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The  
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by  
D. Gerard

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BY  
DOROTHEA GERARD.

IN ONE VOLUME.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

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THE  
INEVITABLE MARRIAGE

BY

DOROTHEA GERARD

(MADAME LONGARD DE LONGGARDE)

AUTHOR OF "LADY BABY," "ONE YEAR," "ITINERANT DAUGHTERS,"  
"THE GRASS WIDOW," ETC.

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1911.



THE  
INEVITABLE MARRIAGE

DOROTHEA GERRARD

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## THE INEVITABLE MARRIAGE.

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### CHAPTER I. THE ORPHANS.

“AND now, Winnie, we have got nothing but each other!”

As they clung together—the sable of their mourning garments making of them but a single black silhouette—there were tears not only in the eyes of the sister, but also in those of the brother.

In excuse for Kerr Mowbray, it must be remarked that he was very young, barely twenty-four; also that his boots were still encrusted with the mud of the graveyard wherein, within the last hour, he had laid to rest a beloved father. Of the grief of the two orphans his was—if not the most genuine—undoubtedly the most poignant. For him that sense of desolation which meets the mourner on the threshold of the house from which a coffin has lately been carried, was complete. Whereas for Winnie—

The tears in her eyes were quite as genuine as in Kerr's; yet upon the face hidden against his shoulder

something faint and tremulous, barely recognisable as a smile, was beginning to relieve the tension at the corners of her fresh lips. Neither did she echo his assertion as to their possessing nothing but each other, presumably because she had reasons for doubting its absolute correctness.

“We’ll stick to each other, Winnie, will we not?”

“O yes, Kerr—of course we will—always!” Her tone was as warm as his; for as to this proposition there could be neither doubt nor difficulty.

One more moment of eloquent silence; and then the one black silhouette resolved itself into two, as brother and sister drew apart, each simultaneously taking place upon the seat nearest to hand. It was done almost unconsciously, by no preconcerted arrangement—as an unavoidable thing. Since the day on which a wire had summoned Kerr to his father’s sick-bed, there had been nothing like connected conversation between these two. After the strain of the sick-room, the agony of loss, the moral oppression and material worry of the funeral, this was the first moment at which breath could be drawn, the balance of the past made up and the facts of the future faced. Nor must there be delay in facing them, as Kerr knew better than did Winnie, fresh as he was from an interview with the family solicitor. Not that the interview had brought any sensational discoveries, only the somewhat brutal confirmation of certain vague fears, instinctively kept at bay by the unkillable hopefulness of youth. Everybody had known that kind, easy-going book-collecting Mr. Mowbray had lived far beyond his means, that the small estate was heavily mortgaged, and—whatever might be the case with those in the library—

the banking-books in an unspeakable condition. What everybody knew, his children could not ignore; yet by tacit consent they had kept their eyes shut to facts which, so far, had altered nothing about the surface of life. Winnie, to tell the truth, did not quite know what a mortgage was, and in spite of the ominous gravity with which the word was always pronounced, it was difficult—so long as five o'clock tea was served as punctually as ever and the lawn kept impeccably shorn—to believe in its pernicious qualities.

To-day she was to gain enlightenment.

"I've been talking to Mr. Tawse, Winnie, or rather he has been talking to me; and I think I ought to tell you what he said. After all, you aren't a baby any longer." Kerr himself, as he spoke, was evidently doing his best—in flat defiance of his limpid blue eyes and curly brown hair—to look as far as possible removed from babyhood, as worthy as might be of the newly assumed *rôle* of head of the family.

"Of course, I'm not a baby,—tell me all he said."

Winnie spoke without anxiety, somewhat like a person whose thoughts are elsewhere and have to be brought back forcibly to the subject in hand.

"Well, what he says is rather serious; in fact the upshot of his remarks is—not to put too fine a point upon it—pretty beastly," concluded the head of the family, in whom the schoolboy had, so far, been imperfectly got under.

"Yes; does he? I mean—is it?"

"He says—I'm afraid it will give you an awful turn—but he says the dear old place will have to be sold."

“Oh, Kerr—not really?”

There was no more inattention in Winnie’s mien now, and in her voice there was the sting of anguish, for she had never known any other home but this, and the roots of childhood strike deep.

Her brother went on speaking as grimly as though he were doing it with set teeth.

“Yes—really. There’s no choice, it seems. The place is swamped with mortgages. Strictly speaking, it doesn’t belong to us at all, but to the holders of the bonds—so far Tawse. The dear old dad never had a business head, you know; and, after all, we must remember that he never refused us anything.”

Which remark was the only thing savouring of reproach to the dead which either then or later crossed either of the orphan’s lips; even in a people worshipping gold there are other gods which—for some—stand upon higher altars.

“Mosscliffe sold!” repeated Winnie slowly and heavily, as—slowly and heavily too—her glance went round the room, passing over objects familiar since the dawn of consciousness. To strange eyes but a typical English drawing-room, “all chintz and comfort,” as it has occasionally been defined, with just enough costly china on the mantelpiece and family portraits on the walls to supply a note of individuality; and with handfuls of summer in the shape of fresh-cut flowers recently introduced from out of an evidently well-tended garden. But to the gazer who in each sofa recognises a desert island of the past, in each recess a brigand’s cave, and in each chair a railway-carriage, at the very least, if not a three-masted schooner, such ordinary rooms never can be

ordinary. Other people moving between these walls as possessors—it was a thing to which Winnie's imagination refused to stretch. And outside, there would, if possible, be worse partings still. Was it bearable to conceive of a time when the sound of rushing water, pleasantly muffled by the height of steep banks, would not be in her ears? Of summer mornings coming when she would not be able to step out into the brave greenery of the cliff and longingly wend her way down one of the steep little paths, nearer and nearer to the tumultuous river's edge, until she stood upon the very brink of the torrent, where the drops of spray trembled eternally upon plumes of fern and moss-cushioned boulders, and where she could not even hear the birds singing because of the rush of the waters?

"Oh, Kerr—to have to leave Mosscliffe—it is too terrible!"

The tears had sprung afresh to the eyes which she turned upon her brother. But he answered with the same artificial grimness in which he had taken refuge.

"That is not the most terrible part of it. The real misfortune is that the sale—according to Tawse's estimate—will not do much more than pay off the bank. Of course, the furniture and the books are ours, and may raise a few hundred pounds, but in the best case not enough to yield even a starvation income."

"That means?"

"That means that you are left unprovided for, my poor Winnie, and that we must just put our heads together concerning your future."

"And yours?"

"Mine is all right, of course. It was because I had



a certain inkling of the state of affairs that I booked for the Indian Civil. It's something more than providential that I should have been able to answer your summons with my appointment in my pocket. Don't bother about me, Winnie, but think of yourself. When I sail for India whatever is to become of you? That is the burning question."

"Ah, that is the question, indeed!"

About Winnie's lips, as she spoke, that shadowy smile—which held a suggestion of "knowingness" in its very shadows—had re-appeared.

"Mr. Tawse made all sorts of suggestions, but I don't like the sound of any of them."

"Let's hear what they were!"

"Oh, the usual thing, of course, about your having no choice but to earn your living in some respectable way; he's a business man, you know," apologetically interpolated Kerr. "He began by supposing that you wouldn't like to be a governess."

"How perspicacious of Mr. Tawse! and besides, just consider what a bad governess I should make! I've never learnt anything really except tennis and driving a pony-cart."

"That's what I said to him; upon which he actually had the cheek to suggest that, if the worst came to the worst, you might do for a nursery governess. I never thought I should want to knock down Tawse, but I felt horribly like it then. What can the old villain mean by such an affront?"

The affronted person laughed quite pleasantly—the first laugh she had uttered since the day she sent the wire.

"That's less perspicacious. I shouldn't like blowing babies' noses; I'm afraid it would end by my boxing their ears instead. Had he any other suggestion?"

"Oh, lots, he talked a heap about the advantages which the modern woman enjoys in this respect and about what he calls 'the new professions.'"

"He doesn't want me to become a doctor, does he?" asked Winnie with a look of not very serious alarm.

"No, but he did suggest chemistry, as well as professional gardening and even architecture, which he says women are taking up."

"Chemistry means making a mess with things in a laboratory, does it not? I don't feel any call that way."

"It means a great deal more than that," corrected Kerr with that brotherly leniency which savours of scorn; "but I doubt whether you could rise to it."

"I don't doubt at all; I know I couldn't."

"How about gardening?"

"I should love that, of course, but I'm afraid the flowers wouldn't have a better time with me than the babies; I'd pull their ears if they didn't come up the way I wanted them to."

"And architecture——"

Winnie shook her brown head decisively.

"No go, either, and no vocation! Not even my brick-houses would ever stand, as you must remember. And besides—her eyes wandered past her brother to the radiant greenery framed by the open window—"besides I would so much rather live in a house than build one."

"Then what remains?" asked Kerr with a note of desperation in his voice, as, plunging to his feet, he

began to pace the floor, hands in pockets, his young brow ruffled by new-born care.

"Being companion to an old lady, I suppose, feeding her parrot and scratching her cat behind the ears. I only hope I shouldn't scratch too hard, or she might turn me out."

"That's not a new profession."

"I never said it was; but I'm not a 'new' woman either, you see—to my shame I confess it."

"What are you fit for, Winnie? what are you fit for?"

This time Winnie said nothing, unless that lurking smile was an answer. Within her own mind she had a pretty clear conception of what she was fit for—though, for obvious reasons, she kept it to herself. With the furrowed appearance of Kerr's brow, the smoothness of her own contrasted; and even when speaking of the old lady and the parrot there was in voice and manner a note of serene detachment most remarkable in a person whose immediate future stood under discussion.

"When I leave England what is to become of you? I wonder whether——Ah, by Jove!"

With a jerk young Mowbray stood still frowning as heavily at the carpet as though it had been a recalcitrant golf-ball. In a moment he lifted his head, the frown chased off already by the light of an eager smile.

"What an ass, to be sure, not to have seen it at once! and with the flat of his big, hard-skinned hand he struck himself almost viciously on the forehead.

"Of course there's only one thing to be done."

"What thing, Kerr?"

"To come out to India with me,—we'll raise the

money for the outfit, never fear! Three hundred a year to start with isn't huge, of course, but it's more than I want for myself. We'll manage all right if we count the pennies. You'll keep house for me, Winnie—ah, I say this is going to be rather ripping;—and at least we won't have half the globe between us. I couldn't stand the thought of your nursing the parrots and scratching the babies—or was it the other way round? You'll come out to India with me, will you not, Winnie? After all we belong together."

Voice and limpid blue eyes were all eagerness, as he stood still before her, looking for her reply.

It came in accents almost of consternation.

"To India? You want me to go out there?"

"I am suggesting to you what, under the circumstances, seems the most natural arrangement," corrected Kerr, just perceptibly chilled by the want of enthusiasm in her tone.

Remorse seized her on the instant.

"Oh, Kerr, that is good of you—awfully good!"

"No more than my duty!" he asserted, still a trifle loftily. "It is true that Tawse acts as guardian, but, after all, I am your natural protector, and to leave you to struggle along by yourself is a thing I cannot reconcile with my conscience, so long as I am able to work for us both."

Both in tone and voice the "head of the family" was now very much to the fore.

Winnie got up impulsively to throw her arms around her brother's neck.

"Kerr, you're a brick! But only——"

"Only what?"

"I'm not sure that I can reconcile it with *my* conscience letting you saddle yourself with me in that way."

"My back is pretty broad: and besides I've no one else to saddle myself with."

"But you might have in time, might you not? Supposing you married?"

The "head of the family" seemed to grow taller by at least another moral half-head.

"I just sha'n't marry so long as I have you to provide for."

"And you imagine I would accept such a sacrifice?"

"It isn't a sacrifice. I shall be far too busy with my work to bother about girls. A pretty pass India would come to if we put our own affairs before those of the Empire."

It was said as by one on whose shoulders a very fair slice of said Empire reposed.

"But still such things do happen," persisted Winnie. "And supposing it happened to you——"

"Nothing would be altered, of course, except for the better, since you would have gained a sister, and consequently a more cheerful home."

Winnie laughed in spite of herself.

"That's you all over, Kerr—but we haven't heard *her* yet!"

"There is no *her*! There's only you and I, Winnie, as I told you at the start, and if we don't stick to each other, then what's to become of us? for I fancy I shall need you as much as you do me. Bother all these beastly professions! You won't require to follow any of them, you'll only require to be my little housekeeper—

and you'll be that, Win, won't you? You'll learn to make curry famously, I'm sure you will," came as an afterthought, though quite a serious one.

"I should love to look after you, Kerr." The words were all right but in the tone still the same absence of enthusiasm. As to the superfluity of modern confessions and the desirability of possessing a home she was quite agreed, but by no means certain that Kerr was the person destined by Fate to provide that home.

"Then you've only got to do what you want to. Is the compact sealed?"

Winnie took her hand from her brother's shoulder a little hastily.

"Not to-night, Kerr! Let us sleep over it! It's too serious a resolution to be taken in a hurry. After all, it's your future that's in play now, as well as mine."

"As if you didn't know that I would stick to you, whatever happens!"

"I'm sure you would. But still—there's nothing like sleeping over a thing, one never can be sure—except—" Winnie interrupted herself a little confusedly under her brother's questioning gaze—"except that of course, in any case, you can always be sure of my gratitude. I'll never forget what you said to-day, Kerr, never! And to-morrow I'll tell you whether I can go to India with you or not!"

Another breathless little kiss, given with an avoidance of his gaze which might possibly have been casual, and Kerr found himself staring at the door behind which his enigmatical little sister had effected an equally breathless exit.



## CHAPTER II.

## THE LOVERS.

As, bareheaded she stepped out into the open, Winnie held her two hands against her cheeks, for they were burning. The July sky was over-cast; but upon her softly waved hair that was too dark to be called golden and too golden to be defined as brown, an unsubstantial sun-beam seemed for ever to be resting gilding the edges of the coils and the tips of the stray tendrils about neck and ears. There were plenty of faults to find with her face; she was beautiful only in so far as a pair of clear hazel eyes joined to the supple slenderness of the "teens" and to that flawlessness of complexion which has come to be considered as a *spécialité* of our humid islands can make beautiful—that is to say, to a degree quite sufficient to upset the balance of young men's minds and to flutter the pulses even of the old. One of those typically English roses of womanhood which, in this commonplace land, have—the heavens be praised for it!—not yet become uncommon.

And the setting was in keeping; far around her, the green of early summer was rioting in the almost insolent confidence of its youth, untouched by the most distant warning of the autumn to come, unmarred by so much as one yellow leaf.

"Ah!" breathed Winnie, and again "Ah!" as, on the edge of the steep bank, she stood still to fill her lungs with the air of her favourite haunt, perforce neglected for many sorrowful days past. It was like coming out of a tunnel into the light again—at last! As now, with a sudden movement almost as unconscious as an impulse, she began to descend one of the steep paths, her nineteen years were retaking possession of their rights. With each step—lighter and more elastic than its predecessor—she seemed to be moving farther away from the shadow of Death and closer to the light of Life.

The wealth of wonderful moss from which the place drew its name, was at its zenith just now. Fed by the dampness of an atmosphere riddled with spray and enclosed between two green walls of verdure, it flourished upon stone and wood alike. Beneath its velvet cushions the boulders all but vanished, while upon mighty branches stretched over the abyss towards other mighty branches seemingly striving to clasp hands, it flourished in the company of thousands of tiny ferns, whose delicacy was as that of green lace. Below, the water, black, white and dimly green, eddied untiringly. Slabs of crystal slid for ever over slabs of stone to be shivered to fragments below, and dance away in a wonderful network of white, whose meshes grew wider and looser as it spread over the green pool.

The chill of the air off the water was upon Winnie's face as she paused upon the brink, gazing, not at any of these familiar wonders, but with eager, slightly scared eyes, across at the opposite bank, as though half fearing to see something which yet it would be worse not to see. Shortlived doubt, for barely had she come into



sight when from among the tall ferns over there, where he seemed to have been lying in wait, a young man in a tweed suit appeared as abruptly as out of a stage drop, and, within the space of a breath drawn, was at the water's edge.

"Ah, take care!" cried Winnie although she knew he couldn't hear her, and in a sudden terror tinged with rapture, for already he had reached the first boulder in mid-stream, and was impatiently spying for the next possible stepping-stone. On former occasions—useless to deny that there had been former occasions—he had joined her by means of the rustic bridge only a couple of hundred yards off, but to his impatience of to-day, those yards were evidently too many.

With exquisite alarm Winnie watched him, as lightly and boldly he sprang from rock to rock, sometimes slipping upon the wet stones and seemingly on the point of being dashed into the foaming torrent below, but never losing either his balance or the eager smile upon his lips. How handsome he looked, and how radiant! Could anything or anyone be more like a hero-lover of that genuinely romantic sort, which she was half-ashamed to prefer to the modern cut and dry, triumphantly un-emotional ideal?

"You shouldn't have done that!" was her tremulous greeting when at length his foot touched firm ground.

"I couldn't help it. Oh, my darling!"

Which was all the warning he gave her before folding her in his arms.

"No, no, you should not do that either!" gasped Winnie, with returning breath, though anything like composure was still absent.

"I suppose I shouldn't; but—I just couldn't help that either. After all these blank days to see you again by the water's edge was too much for me. Ah, they have been horridly blank, these days, and rottenly dull. Knowing you in grief, and having to kick my heels, instead of comforting you! Was it very bad, Winnie?"

"Very bad,—but I can bear it now" said Winnie with a deep breath of comfort, and still resting against his arm; for though the touch of his lips had startled her as premature, it was not quite the same with this welcome support. What could the gloom of the last days matter now, what could anything matter, now that she knew what she wanted to know, what indeed it had not been very hard to guess at during the meetings of the last weeks, casual at first, but soon tacitly concerted, what he had all but told her on the last day they had stood together upon this same spot—the day before the one in which she had wired for Kerr. To be sure he had not asked her to marry him yet, but that was coming now; after that kiss she could not doubt it—unless indeed the concrete request was considered superfluous—also after that kiss.

"If you knew how hard it was to keep myself from flying to your side! I have felt quite jealous of Kerr for having the right to dry your tears."

"I suppose I ought to tell him," said Winnie shyly, following up her last analysis of the situation.

"Tell him what, Winnie?"

"That—that we are fond of each other."

"Why need Kerr know?"

It was said so vivaciously that Winnie's downcast eyes were raised in surprise.

"But—Kerr is in papa's place now, you know; I shouldn't like to get engaged behind his back."

"Ah, if we were able to get engaged!"

"But aren't we engaged?"

The question, as irresistibly she put it, struck herself as almost comical.

For answer the wearer of the tweed suit somewhat abruptly withdrew his arm from its very congenial resting-place, and with a gesture that was both picturesque and tortured, pushed back the straw hat from his forehead.

"Ah, Winnie, that's the rub, that's the rub indeed!"

"But I thought," said Winnie faintly.

"That I was your slave, now and for ever? Quite rightly too, Winnie, quite rightly, I'm that, and far more; for not only do I worship the ground your feet tread on, but I myself would walk bare-foot over any sort of ground—and be it red-hot coals—in order to get to you. You're the rose of my world and the star of my heaven, Winnie, I swear to you that you are! You're my heaven and my goddess but I cannot be sure, no, I cannot be sure whether you will ever be my wife!"

"Why not?" asked Winnie, all the more bluntly because of her emotion.

"For the usual, cruel, commonplace reason which separates so many lives, because of the vulgar want of cash both in your money-box and in mine."

"But I shouldn't mind being poor, really I shouldn't."

"My darling! I do believe you wouldn't—not at first, at any rate. But it is my place to keep you from rushing on your own destruction; for to bruise yourself

upon the rock of poverty, of genteel poverty, which is the sharpest of all, to be ground between the mill-stones of social demands which know no mercy, would be destruction indeed to your happiness and to mine. Not to marry you breaks my heart, to marry you would mean being a villain, and I prefer breaking my heart to being that."

With the last words he flung himself down beside the stone upon which a moment ago Winnie, becoming aware of a certain want of resistance about the muscles of her knees, had sat down rather abruptly.

"But you can't prefer breaking mine?"

It was not said reproachfully, only desolately, and, for that very reason, conveyed a more poignant reproach.

Into the dark eyes of her companion new ardour sprang, while with the composure of his handsome, ac-quiline features real pain was working havoc.

"My angel!" he breathed, reaching up for her hand from the moss-carpet upon which he half knelt, half sat at her feet. "My queen! the only one to whom I shall ever owe allegiance. You care for me like that, then? It is true?"

"How can you owe me allegiance since you cannot marry me?" asked Winnie, almost a little stolidly, and reflecting that if only she could reach the haven of sulks, she might possibly be able to keep back the tears which were doing their best to strangle her. But if she thought she had given him a poser she was mistaken. He had answers ready to more difficult questions than that.

"Do all lovers marry? Is not the world full of couples destined for each other by everything that makes life worth living, and yet separated from each other by

horribly brutal facts? These faults may alter their outward existence, but how can it touch their inner faithfulness—if they are the right sort; for some of them console themselves, I have heard.”

“And why should you not console yourself?”

“Winnie!”

Before the eloquence of the reproach in the eyes turned up towards her the artificial huffiness miserably collapsed.

“I beg your pardon,” she stammered, convinced in one moment that to think of Julian Garvice in the future as decked with anything but the dried chaplets of memory was to do him a grievous wrong. She lent a little towards him as she spoke, as indeed the rush of the waters rendered advisable, unless remarks were to be shouted, to which some style of remarks are peculiarly ill adapted.

“Outwardly,” his gloomy speculation ran on, “I daresay people won’t notice much difference in me. One has to go on dressing and eating and shooting, and all that sort of thing, for fear of getting poked into a lunatic asylum. There won’t be anything wrong about me to the naked eye, I suppose; but underneath my dress-coat or my tennis jacket or whatever it is, there will be a heart that has closed its reckoning with happiness, all the same.”

This with a downward glance at the tweed suit, about which, most distinctly there was “nothing wrong.”

“I am sure you will be brave,” ventured Winnie tremulously; “and I too will try to be brave—if it has to be!”

“It has to be, Winnie, it has! I have gone through

every possible calculation—weighed all contingencies, I mean to say—always to reach the same conclusion! That for us to unite our two penniless lots would be a wicked tempting of Providence. The case is quite clear, quite easy even for you to understand. You must listen to me, Winnie, for I owe you this explanation.”

Rapidly, yet with remarkable clearness of exposure, he launched into a review of his own material position, far from brilliant, in truth, if not quite as deserving of the epithet of “penniless” as her own. For a briefless barrister and a “man about town,” the allowance made to him by his uncle was certainly miserably inadequate, and, even such as it was, ran every risk of being discontinued, as the penalty of what Sir Francis Garvice would certainly consider to be an improvident marriage.

“And I depend upon him entirely, you know, Winnie,—so long, that is to say, as I have not risen at the Bar,—and really I haven’t any claim at all upon him, considering his own large brood. He is always prosing to me about prudence; I do believe that what he would like best would be to see me paired off with a money-bag, and off his hands for good. If he had any inkling of our meetings——”

A rather anxious glance probed the opposite bank, over whose tree-tops off left, a group of stately chimneys was visible.

“To marry upon an allowance which will cease to be an allowance when we marry would simply be criminal. Do you think I could bear to see you in want of any of the comforts you have been used to? perhaps obliged to hem your own handkerchiefs, or—or cook your own dinner?”

"I shouldn't mind even that," murmured Winnie.

"But I should!" came somewhat vehemently from Julian, with a perhaps unconscious mental reference to the eating of those dinners. "And there are worse things than that—social humiliations which it would kill me to see you endure. And it won't get better, it will get worse, since the standard of everything rises from day to day! No age has ever been so exacting as this, and we are its victims."

There was so much sound reason, so much common-sense about what he said that even Winnie sat silenced; the only thing wrong about it being its coming from the lips of a young man of twenty-five, upon which the prudential argument always sits strangely, all the more strangely where dark, ardent eyes and impulsive gestures are in play. For so almost romantic an appearance his speech was a trifle too businesslike.

Maybe it was this discrepancy which kept Winnie silent upon her stone, wistfully following the movements of a kingfisher perched upon a boulder in midstream and eyeing the green pool with the look of a connoisseur. To ask him why—the case being as clear as he put it—matters had ever been allowed to come to this pass, did not indeed occur to her, but, for all that, vague, regretful wonder stirred. What it was that she missed she could not exactly have said, perhaps some of that divine recklessness which lies at the bottom of half of the follies and half of the great deeds of humanity. She had heard of circumstances quite as adverse as these being battled with and conquered, of happiness gained in the very teeth of Fate, and for a moment the words "emigration," "the Colonies," danced suggestively before her excited

fancy. But those were words which he would have to say, not she, and apparently they did not occur to him.

Possibly—his perceptions being keen—the discrepancy above-named had forced itself upon Julian's own attentions; or else her silence acted as a warning; for it was with a ring of true anguish that he now said:—

“Ah, Winnie, Life is cruel!”

She would not agree with him in words for fear of the tears, but her swimming gaze, meeting his, was almost more than even this prudent young man could stand.

“Don't look like that, Winnie, or you will unnerve me! It's for you that I'm doing it, you know; and besides, who knows? I *may* get on at the Bar, after all, and if I do, of course I'll marry nobody in the world but you.”

Instantly quick springing sunshine cleared the mist from her eyes.

“Ah, then—if you think that—couldn't we just get engaged meanwhile and keep it to ourselves? I wouldn't mind how many years it lasted.”

As instantly he took fright.

“That would be the next nearest thing to marrying you. No one but a cad would allow you to bind yourself under the circumstances.”

“I'm bound already, by—by what has happened. Surely—” asked Winnie with the deadly earnestness and unconscious irony with which the question is usually put, “surely you can't think me capable of ever marrying anyone else?”

“You mustn't say that,” protested Julian quickly,



“or you will make me feel as though I had spoiled your life.”

A fleeting sting of remorse had precipitated the words—of remorse almost as much as of regret for those not avowedly clandestine meetings of the past weeks, which, begun as an agreeable diversion to the monotony of a “duty” visit, had so soon become an object in themselves.

“I know I shouldn’t have done it!” he confessed under the stress of one of those flashes of self-recognition which visit even the least modest of men. “It’s the fault of those eyes of yours, Winnie—or of the corners of your mouth—I’m not sure which. No, by Jove, it’s my own fault all the time, I do believe! It’s just that I couldn’t help it—as usual.”

“If you hadn’t done it it would have been worse, I think,” said Winnie, trying to smile.

“My darling! That comforts me—if anything can. After all we have been happy for a few days, a few weeks; nothing can rob us of that.”

“And we may be happy again in the future—if you get on at the Bar.”

“Of course! It’s my one hope, the one thing that keeps me up just now. But, Winnie, you mustn’t count upon that, you know. Getting on at the Bar is a fluke, and it would never do for your future to be built upon a fluke.”

“And what is it built upon now?”

Winnie was speaking more to herself than to him, her gaze still following the kingfisher, strutting upon its stone. Ah, there, like a jewelled flash, it was gone and up again, the dripping prey flapping between its ener-

getic little beak. What a brave little bird it was, and how unwearingly it catered for its family, which presumably lived in that hollow under the rock into which it had just dived. How lucky to be a bird, and therefore not a victim to the exactions of the age!

"Of course, if I do get on, it may come all right in the end, and meanwhile you have your brother, after all. I'm sure he will do his duty by you."

At this Winnie raised her head a little proudly.

"He is doing more than his duty. He is pressing me to go out with him to India."

"Is he really? And what have you said?"

"That—that I couldn't make up my mind so quickly—that I would have to think over it."

"Do you want my advice?"

"Yes."

"Close with the offer: it's by far the best arrangement conceivable. I know—I mean I have heard that Mosscliffe will have to be sold, and surely it would be worse for you to live anywhere else in England, whereas in the new country, in new surroundings, things will be easier, I'm sure they will. And India is such a mine of novelty!"

He paused in his eager speech; half abashed by the astonishment of her eyes.

"I know what you are thinking of, Winnie," he said in a tone to which the glow of yearning had returned; "but, believe me, it's better to have the ocean between us. What could a casual meeting do but stab us to the heart? And we must not even try to meet, since we are not engaged, for the present, and alas, may never be! Mind that, Winnie! It's indispensable for my peace of

mind. Unless I know that you go up that bank again feeling as free as you came down it—as free as air—I shall never be able to forgive myself for these last weeks. You wouldn't want to destroy my peace of mind, would you? You understand, don't you, that you are free?"

"Oh yes, I understand it," she agreed with a half-sob which had the effect of bringing him abruptly to his feet.

"This won't do, Winnie! Unless we make an end of it we shall be committing some folly. You'll thank me for this some day, be sure you will, but—by Jove—it is a rotten sort of a moment!"

He turned to glare at the water, hands in pocket, his features working, then resolutely back towards her, the dark moustache quivering a little under the effort of a smile.

"How does it run? that verse about saying good-bye? You're latest from the school-room, you should know:—

'Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part!'

Don't say No! It's the last time, Winnie, mind, the very last time, unless the Fates be propitious! You might grant me this—in memory of the past weeks!"

He had taken already what he wanted, before Winnie had quite realised that she had granted anything; and while her lips still tingled from the glow of that farewell kiss, was once more in mid-stream, springing from stone to stone in the same haste which had brought him over the water so short a time back. With the torrent between them he could permit himself one farewell glance, one

wave of the hand, but no more, before plunging into the thick bushwork of the opposite bank. As precipitately he climbed the steep path the poet's words ran in his head, to their sequel:—

And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart,  
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.

So cleanly? Yes, unless a couple of kisses, which could scarcely even be called stolen, ranked as unpardonable offence, no, if the trifling with a fellow creature's peace were to be seriously taken into account. And, despite his wiser if not better self, Julian Garvice could not help so taking it—perhaps because, after all, he was only twenty-five. If, underneath his perfectly faultless tweed suit his heart was not exactly breaking it was undoubtedly bleeding; for there was nothing either deep or malignant about this young man's rather premature worldly wisdom, nothing but the fruits of certain sordid home experiences which had, so to say, inoculated him with the serum of genteel poverty, rendering him for ever after immune against its dangers. Of his principles he was quite sure, bolstered up as they were by a very keen appetite for the good things of life, but not always of his impulses, for which reason he was now flying so fast from the field of victory.

Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows!

Thank heaven, anyway, that nothing of the sort had to be done, since there were no vows to cancel, neither locks of hair nor secretly cherished portraits to accuse the past. To have steered his way so neatly between the Scylla of such perils and the Charybdis of wounding her beyond recall was a most creditable achievement.

Could any one of his friends have backed as artistically out of a hopeless entanglement? He hardly thought so. And with the hazel of her eyes shining so entrancingly under the crystal of her tears! But, of course, it would have been insanity, since one can't live upon crystal and hazel, nor upon the ready-made clothes which he might be reduced to wear, as the poor *Pater* had been; nor could he ever have endured to see her love fading away under this latter trial, as shuddering recollection made appear a not improbable issue. No, it was better this way. And yet——

Now if thou would'st, when all have given him over,  
From death to life thou might'st him yet recover!

Confound that versifying fellow, and the tenacity of his own memory!

It was just conceivable that she might still be standing where he had left her. Perhaps through this gap in the foliage——

He paused for the fragment of a second, then almost savagely set his face the other way.

“Nay, I have done, you get no more of me!”

Bleeding heart, or no bleeding heart, the field of victory should not be turned into one of defeat.

That evening as she took her bedroom candle from her brother's hand Winnie said a little hurriedly:—

“Ah, by-the-bye, Kerr, I have been thinking about what you said, and I find I don't require to sleep over it, after all. I will go to India with you, if you will take me.”

The limpid blue eyes brightened.

“Well done, Winnie! That means a home for us both!”

## CHAPTER III.

## THE "ELEVENTH HOUR."

"THAT'S the advantage of India, you see, that one needn't look bored unless one likes to, since on this slice of the globe it's been tacitly settled that you don't become dowdy by enjoying yourself."

"And another advantage is that you get iced pineapple in winter," observed Winnie, carrying to her lips a spoonful of the fruit referred to.

They were somewhat parched, these lips, for the last waltz tour had been a prolonged one, and despite windows open to the ground and carefully sprinkled terrace, the temperature might not unsuccessfully have rivalled that of most baking ovens. But the hazel eyes seen last so full of tears, were bright, for all that, not because they had in the sixteen months past unlearned the trick of shedding them, but because the lights of festive candelabras have a way of kindling other lights, if only by the force of reflection.

"I'd have known in a moment it was your first dance, even if you hadn't told me so," asserted her partner, one of those ready-tongued and agreeably volatile boys who seem to have been invented expressly for ball-room purposes.

"Why? Because I dance so badly, I suppose?"

"No, because you look so rippingly pleased."

“Ah, no—surely I don’t look that!”

