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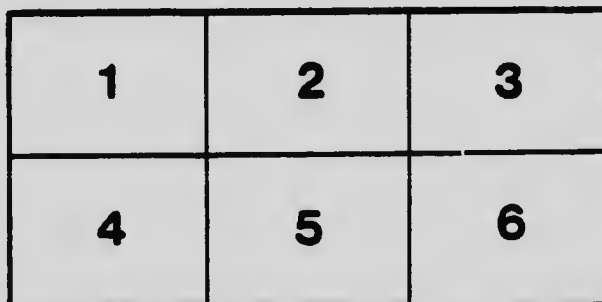
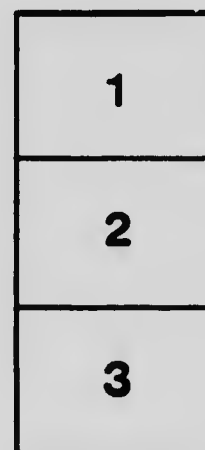
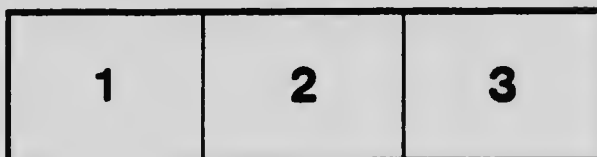
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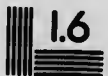
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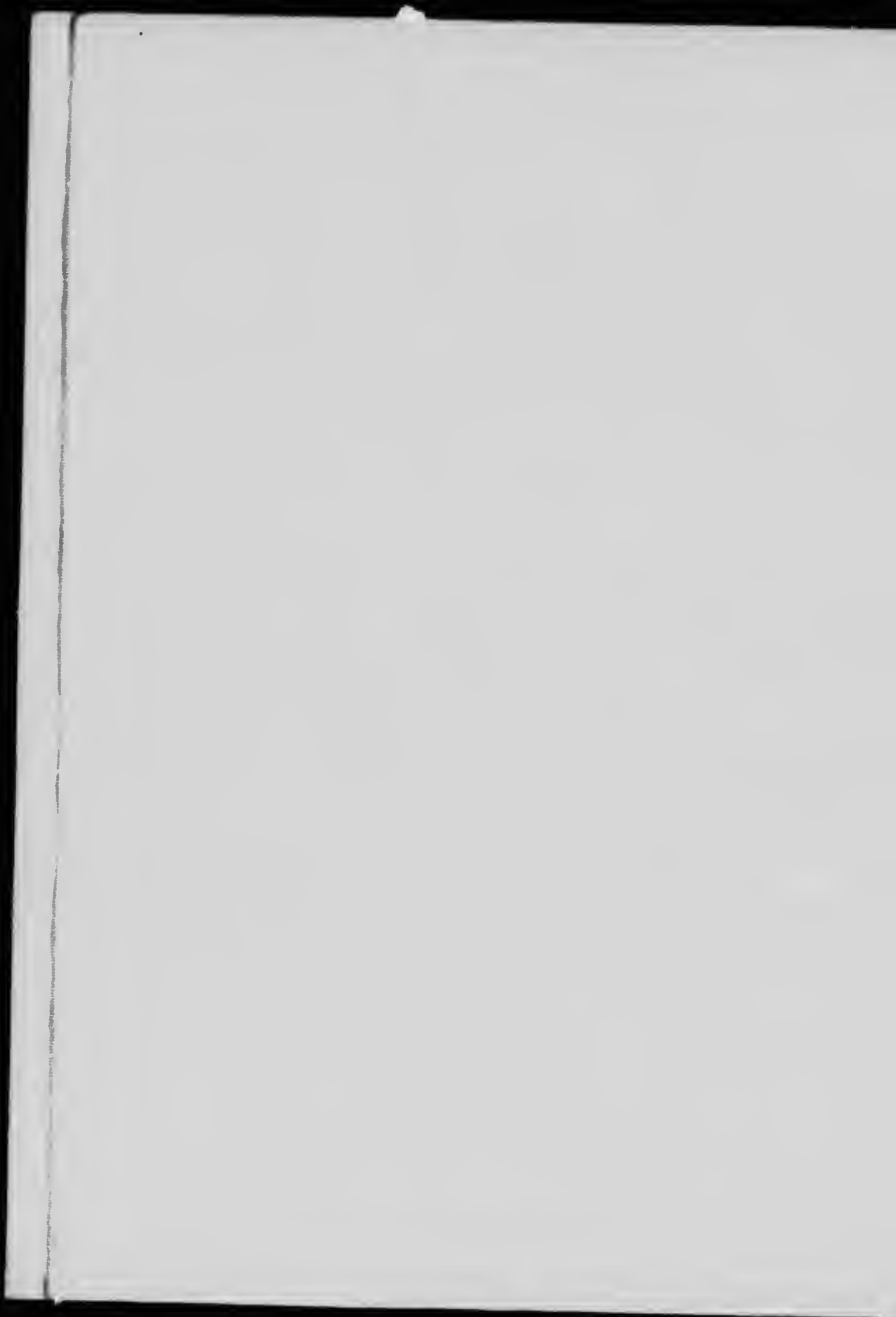
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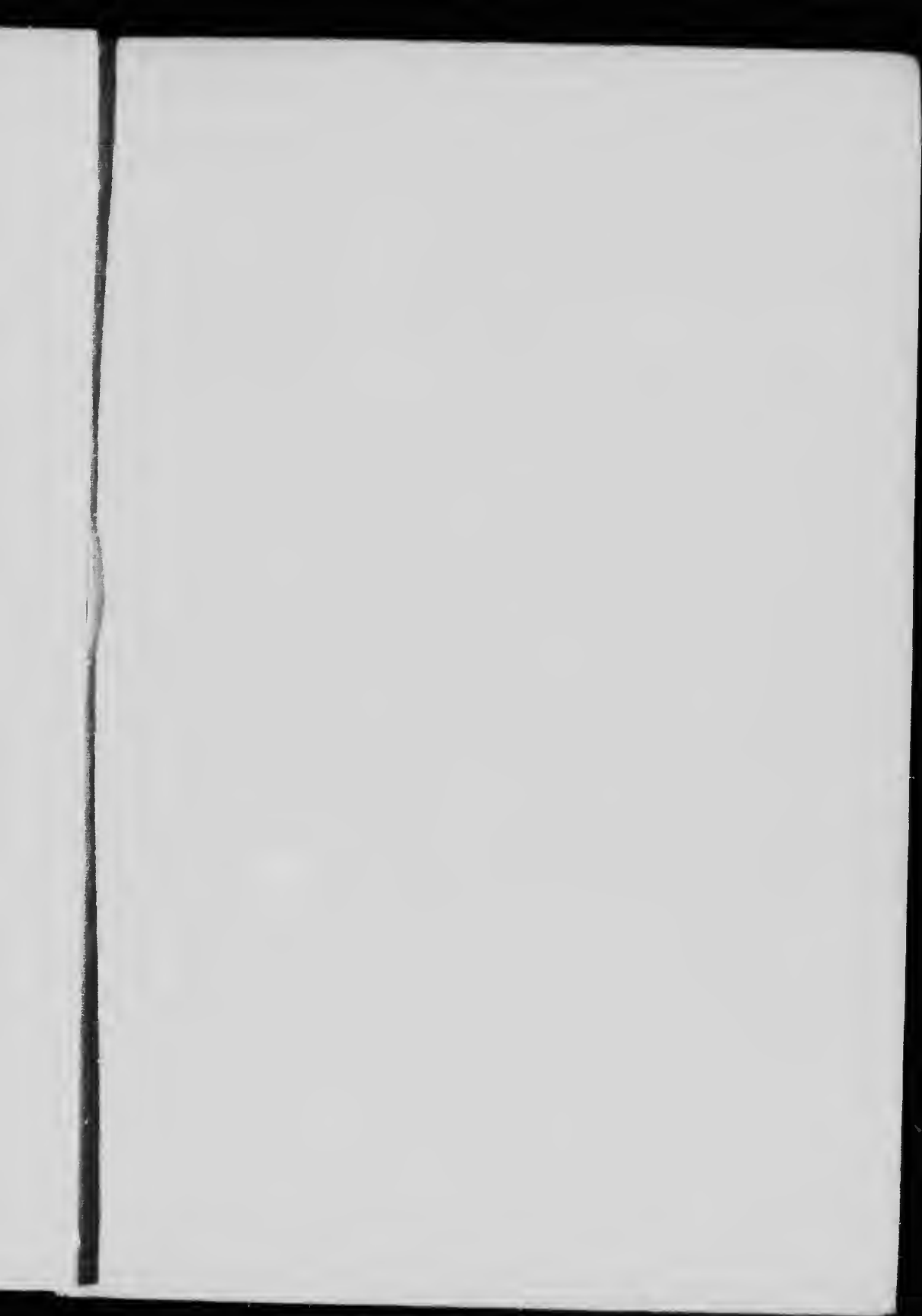
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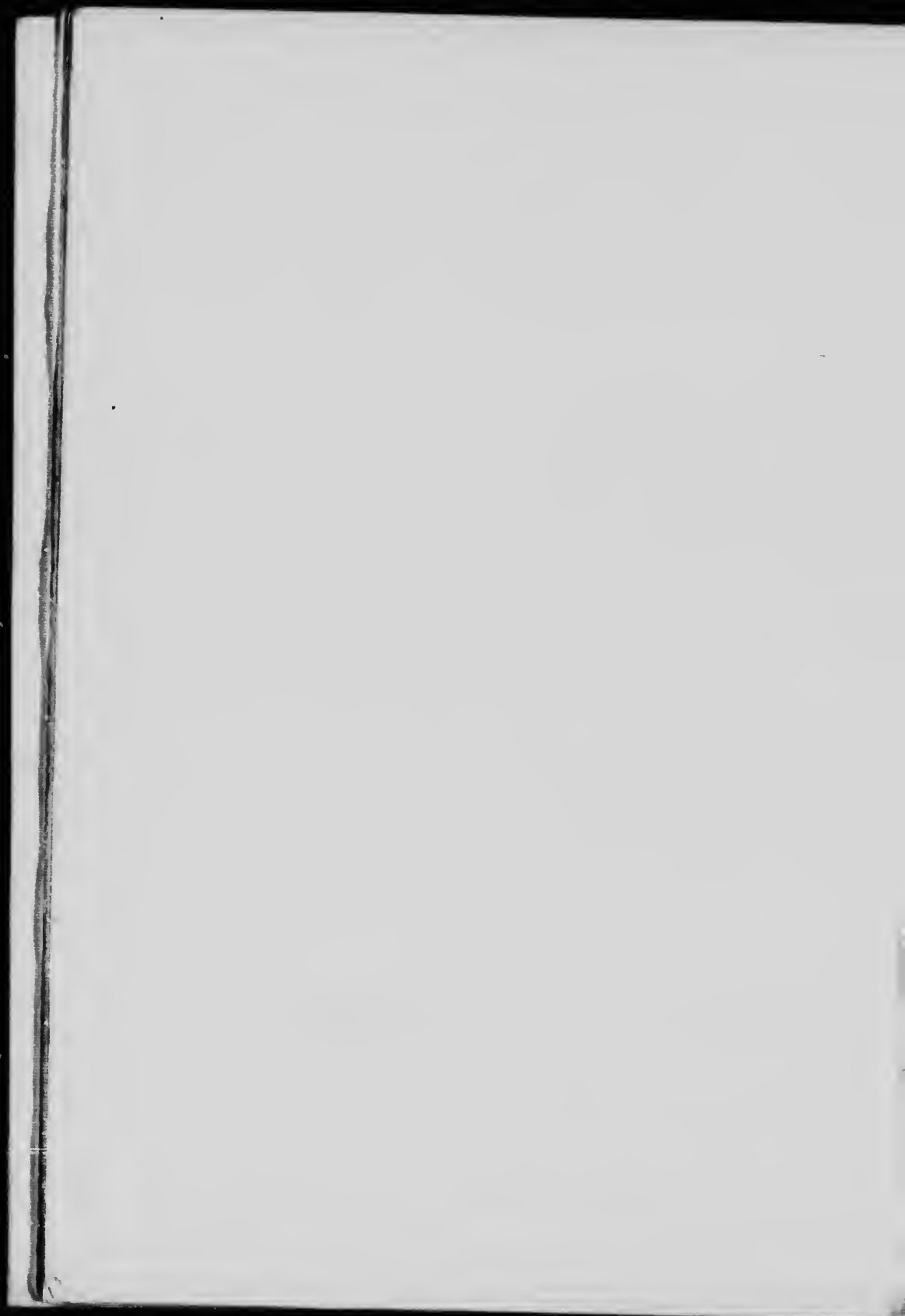
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THE BRIDGE



THE BRIDGE

By MARK SOMERS



TORONTO
WILLIAM BRIGGS

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TO

J. W. H.

PREFATORY NOTE

I wish to express my gratitude to Lt.-Colonel E. C. Thwaytes for granting me the privilege of dipping into his translation of Hafiz with its valuable notes on mysticism.

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THE BRIDGE

CHAPTER I

OVERHEAD the magic veil of night, with its sparkling canopy of stars. Poised low on the horizon, the mellow lustre of a tropical moon gleaming across the infinite waste of waters. Only the subdued throb of the engines, and the ship's bows lifting slowly and dipping on the gentle swell of the Indian Ocean.

Margaret Denham gazed down into the velvety shadows cast by the starboard lights and the tiny blue and silver ripples racing in to meet them.

"What a joy to escape from the eternal crowd!"

As he spoke, the man leaned still closer, and his hand—perhaps it was an accident—ventured lightly over hers, and lingered for a moment as if unconscious of the contact of flesh and blood.

"Captain Mewwyn!" When she was startled or forgot, her r's were apt to become transformed into w's. It was ever so slight and rather enchanting.

Just for the fraction of a second her eyes chal-

lenged his ; then, withdrawing her hand swiftly, she moved a little from him, and her face flushed dimly in the moonlight.

"Oh!" he protested with obvious insincerity. "I beg your pardon. The fact is I hadn't noticed your hand was there—before mine ; the moonlight is so deceiving at times." The erring hand was thrust ostentatiously back into his pocket, and he strove to hide a smile—with indifferent success ; but she did not see, her eyes were intent on the stars which danced aloft in the rigging.

Dreamy strains of a waltz came floating down the soft, sleepy breeze, and the girl started impatiently, the rhythm of the music stealing to her feet so that they began to tingle with the ache of keeping still ; for she was young and evidently fond of dancing.

"I hope——" said he, and paused to glance at her, a faint amusement twinkling still in the keen, worldly eyes—"I hope," he continued, "you are not too offended with me to forgive . . ."

His tones were charged with overmuch penitence, but her ears caught only the sobbing cadence of music which thrilled the still air and mingled with the melody of gliding waters. At length, conscious of his scrutiny, her eyes met his and a faint answering smile wrinkled her mouth. "Of what were you dreaming?" he queried, and his drawl was indolent as he watched her with half-closed eyes.

There came a puff of wind of a sudden and it frolicked in her hair, causing a few tendrils to stray in dark ripples across the moonlight of her forehead. She put her hand up, and deftly patted them back into place with a sidelong, elf-like glance at him.

Followed a silence the while she hid from view a last reluctant ripple, then the oddly pale, half-whimsical, half-wistful little face was upturned to his with swift animation.

"Perhaps I was listening to the music of the spheres, of 'worlds singing to worlds,' she retorted, flashing upon him her strange, maddening smile such as a man might never quite forget. Her smile? A thing so elusive is chary of definition. It rose out of the depths of inscrutable eyes, then spread swiftly to the mouth, wrinkling it like the petals of a rose; and there was a hint of raillery in it and the lure of something subtle and feminine which strained at the very heartstrings of a man.

He watched her closely, so closely that the cigar was forgotten, and the red glow of it faded out and died. She was quite bewildering, half-child, half-woman, with a third indefinable quality that was simply distracting. It was not coquetry with which she was affected, but a perfectly natural, childish *naïveté* that was rather adorable, he reflected. He had never seen a face that changed so suddenly; yet it was not beautiful,

and, moreover, it conveyed two quite opposite impressions: the tip-tilted chin was firm, with all of a woman's decisive character, whereas in the eyes there lurked a soft, abiding childishness. The short upper lip pouted ever so slightly over the lower, and they glowed, a splash of crimson, against the pale cheeks—a pallor that was bewitching, and certainly was due to no lack of vitality. But the eyes! they were the life of the small, pale face. Mervyn smiled a little to himself and peered into their deep, dreamy shadows.

“What a very poetical little person it is!” he murmured; but she was gazing dreamily out to sea, her thoughts flitting far over the blue distance to the silvery rim of the waves; she was wondering just what might begin there—where the sky ceased.

Silence once more, save for the hissing of the water as it lapped against the side of the ship and was repulsed.

The man was pondering deeply, thinking of the childish lilt of the little maid's voice and the mystery of her glance; yet he could not quite fathom her eyes, and he kept turning to them ever. They were abnormally round and clear; the lids were very white, and the thick black lashes veiled them with dewy shadows; and thus far he got, then the colour began to elude him. At times they were the misty grey of early morning; again they seemed all black and limpid like a moonless

night aglow with the sparkle of stars ; between these two extremes there was an infinite range of blue and violet as the expression kept ever changing, and the light and shade kept stealing in and out, after the manner of an opal in the sun.

No, she was not pretty, he decided at last—to call her so would have been almost an insult—and yet she was possessed of a strange, elfin charm.

The warm night air played with the soft, thin frock, causing it to cling more tenderly until it betrayed—while striving to conceal—the sweet, childish outline.

Mervyn's eyes ran over her figure with approbation. Certainly he had a pretty taste in figures—also, the unlovely continental fashion of appraising a woman with his eyes. She was tall above the average, and deliciously rounded, yet he instinctively thought of her as a small person by reason of her slim girlishness.

And so he summed her up.

Suddenly she broke the silence in the low, soft tones that seem always to accompany her particular type of face and colouring.

"Do you ever dream about things that are going to happen? I mean, if you are going on a journey, do you dream all about people and things beforehand?"

He smiled indolently, but, glancing at her,

responded instantly to her mood, his being the winning tact which betokens a knowledge and understanding of women.

"Yes," he assented encouragingly.

"I've been having such strange dreams," she pursued half to herself.

"Let it be revealed, that I may interpret," he answered with just a tinge of railery in his voice. The girl turned to him and there was golden magic in her laugh. "Be it known, O most Delphic Oracle," she mimicked, while in her eyes there danced the spirit of mockery, "I beheld a waning moon climb up over the far horizon, and it seemed to smile with sad derision at the absurd span of human life and the fretful dance of death before one goes out . . . like the moth and gnats."

All trace of mockery died of a sudden, and her voice sank as she went on dreamily: "Little by little, I seemed to slip out into the unknown—far away into the blank silence of space. And I dreamed of an inland sea and a white, shining vision with blue eyes, wide open as a child's. It rose slowly from the water, and somehow I knew it was the spirit of Illusion. I tried to reach it, but it looked at me so strangely, and then vanished into nothing . . . like a dream when it is gone."

She paused, and her steadfast eyes gazing out to sea were fixed as on eternity.

Mervyn watched her spellbound, and as he

watched a moonbeam flickered in her eyes so that the thick, black lashes drooped demurely until they met in a dark tangle.

Silence, the rising moon filling the sea with even deeper mystery. Very softly the dreamy voice continued, and the man swiftly fell under the glamour of it and of the warm nearness of her sweet girlishness.

"Two pale lights flickered up, side by side, and I saw a long road narrowing to a ribbon in the haze. I walked on for years through the mists of infinity. Then, all at once, the veil of clouds lifted, and I saw in front of me a land with a soft, eternal sun shining on it. I began to run, for I longed to reach the journey's end and to rest. Suddenly the earth opened at my feet and I was cut off. I tried to jump across, but the gulf widened and I sank down at the brink with the sound of the waters in my ears. . . . Oh, it all seemed so hopeless!"

She faltered, a little catch in her breath and an inscrutable sadness in the grey eyes. Mervyn waited motionless for her to proceed.

"A silver thread came wafted from the other side, blown on a breeze like some spider's web. It grew bigger and bigger until it stretched across, all white and filmy. . . . I think it must have been a bridge of moonbeams. I stepped on it, all eager to reach my 'Land of Sun'; but below the blackness was appalling, and I knew that I

walked only on moonbeams. I was terrified. . . . Then the bridge broke in two and I felt myself sink into darkness. As I sank, I heard a voice—oh, I can't remember whose it was—” she broke off, wrinkling her pretty brows. “And yet I knew at the time.”

She finished, and the echo of her low, thrilling voice held him in its thrall. Her eyes gazed despairingly into his and for an instant he felt strangely moved; then, for the first time he noted that his cigar had gone out, and, the spell broken, he turned and threw it far out to sea, hiding the swift smile that rose to his lips. Still, when he spoke there was a subtle note of sympathy in his voice.

“Am I to interpret?” he queried, eyeing her gravely enough. Of a sudden, descending from her dream world, she looked swiftly away from him, and her voice was low and tremulous as she murmured her assent.

“But,” he protested, “I must first know your destination. Won't you tell me now?”

“I don't—know.” The eyes were still down-cast, but suddenly they sparkled. “Of course I can't tell you yet. We arranged not to—until the last day on board. Pray, what difference can it make?” she demanded, looking up with a flash of imperious womanhood.

“It is,” said he, “purely a matter of destiny. That I should travel by this boat and know you at all is a sublime decree of Fate.”

She watched him with a feminine, sidelong stare that was searching and not wholly ill-pleased, for the man had rather a courtly manner of speech at times. He possessed also the curious quality of appeal which some men have for the opposite sex, though of course she did not realize it in that way. Only she knew that crisp, dark hair, tinged with grey at the temples, was rather becoming; that he was strikingly handsome; that there was a subtle cord of sympathy linking them together despite the countless years—by her way of reckoning—that lay between.

In the beginning an intimacy had sprung up between them. He had suggested that they should forgo the formal preliminaries of conversation from the first, and she, gleefully consenting, had insisted that the order of events be reversed and all banal topics of conversation reserved for the last day of the voyage. And thus it came about that the destinations of each were not to be discussed or even disclosed yet awhile.

She laughed softly and there was a mocking note in the rippling sound of it. "I think I am engaged for the next dance," she remarked, leaning, as she spoke, over the taffrail and examining her programme.

At that moment the music struck up afresh, and this time it was one of Strauss's perfections, with the throbbing plaint that wrings the heart. The girl glanced at him quizzically.

"We shall know all about each other this time next week," she said, and her childish delight in the situation evoked an answering smile on his face, though he would not admit of a like joy to himself.

"I live but for that moment," he responded gallantly.

"And I must go," she said, and turning sharply round, she walked to the other side of the ship, her face radiant; being very young, her sense of importance grew apace.

That night Mervyn lay out on deck striving to sleep. There recurred to him the grey magic of inscrutable eyes and the lure of pouting lips; he laughed a little at himself, and would not admit aught save the zest of a novel experience. She was a child-woman, he reflected, and but half-asleep—some day she would awake. And—yes, he recognized that rare type of face which is not remarkable save for the witchery of the eyes, but which may flash out at times into a transient beauty that fades as fast. That which charms in a woman is not so much the apparent as the veiled or imaginary quantity, he concluded lazily, and, with a satisfied sigh, he fell asleep to the sound of the wind in the awning.

CHAPTER II

IT was the end of September, and there being the typical profusion of brides-elect on their way to Bombay and matrimony, the flirtations aboard ship were as numerous as is their wont—flirtations on moonlit decks, with stars overhead, and only the whispering sound of still waters murmuring their protests, soft and low.

The prospective wives cultivated the gentle art of philandering with no small degree of aptitude. It was their last fling, and—well, the weather was hot: Suez, that receptacle of consciences, lay far astern. Tropical memories are notoriously short, however, and a month later all the protests of undying affection, the very names almost, would be forgotten or left behind in the storehouse of oblivion—Bombay, most likely.

There were exceptions, of course: as for Margaret Denham it was simply a thing beyond comprehension. She chanced to come under the rather rare category of those who do not forget, and, being charmingly old-fashioned also in other ways, many things on the voyage merely escaped her notice.

As the black-hulled ship was ploughing its way through the Indian Ocean, the girl began to look back upon the days that had passed with a vague sense of disappointment ; still, it was only a part of the price she had to pay for her enthusiastic imagination. Life had been all anticipations with her till now, and the voyage was the first shadow cast by realization. All her life had been spent in a quiet country vicarage, and the perpetual crowd on deck was becoming more irksome each day. Worst of all, the same people at every hour of the day and for so many days ; never to be able to get away from them, when solitude was a thing most to be desired—simply, there was nowhere to go to, the cabin having become impossible by reason of the heat. After interminable hours of waiting there came intervals of food and sleep, and soon the enforced idleness began to react on the nerves of passengers, on their digestion, and subsequently on their tempers. Margaret's stable companion, likewise, detracted from her peace of mind ; for that good lady was fair and forty, not fat exactly, but much addicted to cosmetics and a monopolization of the mirror—also the clothes-pegs.

The girl seldom found herself alone. Her sweet charm of manner had made her rather a popular person on board ; and being natural in a delightfully spontaneous fashion, there was something refreshing and wholesome about her which she

exhaled as an aura, so that her very presence somehow seemed to make one feel at peace with the world. With it all she was deliciously elusive, and to explore the unknown is ever attractive—most of all to men.

The one part of the voyage she appreciated was the Suez Canal; she could half close her eyes and imagine the desert to be moving, slowly sliding past the taffrail, while the boat itself was the stationary object. The sky was a flaunting blue, the sun of a prodigious power, and there was nothing quite so fascinating as the great, arid desert, scorching and sweltering 'neath the fierce ball of fire, with all the wide, silent spaces of it wrapped in shimmering mystery. And the desert sunset, flashing and scintillating through the palms and foliage of some oasis by the way; the opal tints of the sky; the sudden, warm dusk, and then night; the glare of the searchlight forward; large white storks that flitted at times across the shaft of light, looming up in its misty radiance like phantoms of the night! And aft—the vast, unknown desert, stretching out, obscure and ghostly, under the moon and the lonely glittering stars.

By night the canal was a dream of enchantment, and she longed to have it all to herself, with no one breaking in upon her. She had had so many disappointments. The very name of Port Said had sounded so thrilling, conjuring up visions of

the Arabian Nights, and seeming to reek of Eastern mysteries, whereas the day spent ashore there was only very boring, and the East did not appear so picturesque at close quarters—only very squalid and malodorous.

The nights on deck were the illuminating feature of the long voyage—sleeping in the open, fanned by soft, cool airs, the stars above and around; the never-ceasing swish of waters as they lulled her to sleep, whispering that nothing was real, everything but a dream that would soon fade—a dream of subtle fragrance that was strangely sweet, and seemed only to hover on wings of lightest gossamer! For her the present sufficed, and the future was still sufficiently distant to remain enchanted.

Morning was a rude despoiler of dreams, and the noise of many sailors making ready to swab down the decks brought the future unpleasantly close. Then it seemed only a moment since a soft, sweet sleep had come stealing over her. Why the absurd men could not do all that when every one was at breakfast was beyond her comprehension; for to join in a general stampede down the companion-way just when it was most delicious to lie on the vague borderland betwixt sleeping and waking, with eyes half-open, watching the sun rise all rosy from the sea, was in itself unthinkable. But the swift-footed sailors thought otherwise, and there was nothing for it but to tumble

down and into a cabin unspeakably hot and stuffy.

There came at length the last day at sea, and, to her woman's way of thinking, the voyage in retrospect became instantly tinged with regret.

After dinner Captain Mervyn joined her, and as they paced the deck together she talked as though she had known him all her life ; so that, forgetting to think of him as old, she knew only the comfort of an intimacy with one who understood, and of such it was her first experience. Perhaps, too, the consideration that on the morrow they would each go their several ways weighed in no small measure.

They halted finally at the stern taffrail and leaned over, gazing down into the gleaming wake.

"I must go now," she asserted, but with no apparent evidence of departure.

"Talking of our destination——" he broke in hurriedly.

"But we weren't," she affirmed solemnly.

Very gravely he produced a watch and held it so that the moonlight fell upon it.

"In precisely one hour and thirty-five minutes it will be to-morrow," said he.

"And in precisely twenty-five minutes I shall be in bed and asleep," she mocked. "Oh, it has been so delightful not to know anything at all about one another and to meet as 'ships that pass in the night'!"

"And so completely that we never pass again?" he queried, with a shade of bitterness in his voice.

"I did not say so," and she laughed up at his handsome, frowning face; but the laugh died as swiftly.

"You *do* know what I mean, Captain Mervyn," she insisted earnestly. "You—you have been so sweet to me, and it is nice to think that our friendship is a thing set apart in my life . . . as the voyage itself."

Somehow the explanation did not offer much consolation, for the frown on his face did not relax yet awhile; only when he bade her good-night and held her hand for a moment the ready smile lit up his face once more.

Despite her protestations to the contrary, it was long past midnight before she fell asleep, thoughts of the future having suddenly obtruded themselves with all the weight of immediate proximity and with compound interest proportionate to their former repudiation.

She awoke with a start and shivered, and then became conscious that the ship was quite motionless. It was still dark. Rising swiftly, she walked noiselessly to the side and leaned over, watching the image of the last star pale and grow dim: in the silent mirror of the sea there appeared another heaven and other stars, as if in mockery of those above, and for awhile she stood wondering

just what was real and what illusion. She had dreamed that she dreamed. This time it had been a dream within a dream—even yet she could not quite separate substance from shadow. Then she looked out towards the east, where a darker shadow lay and where small, pale lights gleamed, and it occurred to her that the ship must be at anchor in Bombay harbour.

Of a sudden the strange, cold terror clutched at her heart again.

CHAPTER III

MOST of the passengers were already on deck despite the early hour, some few of the male element arrayed in kimonos vying in splendour with the pyjamas they did their best to conceal. The voyage being over, the sleepy tenor of inaction was at an end, and now the pervading atmosphere was one of restless expectancy, men speculating as to the orders that lay in wait for them, and women, perchance, on the men who might be there to meet them. All were awake once more to the worries and cares of life and of the day's work that lay beyond.

The sun, newly risen, was tinting the domes and roofs of the city a faint, delicious pink, and the softness of outline was indescribable. Margaret Denham stood gazing at it, enchanted, as at a city of dreams, with mysterious buildings rising up elf-like from the waters and encircling the distant front like some giant girdle, and the masts of many ships looming up in the morning haze like "spirits from the vasty deep."

"Looks so beastly Eastern," a voice drawled close beside her, and the girl was brought with a

rush down to earth once more—or, to be strictly accurate, the ship's deck—with the spell of her first vision of India broken.

"Oh, Captain Mervyn, what a horribly material person you are! You reduce everything to prose, and that," she asserted, gazing at the shore with an air of childish expectancy, "is a poem in itself."

"Well," he replied, with light mockery of tone, "let us each stretch a point and agree to call it blank verse. With this one stipulation, that six months hence you will admit which version is correct, whether you then find India verse or—er—the reverse. I give you that time to discover the truth—you will find it rather a liberal allowance."

"Very well. I'll take you at your word," she said, smiling.

"Feel disposed to bet on it?"

"Yes, if you like," she flashed back at him.

"What shall it be—the stakes, I mean?" he asked, beginning to smile, and for an instant she stopped to reflect.

"The challenge was yours," she remarked with tentative caution, "so of course it is for you to name them."

"If I were to win, I know full well what reward I should demand . . . if I but dared."

Turning swiftly, he stared at her in silence, and the quiet, steadfast eyes rested on him for a moment with a puzzled look.

"What——?" she faltered; but her eyes, reading perhaps some meaning in his level, passionate gaze, suddenly grew hurt, like a child's, and she drew herself up. Instantly the man looked away.

"In that case, let us call the bet off," she replied in a little chill, cutting voice.

Her face, as she lifted it haughtily, looked so small and young that a fleeting twinge of compunction seized him, and he stood quite still, gravely biting at the ends of a close-cropped moustache and pondering deeply; then a look of veiled amusement crept into his face, as he found her naïve displeasure on so slight a pretext rather diverting.

"What a dear little grey-eyed Puritan it is!" he reflected, approving the curl of pouting lips grown momentarily disdainful.

For the first time it occurred to Margaret that the man's remarks might frequently have meant more than she had comprehended. Presently, she decided that it was only his manner—and her ignorance. She had not yet come to realize that he had a faculty for saying things which in other men would have sounded offensive, but which he carried off with a gallant assurance that would have served to deceive—or gratify—a woman more versed in the ways of the world than herself; and that he was fascinating to most women, perhaps because he was half-insolent to them, in a graceful, indolent fashion. Instead she recalled with

pleasure not wholly free of regret the friendship that had prevailed between them, the disparity in their ages which might confer a liberty not otherwise permissible ; last of all she recollected that the time had come to divulge their several destinations and futures.

Her assurance restored, and feeling somewhat ashamed of her suspicions, she broke the silence.

"Do you know," she queried with a little smile that was strangely shy, "this is the day when we were to tell each other's secrets?"

"Don't imagine I had forgotten. . . . I was waiting for you, to see if you would remember."

"Well," said she, brimful of girlish curiosity, "where are you going?"

"Junglibad—for my sins."

She looked at him ; and, her eyes growing wide and round, the white lids of them flashed up and disappeared quite, leaving only the black, up-curling lashes and the misty grey eyes. Her lips parted to speak, but she said nothing.

"And you . . . where are you going to, my—?" He ceased speaking abruptly, but his smile implied the rest more gracefully than mere words.

Her eyes shone rather than sparkled, and a merry smile broke through despite her efforts to suppress it.

"I—I'm going to Junglibad, sir," she mimicked, looking down demurely.

He watched her awhile as one fascinated against his will.

"Did I not predict we were caught within the same mesh of destiny?" he responded. "But it is perfectly charming to know that we shall be station mates! . . . I refer to my own point of view, of course. May one be rudely inquisitive and ask whom you are going to visit there? It is a small station and we all take a lively interest in one another's most private concerns—pay, place and date of birth, pedigree, and so on down to details of the most minute interest." He broke into a laugh, and for once there was a frank, ingenuous ring of satisfaction in it.

"I am going to be married: Captain Wade—do you know him?"

He looked down, and for the first time noticed a ring on the tell-tale finger; but her eyes, faltering before his swift glance, were mercifully hid from him by long drooping lashes.

For once his mask of indifference all but deserted him, and knowing now that she was beyond his reach, his complacent appreciation of a novel experience instantly vanished and instead he desired her for herself above all else.

Then he spoke, averting his eyes from hers and looking straight in front of him.

"Know him? I should rather think I do! We are both in the same regiment, 'Foote's Horse'—an unhappy name, for of course we are dubbed

the 'Footers' throughout the length and breadth of the Indian Empire. . . ." His voice had grown coldly impassive and he broke into a short laugh, with all its old shallow sound. "What a dark horse old Wade is! . . . I did not know he was going to be married," he added, a little meaning smile still hovering about the corners of his mouth; but her thoughts had taken wing, and she noticed nothing amiss.

"Tell me about Junglibad," she said, with much childish coaxing and grace. "Is it such a very terrible place?"

"Four months in the year are quite delightful, and the remaining eight"—he paused to light a cigarette—"well, they each offer a prospect of Hades quite distinctly and peculiarly their own."

Noting her look of serious credulity, he went on in a tone of mock gravity: "Yes, it is even said that at times there remains only a thin layer of tissue-paper between Junglibad and Gehenna. That is not strictly true—at least, not quite—but it is certainly one of the hottest stations in India. An amazing number of 'em seem to claim a similar distinction! Dust and scorching heat for eight months in the year and station quarrels for all twelve. Our leading lady, in the shape of the Deputy Commissioner's wife, sees to that part of the programme. Does not sound over-fascinating, does it? But then, India is an acquired taste, they say."

"Obviously you have not yet succeeded in acquiring it."

"Candidly, I have not. . . . I don't think that I ever shall. But women don't find so much to grouse about there as men, and some of them like it—perhaps because there are so many men and so few women. Of course you will go to the hills for the hot weather?" His drawl became a very languid affair.

"I do not think I should care to leave my husband," she replied quietly.

" 'Wait and see,' " he quoted sagely. "Husbands are made to be left in India . . . their one justification being that they foot all the bills," and he chuckled softly to himself.

Just then the bugle sounded, and all descended with haste to conventional garb and to breakfast.

CHAPTER IV

LATER, the fussy little tender appeared, threading its way alongside with an air of exaggerated importance and in a fashion suggesting the conflux of impudence and dignity. Margaret Denham, gazing down with fast-beating heart, could distinguish no face she knew on board, and she turned aside with an audible sigh of relief. It was so many years since she had last seen him—how important such years might be in the lives of a man and a maid she did not stop to realize. Once she had loved him within limits, and now she sought to reassure herself.

Some little bustle there was, some hurried farewells, some never-to-be-fulfilled promises to write, and the heavily laden tender set out for the landing-stage.

Mervyn joined Margaret as she stood eyeing intently the fast approaching shore. He was resolved to remain beside her until the very end, and, moreover, he felt greatly curious to witness her meeting with Wade.

"Glad to reach the journey's end?" he queried languidly.

"Yes," she murmured, but she prefaced the affirmative with a sudden sigh.

"What do you think of your dream city now?" he asked, and smiled a little to himself.

"I may tell you in six months' time, Captain Mervyn, but certainly not now."

For a moment her eyes were alluring, tiny twinkles of mischief lurking in their depths; but they changed instantly, and the anxious, wistful look stole into them again.

They drew close to the "bund," and the girl's heart began to race at top speed as she watched the chattering black and white throng—European and native. Presently she stepped ashore, the gateway of India reached and herself in a strange land, and still he was not in evidence. There were so many people all greeting one another simultaneously: the female missionary—woefully plain of features and drab of figure—was being met by her fiancé, equally colourless and devoid of looks.

"Doesn't seem right, somehow, does it, Miss Denham?" queried Mervyn, as he watched them.

He was considering the interests of posterity. But Margaret was wondering if Rex would greet her like that—a greeting of the sheepish order, consisting of a formal handshake and a painful smile.

"There's our man at last!" remarked Mervyn, as a tall, bronzed individual elbowed his way through the crowd.

"Where?" the girl asked breathlessly.

By this time Wade had caught sight of her, and now he was holding both her hands, squeezing them very tightly in large, brown, freckled fists. His vehemence frightened her, and she wondered if he was going to kiss her before every one—his eyes shone so ardently into hers.

"Hullo, little woman! Why, how very grown-up you have become! I should scarce have known you at first; you were more or less of a flapper when I left England, you know, and now I stand quite in awe of you."

The lean, brown face was lit by a pair of piercing blue eyes of that peculiar pale hue which looks as though it were sun-bleached, and they gazed dominantly down on the small, round, wistful face.

Margaret flashed a little, curious look at him, and somehow she did not know exactly what to say. She felt quite composed now, and, half-closing her eyes in a fashion she had at times, she regarded him for a moment with a cool, critical stare. It occurred to her that his face had become very lined, so that he looked almost as old as Captain Mervyn . . . perhaps they really were much of an age after all; and then, all unconsciously, her mind began to weigh the one against the other. . . . The Rex she had known and loved four years ago had been a boy: it was a man—almost a stranger—who stood before her now,

and—yes, it had not occurred to her hitherto that in the four years he and she might discover that each had developed into a strangely different being.

“Oh, I *am* so glad to get off the ship,” she said at last. “It has all been very jolly, of course, but it is nice to be on land once more—and to see you again, Rex,” she added hastily ; for it suddenly struck her that her greeting was miserably inadequate.

The man’s laugh was sincere : it was also rare, as his friends knew. “At least I’m glad you remembered to include me in the end,” he said, and his voice sounded deep and vibrant, “even if I did come in only as an afterthought. Hullo, Mervyn ! didn’t notice you before. I quite forgot that you also were coming out on the *Macedonia*.”

The girl watched the men as they exchanged current gossip, and the harsh contrast between them struck her : the one slim and graceful, handsome, too, in a distinguished, rather brilliant fashion, and the other his very antithesis.

Reginald Wade had fairish hair, which glinted redly in the sunlight, and the short, stubby moustache was frankly ruddy. The face, with its sharp-cut prominence of feature, was cold and haughty, one in which an indomitable pride of race blended with a supreme self-reliance. The projecting, inflexible jaw was aggressive ; but the most notable characteristic perhaps was the penetrating glance of pale, cold eyes, which lent to

his face a keen, hawk-like expression. He was the sinewy, "hard-bitten" stamp of man who always seems to be in iron-hard condition. Compared with Mervyn, his manner and guise appeared blunt: one, the product of civilization, quick and gallant of bearing; the other, elemental and untamed, a type suggestive of primitive passions, with always a hint of reserved strength in the background.

"Well, Miss Denham, good-bye, and all kinds of luck!" Mervyn turned to the girl and held out his hand.

She looked at him for a swift moment and a sudden pain stabbed at her heart, for she hated saying "good-bye" to friends—to acquaintances even—and the man seemed somehow to be the last link with the old life and with England. Just then she felt strangely forlorn; she felt, too, that she knew Rex but little and understood him not at all, and . . . that very day she was to be married to him.

"I say," interposed Wade, with a swift smile—he was in rather an expansive mood just then—"come and see us married—that is, if you chance to have nothing particular to do. We should be most glad if you would, I'm sure."

The other glanced rather quizzically at Miss Denham for a moment. "Delighted to have come," said he at last, "and it is uncommon good of you to ask me, but, do you know, I'm booked

for the rest of the afternoon and I couldn't possibly get out of it—unfortunately.”

The voice was suave, but there lurked somewhere the shadow of a sneer that did not pass altogether unobserved.

“It will not be long before we three meet again in Junglibad, will it?” he wound up, with the least little touch of scorn in his voice.

“Good-bye,” said Wade curtly, turning from him.

The poise of his head had become arrogant, and the lines about his mouth hardened perceptibly.

Captain John Mervyn raised his topee with a smile, and, wheeling round, was soon swallowed up in the crowd.

“By God!” he muttered under his breath, as he drove off a few minutes later, “she does not know the meaning of love yet. Wade, of all men, to teach her!” and he bit viciously into a short black cheroot.

CHAPTER V

"COME along, Margaret ; I've got a gharry waiting outside," said Wade abruptly ; and he led the way through the crowd, with a word to an acquaintance here and there.

Beside the gharry the erstwhile bearer stood waiting to receive his future memsahib in a manner befitting his new estate. He had blossomed forth into the full dignity of the Bootlair sahib, and was imposingly clad in all the honours of his position, including a gorgeous turban with cummerbund to match, for the acquisition of which he had borrowed from "master" one month's pay in advance ; but was it not all in the honour and glory of the sahib and his mem, of which he was to be the chief ornament and upholder ! His salaam was a perfect blending of dignity and benevolence, while in his innermost soul he was asking himself what manner of mistress this would be. Would he still be able to fill his belly to overflowing as in days of yore, or would he have to seek new service with a bachelor sahib who had not the time or the inclination to go into the bazaar bill or count the stores ?

"I suppose the agents are looking after your baggage?" said Wade as they entered the gharry.

"Yes," she replied; "but I have only told them to have it cleared and brought on shore. I did not quite know what other arrangements to make."

"In that case we had better drive round by their office and leave instructions." He leaned forward and spoke forcefully to the gharawalla.

"I have only got ten days' casual leave, and I thought we might as well go up to Materan—it is rather ripping there at this time of year."

"I am leaving all the arrangements to you," she acquiesced after a slight pause.

"I'm sorry that our honeymoon is to be such a short one, but it is difficult to get leave just at present." He glanced keenly at her face for a moment, then continued: "The bungalow in Junglibad is all ready for us, and it is really more comfortable than any up-country hotel could ever be."

