

THE HEAD OF THE DISTRICT.

THE Indus had risen in floods without warning. Last night it was a fordable shallow; to-night five miles of raving muddy water parted bank and caving bank, and the river was still rising under the moon. A litter born by six bearded men, all unused to the employ, stopped in the white sand that bordered the whiter plain.

"It's God's will," they said. "We dare not cross to-night, even in a boat. Let us light a fire and cook food. We be tired men."

They looked at the litter enquiringly. Within, the Deputy Commissioner of the Kot-Kumharsen district lay dying of fever. They had brought him across country, six fighting-men of a frontier clan that he had won over to the paths of a moderate righteousness, when he had broken down at the foot of their inhospitable hills. And Tallantire, his assistant, rode with them, heavy-hearted as heavy-eyed with sorrow and lack of sleep. He had served under the sick man for three years, and had learned to love him as men associated in toil of the hardest learn to love—or hate. Dropping from his horse he parted the curtains of the litter and peered inside.

"Orde—Orde, old man, can you hear? We have to wait till the river goes down, worse luck."

"I hear," returned a dry whisper. "Wait till the river goes down! I thought we would reach camp before the dawn. Polly knows. She'll meet me."

One of the litter-men started across the river and caught a faint twinkle of light on the far side. He whispered to Tallantire: "There are his camp-fires, and his wife. They will cross in the morning, for they have better boats. Can he live so long?"

Tallantire shook his head. Yardley Orde was near to death. What need to vex his soul with hopes of a meeting that could not be? The river gulped at the banks, brought down a cliff of sand, and snarled the more hungrily. The litter-men sought for fuel in the waste—dried camel-thorn and refuse of the camps that had waited at the ford. Their sword-belts clinked as they moved softly in the haze of the moonlight, and Tallantire's horse coughed to explain that he would like a blanket.

"I'm cold too," said the voice from the litter. "I fancy this is the end. Poor Polly!"

Tallantire rearranged the blankets; Khoda Dad Khan, seeing this, stripped off his own heavy-wadded sheepskin coat and added it to the pile. "I shall be warm by the fire presently," said he. Tallantire took the wasted body of his chief into his arms and held it against his breast. Perhaps if they kept him very warm Orde might live to see his wife once more. If only blind Providence would send a three-foot fall to the river!

"That's better," said Orde faintly. "Sorry to be a nuisance, but is—there anything to drink?"

They gave him milk and whisky, and Tallantire felt a little warmth against his own breast. Orde began to mutter.

"It isn't that I mind dying," he said. "It's leaving Polly and the district. Thank God! we have no children. Dick, you know, I'm dipped—awfully dipped—debts in my first five years' service. It isn't much of a pension, but enough for her. She has her mother at home. Getting there is the difficulty. And—and—you see, not being a soldier's wife—"

"We'll arrange the passage home, of course," said Tallantire, quietly.

"It's not nice to think of sending round the hat; but, good Lord! how many men I lie here and remember that had to do it! Morten's dead—he was of my year. Shaughnessy is dead, and he had children; I remember he used to read us their school-letters; what a bore we thought him! Evans is dead—Kot-Kumharsen killed him. Ricketts of Myndonie is dead—and I'm going, too. Man that is born of a woman is small potatoes and few in the hill. That reminds me, Dick; the four Khusru Kheyl villages in our border want a one-third remittance this spring. That's fair; their crops are bad. See that they get it, and speak to Ferris about the canal. I should like to have lived till that was finished; it means so much for the North-Indus villages—but Ferris is an idle beggar—wake him up. You'll have charge of the district till my successor comes. I wish they would appoint you permanently; you know the folk. I suppose it will be Bullows, though. Good man, but too weak for frontier work; and he doesn't understand the priests. The blind priest at Jagai will bear watching. You'll find it in my papers,—in the uniform-case, I think. Call the Khusru Kheyl men up; I'll hold my last public audience. Khoda Dad Khan!"

The leader of the men sprang to the side of the litter, his companions following.

"Men, I'm dying," said Orde quickly, in the vernacular; "and soon there will be no more Orde Sahib to twist your tails and prevent you from raiding cattle."

"God forbid this thing!" broke out the deep bass chorus. "The Sahib is not going to die."

"Yes, he is; and then he will know whether Mahomed speaks truth, or Moses. But you must be good men, when I am not here. Such of you as live in our borders must pay your taxes quietly as before. I have spoken of the villages to be gently treated this year. Such of you as live in the hills must refrain from cattle-lifting, and burn no more thatch, and turn a deaf ear to the voice of the priests, who, not knowing the strength of the Government, would lead you into foolish wars, wherein you will surely die and your crops be eaten by strangers. And you must not sack any caravans, and must leave your arms at the

police-post when you come in; as has been your custom and my order. And Tallantire Sahib will be with you, but I do not know who takes my place. I speak now true talk, for I am as it were already dead, my children—for though ye be strong men, ye are children."