The protest came as hurriedly as though an accusation had to be warded off. Whatever else might be lacking she was quite sure that, beneath the surface enjoyment, she was not really feeling pleased. How was it even thinkable that she should with the cruel ocean—as cruel as the exigencies of life—rolling between her and Julian, and with the man who had kissed her beside the torrent, toiling away at his dull profession in the forlorn hope of conquering the future, at least she could only suppose that he was so toiling, the completeness of the rupture having cut off all sources of communication. To deny the surface enjoyment would have been foolish, of course although she had early decided that not one man in the room could compare in looks to Julian. Still, some of them danced well and some were undeniably amusing, witness the talkative subaltern at her side. On the whole she was glad that she had come—because of Kerr. After a year and more of black-edged note-paper and social abstention it really was time for him to get a little fun; and since he declined to accept the invitation of the Black Dragoons on his own account alone, what choice had she but to make at least a semblance of sharing in the fun? Even her brief reign as ruler of his bachelor household had already awakened in her—as it does in all but the failures of their sex—a certain pseudo-maternal feeling which makes sacrifice easy. This time it had been even easier than anticipated, for her frock—the first ball-dress of her life—fitted to perfection and all the arrangements of the Black Dragoons were at least as impeccable as the frock. Mr. Boxtton, too, was most appropriate, under the circumstances.

"No need to look scared, Miss Mowbray! I've told you that in India you're allowed to enjoy yourself and yet remain in the fashion. Are you so recent an arrival not to have found that out yet?"

"I've been here for nearly half a year."

"Without my having discovered you?"

"We were in mourning."

"Ah! that explains. Have you got over the surprise stage yet, I wonder? Its duration is so very different with different sorts of people. I know a fellow in the Civil Service who for twenty-two years would rub his eyes regularly every morning at seeing bamboos and rice-fields out of the window, instead of beeches and turf, and I knew another who when he found a cobra in the bath-room on the morning after his arrival didn't even find it worth while to mention the incident at mess."

"I belong to the second sort; I fancy. Just at first I did have the impression of a hot-house let loose with a sprinkling of an escaped aviary about it; but I've got over that. What I'm chiefly surprised at now is my own want of surprise. Still some things *are* astonishing, that huge person over there, for instance, in the green and yellow tunic, and with the lumps of diamond in her ears."

"Don't use such a common word as person, if you please, as you'll be giving Mrs. Gollap fits, and I should be sorry for whoever has to catch her in mid-air. We're nothing if we're not a lady!"

"I don't think I have ever before seen a lady of this exact description."

"Because you have never before seen a "Box Wallah."

"A how much?"



“‘Box Wallah,’ for which read a European who has pretty well ceased being one, without succeeding in becoming an Oriental; or—to put it differently—who has retained only the objectionable European qualities, and acquired as much of their Indian equivalents as a white constitution is able to absorb.”

“A sort of de-climatised Englishman, then?”

“Just so. They all keep a tight hold of the English part, of course; but, in point of fact, many of them haven’t seen England since their infancy. I rather think that Mrs. Gollap’s foot has never so much as pressed her native soil. This is our ‘mixed’ night, you know,” expounded Boxton in a confidential undertone; “can’t quite get out of having a few bounders on these occasions—big contractors, and that sort of lot! and Mr. Gollap is a *very* big contractor—in more senses than one. We rather like asking Mrs. Gollap, though; she comes in so useful as a battering-ram.”

“As a *what?*”

“Battering-ram. You see that human island in the middle of the room? Idle lookers-on usurping the dancing-space. To charge it with Mrs. Gollap upon your arm is the best means we have yet discovered of scattering the nuisance, judiciously guided she is positively annihilating.”

“Poor Mrs. Gollap.”

“Oh, she doesn’t as much as feel it,” asserted Boxton, who, having just discovered that laughter had the advantage of disclosing in his partner a set of remarkably even white teeth naturally wished to provoke a repetition of the phenomenon. “Too well padded for that. And I believe it flatters her. In her particular *milieu* beauty

is told off by weight and measure—more or less. Popularly, I am told, she outshines even our own regimental beauty, over there in the red gown, though there is no want of pounds in Mrs. Nims either."

"How can there be any comparison. This one is a beauty."

"I suppose she is—for the lovers of Juno-like creations I myself prefer something less overwhelming. But I'm glad you approve. We always show her as a sample, with the result that untravelled natives suppose the British isles to be peopled with statues come alive."

"And that old gentleman with the eyeglass who is speaking to her now."

"Hush! for goodness sake, or if you will speak, do so with decently bated breath. That isn't an old gentleman at all, but the august commander of this fortunate contingent, and that isn't an eyeglass, but the medium of the eagle glance before which we daily quail. Extraordinary, to be sure, the way young ladies rush in where subalterns fear to tread!"

"In other words my host! But how can one know one's way about among all these new faces and names? There's another over there, that long sunburnt man opposite leaning against the pillar and trying not to yawn. I know Kerr presented him, but as for the name he murmured——"

"Another which should by rights be pronounced with bated breath, Athlick. Rather an awful person as a superior—he's just attained his majority—but not so nagging as the bigger gun."

"I don't know whether he's nagging, but isn't he rather a dictatorial sort of person? Twice already to-

night he has told me severely that I was dancing too much: and he is looking at me quite disapprovingly just now, although I am not dancing."

"Mistakes you for a native recruit, no doubt. It's the sort of thing he's apt to do," suggested Boxtton, intent upon another glimpse of those gleaming teeth. "He's our Major, all right, but he's also our tame bear—warranted never to open a door at the right moment, and to make more uncivil remarks in half an hour than any other man in a day."

"He's not a dancing bear, though, is he? Anyway he hasn't asked me."

"Thank your patron saint for the mercy. There's a story about his having once been ordered to waltz with some big-wig at the vice-regal ball. I forget what happened exactly, but I know there was a good deal of glass destroyed, and something about a bill for an Irish point-lace train which the infuriated husband had to be restrained from presenting to the regiment."

"How pleased the regiment must be to possess him!"

"More pleased than you would surmise from that story. Did you count the tiger-skins in the vestibule, by the way? Quite one-third of them came down to Athlick's gun. In a way we're quite as proud of him as of Mrs. Nims."

"Oh, that's his occupation, is it? I never could get up any enthusiasm for that sort of blood and thunder person. Surely their day is over. I'm quite angry with Kerr for wanting to shoot a tiger. He's awfully keen on sport."

"But not on sport alone, surely," observed Boxtton, whose eyes just then fell among the revolving crowd

upon young Mowbray's flushed and animated face. "He doesn't seem to be boring himself to-night, anyway—not even in the company of the 'Eleventh Hour.'"

"In company of the *what?*"

"'The Eleventh Hour,' *alias* Miss Cassie Bowdler. There, you can see her between those pillars upon your brother's arm. Her waltzing is all right, anyway; as it ought to be—by this time."

"But what on earth makes you call her such an extraordinary name?" asked Winnie as she followed the movements of a very tall, very fair-haired, very straight featured girl, who ought by rights to have been beautiful and yet missed beauty by some intangible shade.

"A simple question of arithmetic. By the trustworthy testimony of fellows who have met her in London drawing-rooms a full decade back, we have reached the sorrowful conclusion that she can't possibly help being within speaking distance of her thirtieth birthday—though I'm bound to say it doesn't show at first sight. What her former attempts at matrimony have been I can't presume to guess. The only thing patent to the meanest observation being that she knows her eleventh hour has struck, and that, unless she wants to be left out in the cold, she's got to make a rush for it. And her mother knows it too better than she does. That's old Bowdler in the doorway with her eyeglass at her eyes, scanning the horizon for a matrimonial sail."

"She doesn't look old at all."

"Of course not—she daren't. She's of the Spartan race, Mrs. Bowdler is. She hates India, and yet sticks to it because of the superior matrimonial chances; she inclines to apoplexy and yet laces to a positively perilous

extent, merely in the hope of upsetting our arithmetic. A girl with a mother with so presentable a waist *can't* be past her best days. You follow the train of thought, don't you? Personally I admire her pluck. Talk of martyrs on the rack! Of course, I can't presume to say what her corsets are made of, but the result makes me think of plate armour. My own belief is that she'll take them off for ever on the morrow of Cassie's wedding-day."

"And Cassie herself—I mean Miss Bowdler—accepts this self-sacrifice?" laughed Winnie, gratifying him once more by the desired gleam.

"Miss Bowdler has reached the point where more things than self-sacrifice are accepted. Do you happen to remember a newspaper print—a Christmas number I think it was. Girl and chap sitting side by side on sofa, he all on the grin, and she all on the blush. 'No reasonable offer refused,' that's the 'Eleventh Hour' all over I tell you."

"I rather think that's actionable," began Winnie, with a hilarious gulp, and then abruptly stopped, for at that unguarded moment whose eyes should she meet, but the greenish-grey eyes of the "Eleventh Hour" herself, looking at her in a curiously penetrating fashion from over Kerr's shoulder.

"I *do* hope she hasn't heard!" breathed Winnie, as, the momentary block in the crowd of dancers being removed, the couple waltzed out of sight round the next group of pillars. "Besides, even if she had, she wouldn't understand, would she?"

"I rather think she would," grinned Boxton. "The appellation has been too long afloat not to have reached her ears. That's the worst of having pillars in a ball-

room—apt to spring people upon you like Jacks in the box. But, cheer up, Miss Mowbray! I'm the culprit, you know, you haven't done anything worse than listen."

"And laugh. That's not a thing she could ever forgive me—if she heard. But I hope she didn't. I don't like people to hate me," murmured Winnie, with a strange feeling of discomfort.

Nor was the discomfort raised when presently, still under the escort of Boxtton in whom she had already discovered a certain burr-like quality of adhesion, she found herself included in the same small supper table party which comprised Mrs. and Miss Bowdler. It was upon the wide terrace of the Club House that the tables had been set against a background of foliage whose very silhouette was exotic, and with the splash of unseen fountains refreshing the air. But, although the light here was far less brilliant than within, Winnie did not think it could have been chance alone which kept the eyes of "The Eleventh Hour" from ever meeting her own even for the fragment of a second. Upon every member of the party the somewhat frigid grey-green orbs rested in turn—only over the brown-haired girl in the white dress they passed as upon so much empty air.

"She must have heard," reflected the remorseful Winnie, only to add recklessly: "What can it matter? What is Cassie Bowdler to me, after all?"

Seen thus close Miss Bowdler's failure to achieve beauty was even more astonishing than at a distance. With so straight a nose, so small a mouth, so fair a shade of hair the result seemed unavoidable, and yet missed fire, perhaps because the nose was just a trifle

*too* straight, the mouth *too* small, and because the carefully dressed hair in its faultless equality of tint was of the sort better calculated to awaken the admiration of the *coiffeur* than of the artist.

“You have got over the home-sickness, I *hope*, Miss Mowbray?”

Winnie, roused out of her abstracted analysis of Miss Bowdler, became aware that the “regimental beauty” was addressing her across the table in broadly *débonnaire* accents, and with a gaze to match out of her magnificent dark eyes. Although far from being able to rival Mrs. Gollap upon her own field, there was undeniably a good deal of Mrs. Nims, but distributed in such faultless proportions as to cause all idea of quantity to disappear behind that of quality. Also, if she was a statue come alive, as suggested by Boxtton, there could be no doubt about it's having come very much alive, so far as the eyes were concerned, any way, which, being naturally more mobile than the rest of her person, enjoyed ample opportunities of exercise. A little while ago they had been very earnestly occupied with an exceedingly green subaltern at her side, who, fresh from home as he was, presumably stood in need of judicious counsel, and now, with the same earnest kindness in their depths the glorious eyes had turned upon Winnie. Upon those full, crimson lips the hope so seriously expressed scarcely even sounded like a *façon de parler*.

“Ah, and so you have had no fun at all!” she exclaimed in what looked like genuine distress, when Winnie had explained the state of the case. “A whole half year here, and seen nothing but dirty natives, I

daresay! I don't call that being in India! We must remedy that, Mr. Boxtton, must we not?"

"Oh, I have seen more than natives. I have seen two cobras, and one monkey. Also I have seen a rickshaw."

"A short list," commented Boxtton, "compared to the things you haven't done, and haven't seen. I bet you haven't ridden an elephant."

"No, nor gathered a cocoa-nut, nor explored a ruined temple, nor interviewed a *fakir*, nor had even the smallest touch of jungle fever," laughed Winnie, in whose veins the unusual prick of champagne cup was pleasantly stirring the blood.

"No jokes about that—it's a tempting of Providence!" said someone with a detectable shudder in the voice.

Winnie looked up the table at the insignificant person who had spoken, and whom she presently discovered to be Captain Nims, the enviable but inexplicably dejected looking possessor of the "statue come alive."

The momentary silence during which the shudder in the Captain's voice seemed to have run round the company, was cut short by Boxtton.

"That's another thing you haven't seen—the jungle, I mean—not the fever. Time we did Miss Mowbray the honours of the jungle, is it not, Mrs. Nims? What would the company say to a week's camping? The season's all right, you know."

It was Mrs. Bowdler who took up the word with a species of enthusiasm which probably surprised Winnie alone, unaware as she was of the matchless opportunities—of different sorts—presented by a jungle picnic.

"Camping? Lieutenant Boxtton, I think you deserve



a medal for that! I've just been wondering what I could do to amuse Cassie, she's so dreadfully apt to get bored when there's nothing agoing. Actually I had never thought of camping, though it's quite two years since our last picnic."

As she leaned forward in her chair to beam upon Boxtton, Winnie could not help admiring the resistance of the "plate armour." But for the somewhat too visible effects upon the complexion, that sternly repressed, symmetrically moulded figure would have disgraced no woman of forty, as little as could the scientifically disposed tresses, only a few shades darker than those of her daughter, and as innocent as hers of the smallest silver thread, for Mrs. Bowdler was the sort of person who goes on being a "fine woman" long after she has ceased to be a handsome one.

"Is she husband hunting on her own account, I wonder?" reflected Winnie, almost startled by the studied sprightliness of tone. It was a mistake that people were apt to make in the early stages of Mrs. Bowdler's acquaintance.

"Cassie, you foolish girl, what are you doing with that cocoa-nut? Extraordinary, how childish she is at times," came in by way of interlude. "We want your attention for this plan—Lieutenant Boxtton's plan of camping out for a week."

"The most ripping thing I've ever heard of!" pronounced Kerr, when matters had been briefly expounded, while Cassie, who had been instructing him in the proper way of eating a cocoa-nut, without for that losing one word of the general conversation, looked engagingly surprised by the latest suggestion.

"Isn't it getting too near the hot weather?" she objected for form's sake.

"All the more reason for losing no time about it," declared Kerr. "I say, Boxtton, when do we start, and, how's the thing managed exactly?"

"Do we start at all? That's the first point to be settled. There are such things as authorities to be consulted, in first line. Week's leave of absence don't go a-begging precisely—and a week is the smallest measure for a jungle picnic."

"Mowgli's Jungle?" asked Winnie with brightening eyes, "I should like that! Oh, can't you manage it?"

"Not without the authorities. Ah—there's one of them handy—the very man for our business, jungle and military authority rolled into one. Gain Athlick for our cause and there will be no difficulty with the Colonel."

"And how do you propose to gain him?" enquired the dejected Captain. "By offering to invade his private hunting grounds? and in mixed company too! You know how he dotes on dancing attendance."

"Leave that to me. I declare he's bearing down straight upon us—and what's that he's got upon his arm?"

"Miss Mowbray, here's your cape, will you be so kind as to put it on? You should not come out like that, heated as you are."

In something like consternation Winnie turned to find Major Athlick standing behind her chair, while her feather-trimmed wrap was being thrust towards her.

"Thank you, I am very comfortable without it," she said after a pause of astonishment, annoyed by the repetition of a *surveillance* which in the eyes of the entire

supper party must surely mark her down as a foolish little girl incapable of looking after herself.

"Would you mind hurrying up a little? I am wanted over there," remarked the self-appointed mentor, who evidently had no idea of entering into any discussion of her sensations.

"Better knock under," murmured Boxtton in her ear, "we don't want his humour spoiled."

Upon which Winnie, who in the light coloured eyes fixed upon her and which looked all the lighter for the dark tan of the skin, had read a determination seemingly quite out of proportion to the occasion, submitted with a very bad grace.

"Stop a moment, Major," cut in Boxtton in the nick of time, for Athlick, having gained his point, had evidently been for turning on his heel. "It's not over there only that you're being wanted. We require all sorts of things from you—your opinion, your advice, your assistance—if it is to be had."

"Come to the point, please."

"The point is a jungle picnic, which Miss Mowbray here is expiring to make, and the rest of the ladies to join. Of course, we can't attempt it without a jungle expert, and of course you're the best expert agoing. We were actually venturing to hope that you'd accept the post of leader; and now all the ladies are holding their breath in order to hear whether that hope has been in vain."

During the expectant pause that followed Major Athlick may or may not have been aware of eight pairs of eyes fixed enquiringly or even pleadingly upon him.

At the end of that moment he turned to Winnie:

"Is it a fact that you want to see the Jungle?"

"Yes—and to meet Bagheera, if possible, or at least Baloo."

"And supposing it is Shere Khan?"

"No such luck!" sighed the depressed Captain. "The Shere Khans are growing extinct in our piece of jungle,—thanks to you amongst others. Chances are we won't rise above parrots and monkeys."

"Oh, *dear* Major Athlick, you're not going to say no!" implored Mrs. Nims, with a large slice of her soul laid into the eyes fixed upon him, while both Mrs. Bowdler and Cassie watched with strained attention.

"If we go without your guidance you'll be responsible for the consequences, mind, Major!" put in Kerr, by way of pressure. "And we're determined to go, aren't we?"

"Quite determined!" echoed Winnie, still smarting under her recent defeat.

"Do you want my opinion on this thing?"

"Haven't we asked for it?" in chorus.

"It strikes me as a hare-brained undertaking" (repeated chorus of groans), "but if you're absolutely gone upon it you may as well have somebody who knows his way about."

"That means that you accept?" came from Mrs. Bowdler incredulously and ecstatically.

"Upon one condition."

"Name it."

"Unquestioning obedience from all parties. If I've to manage the camp I've got to command it."

"We'll not so much as wink without a regimental order," asserted Boxtton, when the clamorous acquiescence

had subsided, and while the rest of the company were exchanging glances of pleasant relief, for the victory had been far easier than anticipated—astonishingly easy to those who knew the Major best.

“And you’ll make it all right with the Colonel, won’t you; about the week’s leave?” insinuated Boxtton, dates and methods having been roughly discussed.

“Yes, I’ll make it all right. Do I understand that the party consists of everyone now sitting at this table?”

“Exactly; unless there are a few more ladies anxious to—”

“Ah, no more ladies surely,” decided Mrs. Bowdler, somewhat in a hurry. “It makes such a lot of baggage, you know.”

“As if it was women one went to look for in the jungle!” she commented to Cassie an hour or so later, while the yellow hair was being brushed out. “It’s bad enough having Mrs. Nims of the party—but that’s got to be lumped, I suppose. And now we have three days left to put our heads together, Cassie. You won’t have such an opportunity as this for a long sight ahead, and it’s just got to be made the most of.”

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## CHAPTER IV.

## THE JUNGLE PICNIC.

It was very early on the morning of the jungle picnic's third day that Winnie, on all fours, crept out of the tent shared with Mrs. Nims, for the time being still blissfully asleep in a pose quite worthy of her statuesque reputation. How anyone could sleep thus peacefully in the midst of surroundings which so teemed if not actually with excitement, yet with its elements, was to Winnie a mystery.

She herself, at any rate, was not going to waste precious time, now that after a short but tiresome railway journey, and two days of progress along dusty cart tracks open to all the airs of heaven, they seemed at last to have reached something which partially answered to her ideas of the jungle; for open stretches of waist-high grass, thinly dotted with thorn bushes, had far from done that. It was only since yesterday that the real tree-jungle, closing stealthily around the party, had begun to convey to her some of that sense of impenetrability which the very word seems to imply. Even here there had, at first sight, been a slight sense of disappointment, not only because, seen from a distance, many of these trees could have passed for English specimens, but also because of a certain starved look about these inhabitants of the

wilderness, precariously existing upon an arid soil. It was not until she was well within the area of these pinched-looking acacias and gaunt date palms, crowding together before and behind her pony like a very tree-mob as they were, ragged but persistent, that something of the spirit of the jungle began to tell upon the newcomer. Was it the total cessation of all marks of cultivation, succumbing before the triumphant invasion of rank bheer grass, or was it the density of the thorny undergrowth, making of the forest one monstrous piece of covert, which at length bore in upon her the fact that this was indeed the wilderness, holding in its prickly hand all the wilderness's potentialities?

With the conviction came a welcome thrill. Excitement, even spiced with danger, was what she required, and the excitement of the new surroundings of every day—though undoubtedly they had served their turn as diversions—was beginning to wear off. You cannot both marvel and pine at one and the same time. There had been so much to marvel at in the early days of her stay that pining had almost necessarily to be restricted. But by this time she was too used to knowing herself a "Mem," and Kerr a "Sahib," even to smile at the appellation, just as it had become quite natural to be waited upon by white figures with what seemed to her black faces, instead of by black figures with white ones. So far as one's inner existence was concerned living in a bungalow flanked by a compound was not really so very different from living in a house with a garden. The Jungle Picnic had come just in time to stimulate relaxing surprise. She must make the most of it too, since already Major Athlick, supreme and somewhat

tyrannical commander of the party, had decided apparently in consequence of information received from a stray villager, and which he kept to himself,—to alter the track of the small caravan, in favour of more open country. A stroll within the precincts of the camp—the orders to keep within bounds being strict—would at least be better than nothing.

It was so early still that Winnie enjoyed the rare luxury of a shiver as she stood up upon the dew-drenched grass. The sun had not yet got through the thick mango foliage overhead, and beside the spent fires even the coolies were still asleep, while the tents lay around as grey and as silent as so many tombs. Only the four-footed things were astir; tethered ponies and bullocks breakfasting side by side on the high grass, while the one elephant which had been brought for the sake of local colouring and in whose howdah the ladies took turns, by way of a change from side-saddles, blinked his eyes gravely and knowingly at Winnie across the back of his snoring *Mahout*.

A cart-track led off among the bushes; she would follow it just a little way, thought Winnie; as far as that sunlit patch which presumably marked a bit of open ground, from which a better impression of the surroundings could be gained. But the sunlit patch proved a fraud, being no more than a triangle of *bheer* grass, lying like a kerchief flung there among the dense brush-wood. No possible outlook to be gained from here.

But how about that foot-path—surely it was a foot-path?—winding away in so insinuating a fashion, and uphill, too, which seemed to promise a view? It was against orders, of course, but who would be the wiser,



since she would be back in five minutes, that was the utmost she could allow herself, just round that tantalising clump of guava which stood like a screen between her and the unexplored.

With a heart whose beats were no more than pleasantly quickened, since the jungle had, so far, not shown her as much as a claw or a tooth, and the neighbourhood of those tents conveyed a solid sense of safety, Winnie engaged in the track of down-trodden grass. Behind the guava screen there were more guava screens, and walls of acacia and wild pear which effectually blocked the expected view. Having turned the one corner it became almost a necessity to turn more corners—to anyone at least as loath to relinquish a purpose as was Winnie. It was not till several minutes later that she stood still reluctantly, aware at last that the jungle was poking its fun at her. She had halted once or twice, once to watch a couple of strange-plumaged birds, hopping along a branch overhead, another time to gather the waxy white blossoms of a creeper dangling straight into her face. She had meant to turn after that; but by the time her hands were full her head was empty of all sense of direction. Was this the way she had come?—or this? How decide when everything on all sides was so exactly alike, and when, moreover, the one track seemed, in some inexplicable way, to have abruptly multiplied? On three or four sides at once she became aware of just such paths as she had been following—winding streaks of down-trodden grass—or had it not been a path at all, all the time, but just a chance track, devoted, maybe, to the need of four-footed, instead of two-footed things?

A rustle just then in the leaves close by started her off, walking more quickly and almost at random, though she thought she remembered that protruding branch across the way. The pace at which her heart was beating was now growing a little inconvenient, if illogical, since of course she knew that, so near the camp, there could not be any real danger. "Why, if I shouted they would have to hear me," she reassured herself by saying aloud. "I don't think I've walked for more than five minutes."

If she did not shout it was principally from the fear of being disapproved of in first line by that martinet of a Major, of course, who expected such implicit obedience, and whom such an incident would only strengthen in his apparently rooted conviction of no woman ever being able to take care of herself.

So silently she pressed on, automatically clutching the white blossoms in her hand, ducking her head under the protruding branch and then standing still again, apprehensively to reflect. She had not had to duck her head before, so this could not be the same branch, and consequently not the same path. She had better get back to that clump of white creepers, and there take her bearings again. But where was that clump now? Not in the spot where she had left it surely, and to which she imagined herself to be retracing her steps—the jungle had swallowed it up—no, there it had produced it again—and multiplied it too—three, four columns of white within sight, and nothing to tell her which was the right one.

A weird sense of enmeshment, of being caught in a huge, green net began to descend upon the now thoroughly frightened Winnie. Without thought of Major Athlick

or of anyone else she attempted one shout, then held her breath to listen to the awful silence. It could not be, surely, that she was lost—in the jungle? The terror-laden thought refused to shape itself in her mind. She had heard stories, but no, the first necessity undoubtedly, was not to lose her head. These tracks must lead to some goal, after all, since as she now noticed, the grass was all trodden down in one direction; perhaps to one of the grazing-grounds with which she knew that the jungle was riddled. And where there are flocks there must be herds.

Resolutely she set off in the direction in which the bent grass seemed to point, and which now led as distinctly downhill as at first it had ascended. Other down-trodden strips merged, at short intervals, into this one. As she noted it, scraps out of the Jungle Book—devoured in the Mosscliffe schoolroom not so very long ago—hummed in her head, and to her excited fancy it would scarcely have seemed strange to see Bagheera, the black panther, step out of the bushes, or Kaa, the giant serpent, glide across her path. Her breath was coming fast and the flowers in her hands were torn to shreds when after ten minutes which had seemed like ten hours the track under her feet\* dipped abruptly, and she stopped herself just in time from stumbling down an almost vertical incline.

And now, for a space, her terror vanished, its place usurped by wonder and delight. It was on the edge of a ravine that she found herself standing, the deep-cut bed of one of those water-courses which alone make life in the wilderness possible. The feast of colour which met Winnie's eyes was something worth purchasing even at

the cost of the last ten minutes. For here the pink oleanders rioted up and down the slopes, set off by the luscious green of figs grown fat upon the precious moisture, while the dhak trees stood ankle-deep in the red-gold of their own shed blossoms. Below her feet the yellow earth-scarp fell away, its nakedness clothed in flowering creepers of many hues as in a wonderfully embroidered tunic, its crevices feathered with young bamboo as with a forest of green ribbons. Between the bluish boulders of the water-course the dark water stood in pools like polished shields, against which the first slender lances of sunlight which had yet pierced the shadows of the enchanted spot, shivered into sparks as golden as themselves. While Winnie gazed spell-bound, there was a hoarse cry and a flutter, and with a flash of blue and gold, a wild peacock rose from the pool in which it had been bathing, and down to the very edge of which the soft clay was deeply marked with footprints, large and small. The path she had been following was no more than one of the many game-tracks leading to a favourite drinking-place of the "jungle folk".

A sound that might have been a sigh breathed close above her head brought her heart into her mouth. On a branch just beyond reach a hairy form crouched, with skinny hands folded upon its stomach and anxious eyes peering from under a wrinkled brow at the river-bed below. Not the first grey ape which Winnie had seen, but the first viewed so near, and now curiously examined. Strange that it should take so little notice of her presence, being evidently too busy studying something at the bottom of the ravine to have more than a passing glance over for its near neighbour. Was it watching for

prey, Winnie wondered, and had the flight of the peacock perhaps disappointed a *paterfamilias* of his breakfast? Instinctively Winnie's eyes followed the direction of the ape's, which seemed, however, to be staring at nothing more unusual than the play of the sunlight upon some almost black-green bushes by the edge of the largest of the pools. It was brilliant sunlight too, unusually yellow and unusually streaky, and it was shifting in a way that sunlight——

“Good gracious!” said Winnie below her breath, and then—again instinctively—looked up at the monkey who this time, looked back at her, in the exchange of a glance of mutual dismay.

When her terror-stricken eyes again sought the dark-green bushes all remnant of doubt was removed, for the yellow and black creature had rolled over on its side, and was now lolling among the rushes, almost clear of the covert; nothing but an over-grown cat, with the very gestures, the very attitudes which Winnie had so often watched in the Tabbies of old days; and making a fool of herself for the amusement of her kittens, exactly as Tabby had always done, for about her and over her there scrambled three plump and vigorous cubs taking mock bites out of their mother in the usual, approved way. There, that cuff of the limp paw—a mock cuff, of course—how often had Winnie seen it done upon the hearthrug at home.

A groan from her companion in alarm quickly scattered all the familiar impressions, and with a shock brought her back to the consciousness that a scarp of some fifteen feet in height was all that separated her

from that most murderous of all combinations: a tigress in charge of her cubs.

"She has not noticed me," thought Winnie confusedly, "and if I stay very still, perhaps she will not notice me."

But staying still meant being nailed to the spot, which yet every nerve in her body was tingling to leave; and nailed thus she remained for minutes which she could not attempt to count, barely daring to draw breath; almost determined at one moment to turn and make a rush for it, and in the next shuddering at the thought of the unavoidable rustle of branches and of the sudden pricking of those yellow ears down below, and all the time unable to take her eyes off the picture of horrible, of murderous grace displayed beside the big pool. The height of the scarp was scarcely enough to justify vertigo, and yet from moment to moment she grew dizzier as she watched.

It was a light but unmistakable touch upon her shoulder which broke the trance of terror.

Winnie could never understand how it was that she did not shriek aloud, yet the fact remained that it was in wide-eyed silence that she turned to find Major Athlick at her elbow with his rifle across his shoulders, and upon his sunburnt face a frown of what looked like almost passionate displeasure. His lips did not move, but already he had noiselessly stepped back and was beckoning peremptorily. As dumbly as he led Winnie followed. The mere recognition had been enough to disperse the sense of dizziness, and to loosen something like an iron band which had apparently been cramping her thinking powers.

They had walked for several minutes thus single file, Winnie instinctively imitating the caution with which her guide was treading before, upon a small clearing, he abruptly faced round.

"And now, Miss Mowbray, I will trouble you to let me feel your pulse."

"What for?" she asked, taken aback.

"To enable me to judge whether or not you are to be considered responsible for your actions. Nothing but a touch of jungle fever could excuse this. Unless you are deaf you must have heard the order given out last night."

The anger—real, unmistakable anger—in the light-grey eyes playing upon her from under the sun-helmet was so unmistakable that no thought of resistance or even of self-justification came to Winnie.

"I know it was foolish," she admitted.

"Foolish? It was *wrong*. If I had not heard that shout you might still be standing at the edge of that bank, and if it had not been for the wind coming the right way you might not have stood even so long as you did stand. Why does your brother not look after you better? Has no one ever taught you to obey orders?"

"I don't think anybody has tried to give me any."

"High time they began. Did you suppose it was for fun I forbade any depassing of the camp boundaries for all but the rifles?"

"I won't do it again," came in a penitential murmur, while Winnie flung from her the remains of her tattered bouquet, withered already in the clutch of her hot hands.

"No, that you certainly will not, I shall see to that—nor have the chance either. Not a step farther do we

go into the jungle. I always said it was a mad idea to come here with women. Do you know that you have not got back your colour yet? I suppose you are going to faint?"

The harassed Major looked about him somewhat desperately, as though to ask assistance of the forest trees in what, undoubtedly, would be an awkward predicament.

"No, I am *not* going to faint," retorted Winnie, put back on her mettle by the very absurdity of the situation, "I have never done such a thing in my life, and I don't mean to begin here; but I would like to get back to the camp, if you please."

"You are sure you are able to walk?"

"Quite sure."

"This way, then."

He turned again, without any hesitation, and within the next minute Winnie found herself walking beside him on a cart-track amply wide enough for two.

"I'll say this much," Athlick grudgingly admitted, "that those creatures hadn't any right to be there. There were fifty to one chances against anything of the sort, for this is no tiger-country. If it was, the tents wouldn't be pitched here, be sure of that. But stray pairs are apt to put one out of one's calculations."

"I wonder you did not shoot," said Winnie glancing at the rifle on his shoulder. "Did you not feel inclined?"

"Inclined?" he repeated with a short wrathful laugh, while through his eyes there passed a covetous gleam which told its own tale.

"Then why did you not shoot?"

"Because I was not alone and because you never can



be sure of making a clean job of it with the first bullet. That scarp was anything but unassailable, and what do I know of your tree-climbing powers? Besides, women's nerves are so queer: it was on the cards that the shot might have frightened you more than did the tiger."

"That means that I have spoilt your 'kill' for you," said Winnie with her head still full of the *Jungle Book*. "But why need I? Why not go back and shoot the beast now, if you are so keen about it?"

"And leave you to find your way back to the camp as cleverly as you found the way out of it?"

