, you'll have something else to tell him—tomorrow."

"We made a bargain," she said sharply.

"A bargain! What have you done of your share?"

"All that lay in my power."

He gave a wretched laugh.

"This evening, for instance? Well—it's finished, do you hear? I've done with the whole thing. I gave them and you a last chance. Now I'm going my own way—and you're my wife. I've got that right left."

"You've no right but what I choose to give you."

"You'll choose—you've got to—you're helpless." He paused, choking. He threw the half-burnt cigarette on the floor and ground it under his heel. "There's no one in this place that's going to bother about either of us. Tristram won't play *deus ex machinâ* this time—you and I—we're going to have this out alone."

He saw her glance towards the door. "It's locked. You can scream to your heart's content. Your Smithy may hear, but she won't help. The servants have

their orders. Besides—what right has any one to interfere. You're my wife. You swore before the altar ——" He stopped again. Like an animal lashing itself to fury, he strode towards her and then turned and came back, his face swollen and quivering. His words came in a broken torrent of passion. "There's—there's a sort of compensation—in things—my mother's body was found out there in the well—she was good enough for an hour's sport—a native—what did it matter?—a sort of superior toy for an Englishman's pleasure-and the result—a half-caste, a mincing, feckless muddle of two races—let him rot in some stuffy Eurasian quarter and drink himself to death. If he dares rise—if he dares come among us—if he dares aspire to one of our blood—then spew upon him—roll him in the dust—kick him out—let him feel the whip like the misbegotten hound he is. As to our womankind—hands off, or heaven help him——"

"I understand," she threw in breathlessly. "I am to be your revenge—on them—on your brother——"

He turned back to her, staring at her. Then he burst into a laugh.

"Revenge? Oh, I don't know—nothing perhaps so—so high-flown as that. After all—they'd hardly know, would they? It's—it's a sort of instinct—to get level—in one way or another. Besides—I want you ——" He measured her with a savage deliberation. "My God—it's natural enough." He was shaking from head to foot. Swift and soundless as a flash of light

she put the table between them and stood confronting him. Her fair small head was thrown back, her mouth set in an unfaltering line. "By all means—it's useless—I've the right and the might ——" Suddenly, like a tiger weary of toying with its victim, he flung himself on the table, lifting it with both hands. Then, as he did so—he stopped short—faltering.

A full minute passed whilst they remained face to face, neither moving. He drew himself slowly upright.

"Well—why don't you do it?" he asked.

"I don't want to—not unless I must."

"It would be an expensive business."

"I don't know. I've paid so much already—it might be better to go on paying——"

"To get what you set out to buy? You don't need to worry about that. I may still keep my share of the bargain. I have other plans. So you had the draw on me all the time? Who would have thought so gentle a bosom could hide so much deadliness?"

"I have always carried it," she answered simply. "It may seem theatrical—but I realized—this might happen."

He smiled ironically.

"You are very cool—very brave, Sigrid. You—you inflame my admiration. Won't you sit down? It is very early yet."

"I would rather you unlocked the door. I am

tired."

"And sick with disgust? I can quite understand. You are white to the backbone." His voice shook with an uncontrollable despair. "Still, I warn you—if I open the door, I win. It is guarded. You see, I took precautions—but I don't want that. I—I have that much English blood in me—I'll fight fair."

"Very well. If there is anything you have to say ——"

"Nothing—except perhaps that it is still early. I can display patience. Won't you sit down?"

"Since you wish it."

He took his place opposite her, the table still between them. It was a wide table and he could not have touched her. She rested her elbow on the polished edge, the little toy-like weapon held lightly but firmly in her lifted hand. He leant forward, his eyes on her, watchful, intent. All passion, all desire had died out of them. They were hard and cold with purpose.

"You will tire," he said softly.

"I am very strong."

"*À l'outrance*, then?"

She smiled faintly.

"*À l'outrance*."

But he had seen that flicker of amusement and winced under it.

"You think I am as absurd—as—as—I am beastly?" he asked.

"No—I couldn't think like that—at least, not at the bottom. I understand too well."

"You understand?" He stared at her hungrily. "What do you understand?"

"That you would have been glad to have acted—and felt differently."

He nodded.

"I would have been their friend—a good friend. It's too late now."

"Yes—too late. I can see that——"

It grew still between them. Once he moved suddenly, testing her, but her eyes and hand were unwavering, and he dropped back into his old position.

As the time passed blue shadows darkened her eyes and crept about her mouth. She seemed to grow smaller and paler, and a kind of wonder came into his patient watchfulness of her—an almost pitying admiration.

"Spare yourself!" he whispered.

She made no answer.

The hours passed. The man and woman became grotesquely like wax figures in their grey, pallid immobility. The lamplight began to fade. In the dusk the empty face of the Venus looked ghostly and unreal. They could hear a heavy bullock-wagon plough its way up the hill to the crack of whips and native imprecations.

Barclay rose slowly and stiffly to his feet. He

went across to the window and pulled the curtains aside, letting in a flood of golden morning.

"You've won—this time," he said. "You won hours ago."

He did not look at her. He went down the verandah steps and did not turn even though he heard the thud of the revolver as it slipped from her unconscious hand.

CHAPTER VI
"OF YOUR BLOOD"

Gaya awoke the next morning depressed and rather incredulous. The daylight has a tendency to throw a chill interrogation at whatever the previous night has held either of greatness, tragedy, or passion. The blood cools to a little below the normal and the brain perceives things in their flattest, dullest colours. Indeed, until lunch-time the human constitution is too busy working up steam to produce emotion, or even to acknowledge the possibility of anything vital save the getting of the daily bread and the partaking thereof. So Gaya went lazily about its business, deferring serious consideration to a convenient future, and meantime vaguely aware of a foolish, unpleasant crack in the neat surface of its daily life which somehow would have to be patched up.

Barclay also went about his business. Beyond a certain sombre abstraction his manner gave no hint of any change. In the early morning a messenger mounted on his favourite Arab rode out on the Heerut road, and in the afternoon Lalloo, suave and impassive, made his appearance in a bullock-wagon which had performed a fifteen-mile journey over bad roads in little over three hours. The two, Lalloo and his patron, sat together in the very English library and talked subduedly until the first breath of nightfall rustled among the trees of the garden. Then Lalloo, as he had come, took his departure, nicely tingeing respect with disparagement and disparagement with respect.

Barclay himself did not set foot outside the bungalow.

At dinner he sat opposite his wife and ate whatsoever the noiseless servants placed before him. Contrary to his custom—for he had a morbid respect for all appearances he did not attempt to keep up the small talk which usually passed between them. He scarcely spoke to her, and only once looked in her direction.

Afterwards they stood for a moment together on the edge of the verandah, looking out into the quiet darkness. Here, too, custom was broken. It was the first time since their marriage that she had joined him after their ceremonious meal. A memory shot like a light through his moody silence.

"Aren't you afraid?" he asked brutally.

"No," she answered. There was no bravado—only a great physical weariness in her low voice. "I want to know what is going to happen," she said.

"Nothing."

"I thought—as I have failed so completely——"

"—that you could clear out?" He smoked for a moment in sombre consideration, then tossed his cigarette away from him. It glowed on the pathway like a tiny, watchful eye. "Of course you're free," he said finally. "I haven't any power to hold you. But if you go, then I shall be free too. The last article of our agreement will have been annulled. That's obvious, isn't it?"

"Yes—if you hold to your agreement."

"I shall." He gave a subdued laugh. "I am like Shylock, Sigrid. And you are one of those good Christians trying to cheat and possibly persecute their infidel creditor. What do you expect?"

"Just that." She waited an instant and then he felt rather than heard that she turned away from him. "That's all I wanted to ask you."

"Well——? Have you decided?"

"There was nothing to decide. I shall go on with it—whatever it is."

He heard the curtains fall. Throughout he had not looked at her. It was as though he withheld from her something which his eyes might have betrayed. When all was still again he took a book haphazard

from the pompously crowded shelves and sat down beneath the light-bearing Venus to read. He sat very still, his dark eyes resting intently on a spot just above the page which was never turned.

The gold-faced clock on the table chimed ten o'clock. The thin, dulcet tones dropped into the quiet like pebbles into a still pool. They seemed to arouse the man beneath the lamplight. He got up and pulled the curtains across the windows. There was a door in the left-hand wall. It led into a room in which he kept his papers, and no one entered it but himself. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked it.

"You are safe now," he said in the native tongue.

Ayeshi came out slowly into the light. His eyes were dazed-looking, but rest and food had restored something of their old fire, and that very return of life accentuated the deeper change in him. It was not only the lines which disease and want had chiselled among his features. The one-time boyish beauty had been hardened and sharpened by something more subtle than physical privation. His eyes, as they grew accustomed to the light, were no longer clouded with mystic dreams, but were stern and penetrating. His very bearing was profoundly different. His dignity had been gracious and unconscious; it was now conscious and commanding.

"You have done me great service," he said in an undertone. "I shall not forget when the time comes for remembrance."

"You are rested sufficiently to go on your way?"

Ayeshi nodded. He glanced keenly into Barclay's impassive face.

"You use our tongue to me?"

Barclay shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it not mine also?"

A faint hauteur compressed the fine lips. He turned away and lifted the edge of the curtain.

"I give you great thanks, Barclay Sahib."

"I ask no thanks of you, Ayeshi. You will find a horse at the gates. But first, can there be no trust between us? Can you not tell me whither you are going and to what end?"

Ayeshi turned, measuring the other man with a grave, scornful deliberation.

"I have learnt to keep my counsel where there is English blood," he said. He did not see the expression which passed like a withering flame over his companion's features. He lifted his hand in salutation, and the curtains fell noiselessly behind him.

Barclay waited, motionless. His breathing was quick and shallow, his whole body tense with pent-up excitement. As the muffled sound of hoofs reached him he turned the light out and the next instant was running towards the compound gates.

A syce leading a horse by the bridle came out of the shadow. Without a word Barclay caught the helmet and long cloak which was held out to him

and swung himself lightly into the saddle.

"Which way?"

"Towards Heerut, Sahib."

"See that you remember my orders."

"The Sahib shall be obeyed."

Barclay's steel wrist brought his nervous, fidgeting animal to an instant's complete quiet. He listened intently. He could still hear the sound of hoofs, beating in the distance. He drove his heels into the Arab's flanks and rode out into the stream of pale starlight which flowed down towards the valley.

He rode at a quick canter, dangerous enough on the steep gradation and only justified by his knowledge of every curve in the narrowing roadway. His riding had nothing of the recklessness with which he had driven the night before. He held himself and his horse in the steel grip of a definite purpose.

At the bottom of the hill on which Gaya perched itself like a beautiful white bird he drew rein and again listened. There was no moon; the intense clarity of an Indian night covered the parched and gasping plain with a seeming luminousness in which nothing was visible but unrealities. Overhead the black burnished shield of the sky blazed with its mysterious, unreadable devices. But for the monotonous rhythmic thud dying in the distance the silence was absolute, painful, like the suspended breathing of a fevered body. The river was voiceless.

Barclay rode on. The road had narrowed to little more than a track which the drought and the passing of heavy wagons to and fro to the new bridge had made a trap of crumbling ruts and dust-covered holes. It was five miles to the river, and nearly two hours had passed before the rider caught the first murmur of water. It sounded faint and exhausted. In the vague light the new bridge looked like some monstrous dragon, its body spanning the half-empty river-bed, its thick-set limbs planted stolidly in the sluggish water. It needed no more than a ceremony for it to be complete. Yet Barclay turned up to the old bridge. In view of its approaching demolition it had been neglected and part of the wooden rail had been broken down, making the crossing at nightfall a matter of some danger.

Barclay chose it and rode across with slack rein. On the other side he dismounted and tethered his horse and went on on foot through the trackless jungle grass.

When he stood still he could catch no sound, neither the thud of hoofs nor the faintest movement. The high grass, as it yielded to his body, rustled and cracked deafeningly in his ears. His own breathing sounded like the loud panting of a hunted animal.

The temple lay sullen and dark and silent in the black shadow of the jungle.

Barclay reached the gateway. The obscurity was here so dense that his instinct alone guided him. He

went forward deliberately, noisily, sensing the hands that waited for him, the eyes that watched him. Then he struck a light.

The next instant that for which he waited came, and, though he had waited for it, its swiftness and deadliness drove a scream from his lips—a scream that was smothered to a choking groan almost at its birth. He stumbled and fell, his hands twisted behind him, his unprotected face grazing the stones. He felt hot breath on his neck, the cut of a cord round his wrists. Gagged and helpless, he was jerked back to his knees and a dark lantern flashed its eye on to his bleeding face.

Beyond the dazzling circle he could see forms no more than shadows painted dimly against the dense blackness of the temple walls. Nearest to the light, Vahana's wild, expressionless eyes glittered with the cold lustre of a serpent's; but, as he grew accustomed to the light, Barclay recognized other faces, two headmen from neighbouring villages, a handful of priests wearing the Triple Cord on their shoulders, five non-commissioned officers from the native regiment. They crowded round him in a silent circle which contracted like a steel trap. But Barclay seemed neither to fear nor heed them. He threw back his head and looked up into Ayeshi's face. Then he drew himself together as a man does who knows that life and death hover in the balance.

"So you were a spy after all, Mr. Barclay?"

Ayeshi said in English.

"No, Rajah, your servant," was the swift answer.

The fine nostrils distended with a deep-drawn breath.

"Do you know who I am, then?"

"I know that you are Ayeshi, the son of Ram Alla, who was deposed and driven into exile by the English. I know that you were saved by a few faithful who feared to breathe the secret even to you. I know that you have borne willingly a stigma which is another's. I know that you have starved and suffered and learned in the gutters of Calcutta that an unworthy English Sahib should go unpunished."

Ayeshi lifted his hand imperatively.

"How have you learnt these things?"

"I have ears in every village, Rajah."

"Why did you follow me?"

"I have a wish to serve you."

"You are English——"

"English!" Barclay laughed. "Yes, I have English blood in my veins. I am the son of the old Tristram Sahib who seduced my mother and brought about her death, who hunted down my brothers and our father's servants and shot them from the cannon's mouth, who gave honourable life to Tristram Sahib, the wealthy and happy and honoured, who gave life to me, an outcaste——"

"Yet a night ago you sat and ate with these, thy people——"

"That also is true. I fought for their friendship, Rajah, I grovelled for it. I schemed for it. I would have sold you and all these, my brothers, if they would have made me one of them. But they would not. They have chosen, not I. Last night, Rasaldû, the swineherd's son, would not sit at table with me. That was the end."

"You have an English wife."

Barclay laughed again.

"Who sold herself to me for a high price, who would rather die ten deaths than be a wife to me, who loves Tristram Sahib——" He broke off and jerked his head towards the intently watching Sadhu. "Vahana here knows something of what I say. Let him testify for me."

The shadowy, unreal circle of faces turned for an instant. Vahana bowed his head in assent.

"I have told you the truth," Barclay went on. "The best and the worst. I have risked life to tell it you. I knew what might await me here—a knife in the dark perhaps without a word spoken—and yet I had to come. Life can be more bitter than death. A man cannot live alone as I have done—there comes a time when his soul cries for his people."

They looked at him silently, without pity. The agony in his hoarse voice did not touch them. For them also he was the Pariah—the outcaste. He read their answer in their eyes and turned back to Ayeshi with a burst of passion.

"Take me—claim me—make me one of you! I have power—I have money—I can do for you what no other man could do. Either you must kill me or make me one of your blood. I know too much. There is no other way out for either of us."

Ayeshi did not move or speak. One of the two priests crept closer, avoiding Barclay's shadow.

"What can you do for us?" he whispered.

"You know very well, O Heera Singh! The drought is on us. The crops will fail. Is there a man in your village who does not owe all that he has to me? What if I make our Lord Ayeshi their deliverer—if he should free them from me? And I have money. Is all that nothing?"

The priest was silent, fingering his sacred cord with eager fingers. But Ayeshi knelt down and looked full into the Eurasian's face.

"You said that you would have betrayed us for their friendship," he said. "What if they came now and offered you their hands——"

"It is not in their power," was the swift and bitter answer. "They have tried—the river is too wide for them."

There was silence again. The yellow light revealed figures lurking behind them, black, vaguely defined forms which glided softly up and down the temple walls. Vahana had bent down and with his claw-like finger drew a pattern in the dust. It was the sign of Swashtika. Barclay drew his breath between

his teeth. He laid his hand on the rough-drawn symbol and Vahana's hand closed down on his. The priest wetted his forefinger with his tongue and touched Barclay's forehead, tracing two horizontal lines. But Barclay did not feel him. He was only conscious of that hand, cold, hard, scaly. It seemed to envelop him, to glide up his arm and to reach down and close about his heart.

"One of our blood," the priest muttered, "for evil and for good we claim you one of us."

But Ayeshi made a gesture of proud impatience.

"There can be no evil," he said. "The worst that can come to any of us is death. And what is death but release? We who have seen our faith insulted, our gods denied, our dreams shattered—what is death to us? Each one of us has his own bitter wrong. Let him avenge it under my banner." He turned authoritatively to one of the native officers. "We have had enough of words. From henceforward there shall be nothing said which does not translate itself into action. You, Parga, what have you to tell me?"

The man answered with a military salute.

"All is ready, lord. We are patient. We do but await your signal."

"We have planned for the twenty-fifth of this month, lord," his companion added.

Ayeshi nodded.

"By that time we shall have our forces on this side of the river ready. Give me the map."

The map was spread out on the ground. Ayeshi traced a line down the length of the river, whispering his orders. Here and there one of the soldiers assented or offered a suggestion. The priests were silent but watchful. Their faces glistened like burnished bronze in the yellow light.

But Barclay felt and realized only that hand which had rested on his. It was as though he had plunged his arm into icy water and the chill had begun to creep through his whole body. His blood had become cold and sluggish in his veins.

He listened, and beyond the subdued voices he heard strange sounds—an intermittent rustling amidst the long grass, a hushed, sibilant whispering, the crack of a branch under the weight of a writhing, twisting body.

He lifted his head and it seemed to him that the jungle towered over him, roofing the broken walls of the temple with its sinister shadow.

Vahana watched him unceasingly.

* * * * *

Dawn was still afar off as Barclay rode his horse over the narrow bridge. Once on the farther bank he turned and looked back furtively. Nothing was visible. The forest-clad mountains were no more than a monstrous blot on the burnished shield, wiping out a part of its mysterious quarterings. Yet their massed blackness fascinated him. They filled him with an

inexplicable horror which until now he had held partially in abeyance; but in this loneliness it became an obsessing force of panic. Something had happened to him. He sat there in the saddle, but his mind, a second vitally real consciousness, crawled through the trackless undergrowth. His ears heard strange whisperings; things unnamable slid over his limbs and wound themselves about his throat and body, driving the breath from him. He could not taunt himself with feverish imaginings. The man in the saddle might have been a shadow, a figment of the brain, but that second being struggling and gasping for life in those jungle fastnesses was a reality—himself.

It was not imagination, but revelation. A sixth sense had been stabbed to consciousness. Scales had fallen from his eyes.

He forced himself to ride on and in an instant the return became a heedless, panic-stricken flight before an invisible, formless enemy. Even in his own compound there was no safety, no escape from whatever hunted him. Rather in the black silence of the bungalow he recognized a new menace. He tried to master himself,—to call the sleeping syce, but his tongue was dry and thick in his mouth and refused its office. With shaking hands he tethered his horse and crawled stealthily across the verandah to the open windows of his room.

He stood still on the threshold, listening. His

own breathing seemed to come from the other end of the room—from some one who crouched amidst the ponderous furniture, watching him. He tried to strike a light, but the match flickered and went out and he dared not try again. He felt that no light could live in that stifling, foetid atmosphere. And the shadows which he had awakened appalled him. He stumbled blindly to the chair beneath the lamp and crouched down into it, hushing his labouring lungs, forcing himself to confront the darkness, the sweat thick and icy on his forehead.

He had dared death that night and had not known fear; but this was different. It was something in himself—an awful disruption, the breaking down of some secret barrier behind which had been imprisoned untold knowledge, a horde of ghostly, inherited memories. He tried to stem them back—vainly.

He—that second self—saw this stain beneath the carpet. He saw old Tristram Sahib seated where he sat—Vahana crawling out of the darkness—the uplifted weapon. He heard a woman's muffled scream—the bumping of a body falling between narrow walls—the sullen splash of water.

These things were to him actual—corporeal.

He turned with a shuddering gasp, burying his face in his arms, hiding from them, awaiting in palsied helplessness for the deliverance of the morning.

CHAPTER VII
THE PRICE PAID

Mrs. Boucicault and her daughter sat on either side of the wide-open windows and avoided each other's eyes. It was the first time that they had been alone together for many months, and they found nothing to say. Had they been total strangers they could have discussed the situation with sympathy, but they were bound together, and to the man on whose return from death to life they waited, by too many ugly memories for any superficial intercourse. They were like galley-slaves, hating each other and the bonds that manacled them to an intolerable intimacy.

There was a faint, sickening taste of ether in the hot air. It seemed to permeate everything, and to Anne, who knew nothing of the surgical side of illness, it conveyed a suggestion of mysterious suffering and horror. It affected her with the same physical and purely instinctive fear which assails most human beings in their first contact with death. It was not so much the thing that was happening as the grim, immaculate ceremonial surrounding it which terrified her. She would have been glad to have been alone, and in her heart she denied her mother the right to be present. But convention and

decorum were on Mrs. Boucicault's side and against such opponents Anne felt herself powerless to make a stand. Once she glanced quickly across at her companion and saw how cruelly the daylight treated the small face now that it was without its persistent animation. Neither paint nor powder could conceal the livid pallor beneath the painful slackening of all the facial muscles. Only the mouth retained its straight, unbreakable resolution.

"One can't live as she does without paying for it," Anne thought, and did not acknowledge the little glow of righteous satisfaction which passed over her. Instead she went back mentally to the man lying unconscious at the other side of the bungalow and to her own life.

For all her painful anxiety she felt strangely content. She had the elevated serenity of one who has passed through tribulation to a well-earned happiness. For she had been very unhappy in her life. There were the days of "misunderstanding" with her father, the days in "Trichy" when she had faced the alternatives of a penniless and ill-prepared attack on the unknown world or an ignominious return to a life her whole soul condemned; there were days, even since her marriage, when she realized that the man she had worshipped was not wholly worthy of worship, that in many ways he had fallen below the standard which she set him.

But of late these things had sunk into the

background. God had been very good. She had longed so much for a child, and that was to be given to her. That fact alone poured like sunshine over all the past. It seemed to her that with the beginning of that hope everything had combined together to make her happy. Her father was to be made well and strong again. Sigrid Fersen, save where a very few were concerned, had dropped out of Gaya's life into a grey seclusion, and with her the man whom she had sought to drag up the heights of her meretricious popularity. And, best of all, that very morning, when so much hung in the balance, she had regained her love, her humble, possessive adoration of her husband. He had seemed so big, so strong and invincible. The fire in his steady, absorbed eyes had thrilled her, the touch of his hand had given her a passionate, child-like confidence.

"I know that you won't fail," she had whispered. "God bless you, Tris."

"I'm sure He will," he had answered, smiling. And though perhaps there was something in that familiar phrase which jarred on her, still it could not weaken her joy in him or her faith in her own blessing.

"Yes, God had been very good——"

"I think it is over," Mrs. Boucicault said suddenly. "I can hear some one coming——"

Both women rose instinctively to their feet and turned towards the door. Anne's heart throbbed

painfully. As Dr. Martin entered she felt a sudden weakness overcome her so that she could hardly stand. The doctor had discarded his white overalls, but he brought in with him a deeper tinge of that nauseating odour. Through a mist she heard him talking, and even in that moment she was conscious of a bitter resentment. He was speaking to her mother.

"Yes—wonderfully successful, Mrs. Boucicault. To tell you the truth I had no idea the I.M.S. concealed such a talent for the knife. Remarkable hand—almost inspired, one might say. Major Tristram can set up in Harley Street any day. Of course we're not out of the wood yet. We can't hope to see much change in your husband for some weeks. Shock and all that, you know. There was a lot more trouble than we suspected. Old trouble which must have caused a good deal of—eh—mental unrest." He rubbed his chin as though on the point of some further information. "Well, I daresay Tristram will go into details. He wants me to stop in Gaya till we know better where we are, and I shall try and arrange to. Very interesting case—very. Hullo, here's Major Tristram himself."

With a little cry of joy Anne turned to run to her husband, but as she saw the man who entered her purpose faltered. She was not given to analysis, and the change in him, because it was not entirely physical, eluded her. And it frightened her. It was as

though all her instinctive fears had taken shape in him. He looked exhausted to the point of breakdown, but that she had seen before, and it was not that which had brought her to a standstill. It was something behind the white stillness of his face the passionless detachment, the Nirvana which, had she but known it, comes to men who have passed through a vast spiritual crisis.

"Tris!" she whispered.

She came to him at last and he put his arm round her.

"It's all right," he said simply. His eyes were on Mrs. Boucicault. "Your husband will live," he said. "He may get well."

She nodded, twisting the rings round her thin fingers.

"How long will it take before he is strong again?"

"A few months perhaps."

"Then I—I have that much time left me."

