

ON CHRISTMAS NIGHT

BY GUY THORNE



IT was some days before Christmas and the great lounge hall of the Central Hotel at Shuttleworth was full of people. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, John Barlas had just arrived from London, and he sat watching the bright and animated scene.

Dozens of merry groups sat taking tea at innumerable little oak tables. On three sides of the vast place, open fires were burning and holly had already made its appearance. Everyone seemed in the highest spirits, and festival was in the air.

John Barlas, tall, lean, brown as a saddle, and going gray, watched the vivid life around him with sadness. He was not bitter; he was not envious; he was simply sad. This was the first Christmas he had spent in England for five and twenty years, and as the band in the gallery began to play a selection of Yule-tide melodies the brilliant spectacle before him faded away, as a dream shifts imperceptibly from one scene to another.

He smelt the scent of the marigolds, the fragrant deodar trees, and the dry earth in his compound at Coonoor. The fragrance of cigarettes, cigars, and China tea changed into the odours of the bazaar—curry and fried cakes, tamarind, and oil mustard. The music of the band turned into the lowing of great humped bullocks, the creaking of the water wheels, the whistle of the kites at evening; and the clatter of the happy Lancashire crowd into the calling of the parrots as they flew in blue and scarlet

regiments about the ruined temples of sandstone.

"Why did I come back from India?" he thought. "What is the use of it after all? I was happy enough there, in my way. We talked a lot about 'Home' and what we should do if we were there. I used to join in with all the rest as if I really had something to go back to. Why did I sell out of the Mills? The native cotton industry was never more promising than now. I've got fifty-thousand pounds, but I might have made it a hundred thousand. What was it?—sentiment, I suppose, though heaven knows I'm not a sentimental man, and my life was hard enough in my youth."

He had been sitting by the fire. He threw his cigarette into it, and strolled towards the lift. All round him he heard the dear old North country speech. It stung him as fresh winter rain stings the face of a man who has been spending a dull afternoon in a heated room, and at dusk strides out to breast the winds.

He was wearing a correctly cut morning coat and dark gray trousers. As soon as he was in his bedroom he changed into his oldest suit, then he turned out the electric light, went to the window and pulled up the blind.

"How things change!" he said to himself. "There was no Central Hotel when I was a lad. This place has been built upon what was once a piece of waste ground where we children played marbles and hop-sotch. One might be in London as far as this hotel is concerned—though there are few hotels in Town to touch it."