Winnie bit her lip and walked on in silence. It was the first time that she was having anything like connected conversation with Major Athlick. The "man of blood and thunder" did not seem to have much use for words, and about the few he uttered there was no trace of either of the objectionable elements. Hitherto their intercourse had consisted chiefly of urgent injunctions touching wraps and head-coverings—usually disregarded.

"Muffling women in shawls is Athlick's one form of politeness," Boxton had said to her early in their acquaintance. "Seems to think that there's nothing like packing them up safely to keep them out of mischief." And the course of these first two days had certainly confirmed this view, as well as proved to Winnie that the "bear" had indeed a good deal of the bear about him, morally speaking, though not physically, since that active, sinewy frame could certainly not come under the description.

For the first time, as she walked beside him, it occurred to her to wonder how old he could be. The slight sprinkling of grey about his temples, as well as the thin-

lipped, unsmiling mouth had hitherto made him appear quite elderly; it was the lightness of the practised tread at her side, the elasticity of each lean limb which caused her mentally to take quite half a dozen years off his supposed age. Though he might not know how to move in a ballroom he certainly knew how to do so in the wilderness.

"But, after all, I am glad that I went!" she burst out after a period of silence, which had been moody at least on one side, if not on both. "I used to think that the gorge at Mosscliffe must be the most beautiful spot in the world, but what is it near that ravine and where is a kingfisher beside a peacock?"

"Is Mosscliffe your home?"

The voice in which Major Athlick put the question was quite an ordinary voice, with all the anger evaporated.

"It used to be my home. It is sold now—alas!"

"In the North? It sounds like a Northern name."

"Yes, in ——shire. Oh, what was that behind that bush?"

"Only a musk-rat. Are you feeling nervous?"

"Not a bit. I think it would be rather fun if something came out."

It was extraordinary how brave she felt in the near vicinity of that rifle barrel.

"——shire?" Athlick was repeating. "I've never been in those parts, but my father has, years ago, staying with a college friend—Sir Charles Garvice—dead for long now. It was his brother who succeeded him."

"Our nearest neighbour," said Winnie, with a quick thrill at the sound of the name. "The two houses are

quite close, with only the gorge, and the river, between. Do you know Sir Francis?"

"Not himself—but hasn't he got a nephew of the same surname who knocks about London?"

"Oh, you know *him*?" exclaimed Winnie, and then bit her lip again, provoked at her own imprudence.

"Not *know*, precisely, but I've run against him now and then in London crushes. A good-looking chap with a dark moustache, who seems to fancy both himself and his clothes pretty considerably?"

"He certainly is good-looking," agreed Winnie very stiffly, stung by the definition given, as by an insult. Could this be how her hero struck other people? But no—what judge could a person like this be?

"And who lives at your home now?"

"A beer-brewer, I am sorry to say—a rich one, of course—and I believe he means to use the river for working his brewery with electricity or something. What is that noise?"

Major Athlick stood still.

"The elephant having his morning tub. Those are the tents through the trees. I presume you will be able to reach the camp by yourself now."

"I presume so too," said Winnie, very frigid still, for that thumb-nail sketch of Julian rankled.

"Then perhaps you will excuse me. I have some business to settle before breakfast."

"Business with that tigress?" she asked, looking at him curiously.

But he passed over the remark as so much empty air.

"You would oblige me by not mentioning your ad-

venture until later on. No object in upsetting the ladies' nerves."

"Very well," said Winnie, and moved on. Not until his back was turned did it occur to her that she had not said as much as "thank you."

Behind her there was a low, very peculiar whistle, and presently Athlick's orderly went past her at a quick trot, followed by a couple of coolies.

An hour later, while the greater part of the party were gathered around a most excellent breakfast in the big dining tent—for under the Major's iron rule the commissariat worked impeccably—the flap was lifted to admit the commander in person looking slightly heated and bearing in his arms something soft and black and yellow which playfully clawed the tumbled front of his linen tunic.

"Oh, you have shot her then?" exclaimed Winnie with a thrill quite pleasurable of its kind, while the rest of the women put down their tea-cups looking slightly scared.

"A tiger-cub? Oh, Major Athlick, are there tigers about?"

Mrs. Bowdler's round face had lost a little of its colour—a thing which it could well afford to do.

"Not now, Mrs. Bowdler, make your mind easy."

"And the other two?" questioned Winnie.

"What other two?"

"That reminds me that I have still to call you to account, Mowbray," said Athlick, before Winnie had had time to speak. "When a young lady takes walks

in the jungle at daybreak I consider that her brother is responsible. If that's the way you look after her——"

Upon which, for several minutes, Winnie became the centre of interest and necessarily also of envy.

"And the sequel? Let's hear what happened after you went back!" urged Captain Nims.

But no amount of catechising could elicit more than that it had been a very easy shot and altogether a quite extraordinary piece of luck, which could not save Kerr from feeling suddenly rather small. Upon the strength of a pair of perratteets which he had shot before breakfast and had the joy of laying at Cassie Bowdler's feet, he had been regarding himself as the hero of the party until the flap of the tent lifted. Now he was feeling not only culpable as a brother, but despicable as a sportsman.

"Oh, give me the darling!" pleaded Mrs. Nims in her velvet voice. "Dear Major, make me a present of him! I have wanted a pet for so long."

"Sorry, Mrs. Nims, but I couldn't take the responsibility. Kittens are more appropriate toys for ladies, in my opinion. These things want a lot of taming."

"I'll back Mrs. Nims to tame anything that ever breathed," sighed the green subaltern, upon whom the process had been very successfully at work since the start of the picnic, at which remark the dejected Captain might have been observed to nod with conviction.

"As we all of us know, to our cost," laughed Boxton, who held a licence for saying things which others dared only think.

A gently reproachful look from the dark eyes was all that punished, or rewarded him.

"Oh, not all!" corrected Mrs. Nims with a smile

whose sweetness was marred by a spice of annoyance. "I am sure Major Athlick himself is untamable. But I should not be afraid to undertake the education of the cub."

"I daresay not. But I should be afraid to let you try it."

"Then what are you going to do with it?" asked Cassie Bowdler, merely for the sake of not being left out of the conversation.

"Rear it myself. I have waited long for such a chance as this."

"If the chance had come to a poor devil like me I'd have sent the brute home and got a good stiff price out of the Zoo," remarked Boxton, whose money-box suffered from chronic vacuum. "But of course *you're* in another boat."

"And if it had come to me," pronounced the Captain, "I think I'd have made a clean job of it, with another bullet. Make a pet of the King of the Jungle? I wonder it doesn't strike you as inartistic."

"Maybe, but I don't go in for art, only for experiments, occasionally, when they present themselves. And this is an experiment I have long intended to make. I rather like trying my hand upon things."

"The bullet would be more generous, I think," maintained the Captain. "What's the use of an existence which is a degradation? You'll teach it to lick your boots, I daresay!"

"No, I'll only teach it to know its master."

Athlick was gently tapping the soft, clawless paws which would have grabbed at his fingers.

"Even that must be bad enough, for a tiger."

"And even a tiger, I imagine, need not necessarily object to having a present made to it of its life."

"I think it must be rather horrid to owe one's life to anybody," observed Winnie as, with a touch of the fascination which had held her fast on the edge of the ravine, she watched the cub's gambols.

"There you have it! And Miss Mowbray isn't even a tiger. Pity this beast can't speak, else one might hear it plead for a quick end in preference to living in durance vile."

"I think that depends entirely upon the master," said Athlick indifferently, evidently tired of the controversy, and went again towards the entrance of the tent, then turned, with the flap already lifted.

"I must recommend the ladies to see to their packing since the tents will be struck in less than two hours."

"Which way are we going?" Mrs. Nims called after him, with a pout upon her crimson lips.

"Out of harm's way—be sure of that!"

And amid a half-rebellious and wholly unheeded murmur the flap fell too.

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## CHAPTER V.

## THE BURRA-KHANA.

"EVEN upon parade-ground I've seen our leader in a better temper than he is in to-day," Boxtton confided to Winnie, while upon the dusty wheel-track their ponies jogged abreast. "Wonder what it is that doesn't suit him?"

They were back in the grass country, Major Athlick having been as good as his word—or as bad—so the general verdict ran. No more deceptive paths among the thickets, no more feasts of colour beside secret riverbeds, only hillock after hillock crammed with date and cocoa-nut palm, or solitary mango groves with foliage so thick as to put bits of twilight into the very glare of midday, and with an ocean of giant grass billowing between. Enough, in truth, to rivet eyes and thoughts of all but the hardened Indian, though not quite enough to console Winnie for that deeper wilderness of which she had had so tantalising a glance.

And soon even this would be left behind. To-night was the last to be spent under tents, since to-morrow the haunts of civilisation would reclaim them. Already the patches of culture were multiplying, and more than one village had been sighted, their low roofs topping the forest of grass like so many brown toadstools. On this



last day of the week's camping there seemed to exist a tacit agreement as to making the most of the licence of the wilderness; and anyone desirous of gaining insight into the personal sides of the jungle picnic, would only have required to study the composition of the couples into which the company inevitably resolved itself.

Like the pillar of cloud which guided the Israelites through the desert, the veteran elephant—pride of the party—stalked at the head of the file, bearing in its howdah the Spartan matron, who, having during six days ridden herself sore and stiff, in order to vindicate the juvenility of Cassie's mother, had at last succumbed to the needs of her aching body. As, from under half-closed eyelids, she exhaustedly watched the progress of affairs in the rear she was wordlessly blessing Providence for having thought fit to bestow upon Cassie a straight seat on horseback. It made all the difference on occasions like this. Was it possible, actually possible, that the haven, sighed after during so many suffocating dances, so many endless tennis-parties, was in sight—at last?

Cassie herself, very slim, in a trifle wooden, in her holland habit, very *blonde* if that same trifle insipid under her pith helmet, was dispensing smiles as bright as she knew how to make them upon her attendant cavalier, whose limpid blue eyes were perilously neglectful of the roughness of the road.

Behind this pair—but by no means treading on their heels, since decent intervals was another thing which seemed to have been tacitly agreed upon, and not only because of the dust nuisance—came Mrs. Nims, engaged in giving the finishing touches to the social education of

the newling: behind these again Winnie with the indefatigable Boxton, whom she found as amusing but also as burr-like as ever, and whose small talk had successfully filled up all the conversational crevices of the past week. Finally Nims and Athlick, the former suffering from an aggravated form of his chronic dejection, the latter wordless and alert, herding the party before him as uncompromisingly as might do a Scotch shepherd a flock of sheep. More finally still the bullock carts with the baggage, upon one of which the frolicsome tiger cub gambolled in close proximity to its mother's skin.

"If we *were* on parade ground I've a notion that he'd give me a day's arrest on the smallest provocation, and yet I'm innocent of any desire to annoy him. He doesn't pounce upon Smithers in the way he does upon me for the tiniest offence against marching orders. To be sure, that may be because he thinks the youth is getting about as much good advice as he can carry, as it is. Have you ever seen so kind a person as Mrs. Nims?" asked Boxton on the strength of the decent interval aforementioned.

"Never! She seems to want to mother the whole world—me included."

"As for the verb," he commented, with a furtive grin scampering across his features, "I wouldn't answer for your having got hold of the right one. But about her kindness there's absolutely no two opinions; she does it all out of pure good nature, you know."

"All what?"

"That sort of thing," expounded Boxton, jerking an eyebrow in the direction of the advancing couple. "It's a process we all have to go through—belongs to the

regimental training so to say. Just as you've got to learn to stand at attention so you've got to have been in love with Mrs. Nims. I ought to know, seeing that I've been through the process myself."

"You? I thought you found her overwhelming?"

"So I do; that's why she overwhelmed me—for a time. It's as inevitable as nettle rash, but also as harmless. And once you've had it you're immune. It isn't her fault. I'm sure she'd paint her face black rather than destroy anyone's peace permanently. All she wants is the opportunity of telling you how deeply grieved she is by your venturing to adore her; and of placing some good advice, and promising to be your elder sister for ever after. It's her *spécialité*; and she does it just beautifully. So stupid of Nims to look dejected over it. As if one could expect to keep such a prize as that all to one's own self! He needn't grudge us the crumbs, anyway. Egoist!"

"At that rate she must have a good many younger brothers by this time."

"Almost as many as the regiment counts officers. But there are exceptions—Athlick, for instance. I fancy it rather annoys her. When you're making a collection of scalps, for instance—only that she'd never have the heart to scalp anybody—it *must* be riling not to be able to have it complete. By this time she's given him up as hopeless, I fancy. What can you do with a person who never by any chance wants advice, and the tenderer side of whose nature—if so it exists—is seemingly bound in buffalo hide? For a horse's points he has got an undoubted eye—more still for a tiger's—but as for a woman's——"

"I can almost forgive him the tigers now," mused Winnie; "since I saw that beast in the ravine, I think I have grasped what it is that makes tiger-hunters."

"One of the things that makes them is cash," sighed Boxton enviously. "If I had Nails' banking account I shouldn't treat myself to one tiger shoot less than he does."

"Nails?"

"That's our usual ticket for him, partly because he's as hard as nails, and partly because he's apt to hit the nail rather hard on the head when he comes down upon us."

"What a person you are for nicknames!"

"Not a person—a people. It's all in the day's work. Do you think I'm not aware of being known as 'Lieutenant Smalltalk' behind my back? Bless you, it amuses them, and doesn't hurt me."

"Have a care, Boxton!" came in sharp accents from the rear, "your pony is hustling Miss Mowbray's."

"There, didn't I say so?" asked Boxton, in an aggrieved undertone as he dropped back. "If his feelings were *not* bound in buffalo-hide," the comment ran on mentally, "I could almost imagine that my revered leader is doing me the honour of being jealous of my favoured position."

It may have been the consciousness of a certain grudge which, since the alteration of the route had been nursed against him, or it may have been something else which, on the last evening of the encampment, moved Athlick to an effort as unusual as it was astonishing. If the idea had been to conciliate the ladies, who for the

last three days had in an intangible sort of way been sulking with their self-elected dictator, then the object was gained; since at the mere sight of the flower-decked table and of menu-cards beside each plate—even though they might be but pages torn out of a pocket-book—eyes universally brightened and pouts turned automatically to smiles. Champagne bottles embedded in pails full of wet grass substantially heightened the festive impression; a distinct concession this, from a leader who had begun by confiscating even pocket-flasks, and never served out a drop of alcohol so long as the sun stood in the heavens, and even, after sunset with the hand of a miser.

“A *burra-khana* (big dinner) I do declare!” ejaculated Boxton, rubbing delighted hands.

Even Winnie felt glad that she had put on the nearest approach to a dinner-dress which her small kit contained—the more so as others had done the same. Cassie Bowdler had done even more than that. When Winnie, entering late, saw her brother leading what was apparently a high-caste native woman in white veils and silver bangles to a seat at the farther end of the dinner-table, her eyes opened wide, only to take in presently that the native had yellow hair and a white skin.

“It always amuses Cassie to dress up,” explained Mrs. Bowdler, with a lenient smile. And since the *ayah* packed up the costume by mistake—it’s a remnant of our last theatricals—the dear child couldn’t resist putting it on.”

Which explanation, of course, though it might do duty with the men, could not blind the women of the party to the fact that there had been no mistake what-

ever, and that this was but the last of many small and ingenious dodges practised by the pair during the fertile week past; such as the unexpected production of a guitar, to whose suggestive accompaniment Cassie, who possessed a rather thin but well-trained voice, obliged the company with songs of the "Home, sweet home," type, which, though utterly out of keeping with the surroundings, could not fail to work wild havoc in youthful bosoms of a sensitive cast. Among the "dodges" too might have been reckoned the bull's eye Kodak, which had proved so excellent a pretext for looking for "likely" subjects—under guidance, of course—and even the pocket-bible which, coming to light on the one Sunday which had fallen within the picnic's span, so deeply underlined the serious side of Miss Bowdler's character. But the native dress was, undoubtedly, the crowning effort.

"It's rather childish, perhaps," admitted Mrs. Bowdler, "but, after all, it's harmless."

As to its being harmless anyone who had chanced to notice the expression in a certain pair of limpid blue eyes might have had their doubts.

"I suppose I ought to have dyed my hair black and my face brown in order to be in keeping," said Cassie with a playfulness to which she rarely rose.

"That would have been a crime," responded Kerr in accents of such deep conviction that Cassie laughed gaily, her spirits going up by another degree. Not quite without ground, either, since paradoxically enough, she was looking her best in an attire which was at least as ill-suited to her personality as the guitar had been to the jungle. What she wanted in grace and graciousness

was to-day replaced by a certain *abandon* which had made a clean sweep of her inherent primness, while a streak of brilliant colour—not born solely of the rouge-pot—and an unusual brilliancy of eye which scarcely required the additional aid of champagne, helped to make the transformation more complete. For the moment at least, the chronically strained look upon the narrow face was gone, as well as the usual drop of acid from the else so stereotyped smile. Even good-natured Mrs. Nims, as she gazed, felt mildly provoked with herself, for not having thought of bringing with her a dress which upon herself would of course have been ever so much more “overwhelming.”

The flowers and the champagne had by no means exhausted the commander's resources, it appeared, since just as dessert was placed upon the table, the ears of the company began to be assailed by the wail of some indescribable instruments, blown and scraped by dingily white figures which, through the V-shaped opening of the dining-tent, could be dimly discerned simultaneously squatting and craning their lean necks for peeps at its interior. At the first note a gasp of astonishment had gone round. Major Athlick as *maitre de plaisir* was a character too new not to produce a sensation. A genuine desire to make up for past offences seemed the only explanation of the phenomenon; and in this sense the native band must be regarded in the light of a peace-offering.

“I acknowledge the excellency of the intention,” Boxtton confided to Winnie, under cover of what sounded like half a dozen kettles being clashed together and a kitten squealing itself to death between them, “but when

you have exactly as much musical ear as a veteran doorpost it would be prudent to choose another form of expression. I wonder how long we are expected to stand this!"

Meanwhile Mrs. Nims had genuine tears standing in her glorious eyes, to which the agony undergone by her ears was not perhaps quite alien.

"Dear Major Athlick!" she managed to make herself heard across the table, "*what* a splendid idea of yours! and how cleverly you have managed it! We can't wait a moment longer for drinking our gallant leader's health, positively we can't! only I'm afraid we shall have to ask them to pause for a little out there, or we sha'n't be able to hear the speeches."

A breath was drawn all round as the murdered kitten broke off short in the middle of its death-shriek, Captain Nims being already on his feet with his glass in his hand. In the twenty minutes that followed Boxtton and he relieved each other in the task of prolonging the respite gained, even Kerr and even the youthful Smithers who could not open his mouth without blushing to the tips of his large and puppyish looking ears, came nobly to the rescue. By the time all plausibly grounded bumpers were emptied the instruments outside could be heard tuning up again. Already a sense of dull resignation was settling upon the company when Athlick himself came to the rescue—unwittingly.

"I happened to find out that there's a juggling fellow in the village," he announced with as much amiability as remained in him after the late ordeal, "and as Miss Mowbray hasn't seen a *fakir* yet I fancied it might amuse her. He's waiting outside now. Will you have



him in at once or would you prefer another spell of music first?"

"Oh, at once! Have him in at once!" was clamoured in reply.

"Another peace-offering!" murmured Boxton, as at a sign from his master, Athlick's orderly left the tent.

It was now, while nimble coolies were disposing of the table and re-rearranging the chairs in a semi-circle, that a small incident occurred, quickly forgotten by Winnie, to be remembered and interpreted later on.

She was standing out of the way of the bustle when she became aware of Major Athlick beside her.

"You find Lieutenant Smalltalk very amusing, do you not?" he asked a trifle sharply, looking her straight in the eyes.

"Oh yes, very amusing."

"That's right! Only don't make the mistake of taking him seriously."

"Am I taking him seriously?" she asked in passing surprise.

"I don't know—I hope not. Oh, there's our gentleman!"

"Is *that* a fakir?" asked Winnie, curiously measuring a shrunken figure which stood salaaming in the entrance. Something of that initial disappointment conveyed by the first sight of the jungle moved her again. This long-maned but obsequious individual swathed in soiled linen and with a bunch of ragged curls—it really could not be called a beard—adorning his unwashed chin, struck her as anything but impressive and yet she was prepared, even anxious, to be impressed.

With the help of much good-will this end was fairly

attained during the performance which followed, though, in truth a mediocre one and which, under any other circumstances would have been pronounced a bore even by the tolerant Mrs. Nims. The name of the mango-trees which she—not to mention Mrs. and Miss Bowdler—had seen “grow” before their eyes was legion—so was that of the vanished and recovered rings, the apparently inspired rabbits and the broken-spirited cobras of the stock repertoire. But for the newlings it served. And as for Winnie, she sat absorbed, oblivious already of the magician’s unwashed chin, and genuinely terrified by the darts made by the hooded snake at the hands of the fakir who, cross-legged upon his carpet, tootled to the captive upon the orthodox reed-pipe. Not even Bostons’ positive assurance that no such thing as poison fangs existed in that cobra’s mouth could quite reassure her.

“Another instance of ‘durance vile,’” pronounced Captain Nims. “This cobra and that tiger-cub might shake hands if they happened to possess any. Not had enough of it yet, Miss Mowbray?”

It was clear, at any rate, that the cobra had, the reed-pipe being unable to get a single rise more out of him.

“He seems at the end of his tricks, does he not?”

“That will suffice,” said Athlick to the man in Hindustani. “No—no need to make a collection—you will be paid outside.”

Upon which the dishevelled sorcerer immediately became vociferous. He was not by any means at the end of his tricks he assured the audience—scarcely at the beginning. He could do much greater things than rear mangos and swallow rings—he could read the

thoughts of the Sahibs by merely touching their hands and could tell the Memes what colour of hair and eyes their future husbands would have.

"A soothsayer, by my troth!" ejaculated the extremely bored Captain Nims.

"I object to having my thoughts read," commented Boxton, "but I shouldn't mind having my future foretold—so long as he promises to make it nice."

Here Mrs. Bowdler who lately had been fighting with slumber was seen to bristle with sudden interest.

"What a splendid idea! Cassie, darling, do you hear that? I'm sure it would amuse you to have your future foretold. She is so easily amused, you know," came the obligatory aside.

"But supposing he promises me a husband who squints?" giggled Cassie, still in the heights of artificial glee.

"Me tell Sahibs of rupees which come to-morrow—day after—year after," gabbled the juggler as he thrust the snake into the inside of his shirt in as matter of fact a way as one might thrust a coil of cord, and stuffed the rabbit into the dirty linen bag which contained the rest of his primitive paraphernalia, "me say which huzzoor will get beautiful wife, which get none, which Mem will get puckha (real) Sahib for husband——"

"Well, I'll risk it!" laughed Cassie, meeting a distinct invitation in the small black eyes looking towards her from under the thatch of hair.

"Do!" breathed Kerr with a catch in his voice and a heart going at the rate of a motor of at least sixty-four horse-power.

A moment later the dishevelled head was bent with

seeming earnestness over Miss Bowdler's narrow hand—nearly as white as the gauze-like draperies from which it issued.

"This slave has words of joy," came the glib oracle presently, "upon the Mem with the hair of gold happiness waits; a puckha Sahib it is, who claims her, a true puckha Sahib—with eyes like the flower of the flax, and hair like its threads. And it will be soon, soon, for happiness knocks at the door. Is the Mem Sahib content?" asked the man, darting his small, cunning eyes—which the past performance had not held so exclusively occupied as to preclude observations—into Cassie Bowdler's face, where the vermilion flush abruptly deepened to crimson.

"Read mine too!" said Kerr, equally crimson and almost suffocating, as eagerly he displayed his palm.

"Another message of joy—how shall this wretch speak it? A Mem Sahib so beautiful that the sun hides its face, waits only for the word, a Mem with hair of gold."

"By Jove, he's laying it on a trifle thick though," murmured Boxton by Winnie's side. "Just look at Mother Bowdler!"

Following his glance, Winnie had almost a slight difficulty in recognising the Spartan mother in this beaming if purplish matron, bending approving eyes upon the prophet.

"Wasn't that gold your brother has given him? To match the hair, I suppose. That class of prophecy always comes expensive."

"What nonsense!" said Winnie just above her breath, and answering her own thoughts more than Boxton's words.

That Kerr had been enlivening the jungle picnic by a "flirt" with Miss Bowdler she was of course aware, and, though annoyed, had not felt apprehensive. It was now only, at sight of that triumphant maternal face that something like terror seized her, but only for a passing moment. Was not Kerr at least five years younger than the "Eleventh Hour"? The thing was too absurd to be alarming, and Mrs. Bowdler of course a bat, blinded by maternal anxiety. As swiftly as it had come the apprehension passed.

When Mrs. Nims had refused to have her fortune read, on the ground that she found the present so absorbing as to have no attention over for the future, and when Athlick had done the same upon no ground which he chose to mention, when to the other three men health, happiness and rupees had been dealt out in generous measure, the turn came to Winnie.

For a moment she thought that she too was going to refuse, then some impulse moved her to hold out her palm. It was all humbug, of course, she told herself, which could not prevent her heart beating rather faster than was convenient.

The stage pause preceding each prophecy was this time rather longer than usual, and anyone acquainted with the *nuances* of the profession might have seen by the contraction of the mahogany brow under the thatch that professional interest had at last been awakened.

"This hand not like other hands," he muttered, as, keen-eyed he pored over the delicate network of lines crossing and intercrossing upon Winnie's rosy palm. "This very curious hand, Memes have it not often. This slave seen such line as this three, four times in life-time

and this wretch has many years on head. The gods alone can say what will come of it; for see, the life-line is cut, as with a knife, that speak of short life, very short; but it is not clear, there are other lines, and they speak other things——”

“Humbug!” said someone between his teeth; to judge from the look of annoyance on his face, it seemed to be the commander who had spoken, while amid a general silence tinged with alarm, the fakir bent yet closer over Winnie’s hand.

“The gods alone know,” he commented, twisting his ragged beard with his left in what looked like genuine perplexity. “It is cut, and yet not cut. A great danger, or a great illness waits for the Mem, life hangs on a thread, but if the thread holds or holds not this slave cannot say, he sees only—— Ah, the light falls badly,” he interrupted himself quickly, meeting Winnie’s wide-eyed gaze of alarm and gliding back promptly into his obsequious manner. “The heaven-born’s slave mistook the lines, the broken line is there, but it mends, it mends, and goes on for more years than one poor tongue can count, by the side of a Sahib who has hair upon his upper lip as black as the raven’s wing and as shining as silk and whose tongue speaks sweet words, and many.”

“All’s well that ends well!” grinned Boxton.

“Is the Mem content?”

“Yes,” said Winnie, very rosy as she pulled back her hand.

The slight fright sustained was amply made up for by the conclusion, since how doubt now that this man could indeed see into the future? That Boxton like-

wise possessed a silky, black moustache, and likewise disposed of words which certainly were many if not exactly sweet, was a circumstance which entirely escaped her notice, but perhaps not that of the fakir.

"That will do now, surely!" said Athlick who was beginning to grow restive. "Shall I dispatch him?"

"No more Sahibs want future told?" asked the man with an insinuating glance around.

"None, I tell you. Get out now, and look *yeldi* (quick)!"

"But their thoughts," he persisted, backing doubtfully before Athlick. "This tent it not contain one Huzzoor who would desire to see his thoughts upon paper?"

Boxton pulled rather self-consciously at the important moustache.

"The 'slave' is many-sided, anyway!"

"What does he mean by 'upon paper'?" asked Mrs. Nims. "I don't think I have seen it done that way."

"This way, Heaven-born." He turned eagerly in her direction. "Paper lie on table—this hand upon it with pencil in it. The Presence lay its fingers upon this wrist—no more than the tips—so!—and put thoughts on something,—some person, some place,—anything,—put them strongly, and this hand move and write the word that stand in the mind of the Presence. Will the Mem Sahib try?"

"No thank you!" objected the regimental beauty. "The process sounds compromising."

"But *can* he write?" asked Smithers incredulously.

"Of himself the Sahib's slave can do nothing; with

the Sahib's fingers upon his hand he will write the Sahib's thoughts."

"It might be worth trying," suggested Kerr.

"Which of the Huzzoors will——"

"I!" said Winnie with a sudden resolution born of the recent elation. A strong desire to test the prophet upon this new field had hold of her.

"Miss Mowbray, believe me that's the super-humbug!" objected Athlick, whose annoyance was visibly growing.

"If it's humbug then it's harmless, anyway," she laughed.

The opposition was the one thing required to fix her resolve.

"Here's paper!" volunteered Boxtton, picking one of the primitive menu-cards off the table. "Plenty of room on the back—so long as you don't think of anybody with a fourteen-syllable name. And I've got a pencil, I think. This will do, won't it?" as he pushed aside a plate to gain space. "Keep your distance, ladies and gentlemen! No crowding round, *if* you please! I take this to be a strictly confidential matter, though I know you're all dying to see your names on that bit of paper! Do you think I'm not? And yet look at me!"

As he stepped back with a flourish, the others laughingly followed suit, leaving Winnie in partial isolation at the end of the table with the fakir by her side, the light from the keresone lamp over-head pouring down full upon the pocket-book leaf with the brown hand holding the pencil poised above it.

"Now the heaven-born's fingers—the ends of them, placed here—so!"



It had cost a slight effort to put even the tips of her fingers upon that brown wrist, but it was done already.

"Has the Presence got something in her mind?"

"Yes."

"Some person?"

"Yes."

There was silence in the tent while the brown hand, immovable till now, began first to quiver and then to move. Slowly and laboriously it traced one letter, then another while the wrinkled brow above contracted again, this time as though under the stress of some painful effort. There followed a third letter, a fourth—stared at by Winnie almost as a ghost might be stared at—until with wide incredulous eyes she spelled it out to herself:—

### JULIAN

clear and unmistakable, and traced in her own—albeit somewhat uncertain—hand and although that hand had not moved, to her knowledge.

"Ah!" she said in a mixture of alarm and delight, sharply lifting her fingers from the fakir's wrist.

As she did so a puff of night air sweeping in by the entrance carried the paper off the table and across the tent, almost to the feet of Major Athlick. He stooped to pick it up, crumpling it in his hand as he did so.

"Now get out with you, at last! we've had enough of this rubbish. *Yeldi! Yeldi!*"

There was so much urgency in the second of the *yeldis* that the sorcerer, who knew by experience when a Sahib meant business, complied without another word.

"Was the name on the paper the right one?" Mrs.

Nims presently asked of Winnie in the privacy of the sleeping-tent, outside which the village musicians presumably under the impression that they were performing a lullaby, were once more making night hideous.

"Yes, it was the right name."

"I am glad of that, at any rate," said the kind-hearted Juno as she kissed her companion's glowing cheek.

In the tent alongside Mrs. Bowdler, while she divested herself of the "plate armour," was meanwhile asking:—

"Do you think that has fixed him?"

"If it hasn't then nothing will," said Cassie, taking another look at herself in the mirror out of her dressing-case, as though regretful at parting from an attire so becoming.

The corners of her lips showed a confident smirk; for it is not mango-trees alone which can be forced into premature growth if only you know the right means to employ.

## CHAPTER VI.

## FRUITS OF THE JUNGLE.

UPON the water-sprinkled veranda sat Winnie in her thin white frock, with the Bougainvillia climber which swarmed up the pillars in the company of Maréchal Niel roses, festooned above her head, and by her side a neglected work-basket overflowing with Kerr's undarned socks. The fatigues of the jungle picnic, whose very conclusion was now two days old, were overcome, but its impressions still lived, inviting to dreamy reflexion. It was round its final phase—the thought-reader—that these chiefly centred. Of all that she had seen or heard this had left the deepest mark—deeper even than the sight in the ravine. A regret mixed with it. Why had she not preserved that mystic scrap of paper on which her startled eyes had read Julian's name? She had seen Major Athlick first crumple it in his hand and then tear it to small pieces—which at least showed his discretion—without finding the courage to claim it. It was reassuring at any rate to reflect that no one had had time to read it—the fakir himself being illiterate.

Where could Kerr be staying so late? He must have left his office long ago. Was he playing tennis on the club-ground again? fancy playing tennis in this temperature! thought Winnie somewhat languidly. It was

wonderful how cool Miss Bowdler managed to keep throughout the most hotly contested set, and how neither her hair nor her temper ever seemed to get ruffled.

The falling to of the gate at the end of the brilliant little compound, in which Nature was head gardener caused her guiltily to stretch for the sock nearest to hand. Kerr should not find his little housekeeper with hands lying idle in lap. Dear boy, how bright he looked, and how perfectly ridiculously boyish as in his white suit he came along between the red and yellow and purple flower-masses. Why, he looked even brighter than usual, and the limpid blue eyes were shining with something that was more than the normal *joie de vivre*.

"Win—ah—that's right! Saves me a hunt through the house."

He stooped to kiss her effusively, rather to Winnie's own surprise, since his affectionate nature notwithstanding, Kerr was too genuinely British to care for "rubbing noses." She even had the impression of something peculiarly cordial in that brotherly kiss, as well as of being measured with a more than usually approving gaze.

"Dear me, Kerr, how pleased you look!"