"Mother!" Anne cried out. She felt Tristram's arm slip from her shoulder. He went to Mrs. Boucicault and took her hand in his.

"He may change very much," he said.

She laughed.

"Perhaps—but it will be too late." She made a little grimace. "Well, I have learned the value of time at any rate. Dr. Martin, come and see me into my carriage. My daughter wants to have a good cry."

Dr. Martin offered his arm with a grave courtesy

surprising in a man of his somewhat casual temperament, and the two went down the verandah steps talking in an undertone. Anne watched them in bitter silence. The attitude of these two men towards the wizened, painted woman had thrown a shadow of disgust over her happiness. They had treated her as though she occupied the centre of their stage, accepting her flippant cruelty without reproof, offering her an austere reverence. A scornful comment trembled on Anne's lips, but, turning, she saw that Tristram had dropped down in one of the chairs, his face hidden in his hands, and her heart melted towards him. She knelt down and put her arms about his neck.

"Tris!" she whispered. He looked up. "Tris!" she repeated on a note of faint reproach. For she had seen that his face was wet, and tears in a man had always seemed to her rather repulsive. "What's the matter, dear?" she asked.

He smiled faintly.

"I am an ass, aren't I? I don't often do this sort of thing—some things touch me horribly. Besides, I'm a bit rattled still. Those two hours were devilish—you don't know——"

She kissed him solemnly.

"I know how splendid you are—Dr. Martin told us."

"Did he? Well, honestly, I don't believe any other man could have done what I did today. No one else

could have wanted to win so badly as I did."

"For my sake, husband?"

"For yours and mine."

"That's sweet of you," she said gently. Her moment's irritation had passed. She rested on his bigness, his redeeming strength and tenderness. "I am very happy, Tristram."

"Are you?" He looked into her face eagerly. "Really happy?"

"Happier than ever in my life. So much that is wonderful has happened. It seems to have made everything worth while. All the suffering." She leant against him, her eyes half-closed in dreamy recollection. "Sometimes I think it's all been for the best. It's taught us charity, hasn't it—to be gentle in our judgment? I know I have often been hard too. Today I could forgive even the man who caused it all."

His arm tightened about her.

"He'd be glad to hear that, Anne——"

"I could forgive." She drew herself up a little. "But I wouldn't help him to escape his punishment, Tristram."

"You couldn't, dear. No one escapes."

"Yes, that's true, isn't it? Sooner or later they are found out. They say criminals always return to the scenes of their crime. Mother told me Ayeshi had been seen slinking about Heerut at night——"

"Ayeshi?" he interrupted perplexedly.

She gave a quick glance into his face.

"Yes—of course, I'd forgotten, no one's ever told you. You see, you were so fond of Ayeshi, and you were ill, and so we arranged that we wouldn't tell you unless—unless he was caught. Afterwards no one liked to, and you're such an old hermit—you never hear anything. But now it doesn't matter, does it? It was Ayeshi who tried to kill my father."

He pushed her away from him as though she had suddenly ceased to exist for him.

"I don't understand——"

She laughed uncertainly—half-angrily.

"Why, Tris, I've just explained——"

"I understood that no one was suspected——"

"I've explained that, too, dear. I thought you would guess when you heard that he had disappeared like that——"

He turned on her almost violently, but even she realized in that moment that he was scarcely conscious of her. His blazing eyes had a sightless look in them that frightened her to her feet.

"I might have known," he stammered, "but I am too big a fool—an idiotic sentimentalist——" He steadied and looked at her straightly with seeing eyes. "Ayeshi must have disappeared to shield me," he said. "It was I who nearly killed your father."

Her face was at first only stupid-looking as though his words had had no meaning—then every trace of colour ebbed from her lips. She wavered,

and he sprang to her side, and carried her to the chair which he had just left. An intense, torturing pity swept him. She was so small, so very fragile. He felt himself as something monstrous riding over all her happiness. She clung to him.

"Tris—Tris—please don't say things to frighten me——"

"I've got to. Sooner or later I had to tell you. I didn't mean to be so sudden. But it's true."

She freed herself. There was no strength in her arms, but he had felt her whole body cower and shrink from him and he stood back from her as though she had struck him.

"I can't—I can't believe——" she whispered.

"You must, Anne." He paused, and then went on quietly. "It was after that time at Bjura. I was riding home as best I could with a temperature God knows where—I don't tell you that as an excuse, but as a sort of explanation—and I found your father torturing Wickie. I know now that probably he was as mad and irresponsible as I was, but at the moment I thought he was simply a devil. I intervened—I believe I appealed to him I tried to stop him. He struck me repeatedly, but as long as he didn't touch Wickie I didn't care. Then he ran Wickie through with the sharp end of a bamboo stick—and I struck him. I am very strong—and I had no self-control. It was as though all the brakes had given way—and I struck too hard. That was how it happened, Anne."

He waited. He could not have said for what, but he knew that it was something great in her. He had seen this moment many times before and seen it both as an end and as a beginning of a new life between them. It was in her hands. But at the last a kind of proud confidence had swept over him. It did not occur to him to appeal to her. Understanding is above forgiveness. Either she understood, and there would be no need to forgive, or he was simply a murderer, and then her forgiveness would be valueless.

But he had believed that now she would understand. She crouched in her chair, looking at him with horror in her eyes.

"I can't—it's too terrible—to have done that—and then to have shirked the responsibility——"

Still he waited. He had to explain—that was only fair to her and to himself. But he began to lose hope. He saw himself with her eyes and the eyes of her world.

"You know that I was delirious for a long time afterwards. When I recovered the whole thing seemed finished. No one was suspected as far as I knew. Well, your father meant to smash me. I saw that much in his face. And, frankly, Anne, I did not choose to be ruined for his sake. My life—my work—was of value to others to whom I owed more than I did to him. If I made no effort to escape the consequences of what I had done I also did not

immolate myself to a false idea of justice——" He broke off. It was not what he had meant to say to her. It was cold and ugly. But her eyes told him that everything he could tell her, of the deliberately accepted burden of silence, of the motive of a great filial love which had chosen to crush the inborn, conventional instincts of honour rather than tread the easy, chivalrous road of self-accusation, of all that the intervening time had held of doubt, and weariness—would be to her so much hypocrisy and cowardly subterfuge. The crisis struck no fire of sympathy in her which might have illuminated his curt and clumsy sentences. To her he was simply a criminal, and before her he became one—tongue-tied, self-distrustful.

She spoke at last and instinctively he braced himself.

"Are you taking shelter behind your mother, or whom?" she asked sneeringly. Then, as he did not answer, she got up. The stupor which had restrained her hitherto gave way. She shivered from head to foot, and her face was twisted and livid with the violence of her feeling. "And then you married me!" she cried out—"just to shield yourself——"

"Anne!"

"Well, didn't you?"

He strode at her and took her by the shoulders. For a moment she thought, in her horror of him, that he would have struck her, and she threw back her

head defying the blow with all the strength of her contempt. But his eyes daunted her. They were neither angry nor guilty—but bewildered.

"Anne, why in God's name did you marry me if you thought of me like that?"

Her lips quivered.

"I didn't think of you like that."

"No, perhaps you didn't. You couldn't have thought of me at all. You just imagined me—you never knew or wanted to know the man I really am. Now that the image is broken, there's nothing left. I am just—somebody you don't know—a total stranger, capable of anything——"

"Isn't it true?" she persisted stubbornly.

"No," he said. "It is not true." He thought a moment and then added with grave simplicity, "It would never have occurred to me. You were just some one I was very fond of. I wanted to take care of you."

She tried to laugh.

"I suppose, having murdered the father, you thought it was your duty to marry the daughter."

His hands dropped wearily to his sides.

"If I hadn't been instrumental in your father's loss, if I had had the faintest hope of his ever being able to take his place in your life again, I wouldn't have asked you to be my wife. I shouldn't have dared draw you into my life. But you were lonely and unhappy—much as I was——"

"You felt guilty and you pitied me," she interrupted with feverish excitement. "I suppose you think you've sacrificed yourself. You never wanted to marry me. It was always that woman—that woman ——"

"For pity's sake—don't, Anne!" he pleaded.

"Why shouldn't I? I've the right——"

"You have not the right to say that," he said sternly. "I have behaved like a fool—I have done you, as things turned, a great wrong; but I have never thought of any other woman as my wife."

"Not as your wife, perhaps," she interrupted wildly.

He turned away from her. He felt physically sick and broken. The room, with its suffocating propriety, its prim order, seemed to him an integral part of the scene's sordidness. He had only one instinct left—the thirst for the free air and the loneliness of the life to which he had belonged. She watched him in breathless silence, clasping and unclasping her thin hands. She was the more resentful because he had driven her to an outburst of which she was ashamed.

"When you found my father was going to get better, what did you expect?" she began again. "I wonder since you had gone so far—that you didn't finish your work."

A faint, bitter amusement touched his white lips.

"Yes, Anne, you would wonder that. But I am a doctor—not so much by profession as by instinct. I

have to save—to heal where I can. Even then I might have failed in this instance and not found myself guilty. But he was your father—I wanted you to be happy—I think it—it inspired me to do more than I could otherwise have done."

"What did you expect—between us afterwards?" she persisted.

The smile lingered, but without its bitterness.

"Oh, I don't know, Anne—but something different from this. I knew that you'd be pained, even horrified—that was only natural. But I thought you knew me well enough to see the less ugly side. I had a foolish fancy even—that in such a crisis we might find each other—understand each other better. Well—I've been wrong all the way."

She was silent for a moment, gathering together the storm-scattered principles of her life. She was trying to be just, charitable, towards him. The tears glistened on her cheeks.

"I daresay you did mean to make me happy, Tris. But you see, you couldn't. One can't build up happiness on sin."

"I did not feel myself guilty—not in that way," he said gently.

"But you were guilty." Her voice hardened. "It was a crime to have struck a man down for the sake of a mongrel dog——"

He turned quickly. He felt mysteriously outraged, as though she had struck straight and deep

into something vital in him.

"It wasn't only a dog, Anne," he said. "It was the pain—all the needless suffering——" He did not try to finish. He could not have explained, because he knew it was not in her power to understand. For the first time he saw all that separated them—not so much a gulf as a world, making her day his night. They were both silent. In a few minutes the superficial wrappings of their life had been torn off and its nakedness held them appalled.

The door opened softly and the new nurse who had come with Dr. Martin looked in for an instant.

"He is coming round, Major Tristram," she said.

"Very well, nurse. I'll be with you at once."

He went towards the door, but Anne forestalled him. Her face was composed and very set, though the tears still hung on her long lashes.

"I don't want you to—I don't think you ought to ——"

He looked at her grimly.

"As you wish. Dr. Martin must be outside somewhere. I'll explain. He can take over the case."

"Explain—what do you mean?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"We've got to begin somewhere. Better now."

She stared at him blankly.

"You don't mean—you can't mean—you're not going to tell people?"

"I must. Besides, isn't it what you wish?"

She turned away and sat down, burying her face in her hands. She was crying softly, helplessly, like a child. He came back to her and stood over her as though his first impulse to comfort, her had been checked by recollection.

"Anne, I am a clumsy beggar—I don't understand—I don't know what you want——"

"You can't tell everyone," she sobbed wildly. "You can't, Tris. It would be too cruel. Think of all the people you'd hurt—who would have to suffer with you—all of us, even—even our child—even father. You mustn't do it, Tris. Father may have changed—he will be so happy—I shall beg him for his own sake as well as for mine. He'll do as I ask—I'm sure he will. Tris—it's awful to know this awful thing oneself—but for others to know too—and all the scandal——"

She was incoherent in her piteous despair, but now he understood her.

"You forget Ayeshi, Anne," he said, "and all I owe him."

"Ayeshi——? But people only suspect—he's in hiding because of some money he took—what does he matter? No one could prove anything—only father—and he can clear Ayeshi best of all. Don't you see that—or don't you care? Do you want me to suffer?"

He winced.

"I'll do whatever you want, Anne," he said

heavily. "Everything on earth I can do. But I've got to think. I'll tell Martin I've had marching orders, or some lie. He knows the case, and can do everything as well as I could. I'll clear out to Heerut. I've got to see Ayeshi. In the meantime, you'll have breathing space to think things over too—and to decide. You can let me know." He went to the door and there hesitated and looked back at her with pitying wistfulness. "Anne, I don't repent much what I did to your father—I can't—but you didn't deserve to be hurt. And I've hurt you. I can't forgive myself that—ever."

He waited an instant. She did not move and he went out closing the door softly behind him.

CHAPTER VIII
RETURN

"When I heard folks say the place was haunted I just laughed in their faces," Mrs. Smithers asserted moodily. "I don't hold with ghosts and them sort, and in a general way I don't believe in them. But I believe in this ghost all right. We've tried to scrub it out, but it won't go and it's got the grouch on us for trying. It's just sucking the polish out of the furniture. And it's sucking the life out of me; I know that."

She turned to her companion lying curled up in

the big basket chair and challenged contradiction with her own appearance. Sigrid looked back at her gravely.

"Your wig's crooked, Smithy dear. Of late its angle has been persistently drunken."

"What's it matter!" Mrs. Smithers returned. "Who cares? We might as well be drunk for all the notice these stuck-up nobodies take of us. What's the use of being respectable, if there's no one to see? Might as well fade away, comfy, that's my opinion." Whereupon, suiting her action to her words, she snatched the offending erection from her head, sat on it, and proceeded to rumple up the short grey hair till the last vestige of propriety was lost in a ludicrously rakish disorder. "Well, I've been respectable for your sake for two solid years, Sigrid, and it's nigh done for me. Now I'm myself again, and I mean to stick to meself or bust; so there."

Sigrid gave a laugh that ended with a sigh.

"Your nice, wicked, unprincipled self, Smithy! It reminds me of old times."

"H'm, does it? Well, nothing reminds me of old times in this horrible place. Nothing—not even you. You're just the outsides of what you were, Sigrid—a sort of husk. I don't know where you are—but the real you isn't here at all—and a good job too." She paused and then wistfully, rather shyly: "You don't even play nowadays, my dear."

Sigrid got up slowly.

"Smithy, one couldn't play in this room. I could play in a garret or in the streets, but not here. Fancy Beethoven and that marble atrocity! Even Elgar! No, no, I couldn't." She went out past Mrs. Smithers on to the verandah and there lingered for a moment. "Look at the sunshine!" she said dreamily. "That, at least, is always the same for the just and the unjust, the happy and the unhappy. Doesn't that console you?"

Mrs. Smithers shook her head.

"It isn't the same. It's an awful thing here. They say if it goes on beating down like that it will mean thousands and thousands of deaths. It's cruel. But, such as it is, it don't come inside this place, Sigrid. It beats down on the road out there, but it don't touch us. We're walled in—the Lord knows by what—but we're walled in."

Sigrid took her lace parasol and went down the steps to the wide avenue which swept round in a semicircle to the road. She still moved with her smooth, tigerish elasticity, but she herself was conscious of an overwhelming fatigue. It was as Smithy said—the spirit of the place had triumphed. Little by little it had overpowered the garish, incongruous splendours with which Barclay had sought to change its character. The life and gaiety which he had schemed for had never crossed the threshold, and now he no longer fought, but in sullen acquiescence watched gloom and decay rise like a sombre tide over its old ground. The place was

moribund. The people in it moved softly and spoke instinctively in hushed voices as though somewhere in those empty rooms some one lay dead.

Sigrid reached the compound gates. It was still early in the morning, but the heat burnt down on the white road with the reflected fierceness of a near and monstrous fire. The air was thick and tasted metallic. A bullock-wagon toiled up towards Gaya, came to an exhausted halt, and then, in response to listless imprecations, creaked heavily on its way. The mingled sweat and dust lay in ridges on the animals' heaving flanks and scored the dark faces which were turned for a moment in Sigrid's direction. Man and brute were curiously allied in that blank and yet piteous stare. It was as though both visaged suffering and visaged it dumbly, patiently, accepting it as the decree of life.

Then all was still again.

A man on horseback turned the bend of the road and came at a lumbering walk down-hill towards the bungalow. She stood and watched him and an odd, unsteady smile of recognition played with the corners of her lips. No other man in Gaya rode such a lank, spindle-legged mare, no other man cut so quaint a figure, no other man could have worn those clothes and borne himself so bravely. For, despite that touch of the grotesque, there was something splendid and royal about him, something in his bigness, in the grand lines of his body, in his freedom

and unconsciousness that made him physically kin to those giants whose fearless, joyous living glimmers through history and legend—to the Siegfrieds and the Beowulfs and the Parsifals, men of the forest and the mountain, who drank deep of life at its source and died on heights which our day has forgotten.

He carried a yellow-haired dog under one arm and an ordinary covered wicker basket was tied to his saddle, and despite his efforts jolted somewhat to the plaintive protests of a cat's mewing.

She would have turned and avoided him, but the bigness of him had held her riveted too long. He drew rein and swung himself to the ground beside her.

"I've brought you Richard," he said simply. He did not offer her his hand or greet her, although they had not spoken to each other for many weeks. He seemed to sweep all ceremony aside.

"I ought to have brought him before—I promised, didn't I?—but somehow I couldn't. It was like a slight to Wickie. He's had a rotten time though, poor chap. You'll make it up to him, I know."

She patted the mongrel's distrustful snout. The man's proximity shook her composure so that she seized eagerly on the first thought that came to her.

"What other passengers have you on board?" she said, with a little nod towards the heaving and mysteriously creaking basket at his saddle.

"My tabbies," he said solemnly. "They've got

rather obstreperous since we've been civilized. My wife doesn't like them running about after me, so they had to be shut up, poor beggars, and there's nothing like shutting people up for bringing the devil out of them. Now I'm taking them with me to Heerut." He smiled a little. "I'm going back to the wilderness," he said.

He took off his helmet and ran his hand through the thick, tawny hair with a gesture like that of a sleeper freeing himself from the clouds of an evil dream. The light striking through the branches of the mohwa-tree lit up his face, and, looking up at him and reading all that the last months had wrought, she felt a pang of angry pity. If this was Siegfried, then it was not the Siegfried of Brünnhilde's fiery mountain, but the man of the Rhine Valley, Gudruna's man, fettered by civilization and weakened by its trickery and dishonesty. Had he also drunk of the cup of forgetfulness, she wondered? Had he lost his vision of the fire-girded rocks above where he had won his manhood? A flicker of the old mockery shone in her eyes.

"You don't look very well, Major Tristram," she said.

He shook his head.

"Oh, I'm well enough—physically at any rate." He laid his hand on his heart with a rueful laugh. "I've got a sort of spiritual indigestion though—it's this life—it doesn't suit me or my tabbies. It's too

neat and tidy. I'm like that what's-his-name person who had to put his hand to his mother earth to keep strong. I need to be doing and fighting, struggling for existence in my mother wilderness to keep decent. Well, I shall have enough of that out there. Unless the drought breaks soon we're going to have more trouble. The unhappy folk in the village are beginning to die off like flies, and when the famine comes——?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't look fit for such work," she exclaimed bitterly.

"I'm tired—that's all. I had a stiff day of it yesterday." He looked at her with a flash of boyish enthusiasm. "Hasn't any one told you?"

"No one has told me anything," she said. "People don't rush here with their latest gossip."

He flushed painfully.

"Oh, well, it isn't exactly gossip. It's about Boucicault."

"Boucicault?"

"Yes. You know Sir Gilbert Foster gave him up. Well, I found something Sir Gilbert didn't—a little spot on the brain not bigger than a pin's head. I operated yesterday, and I believe he'll get well. Isn't that a feather in my cap?"

He looked up, smiling into the sunlight, and waited for her to speak, until the silence became oppressive. Then he turned to her, drawn by an instinct which the next instant he knew was justified.

He caught her by the arm, shaken from all his resolute self-possession by what her face revealed to him.

"Sigrid—what is it—you're ill—in pain——"

But she freed herself almost violently, steadying herself, forcing the blood back into her cheeks by a sheer effort of the will.

"It's nothing—don't fuss over me. It's the heat—nothing more——"

"Then you ought not to be out here."

She laughed defiantly.

"You're not my doctor, Major Tristram, and I won't be bullied. Besides, you've whetted my curiosity. There now, I'm all right again. What were you saying about Colonel Boucicault? You—you operated, and now he's going to get well?"

"I think so." But he answered absently. He was still intent on her face, striving to get beneath the mask. The moment's livid pallor had gone, but she was none the less changed. Her voice, level and quiet, had yet a new tone in it—a kind of hoarseness which he knew as a symptom of exhaustion and pain. She turned away, trying to avoid his eyes.

"Has he been able to speak?"

"Not yet. He is not even properly conscious. It may last some weeks."

She gave a little cynical laugh.

"I suppose some one will be glad."

"Anne—my wife."

"Ah, yes—your wife." Some new thought struck her. She turned back to him, with a line of perplexity between her arched brows. "Aren't you leaving him very soon?"

He hesitated, and then answered slowly:

"Dr. Martin is with him. I have to go to Heerut. It's not only my work. I've heard that Ayeshi's somewhere in these parts, and I've got to find him."

"What do you want with Ayeshi?" she asked, no less deliberately.

"I've got to bring him back. I only heard yesterday of the suspicion which sent him into hiding, and, I am afraid, to the devil. The suspicion is unwarranted. He's got to come back and be cleared."

"Poor Ayeshi!" she said under her breath.

He nodded, his eyes darkened with pain.

"He has suffered horribly and unjustly."

"Needlessly!" she corrected vehemently. "Uselessly! Who minds sacrifice or suffering or injustice so long as the end—the purpose—is clear and attained? It's the pitiable uselessness——" She broke off, tapping the ground with an exasperated foot. But he had heard the tears in her voice.

"Isn't that the horror of all suffering?" he asked, wearily—"its apparent uselessness? We can only hope it leads somewhere."

"Oh, for pity's sake don't be platitudinous!" she burst out. "It's almost as though I was listening to Anne talking."

"My wife!" he reminded her sharply.

"Oh, you are very loyal!" she retorted.

He was silent a moment, and then laughed, covering over his own pallor.

"It's only a sense of justice. A wife isn't responsible for the poor qualities of her husband's brains, is she?"

"She may be responsible for his becoming a sleek prig," she said cruelly, then, with a quick, almost girlish gesture of appeal: "Don't be angry, Major Tristram! The heat has disagreed with me mentally and physically. Let's talk of something else. Tell me something about your mother."

He looked at her, puzzled, and naïvely pleased.

"What shall I tell you about her?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know—tell me if she is well and happy."

He bent down to stroke the dog at his feet, hiding his face.

"I believe she is. In her last letter she hoped to live to welcome us both home——"

"Will that hope be gratified, Major Tristram?"

"I fear not," he answered unsteadily.

She was silent, looking wistfully ahead into the white sunlight.

"Ever since that day I saw her picture and heard her story I have been interested in your mother," she said at last. "She is the sort of woman whom one wants to be happy—whose happiness one would like

to shelter to the end."

"One can't protect another's happiness," he said. "I've learned that much."

"I also," she said gravely.

He straightened up. His blue eyes rested on her face with a treacherous, smouldering trouble.

"I can't help feeling that you're—you're suffering," he said. "It's the only thing I'm quick at guessing at—if it's only physical—please go in and—and rest——"

She shook her head. There was a tenderness in her faint smile which a woman may feel for some big, clumsy, loving boy.

"I'm not tired. I come down here every day and watch life go past."

"Sigrid——" He faltered. "Does that mean that you are very lonely?"

"No—not very. My husband is always away now. Mrs. Boucicault and Mary come sometimes—and even Mrs. Bosanquet. I think they all love me, but they can't alter circumstances, and it makes them desperately unhappy. Often I wish they wouldn't come——" She waited a moment, studying his set features with a pitying knowledge. "I know what you're thinking, Major Tristram. You're comparing this life with the golden palaces and the mountain-tops, with my splendid living and splendid dying."

She burst out laughing and patted him on the arm. "Oh, my innocent friend, don't you know us

mortals better than that—don't you know how we love to air our borrowed souls and talk largely and pompously about the ideals we've cribbed out of a novel? There is nothing in it—nothing. I just sold myself for an easy life in a mud hut in the valley. Let that comfort you."

He threw back his head, looking her full in the face.

"That's a lie," he said. "You must have loved greatly."

For a full minute they remained staring at each other in defiant silence. And under his unhappy eyes her expression changed and grew careless and indifferent.

"Well—perhaps you're right, perhaps I did love with all my heart." She held out her hand. "But I am very, very tired now. The heat is appalling. I wish you God speed, Major Tristram."

He scarcely touched her. He swung himself up into the saddle with a suddenness which startled Arabella into a youthful curvet. The tabbies mewed protest, and Tristram laid his hand soothingly on their basket. Then he looked down and saw Sigrid standing at his knee. The change in her held him motionless for all that every nerve in him ached for motion and action. Her small, pale face lifted itself to his in breathless eagerness; her parted lips quivered, the eyes were fiery with the glitter of sternly mastered tears.

"Tristram—tell me—are all the old dreams gone?" she asked huskily.

His mouth under the short ruddy moustache hardened.

"I am going back to find them."