He took her hand, pressing it almost roughly. Instantly she looked away, and a shadow of restraint fell between them.

"You don't mind, do you, Margaret?"

For the first time in her life her spontaneous naturalness deserted her, and she experienced a strange diffidence. Simply, there had been no cause hitherto to be anything else but natural—in that respect was her upbringing commendable. She shook her head gravely and stared out at the

glaring white road. Sudden baby tears glistened in her eyes and were as swiftly suppressed. She ought to wait, she thought piteously . . . at least until she should come to know him again. . . . And all the while she knew she must go through with it to-day—there was no one she could go to in India save Rex. Suddenly she raised her head proudly, and the pouting lips grew firm, almost hard. She would not give way to self-pity, she vowed ; no one else in the world should know what she was suffering.

They did not talk much as the gharry bowled them along the esplanade, and the grey eyes were fixed in a sidelong gaze that took in all the manifold sights of the city. She strove to rivet her attention on things of the streets—the sounds and smells of Bombay, the first impress of which lingers long and is strong, the strange contrasts in dress—and undress—not least of all.

Under a tree adjoining some college cricket-field sat a native barber, plying his trade in an attitude of complete detachment, he and his victim both cheerfully oblivious of the passers-by, enjoying the publicity of it all perchance. On past stately Government buildings, with tall, shady trees on one side, where an officious waterman was plying his hose, much to his own gratification and the amusement of not a few of the onlookers ; manipulating it in a manner little short of marvellous, playing the water now on one side of the

road, now on the other, with a perplexing change of direction; only just grazing the traffic, or some perplexed pedestrian, by the narrowest of margins.

Arrived at the agents', the needful instructions were given; then the gharry turned down a narrow side-street redolent of Eastern spices and sweet, sickly perfumes, mingled with odours of a less pleasant nature; and in open stalls, with their crowds of black flies, sat unctuous shopkeepers whining their multifarious wares.

Emerging on the broad Queen's Road, fringed with trees, with the sea beyond shimmering in the heat, they drove past cool, shady bungalows, gleaming low from beneath a tangle of rich foliage. Margaret sat up suddenly.

"Oh, Rex," she exclaimed breathlessly, "what an extraordinary figure these natives are carrying along in a chair! Look! over there—all decked round with flowers and tinsel. Why, it is just like a Guy Fawkes!" Her low laugh thrilled him to the heart.

At that moment the gharry was obliged to pull up, and the procession approached quite close to them. The girl shrank back with horror; in a flash she realized that she was looking upon the face of a dead native—a face of a sickly, greenish hue, and a body that jolted limply from side to side.

"How perfectly awful!" she gasped, flinching

from the gruesome object with eyes staring wide ; and with a gesture, childish almost and infinitely dear, she clung to the man, oblivious for the moment of aught but her fear.

He looked at her, and in an instant forgot all save her sweet girlishness and the vivid parted lips ; felt the soft, warm clinging of her until the sense of nearness made his blood tingle. Still he sat staring straight in front of him, holding himself in rigid control.

Glancing up at him, she encountered the masculine power of his eyes. Half-fascinated—as yet she scarce knew why—she watched the face, set and grimly forbidding, then sank back in her corner with a wonderment and an ever-growing trouble in her eyes. In a moment she was afraid of life, of its ruthlessness and its mystery, and she went pale to the lips.

At last he spoke ; and as he turned to her, the keen, hawk-like eyes had grown strangely soft—the pity of it was that she did not see, or, seeing, did not understand.

“It is all right, dear. There, now ! Look the other way.”

“But—what are they doing, Rex ?” she asked in a faint, tremulous voice, her eyes shrinking from him.

“Some dead native being carried to the burning ghauts—that is all,” he answered gently, glancing for a moment into the pathetic, childish eyes,

with their dark, dreamy shadows, and watching the swift surge of her girlish bosom.

Soon they were mounting the road which leads to Malabar Hill, past the Parsees' Towers of Silence, where great unwholesome-looking vultures congregate, perched up in the foliage of palm-trees, waiting patiently for their orgy to begin, their bare, scrawny necks craning forward and evil eyes ever on the alert, some of them with wings rigidly outstretched like so many vampires, all of them unutterably loathsome and unclean.

Margaret Denham passed them by, blissfully unconscious of their fell significance. She was trying to grasp her first impressions of India—and of life. Being impressionable and readily affected by her surroundings, it seemed to her as if the very atmosphere were charged with death and a brooding sadness, rendered all the more vivid by reason of the glaring sunshine. How very different every one seemed to be! she reflected; and ever afterwards a vague dread of the place clung to her, and she hated Bombay always.

"We shall soon be at the Smiths' bungalow now," remarked Wade, striving to rouse her from her despondency. "I'm sure you will like her immensely. She is rather an old dear."

But all his efforts were unavailing, and soon he gave up the attempt.

At last the bungalow was reached, and Mrs. Smith welcomed the girl with outstretched arms,

enveloping her in a copious embrace. She seemed to know instinctively what it must mean to a girl like Margaret Denham to be married away from all her people, and, on the very day of her arrival in India, to a man whom she had not seen for years. The girl's face was expressive, and Mrs. Smith, reading there a great sensitiveness and an innocence amounting to profound ignorance, involuntarily gave vent to a sigh of misgiving, and she found herself hoping that the two loved each other very dearly, as a man and woman should love if they are to become man and wife. She bundled the girl off, and neither of them was visible to the male contingent until tiffin.

In the afternoon they set out for the cathedral, where the twain were made one in the presence of the Smiths and a few others. Margaret looked particularly bewitching in a frock of soft grey. The exceeding simplicity of it accentuated her slim girlishness, and the colour matched perfectly the palest shade of her eyes. The art of dressing being an instinct with her, she had the happy faculty of wearing her clothes as if she herself were part and parcel of them.

There were no signs of tears on her face—only a wistful, half-reproachful appeal ; and the drooping lashes fringed her cheeks with shadows. Her courage had been goaded until there was no room for fear—only an unspeakable sense of numbness.

As for Mrs. Smith's eyes, they were frankly moist, and her handkerchief ceased to be an affectation. The Padre pronounced the benediction and concluded the ceremony graciously.

As they drove away alone the girl's self-control kept oozing out at her finger-tips until it left her altogether. Her face grew white, until the pallor of it was almost waxen ; and she kept it turned from him, looking instead upon the fiery, golden haze and the hard, pitiless blue of the sky.

The eyes that gleamed so ardently could yet hold a look amazingly tender, but she did not know ; she was conscious only of the pale, passionate gaze, knew only that she was face to face with some mysterious horror, and the old hidden terror of her dream clutched at her heart. Wade did not stop to think what a strange mystery is the heart of a woman ; his lack of comprehension was colossal.

Of a sudden she shrank back, vividly aware of his nearness ; and there fell a silence so tense that the faint sounds of the streets drummed violently in her ears.

CHAPTER VI

MARGARET DENHAM had been educated entirely at home, partly by her father, the Reverend John, partly by a governess who rejoiced in a frigidly austere spinsterhood—a spinsterhood, in short, from which all the sympathy and charity belonging to some of the less self-denying and less aggressively virtuous of her sex had been frozen. The girl was further handicapped in possessing a mother whose ideas were of the early Victorian order. The Honourable Mrs. Denham affected blue blood and archaic principles. To her way of thinking, the crown of girlhood could best be attained by an ignorance which she considered essential to innocence and purity ; in her vocabulary all three terms were synonymous. Love, when it came, should be yielded to only under protest. And thus she called in question the appointed scheme of things. Such ideas, however rare, may still be met with as long as human nature possesses the audacity to blind itself to facts.

When she was seventeen Margaret put up her hair and spent a month in London with an uncle who was something in the City. There Reginald

Wade marched into her life. At first she did not impress him ; she was a mere slip of a girl, with a pale face, and he hardly noticed her at all. Girls represented to him the superficial, simpering frivolities of life, over which it was his occasional duty to waste time. After he left, the thought of her suddenly haunted him. There was something inaccessible about her, dimly realized and far out of reach. He was not an imaginative youth, but something inexplicable in the round, grey eyes appealed to his love of conquest. She was a mere child, he reflected, and yet she did not "enthuse" inanely over things which did not interest him. He felt perfectly at ease with her, and her simple directness was comforting to his self-esteem. Last of all, he did not feel constrained to make conversation—that was why she interested him, or so he told himself. Still, it was odd how vividly the grave, wistful face should come back to him : he recollected every inflection of her voice, each little characteristic of her manner, the way she threw back her head when she laughed—the most commonplace gesture.

Again he met her, and he found himself listening for the golden magic of her low, sweet voice ; the odd lure of her rare laugh laid hold of him, and he marvelled at himself. They met a third time, and he suddenly resolved that she should marry him some day.

He was a clean-built, hard-conditioned boy. The

sheer love of soldiering filled his imperious, rather lonely nature ; but the subtle, girlish charm of her had entered deep, and he knew that she had become necessary to him. His decisions were always swift, and he never went back on them : already the matter was a foregone conclusion.

He made love in his own quiet, masterful fashion ; she began to like him more than a little, and in the end they became engaged and received the benedictions of those most directly concerned. Altogether, Margaret began to feel rather an important personage.

From time to time occasions had obtruded themselves upon her when she had felt vaguely uneasy, but she possessed a childish faculty for relegating to the background that which did not please her, and of returning instantly to her fanciful and delightful visions of life. Marriage belonged to the cloudy future, and her thoughts of it were quite infrequent and obscure. Wade himself was not demonstrative by nature, and his manner of courtship was admirably restrained.

The visit to London stretched out until the end of the season, and it was an unending source of joy to the girl. She built upon it an aerial edifice of romance ; also she appreciated the freedom from the restraints of an ultra-austere household—one in which mirth and the sheer joyousness of life were looked at askance. Happily, it was an

unusual capacity for contentment and a forcible imagination that saved her from such a soul-destroying environment.

Reginald Wade had passed through the conventional sequence of Public School and Sandhurst, and thence into the Army, with the ultimate object of India in view. That he should be a soldier went without saying ; it was a tradition of his race. His grandfather had fought under the Most Honourable John Company in days when men went out and engaged in single combat, and when family names became firmly established in the legends of Ind. Innumerable Wades had wended their way out to India, and the country had taken its toll of them. The frontier had claimed his father, and the name of Wade had become one to conjure with in the North Country.

The youth did not cultivate illusions ; neither was he a sentimentalist. That he did not suffer from any undue ignorance of life goes without saying ; indeed, it would never have occurred to him that any one could be thus afflicted. His mother had died before he was old enough to appreciate her, and he possessed no sisters, so that the beneficial influence of a woman-at-home had been lacking, without which modern man may be as uncivilized and inconsiderate in some respects as any savage.

The fact that he was going to India immediately promoted him to the rank of a hero.

Margaret wept when he sailed, but distance only seemed to illuminate the halo of romance which she had woven about him. In her eyes he assumed the proportions of a Sir Galahad, a Bayard, and other gallant paragons of chivalry—all of them concentrated in the person of one man, who, it must be confessed, was only a very average specimen of his age and epoch, with a thin streak of good latent in him, and with this disadvantage, that he possessed more than the average man's ignorance of womankind.

At first she had written and looked forward to his letters intensely. As time went on their correspondence became more vague, but the transition was gradual and in no way perceptible. And so the better part of four years passed, and still she dwelt in fanciful realms of her own creation. The date of the marriage fixed, she experienced only an agreeable feeling of excitement and self-importance, and the affair of the trousseau was simply engrossing.

Even then her mother did not deem it desirable to impart the tardy instructions so commonly resorted to on the eve of marriage—those vague, meaningless innuendoes about fulfilling a duty, sacrifice to the future, price to be paid, etc.—which a girl does not necessarily understand further than this, that there is something unheard of awaiting her.

And so the first great step in life's comedy

was entered upon at Charing Cross—a station which seems to be the one connecting-link 'twixt East and West, or the severing-point of many lives, as the case may be. The whistle blew, some few handkerchiefs fluttered, and the train slowly steamed out of the smoke-begrimed station into the big, bright world beyond.

Hidden somewhere, the little blind god smiled and waited.

CHAPTER VII

WAS it only yesterday that she had arrived in India—only yesterday that she had been married? Already her grief seemed as old as the earth itself—a thing that had been lurking in wait for her all down the ages.

She had just finished tea. A smiling ayah had come in and removed the tray, and now there was nothing to do except sit there alone and think. That was the awful part of it—to remain quite still, and think and think until something in her brain felt as if it must snap. At the moment it was all vague and blurred; presently she must consider the complex horror of it in detail.

The veranda where she sat was deep and shady, and behind it was a bedroom obtrusively Anglo-Indian, with its tawdry draperies and paltry tables and knick-knacks. Outside, the sky shone a cloudless blue, but the shadows were already lengthening, and the vague stirring sounds of the jungle came stealing up to her. Hoopoes flashed in the sunlight, flicking their golden crests out and in. The far-off echo of a water-wheel came to her, groaning and creaking, and the minor-key wail

of the man who drove the bullocks—a melancholy sound at the time, but becoming a melodious enough chant in retrospect.

Margaret Wade sat gazing straight in front of her, with round, staring eyes and white cheeks. It was her life that she saw in fragments about her feet. Romance, at whose shrine she had offered such sweet incense, was but a mirage, and men did not exist such as she had imagined. Love was dead and buried; in all the world there was no such thing as love—only desire. Love? That was a thing to which no man could ever attain, and perhaps only a few women aspire. If she could only stop thinking! It seemed as if her thoughts could never again be clean, as if all the world were unclean and corrupt.

Suddenly her lips quivered, her pale, wistful face had become drawn with the agony of the lost, and she bowed her head. Poor little undeveloped girl, her womanhood was all unknown to her! She had thought of love in a quite impersonal way, and as far as she herself was concerned marriage had meant a delightful, if somewhat glorified, continuation of their courtship—that was all. She had failed utterly to grasp any of its meanings . . . and now all her feelings were grossly outraged, and marriage loomed up as some strange, grisly nightmare. She felt stunned, shrinking from the knowledge of life that she scarce yet realized had been thrust upon her.

A little wind sprang up and sighed plaintively, and the shadows crept stealthily nearer until they reached the room in which she sat. She rose wearily and groped her way out into the veranda. For a moment she stood still, listening to the voices of the twilight, gazing into the golden dusk and this misery of hers which seemed to be stretching away to all eternity.

Sunset in India is startling in its splendour at times, yet it holds an unspeakable sadness for some, partly because of its great loveliness, partly, perhaps, because each afterglow is in itself a farewell.

For long after the girl associated sunset with sorrow.

She sank into a chair, yet she could not rest. She was burning as with a fever, but her heart was cold with dread . . . the pain of it unlike any anguish she had ever dreamed of. Her round, grey eyes were very weary, gazing into the sun's dying gleam with unshed tears glimmering in their depths; and she sat thinking—ever thinking; taking her soul out and examining it with all a woman's eternal quest for the motive in herself and others. Hitherto, the sense of the body had not consciously obtruded itself upon her; now she regarded herself with a feeling akin to repulsion. She had known nothing of the ardent terror masked in the shape of a man, and now all life assumed a physical aspect quite out of proportion.

He—her husband—was so big, so brutally masculine, so carelessly cruel—and she hated him so ! And then her whole soul rose up in fierce revolt, her face grew hard, and she clenched her small hands until the nails dug deep into the flesh. She had no love left now. Everything had been frightened out of her, and the face of the whole earth had been changed.

Oh, how she hated him !

If this was what marriage meant—well, she would not submit to it. It had all been such an unfair bargain ! Her life had been what is commonly called a sheltered one, and now she had to pay the price.

What right had they to send her out to this man's keeping? In a flash it seemed to her as if the very home of her girlhood had been lost to her for ever, and even her own mother in league against her. Her mother ! To be so utterly indifferent to what her child had to face . . . the shock of being quite unprepared ! If she had learned of life, she might have been spared a future of misery—but no ! she had been sent out without any conception whatsoever of the relations existing between man and woman. She began to speculate whether all girls were sold in like fashion.

Then suddenly a sensation of unutterable loneliness swept over her. England and home seemed so far away—lost to her for all time. She turned,

leaning her head against the back of the hard cane chair, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Golden dusk changed to soft purple, and the quick tropic night descended. Darkness closed in from the jungle and enveloped her in its brooding silence.

Then the extrinsic feminine instincts reasserted themselves ; and rising suddenly, she entered her room and proceeded to examine her face critically in the gilt-edged, fly-blown abomination of a hotel mirror, holding the small, evil-smelling glass lamp in her hand, and scrutinizing her face closely for traces of tears.

She started back : her face looked so strange—it had hardened perceptibly and the joy in her eyes had been blotted out.

CHAPTER VIII

A TALL man, with hard, clean-cut features, was slowly threading his way through the jungle, leading by the bridle a powerful little country-bred stallion. It was ill-tempered and cross-grained, as most countrybreds are, only its tendency was vicious above the average and as yet it was but partially broken in. For that very reason Wade had persuaded its owner to let him have it on hire during his sojourn in Materan. He wanted something to master very badly indeed just then—and something to occupy his mind. But for the moment his thoughts had lapsed, and he strode along lost in reverie.

He also was suffering, from a sheer inability to appreciate his wife's point of view. As a girl she had loved him, and now she was a woman she must have come to some understanding of essentials ; at least, her mother must have prepared her, he concluded.

That was precisely wherein his ignorance lay. He was a man of strong convictions, essentially passionate and virile, with some good latent in him, but also with much of the primitive savage,

and he loved his wife with a passion none the less mad for its being thwarted.

It was long past tiffin-time, for his thoughts had been intent on other things, and he had missed his way in the tangled forest path. As he walked through the bedappled dimness of the jungle, he registered a vow that he would bend the girl to his will, so that she should come at last to him of her own accord; even if it took him years, he would accomplish it—in his own way. His fierce pride forbade that he should take the first step or solicit her love again. In the end she would be forced to give in; it was a man's part to exact submission and obedience from a woman—it were mere weakness otherwise.

How, exactly, it was to be brought about, the gods alone knew, but he had good fighting blood in his veins, and resistance of any kind served as a lash. Yes, he would win out by sheer strength of will, by his tireless fixity of purpose! His mouth set hard as flint, and the pale eyes glittered coldly.

Only, he reflected, he must restrain his mad passion, and in the meantime they must continue to live together as friends—nothing more. This time the little blind god laughed aloud, for the man's understanding of women—and of himself—was sadly at fault, more especially his comprehension of such a woman as his wife.

Presently he emerged from the forest on to a

rough track which wound along the side of a steep slope, and the afternoon sun smote fiercely overhead. The path narrowed and the hillside frowned into an abyss.

At this point the mind of the stallion grasped all the possibilities of the man's mood of abstraction. Suddenly it halted, and with a mighty lunge, reared up, snorting, its ears laid flat and its little pig eyes rolling malevolently as it wheeled round.

Wade all but lost his balance. On one side the slope was sheer—suggestive of instant death, and he was on that side—perilously near the edge of it. He took it all in at a glance, but his eyes never flinched. Instead, their paleness vanished, and they began to glow a dull blue with the sheer love of the moment's strife, the lure of danger which he loved better than life itself just then. Simply, it never occurred to him to let go. For that was the man's way.

He held on grimly, straining against the force that was slowly impelling him over, judging to a nicety the inches to spare. Again the brute reared, and the factor of safety had vanished. The lean face became rigid, but he laughed harshly, for he was enjoying it in his quiet, deadly way.

Suddenly he strained at the bridle, knowing that he would win then, or be dashed back—and over. For a moment his fate hung in the balance, and still he smiled his grim, twisted smile.

Crash!

The countrybred's powerful forefeet came to earth again ; the force applied in the nick of time had thrust them back to safety. Wade's short laugh was half-sneering, and he regained control with contemptuous indifference. He was a deliberate man in all his movements, but there was something singularly efficient in his deft manipulation. With a tight grip of the rein he rounded the shoulder of the hill, and then he proceeded to mount, the brute thrusting viciously at him, with teeth bared and bent on "savaging" something.

It had been touch-and-go. If he had gone over the problem would have been solved for all time, and he smiled grimly as he gathered in the reins and galloped back towards the hotel.

CHAPTER IX

THE short honeymoon at Materan slowly dragged towards its logical conclusion, as even the weariest week must. Margaret Wade longed to get away from the place and its associations ; she would go anywhere so long as there were other people to talk to and social duties to distract her attention.

Still, Materan was beautiful enough, with its monsoon's freshness all unspoilt. The beauties of the Western Ghats, which, in other circumstances, would have appealed to her so vividly, passed now all unseen. The green glimmer of the jungle and the sunny green slope stretching almost from her feet, ran down into the parti-coloured plains below, where the quaint little cultivated patches, glistening like emeralds against the lighter background, were not unlike the chessboard country of "Alice in the Looking Glass." The flashing of sunlit waters glinted far away in the distance—and ever the white glare of the sweltering sun.

Margaret's whole future seemed to stand out like the long dusty road, which narrowed to a white ribbon in the haze, and then stretched far

ahead into the grey vista. The past was irrevocable, and of the present she had become only half-conscious.

For the greater part of the day she remained indoors, or on the balcony which opened out from her bedroom. Morning and evening she went for a short stroll, but she never accompanied her husband when he rode out into the jungle. She was glad that he should leave her, glad of the respite when he did not return for tiffin. The short honeymoon had become farcical enough. They met as seldom as possible. The girl saw to that, but it must be confessed that the man had come to fall in with her wishes in the matter without demur of any kind, and at times she almost thought he tried to avoid her. That in itself was a relief, though, as her confidence was restored, she began to wonder, then to feel almost piqued, after the strangely inconsistent fashion of a woman.

One afternoon she sat at tea in the veranda, idly watching a sunbeam as it played on the trellis-work, and listening to the occasional mournful whistle of a kite. There came a firm knock at the door outside, and she laid down her cup. Another and a louder rap, and she knew who it was.

"Come in!" she responded, in a small, cold voice, and her husband entered.

"Do you much mind if I remain here for a few minutes? The fact is, I thought it best that we

should speak quite frankly and arrive at some manner of understanding regarding the future."

There was a tinge of sarcasm in his voice, his manner was stiff and imperious.

Margaret sat up. The round grey eyes, with their wistful appeal, sought his for an instant, then dropped.

A pause.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" he queried, his voice polite but infinitely cold.

Instantly all the antagonism in her was aroused.

"Yes, do—by all means," she murmured, glancing swiftly up at him.

She watched him as he selected a chair close to hers, drawing it still closer, and a curious coldness crept into her eyes, which made her suddenly look old. As he sat down beside her, her glance at him was one of physical repulsion, and she shrank from him—an instinctive movement, almost imperceptible, but by chance it did not escape the man's notice. He rose immediately and walked to the far end of the veranda, and she felt herself flush hotly under his glance.

Outside, the sun smote down obliquely through a veil of clouds fast driving up from the sea. The bedroom door was open, and the cool gloom of it was inviting from the sudden, sultry heat.

When Wade spoke his voice sounded singularly free of emotion. His face had changed subtly ;

not a line of it was altered, but it seemed to have become a frozen mask.

"Am I permitted to continue?" he demanded curtly, his whole bearing proud and somewhat supercilious.

"Of course," she replied coldly. Her voice quivered ever so little; she paused to steady it. "I am quite prepared to hear what you have to say."

"Well," he continued, as he paced up and down the veranda, keeping ever some little distance from her, "we have apparently made a grave mistake. I see now that I was a fool to think you ever cared for me."

Suddenly it grew dark. He could see her face turned towards him, but her eyes were only dreamy shadows. There was a low, ominous rumble in the west, and her face glimmered palely in the gathering gloom.

"It only remains," he went on abruptly, "to make the best we can of the future. Perhaps you may not find life with me so terrible at Junglibad as it has been here. You will have other people and things to occupy your time—I also—and we can each live our own lives." He paced to and fro, jerking the words out as if he were issuing a command. "Perhaps I have been partly to blame, but I also have to suffer. At least, I shall endeavour to make it as easy for you as possible. Some day we may become friends. However, if

you find my presence altogether distasteful, you might prefer to . . . return to England?" There was a supreme indifference in his voice, but his eyes were riveted on her face.

She looked at him for a wistful moment.

"You are very kind, Rex," she began—then faltered and looked steadfastly away. "Do you wish me to go back?" she asked in low tones, without looking up at him—perhaps the tears were not far off.

Watching her keenly, he longed to take her in his arms, albeit his reply was curt almost, and there was a gleam of satisfaction in his cold eyes as he continued: "No; not unless you yourself would prefer it. Your wishes are law—in some matters."

"In that case, shall we first try the experiment you suggest? For my part, I shall try to make it easy for us both—and to make you a good housekeeper," she added quickly.

"Very well," he said curtly, "that is decided then, and if you like we can leave to-morrow for Bombay, and go on to Junglibad the day following."

"I shall be most happy to get away from this place."

Then the storm broke directly overhead, and she cowered back in her chair.

"Oh, please go away," she pleaded, hiding her round, frightened eyes. "I—I want to be alone. I am so tired."

For an instant he hesitated; then his face became cold and proud as ever, and he strode off without a word.

Left to herself, Margaret rose and hurried inside, closing the door behind her. The crash of the thunder filled her with a cold, mysterious fear—a relic of her childhood—and she flung herself on her bed.

The storm passed as swiftly as it had broken, and the evening sun drew out all the fragrance of the drenched foliage and flowers. But the girl lay still, thinking.

Perhaps she might have judged Rex too harshly. Simply, he had effaced himself since . . . His present formality and consideration made the looming horror less distinct.

Perhaps he might have already ceased to care for her? That was a side of the question which had not hitherto obtruded, and she sat up in bed, a little frown puckering her eyebrows in a fashion strangely quaint. She was speculating on cause and effect, and found them a matter of no little interest—as do most women.

CHAPTER X

IT takes some little time to become accustomed to the *Mofussil* and all its animal pests : the frog that hops cheerfully over the floor of one's bath-room and consistently refuses to be ejected ; the great, loathsome cockroaches that prowl in cupboards, some brindled in hue, all of them malodorous and omnipresent ; the gigantic house-spider, hairy of leg and harmless withal.

The new-comer is somewhat prone to visions of snakes and enteric germs lurking in every hole and corner. In time that passes, and is gradually replaced by a semblance at least of resignation and indifference.

Margaret Wade gave a little sigh of relief as she took her seat in the north-bound train. Her first experience of an up-country hotel had not been happy. She did not realize that what she had just left was far above the average ; just then she was very glad to have seen the last of it.

The journey to Junglibad is one of considerable duration, but she found it a less fatiguing affair than it would have been in England—less pro-

miscuous and more spacious, and, most important of all, an ampler latitude in the baggage regulations. The railway-stations, palpitating with life under the fierce sun, and ablaze with colour and noise, interested her, and the throng of natives in scarlet, pink, blue, saffron, with white predominating, from the fierce, greasy-locked Pathan of the frontier to the unctuous, effeminate Bengali babu ; but only an old *que hai* gifted with powers of observation could pick out the distinguishing marks which tribe and sect have adhered to so rigorously down the ages ; the incongruous effects obtained by a blending of European and native clothes, sufficiently ludicrous at times, and of which the peculiar detachment of the native mind appears to take no note ; the monotonous drone of those who sell hideously repulsive foodstuffs black with flies ; the babel of voices, shouting, expostulating, and high-pitched ; the fierce gesticulations of some sudden strife, in which the principals' chief object consists in convincing the audience of their respective points of view, with a magnificent disregard of the remarks and pungent abuse of one another ; the station fountain, at which a native is ever to be seen, clad in loin-cloth and performing his noisy ablutions, surrounded by those who await their turn, and others who discuss their midday meal, most of them in stages of *déshabille*, and all giving forth an odour pungent and aromatic ; fat, black, naked babies, much beloved

by their parents, but becoming more unlovely as they increase in age.

The train, creeping by zigzags up the ghauts, revealed numerous leafy gorges and sharp precipices, with tiny glimpses of the plains far below. On it went, through a succession of short tunnels, till with a scream it emerged upon rolling plains and wind-swept wastes—wide, negative expanses, where the air shimmers in the quivering heat and all Nature seems asleep. There were patches of fertile land, wherein natives tended their crops, sitting on their heels, with knees somewhere in the region of their chins; and a group of monkeys in the next field, seated nativewise, similarly engaged, but with the intent destructive rather than productive. Precision in distinguishing the one group from the other is not always easy. The most common test, though not always an infallible one, lies in the presence of loin-cloth or otherwise. Last of all, a wide stretch of desert, grim and desolate, but with all the lure of lonely places.

"We shall soon be there now," said Wade as he drew up the heavily shuttered window and peered out. A gleam of riotous sunshine flared up in the dim, dusty carriage; and Margaret sat up, with her little, odd smile, the corners of her mouth drawn down, giving it a wistful air.

Suddenly she started. She was fronting her fate once more, and she felt very weary. The

man looked at her closely, and the hard, set lines about his mouth softened strangely.

"Tired?" he queried gravely.

"Not a bit," she asserted, with her round, clear eyes upon him; and the faint smile flashed out again, but it only made her face the more wistful.

"I—I shall try to make you happy, Rex," she faltered, in a little, soft voice that somehow reminded him of a child.

Something tugged at his heartstrings.

"Will you?" He smiled back at her, but a faint note of longing had crept into his voice.

He was a curious blending of conflicting instincts. It was a question largely of circumstance which should come on top—that of a knight-errant or that of a savage. Granted a multiplicity of personalities in any human being, circumstance, in the widest sense of the word, must always play a considerable part in the formation of character. Circumstance must decide whether the good shall come out or the evil. Obviously, force may be applied one way or the other.

As the train pulled up at the station Margaret noted a small group of Englishmen laughing and talking. Her glance became riveted on the face of Captain John Mervyn.

CHAPTER XI

IT was a few weeks after the Wades' arrival in Junglibad. Margaret had successfully emerged from the ordeal of receiving and returning calls, also of undergoing the minutely critical inspection entailed thereby, the advent into a small station being on the same lines as that of the small boy entering a new school—more refined, of course, but perhaps none the easier for all that.

The girl's appearance and characteristics had been exhaustively analysed, and her value as a social asset assigned to her for all time in Junglibad.

"Not a bit pretty, but quite a sweet child!" So Mrs. Edgar summed her up, taking care to issue her verdict to the station "for information and guidance," after the manner of a Government circular. Her husband, be it known, was the Deputy-Commissioner, and ruler over all the "Heaven-born" in the district; and she—well, she knew who was the ruling power in the land.

Rule him she did, with a rod of iron, even to the detriment of that able man's promotion. He

ought to have risen high in the service of the Sirkar, but instead he was fast reaching the time limit of his career—merely a quiet, ineffectual sort of person, with a vague, dreary manner. His wife had fashioned him so, and all the station knew it; he alone was happily unconscious of the fact.

Margaret was seated alone in the bungalow when Mrs. Edgar was announced. The Deputy-Commissioner's wife had called round with surprising promptitude, for sometimes she took up the new-comer with enthusiasm, only to drop her anor without much regret on either side.

The girl rose to receive the visitor in her dignified, childish manner.

"I thought I would call round to see how you were getting on," Mrs. Edgar asserted in her most patronizing manner, and with an affected simper, as she subsided into the most luxurious chair available.

She was the amorphous type of female, which seems to project in odd, unexpected places when seated. She possessed a "bust" back and front, also a "mission in life." Of the two her mission was certainly the worst, for it aimed at pouncing upon human frailty of any kind—in others. Possibly she regarded that faculty of hers in the light of a duty pertaining to her own exalted state, for she most promptly impressed the *chota* juniors with their own individual unworthiness. She was

the *burra* memsahib in the most ominous sense of the term, and never for an instant were the lesser satellites permitted to forget it, or the baleful influence which she could wield over her husband to their undoing.

Margaret gracefully murmured her appreciation of the great lady's kindness.

"I am beginning to feel quite at home in Junglibad. Every one has been so very kind," she added.

"Yes," sighed the other complacently, "one must take the station as one finds it. I have always tried to do the best I could for the social side of it—oh, nothing at all, I'm afraid—and, besides, it's only one's duty as the wife of the Deputy-Commissioner, you know. I have really been quite energetic in fostering the good feeling amongst the members of our small community, but it is a very difficult and thankless task, I can assure you. Some people make it so." She paused, and gazed searchingly at the girl for a moment. She was called the "Radiator" throughout the land, because she diffused a heated air of strife and unpleasantness wherever she went. It was a nickname not without reason, and the girl's frank ingenuousness was an easy mark. "We should be very glad if you and your husband would dine with us to-morrow night. It is a short invitation, I know, but I am rather addicted to that sort of thing"—and she was.

Again Margaret murmured her thanks.

"It is most good of you, but we are dining with the Winfields."

Mrs. Edgar looked acid. Then she sniffed audibly, if such an opprobrious term may be applied to the wife of a Deputy-Commissioner.

"I do not like to say anything against any one, but I think it is my unpleasant duty to warn you. You are so young, my dear child, and I feel almost in the position of—er—of an elder sister towards you."

"Why?" asked the girl breathlessly. "I think Mrs. Winfield is perfectly sweet," she added impulsively.

Mrs. Edgar's glance was one of pity strangely blended with acidity.

"Really, I do not like to be compelled to say so about any woman," she began, "but Mrs. Winfield is rather a dangerous person."

In reality, she lost no opportunity of dubbing the Colonel's wife the "station cat," with all that the epithet implies. Perhaps it was because Mrs. Winfield simply would not be quarrelled with, for she was a perfectly charming woman. It might be said of her that her paths were paths of peace; certainly her ways were ways of pleasantness.

Margaret gasped, and her steadfast gaze sought the cold, green eyes of the other.

"I don't quite understand what you mean," she faltered.

"I cannot say any more. I have warned you—and done my duty."

Mrs. Edgar spoke ominously, and left much to be implied.

"And Cecily? I have fallen quite in love with her daughter Cecily," Margaret pursued staunchly.

"Ah, yes—Cecily." Mrs. Edgar smiled knowingly. "Most people do fall in love with her—all men do. She is safe enough where women are concerned; but that is just the type of girl of which you must beware, my dear."

Mrs. Edgar concluded authoritatively, as if the matter could admit of no further question. She was resolved to attach the girl to her side, and thereby to dissociate her from her hated rival. It was a rivalry to which Mrs. Winfield was serenely indifferent, for she was much too large-minded ever to view it save with a fleeting and amused unconcern.

The Deputy-Commissioner's wife having discoursed upon the failings of each individual, ended with a malicious disquisition upon the station in general, and having reduced Margaret to a state of puzzled dejection, rose to go.

"You are quite musical, are you not? Oh, a little bird whispered to me!" Mrs. Edgar remarked before she left, with a condescending air of levity which sat more awkwardly upon her than malice. "Besides, I myself heard your voice in church; it is quite untrained, of course, but I

think I will help you with it if I can find the time." And she smiled her watery, unnatural smile.

If there was one thing upon which the woman prided herself, it was the sound of her own voice. She was much addicted to concerts wherein she figured so exclusively as to render the effect of a prolonged solo, with a very occasional interlude and a retiring chorus. Any one with the smallest vestige of a voice who would not ornament the background was "no gentleman" or "no lady" as the case might be, and so far as her husband's subordinates were concerned—well, there was no choice in the matter whatsoever.

Margaret Wade had not yet entered into the life of the station sufficiently to appreciate all its gossip and the subtleties thereof.

Thus far the residents of Junglibad have been introduced in their order of precedence, an order which the first-named took care to see rigidly enforced for herself, and—as has been whispered—for her manservant and her maidservant, her ox and her ass. In common justice it may be observed that the Indian servant is himself most punctilious in preserving the precedence enjoyed by "Master."

CHAPTER XII

IT was morning, and the bungalow was very quiet.

Margaret Wade was, grappling with the intricacies of Indian housekeeping, reclining deep in the dim recesses of a large cane chair, after the fashion of the "otiose East." Jock, the wire-haired fox-terrier, lay curled up at her feet, sleeping the sleep of an over-liberal breakfast.

The girl was very wide awake. The round, grey eyes were gravely puzzled as they contemplated the management of her husband's household—like a child playing at keeping house. She was striving to render to him, in the shape of bodily comforts and economy, what she could not bring herself to give him in the form of wifely love and devotion. Thus the bargain would not be altogether one-sided—or so she imagined.

A sudden sound smote the peaceful morning air—the weird, monotonous throb of a tom-tom, which, rising and falling, can soothe the blood or stir it to fever pitch, as occasion demands. She paused with a little frown, furtively biting at the end of her short, stubby pencil. Then she tried to go on with her self-imposed task ; but the

frenzy of the tom-tom kept hammering into her brain, until she was forced reluctantly to listen to it, to fall in with its compelling rhythm. Jock stirred in his dreams, and his paws began to twitch convulsively, as if he were pursuing imaginary foes.

Margaret's frown became almost fierce, for she was intent on the magnitude of certain bazaar bills. The items themselves were trifling enough, but the culminative effect was assuming rather formidable proportions. And it is ever thus in India—countless microscopic provocations culminating in one vast irritation.

As Margaret pondered on the ways of India and of Indian servants, she was considerably impressed with the *dustoor* levied by all the servants, ably headed by the butler—the time-honoured Indian custom of perquisites, which prevails universally among the Aryan brethren, and is commensurate only with their respective status in life.

Suddenly the din outside ceased. A few short, sharp words of command in the vernacular, the sound of footsteps approaching, and a shadow darkened the doorway. Her smile welcomed Wade as he came in, hot and dusty, from the parade-ground, and she regarded him with the frank gaze of good-fellowship. An answering smile flickered for a moment in his eyes and died. She had learned to look for that rare smile of his, and

unconsciously she tried to call it forth. It made his hard features less grim.

"Well," he remarked, unbuckling his sword-strap and throwing himself into a long chair adjoining hers with a grunt of satisfaction, "groping among the bazaar bills, are you?" And he glanced at the well-thumbed, greasy scrap of paper presented each week by a smilingly unctuous butler.

Her laugh was low and vastly alluring.

"Do listen to this, Rex."

With no little difficulty and repeated halts she read out some few items, for the spelling of butlers' bills is sometimes correct phonetically, but more often impossible: always it requires some experience to decipher.

"Old Rama's efforts are really rather wonderful at times," was his indolent comment, as he leaned farther back in his chair and extended a pair of long, kharki-clad limbs to their full stretch on the foot-rests.

The dog, which had become hilarious upon the arrival of his adored master, now seized the opportunity and leaped swiftly upon his lap.

"Oh, Wex, you *are* lazy!" she protested. But her smile was indulgent. At times she had a quaint way of speaking all her own.

She bent over her task again, like some school-girl in the throes of an essay. Her small face puckered into a frown of concentration, and the

faintest of flushes rose in her pale cheeks. She mused for a moment, then proceeded to bite the end of her pencil. Wade lay and watched her with a lazy sense of well-being.

"Do come and translate for me," she said at last, her lip beginning to pout in a fashion that was rather distracting. "I daresay you have some little knowledge of the Oriental mind, and perhaps you will manage to decipher some of the idioms that seem to run riot in these productions." And in her voice there sounded that little air of patronage which the merest girl will bestow on mankind at times.

Wade uncurled himself and rose deliberately.

"I am afraid," he said, coming up and looking over her shoulder, "that the fudging of bills is a bit of a novelty for poor old Rama. I resolutely set my face against all such afflictions in my bachelor days."

He gazed down at the graceful turn of her neck, where the small silky hairs curled, and kisses seemed to cluster of their own accord. He was not an imaginative man, only he longed greatly to stoop down and press his lips to the soft, white skin.

She did not wince now when he came near her; instead, the small, tip-tilted face turned up to him in a childish, almost coquettish, fashion, and her soft, caressing glance rested on him.

"Yes, and it is he who has been inflicting you

all the time, swindling you most horribly, too. I know he has. But that sort of thing shan't go on any longer," she asserted, and her sweet, eager face was aglow with righteous indignation, like a child of twelve—not more.

"I see," he replied, smiling; "and I predict that the unfortunate Rama will not go on much longer, either."

A sudden change came over her face. The odd, alluring smile vanished.

"But surely, Rex, you do not wish all this absurd expenditure to continue?" The grey eyes looked rather hurt, and the rosy lips pouted more than ever, for the matter to her was of serious import.

"Of course not; and it is most good of you to take all this trouble over my welfare, little woman," he answered. There stole into his eyes a tender smile, a whimsical expression that was entirely new, making his face very pleasant and obliterating all the hard lines about his mouth. "What is the trouble?" he asked, picking up the slip of paper. "Hullo!" he exclaimed, examining the contents, "old Rama must obviously have found the length of Master's foot. Apparently, Margaret, he is going to find yours longer and farther reaching than mine." The man's laugh was hearty—a thing that was good to hear.

"What does he mean by 'present to Master'?" she queried, still intent on the subject in

hand, but with a sudden return of the old buoyancy.

"That, I take it, represents the wholly inadequate waste-paper basket of many colours which he presented on the occasion of our marriage. The other item entered as 'to scratching ponies' toes' is a somewhat realistic rendering of the *nahlband's* ministrations when he filed their hoofs last week."

"Well," she said firmly, "he will have to leave if he does not mend his ways—that is, if you don't mind, Rex."

"No, I certainly don't mind. I am only too glad to have some one to do all that sort of thing for me."

He looked down at her with a little wry smile, for he felt the fierce want of her now.

Her small, sensitive face did not disguise her gratification. He had paid her the compliment of obvious appreciation—and she was a woman.

"Sure you are, Rex?" she asked, half-shyly.

"Quite positive," he asserted. "Now I must go and have my tub. It must be getting on for tiffin-time."

Left to herself, the girl sat still, with a little pleased smile. They were fast becoming friends, she reflected, and in friendship they might piece together the fragments of their lives. She was still half afraid of him; he was such a great, strong, fighting man, and she thrilled at the very



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thought of him. Though she knew it not, the thrill was not wholly one of fear. She did not realize that a constant companionship of two must always be fraught with the mutual danger of boredom—if love be denied. Also, she did not know that the patience of a man is a thing easily exhausted.

It seems to be a provision of nature that perfect unison is only possible between a man and a woman: if there is no difference of sex, the bodily attraction is lacking, and all harmony marred. To effect this harmony, the love of the body, of the mind, and of the soul must unite. The first is transitory enough, but it is the fundamental element of them all: it is physical and primitive, and it must be satisfied first of all.

CHAPTER XIII

SANDFORTH, I.F.S., or to be more explicit, of the Indian Forest Service, spent the greater part of the year in solitary state in a tract of heterogeneous jungle euphemistically known as a Forest Reserve. Certainly it was wooded in parts, but on the whole it embraced more reserve than forest. The shooting, however, was good, and the youthful forester was fond of sport. He had never been particularly keen on games; consequently, his lonely existence in the jungle had its redeeming features. In a station Sandforth disliked most of all the tyranny of paying universal calls, and only when it was inevitable did he make a virtue of necessity. He could never become a slave to the twin gods Red Tape and Convention. Also, he could never bring himself to appreciate the privilege of calling on people he did not wish to know, and who, in their turn, wished still less to know him. Many a fruitless afternoon was spent driving round in a tonga watching for the little wooden "Not-at-home" boxes, and at sight of one his eye would brighten, his drooping spirits revive, and, hastily dropping in a card, he would

retire with a surreptitious sigh of relief. Should the aforesaid box not be in evidence, he would drive past with an air of detachment and a firm resolve to try his luck there another day. Thus he developed the semblance of calling to a fine art, and reduced the reality to an absolute minimum. He spent many months absolutely alone in his native jungle, emerging therefrom into a station with much of the sensation of a rabbit forced outside its warren for the first time. At first he had utterly disliked the solitude, with none to talk to save natives; but, as he was not essentially a gregarious animal, he grew by degrees to like it, and the delightful freedom from restraint and convention, whereby he could do and dress just as he pleased, was to his taste. He was monarch of all he surveyed except for the rare occasions on which his chief came round on tour. The youth spent most of his spare time shooting, in and out of season, and in a mild way became a bit of a naturalist with the study of jungle lore as his hobby.