"I am pleased, just rippingly pleased. That's to say," as he corrected himself to a fitting sense of gravity, "I have something to say to you, Winnie,—something of the very first importance and which absolutely will not bear keeping. No one in these front rooms?"

Through the mosquito curtains he took rapid stock of the interior, then came to sit down on the canvas chair opposite to Winnie's own, hitching up his duck trousers as he did so, with all the seriousness which the operation demanded.

"Out with it, Kerr, I'm all ears!"

"You'll be all eyes in another moment—unless indeed—one never knows with girls—possibly it will surprise you less than it did me."

"Do you call it kind to keep me upon tenter-hooks? I call it cruelty to animals."

"Well then, here goes—I mean please give me your attention. The long and the short of the matter is that within the last hour a proposal of marriage has been laid before me—for you."

"A proposal—of marriage—for me?" incredulously repeated Winnie.

"Just so. Ah, I thought it would make you open your eyes. So you weren't aware of the conquest you had made? Honour bright?"

"But who?" gasped Winnie, seized with inevitable curiosity, "who? and why should he go to you instead of to me?"

"Considering I'm your natural protector," pronounced the head of the family, hitching up his collar as gravely as he had done his nether garments, "that part of the matter is surely natural enough."

"His name, Kerr? his name?"

"Don't push the thing too far, Win, by pretending you can't guess."

"The only possible person I could think of would be Mr. Boxtton, and I'm quite sure he isn't a marrying man."

"It isn't Boxtton."

"But there is nobody else, except Major Athlick; and of course he——"

She stopped short, struck by the delighted twinkle in her brother's eyes.

"Kerr, you can't mean to say——"

"Can't I though! I'm straight from the interview in which Mark Athlick, Esq., junior major in H. M. Black Dragoons, asked me to lay his case before you, and actually condescended to consult me concerning his chances. There!"

"Major Athlick!"

With another and deeper gasp of astonishment Winnie sank back in her chair, the half-darned sock dropped to her lap. In the next moment the ludicrous side of the situation had come uppermost.

"Oh, it's too funny—quite too funny!" she declared with a quick little burst of laughter. "That's to say it would be too funny if it were true; but you're joking, Kerr, aren't you? and I admit that the joke is good."

But when she looked across to Kerr for sympathy there was no laughter in response, only a look of dignified annoyance.

"I really can't see where the joke comes in, Winnie. "Girls certainly are incalculable. Here I bring you a message which is a perfectly serious offer of marriage, and all you do is to burst out laughing in my face."

"I see, Kerr—I—beg your pardon."

She had pulled herself together already, conscious at last that the incredible thing was actually genuine.

"You see, what took me by surprise was the absence of—of preliminaries. I don't think I've exchanged more than a hundred words with Major Athlick, and they weren't even all of them exactly—well—amiable."

"Ah, he's not of the flirtatious sort, I grant you that; but lots of people do dispense with the preliminaries, you know."

"Still it's the usual way."

"An unusual way needn't be a bad one, need it?"  
Meanwhile Winnie had been reflecting.

"I can only see one explanation for it. Since that morning stroll in the jungle he is profoundly convinced that I can't take care of myself, and for some inscrutable reason he considers himself responsible for me. His proposal springs from a twisted sense of duty, yes, that's it, I think."

"Nonsense, Winnie, that's not it at all. You're on a wrong tack altogether. There was no 'sense of duty' about Athlick just now when he came to my office."

"You don't mean to say that he told you, he—he cared for me?"

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but it was implied, quite as plainly as anyone could wish. It's surprising in a way, but I'm sure he cares."

"That's a pity, certainly, since I don't."

"But you might get to, mightn't you?" questioned Kerr, watching his sister's face with a hint of anxiety upon his own. "Athlick may be a bit crusty on the outside, but he's an awfully fine fellow. There's only one voice in that matter."

"Oh, he has more qualities than I should care for in a husband, and more years too, if it comes to that."

"That's rubbish, he isn't old a bit: barely thirty-seven, he told me so himself. And I'd back him to knock any two of his own size into a cocked hat."

"Dear me, Kerr," said Winnie, with another laugh, of pure astonishment this time, "one would almost think that Major Athlick has been bribing you, or is it only that you're so anxious to be rid of me?"

At this he flushed hotly and spoke somewhat more precipitately.

"What an idea, Winnie! You know it's not that. It's only your good I'm thinking of—your happiness; and this seemed such a piece of luck. Athlick's a good sort, and—and very well off."

There was a slight silence after that, while Winnie played abstractedly with the most forward of the Maréchal Niel roses, which had laid its head almost in her lap.

"What am I to say to him?" asked Kerr, after that pause, and having cleared his throat.

"Nobody asked you, Sir," she said, "that's what you've got to say to him, of course. I thought you had gathered that much."

Kerr's transparent countenance broke into agitation as plainly as does a wind-stirred sea into waves.

"But oughtn't you to take time to consider it, Win?" he asked, running his hand perplexedly through his close-cropped curls. "It's not the sort of offer to be chucked aside like an old shoe, after all." Then a trifle shame-facedly:—

"He'll have ten thousand a year, in time; he told me so."

"Kerr!"

"I beg your pardon," he stammered, collapsing before the look in the hazel eyes. "I didn't mean anything—disagreeable. Of course you wouldn't take him for his money alone, but mightn't you get to care for him for himself—if you tried?"

"Thank you, I don't mean to try."

"You'll think over it, at least?" pleaded Kerr almost humbly.



"It requires no thinking over. If to-morrow you won't tell Major Athlick that although I feel flattered or honoured—or whatever one is on those occasions—I much regret not being able to return his sentiments, then I suppose I shall have to tell him so myself. It isn't fair to keep him waiting."

There was so much finality of tone in the little speech that Kerr sat back in his chair, silenced at last, although evidently very much against the grain.

"That's a pity," he said slowly after a moment. "I had been thinking——"

"What had you been thinking, Kerr?"

He laughed with a sort of amiable sheepishness new to Winnie, colouring up to the roots of his curly hair, while he studied his canvas shoes.

"That we might have made a double wedding of it."

"Double—wedding?"

"Yes—you see;—fact is," the canvas shoes becoming all at once absorbingly interesting, "I daresay it won't surprise you much—after the picnic—but fact is, Miss Bowdler and I—that is Cassie and I—have fixed it up between us. I was on my way to tell you so when Athlick waylaid me."

"Fixed up what, Kerr?"

"Our getting married, of course. Really, Win—with a touch of annoyance—"you're not over quick to-day. I scarcely dared to hope, but Cassie has actually consented to become my wife. I'm an awfully lucky fellow, I take it."

"Your wife?" came from Winnie with a panic-stricken cry. "But she's five years older than you are, Kerr—five years, at least."

The blue eyes left the duck shoes to blaze indignantly into her face.

"What have years got to do with it? A woman is only as old as she looks, and Cassie is just lovely, and she returns my affection, and nothing will induce me to give her up. Is that all you have got to say to me? I thought you were going to wish me joy."

In the boyish voice the tears did not seem very far off.

It would have needed less than that for Winnie's heart to smite her.

"Kerr, dear boy," she murmured, overturning the basket of socks as she leant forward to get at his hand, "of course I am ready to wish you all the joy possible, if only I could be sure that this is for your happiness."

"I tell you that it is; and surely I am able to judge better than you can; I'm not a baby, though you seem to think so. And, look here, Win, I do wish you would stop apostrophising me as 'boy!' It's out of place, considering the—circumstances."

He gave another and slightly sulky twitch to his collar. Clearly it was his own youth that was the sore point, rather than Miss Bowdler's age.

Speechless, Winnie stooped to collect the scattered socks, striving to do the same by her thoughts, meanwhile. But the respite was too short to bring much success. A vague and formless horror of the future was upon her—the future so abruptly so unexpectedly transformed. With that she would grapple later; meanwhile the only conclusion to be reached was that same sense of finality which had come to Kerr himself when listening to her decision concerning Athlick. This thing was

to be—that was clear—and Kerr was hurt by her reception of the news—that too was clear.

“I’m horrid!” she burst out, rising to throw her arms around him. “Don’t mind me, Kerr; it was just the fear of—of losing you. You know, don’t you, that whatever makes you happy will make me happy too?”

And, for fear lest he should see the tears in her eyes she hid her face against his shoulder.

It was not until Kerr, disarmed on the instant, had half suffocated her in a brotherly hug, that he discovered the wet blotch upon his shoulder.

“Hullo, Win!” as he looked from that to his sister’s eyes—“what’s the sense of this? And what’s this talk about losing me? Didn’t I tell you at Mosscliffe already that even if I—if something like this happened—it wouldn’t alter anything about the future? If you had cared to accept Athlick you would have had a finer and bigger home, that’s all, but so long as you’re content with what I have to give you this remains your home all right. You understand, don’t you, Winnie,” he insisted, “that nothing is altered about the future?”

“I understand,” said Winnie with a heart which, despite the obvious sincerity of the tone, sank like lead within her.

“I told you then, did I not, that you would have gained a sister—and so you have.”

With difficulty Winnie repressed a shudder. A sister in the “Eleventh Hour!” a sister in the woman of whose persistent grudge she had been convinced ever since that unlucky moment in the Club ball-room! In spirit she saw again that cold glance of spite in the grey-green eyes. “What is Cassie Bowdler to me?” she had

said to herself, recklessly, then. And now it turned out that Cassie Bowdler was to be—her sister! Ah, Lieutenant Smalltalk, Lieutenant Smalltalk, what mischief has your glib tongue set agoing there!

“But supposing she doesn’t want me for a sister?” said Winnie helplessly, which had the sole effect of sending Kerr into a trance of indignation. As if such an angel as his Cassie was not just quivering to open her lovely arms to all the sisters of the universe!

“That just shows how little you know her,” he asserted with all the triumph of superior information. “One of the first things I spoke to her about—after the—the other things, you know—was you—and she was so hugely nice about it; said that of course you would live with us, until you got a home of your own; looks forward to knowing you better, and so on.”

“Really?” said Winnie, catching at a straw of hope. It was true, after all, that she knew Cassie Bowdler hardly at all. Was it not within the bounds of possibility that there might be agreeable discoveries to make?

“Yes, really. And Mrs. Bowdler as well. She’s going to live with us too, you know. She thinks her pension will be a help. So we will be quite a family party from the very first,” laughed Kerr rather more hilariously than seemed called for.

“But I have no pension, Kerr; my wretched forty pounds won’t fall much into the balance. Are you sure I sha’n’t be a burden to you?”

“A burden? What rot! Cassie has a hundred a year of her own, which with my pay and Mrs. Bowdler’s pension will bring us up to near seven hundred pounds. We sha’n’t really be half badly off—well enough off,

anyway, to afford ourselves the luxury of your society, dear girl," argued Kerr, who was speaking with that sort of emphasis which is meant to silence lurking doubts. "And it's not a sister alone that you will have gained—it is a mother as well. Mrs. Bowdler herself told me that she is longing to take you to her heart."

"Really," said Winnie again, this time without any conviction. Not even the biggest stretch of imagination could enable her to see herself in the position suggested by the Spartan mother.

"Fact is she's waiting to do so now. There's plenty of time before dinner. What would you say to coming with me right along?"

"Now?" repeated Winnie in a fresh access of terror, quickly repressed by that peculiar impulse which Englishmen define by the desire of taking the bull by the horns, and Germans liken to the biting into a sour apple. For Winnie, it was indeed a very sour apple which had ripened within the jungle.

"No use in putting it off," Kerr was urging beside her.

"No, you are right, there is no use at all," she agreed with a sternness of resolution which, to Kerr, at least, seemed quite out of keeping, with so propitious an occasion.

Since the thing had to be done expedition was all that remained to her.

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## CHAPTER VII.

## STRONG POINTS.

THE Bowdlers' bungalow lay at the opposite extreme of the set of straggly streets spread, spiderweb-fashion, around the central bazaar (within which, in truth many and divers spiders sat and waited for their prey) known as the town of Mangopore. During the drive in the buggy, hastily requisitioned, Winnie therefore, had ample time to form good resolutions. Already she was quite determined to look at Cassie Bowdler, not through her own eyes, but through Kerr's. Nothing could exceed her readiness to start afresh, with a clean slate, so long only as Cassie was willing. The optimism of twenty years had caught sight of all sorts of chances and also of excuses. It was quite natural, after all, unavoidable, in fact, that Cassie should have felt annoyed by that unlucky remark. It must be hard indeed to feel all but stranded, so to say, upon the desolate rock of spinsterhood, to long, no doubt, for a home of one's own, perhaps to tremble before the enhanced loneliness which the future must bring and, the tint of Mrs. Bowdler's complexion being taken into consideration might not be long in bringing. Yes, there were plenty of extenuating circumstances. All depended now upon whether or not she was morally capable of digesting an offence. Towards

the sister of the man she loved ought she not to relent? And it was to be supposed that she loved Kerr, since she was going to marry him.

But upon this reflection came another, like a jet of cold water.

“No reasonable offer refused.”

With a recrudescence of the annoyance which she already felt towards Boxtton, Winnie turned from the tiresome remembrance.

The bungalow in which the widow of the District Commissioner lived was both bigger and more luxurious than the Mowbrays' new home. On the outside everything invited the visitor to enter, while in the inside everything loudly advertised the housewifely qualities of the fair daughter of the house. Elaborate contrivances for coolness, flowers tastefully disposed in china vases, dainty needlework lying visible, nothing was wanting which could suggest to the chance guest that he who gained for his own the author of these wonders would indeed be a man to be envied.

As, on the heels of Kerr, she penetrated into the artificially darkened room, right through the strings of the ~~bed~~ curtain which with a soft clink, fell to behind her, Winnie felt both blind and dizzy, but not for that less valiantly determined. Right through the artistic twilight—so becoming to any complexion not absolutely in its heyday of freshness—she made for Cassie, unmindful of the Spartan mother who, open-armed was bearing down upon her between a wilderness of lacquered tables laden with bric-à-brac. Resolutely, she threw her arms around the upright neck.

“Kerr has just told me,” she almost panted, “and I

was so surprised, so glad, I mean; and I'm sure you'll make him very happy, won't you?"

As she clung round Miss Bowdler's neck with a vehemence of which she was unaware, Winnie was almost crying from sheer agitation. It was Cassie's responding kiss, just touching her cheek, which brought her to her senses, as ice may cool fever.

"My dear Miss Mowbray, I beg your pardon, your name is Winifred, is it not? and I may call you so now, I suppose? Surely there is nothing to cry about? One would almost think," with a little smile that aimed at playfulness, "that I was murdering your brother instead of marrying him. It was very good of you to come so quickly. I hope it means that we shall get on."

It was only on hearing the composed accents that Winnie became aware of how ill-governed her own tone had been.

"If you make him happy, of course we shall get on," she declared, dabbing her eyes, and quite illogically chilled to the heart.

"I have the best intentions, I assure you," said Cassie with a modesty which was the reverse of convincing. "And meanwhile, I hope you won't mind my mentioning that you are choking me. Besides, Mamma is waiting for you."

After which Winnie found herself passed on to Mrs. Bowdler and able to convince herself personally of the consistency of the plate armour.

"Does she want to crush me against it, I wonder?" she asked herself, gasping between the substantial arms.

"I have just been telling Winnie what a happy family we shall be," remarked Kerr when, initial emotions being



calmed, he found himself seated beside the adored of his heart, the amiable sheepishness once more conspicuous, as he struggled to fit himself to the new rôle.

"Ah, a *very* happy family!" echoed Mrs. Bowdler with conviction, still keeping a firm hold of Winnie's hand and peering into her face with an attention, presumably the outcome of new-born affection.

"Such a big family too," smiled Cassie with a side-glance at her fiancé whose eyes devoured her, unabashed.

"For the beginning, you mean," he had the audacity to complete, which earned him another side-glance, this time of demure rebuke.

"The dear boy is in such spirits," purred Mrs. Bowdler, gloating over the couple with eyes which seemed, from sheer force of tenderness, to be dissolving in their sockets. "You are not of so gay a nature, are you, Winifred?"

"Oh, yes, sometimes, I mean usually," stammered Winnie, trying hard to remember that this was a joyful occasion and which called for joyful spirits. "But I'm so astonished still, you see."

"At my luck, she means," cut in Kerr with an anxious glance in his sister's direction.

Winnie coloured guiltily.

"Of course at his luck. You see, the acquaintance has been so short."

"Yes. Fate makes quick work, sometimes," pronounced Mrs. Bowdler with a conviction almost pious. "But not the less thorough for the quickness," she added, her voice sinking to a confidential note, as she looked across at the two between whom a whisper was passing.

As the outcome of the whisper Cassie rose demurely.

"Mamma, I am going to show Kerr the pink water-lilies in the pond at the end of the garden."

"Pink water-lilies will serve as well as anything else," murmured Mrs. Bowdler, following the couple with her eyes as they left the room.

Then she turned back to Winnie, releasing her hand at last.

"I daresay you will be glad to be relieved of the housekeeping," she suggested, smiling unctuously. "Housekeeping is so troublesome in India, especially when you are new to the country. I am sure you must have difficulties."

"Yes, I have difficulties," admitted Winnie. "One has to learn so many things."

"Ah—I thought so!"

"But I don't really mind them, so long as I can make Kerr comfortable."

"Considering your little experience I think the result is very creditable—very creditable indeed. After all it is only natural that you should overlook things. For instance, when we called upon you—that time before the jungle picnic, you know—I noticed—I am sure you won't mind my mentioning it—that the soda water you gave us to drink was quite tepid, and also that there was a tear in the canvas ceiling of your sitting-room. You probably don't know how necessary it is to mend up a tear at once, for fear of the scorpions getting in."

"No, I didn't know," stammered Winnie, quite humbly.

"Of course; how should you? It is only old Indians such as we are—I mean like myself—who are up to these wrinkles about how to keep things cool and the

vermin out. Natural aptitude certainly has something to do with it too. Fortunately housekeeping is one of Cassie's strong points. I don't think you need be afraid of your brother losing anything in comfort by the exchange."

"But perhaps I could help Cassie a little?" pleaded Winnie, with a rather desperate feeling gaining upon her. "I am not really so very stupid."

"Stupid? My dear girl, haven't I just been telling you that I think you have managed very cleverly—considering. But as for help, she's used to turn to me for that, you see—and too many cooks spoil the broth, you know," with a little laugh which upon the bunch of keys displayed upon a heavy watch-chain, had the effect of a minor earthquake.

"Perhaps I could darn Kerr's socks, at least? I'm so used to it, and I darn quite decently, I assure you."

"Well, you see, darning is another of Cassie's strong points; and I really cannot guarantee her trusting her husband's socks to any fingers but her own. Young wives are apt to have fancies, you know," with a confidential wink of the congested eyelids, "and darning generally ranges as a labour of love."

"But if I do nothing at all I shall feel so dreadfully superfluous."

Winnie said it as lightly as she could, although her deprecating smile wavered.

"You'll get over that," asserted Mrs. Bowdler encouragingly. "A companion never need feel in the way, and I don't want to doubt that you'll be a very agreeable companion for Cassie—so long as you take to each other, that's to say. You must try and get friends with

her, that's all. Cassie is rather particular about her friends, I must tell you."

"I'll do my best," said Winnie in a very small voice.

"That's right. When you come to think of it we are both of us rather superfluous personages; and it is very good of your brother to take us in. But the circumstances are so—peculiar—and besides, I am so glad to be able to help a bit with my little pension."

After that there was a pause—not to be defined as comfortable. It was broken by a brisk question.

"How many rooms has your bungalow got?"

"Five, and a bathroom."

"That's not very much, certainly. We may be a bit tight, but we shall manage all right, never fear! I dare say, you won't mind being squeezed a bit."

"No, so long as my presence doesn't squeeze Cassie in her housekeeping. But I really don't eat much."

"Never fear!" repeated Mrs. Bowdler with the same aggressive cheerfulness. "Under Cassie's rule there will always be enough to go all round—she is such a wonderful manager. I must say she astonishes me at times. You would never believe how little she dresses on; and yet never a ribbon so much as creased, or a hair out of place. By the way, Winifred, do you know what I advise you? to take a lesson in hair-dressing from Cassie, I *know* you won't mind my mentioning that your hair looks, at times, well, just a little bit *wild*. It's the way you do it, I think."

"Kerr likes it done that way," ventured Winnie.

"What shall I wager you that he likes Cassie's way better still," and the maternal eyes essayed to twinkle.

"And another remark I should like to make—feeling, in

a way, responsible for you now, you know—is about your frocks. That ball-dress of yours was too much trimmed for a girl of your age and—means. That sort of thing doesn't make a good impression."

"I'm not yet used to being poor, you see, Mrs. Bowdler."

"You'll get used. Never fear! And of course it's been a great disadvantage not having had anyone to advise you. Ah, here are our turtle-doves back again!"

Winnie got to her feet, swallowing something hard in her throat.

"Kerr—it's late; isn't it time for us to be going? your dinner will be getting cold."

Perhaps it was something in the voice which made Cassie look more narrowly at the face of her future sister-in-law, and from that back again to that of her betrothed, upon which a touch of anxiety was manifest. Upon the front of her dress a pink water-lily was fastened, matching the heightened colour in her cheeks, while her fingers twirled a second of the glistening, rosy chalices.

"Why go at all?" she said quickly. "Why not stop and dine with us—if you don't mind taking pot-luck, that's to say."

"Oh, but, Cassie, I'm afraid we shall send them home hungry," objected Mrs. Bowdler with as skilfully marked an alarm as though the menu for the dinner *à quatre* had not been carefully settled since the morning. "We were not prepared ——"

"It's all right, mamma," came the serene reply, "I'll see about everything."

"But we're not dressed," said Winnie with an appealing glance at her brother.

"Oh, as for that, we won't dress either, so as to keep you in countenance," magnanimously conceded the Spartan matron.

"This flower will smarten up your blouse a little," added Cassie, moved by what she herself recognised as a peculiarly happy inspiration, as she stepped forward with the pink water-lily in her hand.

"There, shall I fasten it for you?"

The knowledge that Kerr was looking on and beaming may have helped to lighten the effort at graciousness; at any rate it was under his delighted eyes that the flower was satisfactorily settled.

"Oh, thank you, so much!" murmured Winnie colouring with pleasure and surprise, and thinking that, after all, she must have been mistaken in her appreciation of Cassie.

"I hope you won't get *too* horrible a dinner," said Mrs. Bowdler when a moment later, Cassie had left the room to "talk to the cook," as she put it.

"That dear girl *is* such a wonderful manager."

Evidently the time for dropping Cassie's childishness in favour of her practical qualities was judged as arrived.

So far from "horrible" was the meal served with miraculous promptitude on the back of the conversation with the cook that Kerr's conviction as to being the luckiest fellow in the world could not but be sensibly deepened, while a lurking feeling of envy took the taste of even the daintiest dishes out of Winnie's mouth. *She* had never been able to put such curried fish, such egg-fruit salad before Kerr, her most conscientious efforts notwithstanding. Small wonder that from minute to

minute the pride of prospective possession was stamping itself more visibly upon Kerr's radiant—and masticating—countenance.

With the pink of the water-lily in the front of her dress mirrored, so to say, in her cheeks, and her yellow hair furbished to a new pitch of perfection, the future mistress of his household was looking as much her best as she had done on the evening of the *Burra-Khana*. It always required the element of excitement to melt the inherent primness of Cassie's demeanour and to galvanise into life those regular if wooden features.

Presently between two faultless savouries, Mrs. Bowdler said with a huge sort of slyness:—

"I rather suspect you young people of having settled the day between you over there beside the pond. Am I right?"

"We *did* touch upon that question," confessed Cassie, carefully dropping her eyes to her plate. "Kerr is in such a ridiculous hurry."

"It would be more ridiculous if I wasn't in a hurry, wouldn't it, Mrs. Bowdler? I am sure you agree with me that there is no reason for delay?"

"Well, no *especial* reason, of course, except that she must see about her clothes, but she'll do that very quickly, it is one of her strong points. I don't want to stand in the way of your happiness, you know."

"Didn't I say so?" came the triumphant question.

"And has the honeymoon been settled as well? I suppose you'll want to be carrying her off to the hills?"

"You've hit the nail on the head, Mrs. Bowdler, just exactly what I wanted to do. But she won't be carried

off. We've been quarrelling about it—nearly. She pretends we can't afford it."

"No more can we, Kerr, dear. Haven't we just gone through the figures together?"

"Now that I come to think of it, I daresay she is right. Ah, you have no notion how practical a head that girl has! There are unavoidable expenses about starting a household, even when all the furniture is there, and of course you have calls upon you. Hard upon you doing without your honeymoon; though."

"Oh, that is not the essential, surely," murmured Cassie with a modesty which made it difficult for her *fiancé* not to rise and embrace her on the spot.

"Another thing we talked about was the house," she continued. "Kerr thought we might have taken on this bungalow instead of the other, which is rather small for so large a party. But here also we came to the conclusion that it would be too expensive—under the circumstances."

"No doubt it would," agreed Mrs. Bowdler, her remark being followed by a silence which Winnie felt desperately inclined to break, without quite knowing how to do so.

After dinner there came a moment when upon the veranda Winnie, by some chance combination of circumstances, found herself *tête-à-tête* with her sister-in-law that was to be. Perhaps it was the hope built upon the gift of the water-lily, or perhaps only the merciful gloom which pushed her to make one determined move towards the breaking down of that intangible barrier of whose existence Cassie could surely not be less aware than she was.



"Cassie," she said—very nearly gulped—as she made a grab at the hand upon the balustrade, "I'm afraid you're provoked with me—about that stupid joke which Mr. Boxtton made at the dance, you know. I think you heard it, and I quite understand your being angry, but it wasn't me, you know, it was Mr. Boxtton, and I should like to be friends with you—I mean sisters."

If it was a little incoherent it was unmistakably sincere, and her hold upon the hand of the astonished Cassie so tight as to be almost painful.

In the next moment already it relaxed, for Cassie had turned towards her with raised eyebrows, and eyes which, almost for the first time in their acquaintance, met her's full and attentively.

"Stupid joke?" she repeated in admirably cool astonishment. "My dear Winnie, what are you talking about? What joke could Mr. Boxtton possibly make which it might be disagreeable for me to hear? Surely your imagination must be very inflammable. And, dear me, how excited you are! Are you sure you are feeling quite well?"

"Quite well, thank you," said Winnie with the sensation of having hurled herself against a wall of ice which never even thought of melting at her contact.

She was glad of the interruption that came, and of the leisure which it afforded her for dispassionately considering the aggravated muddle which her impulsive act had made of the situation; for that Cassie had heard the critical remark and had not forgiven it, she felt more firmly convinced after the denial than she had felt before it.

The drive back in the buggy was almost wordless on her part, though not on Kerr's.

"Like to see any fellow pretend that I haven't drawn a prize! And how sweet she was to you about that flower! I'm sure you'll get on famously together, won't you, Win?"

"I hope so, Kerr," Winnie succeeded in saying.

Never in her life had she felt so small as she was doing—crushed almost flat by the multiplicity of Cassie's "strong points." And the future? If on the first day of betrothal these two women had made so good their possession of Kerr, what part could she hope to keep in him after the wedding-day?

"He's quite a nice boy—and I don't think he'll be difficult to manage," Mrs. Bowdler was remarking to her daughter as she looked after the buggy. "But the girl of course is a nuisance."

"Nuisances are not necessarily permanent, are they?" asked Cassie, a touch of the old acidity reappearing in both voice and smile.

"That's what I'm thinking too. And her complexion is so much better than yours," added Mrs. Bowdler with an irrelevancy which was only apparent. "I declare you looked quite yellow beside her to-night. Besides, I really don't see how we are all to pack into a house of five rooms."

"You mustn't hustle Kerr, though," said Cassie quickly. "He might fire up if he was asked to turn her out."

"My dear Cassie, I'm not thinking of such a thing!

Nobody is going to turn her out, of course; there are plenty of other ways. But they take time."

"I don't think they need take very much time," said Cassie reflectively.

"Well, for the present there is nothing for it but to put a good face upon it. After all it's only a fly in the amber."

And with a sigh of supreme satisfaction the Spartan mother went back into the house to seek a pillow which had become ever so much softer within the last twenty-four hours. This consummation was not exactly what she had dreamed of for Cassie—once upon a time—yet could range very fairly as a "reasonable offer."

"And the best she could hope for, as matters stand," commented the astute matron; for in the privacy of the maternal mind there was no necessity for keeping up the chorus of maternal admiration. The ardent desire to see a daughter settled does not necessarily imply stone-blindness to that same daughter's utter want of the magic quality of charm; and to see girls with snub noses and wide mouths marrying to the right and the left of the neglected Cassie had perhaps surprised Mrs. Bowdler less than it had done other people.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

## THE "HAPPY FAMILY."

THE wedding was both speedy and quiet; speedy because, as Mrs. Bowdler herself admitted, no reason for delay was discoverable—rather the reverse, in fact—taking into account the curious accidents which are known to occur in the interval which separates the cup from the lip; quiet, because there was as little ground for calling the attention of the world to the exact moment at which the standing dish known as Miss Bowdler was metamorphosed into the novelty called "Mrs. Mowbray." To glide, almost unobserved from spinster to wifehood seemed, under the circumstances, the most desirable thing. Nor did the usual drags exist, seeing that for five years past all the underlinen and most of the material for the trousseau frocks had been lying ready against the desired moment. Even Mangopore itself was given short shrift, having to content itself with a rumour, quickly followed by a *fait accompli*. An arrangement which could not keep Boxton from placing his little joke.

"Lucky fellow, Mowbray, to be sure! Just as the hot weather is setting in, too! I'll back Miss Bowdler against any refrigerator that ever was invented. Almost

think he'll be able to dispense with a *punkah* when she's at hand."

Anyone but Boxtton might under the circumstances have felt abashed, and even Boxtton, while warmly congratulating Winnie upon her brother's good fortune, could not help wondering how much exactly she remembered of the conversation at the regimental dance.

Major Athlick's felicitations were spared to Winnie, he having gone home on six months' leave—mercifully, as she could not help considering.

By the time the knot was tied the hot weather was upon the land; and it was under the rule of the sovereign *punkah* that the young couple crossed the threshold of the five-roomed bungalow as quietly and unostentatiously as they had glided across the threshold of wedded life.

If Winnie's trials had made a fair start before, they could not fail to develop after this auspicious moment. She had not waited for Mrs. Bowdler's suggestion in order to exchange her own room—the best in the house—for a small one at the back, which instead of the view into the garden had one of a dusty yard. It was a sacrifice which she gladly brought to Kerr, but to see it so easily accepted was bitter, all the same, and bitterer still to deduce from Mrs. Bowdler's remarks—in a quite indirect fashion, it is true—that even so, she took up more space than was strictly speaking, convenient.

"With just one room more to this bungalow we would be as comfortable as possible," the good lady asserted with that peculiar form of cheerfulness which is so paradoxically depressing. "It would be *so* nice for your brother, would it not? to have a little smoking den—

just some snug little hole where he need not trouble about the smell of his pipe and where he could receive his men-friends in shirt-sleeves if he likes."

"Oh, very nice," agreed Winnie with just a touch of exasperation in her tone, seeing that this was not by any means the first of the hints which she had detected embedded in the most harmless seeming conversation. "But you see, Mrs. Bowdler, I can't exactly fold myself away into a cupboard, although I should be delighted to do so."

Mrs. Bowdler stared, with spare eyebrows arched over goggle-eyes.

"My dear Winifred, what an extraordinary way you have of expressing yourself! Who is wanting to put you into a cupboard? I'm not aware of even having mentioned you. I *hope* you won't mind my saying that your temper does not seem to me to be always under perfect control. It's not the first time I have noticed it."

In after years Winnie used to wonder how her imperfectly controlled temper had been able to brook even this much, but in these early days of the great change her store of goodwill was so great, her terror of marring Kerr's domestic peace in any way so sincere that, before Mrs. Bowdler had done speaking, she was already feeling remorseful.

"I didn't mean it that way," she earnestly protested.

"That's right! There's nothing like a sweet temper in a girl. You'll acquire it in time—never fear!"

It had been on the eve of the wedding-day that much bottled-up feeling permitted itself one tiny explosion.

All the small preparations were complete, the change of rooms accomplished, the mansion swept and garnished in expectation of its new mistress. Upon the dimly lighted veranda brother and sister were enjoying what would virtually be their last *tête-à-tête*. Winnie, tired out with the exertions of the day, harassed by emotion, trembled on the verge of tears. It wanted but Kerr's warmly expressed gratitude for them to rain down upon the hands in her lap.

"Don't thank me, Kerr!" she sobbed quite suddenly. "It's the last thing I shall ever be able to do for you, and I don't want to be thanked for it."

"Good gracious, Winnie, aren't you mixing up things a bit?" he laughed with just a hint of impatience. "This isn't my funeral, you know, it's my wedding!"

Winnie began in a great hurry to dry her tears.

"Yes, I know, I didn't mean to cry, really; it's stupid of me. But oh, Kerr, what I wanted to ask you was whether it mightn't be better for everybody if I went away?"

"Went away?" he asked sharply.