"That's well—go back, Tristram. They may be all that are left any of us at the end. Our dreams are real—reality is nothing. See—!" She laid her hand on her breast with a curious gesture of self-accusation. "I am all your wife would call me—just a mean, soulless fortune-hunter. You've found me out. There is not one fine or noble or high thing in me—and yet your vision of the woman who danced that night, who has played to you the finest music in the world is no illusion, but the truth. Keep it—remember it. Perhaps"—she smiled faintly—"your memory of her may bring Undine to her soul."

He looked away from her.

"I can't help myself——" he said roughly.

"Don't try. Let us keep all the beauty that we can."

She laid her hand on Arabella's long neck and stroked it caressingly. And now something elfish and illusive dawned under her expression of intense earnestness. "Do you remember—you used to go down to the temple when the moon rose and dream you saw me dance among the ruins——"

"I was a romantic boy—half crazed with loneliness——" he broke in with repressed

vehemence.

"The moon rises tonight," she said, so gently that he scarcely heard her. Yet something insistent, patient in her forced him to meet her eyes. He saw that they were dry and brilliant, tragically exultant. They betrayed her careless smile, the affectation of demure mockery with which she once more gave him her hand. "Major Tristram, I have a foolish presentiment that we shall meet just once again—and after that no more. Good-bye till then."

He did not answer. She turned lightly away from him. And he rode on down towards the valley.

CHAPTER IX
FOR THE LAST TIME

Memory has many merciless weapons, but none keener, crueller than a room which has belonged to our dead. Who amongst us has escaped that moment of return after what seems the culmination of all agonies when the mere position of a chair, a glove thrown down idly and forgotten, a little touch of familiar disorder tears open the freshly closed grave and shows us on our way to a new, seemingly endless road of pain?

Something of that impotent grief laid hands on Tristram as he stood on the threshold of his old home. The barely furnished room was as he had left it that night of Meredith's visit. An instinct had forbidden his return. Shortly afterwards he had gone to Trichinopoly to be married, and since then the place had stood deserted.

The camp-bed had been tidied by Meredith's conscientious hand, and the few breakfast things washed and replaced, but there was cigarette ash on the table and the lamp stood where it had burnt between them. It had a grey, dead look, as though it had burnt itself out. The chair where he had sat in that final hour of reckoning expressed vividly the movement with which he had risen. There were small, regular fragments of torn cardboard beneath the table, and the dust lay thick and white over them like a shroud. The dust was everywhere. It veiled the

photograph of his mother so that he could not see her face.

And the dead man whose personality the place expressed so poignantly was himself. He felt towards it as a spirit may do, looking down on the body which it has quitted for ever. Not years, but a deep, narrow gulf of experience separated him from the grown boy who had lived out his joyous, romantic creed between these wooden walls, who had striven and dreamed in their cool solitude, and gone thence day after day to fight the bitterest of all realities, human suffering, himself living in a world of his own imagining.

Looking back, he saw that those had been winged days of inspiration. He saw that in his dreams he had stood close to the inner life of men which is greater than reality and had seen visions and been dimly, gloriously aware of great truths. These things had gone from him. He stood with his feet planted on firm earth and knew nothing but the dust and the turmoil and the darkness.

But because there was stern stuff in him, he went about his work patiently. With the help of the servant who accompanied him, he dusted and tidied like a woman, unpacked his medicine-chest and set out his instruments in their glass cases. The two tabbies which he had set at liberty prowled disconsolately about their old home, seeming to miss something. He called to them and fed them, but they

did not respond, and presently they slipped out into the street and vanished. He let them go. He felt that they would not return. They had forgotten him and had grown wild in their captivity.

The brief dusk which precedes the Indian night shrouded the village street, when at last, his work done, he came out and closed the door of the hut behind him. The street was empty. That fact did not as yet appear strange to him, for the murderous heat of the day, far from relaxing, seemed to have become intensified and hung thick and sullen in the tainted air. Overhead the sky threw off its brazen robes and came out in a luminous purple, whose darker brilliancy was no less sinister. As yet there was no sign of the break for which the land waited in gasping agony.

Tristram went on his way towards the cross-roads. He passed a little group of old men returning from the river and would have spoken to them, but they salaamed and there was something in that ceremonious greeting, in their stony, expressionless faces which chilled the blood and forced him to go on wordless.

It was dark by the time he reached the council-tree. As he approached he had heard a murmur of voices, which were hushed as his shadow loomed up over the circle of squatting figures. In the brightening starlight, he recognized Lalloo in the place of honour at the foot of the battered idol.

Other forms he recognized, and for the first time he became aware that he had seen only old men since his return.

The circle greeted him gravely. He sat down at Lalloo's side and filled his pipe. He talked of the drought and of the coming famine and asked after those he knew. The glowing bowl of his pipe threw a dull reflection on his face, and he felt that their eyes were fixed on him. They answered his questions with a measured slowness as though each word had to be chosen and weighed, and when his questions ceased they too became silent. One after another a shadow rose from the circle and glided out into the darkness.

Presently only Lalloo remained.

Tristram got up.

"Tell me," he said, "what is happening here?"

Lalloo lifted himself slowly and stood deferentially bowed, his hand caressing his beard.

"Nothing, Sahib."

Tristram smoked placidly.

"That is a lie, Lalloo. Once you were my friend."

"It is long since the Dakktar Sahib lived amongst us."

"Is friendship forgotten from one day to another?"

"There is a saying, Sahib, that it must be won every day afresh."

Tristram was silent for a moment, hiding from the other's eyes how sure and deadly the thrust had

been. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid fate means to give me another chance to serve you and win your friendship, Lalloo."

"The wheel turns but once in a life-time," was the enigmatic answer.

"That may be. Well, I don't intend to cadge for your good-will. I shall stay here and see you through whatever is coming. In the meantime, tell me where can I find Ayeshi?"

Lalloo gave no sign.

"Ayeshi comes no more——" he said.

"Doesn't he?" Tristram laughed grimly. "Well, the next time he doesn't come, will you tell him that I must see him. Perhaps his friendship will have worn better. Tell him that he may return to us in safety and honour."

"There is no return for Ayeshi, Sahib."

"Dead——?"

Lalloo glanced up through the darkness into the Englishman's face. For a minute his own manner changed, losing something of its impassive reticence.

"Sahib, there are things which no man may forget and prosper. For the sake of one memory—leave here, leave Gaya—there is an illness coming which even the cunning hand of the Dakktar Sahib cannot stay——"

"Is that a threat, Lalloo? Do you know me so little that you think I should turn tail——"

The old money-lender lifted his hand almost

with authority.

"No man can change the course of his fate, Sahib. But I have paid my debt."

He salaamed and slipped away into the irregular silhouette which the tumble-down huts threw into the palely-lit street.

Tristram lingered a moment. His pipe had gone out, and he lit it again with an affectionate care, which covered tension. An instinct, more delicate than a seismograph, inherited from men who had learnt at bitter cost the significance of a glance, had warned him. It fed itself on the unbroken silence, on the fevered, palpitating heat. The bo-tree, whose leaves quivered to the faintest breath, was still as though it, too, was aware of an approaching change and listened for its footfall. The very light which filtered down from the stars and poured in a pale stream between the black banks of the street carried with it a suggestion of a near and brooding menace.

Tristram walked slowly up towards the northern entrance of the village. In the past he would not have walked alone. There would have been Ayeshi on one side of him and some woe-begone villager on the other, with Wickie scampering in and out among the shadows, pursuing, with the uncrushable optimism of his kind, the elusive mouse. And Tristram, listening in memory to those past sounds and voices, was overwhelmed, not with a sense of an invisible danger, but with a bitter loneliness. He had now only

one desire, and that to get away from these silent, watching walls, out into the open.

He walked fast, but by the time he had reached the narrow road along the river the first bar of moonlight had struck across the valley. He stood still again, for beneath the sullen muttering of the water he had heard other sounds.

Two horsemen rode out of the shadow. He made way for them, and as they came abreast the man nearest to him turned his head, so that the light fell full on to his face.

Tristram sprang to the horse's head, forcing the startled animal to its haunches. The rider made no sound, but his companion turned about instantly and bore down upon Tristram as though to force him back into the river. In that swift course of action not a word had been spoken on either side. The Englishman held his ground. With an iron skill, he dragged the plunging horse about so that it came between him and his aggressor, who reined in frantically on the very verge of the steep and muddy bank.

"Ayeshi!" Tristram exclaimed, imperatively.

The Hindu peered down into his face. The recognition for which Tristram waited with passionate hope did not come. Ayeshi drew himself up in the saddle.

"Let me pass, Major Tristram."

Tristram laughed between his teeth. The hope

was dead in him. "No, by the Lord, I won't. You've got to listen to me first. I don't know what devil's game you're playing, but I know what you've done—what you've sacrificed for me—you've got to listen—I've a right to ask this of you——"

The second rider burst out laughing. Tristram could not see his face, but the laugh had a familiar ring. A pale satiric smile quivered at Ayeshi's mouth.

"I have ceased to be your servant, Major Tristram!"

"Have you ceased to be my friend as well?"

He waited. He heard a whispered appeal. Ayeshi's companion shifted his position and Tristram, though he could see nothing, knew that he was now covered by a revolver. He knew, too, that it was no threat but an intention. Death tugged at the leash. He drew himself up to meet it. Had he possessed a weapon, he would not have sought to defend himself. An overwhelming indifference akin to relief rested on him. He released Ayeshi's bridle and stood back a step. He was like a drowning man, fighting off the final and fatal apathy. "Is there no memory, Ayeshi, which gives me the right to appeal to you?" he asked.

The smile faded from the Hindu's haggard features. He threw back the loose white sleeve from his arm and pointed to the wrist.

"There is one memory, Major Tristram, against a hundred wrongs with which your race has afflicted

me and mine. That memory has saved you. A life for a life——"

He made a gesture of proud authority. The next instant, both men were riding at a fast canter into the darkness.

Tristram listened absently to the water as it poured over the rhythmic thud of hoofs, till there was no sound left but its own languid murmur. The indifference with which he had faced the end receded from him like a narcotic before the returning tide of pain. He saw now that in that moment death had seemed not so much a release as a blotting out of failure, a passing on to the hope of a new and greater achievement. For he had failed. Upon the recognition Ayeshi had set the seal. He had ploughed and sown and watered the acre of earth which had been given to him in stewardship, and there was no harvest. He had poured out his strength and faith over that beloved ground, and it lay before him in hard unfruitfulness. The magnitude of his bankruptcy staggered and stupefied him.

It would have been better for others had Ayeshi forgotten his debt—better for Anne, entangled innocently in the mesh of his blunders, for his mother who would have seen in that death only a mysterious, tragic repetition. Both would have been spared the pitiable anti-climax of his career, one at least the publicity of an incomprehensible dishonour. He stood at the edge of the water, listening to its

luring whisper as it slid past in the blackness beneath him, thinking of those two women. For in them he had worked out his creed of happiness, in them he had failed most utterly. One other woman indeed crossed his thought, but she stood apart, neither failure nor success, but a golden figure of enigma, a fancy, a dream that had become a reality, and had separated itself from him and gone into the turmoil and mystery of life, a separate individuality lost to him forever.

The moon rose slowly and majestically above Gaya's mountain. It poured its pale splendour over the plain and changed the black-flowing river into a polished, glittering road of silver. The man wrestling with his last problem stood in the midst of the light, his shadow thrown in gigantic outline against the high-standing grasses. And little by little the light permeated his greater darkness and reached his knowledge. He lifted his eyes from the black temptation and despair of the waters to the faintly shadowed disk rising in serene immortality amidst the music of her million worshippers. And suddenly the tension and horror passed from him. He lifted his arms above his head with a gesture of release and greeting. His stifled lungs drew in the life which came down to him from those vast heights of infinity.

This much remained; for the foolish and the wise, for the successful and the failures, for Lazarus

starving in the gutter and the rich man starving at his loaded table—the earth's godliness, man's oneness with her and with his brother, as yet but dimly felt and broken by devastating storms of passion, yet moving on triumphantly to the divine, far-off event of perfect unity. Thus in his isolation he was not alone, but could reach out in fellowship to the whole earth. It did not matter that he had failed. Others would follow stronger and wiser than himself. They would till his barren acre—perhaps out of his very dust would spring the harvest which had been denied him.

The moment's ecstasy passed, but behind it followed a deep and healing serenity. He walked on slowly. "Our dreams are real—reality is nothing," Sigrid had said, and now the words were illuminated with his own knowledge. They gave her back to him. They lifted her figure out of the sordid ugliness of the events which had blurred and marred his vision of her. He had known her best when he had known her least, and as he knew her so she would belong to him and go down with him through all the years.

He reached the temple gateway. He did not know nor care what power had drawn him there. He stood in the entrance looking into the moon-flooded court, remembering those far-off nights when he had come there to picture her as he had seen her amidst the trumperies of a stage churchyard, transfiguring them with the energizing spirit of her genius. His

imagination had painted her amidst the grandeur of these broken pillars. In his romantic fancy it had not seemed incongruous that she should dance against the background of an alien thought and art. Fearlessly he had linked beauty with beauty, perfection with perfection.

And as he stood there gazing down the softly radiant avenue of columns towards the black entrance to the *antarila* he saw her. He knew one moment's agony of doubt, of fear, of mental disintegration as though the marvel of it had torn down the walls of his mind and spirit, thrusting him out into a bottomless void. Then, as a falling bird spreads out its wings and swings back in safety to its old heights, his mind rose out of the moment's chaos and went to her in passionate recognition. It did not matter then whether she was fancy or reality, whether he was sane or mad. The splendour and wonder of it was all.

At first she was a shadow among shadows. She seemed to hover on the verge of the light as a thought hovers on the verge of form. Then, without effort, seemingly without movement, so still and quiet did she hold her whole body, she glided out of the darkness, and, with her arms raised above her head, her face lifted to the flood of moonlight, she stood still, *sur la pointe*, poised in attitude of joyful waiting.

She wore the low bodice and short, full skirts of

the old classic ballet. A slender wreath of laurel crowned the smooth, fair head. Though as yet she stood afar off from him, he knew that her eyes laughed, that her mouth was open in that wide, frank smile of happiness, that she was breathing deep with the foretaste of ecstasy. He knew, too, for what she waited—for the bar of music which should set her free.

It came at last. He heard it rush down through the stillness. It caught her up on its crest and swept her down the path of silver towards him. He knew it and recognized it. Its delirious beauty poured through his blood. And even if his instinct had not seized it she would have taught him. Her movements, her hands, her feet her body sang it to him.

She danced. Even in these moments when all clear thought was suspended he knew that this was something that his generation had never seen. It was the final word of a great art, often debased, now lifted to the heights where the soul pours through the body to triumphant expression.

She danced. Her shadow rose and fell upon the grey, time-defaced columns not more silently. There was no technical feat that she did not strike like a note of music in her passage, but the marvel of it was lost. As the daring flight of a gull, swooping from precipice to precipice, becomes a simple thing of ease and beauty, so her laughing, dangerous steps

over the uneven flags seemed no more than an instinctive, effortless volition. As the brook leaps and sparkles over its rocky bed, now in sunlight, now in shadow, now rushing forward in headlong eagerness, now caught in a clear pool and held an instant in quivering suspense, so joyously and fearlessly she passed from the quick, brilliant passage of the waltz to its slower, deeper movement.

She danced. And it was a religion. Amongst the shades of departed worshippers she was the living spirit. She called them back from their dust-strewn oblivion to the rites of their mystic faith. She leapt the barriers of time and race. The ruined Hindu temple, its towering *sikhara* rising up over its holy mystery to the stars, identified itself with her; she became its priestess, it became her natural background, the splendid shrine of her genius.

She danced. As David danced before the Lord, so she offered up the incense of her art to whatever was divine in that crumbling monument to man's faith in God. Greater than prayer or praise was the joy of her body and the laughter of her face lifted to the moonlight.

She danced. She had the austerity of nature. Her appeal to the senses was the appeal of a flower, of a butterfly's wing, of a lark singing amidst the azure, of the forest and the mountain and the running water. It was the appeal by which the earth calls men back to their sonship and the knowledge of her divinity.

She danced. And to the man who watched her she was all things that he had ever loved, ever believed in, ever hoped for.

A cloud passed over the moon and threw the temple into obscurity. She was for the moment only the shadow of herself. It seemed to him that the music had broken off and that she too had faltered. Then, as the light came out from behind the drifting darkness, he saw her glide down the avenue of columns, on tip-toe, her arms raised, her small fair head thrown back as though she drank in the growing radiance.

But her expression had changed. Her face had a look of child-like awe, of breathless, startled wonder.

She danced. It was the apotheosis.

She came like a leaf blown before the wind and like a leaf sank slowly to the ground. She was so small, so frail and white, she seemed no more than a flower lying on the great stone flags beneath the pillars.

He ran out to her. He knelt beside her and gathered her up with her head against his knee, calling her by name. But it was only the half-dazed dreamer who called her, for one glance at that white still face, with the faintly shadowed lips, told him that she could not answer. He lifted her in his arms. For all the sick horror that drove its claws into him he was still too much the man of action to hesitate. She was so light. It seemed to him that he carried a

tired, sleeping child—something so frail and tender that his own strength seemed giant-like and almost brutal. He scarcely felt the burden of her, and yet before he reached the outskirts of the village he knew himself broken by her nearness. Her warmth enveloped him. He could feel the faint, irregular breath against his cheek. A perfume more subtle than a flower's reached his senses and stirred them to an exaltation that was beyond reason, far beyond desire. Her face rested against his shoulder and he could have bent and touched her cheek with his lips. He did not. He carried a Holy Thing—a vessel into which the Creator had poured all beauty—a lamp whose flame of genius flickered beneath the breath of death, a woman whom he loved with all the force and passion of his manhood. Beneath great banks of sullen cloud rolling up over the moon's silvered field, the village slept or seemed to sleep. He strode through its forbidding silence like a man possessed. He had become invulnerable, omnipotent. There was no force on earth that he could not have met and scorned in that hour save the invisible spectre stalking at his elbow.

He reached his hut at last and laid her on the camp-bed. He lit the lamp and with ruthless, skilful fingers ripped open the close-fitting bodice about her breast. He forced a stimulant between the blue lips. In everything he was as swift and sure as though no fear knocked at his heart, as though his own pulses

beat with the smoothness of old custom.

It was done at last—all that he could do. She lay there in her deep unconsciousness like a fair princess from a child's dream. The laurel wreath had freed itself from the pale gold of her hair and fallen back upon her pillow, making a dark frame for her ethereal pallor. He took it gently and laid it on the table. Up to that moment he had held himself in an iron calm, but the touch of that simple ornament, with its poignant significance, struck deeper than all his memories. He turned to her and knelt down beside her, pressing the still hand to his lips in an agony of helpless pity.

The seconds passed. Each one, for the man kneeling there, was measured by the sound of the quick-drawn, shallow breath. Each one, as it passed, left behind a deepening hope. His fingers rested on her pulse, and as though his will drew her back from the depths into which she had been sinking, he felt it slowly steady and strengthen.

And suddenly he looked up, knowing that her eyes were open.

They were very clear—very peaceful. They looked down into his haggard face with a wondering tenderness. Her lips moved. Twice she essayed to speak. He drew closer to her.

"Wasn't it the end——?" she whispered. He shook his head. He could not have answered her. "Isn't it the end, Tristram? I'm—I'm dying, am I not?

Tell me—I'm not afraid—not very—tell me——"

"No—please God——"

She smiled with a ghostly touch of her old mockery.

"You—you believe in God, Tristram. Do you care so much?"

"Yes—I care."

She lifted her little hand as though it was almost too heavy a burden for her weakness, and laid it on his bowed head.

"It doesn't matter what we say to each other now—we don't need to pretend. I'd hoped there would be no coming back, but now I'm glad. I love you, Tristram."

"I love you," he answered.

And therewith there came silence and peace into his tumult. The warring events of their lives poured into a deep and tranquil river flowing on irresistibly seawards. They knew now with the great certainty which comes in such moments that there was no end, no power in heaven or earth to blot out that simple confession and all that it must mean, now and in whatever hereafter awaited them. He could look into her face over which death had passed its hand, without fear, almost without pain. She too had ceased to suffer. Her hand caressed him softly.

"I knew you would come, Tristram."

"I had to—all the time I was coming to you."

"I danced for you. I've never danced like that

before—it was the last time——"

"Sigrid—if you knew—why did you do it?—why have you hurt us both?"

"Have I hurt you?" She drew herself up a little, looking down at him with an exquisite compassion in her fading eyes. "Dear, it was to make you happy—to give you back all you had lost—I wanted you to see me—at the last—on the mountain-top—in my golden palace—don't you remember——? Not in decay and ugliness—but in beauty."

"It has always been in beauty!" he cried out in passionate protest.

She shook her head. Her eyes no longer saw him. They were fixed ahead on some brightening vision.

"Not always. You and I—we saw the same sunrise but we were afar off from each other. We stood on different mountain-peaks—there was a great valley between, which one of us had to cross before we could stand together. And one night—I couldn't bear to be so far off from you and I saw that your mountain-peak was higher than mine and nearer to the sun—and I made up my mind. I came down from my heights and went through the valley. It was so ugly—quagmire and darkness—and loathsome things—sometimes I felt I could never be clean again and sometimes that I should not have the strength to reach you—and in that time you could not see me but in the end we stood together—we're

near each other now, Tristram——"

Her voice faded into an exhausted silence. He knew that her mind was clouded with a rising mist of old memories, old doubts and struggles. He could not wholly understand, and yet the recognition of an immeasurable, fearlessly born suffering came to him with her broken, fevered murmurs.

He bowed his face upon her hands.

"My mountain heights—oh, Sigrid, they have been low enough—if you knew how low——"

"I know everything—everything——"

He was silent. The certainty, serene and complete, broke in a shaft of light through his darkness. He lifted his face to hers. Her eyes were closed. Her fair head had fallen a little on one side in an attitude of great weariness. Slowly, in answer to his imperative appeal, her eyes opened. They were at first dim and expressionless as though she withdrew her sight from some inner vision.

"Everything—Sigrid?"

"Everything," she answered.

"Barclay——"

"He told me—but I knew more—I knew everything. Because I loved you I understood."

A fine, contemptuous smile touched her suffering lips. "I knew Anne, too. I knew how she had chosen——"

He got up, driven to his feet by an intolerable knowledge.

"Then you shielded me——"

"Do you grudge me that little comfort?" she whispered. Then as he stood staring down at her, she made a little helpless effort to touch his hand. "Bracelet—brother—you mustn't be too proud——"

"Oh, God——" he burst out. "It isn't that—don't you know I love you too—and you've suffered——"

"I've lived as I wished to live," she said with a sudden thrilling clearness, "and when I couldn't help you any more—when I saw that it was all useless I made an end—my end. I didn't mean to tell you—I meant to leave you a perfect memory—and to go silently. But you called me back. You made me—if you love me—you will be glad."

She struggled up on to her elbow, gasping for breath, and he saw the greyness creeping to her cheeks. He turned to fetch fresh stimulants, but she clung to him with an incredible strength.

"No—stay with me, Tristram—these must be perfect minutes—we've earned them—they're ours—there's nothing to regret—a happy death—it's what we live for—I'm happy—madly happy. Stay with me, Tristram—don't leave me in all this darkness——"

He dropped to his knees beside her. He slipped his arm beneath her shoulders, holding her in an embrace of desperate tenderness. She threw back her head, smiling.

"Kiss me, Tristram."

Their lips met. She fell back with a short sigh

and lay still, her mouth a little open as though in the midst of a laughing triumph she had fallen asleep. But presently she stirred and drew closer to him.

"Happy, Tristram?"

"Yes," he answered.

And indeed all anguish, all fear had gone from them both. They had gone down together into a sea in which there was no thought, no memory, no desire. The coming night enclosed them, shielding them from the future.

"It's because I'm dying——" Then suddenly she laughed softly, contentedly. "Those steps—in the fast movement—no one—no one has ever dared them—no one has ever danced like that—it was a great triumph—the greatest——"

He bent and touched her forehead with his cheek, soothing her. She smiled a little as though in gratitude, and sighing, fell asleep.

He did not move. He knelt there listening to her breathing. It hypnotized him, drowning his consciousness in its sweet, unbroken rhythm. It conveyed no meaning to him. He had passed out of the regions of hope and dread into the serenity of resignation.

Far off, in some other world, he heard the whisper of rain, the patter of heavy drops in the dust-laden street. He heard voices—exultant, hysterical. A pregnant coolness crept into the suffocating quiet. He knew that the drought had

broken—that the rains had come.

But it was another world. In this world there was nothing but himself and this one woman.

He bent lower to catch a murmur from her parted lips. One small hand still rested on his breast, clinging to him. Its hold was greater than death—stronger than the threat of life. It drew him down with her into her peace.

* * * * *

She awoke as the grey, rain-swept dawn crept sullenly through the open doorway. Only little by little had she fought back the engulfing oblivion. The shadow of the man standing beside her, watching her, had loomed huge and unreal. But now she saw his face and knew him.

"Tristram!" she whispered.

He seemed to draw himself up to a greater height. His features were haggard and painted with the livid pallor of the light.

"A messenger has gone to Gaya," he said. "They will send Smithy with a litter——"

"Tristram—I'm going to live?"

"Yes," he said, "the danger is over."