For all that, it is not good for any man to be alone overmuch: the danger of becoming irretrievably "jungly" is ever present, and a species of dry rot may set in in spite of a whole host of hobbies. He was ever a serious youth. On his return to civilization he became rather ponderous, and felt very much out of everything; all the pleasing frivolities of life appeared trivial, almost

absurd, and he felt himself to be only a looker-on. But he lived in O'Keefe's bungalow, and that cheery individual, who happened to be his greatest pal, soon laughed him into a more civilized frame of mind, so that when the time came for him to be cast adrift into the "forest" once more, he even experienced a strange reluctance. It was a reluctance that wore off all too soon.

On this occasion he had come into Junglibad in connection with language exams., and some calls had perforce to be made.

As he approached the Wades' bungalow he scrutinized the front carefully, and, finding the "Not-at-home" box lacking, for a moment he debated within himself whether he should try again some other day. He had seen Mrs. Wade from afar off, and her face had somehow haunted him ever since.

Suddenly he leaned forward and addressed the *tonga-walla*.

"*Subar!*" he exclaimed, with an illuminating display of resolution, and the tonga stopped.

Sandforth, the instant he was committed, cursed himself for a fool, but the Rubicon had been crossed, and there was nothing for it but to proceed. As the tonga rattled into the compound he cursed still more fluently, and between whiles he found himself fervently hoping that he should find Mrs. Wade alone. When they stopped at the door he summoned his fast-dwindling courage, and in

a louder voice than the occasion demanded called out—

“*Que hai!*”

A butler appeared and, accepting with dignity the proffered card, noiselessly vanished. In a moment he had returned.

“*Memsahib salaam bola,*” he announced benevolently, and Sandforth followed him into a dim, spacious room, wherein a white-clad vision arose gracefully and glided towards him.

The forest man was not impressionable as youths go—in fact, he disliked women rather; on this occasion he fell an instant victim, and collapsed somewhat helplessly into a chair. He was conscious of her voice, and the low, sweet inflections of it, though he had only the most vague idea of what she actually said, and was only dimly aware that he replied at intervals—he hoped his answers were not too inane.

“Are you out in districts much?” she queried. She could scarce restrain a smile as he gazed at her in stupid admiration, but she repeated the question gently.

He paused to reflect. “I am not quite sure,” he said at last.

This time the smile would out, but it was a very sweet, sympathetic one, and he adored her for it.

“I mean . . . I don't quite know what I mean,” he went on hurriedly. “The fact is, I'm

rather an ass at times. . . . They say a man who lives for months alone in the jungle is never quite normal, don't you know," he ended, with a feeble grin, and began to hate himself for his diffident aberration.

She looked at him for a wistful instant, and something in his face stirred a responsive chord in her own nature. The round, grey eyes grew very soft and childish as she spoke—

"It is rather terrible to be all by oneself, is it not?"

"No," said he, sturdily enough; "it is very ripping."

She looked at him, and again he fell under her spell; but this time assurance swiftly came to him, and he began to talk quite fluently. Presently he found himself telling her things he had never dreamed of telling any one—things he had never quite realized himself before, but which took form and shape in the comfort of her personality.

With a woman's intuition she divined that which they had in common—the affinity of loneliness: he was a man and did not understand; he thought of her as inhabiting a sphere far removed from his own, and one in which all the good things of the earth were hers, and a vision of heaven the privilege of the man who was her husband.

Her talk and something in the tone of her voice revealed the odd blending of youth and age; one still hoping much from life, and yet one who under-

stands ; one who knows the old youthful illusions a mirage, yet clings to them the more closely. It was just such an undefinable fusion of which he had dreamed, and he promptly elevated her to the pinnacle of a hopeless ideal.

He remained a long time, so long that he quite forgot that time existed or that a game of bridge awaited him in the gymkhana. Suddenly he remembered, and rose with a sigh.

"I'm afraid I've overstayed the regulation time, but—but—you know——" He was fast becoming incoherent once more.

"No, you haven't," she said simply. "I'm so glad you have, I mean."

For a moment her glance rested on him almost maternally. It was the first time she had felt years older than any one else, and it seemed to stir some protective sense deep down in her innermost self. The glimpse into another's life had made a subtle appeal to her sympathy which might tend to widen her view of life.

Sandforth departed, Margaret's most devoted adherent for all time.

CHAPTER XIV

MARGARET WADE awoke suddenly with a great stab of fear at her heart. In a dream she seemed to have got nearer to the Shadow, almost to have seen whither it led; then the pale lights had gleamed, and she had started up.

All was silent in the room. The moon had sunk and the night become hot and windless; the very blackness of it made her almost sick with apprehension. She sat up, white-lipped, and listened, resting on her elbow. Suddenly she remembered that her bedroom door had been left open, and instantly her eyes flew where the door should be. There only a nameless blackness seemed to be reaching toward her.

It was a big room, and she peered furtively across the breadth of it, trying ever to penetrate the gloom; but all the terrors of the night closed in around her. Her lips parted to cry aloud; she smothered it back, and, with a little sob, strangled in her throat, sank silently back into bed. It was some unseen terror—she knew not what; but her eyes kept turning to where the door should be, and she shivered violently. She lay perfectly

motionless now, fearing to move so much as a muscle, paralyzed with dread at what might happen, striving to stifle the very sound of her breathing.

Somewhere behind her head a board creaked faintly. Her heart gave a great leap, then seemed to stand still. She felt as if she must scream, but she could not. A strange, overpowering longing came upon her to look behind; still, she dared not; she lay quite rigid.

Slowly the longing was conquering all other emotion. The darkness behind her began to have a horrible fascination that would not long be gainsaid. Sooner or later, she knew, she must turn round. Something must be lurking in the shadows behind. Something breathed upon her from behind—she was sure of that. A pair of eyes were watching her unseen. The baleful glare of them seemed to pierce into her very brain—from behind.

It was very silent in the room, and she lay unable to move, scarce able to breathe. Her wide-open eyes strained to penetrate the noiseless shadows, and all the time the unknown terror behind was drawing her like a magnet.

Very slowly she began to raise herself. Very gradually she moved her head and shoulders, with a horrible intuition that the frantic beating of her heart must be audible to that which lay in wait for her. At last her eyes were riveted with a fixed stare into the dread shadows behind. A faint

glimmer of light from under the dressing-room door was all that met her eyes—at first. It gave her a moment's confidence ; but still she strained her ears . . . not a sound save her own soft breathing.

There was a sudden, stealthy sound as of a breath drawn in sharp. Instantly she raised her eyes from the welcome glimmer and started back, her hand to her throat, her heart numbed with fear, conscious of twin points of fire which shone malevolently upon her not two yards distant. Then she knew what real, live fear is. For the moment it rooted her spellbound, without a cry, without a movement. Still the sinister lights flickered, and still she gazed into them, as if slowly hypnotised.

The creaking of a door upon its hinges, and her eyes leaped to that corner of the room where the shadows lay deepest. The spell was broken, but the awful fear remained.

Suddenly the mosquito net rustled, and a cool air smote her cheek ; but she knew it was only a sudden gust, a soft breeze of the night. There followed the sound of a human cough and the tread of a sepoy outside. The footsteps trembled in the distance and died away ; for that sleepy-eyed custodian had drawn his chuddar more closely about him and settled himself to slumber once more.

The ensuing silence was the most dreadful of all. With a little gasp she turned swiftly back to

face the lights, but, as she looked, they flickered out and were gone. The stealthy pad-pad on the floor of some heavy animal moving towards the door, and all was dark and silent as the grave. Then she screamed—a loud, shrill scream of terror. But the bungalow remained wrapped in slumber.

She lay back in bed, quivering in every limb, her ears still alert for the slightest sound. If she could only close the door! No; she dare not get out of bed: the darkness swarmed with ghastly terrors. Still, as before, the longing crept over her—the fascination of ending this hideous suspense. With her hand she felt for the mosquito net. Slowly she gathered it into her grasp, raising it little by little as she did so. A sudden leap out of bed, and she darted for the door with the glimmer of light beneath. She clutched at it with a great gasping sob, and threw it open. Ah! she had that light at last.

Trembling all over she blundered back, saw the wide, gaping door that led into the veranda and all but tripped over a rug by the way; but at last she reached it. With shaking fingers she banged it to and bolted it, then collapsed on the floor.

For a moment she lay huddled up, incapable of thought. Then she rose to her feet, groped for matches and lit a candle. Her eyes went rapidly round the room, peering into every corner. Nothing remained—only the vast, bare walls, the

sparse furniture of an Indian bedroom ; and with a great sigh of relief she slowly crossed to the table and set down the lighted candle.

Then a pang of loneliness stabbed at her heart. She gazed at the gloomy solitude of the room, and her fright came back. It was so lonely by herself in that great, empty room ! The very idea of the darkness terrified her again. She knew not what animal had been in her room. Perhaps it was lurking still in the veranda. Should she go to Rex ? " He is my husband," she murmured softly to herself, and blushed rosy red though there were none there to see.

She knew not what to do.

She was a pathetic, childish figure in the white, flowing night-robe which rendered still more beautiful the rounded outline it partially sought to veil—the soft, palpitating curves of her sweet, girlish form. With flushed cheeks and unruly hair, she looked distractingly wistful and forlorn : the round, grey eyes were aglow, and the corners of her mouth drooped pathetically.

Just then she was in the mood to confide herself utterly. She was growing accustomed to the quiet ring of mastery in her husband's voice, and she had come to trust the quiet, grave manner of him.

Her mind passed through some unaccountable phases. She began to doubt herself and her convictions : one part of her seemed to cling to her

illusions—what had been left of them, while another part seemed to long fiercely for something she knew not. It was as if the girl and the woman within her strove for the mastery.

Her heart throbbed violently. Suddenly her thoughts flew back to that other dawn which she had awaited with so much terror and loathing. The picture was cruelly vivid still, and the old, chill dread clutched at her. No; she could not. She loathed the very idea of submission, although it made her thrill all over—with fear.

And so the mood passed; the opportunity was lost.

Slowly the endless tropic night wore on, and with the first breath of dawn she fell asleep.

She said nothing to Rex next morning. She simply could not bring herself to speak of it to him. And it was not until long after that she understood her nocturnal intruder had been—a dog. She learned then that some *dacoits* train dogs to enter dwellings by night, so that they may know whether the inmates are sleeping sufficiently soundly for the purposes of their profession.

CHAPTER XV

JUNGLIBAD is a typical up-country station. It nestles unobtrusively in the northern foot-hills, tucked away not too remote from the edge of the Indian frontier. Obviously, it is more essentially of a military nature. A sun-baked, scrubby country, the colour of an over-burnt brick, slopes sharply away from it on all sides. In olden days it had been a fort of some repute, and the rough mud walls had offered an active resistance to many a wild, invading horde. To-day they passively hold their own against the ravages of time.

Away to the north there flows a winding river, glittering sinuously in the sunshine like some monstrous snake, and, looming up in the distance, the greenish-grey of a wide-spreading forest, with a giant range of mountains far beyond and above.

One afternoon Margaret Wade drove round to the gymkhana, armed with a badminton racket. She was alone save for the syce who occupied a back seat on the little polo-cart. The slanting afternoon sun, which casts ever a golden haze, shone in her eyes, and the long, hot road stretched, glaring white, in front. The way to the gymkhana

lies through the cantonment, barren, sun-baked, and altogether unlovely, past the crumbling mud walls and the civil lines beyond, then through an avenue of giant banyan-trees, whose branches, meeting overhead, form a wonderful tunnel of dappled green. The gymkhana is situated bordering on the Maidan. The long, low building half hides itself in an island of trees and tropical plants. Precisely at this hour the veranda is full of men in flannels and girls in white, clinging frocks, and the dusky, white-robed "boys" silently thread their way between the tables to the accompanying tinkle of spoon on cup and ice upon glass. It is a veranda which has heard full many a tale of scandal after the daily routine is over—office work, after-tiffin snooze, and game.

There one gossips about friends who may chance to be absent—not over-maliciously, and in a manner not wholly unamusing; or, joining the male contingent which leans supreme over the bar, one may indulge in scandal and tale of a rather fuller flavour. But it is largely a matter of retaliation—not infrequently of self-defence, every one practising it about every one else, so that the balance becomes fairly even in the end. It is the faults and frailties of mankind that are alone of interest to others; the good points may be taken for granted, but they could never form a topic of conversation or a source of mirth. And a small community of "exiles," meeting day after day

in a torrid and weary land, are hard pressed for something to talk about or laugh over.

The south veranda fronts on a much-watered lawn, fringed with the sweeping branches of large, shady trees. There is a splash of vivid colouring from the flower-beds, and butterflies float about lazily in the warm air, fragrant with the exotic scents of the blossom-clad trees.

In a land where baked mud predominates nothing can be more pleasing to the eye than the sight of a close-cropped lawn, the greenness of it recalling visions of England and of home.

Margaret made her way lightly through the veranda, strewn with small tables and large chairs, the cool dimness of it freckled with tiny points of white sunlight filtering through the lattice-work. With a few words of greeting, she passed swiftly on to the badminton shed, the situation of which might easily be detected by its emergent sounds—frequent feminine shrieks overtopping an occasional masculine guffaw. It was a part of the gymkhana into which Wade himself seldom penetrated—being too aggressively feminine for his taste.

Mrs. Edgar pounced upon the girl with oppressive friendliness as soon as she entered.

"We are giving a moonlight motor picnic the day after to-morrow," she said, with her hard, mirthless smile which never seemed quite to reach the cold, green eyes. "Quite an informal affair,

you know. I do hope you and your husband will be able to come."

"We shall be delighted," the girl answered, mildly surprised at so short a notice. "But I must first ask my husband if we are doing anything that night."

"Oh, you must persuade him. Remember, I count on your presence very particularly, dear child," and she tapped the girl's arm with a show of playfulness. "Besides, I happen to know that there are no other engagements in the station for Thursday. I made a point of finding that out before I fixed on the date. There, now, it is arranged," she concluded, with the faint trace of authority in her voice. "You shall dine with us, and immediately after dinner we shall all motor to the waterfall for supper."

"It is most kind of you," the girl murmured, and Mrs. Edgar, with a suppressed gleam of satisfaction in her eye, proceeded to inflict herself upon a game of "badders" which was commencing.

Mervyn sauntered up just then. His graceful indifference may not have been altogether aimless, for he contrived with no little dexterity to claim Margaret's attention for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XVI

"BY the way," Margaret remarked, as she and her husband sat at dinner that night, "Mrs. Edgar has asked us to dine there on Thursday. She is giving a motor picnic out at the waterfall by moonlight. As we are doing nothing that night, I accepted. You don't mind coming, do you? It will be rather fun, and I am quite looking forward to it."

Wade looked across at his wife for a moment in the strange, quizzical manner he had at times.

"Why, whatever is the matter, Rex?" she queried. "You look at me as if—as if I had been doing something wrong. And I feel like a small child about to be punished," she added, smiling merrily. When she was amused, her eyes really smiled—not her lips alone—and they were bewitching.

She was fast becoming attached to this man, with his quiet, grave ways, regarding him more in the light of an elder brother.

"Do I?" he said slowly, but with no answering smile. "The fact is, I was wondering why, precisely, you had accepted that woman's invitation.

It will be necessary to write and make some excuse. Will you please do so at once, Margaret."

Of a sudden his voice had become rather peremptory and abrupt.

Then the white-robed butler glided noiselessly from nowhere, and Margaret sat back with an almost imperceptible flush on her pale, sensitive face.

Rama, having removed the last course, closed the door behind him with no little ostentation and reverted to the scant attire of his kind, and his assistant, the *massaul*, proceeded to demolish the remains of dinner in the back veranda.

Relieved of the butler's presence, the girl leaned forward, her arms resting on the table.

"Rex, what do you mean?" she asked, as she gazed across at him, her grey eyes wide with wonder.

"You have not heard about it?" he queried, and she gazed at him curiously, his face was so cold, so utterly impassive.

"No. But perhaps you will be good enough to explain," she said rather haughtily.

"Well, you know that Mrs. Edgar has always disliked the Winfields?"

"Yes, I know, but what on earth has that got to do with the picnic?"

"Only this, that she has invited the whole station to her *tamasha* and left the Winfields out of it. Not that they care for the wretched affair, but it was a monstrous thing to do."

"Yes," she admitted, "it certainly was rather childish. I had not heard that part of it before. But, Rex, I have already accepted for us both, and I don't quite see how we can get out of it at the last moment. I am afraid we shall have to go now."

Her voice was soft, and in the end it trembled ever so little. She was testing her power over the man; all the time the chill, subtle dread of him was coming back. She fully recognized her peril, but, womanlike, she felt compelled to go on.

Wade remained silent for a moment. He produced a brierwood pipe from his pocket and proceeded to polish it contemplatively. As he did so he turned away, hiding the pale eyes which had become a shade paler. At last he glanced up, looking at her very straight, with the old arrogant stare, and all the old instincts fast crowding back.

"Very well," he replied curtly. "I shall myself write a letter to Mrs. Edgar regretting that we find ourselves unable to be present. It is unnecessary to say anything further—or to continue the discussion."

Rising swiftly, she drew herself up, quivering. The small, pouting upper lip grew firm. He had risen also, the sun-washed eyes glinting ominously in the lamp's dim lustre, the pupils narrowing down until they became mere points of steel. This

was a matter upon which he felt very strongly. He had viewed his wife's growing intimacy with Mrs. Edgar with disapproval, but that she should presume to dispute his authority was a thing he had never taken into account, his authority having been a thing hitherto established by his own simple assumption of it.

She stood motionless, quivering before his pale, threatening eyes, yet facing him bravely, forcing herself to encounter the sudden and almost overwhelming sense of power in them. He gazed at her steadily, the light in his eyes burning until it seemed to sear. Involuntarily she shrank a little—almost she flinched; still she did not give way.

"Of course," she faltered at last, struggling to quiet the fierce beating of her heart, "you must please yourself. If you do not wish to go, by all means write and refuse. But I have accepted, and now I intend to go."

As she finished, her courage rose fast—also her temper. For there was latent in her that spice of perversity which seasons a woman's waywardness—just a pleasing sufficiency of the devil for a woman, just enough to render life piquant.

In silence he strode over to her, until his presence was close and menacing. His face, with its high cheek-bones, became fierce and passionate. Civilization fell from him for a moment. Simply he reverted to primitive manhood, being touched

in the most vital part of the pristine male—the sense of property in his womankind, and of vested rights that were absolute.

"I forbid you to go," he managed to say, in the quiet, deadly way he had at times. "No one in any way connected with the regiment has accepted. You shall *not* go!"

There was an ugly gleam in his eyes. One corner of his mouth assumed a curious, twisted appearance, half-sneer, half-smile, after the manner of a snarling beast.

She stared at him fixedly, as if fascinated against her will, and for an interminable moment they remained just gazing at one another. The colour flooded her face, then fled. The lamp flickered in a sudden night breeze, and in the room the silence of the night reigned, save for the rhythmical music of the frogs and the beating of her heart. The girl was mustering all her courage to meet the onslaught. If she were to yield now, she realized instinctively that his will would dominate her always, that she would become his slave. The ominous side of his character flashed back with startling vividness, and all her old hatred of him returned, arousing her antagonism to fever pitch. Suddenly her eyes changed, and growing dark with anger, looked fiercely into his. The half-childish appeal died out from them and she awoke to her strength, leaving the last remnants of her girlhood behind. She knew now that she

was a woman, and she gloried in her woman's power.

"You—er—seem to forget our respective positions," she said at last, very deliberately.

The man approached still nearer, and for a moment she thought he would strike her. But she continued fearlessly, and her glance upon him was steadily disdainful, infinitely provoking.

"There was, I think, a mutual understanding between us—or shall I say toleration? It was agreed that we should each go our separate ways. As it happens, I choose to go to this affair of the Edgars—and I expect to enjoy it immensely. Understand," she added, speaking very distinctly, "I shall do just as I please about it."

She looked past him and half turned as if to go. There was silence.

Suddenly the man wheeled round and strode to the open door, and for a while he stood there with his back to her, gazing, motionless, out into the night.

From out the silence there rose the faint, distant wail of a jackal, rising higher and higher, till the cry, long-drawn-out and weird, was taken up and drowned in the chorus of the pack.

Silence again, then the sharp rat-tat of the everlasting tom-tom. The man turned slowly and came back to her, and in his eyes there brooded a deep resentment.

"You claim," said he, fiercely gripping the back

of a chair and striving to choke all trace of feeling out of his voice—"you claim what appears to have become a strangely ordained privilege of your sex. If I have assumed any authority over you I must apologize. In future you shall have no cause for complaint on that score, and since you remind me of the peculiar relations existing between us, let me assure you that there shall be no lack of formality between us from now onwards. In future you will be at perfect liberty to go your own way, orly"—he paused again and looked her full in the eyes for a moment, but she returned his gaze with fearless innocence—"remember, my name, my honour, must always be beyond reproach."

With that he turned swiftly and left her.

Suddenly a great wave of colour surged over her face and she sank into a chair, the grey eyes drooping until the lashes hid them quite. For long afterwards, in the silence of the night, his words kept rankling, cruelly stinging her sensitive soul.

CHAPTER XVII

INDIA changes but little as the centuries roll by. It maintains always its brooding patience and its amazing resignation, so that the Anglo-Indian almost unconsciously falls into its moulding influences, until his soul has become disciplined to fate—and red tape. The reward of some of his toil he has seen reaped—by others. He may have been suspended or invalided home. In the end he creeps back to England with a small pension and an expansive liver, where by friends of old he is voted a bore; and so the remaining years roll by until old age advances to meet a man before his time, and he is left only a mixed memory of work done.

Charles Chaytor, the judicial luminary of Junglibad, was a man who had learned to look for little and to expect no encouragement. In his parchment-skin face there was a fatal suggestion of that which commonly accompanies a wig, but the complexion was leathery rather than washed out, and the bleached hair—what remained of it—was all his own.

The judicial routine had left its mark in the

furrowed and resigned aspect of him. Law, he maintained, was the only feasible religion: it upheld the greatest good for the greatest number, and made society possible—at least, it aimed at so doing. Long ago he had concluded that the individual was nothing.

When the night of the moonlight supper came round and he was obliged to join Mrs. Edgar in her motor, his face was quite devoid of emotion, only a little more passive than usual. Elsewhere, there was a painfully obvious scramble to avoid this particular car, and Margaret Wade, as luck would have it, found herself installed along with Miss Chaytor Sandforth of the Woods and Forests, and Patrick O'Keefe.

"Faith, but that was a narrow shave!" ejaculated O'Keefe, who affected the Indian Police and was a distant cousin of Wade's. "I thought my hour had come when I saw the great lady bearing down upon me. Fortunately, your brother was in the way, Miss Chaytor, and he was dragged off captive to her bow, as a lamb to the slaughter."

"You should not speak of your *burra* mamsahib so disrespectfully," replied that lady, in tones of mock severity; "and, besides, your metaphors are becoming hopelessly mixed, you quaint old Irish Pat!"

Miss Chaytor was only just on the sunny side of forty but, having decided that the life of the predestinate spinster—unlike that of a policeman

—may be a very merry one if adopted in the right spirit, she was beginning to appreciate her single blessedness and to enjoy herself in consequence. Besides, she had lived long enough in the land to realize the amazing number of negative or actively unhappy marriages possible.

“It is all very fine, but not many fellows are obliged to serve two masters with a mistress over and above to complicate matters. Sure, a man who enters the Police deserves all the knocks he gets! To be at the beck and call of his own service as well as that of the I. C. S. is the very deuce! and if, on top of it all, he has to kow-tow to a woman like Mrs. Edgar . . .”

“Never mind, Pat, there is no good to strain at a gnat and—er—to swallow a camel,” she added, with a low, amused laugh.

“Yes,” replied the Irishman, with a portentous grin, “but then, which is the gnat and which the camel?”

“It sounds really most distressing,” Miss Chaytor broke in gravely.

“Another injustice to ould Ireland,” interposed Sandforth.

“Don’t you be thinking you can talk Irish, old Sandy bird. There is far too much Scotch in you—or will be before supper is over,” O’Keefe chuckled softly to himself.

“I don’t know why every one is so down on poor Mrs. Edgar,” Margaret remarked. “She

has always been most kind to me, though at times she may be a little eccentric."

"Eccentric!" broke in O'Keefe excitedly. "Why, the woman is a veritable policeman in petticoats. She tries to run the Police Service as well as the Civil. She'd run all India if she happened to be the Viceroy's wife. And just think—not inviting the Winfields to this blessed picnic!"

"Oh, Pat, you do talk so much!" said Miss Chaytor, laughing; "you never give any one else a chance."

"Always said you were an old buckstick, O'Keefe." And Stanforth drove it home.

"But," she resumed, "the reason for his present outburst of eloquence is delightfully obvious."

"Is it now?" replied O'Keefe, with a conscious grin on his face. "I do not see it, myself."

"Why, of course, how stupid of me! Perhaps I should have said the absence of reason."

"And of Cecily Winfield, perhaps," said Sandforth. "The two are, of course, synonymous."

"That is quite too self-evident, Mr. Sandforth." And Miss Chaytor sat back, smiling sweetly.

"What an old ass you are, Sandy!" chuckled O'Keefe.

"Perhaps, after all, it is only his native Irish wit effervescing," broke in Margaret.

"Thanks, Mrs. Wade!" And the Irishman bowed profusely. "You alone are charitable. But

I say, you are rather a pal of Mrs. Edgar's, aren't you? At present I am in her black books—I, your cousin's marriage. If you get the chance just tell her what a fine fellow I am."

"Tell her he is no end of a humbug," the judge's sister recommended, smiling upon the genial Irishman, who was so popular a figure in the station.

His manner was inconsequent, at times almost infantile, and people loved him. It is curious to note how a man's popularity may be judged from the amount of chaff he receives from his friends.

At last the cars came to a standstill where the path leading to the famous falls branched off. The tropical moon was sailing in the high heavens, but the path was narrow, winding under the trees of a babu plantation, and so the Deputy-Commissioner's *chaprasi* stalked on in front, armed with a small lantern and an enormous *lathi*, his ostensible function being that of Lord High Executioner of all snakes that might be lurking unseen on the pathway. That he felt the grave responsibility his gait and bearing betrayed at every step.

At places it was necessary to proceed in Indian file, threading in and out the trees and ghostly shadows of the woodland, where the warm rays of the moon gleamed through the interstices of the leaves as through a trellis. Presently there arose the soft, subdued tinkle of water splashing lazily

over rocks, and the party emerged into the open once more. Just in front there lay the river bed and, closely adjoining its bank, a clump of trees from which Chinese lanterns of varying sizes and colours were suspended.

"I have at last contrived to make good my escape," remarked Chaytor quietly, with his customary indifference, as he attached himself to Mrs. Wade; "and now that I have done my duty nobly, I feel rather aggressively virtuous, and disposed to enjoy my liberty for the rest of the evening."

He was a tall, spare man, with a middle-aged bachelor's face and a tired, indifferent air. His outlook upon life was vaguely cynical. Still, there were innumerable kind deeds to his credit, all effected with the utmost secrecy; for his cynicism was curiously complex and paradoxical. His stories of the failings of others were amusing—as he chose to fashion them—and he possessed a fund of dry humour, drawing largely upon his imagination, as is the way in India.

"I think it is perfectly lovely here by moonlight. What a curious patch of trees!" she said, pointing to where the feast had been spread.

"Yes, it is what is known as a mango tope, planted by some person or persons unknown, doubtless in expiation of manifold sins. There is also a well and a small temple, wherein is seated a red-daubed image of the god Ganesh."

As they reached the spot indicated they were received by the Edgars' butler, whose greasy countenance was illuminated by a sleek smile, for he was a thoroughly fat and wealthy man. Supper had been laid on tables set under the lee of the trees. It was an alfresco meal, and every one sat just where they chose.

Margaret found herself sandwiched in between Chaytor and O'Keefe, who, by skilful manœuvring, had occupied the position most remote from their hostess. The branches overhead were festooned with lights, much to the apparent annoyance of numerous green parrots, which flitted, shrieking, from bough to bough, hurling the most virulent abuse upon the philistines who had ventured to intrude upon their sanctuary and their slumbers. Out beyond the radius of the gleaming lanterns the bluish-white glare of the moonlight shone with a misty radiance. Margaret was delighted with the scene, and she was glad she had come. Then her thoughts flew back to Rex, and the blank prospect of their married life bid fair to damp all enjoyment. But the man at her side did not give her much opportunity to brood over her sorrows.

"Have you met our latest acquisition?" Chaytor asked. "I mean Edgar's new assistant—Jones."

"He has not yet called. I've only seen him at the gymkhana. But look, Mr. Chaytor, he is

sitting at the table right at the back of us," the girl replied in low tones of warning.

"So he is." And Chaytor, craning his neck in the direction indicated, was confronted by the stonily superior smile of Herbert de Wentworth-Jones. The judge ran his eye over him with an apparently careless scrutiny, then desisted with a sigh.

"A most meritorious person. Simson—the senior assistant, you know—told me quite a good story about him, which I am impatient to pass on to others," said he, lowering his voice. "I shall do so on the return journey, for I intend coming in your motor, if I may."

"Now, Mrs. Wade, just look here for a moment," broke in the Irishman; "you did not know that your cousin-in-law was possessed of magic powers, did you?"

"No, I have not yet fathomed the possibilities of all my relatives," she replied, eyeing him with a little swift smile.

"Will no one appreciate me at my own true value?" he persisted in tragic tones. "Just watch this wine-glass: I shall make a few passes and—hey presto!—it moves. Don't you see it trembling?" he asked, as he made some passes in the air over a wine-glass from which he had just removed his hand.

The girl looked, and sure enough the glass was rocking to and fro.

"Marvellous!" quoth Chaytor. "Now just lift up the glass and show Mrs. Wade the hard-back beetle underneath."

The O'Keefe grinned.

"'Twas ever thus; the magician is not without kudos, save in his own district."

The lights were attracting some attention now, and the table-cloth was strewn with half-burnt moths. Fortunately the time was not yet when an assorted horde of insect pests would crowd in, crawling and flying, seeking an early death in the lamps and the soup, littering the table linen with corpses and wings.

The night had become chill, but supper was a fleeting affair, and soon it was over. Not that there was any lack of generosity, for the money expended was no inconsiderable amount; but, the whole *bundobust* being left to the butler, that opulent individual acted as a filter for all the gold passing through him—a filter so effectively exclusive that only a small moiety ever emerged. It was even a matter of talk in the bazaar. It is a strange provision of nature whereby those most intent on managing other people's affairs unconsciously have their own managed for them in turn by some quite insignificant agency. As it was, Mrs. Edgar regarded her butler as one of the seven wonders of the Orient, speaking always of him as her "treasure of a butler," much to the amusement of the onlooker, who knew him for the

"veriest scoundrel in Asia." But the man flourished as the green bay-tree, and might be seen driving hither and thither in the D. C.'s carriages, for it was beneath his dignity to walk on his flat feet, like any common butler.

After supper, a visit was paid to the waterfall, but the river was low and much had to be left to the imagination. Followed some thrilling games of hide-and-seek amongst the trees, with the amorous moon shining down, and an occasional couple who refused to be found.

At last all sought safety in the motors, for it was getting late.

On the return journey Chaytor and O'Keefe gallantly maintained their places beside Margaret Wade, Miss Chaytor and Sandforth being replaced by Johnson of the Public Works Department, and little Simson, the Deputy-Commissioner's senior assistant.

"I say, Simson," said Chaytor, as the car got under way, "what was that yarn you were telling me about Jones? Mrs. Wade is positively pining to hear it, I know."

"It is scarce worth repeating," replied the little man apologetically.

"Come on, old bird, out with it," O'Keefe put in persuasively.

"Johnson may not like it," continued Simson, and the P. W. D. man, pricking up his ears, remarked grimly—

"Don't mind me, Simson, I'm sure I shall quite love it."

"Well, it happened in this way. I was escorting de Wentworth-Jones clubwards on the evening of his arrival from England, via Bombay. As we neared the club, I remarked, merely by way of something to say, that there were a number of engineers in the station at present. 'But they are not membahs of the club—these fellas—are they?' The youthful griffin's drawl was quite inimitable, I assure you, so I shall not attempt the impossible. I replied in the affirmative, and he continued: 'But has one to associate with these—aw—mere mechanics?'"

Roars of laughter proceeded from O'Keefe as he vigorously dug Johnson in the ribs with his cane. When the Irishman laughed his whole face seemed to open out and expand, the wrinkles of good nature unfolding themselves in waves.

"Just what that bounding youngster might be expected to say," replied Johnson, laughing heartily. "Fancy him talking like that about the old P. W. D. though! He is callow to the roots of him—callow even for a civilian."

"Yes," went on O'Keefe the irrepressible, "old Simson is one of the best, of course, but in these days the young of the 'Heaven-born' on its first advent into India is becoming rather oppressively bumptious. I can't think why Government dispatches 'em at all."

"That veteran Anglo-Indian, Patrick O'Keefe, is about to favour us with his views on the degeneracy of the present-day civilian," remarked Chaytor, with a sardonic smile, and the Irishman subsided with a luminous grin.

"Jones is certainly somewhat unique. He apparently believes in the divine right of kings and of all other 'thrice-born' rulers," remarked Johnson. "I dined at mess the other night and Jones happened also to be there. Do you know, that fellow had the amazing audacity to try to teach the Colonel tactics, laying down the law with much pomp. He would teach every man his own job, and incidentally run India—if he got the chance."

"What did you say his name was?" asked Mrs. Wade.

"Herbert de Wentworth-Jones. There may be more, but that is all I can remember at present."

"Please don't omit the hyphen between the last two," pleaded Simson.

"I wonder if it can be the same," Mrs. Wade went on. "There was a family of that name near where I live at home. I don't know much about them, but my father once happened to stay at the same hotel as Mr. de Wentworth-Jones—I have not forgotten the hyphen," and she smiled sweetly across at Simson, to that little man's no small gratification. "Well, Mr. de Wentworth-Jones used each morning to deposit carefully on the table of the smoking-room a Bradshaw, with

a colossal coat-of-arms figuring prominently on the fly-leaf. He would then lie in wait for some chance comer."

"Distinctly good!" laughed Chaytor, in his own dry way. "Sort of spider and the fly episode, and quite exciting for the former. I should imagine he was the type of man who speaks affectionately of William the Conqueror as of an intimate friend—of a quite fictitious ancestor of his. Goes to hotels and complains universally of the food and the service in tones sufficiently loud for the whole room to hear. 'What! Call that *vol-au-vent!* Take it away; it is not the sort of thing I get in Brussels'; whereupon the entire room becomes aware of the fact that he has probably eaten his way across Europe."

O'Keefe took up the parable, but his volubility was forcibly cut short by Simson.

Then Chaytor broke in. He had the impelling gift of holding his audience when he chose to rouse himself from his habitual apathy. He was a man who looked on at life—for that he possessed a positive genius. "I can never quite fathom the infinite trouble some people put themselves to in order that they may establish their alleged superiority, unless it be the effect of an ingrowing mind. It is all so fleeting, and life is so absurdly brief. We all come into the world and then go out of it again—all in precisely the same way. I know that equality is impossible—undesirable

even. There must of necessity be a large number of different classes in society, each bound together by its own traditions and inclinations, but why allege that one class is better than another? Each class is essentially of utility in itself, and the standard of comparison is merely arbitrary and archaic, after all. Each has a dignity of its own to uphold, and if any one looks down upon another it must be because his own equality requires some demonstration to make it visible."

He paused, and Margaret, who never consciously maligned any one, remarked with a guilty flush: "I am not sure that I should have told you what I did about Mr. Jones. It may not be the same people at all."

"Oh, young Jones will be all right. Time and a small station—ably assisted by Simson—will work wonders in him. Fortunately for himself, he was not posted to a large station where he would have been quietly ignored had he made himself obnoxious in any way," replied Chaytor with quiet assurance.

"Only it is a pity that the old Jones had not spent sufficient time in Junglibad," remarked Johnson resentfully.

"My dear fellow," drawled little Simson, "is it not better that he should be in England, climbing society's lofty peaks? He has yet to trespass beyond the line of perpetual ice."

"Here we are, back in dear old Junglibad,"

sang out O'Keefe, beginning to feel it was time to assert himself once more after an enforced quiescence that had seemed interminable—to his way of thinking.

* * * * *

Wade sat alone in his bungalow with set and brooding face. He wished to be alone, for misery having entered at the window, his sociality had flown out at the door. He had begun to hope—but that was over now. They would slip back into a groove of antagonism once more, he reflected. What a threefold fool he had been! Had she liked him even she could never have gone so entirely against his wishes. And he loved her more than ever—that was the worst of it. He gazed at the sun topee and riding-switch hanging up—countless little things that seemed to incarnate her sweet girlishness. He was not an imaginative man, but the memory of the low, sweet voice thrilled to his very soul; almost he could hear the seductive murmur of it; almost he could see the wide, half-childish eyes, and he was racked by the want of her.

The door opened cautiously and the butler insinuated himself with an air of importance beyond the ordinary. Wade looked up impatiently and frowned, but the native of Surat plunged into volubility with much self-satisfaction: The sahib was his father and his mother—numerous

other relatives besides—but he, Rama, must leave and go into his own country ; his wife was sick, there was none to look after her, and so on. The sahib frowned still more deeply, then he commended his faithful follower to gehenna, in the quiet, tense fashion which he wielded with deadly effect, and Rama melted away.

Instantly Wade's indomitable pride came back to him. She should never see how much he cared, and he would break her will yet, even if she never came to love him. The pale eyes grew suddenly hard and repellent.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN Junglibad the cold weather had come at last, and its tardy arrival was welcomed by all and sundry. There was a whisper of winter in the air, and bungalows rejoiced in the manifold comforts of log fires—the cosy, crackling logs so reminiscent of England and of home. Morning and evening the little bluish clouds of smoke hung suspended in the still, crisp atmosphere 'twixt heaven and earth, like the legendary coffin of Mohammed, clutching at earth as if loath to rise up and leave it all behind. At times the pungent smell of it, wafting fitfully on some tiny puffs of wind to some homesick exile, would carry him back to the delights of childhood's days and the bonfires long ago, and then he would proceed to count again, for the one thousandth and oneth time, perchance, the days that must elapse ere he should set sail for his native land, with the lights of Bombay astern. The keen, sparkling radiancy of early morning, when the blood begins to race again in veins grown sluggish; the sweet, soft breeze which to breathe was all a man might ask after months of a fierce, grizzling heat—on such

a morning there is an expectant stillness in the air, broken, not infrequently, alas! by the many discordant notes of the Aryan brother as he performs his noisy toilet; also by countless "pie" dogs barking as if in justification of their very existence.

But have they not all some charm of their own for the exile—some tender half-regret, at least, when, the day's work over, he has departed again to his own land, leaving India and the East behind him for ever?

It was just such a morning, with the early sunshine streaming over the distant horizon, when Mrs. Wade trotted her Arab pony, Saladin, on to the Maidan, where she had arranged to meet Cecily Winfield. She was passionately fond of riding: seldom a day passed that she was not in the saddle, and she was fast becoming an expert horsewoman. On horseback her mind was taken off a morbid brooding over what seemed to be so hopeless and tragic a fate. There were still despondent moments when the future loomed up very dull before her, but the spirit of fatalism—which is a heritage of the Orient—was slowly permeating her impressionable nature. Unconsciously she assumed an affinity with the East, gathering unto herself some of its colossal calm, and arriving at the knowledge that a human life is but a small matter after all. There Nature is rather more obtrusive than in the West; at least, it is not

looked at askance as in colder and more artificial climes, and mankind is brought down very close to Mother Earth and "bare brown humanity." In Nature there is little scope for regret.

That same morning Mervyn chanced to be on the Maidan and he caught sight of Mrs. Wade riding at a foot-pace, and alone. She was a gallant figure in the saddle, her trim, erect shape standing out clear against the sky-line. He watched her as she put the pony to a canter, the grace of her lithe form bending and swaying in the saddle like some willowy wand. "She knows how to sit a horse," he reflected with a gleam of admiration in his dark eyes. The man was himself a noted horse-man, his judgment of the noble art sound. Certainly the girl sat her pony with a grace and ease that characterized her every movement.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wade," he said, riding up at an easy canter. "I hope I don't intrude? The horse, you know, is a gregarious animal, much more so than the majority of human beings."

Looking up with a little smile of welcome, "Yes," she replied, "they do go better together. Old Saladin has been so very uninteresting this morning; I don't think he likes his own company one little bit. But I am just waiting for Cecily Winfield; she arranged to meet me here at eight." Suddenly the faint drum-drum of horses' feet smote the still air behind them, and Margaret turned in her saddle, shielding her eyes

with her hand. "Oh, there she is at last, and she has got some one with her."

Mervyn assented with a smile. "Looks like Pat O'Keefe; perhaps I may not be *de trop* after all," he added.

The girl smiled also as she watched the two approaching. "No," she replied. "I rather think you will be very much to the point—now; but I wonder how Pat knew that Cecily was coming here this morning."

"There is," said he, "some strange telepathic communication at times. At times the gods are good to us poor mortal men."

"So sorry I'm late, Margaret," said the girl, as she pulled up her pony impetuously. "Really, it was all Pat's fault." And she glanced at O'Keefe, her little piquant face aglow with animation.

"But what has Pat got to do with it? I was not aware that he was coming." And the spirit of mischief sparkled in eyes of grey.

"Oh, for that matter, no more was I," replied Cecily, her adorable little round face dimpling ever so little. She was a soft, friendly little person, and the dimple was not the obvious and obtrusive kind—merely the faintly suggestive sort. "But then, he is so frequently the uninvited guest, and at all times no end of a bore," she finished, with a little delicious ripple of a laugh.

"Mrs. Wade," said Pat, not a whit abashed,

"I appeal unto Cæsar. Last night I was informed on the best authority . . ."

"I did not tell you, Pat; you know I never did!" she broke in, a look of outraged dignity on her impudent little face—it made her look simply distracting.

"But, me dear, I never even said you did," replied the imperturbable Irishman, with a laugh—such a merry, whole-hearted laugh it was; but the very nature of it was peculiarly irritating to dignity offended.

"How odiously impertinent you are becoming!" and Miss Cecily drew herself up with the effective hauteur of all her eighteen years. "At times you are merely foolish," she added, in tones withering and scornful.

Margaret came to the rescue. "I think we might as well move on," she said; "I, for one, positively long for a gallop." And touching Saladin with her switch, she led the way, with Captain Mervyn in close attendance—a position hotly contested at first by the indignant Cecily; but the man was not to be ousted, and soon he and Mrs. Wade were drawing away clear with a comfortable lead in hand.

"Better let them fight it out to a finish—and alone," said he, laughing softly.

"It is," replied Mrs. Wade gravely, "the only way."

The pace had hardened into a gallop and, as the

going improved, the animals settled down and stretched themselves. Soon they were racing along neck to neck. The ground flew from under them, the sky raced above, the air singing past as they tore along, all care and useless regrets submerged in the whistle of the wind and the pounding thud of galloping hoofs—man and beast alike in perfect sympathy, heart and blood beating as one. Flashing through a delicious world, with wonder flying ever before; out over a wide expanse of open country, the blue sky overhead and a good horse moving beneath; nothing save the shining horizon in front, with all the lure of the unknown ever keeping just out of reach, the every-day, work-grimed world far behind and forgotten—it is to live, indeed.