"Yes, if I did what Mr. Tawse said I would have to do after papa's death, that is look for some employment. I'm no longer a necessity, you see, and I don't much care for being a luxury, somehow. Luxuries are expensive things, you know."

She stopped short with a little gasp, for Kerr had got hold of both her hands.

"Never say that again, Winnie," he said in an agitation which his troubled tones advertised as real, "unless you want me to doubt your affection! Didn't I tell

you at Mosscliffe that I would stick to you—always? and would you make me out untrue to my word?"

And then for a moment the two orphans clung to each other as they had done in the Mosscliffe drawing-room, and just for that space Winnie was able to feel that Kerr was not yet Cassie's exclusive property.

By next day the impression had necessarily weakened.

Cassie had had the heroism of barring orange-blossoms and white satin; for, as her mother truly said, she had an eminently practical head, and as eminent an eye for essentials. Here the kernel of the ceremony and not its trimmings, was, obviously, the essential thing. Yet even in her cunningly simple muslin she appeared to the enamoured bridegroom so desirable as to cause everyone and everything else to vanish from his blissful ken.

The week that followed was marked by various circumstances calculated to intensify Winnie's desire to fold herself away out of sight—and hearing. An atmosphere of suppressed honeymoon pervaded the bungalow. During those hours of the day in which the roof sheltered the young husband's beatified head it was wise to avoid the veranda, while to come round a corner suddenly, or to enter a room without a preliminary and audible cough was deliberately to court mutual embarrassment, also to awaken the displeasure of Cassie, who at that period, had not yet begun to look bored by tenderness, as was the case pretty soon.

During those other barren hours spent by Kerr in his office there was plenty of occupation for both mother and daughter, though curiously enough, not for Winnie. Those hours saw the gradual but complete transforma-



tion of both house and household, reorganised on approved "Indian" lines, and enriched by all the lacquered tables and all the bric-à-brac which had adorned the larger bungalow. Although each new disposal of furniture and every new order to the servants was virtually a condemnation of herself, Winnie would have readily if not gladly lent a helping hand had it been wanted. But somehow it never was. Whatever she was willing to do had either just been done, or was just going to be done by Cassie—one of whose strong points it was—in an altogether superior manner. It was just *awfully* kind of her—quite sweet, in fact, to want to help—but just at this moment there was nothing particular for her to do, and would she mind standing out of the light, as Cassie could not see to drape that curtain.

The usual result being that Winnie retired to the room with the view upon the yard there to reflect upon the subject of her entire superfluity.

And other things besides the house were transformed in those days.

Habits of thirty years' standing are not shaken off in a week, and at first it was only in the early morning hours that Mrs. Bowdler was to be met minus a corset—or corslet—and in comfortably flowing garments. But as her appreciation of the position increased together with the heat, the flowing garments made more and more frequent and even untimely appearances. Within a few weeks of the wedding day the cult of the waist had been definitely abandoned, and every bodice that Mrs. Bowdler possessed let out at the seams to the utmost limits of its capabilities. About the roots of her hair too there began to manifest themselves strange and,

to the ignorant, mysterious symptoms. In proportion as the matronly figure expanded the matronly hair was going the way of nature, or, rather, confessed to the bit of road already gone in that direction. Why spend money on hair-dyes, now that Cassie was safely married? At last, at last, the hard-worked mother could permit herself the luxury of growing old.

In Cassie herself the transformation was entirely beneficial. The disappearance of that common look of strain which had marked the faces of both mother and daughter was not the only improvement, since happiness—or let it be called success—is mostly becoming. Neither was there any relaxing either of corset laces or of the rigours of hair-dressing in her case. Trim, serene and impeccably tidy she presided over the small household, shrewdly determined to keep a firm hold upon the husband secured in the eleventh hour.

This class of serenity does not usually warm the blood in anyone's veins, a process which, to be sure, the sun quite sufficiently accomplished at this period. Whatever they might be in private, in public Cassie's smiles in these days of her new sovereignty, became more and more like winter sunbeams. Boxtton's idea about the refrigerator, though unknown to Winnie, suggested itself to her mind in other forms. How often, when panting sleepless upon her bed through the stifling nights with the whine of the *punkah* in her ears, she would long to possess Cassie's secret of eternal coolness, for young Mrs. Mowbray seemed far more impervious to the heat than any lump of ice, seeing that lumps of ice are, after all, liable to melt. Mrs. Bowdler, though far from icy, did visibly melt, but not by any means with the result

of there being less of her, and seemingly without any serious feeling of discomfort. Kerr, again, was in a state which soared above peculiarities of temperature, so that of the four inhabitants of the bungalow it was upon Winnie alone that the heat visibly weighed—so visibly that right through the golden haze of his paradise, Kerr's attention was forcibly arrested.

In the days before the jungle picnic it had been settled that, by hook or by crook, means must be found for Winnie to spend her first hot season in the hills. It was one day at dinner, that, seeing his sister's white face across the table, this forgotten plan suddenly recurred to Kerr's mind.

"Goodness, Winnie, whatever have you been doing to yourself?" he exclaimed in genuine distress, and in the tone of a man making an absolutely new discovery. "If I didn't know that your complexion is genuine I should suspect you of having lately left off painting."

"She does look rather washed out, does she not?" agreed Mrs. Bowdler, contemplating Winnie with the most approving gaze she had yet bent upon her. "Ah, yes, English roses do not bear transplanting into this climate."

"We must send her to the hills, mustn't we, Cassie?" asked Kerr, looking across at his wife with something of an appeal in his eyes and voice.

Cassie finished filling the soup-plate she was busy with (she made a point of herself dispensing the soup) before replying.

"If you really think it necessary, Kerr, then of course it must be managed somehow, though I confess I don't quite see how it's to be done. Those new kitchen

fittings cost such a lot, you see. Besides she could not go alone. I suppose mamma would have to accompany her, I rather think she needs it more than Winifred does; having so much extra flesh to carry. Just look at her!"

Kerr looked, and for the first time clearly realised how much flesh his revered mother-in-law actually had to carry—another fact which the golden haze of his paradise had, until to-day, veiled from him. He also observed that the complexion showed a curiously mottled appearance, the flaming tint being no longer as equal as in the days of plate armour, but having concentrated into islands of a fine purple hue.

"Oh, never mind me—I am all right!" she asserted as briskly she mopped her streaming brow. "I don't say that a little hill air mightn't do me as much good as anybody else; but, under the circumstances, such a thing is not to be thought of. I am quite ready to do without it, as I am sure is Winifred. We neither of us are ill though one of us may look rather red and the other rather white."

"Of course," said Winnie hastily, and anything but white as she spoke. "Don't bother about me, Kerr, please! I shall take more cold baths, and—and the hot weather won't last for ever, after all."

"That's right!" approved Mrs. Bowdler. "I was sure you would see it as I do. People in our position always have to be ready for sacrifices; the great thing is to try and look cheerful over it."

She did not in words add: "Look at me!" but the exhortation was not, for that, less plain.

After that the subject was dropped; and presently

Winnie went to bed feeling more miserably unhappy than usual, and having for the first time noticed a distinct look of worry marring the beatitude of Kerr's face.

Very soon, however, the beatitude reappeared in an even intensified form, and presently Mrs. Bowdler with many broadly maternal smiles and smirks, confided to Winnie that serious prospects existed of the household of four being turned into one of five, upon which foolish Winnie losing sight of all side-issues, unthinkingly exclaimed: "Oh, how delightful!"

"That's right, my dear! I am glad you take it in that light; it will make it easier for us all to bring the necessary sacrifices."

"What sacrifices?" asked Winnie again unthinkingly.

"Well, of our comforts, to be sure. You don't suppose, do you, that it is possible for a house of this size to contain a baby without the other inmates being very much aware of it, particularly when there are so many inmates as here. For one thing a nursery will be wanted."

"To be sure," said Winnie, suddenly crestfallen.

"And where it's to come from I am sure I don't know, unless Cassie makes up her mind to do without a dining-room."

"She wouldn't like that."

"No, but Cassie is always ready for sacrifices. The only other way would be for you and me to sleep in one room."

"Oh, but *you* wouldn't like that!" murmured Winnie. "Nor I either!" came the mental rider, while volubly,

Mrs. Bowdler exposed the heights of self-immolation to which she was prepared to rise.

"You will be particularly careful, will you not, Winnie, not to irritate or contradict Cassie at present? That sort of thing is apt to have such very pernicious effects."

"But I don't contradict her, surely?" asked Winnie, opening protesting eyes.

"Not usually perhaps. Still, at times I have noticed—but never mind; I am sure you will be more attentive in the future."

Until now Winnie's relations with her sister-in-law had been smooth, if anything but warm. Although the various efforts made to break down the intangible barrier had miserably failed, there was no fault to be found about those scanty phrases which Cassie found it necessary to address to her. In Kerr's presence, the phrases even became more frequent, and brightened by a sprinkling of the winter-sunshine smiles. Clearly she considered that whatever "dirty work" had to be done was best left to her mother. It was dating from the discovery mentioned by Mrs. Bowdler and which necessarily left the young wife complete mistress of the situation, that a new phase declared itself. The time, seemingly, was considered ripe for at least beginning to unmask the batteries.

The first thing in the shape of a conflict was caused by a very small thing indeed, nothing but a difference of opinion touching Kerr's taste in neckties. Cassie, noting that his stock had run low, had sent for some on sight from the stores, and was proceeding to make a selection straight off, when Winnie tentatively remarked

that it might be as well to consult Kerr himself, also that she did not think that he cared for so bright a blue as the one Cassie had decided upon.

"I imagine that he will care for anything *I* choose for him," responded Cassie, with a lofty smile and an eloquent emphasis upon the pronoun.

"Of course; but couldn't you wait until he comes home this evening? Men do like having a say in these matters themselves."

Cassie's yellow eyebrows went up in a distinctly aggressive manner.

"And where have you gathered your experience of men, if I may ask?"

"At Mosscliffe," said Winnie flushing hotly, "and Kerr is the only man I have experience of, in that way. But it would be funny indeed if I did not know his taste in neckties, seeing that ever since he began to wear them he has always consulted me."

"I can't pretend to know what he did at Mosscliffe, but I presume that you do not expect to go on playing the counsellor indefinitely—now?"

"Oh no, I don't expect anything; but I warn you that he hates that particular blue, I know it, even though he should pretend to like it, just to please you."

"There is no such thing as pretence between my husband and myself," said Cassie sharply. "I cannot imagine what you mean to insinuate."

"Insinuate?" retorted Winnie, almost as sharply, for the store of good-will was running low when, like a very much materialised whirlwind, Mrs. Bowdler entered to throw protecting arms around Cassie.

"Cassie darling, what is the matter? What has she

been insinuating? I do believe you are exciting yourself; and you know how bad it is for you—at present. Really, Winifred, this is not what I expected of you after what I told you the other day."

Without a word Winnie turned and fled; wildly wishing that she could feel as guilty as she knew that she ought to.

And it would seem that it was not to her mother alone that Cassie had complained, for that evening before parting for the night, Winnie heard from her brother the first thing that at all resembled a reproach.

"Look here, Winnie," he said with a touch of testiness in his tone; "you and Cassie seem to have had some sort of a difference this morning."

"Did she tell you?" asked Winnie, catching her breath.

"Cassie? Oh, no, she is not of the tell-tale sort; it was Mrs. Bowdler who let drop something. And, Winnie, when I'm about it, I can't help saying that I do wish you could manage to be a little nicer to Cassie. I've noticed that you don't seem to get on quite as I should like to see you getting on."

"Which is all my fault, I suppose?" said Winnie with a sharp stab at her heart.

"Well, I am sure it can't be Cassie's fault, so sweet tempered as she is."

"Kerr," she said, very slowly, for fear of the sob rising in her throat, "I really think it would be better if I went away. I don't think Cassie likes me."

The only thing to save the situation was to fly into a passion, which Kerr immediately did, protesting in indignant words against so censorious an opinion of



Cassie, who of course was far too angelic not to give to her husband's sister the place in her affections next to that husband and her own mother. Again Winnie was reminded with much genuine trouble that, whatever happened, he would not be untrue to his word. All he begged of her was to control her temper and avoid unnecessary contradiction. He certainly would not hear of her going away.

"And, besides, where could you possibly go to?" he added, as in his agitation he flung a barely half consumed cigarette out into the night.

Yes, where could she possibly go to? It was the question which pursued Winnie to the narrow bed on which she was to turn sleepless till morning, counting the groans of the detestable *punkah*.

When next day, just before leaving for his office, Kerr gave her—behind Cassie's back—a sudden and quite unexpected kiss, Winnie could not help wondering whether her brother's night had not perhaps been disturbed by some of the same reflections which had poisoned her own rest. That morning she had actually begun to pack her trunk, but after that kiss with its dumb message, she unpacked it again, resolved to spare him all self-reproach.

During the week that followed she was aware more than once of his eyes upon her, anxiously watchful, and could note the increase of that worry of which she had detected the first symptom weeks ago. Of his affection she never doubted for a moment, nor of the excellence of his intentions towards herself; but was beginning to grasp the fact that people with limpid blue eyes and curly brown hair are not always a match for women of

the Bowdler stamp, more especially when there are a pair of them.

The end came on one of those copper-coloured Indian afternoons which seemed to weigh upon even seasoned nerves with an almost unbearable strain, when serene tempers became short, and short tempers explosive, and where any chance word may prove to be the match that fires the train. Mrs. Bowdler's violet flecked countenance had been streaming since morning, and Cassie herself showed a less serenely cool front than was her habit. As for Winnie, nothing but the determination to give no extra trouble kept her upright. To break down in Cassie's house and be nursed by Mrs. Bowdler was a vision beside which the most torturing endurance lost all its horrors.

And this was the day on which Mrs. Bowdler chose to mention at luncheon in a would-be casual manner that Mrs. Gollap was looking out for a substitute to the nursery governess who had just fallen ill.

"At such an inconvenient moment too, just as she is starting for Bombay. And of course she can't be expected to look after the children herself. Children are always so troublesome on a journey."

Gollap was a name familiar to Winnie, as that of the big contractor of the district; and since the regimental dance in winter even the appearance of Mrs. Gollap—the living battering-ram as defined by Boxtton—had been familiar to her. She knew also that the big contractor having grown too big for Mangopore, had lately been transferring himself in instalments to Bombay, where pastures new—and doubtless fat—awaited him. His

wife and three very plump little daughters represented the last of these instalments.

"But she has ayahs enough, surely," remarked Cassie, rather languidly for her.

"Mrs. Gollap doesn't trust them to ayahs, and quite rightly too. She is very particular about the children getting a genuinely English education."

"At Bombay, of course, she will find what she wants, for she pays well, and the household is quite luxurious: but for the journey it is a bore."

During the silence that followed Winnie stole a look across at Kerr, and, noting the flush upon his face, kept back the words that had almost risen to her lips. This was by far the broadest hint which she had received, but it was by no means the first. Quite lately Mrs. Bowdler had taken occasion to mention a young girl of her acquaintance who, rather than fall a burden to her aged parents—her own parents, mind you!—had preferred to take service as, what do you suppose? A lady's-maid."

"I do like an independent spirit in a girl!" she had approvingly and emphatically added.

But Mrs. Gollap was undoubtedly heavier artillery still, quite the battering ram, in fact.

An hour later, Kerr having returned to his office and Winnie retired to her room to doctor one of the worst headaches she had ever known, there was a sharp rap at the door.

It was Cassie who entered in the flowing white tea-gown she had lately worn, and holding in her hand a parcel just left by the postman. She clutched it rather in the fashion that a weapon is clutched, and even be-

fore she had spoken, Winnie noticed something like a war-like gleam in the grey-green eyes.

"I opened this by mistake," she explained as she threw the parcel onto the table, "thinking it was the lace for the layette, but I see it is addressed to you unless there is some mistake, for I can't imagine what you should be wanting this trimming for."

"For my white dinner dress. It requires doing up. I am doing it up myself," Winnie hastened to add.

"May I ask what this trimming cost?"

"Only ten shillings."

Cassie laughed in a distinctly aggressive manner.

"Only! That is rather a magnificent way of speaking of ten shillings, isn't it?"

"I am paying it out of my own pocket-money."

"The pocket-money which Kerr gives you, you mean."

Winnie's breath began to come rather deeply and her head to throb unbearably as she gazed back at her sister-in-law.

"I am not quite a pauper, Cassie, you know that I contribute forty pounds to the household."

"But you don't suppose that those forty pounds cover the cost of your keep, do you? let alone pocket-money. I knew you were *naïve*, but I never took you for quite so *naïve* as this."

"Why not say at once that you want to get rid of me?" panted Winnie, maddened by the supremacy of Cassie's smile.

Cassie's eyebrows went up in a way that Winnie knew, and had been able to bear in lower temperatures, but not in this.

"Want to be rid of you? My dear Winifred, what

extraordinary things you do say, to be sure? Whenever I do want to be rid of you I shall not need to speak to you at all, but only to say a word to Kerr."

It was then that Winnie's nerves gave the final wrench.

"Oh, go away! *please* go away!" she cried, for a moment losing sight of her sister-in-law behind a blood-red cloud. "I shall say something dreadful if you stay and, after all, this is my room."

"And this is my house, I fancy," said Cassie, as scornfully she gathered her flowing skirts into her hand.

"It will not have to shelter me for long, never fear! There is not room within it for both of us, that's clear!"

"It's always a good thing when facts are recognised even at the eleventh hour," answered Cassie, very deliberately.

During the fragment of time in which their eyes met full, Winnie knew at last what an undying grudge and a hatred, no doubt as undying, looked like when mirrored in human pupils.

"Please go!" she said again very low, for already the approach of the materialised whirlwind was becoming plainly audible.

She had barely locked the door upon Cassie when Mrs. Bowdler was outside it, soothing her ill-used daughter loudly and plaintively, and demanding of Winnie in apoplectic accents through the keyhole what she had been doing to the poor, dear girl.

When the storm had died away down the passage, Winnie sat down at the table not to think, for she knew already what she had to do, but to try and regain a little of her mental balance before she set about doing it.

Presently, dressed in her thinnest frock and armed with a pith-helmet and her thickest sunshade, she stole to the back entrance, and having hesitated for a moment on the threshold, plunged into the ocean of heat outside as one might plunge into a molten sea.

That evening when Kerr came home he found himself waylaid by his sister on his way through the garden.

"Kerr," she at once began the set speech prepared for hours; "I want to tell you of a step I have taken. I have been to see Mrs. Gollap this afternoon, and she has engaged me for her children. On Wednesday she starts for Bombay, and I go with her. It's all settled, so please don't say anything against it."

Winnie spoke quite quietly now, and felt also quiet to the point of exhaustion.

For a moment there was silence between brother and sister, a silence of complete astonishment on his part, followed by the inevitable burst of anger.

"Mrs. Gollap!" he blazed up in accents of unspeakable scorn. "*My* sister in the service of a Box Wallah! governess to her horrid brats! Never!"

"It is settled," repeated Winnie immovably. "We start on Wednesday, and she gives me a hundred pounds a year, and I am to have my own apartment and my own attendants. At least this way I shall not be a burden to anybody."

Despite the exhaustion her voice gave one quiver as she said it.

"I can't allow it!" said Kerr, more uncertainly already. "You know I can't."

"That's why I didn't ask for your leave."

"Winnie," he said tumultuously, getting hold of her hand, "has anyone, has Mrs. Bowdler been nasty to you? Is that what makes you go? Tell me the truth, Winnie, do!"

Winnie glanced at the truth and saw therein nothing but the wreck of Kerr's domestic peace, with no salvation for herself. No, that way there lay no escape. She was not fond of telling lies, but she told one now.

"Nobody has been nasty to me, Kerr, it is only that I have a fancy for independence, and this chance is too good to be missed. You have no right to prevent me, really."

"No, I suppose I have no right," he said in a genuinely miserable voice. "And of course you will be more comfortable with Mrs. Gollap than you can be here in this small bungalow. But remember, Winnie, it was not I who asked you to leave it. I would never have broken my word."

"Oh yes, I shall remember that," said Winnie, trying to keep the bitterness out of her voice, and more intimately convinced than ever that presently Kerr would be feeling truly grateful to her for having saved him the disagreeables of that breakage, if indeed he was not so already.

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## CHAPTER IX.

## WITHIN THE "GOOD BAY."

"MA," squeaked a very young voice, "the banana man is coming; me vant much bananas."

"Soder-water, Ma! Soder-water! Me be thirsty!"

Then in the youngest and most determined voice of all:—

"I vant take off my clothes."

"Mees Mohbreh! Mees Mohbreh!" shrieked the harassed mother.

"What is it, Mrs. Gollap?" asked Winnie stepping back from the corridor, whither she had gone in search of a breath of air.

"Be so kind as to summon the banana man and the soda-water carrier, and have the favour to prevent Milly from stripping herself to the skin. They are enough to put one straight into one's grave. Brats!"

During the long hours of the railway journey already endured this latter word had been considerably hard-worked, and was likely to have more work before it ere Bombay was reached. Each wayside station, with its glimpses of soda-water and syrup stands, its swarm of fruit and sweatmeat sellers, buzzing at every window, like so many importunate flies and awakening ungovernable desires in the breasts of the three plump little girls,



ranging in age from five to eight, presented increased opportunities for its employment.

Since the start from Mangopore, Winnie's new duties had kept her hands full, and she was glad of it, since it gave her no time to brood over the parting of yesterday. Cassie's magnanimous condescension and Mrs. Bowdler's brisk approval had left her indifferent; but Kerr! Poor boy, he had done his best; yet nothing could quite hide the ignominy of the moment, not even the fact of his having the grace of being ashamed of himself. As a matter of course he had asked her to promise to turn to him if ever she should be in any sort of strait; and, also as a matter of course, Winnie had evaded giving any such promise, which, in any case, she was determined not to keep.

To her sore heart the plunge into new surroundings had come as a balm. Mrs. Gollap, chronically beaming, and seemingly as vastly good-natured as she was vast in person, presented a welcome substitute to Mrs. Bowdler, and the whole lot of the three fat round-eyed little girls did not seem likely to put so severe a test upon her temper as had the serene Cassie, single-handed.

On the whole she had been fortunate in her misfortune. Of that she had felt convinced on the day of the initial interview with the contractor's wife, which had become more amusing in retrospect than it had felt like at the moment. The very details of the room into which she had been ushered, and where she waited for Mrs. Gollap to struggle into garments suitable for the occasion, were eminently calculated to tickle the nerves of laughter—only that Winnie, just then, was feeling so much nearer to tears. From various symptoms she

gathered that the large and sumptuous apartment was supposed to be an English drawing-room, the usual Persian carpets having been studiously replaced by the Axminster brand, and bamboo chairs eliminated in favour of damask sofas, thickly sown over with antimacassars of the cheapest Nottingham make. Upon these and upon the gilt clocks—(of French origin, by the way) of which Winnie counted seven disposed in such unlikely places as window-sills and piano-tops—Mrs. Gollap evidently relied for imparting a genuinely British stamp to her state-apartment. A tea-table, heavily laden with silver and flanked by groaning cake-stands stood ready (chronically, as Winnie subsequently learned); likewise two card-tables, with bridge cards and markers largely displayed, not because Mrs. Gollap cared for bridge herself, nor was expecting anyone who did, but simply in order to show her complete intimacy with the tastes of modern English society. The magnificence of the gauze and tinsel tea-gown in which she presently rolled in, and the size of the diamonds in her ears were, presumably, meant to underline this same intimacy.

Subsequently Winnie learnt that Mrs. Gollap, despite her unimpeachably white skin, was suspected of having just a touch of the tar-brush in her composition, which quite sufficiently explained her eagerness for proving herself genuinely English, as well as her insurmountable laziness, making of the daily toilet an effort which left her nerveless and exhausted for the rest of the day.

With child-like candour, and in her "chi-chi" English, closely resembling a foreign accent, she now confessed that owing to a prolonged absence from what she loved to refer to as her "native soil" she had somewhat

fallen out of English habits; for which reason "Mees Mohbreh's" offer transported her with delight. For "Mees Mohbreh" was fresh from England, or very nearly so, and would, doubtless, be able to give her a few hints as to the way things were being done there at present. That poor Miss Hood who had fallen ill had really been no good in that way, since she turned out to be a shop-keeper's daughter, actually the daughter of a man who sold almonds and rasins—contemptuously repeated the wife of the man who sold cotton and jute. What could such a person know of the manners of "choice" society, in which, it was to be presumed that Miss Mowbray was well posted up, her father having been—so it had come to Mrs. Gollap's ears—a landed proprietor. Was this indeed an actual fact? On hearing that it was, Mrs. Gollap's fatty countenance became illuminated by a brilliant smile. She seemed on the point of clinching the bargain there and then, only that conscientious scruples pushed Winnie to speak.

"But my qualifications, Mrs. Gollap, you haven't enquired about these at all, and I don't know whether they will satisfy you. You see, I have not been brought up for a governess."

Mrs. Gollap waved a plump hand, scornfully.

"I should rather think not—with a property in the family. The qualifications I look for are elegant manners and a *rearly* good accent. The thought of my childrens' language being corrupted by a—cockney—isn't that what you call it? would poison my peace."

"Oh, my accent is all right, I think; and of course I can read and write. And I don't think I spell worse than other people who are not governesses."

"And your examinations?" enquired Mrs. Gollap, a little anxiously.

"I have made none, I am sorry to say. I was always too busy playing tennis and golf to bother about exams."

Winnie looked across apprehensively at the mountain of tinsel, only to become aware that Mrs. Gollap's smile threatened to cut her face in two.

"Praise the heavens!" she pronounced, in accents of profound relief. "Miss Hood had made three examinations, but she could not play tennis—the very thing that I yearn for my daughters to acquire."

When Winnie had further confessed that she had not a single testimonial of any sort to produce, and that she had always been the despair of her own governesses, Mrs. Gollap, convinced that she had got hold of the genuine article, was evidently on the point of falling upon the new governess's neck, but remembered in time that this might not be modern English manners. In one moment she would fly to summon her progeny for presentation to their future guiding hand; but, before flying, would Miss Mowbray permit her to present a cup of tea? It even seemed to Winnie that the card-tables had been glanced at, as though Mrs. Gollap were meditating the suggestion of a rubber *à deux*, by way perhaps of making her feel more at home.

Soon the progeny, rigged out in starched frocks and pale blue sashes—after the most approved Christmas supplement fashion—were displaying their chubby faces, and devouring Miss Hood's successor with eyes as round and as expressionless as saucers.

"My husband will be transported to make your acquaintance," Mrs. Gollap explained. "'Never mind what

you pay,' he said to me in his last letter, 'see only that you procure the genuine article.'"

The transports in question had necessarily to be postponed until the arrival in Bombay.

It was amid the bustle of the big station and the clamorous family greetings, that Winnie was introduced to the father of her charges. What Boxtton had meant by qualifying Mr. Gollap's bigness as to be taken in more senses than one, became very clear to Winnie as she watched his huge spouse disappearing bodily into his huger arms, which presently opened again to make, as it were, one mouthful of his three daughters. When Mrs. Gollap had, breathlessly and triumphantly, described her as the *real* English lady, whose father had possessed a property, and who had *not* been brought up as a governess, it almost seemed as though Winnie's turn were coming next. But the big man pulled up in time. Even as it was, he struck Winnie as somewhat overpowering, displaying manners of the bluff, ostentatiously hearty, and clothes of the "flashy" description, both being visibly flavoured by the sporting element, used, presumably as an antidote to the commercial. The mere cut of his breeches, very clinging about the knees and very baggy about the hips, as well as the riding-cane with which his sausage-like fingers nimbly played, betrayed this latter leaning, as well as the frequent use of the ejaculation "Hulloa!" Something that probably took itself for a covert-coat, and a flat straw hat about three sizes too small for the head on whose summit it precariously reposed, helped to complete Mr. Gollap's appearance. It scarcely wanted the jewelled scarf-pin, nor the gold-rimmed "pinch-nose," to proclaim

that this mountain of a man had far from abandoned all personal pretensions. If this was a "Box-Wallah," reflected Winnie, then a "Box-Wallah" was something to which her imagination had not stretched as the possible development of an Englishman.

So far as the cordiality of her reception was concerned, Winnie had nothing to complain of.

"Hulloa, Miss Mowbray!" he laughed with an exuberance which almost awoke doubts as to his English birth, and while inflicting upon her a hand-shake which caused her to wince with pain, "my poor house will feel much honoured by your presence. Allow me to hope that we will pull together all right—ha! ha!" And Winnie had the impression that her future bread-giver refrained with difficulty from clapping her on the back.

That first night spent under the contractor's roof was the first, for long, in which she slept deep and dreamlessly and not merely from sheer physical exhaustion. The summer residence selected by Mr. Gollap was an enchanting bungalow, lying upon one of those enchanting islands which stud "the good bay." The mere smell of the sea air, as in a large and well-cushioned boat the party was rowed across, had been as medicine to Winnie, even though it brought with it a new pang: the pang of home-sickness. When last she had been within this bay England and all that England held had still seemed so near; the steamer which had brought her counted as a piece of it, whereas now——

Being too tired to feel keenly, or even to think coherently, is sometimes fortunate—and this was Winnie's case to-day.

Next morning the unquenchable hopefulness of youth had regained the upper-hand. It wanted but one unbroken night's rest to let her awake brimful of resolutions for the conscientious filling of a post which bore all the appearances of a sinecure. Within the first few days already she had gathered that she was chiefly wanted for decorative purposes, or, to speak more accurately, as an advertisement of the high-tone nature of the establishment. On the whole it was Mrs. Gollap herself who kept Winnie busiest. The points upon which she thirsted to be enlightened were numberless, and extended from the choice of the proper periodicals to keep, to the shape of the pinafores to be worn by her offspring. Although cautiously worded, the searching nature of her questions had early convinced Winnie that Bostton had not been wrong in assuming that Mrs. Gollap's "native land" was known to her only by hearsay, and perhaps for this very reason striven after in the way that ideals are striven after. Blind confidence in the new oracle actually led to a transformation of the drawing-room, Winnie having succeeded in convincing the contractor's wife that English ladies do not necessarily spend their lives in an atmosphere of antimacassars and gilt clocks, and drink tea only at stated hours. Even Mr. Gollap himself, as she presently discovered, was by no means above taking a hint as to the latest London fashion in boots, or the make of neckties ranging at present as the most thoroughly sportsmanlike.

So much for the parents. As for the three chubby little girls, they differed chiefly from their contemporary countrywomen by being lazier—having already assimilated a fair portion of oriental indolence—and consequently

easier to manage. Nor were the tasks they were put to of a nature likely to provoke rebellion.

"Teach them to do what you yourself did in the school-room," Mrs. Gollap had said; a call to which Winnie readily responded by teaching Polly, Nelly and Milly to make both toffy and apple-pie beds, as well as by guiding their first tottering steps upon the tennis and croquet ground. Surely never before had eighty pounds a year been earned with less effort of mind and body.

"It is a lovely house and in a lovely spot," she wrote to Kerr two days after her arrival, "and everybody is so fat and kind that I am sure to feel quite at home in a very short time."

And yet, all advantages notwithstanding, the sensation tarried, and even seemed to be slipping farther away. The first stimulating effect of mingled novelty and amusement evaporated, left Winnie longing almost passionately for the sight of some familiar face—almost anyone—the touch of a hand that was not only friendly, but that of a friend. Almost unknown to herself that home-sickness of which she had felt the first pang on the day of arrival was secretly growing. No mail-day passed without bringing a new stab. To watch the incoming boats was painfully interesting, but to watch the homebound ones was worse. How long would it take her to save up her passage home? As she strained her eyes after the smoke on the horizon, she made the calculation over and over again—even while telling herself that to throw away so good a berth as this, was in her position a tempting of Providence. Already, although the hot season was wearing to a climax, she had regained a little of her colour, and but for that gnawing home-



sickness would doubtless have regained more. Every symptom seemed to point to a prolonged stay in the contractor's household. And yet every symptom pointed falsely; for already, before her unseeing eyes, the causes were at work which were to cut the Gollap episode far shorter than had been the Bowdler one.

At the time itself it was difficult to identify the exact moment from which dated a subtle change in the atmosphere; but subsequently Winnie was inclined to connect it with a certain box of extremely sticky sweetmeats— also with a singing lesson—she having remembered the part played in her own childhood by “baby-opera.” A growing interest in his daughters' education had recently marked the doings of the contractor, whose mornings, devoted to business, were spent on the mainland and whose evenings alone belonged to his family. That he should wish to convince himself personally of the progress made was only natural; likewise that he should aspire to reward this progress. Nothing, therefore, could possibly be objected to the boxes of unspeakably sticky sweetmeats with which he now began to fill his capacious pockets (unless, indeed, they were objected to on their own merits) and if in his hurry, he had brought one too many, what more obvious than to present it to the governess—the moral author of the progress which delighted him? But nothing delighted him so much as the “baby-opera” songs—for whose sake he had taken to hurry home at abnormally early hours.