They looked away from one another, finding no word of comfort. The glamour of the night dropped from them. They had drunk of death, and of that intoxicated hour nothing remained but the bitter aftermath of life—an anti-climax, tragic and pitiful,

half-grotesque, a little sordid.

And as two travellers who have reached what seemed their journey's end only to find the desert stretched before them, they faced the grey, unending road of their future.

CHAPTER X
ANNE CHOOSES

Outwardly the scene was commonplace enough. Women, for all their supposed emotional weakness, have for the greater part a knack of facing the graver crises with a deliberate and almost prosaic calm. And for one woman at least in that quiet room the moment could not have been more bitter, more fraught with ugliness and humiliation. Yet she sat very straight, very composed, tearing down the sanctity of her life without a quiver.

"You must think it very strange of me to come to you like this," she said, "but I had the feeling that, whatever else you would do, you would be frank with me. And I must know the truth. I must know where I stand. I must know what you are to my husband, Mrs. Barclay."

She looked straight at her companion as she spoke. She was not conscious of her own insolence. Her words had been forged in a fortnight's agony and

had cost too much in their utterance to allow consciousness of any hurt but her own. Moreover, to her the pale, delicate-faced woman opposite her had no claim to her consideration. She was "one of those others" whom the remnant of man's prime favourite, the Victorian female, passes with gathered skirts. For in Anne's catalogue of humanity there were as yet only two varieties of her sex, the sexually virtuous and the sexually immoral. They were accordingly good women or bad women, no matter what other failings or qualities they might possess. Or, in a word, a woman's loyalty to her husband, prospective or actual, was all that mattered in Anne's eyes.

Mrs. Barclay, she knew, was a bad woman.

Sigrid regarded her thoughtfully from beneath the shadow of her hand.

"You are insulting me, Mrs. Tristram," she said, "but I do not think you mean it. I think you are unhappy, and that is excuse enough. Won't you explain exactly what you mean?"

"I'm sure you know," Anne answered unsparingly. "You were always—I don't know how to express it—but it seemed to me—to a great many people—that you tried to entangle my husband—before our marriage——. I could have borne that. I knew my husband so well. In many ways he is careless and unconventional. He doesn't recognize evil easily. But now—now it's different." She halted, fighting the tremor in her voice. It was the first trace

of emotion that she had shown, and, in spite of her prim brutality, it was curiously pathetic. "Since the—the scandal in the temple—I've felt I couldn't bear it any longer. People have talked—they think—oh, I know—though they hide it from me—and I can't do anything. I can't because I don't know——"

"You don't know what?"

"Whether it's true."

"Wouldn't it be best—fairer—to ask your husband?"

There was a moment's silence. The splash of the rain on the trees of the compound sounded dismally in the room's stillness. Sigrid shifted her position. She leant forward a little as though to look closer into her visitor's face. The small white hand on her knee clenched itself. But Anne turned her face away from the intent, weary eyes. She bit her lips desperately.

"I can't——" she said. "I can't—that's just it——"

A tear rolled down her cheek. She brushed it away flurriedly, but the knowledge of her weakness broke down the wall of pride and anger which she had built up in her loneliness. "I can't because I sent him away. We'd quarrelled—no, it wasn't a quarrel—it was something worse than that—and—and he let me choose—and I told him to go. I was very wicked—very unjust. A wife's business is to forgive everything. I see that. But it's too late. He's gone, and now—now I've no one——"

It was not what she had meant to say. She had

meant to be grave and dignified and judicial, and instead she was crying quietly. But now that the dam was broken her pent-up unhappiness flooded over her irresistibly. She had been intensely lonely. She had no great friend to turn to, and her instincts tended to a stern reserve where marital relations were concerned. She had hidden her growing fears and remorse under a cloak of indifference. Then had come the wild story of the temple, of Sigrid Barclay's night spent in Tristram's hut, of her supposed dangerous illness, of her apparently swift recovery. Then Gaya had begun to whisper, and those whisperings had been more than she could bear. She had meant only to seek the truth—instead she had poured out her overladen heart to the woman she most hated.

Sigrid got up slowly and went to the verandah. She stood for a minute with her raised hand resting on the lintel, gazing out into the rain-soaked gardens. The moist air was full of fragrance and reviving life. When she turned at last there was a splash of colour in her pale cheeks.

"Mrs. Tristram, send for your husband—go to him. He is the sort of man who doesn't need to forgive."

"I can't."

"You love him——"

"I couldn't go to him until I knew——"

"—that you had nothing to forgive?"

Anne's silence answered. Sigrid studied her with no shadow of change on her own palely composed features.

"We're two women, Mrs. Tristram," she said, "and that makes many impossible things possible—it makes it possible, for instance, though we dislike one another, for us to be honest—even about the man we both love."

Anne lifted her wet, piteously twisted face.

"Then it's true?"

"It's true that I love him." She played absently with one of the little silver ornaments on the table beside her, and then added: "It is true also that I offered myself to him, though I never meant to marry him—threw myself at his head. And that he refused me——"

"He didn't care——?"

Sigrid, glancing up, caught that look of mingled disgust and hope and fear, but it was the hope and fear alone that had significance.

"He had asked you to marry him. He told me that there could only be one woman in his life—and that woman his wife."

"That is true?"

"I give you my word of honour."

Anne sat very still. The tears were dry on her cheeks. She held herself rather as she had done at the beginning.

"And then—that night—a fortnight ago——"

"Ah, the temple?" She smiled faintly. "You won't understand that so well. You see, I am a mixture of a great artist and a bad woman. And artistically I have always realized how beautiful I should be against such a background. It was an artistic freak—though I daresay the woman in me had a spiteful hope that Major Tristram might chance that way and realize all he had lost. Anyhow, my heart failed me. Your husband acted the good Samaritan; and that is the whole story."

"If that is true I have done my husband a great wrong."

"I think you have."

Anne rose with a vague little gesture. It seemed to indicate barriers over which no reproof could pass. She was quite composed now. The strain and insolence had gone out of her manner, which was faintly patronizing.

"I have to thank you for your frankness. I—I shan't ever feel quite the same to you as I have done. Indeed—I hardly understand. You say you dislike me—and yet you've told me all this——"

"That's because most unscrupulous people are good-natured," Sigrid answered with careless amusement. She helped herself to a cigarette, aware that by so doing she was living up to Anne's conception of her. "You see, it doesn't cost me anything. This particular incident is closed as far as I am concerned, and you might as well enjoy the

benefit of the truth. I am conscious that I tried to hurt you, and I'm sorry."

Anne nodded.

"I'm sorry, too," she said primly. She went towards the door and there hesitated nervously. "You're—you're leaving Gaya, are you not?"

"Yes, soon. My husband's business here is finished. It is very fortunate."

"Yes—very fortunate."

She lifted her eyes to Sigrid, realizing for an instant why Gaya had called her beautiful. An incredible impulse seized her, but she thrust it down in scorn and self-disgust. She made a little tentative movement as though to hold out her hand, and then turned and went out without a word. After all, it was the only thing to do. Now that her worst fears were over she saw that the scene had been preposterous, but she was a little thrilled by her own action as conventional people are when they have ventured out of their rut. She had met sin on her own ground and worsted her. In some dim way she believed that she had fought for Tristram and his happiness. Her anger against him had died—had been transmuted into pity. She saw that behind his bigness he was weak and easily led. Well, it was her task to lead him, to protect him. She was his wife.

She drove homewards through the steady downpour with an exalted consciousness of a duty done and of a clear road before her. She knew now

what she had to do. It meant sacrifice because she no longer loved, but sacrifice was a glorious prerogative. In it one found peace and happiness. She was happier already. As she passed the little tin chapel her happiness clamoured for expression, for thanksgiving. She ordered the syce to wait for her, and a moment later she was kneeling in her old place, to the right of the pathetic altar, thanking God for the light that had been granted her.

At first she did not see Meredith. There were only two side-windows through which the grey light filtered, sinking drearily on to the place's bleak unloveliness, and the figure bowed down before the altar was in shadow and motionless in its utter, almost passionate prostration. But presently he rose slowly to his feet and turned. The lower part of his body was still in darkness, but his face was in the light, lifted to it. And to Anne, who now saw him, its hideousness was sublime. She saw in it the seal of God set on His martyr. Her intuition flashed down into the depths of the man's patient soul, more seared and scarred even than those dreadful features, and the compassion which she poured out to him was other than her pity for her husband. It was understanding. In truth it was not pity, but she gave that name to it.

He saw her. Even though the twilight separated them she knew he faltered. She knew the memories that had driven the dark blood into those scars. And

she too remembered—all her girlhood and all her girlhood's prayers and fancies which had been born in this poor room. She was a woman now. The fancies had been foolish and childish. She had flung away reality for them. Well, she would take up her cross.

Meredith came towards her and took her outstretched hand.

"When I saw you it was as though all the old times had come back again," he said with a grave smile.

"I came in for quiet," she answered. "I wanted to —to thank God for something. And now I've found you—may I speak with you?"

He nodded silently and led her into the tiny side-room, where he changed his vestments and gave lessons to a few Pariah children who accepted his doctrine in exchange for a certain social status. He offered her the one chair, but she remained standing.

"I have just seen Mrs. Barclay, Owen," she said. "I went to see her. It may seem a dreadful thing to have done—and it was dreadful—but I know that I did right. She confessed to me."

He looked at her and then down at the papers littered on the table.

"What did she confess?"

"That some of the wretched scandal which has associated her with Tristram was true. She did try to drag my husband into a horrible intrigue. But she

failed. She swore to me, and I believe it was the truth."

"I think Mrs. Barclay would speak the truth," he said meditatively.

"She is shameless," Anne retorted with a flash of scorn; "but, at least, now I know that Tristram is innocent where she is concerned. It is for that I am so thankful."

Owen Meredith drew himself up from his bowed attitude. There was something weary and apathetic in his bearing which was new to her. She felt, with a stab of pain, that he was very ill.

"Anne—don't you love your husband?" he asked.

The feverish blush in her cheeks deepened. But his eyes were grave, even to severity, and admitted no offence.

"Why, I must love him—he is my husband."

His twisted mouth was bitter.

"The one thing doesn't always imply the other, Anne. Men and women are frail. They can't always keep the terrible oaths God makes them swear."

"They can do their duty," she interrupted, "as I shall do mine."

"Duty isn't love," he said.

She lifted her head proudly.

"It is the best one can give after love has been killed."

"Has Tristram killed your love, Anne?"

She met his stern gaze unflinchingly.

"He has done something I can't forget. I have forgiven it, but I know now how wide the gulf is between us and now I can't ever forget it. That's all I can tell you."

"Anne—Anne—we must judge gently——"

"I don't judge any one but myself," she answered. "I see that I have been most to blame. I made a great mistake and I accept the consequences. I am going back to my husband."

"Going back to him?" he echoed heavily.

She nodded.

"I can do nothing here. My father's condition is unchanged. Dr. Martin is staying on, but he believes that the operation has failed. At any rate, I shall be within reach and my place is at my husband's side. I see that in many ways I could have done more to help him. Now I mean to share his life—to stand by him. I am going to Heerut."

"There's no place for a woman," Owen exclaimed.

"I think there is. I am a good nurse. I could help him. And out there I should see all that is good in him—oh, Owen, I must love and respect him if I can."

She lifted her eyes to his and for the moment in which their gaze met they acknowledged to each other the naked, hopeless truth. He turned at last with a broken laugh.

"I think hell itself must be paved with useless

sacrifice," he said.

"Oh, Owen, don't talk like that—it's terrible. I can't bear it. Help me!"

"How can I help you?" he asked almost impatiently.

"Ride with me to Heerut this afternoon—take me back to Tristram."

She did not realize what she asked. She did not see his face. She was possessed with a restless feverish desire for action—to start out on the road she had chosen.

"Dear, it's not possible. The weather and the roads are too bad. You're not strong enough. A man told me this morning that the river is terribly swollen —dangerous even——"

"I am not afraid," she said proudly. "Owen, won't you help me this last time?"

"This last time?"

She faltered.

"Oh, I didn't mean that—it was just a phrase ——"

"God knows, it may be the truth—of late I have felt——"

He broke off and added quickly: "Yes, of course I will take you if it can be done."

"Thank you, Owen. I knew you would always help me if you could."

"Always."

Their hands met. The tears shone in her eyes,

and they were not far from his. He bent and kissed her solemnly between the wet curls on her forehead.

"My little sister in God!" he whispered.

"Dear Owen!"

And neither of them was conscious of a lie. Their hypocrisy was pathetic in its stern sincerity.

That same day Owen Meredith rode with Anne to Heerut. The pitiless rain, the roads, so deep in mud that their horses had to pick their way at a walk, prolonged the fifteen-mile journey into the late afternoon. They scarcely spoke. The strain and physical discomfort kept them silent, and on Meredith's part there was an abstraction, a curious detachment which made speech difficult. It was as though somewhere, somehow, a vital link between himself and life had been cut. Something was finished—a book had been closed. He knew no more than that, but the vague knowledge numbed even his suffering. From time to time he glanced at his companion, questioning her power to bear so much; but her upright figure, the brilliant flush on her cheek, reassured him. He knew that she was setting out on a road of abnegation. He saw how wonderful she was.

They reached the new bridge and drew rein for a moment to watch the angry river rush past between the arches. The soffits were already awash. The monstrous flood of roaring water deafened them, and the voice of the engineer who had crawled out of his

shanty to watch the progress of events came to them only in gusts.

"Damnable—you never know where you are—these accursed rains—nothing in moderation—my life's work—the lady'd better go back—it's no time to cross——"

"I am going to join my husband," Anne said slowly.

The man grunted.

"Better if he joined you," he grumbled.

They reached Heerut at last and urged their weary horses to a canter down the deserted, evil-smelling street. Tristram's hut was empty, but there were signs of a recent habitation—a pipe on the table, some instruments washing in a basin of carbolic, an open book. The dank nakedness of the place drove Meredith out of his stupor.

"Anne, is it wise—hadn't you better come back—you're not strong enough to bear all this privation ——"

She shook her head with a faint smile.

"I'm not strong enough to ride back. Besides, I wouldn't. I've set out, and I'm going on."

He placed her saddle-bags out of reach of the rain which oozed in through the open doorway. He knew now that he had acquiesced in a reckless, ill-judged adventure, but a spirit of weary fatalism silenced him. Perhaps good would come of it—a real and lasting reconciliation. He thought of that night

in this very place when he had intervened and his whole being winced under the lash of his self-contempt. He would not intervene again.

"So it's good-bye, Anne."

"Good-bye, Owen—and thank you."

Their hands met. He did not kiss her. Though he did not own to it, the presence of Tristram was strong in that drear place, and his own passion more vivid, less subdued by resignation than he had believed.

"God bless you, Anne—I—I—shall pray for you always."

"And I for you."

Such was their leave-taking. There was in it an element of finality which neither analysed nor understood. When the door had closed on him an instant's pang of fear and yearning forced his name from her lips, but he did not hear and she did not call again. She sat down, looking about her. Now that she was alone she knew that she was very tired—so tired that even rest offered no relief. At other times, after a long day in the saddle, the thought of sleep had been like a draught of fresh water to a thirsty man, but now it seemed hideously afar off—almost unthinkable. Instead her weariness goaded her to movement, whilst her brain was numb. It was as though something mysterious was working up inside her physical being, gathering together for some unknown crisis.

She tried to think—to visualize things. She tried to picture Tristram's entry and the scene between them. She had gone over it so many times, and now it eluded her. She tried to remember what her husband was like, but could not. A little prayer for strength and guidance came into her mind, but after the first words she forgot that she was praying. In despair she drove herself to think of Sigrid in this place, of Sigrid in her husband's arms; but the picture left her numb and indifferent. Her mind rode helpless on a great shoreless sea of exhaustion. Nothing mattered but her body, and its rising suffering.

Her hands and face burnt. The room was stifling. She got up uncertainly to open the door, but on the way remembered her wet things and began to unpack the saddle-bags. In the midst of it she fancied she heard Tristram's step and a new desire obtruded itself on her masterless thoughts. She had meant to get a meal ready for him—to make the place homely—to welcome him as his wife, his comrade. She swayed as she drew herself up. She began aimlessly to clear the table——

Half an hour later, when Tristram returned, he found his supper waiting for him and his wife unconscious on the ground.

The shock, coming as a climax to a fruitless day of labour among men and women who had once loved him and now shrank from his very shadow, did not hinder prompt action. He gathered her up

tenderly and laid her on his bed. Her clothes were wringing wet, but the fever of her body burnt through them, and, knowing what Meredith did not know, he cursed with an anger inspired by pity. He forced a little brandy between her lips, and he was beginning to remove her soaking riding-skirt when her eyes opened.

"Tris—what's happened? Did I faint?—oh, how stupid of me—don't bother—I can manage—I shall be all right in a minute——"

"You must lie still," he said impatiently. "Why did you come? It was madness. If you had wanted me you could have sent for me. You've made yourself ill."

"I don't know—I wanted——" She tried desperately to think, to recall all her plans and motives. They slipped through her fingers. And meanwhile he was tending her skilfully, tenderly. He scarcely heeded her broken muttering. Suddenly she stretched out her hand and drew him to her.

"Tris, I know what it was—I wanted to come to you—and tell you that—that—I—I—forgive—I was harsh—and cruel—I—misjudged. Mrs. Barclay told me—how loyal you had been. I'll stand by you—I'm your wife—it's my duty—I want to do what's right—I'll help you—here—I——" Then her body overwhelmed her. It threw her soul to the earth, whining and whimpering. "Oh, Tris, Tris, I'm in such awful pain—such awful pain."

"I know," he answered hoarsely, "my poor little Anne——"

Her eyes turned to his. They cleared for an instant.

"Tris—you don't think——"

"Dear, I'm afraid so. We've got to do the best we can. You mustn't be frightened——"

She began to cry helplessly. Then the pain dried even her tears. She clung to him in a frenzy of agony.

"Oh, Tris—Tris—help me——"

She passed at last into a merciful unconsciousness. Not once during that night did she regain knowledge of his presence and yet he knew that even in that mental darkness she suffered as only women are doomed to suffer. Watching her, alleviating where he could, he gave no thought to the past or future, no thought to the other woman who had lain in the selfsame place, battling with the selfsame enemy. He did not ask himself whether, had this piteous offer of forgiveness been made in the crisis of their lives, it would have stemmed the torrent of events, whether indeed there is any power which can check the course of character and the heart's will. Nothing of all that mattered. Nothing but this pitiful suffering. He saw Anne only in her girlish youth and innocence and ignorance. He saw her as a child ground between life and her own child's beliefs and ideals. She claimed him by the great right of pain.

Her poor fevered little hand rested in his. Even in her unconsciousness she clung to him as though his touch soothed her. But in her delirium she called on Owen—called on him incessantly——

And in the early hours of the morning her hope was taken from her.

* * * * *

Owen Meredith reached the river shortly before nightfall. The muffled roar of the water sounded louder and nearer than before. As he crossed the bridge he could feel the steel girders quivering under the strain; he could see the yellowish-greyish mass racing from under his feet into the gloom of the coming night. It conveyed nothing to him. He was thinking of Anne—praying for her with a dull, stupid persistence.

The engineer, encased in waterproof, met him with a torrent of grim abuse.

"What we poor devils have to put up with! If this blessed thing doesn't hold—I'm dished. Bah—India! What the dickens are we doing in this *galère*? The very elements are against us." He shook himself like a wet dog. "Well, you'd better hurry. You'll catch up that fat monkey of a Rajah. He's in a towering rage about something—somebody been rude to his Allmightiness. You'd better soothe him down. There's trouble enough going——"

Meredith rode on. He did not want to catch up

with Rasaldû. He was still thinking of Anne when the Rajah, wet through and mounted on a limping English thoroughbred, loomed up like a ghost in the rain-soaked twilight. He greeted Meredith much as the engineer had done.

"This rotten climate! Look what a mess I'm in. I've just come from Heerut—incog. you know. Wanted to do the poor beggars a good turn and they threw stones at me—they—they insulted me. It's that damned blackguard Barclay. He ought to have been shot. You English are getting too devilish delicate. One's got to hit, and hit hard." He rambled on furiously. Meredith understood that Rasaldû, without escort, after the fashion of English royalties on their own domains, had sought to act the part of benefactor in Heerut and had been repulsed. At another time the incident might have caused Meredith a faint amusement, but now he could feel nothing. The desolation of rain and grey, lightless sky pressed down upon him like a stupefying burden. He went on thinking of Anne, wondering dully how it was he knew so well that he would never see her again. He thought of Tristram and pitied him. In that hour he forgot creed and principle. He saw, perhaps for the first time, humanity as one in suffering.

Two beggars slunk through the mud towards him. They were almost naked. The water ran in streams off their glistening brown skins and matted their beards into black masks. They came up, one to

Meredith, one to the Rajah, whining for alms. Meredith threw his man a coin. He did it mechanically. The Rajah burst into a fresh stream of curses. He was very wet—very angry. He had been called "swineherd" by his own people and the name rankled like a poisoned dart in his quivering flesh. He spurred his horse at the whimpering mendicant.

"Get out of my way, you vermin——"

Something happened. Meredith, still weighed down by his own thoughts, was only conscious of a coming change. He half turned to his companion, and as he did so one of the natives sprang past him. It was the leap of a tiger, straight at Rasaldû's throat. A gleam of white light streaked through the greyness—a muffled scream ended suddenly by a choking, sickening groan.

Rasaldû pitched headlong from the saddle. His foot caught in the stirrup. The startled animal swung round and bolted, dragging its rider face-downwards through the mud—a mere inanimate, shapeless bundle.

So much Meredith saw. He tried to think—to act. But he was like a sleeper waking slowly—too slowly—from a narcotic. Instinctively he turned to meet his own danger. He never saw it. It came noiselessly and quite painlessly. It was like a stupendous stroke of lightning severing the earth under his feet. It sent him spinning through æons of memory and feeling into nothing.

CHAPTER XI
FREEDOM

A covered bullock-wagon which for the last two hours had been struggling with the morass leading up from the valley came to a standstill outside the gates of the Barclays' compound. The driver lifted a flap of the canvas covering, and a woman crawled out and clambered stiffly to the ground. She stood for a moment in the steam of the panting and sweating bullocks counting money into the brown calloused palm extended to her in greedy persistence.

"No, I shan't want you going back," she said, in answer to his half diffident, half insolent question. "I've come to stop." She gave a little, high-pitched laugh, and, gathering up her untidy skirts, went through the open gates.

A syce, holding a lady's saddle-horse, waited at the bottom of the verandah steps. He stared stolidly at the intruder. He did not know her, and he knew everyone in Gaya. He had also the unerring instinct of his race and class which discounted the superficial Europeanism of her dress and its common gaudiness. He knew her for what she was, and made a gesture of detention as she passed.

"What you want, missy?" he asked in English, and with a mocking flash of his white teeth. "Missy not go in there."

She turned her head. The expression on her dark, mobile features was composite of dignity and nervousness.

"I want Barclay Sahib," she said. "Is he here?"

"Meester Barclay gone away," the man retorted, using the English prefix deliberately. "Meester Barclay gone away many weeks."

"Where has he gone?"

"Not know, missy."

She stood irresolute, looking at the saddled horse. At first it seemed to convey no significance to her. Then suddenly she flushed up.

"I must see some one who does know," she explained. "Who lives here?"

"The Mem-Sahib, missy."

"Who is the Mem-Sahib?"

The syce made no answer. He stroked the velvet nose of his charge and the stranger became aware from his attitude that they were no longer alone. She turned sharply, and the woman standing at the head of the steps immediately behind her returned her stare with a faint smile.

"Do you want Mr. Barclay?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I do." The Eurasian hesitated. The fair-haired fragile-looking woman in the dark riding-habit seemed to frighten her.

"I've come all the way from Calcutta," she stammered.

"That's a long way. I'm sorry—Mr. Barclay is away—has been away for many weeks. I don't even know where he is. If you would tell me your name ——"

The woman caught her breath audibly. Her dark, uneasy eyes had a smouldering look in them—a look that was somehow primitive in its sombre, gathering suspicion.

"My name's Barclay—Marie Barclay," she flashed out.

"Ah, Mr. Barclay's sister?"

"No, his wife." She flung the words down with the defiance of an animal that is afraid of its own temerity. Her head, with its over-adorned hat, was thrown back truculently, but her lips quivered. "I'm his wife," she repeated.

Sigrid had been pale when she came out. Now a faint delicate colour tinged her cheeks, bringing life and energy to her listless transparency. She put her ungloved hand to her face with a little familiar gesture of surprise and thought—but to Marie Barclay it expressed mockery.

"It's true," she burst out. "I can prove it——"

"I'm sure you can—only not here. It's so wet. Purga, you can walk Astora for a little. Won't you come in—Mrs. Barclay?"

She gave her visitor no opportunity to answer,

but led the way to the library where Mrs. Smithers, with ruffled grey hair and a face of care and perpetual perplexity, sat beneath the marble Venus knitting a pair of mittens which no human being was ever likely to wear.

"Smithy, this lady has come all the way from Calcutta. She's Mrs. Barclay—Jim's wife."