As they pulled up at last to give the ponies a breather, Mervyn gazed in wonderment at the girl's radiant face, the grey eyes, sparkling with the zest of life, and the black, unruly hair. He had never seen her quite like that before. A sudden beauty had flared up in the small, pale face, and it was so dazzling that he stared, frankly unable to avert his eyes.

"The O'Keefe scored pretty heavily just now, did he not?" he spoke at last, stooping low over his horse's neck to light a cigarette.

"Yes, I'm afraid he did," she admitted with a rueful smile, "but it will be to his own undoing. If I know my Cecily at all, poor Pat will have to

pay heavily, at a high rate of interest. The way she torments him at times is really quite distressing. He is so palpably in love with her, and of course she takes advantage of it, as only eighteen can."

"You speak as if you had left that golden age very far behind," he replied softly. When a woman pleased him, his manner was easy and sympathetic.

"And so I have," she sighed, and he did not pursue the subject farther.

"Miss Cecily will at least give O'Keefe some invaluable instruction in the wiles of your sex," he resumed. "It is a lesson all men must learn some time or another. Men are born to trouble as the sparks fly upward—to suffer as bright eyes frown."

"That is so like a man!" she retorted, with a swift flush. "I don't think they know the meaning of the word 'suffering': that is left for the woman to discover."

Unconsciously she spoke her thoughts aloud, and her face grew very wistful.

He watched her narrowly, the ghost of a smile gradually curving his mobile lips.

"Would it be indiscreet to ask what your opinion of India is now, Mrs. Wade? Is it still a land of dreams and of poetry?"

"I have not yet quite made up my mind about that," she retorted, smiling, with a lightning

change of expression; "there are still three months, you know, for me to decide such a momentous question."

"Just the other day I heard about Miss Fendal; you remember her on board the *Macedonia*, don't you?"

"Yes, but what about her? She married that man who was coming over from Calcutta to meet her," she said, gathering in the reins as Saladin lazily stumbled in his walk.

"Oh no—oh dear me, no! She married Conway—the man who was so keen on her on board ship, you know."

"How dreadful! How could she do such a thing!" said Margaret, aghast.

"Still, she contrived to do it," he replied, with a languid drawl. "Apparently she and Conway managed to elude the other man and to complete the marriage ceremony while he was ransacking Bombay for her. At last he ran the happy couple to earth in the Yacht Club. It happened on the lawn while she was drinking tea with Conway. The man who told me was a spectator, and happened to know the circumstances. Miss Fendal, or rather Mrs. Conway, maintained a cool indifference—quite commendable, I'm told. She turned to the man who had crossed India to marry her, and in a sweetly casual voice said, 'Let me introduce you to my husband.' That was all. Brief and much to the point."

"What ever did the poor man do?" the girl asked breathlessly.

"Oh, he merely melted away. He was too utterly dazed to protest, to do anything but respond to the introduction and vanish."

"It is almost incredible," she said simply.

"It is true, nevertheless," he responded.

The other two caught them up, Cecily beaming triumphant, her face all radiant and adorable once more, and Pat's square, freckled visage as crest-fallen and jaded as it could well look. The Colonel's daughter was a delicious little person, all sunshine and shower. At times her face assumed an expression suggestive of the Cherubim and Seraphim, softening into the look pathetic and appealing as the occasion demanded, so that brave men—if they were young enough—felt an immediate yearning to protect her. At times her eyes sparkled with mischievous delight, as she administered rebukes to her numerous male admirers, snubs which the unfortunates may or may not have merited. A demurely impish expression was the most habitual one, and, in truth, one sufficiently effective to lay low the hearts of all youthful subalterns in Junglibad, in addition to that of the O'Keefe.

"Pat's great clumsy waler kept getting in the way: if it hadn't been for that I should have caught you up long ago. It's a pity that the Police ride so badly, is it not, Captain Mervyn?" she

said, eyeing him persuasively with a whole broadside of smiles and dimples.

"Well," he temporized, "if the horse be large and clumsy, as you maintain, surely the man is not to blame."

"Like horse, like man!" she misquoted glibly, breaking off into a little gurgle of delight at the aptitude of her remark, for O'Keefe certainly was large and not over-graceful. "But of course it takes a man in the service to know how to ride a horse, and it is unkind to judge others harshly—most of all, the Police Force," she added disdainfully, wrinkling her little tip-tilted nose in a fashion peculiar to herself.

The ready-witted Irishman did not reply. He ignored the remark. Cecily's small face quivered with mischief.

"Never mind, Patsey! Better be a live policeman than a dead dog!" she concluded, in a voice sweetly conciliatory, infinitely provoking. Having succeeded now in driving home a smashing victory, she could afford to be magnanimous.

O'Keefe was apparently absorbed in an engrossing conversation with Mrs. Wade. He did not reply.

"It is such a pity when a man is unable to control his nasty little temper," the girl remarked, as she turned to Mervyn, looking up at him with an air of unutterable sweetness; and the eyes of that hardened veteran twinkled with amusement

as she proceeded to practise all the wiles of her budding womanhood upon him for the rest of the way home. He watched her closely, with sly amusement, for he realized that he was being flirted with, and he did not altogether dislike the sensation. Moreover, there was in her that which challenged the male in him. Women, especially young women, became hopelessly enamoured of this man. They had a habit of enthusing over his looks and his manner. He was the *beau garçon* of Junglibad, with all the fatal fascination of one who is a "woman's man," a squire of dames, and yet a man withal. He carried on flippant flirtations with young women, he delighted in flappers, but all his serious energies were devoted to married women. It was safer, he found, and much less expensive. Contrary to general opinion, he found the devoted husband the safest and most facile of all. For to be a good husband it is essential that a man be a fool.

The look of gratified vanity in his eyes did not escape the girl's notice; very little, indeed, ever evaded Miss Cecily's powers of observation. There was a mock solemnity in her glance, and in her voice a sound of subdued laughter.

"Oh, Captain Mervyn, isn't it sad? Do you know, I have never yet developed an attack of Mervynitis? I fear I have grown rather old and wise ever to catch it now."

Of which cryptic remark she could be induced to vouchsafe no further explanation.

CHAPTER XIX

WADE lounged into the bridge-room. He had just emerged from a bad bout of fever, and his lean face was gaunt, so that the sharp features were more harshly aggressive even than usual and the stern mouth more grimly set.

The green-baize tables were fully occupied, and here and there an overflow waited and watched for an opportunity to cut in. At one table Chaytor and Simson battled for points with the O'Keefe and his ally Sandforth.

"With you, partner," murmured the Irishman disconsolately.

"No trumps," came the reply, but it lacked any decisive spontaneity, and the player's face lost the look of cheerful optimism characteristic of it; it was a face the expression of which was at the mercy of any transient mood of the moment. The cards fell, also the tricks, in rapid succession, and presently little Simson chuckled as he complacently added up the score.

"Sandy, you're an old Jonah, and you've lost two rubbers in rapid succession," cried O'Keefe,

more jovial in defeat than in the anticipation of it, and still more so than in victory.

Sandforth rose solemnly and beckoned to Wade.

"Cut in, will you?" said he, laconically, as Wade joined them.

"Hullo, old bird, was it angry with me, then?" demanded Pat in a soft, coaxing voice.

The forester smiled back at him and responded with a growl: "Don't be an ass, O'K.; I'm going to support the bar for a while."

"Jonah seeks the whale's belly," O'Keefe informed the world at large, and the world shouted back at him to keep quiet.

"How's the fever?" inquired Chaytor as Wade took his place at the table.

"Better, thanks," Wade answered. His lips smiled, but they were no less grim, and his head ached fiercely from the aftermath of fever and quinine.

"The other night," remarked Simson as they cut for partners, "I played bridge at the club with de Wentworth-Jones."

"Any good?" queried Chaytor.

"Well, before we started the fellow had been discoursing most learnedly on the game. Amongst other things he informed us that he played the American fashion, and I began to think I should be obliged to mind my p's and q's with such an aggressively scientific exponent of the game. Jones was my partner, and his game might have

been American—might even have been magnificent—but I'm damned if it was bridge! I speedily parted with a good-looking twenty-rupee note.

"Never mind, old bird, you will fleece some of us poor lambs to-night," said O'Keefe soothingly, and the game proceeded quietly and uneventfully, none of the four being addicted to "post-mortems."

"I see that Jones has got in tow with that little Nelson woman," announced Sandforth, strolling in from the veranda after the rubber was ended.

"The devil he has!" O'Keefe ejaculated, and he shouted aloud for drinks.

"She is rather a marvellous little person," Chaytor said in his habitual voice of weary indifference. "I declare I cannot but admire that woman. After exploiting all the youthful subalterns in her husband's regiment—and certain other verdant youngsters who shall remain nameless—she fastens on the new-comer with an avidity that is deserving of a better cause. She is what one might term a 'woman with a grievance'; she and the 'woman with a mission' are persons ever to be avoided."

Wade leaned back in his chair wearily, and his deep, resonant voice had a tired ring in it. "I never could understand why some women are not content to fulfil naturally their appointed destiny in life without endeavouring to make

themselves out other than they are or can ever hope to be."

O'Keefe looked up as a white-robed, dusky attendant appeared with noiseless footfall, also with four large glasses. The sight of the sparkling soda met his gaze; the tinkle of ice on glass sounded like music to his ears; he smiled upon the world at large.

"This is a matter that requires immediate attention," he asserted, as he buried his nose deep in the long, cool glass.

"All I seek myself is the 'girl with the roguish dimple,'" and little Simson gravely applied himself to his drink without glancing in the direction of O'Keefe.

"So do I, old son—only I prefer two dimples to one," grinned O'Keefe, his rubicund face aglow; "but we know how strongly some men must feel on the subject. History relates that one—Simson by name—was among Mrs. Nelson's earlier victims."

"'Tis true, 'tis pity,'" quoted that individual sadly. "I admit it to my sorrow and shame—only it all happened in my far-off salad days."

He fortified himself from the large peg at his side and continued: "We started by becoming friendly—only a little, mark you—then one day she assumed a look of pathos, one that would melt the veriest crocodile to tears. Her husband, she confided to me, had been *such* a brute to

her ; he drank, and neglected her shockingly, and I—well, I swallowed it all. I offered up at her shrine all the consolation and devotion of a chivalrous nature. To be brief—”

“Yes, do !” The interrupter was O’Keefe.

“I fetched and carried for that woman—”

“‘Poodle-faked’ no end, and enjoyed it, too, I’ll be bound,” once more O’Keefe interrupted.

“—And did all in my power to render her life less tragic, until I came to my senses and realized what an utter ass I had been,” Simson concluded, serenely ignoring O’Keefe’s interruptions. One always did ignore them, chiefly because any comment but served to give him the opportunity he awaited, namely, that of monopolizing the conversation. The Irishman, it must be confessed, was a prodigious “buckstick.”

“The point of it all being that poor Nelson is an exceptionally mild individual—couldn’t harm as much as a fly if he tried ever so hard,” said Chaytor, interposing hastily before the loquacious youth could get under way. “And he smacks the bottle but lightly with it all. But that woman overflows with self-pity ; I declare if she had married the archangel Gabriel himself she would still have yearned for consolation—and got it, too. Her thirst for sympathy is unslakable. To see how she works on the chivalrous feelings of callow youth—incidentally flirting atrociously with them—all in the way of sympathy, is a sight for the gods. It is

beyond my comprehension why she cannot flirt frankly—if she wants to flirt at all ; it is no very uncommon feature of the Anglo-Indian matron, but such a method would not be sufficiently melodramatic for her æsthetic taste, I take it. The fact is that most women dramatize themselves more or less.”

Chaytor professed to being a bit of an Oriental where women were concerned, while in reality he cherished a romance locked up in his breast alone ; for the other participator had been lost to him long years ago, had entirely forgotten his very existence a like period. As a rule there is the image on which we strive to pattern ourselves, but that which we really are remains always, and Chaytor, with all his sense of humour, posed as the cynical critic of women, while inwardly he adored them.

“ By the same token,” said Simson, “ one might call de Wentworth-Jones the ‘ man with a future.’ Unlike Napoleon, it is a destiny of the imagination alone. It will fade, and fade in proportion to the modicum of common sense one can succeed in hammering into him, until at last he comes to realize his utter insignificance in life.”

“ And,” continued Chaytor, forgetful for the moment of his pose, “ women with a mission or a grievance can be excused just because they are women. That they should persuade themselves into believing just what they want to believe is,

after all, only the *métier de femme*, and we should judge them by motive—or, rather, impulse—and not by action or effect. Then they remain dear, incalculable creatures. That which Simson so aptly terms a 'man with a future' is intolerable until it becomes a man of common sense, for now he is a man and yet a woman, and he will require no end of tail-twisting." To this last Simson assented grimly.

"Which is the worse," asked Sandforth, "a woman with a mission or she of the grievance?"

"Of the two evils, I should personally feel inclined to choose the latter. She seeks other men for her purpose and leaves the wretched husband alone, while the former is the managing type of woman—from which, good Lord, deliver us poor men! But don't listen to my advice; I never profess to understand women," advised Chaytor, with the short, dry chuckle one always identified with him.

Wade rose languidly from his chair. "You fellows seem to know all about women," he remarked dryly. His bearing was erect and arrogant as ever, but the pale eyes were dull, and the face had lost its tan, so that it looked curiously yellow. "I know less than nothing about 'em, so I'll leave you to it," he added, and with a curt nod he turned and sauntered off.

"Poor old Wade must have had a bad go of malaria," said Chaytor pensively.

"Time for one more rubber," O'Keefe exclaimed. "Now then, Sandy, we'll take 'em on again and have our revenge."

* * * * *

Outside, in a dim, shadowy corner of the veranda, sat Jones. He was a large, fat youth, and just now there was a fatuous look of sympathy on his florid face as he gazed into the tragic and liquidly appealing eyes of a woman.

"Oh, it is terrible for a woman to feel herself alone in the world, Mr. Jones. Above all things, a woman needs sympathy and love—at least the love of a child, if her—if the others all misunderstand her and—and are cruel."

Mrs. Nelson's shoulders heaved tumultuously as if in one long, concentrated sob.

"Yes," agreed the sympathetic knight-errant, delivering himself in his own most bumptious and pedantic manner, "a man must devote himself to the woman of his choice. He must protect her for whose life and soul he has made himself responsible to God. It is merely his duty"—throwing back his head, with chest swelled out—"and it ought to be his privilege."

The man's vanity was prodigious.

"How perfectly sweet you will be to the girl you marry!" She sighed wistfully, with just the requisite amount of envy visible. "Ah! you at least seem to understand me," she murmured,

laying her hand on his arm lightly and as if by accident. "I feel that I have no *real* friend in all the world," she added, with a hint of tears not far off.

"Present company excepted," the youth who fondled his future remarked gallantly.

"It is good of you to say so, and we have known each other for so short a time! Do you know, my little girl—my one little blessing—has been taken from me and sent to England to be with my husband's people. A woman must have some object upon which she may lavish all the great wealth of her affection. She is . . . she must be, exposed to many temptations if she be deprived of all the natural sources of love by the one who most of all should be considerate to her, the one man who should shelter her."

The all-obedient tears of self-pity came welling up into her eyes. They were tears which would never disfigure, for they never advanced beyond the piquantly effective style—and that in itself is an art which demands no little practice. "At times," and her voice sank to a whisper still more tragic, "he makes me afraid—I get positively terrified of him"—suppressed sob—"but I must bear my cross," she concluded, with a sweetly softened look.

The conversation need not be pursued farther: suffice it to note that the woman was amazingly versatile in her methods. It may seem almost

superfluous to add that the "little blessing" had been sent home after Nelson had come to realize how completely his wife was neglecting their child, and yet the woman was remarkably strong on principles, and the upbringing of children was a favourite topic of hers; unfortunately, she never applied her ideas.

"I say," remarked Chaytor, as they rose from the bridge table, "the sister and I are contemplating a shooting camp for Christmas. We'd be very glad if you fellows would join in. Mrs. Wade and Cecily Winfield are coming, I believe."

O'Keefe was positive about it; he would certainly "like it immensely." Simson was not sure that he could get away, and Sandforth was sorry he couldn't manage it.

"Sandy, you old prevaricator, it's the petticoats you're funkng all the time. You might as well own up at once," O'Keefe laughed as he punched his friend in the ribs. "You should not have mentioned so many women, Chaytor. I've seen him facing up right manfully to one at a time—but three all at once, and the old Sandy bird will bolt like any buck rabbit."

"Don't seem to frighten you, anyhow, O'Keefe," said Chaytor dryly, as they separated for the night and wended their several ways homeward.

CHAPTER XX

"ARE you going away for Christmas?" Mervyn queried, after a short lull in the conversation. He had developed a habit of calling somewhat frequently at the Wades' bungalow. Wade himself seldom chanced to be in at these times.

"I am joining the Chaytors' camp at—oh, the name is quite unpronounceable!" Margaret said, with a little pout, then broke into a sudden laugh.

"I thought your husband was going after *markhor*?"

"So he is, but"—she stopped short in sudden confusion—"but it is too impossible a place for me," she concluded, lowering her eyes with the knowledge that her excuse must be lamely obvious to him.

Presently the butler entered with tea, and departed again noiselessly. Mervyn watched the girl as she presided at the table with an exquisite grace.

"Cream and no sugar—you see, I begin to know what you like," she said with her little odd smile, the drooping, dark-lashed eyelids opening wide of a sudden, and the expression of the eyes

changing subtly to one of inscrutable mystery : it was that little trick of the eyes he loved most of all.

"I also," said he, with unmoved countenance. "We aren't altogether strangers, either," he went on hastily.

"Yes," she admitted, with half-wistful curiosity; "I wonder why it is that friends on board ship should be different from any others. Perhaps it is because we get to know people outright and unconditionally; and then the friendship is dropped so completely, and everything seems to change when the journey ends, and one has to gather up the threads of life again."

"Yes, I know," he murmured.

His manner was always smoothly agreeable, but of late it had become reverential and subdued in a fashion quite foreign to the man in general. She was too much of a woman not to note and appreciate. Her heart was very empty, and the sweetness of an intimacy with one who understood was great, so that she felt more strongly the bond of sympathy between them while assuring herself it was because she had known him before. Perhaps she unconsciously imagined she was exerting a woman's beneficial influence over the man.

"Our friendship has not become extinguished?" And he hazarded a small but comprehensive smile.

"It certainly has not," she assented, with her low, alluring laugh.

"It is amazingly kind of you to permit me to see you so often," said he.

She looked up, and their eyes met. Her glance was perfectly frank—as clear as a child's and with a child's appealing confidence.

"Perhaps I ought not to inflict myself so much upon you," he continued humbly, but he knew he could rely upon the inflection of his voice rather than on the words themselves.

"Why?" she queried, with a note of regret in her voice that was spontaneous. She was herself too natural to try to suppress it.

"Of course, if you don't find me too much of a bore, nothing else matters—that was all I referred to," he added hastily. On later reflection he did not find her directness quite so gratifying.

She considered for a moment, her small, tip-tilted face grave of a sudden. "Yes, we have seen rather a lot of each other. We happen to meet so often on the Maidan, but that is because we are both so fond of riding and of horses and things."

The man laid down his cup in silence, and his hand brushed hers by accident.

"More tea?" she asked abruptly.

"No, thanks," he said, after a slight pause.

Followed another silence; then he looked away swiftly, his darkly handsome face rather pale and set. At last she broke the silence, half-shyly—

"I think riding is the one thing that makes life in India worth living."

"So you are coming round to my point of view with regard to the country?" he said, smiling gravely back at her. "India is rather a strange place. A man gets into the habit of hating it frequently, and grouching about it at all times. Perhaps the worst part of it is the subtle, unseen fascination that seems to unsettle one for all time and for all other parts of the world. But I suppose there is always a perverse attraction in that which one dislikes most." He fell into his slow, indolent drawl and ended with a short laugh.

The door opened suddenly and Wade lounged in. His pale, keen glance instantly fastened on Mervyn, and the haughty air of self-absorption became more pronounced than usual.

Mervyn rose with deliberate reluctance. "I have just been recounting to your wife the merits and demerits of the East," he said languidly.

"Vastly interesting, I'm sure," replied the other curtly.

The silence which followed was of the uncomfortable order, wherein the atmosphere seems strained to the fulminating point. It was a position hardly bearable, and Mervyn, picking up his topee, prepared to depart.

"Afraid I must move on now," he said with deliberate slowness, and his outstretched hand closed over hers in a firm, sympathetic clasp.

"See you at mess to-night?" he queried, turning to Wade, who was silently gnawing his short, bristly moustache.

"No, not to-night." The door closed, and the Wades were left alone.

The man turned to his wife and asked abruptly: "What day do you join the Chaytors?"

"I think it is the 23rd, but I'm not quite certain yet," she replied. Suddenly she walked across to the window and gazed out into the sun-scorched compound.

"Will you be so good as to inform me when you know the exact date," he continued coldly, and she turned instantly and faced him. "Believe me, it is not out of curiosity I ask—I merely wish to know so that I may make my own arrangements as soon as possible."

"Certainly; I shall find out this afternoon. But your—er—arrangements need not be affected in any way by mine, need they?"

She was paler even than usual, but her look was one of ingenuous wonder only. The relations between husband and wife had become little more intimate than those of casual acquaintances. The man's manner was formal and studiously polite—nothing more, and when he replied there was in his voice that deadly composure which she had learned to dread.

"To this extent only: that I do not propose to leave you alone."

For a moment the childish eyes opened very round and watched him with half-wistful curiosity. Then there happened one of her swift flashes of comprehension. The short, pouting lip quivered for a moment, and set suddenly in a hard, straight line.

"You are most considerate, I'm sure," she said, in the level, contemptuous tones of a woman of the world. The piercing eyes watched her keenly: her pale, tense expression fascinated him rather.

"You are my wife. I have some responsibility in the matter——" He broke off and lapsed into a gloomy silence. Margaret's eyebrows elevated, and her lip curled ever so little.

"Do you mean——?" she asked softly.

"I mean nothing."

The girl fingered the ring on her third finger, twisting it round and round as if it hurt her. She turned once and regarded him in a curiously detached manner.

"Very well," she said quietly, in the cold tones of youthful finality, and left him.

CHAPTER XXI

CHRISTMAS in India is the same as it is elsewhere, only instead of the snow and frost of the Christmas illustrated numbers, and the more common mud and fog of British reality—sunshine, dazzling and brilliant. The same amount of sentimental retrospect and mixed memories of olden days, a forgotten past crowding back and thoughts of friends of long ago, tinged one and all with the visionary glory of rose-coloured spectacles.

As seen from India, the hardships of exile assume exaggerated proportions and there is a corresponding fictitious value set on the old life in England; but in the obscure twilight of a pensioned retirement values have a tendency to become reversed, for then all the absorbing interests in a man's life have died and youth itself become a thing of the past.

The Chaytors' camp had been pitched on the bank of a river under the shade of a sparse babul plantation. The utility of the babul is universal: its leaves and seed-pods furnish the camel and the goat with seasonable delicacies; its wood is excellent for rough carpentry and for fuel, and its

thorns seem pre-eminently designed to puncture the bare, black, leathery feet of the native servant. In this latter respect the situation of the encampment was not appreciated by the small army of retainers who at critical periods were obliged to pull up short and extract the thorny spikes—their language prolific in maledictions, pungent without being at all redundant. From all other points of view the site was admirable. On one side stretched an extensive *jheel*, or swamp, wherein duck and geese congregated in their thousands, and on the other bank of the river a patch of very fair quail country. The encampment was on a high, overhanging bluff where the river took a sharp bend, near which a long, sandy spit projected. It lay in the direct line of flight of the *kullum* (or demoiselle crane) as they winged their noisy way morning and evening to and from the feeding-ground of moist, green wheat.

The party was small, consisting only of Chaytor and his sister—the host and hostess—Mrs. Wade, Cecily Winfield, Simson, and O'Keefe. Wade himself had not accepted; it was understood that he had gone north after larger game. However, it was a merry gathering, for they were friends all, and O'Keefe was always a host in himself.

It was Christmas morning. For some reason best known to themselves Cecily and Pat were the first two to appear.

"Merry Christmas, Pat," said the consummate

little coquette, as she raised the *chik* of the tent and entered with an air of detachment, freshly demure and infinitely tantalizing.

"But I say, aren't you even going to shake hands with a fellow?" he asked, advancing towards her with hands outstretched and a rueful smile illuminating his good-natured face.

"You know I detest pawing people," she replied, the adorable little dimples flashing faintly as she skilfully projected the table betwixt herself and the ardent Irishman.

"I've got something for you here," said he, drawing a small packet from his pocket.

"For me? How perfectly lovely!" As her dancing blue eyes were all intent on the parcel, the man surreptitiously drew nearer until the table no longer intervened. "Oh, do let me have it, Pat! I do so want to open it myself!" Then suddenly she snatched it from him, retreating the while to a position more remote—a very accessible one for all that. There she proceeded to remove the wrappings carefully, one by one, until a tiger's lucky bones, mounted as a clasp in a unique and rather artistic fashion, were exposed to view. "Is it for me—really?" she asked with a radiantly effective smile.

"Yes, really," said Pat, a little closer still.

"How altogether ducky! And, Pat, you are rather a kind old dear—at times," she added hastily as he swiftly sidled close up to her, a gleam of mischief in his merry, laughing eyes.

This time her retreat had been cut off and she found herself cornered. For so skilful a strategist it was a predicament sufficiently strange to render the discrimination between accident and design a matter of some difficulty. Apparently O'Keefe leaned towards the view of art and opportunity.

"Faith, ye can't get away this time, me dear!" said he joyously. "Now, are you going to shake hands or must I—"

"Yes, yes, of course! Just in a moment"—raising her little hands in an absurdly inadequate attitude of defence—"but tell me, Pat, when did you shoot this tiger? I *do* believe you have never seen one in all your life—outside the Zoo." The remark tailed off into a small, rippling gurgle.

"Well, I went after him last hot weather," said he, pausing a moment to scratch his perplexed pate. "The fact is—er—these are the bones of the tiger I'm going to shoot this hot weather," he added, brightening visibly and at length breaking into a grin.

"Sure, Pat?" retreating farther into the corner.

"Quite positive. By Jove! just look, Cecily—there is a piece of mistletoe right overhead," and once more his eyes were brimming over with merriment and all the joys of the chase.

"If—if you do, Pat, I'll—I'll punish you. Remember, I shall never speak to you again."

His only reply was to draw closer. As he

bent down, her resistance was a demonstration passive rather than active. All the while her eyes sparkled with irresistible allurements, and the dimple flickered in rather a perplexing manner.

But the psychological moment was interrupted. They so often are, and the very angels weep. A warning cough proceeded from the outer passage of the tent, and the girl darted out of reach with a facility that belied her apparent helplessness of the moment previous.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Chaytor! A merry Christmas."

Cecily kissed the intruder with much demonstration, thereby hiding from view cheeks slightly more rosy than usual—raising, at the same time, the youth's envy to a high pitch of exasperation.

"Always my dashed luck!" he muttered to himself, for he had been sorely tried, "and 'Christmas comes but once a year.' Gad! there is still New Year left, though," and he chuckled to himself audibly as his equanimity was restored.

"I beg your pardon, Pat, were you addressing me?" Miss Chaytor asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes, Miss Chaytor; I was only trying to seize the opportunity of wishing you many happy returns of the day—as soon as Cecily has finished with you."

"Not just in the same way, I hope," she remarked, striving to frown. The attempt was a failure. "Ah, Pat, it is the lost opportunities

alone that cause regrets when you reach my time of life. Never mind, you have many Christmases before you yet—New Year, too," she added with a meaning smile.

Apparently Cecily did not understand, but when her face was hid to view the blue eyes sparkled merrily.

"Well," said Chaytor, as *chota hazri* was approaching its logical conclusion, "we had better make an early start if we wish to bag the duck that are circling over the jheel at this moment, madly shrieking to be shot."

"Margaret and I have decided not to go with you, but we will join you for tiffin," Miss Chaytor announced gravely. "Cecily, dear, you would prefer to wait with us here—is it not so?" she asked with mischievous intent.

"I don't really mind what I do," the girl answered slowly; but the dimples had vanished quite, and her general air rather contradicted her avowed indifference.

"I say, old bird, you promised to come with me and watch my prowess. I'm no end of a shot, aren't I, Simson?" O'Keefe interposed, a look of swift consternation on his face.

"Don't know that I should quite put it that way, old chap; say, rather, that you blaze away no end of cartridges. I never yet saw a man so extravagant in ammunition and so economical in birds—except when addressing your nearest—er—

friends," replied the little man solemnly as he lit a very lengthy cheroot and heaved a half-envious sigh.

"Of course, Cecily, you must not break any promises made on Christmas day," Miss Chaytor broke in relentingly, "so you had better accompany the men. Take my little twenty-bore gun with you if you like."

"Please, Miss Chaytor, I'm not fit to die," said O'Keefe.

"If it comes to that," said Cecily, pouting, "I think the safest thing would be to be a duck with you anywhere near."

"Of course it would," roared the delighted Pat. "Sure, isn't that what I'm always telling you now?" When others smiled, he laughed loudly—his very nature was joyous. The discomfited aspirant to duckdom retired to prepare for the fray.

As they approached the wheel countless ducks were seen darting hither and thither like so many clouds hard driven before the wind, hovering round and round in endless circles, and with never-ceasing clamour. High overhead in the cloudless blue was the whirr of many birds on the wing.

A few temporary makeshifts had been arranged as butts along one of the numerous *bunds* that intersected the shimmering sea of reeds which almost hid the water. In season it would be converted into smiling fields of luscious rice, vividly

green and watery-looking ; but now the *bunds* were riddled with breaches, and to reach the scene of action they had to take to the boats—a complimentary term for the flat-bottomed contraptions of the country. A garrulous headman with two assistants piloted them out to the scene of action with long bamboo poles, talking the while of the incredible number of birds and of the superlative *bundobust* he had made for the beat. Cecily and O'Keefe were to occupy the first butt, on the extreme right, and Simson—who was really a first-class shot—was to be posted in the centre.

"You two don't mind getting out here, do you?" asked Chaytor with conscious irony. "It is the one most easy of access for Miss Cecily."

"It is the one most remote, and therefore the most safe for you, Chaytor," Simson growled in an audible undertone.

"Oh, it is quite all right," sang out O'Keefe gaily ; "Cecily is not going to shoot, you know. Miss Chaytor's gun is a mere protection against wounded duck—the charging mallard is no joke !"

"Oh, you are silly, Pat ! Of course I'm going to shoot," she cried petulantly as he assisted her to alight with an excess of zeal that was not altogether warranted.

"Miss Cecily was not the danger to which I referred," and with that parting shot Simson and Chaytor moved on, leaving the two to their own

sweet devices. Not entirely alone, to the O'Keefe's infinite regret, for they had perforce to retain two of the shikaris to retrieve the stricken game. The astute Irishman had, however, stationed the encumbrances as far out of sight as possible—but not of the duck.

Cecily and he crouched behind the bushy screen and soon they heard the beaters as they splashed about the shallow water, driving the birds before them. The man deemed it expedient to draw up as close to the girl as possible, ostensibly for their better concealment, and she let it pass unrebuked on the tacit understanding that the end justified the means.

It was the girl's first real shoot. She had hitherto fired only at a few pigeon in a casual manner and quite without result. Now she knelt with shining eyes and flushed cheek, nervously fingering the trigger guard as the sounds of man and bird approached nearer and yet nearer—the splashing of water and beating of wings as the birds rose in dense clouds from among the reeds, with much quacking and tumultuous protest. A gaggle of geese passed noisily, far overhead and out of range. Suddenly the loud whirr-whish of many wings caught Cecily's ear, and her grip on the gun tightened. She was breathless with excitement ; the light of battle was in her eye, and her teeth set hard.

“ *Maro, Sahib, maro!* ” the shikaris breathed in

tense whispers, for they were Mohammedans and therefore keenly fond of sport.

A rushing sound in the air overhead and a magnificent flight of duck showed up low over the waving grasses. Bang! Bang! rang out the little twenty-bore in a shrill, spiteful right and left. A sudden swerve of the cloud to the right, and then on, unharmed.

"Oh, I've missed them all!" wailed the girl. "Why don't you shoot, you stupid?" and she turned like a little fury on the man beside her, for his thoughts had soared far above all mundane ducks as he gazed in rapt admiration at the girl's keen, eager face.

Bang! Bang! snorted the twelve-bore in deeper tones. This time the fast-retreating cloud did not turn as much as a feather.

"Wah-wah!" muttered the followers of the Prophet, their tongues clicking with scorn.

"I thought you said you could shoot!" Cecily cried in tones of bitter resentment, with all traces of the elusive dimple quite gone. "You silly ass, you didn't get within a mile of them! I tickled 'em up, anyhow!" In her annoyance she was rapidly reverting to the slang of her flapperhood.

In silence the O'Keefe girded himself for the next onslaught, with the courage of despair and a firm resolve to do or die.

"Here they come again!" she whispered,

hoarse with excitement, as another noisy, densely packed wedge of duck loomed up on the horizon.

"Oh, I must get one this time!"

Then they came with a fierce, low, swooping flight, at lightning speed, right over the guns. This time two birds fell to the man's gun, and the consequent glow of pride served to raise his drooping spirits. As the bunch rose in confusion, continuing the while their rapid flight, the girl's left barrel pulled down a magnificent old mallard from the blue. It dropped straightway, striking the water with a soul-satisfying splash, and the small round face broke into sudden sunshine once more.

She looked on complacently while her splendid mallard was being retrieved, and her stare of scorn was fixed on the "shameful shoveller" and the drab female gadwal that had fallen a victim to the man's gun.

"Certainly it is unsafe for you to go after any tiger," she announced with a contempt that stung.

"But I've pulled down two," Pat retorted in no little astonishment.

"That's nothing to boast about—quite the reverse! Two miserable duck that got in the way of your right barrel at the same time—and there were thousands of 'em!" Her scorn was more pronounced than ever.

"The small ones are harder to hit than—the big ones," he protested, feebly but with some

truth. "Hang it all, you only brought down one yourself!" and he gazed at her more in sorrow than in anger.

"Oh, Pat, you are stupid! Why didn't you pick your bird, as I did, instead of blazing away into the bunch?" The rebuke was well earned, albeit part of her statement was not strictly accurate. "Besides," she added, resorting to a woman's trump card, "I'm only a girl."

To this irrefutable statement he deigned no reply, and the shikaris arrived with the duck. The old mallard, suddenly showing signs of animation, began to struggle vainly, with the man's tight grip about its neck.

Cecily gasped and looked away. "It's not dead yet!" she wailed, and her face turned scarlet with anguish. "Oh, how perfectly awful! I am a beast! I'll never try to shoot again—it's—it's perfectly brutal."

She shut her eyes to the tragedy of a wounded mallard, and O'Keefe drew his knife.

"*Halal*," he said softly, and the shikari proceeded to cut the bird's throat in the name of Allah.

"Is it dead yet?" she asked in a small, faint voice.

"Yes, of course—-dear," said he, firmly resolved to take a masterful advantage of the occasion and thereby emphasize what a very manly and indispensable person he was.

It was a pensive and penitent Cecily that sat meekly beside him for the remainder of the beat. That, somehow, had the effect of raising his spirits to a boisterous pitch so that he shot more execrably even than was his custom, blazing away gaily, little recking whether he hit or missed. He felt that he had at last gained the mastery over Cecily, and the future would all be plain sailing. Women needed delicate but firm handling, he reflected; they had to be conquered once and for all, and they really liked the process. It was the strong, silent man that appealed to them; he must radically change his tactics, and he registered a vow to that effect, which he put into immediate action after his own impulsive fashion.

His sudden despotic air had not passed unnoticed. All unawares, he was being closely scrutinized from out of a pair of heavenly blue eyes. Their owner affected to have seen nothing, but her nose—which had a saucy, irritating little tilt upwards—assumed curious little wrinkles. O'Keefe glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. He knew these wrinkles of old, and he began to experience vague qualms of misgiving. But Miss Cecily remained preternaturally grave. There was a mock meekness, a sweetly sainted expression that seemed to reassure him.

As they rose to go she yawned in a grossly exaggerated manner. "I don't think you will quite succeed in shooting the tiger, after all," she

remarked with a languid drawl and *à propos* of nothing in particular.

In the evening the whole party strolled out in a desultory quest of quail and in a manner not so bloodthirsty as that of the morning, the men armed with guns and the women with the artless prattle which serves as an antidote to male destructiveness.

Cecily warded off all advances of the O'Keefe with an aloofness irreproachable but effective. She walked between Simson and Chaytor, but all her energies were devoted to the subjection of the former. That they were attended by some measure of success was self-evident from the black looks of the Irishman and the bad marksmanship of the joyous little civilian. Bevy after bevy of frightened quail rose with wild whirr in the short, stubbly grass, but Chaytor alone wrought any havoc among them. To carry on an animated conversation with such an one as Cecily and to mark down birds was scarcely a feasible proposition: to long to be the man who was doing so, and to hit anything at all was a sheer impossibility, as Pat found to his sorrow.

During the Christmas dinner Cecily sat between the rivals and appreciated to the full the flagrant joy of the situation. She bubbled over with sheer animal spirits to a surpassing degree of joyousness, and all were favoured with radiant smiles and flashing dimples—all, save Pat. He, poor

youth, was relegated to an aspect remotely sweet, when he did not chance to be indifferently ignored, and his cheery eloquence evaporated rapidly.

"You are rather silent to-night, Pat," Miss Chaytor remarked during a lull in the conversation.

"I think a lot, like the proverbial parrot," he admitted, with a gloomy smile.

"You see," said Cecily, addressing the table at large, "it is impossible for some people to think and talk at the same time. The poor boy must occasionally devote a few moments to—how shall I put it?—to mental development." Her voice was gravely sympathetic.

"He's thinking of the duck he missed," suggested Simson with a triumphant grin.

"Or perhaps of the opportunities," added Miss Chaytor.

Into Miss Cecily's face there flashed a look of impish delight utterly childish and unutterably fascinating.

"Just now he is contemplating the tiger he will never shoot," she tittered, then broke into a gurgling laugh peculiarly her own, peculiarly infectious, too, for when she laughed the world had perforce to join.

Pat alone did not laugh much. He, who commonly looked upon life as one huge joke, lapsed swiftly into a grim silence. The conviction began to sink into his prophetic soul that he had been

no end of a fool, and his resolve to be masterfully firm fast oozed away.

"I received a letter from Mrs. Nelson to-day," remarked Mrs. Wade, as they all ensconced themselves round a vast, roaring fire outside, assuming luxurious attitudes in long chairs and innumerable rugs.

"What has she got to say for herself?" Miss Chaytor asked, struggling to enjoy the cigarette she could never appreciate, and gazing reflectively into the blazing logs.

"Let me see: she wishes you all a merry Christmas and—well, the rest of her letter is mostly gossip of the trivial order. Most people have left for Christmas, and Junglibad is almost deserted. She herself is very lonely; apparently her husband has gone off shooting and left her all alone, but Mr. Jones has been very good to her. And that's about all I can remember. I do feel sorry for her, don't you, Miss Chaytor? She always looks so very pathetic."

"Candidly, I don't," replied that otherwise charitable spinster. "You won't be, either, when you know her as well as I do, Mrs. Wade. She always manages to extract sympathy from the new-comer of either sex. A morbid craving for sympathy is the ruling passion of her life."

Chaytor leaned back leisurely and crossed one long, thin leg over the other. "That and gossip," he assented dryly; "but her mind can only extend

to one idea at a time. When it is gossip she talks to the ayah—her own and other people's. Her fund of information culled from the native community is really rather wonderful. Literally and metaphorically, she has a deeper knowledge of the *lingerie* of other women in the station than they possess themselves."

"Charles!" Miss Chaytor demanded sternly, "what do you know about *lingerie*? Pray spare Cecily's blushes."

That unsophisticated maiden paused in the midst of a spirited flirtation with little Simson, looked up, her face wreathed in smiles—not blushes—tittered shamelessly, and deliberately adjusted the lace frivolity of a refractory underskirt, nodded her head approvingly at "Charles," and turned again, radiant and adorable, to the now infatuated civilian.

O'Keefe smiled and smiled and was a prey to all-consuming regret.

There was a moon somewhere above the trees, but the fire crackled brightly, shooting up great sparks and investing the sky with gloom. Margaret Wade sat in silence, gazing at the dancing flames with wide, grey eyes; for the atmosphere of Christmas always seems to be charged with joy or with sadness, sensations rendered suddenly vivid by a season's instinctive sentiment.

The little hybrid spaniel was not the least

happy : he slept the sleep of utter repletion and dreamed of driven duck to his heart's content.

"Oh, Mr. Simson, *do* be a darling and bring out that box of chocolates from the tent!" Miss Cecily beamed, and he went instinctively to do her bidding, with an alacrity that could not fail to gratify.

The chocolates circulated and soon Miss Chaytor talked of bed. Still Pat sat silently pulling at a black, evil-looking cigar, and emitting curling rings of smoke into the still air. A canker was slowly eating into the youth's heart.

"It has been perfectly lovely sitting out here. I don't a bit wish to tear myself away from the fire, do you, Mr. Simson?" Cecily remarked. She rose reluctantly, and selecting a large, fat chocolate, inserted it daintily between her rosy lips. For the moment she felt devotedly attached to the donor and her eyes were a-sparkle from the firelight glow.

"Rather not!" said he, continuing to hold her dear little plump hand in his, after having already shaken it twice in token of good-night. He was glad now that he had joined that Christmas camp.

"It has been a glorious day, but I think I have enjoyed this most of all; yes, I'm sure I have."

She was looking unutterably upon him just then, and the accompanying sigh found its billet in the heart of the O'Keefe. Cecily's marksmanship was vindicated.

The Irishman was a frank youth and did not bear malice, but just then he began to dislike Simson very much indeed.

"Good-night, everybody!" Miss Chaytor called out as she disappeared within the tent, and Cecily turned to follow. Apparently, she had not observed Pat standing patiently waiting, with a look of tense longing on his face.

"Good-night!" she said, her air of indifference approaching a fine art; but there was such unmistakable misery in his face and voice as he bade her good-night, that she was moved almost to pity—not quite, however.

That night, as he climbed sadly into bed, the O'Keefe began to realize that his understanding of women was sadly at fault. "They're the very devil, anyhow!" he muttered to himself, and all his hopes dwindled and died out.

Miss Cecily Winfield was smiling sweetly to herself as she turned over drowsily and snuggled more deeply into the blankets. "Men *are* so stupid and so absurdly obvious! they must be tamed, otherwise they become quite impossible!" she confided sleepily to the pillow. She yawned. Then she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXII

IT was the hour at which the gymkhana settled down to bridge and badminton, and the veranda being more or less deserted in consequence, Mervyn was able to secure a corner of it for himself and his companion.

Horses and horsemanship formed the topic of their conversation for a while, and, indeed, it was a subject upon which each enthused, so that it offered a point of contact of mutual interests. Mervyn spoke, and his slow drawl became almost animated.

"You must see my new pony, Mrs. Wade; he is a little ripper, and goes like the wind; wants a bit of riding, too."

"Oh! but I've seen him already . . . from a distance," she replied. "I broke one of the commandments—I don't remember the number of it, but it was the one about coveting your neighbour's pony." And she proceeded to appraise as only one possessed of a love and knowledge of horses may.

Their eyes met in a smile, and it must have

been that their thoughts coincided, for he answered almost immediately—

“He has never yet been ridden by a lady.”

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, and when she spoke her voice was soft and irresistibly sweet.

“I should like to be the first,” she said slowly, and paused for a moment. “You will let me try him, Captain Mervyn?” she continued pleadingly.