“Mareh, Mareh, quite contraireh,  
How does your garding grow?”

piped Polly in her uncertain little voice; to which came Nelly's somewhat languid response:—

"With seel-ver bells, and goggle-shells  
And prettee maids all in a row."

"A 1, upon my soul, quite an A 1 performance!" declared the proud father, blissfully slapping a very resounding thigh. "Miss Mowbray, permit me to define it as a ripping success! Hulloo, my chickabiddies! come and see what sort of rewards for diligent children I have in my pockets. Upon my soul, I've made a mistake, there's one too many. You will honour me by accepting these sweetmeats, Miss Mowbray! It is sugar and spice, and all that's nice; same way as in the song. You'll allow me to ask for a repetition, won't you?"

And presently he went out, whistling to the air of: "What are little girls made of?" to break off, unseen, with a stormy sigh, and a passing of his huge hand down the region of his stomach, after the fashion of a person who is revelling in some extremely palatable flavour.

When Mrs. Gollap, who had not assisted at the music lesson, saw the sweetmeat box in Winnie's hand, she turned upon it astonished and covetous eyes, for among her amiable qualities greediness ranged conspicuously, and this happened to be her favourite sort of sweetmeat of which she consumed large quantities yearly, though mostly behind closed doors, because of its non-English character.

"Where did you get these?" she now queried, pointing a jewelled finger at the box.

Then, when Winnie had explained:—

"From my husband? And he gave me none! That is very curious."

Without hesitation Winnie pushed the box into her hands, only too thankful to be rid of the sticky horror.

"Take it, Mrs. Gollap, please take it! I can't eat them—because of my teeth. It makes them ache."

Mrs. Gollap took the bag with a little hesitation, but, for the first time in Winnie's experience of her, without the broad smile she was used to, upon which, just as she clutched her prize—enter, for his sins, Mr. Gollap.

"How is this, Harry," panted his wife, with the air of a sulky child, as she held the offending bag before his eyes; you give Mees Mohbreh things that make her teeth ache, while I——"

"A trifle," explained the contractor, with a contemptuous wave of his hand, but an apologetic turn of the eye; "a mere nothing, of which, by mistake, I found that I had got one too many."

"It would seem, rather, that you got one too few," remarked his spouse in withering accents. To which observation Mr. Gollap, despite his size, found nothing to reply.

During the rest of the evening Winnie noticed a look of abstraction upon his face.

"Mrs. Gollap has not yet forgiven me about those sweetmeats," he confided to Winnie at an appropriate moment. "We must find some way of restoring her good humour. Perhaps you would kindly lend a hand in the operation?"

"Bring her lots of sweetmeats," was all Winnie could think of as a remedy.

The sweetmeats were brought, without the desired result. Vaguely Winnie began to wonder what had become of Mrs. Gollap's eternal smile. So suave had been

the fat woman's address hitherto that the first snappish word from her lips positively took Winnie aback. Having posed as an oracle for three weeks it is not pleasant to discover that, after all, you are only a nursery governess. Yet this is what happened to Winnie, who could find no explanation save in some remissness of her own, and conscientiously redoubled her efforts—with as little result as the belated sweetmeats had had.

It was three or four days later that Mr. Gollap hit upon the plan which was to restore his better half's serenity, or so, at least, he elected to surmise.

"I've got a splendid idea," he explained to Winnie, whom he had followed to the arbour overhanging the still, blue water, where she was trying to get Polly to believe that d-o-g really did spell "dog"; while Milly and Nelly played at "post-office," the latest game, which consisted in folding up a cocoa-nut leaf and placing it in a handy cleft of the rocks, presently to fish it out again with the handle of a sunshade; "quite splendid. Permit me to impart it to you. In two days Mrs. Gollap celebrates her birthday. We'll keep it in the real English style, which, to say the truth, has somewhat dropped out of our habits. It was your telling the children about the birthday cake the other day which reminded me of the custom. We'll have the candles and the surprise presents, and everything. That is sure to bring back Mrs. Gollap's smiles all right."

"Oh, but I'm afraid it would take rather too many candles," objected Winnie. "There has to be one for each year, you know."

"Why too many?" retorted Mr. Gollap, leaning back self-consciously in his chair, with his gold watch-chain

advantageously displayed. "What are candles to me? Can I not pay for them? And it is only twenty-nine, after all."

"Only?" said Winnie, who, judging by appearances, had expected them to be at least ten more.

Then the plan was unfolded. The cake must be a real English cake, and therefore purchased at the English confectioner's in town; also it must be personally selected—by Miss Mowbray, of course, who would choose the candles as well. This meant a secret and surreptitious excursion to the mainland, which could only be effected at the very break of day while slumber still wrapped Mrs. Gollap round. Could Miss Mowbray be ready in the morrow at 5 a.m. to accompany her humble servant to town, and there to make the necessary purchases? after which, while proceeding to his office, he would cause her to be safely conveyed back to the island, which she would certainly reach ere Mrs. Gollap had risen, as was desirable, because of the birthday secret.

"I really don't know," began Winnie doubtfully.

"A family party," broke in her employer, who with small, sly eyes had been watching her face, "quite a family party; for it is superfluous to point out that my three daughters will be at your side. This circumstance is imperative; for, mind, this is not the end of my ideas."

"Isn't it?" asked Winnie resignedly.

"By no means. Do you happen to remember talking of the brown holland pinafores braided with red which you yourself wore in the schoolroom? Well, my second idea is to have the three brats measured tomorrow for such pinafores, in which I know that their

mother will be overjoyed to behold them. On the following day, thus attired, they appear before her, bearing the cake. Could her bad humour hold out against such a sight? Hulloo, my chickabiddies, what say you? Shall we run off to the town before the sun is up, and be back again before your Ma is?—but not before we have put something good into our little mouths, eh?"

Whatever doubts Winnie may possibly have felt concerning the wisdom of the arrangement were swept aside by a chorus of tumultuous acquiescence.

It proved to be one of those matters in which "l'homme propose et la femme dispose."

Milly, when accused by her elder sisters of having blabbed, flatly denied the imputation. Nor could it ever be proved; the solid fact alone remaining that next morning, just as the party were cautiously embarking, a breathless ayah appeared on the scene to request Mr. Gollap's immediate presence in his wife's apartments. Reappearing ten minutes later he showed a crestfallen mien, and somewhat curtly dismissed his progeny with the intimation that their "Ma" considered that the heat on the mainland would be too much for them.

Of Mrs. Gollap herself nothing was seen during daylight hours, her first appearance being made at the head of her dinner-table that night.

It was across the dinner-table too that she asked Winnie, with a broad attempt at irony, whether the day had not seemed to her intolerably long.

"Why?" asked the obtuse Winnie.

"Why? Because the Bombay jaunt fell into the water, to be sure!"

Then only, as she met the smouldering anger in the

eyes fixed upon her, and noted the contractor's ponderous embarrassment, did it occur to Winnie that Mrs. Gollap was doing her the honour of being jealous, an idea over which it was difficult not to burst out laughing, although, within a very short space, she was to feel more than inclined to burst out crying over this identical matter.

Another morning came, the eve of the birthday, without a further word having been said about either the cake or the pinafores. According to custom, Mr. Gollap had been borne townwards, and, according to custom too, Winnie was preparing for the so-called lessons in the summer-house among the rocks. Nelly's marked impatience to get to grips with the alphabet was, however, not quite customary, and, but that Winnie's eyes and thoughts were occupied with a certain smoky blotch upon the horizon—for this was mail day—might possibly have arrested her attention.

"Mees Mohbreh, quickly! quickly! The book is there upon the table; I vant to begin!" the round-eyed imp piped, as with a fold of Winnie's white frock firmly clutched between her plump fingers, she towed her governess in the desired direction. Then, with saucer eyes dancing in some sort of expectation:—

"But you vill go to the post-office first, von't you? *our* post-office in the rocks. Pr'aps the morning post have brought you a letter."

"Not the one I am waiting for, I am sure," sighed Winnie, out of the depths of her homesick heart.

"Oh, a very nice letter, a sweet, *sweet* letter!" assured Nelly, who was sucking a huge stick of pink sugar with the wasteful application of a person who has more

such sticks in prospect. "But I won't tell you who wrote it. Oh, no!"

It was then that, turning a corner, they came full upon Mrs. Gollap, whom to see upon her feet at this hour was the least customary thing of all, Mrs. Gollap dishevelled and in an indescribable *déshabillé*, clutching in one hand a torn envelope, in the other a sheet of letter-paper unfolded.

At the unlooked-for sight Nelly incontinently fled, while Winnie stood still in positive dismay, for the broad countenance confronting her was more than crimson—it was very nearly purple—apparently from fury.

"Ah, here you come! here you come!" she panted, brandishing the sheet in Winnie's face, "to fetch these tender lines, of course! But too late, too late, my fine miss, since Providence has inspired me to leave my bed at dawn, in order to catch my faithless spouse red-handed. There!"

With shaking hands she thrust the sheet at the speechless Winnie, who, under the vague impression that Mrs. Gollap had gone mad and that it would be wise to humour her, mechanically took it. The key to so abrupt an attack was perhaps to be found upon this paper; for which reason she hastened to read it, an easy task, the writing being large and calligraphic to an almost disconcerting point, a typical business hand.

"ADORED MISS!

"In view of the most unsportsmanlike way in which my so-called better half has laid herself out to spy upon my movements, I make use of this possibly frivolous fashion of assuring you that I worship the ground on



which you tread, and thirst for nothing more than for one golden hour of your undisturbed society. Our charming excursion to Bombay having been nipped in the bud by the jaundiced heel of jealousy, I nourish the hope that you will agree to meet me in the summer-house upon the rocks this evening, as soon as ever Mrs. Gollap is safely in bed.

"Don't lay yourself out, oh adored one! to be the 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary' of the bewitching song, but lend an ear to the prayer of the humble servant whom you have run to earth with those ripping eyes of yours!

"Believe me

"Yours truly

"HENRY GOLLAP."

"*P. S.* Nelly is to get another pink stick if she takes you to the rock post-office before her Ma be on her legs."

Long before her horrified eyes had reached the last word Winnie had discarded the theory of Mrs. Gollap's insanity, in favour of that of her husband. Enough here, indeed, to turn any jealous wife both crimson and violet in the face, even without the "jaundiced heel" and kindred flowers of speech, which so clearly betrayed the influence of a baboo atmosphere even upon the English-born individual.

"Mrs. Gollap," said Winnie earnestly, as, scarlet up to her hair-roots, she crushed the detestable paper in her hand, "please believe that this makes me as angry as it does you. I knew nothing, have guessed nothing——"

She was interrupted by a shrill scream of laughter from her glaring antagonist.

"Hear that! Hear that! She knows nothing, no, not she; yet she comes in all haste, before the dew is off the grass, to fetch a love-letter from a legally married man, whom her shameless glances have bewitched! Not difficult to guess now why the post-office game was introduced. Very clever, my fine Mees! very clever, I'm bound to say!"

"It is the first time, I swear it," protested Winnie, now pale to the lips. "The letter itself says so."

"And perhaps you'll tell me that it would be the first time you meet him in the summer-house? Ha? But the last time it shall be; no, the last time has been already, for not one night more do you pass beneath my roof, you precipice of falseness, serpent whom I weakly took to my bosom, black-hearted pussy-cat, fraudulent toad, double-tongued——"

"That will do!" interrupted Winnie, very erect, and speaking with exaggerated composure, her lips quivering in disgust, for Mrs. Gollap in a passion with round eyes rolling and every vestige of self-control gone, presented a spectacle too eloquent of that tar-brush to which rumour assigned a certain interference with her pedigree. "If the object is to get me out of the house you are taking superfluous trouble. Even if you had behaved ever so decently to me nothing would have induced me to stay here after this—piece of insolence," indicating the crumpled paper in her hand. "Be so kind as to pay me my wages, and to order the boat, and you shall be relieved of my presence within half an hour, as well as I of yours."

“Of course, I shall pay you your wages,” vociferated Mrs. Gollap. “What do you take me for? Am I a common thief? Your wages! I snap my fingers at such a trifle. What are they to me? And what are you but a nursery governess, whom I turn out of the house when it suits me!”

“And what are you but a ‘Box Wallah’?” asked Winnie very deliberately, as with a long glance beneath whose steadiness Mrs. Gollap quivered, inarticulate, she turned upon her heel, rapidly to regain the house.

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## CHAPTER X.

## THE BATTLE OF BOMBAY.

THUS it came about that within a month of her departure from Mangopore, Winnie found herself, quite literally, upon the Bombay pavement, with between sixteen and seventeen pounds sterling in her pocket, Mrs. Gollap having been munificent enough disdainfully to throw a month's wages at her head in place of due warning. The thought of those seventeen pounds went far towards keeping up her courage during the transit to the mainland.

By the time she had reached it the first misty outline of a plan had formed itself in her mind.

Recently, by the merest chance, while looking up an address in the post-office directory, she had come upon the name of a Governess's Home, kept by a Miss Macdonald, which, at any rate, sounded reassuringly European. Something, a vague presentiment, perhaps, had moved her to make a note of it. She would go there first, and there form further projects, perhaps, with the aid of Miss Macdonald.

But, alas, for this modest air-castle!

Miss Macdonald proved to be one of those forbidding Scotch females who are like nothing so much as an "elder" dressed up in petticoats, and apparently cherish-

ing a fixed idea that affability is somehow related to godlessness. The type grows rarer from year to year, mercifully, but still subsists, and is to be met at the most unlikely places, as impervious to climate or surroundings as might be a block of Aberdeenshire granite. In her youth (a thing to be believed in, rather than realised) Miss Macdonald had herself been a governess, and to judge from the double-distilled quintessence of vinegar in both tone and mien, was determined to make up for the trials of her own servitude by causing others to drink of the same cup which, presumably, had been served to herself.

Having received Winnie mistrustfully, she looked her over severely, and evidently disapprovingly, to end by the information that the house was full up, which happened to be true, but was not, as she took care to explain, the only objection, seeing that references were indispensable. Had Miss Mowbray any to produce?

Not on the spur of the moment Winnie was forced to confess.

"I thought so," remarked Miss Macdonald in a tone of infinite satisfaction.

When Winnie, much cowed, begged to be given the address of any decent boarding-house, the alarming woman produced it grudgingly.

"It is a thoroughly respectable place, mind!" she admonished her, as though fighting with conscientious scruples as to the expediency of letting loose so doubtful a character upon so immaculate a domicile.

The respectability of the place which Winnie presently reached was scarcely as evident as its mediocrity. The timid lady who kept it asked for no references, but

took a furtive and piercing look into Winnie's face instead, whereupon she immediately declared herself both ready and honoured to let her a room, always supposing she could pay a week's rent in advance. The peculiar tint of her complexion as well as the fluttered and uncertain manner, began by puzzling Winnie, whose experience of Eurasians was limited. It was still more puzzling within a quarter of an hour of her instalment, to hear the same person who had been smirking and curtsying before her, with the air of one in whose mouth butter could not possibly melt, screaming like a fury at an ayah. Subsequently she learnt that Miss Banks (how proud a possession was that English name!) possessed two sets of manners, one for the compatriots of her white father, the other for those of her coloured mother. For mixtures like herself she cherished a secret contempt, which was the reason of the flutter in her manners. Until certainty on the colour-point had been reached it would not do to begin either to bully or to cringe. In Winnie's case the question had been quickly settled.

In the small, meanly furnished room into which she had been ushered Winnie sat down almost thankfully though very wearily, for the sun was high by this time, and the glare of the streets had exhausted her. The mosquito curtain across the window was torn, and the matting upon the floor far from coming up to the "immaculate" standard suggested by Miss Macdonald's words, but for all that the narrow space with the outlook into a narrow side-street bore some resemblance to a haven. The mere consciousness of having secured a roof over her head for a full week, was in itself comforting. She would rest for some hours, unpacking only the strict

necessaries, and in the cool of the afternoon she would try and reach some agency likely to put her in the way of finding employment. Only after she had found it, would she write to Kerr. There was no use distressing him by the account of a position which he was too far off—and also too unfree to remedy.

Almost before it was quite reasonable to do so Winnie crept out into the street again and made for the nearest post-office, to hunt in the directory for likely addresses.

Half an hour later she reached the most likely sounding of these on foot, since she was determined to let those seventeen pounds melt as slowly as possible. Here an energetic but breathlessly busy old lady in a lace cap put her through a series of business-like questions, the answers being noted in an awe-inspiring ledger. When it came to the question of qualifications the old lady's eyebrows went up, almost to beneath her cap.

"No training as a teacher, and no examinations passed," she summed up the matter with grave conciseness. "And yet you expect to be placed?"

"I thought perhaps as nursery governess——"

"Next to no openings for nursery governesses in India. Children sent home too early for that. And your testimonials?"

"I have none. I have only been in one place, and I had to leave it—in a hurry."

"That's unfortunate," said the business-like lady with a sharper look at Winnie. Perhaps it was the glitter of rising tears in the hazel eyes which caused her to add:—

"However, we'll see what we can do for you. Call

again in a couple of days. The entry fee is fifteen rupees. Thanks. Good evening. Next case!"

And Winnie was once more in the street, minus a pound of her small hoard.

The next few days were spent chiefly in the narrow room overlooking the narrow street. Both the glare of the sun—so much more oppressive here than it had been on the island—and the dread of the crowded thoroughfares kept her prisoner. Here Miss Banks flutteringly served her nondescript meals, which Winnie valiantly endeavoured to swallow. Of her fellow-lodgers she was thankful to see next to nothing, and more thankful still that the few faces she passed in the entrance and upon the landing were white—or comparatively so.

On the third day, with a beating heart, she paid another visit to the agency. The mere sight of the face above the ledger was answer enough:—

"Nothing yet!"

So Winnie went back to wait, and to sweat in the narrow little room.

It was not the last time that she was to hear those two words.

About the fourth time the attention of the busy old lady seemed at last to have been forcibly arrested.

"Have you any friends in India?" she asked sharply.

"I have a brother."

"Then I advise you to go to him. Or—better still—to go home to England. Bombay is no place for you, and India is no place for you. If you have the passage money——"



"I haven't. I am trying to earn it."

"Ah, that's it. Well, we'll see what we can do for you. No need to lose courage. Good evening. Next case!"

But even while the next case was entering, the agent's eyes darted a quick look after the brown-haired girl, which possibly meant that she would have been quite open to personal interest in her, if only time had permitted.

After this Winnie took to reading advertisements in the papers and occasionally to answer them. She also tried some other agencies and paid some further entry fees. But this she soon gave up, for most of the men in the offices were young, and some were impertinent, and it began forcibly to be borne in upon her that this was not England. Among the jobs that were offered her was the care of a jabbering idiot-girl, and the post of female shop-walker in a fashionable dress-shop, and she was not yet desperate enough for either of these things. Necessarily these attempts took her into the streets, and sometimes into strange corners of Bombay. But the motley panorama, with its European touches upon an Asiatic background, with the anomalous costumes which had so amused her on her first landing with Kerr, nearly nine months ago, had lost its power of fascination. Engaged in the *mêlée* of the fight for life she barely noticed the details of the battlefield. Once only, when some forlorn quest had taken her to the oldest part of the town, and she found herself surrounded by flat roofs, caged windows and decrepit wooden balconies, seemingly groaning under the weight of dusky humanity crowding together upon them, she was startled

out of her inattention to the point of precipitate flight, rendered advisable by the notice she found herself attracting. Another time again she enjoyed a curious shudder at sight of the vultures sitting upon a group of dead palm-trees—sitting and patiently waiting for their food, which could not fail to come, seeing that the "Towers of Silence" were close by, whereon the Parsee dead are exposed in as business-like a manner as could be desired—even by vultures.

Meanwhile the signs of the coming change of season were multiplying. More than one cloud-bank had risen in the horizon to disperse again without result, and to gather again next day. Longingly Winnie's eyes turned towards it; for the physical rally, which the month upon the island had brought her, was exhausted, and the languor and sleeplessness of Mangopore upon her again. Surely the rains would bring her strength again; for if not——

Of course there would always remain the possibility of an application to Kerr. But, however low her courage sank at moments, she never reached the point of even contemplating this. Though her heart-strings might pull her towards her brother, she had only to think of Mrs. Bowdler's purple countenance, and more still of the look in Cassie's grey-green eyes as she had sent home the words: "I am glad you recognise it at the eleventh hour," to shut her teeth tight and swear to herself that, rather than accept quarter from such antagonists she would fall upon the battlefield.

And, after all, she had still more than ten pounds in her pocket, and Miss Bank's lodgings, if painfully

second-rate, were unquestionably respectable. Matters might have been worse than they were.

Neither were they to lose much time in becoming so. It was a fortnight after her exit from the island when the evening post brought her a letter addressed in a calligraphic hand which she recognised with a shock, and the contents of which she perused with alarmed eyes.

“ADORED MISS!

“After infinite trouble my humble efforts at procuring your address have at length been crowned with success. I therefore lose no time in conveying to you the burning indignation which fills me at the thought of the treatment you have undergone beneath my unworthy roof. What comfort I can give you in your misfortune please believe to be at your disposal. I make bold to hope that it will not be spurned. If my guess hits the nail on the head then please kindly address your reply to my office in — Street, — a course which Mrs. Gollap’s present mood renders desirable.

“Allow me to trust that your precious health has not suffered by this devilish temperature, and that—to speak plainly—you are feeling as fit as a fiddle. Ah, if the nursery song spoke true and little girls were indeed made of ‘sugar and spice’ and all that’s nice, what could remain over of your valuable person in such infernal weather? Oh, Chickabiddy of my heart, come to it without delay! Reply to — Street, unless you want to be the death of

“Yours truly,

“HENRY GOLLAP.”

With panic-stricken eyes Winnie read down to the last word, then, in the same panic, stared from one wall of her room to the other. It had not been much of a home, but such as it was, it stood clear that she must leave it without delay. From the moment that this detestable man had tracked her there could be no more peace for her here. The day's paper was lying on the table. She almost rushed at it, and began to search its columns for the boarding-house advertisements. Within a quarter of an hour she had made her choice, almost at random, guided only by the English name, as well as by the street, which happened to be one she had passed through and knew the look of.

Miss Banks, on being informed of the sudden resolution, fluttered painfully and even attempted to protest. "Was there anything wrong about the room?" she timidly enquired. "Had Miss Mowbray anything to complain of?"

Nothing at all, Winnie assured her; only circumstances made it necessary for her to move to another quarter of the town. Would Miss Banks kindly make up the bill, and also have a conveyance called?

"But need it be to-night?" asked the little Eurasian, the tip of whose long, thin nose positively quivered with agitation. "Would it not be advisable to wait till to-morrow morning? The storm is breaking at last. Listen!"

It was true. A howling wind had been sweeping the streets for hours, and even as she spoke the first drops drummed upon the roof. How Winnie had longed to hear them! Yet now she scarcely noted it.

"To-night, to-night, it must be to-night," she insisted.

To effect the move in those evening hours during which she knew him held fast in the bosom of his family, seemed to Winnie the only sure way of causing that wretch of a Gollap to lose her trace.

Against her frantic decision Miss Banks' wavering objections had no chance.

By the time her small belongings were packed sheets of water were descending to the pavement. One of them caught Winnie as she crossed the footpath to the waiting vehicle, and wrapped her round as in a cold compress. Umbrellas were mere toys for the storm to play with, and the damaged roof of the *gharry* offered anything but perfect protection from the rain.

The boarding-house with the likely name was full-up and directed Winnie to another, with a less likely name. But here too she was politely and firmly turned from the door. Not until ten at night did she find herself landed in a room larger, but distinctly dirtier than the one Miss Banks had put at her disposal. The first word pronounced by the jovial looking landlady had settled the question of nationality.

"Sorry a night, indade, for a young lady to be walkin' the strates in a car, to be sure!" she had declared as she ushered the exhausted and drenched Winnie to her room. And Winnie, dog-tired though she was, could almost have fallen round her ample neck for the sake of that brogue. Next morning, when she met her on the staircase, she was glad that she had not done so, for Mrs. O'Hagan was walking uncertainly, and as she brushed past her lodger, emitted a strong, alcoholic perfume. At sight of the flushed countenance and glazed eyes, Winnie, who had intended to ask a question,

left it unasked, and, instead, retired precipitately into her room.

During the next two days she did not leave it, partly out of the fear of meeting Mrs. O'Hagan, more still from that of encountering Mr. Gollap should she venture into the streets, which, for the matter of that, were scarcely inhabitable, the rain-storm having not yet run its course. From the mere thought of another such wetting as she had undergone Winnie shrank fearfully. On the morning after her first night under Mrs. O'Hagan's roof she had awoke with aching limbs and strange shivers running down her spine. An influenza, she supposed, which it might be as well to nurse a bit.

For two days she drowsed upon her bed, listening vaguely to the sound of the rain, and finding a strange difficulty about coherent thought. Upon the evening of the second an effort became necessary, for on that day Mrs. O'Hagan, perhaps alarmed at the passivity of the new lodger, knocked peremptorily at the door. She had come for two reasons, she explained, the first being a somewhat bellicose enquiry as to what the young lady had to object to in the food, seeing that it invariably returned untouched; the second the inevitable request for an advance upon the week's rent.

Winnie, while noting with a species of gratitude that her landlady was, comparatively speaking, sober, hastened to reassure her on the first, while declaring her readiness to satisfy her on the second point.

In the next moment a sudden faintness came over her, for, groping beneath the pillow, she had not found her purse on the accustomed spot.

"In a moment! in a moment!" she stammered, putting her feet to the ground and her hand to her head.

More than once, during the past two days of semi-consciousness, the thought of making up her accounts and assuring herself of the exact margin which still stood between her and misery, had crossed her mind, but uselessly, under the weight of increasing lethargy. That the purse was under the pillow all the time she never doubted. And now her groping hand had returned empty. That could only mean that upon that dreadful evening of mental and physical exhaustion she had left it in the pocket of her skirt. And that skirt? Had been fished out of the pool of its own making on the floor and taken out dripping, presumably to the kitchen fire. Brought back again too, as Winnie knew, remembering one of the unwelcome interruptions to her two days' drowse. There it hung upon a nail driven into the door, a row of such nails being the only substitute for a wardrobe.

With knees which seemed unequal to bearing Mrs. O'Hagan's watchful and suspicious gaze—so sorely did they totter beneath her—Winnie went towards the door and reached for the pocket of the skirt. Empty! She felt again, refusing to believe the evidence of her senses, then stood frowning for a moment at the unresponsive article, finally tottered back again towards the table and—still under the oppression of Mrs. O'Hagan's eyes—sat down to think.

She was quite sure now of not having taken the purse out of the pocket herself; therefore, somebody else must have done so. That seemed clear and logical. The probabilities pointed to the very sly and oily look-

ing female who was the equivalent for a housemaid in Mrs. O'Hagan's establishment.

"Mrs. O'Hagan," she began with a supreme effort at calmness, "I don't want to cause you any disagreeables, but my purse was in the pocket of that skirt when it was taken out to be dried, the day before yesterday."

In response to which Mrs. O'Hagan immediately flew into the passion which had been simmering during the past few minutes.

"Oh, was it indade?" she snorted, with arms akimbo. "And sure, I've been tellin' myself that it's no blessed thing but that which could be comin'. It's allays the way with them purses, ain't it? especially when there's a bill fallin' due. And how much would you get me to believe was in that ghrand concairn of yours, anyway?"

"Between seven and eight pounds, I think. It was a brown leather purse. Perhaps if you would ask the servant ——"

Here the choleric symptoms showed so marked an increase that Winnie wondered how she had ever been able to discover joviality in this flaming countenance.

So it was as a den of thieves that Winnie was trying to brand this "dacent" house, was it? and with shame that she was endeavouring to overwhelm the head of a "god-faring" widow who had lived fifteen years with her husband (the Lord rest his soul!) and hoped to live double that time without him, to be sure! What else was this—she called the Saints to witness of it—but inky-black ingratitude on the part of a person whom she had gathered in from the street, so to say! What? Not accusing herself? Only her servants? And how



about the proverb which said "like maid, like mistress," or the other way round? And Nana, too, who had been six whole weeks in the house, and possessed her confidence "enthirely"!

"I am not saying she has stolen it," edged in Winnie during an indispensable breathing interval, "but it may have fallen out of the pocket while she was carrying it down the stairs: I want you only to enquire whether"—

"Sorry a bit I'll enquire," stormed Mrs. O'Hagan, "after a thing wot I don't believe in any more than I believe in pigs flyin'. Do you think it's the first time I've haired the story of the stolen purse, to be sure?"

"But it must be found! it must!" cried Winnie in irresistible flurry. "It is all the money I have got in the world—every penny."

A shrill scream of laughter, half hysterical and wholly furious, answered Winnie.

"And I so innercent as to take you in without so much as seein' the colour of your money! Serves me roight for havin' a heart o' butter, to be sure! But I'm done wi' them foolishnesses. Either you hands me out the week's board and lodgin' or you packs yourself out to make room for people who looks after their pairses better than you appears to do."

"Mrs. O'Hagan," said Winnie, and in the terror of her soul she mechanically clasped her hands, "don't turn me out to-night! Wait till to-morrow morning! Perhaps the purse will be found. I shall search my things carefully. Even if I don't find it I have still got my watch: so you are not risking anything. Let me sleep here this

one night more! I should not know where to go to at this hour."

In the end Mrs. O'Hagan's "heart of butter" moved her—in consideration of the gold watch—to grant the request; but with the emphatic conclusion that by next morning's daylight either the rent must be forthcoming or Winnie herself depart.

By next morning's daylight, however, other things had happened. For, throwing herself upon her bed after a fruitless hunt through all her belongings, and with every single bone in her body aching as though it possessed a separate consciousness, Winnie fell straightway, not into the arms of sleep, but into those of nightmare. Mrs. O'Hagan's enquiring knock at break of dawn met with no response, and it was with blank, unrecognising eyes that Winnie stared at her from her tumbled pillow.

The sight of those scarlet cheeks and parched lips was enough for Mrs. O'Hagan. She had, ere this, endured the disagreeables of jungle fever in the house and had no mind to endure them again.

Without a moment's delay the nearest doctor was summoned.

"Has she any friends?" was the first question he asked, after the examination. To which Mrs. O'Hagan in deep disgust:—

"Sorry a friend, and sorry a penny in the world, so far as I can see, to be sure!"

"Nothing for it but the hospital, then. The quicker you get her removed the better, both for her and for yourself."

And Mrs. O'Hagan—having first safe-guarded herself against accidents by taking possession of the watch

—was so quick about it that before the bulk of the lodgers had breakfasted Winnie's room was empty.

To be penniless was bad enough, but to be sick into the bargain was more than even a "heart of butter" could put up with.

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## CHAPTER XI.

## DOCTOR MILES.

"YOU'VE got everything you require, Miss?" asked the trim nurse, as she settled the patient in the bath-chair in the shade of a cocoa-nut palm.

"Everything, thank you."

"Then I'll just be looking after that old lady at the end of the avenue—she can't move foot or hand, you know. If you feel faint just take a sniff at this bottle—and should you be wanting me, you've only got to wave your handkerchief, and I'll be beside you in a moment."

"Thank you. What is the second chair for?"

"For the doctor. He'll be coming along presently. Said as how we were not to waste this fine afternoon indoors. There! I've taken you to where you can see the sea, just as you wanted. That will do, will it not?"

"Yes, that will do."

With another scientific pinch to the pillows the white capped figure tripped away between the palm-trees. Winnie's eyes followed it listlessly, to return to the glitter of blue water visible at the opposite end of the avenue, and there hungrily to fasten themselves.

Many might have passed before that bath-chair with-

out recognising in its occupant the girl with the sunshiny hair and the English roses in her cheeks, who, on the evening of the Black Dragoons' dance, had carried the thoughts of so many of the exiles straight back to their distant homes. No wonder either, seeing that both roses and hair were gone, the former brutally plucked by the hand of disease, the latter shorn by a pair of hospital scissors and replaced by a dreadful little linen cap tied with tape beneath the chin. The face which it framed seemed to have shrunk to about half its size, in favour of the exaggerated looking eyes—for in the six weeks that had passed since Winnie's admission to the hospital, she had had one foot already upon the threshold of the portal of death, and to withdraw it had taxed all her strength. Now the portals had been closed in her face—for the moment, at any rate. For the first time to-day she was again looking at the sky otherwise than through a window, for the first time breathing other air than that of a hospital ward; a break in the monotony of the rain having let loose the herd of convalescents—penned up till now behind walls—into the vast well cared-for hospital grounds. Their languid figures were to be seen tottering feebly along smoothly sanded walks, or reposing immovable in bath-chairs uniform in pattern with the one occupied by Winnie.