Mrs. Smithers let the mittens drop into her lap, but she gave no other sign of consternation. She was in the state of a person who has been subjected to a vigorous course of electric treatment and has become impervious to shocks.

"Lawks a-mercy!" she exclaimed wearily. "Well, and I'm not surprised. It's not the last thing I expected to hear. I warrant there's a good few of 'em about the country if we only knew."

"But this is true, Smithy—I'm sure it is, isn't it?" She turned, with a quick gracious movement, to the woman at her side, but for a moment the latter did not answer. Her full, rather pretty, mouth was desperately closed to hide its trembling. Her hands were interlocked in front of her. A strand of straight black hair straggled untidily across her face, and she tried to toss it back with an upward jerk of her head. It was as though she dared not unclasp her hands.

"Yes, it's true," she said at last. "I can prove it. We were married—years ago—in Calcutta. He's kept it quiet—I know—he was ashamed. He thought I'd pull him back. He wanted to get on so badly—and I

put up with it. I'd—I'd have put up with anything. He said he'd send for me—afterwards—but he never did. I hadn't heard from him for weeks. He didn't send any money—there was hardly any left—just enough to bring me here——" she looked from one woman to another, and there was a tortured, hunted look in her eyes that made her violent defiance pitiable. "I didn't mean to tell—he made me promise—but I've been so unhappy—so desperate—when I found he'd gone—and—and you here, I lost my head—I couldn't bear it any longer—I couldn't——"

She dropped down into the chair nearest her, her face buried in her hands, crying wildly.

"Scoundrel!" Mrs. Smithers ejaculated on the same note of confirmed conviction.

Sigrid stood looking down at the bowed, shaking shoulders. Her eyes were pitying, but her mouth was a little wry, almost whimsical.

"You were quite right to tell us," she said. "It's made a great many things clear. You needn't be frightened. I have an idea your husband meant you to come and that he will be glad. I daresay that was why he didn't write——"

Mrs. Barclay lifted her head, brushing the tears from her wet cheeks. Her hat had slipped a little to one side, giving her a look of grotesque and distraught violence.

"What are you doing here?" she asked insolently. "Who are you?"

"Nobody in particular—an interloper—it seems."

"Oh, I know better than that!" The dark face quivered into a sneer. "I know who you are. You're the white woman he was after. I guessed right enough. He wanted an Englishwoman." She sprang suddenly to her feet with an almost threatening gesture. "But it was me he loved—me he married. He didn't care for you—don't you flatter yourself—he wanted you—just to get even—just to hurt as he'd been hurt. You're nothing but a——"

She broke off. Sigrid had not moved or spoken, but there was that in the still white face which checked the torrent of savage insult. Mrs. Smithers got up. She rolled the mittens into a neat ball.

"I'm an old woman," she said, "and I hate violence. But just you mind what you're saying, Mrs. Barclay——"

Sigrid checked her with a gesture.

"Mrs. Barclay is quite right," she said calmly. "I think she understands her husband very well. She is only mistaken in supposing I did not understand too. I did not know that he was married, but that is neither here nor there. I did know that I was merely a means to an end—as he was to me. Now that's all finished and done with." She laughed a little. "Do you know, Mrs. Barclay, you are the second woman in twenty-four hours who has accused me of trying to steal her husband, and, heaven knows, in this instance, it isn't true."

Marie Barclay stared at her in sullen silence. Her passion had gone down under fatigue and a natural racial apathy. She had struck with all the strength she possessed, and now came the reaction of helpless tears.

"I don't know what to do," she said brokenly. "I've nowhere to go—no one to help me."

"We're going to help you," Sigrid answered. She came and laid a gentle, controlling hand on the other's arm. "You mustn't break down. There's nothing to be afraid of. You don't know it, but you've done me a great service. And now it's my turn. You'll stay here. It's your home—everything in it is yours. There's money enough to keep you going till he comes back. And he will come back. He'll be glad to find you here—we were nothing to one another. Doesn't that make you happy?"

Her tone was so gay, so assured that the brimming eyes lifted to hers lost their suspicion and hatred.

"I don't know—I don't understand—and you ——"

"I shall clear out. I've no right here. We'll be your guests for tonight and we can talk things over. Meantime, Mrs. Smithers will give you tea, and I'll go for a last ride on your horse. I want fresh air and a little quiet. You don't mind?"

The full lips quivered resentfully.

"You're making fun of me——"

"No—I'm in dead earnest. I've been an intruder and an unwilling thief, and now I return my ill-gotten gains. Smithy, take care of her till I come back. And no violence!"

Mrs. Smithers paid no heed to the injunction. She was trembling in every limb as she followed the quickly moving figure to the verandah steps. She clutched Sigrid's hands. Her dim old eyes were full of a great dread.

"Sigrid—my dearest—what are you going to do?"

"Do? Nothing rash, Smithy. Did you think I might——? Don't you see how good it is? I'm free. I'm Sigrid Fersen—I haven't got to fight daily, hourly, for my integrity—I'm free." She drew in a deep joyous breath of the fresh, rain-soaked air. Her eyes shone under the fine, untroubled brows. "I'm going home with you to England, Smithy. I'm going to live in the little suburban house and give dancing lessons to the large suburban feet. And in my free moments I shall play Beethoven and Wagner and Chopin on an extravagantly fine Bechstein. For I've learnt that one can play noble music anywhere. That's a great lesson, Smithy." She smiled tenderly. "And I shall live on your savings, Smithy. That'll make you happy, won't it?"

"Oh, my dear——"

"I know. Such queer things make women happy." She grew grave for an instant. "And perhaps I shall live to be very old, as Tristram said I might. I may

grow so much stronger—I shall outlive you, Smithy, and every one who ever cared for me. But I'm not going to funk it now. I shall play my music to the very end."

Mrs. Smithers made no answer. She could not have answered, for the dimness had crept into her throat and choked her. She lifted the little hand clasped in hers and kissed it.

Thus Sigrid Fersen rode down the steep, mud-choked road towards the valley. She told herself that it was for the last time. And because each "last time" in life is a bridge-crossing into a new and trackless country she looked back along the old road, and her thoughts lingered by the high landmarks by which she would never pass again. High up against the horizon a mountain-peak glowed in the warm splendour of this farewell. On its topmost crag she had dwelt a little and alone. She saw the rough and ruthless descent into the world of men the winding road over strange countries, the always-seeking of those two years, and there on the verge of an abyss the revelation of something as lofty, as splendid as all that she had left behind her. At first she had drawn back. She had even smiled a little at the thought that her feet should tread so desperate a path. But in the end she had gone on—down into the depths and through a suffocating evil darkness and up again at last to the farther summit. And had it been worth it—worth the effort, the sheer, physical

effort, the pitiless drain upon soul and body, the inevitable loneliness? She knew her answer. She saw before her the country to which her stern enterprise had led her. She saw it flat and barren and wind-swept, its sparse trees bowed before the solitary storms. She saw that it had its own grandeur. There was a sweet taste in the wind; and the rough earth carried many flowers on its bosom, and they had a fragrance more delicate than all the rich exotic blossoms which had once been dear to her. She welcomed the sweet winds and the great limitless horizons. She stretched out her arms to the blustering storm. She was free. Her freedom was not of the mountain crags, but of the great undulating plains where men pass their daily life. And she had ceased to be alone. Somewhere on that vast expanse a fellow-traveller pressed on his way, often erring, often misled, but still with head erect, eyes fixed on the down-going sun which was their common goal. She saw him big and careless and unkempt with strays and vagabonds crowded at his heels. She saw the light on his face, and knew that he too was conscious of their comradeship. It did not matter that in that country over which they travelled they would not meet again. They had met once. God Himself, if He existed apart from His creation, could not blot out that knowledge or His own decree by which the separate paths of men meet at the end.

Thus Sigrid Fersen rode out of Gaya. Her horse

slipped and fretted over the treacherous descent, but her hand was as strong and steady as her thought. She had the quality common to all vitally living things—the love of physical, friendly warfare with the elements. She lifted her glowing face to the warm rain. She felt at peace and happy. She could look with clear eyes into the future. Tristram had said that with care she might live to be very old. The thought had no terrors for her now.

Between dreams and realities she left Gaya floating in the grey mists behind her. The solitude and wide stretch of the plain soothed her and gave her a sense of release from a cramping prison. She began to deal practically with the coming years—even, with a faint smile at the corners of her mouth, to furnish the little suburban house, to arrange her days.

And then, in the midst of her planning, her horse jerked to a quivering standstill. She leant forward in her saddle, frowning through the veil of rain, and saw that something lay across her road—something black and huddled and shapeless. She tried to urge the frightened animal forward; then something definite checked her—held her in sick, motionless horror. It was a white patch—the shape of a man's hand, the fingers clawed into the mud.

A minute later she had managed to dismount. She knelt down by the crumpled body, and, exerting all her strength, lifted it. It was so caked and

stiffened with mire and blood that it remained upright, kneeling grotesquely, leaning against her. The disfigured features, made more hideous by their mud-smeared agony, were close to her own. She believed him dead. The horror of him, kneeling there, leering at her, overcame her. She let him sink back—and then only saw that he still lived. His eyes were open. They were already glazed and could not have seen her, but an instinct, kindling for the last time, recognized her presence.

"Tristram—Heerut—warn Tristram—warn——"

His mouth fell open. His gaze became fixed under the half-sunk lids. It was finished.

Sigrid Fersen rose to her feet. She was not conscious now of fear or hesitation; she walked forward a few paces, tracing the smeared track of Meredith's body back to a confusion of hoof-prints in the thick mud. There had been a struggle, and Meredith had had strength enough to crawl a few feet—she did not know that each foot had represented hours and the triumph of the man's will over agony and unconsciousness, but she knew what he had tried to do.

"Warn Tristram!"

It was a call to her old, unbroken fearlessness, to the eager, adventuring blood and the new faith. Gaya and prudence and safety lay behind her; but what was Gaya to her, what had prudence or safety ever mattered to her? Before her lay the swollen river and

sinister, uncomprehended danger.

She was going forward.

She caught her horse by the bridle. It was no easy task to mount from that slippery road, but she had in that hour an unconquerable energy and resolve. It was done at last. She settled herself firmly in the saddle, her hands on the reins were flexible and strong as steel. Through the splashing mire and rain she rode towards Heerut.

She reached the river-bank. The door of the engineer's shanty stood open and one glance showed her that the place was deserted. She rode over the bridge. The water slid across the roadway with an ugly, slopping gurgle; its deeper voice thundered beneath among the shaken arches.

On the farther bank she drew rein for an instant. Amidst the rush of the river it seemed to her that another sound had reached her. It was vague and indefinite, and yet unmistakably separate from all else. It was as though close to her, and yet hidden beneath the water, something monstrous and living groaned in the agony of dismemberment.

"Warn Tristram!"

She rode on towards Heerut.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEETING OF THE WAYS

They had come from all the ends of the Province, secretly and one by one from the towns, and in whole companies from the villages. It was for them only another pilgrimage. They brought with them the same childlike faith, the same dim, passionless hopes, the same fatalism. And behind those simple things there was the same incalculable force awaiting the spark which should fire them to a ferocious heroism or headlong panic.

They came together in the broad curve of plain where the Ganges twisted in a horseshoe towards the foot of Gaya's hills. To the west, within half a mile of the encampment, the black impregnable barrier of the jungle followed the river's course past the bridge-head and the temple, forming lower down a crescent around the little plateau on which Heerut lay huddled.

There were close on two thousand of them, men of all ages, all castes. They carried weapons, but of a strange and varied nature—old army rifles, an ancient sword, the deadly kukri, sometimes no more than a rusty bayonet, stolen or bought from some drunken defaulter. They themselves were as heterogeneous. They herded together without order or discipline. The rain poured down upon them ceaselessly, saturating their scanty clothing so that it clung to their lean bodies like creased and dirty skins. Here and there the saffron robe proclaimed the

Saddhu, and there were priests, haughty, arrogant-featured men, who stood aloof, as though the matter scarcely concerned them. Yet it was they who had worked secretly and cunningly in the towns and villages. It was their infallibility which had welded these strange, inco-ordinate atoms into a weapon. For, undisciplined, ill-armed, and dejected though they seemed, though they came straight from their fields and the enervating atmosphere of the bazaars, these two thousand men were still fighters. In the old days their fathers had scorned the plough and had lived and died by the sword. They had fought for the old Rajah and gone with him into exile and ended their adversity in the wildernesses. Some of that fighting blood was in the veins of these, their descendants, and some of that stern tradition lay smouldering beneath the veneer of peace which the British Raj had forced upon them.

But of all this, Barclay, riding at Ayeshi's side down the irregular front of this strange army, saw nothing. To him they were a sorry, pitiable crew, foredoomed to disaster. He knew now, if he had not always known, the futile madness of the enterprise on which they were launched, he with them. The brief illusion which he had nourished that night in the temple had gone. Though he had flung himself into this cause with all his wealth, all his power, he saw it to be lost. The shadow of the future was on these upturned stoic faces, on Ayeshi, and on

himself. Yet he would not have turned back nor changed the course of events. A sombre triumph and satisfaction glowed through his foreknowledge.

He had found his people. He belonged to them. In the end that was coming he would not be alone. His blood would mingle with theirs. And with them those others would be swept away—those others who had rejected him.

He turned his haggard, moody eyes towards distant Gaya and laughed. Even now he was a little theatrical. He wore the native dress, and it was like a masquerade. All that was English in him stood out the more prominently. The very priests who had admitted him to their caste shrank from his shadow, and quick, dark glances of suspicion followed him as he rode at Ayeshi's side. Vahana, the Saddhu, clung to his stirrup-leather. He was like a mocking spirit of evil, noiseless and remorseless. Once Barclay had tried to swing him off by a quick turn of his horse, but the old withered figure had leapt with him with the agility of a tiger. Afterwards Vahana had lifted his face to Barclay, showing his teeth in a mirthless grin of understanding.

Thereafter Barclay made no effort to free himself. But he had become afraid—afraid of something other than the end.

Ayeshi rode to the farther end of the roughly formed square. Beyond the jewelled turban and the ancient sword at his waist, he wore no insignia of his

rank, and even his knightly seat on the thoroughbred Arab could not wholly atone to his followers for this lack of outward splendour. They had expected something other—something resplendent, a gorgeous representative of the millennium that was coming,—a god, an avatar. And he was only a boy, with wasted features and restless, unhappy eyes. Yet they greeted him as their lord. Perhaps even in their minds was the knowledge that their lives were bound up with his, that there was no turning back either for him or them. A Brahmin and a native under-officer, still in uniform though without his badges, came out of the ranks to meet him, and for a few minutes they spoke together in an undertone. Barclay scarcely listened. He was watching with cynical intentness the play of the priest's astute features, the deferential, courtly movements, the keen flashes of the cruel eyes. In contrast, the soldier seemed brutal and aggressive. His face was pockmarked and sodden with vice, but he was a strong man—more vital in that moment even than Ayeshi.

Between Barclay and these two men Ayeshi was the shuttlecock—the toy and instrument with which each sought to attain his own petty ends of vengeance and power. For a moment Barclay could have pitied him as he sat there, reining in his restive Arab with a master's hand, so passionately in earnest, so deeply shaken by premonition.

"They will fight, Pugra?" he asked repeatedly.

"They will keep faith with us?"

The soldier grinned significantly.

"They have sworn it, lord. There is no cause for them to break their oath. It is a simple matter. In an hour it will be finished. Heera Singh leads them. He is a good soldier. His brother was shot a year ago. He will not fail."

"And afterwards——?"

"We shall join forces with them."

"And after that——?"

The soldier and the priest exchanged a quick glance of interrogation. But the question had rung with an urgent appeal not to be denied. The Brahmin drew a step nearer, taking the answer upon himself.

"After that the great cities will follow. In Calcutta and Bombay they do but await the signal. Is it not so?"

"That is what they told me." Ayeshi passed his hand nervously over his forehead. "They swore to me that they were ready. I was to be the torch which should light India——"

"Surely, then, it will be so, lord."

Ayeshi made no answer. He seemed to sink into a fit of brooding, his eyes fixed in the direction of Gaya. Barclay, who had not ceased to watch him, urged his horse nearer.

"Of what are you afraid, Rajah?" he asked softly in English, adding with a flash of malice: "Isn't death the worst that can happen to us?"

The echo of the grandiloquent phrase stung Ayeshi to a haughty gesture.

"I do not fear death."

"Whom then? Rasaldû? Rasaldû is dead. In a few hours there will be no white men left in your kingdom——"

"I know. It is not that. It is for these men—my people. They trust me. They hope great things. If I should fail——"

"You will not fail, Rajah. You have the right to call upon them. You are their lord."

Ayeshi glanced up swiftly.

"And if I were not—if it proved a mistake—sometimes I am afraid——"

Barclay shrugged his shoulders. He was growing impatient. The merciless rain began to chill his blood. The roar of the river beat like the incessant thud of a hammer on his ears.

"What does it all matter?" he muttered. "If only this infernal rain would stop! It's dangerous. If the water overflows on the high ground up by Bjura we shall have to swim for it. That's what matters."

But suddenly Ayeshi bent down from his saddle and laid his hand on Vahana's shoulder.

"You promised!" he said, in a tense undertone. "You promised that today you would speak—that you would give me proofs to show my people. Now keep your promise to me. Vahana—justify me."

The fakir lifted his eyes to Ayeshi. His lips

moved, but no sound came from them. He shrank back against Barclay's knee, cowering as from a blow. But his expression was triumphantly evil.

And Barclay, looking into Ayeshi's stricken face, came to a bitter understanding. Not only this boy, but all of them, were so many instruments in a master-hand. Their hates and ambitions had been woven skilfully into the greater pattern of a patient, insatiable vengeance. They were pawns in Vahana's game. *They* would be swept from the board. Vahana would go on to his own end.

Before this selfsame knowledge Ayeshi had faltered. Now he drew himself up in the saddle.

"Rasaldû is dead," he said quietly, yet with despair, "and Sahib Meredith and others—others. Justify me!"

And to that final, irrepressible cry of anguish Vahana answered. His unaccustomed tongue wrestled with the words, and formed them slowly and thickly. They fell like blows.

"The—Rajah—had—no—son," he said.

Then suddenly he laughed. In that final moment the brain, corroded with hatred, broke down beneath its accumulated burden. The maniacal merriment rang out above the thunder of racing water, it pealed on till it dominated every other sound. As Ayeshi turned with lifted hand to strike, it subsided hideously into a broken cackle. Still clinging to Barclay's stirrup, Vahana dropped to his knees. What

possessed Barclay in that moment he could not have told. He stretched out his arm over the cowering figure, shielding the thing he feared.

"No, no, Ayeshi—it's too late. It doesn't matter who or what you are. You've got to go on with it. You can't leave us in the lurch. There's been bloodshed enough——"

Ayeshi's hand sank limply to his side. His lips were quivering.

"Rasaldû is dead," he repeated. "Rasaldû the swine-herd—had more right than I—and the Sahibs who have done me no wrong——"

Barclay interrupted him with a curse. Was this last catastrophe of his life to end as the others had done, in a travesty—in a Gilbertian fiasco? Was he to be held up to ridicule before those cool, insolent men and women—ludicrous and ineffectual even in his death?

"For God's sake—pull yourself together, Ayeshi!" he said imperatively. "What does it matter whether you are wronged or not? You are the leader. Chance has made you—the deliverer of your people. Act like a man. Save your country—set us free——" He laid his hand on his breast with a dramatic gesture. "I ask it of you—I, who have suffered at their hands. Be strong, Ayeshi. Give us our freedom."

But Ayeshi seemed not to listen. His frowning eyes were fixed in front of him, and suddenly he pointed. Barclay turned in his saddle. At first the

spectacle that met him seemed no more than curious. The belt of high grass which separated them from the river had parted, and a young tigress stood in the opening. She seemed wholly unconscious of the massed enemy before her. She stood there lashing her tail, her velvet flanks heaving with recent hard effort, her fine head lifted in an attitude of listening. For an instant she remained thus. No hand was raised against her. Ayeshi and his followers watched her in motionless, superstitious silence. Even Barclay felt himself incapable of action. It was as though the apparition had for them a deeper, as yet unread significance.

With a low growl, not of anger but of fear, the beautiful animal trotted with long, loping strides between Ayeshi and the herded crowd of tensely watching natives. No sound was uttered until the lean, striped body had vanished. Then a cry went up —at first isolated—then swelling to a shout:

"An omen—an omen!"

"Vishnu has spoken!"

"The gods are against us!"

"The flood—the flood——!"

The last came in a scream. It bore the other cries down into an instant's stupefied silence. The massed square of humanity which had tossed and surged in a gathering storm of panic grew still.

Barclay lifted himself in his stirrups. He could see nothing. The rain blinded him. Yet his ears, alert

now, caught a distant ominous boom.

"I believe it's true—the animal was bolting for her life—the water must have burst its banks at Bjura—if it has, it's coming twenty miles an hour—we've got to run for high ground, Ayeshi."

The Hindu shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no high ground——"

Vahana roused himself from the mud where he had remained in an attitude of apparent stupor. A demoniac energy blazed in the mad eyes.

"There is a way—past Heerut—I will show you—only let me ride with you, Sahib Barclay——"

The Eurasian nodded. He no longer appealed to Ayeshi, who was sunk in an apathy of despair. He raised himself again in the saddle.

"There is a way to safety!" he shouted. "Vahana, the Holy Man, will lead us—the gods have sent a warning—the gods are with us—follow!"

He lifted Vahana into the saddle behind him and swung his horse round towards Heerut. Ayeshi lingered; Barclay passed him with a gesture of contempt. The control was in his hands now. It was for him to act—to retrieve disaster. He had become the leader—the leader of his people. He heard the rush of feet behind him—the sound thrilled through his blood in a storm of exultation.

"Follow me!" he shouted. "I will lead you."

They followed. They swept Ayeshi into their maelstrom and carried him with them, but they too

had ceased to heed him. Nor did he try to regain his hold. The right to command—even to resist—had gone. He was no longer Rajah—exiled and disinherited, yet still lord of his destiny. He was Ayeshi, the village story-teller, the servant of Tristram Sahib, the dreamer bereft of his dreams. He would have been glad to meet the end.

But the people he had betrayed bore him in their midst, as they fled before the oncoming waters.

* * * * *

Tristram heard only the deepening voice of the river, the rain splashing on the roof, and the rush and swirl of the water as it tore through the village gutters. Even these things, though they reached his hearing, scarcely touched his consciousness. They walled him in. They formed a sombre background for his wife's voice.

He sat beside her, her hot little hand in his, and it seemed to him that they talked together for the first time in their lives. Her voice was weak and husky with pain, but the pain itself relaxed its grip on her, allowing her to sink slowly and mercifully.

"I'm dying, am I not, Tristram?" she had asked, and then, reading his face, added gently: "I want to know—really. I'm not afraid to die. Why should I be? There is nothing to fear—only so much to hope. Tell me."

"Anne—little wife—I honestly don't know. So

much depends on your will to live——"

Her smile was touched with something of its old wisdom.

"It depends on God, Tris."

He nodded. It was too late to show her where their roads met. He could only acquiesce. And presently she spoke again. "It's all been such a big, sad mistake, hasn't it?"

"What, dear?"

"Our marriage."

He looked into her pinched face, in which only a child-like wistfulness remained. He looked then at her hand, hiding his own smarting eyes.

"I suppose it has. It's my failure——"

"You didn't love me, Tris."

"I cared—genuinely. I cared so much that I wanted to make you happy." He hesitated. "But I couldn't make myself to be the man you loved."

"No, it was just a mistake," she agreed.

"You're very generous, dear."

She shook her head.

"Oh, no—it was my fault most of all. I didn't understand. There are things I don't understand even now."

"What things?"

"Wickie—and—and—that. It seems so wrong—just a dog. You love life so—Tris."

"I love living things—I can't help it—helpless living things most of all. Even now I can't judge what

I did—it's the old problem—how far one has the right to punish—to resist evil. But I haven't any real theories. I can't bear pain—that's all."

Her eyes softened.

"I know. You have been so good—so tender to me. Last night I understood better all you are—but it's too late——"

"No, Anne—it isn't. Live—give me the chance to make up to you. Dear, you can. Ask God to give you the will. We've muddled it so far, but we've seen our mistakes. We can start again. Who knows but if all this trouble and pain wasn't meant to bring us together—to give us a real love and knowledge of each other, Anne; couldn't it be——?"

He was using instinctively the language which she could understand best. Yet there was a sincerity behind the artificial sentences, a passionate eagerness which moved her. She turned her head wearily on the pillow, looking steadily into his face.

"Would you be glad—if I lived?"

"Unutterably glad."

"Perhaps we might learn to love each other—in the end——"

"I would try to earn your love."

She smiled wanly.

"I would try to—to make you love me too. I don't know. I would be glad to live—perhaps if I could only sleep a little. Is there a chance——"

"Only try."

"Will you stop by me whilst I sleep?"

"I won't leave you."

"I think—if you're there—if you wish it—yes—I will try. I will ask God to let me live." He bent and kissed her hand. "You won't leave me, Tris?"

"I promise you."