“But,” he protested somewhat feebly, “I haven’t tried him thoroughly myself yet, and——”

“Oh, I’d be quite safe if you were with me,” she broke in with a sweet intimacy that sent the blood rioting in his veins.

“Well——” he temporized, with a slow smile; and she pounced upon his hesitation with all the subtle cunning of a woman.

“Oh, it is nice of you,” she said, and her face, flushing ever so faintly, paid him the compliment of obvious appreciation.

“I really think I could manage him all right; don’t you think I could, or am I only a very conceited person?” she went on, her grey eyes radiant with restrained eagerness so that he surrendered unconditionally to the charm of them.

“I’m sure you could; and your touch on the reins is just what he wants. You have got a most excellent pair of hands, you know.” As he raised his eyes to her there was that in them which made her flush once more—this time with embarrassment,

but in his voice was only a note of deference that could not fail to be flattering to any woman.

"You certainly will make me vain if you talk like that about my horsemanship—or should one say horsewomanship?" she exclaimed with some haste to hide her pink confusion.

"The truth is not a vain thing," he responded gallantly, and with a flashing smile. "We could ride out to Fattehpur Tank some day," he continued, avoiding her eyes. "I think you would enjoy it if you have not been there already. First of all, there is a most enchanting piece of open country, and then a bridle-path through the forest."

Her answer was some time in coming; she knew instinctively that her husband would object, and she was debating in her mind whether she should consent or not. Suddenly she turned to him with a spurt of childish impulse—

"I'd simply love it! Do let's go!" she said eagerly, her eyes wide and sparkling.

"Well, what about to-morrow? Let me see!" He paused, as if weighing the matter gravely. "In the morning there's a parade; that's a bore, but we could start early in the afternoon, have tea there, and get back in plenty of time. That pony of mine would not take long to cover the ground with you on his back, and I shall ride my old waler mare. Perhaps you are engaged in the afternoon?"

"Fortunately I am not. I could be ready

between three and four o'clock, if that will do."

"It will suit me most admirably. I shall come round for you at half-past three. This evening I shall send a chit to the khitmagher, warning him of an invasion of the *dâk* bungalow and our designs on his tea."

The veranda began to fill once more with the overflow from the badminton shed and the bridge-room, the time being ripe for a parting cocktail before the general exodus from gymkhana to bungalow began.

"Good-night, Mrs. Wade. Half-past three to-morrow," he said, rising, as Wade approached.

"Captain Mervyn has asked me to ride with him to Fattehpur Tank to-morrow afternoon," Margaret informed her husband, as they drove home together.

Wade glanced at her keenly for a moment.

"To Fattehpur? It is rather a long distance for an afternoon."

"I am going to ride Captain Mervyn's pony, and he says we shall easily get back before it is dark."

As she replied, she gazed straight in front of her, and, knowing that she had roused him, she was too much of a woman not to play up to it and make him suffer ever so little in return for her own great hurt.

"As the matter has already been arranged, there

is nothing further to be said," he answered, with an assumption of supreme indifference, the while there crept into his voice that curious deadly quiet which she knew of old. "You are sure the pony is all right, and will not prove too much of a handful for you?" he added.

"How absurd!" she exclaimed, piqued in turn by the reflection on her horsemanship. "I can really sit on a horse now. Captain Mervyn says I ride rather well . . . and *he* is the best judge of that." There was a calm assurance in her voice, and the slight emphasis on Mervyn's judgment was deliberately provocative.

"Oh, of course, that settles it." His reply was curt, and he dropped the subject with an air of finality as if it were of no further interest to him, only the glint of the piercing eyes betrayed the cold fury which raged within.

CHAPTER XXIII

PUNCTUAL to the minute Mervyn trotted into the Wades' compound, the pony for Mrs. Wade having been sent on ahead in order that the saddle might be adjusted so as to fit its new prey.

She was awaiting him in the veranda and sprang up eagerly to greet him. Her perfect figure showed to supreme advantage in the tight-fitting habit, and the man's eye ran approvingly over her as he lifted her into the saddle; and if his hands lingered over their task just a trifle longer than was necessary, the girl was blissfully unconscious of the fact. He grasped the reins, walking alongside for a few paces to see how the fiery little arab would deport himself under his unaccustomed burden, and Margaret sat with a fearless assurance that was subtly communicated to the equine mind, and her touch on the reins was gently firm.

"Oh, do let us be off now, Captain Mervyn! Your pony is beginning to know me, and he has already decided to be as docile as is good for any man or beast." She looked down at the man with the flicker of laughter in her eyes, and he,

doing her bidding with a smile, vaulted into the saddle and they were off.

They rode slowly at first through the crops and the patches of jungle, where children were herding meagre goats and ponderous black buffaloes, fierce of aspect and suggestive of a past before man was, but placidly domesticated for all that. Farther on, a herd of small, lean cattle grazed: a gentle-eyed Indian calf, with its graceful, undulating movement and its soft, dark, liquid eye, out of which peered the infinite patience and inscrutable calm which is the intangible essence of the East. Then the way led along a narrow, dust-laden road deeply grooved by the wheels of countless bullock-carts and lined on either side with a panoply of cacti and of aloes, over which the dust lay thickly powdered. There the going was bad and the dust almost suffocating as they passed numerous native vehicles—the leisurely bullock-carts that creaked along at a snail-like pace, the poor, patient oxen ankle-deep in white dust, straining under their yoke, submitting meekly to the tail-twisting and perpetual prodding with stick and native toe, whichever the driver might see fit to administer—both, if he possessed sufficient energy at the moment and did not happen to be asleep. And then the light, racing rig, innocent of springs, in which some *bania*, full of unction and *ghee*, hastened in pursuit of extortionate loans and their incredible rate of interest.

The blinding glare of the white way was rendering the little stallion restive and irritable, and the girl had to exercise all her equestrian adroitness to soothe him. She began to long for the open country once more.

"By Jove! Mrs. Wade, you are managing the little brute magnificently—much better than I could ever hope to myself. We shall soon be out of this infernal lane now, and then we can let them go a bit. Ah! there's where we branch off." And he pointed in the direction of their left front.

As they reached the open country, with its scant covering of parched scrub, a sudden scorching wind set the thin, tawny grass stirring and shivering, while the cactus-bushes nodded their heads with Jove-like gravity.

Margaret felt the pony thrill beneath her. It stepped out as if on springs, the switching tail proudly arched.

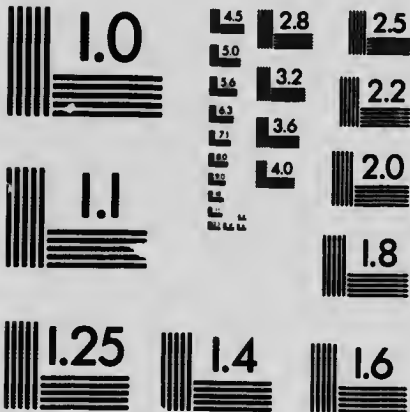
"Now we can let them go. Don't give him too much of his head, Mrs. Wade," Mervyn shouted, and they were off like the wind.

She had never had a gallop quite like it before. The great speed went to her head like wine. She felt intoxicated with the joy of it, sitting her horse as though she and it were one. On, ever on, over sweet-scented grasses that waved in the breeze, with a sublime indifference to any danger that might lie in wait just ahead, the pony's feet seeming scarce to touch the ground, skimming along in



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a series of bounds. The man was left far behind.

Then she heard his voice faintly in the distance, and began to realize that she must not lose control of her mount—or of herself—in such fashion. It took some time to pull up, and it was accomplished none too soon, for just ahead the jungle was beginning to rise from the rough, broken ground which bordered the river. Beyond that, again, loomed the dark expanse of forest.

As he came up with her she turned in the saddle, her face radiant and the large grey eyes aglow.

“Oh, Captain Mervyn, it was divine! I never imagined anything more thrilling in all my wildest dreams of delight! Your pony is quite too splendid for words!”

He gazed at the face beside him, so wonderfully beautiful now in its flushed enthusiasm, and the blood surged hot in his veins. To think that she was wasting her splendid womanhood upon a man like Wade—a man who obviously did not appreciate his great good fortune, his gift of the gods! There flashed upon him the knowledge of what a girl such as she could give to the man she loved. Her deep-rooted power to withhold was simply tantalizing.

Hot words of love rose to his lips. He came near to crushing her in his arms, and it was only with an effort that he held himself under control;

but when he turned there was a look of baffled passion in his eyes.

As they splashed through the ford there was a stirring of spring in the air, the exuberant joy of Nature's awakening from her long sleep, and the regenerating sap rising in the boughs of trees and in the veins of man. The burning heat of the afternoon sun drew out all the mingled sweetness of the earth. Somewhere near there rose the sigh of a breeze laden with the fragrance of flowers, and as they drew near the forest the deodar reared its stately branches and the sprightly bamboo rustled in the wind. Then he spoke—

"Bit of a thruster, that pony, isn't he? I quite thought for a bit that he had bolted with you; but you got him in hand just in time. Really, he ought to belong to you, Mrs. Wade. No one can handle him as you do. . . ." He broke off, again checking the words on his lips.

Still, she noted nothing amiss, and they entered the delicious cool of giant trees. Outside, the afternoon sun had grown dreamy, and on the horizon behind a cloud had risen, just a tiny fleck of white against the hard, pitiless blue.

Spells of silence followed—that intimate kind of silence which can bring two human souls together when naught else avails.

"This strange old haunted forest seems to recall some long-forgotten memories of bygone days," she went on dreamily. "Oh, I do feel so tiny

in all its vastness ! I can imagine myself creeping under these great trees in some prehistoric past, and being terrified of all the animals and monsters lurking in every shadow. And yet"—she paused for a moment, half veiling her eyes, then went on idly—"yes, there must have been a delicious thrill in those old, instinctive terrors. Don't you feel it all—the far-offness of the twentieth century, with all its puny civilization, all so unreal in the midst of the real? Don't you?" she persisted, then broke off abruptly with her low, delicious laugh. "I quite forgot how silly all my imaginings must seem to you. My thoughts would express themselves aloud : I think that great gallop must have stirred them all up; anyhow, it must serve as excuse—I have none better to offer."

"I, too, have lived in a world of dreams," he murmured softly, and she was glad. To be with a man of such intimate sympathy was a pleasure, she had to confess inwardly, and, yes—she greatly liked him for his understanding of her.

"But," she faltered ever so little, "a man cannot be expected to understand such introspection, can he? To be a woman is to be misunderstood."

"To be a woman is to be a queen," he retorted gallantly. "I feel most honoured that your majesty should deign to confide in so unworthy a subject as I."

Outwardly he was cool, albeit her change in manner had not escaped him. A note of subtle familiarity crept into his voice, but she failed to notice it; her thoughts were far away, lost in a maze of her own imaginings.

"It is a veritable forest of fancies," she pursued, with a smile half-mocking, half-earnest. "I think one of my previous *avatars* must have been spent in it. Is that the correct term for incarnation?" she asked, gazing up at him.

"Quite right," he answered gravely. "It is a strange thing, but I feel sure mine also must have been spent here. I must have acquired merit in some former birth, for I know we were together in this old forest. The gods were kinder to us then than now; we must have been friends, perhaps even . . ."

But at that moment the Arab pony seemed to find the proceedings somewhat dull, and, as the reins lay loose on his neck and his rider's attention was obviously distracted from him for the time being, he gave vent to his feelings in a series of vigorous bucks, so that the girl was fully occupied with her mount for the next few moments. Afterwards they lapsed into silence.

The way through the forest seemed endless, and Margaret began to feel as if she had been riding through it for ever. Perhaps she came near to caring for the man beside her just then: it seemed to her that some natural, subtle affinity

must always have existed between them, and it was inevitable that she should compare him with her husband and his utter lack of comprehension.

At last a ray of sunshine glimmered through the trees in front, and soon they emerged into the heat. The air suddenly seemed to have grown stifling: there was a sultry heaviness, a waiting stillness that had not been present before, and the cloud, once so tiny, was now reaching out sombre, threatening fingers. The girl, looking back, saw the dark bank of lurid clouds creeping up behind and rapidly overtaking them.

"Oh, Captain Mervyn," she exclaimed in alarm, "I am sure there is going to be a storm. Just look at those horrid black clouds racing up behind us. Had we not better turn back at once and ride for home?"

The man looked back at the fast approaching storm, and it occurred to him that the gods had been very good, after all.

"It is impossible to go back now," he said gravely. "We should only land right into the thick of it, and make no headway at all. The *dâk* bungalow is not far off; we must push on and get under shelter before the storm breaks."

As he spoke a low rumble murmured in the distant hills, and the girl's face paled ever so slightly. They were on a country road again, and in front lay a native village of some size. At the entrance to the village a beggar by the road-

side stretched out maimed, unsightly limbs, and grovelled in the dust, but they flashed past him. The way was barred temporarily by a troop of nose-slit asses, staggering under loads too heavy for the much-bruised backs and the weary, inbent legs. The Arab aristocrat sniffed disdainfully, and shied sidelong. Mervyn spoke harshly and much to the point, and a way was cleared for them, but they were obliged to proceed warily through the narrow, winding streets, in which small black children ran in and out and dogs howled, streets in which goats and hens scuttled across in a manner still more bewildering, and where buffaloes and cows sometimes blocked the way. They rode at a foot-pace through the bazaar, with its stalls open to the dust and myriads of flies, in which fat, greasy shopkeepers, looking as if one spark would suffice to set them ablaze, sat cross-legged, their shining skin of a sickly yellow hue, and innocent of all attire from the waist upwards. There was a monotonous din of the metal-workers as they beat a never-ceasing tattoo on the metal they fashioned.

A gust of wind swept up behind them, and the sun became blotted out. As they issued from the village at a trot, huge warm raindrops splashed down and were greedily sucked up by the parched and thirsty earth. The day grew suddenly dark, but the bungalow was close at hand, perched right up on the side of a hill in front of them,

and putting their horses to a canter up the slope, they reached the compound just as the first peal of thunder broke overhead. The bungalow nestled beneath the shade of a kadamba-tree, the purple blossoms of which would soon fill the air with sweetness. About its roots a small family of rat birds scuttled and quarrelled in their querulous voices, and farther off there crouched a fakir, his body smeared with ashes and his hair matted.

Margaret found herself lifted down from the saddle. Then came the rain. It sheeted down with a fierce, dull rattle.

CHAPTER XXIV

"I MUST take the horses round to the stables and rout out the old khitmaghar. Whew!" He paused and glanced up at the sky. "There is going to be the very deuce of a storm, but I shall rejoin you almost immediately. You won't be frightened all by yourself until I get back, will you?"

There was a curious gleam in his eyes, and his voice sounded strained and unnatural. She answered him with a smile, the while a curious little fear stirred at her heart.

In an incredibly short space of time he had returned. "The khitmaghar is preparing some concoction which he is pleased to call tea, and I have got the horses under cover. Good thing we got in when we did: the rain is coming down in the most unholy manner now. How dark it is getting!" and he gazed out of the window intently for a moment.

Margaret sat on the edge of the table, her face paler even than usual, and her eyes very large, with a look of mute appeal in their depths. She had a childish fear of thunderstorms, and to

remain quite alone in one, even for a few moments, was agonizing. Suddenly a blinding flash of lightning stabbed right down, its lurid glare lighting up the gloom, the vivid, crackling light of it enveloping them for a moment. An instant peal of thunder followed, crashing wildly about them, the very walls seeming to tremble and the earth to reel from the shock of it.

"Oh, Captain Mervyn, I am so frightened!" she almost sobbed.

White to the lips, she clutched his arm with both her hands, her eyes bright with unshed tears and her lip quivering. The man's control had all but vanished when the door slowly opened and the *khitmaghar* appeared, tray in hand.

That much-maligned attendant proceeded to spread out a tablecloth the hue of a flea-bitten grey; then crockery, ancient and crazy, was produced, and he volunteered the information that tea would soon make its appearance, his voice being apologetic, for he was old and of a vague, helpless manner, as is the nature of most *dāk khitmagars*.

Margaret, feeling rather ashamed of her display of cowardice, had subsided into one of the few convalescent chairs the room possessed. "How very foolish of me!" she said, smiling rather wanly. "Thunder is the one thing I have always been horribly afraid of. Perhaps I was struck by lightning in that forest incarnation of mine." The

glanced swiftly at Mervyn, her eyes inscrutable with dark, dreamy shadows.

"*Chah tayar hai, memsahib.*" It was the voice of the khitmaghar, who had glided noiselessly in, bearing in his hand that which faintly resembled a teapot, and in his face a look of philanthropic benevolence. Actually he was debating within himself how much baksheesh this sahib might be good for.

The girl rose with a whisper of skirts and seated herself at the table facing the so-called teapot, and Mervyn watched her every movement. What a contrast! he reflected, as he noticed the delicately moulded hand twinkling daintily amongst the crudely incongruous tea appliances. He gazed at the sensitive face which gleamed whitely against the dark, rippling hair; the eyelids, deeply fringed with black lashes, drooping tenderly over eyes that seemed to ask for love they had never known; grey eyes, half-awake with pleasure, half-asleep with pain. How unutterably sweet she was! and how red the lips—lips made for smiles and kisses, but curving now to such a pathetic little droop in the corners of them. Her face and voice had haunted him for weeks past, and—were slowly driving him mad. A thin vein of cruelty ran like a streak through the brilliant polish of the man, and he had never known what it was to put a curb on his desires.

Outside, the rain rattled down with one con-

tinuous thud, broken at intervals by the roar of the thunder as it rumbled and re-echoed in the distant hills. She spoke, but he did not hear her.

"Your tea is getting quite cold," she repeated, raising her voice ever so little. Then he reverted to the present, murmuring his apologies gracefully enough.

"The kadambi-tree is in bud now," he remarked, experiencing a curious diffidence in putting his thoughts into words. He met her calm, steady gaze. "It ought to bloom soon after all this rain."

"Yes," she said somewhat dreamily; "what an intoxicating smell it has!"

"You speak as if you could smell it now."

"It always seems to me that rain brings out all the sweetness from the earth and from the trees," she answered, with a hint of weariness in her voice. "I often imagine I can distinguish all sorts of heavenly perfumes in the air after a thunderstorm. . . . My imagination is foolishly strong and often plays me strange tricks."

"Just as love brings out all the sweetness in a woman's nature," he asserted in his half-bantering manner, and thus masking for a moment the passion fast rising.

Margaret regarded him contemplatively, and he continued—

"I can imagine what heaven is like—now." His

voice had suddenly become low and tense and she was wondering—trying to connect the tones with some bygone association.

"Can you?" she said coldly, groping in her mind for his meaning. "I fear I do not myself get beyond earth."

"Earth also holds possibilities," he replied in almost a whisper, but it trembled with passion

Memories surged back and understanding swiftly came to her. The colour flooded her face and left her pale again. Deliberately she proceeded to flick with her riding-switch the dust of ages from the floor, while there leaped a great trouble into her eyes and the old dread stabbed at her heart.

"I think you forget—the impossibilities," she said at last, proudly raising her head and looking at him fearlessly.

"And you? Do you not forget that the Garden of Eden was on earth, and therefore Paradise becomes possible here?" he asked, and a small, sinister glitter lit up his dark, passionate eyes. For once he had misjudged his woman.

"I understand the Garden of Eden to be forbidden ground," she retorted. "But pray curb your imagination," she added, looking straight in front of her.

A pause.

"Will you be so good as to have the horses brought round. I intend starting at once for

home." Her voice fell coldly on the moment's silence and she rose from her chair.

Then the man's control broke down utterly. Something blazed up in his eyes. She shrank from him, but passion had swept him away. He started up, and in a moment she was in his arms, his lips on hers—hot, scorching kisses that seemed to sear her lips as he strained her to him. For an instant she hung limp in his arms, her eyes filled with unutterable loathing, then his clasp of her loosened and with a wrench she was free. She stood motionless, gazing fixedly at him, but the passion in him, long pent up, was not easily checked.

"Margaret, I love you!"

His cry sounded harsh and he moved as if to take her in his arms again. Still she stared steadfastly into his eyes, and slowly his arms dropped to his side.

"Ah! you must see how I love you—how I have worshipped you always. I will go when and where you wish, and I will give you such love as you have never yet dreamed of. You shall be mine! I cannot wait—I cannot let you go—now! You——"

Suddenly he broke off. The curious, dull look of tense repulsion and contempt in the grey eyes began to pierce his consciousness, and he gazed back at her with mind fast arriving at some understanding. Still she stared, her eyes stinging him

with sudden scorn so that his gaze faltered, then dropped.

Silence for a while, with the gloom gathering swiftly about them until their faces gleamed palely.

At last she spoke, and her voice was curiously soft and distinct. "Captain Mervyn, you have quite misunderstood. If I have treated you as a friend it was—because I trusted you. I came with you to-day because—I thought you were a gentleman." She paused, but the man merely bowed his head and was silent. "Will you bring my pony round now, or shall I call the khitmaghar?" Her eyes were wide and shining with anger now, and her voice cold and hard once more. "I shall wait in the veranda. Please arrange for our immediate departure," and she swept out of the room, head erect, the small pointed chin tilted forward.

Mervyn stood for a moment half-dazed. Like Brutus, he had ever been an honourable man—in accordance with his own particular code, but he had just committed an unpardonable breach of that code, and the knowledge of it had suddenly brought him to his senses. Whereas, in his vanity, he had honestly imagined that the girl cared for him, and the sacrifices he had been prepared to make in order that he might possess her were, in his eyes, sufficient justification for his conduct, yet to have forced his attentions on a woman who was unwilling—one of his own caste

—was a thing quite beyond the elastic limit of his scruples, and it was that which rankled now, so that he genuinely regretted it—as an error of judgment.

In reality the only extenuating circumstances lay in the past, though he did not reckon with these himself. Women had always petted him when he was young, flirted with him as he grew older, and wooed him ever since he had attained to manhood, thereby causing him to look upon himself as irresistible whenever he chose to exert his influence over them. And it must be confessed that he had never experienced much difficulty with women, granted the time and the opportunity.

For a while he pondered, and recollecting her incredible innocence, he felt remorseful and unhappy just for the moment. Presently he thought of her husband, who was, he reflected, but marble, whereas he himself, being flesh and blood, loved her and would have married her. In the end he persuaded himself that it was only a stroke of bad luck, that, in short, she was the type of girl that must always pay—where men are concerned. The next moment it occurred to him that he must offer some form of excuse, and with a little twisted smile and a gesture of aversion he turned to thoughts of the future.

What in Heaven's name could he say that would not aggravate the offence? He walked slowly to the door. Standing there he noted the fast-

approaching gloom and the rain which was still falling fitfully, and his mood became apologetic.

"Mrs. Wade," he began, striding swiftly to her side, "I can only say how exceedingly sorry I am for what has happened. I—er—I quite forgot myself."

He paused, but she remained as if she had not heard him.

"Anything I could say must appear miserably inadequate. There is, I know, no excuse. My behaviour was quite unpardonable, and I begin to altogether hate myself. I shall never intrude again. Will you not sit down while I go for the horses?" he added, fetching a chair and setting it beside her.

"Thank you," she said simply, without turning round. And he left her.

It was a dull, leaden sky, with dark, lowering clouds in the west. A high moist wind rose in wild, sudden gusts, sweeping over the plains, tearing the leaves from the trees, and launching dark squalls across the surface of the small reservoir. Margaret felt as though she had been plunged once more into a sea of infinite sorrow, but this time it was a sorrow mixed with acute vexation; and, brooding over the insult, tears of mortification sprang to her eyes. What perfectly odious things all men must be! and this man professed to care for her, she reflected with a shudder. Well, she had unmasked his love. Under the

surface there lay only passion, after all—animal and unrestrained.

Furiously she rubbed her lips as if to remove the stain of his. She had never before dreamed of such mad, passionate kisses. She shivered, fearing they must leave their brand on her for ever.

The wind stirred among the leaves of the kadamba till they rustled and sighed with a sad, plaintive moaning. She peered into the shadowy compound, with a sudden fear at her heart as her eyes lit upon the hideous, painted visage of the fakir, sitting huddled up under the lee of the veranda, his cruel, mocking eyes, alight with fanaticism and with greed, turning slowly until they shone malevolently upon her. The loose, hanging lips began to mumble, and suddenly he smiled at her with an unholy leer on his face. She could not look away : her eyes seemed riveted on him against her will. At length, with an effort, she forced herself to rise and go inside, and there the tears welled into her glorious eyes; a sensation of abject loneliness swept over her, and in a flash it was brought home to her what a vast, ever-widening gulf lay between Rex and herself. She could never for a moment dream of telling him what had happened, and she was so helpless and alone.

Then the tread of horses' feet sounded in the compound, and the tears were hastily brushed away.

As he assisted her into the saddle the man's manner was all that could be desired, and the girl instinctively felt that there would be nothing to fear from him in future.

Profuse salaams from the khitmaghar, whose face exuded more benevolence than ever as the sahib threw him baksheesh far exceeding his wildest expectations.

"*Huzoor, salaam! Salaam, memsahib; salaam sahib. Bahut salaam!*" and then they were off.

"We must push on as fast as possible and get through the forest before it becomes quite dark," Mervyn remarked in tones of grave courtesy. "If you do not mind, I shall go in front. The road is rather difficult after so much rain, and it will be better if I give you a lead."

She nodded assent and looked away swiftly.

Force the pace as they might, the heavy going kept them back so that it was all but dark as they entered the gloom of the forest, and before they had penetrated far night came down, hot, and black as pitch. Darkness entirely enveloped them, and realizing that they could not count on any rays of moonlight to guide them, Mervyn felt genuinely sorry for what had happened, and the present plight began to cause him some anxiety more for her sake than his own.

The road through the forest was in the nature of a bridle path; it was well defined, otherwise they would have lost their way irretrievably. Once,

indeed, they went off the path, and it was only by great good luck that they succeeded in striking it again. After that the man determined to risk nothing, and, getting off his mare, he walked in front, carefully scanning the ground as he went; but he had to grope his way with the utmost care, and the progress was slow in consequence. The darkness became crowded with terrors, ghastly and alive; things kept creeping out of the gloom; giant trees loomed up with wraith-like branches.

Dead silence in the forest save for the subdued tread of horses' hoofs on the soft ground; yet it teemed with tiny, creeping footfalls that pattered among the leaves. It had become a haunted forest, full of unseen presences and watching eyes. The girl's heart sank. A sudden rustle in the undergrowth, and her heart leaped to her mouth. She knew there were tiger and panther about. Something might even now be following them stealthily through the bushes, and they were only two—and unarmed. She was filled with the horror of anticipation, of sounds not accounted for—sounds that might well be the herald of instant disaster.

The man was shut off from her by the mare, and she could scarce even see as far as that, so dark had it grown. She had all the grisly sense of dire solitude—of being the last one left alive in the night of the world. A horror of that which lurked in the shadows seized her. Her vivid imagination was the cause of untold agonies. Any-

thing might spring out on them, or drop from the thickly intertwined branches overhead—a panther or some loathsome snake : anything might happen to Captain Mervyn and she be left quite alone. Almost she shrieked aloud, but pride forbade.

Expectancy became unspeakable. Better almost if the ghastly anticipation became reality, and suspense ended for ever. Should they not climb into the branches of some tree and wait there until daylight came? But then, what would Rex think—what would the whole station think? Better all the horror—best of all, death.

Again the memory of his kisses made her writhe and her face flushed hot.

On, ever on. Silence and gloom as of death itself. Would it never end? Already an eternity seemed to have passed since they entered the forest. Surely they must be nearly through now. Still there was no glimmer of a light ahead.

Suddenly her heart stood still with terror. She would have screamed then, but, as in a nightmare, her throat felt paralyzed. She could only stare with horrified fascination at the two small round lights flickering malevolently just in front of them. The pony stopped short, trembling in every limb, and it was as much as she could do to prevent him from wheeling round and dashing off blindly. That would have been the end of all things, she knew.

An angry snarl, the sound of some heavy body

crushing through the jungle, and the evil eyes had vanished. Silence once more.

"It's all right, Mrs. Wade," sang out Mervyn with what cheerfulness he could muster. "The brute has cleared off. There cannot be much more left of this old forest now," he added ; but it must be confessed that he was feeling far from assured at that moment himself.

On again, until she felt she could bear the strain no longer. She gazed in front of her as one in a dream. The brooding stillness of it all, the air full of strange, damp scents appalled her. They were far from smelling sweet to her now, she thought, with the ghost of a smile that faded before reaching her eyes. Where now was the delicious piquancy of terror?

Centuries seemed to have passed, when at last a rift of light pierced through the black of the jungle. There gleamed a sudden splash of moonlight, and she knew that the end was near. Gradually the light increased. It reminded her of emerging in a train from out some long and weary tunnel.

"This is the end of it now," she heard him say, and as they got into the open once more she sighed a prayer of thankfulness for dangers past.

The clouds had by this time broken and the moon detached itself in fitful rifts—faint and subdued as yet, its wondrous, misty radiance clinging to bush and tree. The still air was filled with the

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sound of crickets chirping shrilly, and frogs hoarse with delight after the storm.

Suddenly the lights of Junglibad shone out— little points of fire in the far distance, which, by the time they were reached, had paled perceptibly, for it was very late.

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CHAPTER XXV

MARGARET had outlined but briefly the events which had delayed their return from Fattehpur Tank, and, without admitting so much to his wife, Wade had held the man to blame for the risks run.

It was part of his creed to exact liability for failure of any sort in life or for any miscarriage of the task allotted. Extenuating circumstances, whether or no they existed, he simply refused to admit, for to do so would be detrimental to efficiency, and efficiency was his watchword. He did not allow a man any refuge in repentance. Yet he was a just man according to his lights, although he judged harshly—himself, if occasion arose, as well as others. Women only he did not attempt to judge. In his lack of comprehension of them they were utterly irresponsible and inconsequent; but at the back of it all there was latent in him a strain of chivalry towards the sex which might suddenly flare up and approach the quixotic.

He had realized with ever increasing resentment the intimacy existing between Mervyn and

his wife, and the climax had been reached which determined him upon immediate action. Mervyn's attentions to other men's wives he had regarded with contemptuous indifference; but now it was his own wife, and there would be an end to it—before it chanced too far. In his wife he had every confidence, but he had a shrewd suspicion that something had been concealed from him, and, in his own direct fashion, he resolved to go instantly to the root of it, or at least to render impossible any recurrence. He was possessed of a great singleness of purpose, and he always did the obvious thing in life with a singular lack of imagination and without overmuch prevision.

It was a glorious morning after the storm. A cool, sleepy breeze was blowing, and there was a sense of refreshing vigour in the air, reminiscent of the cold weather so swiftly passing away—a coolness that trembled on the brink of the hot, shimmering air of summer.

The sky above shone serenely blue; the earth beneath seemed to have assumed a fresh lease of life and all nature grown riotous with joy.

At that hour the mess of Foote's Horse was all but deserted. Wade, entering the wide, shady veranda, paused for but a moment to scan the few loiterers scattered about its airy precincts, and his eyes lighted up with a cold gleam of satisfaction as they noted the figure lying at full length on a

long cane chair engrossed in the *Pioneer*. Apparently this was the object of his quest, for he strode up to the chair with firm, resolute steps.

"Sorry to interrupt the thrilling advertisements of the *Pioneer*, Mervyn, but may I have a word with you?" he asked in an even voice, without the vestige of a smile.

"A word with me, Wade? Delighted, I'm sure," replied the occupant of the chair, looking up with a quizzical smile—an assumption of indifference that was well feigned.

"Quite by ourselves, I mean." The stiff impassiveness of the voice was sufficient to repulse any approach at cordiality, and the other shot a swift glance at him.

"Oh, all right—by ourselves," he drawled, the smile becoming derisive as he rose languidly from his chair.

"Thanks," replied Wade curtly.

"Where do you propose to hold this so mysterious conference? It sounds almost interesting." A half-suppressed yawn was obviously intended to give the lie direct.

"I regret that I am unable to ask you to my bungalow; perhaps we can find a room to ourselves in the mess," replied Wade, his eyes steadfast and hard on the other's.

There was a momentary flash of suspicion in Mervyn's eyes.

"Oh, if that is the trouble, why not let us stroll over to my bungalow? It is not far to go."

The words were spoken in a drawl that was slowly provocative, and the tolerant smile stung the other to a sudden fury, but his face remained masked of all emotion. Only in the piercing eyes there appeared a glint that did not pass unobserved, and Mervyn rejoiced inwardly that he had the power to reach this man of stone whom he hated and despised.

"I hope your wife is none the worse for last night's experience," said Mervyn, as they entered his bungalow.

"She is none the worse, thanks," replied Wade coldly.

"Now," the other remarked as he shut the door, "we are by ourselves, and I am quite at your service."

There was a note of biting sarcasm in his voice, and his attitude seemed to suggest that this moment had been inevitable from the beginning—that he did not desire to avoid it or precipitate it in any way.

There must have ever been the strongest antipathy between the two men. They represented the opposite extremes, and both were strong, the strength of the one being the product of the twentieth century, that of the other elemental. Even without any feminine intervention, each must always have despised the other, and now each

knew instinctively that the hour had arrived when they would measure their strength one against the other.

Wade went straight to the point without any semblance of hedging or *finesse*. There was more than a hint of arrogance in his voice, and his manner was brusque almost to rudeness.

"You met my wife for the first time on board the *Macedonia*, I think. Since our arrival in Junglibad there has been an intimacy bordering on friendship, and of late——"

"You are uncommon curt in your mode of address, Wade," the other retorted, suavely enough; but his face had darkened visibly, and for a moment he paused. "Wherefore all the recapitulations, may I ask?" he added, breaking into a smile of amused contempt.

Something blazed in Wade's eyes—curious little gleams of light that flashed in and out.

"I have done with recapitulation," he replied, with his quiet, deadly composure, only the veins in his forehead and neck swelled visibly. It was the calm of danger—the calm that precedes the storm. "It remains only to deal with the future. You shall show no more attention to my wife. Yesterday you met her virtually for the last time, and you shall not again enter my bungalow. You understand? I forbid it."

There was that in his bearing that was all-impelling. It served only as a scourge to the

other's pride, Mervyn professing too much contempt for his adversary to be browbeaten by him and being, moreover, curious to find out exactly what Mrs. Wade had told her husband regarding the events in the *dâk* bungalow. The two men stood facing each other, the width of the room between them. There was another pause while Mervyn struggled to retain his imperturbability.

"My dear Wade, I must confess I fail to appreciate such—er—vehemence," he began at length in the smooth, deprecating voice he might employ towards a restive horse. "It is fortunate that I am possessed of a sweet, angelic temper, else I should feel uncommon like losing control of myself also. Am I to understand that you object to any friendship your wife may choose to honour me with? Or is it that you hold me responsible for last night's storm? Frankly, I do not understand you," he added, his voice rapidly reverting to a lazy indifference.

Wade strode up to him, the pupils of his eyes suddenly narrowed till they were shining slits of steel.

"You are to understand that the friendship of such as you is an insult to any woman. In particular, I object to my wife being brought into contact with any poisonous reptile," he thundered. "Yes, I hold you to blame for endangering her life last night, and now my house is barred to

you." His voice fell as swiftly as it had risen, but it quivered with pent-up rage.

The other flushed up dark with passion. "Have a care, Wade. I do not permit any man to talk to me like that—to raise his voice in such fashion to me. My patience is all but exhausted, and——"

"You've got to swallow just whatever I have a mind to do or to say," Wade broke in with a snarl, his lips drawn back after the manner of some animal. "Do you understand? I do not wish to manhandle you now, but if the occasion arose, by God! I would crush you. Man! I would squeeze the life out of you with these hands—and, by Heaven! I'd relish the job."

His voice sank suddenly to a low, tense whisper; his eyes grew fierce and ready, and for a moment the other stood half expecting the clutch of brown, sinewy fingers at his throat. But Wade stood motionless, his hands outstretched and rigid, silently glaring at his adversary with a look of such implacable hate, such relentless purpose, that the dark eyes fell at last before that mute onslaught. The man was amazing in his fierce, dominating strength; there was something terrifying in his cold, resistless fury. In that silence the real Wade stood revealed—outwardly cold, perhaps, but inwardly a man of fire and passion.

In a flash it was forced upon Mervyn who was the stronger of the two.

"Do you think I'm so damned easily cowed as

that—do you?" he broke in at last, striving to meet that glance, but failing.

"Not easily, perhaps," the other replied, his voice now deliberate and distinct, in no way raised. "Mervyn, my threat is no idle one, I pledge you my word. I may be tempted to forestall it, and I should prefer not to do that—just yet, you damned cur!" He paused, and scrutinized the man before him; suddenly he laughed softly, and his voice was tempered to that deadly quiet which was worst of all. "But I think you understand now."

Mervyn, overruled by the sense of sinister power in the cold, fierce eyes, flinched almost imperceptibly, and the smile of mockery froze on his face.

Wade said nothing further. There was no trace of triumph in his bearing, but the devil looked out of his eyes as he swung round on his heel and stalked out of the room.

The other sank back limply into a chair, with the sensation of a man lashed across the face with a whip. He knew now who was master, knew that he was beaten once and for all, and the shame of it ate into his very soul.

Margaret Wade could not have given him away. That, at least, was certain, he reflected, wincing—otherwise he believed his life would have paid forfeit.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE veranda of the gymkhana was rapidly filling up, men and women arriving to resume their nocturnal occupations of game and gossip. In one corner sat Mrs. Winfield and Cecily. They had just been reinforced by Mrs. St. Aubyn Smythe, who, on her advent, had immediately attached herself to mother and daughter to their no little dismay.

Mrs. Smythe was a friend of the Nelsons, and at present she happened to be their guest. Her place of abode being X—, the Government headquarters, she chose to consider Junglibad quite provincial, and her manner was faintly patronizing in consequence, her air falsely exclusive.

The eye of her hostess—the “lady with the grievance”—exploiting the new-comer as a hawk does its prey, had fastened on a possible victim, and without remorse had left her visitor at a loose end while she herself proceeded to swoop down with a grand rehearsal of her manifold woes. Miss Cecily was feeling preternaturally bored, and her all too expressive face looked the part to perfection. As she caught a glimpse of Margaret Wade in the

distance, her eyes visibly brightened, and soon she had succeeded in making the party a square one. The two girls sat close together, and Cecily bubbled over with mirth as she recited in low tones the latest sayings of De Wentworth-Jones.

"You know, dear, he thinks you a sweet, unaffected little woman--told me so himself in his own most impressive manner."

"Which, translated into prose, reads 'plain, but thoroughly amiable,'" the other laughingly retorted.

But Mrs. Smythe was determined to monopolize the conversation, and, gazing reprovingly upon them, she plunged into conversation, or rather, the very latest thing in station gossip—it has already been noted that the woman chanced to be a guest of Mrs. Nelson. Margaret and Cecily, exchanging veiled smiles, resigned themselves to their fate.

"Yes," she was saying, in tones of assurance that could not be gainsaid, "I hear that that charming Captain Mervyn had a most dreadful quarrel with a man in his own regiment yesterday. It occurred in his own bungalow—about some woman, of *course*; and it is commonly said that—"

Her voice sank to a sibilant whisper as she leaned towards Mrs. Winfield so that youth and innocence should not be hurt.

"The butler told the ayah," Cecily the incorrigible hummed in an undertone to her friend.

"What is commonly said can as a rule be traced direct to women like Mrs. Nelson by way of servants' quarters. Usually it is a gross libel."

"Now what *was* the other man's name?" resumed Mrs. Smythe, in her customary penetrating voice. "Let me see—Wade? Is there a Captain Wade in the regiment?" she queried, turning to the girls with an affable smile of patronage.

"Yes, there is," replied Margaret, in a clear, deliberate voice, looking straight in front of her. "I happen to be Mrs. Wade."

There was a tangible lull in the conversation. Cecily's eyes sought those of her mother in mute appeal; but—be it noted in her credit—Mrs. Smythe did not so much as turn the proverbial hair, she having handled too many delicate situations in her life of make-believe.

"Ah, no," she said deliberately; "now that I come to think of it, that was not quite the name. Something like it, though. You know, I am so utterly foolish about names; they always seem to get mixed up in my poor brain."

Complacently she sat back, smiling her supreme self-satisfaction, utterly indifferent to the havoc she had wrought through the freedom of her tongue. She was known as the "Bell of X—," not for the beauty of her face or form, but for the "clapper" of her tongue. She beamed sweetly on the girls, fondly imagining that her obvious insincerity had

passed muster; for she was a woman who proceeded through life with the comforting assurance that she was inscrutable to all but herself.

"But have you met dear old Trammels yet, Mrs. Winfield? He arrived here only to-night, I hear."

India may be the land of nicknames, but Lord Trammilton, the Governor, had not quite the personality that lends itself to the familiarity of nicknames—no matter how much his title might be adapted to abbreviation. Mrs. Smythe alone possessed the temerity, and she made full use of it.

"We know him very well in X—; he happens to be some distant connection—very distant, don't you know." (The noble lord certainly did not know.) "He is such a dear—such a naughty man, too, but rather deliciously so. Are not relations such very funny people?" And the good lady broke off into a self-conscious laugh that contained just the requisite quality to suggest flirtations galore, in which she might be presumed to have figured prominently.

She was the type of woman which exhales suggestions of a past, and she took no small satisfaction in that mythical past—in vivid contrast to the youth with a future. Perhaps it was fortunate she had no charms to boast of, so that the world and his wife, taking into account her lack of loveliness, had long ago decided that her virtue was quite unassailable.

"Dear Mary Trammilton is so sweet and good; we are all so fond of her in Blankshire." And so she rippled on until she had sketchily weaved a connection between her family and most of the peerages of Great Britain and Ireland.

All the while Mrs. Winfield maintained a discreetly amused silence. She was a woman who happened to be blessed with a sense of humour; as a consequence, perhaps, she seemed to retain the very spirit of youth, and to have found favour in the eyes of Time, so that she never grew old but passed through life on the sunny side of age and with laughter. She had retained the excellent figure of her youth, and that contributed in no small measure to her defiance of the hour-glass and sickle. Her eyes were dear, sweet, motherly eyes that twinkled kindly, and they were a source of never-failing joy to the husband who worshipped her.

"We have had such a delightful conversation, dear Mrs. Winfield, but I must depart now and hunt up Alice Nelson."

Mrs. St. Aubyn Smythe rose with a stately rustle of skirts, and took her smiling departure, happy in the knowledge of the impression she must have left behind and of the patronage so graciously bestowed.

"The poor woman is quite too absurd," remarked Cecily, breaking into sunshine once more, while the others echoed a sigh of relief.

"Oh, there's Lord Trammilton! Now, I do wonder if he is such a friend of hers as she would have us believe," she added, straining her mischievous blue eyes to watch the meeting.

Mrs. Smythe had seen him too, and she quite visibly resolved to talk to him, so that those with eyes might see.

"Oh, it is quite too funny!" cried Cecily, giving way to a paroxysm of mirth as the Governor looked straight in front of him with no smile of greeting on his face—for all the world unconscious of this distant connection of his. About the whole man there was an unassuming air of self-absorption that invested his every movement with dignity.

"Poor woman!" murmured Mrs. Winfield, genuine sympathy in her voice.

Presently Trammilton came up and greeted Mrs. Winfield with an ease of manner that betokened long friendship and deep respect.

"Well, Cecily," turning to the girl, and smiling down at her, "are you still decimating all the male hearts that beat in Junglibad?"

"I have never yet succeeded in even centimating them," she retorted, a reflective dimple showing signs of animation. "Oh, Lord Trammilton, do tell me: do you happen to know Mrs. St. Aubyn Smythe very well?" she pleaded, with all the privileged impudence of her irresistible youth.

"Mrs. St. Aubyn Smythe?" he repeated, in rather a puzzled manner, as he sat down pensively.