That rapturous feeling of returning life which, by those who have tasted it, is described as the most perfect joy on earth, should have been coursing through Winnie's veins and knocking at her heart; yet nothing of the sort was to be read out of her lustreless eyes and drooping attitude. The appetite for living had not re-

turned, and tarried strangely. It was no use repeating to herself that she had escaped from death, that she had life before her, when close upon the heels of that thought came the question as to what she was to do with her life? Who, in the wide world, cared whether she lived or died? Not Kerr, apparently, who, the absorption of the coming family event notwithstanding, might surely have found means of reaching the explanation of this two months' silence; not even Julian, she told herself with one of those momentary intuitions which often come to those who have recently seen death near, and, from the mere sight, gained a truer valuation of life—and sometimes of men. In the delirium of the past weeks his elegantly turned and well-dressed figure had played the chief part, sometimes flitting before her among the branches of jungle trees like some tantalising will o' the wisp, at other times joining hands with Mrs. Bowdler and Cassie, and, together with Mr. Gollap and Miss Macdonald, to whirl in a dizzy dance around her. Perhaps the very intensity of the fancy had tended to exhaust itself, for with the return of consciousness the well-dressed figure had faded back into the distance—a further distance than before. It had no place beneath this sky and among this exotic vegetation. Its proper frame were mass-grown boulders and gnarled beech-branches.

Ah, the beeches! Never before had Winnie believed that the longing for the sight of anything inanimate could come so near to a physical pain. That home-sickness which already on the island in the bay had attacked her, was back upon her again in tenfold force, which physical debility could not attempt to fight. Neither the

glorious verdure of newly refreshed grass and foliage, nor the flame of cactus blossoms, nor the exquisite lace-work of tree-ferns cut out against the pure blue sky could bring a smile to her lips. Past them all she looked towards that gleam of blue water which meant the homeward road. That nausea of the East, which is one of the tortures of exiles, made her turn from her surroundings with a movement almost of physical disgust. It was English lawns, she craved to see instead of all these splendours, the black of Scotch firs, the boles of centenary oaks, English meadows starred with ox-eye daisies and with the dappled cows standing knee-deep in the summer grasses.

A footstep on the gravel struck like a blow across the vision, sending a quiver of apprehension along her weakened nerves. A glance over her shoulder calmed them again, for she had recognised Dr. Miles, whose very appearance never failed to act as a sedative.

"Tut, tut," said the rotund little man, whose bushy eyebrows, seeing that he was clean-shaven and as bald as an egg, were the only hairy portion of his physiognomy, "is that the way you keep your nervous system in order. I'm half inclined to resent that start. Not used to striking terror into people's hearts, you know."

"I am sorry," said Winnie feebly. "I didn't hear you coming."

"Shall I venture a guess why? Because it was only your body that was present in this chair a minute ago, while your mind was taking a trip across seas in a P. and O. steamer, I venture to surmise. Am I wrong?"

"You are right," admitted Winnie, too weak to check the tears that started to her eyes.

"Tut, tut, the first taste of open air always is a bit trying, isn't it? Let's get a hold of your pulse."

He had taken his place on the second chair by this time and now reached for her listless right hand. With his watch upon his knee he checked off the beats, then said "hum" twice over, in two different keys, then—still keeping the little hand within his own broad paw as though he wished to chafe it back into warmth—fell to examining the face between the cap ribbons with a quiet but exceedingly penetrating gaze, which, thanks to the bushy eyebrows and a pair of smoke-glass spectacles, he could do almost unobserved.

"Appetite not yet returned, I hear?"

"No, I'm not hungry at all."

"But the pains are all gone?"

"Oh yes," replied Winnie listlessly. "They are gone—just as everything else is gone."

"Hum!"

He took stock of her once more before speaking again, this time in an undefinably altered tone, still holding her hand and giving it little fatherly pats, by way of a change.

"I'm not sure that you are quite strong enough to listen to me, but I am going to talk to you all the same. The truth is, my dear girl ——"

"I'm not a girl," interrupted Winnie bitterly; "I am a number! Number twenty-seven in Ward G. You know that quite well."

"Hum? So you were, until we got your name out of you—together with the fever. Since then I happen



to know that your rightful appellation is Mowbray—which I take the liberty of preferring to twenty-seven. But these are details. What I wanted to say just now was that the sooner you are able to go aboard that P. and O.—not in spirit only, but in body as well—the better it will be for you.”

“Ah, if I could!” said Winnie, catching a painfully deep breath.

“And can you not?”

She slowly shook her head.

“It’s the usual difficulty, I suppose?” he asked, carefully studying the tree-fern nearest at hand, “the pecuniary one, I mean?”

“Of course. You must have seen that I had not so much as a purse about me when I was brought here. Two days earlier I had one, but there were not much more than seven pounds in it. It was stolen, I suppose, and my landlady kept my watch—for the rent.”

“I see. But I daresay you have other means. I’m not a connoisseur in ladies’ clothes, but your underlinen certainly did not strike me as being that of a pauper. I don’t apologise for indiscretion, by-the-bye; doctors can’t be indiscreet, you know.”

“If having forty pounds a year means not being a pauper then I am not one. But I only get the money quarterly, and the next ten pounds isn’t due for a month.”

“Are you of age?”

“No.”

The doctor’s face lighted up.

“Then you must have a guardian. Can’t you apply to him?”

"He's in England; and besides, I don't believe he has any power over the capital."

"But your relations? You must have some."

"Only a brother."

"In England too?"

"No—in India," said Winnie, reluctantly.

Dr. Miles slapped his knee triumphantly.

"What? A brother in India? the very thing we want. You will write to him at once, will you not?"

"No, I will not. He can't help me. He has no money to spare."

"He will raise it somehow—the passage, I mean. He's in one of the Services, I suppose?"

"In the Civil."

"Splendid! Write to him to-day, my dear!"

"I won't," said Winnie, more obstinately than before.

"Then I will. Mowbray—in the Civil Service—only requires the looking up of a list."

Winnie tore away her hand from the doctor's to clutch at his sleeve.

"Don't! Don't! Promise me that you won't. If you do I'll—I'll—I don't know what I'll do, but it will be something you won't approve of. You don't know—you can't understand—my brother has calls upon him—he has a wife; I never could accept anything from him."

"Hum!" said the doctor, once more scrutinising the convulsed face, from beneath the shelter of his down-drawn brows and from behind the smoked glass screen.

"Promise me that you will not write to him!"

"Steady! Steady! I'll promise all right; but can't I get you to promise that you'll do so yourself?"

"No, you can't," said Winnie, with a relapse into the sullen obstinacy of a minute back.

"Not even when I tell you that this is for you not a question of mere expediency, but one of life and death?"

The comfortable tone had deepened suddenly, and the eyes behind the spectacles looked very grave.

"Of life and death?"

Winnie repeated the words with a touch of scare in her voice. "But they all tell me that I am going to get well!"

"Yes,—so God wills, but not here. Once get you safely to England and I think I can answer for your life; but if you stay out here I wash my hands of you. It is quite likely—though not at all certain—that you may have three or four months before you; more than that I do not give you if you stay. If there was anyone else to say this to I should not be quite so frank, but it seems that there isn't. Besides, a dose of truth has its advantages. And *now*, will you write to your brother?"

Winnie's head had fallen back against the chair, while her over-large eyes scanned the doctor's face in genuine alarm. But not for very long. Very swiftly he saw a new and fiercer light chasing off the shadow of terror.

"No, I will not write," she said slowly and deliberately. "What for? It is better this way. Just this morning I was asking myself where I should go to, what I should do when I left the hospital. This solves the question since I simply won't leave it. You will not turn me out before the—the end, will you? Besides,

nobody cares whether I am alive or not. Nobody needs me. Oh, yes, this is much simpler."

"Child, you are mad!" said Doctor Miles, blinking hard behind his spectacles. "In the world there must be somebody who cares. If it were otherwise it would not be in the nature of things."

"Of such things as this?" asked Winnie, lifting an unsteady hand to the little linen cap, and smiling a wry little smile that was almost a grimace.

The doctor moved a fat but impatient hand.

"A mere episode! *I* saw what was there before that cap, and others must have seen it too. Material for mountains of love-locks."

"Nobody wants them," said Winnie just below her breath. "Not even Julian," she added within herself, with that newborn intuition once more at work, "not if he saw me now, at any rate."

"I will procure you the money for the passage—I will lend it you."

She shook her head wearily.

"It would be no use, even if I reached England I should not know where to go to there."

"My dear child——"

"Oh, don't be so kind to me—I can't stand it!" she cried fretfully, and before his troubled eyes burst into half hysterical tears.

When presently he left her to continue his rounds, Doctor Miles carried the impression of those tears with him, together with a certain preoccupation engendered by the interview, being one of those unpractical members of the profession to whom their patients are not merely "cases" but also human beings. Right through the other

interviews the desolate accents of the young voice pursued him, and back to his lodgings where he had to change his infected clothes in a hurry, seeing that two colleagues were waiting for him—and by this time probably swearing at him—in the club dining-room. Even to the perfectly appointed dinner-table itself he carried his pre-occupation so visibly that before the soup was eaten he had been offered a penny for his thoughts.

“I wonder if you’re aware that you’re putting sugar into your broth instead of salt,” grinned the younger of his two friends, a galvanic looking person without an ounce of superfluous flesh about him.

“Not he!” asserted the other who was big and bearded. “Exchanges are on the order of the day. He’s just handed me the mustard instead of the pepper—and at the second asking too.”

“That’s what comes of letting your cases get upon your brain.”

“The brain would be all right. It’s the heart I object to. I bet anything you like that he’s been taking some new case to heart. The most unprofessional thing you can possibly do. Can’t imagine what made him become a doctor instead of a sister-of-charity.”

“Shut up! and don’t give me away before strangers,” growled Doctor Miles over his sugared soup, while squinting significantly towards the neighbouring table at which two men were dining *tête-à-tête*, somewhat silently.

“Who’s the sunburnt fellow dining with Macleod?” he enquired in an undertone. “Don’t seem to have seen him before.”

"Don't you know? Athlick, Major in the Black Dragoons."

"Athlick, the tiger-swell?"

"Exactly."

Dr. Miles threw a keener glance in the direction of Colonel Macleod's companion.

"What's he doing here?"

"Just back from leave. Landed this morning. On his way to the regiment. Macleod is pumping him for the latest English news."

"Not very successfully, it would seem."

"No. But these are wilful digressions, palpably started in order to get us off the track. It's *you* that we're engaged in pumping, my friend, touching that latest heart-rending case; it *is* a heart-rending case which is responsible for the condition of that soup, is it not?" asked the bearded man, winking playfully at the galvanic one.

"Well, pretty heart-rending," admitted Miles shamefacedly. "I can make shift to look at a man in a tight place, but when it comes to a girl——"

"Ah, a girl!" gleefully grinned the galvanic doctor, picking his teeth with so alarming an energy as to make one fear for the very visible stoppings. "What a hypocrite that Miles is! Good looking, I wager!"

"Not now, but she has been so, and she might be so again—if she lives—which I'm afraid she won't, as matters stand."

"And how do they stand?" asked both doctors together, in a tone which showed that the professional chord had been touched.

Stimulated by their interest Dr. Miles began to un-

roll what he knew of Winnie's story, at first in a discreet undertone, which rose unperceived as he warmed to his own tale.

"Three months is the outside I give her unless she can be got back to Europe," he concluded with an undisguised sigh.

"A case of undermined constitution," commented the elder doctor, dispassionately, while the other paused in the picking of his teeth to enquire:—

"And her name? Have you got hold of that?"

"Yes,—but only lately. Mowbray."

Had the doctor chanced to be looking in the direction of the neighbouring table he could not have failed to observe how, at the sound of the name he pronounced, the unknown Major sharply turned his head in the direction of the speaker, becoming at the same time immobilised with attention.

"Mowbray? That sounds all right."

"Yes, I fancy it's a good name."

"And this is a better sauce," cut in the bearded one, helping himself profusely to a bright yellow concoction. "I vote that we drown our cares in it. Bless you, if we wanted to disentangle every muddle that came our way, we'd have no time over for the healing business. I've given it over long ago; and so will you, in time. It doesn't pay, Miles, it doesn't pay!"

When half an hour later Dr. Miles was lighting his pipe in the smoking-room, he felt a neat little military tap upon his shoulder, and turned to find Colonel Macleod behind him.

"Major Athlick wishes to be introduced to you. This is Dr. Miles, Major, one of our medical lights."

Before outraged modesty had had time to protest, the Colonel had turned upon his heel, leaving Dr. Miles and Major Athlick face to face.

"Would you mind getting into a corner with me?" said Athlick without any delay, "anywhere where we can talk unmolested. I have some questions to put to you."

"This window embrasure will do, will it not?" suggested the doctor, as astonished at this opening as he had been by the introduction itself. "A medical consultation—here?" he was meanwhile asking himself somewhat aghast. "Surely the man isn't quite all there?"

They were standing in the embrasure by this time, their voices covered for the bystanders by the street-sounds mounting through the open window.

"I was dining next to you," began Athlick, talking rather close to the doctor's ear, so as to ensure complete distinctness, "and thought I heard you mentioning the name of a young lady—a Miss Mowbray; is that correct?"

"Yes, the name is correct."

"And she is lying in the hospital here? I think I heard you say so, although I could not catch every word."

"Yes, she is in the hospital. Do you happen to know her?" asked the doctor eagerly, his eyes lighting up behind the spectacles, with a gleam of newborn hope.

"If she is the person I suppose she is. Can you describe her to me?"

"Not as you have known her, certainly. It is a question whether you would even recognise her in the flesh, far less by my description."



"Has she got brown hair with a gleam of gold in it?"

"She *had* hair which might come under that description but she hasn't got it now. We had the inhumanity to cut it off."

A spasm of pain crossed the sunburnt face beside the doctor.

"And hazel eyes?"

"Yes, that tallies," said Doctor Miles, drawing his eyebrows down as low as they would go, in order the better to observe his companion's face.

"Do you happen to know what her Christian name is?"

"It's down in the register—let me see—yes: Winifred."

"That's her then," said the Major, suddenly biting his lip rather hard, as he first stared down at the floor, then quickly up into the doctor's face.

"And you say she is very ill? In danger?"

"Not in immediate danger, but you may have heard me tell my friends that she can't recover here, and that, apparently, she can't get home, which means her doom."

"Impossible!" said the Major, not loud, but very vehemently. "Her brother must be able to help. I know him."

"She refuses to apply to her brother, says he has calls upon him—and a wife. I fancy that's the crucial question."

"Yes, I fancy so too," said Athlick after a reflective pause, during which a vision of the erstwhile Cassie Bowdler's face had flitted across his inner eyesight. "Did she tell you how she comes to be here at all?"

"I know only that she has been in a situation as nursery governess, and was turned off without notice."

To the doctor's attentive ears there came the sound

of a groan, which sounded too human to belong to the street noises.

"The worst of it," he went on with both eyes and ears very much on the alert, "is that she doesn't seem to want to recover. The *will* to live is missing, and without it nothing can be done. It may only be nervous depression which makes her say that nobody cares whether she lives or not, but she says it with apparent conviction."

Major Athlick took an unexpected grip of Dr. Miles' sleeve.

"Doctor," he said a little huskily, "is it possible for you to procure me the opportunity of speaking to Miss Mowbray? I am a friend, or, at any rate, an acquaintance of hers, and perhaps—I do not know—but perhaps I may succeed in getting her to hear reason. I will do my best, at any rate. Will you take me to her?"

"I should rather think I will!" beamed the doctor, who had been waiting for this all along. "As if I would miss so good an opportunity of halving the responsibilities of the case. Maybe you'll find a way out of the dilemma where I haven't been able to. Here's my card. Ask for me at sharp 5 p.m. to-morrow, and the rest is child's play. By the way, am I to mention your visit to her?"

"No, better not," said Athlick quickly. "She—it might alarm her."

"Hum. Well, at 5 p.m."

The doctor, on the point of quitting the embrasure, turned back again, as though struck by a new thought.

"Would you mind telling me what your Christian

name is?" he asked with a distinct note of curiosity in his voice.

"My Christian name? Mark."

The doctor's face fell.

"Mark? Not Julian? You are sure it is not Julian?"

"Quite sure. What on earth makes you think so?"

"Oh—well—nothing, only that I've been hearing that name lately, rather often, during that girl's delirium, it was on her lips constantly, and I imagined——"

"There is nothing whatever to imagine," interrupted Major Athlick rather grimly. "I have told you that I am only an acquaintance."

"I beg your pardon, well, at 5 p.m. precisely. Good morning."

And the doctor was gone from the embrasure with the prettily little romance which his fertile imagination had, in a turn of the hand, constructed, all tumbling about his ears.

"Only an acquaintance," he reflected in discomfiture. "It's better than nothing, of course, but I had hoped for other things."

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## CHAPTER XII.

## THE LESSER EVIL.

NEXT day at the same hour Winnie, sitting under the same palm-tree was busy with almost the identical thoughts which had occupied her yesterday. Yet with a difference. For while yesterday she had gazed at the blue gleam of water with impatient longing, to-day she looked at it almost indifferently, knowing that she would never cross it. Although there might be despair there was also a certain quiet in the thought. After her experiences of the Bombay pavement, the hospital had seemed to her like a haven of rest. And now there would be no more need over again to face the breakers outside. How little fitted was she to face them too! Could these poor, weak hands ever again have taken up the battle of life?

She lifted them to before her eyes, letting them drop again to her lap; then raised the right one again with a sudden movement of interest. It had fallen palm upwards, with the network of lines conspicuous upon the shrunken flesh. In a moment memory was at work, showing her the dishevelled *fakir* bending over that palm with his fingers twisted perplexedly in his ragged beard.

"Some great illness, some great accident awaits the Mem," he had said. "The line is cut in two."

Well, he had seen rightly. True, he had added something about the light falling badly, and the line going on again, and even about a husband with a dark moustache, but that had evidently been patched on in order to calm her alarms, and it was the first prophecy that was the true one. Better so, too, since she had as little more use for life as the world evidently had for her. And yet—a small shiver ran down her spine at this point—it was a little dreadful to think that by this day three months—

Here she happened to raise her eyes, and immediately stiffened into alarmed attention; for Dr. Miles was coming down the avenue, bearing straight upon her bath-chair, and he was not coming alone. Was that another doctor he was bringing with him? None that she knew by sight, certainly, nor did he look in the least like a doctor; far more like——

Winnie's eyes widened as she strained them towards the advancing figure, upon which the sunlight from between the straight palm-leaves was laying golden and ever-shifting stripes, in a truly bewildering manner. Surely she knew that lean figure, that sunburnt face with the light, keen eyes?

“Good gracious, it's Major Athlick!” she was saying to herself in another moment, almost panic-stricken.

So far had Major Athlick lain outside the circle of her thoughts that during her recent desolate reflections his figure had never once obtruded itself upon her inner sight. Now all at once she remembered the dreadful little linen cap and felt abruptly inclined to hide underground. For to have discarded a man as suitor does not necessarily mean that you care to be seen by him

as a fright. A movement of violent resentment towards Dr. Miles was her most coherent feeling at the moment. Really, it was too bad of him to spring visitors upon her in this way!

So strong was the repugnance to the untimely exhibition that as the two men stopped before her chair, she all but yielded to the temptation of covering her face with her hands. As it was, she shrank back as far as was possible into the shadow of the hood, and from out of it looked at the doctor alone with wide reproachful eyes.

"Picked up a friend, an acquaintance of yours, in the street, so to say," observed the doctor briskly. "Fresh from England. Thought you might like a helping of home-news grill-hot. Look round again in ten minutes. Case waiting for me over there."

Before Winnie had quite grasped what was happening she found herself, with plenty (mostly debilitated) people within sight, it is true, but still virtually alone with Major Athlick.

Of course there was nothing for it but to look at him now, which Winnie did with a sort of shrinking terror, afraid of reading upon his face the horror which the sight of her own must surely produce. But there was no horror upon the features she glanced at fearfully from under her eyelashes. There was only a very evident pain, and something so immensely kind in the light grey eyes that abruptly her agitation calmed. In its place came that pleasant warmth about her heart which the sight of a known face, which is at once a friendly one, brings to the waifs of fortune. It was no longer the unwelcome visitor, the rejected suitor whom she saw

in him, it was a human being to whom she was at least something more than a number in a hospital ward.

"You—you would not have recognised me, would you, if you had not known who I was?" she asked with a shaky little smile, while the quick flush which for a moment had suffused her wasted cheeks, fell as rapidly as it had risen, leaving them paler than before. Then quickly she added:—

"Don't pay compliments, please! You know, I couldn't believe them."

"I never pay compliments," said Athlick very gently, and evidently trying to speak lightly. "But I would have known you all the same. Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that I would have reconstructed you from what I knew of you before. May I sit down?"

"Of course," said Winnie, confused at her own remissness.

Before taking his place he furtively kicked the chair a little further from hers, for which she felt inwardly grateful. Since he had not to feel her pulse or examine her tongue there was really no call for such vicinity. At the distance he was keeping she had no objection to his presence, the less so as the man was, somehow, not quite the same man she had known. She never would have suspected his dictatorial tones of being capable of so subdued a note, nor those keen eyes of so mild a light. The edge of the steel was either broken—or else it had been most effectually sheathed—for the moment.

"And you are actually straight from England?" asked Winnie, looking at him with wistful, envious eyes.

"Straight. I landed yesterday morning. On Satur-

day I mean to go on to Mangopore. That is why I called. I wanted to ask you whether you had any message for your brother."

"No, I have no message," said Winnie hastily, with the quick, evanescent flush again springing to her cheek. "I see," she added, looking at him defiantly, "that Dr. Miles has been talking to you. I told him yesterday that I would not apply to my brother, and I tell you so again to-day. In fact, if you are going to Mangopore I would ask you to promise that you will not tell Kerr that you have seen me, and—and particularly where you have seen me. Will you promise?" she asked in growing agitation.

"Yes, I promise," was all he said, but the tone was enough instantly to soothe her alarm.

In the same breath, by way of changing the subject, he added:—

"I am afraid you have had a bad time of it since leaving Mangopore. Would you mind telling me some of your adventures?"

She began telling him, rather reluctantly, gradually with a sort of zest, as she discovered the relief of confiding her troubles to so obviously sympathetic a listener. Once or twice he shifted his position uneasily, and at the mention of Mr. Gollap's second letter there was a mutter beneath his moustache which did not sound like a blessing.

"And in spite of all this you never felt tempted to apply to your brother?"

"Not really tempted. If Kerr were unmarried it would be different, of course, but perhaps you can understand——"



"I can understand perfectly. But then what's to be done?"

"About what?"

"About getting you to England, of course, since Dr. Miles tells me that's your best chance."

"Oh, I've given up that idea. When you come to think of it it doesn't really much matter where *it* happens, you know."

"But it isn't to happen!" he said with restrained vehemence. "I'm not going to look on at it. And the way to prevent it would be so easy."

"I can't say it seems to be so," said Winnie bitterly.

"Quite easy, you have only got to allow me to lend you the passage money, which you can return to me quite at your convenience. It so happens that it wouldn't hamper me in the least, the *pater* having been more than normally liberal this time at parting. What's the good of a few loose coins in one's pocket if one is not to be allowed to help a fellow-creature out of a fix? Among this crowd of niggers white folk ought to stick together, ought they not?"

Though he spoke as lightly as it was in his nature to do the intense anxiety in his eyes was not to be mistaken.

Winnie flushed more hotly than she had done yet.

"No, no—I could not do that—I could not take it," she said hastily.

"Why not? in the name of all that is unreasonable!"

"It would not even be honest of me, since I could not pay you back."

"Don't pay me back! Pay me interest instead. I'll let you fix the percentage."

She shook her head in the old, obstinate fashion.

"It would not be any use, since, even if I got to England I have no one to go to there,—not even the shadow of a home."

"Miss Mowbray," said Athlick, with a sudden change of tone, in his eagerness laying a hand upon the arm of the bath-chair, very near to her own, "you must let me do this for you—you *must!*"

For a moment Winnie's eyes met his, from which the veil of mere friendliness had fallen, and, as she did so, her heart smote her with sudden pity:—

"Never!" she said vehemently. "I could never be your debtor."

"Then make me yours!"

"How?"

He leaned a little closer, and she could see the quick, almost convulsive movement of his nostrils.

"By becoming my wife—as once before I asked you to be."

She shook her head, unable at once to find her voice, chiefly from surprise, so completely had the frankly friendly attitude of the beginning of the interview put her apprehensions to rest.

It was after a moment only that she managed to say:—

"I know why you do that; it is because you are sorry for me."

Athlick snatched away his hand from the edge of the bath-chair, and spoke with sudden vehemence.

"Was I sorry for you when I put to you this same question in winter? What do you suppose sent me to England, but the dread of meeting you again, knowing

that you could not be mine? and what do you suppose drew me back again—a full month before the end of my leave—but the craving to see you again, in spite of everything?”

“Ah, in winter everything was different, I was different,” objected Winnie, shaken in spite of herself by the strongly governed passions of his tone. “Anyone who married me now could only marry me out of pity.”

“*I* should not be marrying you out of pity. Good God, *pity!* How little you understand!”

“I defy you to say that I am not a fright to look at.”

“To others maybe, not to me.”

“You are very generous,” said Winnie, rather bewildered and a good deal touched.

“Generous!”

There was a touch of bitterness in his laugh.

“There again, how little you understand! I am not generous at all, since I should be taking, not giving. I am claiming a very precious thing: the right to look after you, to care for you.”

“And nothing else?”

“Nothing that you are not ready to give me. I am neither an idiot nor an optimist. If you did not care for me as a husband five months ago, I am not so foolish as to suppose that you can care for me now. Tolerate me as a protector—that is all I ask of you. The rest I am content to leave to Fate. Give me the right to help preserving your life by sending you home to my mother’s care. You will not even be annoyed by my presence, since I remain out here. You need only say one word and I will secure both the licence and the berth for you at one and the same time. The P. and O. goes on

Tuesday. I could put you on board before returning to Mangopore. In three weeks you would be at Ditton, sitting out all day under the beeches—we've got some really good beeches—and with my mother looking after you like the apple of her eye."

Winnie threw her hands over her face, as though to shut out the vision.

"Oh, don't! don't draw such pictures! You know, it would be an absurd arrangement, and quite unfair upon you."

"That is my affair, surely. It's an old house, and a typical country," continued the wooer, rendered wily by circumstances, "all grass and woodlands, and they'll be in their prime just now."

"It's impossible! Impossible!"

"Have you asked yourself why? Look the impossibility in the face, and perhaps you will discover that it isn't one, after all. Look *me* in the face, Winnie, and tell me whether there is anything there that repulses you. If so I will leave you in peace at once. I don't believe you have ever so much as looked at me attentively."

It was perfectly true. She had never looked at him more than superficially. Timidly she now raised her eyes and furtively scanned his face, so different from her recollection of it, with all the harsh lines mellowed, and that immense kindness covering up the passion of the eyes which else might have frightened her.

"Is there anything in me disagreeable to you?"

"No—nothing. I think I could like you if I knew you better, but for marrying liking is not enough."

He rose abruptly, with a sort of wrench.

"That will do for to-day. I will not worry you further just now. To-morrow I shall come back. Think over it meanwhile. By the time you get home the beeches would be turning golden."

"Oh, don't speak of beeches, or I shall do something foolish!" cried Winnie, putting her wasted hands to her ears.

For all reply he took one of them in his own, pressed it as gently as though he were afraid it would break, then raised it as cautiously to his lips, and, without another word and only a reassuring smile, left her alone under her palm-tree.

The night that followed proved to be one of the worst that Winnie had passed since the beginning of her convalescence. Her first impulse had been one of unconditional refusal, nor did it weaken immediately. For several hours after Athlick had left her she felt sure that she would say an uncompromising "No" on the morrow. It was the long, suggestive hours of a sleepless night which introduced insinuating thoughts, as secret enemies are introduced into a citadel. Visions of a green, English park with the chimneys of an old ivy-grown English home in the background tormented her as the vision of water torments the thirsty. And through it all shone the face of a grey-haired mother, with arms outstretched towards her, a mother for the waif who had been dismissed as a cook might be dismissed, who had thankfully accepted the shelter of Mrs. O'Hagan's roof! All these things might be hers for but one spoken word. Major Athlick was never quite to realise how strong an ally, in the struggle of that night, he had found in the sting of home-sickness. It worked even better than the

astonished gratitude of one who discovers that, after all, there is someone in the world for whom the question of her life or her death possesses a vital value.

Behind her closed eyelids she conjured up the face of her would-be saviour as she had seen it this afternoon. A good face, unquestionably, in its way almost a handsome one—though, of course, not to be compared to another's, enshrined in memory's most sacred place. Some women might not feel degraded by owing their life to such a man as this, but her own attitude in the question had not altered since the day of the jungle picnic on which the fate of the tiger-cub had been discussed. "I think it must be rather horrid to owe one's life to anybody," she had said then, and still thought now. To have yielded to the pressure of circumstances, instead of making a free gift of herself, still seemed to her that "Durance Vile" which every high-spirited woman must surely abhor. That never for a moment he would allow her to feel the pressure of her chains she instinctively knew. But it was exactly because he was generous that she must not take advantage of his generosity. That surely would be the height of meanness. Like a temptation she put away the thought from her, a temptation which grew stronger with the advancing hours, for now that instinct of life which she had thought dead, began to stir again and unexpectedly to take a hand in the battle. That dull and peaceful resignation had been destroyed in the interview of the afternoon, since to discover that somebody takes an interest in your existence is the surest way of reviving our own interest in the subject.

To close her eyes, however resolutely, was only to see visions of that English landscape, whose fresh breezes

held for her the gift of health, and of that unknown mother beckoning to her from over the waters.

And the unfaithfulness to Julian—virtual unfaithfulness, if not literal—did it not fall into the balance? Scarcely as much as she would have expected, no doubt, owing to the mental exhaustion signalled above. It was as a treachery towards Major Athlick that the acceptance of his proposal struck her, rather than as a wrong to anyone else. Certainly she could never marry him without telling him the truth, and, arrived at this point, Winnie buried her face, horror-stricken, in her hot pillow, confronted by the discovery that for one minute at least she had actually looked at the possibility as a possibility.

So plain were the symptoms of fever that the anxious sick-nurse telephoned for Dr. Miles—on night-duty by good luck—with the news that number twenty-seven was evidently having a relapse. But the doctor, appearing with miraculous rapidity by the bedside in question looked neither astonished nor alarmed, and even might have been observed to smile to himself in a rather knowing manner while administering the sedative which he happened to have in his pocket—by the merest chance, of course.

“Not worth mentioning, natural effects of the open air,” he assured nurse and patient simultaneously. “There, my dear, you’ll be comfortable in a moment.”

And five minutes later Winnie was quite comfortable, fallen heavily asleep, her last waking thought being a confused conclusion that no conclusion was possible until next day, at any rate.

She had expected to have the whole long forenoon

and at least part of the afternoon for inner deliberation. It was therefore rather disconcerting, in fact startling, to find herself summoned to the parlour almost as soon as her toilet had been completed.

"But I am not ready, not ready!" she said to the nurse who already was briskly wheeling her down the long passage. "Could the visitor not be told to call again in the afternoon?"

"Supposing you tell him so yourself, Miss? I understood from Dr. Miles that he's come on pressing business."

The door of the parlour was standing most hospitably open. Before Winnie had found time to frame another protest it was closed again—behind the bath-chair, but not behind the nurse. The whole thing could not have been done more quickly and neatly if it had been rehearsed.

In the middle of the bare, white-washed space with the severely hygienic cane seats all round it, stood Major Athlick, facing the door in an attitude which suggested that he was also facing his fate. The first thing she noticed was that he was very pale under his sunburn and had probably slept even less than she had done herself, seeing that no one had given him a sedative. It was an impulse of unthinking sympathy which made her hold out her hand.

In a moment it was between both his own, being strongly pressed.

"Does that mean that my prayer is granted?"

She saw her mistake, and would have withdrawn her hand, but the vigour of that clasp had something so strangely reassuring that she left it where it was. At the same time something like a solution dawned upon her



mind. She would tell him the truth, and after that, if he still persisted—who knows what might happen?

She looked at him almost steadily as she said:—

“If I could grant it and remain honest I would do so, but I cannot. You had better know everything: I cannot marry you because I care for somebody else.”

“I think I know that,” said Athlick, without releasing her hand.

Winnie gasped.

“You know that?”

“More than that. I can even guess at the name of—the man. But I am not afraid of him as a rival.”

“His name? How could you possibly?” She asked precipitately, so startled by this discovery as to overlook the offence of his last, supremely scornful remarks.

“Perhaps you remember the paper which fluttered to my feet in the tent, on the last evening of the picnic. There was a name written upon it.”

“You should not have read it,” said Winnie, flushing darkly, and again trying to withdraw her hand, but in vain.

“I did not mean to; but it fell face upwards, and I have the hunter’s habit of taking in things at a glance. I tried to forget it, but it was no use. We had some communication a few days before, that morning in the jungle, and a mutual acquaintance had been maintained. Putting two and two together is not a very laborious work in some cases.”

“Well then, since you have made the sum,” she began vehemently; but he interrupted her.

“I have only one question to ask: Are you pledged to that man in any way?”

Winnie pondered, the scene beside the Mosscliffe river rising before her mind, Julian's words ringing once more in her ear: "No one but a cad would allow you to bind yourself!" And again: "You understand, don't you, that you are free?"

"No, I am not pledged in any way," she said slowly.