Her eyes closed peacefully. Her hand rested in his. He remained motionless, hushing his own breathing. He did not want to disturb her by the faintest sound, and he himself was tired almost past feeling. He tried to hush even his thoughts—to create an hiatus between present and future in which they could both rest. For an instinct in him knew well that the great battle lay still before them. The time would come when the warmth of reconciliation would grow cold, and they would face each other again in the full strength of their conflicting temperaments. But so long as this silence lasted there was peace, and in that peace they were very close to each other—closer than they had ever been.

They were both so unutterably tired.

Of what use to force the issue now, even in his mind? Who knew—perhaps they had indeed learnt their lesson—perhaps they would have patience and help each other. All things were possible. He had sworn to himself to make them possible.

He sat there, bent forward, and listened to the rain and the monotonous boom of the river. His hearing was that of a man coming out of an

anæsthetic—it distorted and magnified sounds, and yet held them a long way off as though they came from another world. He could not bring his thoughts to bear upon them.

Then, amidst the dull persistency of it all, there broke the sharp, staccato beat of hoofs—the splash of a horse galloping through water.

Tristram rose cautiously to his feet. He had to unclasp his wife's hand and her eyes opened.

"What is it, Tris?"

"My messenger back from Gaya, I expect. I didn't believe he meant to go, but it seems I misjudged him."

"You won't leave me, Tris?"

"I've promised you."

The horse had been drawn up sharply. Tristram went to the door and opened it, letting in a wave of dank air. Sigrid stood on the threshold. She was drenched with rain and mud. She went past him, closing the door behind her.

"Tristram—I——" she began breathlessly.

"For pity's sake!" he muttered, in utter consternation. Then she saw Anne lying on the bed by the wall. There was an instant's silence. Anne had lifted herself on her elbow. Her cheeks blazed with colour. All the childish wistfulness had gone from her expression, which was old and hard and cruel.

"Is this an appointment?" she asked clearly. "Didn't Tristram warn you in time?"

"Anne—what are you saying?" He came to her side, trying to force her gently back. "I know nothing of Mrs. Barclay's coming—she will tell you herself ——" He looked towards Sigrid, standing white and still in the centre of the room, and his voice shook with anger. "Mrs. Barclay—explain to my wife—and to me——"

But Anne freed herself from his hands.

"Please—don't ask her to perjure herself. I don't believe you, Tristram—lies are nothing to you—and I shouldn't believe her. She didn't hesitate to try and take you from me before—a woman who can do that is bad——"

"It's not true," he broke in sternly.

"It is true. She told me so with her own lips. I wouldn't be here now if she hadn't confessed to me. You wouldn't have her—that's what she said. Now, I don't believe even that——"

She stopped, gasping for breath. Sigrid took a step forwards, and Tristram, as he saw her face, felt the anger go out of him. She also had tried to atone—to safeguard the happiness of a woman they had both wronged. It had been in vain, grotesquely, tragically in vain. But she had not spared herself.

She went past him, straight to Anne's side.

"Mrs. Tristram——" she began, "your husband has told you the truth. He knew nothing of my coming. I bring grave news——"

Anne shrank back from her.

"Tristram—tell her to go—I can't bear it—won't you do even that for me? I'm dying—you'll have time enough afterwards. You'll be happy with her then. Can't you give me this hour—tell her to go——"

He stood big and determined before her.

"You are unjust, Anne. And you are doing yourself harm——"

"Does that trouble you?"

"I tell you, you are unjust. At least, hear why Mrs. Barclay has come. She may have a message for us—perhaps from your father."

She laughed bitterly.

"You are very clever, Tristram. But I shan't believe her. I won't hear her——"

"You've got to," Sigrid interposed resolutely. "Mr. Meredith is dead. He has been murdered. I found him dying—and his last message was a warning to Tristram."

She had meant to cut short the ugly scene. There was no time to waste. One sentence was to save Anne the agony of a suspicion which seemed justified enough. But no relief came into the poor, passion-twisted features—only a more terrible change. Without a sound, Anne dropped back among her pillows. Her eyes were closed, the last atom of colour drained from her open lips.

Tristram bent over her, his hand on her pulse. The fear of that moment sickened him.

"Owen,—Owen——!"

The whispered name, warm with tenderness and grief, silenced them both. They could not look at each other. It was as though they had pried unwillingly into a secret which filled them with shame and a sense of tragic futility. She, too, had borne her burden—her share of their common error.

"Owen—Owen——!"

Sigrid touched Tristram's bowed shoulders. There was an odd diffidence in her touch, as though she had become afraid.

"I didn't know—how could I have known? Have I hurt her?"

"It seems our fate," he answered bitterly.

"I couldn't help it. There was no time to think. Something is very wrong. Rasaldû was missed yesterday. Then Meredith—and there was no one at the bridge. I came as fast I could—to warn you——"

He drew himself up painfully.

"It's no good. We can't leave here. You'd better go back to Gaya." He glanced quickly at her. Her ethereal pallor, the look of wan spirituality, smote him to the heart, and yet he spoke roughly. "You ought never to have come. Why didn't you return to Gaya at once?"

"He sent me," she said simply, like a child that has been reproached.

"He knew that Anne was here," he muttered. His eyes returned to the white, still face of his wife, as though he saw her for the first time. Sigrid's answer

seemed to him no more than the whisper of his own thoughts.

"Perhaps I should have come anyhow."

"You won't be strong enough to ride back."

"Oh—yes—I am quite strong. It's as you said, Major Tristram—I think I shall live to be quite old."

He heard her turn to go. He remained motionless, his hands clenched at his side. No other words could have expressed more poignantly his own vision of the future, and yet he dared not answer, dared not look at her.

"Ask them to send help," he said thickly. His voice shook beneath the harsh self-repression. "You see—how it is—I can't leave here—I couldn't leave her here——"

"Yes—I understand—I'll send help." The door opened. Yet he knew that she still lingered. "Major Tristram—I'm afraid, somehow, it's too late."

He turned. He heard what she had heard.

"Close the door," he said quietly.

She obeyed. There was something inexpressibly gentle and docile about her. He remembered—not in thought, but in a vivid picture—how once before they had confronted each other in that selfsame place—he saw her resolute, defiant of life, splendidly self-assured. All that was gone. It was as though her physical being, her bodily vitality had been worn away, and that there was nothing left but the spirit, unbroken, yet intensely weary.

The sound of voices grew nearer. The cries, at first blurred into one, became separate, sharp, shrill notes played on the dull bass of the booming waters. Inarticulate though they were, they carried an unmistakable significance; they were cries of fear, more terrible, more pitiless than anger.

Tristram made a gesture of quiet understanding.

"Yes, it is too late," he said. "It's been working up to this. We shall have to face it together."

She assented silently.

"I can't do much. I haven't a weapon—not so much as a rusty revolver." He smiled grimly, remembering their first day together. "I shouldn't do much damage, anyway."

"I'm glad," she answered.

Their eyes met. They dared look at each other now. In that steady, passionless encounter there was acknowledgment and confession. They saw their visions of the future as realities and knew that they had been the creations of their despair. It was all impossible. They could not have gone on. They were exhausted. They had worn themselves out in the effort to bear their burden honourably, to break the rare mysterious decree which binds one being to another in defiance of all human law and circumstance. It was over. Soon they would be able to rest.

"If only Anne were safe!" he said.

"We must try and help her——"

He felt a hand on his sleeve. He looked down and saw that his wife's eyes were open. She clung to him.

"You won't leave me, Tris?"

"No, no, I promise you."

"I'm so frightened——"

He could not answer. The vain assurance died on his lips. He could only hold her hand in his, comforting her to the last. The door opened and he turned, facing whatever was to come.

Barclay entered; Vahana, at his heels, lingered sinisterly in the shadow, but Barclay strode straight forward, his arrogant eyes flashing from one face to the other. He held himself as he had always longed to hold himself—as the master, as the more than equal. He looked straight at Tristram, and in that steadfast regard there was satisfaction, an almost voluptuous foreknowledge of satiated passions.

"You are my prisoner," he said.

"Whom do you represent, Mr. Barclay?"

"The Rajah Ayeshi." He saw, or thought he saw, amusement in Tristram's eyes, and pointed to the open doorway—"and two thousand armed men."

"Is this Ayeshi's order?"

"It is my order—Rajah Ayeshi accepts my leadership."

"Then it was you who murdered Rasaldû and Mr. Meredith?"

He smiled.

"And others. Believe me, there will be no living white man or woman in Gaya by midnight—my wife excepted." He made Sigrid a little satirical bow. "In spite of circumstances, I am glad of the chance to make that exception. My wife will follow me."

"Your wife is waiting for you in Gaya," she answered. She felt rather than saw Anne lift herself on her elbow. She felt Tristram's movement and added simply: "Mr. Barclay was married years ago. My marriage with him was illegal, and I am free."

She did not see the ugly little smile quiver about Anne's lips. She held her ground, patient, content. She had broken the last link which held her to a loathed life. It was as though she breathed a fresher, purer air.

"That frees me from all responsibility, doesn't it?" Barclay suggested.

"Quite."

He hesitated. His minutes in the place were numbered. His ears, attuned to catch the first warning, reminded him of the remorseless, oncoming danger, and yet he faltered. A bitter taste of failure was in his mouth.

"You had better follow me, Tristram. Resistance is useless."

"As you will. I have only one request to make. Respect my wife. She is very ill."

Barclay shrugged his shoulders.

"A dying woman——? I can grant you that

much."

But even in the midst of his brutal self-assertiveness, a merciless flash of intuition showed him himself as they saw him. His power slipped through his fingers. He looked from Sigrid to Tristram, and knew their immeasurable indifference to all that he could threaten. They were not afraid—almost—they were glad. He could not penetrate their mood—he only felt it as an intolerable hurt—a frustration of that madly aching desire in him. They stood aloof from him as they had always done. He could not reach them—the woman had shaken herself free from his very name as from something loathsome. To the last—ineffectual, beyond the pale. He had meant to strike—he had set them free.

He made a gesture, and Vahana closed the door. He came and stood close to Sigrid, staring into her face.

"Will you come with me?" he asked. She made no answer. He felt his lips trembling. "I could make you," he broke out.

"I think not."

"You mean that, sooner or later, you would escape me? I daresay. You are brave enough. But I ask you to come with me of your own free will—as my mistress—as anything on earth I choose—to share my life—whatever future I have—faithfully ——"

"Aren't you wasting time, Mr. Barclay?" Tristram

interposed.

Barclay remained with his eyes on Sigrid's face.

"If you will come with me, Sigrid, Major Tristram can go back to Gaya."

She seemed scarcely to hear him. He heard Tristram laugh.

"Isn't this all rather melodramatic, Barclay? Do you really imagine I am anxious to save my life on such terms? Why don't you get on with things?"

Barclay swung round on his heel.

"And does my offer really amuse you? Are you amused at the death of a score or so of your countrymen up there in Gaya? That's what it amounts to. Mrs. Boucicault is giving a dinner to the station tonight. In three hours' time, the regiment mutinies, and your friends will be wiped out without being able to lift a hand—unless you warn them. Is that amusing?"

He drew a deep breath of content. He had seen Tristram flinch. He had reached him at last, had forced him down from his heights to meet him in the equality of a life-and-death struggle. He could afford now to be patient and composed.

It was Sigrid who spoke. Her voice sounded curiously flat and lifeless.

"Why have you told us this?"

He turned to her.

"Because I am asking a great deal of you. This is not our old bargain, Sigrid. If you come with me, it

must be on my own terms. I don't know where I am going—but I shall be an exile—an Eurasian outcast with a price on his head. And you have got to stick to me."

"And your wife? She believes that you care for her."

His hands were clenched.

"I have done with caring," he said harshly. "You've taken care that I shouldn't put love first in my life. Leave my wife out of this. Nothing concerns you but your own decision."

"And you are ready to sacrifice your plans——?"

"I am prepared to give Gaya a fighting chance," he interrupted sternly. "I do not pretend that it is more than that—perhaps not so much."

"If—if I consent, will you keep faith? Have you the power——?"

"I have the power. Ayeshi will consent to anything I suggest. Remember—I have to trust you, too——" He hesitated, and then added slowly: "I do trust you."

She made a groping, uncertain gesture.

"Tristram——"

But he threw back his head in defiance.

"It can't be. Gaya wouldn't be saved at such a cost."

"It isn't what Gaya would want—it's what we've got to do—we ourselves don't count."

"Your honour——" he burst out.

"What is honour?" she retorted finely. "By your own creed, Tristram—what other honour is there but our duty towards others?"

He fought against her, against the light which he saw gathering in her eyes—against himself.

"It's a hideous impossibility."

"The hideousness isn't ours. It isn't impossible."

"Decide—can't you?" Barclay flung at them.

Tristram turned to him with a gesture of immeasurable contempt.

"So you betray all your masters?" he said.

"I am the son of a betrayal," Barclay retorted, smiling bitterly. "Has that ever troubled you? Why trouble yourself now about me?"

Sigrid's eyes avoided Tristram's face. The grey horror of it shook her.

"It's as Mr. Barclay says—we've only got to consider our own actions."

"Then you've decided?"

"Is there any choice?" she asked sternly.

For one moment he hated her as a man hates the cause of an intolerable suffering. The next, he saw that she had outstripped him. She had taken the fundamentals of his life and built her own edifice upon them—a higher, finer edifice than his own.

"I see that there is no choice for you," he said, with a chivalrous resignation. "And you're right. We don't count."

He felt the hand in his tighten. He looked down

into his wife's ashen face. Throughout she had not spoken—scarcely moved. Now the change in her startled him out of the stupefying absorption of his pain. He saw that she had ceased to be afraid, and that the malice and anger had gone from her. He saw her as she had been in her girlhood, in her first innocent, incredulous love of him. Her failing eyes were full of a deep, unearthly pity.

"Tris—you are both—very brave."

A groan burst from his lips.

"Anne—I can't leave you."

"You must. That is my little share in the sacrifice. I shan't be afraid now, Tris."

He knelt down beside her. She put her weak arms round his neck and kissed him. "Good-bye, husband."

"Little Anne—God keep you."

She smiled a little.

"I'm—sure—He—will."

Barclay moved impatiently. He saw that they had forgotten him.

"Will you come, Sigrid?"

She bent her head in assent.

"Then you can go your way, Major," Barclay said.

But it was as though the last weapon which his tortured pride had forged for him had shivered against an impregnable armour. They were great—these people—even in defeat—even Anne, little

cowardly Anne—could face death alone and unflinchingly. He recognized that greatness with a last anguish. He had their blood in him. If they had turned to him, recognized him, appealed to him in the name of their common ancestry,—even then——But they did not think of him. He was a whirlwind driving them apart to their separate destinies—an impersonal, soulless force—no more.

"Come!" he demanded violently.

Tristram gave Sigrid his hand. They took up their burden of life. It had become heavier; but they took it up. And for a while they would carry it. But in the end there would be rest. That was their message and their farewell.

Tristram went out into the rain-swept street—past Vahana, who looked up into his face and laughed.

Sigrid lingered. She drew shyly near the camp-bed with its little burden.

"Good-bye——"

But Anne stretched out her hand and drew Sigrid down to her and kissed her.

"Yours is the hardest part. I—judged—harshly. Forgive."

"There is no need—our ways have met in the end."

The door closed presently. It grew very still in the little hut. The voices and the clatter of hoofs faded in the distance. All other sounds sank into the

deepening, growing call of the flood.

Anne lay still. Her eyes lingered on the shadowy furniture. Even now there was Wickie's old basket in the corner. Poor Tristram! She sighed faintly—wearily. Somehow now it was so much easier to understand—God was all-merciful.

It was growing dark. She tried to compose herself. The shadows were rising up all around her. She was not afraid. Owen would be there—he would be waiting for her—it would be just as it had always been—only more perfect.

She tried to fold her hands.

"Our Father which art——"

It was as though a great sea poured over her—engulfing her in its peace.

CHAPTER XIII
TO GAYA!

Tristram led Arabella out of her stable and spoke gently to her. He showed no sign of haste or trouble. He did not believe Barclay. He was convinced that there was no intention to allow him to leave Heerut living. Even Barclay could not betray his followers so openly. Yet he had no right to refuse the chance, and in the end it could make but little difference.

He mounted and walked Arabella down the centre of the flooded street. Across the western exit of the village, where the land lay highest, the two thousand had herded together like a pack of hunted wolves awaiting the signal from their leader. Ayeshi sat his horse a little in advance, with Barclay and the shadowy mendicant to his right. Tristram rode towards them unmoved. He held himself with his usual casual ease, a little loosely, with one fist stemmed against his thigh. There was no conscious bravado in the attitude. An instinct inherited from generations of men who had confronted the same enemy at the same odds taught him an unchallenging serenity. As he drew nearer, he looked full into Ayeshi's face and read in the sombre eyes the

confirmation of his death. He might have spoken, made some appeal to the old memories that bound them, but something—perhaps the consciousness that for that moment he represented more than himself—held him sternly silent. Barclay smiled, but his eyes too, were overshadowed with a knowledge in which there was neither happiness nor triumph. Thus the three men met in a last encounter. For an instant they seemed to be alone—to be standing on a lofty plateau above the watching crowd, confronting each other with a tragic perception of something common to them all, and of a destroying, merciless destiny.

Then Vahana laughed, shrilly, exultantly, and it was over.

Tristram rode past Ayeshi. He reached the border of the crowd. Arabella hesitated and he touched her gently with his heels. She understood, and, understanding, became insolently irresistible. The first man whom she nosed aside hesitated, his hand on his knife. Tristram did not look at him. His eyes passed carelessly over the sea of upturned faces. He did not draw himself up. So he might have ridden among them on a feast day, or as they returned from their work on the plain. His expression was neither defiant, nor contemptuous. To the last even as he awaited death at their hands, he remained one of them, not judge or master or victim, but man among men. One step more. The sea closed in behind him.

Would it come now? He knew that it would be in his back. Sooner or later the hypnotic spell which his presence threw over them would snap. Some hand, bolder, more resolved than the rest, would lift itself, and then the waves would close over him for ever. Yet as he rode on, winning each step, the tension of waiting relaxed. He forgot himself. Something rose up to him in that heated, foetid atmosphere of a passion-ridden humanity. It enveloped him with a deeper knowledge of their dim strivings, of their dimmer hopes, and great fears. He saw in their revolt only a thwarted desire, a piteous clinging to the only faith they knew, in their hating cruelty only the curse under which all men, struggling blindly towards their vision of the future, flood their path with the blood of their brothers.

He did not pity them. The burden of their life was his. He forgot himself as the individual. He was part of the universe, part of all life. The instinct in him was to hold, out his hands to them in recognition—in acceptance of their common destiny.

He did not know that his face had changed as he rode slowly forward, nor that the faith which burnt up in him shone in his eyes. He only knew that suddenly it was over. The last wondering, questioning face flashed past him. He was out in the open—free.

Arabella broke into a canter. He pulled her back to a walk. The time had not yet come. They would

recover now. Some of them had rifles. They would use them. There must be no sign of flight, of fear.

Ten yards—twenty—fifty—still nothing. Another pace or two, and he stood on a hillock, his body, as he knew, sharply outlined against the light. He drew in deliberately. Still nothing. He went on. He was hidden now. He called to Arabella, and then they were galloping towards Gaya.

Three hours and fifteen miles of bad road—perhaps partly flooded. So far there was only mud, into which Arabella sank up to the fetlocks, but down on the plain itself there would be morass—in places water. His mind foresaw each mile, each obstacle. If it could be done, Arabella would do it. No thoroughbred had her pluck and stamina. But it would be a close finish. Night was coming on. It would be dark within an hour. He would have to rely on his instinct to guide him. The lights of Gaya would not carry half a mile through the rain which fell in a finely woven curtain from the loaded sky.

He had ceased to question Barclay's action or Ayeshi's curious acquiescence. Possibly they had not meant him to escape—possibly they had relied on his coming too late or on the futility of his warning. It was useless to speculate. He could only act—do the best he could.

He breasted the last hillock which separated him from the plain. The roar of the river sounded ominous even then—like the roll of continuous,

unmodulated thunder. Then on her own initiative, Arabella slithered to a standstill, her ears pricked, her lean body quivering with apprehension. Tristram brushed the rain from his eyes. For an instant he was only incredulous—distrustful of his own senses. Twenty-four hours ago—a wide flat stretch of saturated fertile soil—the bold, sweeping line of the Ganges—and now this—this level, rising, onward-flowing surface, broken near the centre by a broad ribbon of sinister, rippling movement—no landmark left, no grass, no trace of land—one stupendous, terrible monotony of water.

Then he knew what Barclay had known. The floods had come. The catastrophe of which old villagers had spoken with bated breath had broken over them. He could hear the water lapping against the base of the rising ground. With every minute it grew louder, nearer. In a few hours it might well be that the whole plain might be covered—Heerut—the temple itself.

He spoke to Arabella. He felt that figuratively she shrugged her shoulders. They had done many mad things together in their day, and this was the maddest and the last; but, if he wished it, she had no objection. She went slithering and stumbling down into the water. It rose to her knees, to his feet and there for the time stopped. They waded steadily towards the bridge-head. If it grew no deeper than this the passage might still be possible. He leant

forward eagerly in the saddle, waiting for his goal to outline itself against the eternal greyness. There was no sound but the sish of the water as it broke from Arabella's shoulders and her own heavy breathing. He had ceased to hear the boom which had first warned him. He was in the midst of it and it became a kind of silence. It was a part of his consciousness—it had been there always.

Striking diagonally across the plain, he left the black mass of the temple on his right. He could not feel any current, and yet he was aware that they were being drawn insidiously towards the centre. The knowledge did not trouble him. So long as he could keep Arabella's head up the river, he could afford to give ground. He did not contemplate the possibility of being sucked into the torrent itself. As yet Arabella's foothold was sure and her progress steady.

No suspicion of the truth had reached him.

But still he could not see the bridge. Once past the temple it was the first important landmark, and he began to wonder, in spite of Arabella's sturdy efforts, whether they were really moving forward. The horror of the passing time coiled itself round him, stifling him. He knew fear—already the drab daylight was failing rapidly. Yet there was no bridge.

He was drifting nearer to the river's banks. He could mark them definitely by the break in the placid surface—the sudden rush, the eddies and deep pits of

the whirlpools. He could judge the pace of the torrent by the passing of odd, as yet unrecognizable fragments. They sped on their way, now disappearing for many minutes, now carried from side to side in cross currents, but always in headlong movement. Some of the fragments were like small islands—they stood upright out of the water like pillars of a ruined church, black and straight.

Still there was no bridge.

"Mother Ganges demands toll of those who curb her."

Suddenly he understood. He understood Barclay's smile and Ayeshi's acquiescence. He recognized those pillars. They were motionless. They held their place in the torrent like the defiant remnant of an annihilated army, like tragic monuments to man's futility.

The bridge had gone.

For a moment he drew Arabella to a standstill. He had lost all sense of anxiety, all thought of failure. Methodically but rapidly, he threw overboard every unnecessary weight: his water-logged riding boots, various small items in his pockets, a heavy belt with a metal clasp, his coat. With an effort he managed to cut the girths and finally to remove the saddle itself, flinging it to the rest. Then he turned Arabella's head towards the river.

They were moving quickly now—perilously quickly. In what seemed no more than a minute they

had reached the limit. The water rose above his knees, he could feel it circling round him—a living monster, awaiting its moment. He bent forward and patted Arabella's neck and whispered to her, and kissed her warm sleekness. She whinnied challengingly, tossing her head. Then plunged.

The torrent passed over them. He went down under a crushing opaque mass of delirious water. It seemed many minutes—perhaps it was only a second or two—then they rose again. Arabella's head was turned downstream. She made no effort. She was panic-stricken—helpless. He called to her. He himself was stunned and could barely keep his seat. Invisible forces had hold of him, dragging at him. At last he had her head round, and she struck out with the energy of terror. They were moving now. He could judge their progress by the two pillars mere specks on the rushing greyness. A fierce exultation possessed him—the glory of struggle—they were moving. Arabella had found her stride. Though they drifted, too, they were not wholly at the mercy of the current. Foot by foot, they were winning their way across. It did not matter that they were being swept farther down the river. Once on dry land they could make up for lost time. Then Arabella would not fail.

But now he was afraid for her. He could feel in his own nerves and sinews the cost of her heroic effort—the rising agony of her exhaustion. He believed that already she was finished. He felt her go

down under him. Then, in answer to a supreme demand of her spirit, she rose again—the blood streaming from her nostrils. He called to her, and she turned her head a little. He could see her eyes, their whites veined with red, and he remembered Wickie. It was the same look, the same unfaltering confidence, the same patient acceptance of suffering. For herself alone she would not have struggled farther; but for him, for his life she accepted the crushing, heart-breaking burden of living.

Strange things raced past them—fragments horrible in their significance—an unhinged door, a table, a wooden image swept from some village shrine, its battered face staring from out of the foaming water in grotesque serenity; dead things—the carcase of a bullock, a woman's rigid hand tossed up in horrible semblance of appeal, a baby's body; living things—the hideous snout of a mugger battling against the stream, its jaws snapping greedily at the passing provender, a cheetah, caught perhaps in the midst of some marauding expedition, which struggled to Tristram's side and kept close to him. He called to it and it turned its eyes to him in frantic supplication and terror. In that dread moment they were comrades, fighting shoulder to shoulder against the common enemy.