"And thou art our father and our mother," broke in Khoda Dad Khan with an oath. "What shall we do, now there is no one to speak for us, or to teach us to go wisely!"

"There remains Tallantire Sahib. Go to him; he knows your talk and your heart. Keep the young men quiet, listen to the old men, and obey. Khoda Dad Khan, take my ring. The watch and chain go to thy brother. Keep those things for my sake, and I will speak to whatever God I may encounter and tell him that the Khusru Kheyl are good men. Ye have my leave to go."

Khoda Dad Khan, the ring upon his finger, choked audibly as he caught the well known formula that closed an interview. His brother turned to look across the river. The dawn was breaking, and a speck of white showed on the dull silver of the stream. "She comes," said the man under his breath. "Can he live for another two hours?" And he pulled the newly-acquired watch out of his belt and looked uncomprehendingly at the dial, as he had seen Englishmen do.

For two hours the bellying sail tacked and blundered up and down the river, Tallantire still clasping Orde in his arms, and Khoda Dad Khan chafing his feet. He spoke now and again of the district and his wife, but, as the end neared, more frequently of the latter. They hoped he did not know that she was even then risking her life in a crazy native boat to regain him. But the awful foreknowledge of the dying deceived them. Wrenching himself forward, Orde looked through the curtains and saw how near was the sail. "That's Polly," he said simply, though his mouth was wried with agony. "Polly and—the grimest practical joke ever played on a man. Dick—you'll have—to—explain."

And an hour later Tallantire met on the bank a woman in a gingham riding-habit and a sun-hat, who cried out to him for her husband—her boy, and her darling—while Khoda Dad Khan threw himself face-down on the sand and covered his eyes.

II.

The very simplicity of the notion was its charm. What more easy to win a reputation for far-seeing statesmanship, originality, and, above all, deference to the desires of the people, than by appointing a child of the country to the rule of that country? Two hundred millions of the most loving and grateful folk under Her Majesty's dominion would laud the fact, and their praise would endure for ever. Yet he was indifferent to praise or blame, as befitted the Very Greatest of All the Viceroys. His administration was based upon principle, and the principle must be enforced in season and out of season. His pen and tongue had created the New India, teeming with possibilities—loud-voiced, insistent, a nation among nations—all his very own. Wherefore the Very Greatest of all the Viceroys took another step in advance, and with it counsel of those who should have advised him on the appointment of a successor to Yardley Orde. There was a gentleman and a member of the Bengal Civil Service who had won his place and a university degree to boot, in fair and open competition with the sons of the English. He was cultured and of the world, and, if report spoke truly, had wisely and, above all, sympathetically ruled a crowded district in South Eastern Bengal. He had been to England and charmed many drawing-rooms there. His name, if the Viceroy recollected aright, was Mr. Grish Chunder Dé, M.A. In short, did anybody see any objection to the appointment, always on principle, of a man of the people to rule the people? The district in South Eastern Bengal might with advantage, he apprehended, pass over to a younger civilian of Mr. G. C. Dé's nationality (who had written a remarkably clever pamphlet on the political value of sympathy in administration); and Mr. G. C. Dé could be transferred northward to Kot-Kumharsen. The Viceroy was averse, on principle, to interfering with appointments under control of the Provincial Governments. He wished it to be understood that he merely recommended and advised in this instance. As regarded the mere question of race, Mr. Grish Chunder Dé was more English than the English, and yet possessed of that peculiar sympathy and insight which the best among the best Service in the world could only win to at the end of their service.

The stern, black-bearded kings who sit about the Council-board of India, divided on the step with the inevitable result of driving the Very Greatest of All the Viceroys into the borders of hysteria, and a bewildered obstinacy pathetic as that of a child.

"The principle is sound enough," said the weary-eyed Head of the Red Provinces in which Kot-Kumharsen lay, for he, too, held theories. "The only difficulty is—"

"Put the screw on the District officials; brigade Dé with a very strong Deputy Commissioner on each side of him; give him the best assistant in the Province; rub the fear of God into the people beforehand; and if anything goes wrong, say that his colleagues didn't back him up. All these lovely little experiments recoil on the District-Officer in the end," said the Knight of the Drawn Sword, with a truthful brutality that made the Head of the Red Provinces shudder. And on a tacit understanding of this kind the transfer was accomplished, as quietly as might be for many reasons.