"I think I begin to recollect some one of that name. They live in X—, do they not?"

"How perfectly lovely!" she gurgled with delight, and the small round face quivered with impish mischief.

"What is so perfectly lovely, my dear Cecily, if I may be so inquisitive?" he asked, now very much puzzled, but gazing at the girl with affectionate indulgence.

"Oh, Lord Trammilton! And she knows you quite well—you are such a dear, such a naughty man, too!" And she mimicked the woman's voice to a nicety.

"Cecily, *dear!*" remonstrated Mrs. Winfield, proceeding to summarize the recent conversation for the benefit of Lord Trammilton, and generously reducing it to so mild a rendering as to blunt the whole point of it.

"Well," he said, leaning back in his chair and laughing, "I have a faint recollection now of the woman you refer to. I suppose I must have met her in X— at some time or other; but she is amazingly audacious to raise such base insinuations regarding a harmless old person like myself. 'Naughty man,' indeed! And that is all the reward of a blameless past! The idea is not unamusing: pray present me, Mrs. Winfield, so that I may tax her with the statement."

Margaret Wade remained rather silent, and she seized the first opportunity that offered to make

good her escape. The careless words of Mrs. Smythe were causing her grave anxiety: it was so obvious that the woman had lied about the name as soon as she had discovered the identity of one of her audience. Something must have taken place between the two men, and the servants must have overheard. What the cause of it might be she was able to surmise only too well.

That night, as soon as she had ascertained that the servants had all retired to their quarters, Margaret broached the subject to her husband.

"Rex," she began, in her low, quiet voice, fixing a pair of discerning grey eyes on his face, "what have you been saying to Captain Mervyn?"

"Has he gone to you about it?" he flashed out, rising abruptly from his chair.

She knew then that her surmise had been correct.

"No. I have not seen him to speak to since that night," she answered, never dropping her eyes from his. "Oh, it does not matter who told me about it—I heard it by the merest chance—it is quite sufficient that I know of your quarrel with him," she continued impatiently, noting the look of interrogation on his face. "Tell me, Rex, have you—did you bring my name into it?" she asked, lowering her voice so that it became wonderfully soft; but the searching eyes sparkled ominously.

The man began to pace up and down in a state of extreme irritation.

"That," he answered coldly, "is a matter which concerns Mervyn and myself alone. I am your husband."

At his reply she rose from her chair, proudly drawing herself up to her full height. Her tender little, pouting mouth grew hard, and her glance was one of disdain.

"Surely it must also concern me. I am your wife. But you—you look upon a woman as a mere plaything, to do with as you see fit—to break her pride until she has no mind of her own, no will save what you choose to allow her. A wife is a man's helpmate—not his toy. She must shape her own destiny in life lest she lose all sense of individuality; and yet her life is one long sacrifice from start to finish. I——" She paused for a moment and looked at him with a strange, searching glance. The cheap, nickel-plated lamp on the table cast a bright circle of golden light in its own immediate vicinity; elsewhere the room remained veiled in shadow. "I am your wife in name only," she continued slowly. Suddenly the man ceased pacing up and down and stood watching her in silence. "But I am a woman," she went on. "A man, if he be a man at all, should realize the debt he owes to all women. He should take her into his confidence, permit her to share a part of his life, and in return she gives up everything to him—all of her life. You, in your gross egotism, see only your position as a man and

master, and if your wife does not submit to your arrogant will, you thrust her out of your confidence, cast her out of your life altogether."

Her great eyes were wide open now, and they shone with bitter resentment as she ruthlessly drove home each point. For a while he gazed at her in astonishment; then he crossed the room until he stood towering above her. Never before had he seen his wife in this light, with an indomitable courage radiating her every feature; never before had he loved and desired her so much as now. There was that in him which men found hard to disobey. His nature was far removed from that of a bully, but he never brooked opposition to his will. And it was a woman who faced him, a slim, girlish figure—and his wife.

"Ah!" he said, endeavouring to keep out of his voice the admiration he felt.

His face never relaxed, and the stern blue eyes struggled to beat hers down; all the while he hoped she would win, and he marvelled at himself for it.

The grey eyes returned his gaze unflinchingly and direct as ever.

"Well?" she demanded, with a sharp, decisive ring in her low, deep voice.

When he replied, it was only with difficulty that he suppressed a growing appreciation, none the less keen because it was counter to his will.

"Is it your wish to know all that passed between us?" he asked with grave courtesy.

"It is," she retorted curtly. "Understand, I do not claim any consideration . . . I am forced to insist; otherwise——"

She broke off, for her heart was beating tumultuously, and she did not wish to display any emotion. He paused, carefully weighing the question in his mind.

"Captain Mervyn has been informed that his presence in this bungalow is not desirable," he said at last, avoiding her eyes.

"Yes—and then?" she pursued relentlessly.

"And then," he continued, in cold, measured tones, "I requested him to discontinue his attentions to my wife."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked fiercely.

The soft curve of her bosom rose and fell, and she breathlessly awaited his reply.

"I imply nothing," he said gravely. "I mean that you are my wife, and beyond reproach."

A burning flush rose to her face and vanished as suddenly, leaving it lividly pale. The lips quivered, for she was painfully sensitive in her pride.

"Did you for a moment imagine your honour was at stake?"

Her look was proudly scornful. Deep beneath the surface the unfathomable eyes were dark with pain—a hurt that completely transformed her from girl to woman.

"I know that my honour is safe in your hands," he said more gently, looking away; simply he could not bear to meet those eyes.

"And this is your honour!" she retorted, throwing back her head defiantly; and the bitter scorn in her voice lashed his pride. "Without any justification whatsoever, you drag your wife's name into a quarrel with a man of whom you deign to be jealous. It is nothing to you that the servants should hear. That is your honour! Your honour? Yes, I had given you credit for that one quality. Now I know it was but a mask for the most intolerable arrogance and egotism—an arrogance that does not consider your wife's good name before your own miserable pride." She turned to leave him. Suddenly she faced round. "I will see Captain Mervyn again—if I choose," she broke out imperiously.

"You shall not!" he replied, with deadly quiet. "I forbid it—you understand?"

She gazed at him silently, not deigning to reply, her passive courage a match for the activity of his.

Very slowly she walked to the door, closing it softly behind her.

Left to himself he thought bitterly of her words, each one of which had cut like a knife. It was the most fatal feature in his ignorance of women that he should take them literally. She had taunted him with failing in his duties as a husband, and

the retort had been so obvious; yet he could not have brought himself to utter it, or have attempted to justify himself in any way. He was not to know that in calmer moments she would account that unto him for righteousness; that even in her bitter resentment she had realized the great point of weakness in her prosecution, but, after the manner of women, had blinded herself to facts and seen only what she wanted to see at the time.

Wade sank into a chair, frowning over the memory of her scorn. He produced a pipe from his pocket, slowly filled it—and forgot to light it. His arrogance? The debt a man owes to woman? Unconsciously he began to take himself to task: was there some truth in what she said, and had he failed to consider her point of view as a woman—as an equal? He had never even thought of it in that light before.

He loved her. God! how he desired her now, for her courage and her sweet womanhood. There was something always new and unexpected about her, and he was beginning to love her every mood.

No, he did not understand women at all. Perhaps it was better so, he reflected. It was not given to him to see that there must ever exist a certain antagonism between a man and a woman—an antagonism as old as the earth itself.

“‘Your gross egotism, intolerable arrogance.’” Suddenly he remembered to light his pipe; but the words kept searing themselves into his brain.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOR a long time past there had been peace and quietness on the frontier, and the mind of the soldier dwelt with regret on the good old times when border raids and gallant fights had been the order of the day.

Soldiering was not at all what it had once been : even the piping days of peace were not as of yore. Instead of quiet, there was a strenuous labour at all times, so that the efficiency of the fighting man might be maintained and the taxpayer appeased.

As the soldier groused of his hard lot out there in India, a mullah had arisen in the mountain fastnesses, and from under a ragged tent beside a swift torrent he was even then preaching the *jihad*, or holy war, to all true believers. It was among the Gulzai tribesmen that he had first sown the seeds of an exceeding fierce fanaticism; the work had been done conscientiously, and the hillmen had been tuned up to fever pitch. The flame was spreading amongst the neighbouring tribes, but the Gulzais, jealous of striking the first blow against all *Kafirs*, had poured down across the

frontier and had already engaged in raids well-planned and lucrative.

That punishment must be meted out to them by the great Indian Sirkar they knew full well but they were staunch Moslems all, and Allah had long ago fixed their destinies for them. The fate of each man had been hung around his neck when he was brought into this world of woe, and if he should meet his end in a holy war his passage through purgatory would be swift, and he would soon attain the delights of paradise and of the houris: albeit, visions of earthly loot and stolen rifles influenced him in no small measure.

So a patient and long-suffering Government had been compelled at last to sanction a punitive expedition against the raiders, and orders had just gone forth. Followed many heart-burnings, also much strategy: men moving heaven and earth in order that they might be included in the expeditionary force and have the privilege of being shot at.

Foote's Horse were under orders, and there was much joy in the regiment—joy in the hearts of officers and men alike; and afterwards, perchance, sorrow and desolation in some of their homes.

None of them rejoiced more exceedingly than Reginald Wade. He had just heard the news, and at tiffin he communicated it to his wife. She looked up with grey eyes very wide and round, and whatever emotion she may have felt she

managed to conceal so that her voice did not falter.

"When do you expect to set out?" she asked, watching his face intently.

"We have to rendezvous at Fort Anstruther without delay, so I expect the regiment will be moving out of Junglibad in a couple of days' time," he replied. His tone was calm and casual, but there was a suppressed air of exultation which did not escape her notice.

"Let me know what things you will require," she went on in a matter-of-fact tone; but her eyes were lowered, and the long, drooping lashes wellnigh veiled them altogether.

"Thank you; you are very kind," he replied with grave courtesy. "The bearer and my orderly know exactly what kit to put together for me. There will be no occasion to trouble you with it."

The black lashes flashed back from her eyes, and a hurt look crept into the greyness of them. "How long do you imagine you will be away altogether, Rex?" she asked, choking back a sudden sigh.

"Really, it is rather impossible to say exactly, but I should imagine it might be for a couple of months or thereabouts. Of course, that is a matter that rests very largely with our friend the enemy," he said, smiling across at her. "You may be lonely in the bungalow all by yourself. Would

you not prefer to go up to Simla until next cold weather? The Grays would be delighted to put you up, and I fear it must be very dull for you in Junglibad, at the best of times." His voice had grown considerate—almost tender.

"But, Rex," she exclaimed in some dismay, "you will return long before the cold weather, and I should like to be here then. You may come back ill, you—you may be wounded—and—and my place is with you. After all, I am your wife." Her voice sank almost to a whisper, and a swift blush rose to her cheeks.

Wade lapsed into silence. For a moment he seemed to be thinking deeply. He was naturally an impulsive man, but long restraint had made reserve almost a second nature with him. At that moment he longed to spring up and take her in his arms; she looked so childish, with all her curious little appealing ways that wound themselves about a man's heart.

"Oh, I shall be all right, Margaret. Things don't ever happen to fellows like me except in fiction, you know." His laugh sounded rather forced and unnatural; there was a hint of bitterness somewhere in its ring that was all involuntary. "If you will decide to go to Simla I shall write off at once and tell the Grays you are going to them. The change will do you good," he continued, leaning back in his chair and reaching out for a cigarette. "I'm not much of a companion,

I know, but you may find the bungalow somewhat lonely all by yourself," he concluded simply.

The girl bit her lip, but there was good fighting blood in her veins, and she smiled up bravely into his eyes. "All the same, I should much prefer to stay on here. I shall have my ayah with me, and there are heaps of servants about," she replied slowly.

"Just as you please, of course. But if you prefer to remain in Junglibad, would it not be better to stay with Mrs. Winfield until I return? I'm sure she wouldn't mind." He was beginning to consider her now. The idea had begun to take root. Her words regarding a man's duty towards womankind had not yet ceased to ring in his ears.

"I would much rather remain on here. Two months is not so very long, after all, and I'm not one tiny bit frightened to be alone," she answered, with a dazzling smile, while the woman in her began to resent the stiff formality and constraint of his manner. She knew, too, that she would feel horribly lonely in the great, silent bungalow all by herself; but her self-control was developing swiftly, and not for the world would she acknowledge fear, least of all to her husband.

So the subject was dropped, and no further mention made of it again that night.

Next day the regiment received its marching orders. They were to start very early the morning following, and everything was in readiness, to the

last button. Colonel Winfield was a strict disciplinarian to some purpose.

There was to be a *burra khana* at the Winfields' the night preceding their departure, and to Margaret, at least, it was a relief to know that she and Rex would not be alone that last night together.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

THE invitations for dinner had been issued before Foote's Horse had received their marching orders. That her husband was going out on the morrow and would be exposed to all the risks of frontier warfare Mrs. Winfield realized only too well. The poor woman felt it terribly, and the period of anxiety until his return would be a very dreadful one indeed—the Colonel and his wife were not nicknamed "Darby and Joan" in the station for nothing. She was a soldier's wife, and the mother of soldiers; and she would send them forth with a smile, no matter how much her heart might be aching.

At dinner all the officers of the regiment were present, besides numerous civilians in the station. After dinner there was to be an impromptu dance: for that the station would turn out in full force.

"It almost makes one think of the eve of Waterloo and the Duchess of Richmond's ever-memorable ball in Brussels," Mervyn murmured to Mrs. Wade, for fate had decreed that he should be her right-hand neighbour at dinner that night.

"Just what I was telling my husband," said Mrs. Winfield, who had overheard the remark. "I even went so far as to suggest that we should all be arrayed in the dress of that period," she added gaily.

"What's that, my dear? Are you still bent upon having us all dressed up to look ridiculous?" The Colonel's shrewd, kindly face beamed down the table at her. He made no disguise of his affection for his wife, as so many husbands do. "It is an extraordinary thing," he continued, turning to the Deputy-Commissioner's wife, whom he had taken in to dinner, "how keen all women are on fancy-dress costumes, and how much men dislike the same. I imagine it must arise from their greater love of finery in particular and their superior—er—vanity in general. There are two things that all women like and most men loathe—fancy-dress balls and picnics. Don't you think I am right, Mrs. Edgar?"

It must have been some telepathic current of sympathy that made the Colonel aware of the warning eye of his spouse upon him. At first he did not comprehend, then suddenly, to his horror, he recalled the famous affair of the picnic. Of course, at the psychological moment there was the proverbial pause in the conversation, and the Colonel's *faux pas* reached the ears of the whole room, afterwards delighting the whole district, where the tale was told and re-told with many

variations and exaggerations, until it became almost an epic in India.

It is strange how news travels over the vast Indian peninsula—tales, too, with a very small modicum of truth in them, perchance, but picking up such extraneous matter as they roll along on their course, snowball fashion, until they develop at last almost beyond knowledge.

"It is the same with the fuss over the marriage ceremony," chimed in de Wentworth-Jones, insufferably pompous, and maladroitly piling on the agony. But no one took any notice of him whatsoever: every one simultaneously resumed conversation. The poor old Colonel went on talking to the Deputy-Commissioner's wife without being at all aware of what he was saying, and with her green, basilisk eyes fixed upon him in silent but marked disapproval.

For some time the conversation was not general, and as dinner approached an end Mervyn's face became slightly flushed, and his utterance thickened.

"Am I permitted to request the pleasure of a dance, Mrs. Wade?" he asked, turning to her, his voice assuming the low tones suggestive of confidences.

"It is too early to think of booking any dances," she replied pointedly.

"May I not live in hope?" he asked, with a look of unfeigned admiration which the girl resented bitterly.

"I think I shall not be dancing much to-night, Captain Mervyn."

Drawing herself up stiffly, she turned to the man on her left, and ignored the other for the remainder of dinner.

Wade, whose eyes kept ever reverting to the woman he loved, had chanced to see the man's glance. His face became all at once stern and forbidding, and his voice sounded harsh as he turned to talk to the woman next him.

Dinner was over. The silent-footed attendants stood to attention as the Colonel proposed the toast of the evening—

"Gentlemen—the King!"

All rose, rather grave and solemn. Some who drank were soon to put their sincerity to the test. Then Edgar rose in his diffident, ponderous manner and made a happy little speech, in which he wished success of arms and glory to the regiment, also a speedy return to Junglibad, lapsing once again into his vague air of self-effacement.

The dance was a merry one, as was the nature of Mrs. Winfield's entertainments, for she was a hostess possessed of the happy faculty of making people enjoy themselves. But O'Keefe frowned upon the world at large and on the brilliant ball-room in particular. At that moment he was the one unhappy feature in it. After much cheery eloquence, he had succeeded in extracting the promise of two dances from Cecily Winfield, and

the first had been a failure in a negative sort of fashion: simply he had been unable to find her. Now the music for his second dance had struck up, but the pursuit of the elusive one was proving as distressful as ever.

Suddenly a small, demure face appeared in the doorway, seen dimly through a blending of brave men and fair women—soldiers radiant in uniform and a sprinkling of civilians in sombre black. An extensive smile irradiated the Irishman's face as he made one mighty plunge across the room, incidentally colliding with three couples by the way, and putting one of them completely out of action; still, nothing signified so long as he made sure of his prey before she could vanish into thin air once more.

Words of reproach were forming on his lips, but the girl stood regarding him with calm complacency.

"At last," said he, "I have found you."

"Yes," she retorted quickly, with an appreciable sigh; "I'm afraid you have." Before he had time to reply she continued, looking him coldly up and down, "I was not aware that cutting dances had become one of your accomplishments." And hidden somewhere in her heavenly blue eyes a look of vast amusement nestled.

"Wha—what!" he ejaculated, surprised beyond measure at the cool, girlish effrontery of her. After a long and varied experience of his tormentor

he had failed quite to fathom all the possibilities of the feminine mind. "Faith! but I've spent half the night looking for you, Cecily dear," and he lapsed, somewhat loudly, into his native brogue.

"Do not call me dear—don't you dare!" she flashed back at him, the soft, silken skirts rustling almost inaudibly as her small foot met the floor with a vicious little stamp. "One does not raise one's voice in a drawing-room. Do you understand?—it is not done. I don't think that I wish to dance this," she added, blue eyes sparkling ominously and the wrinkles forming faintly on the dainty little tip-tilted nose.

"Ah, Cecily!" he pleaded in low, contrite tones, and his irresistibly tender smile was hard to gainsay.

"No," she replied firmly, but the small, round face began to dimple in the way he most loved. "Already my feet ache quite sufficiently—thanks very much."

The meaning glance which she cast at his feet was another injustice to old Ireland, for, like most of his countrymen, he danced most deftly.

"Let us sit it out," she said, turning away, and the O'Keefe followed her through the open doorway, his face opening out into a broad smile. He was blessed with a cheerfully sanguine disposition.

"I have not yet discovered any place," said he, as they reached the veranda.

"There is just one," she remarked, and the solitary dimple flashed faintly as she led the way in silence.

Certainly that one had the advantage of privacy. It was a corner deep and shady—a corner which owed its cosy seclusion, its very existence, to Miss Cecily. Through the foliage overhead the stars shone with a glitter seen nowhere save in India, and in front a garden of sweetness and flowers, where the moonlight shone supreme and where all was wonderfully still, only the faint strains of a waltz wafted on the soft, warm breeze—the music of Strauss, dreamy and infinitely sad.

"Well," he began as they found two chairs, "where have you been all the time?"

"At first I helped the Parent to get things going, and then——" She paused reflectively, looking sideways at him with an exceeding sweetness of expression as she played him with her eyes.

"And then?" he pursued breathlessly, and he fell to studying her with a deliberate scrutiny that took in every tiny detail.

"Why, then you were nowhere to be seen—that's all." As she spoke she preened the soft filminess that nestled at her white throat.

"But," he protested, "I was hunting for you high and low."

"'Up the town and down the town,'" she mimicked in accents grave. "And you know, Pat, this *tamasha* is run more particularly for the

regiment who are going out to fight to-morrow." Just then she saw through rose-coloured spectacles, and was in danger of a mild attack of "scarlet fever." "You see," continued Miss Cecily, nursing her knees with a complacent smile, "the Police Force, like the poor, are always with us—except on the very few occasions that they are wanted." Her face reflected only a singularly innocent sweetness.

Pat flushed darkly, and for a moment her heart smote her, for she knew that she had hit home. She knew, too, that but for a lack of luck in meaningless exams., and the wherewithal to try again, the man would have been a soldier.

"I noticed that young ass Bentley was also missing," he remarked after a pause, gazing reproachfully at the small, mischievous face beside him, and rushing blindly on to his fate.

It was the girl's turn now to flush, and with it the dimples disappeared quite.

"You've no right to say such things," she retorted with immense dignity.

"But where were you, Cis?"

O'Keefe's persistence at least was commendable.

"Don't call me that," she broke out imperiously.

"I do not permit you to."

Miss Cecily's anger was fast rising. His insinuations happened to be unfounded, but then she could not admit that the preparation of this particular corner had been the cause of absence.

"To the latest thing in subalterns, it is permitted—the infernal insolence of some young griffins!" His disjointed retort was bitter, and ended in a growl.

The girl's face broke into sudden sunshine, and she gazed at him adorably out of long dark lashes.

"That," she replied, with her quaint little air of patronage, "is quite another matter. Besides, he is not a griffin," she added, nodding her small head sagely; "he is a soldier—and I like soldiers who go out to fight. To-morrow he is going on active service."

She paused to give effect to her words, then continued maliciously: "Policemen who remain at home to conduct small, naughty boys and old, harmless men to prison become rather oppressive at times—and boring."

She stooped to adjust one of the lace frivolities of her underskirts, also to hide a smile that was less unkind.

"Last April we had a stiff brush with dacoits," he broke in hotly, in vindication of his own service. He might himself revile it with well-merited abuse, but to no outsider—not even to Cecily—would he permit a like privilege.

"Yes, yes, I know," she admitted in a voice pacific but infinitely provoking; "and one or two of the brushed were even armed with the deadly bow and arrow," she added with cheerful sarcasm.

Followed a breathless silence, the while Pat

frowned furiously in a manner wholly strange to that jovial youth: just then he was thirsting to do some brave and dashing deed.

The moon was now shut off from them by a dark fringe of trees—peepuls, whose small, stiff leaves rattled and whispered in the passing breeze to the accompanying sigh of the plaintive kajerino. It was she who first broke the silence.

"Oh, Pat, you are stupid! Do you know what I'd do if I were you?"

"No idea," he answered, with a gloomy frown.

"I'd—I'd do something worth doing—fight something or some one—not just sit in a station all day and—be a policeman." She ended with a giggle reminiscent of her flapper days.

The Irishman jumped up in sudden wrath. Much as he adored her, the limit of his endurance had been reached.

"Shall we go in?" he said furiously. "I don't think that I ever wish to call you Cis now—or Cecily, for that matter, Miss Winfield."

"Oh, Pat, you are a stupid!" she repeated. "Yes, go in by all means." She looked up at him with a merry sparkle in her eyes. "Good-night, Pat," she remarked with cheerful indifference.

"Good-bye, Miss Winfield," he replied in grave, sepulchral tones.

"But, dear old Pat, I rather love to see you looking cross, and I've never seen you really angry

before," she murmured to herself as he wheeled round and left her.

The O'Keefe stalked off in a blaze of indignation. He would end it all: leave the police; leave Junglibad; leave India—it was such a poisonous country. No, he wouldn't, but he would go on leave, or failing that, ask for a transfer. The girl drove him quite mad, and he would put an end to that madness somehow.

CHAPTER XXIX

MARGARET WADE was transformed that night. Her beauty flamed up as if she had suddenly been touched by the magician's wand; it startled people who hitherto had seen only a small, pale face with round, steadfast eyes, and passed on. Even those who knew her best paused to stare again, and assure themselves that it was one and the same person. The colour of her shining eyes seemed to light up the peculiar grey of her dress, and the long curling lashes stood out black against the ivory cheeks with their faint under-glow of colour.

It was the last dance. They were to break up before midnight, in view of the early start of the morning after. Margaret had danced it with her husband, but just before the end the Colonel had called him aside to impart some instruction regarding the morrow, and she was left standing alone for the time being.

She realized with a sudden tightening round her heart that to-morrow she would be all alone—that Rex would have left her. At her last dance with him, to the dreamy, intoxicating music of that

queen of waltzes, the Blue Danube, she had begun to see dimly the elements of greatness in the man. And now it was all over, and he would leave her. Her heart began to ache cruelly with vague regrets. He was so big and strong and brave. Ah! if she could only have loved! If she could but lose this terrible sense of heart-chill! He was going out to-morrow and there was no time left; going to fight, and she knew he was a man who would run the greatest risks of all.

From the other side of the room Mervyn gazed at her with a half-whimsical smile. He was the one other man who had stood silently aloof from the merriment of those around him. He was thinking of the years that had passed—the pleasures and unbridled indulgences—and he was beginning to realize vaguely the bitter harvest of disappointments that might accrue as age came upon him—an age from which all youthful zest would have flown, and the flames of desire have well-nigh burned out. He was approaching forty and, having tasted of every pleasure, was reaching to the dregs of satiation. Now he began to have a faint, glimmering intuition of that which he would miss when he reached the twilight of his life. Unconsciously, Margaret Wade had made him begin to realize the infinite possibilities of love and tender sympathy such a woman had it in her power to give to the one man when all earthly passions were but a memory of the past. The

divine component of love, latent in mankind, had begun to flicker feebly, but it would never have a chance ; only she who had kindled it could keep it alight—and now it was too late. He would eat out the evening of his life in loneliness, and age would find him alone. The plaintive music throbbed and wrung his heart with a yearning for all that might have been. He looked around him and sighed unconsciously. Another day, and the lights, the dainty frocks, and flushed, radiant faces would all have vanished.

“ Bah ! ” he muttered under his breath, with the old cynical smile curving his lips.

Suddenly he threaded his way across the room.

“ Good-bye, Mrs. Wade. Will you not shake hands with me before I go ? ” he asked, with a strange humility. “ Can’t you shake hands with me ? I should like to know that I am forgiven. I hope you understand how unhappy I feel about it all now.”

His hand was stretched out diffidently. The deep grey eyes gazed into his searchingly for a moment ; then, with sudden impulse, she gave him her hand.

“ Good-bye—and good luck ! ” she murmured in her low, sweet voice. “ The past will soon be forgotten—just now I think it is forgiven,” she added gently.

But Wade was fast approaching, and the pity of it all was that he saw—and misunderstood.

"Well," he remarked curtly, when they had reached their bungalow, "we have got to be off early to-morrow, so I shall turn in at once. I had better say good-bye now, Margaret; I do not wish to disturb you in the morning."

The casual indifference of his manner sent a chill through her. She flushed; but they stood on the veranda, and the light was dim.

"Oh, Rex, I shall be up to see you off—I shall be awake in any case, you know," she added with an effort: but her voice faltered.

A ghostly moon was rising slowly over the black, sombre tree-tops; the compound gleamed white in places, and there was a great silence over all.

The girl had the sensation of being alone with him in a silent, deserted world of their own, peopled only with dreams. She paused, standing beside a bowl of roses, and suddenly she turned her face from him: it looked strangely pale and pathetic in the light of the moon, and her lips quivered like a child's.

"It is a very early start, and I would prefer that you did not get up," he repeated coldly. "In these parts one must not risk the chance of chills."

She listened; the sense of the end of all things stole over her, and there was a soft sparkle under the wet lashes that shadowed the cheeks. Once she had so longed for it all to end—but not in this way. It dawned on her that he had unconsciously

grown into her life, and she caught her breath. What if he should never come back to her again? It was not love for him that made her heart ache now—simply, it could not be—but she could not bear to lose him after all these months together. She turned sharply and gazed at him with big, childish eyes, and the rose she held was cruelly crushed against her breast. She saw that he was waiting for her to bid him good-bye. The solitude, the stars, the intimate sense of her presence, had no visible effect on him; and, almost instinctively, she felt it as a slight upon her physical power over him.

A tiny breeze had sprung up, and it rippled past them, playing gently with the grey gown so that its soft folds fluttered towards him as he stood close beside her. It gave him an intoxicating sense of nearness to the woman he loved; all unconsciously his hand went out as if to touch her, and for a second he leaned nearer, the sweet fragrance of her presence drawing him subtly closer, and robbing him of his senses. The breeze fluttered her hair, her cheeks became oddly flushed—then it passed. He drew himself up, his face gone suddenly pale—whiter than her own, almost. His mouth set rigid, and wheeling round abruptly, he strode to the other end of the veranda. He had recollected the other man—the vision of her parting with him rushed back, and the memory of it cut deep.

All the while his pulses were throbbing madly, and he longed for her more fiercely than ever.

"Rex," she almost whispered, as he halted beside her once more, "you will be careful? Oh, promise me you will—Rex!" and her hand caught at his sleeve. "You will come back safe—to me?"

"My dear Margaret," he began, striving to speak calmly, but his voice failed him for an instant, and he trembled with passion, "what will or will not happen is of no account; already it is written."

For a moment she gazed out into the night. The garden lay stretched out before her, a place of black, mocking shadows, with the tracery of the trees silhouetted against the pale, gleaming sky. The stars trembled overhead—grey eyes that seemed to float in tears. That is what they saw.

For a moment she remained silent, looking away from him, her fingers slowly rolling and unrolling a tiny lace handkerchief. She had an intuition that he might be going away for ever, and suddenly she faced him, the sweet, gentle face held up to his under the starlight, and her soft, caressing glance resting on him.

"Wex," she exclaimed brokenly, and the bruised rose fluttered to the ground: "Wex, you'll come back to me unhurt—safe?"

But he scarce heard. He was impressing on

his memory every tiny detail of her : the perfume, the dress she wore, the very flowers ; and he never after forgot. When at length he answered, his voice was harsh.

" Do not be so childish, Margaret. I am not a dashing, reckless fellow like Mervyn."

She bit her lips hard until the blood came, but the tears were choked back. The small, wistful face flushed painfully ; the childish appeal died out of it, and her eyes grew almost old. Suddenly she felt very tired.

" Have you everything you require?" she asked, in a cold, clear voice.

" Thanks—yes," he replied more gently. " You are tired now, I know ; I shall not intrude further upon your rest," he added, as he noted the faint blue lines edging the eyelids.

" Good-bye."

She could not trust herself to say more, and, turning swiftly, she entered the bungalow. Just before she disappeared, she turned round and looked at him.

" Good luck!" she said simply. At the end there was a curious little catch in her voice.

Afterwards Wade remembered what reproach her eyes held.

For a while he stood motionless. A light flared up in her room, and a pale ray of it lit upon the petals of the rose. He smiled bitterly ; but he stooped of a sudden and picked it up.

"God!" he muttered through set teeth; "I love her. . . . What a fool I am!"

He turned slowly and entered the bungalow, wearily locking the doors behind him. Arrived in his room, he sank down on the edge of the bed, his face white and drawn, and his strong right hand tightly clasping the tattered rose.

Suddenly he jumped up and cast it from him, took a turn up and down the room with lips pressed close together, stopped abruptly, and dropped back on to the bed once more.

There was little enough time for sleep, but he sat on unheeding. The vision of their short life together rose up and mocked him. Countless memories trooped back, and left him with the sense of bitter loss: little, childish tricks of her so infinitely dear.

Well, that episode in his career had been closed, as a book which is read and laid aside for ever. It occurred to him that his life had split in two—hope itself had become a fitful will-o'-the-wisp—and he had felt strong enough to defy Fate!

A faint smile twisted the corner of his mouth. It had been written long ago, he reflected; this destiny of his had been fastened upon him long before he came into the world. A woman was a mystery stranger than Fate itself—better far to let her remain so. Where Margaret was concerned he had failed miserably. All his strength and self-effacement had gone for nothing, were but

a source of weakness and loss. And his gain was this: that she had grown to love another!

For a moment he bowed his head wearily, and there came to him the realization of his supreme helplessness; his pride seemed beaten to the ground. The feeling was new to him; it swiftly passed, and when he looked up again his lean, brown face was hard and proud as ever. It was only the end of one phase of his existence—the sweetest, perhaps—but there still remained his profession, and that, at least, was a man's work. For a career woman must be a secondary consideration, and love an episode to be indulged in after the fashion of a pastime. His life was but a small matter, after all, and the frontier might serve to disentangle the web of life and free Margaret of him. At the thought he smiled grimly.

Presently he noted that the darkness was paling, and as he rose stiffly the first faint rays of daylight entered the room. His brief preparations were soon over, and he tiptoed quietly out of the bungalow so as not to awaken her.

When he stepped out into the crisp morning air he looked back once only. His eyes, as they sought out the window of her room, changed; but the tenderness in them died almost immediately and in its stead there shone a keen, fierce joy as he set out towards the dawn and the grim, everlasting hills.

CHAPTER XXX

SANDFORTH of the Woods and Forests had received *khubber* of a panther, exceptionally large and fierce, which was haunting the jungle around Muggerpur. It was no end of a brute—had even entered the village and carried off more than one native child ; and on its head a price had been set, after the benevolent fashion of Government.

The Bhil shikari, dispatched to inquire into the haunts and habits of the man-eater, had brought back word that it was a "big black fellow" (*bahut burra, huzoor*), and the Forest man vowed that he would have the hide of this prodigious panther—a black panther's skin being worthy of much labour and expense. So Tantia, the Bhil, returned with speed and the promise of much baksheesh to make the necessary arrangements.

Patrick O'Keefe, having recently discovered the utter futility of life, had gone out on tour, and was only one day's march from Sandforth's camp. A chit was sent him by chaprasi.

The O'Keefe, needless to say, seized such an opportunity with avidity, and the next evening found the two friends ensconced in the old *dâk* bungalow of Muggerpur.

It was the first wave of hot weather. The sudden spell of heat, coming on the heels of a comparative coolness, had induced the mood that melts, and renders clothing of any sort superfluous. Both men had ridden a long distance that day; now they sat at dinner clad only in pyjamas, and still they groused about the heat and the deficiencies of a punkah which seemed to be coeval with the bungalow, and that dated from before the Mutiny.

They proceeded to exhaust all topics of conversation relating to current station gossip, but the Irishman lapsed spasmodically into strange, moody silences. Even the peculiarly offensive brand of liqueur he affected did not serve to raise his drooping spirits. As they leaned back, legs outstretched, and smoked long, emaciated cheroots, Sandforth bucked of the morrow's sport desultory fashion, and the other periodically gave vent to profound sighs.

An unsociable O'Keefe was little to the Forest man's liking. He had been alone in the jungle for two weary months, with no one but natives to talk to, and he was young. Naturally he looked forward to the customary good cheer of his friend and the chance of some "chin-wagging."

"Have a drink, a smoke, anything; but for the Lord's sake, cheer up! You become oppressive. It isn't a bit like you—it's like nothing on earth or in heaven, and it doesn't suit you a bit."

He paused, and then pointed out in detail the manner of surly brute a policeman could be, but Pat puffed solemnly on and gazed up abstractedly at the ceiling.

"'A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar's a smoke,'" quoted Sandforth. "A bad liqueur is even a drink, and I refer you to Kipling for the true valuation of woman."

At last he elicited a response.

"Oh, shut up, Sandy, you know nothing about it! Trees and wild animals are more in your line. Damn it, man, don't talk to me about women!" he added, with a gloomy smile.

"Bad as all that, old chap?" grinned the other. "What does it feel like?"

"Hades: just plain, downright hell; so let's get off the subject," replied O'Keefe sadly.

"Well," resumed his friend, "there is a Bhil colony in Muggerpur—migrated from Khandesh only a few years ago—and Tantia, my shikari, is one of them. He has got together about forty men, and they are out in the jungle now, watching for our panther to kill one of the goats I had tied up. There might be a kill to-night; the old *wagh* has done no baby-snatching in the village for some little time, and he may fancy a goat for a change of diet. If he does, the Bhils are not the birds to miss the brute when he lies up to sleep off the effects; they will sit round in a wide circle and ring him."

"Good beaters, too, aren't they? . . . Mighty little shooting I've had, so far!" growled O'Keefe, as he tilted back his chair and deposited a pair of large flat feet on the table; "and that has been with the havildar and a sepoy—Hindus both, and quite meritorious in their own sphere, but shocking bad shikaris. You old Forest wallahs keep the best shoots up your sleeves; mean sort of divils some of you are!"

The O'Keefe was unhappy. He had passed the stage of romantic heartbreak, and the morbid joys of his misery were fast fading also.

Sandforth eyed him, then spoke.

"Tell you what, young fellow, you bury your nose in another of your rat-exterminating concoctions and tray to buck up a bit. At the present moment your face would pass muster at your own funeral. Nice, grateful sort of beast you are, too!" he added, in one last effort to rouse his friend from his ill-humour.

"All right, old Sandy Scot! After that outburst of heavy Caledonian wit let us anchor ourselves in the deep chairs outside. I'm tired, and you cling to a joke overlong."

Pat, with the ghost of his old smile returning, gathered his long limbs from the table and led the way towards the veranda.

"The Bhils are a race of sportsmen," Sandforth affirmed as they assumed a digestive recumbency. "Did you ever hear the yarn about the Bhil dacoit down in Khandesh?"

"No, I did not," grunted the Irishman sleepily from amid the recesses of his chair; "and, faith, I hope it's not a long one. I want to go to bed and to sleep most of all—didn't get a wink of it last night."

"Poor old Pat!" rejoined Sandforth, laughing immoderately.

"You're so darned Scotch at times, Sandy, that's the worst of you. You laugh when you oughtn't to, and never when you should," retorted the Irishman, striving to hide a reluctant grin. And Sandforth continued gravely—

"The old dacoit was being run to earth by the Police—don't know quite how they ever managed it, but they tell me that policemen with brains have been discovered down there——"

"Not so much facetious flapdoodle—I want to be soothed," O'Keefe broke in wearily, but suddenly warming up, he went on: "You old ass! you don't know how to tell a yarn. Why don't you get on, man? Amuse me—make me wish I was never born."

"You are uncommonly complimentary to-night," Sandforth replied, laughing softly to himself as he lit a final cheroot and resumed: "There was a reward of five hundred rupees on the dacoit's head, and he knew that his capture was only a matter of days. So the wily old sportsman commanded his son to give him up, that the money might remain in the family. The dutiful youth

obeyed ; his old dad was strung up and the family made merry with the dibs."

"Quite a sound thing to do," remarked the other, with a prolonged yawn ; "but I'm going to turn in now." He rose slowly and stretched himself. "Glory be to God ! we are all undressed and ready to tumble into bed. I see they've put our charpoys out in the compound—hope the panther doesn't come this way and carry you off ; you do look a bit of a goat at times, Sandy, my boy," he ended, with a spontaneous guffaw.

Sandforth did not feel inclined to sleep : he had only turned in because his friend had done so. Now he tossed from side to side ; at length, giving up the attempt, he lay wide awake looking up at the stars, and the sparkle of them filtering through the leaves of the great neem-tree overhead. There was no moon, but the white-washed bungalow loomed up, grey and ghostly, in the shadows. As the night wore on a delightful cool breeze sprang up, stirring the branches overhead until they rustled softly. He lay and listened to their murmuring, and the fragrance of some blossom-clad spray floated down to him. It was all so beautiful out there, with the stars above and the air of heaven about his bed. His thoughts took wing and wandered far ; he was thinking of home and gloating over the prospect of his first leave. This time next year he would be going back, and what a time he would have !

He had pictured it all over and over again, his mind following up every step of the way. Arrived at the little country station, the old governor would be there to meet him ; turning in at the gate, the mater would be watching for him and waiting to welcome him home again. Often, too, he had dreamed of it. His dreams had started all right, but somehow they had always ended up wrong—alas ! dreams so often do. He could never quite recollect how they did end, but when he awoke there had always been left behind a feeling of anguish and of infinite regret.

Sandforth had some Celtic blood in his veins, and he entertained vague superstitions unawares. Now when he thought of his dreams he became strangely depressed, and at dinner he had felt in such good form. It must be the effect of O'Keefe's poisonous drinks that was keeping him awake and making him feel so melancholy, he reflected.

In the far end of the compound the newly risen moon was casting dark, eerie shadows. Involuntarily the man shuddered as he kept gazing into them, but at last he dropped into a deep, troubled slumber. He awoke again in what seemed all too short a time, with the sun's rays shining down on him, and as he pulled aside the mosquito-net and sat up in bed—eyes sleepy and feeling very tired—O'Keefe's voice sounded cheerily through the open door of the bungalow.

"Buck up, Sandy! *Chota hazri* is getting all cold, and I'm starting on the second last mango."

"I can quite imagine it, Pat. You always did make rather a beast of yourself in the mango line, and jolly well deserve to be afflicted with mango boils, although your patience would scarce be that of Job. Oh, I hate this blasted Orient! makes one feel so futile in the mornings," he grunted, as he made his way into breakfast and collared the one remaining mango. "You don't happen to mind my eating while you smoke, do you, Pat?" he said facetiously, as he glanced up at the volumes of smoke issuing from a rank green cheroot.

"Time that ancient joke was buried," grinned O'Keefe, now restored to partial equanimity.

"Rotten!" was the sole reply, sourly ejaculated between mouthfuls of mango, a thing itself unripe, and left untouched for that reason alone by the voracious O'Keefe.

The morning meal over, they lay in long chairs in the cool of the veranda, guns and tiffin-basket beside them, the ponies ready saddled in the stables, all awaiting the arrival of the Bhil runner, who would bring in *khubber* (news) and conduct them out to the panther's lair.

"Feeling surly this morning, old Sandybird?" queried O'Keefe. And once more he laughed his good old cheery laugh, all his love troubles well-nigh forgotten in the prospects of the chase.

His gun had never yet accounted for anything dangerous ; but, having laid low a few confiding blackbuck, shot with the aid of a bullock-cart (fifty yards range and fixed target), the O'Keefe rated himself an experienced shikari, and held lofty views on the subject of big game.

"Somehow, I do feel rather blue this morning," replied Sandforth, gazing steadily in the direction from which the newsbearer should come.

"Funny thing, it was I who was the bluebird last night, and now it is your turn." O'Keefe was somewhat fond of the bird epithet, and coloured many of his sentences with it.

"That infernal drink of yours kept me awake most of the night!" the other answered shortly.

"Get out your rifle and let's have a look at it, old chap. What is it—a D. B. .500 express?" he queried, changing the subject.

"Couldn't quite run to all that, you know," replied O'Keefe, with a rueful laugh. "It is only a single-barrelled .400, but a bit of a nailer in its own little way."

He produced it from its wrappings, handling it the while with loving care. Sandforth examined it critically.

"I know these old single-barrelled monstrosities, with their antiquated block action that jams unaccountably at critical moments and works most sweetly when not required. You want to shoot straight with them, for it isn't much fun following

up wounded game on foot with a single unreliable barrel to pin your whole faith to. If it jams, and the jungle is dense, where are you?"

"Up a gum-tree, I hope," the quick-witted Irishman replied instantly. "Oh, it is all right," he went on, as if mortified at the criticism of his rifle. "I've got a great service revolver in my belt and a knife somewhere else. I declare I feel quite like a pirate king—armed to the teeth."

"Hullo!" broke in Sandforth curtly. "Looks like *khubber* at last."

As he spoke the Bhil runner appeared in the compound, with a spear in one hand and a smile of excited importance on his flat face. It was the news they so much desired, and soon they were cantering along on their ponies to the scene of action.

Tantia was awaiting them near a native hut, and he pointed to a steep, jungle-clad spur of the hill close at hand.

"*Wagh, sahib, bahut barra, sahib.*" And his gestures indicated dimensions that would not have disgraced an elephant.

Then he proceeded to unfold the plan of campaign. One sahib was to take up a position on a branch of a stunted mango-tree, and the other to dispose of himself on a rock a little higher up the hillside. The "drive" would be uphill.