They reached midstream. In a minute they would be out of the worst—out of danger. He turned his head; he wanted to measure by the pillars how

far they had still to go. He saw the end coming. It was grotesque—absurd—a native hovel that had been caught up bodily. It bore down upon him, staggering drunkenly on the full breast of the current. It seemed to blot out the sky—a monstrous, towering Juggernaut.

A figure clung to the thatched roof. It was gesticulating wildly—in fear or warning, he could not tell. But there was no escape. The rocking structure was travelling with the speed of an express, —Arabella had almost ceased to move. Tristram slipped quietly from her back, only holding to her bridle, and she rose buoyantly. In that final moment, a deep-rooted instinct in him had prevailed. She was to have her chance. He struck out—turning his head for a last time towards the onrushing catastrophe. It was not more than twenty yards away. He could see the man's dark face—staring down into the water—aghast, silly-looking. His grotesque vessel seemed suddenly to stop, to draw back, quivering like a frightened, death-stricken animal—then plunged headlong—flashed like a pebble over the edge of a precipice.

Tristram closed his eyes. He tasted death. He knew the horror of suffocation—the pitiless night which swirled over him, choking him, stupefying him.

Twenty yards lower down the hut reappeared. Its roof was battered in. The clinging, piteous figure

had vanished.

Tristram twisted Arabella's bridle about his arm. It was his last deliberate act. He was dimly conscious of movement, of being sucked against warm, heaving flanks, of a hand that closed down blackly on his will to live. He knew that he was letting go his hold—he was beaten. He felt himself go down—then one last thrill of consciousness. His feet jarred against something—he was being dragged—dragged over a soft spongy substance.

He tried to right himself—but instead stumbled —pitched headlong into oblivion.

CHAPTER XIV
RESURRECTION

"That reminds me of a story some one told me once," Mrs. Brabazone declared. "I think it was George——"

George, seated three places lower down on the opposite side of the table, looked up anxiously and, meeting his wife's eyes, signalled a denial. "Yes, I'm sure it was you, George. Anyhow, it's a very good story. It was about a Lancashire coal-heaver—or was it a cotton-spinner? What do they do in Lancashire? I never can remember. But I know they make a frightful lot of money, and are horribly extravagant." She considered a moment. "Yes—it is extravagant,

not mean. I get so confused. And one day when he was dying——"

Some one laughed, and Mrs. Brabazone glanced up perplexedly. "My dear, that isn't the point—at least, I don't think so. George, do tell it. It's such a good story."

The Judge, usually the soul of courtesy, turned a deaf ear and fixed his attention with an expression of almost passionate interest on Colonel Armstrong, who was seated on Mrs. Boucicault's left. The Colonel was discussing the prospects of the rains, his manner beautifully Anglo-Saxon in its optimistic serenity.

"I'm sure we can congratulate ourselves that the worst is over," he said. "As long as the banks at Bjura hold there is nothing to fear, and Rutherford promised to let us know the moment there was any danger—on account of the bridge, of course. Poor Matherson was rather rattled about the bridge. It's his first single-handed job, and a swollen river like that is a severe test. However, he's kept quiet, so we can presume that it's holding out."

Mrs. Boucicault smiled. She smiled very often—always when a reply was expected of her. It covered over her silence. It was a curious smile. It came suddenly and faded slowly, leaving behind it a kind of grimace. Her eyes, abnormally large and intensely blue, were fixed blankly on the length of the table. Its display of silver, the many flowers, the subdued lights, the noiseless servants whose dark hands

reached out spectrally from the shadows, seemed to absorb her. Certainly it was a feast unequalled in the annals of Gaya's sociabilities. Some of the guests were even vaguely oppressed by it. A pace was being set which none of them could hope to keep up.

Dr. Martin, seated a few places lower down on his hostess's right, scarcely turned his eyes from her face. She seemed to fascinate him. His neighbour—the wife of a newly arrived Captain—decided that he was a very stupid little man. He rarely spoke, and seemed to have no appetite. Her inherited antipathy for civilians increased to dislike, and she pitied herself intensely. In despite, she amused herself with Captain Compton, who was her *vis-à-vis*, dilating rather maliciously on the glories of Simla, from whence she hailed.

The conversation never flagged. Its feverish persistency covered the splash of the rain outside the open windows and the sound of smothered, angry whisperings somewhere behind the curtained doorways. Mrs. Compton, who was an old hand at Indian life, sensed "nerves" in that perpetual chatter, in that resolute determination to shut out alike thought and silence. The last weeks had been almost unbearable. She herself had never experienced anything to equal the incessant downpour. But it was more than the climate. There was unrest in the air. From her husband she had heard mutterings to the effect that Armstrong, good soldier though he was,

did not know how to tackle the ugly temper of his men—that a demand had been sent to headquarters for a battalion of white troops. Then other things had gone wrong—Rasaldû, Sigrid, Barclay—it was one long sequence of trouble.

And now tonight, Mrs. Boucicault sat at the head of the table with her staring, unseeing eyes and grey, powdered face, looking like a smiling death's-head.

Mary Compton thought of the man who lay paralysed and silent behind the walls, and wondered if beneath their gaiety the others thought of him and of the unknown hand which had struck him down. Things happened in India. They came out of the darkness like lightning—struck, and vanished. It was no wonder people had nerves. They were in the minority—in reality quite powerless. It was just bluff —splendid bluff.

Mrs. Compton bit her lip. She had nearly screamed. In the midst of her unpleasant reflections, the voices in the corridor had risen to an angry clamour. Suddenly the curtains were pushed violently aside. The butler entered backwards, expostulating, gesticulating, followed overwhelmingly by Mrs. Smithers. Her entry, her rain-soaked clothes and dishevelled grey hair might have been comic—might have caused amused surprise—discomfort; but there was something else about her—a resolution, a reality of tense anxiety which, reflected on the faces of those who saw her

first, brought the rest to an instantaneous silence.

She looked round the table, and, seeing Mrs. Compton, who had half risen, burst into breathless speech.

"It's Sigrid—she's gone—she's been gone since this morning—I've waited—I couldn't bear it any longer. She'll die. It's her heart. And that man—that scoundrel—his real wife's down there now—crying her eyes out. It made me sick. I had to come. Mrs. Compton, you cared for her—you'll help me. Don't you know anything—don't you know where she's gone?"

The broken, incoherent flow came to a more resolute end. The servants made a movement as though to approach her, but Mrs. Boucicault waved them back. She had become suddenly alert and watchful, as though for something which she had long foreseen.

Mrs. Compton looked helplessly round the table.

"Does any one know—I haven't seen Mrs. Barclay for days——"

"You can call her Miss Fersen," Mrs. Smithers broke in doggedly.

"Well, you know who I mean. Perhaps she's taken shelter——"

"It was raining when she started out. That was this morning early—after that woman came——"

"What woman——?"

"Mrs. Barclay—a nigger, like him."

Mrs. Smithers was uncompromising—violent. She did not care that she interrupted, that forty of Gaya's most important inhabitants stared at her with varying feelings of consternation and annoyance. She was frightened. Her fear had tightened its hold with every hour of futile waiting, till what self-consciousness she had was stifled out of her. Her fear was everything. These people were nothing. Her disparagement of them expressed itself in every line of her grim, ashen features.

"You mean"—Colonel Armstrong leant back judicially in his chair, fingering the stem of his wine-glass "you mean actually that Mrs.—your mistress discovered this morning—that—that, in fact, her marriage had been illegal——?"

"That's it. She wasn't *his* wife—never had been, thank God."

"Isn't it conceivable—I don't want to frighten you—that in her despair she may have done something rash?"

Mrs. Smithers jerked her head with a movement of utter contempt.

"You men seem to think we're always in despair if we lose one of you precious creatures—most times it's t'other way round. She was glad. It's the first time I've seen her happy for months and months. He's done away with her—and you sit there like a herd of stuck pigs——"

"Really, my good woman——"

"I'm not your good woman. A lot you care. She's one of your blood—worth the whole crowd of you—and you treated her like dirt just because she got into the clutches of one of your—your—wickednesses ——"

"Smithy!" Mrs. Compton implored.

"I don't care—it's true."

Armstrong looked helplessly at Mrs. Boucicault; but Mrs. Boucicault was staring in front of her with that same look of tense expectancy. The new arrival from Simla shivered. She did not understand the scene, but she thought it vulgar and horrid. These out-of-the-way stations were very uncivilized. It was amazing how quickly the smartest people lost their polish.

Captain Compton came suddenly to the rescue.

"It's a queer thing," he said, in his deliberate way. "Meredith and Rasaldû and now Miss Fersen ——"

"Rubbish!" Armstrong knitted his brows at his junior. "Meredith has probably taken the Rajah with him on his rounds. It's happened before. As to Mrs.—Miss Fersen, there are any amount of possible explanations. Her horse may have fallen lame. I've always set my face against this silly craze for riding alone, and now——"

He stopped. The stem of his wine-glass snapped under the sudden pressure of his fingers. The Simla woman gave a little scream and rose to her feet. He

frowned at her. The men exchanged glances. The women were curiously still—looking towards the window. Armstrong laughed, mopping up his wine with his napkin. "'Pon my word, we're all suffering from nerves. Absurd. Some sentry——"

But no one listened to him. Compton got up and ran out of the window—down into the garden. They heard scuffling—a muttered exclamation—the sound of something soft and heavy being dragged up the steps. They sat still—waiting. They saw Compton hesitating on the threshold of the light. He was bending down——

"Give me a hand some one, for God's sake!"

George Brabazone pushed back his chair and turned to his assistance. Between them the huddled, shapeless something was pulled into the room. It lay inert. The shadow covered it. One of the men snatched up a light, holding it above his head.

"What is it——?"

"Tristram——"

"What—not——?"

"I don't know—tumbled off his horse. Pull the curtains—get the servants out of the room." Armstrong took over Compton's command. The natives fled noiselessly before his imperative gestures. The curtains were dragged across, shutting out the black, menacing gulf. They were all on their feet now—two brilliant lines of colour—with that blot lying in a pool of mud and rain——

"Give me wine—anything."

Tristram stirred. With Compton and Brabazone on either side of him, he dragged himself to his knees. The water dripped from his face—from his clothes. He was almost unrecognizable.

"It's nothing—they—missed me. Only winded ——" He pushed the proffered glass aside. "Rasaldû—Meredith—both murdered yesterday—regiment mutinies—organized for tonight—not a soul to escape—any minute now. That was the first shot ——"

"Where have you come from?"

"Heerut. Bridge gone. Had to swim for it——"

"Matherson——?"

"Gone—I don't know. Don't talk——"

"Of course not—we must act. Who's on duty tonight?"

"Farquhar—Haverton——"

"They must be warned."

"It's too late. It'd show them we were prepared. Our only chance is to take them by surprise— What's that——?"

"Firing. Poor devils! We shall be the next. Who's at the bottom of this, Tristram?"

"Ayeshi—Barclay—what's it matter? Do something!"

They looked at each other. Something like a smile passed over their faces. They were very calm—very quiet. The men and women were equally aware

that there was not much they could do. They were cut off by hundreds of miles from any real assistance. It would have taken an hour at least to have gathered the rest of Gaya together and prepared a defence that might suggest even a fighting chance. As it was, they had perhaps a few minutes—if one or two of them had a weapon in his possession it would be a great piece of luck. The thought of a five-chambered revolver—three chambers empty—which he happened to have slipped into the pocket of his military overcoat some days back—gave Compton such an absurd thrill of satisfaction that he laughed.

"We shall have to shy the spoons at 'em!" he said.

Mrs. Boucicault brushed the fluffy grey hair from her forehead.

"My husband has a few guns in his rack," she said quietly. "He used them for hunting, but they might do. I think there are some cartridges, too—I don't know—we might look."

"Better than nothing." Armstrong began to direct, heavily but systematically. "Compton, get the servants together. Shut them up and see that they don't get a chance to communicate with any one outside. Five of you had better keep a lookout. The rest stay here. It would be better to go on as though nothing had happened. We shall defend this side of the house—this room, in fact. We're too few for anything more. Mrs. Boucicault, please lead the way

——"

He was obeyed. The women reseated themselves. Mary Compton began to talk. Mrs. Brabazone took up the tangled thread of her story and unravelled it laboriously. The dead white tablecloth and the brilliant colours of the flowers made their faces look vivid.

"It's like old times," Mrs. Compton declared. "I expect it's really a blessing in disguise. If we didn't have these periodical shake-ups our livers would never work at all. We do eat such dreadfully unhealthy things. Somebody pass me the almonds. Let's have our desserts now as well as in the hereafter!"

It was an old and rather feeble jest, but it served its purpose. The Simla woman laughed heartily. Mrs. Brabazone grumbled.

"People always seem to find something in Mary's remarks. It's base favouritism. I'm every bit as funny ——"

"A lot more, my dear." Mrs. Compton's manner was that of a rather over-excited school-girl. She ate salted almonds vivaciously and threw one at Tristram, who had stumbled to a chair and sat there with his face between his hands. "You look like a drowned rat, Hermit—not a bit lovable. Where's Anne?"

He glanced up with bloodshot eyes.

"I—think she's dead," he said, hoarsely. "She died

alone in Heerut. Sigrid has gone with Barclay. It was his offer—you understand? I shouldn't be here now if it wasn't for her. She and Anne—they thought of you —they neither of them funked."

They were silent for a moment. A spasm passed over Mary Compton's face. She reached desperately for the sweetmeats.

"Mrs. Brabazone—for mercy's sake, tell that Lancashire story of yours——"

"It's about a miner," Mrs. Brabazone began jerkily. "You know how horribly dirty they are. And one day he came home—he was very ill, you know, and his wife said——"

She laboured on with quivering lips. They listened attentively. A sound of shouting came from the barracks not a quarter of a mile distant. Tristram and Mrs. Compton exchanged glances.

"They're working up to concert-pitch——"

* * * * *

In the quiet, whitewashed soldier's room, Armstrong and Brabazone were collecting what weapons they could find. Mrs. Boucicault had underestimated, but even so there was not much hope to be found in the six double-barrelled guns and the few cases of ammunition.

Mrs. Boucicault stood at the foot of her husband's bed looking at him. They were both so still —the grey-haired, painted woman and the big man

lying stretched out beneath the thin sheet—that Armstrong almost forgot them. But at the door he remembered and looked back.

"You'd better explain to your husband—I'll send some one to carry him—he must be where we are ——" He hesitated, and then added gruffly: "You don't need to worry, Boucicault. You shan't fall into their hands, I give you my word of honour."

They went out. Still Eleanor Boucicault remained at her place at the foot of the bed. The man's eyes were fixed on her. They were distended. The dim light could not reveal their expression, yet all the life which had made its last stand in their depths seemed to gather together—with a supreme effort—to spread over his face—to swell the withered muscles.

The distant shouting reached them. The sound released her from her still absorption. She threw herself down on her knees beside him.

"They're going to kill us, Richard—they're going to kill us. It's the regiment—your regiment.—Colonel Armstrong says we can't do much. They'll just—just do what they like! Do you hear that shouting? That means they're coming. They know we're here—they know you're here. You made them hate us—just as you made me hate you." She gripped him by the shoulders, her words rushing down on him in a fevered, awful torrent. "It doesn't matter to me—I'm dying, anyhow. You've killed me. That's what I want

to tell you. I didn't tell you before, because I thought you'd be glad. But now we're going to die together I want you to understand. Look at this——" She tore open the bosom of her dress.

"You did that—that time you struck me. It never healed—it never will. It's cancer. Oh, but I've had a good time all the same. I've spent your money, Richard. I've made you suffer. I've had you to hurt when I couldn't bear the pain any longer. And now—now you're just going to die like a rabbit in a trap." She burst out laughing. There was a long flat chest against the wall, and she went to it with quick, tottering steps and opened it. The neatly folded uniforms, the sword in its leather case—she flung the whole contents down before him with a shrill cry of bitter triumph. "You'll never wear them again, Richard. You won't go down fighting—*I* shall, but not you—you'll just lie there and trust to us to have mercy on you. You're just a wreck—a crumbling, hideous ruin. That's why I hate you—why they hate you—those men who are coming to kill us. We loved you so. You were our god—our Bagh Sahib—and then you became—a devil."

She knelt down by the heap of red and gold splendour. She was crying, and the tears carved deep channels through the paint and powder.

"Bagh Sahib!"

She put her hand over her mouth. It was as though she had tried to smother a scream, but no

sound had come from her lips. She shrank back from him, farther and farther back till she cowered on the floor, watching him.

Slowly—so slowly yet steadily that the movement seemed supernatural—he was lifting himself up. He did not look at her. His gaunt face was tense and absorbed as though the whole being of the man were turned inwards on the contemplation of a miracle. His arms hung straight at his sides. He lifted them—holding them out before him.

"Bagh Sahib!"

He pushed the sheet back and slipped his legs over the edge of the bed. They were mere sticks—fleshless, piteous—yet he stood up swaying like a tall reed in the wind. The woman, huddled on the floor, dragged herself to her feet and stumbled towards him. He put his arm round her shoulders, leaning on her.

"Nelly—poor Nelly—something in my head—it's better—help me——"

It was a child talking—a mumbling, broken appeal. Yet there was a purpose in him stronger than his weakness. He lurched across the room. "Nell—sweetheart—my uniform—my parade—things—my sword——"

"They're here—dear—you can't——"

A shot was fired—this time close at hand. He made an odd little sound like a laugh.

"They've not done with me yet—by the Lord—

they shall meet Bagh Sahib again—we'll see who's strongest—even now——" He held out his palsied hands; he was gasping, but it was in the flood-tide of returning life. His eyes shone like a young man's. "Nell—you used to know the way—there wasn't a buckle you couldn't manage—quicker to spot things than a sergeant on parade. No mistakes now—Bagh Sahib never made mistakes—the smartest man in the Indian Army. By Gad—there's the sword—not rusty? No—that's like you—so—now—kiss me——"

Between each sentence there had been a gap of time. She had obeyed him like a woman possessed. Now he stood before her—a ghostly figure in the loose-fitting uniform—the shadow of the man whom she had once loved—but at least the shadow.

She clung to him—half supporting him, herself shaking from head to foot.

"My Richard——"

"Nell—sweetheart—help me—to go to them—just to the door—and then alone——?"

"Yes—yes——"

"Kiss me!"

Her poor, wizened little face glowed like a girl's as she lifted it to his. The years, with their bitterness, dropped from her memory. She did not need to understand more than one thing, that he had been given back to her as he had once been. Nothing mattered now—not even death itself.

"Lean on me, Richard—I am quite strong——"

They went together down the gloomy passage, his arm still about her shoulders. She had need of her boasted strength. At first his weight almost bore her to the ground. But with every step he held himself straighter, freeing himself from her support. At the door of the dining-room he stood upright, only his hands touching her.

He kissed her. Then he went in alone.

A handful of women still sat at the table and talked loudly and incessantly. The rest were helping the men barricade the verandah window. Mrs. Smithers worked with the grim energy of despair, keeping to Tristram's side as though his nearness brought her some comfort. It was she who saw Boucicault first, and in her consternation clutched at her companion's arm.

"Lawks a-mercy!" she whispered. "Look——!"

Tristram turned. It seemed to him that he had known even before she had touched him. Incredible though this thing was, it was also inevitable. The gaze of the two men crossed. Tristram waited for the hating, satiric smile, bracing himself to meet its triumph. But there was no change in Boucicault's face—scarcely recognition.

A bugle-call rang above the approaching storm.

Boucicault came forward.

"Gentlemen—gentlemen—this is child's-play! Do you suppose my fire-eaters care for a few arm-chairs and a crazy gun? Why, we've swallowed whole

fortresses armed with cannon in my time. Who's in command here?"

He frowned round on them. Not even Armstrong himself moved. This man had risen from the dead. If their own nearness to death blurred the miracle of it, they were no less under the ban of a miraculous authority. Boucicault shrugged his shoulders. He crossed over to the window and pulled the curtains aside. To the right, towards the barracks, torchlights ran backwards and forwards like distracted fireflies, gradually converging together in a solid block of flame. A black rage settled on the old man's sunken features.

"Who the devil has been meddling with my men?" he cursed. "The 65th never revolted in its history. Whose fault is this? Can't somebody speak?" But they could only look at each other in pitying helplessness. He had forgotten. He was back in the old days when he had led his men triumphantly into a fire under which every other regiment had withered. He was Bagh Sahib, the hero, the demi-god. He had forgotten—and even if they could, they would not have penetrated that merciful oblivion.

He settled his helmet. His thin hand rested tremblingly on the hilt of his sword.

"The civilians stay here with the women," he said. "The rest follow me."

He went waveringly down the steps. And then only they recovered their power of action. Tristram

was at his side as he reached the garden.

"Colonel Boucicault—you're not in a fit state ——"

The light from behind him flashed into the cold eyes.

"Not fit? I'm more fit than those arm-chair soldiers." A wintry smile quivered under the grey moustache. "You were always confoundedly interfering, Major Tristram."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Take command of my regiment." He turned his back on them. Arabella, still panting and covered from head to foot in mud, had drawn his attention. "Your horse, Major, I am sure? Your mounts were always a disgrace to your service. Saddleless, too? However—better than nothing. Help me up——"

He was obeyed. They might have thrown themselves on him—held him back by sheer force, but they could not. He had taken command. Dr. Martin wrung his hands as though his own death were not howling at him within a couple of hundred yards.

"It's impossible—the man was paralysed half an hour ago—he ought not to be able to stand. If you allow him to go, I won't take the responsibility——"

Mrs. Compton shook him by the arm. Her eyes were shining like two points of fire.

"Shut up—don't you see—he's the Bagh Sahib—he can do things we can't—it's our only chance."

Bagh Sahib rode down the avenue at a walk. He did not hurry, though the sinister light swept down on him amidst a pandemonium of rattling drums and trumpet calls. His face was resolute—no longer brutal—and the smile lingered at his lips. It was as though the coming encounter amused him. He did not look to see whether he was followed.

The men he had commanded looked at one another. Compton fingered the revolver which he had retrieved. He glanced at his wife, and she nodded.

"Well, I'm going, anyhow," he said.

The twelve remaining officers of the 65th assented. Armstrong himself had already hurried on in front of Compton. He was a staid, humdrum type of man, but in that moment the fire was in his blood. None of them remembered that this same Boucicault was the source of the very evil which he had set out to master.

He was the Bagh Sahib.

That was all they knew of him.

They reached the compound gates as Boucicault, with Tristram at his heels, came in sight of the mutiny leaders. It was still pitch dark, but the rain had stopped and the torches burnt up luridly in the still air. Separate from the rest, a gaunt, spectral figure on the ungainly horse, Boucicault waited tranquilly. He was so motionless, so unexpected that the seething mass of soldiers came to a sudden halt.

A shot rang out from somewhere in the rear, but those in the first ranks wavered. The superstition which was a very part of their blood chilled them to silence. The roll of drums died away to a faint beat, like the throb of a dying pulse. The trumpet no longer sounded. Boucicault's eyes passed from one dark, uncertainly lit face to another. Then he laughed.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourselves?"

He spoke clearly now. His voice had a metallic ring in it which awoke old memories. But it broke the spell. There were, perhaps, ten yards between him and the leaders, and they rushed, five of them, with a howl of triumph—then again halted—as though they had flung themselves against an invisible barrier. A shot whizzed past Boucicault's head. He grinned mockingly. He touched Arabella's sides and rode forward, till the last five yards were covered, and he stared down straight into their faces. "You don't shoot as well as you did, men. That sort of thing won't do. You want drilling, and, by God, you shall get it! That fellow who missed me shall have my special attention. The 65th wants polishing." He removed his helmet, so that the light flickered on his features. "And I shall polish it," he said.

They recognized him. It was the thought of him which had goaded them to their revolt. Yet now he sat there on his horse—the man whom they believed helpless and stricken—and gibed at them. For them,

too, he was as one risen from the dead. A sergeant in the foremost line drew back, cowering from him.

"Bagh Sahib!" he muttered.

Boucicault leant forward and seized the man roughly by his ear.

"Yes—Bagh Sahib. You shall see that I can spring still. Ah, you, Heera, so you remember me? In the old days you fought at my heel like the tiger's cub you were. That was at Affra and Burda. Yes—you could fight then—now you can only mutiny like angry children. Then the 65th had a glorious name in India, and I was proud of you—but now—" He thrust the man from him so that he went reeling in the mud. "You cowardly pack—lay down your arms!" he thundered. His command fell like the lash of a whip. The man he had struck leapt at him. He had a revolver in his hand and he pointed it straight at Boucicault's breast.

"Bagh Sahib—you killed my brother——"

"And I shall live to court-martial you, my friend."

"Not now——"

"Shoot then, you cur!"

A splash of fire was flung up in Boucicault's face. Tristram, hiding in the shadow, sprang forward with a smothered cry of horror—then stood still—incredulous. Boucicault had not moved. He looked down into his assassin's stricken, gaping face and laughed.

"You can't touch me, Heera. Your very weapon

refuses. We have fought together too often——"

There was a new note in his voice—stern yet curiously caressing. The man reeled, broke down, sobbing thickly.