It is sad to think that what goes for public opinion in India did not generally see the wisdom of the Viceroy's appointment. There were not lacking indeed hireling organs, notoriously in the pay of a tyrannous bureaucracy, who more than hinted that His Excellency was a fool, a dreamer of dreams, a doctrinaire, and, worst of all, a trifler with the lives of men. *The Viceroy's Excellence Gazette*, published in Calcutta, was at pains to thank "Our beloved Viceroy for once more and again thus gloriously vindicating the potentialities of the Bengali nations for extended executive and administrative duties in foreign parts beyond our ken. We do not at all doubt that our excellent fellow-townsmen, Mr. Grish Chunder Dé, Esq., M.A., will uphold the prestige of the Bengali, notwithstanding what underhand intrigue and *peshbundi* may be set on foot to insidiously nip his fame and blast his prospects among the proud civilians, some of which will now have to serve under a despised native and take orders too. How will you like that, Mistery? We entreat our beloved Viceroy still to substantiate himself superiorly to race-prejudice and colour-blindness, and to allow the flower of this now *our* Civil Service all the full pays and allowances granted to his more fortunate brethren."

III.

"When does this man take over charge? I'm alone just now, and I gather that I'm to stand fast under him."

"Would you have cared for a transfer?" said Bullows keenly. Then, laying his hand on Tallantire's shoulder: "We're all in the same boat; don't desert us. And yet, why the devil should you stay, if you can get another charge?"

"It was Orde's," said Tallantire, simply.

"Well, it's Dé's now. He's a Bengali of the Bengalis, crammed with the code and case law; a beautiful man so far as routine and deskwork go, and pleasant to talk to. They naturally have always kept him in his own home-district, where all his sisters and his cousins and his aunts lived, somewhere south of Dacca. He did no more than turn the place into a pleasant little family preserve, allowed his subordinates to do what they liked, and let everybody have a chance at the shekels. Consequently he's immensely popular down there."

"I've nothing to do with that. How on earth am I to explain to the district that they are going to be governed by a Bengali? Do you—does the Government, I mean—suppose that the Khusru Kheyl will sit quiet when they once know? What will the Mahomedan heads of villages say? How will the police—Muzbi Sikhs and Pathans—how will they work under him? We couldn't say anything if the Government appointed a sweeper; but my people will say a good deal, you know that. It's a piece of cruel folly!"

"My dear boy, I know all that, and more. I've represented it, and have been told that I am exhibiting 'culpable and puerile prejudice.' By Jove, if the Khusru Kheyl don't exhibit something worse than that I don't know the Border! The chances are that you will have the district alight on your hands, and I shall have to leave my work and help you pull through! I needn't ask you to stand by the Bengali man in every possible way. You'll do that for your own sake."

"For Orde's. I can't say that I care two pence personally."

"Don't be an ass. It's grievous enough, God knows, and the Government will know later on; but that's no reason for your sulking. You must try to run the district; you must stand between him and as much insult as possible; you must show him the ropes; you must pacify the Khusru Kheyl, and just warn Curbar of the police to look out for trouble by the way. I'm always at the end of a telegraph wire, and willing to peril my reputation to hold the district together. You'll lose yours, of course. If you keep things straight, and he isn't actually beaten with a stick when he's on tour, he'll get all the credit. If anything goes wrong, you'll be told that you didn't support him loyally."

"I know what I've got to do," said Tallantire, wearily, "and I'm going to do it. But it's hard."

"The work is with us, the event is with Allah,—as Orde used to say when he was more than usually in hot water." And Bullows rode away.

That two gentlemen in Her Majesty's Bengal Civil Service should thus discuss a third, also in that service, and a cultured and affable man withal, seems strange and saddening. Yet listen to the artless babble of the Blind Mullah of Jagai, the priest of the Khusru Kheyl, sitting upon a rock overlooking the border. Five years before, a chance-hurled shell from a screw-gun battery had dashed earth in the face of the Mullah, then urging a rush of Ghazis against half a dozen British bayonets. So he became blind, and hated the English none the less for the little accident. Yardley Orde knew his failing and had many times laughed at him for it.

"Dogs you are," said the Blind Mullah to the listening tribesmen round the fire. "Whipped dogs! Because you listened to Orde Sahib and called him father and behaved as his children, the British Government have proven how they regard you. Orde Sahib ye know is dead."

"Ai! ai! ai!" said half a dozen voices.

"He was a man. Comes now in his stead, whom think ye? A Bengali of Bengal—an eater of fish from the South."

"A lie!" said Khoda Dad Khan. "And but for the small matter of thy priesthood, I'd drive my gun butt first down thy throat."