O'Keefe and Sandforth tossed for places, and fortune favoured the latter; for he won, and chose the rock, which was the more likely of the two from the shooter's point of view—if not the panther's.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE beat had begun. Away in the distance a sudden outburst of hoarse yells heralded the approach of the beaters as they moved through the jungle, all unseen in its thick undergrowth.

Followed a silence.

To O'Keefe, sitting there on his mango-tree, there was magic in the moment, and the blood in his veins tingled. Overhead was the blazing sun, underneath the hush and cool of the jungle. Not a leaf stirred; the silence was utter save for the beating of his own heart, broken at intervals by the shouts that approached ever nearer and nearer.

He was seated about five feet from the ground, perched there, not for safety but to enable him the more easily to see the panther without himself being seen; for the animal seldom looks up when it is being driven. Beside him sat a Bhil, clad only in a loin-cloth, his black, glossy skin shining like satin in the sunlight. Crouched on the branch of the tree, his coarse, matted hair streaming behind his head, spear in hand, and leaning forward to peer intently into the jungle, the Bhil

formed a striking picture of prehistoric man, and looked every inch the aboriginal that he was. It lent enchantment to the moment, and the Irishman had the true Celtic sense of the picturesque. He felt in complete sympathy with a man who was every whit as keen on the sport as he was himself.

There was a rustle in the jungle near by. O'Keefe, his heart exceeding the speed-limit, gripped his rifle more firmly and peered down. It was a false alarm—only a peacock which strutted into the open with an air of pride and insolence.

Dead silence once more.

Suddenly there was a shout more prolonged than the others—quite close at hand now. From the confusion of hoarse, guttural cries he could distinguish the word "*Wagh!*" and the voice of the headman cursing his fellows and their female antecedents for many generations back. "You sons of dogs—beating like a pack of Brahmins!" an abuse as effective as any other.

"There he is, sahib!" the Bhil was muttering in the Irishman's ear in a hoarse, excited whisper.

All at once O'Keefe saw a long, low body, with tail dragging along the ground, creeping in furtive manner from bush to bush, with ever a look behind and in front. His heart beat quite normally now, and he offered up a silent prayer that the panther might come his way . . . but it was making for

Sandforth's rock. Just his luck—he wouldn't get a look-in!

Suddenly the brute seemed to change its mind. It wheeled to the left and headed straight in his direction, hesitated, then broke into a slow trot. As it lolloped past at about fifty yards distance, O'Keefe only caught glimpses of the body flashing through the bushes. He raised the rifle and covered the line of it with the foresight.

Bang!

The hillside re-echoed the shot; then there was silence again in the jungle. The panther, with smashed foreleg, was seen to have broken back. Now it was bursting its way downhill through the jungle, with O'Keefe firing at it as fast as he could load and quite aimlessly.

"There he is, sahib! Down there, licking his wound!" and the little Bhil pointed excitedly.

The Irishman's eyes were not so keen, and the colouring of the panther blended too well with that of the surroundings for him to distinguish it. However, he followed the line in which the Bhil was pointing, and fired. The brute moved farther off; soon it was lost to sight in a thick clump of cactus.

Sandforth descended from his perch and rejoined the other.

"Well," he said gloomily, "there is nothing for it now but to follow up. We must polish him

off or he will become more of a man-eater than ever. Only he is lying up in the devil's own piece of jungle, and I don't admire that old blunderbuss of yours overmuch, O'K."

"Just a nasty piece of envy on your part, me bhoy. Begrudging me the joys of a good follow-up, were ye?" the other replied in great glee. "'Once aboard the cactus and the panther's mine,'" he added, misquoting glibly enough.

"We have to get him out first, and I never saw a more deadly looking piece of cover. It's as bad as a cave, if not worse. And we haven't the time to wait until his wound stiffens up, either." Sandforth paused and gazed reflectively at the sun. "Well, let's get to work," he continued, leading the way cautiously in the direction of the cactus entanglement, keeping above it and clear of the denser jungle.

"Now," said he as they halted, "that is where the brute is sure to be."

He pointed to a towering expanse of cactus, ranged in the form of a crescent round the head of a small nullah. With its thick undergrowth, it presented all the disadvantages of a cave, with no possibility of "smoking out."

"We will try to make him charge us uphill." Sandforth's voice sounded dubious, but he ordered the shikaris to have rocks thrown in.

They stood above, waiting, the two sahibs and O'Keefe's havildar armed with guns and the Bhil

contingent with spears. The brute would not be drawn.

"Wily old devil! He refuses to charge uphill with one foreleg gone. There is nothing for it but to walk up from below and go right into his den-oh!" The pessimistic Scot muttered and looked glum. "I say, O'Keefe, for God's sake tell that *loocho* of a havildar not to point his carbine. He was right on me just now with it. Gad! if he doesn't bag one or other of us before the panther gets a look in, I'm a Dutchman."

Pat took the hint, and growled out an order in an undertone; and the subordinate, much to his chagrin and no little humiliation, proceeded to unload.

Then they began to work their way round the jungle.

"Tantia is one of the staunch Bhils, and will stand all right with that great spear of his," said Sandforth in low tones, as they slowly and carefully skirted the cactus. "But the rest will most likely vanish into thin air when we are charged. Remember to aim low, old chap."

The mouth of the lair was reached, and they gazed up the gloomy-looking hollow, screened everywhere with dense bush and reaching back for a considerable distance.

"Whew! the plot thickens," remarked Sandforth in a whisper, stopping to mop his forehead savagely.

Suddenly his face appeared to sharpen, and there came a strange, fixed expression into his eyes that was almost uncanny.

"Great sport, I call it," breathed the exuberant Irishman. "Upon my faith, it's the best day I've put in since I landed in India."

"Don't be an ass, Pat. Some one's just about sure to get mauled in that old death-trap there. The brute will be on us before we can see him," replied the more sober-minded Scot gravely.

Unconsciously a note of conviction had crept into his voice; there was a look of strained expectancy in his eyes. They began to move slowly forward and upward, their nerves on the alert for the first signs of the enemy. Creeping on and on, watched by unseen eyes, expecting something to spring out at every turn, they were thrilled as in some exciting game of childhood's days. On still farther, the two sahibs leading the way, rifles held in front at the ready, with finger on the trigger guard. Soon it must end one way or another.

Whouf, whouf, whouf—WHOUF!

A sound almost like that of a locomotive getting under way, and the flash of some huge, dark mass, which hurled itself, snarling and biting, on Stanforth. Before a shot could be fired, before O'Keefe quite realized what had happened, man and beast were rolling on the ground.

The Irishman reached the spot at one bound;

but Tantia was there before him, and his spear sank into the brute's side. Still the great cat, with all the lives of the domestic feline, had not yet been touched in a vital spot. It was impossible to shoot for fear of hitting his friend, and O'Keefe in desperation literally threw himself on the panther, stabbing it with his knife again and again. With a snarl of rage, it let go, and, turning on its assailant, clawed him badly down one arm. The shikari now saw his chance, and this time the spear entered just behind the shoulder and pierced the heart. Without a groan, the great brute rolled over dead.

At once they hauled the carcass clear, and poor O'Keefe, his arm bleeding profusely, knelt down by the side of his friend.

Stanforth lay quite still, with the blood slowly oozing out of a great, gaping wound down his neck and chest. One side of his head had been mauled also; but, strangely enough, the face had escaped injury, having apparently been protected by his topee and his hands.

O'Keefe gently raised the man's head, supporting it on his knee while he tried to pour some brandy down his throat—the flask he had abstracted from the pocket of the far-seeing forester—but the still, white face showed no signs of returning consciousness. He gazed round helplessly, and there stood Tantia, in an ecstasy of rage, stabbing the dead panther again and again

with his spear. The sight filled O'Keefe with fury, and for no ostensible reason.

"Stop that at once, you *badmash!*" he shouted. "Have the tiffin-basket brought up immediately, and tell the others to contrive some sort of a litter—at once. *Suar ki bacha—you!*"

Very soon the tiffin-basket arrived. In it bandages and carbolic acid had been placed by Stanforth himself, whose experience had taught him the wisdom of preparing for all emergencies.

Blood-poisoning is the chief danger to be feared from a panther, and this one in particular had been more like a tiger in strength and ferocity. The Irishman bathed the dreadful wounds as best he could. The very sight of them nauseated him and made him feel faint. It was as much as he could do to keep himself in hand, and his own wound, still unattended to, was fast robbing him of his strength. At last he got through with it, and when the supply of bandages proved insufficient, the table-cloth from the tiffin-basket was requisitioned. Through it all, Stanforth lay strangely cold and inert—without a tremor of any sort.

Suddenly O'Keefe became alarmed. It had not occurred to him before, but now he seized his friend's wrist. No pulse was perceptible there, and his own heart began to throb painfully. Still, he knew nothing about pulses, he told himself. He looked up, and the gleam of Stanforth's rifle

flashed in the sun. Slowly and tremulously he reached out and grasped it, then held the polished barrel of it close to the half-open mouth. He watched eagerly, his face grown ashen and his heart still for one moment's hideous suspense: the barrel flashed back at the sun with a glitter of silent mockery, without a vestige of dimming on its polished surface. With an ever-deepening horror in his eyes, he still held it there. Suddenly his hold relaxed and he fell back in a dead faint.

When he awoke, the sun's rays were commencing to strike obliquely, and faint shadows were stealing up in the jungle. The havildar bent over him with a *lota* of water, but poor O'Keefe could not at first recollect where he was. A throb of pain went stabbing through his arm, and, glancing down at it, he noticed the rough bandages which had been the work of his faithful subordinate. Then the memory of it all came crashing back on him.

He looked round. There lay the body of his friend, his face frozen into a mere lifeless mask, and the Bhil shikari sat, crouched upon his heels, at the feet of his dead master. Farther off, the other Bhils squatted in groups.

As O'Keefe sat up and gazed at them, there was wafted over to him the monotonous wail of voices that rose and fell after the manner of primitive grief. It all came home to him then,

and the thought of it goaded him to frenzy. Jumping up, he turned to his havildar.

"If those brutes do not stop that noise at once, I'll shoot the lot of them. Go, instantly, and tell them so. Wait!"

He paused as if lost in thought for the moment; then, extracting a piece of paper from his pocket, he rapidly wrote and folded it up.

"Give this to one of them, and tell him to take it to Junglibad without delay. Remember, he must arrive there by ten o'clock to-night."

He lowered his voice as he handed it to the havildar, for his thoughts had flown back to the dead, but his eyes were resentful still. Sandy, his old pal, to be mourned over by a pack of Bhils! He felt as if the world had come to an end—what had been left of it.

As the party turned back to the bungalow with their sad burden, a feeling of shame filled his honest heart: they were good sportsmen, he reflected, and, after all, they had tried to show honour to his dead friend in their own way.

The dusk of the warm evening had fallen by the time the bungalow was reached. Outside was the mysterious, brooding peace of the East; inside, the ghostly hush of the old *dāk* bungalow, where O'Keefe sat beside his dead friend in the gathering shadows cast by the flickering candle. The meagreness of the light served but to intensify the gloom and melancholy that lurked in the vast,

sombre room, and the pervading air of decay of the great height of walls, bare and discoloured, with the plaster peeling off in places. Dismal ghosts of bygone days seemed to crowd into the room. There, perchance, some long-forgotten exile had brooded in solitude over lost health and lost hopes—filled with a mighty longing for the old land and the old faces he would never see again. Everything was very quiet—only the sound of his watch ticking out its death dirge in the silence where a man lay awaiting the dawn.

He could stand it no longer, and rising silently, crept to the door.

Outside, a deep peace brooded over the land, and the thin wisp of smoke from the compound was curling straight up in the still air. The sigh of a passing breeze, and the wind suddenly rustled in the branches of the neem. The leaves began to murmur among themselves again. They had known it all last night—oh, yes, they had known it always, they chuckled grimly to themselves.

O'Keefe leaned against the door, waiting until the bullock-cart should arrive to bear back to Junglibad the body of his friend—one who had been full of the joy of life only a few hours ago, and now. . . . The Irishman bowed his head between his hands with a groan, for he had a tender heart, and he had loved old Sandy. It was he who had wounded the brute, and the other had paid the penalty. Why had he not been struck

down instead? He was not in love with life any more, and would willingly have passed out of it just then.

* * * * *

It was evening of the next day, and O'Keefe sat alone in his bungalow. His arm had been attended to, but it was very painful. The Irishman could not bear to have any one near him; his heart was heavy with grief, and he wanted to be quite alone. That morning they had buried Sandforth in the tiny English cemetery of Jungli-bad. Old Sandy, his best pal, had been tucked in under the sod, "until the day dawn and the shadows flee away." It had all seemed so sordid, that Indian funeral. "Dust to dust," and the Padre's audible whisper to the native Christian who officiated—" *Mutti dalo.*"

The Burial Service had been somehow robbed of all solemnity, he reflected bitterly, and it was old Sandy that had been put out of sight, hurried into the darkness beyond at a pace that seemed to lack reverence. He knew, too, that his friend would be put out of mind with no less ceremony in a land where a man's life is a small matter, and the memory of it still less.

He of the Indian Police sat out in the dim glow of the veranda after his solitary dinner, with only the half-light of the lamp from within and the faint sparkle of some distant star. It was

a hot, windless night, with heavy clouds slowly rolling up from the south ; silent too, save for countless crickets droning their ceaseless monotone, with all its drowsy mystery, and frogs croaking in unison.

A soft breeze came fluttering along to soothe him, but he was not to be comforted. He began to hate the East—it was nothing but *dikh* and worry. His staunch ally, Miss Chaytor, had gone home ; Simson had been transferred ; the "Footers" were away fighting ; and poor old Sandy was under the sod. His heart was empty of all that he loved in India, and he sat moralizing in a fashion that made him feel old and cynical.

He had just reached the point of longing with all his ardent soul for a sight of the Emerald Isle, when a chaprasi appeared, bearing in his hand a *chit*.

" Pat, dear, I am so sorry.

" CIS."

That was all, but his thoughts flew back to Junglibad and became riveted there.

CHAPTER XXXII

FORT ANSTRUTHER is one of the sentinels of Empire. Perched right up on the turbulent borderland, it is not infrequently the rendezvous for the various units of a punitive expedition.

Troops had been concentrated with unobtrusive speed. Foote's Horse halted there for two nights, and next evening saw the whole column moving out of the fort. Followed swiftly a final parting to the stirring strains of "Auld Lang Syne," and the expedition moved on, wending its way onwards and upwards towards the fastnesses of the Gulzais' country, with the band blaring out some forlorn ditty.

Visions of glory in the fight to come floated before the more youthful members, and the hearts of all beat high with hope and expectancy. In front rode the advance guard—a squadron of Foote's Horse. In the rear came a swaying line of grunting camels, roped up together, nose to tail, like a string of ungainly khaki sausages, stalking along with the supremely supercilious air that never seems to leave them.

The sun sank slowly behind the giant hills,

which loomed up purple in the distance. Soon all that could be seen of the column was a vast cloud of dust, through which spectral' figures appeared at intervals. The road became veiled in blue and purple shadows, until the long line looked for all the world like an army of phantoms. The *Asan*, intoned by voices of many camel-men, was wafted softly on the breeze, rising and falling in the still air: *La Illahu il Allah*—dying away with the cadence of a Gregorian chant, and testifying in Arabic that "God is *the* God." All to the accompaniment of the curious, bubbling note of the camel when he becomes *must* and projects from his mouth that, which resembles a bladder, now inflated, now deflated.

Grey slabs of rock closed in behind the last of the stragglers, and Fort Sandeman returned to the comforts of club or bungalow and cane-chair criticism.

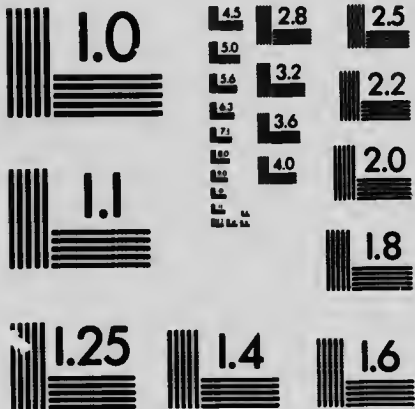
A few days later and the column was still toiling on. Suddenly the road became a defile; the sharp crack of a rifle rang out, then another, but the marksmanship was not good, and soon the main body emerged into a wide, rolling valley. When they halted it was found that the total casualties amounted to one mule killed and some three sepoy wounded.

That night the column bivouacked near a nulla which slashed the valley deeply across. Strong pickets were posted, for the outposts had got in



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touch with a large body of hillsmen, who were reported later to be in great force, and in a commanding position some six miles up the nulla. The prospects for the morrow looked rosy, and there was great jubilation throughout the camp.

Night fell, and the lights began to twinkle on the grey hillside. Overhead there sparkled a canopy of stars, but the heavens were dark, for the moon was in its last quarter, Throughout the camp there was an air of subdued excitement.

The morrow would be a searching test. Men new to the game of war looked forward to it with feelings somewhat mixed, and never having been tried before, they vaguely wondered how exactly they would acquit themselves: some of the more imaginative and highly strung were haunted with the dread of being afraid, though they had not flinched the lesser stakes of life. Still, they viewed it less seriously than the veterans of many fights, who had found themselves and settled the matter of courage for all time.

At last the encampment began to settle down for the night. The hum gradually died out, and the lights vanished, until there was a deep silence over all. Somewhere a sharp cry rang out. Men listened in silence, their faces keen and ready, bodies on the alert, but all grew quiet again, silent as the grave. Once there rang out the sudden crack of the rifle; but it was only a hillsmen, ambitious of glory and a reputation for

marksmanship, indulging in the gentle art of "sniping," and he paid the penalty of his conceit at the hands of a formidable little Gurkha, who, stalking up behind, silenced him for ever with the deadly *kukri*.

Time passed. The waning moon climbed over the mountain ridge and found Wade wrapped in dreamless slumber. Imagination was a thing unknown to him; utter self-reliance and fierce pride were the outstanding features of his character. He had fallen asleep with only a great joy at his heart as he thought of the fight to come; and in his sleep his lips were smiling grimly. The dying moon gazed down sadly upon him.

The sun's first rays were softly tinting pale, distant vistas when the orders to advance were given; its youthful strength was flooding with ruddy gold the vault of an Eastern sky as the column toiled up the intervening ridge.

* * * * *

By late afternoon the line of stone sangars had been rushed. Now Foote's Horse were in the thick of it, riding down scattered bands of hillsmen who still offered a stubborn resistance with sullen fury, implacable hate.

Hard, bitter fighting at close quarters; ruthless pursuit; and it was Foote's Horse that led the way. Wade, sword in hand, was riding at a solid body of tribesmen, and the squadron

followed close on his heels. As he thundered on, an Afghar, mounted on a magnificent stallion, detaching himself from the mass in front, rode out slowly to meet him. Apparently he was a chieftain amongst them, and a noted warrior to boot. Wade looked, and his lean brown face caught light and fire as he gripped his sword tighter. He dug the spurs home, and rode straight at his man, a fierce joy gleaming in the pale, hard eyes.

Now he was on him, and, oh! the joy of it. But his sword whistled harmlessly through the air—the Gulzai had wheeled his mount just in the nick of time.

Quick as thought, with almost uncanny presence of mind, the Englishman ducked. An instant after and the great tulwar came sweeping down, just grazing his helmet, and the charger thundered on and out of reach. Pulling the animal back on its haunches, Wade wheeled round and faced the foe once more. This time, he vowed, there should be no mistake, and the thin lips were drawn back in a cruel smile. He galloped back, the lust of slaughter on him, aware of naught save the fierce desire to thrust home until steel bit through flesh and bone. Sword and tulwar met with a clear, ringing blow. There was the fierceness of the whirlwind in the Afghar's strokes, but they were met time after time by the steady parry of an expert swordsman. The slashing blows rained in,

but the fire of them was slowly dying out, and the Gulzai began to breathe more heavily, the breath began to sob in his throat. Wade's eyes narrowed as he watched and bided his time.

Ah! a short, strangled sob, and the good sword bit its way home. It was the first death-blow to his credit, but he promised himself more to follow. Civilization had slipped from him completely now; he was himself as savage as any Afghan, and he saw red.

There was a dense mass of white-robed figures before him, and he rode with Berserker fury into battle, the blood-lust consuming him, the troopers thundering behind. Suddenly the keen eyes discerned a narrow defile at the head of the nulla. It occurred to him that the way of escape might be cut off by a handful of men, and in a flash his mind was made up. He rode on, his face distorted and the devil in his pale eyes. Soon he was literally hewing a way through, his purpose ever in view. One thought kept hammering in his brain—kill! One fear kept tugging at his heart—the enemy might waver and break into flight before he could reach his goal. And none must escape.

At last the fierce onslaught had carried his squadron through, and Wade looked round to get his bearings. To the south, some little distance off, he noticed a detachment of his regiment surrounded by a large force of the enemy. Suddenly

he started, for he had distinguished Mervyn in the midst of them, hard pressed, with the Gulzais closing in on him.

It occurred to Wade that he alone might be able to succour them in time. If he did he might miss his opportunity—the chance of seeing the enemy wellnigh exterminated—the one fierce desire that filled him at the moment. Swift memories whirled back on him, and there flashed into his eyes the picture of Margaret as she had appeared that night of the ball. Now he saw her as she bade Mervyn good-bye, and there was a cruel vividness in the picture that wellnigh choked him. Just for a moment he hesitated. All the fierce chivalry that was in him rose up and urged him to sacrifice self and duty so that he might save for her the man she loved. But his gaze again swung round to the defile, drawn to it as to a magnet. Instantly the deep-rooted soldier's impulse returned, blotting out everything else. The square, lean jaws set hard, and with the curious fixed stare of one in a dream, he headed his men straight for the goal.

Only a few straggling bands intervened ; these they passed through like a whirlwind. The defile was only five hundred yards off now—but would they be in time to secure it? Away to the right a large force of hillsmen had detected their object, and were racing madly to get in first. The main body was beginning to break up too.

They came on, clouds of white-robed, fierce-faced hillsmen. Only two hundred yards more! For a moment it was neck to neck, then the squadron thundered in with a mighty clatter and wheeled instantly about. Hordes of tribesmen bore down upon them, disputing the right-of-way with the frenzy of despair, battling for dear life. Wade settled down to fight with mad fury, his face wildly exultant, radiant with the sheer love of the thing. His troopers would follow him to the gate of hell itself. He knew they would stand by him now; they would guard the way with the last drop of their blood, and none would escape.

Away back to the south beside a rushing, nameless stream, Mervyn and his men fought doggedly and with the courage of despair. He knew that his last hour had come—that he must die now and go out—and he was not afraid. His lips almost began to smile, and he swore that he would render a good account of himself before he was launched forth into the land of shadows.

The ring of dark, cruel faces closed in ever so little; the defence was weakening and the ammunition going out. A sharp, stabbing pain, and Mervyn knew he had been hit. He felt his strength flagging fast, but he set his teeth and hung on grimly. Memories and fancies whirled in his brain, ghosts of dead joys rose up in the

flesh. A vision of town, and the fair faces of women crowded in upon him. Slowly they faded until they were very far away indeed; and the fierce black faces kept closing in, nearer and nearer.

The rushing waters of the river sang in his ears, the sky reeled above him. Fierce, blood-shot eyes, cruel knives glinting in the sun, and the black wave had closed overhead, blotting him out for ever. It was all over. He lay on his back, his head tilted back at a sickening angle and his eyes glazing fast.

Wade, his goal won, fought on with never-flagging fury. The hillsmen hurled themselves against the tiny handful of men, fighting fiercely to clear the way of escape. But the jaws of the trap were held against all odds; the hill figures, leaping forward, fell back prone.

Reinforcements reached him. The attack was driven home, and the Gulzais went down by scores, crushed slowly as in a vice. The dust and tumult of battle died down.

The sudden boom of a distant jezail, a white puff of smoke, and Wade went down, stretched full length on Mother Earth, eyes closed and face ghastly pale. He, who had made all this carnage possible, had borne a charmed life until the end: then some stray splinter had found him out—one of the last fired, and probably not

intended for him at all! Such is the irony of Fate!

The fight was over, and the sun was sinking fast. The crimson glow spread swiftly over the everlasting hills and veiled the valley in shadows. Few of the Gulzais had escaped. The ground was thickly strewn with their dead—things, once human, lying crumpled up in a casual, almost ludicrous fashion.

And the worth of it all?

As the sun sank out of sight, and the stars crept out and peered down on the distorted heaps, the jackals howled their hideous requiem, proclaiming their approval in cries long-drawn-out and weird. Yet another tragedy had been added to this dark, bloodstained borderland, but the frontier had received a lesson, the tale of which would ring throughout the land.

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was midday before news of the fighting reached Junglibad, and after tiffin it was one of the topics of conversation in the club. It had been a glorious fight, an overwhelming victory, and poor old Mervyn had been killed.

It is the nature of the East to regard death with becoming levity and an interest that is but fleeting, it being a much simpler affair than in colder climes—more elemental and sudden. Death and dissolution become more familiar and more tangible where the light is fierce and the shadow swift, and where life itself is a thing of grim contrast. To-night, a murmured "Poor devil!" and a drink; a place vacant at the bridge-table; a man the less on the list of seniority—and that is the end of it.

It is the spirit of the East, and perhaps it is better so.

Later in the day a rumour circulated—at least, it was current in the bazaar and the servants' quarters—that Wade sahib had performed prodigious deeds of valour, and been slain in the end.

In the grounds and veranda of the gymkhana

people clustered together in groups and commented on the whole affair with the acute criticism of the stay-at-home. As they gossiped, official messages were coming through from Anstruther: the expedition was at an end, and the column would be returning immediately; and last of all, it was reported that Wade had been dangerously wounded.

Margaret Wade had felt strangely nervous all day, but, as luck would have it, her ayah chanced to be absent, and no news had filtered through. The servants kept eyeing her with all the complaisance of the native who has ill news to relate, but they dared not tell—that was the ayah's own peculiar privilege. Time seemed to pass very slowly, and she found herself restlessly going over all the past in her mind.

In the afternoon she was feeling tired, but solitude compelled her to seek the society of her kind, and she languidly proceeded to dress, feeling curiously ill at ease the while.

It was rather later than usual when she arrived at the gymkhana, and as she stepped out of the polo-cart and flung the reins to the syce, Mrs. Winfield was there to meet her.

"My dear Margaret," she said, her kind face gravely sympathetic, "I am simply longing for a stroll—it is so insufferably warm in here to-night. Will you not take pity on my loneliness and accompany me. I can't think where that child Cecily

has vanished to." Her smile was comforting and infinitely sweet. She was a woman who seemed to radiate an atmosphere of peace and comfort.

"I should love to come with you, Mrs. Winfield," replied the girl warmly. This woman was to her the essence of all that was kind and motherly, and she loved her.

The Colonel's wife led the way, talking brightly the while, and her companion had no suspicion of what lay before her. At length they halted near the shade of a giant tamarind, and the older woman turned gently and looked at her with tender compassion.

"Margaret," she said, taking the girl's hand in hers, "you are a soldier's wife, and so am I. We must try to be brave as befits a soldier's women-folk."

The girl started. "Mrs. Winfield, tell me all at once," she broke in, white to the lips, something clutching at her heart. "Ah! I must know the worst. Rex is dead! I knew it must be so always, and—and——"

She paused, gazing at the older woman, her eyes without a hint of tears, wide open, and filled with a horror too great for words. Already she had begun to blame herself, extravagantly jumping to conclusions and confusing issues, as is the manner of women at times.

"My dear! my dear!" murmured the other, putting her arms round the tensely erect form.

"He is not dead, dear—nothing so bad as that. He is not going to die; he has been wounded, that is all," she added, holding the slim figure tightly, for it felt suddenly limp. "There now, I knew you would be brave," and she smiled encouragingly at Margaret. "You ought to be a very proud girl, too. Your husband has been so splendid. Just think, dear, he will get the V.C.—a D.S.O. at least. Do you know, we are all envious of you."

"Ah! he's not dead." The words were breathed in a sigh only half audible, the colour rushed back to her face, and she gazed straight in front of her, the grey eyes staring fixedly, as if conscious of things which to others were unseen. What mattered it to her if he had achieved glory in the field? Already she had forgotten that part. There was one thing alone that filled her mind—he was not dead.

Suddenly another fact flashed back to her as from a distance—he was wounded, dangerously perhaps, and he had need of her. Mrs. Winfield stood silent, looking away. She knew the comfort of the word unsaid, the glance averted.

Margaret grew instantly alert. "Is it dangerous?" she demanded abruptly, earnestly scrutinizing the other's face.

"There are no very reliable details yet, dear," replied Mrs. Winfield softly; "but he is being taken to Fort Anstruther, and will be well looked

after there. When I heard of it this afternoon I wired off immediately to a friend who lives there for information. I would have come round and told you before this, but I was awaiting the reply—it ought to arrive at any moment now. I thought that perhaps you would like me to tell you as well as any one else. That is why I was waiting for you when you drove up.”

The sweet motherliness of the Colonel's wife went straight to Margaret's heart, and the tears welled into her eyes. It had been so lonely, and she was a girl who craved for love and sympathy. She glanced at the eyes that were so infinitely kind; her hands stretched out, and, leaning over impulsively, she kissed the soft, round cheeks.

“You dear!” she murmured brokenly. “It was so good of you to think of it all. You are so sweet!” she added simply, gazing through a mist of tears.

“My dear child, it was nothing at all,” replied Mrs. Winfield, patting the girl's hand in the gentle, graceful manner that distinguished her. “Now, shall we go back and see if the telegram has arrived yet?” And the two turned and retraced their steps.

“There it is, I think,” said Margaret eagerly, as a small boy in club uniform was seen approaching them with an air of importance, mildly suggestive of the possibilities of baksheesh.

With heart beating rapidly, she listened to the Colonel's wife as she read it aloud—

“ ‘ Captain Wade has arrived in our bungalow. Doing as well as can be expected.’ There now, that is splendid. This is from Major Smith, the civil surgeon in Fort Anstruther, and your husband will receive the very best attention.” Mrs. Winfield beamed on the girl, and her voice was greatly comforting.

Margaret remained strangely quiet. She had the sensation of one in a dream. Rex had always been the embodiment of health and strength, and it was difficult to picture him lying there dangerously ill. The next instant it occurred to her that she was his wife, and that she must go to him at once.

“ Oh, I must return to the bungalow and get my things together. I shall start off for Fort Anstruther immediately,” she said, all her self-possession returning.

“ Yes, dear, of course; but first let us find out about the trains. If there is anything that I can do you will be sure to let me know? Remember, Margaret, I trust you to tell me. I feel, somehow, that I stand in the place of a mother to you, child. Are you sure you have plenty of money for current expenses? I would be only too delighted to lend you anything you require.” And the good lady cudgelled her brains, thinking of all the arrangements she might make for the girl's

comfort, all her energies bent on deeds, so that there was little time to waste on the words of advice which the recipient rarely listens to, after all.

She turned round before the girl could express her gratitude, and moved off rapidly in the direction of the office; but Mrs. Edgar stood in the way, looming up ominous and grim.

The Deputy-Commissioner's wife had a disregard of others that at times reached the sublime, and she would calmly break in and interrupt the most delicate situations, stepping in where angels might well have feared to tread. At other times, if she saw fit, she assumed an air of exclusiveness that was absurd; only, on this occasion, she did not see fit.

Mrs. Winfield nodded affably and passed on, receiving a look of spiteful venom as she did so. On Margaret the "radiator" descended with avidity. She had been waiting all the evening to pounce and be the first to break the bad news, but fate had intervened and snatched the rightful privilege from her. Only she herself did not reckon with fate, but with a piece of subtle diplomacy which she connected not remotely with Mrs. Winfield, and perhaps she was nearer the truth than she even imagined this time.

"Such dreadful news, Mrs. Wade. Believe me, I am deeply sorry for you. I suppose you have heard all about everything?" she asked, with a

fitful gleam of hope that was cut off by the girl's resigned affirmative. "One must hope for the best, but serious wounds—that is—er—wounds, are disagreeable things in this suffocating weather." She ended up lamely, but with an air cheerfully lugubrious. "Now, tell me what you propose doing, and I shall advise you to the best of my ability," she continued, and poor Margaret gazed round helplessly for relief. She had come to a more intimate understanding of the woman by this time.

Mrs. Edgar was the undesirable nasal type of individual—so many people can be classified by one feature or another, and hers was the aggressive, obtrusive feature that must ever try to manage other people's affairs while mismanaging their own.

The girl had resigned herself to fate when she saw Cnaylor, the judge, bearing down upon them with obviously kind intent. Suddenly her face lit up, and their eyes met in a glance of mutual understanding and sympathy: she felt for him as for one about to step into the breach.

"Oh, Mr. Chaytor, have you seen Pat O'Keefe?" she asked, darting at him a glance of deepest gratitude and relief.

"Yes," he replied, with an almost imperceptible movement of the eyelid farthest from Mrs. Edgar. "He wishes to see you for a moment, I believe."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Edgar, "I see." And she gazed over the judge's head in a contemplative

manner she had when not wholly understanding, but groping after a possible slight.

"Good-bye, dear, and take care of yourself," said Mrs. Winfield a few minutes later; and she stood waving to the girl as she drove out of the gymkhana compound, then wended her way back and dispatched another long telegram to the Smiths.

* * * * *

Margaret Wade succeeded in getting a compartment to herself, for which she was devoutly thankful. The two first-class compartments for men were fully occupied—that is to say, they each contained four sahibs and a plethora of baggage, but, as the only memsahib in the train, no one invaded her compartment. The ayah, having made up the bed, retired to the servants' compartment adjoining, and Margaret was left alone.

The train slowly pulled out of the station, with the clatter and hum gradually receding in the distance. The girl closed her eyes, but sleep would not come. The events of the past few months kept turning over and over in her mind. What a strange thing life was! Surely she must have embarked with wrong conceptions of it, for she felt like some rudderless ship driven before the gale on a lee shore and without anchorage of any sort. Her old ideas were failing her, and as yet she had found no others in their stead. Other

girls did not feel as she did: her few months in India had brought that home to her, at least.

Then her thoughts flew to her husband. If she could only come to love him! Life was such a very cheerless thing without it. Perhaps she was herself incapable of emotion—there must be such women in the world, she reflected. Rex was a hero, and admiration must lead to love in the end . . . but no, it left her cold; it had no power to blot out the past or the memory of her lost ideals. India was a land of forgetting—the land of the lotus-flower—but she had found only a land of regrets, and in her heart a great, gaping emptiness.

The train sped on through the darkness, and the lights of stations flashed periodically into the compartment. There was an occasional jarring stop, with the peculiar sounds and odours inseparable from the Indian railway-station, and sometimes she gazed out upon the white-robed figures that thronged the stations, many of them sleeping on the platform for the sake of trains they would catch the morning after—punctuality in the native of India being no virtue but rather a failing, a thing that does not exist. Again she tried to sleep, but the frayed end of that old broken dream haunted her, and she felt a strange sense as of something pending. Perhaps she was nearing that something she should have reached in her dream . . . still, she remained conscious only

of the ceaseless quest of the truth and the thud-thud of the train.

The night passed at last, and the station of Fort Anstruther was reached. On the platform stood Major Smith—a little, dark, dapper man with rather a prominent nose and a jerky manner. He reminded one rather of a parrot, but a distinctly aggressive monocle strove to atone for the insignificant exterior, and he was most kind. The two had not met before, but he singled Margaret out at once.

“Mrs. Wade, is it not?” he queried, advancing fussily with outstretched hand, and smiling all over his little wizened face.

Almost before she had time to question him about her husband he had rapidly summarized the state of affairs and bundled her into his dog-cart, the ayah and baggage being wafted into an attenuated tonga whose threadbare ponies with their blue and white bead necklaces to avert the evil eye (if not the merciless lash of the *tongawalla*) stood hunched together in deepest dejection.

The girl was only too pleased to have some one to manage her affairs for her, and resigning herself gratefully into his charge, she began to relish the drive in the cool of the morning after a sleepless night spent in the train. It was a matter of four miles to the Fort, and Margaret was very silent, the Major's cheerful eloquence being all-sufficient.

As they approached their destination she inquired the whereabouts of the *dâk*.

"Over there, left of the lines," he replied, pointing with his whip in the direction indicated. The little man had a trick of clipping his sentences until they obtained the limit of brevity consistent with understanding, and he seemed to find the span of life all too short for the fund of speech within him. India would appear to make a man silent or an inveterate "buckstick." "Stopping with us, of course!" he exclaimed, with a tone of some resentment as the possible object of her question occurred to him.

"It is indeed good of you to suggest something, but I had fully intended putting up at the *dâk* bungalow. We are giving you so much trouble as it is, I fear, but I *was* glad to see you at the station. It was so nice of you to think of meeting me."

"Delighted!" responded the gallant little major. "Only too charmed to have you with us; memsahib wouldn't hear of such a proposition. Myself, I wouldn't permit it—most insanitary place, the *dâk*."

Margaret murmured words of gratitude, and soon they turned in at a gate adorned with the motto "Major Smith, I.M.S." in very large black letters.

Mrs. Major Smith met them at the steps with a smile of genuine welcome. She was a large

woman, of imposing appearance, and Margaret at once voted her a dear—there was that in her which inspired affection at first sight ; at the same time she rather marvelled at the audacity of such a small, sprightly man as the Major proposing to this great, impressive woman, who had attained to a degree of stoutness eminently matronly and respectable.

"Come, dear," said Mrs. Smith simply, and the girl followed, face set and bosom panting. "This is the room."

Her voice was hushed, and she tapped gently at the door. A silent-footed nurse in white cap and uniform softly opened it, and Margaret entered.

At first she could see nothing. The light of the room was dim and the atmosphere subtly suggestive of pain and sickness. A punka swinging slowly to and fro first caught her eye, and her eyes travelling down to that which lay beneath it, she started back with a low cry, instantly choked back. The death-like rigidity of the features, the bandages round the head, produced an effect that was ghastly—and her last memory had been one so full of brutal power and life ! Now he lay utterly helpless ; there was no movement whatsoever, and his eyes were closed fast.

Tiptoeing softly across the room, she knelt beside his bed, her grey eyes wide with horror

and standing out like two dark shadows against the pallor of her face.

"Rex!" she whispered under her breath.
"Rex!"

But the white face never stirred, and the eyes remained closed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE fight for life was long and the road back weary, fraught with many a check and strewn with danger all the way. There were times when hope wellnigh vanished; but Margaret Wade strove desperately for her husband's life.

As she looked back on her life, it seemed to have been one long strife to consume time; and now each waking moment was all too short, and asleep her mind was a vortex of vague emotions. It was her first experience of hot weather in India, and as Wade lingered long on the borderland of life and death, her share of the nursing was no light task; but at such times a woman seems to exist by drawing upon a fund of nervous will-power, a reserve of mental and spiritual force of which most men are devoid. Despite her appealing childishness, Margaret was the type of woman to whom a man's weakness might be his greatest recommendation. Nursing was essentially an instinct with her.

The Smiths had tried to persuade her to wire for another nurse; but they were obliged to let her have her own way in the end, and night

after night she sat beside him. He had not recognized her so far. The last few nights had written their history on her face, seeming to draw out all the eternal motherhood of the sex.

At last a climax seemed to have been reached, and he became very restless, calling out and muttering to himself almost incessantly. In his delirium a dream came to him.

He was lying stretched out on a wind-swept waste of sand, with a fierce sun beating down, and in his heart a raging passion. All around the dead and dying lay. Raising his head painfully, he beheld the body of Mervyn lying near, and a murderous rage seized him. He strove to drag himself nearer, to feel his fingers pressing into the man's throat and choking the life out of him; but his body remained motionless as if paralysed, save that his fingers opened and shut convulsively. Suddenly he became conscious of a touch, light as the thistledown that floats on a passing breeze, and cool as running water; and all rage and passion faded out of his heart, and in their place there stole a feeling of peace such as he had never known before. The cool, white hand beckoned, raising him gently until he was borne upward. As he looked down, a pang of fierce remorse, of compassion for the dead and dying who were left behind, entered his heart. He felt his voice and listened to it pleading for them, but a sweet, low murmur from an infinite

distance quieted him, and he let himself be drawn upward into peace and unconsciousness. . . .

The woman sat beside him, soothing him ; but he started up with many wild, incoherent words. There seemed to be something weighing on his mind and distressing him, and once she heard Mervyn's name on his lips. She murmured softly in his ear, her hand gently stroking his head. and bit by bit he seemed to quieten down until a great silence fell upon the room.

She sat motionless by the bedside, fearful of the least sound that might arouse him once more ; and the room was veiled in darkness ; only the shaded night-light on the floor spluttered and cast dim shadows on the bare height of lime-washed walls so typical of an Indian bedroom. The gaunt room was bare too : on the floor the blue and white, jail-worked carpet, and in the corner the worn and much-battered bullock trunk. From outside all the mysterious noises of an Indian night were wafted in through the open window : the music of the frogs ; the cricket's shrill chirp, rising and falling with the plaintive, dull monotony of a dirge, sounded weird and eerie, a cadence that seemed to be marking out the destiny of a man's life, tolling out the knell of parting and farewell.

She sat up and shivered. Her nerves were all on edge, strange tremors swept over her as she

listened. She seemed to be waiting—waiting, she knew not for what. Something was going to happen—that, at least, she knew.

And so the long night dragged wearily on.

Suddenly the man's mutterings broke out afresh, and his voice became distinct. It was the voice of a man struggling with some infinite problem of life and death, his tones now fierce and passionate, now feeble and expostulating as those of a little child. At times he talked of the past, little familiar incidents, at times the agony of his voice wrung her heart with compassion; but always he harked back to the thought that tortured him, the thought of leaving some one behind to die.

The laugh of delirium was very horrible to listen to, and she sat with eyes growing wide, shrinking for a moment from him in horror, a sudden suspicion flashing into her mind. Bit by bit he went over the whole scene of the fight, raving disconnectedly with many repetitions. His words were incoherent, his sentences confused, but in the end she had pieced the fragments together . . . and understood. Then his voice became filled with a great remorse, he seemed to be repenting of something, to be striving to tell some one all about it. His delirium ceased again, and she sat staring vacantly in front of her, gripping fiercely the arms of the chair with her hands.

In that moment she saw deep down into the

man's soul—saw all the simple nature of him with its fierce, crude strength struggling for the mastery ; saw, too, though dimly, all the elements of greatness in him stung with remorse, and his old, arrogant pride humbled in the end.

Suddenly her heart ached with compassion for him. It dawned upon her that his savage strength was but weakness after all, that he had loved her always, and now had need of her.

Very quietly she rose from her chair and tiptoed over to the window. Night must be almost over, she reflected, as she drew aside the white curtains and gazed out into the great calm. Again she fell into her old search for the eternal WHY—groping, blindly as ever, for the truth, woefully ignorant of reality and dimly pursuing her quest of the absolute through a mist of illusion.

As she gazed intently into the darkness, she saw a vertical shaft of light appear on the far horizon, and the shape of it faintly resembled the tail of some animal suspended on the skyline. What it might be she could not imagine, she had never seen its like before. Gradually the light faded and died out, the darkness closed over a dense pall, and in breathless silence the whole world seemed to be waiting for something. She stood, lost in vague, sweet reveries, gazing out into the blackness as if fascinated by it ; and the minutes passed unheeded.

Suddenly all nature stirred. Instantly the dark

veil seemed to lift; faint, horizontal bands of light appeared where before that other light had been, and this time the red streaks did not fade, but spreading swiftly and growing ever more vivid, they proclaimed the approach of the sun. A tiny breeze sprang up, and the sweet nectar of dawn entered with the soft, cool touch of rosy fingers.