"Bagh Sahib——!" he moaned. "Bagh Sahib——"

"It is well, Heera. I forgive." He looked over the sea of faces. "You see that you cannot touch me. For the sake of the old days-when you fought gallantly, this night's work is forgotten. Lay down your arms."

For an instant longer they stared at him. The red of his tunic hid the dark, widening stain. They only saw that the bullet had passed through him and left him unharmed. The older men among them remembered how in the bygone days he had passed scatheless through a hail of bullets. Then as now he had been a stupendous figure—half god.

To the younger men he was a legend. The evil that he had done them was forgotten. He was their own past—their own greatness—the greatness of their fathers. They could not touch him.

"Gentlemen—form your men into their companies. Lead them back to the barracks. Remember—what I tell you—this night is to be forgotten."

The little group of Englishmen behind him obeyed tranquilly. There was the sound of rifles being stacked. The disorderly crowd formed automatically into sections. The scene had lasted five minutes. Now it was finished.

But Boucicault turned Arabella's head and rode slowly back, and Tristram, who had seen that black stain upon the tunic, followed him.

Mrs. Boucicault stood separate from the rest upon the balcony and waited. She was smiling. There was no fear—only a girlish pride, a tragic happiness written on the grey face. As he came within the lights of the verandah she waved to him, and he saluted her with a chivalrous dignity.

Then he toppled from his seat into Tristram's arms.

They carried him into the bungalow and set him gently on one of the sofas. His wife knelt down beside him and he put his arm about her and held her close to him.

"There is nothing to be done—the whole breast. I am too old a soldier not to know. Please leave us these few minutes. We have so much to say to one another." But to Tristram he gave his hand, drawing him down so that his face almost touched the dying lips. "Major I'm—sorry—about—your dog——"

Tristram knew then that at the last it was not oblivion, but resurrection.

He lingered a moment. Even as he stood there hesitating, Boucicault's body straightened out a little. His wife's head rested on his shoulder, and there was blood mingled in the grey, untidy hair. Her eyes were closed, and she seemed asleep.

They had so much to say to one another.

Tristram crept out on tiptoe. He went down again into the compound. It was very still. The tumult of the last hour had died away. It had all been like an adventure in a mad, terrible dream. Arabella nozzled against his shoulder, and he stroked her gently. And, as he did so, the faint light from the room behind him showed him the slender, colourless band about his wrist.

It was as though a charm had laid itself on his aching senses. A gate of memory was opened. He passed through. In the tranquil solemnity of an Indian night, he heard voices—Ayeshi's voice, hushed yet passionate.

"Behold, according to the custom, Humayun accepts the bond, and from henceforth the Rani Kurnavati is his dear and virtuous sister, and his sword shall not rest in his scabbard till she is free from the threat of her oppressor."

The bo-tree whispered mysteriously:

"Ah—those were the great days—the great days ——"

And Tristram Sahib swung himself on to Arabella's back and once more rode out towards Heerut.

CHAPTER XV

THE SNAKE-GOD

Vahana ran on ahead. Bent and twisted with age, his half-naked figure far outstripped the riders whose horses ploughed heavily through the morass of jungle-grass. Behind them, again, came the straggle, panic-driven horde of Ayeshi's army, and after them the flood, rising over Heerut.

Vahana halted from time to time and looked back, nodding and beckoning. He was too far in advance for them to see his face. But in that feverish agility, in that patient waiting on them there was a malignant joy, the expression of a soundless, senile laughter.

They had strange companions—cheetahs, antelopes, wild pigs—all the creatures of the plain—trotting at their sides, unheeded and unheeding, conscious only of their common peril. They moved slowly, dragging themselves painfully free from the clinging mud. It was the flight of an evil dream—the enemy at their heels, their limbs weighted, each step an anguished effort. They made no outcry, but the tortured breathing of these flying thousands became an unbroken moan of terror.

Vahana led them by a circuitous path back over a ridge of ground rising to the rear of the temple. They followed unquestioningly. There was no choice. Their retreat was already cut off: to the right the flooded plain, to the left the trackless jungle hemmed them in. The ridge was all that remained to them.

Sigrid rode between Ayeshi and Barclay. They had not spoken. Ayeshi held himself like a sleep-walker, his face blank, his eyes wide open and expressionless. The hand that held the reins was slack and indifferent. His horse, instinctively aware of the danger pursuing them, kept up of its own account, but he did not seek to control it. Compared with him, Barclay was the very spirit of sombre exultation. He turned persistently to the woman beside him, his eyes ugly with significance. But her small, white face betrayed no consciousness of him. Its serenity was deathlike. Her body rode beside him, but her mind, the living part of her, eluded him. He had not hoped that it would be otherwise—his pitiless intuition had showed him the limit of his power, the limit of all power; but there was Tristram, who by now knew the value of the freedom which she had bought for him—Tristram, who represented all that he, Barclay, had desired and hoped for and loved, all that he now hated with the intensity of a mutilated passion, Tristram who would suffer at the last.

He laughed at his own thought and pointed a shaking hand at the mournful immensity beneath them.

"Your friend will have a wet ride. Look out there—the bridge has gone. It was swept away an hour ago."

He laughed again, and urged his horse past her.

He had triumphed, but he did not wish to see her face.

She turned her head in the direction which he had indicated. The night, mingling its sable with the dirty greys of sky and water, shrouded the familiar landmarks, but that very narrowing of her vision widened the boundaries of her hearing. The thunder of the torrent sounded nearer—she heard again the mysterious mutterings which had arrested her at the bridge-head only an hour or two before. She knew that Barclay had not boasted.

"Did you know that too, Ayeshi?"

"Yes, Mem-Sahib."

His voice was callous, toneless. She could not look at him.

"And you let him go? You had forgotten so easily?"

"Have you found it hard to forget, Mem-Sahib—you whom he loved——?" He awoke suddenly from his apathy. He bent towards her, his fevered hand on her arm. "Was not a little of *that* man's gold, stained with the sweat and blood of men, enough to buy your forgetfulness?"

And now she looked at him. She saw the quivering features—the eyes bloodshot and wretched with scorn of her.

"I went out of his life as you did, Ayeshi," she said gently. "Was that forgetfulness?"

"Mem-Sahib——!" he muttered.

"You tried to save him," she persisted—"as I tried. If we have both failed need we reproach each other now?"

"Mem-Sahib!" In that reiteration there was agony. His hand dropped from her arm. "It was for his sake—? Barclay Sahib threatened you?"

"Yes."

"And now——"

"Now it is for Gaya—for those lives your ambition has jeopardized. And even that may be useless."

The ridge they were traversing began to slope downwards. The water was at their feet. They could hear it sucking at the long grasses. The men immediately behind them were swept forward and lost their footing. A man who stumbled at Sigrid's side clutched at her and then went rolling ludicrously down the mud bank into the rising flood. She saw his head for an instant—his face gazing stupidly up at them. Something square and black and evil that had lain like a lump of wood on the surface of the water moved swiftly forward.

There was a scream. Ayeshi held up his hand before Sigrid's face, but she had seen enough. The man had vanished, and where he had been the greyness of the water had turned to red.

"Oh, God!" she whispered. "Tristram!"

"No, no, Mem-Sahib—not that—not that—they meant that he should die, but I—I who served him

and loved him, I know that death cannot touch him when he fights for others. He fights for others now, Mem-Sahib—for those I have betrayed—for my salvation." He laid his hand on his breast with a gesture of unutterable despair. "No—not even he can do that. It is too late. I am accursed—accursed——!"

And, as though in answer, the crowd he led surged up closer to him. Arms were held up to him—thin, supplicating arms.

"Lord—the water—the water—save us!"

"I am accursed!" he whispered. "Accursed!"

She saw his face. The youth in it was dead—stamped out. Yet in that instant she recognized in him the boy, the dreamer who, crouched upon the step of her verandah, had told the story of the Rani Kurnavati. And the pity that surged over her had in it the passion of that memory.

"Ayeshi—why have you done this——?"

His wild eyes met hers for an instant's desperate intentness.

"Mem-Sahib—I loved my country—my gods—the history of them was in my blood. And then in Calcutta—the misery—the thwarted ambition—my people starving—the Englishman in the high place. They told me they were ripe for revolt—only they needed a leader—a leader who would carry the country-people with him. I came back. Vahana lied to me. I believed that my father had been robbed and murdered—that my heritage had been stolen from

me—that Tristram Sahib himself had known who I was and made me his servant——" His voice broke. "But it was a lie—I had no heritage—no wrongs to avenge—I was their tool—and now—Mem-Sahib, if ever you should meet him, tell him it was a false dream—but that Ayeshi loved him——"

She nodded. She could not answer him, and they rode on in silence till suddenly, Vahana, whom they could still see dimly ahead of them, turned to the left and pointed up towards the jungle.

"There—there is escape, O Lord Ayeshi! The Sacred Path that leads to the Shrine of the Snake-god. Who follows?"

The shrill cry died into silence. There was no answer. Barclay came splashing back through the water. His face glowed with a sombre excitement.

"It seems there's some secret passage up through the jungle. We may be able to get right away. At any rate, it's our only chance."

But Ayeshi sat rigid in his saddle, and that which Barclay saw in his eyes silenced him.

"There is a curse on all those who profane the Snake-god's sanctity——"

Barclay burst out laughing.

"Good God, man, that silly native yarn——"

"I am a native."

"Still, you can't be such a fool——"

Ayeshi turned in his saddle and looked back at the black, silent mass behind him.

"Who follows Barclay Sahib through the jungle?" he called.

But there was still no answer. They stood there silent and inert, the water rising about their feet. There was no cry of terror from among them now. It was finished.

Those nearest Ayeshi lifted their faces to him in stubborn fatalism.

"Ayeshi, pull yourself together—they'll follow you right enough."

"I dare not," was the desperate answer.

"Afraid—? A coward—? You don't really believe ——"

Ayeshi threw back his head. His features were terrible in their frozen composure.

"I believe."

"You accept the responsibility for all these lives ——?"

"I cannot help myself—I am one of them."

Barclay made a gesture of angry impatience.

"Do you expect me to stay here and drown like a rat in a trap——?" he demanded.

"No—why should you? What are we to you—or you to us?"

Barclay shrank back. With a sound like a smothered groan, he turned his horse about and rode towards Vahana who still stood motionless and waiting beneath the black shadows of the trees. He dismounted and looked back. Sigrid had not moved.

The water had risen swiftly to her horse's knees. Ayeshi bent towards her and laid his hand on her bridle.

"Go, Mem-Sahib-fear nothing—*they* will not harm you. You are not of our blood or faith. Go—do not let me have your death on my hands. Mem-Sahib—trust him—he will not fail you——"

She lifted her eyes to his face. Behind his passive despair there shone the old confidence—the re-birth of a faith. She gave him her hand, and he lifted it to his forehead.

"Mem-Sahib—remember that I loved him."

She saw Ayeshi for the last time as on the very verge of the jungle she turned and looked back. His silhouette, cut sharply against the fast-fading light, rose up from the midst of his unhappy followers like a tragic, heroic statue out of a black, uneasy sea. Vahana laughed shrilly, and the sound, breaking the spell of inarticulate terror, let loose a wailing cry which swept in a gust over the rising water.

"Lord—save us—save us——"

She saw Ayeshi lift his hands above his head. She could not have heard his voice, and yet the echo of his impotent agony reached her.

"I am accursed—accursed——"

She saw him no more. Vahana had hurried on into the darkness ahead of them, and Barclay half lifted, half dragged her from the saddle. She made no resistance. But her strength had begun to fail. She

tried to free herself from his hold—to stand alone.

"Go on without me—I'm not strong enough—save yourself."

He shook his head stubbornly.

"No—I've nothing left but you. Keep your promise. The path is steep—I can carry you. We're safe now. The ground's rising all the way. We've nothing to fear—nothing. It's dark, of course—hideously dark. Give me your hand." His was dry and cold. It filled her with a nameless disgust—a strange pity. It was as though, helpless as she was, he clung to her.

"Why—you're shivering!" he muttered. "What is it? You're not afraid? What is there to be afraid of? We're safe here——"

"It's those others—Ayeshi——"

He laughed brokenly.

"What are they to me? What am I to them? Didn't you hear him? That settled it, didn't it? I'm not one of them—I've got English blood in my veins. I've nothing to fear—nothing."

She could not see his face. They were stumbling blindly up the steep and broken path, and the dense growth of jungle walled them in from whatever daylight remained. Yet his voice, the touch of his hand, painted him for her against the black canvas. She could see his face, eyes wide-open and distended, the mouth agape, the sweat on his forehead. She knew him to be possessed by an

insidious terror.

"What is there to fear?" she asked in her turn.

He muttered incoherently.

Vahana had vanished. They could hear his body brushing against the tangled growths that hung across the narrow path like warning, invisible hands. Barclay called him by name, but there was no answer—only a sudden stillness. He faltered—the hand which still held Sigrid's relaxed. She stood apart from him. But for the sound of his breathing she could not have known that he was near her. The infinite relief of that moment's freedom kept her motionless, and then she realized that he was moving forward—that he had forgotten her, every ambition, every desire in the one formless, all-mastering dread.

"Vahana!"

Stillness. He groped wildly about him. The sudden consciousness of his isolation drove a scream from his dry lips.

"Vahana!"

The answer was almost in his ear—a soft, caressing whisper.

"I am here, Sahib."

"Don't leave me—I can't see—this darkness."

"The path is a straight one, Sahib. Give me your hand."

Barclay cowered back. A chill, foetid breath fanned his face. Something familiar coiled itself about his fingers. He tried to free himself.

"The Mem-Sahib!" he gasped thickly. "Where is she?"

"The Mem-Sahib is safe. The path leads to one end. Come, Sahib!"

The whisper had grown shriller, authoritative. There was a subtle hint of anger in its caress. Barclay heard its echo. Overhead a branch cracked under a moving burden. A thing slid over his foot and went hissing into silence. He threw up his free hand to beat off the invisible attack and touched a slimy, gliding mass which dropped on his shoulder, winding itself about his neck. He flung it from him. He was gasping—choking with fear and nausea. He heard Vahana's whisper, subdued, sibilant:

"Sahib—there are no snakes."

But the very hand that held him was a hideous memory. Something vague, indeterminate, which had begun to hem him in since that night when he had fled from the vision of himself, was closing in faster and faster. This, that was coming, had been from all time, a hand groping up through the black depths of the ages, a monstrous, inert mass rousing itself from long sleep to predestined action. The darkness, the jungle, was a huge prison alive with sound and movement. The sounds awoke under his feet and went hissing and murmuring like a train of fire into the far distance, setting alight other sounds till they surrounded him in an awful, mocking circle. The walls of the prison were narrowing—the air,

thick and heavy with an evil sweetness, weighed down upon him till his strength reeled. With an effort he freed himself from Vahana's clutch and began to run. The steepness of the path, the uneven ground, jolted the breath from his body in agonized gasps. The branches of the trees were alive—sensate, twisting, winding bodies, which beat their cold, slimy tentacles against his face—their roots clutched at his stumbling feet, the hissing murmur had become the high, threatening note of a rising wind. And behind him was that pursuing Thing—that formless, familiar menace which he had foreseen, which had hung on the outskirts of his life waiting for its moment. He fled before it because his frantic body demanded flight, but *he* knew its futility. The Thing was there, silent and invisible, gibing at his pitiful effort. It was not Death—it was Horror itself ——

A pale light broke ahead. He neither knew whence it came nor its significance. He made for it with a last call to every nerve and muscle in him. He reached it. He was dimly conscious of a brightening luminousness, of something black, serenely still, rising up out of the grey transparency before him. Then the end. It came upon him with a rush. It closed in in a clammy band about his throat. He turned. A flat head with a wizened face and small dead eyes and pointed mouth swayed before his vision in a sinister, rhythmic measure. It was Vahana

—yet not Vahana. It was not Vahana who was slowly dragging his life from him. It was that cold tightening band—and yet Vahana was there—close to him.

He screamed. Again and again. The jungle—the whole world, *his* world, shrinking about him till it was no bigger than his own brain, echoed with his screams.

CHAPTER XVI
TOWARDS MORNING

The rain had ceased. A soft wind blowing from the north swept the low-hanging clouds into the fantastic, tattered fragments, between which a thin moonlight poured down on to the desolation of waters. All that had been had been washed out as though a child's sponge had passed over a slate covered with the laborious work of a life. Fields and villages, rich pastures, homesteads, bridges, each of them some man's dream and ambition, lay under that smooth, glittering surface awaiting their resurrection at the hands of a patient humanity.

It was by this first break of light that Tristram saw the way over which they had still to travel. He sat motionless and upright, scanning the seeming limitless expanse, and perhaps in that moment some

dim, unformed appeal went up from him to the Unknown which steels the hearts of men to supreme effort.

And, swift on the heels of that brief intercession, there followed an aching pity for the faithful comrade whose share in the coming struggle was so much greater than his own, whose purpose in it was no more than to serve him with the last breath of her life. He stroked her ungainly neck, striving to break down the barrier between living things which made his remorse and pity powerless. She answered gallantly with the grand courage of her kind, and the water rose about them.

It was a nightmare redreamed, save that now the first violence of the storm had spent itself. The wreckage had gone its way, and the flood's polished bosom shone bare and empty under the wane and glow of light. There was no landmark left by which they could guide their course. The jungle-clad mountains were mingled with the clouds. The temple shrouded itself in the shadow of the jungle. They could but drift with the currents, fighting their way across, hoping—Tristram himself scarcely knew for what. For who could have lived in that deluge, what escape was possible? Yet he carried with him a belief born of despair, a serenity such as men feel for whom there is no choice, no second possibility.

Something black drifted past him. He could not recognize it, and in a moment it was gone. They

were now in midstream, where the rush of the water swept over Arabella's desperately uplifted head. It was then, the moon sailing out unveiled into the open sky, that he saw other black shapes and knew them for what they were. They were the bodies of men—not of isolated victims, of villagers and field labourers trapped separately or even in small communities by the swift disaster. They were many hundreds. They had died together, and death had not separated them. Like driftwood, they had been swept into entangled, shapeless piles of floating horror.

"Sahib! Sahib!"

The cry came faintly across the racing waters. Tristram, waking from the lethargy of abandoned hope, turned Arabella's head sharply upstream. She responded. It was as though in those years of comradeship she had become a part of himself, obeying the same law, acknowledging the same creed. It was as though she recognized a familiar message in that appeal to her last strength, as though her blinded eyes had seen what Tristram saw. It was little enough to accomplish—and yet so much. Ten feet to go before that agonized, appealing figure, a hurrying blot on the silver pathway, would be swept irrevocably past and beyond hope. It could be done. Arabella lifted herself breast high out of the water. She was young again. All the fire of her mixed ancestry blazed up for the supreme effort. Five feet—three——. It was done. Tristram stretched out his

hand. It was gripped and held with the tenacity of despair. Arabella went down under the double burden—rose again superbly.

"Ayeshi——!"

"Sahib—I knew that you—would come—she—is—safe—the jungle—-path—behind—the Temple——"

"Hold on, Ayeshi——"

"No—Sahib——"

For an instant their faces were almost on a level. The brightening moonlight was in Ayeshi's eyes—full of a passionate worship. "Humuyan came—too—late—not you, Sahib——"

He tried to wrench his hand free. Tristram cursed bitterly at him.

"You try to let go—you dare try it—damn you, boy, do you think I'm going to let you go—now—don't play the Rajah with me here——"

They were being swept faster and faster downstream. Arabella was dying under him. He did not know it. He could not have unclasped his hand. No reason could have mastered the love in him, or denied the love which illuminated the face lifted to his out of the black waters.

"Sahib—forgive——"

"Fool's talk—I don't know the word—hold on, d'you hear? I'll get you out of it. You shall go scot free—only hold on—Ayeshi——"

They fought each other, hand clasped in hand,

eye to eye. No two enemies, spurred on by the bitterest hatred, could have fought more grimly.

Tristram laughed.

"I'm stronger than you—always was——" Something flashed up in the light. "Ayeshi——!" he gasped.

A faint smile dawned on the native's face.

"Greater love hath no man——"

The knife fell with maniacal strength. Tristram closed his eyes. No fear, but a sheer incredulous horror lamed all power of self-defence. The second of suspense passed. Nothing—only now there was no weight on the hand still clasped in his, only Arabella again breasted the torrent with the energy of release from a killing burden.

"Ayeshi——!"

No answer—only that mute, blood-stained hand —grown powerless—and one more figure floating to join its brothers on the great, silver-flooded field.

Two boatmen, guiding their flat-bottomed craft between the ruined hovels of Heerut, saw him as he waded waist-deep through the receding flood. The brightening dawn was on his face, but they did not recognize him till he called them by name. Then silently they paddled towards him and dragged him to safety.

They were old men, palsied with the horrors of that night. There was no thought of rebellion left in them. They could only whisper incoherently, like

frightened children, looking up into his face as at something at once loved and terrible.

"Dakktar Sahib—Dakktar Sahib!"

He became slowly conscious of them and of their piteousness.

"There's nothing to fear," he said compassionately. "I'm not a spirit—my horse brought me across—just got me into my depth, poor girl—I've been wading about—till morning." He composed himself with a stern effort.

"Row me to my place—will you?"

But they shook their heads.

"Gone, Dakktar Sahib, gone."

His face was grey—stiff-looking.

"Still, row me—to where it was."

They obeyed him. Here and there a wall remained, or a half roof balanced on a few battered, shapeless heaps of mud. A carcase of a sacred bull floated backwards and forwards between two ruins, with a grotesque semblance of life. At the cross-roads the council-tree trailed its leaves sadly in the still water.

But where the Dakktar Sahib's hut had been there was nothing.

He bowed his face upon his hands.

The men stared at him blankly, themselves too stupefied by loss for either pity or understanding. The minutes flowed past in mournful, stately silence. At last Tristram drew himself up. His eyes were calm

—warm with a hardly won knowledge—and the awfulness had gone from him.

"Row me to the path behind the Temple.

"Dakktar Sahib——" they muttered.

"I shall not ask you to follow me," he said, gently.

They rowed out of Heerut towards the rising ground of the jungle mountains. The fiery wheel of the sun rose behind Gaya and the temple shone like a black opal in the morning glow. As they drew nearer Tristram's eyes sought out the great window of the *sikhara*. His thoughts were vague, unformed, still and serene as the water flowing peacefully over the plain. Through that window Vishnu watched for his beloved rising amidst her golden-haired dawn-maidens.

"It is here, Sahib."

They looked at him and now it was with awe—a kind of dumb protest, but he smiled at them, shaking his head.

"There is nothing to fear. Wait for me."

"Sahib—the curse."

"There is no curse," he said, with the same gentleness.

He waded through the water to the place they indicated and pushed aside the tangled bashes. The hidden path lay before him, leading steeply upwards. He went on. He was climbing from gloom and shadow into light. He knew now neither doubt nor

fear. A great serenity possessed him. There could be no curse. Strange flowers clustered at the roots of the stark, straight-standing trees—but they were not evil. There was sound—a rustling and crackling among the branches-a frightened scurrying of some wild creature startled from its lair—familiar loved sounds of living things. A warm, consoling radiance sank down between the stems of the trees as light pours down through a cathedral window upon the stately pillars.

Up—steadily upwards, up into a higher, purer air, with a strange heart-beating of foreknowledge. And then at last the end—a wide clearing on the mountain-summit, and on a high altar, not Siva, but a golden Lakshmi, her face, beatific in its serene sweetness, turned towards the rising sun.

Vahana squatted in her shadow, his half-naked body bowed over something so still, so huddled that Tristram faltered for an instant. Then he went forward and Vahana, seeing him unrecognizingly, pointed down with a shaking finger of derision.

It was Barclay. His piteous face, lifted to the peace of the clear sky, was swollen and bloated almost out of recognition. But he bore no trace of violence.

Vahana shook with a senile laughter. A fangless adder unwound itself from about his wrist, and he held it to the dead man's staring eyes, gibing at him.

"There are no snakes—there are no snakes."

But Tristram had gone on.

He had seen her. Like a pale lotus-flower cast up by the waters, she lay stretched in the short grass which grew about the foot of the altar, her fair, dishevelled head pillowed on her arm in an attitude of happy weariness. He knelt down beside her. The moment's dread was gone. He saw the faint colour in her cheeks. Her breath came gently, smoothly as a child's.

He dared not touch her. Her peace was holy to him. But as though his nearness pierced like sunlight into the calm depths of her dreams, she stirred, her lips moved, shaping the shadow of his name.

He drew her into the warmth and comfort of his arms. So it had been once before; but now there was no fear, no pain, or conflict.

"Tristram—I waited for you. I was so tired. I fell asleep. But I was not afraid. There was nothing to fear—nothing. I knew that you would come." She smiled wistfully—tenderly. "Bracelet-brother!"

He found no answer. He pointed out eastwards. Above the desolate plain the sun climbed up in majesty towards a splendid promise of atonement. One day the fields would bear their harvest, men would build their houses upon the ruins—there would be a new bridge across the river, wiser and stronger. The shadow of a curse was lifted.

They knelt together, hand in hand, watching, awestruck, at peace.

Vahana, too, was still. He, too, watched and waited, his mad, hate-filled eyes growing dim in the clearer light of reconciliation.

THE END

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