Some old memories rushed back to her, and a spell laid hold of her—some mysterious, enchanting terror which seemed to be the culminating point of all her moods. She seemed to see again the vision of which she had dreamed; it was as though she had stepped right back into that broken dream.

This time she had crossed the threshold of the Bridge of Moonbeams, and the way to her "Land of Sun" lay unclouded before her; the moonbeams at her feet had become clear as crystal and as strong.

Suddenly in a bewildering flash came knowledge.

With a little choked cry she started up, and the truth burst upon her—she loved!

"I love him!" she whispered.

Unknown pulses throbbed in her veins and she blushed ever so faintly. A vivid light of loveliness flared up again in her face; there was none there to see, and it died out as swiftly, as if reticent of its power.

Thoughts came crowding into her mind. That

which she had just witnessed became symbolic of her life : first the false dawn, the *subah sadik*, then the dark shadow, and, last of all, the true dawn—and the broken end of her dream.

Somewhere in the trees near by a bird called to its mate with a strange, sweet note, and Margaret smiled half shyly to herself, then for some quite unaccountable reason tears glistened in her eyes.

She longed to go and tell him—tell him that she knew everything, and that she loved him above everything else in the world, tell him that he had been so splendidly brave—and comfort him. After all, he had only sacrificed life to duty ; and so, like a woman, she began to make excuses for the man she loved.

Softly she stepped back to the bedside and gazed down at him. If she could but tell him ! It was so hard to wait.

Stooping low, she kissed him. But he lay still, sleeping peacefully.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN the afternoon Wade became conscious, and though the long illness seemed at last to have taken a decisive turn for the better, he was very restless, tossing from side to side and asking continually for his wife. The nurse did her best to keep him quiet, but her efforts were all unavailing, and in the end she was obliged to give in.

Margaret rose at once, hurriedly donned dainty dressing-gown and slippers, and softly entered the sick-room, the nurse remaining outside.

He looked up, tried to raise his head, but fell back limply on the pillows once more, where he lay weak and pale, his eyes never leaving her face. Suddenly she felt herself flushing hotly, and going up to him, she took his hand in her own cool, firm clasp, gazing down at him with a shy, proud defiance in the eyes that were melting soft and shining with repressed emotion.

She had meant to greet him so very differently !

But of a sudden she felt strangely shy ; simply she could not stoop down and kiss him with those eyes gazing up at hers so, and the paleness of them

had turned dark—how well she remembered the change of colour in them !

“How are you now, Rex?” she asked unsteadily.

There was a little catch in her voice, with the hint of tears not far off, as she looked at the face which had grown so pale and gaunt.

“It was good of you to come to me, Margaret,” he said slowly, and his voice sounded very hollow and very weary. “You have been with me for some time, haven’t you? Sometimes I seemed to know that you were beside me.”

“Yes, Rex dear,” she replied softly, with a look of infinite pity in the sweet grey eyes; “of course I have. It was my privilege as your wife.”

“Margaret, why do you do all this for me? Will no one let me die in peace?” he demanded, with the petulance of utter weakness.

“Hush, dear !” she faltered, gently stroking his thin, white hand. “You must not talk like that. We are all trying so hard to get you better soon. It won’t be long now.” She paused for a moment, then continued : “We are all so proud of you, you know. Every one is talking of your bravery ; you were simply splendid, and there are all sorts of rewards in store for you.”

The man flinched as if she had struck him, and she could have bitten her tongue out as she realized the slip she had made.

"Listen, Margaret," he muttered after a while, and a strange, furtive look crept into his eyes which had never been there before.

The woman hurriedly put her hand over his lips and looked round the room fearfully; but, finding they were quite alone, she withdrew the hand and smiled softly down at him.

"Dear, you mustn't talk; it will only make you ill again. Do lie back and try to rest now," she said in sweetly persuasive tones.

He shook his head, and a faint shadow of a smile flitted over his face.

"It's no use, Margaret, I can't rest. If I don't tell you now, I think I must go mad."

She knew that he must have his way.

"Tell me all that happened—if you must," she murmured, seating herself on the edge of the bed and holding his hand very tightly.

"If I am condemned to get better again, it will only be to send in my papers and leave India." His voice was dispassionate, and he paused, thinking deeply. "Then you can go back to England, and I—I shall try some other country. That is the only thing left."

The tears sprang into her eyes and her lips quivered. All at once she came close to him, her hand on his arm, and her touch was gentle as a caress.

"Oh, Rex, don't, dear! I cannot bear it," she murmured. Slipping suddenly to the floor,

she knelt there, her soft, round arm about him. "I know everything. You talked sometimes when you were delirious. I was with you always at night, and no one else has heard—no one else will ever know."

She pleaded with him ; her tenderness was divine, and he lay back, gazing up at the sweet, winsome charm of her, and knowing that he would bear the memory of it as long as life itself lasted.

"You cannot know everything," he broke in. His voice quivered, and he paused to steady it. "I know you have never cared for me, Margaret ; Mervyn has always meant more to you than I have ever done. I think I might have saved him for you, but I——"

"Why didn't you?" she broke in suddenly.

He thought for a moment.

"You see, I hated him. Oh, I can't remember what happened," he went on wearily, "only I seem somehow to have left him behind."

"You hated him? Why?" she persisted, almost fiercely.

That seemed to rouse him at last, and when he spoke there was an odd tremor in his voice.

"Because I love you. I was jealous of him—and you know it! I always wanted him out of your life and mine, and now he has gone."

He stopped and closed his eyes for a moment. Almost unconsciously she clasped him tightly in

her arms, as though to protect him from some force tearing him away from her.

"Oh, won't you listen to me?" she begged, and her voice was low and tense. "My dear, my dear, look at me. Won't you—oh! can't you see?" she whispered.

He opened his eyes and gazed at her with an ever-growing wonder.

"Could you——" he faltered, "now you know the worst of me—could you ever have the strength to care? Could you try to find something good in me—something you could make better? Could you?" he repeated, gripping her hand fiercely until it hurt.

All the while his gaze was fixed hard on hers. Just for a moment she hesitated, but her eyes shone, and the light in them was dazzling.

"I am only a woman, after all, Rex—and I love you," she said, holding her flushed face close to his.

Suddenly she forgot all else, knew only that she was a woman, that he was alone with her, close to her—and that she loved him. Passion swept her away; in a moment her arms were clasped tightly about him. . . . Time seemed to stand still. . . .

At last she rose, releasing herself very gently, her face flushed and rosy with happiness, the grey eyes half closed. For her, life had never yet held such a moment.

Followed a silence too intimately sweet and sacred for words.

"There is no one—nothing else I care for in all the world but you, Rex," she began. Then she stopped abruptly, and the lashes drooped suddenly to veil the shining of her eyes.

He did not speak; but silence is sometimes more expressive than words; and his eyes . . .

"Still, I'm half afraid of you," she faltered, with a little laugh of happiness not far removed from tears.

He strove to reassure her in his own impulsive way, but she eluded him.

"You—you will have to let me care for you all over again," she protested with some haste, smiling into his eyes.

And he smiled back at her, content for the moment just to watch her and let all else go by.

Of a sudden a thought seemed to strike him, and the old weary look in his eyes returned.

"Margaret," he queried in a voice grown almost inaudible, "do you quite realize all that this means? My whole career—all that I have worked for—is gone, and I seem to have sacrificed a man's life because—because——"

Of her own accord she stooped down swiftly and kissed him, pressing her lips to his.

"Now do you understand?" she queried in a small, shy voice. "For I love you, dear, and nothing could ever alter that now. Last night

I learned what love was, and—and I would go on loving you, no matter what you were." She raised her eyes to his, frankly and sweetly. "As it is, I know that you must have simply done that which was your duty. Why distress yourself with anything else, dear?" Then her voice sank until it was low and hushed, and she leaned once more and whispered into his ear. "Your career—nothing else matters except this one thing—in the end, does it, Rex?"

* * * * *

It was a little later, and Margaret sat beside him on the edge of the bed, her hand in both of his, talking with him shyly yet frankly of the future.

"You will promise to be very good now, Rex, until I come back for the night," she said, gently disengaging her hands and rising. "It won't be long, and—oh! you must get well quickly, darling. Life is just beginning for us both, and it is all so short, so soon over."

She turned hurriedly and left him, for the heavy tread of the nurse sounded ominously on the veranda outside.

Left to himself, he lay thinking of all the past. She would have him keep silence about Mervyn's death! He smiled tenderly to himself as he thought of the allowances a woman can make for a man she loves, the strange laxity in her code

of honour where his happiness is at stake, the infinite faith in him. But he knew that he must face it all, and he leaned back wearily. He began to long again for the comfort of her and the sympathy of her eyes.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

"REMARKABLE nurse, your wife," ejaculated the little major, as he adjusted a refractory monocle and applied himself with nervous energy to his soup. "Astonishing thing how quickly she hauled you back to life—pretty close run for it, you know." And so he rattled glibly on until the noiseless attendants had appeared with the ensuing course, at which point Mrs. Major Smith bestirred herself.

"Do you know, George," she interposed, with all the weight of her irresistible placidity, "there are times when you talk too much—far too much. Did you ever know a man who could talk so incessantly as my husband?" she asked, smiling indulgently upon Margaret.

The gallant little man took upon himself the onus of the situation.

"I am not a man, my dear—only your husband," he responded with a swift smile of conjugal felicity and a complacent sigh of much content as his eyes rested upon his wife's ample form. She was the sort of woman upon whom his highly strung personality could rest, as upon a cushion,

pervaded with much the same sense of comfort and peace. "Miss you no end to-morrow, you know," said the sprightly little major, as he gallantly toasted the departing guests. "You will have to convalesce a bit more yet, young fellow, but it's all over now bar the shouting—and the decorations, eh?" he added, his twinkling eyes shining benevolently upon his patient.

Wade did not reply for a moment. Instead he glanced at his wife, and from her steadfast grey eyes he seemed to gain instant inspiration.

"Not much chance of that, I fear," he asserted lightly. "Some impossible person appears to have been grossly magnifying the circumstances."

"Oh, come, come! Not so much infernal modesty, y' know. I—"

Just then Mrs. Smith stepped into the breach which she proceeded to fill adequately. Being a woman, she had not failed to note the glance that had passed between the Wades—she was a person of discernment notwithstanding her bulk. What it might betoken she had not the vaguest idea, and, be it said to her everlasting credit, she had no desire whatsoever to pry.

"Yes, George, I must again repeat that you talk overmuch," she broke in with all haste, before her husband could embark afresh on the same subject. She saw the signs of it upon him. "And this is one of the occasions," she went on triumphantly, "for I have been patiently await-

ing an opportunity to tell you some news—ever since we sat down to dinner."

"Sorry, dear," replied George, manœuvring the glass more fiercely than ever into his eye and endeavouring not to look overwhelmed. Monocles do have their uses at times.

"Mrs. Winfield has just written to say that she and Cecily are going up to Simla for a month. She hopes they will not have left Junglibad before you two get back—apparently she takes your furlough for granted, Captain Wade. I took upon myself to wire that you were returning to-morrow. What is our loss will be their gain." And the good woman beamed her affection upon Margaret.

"Poor old Pat O'Keefe! He will be quite desolated without Cecily," said Margaret, with a little low laugh.

"Oh, Pat will pull through all right," Wade muttered, with a faint grin.

"Love's young dream—eh, what?" the little man jerked out, with an amorous glance at his wife. "Never heard of the fellow, though. Sounds Irish: what sort of a chap is he?"

"Well," responded Wade, gravely enough, "he is by way of being a relative of mine. He isn't a bad sort for all that."

The others smiled, all save George, and he looked just a trifle discomfited—but not for long.

"There you are again, George. What am I

always telling you? You do chatter too much—now don't you?" said Mrs. Smith.

She spoke persuasively; nevertheless, she seized with avidity such an obvious opportunity and she registered one more score off poor old George.

"Pat is a dear," Mrs. Wade affirmed by way of a diversion; "but I fear he has not been improving his chances with Cecily of late."

"The odds lengthened visibly by reason of this frontier affair," said Wade, smiling rather grimly.

"Cecily is a sad little flirt, I hear," Mrs. Smith remarked with a sigh, as the port and madeira were circling the table.

"Rather a stamp-the-floor little person," the major rapped out, with a cautious eye upon his wife. "Do you think I should have port to-night, my dear?" he queried in a conciliatory tone of voice, as the decanters came to rest facing him.

"Madeira suits you better, George," said his wife firmly, as she scrutinized the face and figure of her lord and master.

"Quite right, my dear—quite right. Just what I think myself," replied George, sadly eyeing the port—and with no little regret.

"I think Cecily is perfectly charming. She will make the sweetest little wife in the world," Margaret remarked, nodding her head gaily at her husband, who was slowly shaking his.

"She is a bit of a thruster, and would speedily reduce any man to the status of a mere appendage," Wade replied, eyeing his wife with a knowing smile.

"If she does, it will be all for his own good, Rex," she retorted, laughing back at him.

"Well, here's to our next merry meeting!" Once more George raised aloft his wine-glass, glancing at his wife for approval as he did so. "Hope it won't be long, either. Feel quite lonely when you people have gone." He screwed his monocle farther into his eye and bowed.

And George really meant it. He chanced to be a sincere little soul, which is a thing sufficiently unique in these days.

CHAPTER XXXVII

PATRICK O'KEEFE nervously pulled out the letter and read it again. Under the blazing morning sun it looked soiled and worn, as if constant perusal had rendered it so.

"DEAR PAT,—I'm leaving for Simla to-morrow morning. You can come and see me to-morrow—that is, if you wish to.

"CIS.

"P.S. Come in the morning."

He returned it to his breast pocket, and his heart began to beat in great, painful throbs as he approached the Winfields' bungalow.

It was early morning, much too early for paying calls; but she had said "the morning," and he simply could not wait another minute. He had not slept a wink all night.

As he stood on the veranda, hoping fervently to find her alone, yet half fearing to do so, the butler appeared and ushered him into the Presence. He found her lying curled up in the dim recesses of a vast cane chair, a chair that

seemed much too large to contain such a dear little person—and she was quite alone. She looked up as he entered, with a look that was not unkind ; then, noting the pale, weary face and the arm resting limply in its bandages, she started up with a look of genuine pity in her heavenly blue eyes.

“ Oh, Pat, how ill you do look ! ” she murmured. “ I’m—I’m so horribly sorry about it all. You know I am, don’t you? Perhaps you would rather not talk about it now? ”

Her voice had grown very gentle, as she permitted him to hold her firm, plump little hand just a minute longer than usual. An air of maternal protection enveloped her for the moment—an air which the veriest girl at times bestows upon a man old enough to be her father. Pat was twenty-five ; still, he did not dislike that air of hers.

“ Yes ; I do feel somewhat pale outside and in. I think I’d rather not talk about it at all—just yet, if you don’t mind,” he admitted with a ghost of a smile, as he sat down beside her, as close as circumstances—and the chairs—would permit. Followed a silence. The man was vainly striving to quiet the fierce beating of his heart, for he had come determined to make a bid for fortune—and it would be his last.

The girl lay back, burrowing luxuriously into

the cushions. There was an intangible something in the atmosphere, and she was content just then with silence and her own thoughts.

Through the open windows there happened a tiny puff of wind. The soft white skirt fluttered and wrapped itself about his feet; a stray tendril of sunny brown hair flickered out and ventured perilously near his face. A swift spell descended upon him; and, with equal precision, some mysterious, enchanting terror laid hold of her. She started involuntarily.

"Cecily," he murmured.

In his voice strange little tremors sounded, and his heart began to thump unpleasantly. Another silence, while the girl nestled farther under the cover of the cushions, until he could only see her face dimly.

"Cecily!"

He started again, and stopped. Simply, his voice failed him; he was robbed for the time being of speech. Still she remained silent, staring into vacancy. She was such an adorable little person, all soft curves—the dear eyes shining softly and above the riotous hair that shone in burnished ripples of sunlight.

Suddenly she looked at him, her eyes misty, and the direct gaze of simple good-fellowship faded out of them—for ever.

"Yes?" she said somewhat dreamily, struggling hard lest her eyes should falter and betray

her. Yet her experience of men and things was wide.

And then he spoke, choosing at random the most banal topics of conversation ; but it mattered not, she was conscious only of his voice, which had grown soft and tender, gentle almost as a woman's. He raised himself in his chair, sitting close to her and speaking in low, hushed tones which held some mystic masculine quality in them and thrilled her strangely.

The morning air seemed to exhale a warm perfume, and the scent of the flowers held a languorous, subtle intoxication. Slowly and with reluctance his glance dropped before the witchery of her presence, and his voice broke. She was quick to note the signs to her advantage, and laughed softly to herself, for her command over the situation had returned.

Now she was able to regard him critically, and a hint of amusement crept into her eyes. He looked so unlike any Pat she had ever known before ; there was something almost comical in his aspect which made her long to tease him as of yore. She laughed oddly.

"Well?" she demanded brusquely, smiling, mistress of herself again.

"I—I—there is something I wished to tell you," he managed to articulate at length.

He looked down and examined critically the polish of his tan shoes.

It was far from being her first proposal, but somehow she was experiencing the unspeakable freshness of a first love-making.

"Dear me! How deliciously mysterious this sounds! And—oh, Pat, you *do* look so solemn and quaint!"

For the life of her, she could not restrain the light ripple of laughter that rose to her lips. Save for this, her composure now was in strange contrast to his grim embarrassment.

"Oh, do tell me!" she pleaded, vastly interested of a sudden.

He looked up quickly, gazing with awe at the laughing eyes, the stray tendrils of hair, and flushed cheeks. The little childish lilt in her voice had sunk deep into his heart, and the memory of it wellnigh choked his utterance.

"Well," she continued, with a light mockery of tone, "I'm waiting to have this great mystery solved . . . the parent will be back any minute now," she added hurriedly. And, with her eyes smiling encouragement into his, Pat found his voice suddenly.

"It is this—that I intend to apply for leave at once——"

The smile vanished, and her eyes grew dim with disappointment, then wistful for a moment as a sudden sense of loneliness crept over her.

"Is that all?" she queried at length, smiling up at him indifferently.

"No," replied he, almost roughly, "there is this also: I intend to make you marry me—at once!" he asserted, greatly daring. Danger, he knew, lay deep hid in those eyes of hers.

"You won't, Pat!" she gasped, surprised now beyond measure. Then she smiled bewitchingly. "Do you think you can be so very masterful with me—do you?" she demanded, tilting back her chin defiantly.

The O'Keefe subsided once more.

"No," he began weakly. "I put no claim on you, but——"

"You are very absurd, Pat—dear," she interrupted, the blue eyes sparkling upon him.

"Ah, Cecily—darling! I love you so!"

His voice had melted, and now it was soft and pleading. He was gazing at her, all his life in his eyes, and the deep brogue was vastly tender and coaxing.

She looked with fearless gaze into the man's soul. What it was she saw there she knew not, but her heart sang with sheer joyousness; the round little face was wondrously transformed; the blue eyes grew infinitely tender—just for a moment. And he failed utterly to grasp the lack of coquetry that was unfamiliar and passing strange—his heart beat so.

Followed another pause, the silence of it pregnant with possibilities which the man did not comprehend, and in the end the girl had time to

reflect, time to shrink from surrender, though she knew that she must be inflicting exquisite pain. At times feminine instincts prevail, and the woman cannot refrain from cruelty—if they happen to carry sufficiently.

"Love is such a very foolish thing, is it not Pat?" she demanded, changed once more into the imperious, laughter-loving Cecily of old. "It is a dream within a dream, and so often it turns out to be merely a nightmare after all. How many girls have you made love to before? You're really quite good at it, you know," she added, with a swift smile of disdain.

"Faith! there's only you, Cecily, and you know it. Look at me, darling! There never will be any one else in all the world. You must see it in my eyes."

He had found his voice in earnest, and the words came out with an abandonment that knew no restraint. His honest eyes shone, and she longed so to yield—simply to feel his arms about her. Still, she lingered.

"Ah, well," she said, lightly breaking in upon his protestations and veiling her eyes from him. "it is better to be bruised in the heart than—than elsewhere."

Her laugh was not wholly natural; there was a curious little catch in the end of it. She paused and then looked up with the air of one conferring a priceless favour.

"But I can always be a sister to you, Pat, dear." Her eyes had resumed their impish expression, and her voice broke off into a little gurgle of laughter.

Somehow, the consolation did not appear to weigh much; he gazed back at her with such a look of unspeakable anguish and loss in his eyes that it went straight to her heart, causing her almost to repent of her cruelty.

"I shall go on leave," he said simply, his voice not quite steady. "When I come back—oh, it shan't be to this poisonous old station!—afterwards, perhaps, we can meet in the same old way."

"But how nice of you, Pat, dear!" she murmured sweetly.

"It can't be—for years," he pursued, refusing to meet her eyes. "I've simply got to forget—forget how much I adore you." And his voice gradually sank to a whisper.

"You won't," she protested with some haste and just the faintest suggestion of a break in her voice. Then, rising from her chair, she slowly crossed the infinitesimal space that intervened, and perched herself deliberately upon the arm of his chair. She was fond of perching, this small morsel of distracting womanhood. "Ah, no you don't!" All the while she smiled as his arms, from sheer lack of control, began to fold round her. "No, Pat! Really you must not take advantage of my—my indulgence, else I must leave you at once. You will really be good?" she queried.

"I'll do just what you ask me," he responded, desisting with a grace that pleased her not a little.

"Can't you wait? I may come to care for you—some day. Oh, no," she went on hurriedly, "there is not much chance of it. Besides, there is so much fun in life yet, so much to see and do before one would ever dream of settling down." Her smile was enigmatical.

"Yes," he assented reproachfully, "and so many men to make love to you. Sure, no man could help adoring you, Cécily."

"There is no man that counts yet—that is, not any more than you do."

She gazed into his grave eyes with a roguish sparkle in her own. His understanding of the unspoken word—that which is the most important of all in a woman's vocabulary—was not great. He rose suddenly, as if he had reached the end of his endurance.

"I simply can't endure it! I simply can't stay on and watch you with other men, knowing that any moment may be my last—with you."

He looked down at her with a faint, whimsical smile. It was not the bitter look of the man rejected—the aggrieved air that nine out of ten would have assumed; it was a smile brave and infinite loving. She began rather to adore him for it.

"But I'm going to Simla to-morrow," she said, with a ludicrous lack of logic.

"That is the worst of it," he groaned. "My last ghost of a chance is quite gone when you do."

"Well," she replied, rising and standing close to him—so close that his very senses reeled to the accompanying thud-thud of his pulses, "I suppose men are very frail creatures, after all."

She spoke with conviction and a worldly wisdom only to be found in the present-day maiden with eighteen years of crowded life to her credit. He said nothing—just stood and gazed, feasting his eyes upon her as if for the last time; and she faltered, her lips quivering, but a passing cloud was dimming the room, and another opportunity was swiftly lost for ever.

"I am myself woefully weak at times, Pat, dear," she murmured, sighing somewhat wistfully. "Is it good-bye—is it?"

She flashed the question at him, scrutinizing his face closely the while—sudden sunshine again, with a note of assumed tragedy in her voice, but with a real sorrow lurking somewhere at the back of all.

Still that cloud obscured the light.

"Good-bye," he said suddenly, turning on his heel. He never looked back.

And so he left her. She wafted a tiny kiss with the tips of her rosy fingers, but he did not see.

* * * * *

The sun was once more approaching its western horizon. Its evening light glowed over the land,

and the O'Keefe sat at his desk chewing the end of a Government pen; then he proceeded to scrape out his pipe with the Government office-knife, which is a thing pre-eminently suited for any purposes save those for which it was originally designed—and then it is a device unthinkable.

Overhead the creaking of the punkha-rope sounded sadly in his ears, for he was alone in the bungalow. The delights of club or gymkhana could not lure him from his voluntary confinement. Solitude alone remained to render such solace as it saw fit; the society of his kind, the picture of merriment in others, was a thing intolerable. The cup of happiness, now held out, now dashed from his lips, was simply more than his ardent soul could endure, and he was speedily developing into a philosopher; soon he might become a cynic—and the prospect held some grains of consolation just then.

Love of Cecily, the memory of her, were such as a man could never after cast from him. She was too infinitely dear for that; the thought of her was too sweetly alluring. Soon it would become a thing that is past—a memory. He dipped his pen into the sticky ink, from which one of the myriad of house-flies that buzzed overhead was slowly extricating itself. Wearily he applied himself to his task. It was an application for leave on which he was engaged—the plea, “urgent private affairs,” that phrase which covers a multitude of sins.

"He, *puttewallah!*"

The sound fell on ears closed in deep slumber.

"*Putte-wallah, puttewallah!*"

His voice reached a stentorian shout as the pen completed the last flourish of a dashing signature.

The padding of bare feet on tiled floors resounded through the veranda, approached nearer, and only ceased as the door opened cautiously and a belted and white-clad benign whiskerosity appeared.

"*Tapal, sahib,*" the wearer of the large red belt murmured apologetically, holding out a letter as if it were a peace-offering.

O'Keefe snatched it from him, eagerly glanced at the handwriting, then opened it with an air of dejection, and the eagerness faded from his eyes. It was merely a note from Mrs. Wade to say when they were returning, and asking him to make some arrangements. The sheet—half-read—fluttered from his hands, and he sat back in his hard office chair staring into vacancy. Only one thing in the world could be of any interest just then.

A green, semi-translucent lizard shot swiftly down the white, bare wall, absorbing a blue fly with a hardly perceptible flash of crimson jaws; once or twice it blinked its greedy satisfaction, but the sahib stared in front of him with eyes that saw naught of the passing tragedy.

Suddenly looking up, he encountered the *putte-wallah's* patiently expectant gaze upon him.

"*Jao, suar ki bacha!*" That and further abuse of the man's ancestry followed in voice of thunder.

With unruffled countenance the follower of the Prophet retired, slowly closing the door behind him.

The punkha creaked on, the flies buzzed, and the sun slid down below the horizon; the short golden dusk deepened rapidly as the stars began to twinkle faintly, and still the man sat on, chewing the pen to shreds.

Outside there arose the muffled whispers of officialdom. Again the door opened, and the dignified whisperer reappeared.

"*Chitti, huzoor,*" he stated with dignified pomp, so that he who waited outside might note.

The Irishman eyed it with no little mistrust; but as the large round writing caught his eye, he snatched it and tore it open feverishly. This time the note was from Cecily—also, it was brief. His eyes grew wider and wider as he read.

"Pat, dear, how stupid you are! Of course I'm going to marry you—some day.

"CIS.

"P.S. I always intended to, you know. But you mustn't come to see me until I return from Simla.

"C. W.

"P.P.S. You can write—if you want to very much.

"C."

The O'Keefe jumped up. His first sensation was that of profound awe ; then— Well, he did not know quite what he did. Only, the application for leave was torn into a hundred tiny fragments.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THERE is a stage in convalescence when the patient feels life coming back to him with painful reluctance, when mundane affairs, which have been allowed to glide during illness, begin to press forward once more and assume exaggerated proportions in a mind not yet restored to its normal poise. We can all probe deep down into our motives, and, if we are honest, find that which we would rather have kept hid—the germ of selfishness at the root of all ; and it is difficult to separate the subjective from the objective in a world of illusion where good and evil seem strangely to intermingle.

So it was with Wade. Viewing motives in perhaps a morbid perspective, he felt that he must unburden his conscience at once ; and his very soul rose up in revolt against Nature's slow recovery. Margaret prevailed upon him to rest the day after their return from Fort Anstruther ; but he fretted incessantly and longed for the morrow, when he should see the Colonel and have his destiny decided.

Devoted to the service as he was, he had yet

almost reached an acquiescence in what he deemed his fate must be. They would start life all over again in some colony far from the atmosphere of his profession—the profession round which all his ambitions centred, and which he had ever looked upon as his life's work. In time he would come to centre his interests elsewhere; for he was a man who must ever "scorn delights and live laborious days." His outlook was one of great simplicity. Right and wrong were hard-and-fast lines, and in his code there was no room for the self-humbag which works to many a man's undoing. What he had done was over and finished with, and it only remained to bear the consequences. He was perfectly sincere with himself, and looking at things from a detached point of view, he might have been perfectly justified in his action; but the possible motive underlying—well, that was not quite playing the game as he considered it, and that was what he must explain in detail to the Colonel. A man given over to premeditated petty practices he respected less than one guilty of impulsive homicide. The one cowered behind the convenient shelter of the law and contrived that others should pay the penalty while he alone reaped the benefit; whereas the other's sin was but the passion of a moment, and he suffered the consequences to the full extent. Thus his judgment of himself was not exaggerated in the main. After his confession he would let

the matter rest for all time, holding tardy remorse to be the most futile of all the virtues—the remorse which prompts promiscuous and unnecessary confidences and is itself merely a weak form of selfishness. His faith had always been based on a negation of the past; his creed was a futurism tinged with fatalism, for he held that the future should only be concerned with the experience derived from the past, and never more with the evil done; perpetual penitence he deemed a form of egotistical emotion.

The present was the hardest part of the penalty, because to a man who has led an active life an existence of enforced idleness is the worst fate that can befall him: a life of idleness in which all the small things become of vast importance, and wherein the things of little or no account have to be prolonged so that time may be killed.

Chota hazri over, and the fat butler having removed his ponderous presence, the two were left alone. Wade looked across at his wife. The pale blue eyes glowed now with a passionate reverence and devotion, but his voice was grave and deliberate as he proceeded to reopen a subject which had for some time been tacitly dropped by both.

“Margaret, you quite understand, don't you?” he began, and went on hurriedly without awaiting her reply. “You know, of course, that I shall

put the whole matter before the Colonel. It must be so," he added, as he saw the look of denial flit across her face. "It is simply a matter of honour. Do you mind so much, dear, that I shall have to resign—that we shall have to start life over again in some other country?"

"It is not that, Rex," she breathed.

She could not trust herself to say any more. Her heart was very full just then—with happiness.

"Is it—quite necessary to say anything about—about everything to the Colonel?" she faltered; and the lashes hid her drooping eyes.

"You did your duty, and no one need know—the rest, need they, dear?"

At the moment she was striving against her very instincts, realizing as she did that she could have been very jealous of his career and all that it meant to him.

"The Colonel must know. I could not remain in the Service," he replied almost coldly.

"Oh, Rex, I—I am sorry," she said.

The words sounded paltry, but there was a song in her heart, and she knew that she lied. It may be that love is to a woman what honour is to a man.

"Can you be strong and forget all the past?" he queried, scrutinizing her face closely.

She looked up and met his glance; then she rose and went over to him until she was quite close.

"There is no past, dear, only the future. There is only one thing I could never forgive," she paused and stooped to whisper into his ear—"and that is if you ever ceased to love me."

She held her cheek to his with one of her rare gestures of submission, and his immediate answer was too incoherent for record.

"You don't understand women one tiny bit, do you, Rex?" she queried, smiling fondly down upon him. "I don't think you're the sort of person that could, and I'm glad. You're just a strong fighting man. How did you ever come to care for me?"

Her smile had grown infinitely tender, and she longed for words that did not come; but he was not demonstrative by nature, and she sighed.

"I never cared for another woman in all my life," he replied simply. "You're rather different from the rest of 'em, you know."

"I'm almost inclined to believe you," she murmured, "because you don't know how to—to make love at all. I shall have to teach you how to flirt—to flirt with your own wife," she added, with mock solemnity.

She broke off into her low, delicious laugh. Pleasure lit up her eyes, and the cleft in her chin dimpled ever so faintly.

"Won't you begin now?" he pleaded, smiling back at her tenderly.

"Oh, no," she protested, and rising hurriedly,

she moved away—ever so little. “Not yet. It is time you left now . . . afterwards—perhaps.”

He rose in search of his topee—also his most precious pipe; and she watched him and was very happy. She saw the simple honour of him—a man to whom there could only be one straight course, who did not analyse and blind himself to facts by an ingenious and complex sophistry. His faults were all of the large order; he would “dare nobly,” might sin regally, but there was nothing mean or soul-destroying in him, and she loved him as it is given to few men to be loved.

When he reappeared, the gharry was waiting at the door. Just for a moment he held her in his arms, clasping her very close until she thrilled under the mastery of his touch.

“Rex, darling,” she whispered very softly, “we have always got each other. Can I—do you think I could ever make up for all you have lost?”

The light suddenly died out of his eyes and he turned his head so that she should not see. He knew the love of a good woman to be the greatest thing of all; yet his face looked old and lined just then.

“You shall be my career,” was all he said.

“Do you love me—so very much—do you?” she demanded with shining eyes and rosy, parted lips.

“Yes,” he said, looking at her almost sternly. She walked out to the gharry with him, and saw

him safely ensconced in it, waving to him good-bye and good luck as he drove out of the gate, until he was lost to sight altogether.

As she slowly retraced her steps, tears that she could not suppress welled into the grey eyes until they lit up : they were tears of joy, and it was the light of possession that shone in them.

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CHAPTER XXXIX

"HULLO, young fella, glad to see you on your legs again. Feeling all right?"

The Colonel's greeting was of the cheery, brusque order, which he kept in reserve for men he liked.

"Yes, sir, thanks, I am quite all right again," Wade responded, as the O.C. waved him into a chair.

"Well," resumed the Colonel with a swift sigh, as his glance lingered on the voluminous correspondence which littered his desk, "you were mentioned in dispatches, you know. I am just sending in recommendations now, and I think I can safely predict a speedy promotion and the D.S.O. It was quite a good piece of work, sir, and we are rather proud of you in the regiment." The rubicund face relaxed and the grey moustaches looked slightly less fierce than usual.

A look of embarrassment flitted over Wade's gaunt face as he returned the direct gaze of his commanding officer and listened to words of praise from one from whom they were rare.

"That is what I came to speak to you about, sir," said he after a slight pause, and his gaze faltered and fell before the swift look of surprise shot at him from under bushy grey eyebrows.

"Have a smoke, Wade," Winfield replied, shoving as he spoke a box of cheroots in the other's direction, "and get ahead with what you have to say."

His manner was gruff as ever, but the intent was kind as he averted his gaze from the face of his junior.

"Thanks," murmured Wade, as he helped himself to a long, thin cheroot and proceeded deliberately to light it. "Well, sir, it is just this," he said slowly: "I should prefer not to be recommended or have promotion of any kind."

"The deuce you would! What a very independent young fellow it is, to be sure! What is it all about? Surely to God, sir, you are not turning a Socialist or any damn foolery of that sort?" the Colonel rapped out, sitting bolt upright in his chair; then he paused, and smiled on Wade, who chanced to be rather a favourite of his.

"You see, it is like this, sir——" Wade began gravely, and stopped.

When it came to the point it was a hard matter to explain what was in his mind; but at last he contrived to blurt out the whole affair, while his

senior eyed him grimly and drummed impatiently on the table with his fingers.

"But, my dear Wade, this is all quite absurd," he broke in, as the other ended lamely enough. "You ought to know that a soldier is paid to fight his country's battles, to kill or be killed, and not necessarily to save life. I confess that I cannot follow your point of view in the least. It would almost do justice to a hysterical school-girl, as far as I can comprehend it." And the good man looked puzzled.

"You see, sir, I always disliked Mervyn." Wade made no mention of the reason of his dislike. "I fear that this feeling influenced my action. It might have been quite possible to have succoured him and still have been in time to secure the defile," he explained, with a strange lack of expression in his weary, downcast eyes.

"You rode like hell to get there before 'em—and you were only just in time," the Colonel muttered testily. "You did your duty, and—What is your object in telling me all this?" he demanded, breaking off suddenly.

"I did not wish to be recommended for anything, sir, and I thought you would wish me to send in my papers."

"Gad!" the Colonel exclaimed with a frown, "I don't feel much flattered by your opinion of me, sir. Now, listen to me, Wade. You are not called upon to go into casuistry of this sort. Man,

you are a soldier, not a parson! I respect the uniform of the Church as much as I do that of the Service, but the duty of each is quite distinct. Your duty as a soldier was to do the obvious thing, and to take no risks where the rout of an enemy or the life of any man was in question. Whether you could have done both does not matter—not a damn!" The Colonel thumped on the table with no little vehemence. "I say you did your duty, and that is enough for any soldier. Poor Mervyn was killed, but he was a soldier also, and he died a soldier's death. You are fond of your profession, I take it?" he questioned abruptly.

"Yes, sir; I shall regret it always if I have to resign," the other replied, with a gleam of hope beginning to flicker in his pale, cold eyes.

"Well, sir, don't ever talk to me of resigning again!" The words issued loud and sharp, as words of command. "Go on leave, and come back cured of all such maudlin sentiment. I declare I'm disappointed in you, Wade. Sentimentality is the curse of these degenerate days."

For a moment Wade did not speak. He stiffened up in his chair; the tired look faded out of his gaunt face.

"Very well, sir, I accept your ruling." He rose suddenly with flashing eyes and his head erect and arrogant as ever. "I—I feel a new

man, Colonel," and he gave a short laugh. "But I'd like that leave, all the same—if I may."

"That's right, Wade," said Winfield, rising and glancing up at his junior with a merry twinkle in his shrewd old eyes. "We can spare you for six months—no more, remember! You must please yourself about your promotion and so forth, but you are a quixotic young ass if you refuse all the gifts the gods have in store."

"I could not bring myself to accept anything, sir, for what I have done. That I should be able to continue in the Service is more than I had ever dared hope," Wade made answer.

All right, young fella. But you are a deuced poor imitation of Don Quixote, you know!" The keen eyes frowned, and the Colonel's voice was very gruff indeed, but he shook the other's hand warmly. "Now I've got a lot of work to worry through, so cut along, if you don't mind."

The Colonel had never spoken to him like that before, and Wade felt boisterous—in a juvenile sort of fashion—as he strode out of the room in the seventh heaven of delight. He was all impatient now to get back and tell Margaret the great and glorious news; he began to conjure up the joy in her dear eyes.

Colonel Winfield was a simple, unassuming English gentleman. After Wade had left, he sat back and ruminated a while.

"Damned young fool!" he muttered under his

breath. " But not bad—no, not half bad. I'll be damned if he doesn't get promotion in spite of himself."

And he chuckled as he bent over his pile of correspondence.

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CHAPTER XL

MARGARET WADE sat awaiting her husband's return. It was past tiffin-time, and she began to feel anxious—partly because of the heat, for the hot weather was now in full blast. The room she sat in was dim and silent, the doors and windows closed to retain what cool air remained from the night before, but the vast, limewashed walls radiated quivering waves of heat.

She rose nervously and walked to the window; the glass was opaque half-way up, and she could see nothing. Then she crossed to the door and opened it cautiously. As she peered out, a sudden scorching gust of wind swept over the land, picking up the dust and whirling it about in ever-rising circles, until it resembled a miniature volcano in action. There was no one to be seen.

She shut the door with a bang, and the "dust-devil" howled and raved outside. It fell as swiftly as it had arisen, and all was peaceful once more . . . only the droning of the punkha-wheel and the buzz of an occasional fly broke the silence.

She felt strangely restless. Still, the atmosphere was too oppressive to allow her to do aught but

sink limply into a chair and gaze up at the frill of the punkha as it flicked to and fro. The fox-terrier lay panting, with his tongue lolling out ; every moment he kept shifting his position in a vain attempt to find a cool spot wherein he might doze. At last he gave it up in disgust, and lay on his back with his legs outstretched in a grotesque manner.

The rhythmical movement overhead and the languorous swish began to exert a drowsy effect, and Margaret gradually fell into a dreamy reverie wherein matters past, present, and future paraded for inspection and analysis. She thought of her girlhood and of her amazing ignorance, and—yes, she smiled ever so faintly. Of old her judgments had been absolute, her comprehension of love so deliciously romantic ; and she sighed almost unconsciously as she remembered her lost illusion—the white, mystical vision of her dream. It was only when she had found courage to face reality that she came to suspect the love of a man and a woman to be a composite thing, the spiritual side of which must first be inspired by an earthly component—as if the body and the soul were divided against themselves in the beginning, but must merge at last one into the other. Her lack of knowledge had condemned her to pay—and pay again. She frowned a little as she thought of the irrevocable past, and there crept into her eyes that oddly blended look, as if child and

woman were struggling for supremacy. Presently her eyes fell on a book of Persian poems ; she picked it up and idly turned the pages. All unconsciously, a word attracted her attention, and she stopped to read : "*Earthly love the bridge over which those must pass who would seek the joys of Divine love.*" Suddenly she sat upright and examined the sentence more carefully. The bridge? She gazed up at the punkha for a moment as if for inspiration. In a flash it came to her—it was *her* bridge of moonbeams, the silvery span of her dream !

She knew it all at last, with a subtle thrill of sheer ecstasy, and she longed to have her husband with her again, to feel his strong arms around her—the intimate sense of his nearness. She belonged to him absolutely, and every vein in her body tingled with the knowledge of it. Her detachment from the past was complete.

She picked up the book again and read on. New meanings flashed out at her from every page ; revisions of old judgments occurred to her. The wine so frequently quoted by Hafiz and Omar Khayyám emerged as the symbol for the Divine inspiration of love—the essence of life, its very meaning and justification. The story of the nightingale and the rose, which she loved most of all, now assumed a strange, sweet significance. The nightingale, with its heart pressed against a thorn of the rose, raising its litany of love higher

and higher, with the thorn piercing deeper and deeper until it fell back dead, was a symbol of earthly love dying and becoming merged into Divine love, for which it had given up its life—a suggestion of the dual aspect of love. For a while she pondered deeply; then, rightly or wrongly, she came to a conclusion—jumping to it with a woman's instinctive finality. The material part of love had a purpose quite distinct from its biological aspect—it was, in fact, the “bridge.”

Margaret thought of the many women whom love had passed by, their lack of charity and sympathy—that twin sister of love, which takes its place in life when love grows weary. To her it appeared as if the total suppression of earthly love might serve to dry up the springs of Divine love, until virtue in excess approached vice and extinguished even charity. For good or for ill, all great things in the world have been accomplished by those who have loved greatly; for good or for ill, according as the balance of that love has chanced to swing—reaching to heaven or dropping to earth: either way, it has been the motive power of the universe.

Still the punkha swung backwards and forwards, and a multitude of flies buzzed. Her eyes began to droop drowsily, and her thoughts to fly to the future. If ever she had a daughter—and she began to long for one very fervidly—she would not make the mistake that had been made in her

own upbringing—confining a girl's mind as the Chinese do her feet. She would answer all her childish questions, keep nothing from her, and retain her entire confidence, so that the girl should grow up with the innocence of knowledge and free from the vice of an ignorant curiosity ; grow up familiar with facts and accept them naturally from childhood, without any chance of morbid musing or sudden shock.

Sudden footsteps sounded on the veranda ; her heart leaped to meet them. There would be nothing to come between them now—no rival in the field when Rex had left the Service for ever. She would make it all up to him ; the very comfort of her would cause him to lean all the more closely upon her, and he would belong to her absolutely.

The door burst open, and her smile held for him a wonderful welcome. She rose—and next moment she was in his arms, clinging to him with a new-born passion of tenderness and abandonment.

“Margaret !” he almost shouted aloud. “Just think, dear ! It is all right, after all. The Colonel only laughed at me, and wouldn't hear of me resigning, and so you will be a soldier's wife until the end of the chapter. Too ripping to be true, is it not, darling ?”

It was odd how the picture of a gaunt, pale face flashed back to her ; and at the memory of

past helplessness a sudden sigh rose to her lips— simply she could not suppress it.

“Aren't you glad?” he questioned, grave of a sudden.

“You foolish boy!” she said at last. “Now you have your—your beloved career. Do you know, I think I shall be almost jealous of it.”

“Of the Service?”

“Yes.” Her voice had sunk almost to a whisper.

“But that's second now,” said he, suddenly beginning to understand in some small measure.

“The only first thing is—you!”

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