"You are mistress of your own decisions?"

"Yes."

He fetched a deep breath.

"That is all I want to know. I have no more questions to ask except the one of yesterday: Winnie, will you be my wife?"

She looked at him in a sort of exasperation, feeling how her will bent under his, as the knees of the weaker wrestler bend under the hand of the stronger one.

"You still ask me that—knowing that I cannot love you?"

"We talked of that yesterday," he said with laborious patience. "Have I made love to you? Not in the ordinary sense of the word, I think. I have only asked for leave to watch over you, I am content to save your life, if you will let me, without claiming any part of that life for myself; not out of generosity, as you put it yesterday, but out of pure egoism. Without you the world becomes empty to me, and I want to keep my world full, that is all. It is not even your presence I ask for. You need never see my face again if you would rather not. I give you the word of a gentleman and a soldier that, unless you summon me, nothing will make me come back to England, not though both my parents were to die without seeing my face again."

"That means, I fear, that you yourself would die in

India," said Winnie, trying to smile, though in truth she was almost aghast at the obvious sincerity with which the words were spoken and of all that that sincerity implied.

"But you would live, in England, and I would know that you are living, and that I have taken the stones from your path. That would be enough. My parents may have lost a son, but they would have gained a daughter; and my sister a sister."

"A sister? You have a sister too?" asked Winnie with a note almost of rapture in her voice. "Why did you not tell me so before? I have never had a sister."

"There is one waiting for you in England,—of almost your own age,—if only you say 'yes.' You have said 'yes,' have you not, Winnie?"

"How can I say 'no,' when you offer me such tempting conditions?" said Winnie with a helpless laugh, feeling herself abruptly at the end of her resistance; "my health, my liberty and a sister into the bargain! But I feel as though I were taking a mean advantage."

"I think it is I who am doing that," he murmured as with a sudden, almost fierce flush of joy he clasped her hand.

"Thank you—ah, thank you!" she heard him say below his breath, in an intense and unsteady whisper, taking her second hand too and kissing it again and again. But he felt them shrink beneath his own, and quickly desisted, as though remembering the terms of the bargain.

"Don't imagine that I am acting under any illusions. I perfectly understand that I am not being chosen for

my own sake, but only as being the lesser evil—something a little less black than sickness and exile.”

Then, as she tried to speak, he put up a deprecating hand, smiling a smile that was miraculously free of bitterness, as, in a purposely brisk and business-like tone, he went on:—

“No time to lose, the licence must be seen about at once. You have papers with you, I suppose?”

“Yes, in my travelling desk.”

“I must have them. Then there is the berth to be engaged, and a nurse to be found. Also I must wire to my father, so that there should be somebody to meet you at Plymouth. And only two days to do it all in.”

Winnie, listening bewildered, found nothing to remark.

Even after he had left her, in possession of the necessary papers, she was aware of nothing but a sort of numb wonder, scarcely active enough to be called astonishment at her own decision, or rather at the decision which had been taken for her. After the general hesitations of the night the reaction of exhaustion was upon her. Physically and mentally she was capable of nothing now but of letting events take their course.

It was made as easy for her as possible. During that two days' interval Athlick—with an intuition rarely bestowed upon the male portion of creation—kept almost persistently out of sight, and during his brief appearances at the hospital, tried not unsuccessfully to behave like a merely good-natured, somewhat solicitous elder brother. Neither was she disturbed by the sight of any of the machinery which was hurrying on the consummation of events. It all worked so smoothly that even the final act in the hospital chapel, whither her

bath-chair had been wheeled, and where a grey-haired chaplain pronounced Mark Athlick and Winifred Mowbray to have been lawfully made man and wife—while Dr. Miles stood by as an indecorously grinning witness—seemed to be something that was happening, not to herself at all, but to some third person. Her unstrung nerves were as yet incapable of vibrating to the touch of reality. It required the pungent steamer-odours to help her grasp the truth. Not until she found herself on board ship with the newly engaged sick nurse—a fresh-faced robust English girl—busied about her, did she actually believe that she was starting homewards. Vaguely she wondered at the arrangements for her comfort, the luxurious invalid's chair, the tent which was to screen her from the gaze of the curious, the portable table laden with the newest magazines and with a pile of uncut books. In silence she allowed Athlick to instal her, wondering a little at the deftness of his movements, the lightness of his touch (was this the man who had plunged through a window and destroyed a point-lace train at a vice-regal ball?) in silence received the presentation of the ship's captain, whom he tore out of the thick of his most arduous duties, in order to have "Mrs. Athlick" put under his especial care. Mrs. Athlick! was that actually herself?

It was the moment of last supreme bustle before the anchor is weighed, and from under the flaps of her tent she was aware of a faint amusement in watching the latest, and again the very latest stragglers arriving with streaming countenances, and with voluble and heavily laden coolies behind them. She could do so with almost an easy mind; for although her newly-wedded husband

was beside her, and although there was an astonishing light in his eyes, she somehow felt quite sure that he was not going to make love to her. What remarks he made were as harmless as possible, all about the belated fellow passengers, and of a carefully careless description, varied by questions as to whether she was quite sure that she had enough wraps. Once he interrupted himself to say:—

“I hope you will get on with Edith. She needs a friend badly. She—but you will see for yourself.”

Until the last bell sounded he stood chatting by her side, just like any other husband might have done beside any other wife. But at the sound of that bell a sort of shock seemed to go through him. All around them partings were taking place, sometimes tearful, sometimes slightly hysterical. Two steps from the tent a young wife was sobbing unabashed upon her husband's neck. Athlick turned his back upon them to take Winnie's hand.

“Try and get well,” he whispered, with a sudden roughness in his throat, “it is all I ask of you. And don't forget that there *is* somebody who cares.”

He bent to kiss her ungloved hand, then having hesitated for a moment, bent a little lower and lightly touched her forehead with his lips.

“Only because of the lookers-on,” he muttered apologetically. “They might think it strange, otherwise. You see, they don't know.”

Winnie, her eyes raised to his, was trying to say something, but utterly failed. He saw the useless motion of her lips and, with a reassuring smile, warned off the unspoken words. With one quick look he wrapped her

round, then turned and went. The hand he had released fell back upon her knee, while once more her lips were parted with a long breath of relief, not unadulterated relief, of course, since a feeling of self-accusation could not but mix with it.

"Are you ready for your broth now, Ma'am?" asked a pleasant voice at her elbow.

Winnie turned to meet the nurse's respectfully attentive eyes.

"I'll have it when we're off, thank you."

"We're off already, Ma'am. Look at the shore!"

Winnie looked, and became aware that the lines of roofs topped with palm-trees were beginning to glide past, like the slides in a magic lantern.

That could only mean one thing: the anchor was weighed. They were on their way to England.

To England.

CHAPTER XIII.  
THE HOME-COMING.

PERHAPS it was as well for Winnie that the first days on board the "Ganges" were of a nature which made reflection difficult, mental needs being forcibly effaced by physical ones. By the time the storm had calmed Asia had practically ceased to exist for her, and Europe was a perceptible piece nearer.

For days after that she did not do much more than exist, her weakened condition being ill-armed against so severe a shaking. It was not until the second half of the voyage, when the long hours on deck beneath her airy tent, with the salt breezes playing about her, had begun to do their work, that the actualities of her position began to obtrude themselves upon her thoughts.

The thing that, so far, she grasped most fully was that she was going home. For the moment this supreme fact dominated all others, the more so as it was the only thought to which she readily gave audience. By this time she was quite used to being addressed as "Mrs. Athlick," but of the man who had given her the name she thought as little as possible. If it had been feasible she would not have thought of him at all; but how forget his existence when surrounded by the traces of his care? It was not only in the paternal watchfulness of the



Captain that she traced the effects of his injunctions, but there were other signs yet more unmistakable. Thus upon the first morning on which she began to take stock of her surroundings she discovered upon the table beside her berth the identical watch which she believed to be in Mrs. O'Hagan's clutches, and having put an astonished question to Wiggins, the nurse, got as answer:—

“It was the Major who gave it me to look after, ma'am. He said I wasn't to bother you with it until we were out of port.”

Winnie remembered now, when recounting the episode of the watch to Athlick, having mentioned that it was a relic of childhood. It was patent that he had found means of inducing Mrs. O'Hagan to disgorge it, still more patent that he had wanted to spare Winnie the necessity of thanking him.

Very few among her fellow-passengers became known to her personally, her meals being served to her alone, as had somehow been arranged without her having to express the wish. Only a few young women of her own age were introduced into the tent by the Captain, conscientiously anxious for her entertainment. One of them was the same whom Winnie had seen sobbing upon her husband's neck on the day of the start, and whom she could not help looking at with a certain interest. She was golden-haired and ridiculously young, also quite as ridiculously in love with the husband she had left behind her.

“Why did you leave him then?” asked Winnie, having listened with uneasy impatience to an almost indecent amount of conjugal “gush,” excusable only in view of extreme youth.

"For the same reason that you left your husband, apparently. The doctor said that I could not stand the climate. I begged Harold on my knees to let me stay, but he was hard-hearted, and now I shall not see him again for a year at least. It seems to me too dreadful to be true. I am sure you must feel like me, Mrs. Athlick. Will it be as long before you see your man again?"

"I think it will be longer," said Winnie, a little grimly, and aware of having taken a personal dislike to the golden-haired chatterbox.

"Oh, you poor thing! I suppose he can't get leave sooner? Harold is a soldier too, you know, 55th line. Isn't it cruel to be a soldier's wife, and always to be trembling for one's treasure? And yet I wouldn't be anything else for worlds—would you? The partings are horrid, of course, but the meeting, ah! the meeting will be heaven!"

She ceased, with hands clasped in her lap and rapt blue eyes turned back towards the East.

It was towards the West that Winnie's persistently turned; since in marrying Athlick she had really married England, and for the consummation of that union she yearned—but for nothing else.

From this moment on there mingled with the resentment towards the blonde Mrs. Cowley the first dawn of a resentment towards Athlick himself. In a time of more vigorous mental activity Winnie might have discovered that these two resentments virtually formed one, and that if a sort of sullen jealousy towards the woman who was so blissfully married was at work, so were the beginnings of a grudge towards the man who, by taking

advantage of her helpless position, had for ever debarred her from enjoying that same bliss. In measure as the impression of his presence and the memory of the pain and the passion she had seen in his eyes receded, in the same measure did her apprehension of the future grow. With alarmed eyes she looked at the golden circle upon her finger, seeing in it the first link of a chain which, however long, however lightly manipulated, she would not in the end be able to escape. Long before the cliffs of England were in sight something like repentance already moved within her—the surest sign of reviving interest in life, and consequently of reviving strength, as Dr. Miles would gleefully have told her, had he chanced to be at hand and in her confidence.

But as yet it stirred but intermittently, weighed down by physical debility and overshadowed by that joy of home-coming for which, as yet, no price seemed too heavy to pay. In preference to her husband her thoughts turned continually towards those new relations who, doubtless, were now awaiting her with a curiosity at least equal to her own. With the approach of the moment of meeting her nervousness grew. How much could Athlick have said to them in his cable? Scarcely enough to prepare them for the shock of her wretched appearance should not the abruptness of the event appear to them suspicious? And supposing there was no one to meet her at Plymouth?

This part of the question was very speedily answered. Winnie, who had been advised by the Captain to sit still in her deck chair until the first bustle of arrival was over, had not waited for more than five minutes gazing with beating heart into the voluble and jostling crowd, when

out of that crowd there detached himself a tall and slender old gentleman with a small snow-white head which, owing to a stoop in his narrow shoulders, he carried somewhat too much forward. This faultlessly attired person, on whose heels followed the very type of a confidential valet, was looking eagerly and anxiously about him.

Was it a family likeness or only an intuition which caused Winnie, seized by a sudden terror of the impending meeting, to shrink back into the depths of her chair? A word exchanged with the Captain, a look in her direction, and she knew that she had guessed aright, for already he was close.

"You are Mark's wife, are you not? I am his father," was all he said: but the perceptible quiver in the low-toned voice, the look in the clear grey eyes amply sufficed for the occasion. Except that it came from old eyes, it was very much the same look which Mark himself had given her on that first day in the hospital garden. Even something of the same pain was there as he contemplated the so delicate face—yet quickly replaced by a reassuring smile.

"Not too much knocked up by the voyage, I hope?" he went on quickly, without waiting for her to speak, and averting a gaze which he guessed to be inconvenient. "We could stop a night at Plymouth, of course, though I daresay you would prefer to push on to Ditton and to complete rest. It isn't much of a journey. Doctor Nickoll must decide that point. I brought him down with me. There he is. Let me introduce him. A sort of family appendage."

The family appendage, who had the face of an in-

telligent pug dog framed in stubby hair, pronounced, after testing pulse and heart, a stoppage not to be imperative; which was just as well, since it turned out that a saloon carriage had been standing in wait since yesterday.

The next half hour was too busy a one (mercifully) for private conversation. It was not until Winnie found herself installed in the luxurious compartment with her attendants by her side, two of them, since Mrs. Athlick had despatched a trustworthy maid to Plymouth, just in case the Bombay nurse should be incompetent, or knocked up, or something—that Mr. Athlick, standing on the doorstep, again mentioned his son's name.

“Are you *sure* you have got everything you want?” he began by earnestly enquiring.

“Oh, much more than I could possibly want,” stammered Winnie, who had been struck dumb by the vastness of her father-in-law's measures. The saloon carriage seemed to her to exhale an odour almost of royalty, and the attending doctor, as well as both the maid and the valet who arrived just then with his hands full of evening papers and periodicals, “just to amuse you on the journey,” struck her as glaringly superfluous.

“Won't you come in?” she suggested, diffidently, anxious to give some sign of gratitude.

Mr. Athlick shook his beautiful white head, smilingly. “No, no, that would be against doctor's orders. I'd have too many questions to ask, and Nickoll has prescribed rest. We shall be alongside in case you want anything; but I feel that I had better keep out of talking distance. You *did* leave Mark quite well, though, did you not?”

"Yes, quite well."

"And did he happen to mention when he would be coming home again? I fancy it will be a bit sooner now than he had planned."

The old eyes twinkled as he made the confidential remark.

Winnie felt herself colouring.

"No, he has settled nothing."

"Well, Well! I'm off to send him a cable. The poor fellow must be on thorns. I'll say, 'Arrived safely and well.' I can say *well*, can I not? And I suppose you will be wanting to add some message of your own, eh?"

"Must I," said Winnie, then quickly correcting herself: "Of course I shall add a message. But in wiring it is so difficult."

"I should think it is," chuckled Mr. Athlick softly. "But he won't be exorbitant, knowing that the eye of the telegraph clerk has been upon it. Shall I say: 'love from—' upon my word, I don't even know your Christian name, my dear."

"Winifred."

"Is that what he calls you? I could almost wager he says Winnie?"

"Yes, he does."

"Well then: 'Love from Winnie,' will that do?"

"Yes, yes—quite well."

As he left the step Winnie sank back upon her seat thinking that, after all, it was quite as well that this charming old gentleman had elected to travel in another compartment.

It was late at night before the closed carriage which

had brought her from the station stopped before the imposing entrance of Ditton. Both wings of the big door stood wide open as already had done the park gates, and the lighted windows as well as the faces of the attendants who with miraculous promptitude appeared at the door of the landau, proclaimed that her coming was looked for with an impatience which probably partook of anguish. Once more Winnie was overcome by that half-shamed feeling of being taken at a value beyond her deserts. An imposing flight of steps led up to the doorway, and despite her declaration that she would be quite able to mount them she found herself kindly but firmly placed in a chair which stood ready, slung upon poles, and swiftly borne up the staircase by two stalwart footmen.

The glare of light in the big hall within blinded her for a moment. She seemed to herself to have got into a den of wild beasts, so thickly were the tiger skins strewn about; but before she could note anything further, a voice, rather low pitched, but very urgent, came down from somewhere above, saying:—

“Up here! Bring her straight up here; and mind you don’t shake her!”

And immediately she found herself gliding up the broad, carpeted stairs, hurried down a bit of gallery, through another open door, and carefully deposited in the middle of a large and luxurious bedroom, in whose grate a fire burned brightly. A small old lady in a lace cap, who had just been poking it, first put out all the attendants and then came close up to the chair. At last, at last, Winnie was alone with the mother whose

thought had tempted her almost more than the thought of mere life.

"I had the fire lit because I thought you might feel chilly after India," Mrs. Athlick remarked, for the sake probably, of saying something as neutral and as little agitating as possible, but the voice in which she spoke was scarcely in accordance with so harmless an observation, and before Winnie could answer, she had lifted the drooping chin, with finger's which were at least as unsteady as the voice, and was arduously scanning the young face.

"Mark's wife! Mark's wife!" Winnie heard her saying under her breath, just before she felt Mrs. Athlick's arms about her.

"I hope you don't mind being cuddled, my dear," she said deprecatingly, "and I hope you don't mind my crying; I can't help it. But that doesn't mean that I am unhappy; quite the reverse! We shall make you strong again very soon—never fear! Mark shall come home to find you blooming."

"Mrs. Athlick, you are too kind," muttered Winnie, only to feel a plump little hand put over her mouth.

"I am Mamsie," whispered Mrs. Athlick in her ear, "unless you prefer to say 'mother'? And how could I be too kind to Mark's wife? Did you leave him well? But you'll tell me all about him to-morrow. I'm not going to worry you now. That's why I turned out all the others, even Edith, though she was wild to speak to you."

"Was that Edith I saw, standing behind you?" asked Winnie, remembering a glimpse she had had of



an eager, rather sharp face peering over Mrs. Athlick's shoulder at the head of the stairs.

"Yes, that was her. She will have lots of questions to ask you to-morrow, but to-night I will not have you worried. I'd better be getting out of the way myself, before your nurse turns me out. It's horrid to be fussed over, isn't it? Good night, dear! and don't try and say anything; its quite superfluous. I know! I know!"

How little she did know! thought Winnie, as presently, in a bed covered with the finest linen she had ever seen, she glided into dreamland.

So deep was that sleep of exhaustion that, awaking next morning, it took Winnie some moments to identify her surroundings. As she did it a sort of cry escaped her lips.

"Wiggins! Wiggins!—the blinds up! quickly, the blinds up!"

The nurse appeared smiling to let in what light there was.

"There's no sun out, though, ma'am," she observed apologetically.

"I'm glad of that," said Winnie, sitting up in bed to gaze eagerly at the tree masses in the distance, just touched with the bronze of autumn, and splendidly grouped against the undulating lines of higher land. And she really was glad. Sunshine she had had enough, and more than enough of in India. This cloudy grey sky was so much more convincingly English than a blue one could have been.

"Oh, Wiggins, I can get up, can I not?"

"That's for Dr. Nickoll to settle, ma'am. Mrs. Athlick told me as how he was coming to see you after breakfast."

"What do I want a doctor for?" laughed Winnie recklessly. "I feel quite well already. Give me my clothes, Wiggins!"

"Indeed, ma'am, I won't," said the girl unmoved. "Just before sailing Major Athlick made me promise as how I should do all in my power to get you to follow the doctor's prescriptions, and I'm meaning to keep my promise."

"How tiresome you are, Wiggins!" was all Winnie said as with the sensation of a sudden chill, she fell back upon her pillow.

With the breakfast tray came an orange-coloured envelope addressed to Mrs. Mark Athlick: an enthusiastic message of congratulation signed "Kerr!" Winnie smiled a little cynically as she read it. Of the sincerity of the good wishes she did not doubt. She could easily picture to herself the sigh of relief breathed at hearing from Athlick (a verbal communication having been decided upon) that she was finally provided for and therefore safely off his hands. That Cassie should have allowed him to go to the expense of a cable seemed to argue that even the Bowdler party welcomed this unlooked-for solution of the situation.

Indifferently Winnie tossed aside the paper to apply herself with something actually like an appetite to the daintily set out breakfast.

While she was eating it, there was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Athlick senior entered, anxious and apologetic.

"I wouldn't disturb you so early if it was not for Edith," she explained, after such a good-morning kiss as Winnie had not known since childhood. "That girl

has no patience. The only way to keep her out would be by locking your door. Are you able to see her for a tiny bit? or shall I chase her away?"

"Oh, no, don't do that," pleaded Winnie. "I am quite as impatient as she is. Please let her in!"

"Did Mark tell you about her?" asked Mrs. Athlick, while a mist seemed to pass over the blueness of her eyes.

"He only said he hoped we would be friends."

"So you will if you are patient with her. The poor child is so heavily afflicted."

She stopped short, and seemed on the point of saying more, but in the end did not say it.

Yesterday Winnie had only had a general impression of plumpness and kindness. To-day looking more attentively at her newly acquired mother-in-law, she perceived that she was a rather small old lady—smaller certainly than would have been expected of the mother of Major Athlick—with curiously peaceful eyes, and a distinctly patient smile, as of one whose opportunities for the exercise of the virtue have been plentiful. The agitation of yesterday was banished already, giving place to a restfully quiet demeanour which seemed to be the natural condition of affairs.

"I shall send her to you," was all she said now, as she went towards the door. "But don't let her worry you too much. She is a perfect mine of curiosity."

A minute later the door opened again, and Winnie recognised the same sharp little face she had had a glimpse of yesterday, but saw now, with painful surprise, that it surmounted a dwarfed and shrunken body, whose misshapen shoulders and attenuated neck were hardly

veiled by the knitted shawl which was huddled around them. The features themselves might almost have laid claim to beauty, had not the hand of organic disease pared them away in a point of unpleasing sharpness. Not hard, indeed, to understand what the mother had meant by speaking of a heavy affliction.

She came in with diffidence and curiosity visibly conflicting upon her bloodless face and in every movement of her wizened body. At two paces from the bed she stood still, her clear grey eyes—almost the eyes of her brother—devouring Winnie's face.

"May I come nearer? or is it—is it too unpleasant for you to look at me?" she asked humbly, startled perhaps, by Winnie's wide open gaze of surprise.

For all answer, Winnie, smitten with pity, opened wide her arms, and with a cry of some small bird, Edith was nestling against her shoulder.

"And you are really Mark's wife?" she asked, when at last she withdrew from the close embrace.

"So everybody assures me," smiled Winnie, and not without some bitterness.

"I scarcely seem able to believe it!"

"I scarcely seem able to believe it myself."

"Ah yes, I should think so! when you had to go away so quickly, within an hour of the ceremony. Mamsie told me. How dreadful that must have been! Oh, I shall try so hard to make the time pass quickly for you until Mark is able to come. It won't be difficult if we are friends. And I *know* we shall be, I love you already."

"How can you love me when you have only seen me for three minutes?"

"I loved you before I had ever seen you at all. I couldn't help loving Mark's wife if I tried ever so hard."

"It seems to me that I have been taken on credit all round," remarked Winnie, with a faint laugh. "Your mother said nearly the same thing to me."

"Mamsie? Oh, she'd have taken you with her eyes tight shut; and so would Papa. Even if you had been a coal-black nigger, with a pound of wool upon your head, you would have been welcomed with open arms. It's enough that Mark has chosen you."

"Just as well to know that," smiled Winnie a little cynically; "lessens the danger of having one's head turned."

"You see, we all know—I mean, we *feel* that he couldn't marry anybody who is not worthy of him; and to be worthy of Mark means such a lot!" said the little cripple in tones so awe-struck that Winnie did not dare to laugh.

"You are very fond of your brother, are you not?" she asked, looking up into the sharp little face bending above her's, for Edith had lost no time in perching upon the edge of the bed.

At her words she saw the tears start to the clear grey eyes.

"Fond! that's much too small a word! You don't know—no, you *can't* know what a brother Mark is to me. And he is so big and strong, and I such a weak wretch!"

"I'm a weak wretch too," smiled Winnie upon her pillow.

"Oh, but that's only because you are ill. In a few months you will be strong and beautiful again, and your

hair will all have grown. Why, it is down to your neck already; and what a lovely wave it has!" as, with long, thin fingers, she timidly touched one of the brown tendrils curling about Winnie's ear. "Oh, how curious I am to see you as Mark saw you first! But for the beginning, I'm glad that you're a little weak and a little wretched; it makes it easier to get friends; just for the beginning. You are sure you won't mind having a friend like me,—not now, I mean, but when you're strong again?"

"Quite sure," said Winnie, groping for the thin hand upon the counterpane.

"That's because I'm Mark's sister, of course. That makes it easier. You *must* love me a little if you love him so much."

"How do you know I love him so much?"

Edith almost fell off the bed in her astonishment at the question.

"Because you married him, of course! You wouldn't have married him if you did not love him, I'm sure of that, because then you wouldn't be the sort of person whom Mark would have chosen, don't you see?"

"I see. A perfect circle from which there is no escape."

"I don't want to escape from it. But oh, Winnie," as curiosity suddenly broke bounds, "you'll tell me all about it some day, won't you?"

"Tell you what?"

"Oh, about how you first met him, and whether it all happened in a moment, or whether it only came slowly—the real feeling, I mean; I know that it comes in different ways," returned Edith with quaint importance

of mien. "And what he said to you, and you to him—and in what words exactly he—he proposed to you. Oh, it must be perfectly entrancing to be proposed to—by the right man, I mean, of course. I can't imagine what it *feels* like."

"How old are you?" asked Winnie, listening astounded to the childish prattle.

"Guess!"

In perplexity Winnie scanned the wasted face and shrunken figure.

"Twenty-five—" she hazarded, though she might as readily have said "Thirty-five."

"Eighteen!"

Eighteen! How pathetic the word sounded upon those lips devoid of bloom!

"Perhaps you will know what it feels like some day," said Winnie, rather haltingly, anxious only to turn the tide of questions.

"I? With *this* under my shawl?" and she lifted the knitted shawl to show her misshapen shoulders, then shivering, wrapped herself up once more.

Winnie stretched out a deprecating hand towards the fingers which held the soft woollen fabric gathered under the chin.

"Forgive me! I would not hurt you for worlds! I did not think of what I was saying."

With a sudden radiant smile Edith clutched at the outstretched hand, her eye caught by the gold of the plain narrow ring upon the fourth finger.

"Oh, your ring! Let me see it! How beautifully it shines! That's because it is new. I suppose Mark's name is engraved inside? But I couldn't ask you to

take it off, of course,—oh, have I scratched you?” as Winnie impatiently snatched away her hand. “You’ve got an engagement ring, too, haven’t you? But I don’t see any on your finger.”

“No, I have no engagement ring.”

“Ah, yes, it was very short, was it not? But you will tell me all about how it happened, won’t you?”

“Not to-day,” said Winnie wearily.

At the tone, Edith took fright, abruptly appearing to remember some injunctions received.

“Of course, not to-day. Mamsie told me not to worry you, and I’m afraid I’ve been forgetting. But another time, perhaps. I may remind you, mayn’t I? You mustn’t be angry with me;—I’ve taken such trouble with the room and with the photos. Have you looked at the photos yet? I collected them out of all the albums—twenty-seven of them altogether—beginning with one in long clothes, and ending with the new one in his uniform as Major, but of course you’ve got that one.”

She had leaped from the bed already, and had reached the mantelpiece, upon which Winnie for the first time noticed a row of cabinet photographs, carefully ranged. Following Edith’s movements she now became aware of other photographs, some of them in frames, and some unframed, disposed upon the tables as well as upon the walls, and all showing to her the same features at different stages of growth. Upon the chest-of-drawers stood Mark Athlick in an Eton jacket, upon the toilet-table he was in cricket flannels, while upon the wall behind he hung in khaki, and so on, in endless variations.



"It was a splendid idea, was it not?" asked Edith from across the room, with, in her voice, a ring of pardonable pride.

Winnie made no answer. Her eyes were gazing round the room as though in search of some point of rest. Marks, Marks, everywhere—a perfect gallery of Marks—no escape from the all-pervading presence!

## CHAPTER XIV.

## "MRS. MARK."

WITHIN hours Winnie was sitting out upon the lawn, under the shade of just such beeches as those whose vision had haunted her home-sick fancies; within days had begun to grasp the individualities of the three people in whose close familiarity she was to live for months, perhaps for years. None of them—not even Edith—lost anything by nearer acquaintance, in which particular they did no more than fall under the general rule, a bad first impression being, to the honour of human nature be it said, so much less enduring an article than is a good first impression. The exploration of man's soul has this much in common with mining operations that the deeper you dig, the more valuable ores are you apt to bring to light.

The pearl of the trio remained "Mamsie." The better Winnie got to know her, the more scraps of the past she picked up—partly through Edith's prattle, partly through her own observation—the more irresistibly did Mamsie, with her peaceful eyes and patient smile, remind her of some round and gleaming white pebble, lying at the bottom of a transparent pool. To watch its smoothness and its whiteness, to note how every, even the smallest angle has been rubbed away,

how every, even the smallest speck has been washed clean, sets one thinking of the torrents through which such a small, helpless stone must have passed, of the fierceness of the waters which have been at work upon it before it reached its present haven of rest.

And the torrents had not been wanting, as Winnie presently gathered, nor the rocks against whose harshness the angles had been ground to powder.

"Whose picture is this?" Winnie had asked of Edith on one of the first days of her stay, her eye having been caught by the water-colour portrait of a chubby boy with golden curls tumbling to his shoulders, which hung over the writing table in Mrs. Athlick's private sitting-room.

Edith smiled slyly.

"Oh, I know what you think; but it isn't Mark. It's like him, though, is it not?"

"Not now, anyway," said Winnie drily. Then: "Who is it?"

"Lionel, my baby brother, who died of scarlet fever complications before he was out of the nursery. He was ill for six months, and I don't think Mamsie slept one whole night during that time."

"I didn't know you had had another brother."

"I had two. That is George over there, in the riding dress. He didn't take so long as Lionel over it; broke his neck polo playing when he was seventeen, and very nearly broke Mamsie's along with his own besides her heart, of course. The wire with the news came while father was out, and Mamsie took it at the head of the stairs, just where the servant met her. She didn't open her lips when she had read it, but she closed her eyes

instead, and just dropped down where she stood. Before the man could stop her she had rolled down half the staircase. I was born next day, and they say that's the reason why I am like this. Mamsie herself took years to recover."

"She must have suffered dreadfully," said Winnie, in an awestruck whisper.

"Oh, that's not all she has been through. Wait a moment, and I'll show you something else."

With a cautious look round to assure herself that no one was near, Edith went up to the writing-table and unfastened the little folding-doors of a leather frame which stood there in a retired corner, as might stand some sacred shrine. The miniature portrait of a very young girl, painted upon ivory, was disclosed.

"How beautiful!" came irrepressibly to Winnie's lips. Then as she noted the likeness, for it seemed to be a sort of glorified Edith she was looking at: "A sister, perhaps?"

"Yes—Susan. But you must not let Mamsie know that I told you, and you must never mention her name. Mamsie can stand a good deal, but she cannot stand *that*."

"And she died too? Another accident?"

"No—lungs. She was Mark's twin, and everyone agrees that she was an angel. That she was as beautiful as one you can see for yourself. When she was sixteen she got a chill, and when she was twenty she died—in Mamsie's arms, of course. Four years, mind,—and always hoping to save her. Mamsie isn't given to pride, is she? but *I know* she was proud of Susan. I'm sure she wanted a daughter even more than a

son; and now *I'm* all the daughter that remains to her."

"He—I mean Mark, never told me about all this," said Winnie, with genuine emotion.

"No, he doesn't like to talk about it either. You see they were twins, and they just clung to each other. Father has told me how during those dreadful four years he was always walking after her with shawls and scarves, and wanting to wrap her up to her ears. He got so much into the habit that now he can't almost see a woman in a light dress without wanting to put something round her."

"I see," said Winnie reflectively. This peculiarity of Major Athlick which, even on the occasion of their first meeting, had both amused and irritated her, now appeared under a new and less ridiculous light.

"So of the five we should have been, you see, there are only two remaining,—or, rather, only one, since I am a failure, of course. It's only Mark who really counts. It's upon him that all father's and mother's hopes are founded. It's the accomplishment of his happiness that they have been waiting for for years. Imagine then what you are to them! you, who have given him the happiness they coveted—for him."

"I see," said Winnie again, with a sudden, half shamefaced sinking of the head.

It was dating from this conversation that Winnie began to construe aright the patient look in the blue eyes, and to appreciate at its true value the gentle serenity which had survived such storms as these.

Neither had storms of other sorts been wanting among Mrs. Athlick's trials, as Winnie gradually arrived

at understanding. From the beginning she had been struck by a certain apologetic note in Mr. Athlick's attitude towards his wife. Here again it was Edith's chatter which put the clue into her hands.

"Can you imagine Mamsie and father apart?" she asked Winnie one day. "I can't. And yet Mrs. Merrick has told me that there was a time—long before I was born—when father used to be away for months, and when Mamsie used to sit in her room and cry. It was Lionel's death that brought them together again."

"You shouldn't listen to old wives' tales," said Winnie severely, knowing that the authority quoted was the wife of the head game-keeper, a veteran of the estate.

But the remark set her thinking all the same. Looked at by the light of Mr. Athlick's perfect features, but somewhat feeble mouth, it suggested an explanation of his almost compunctious courtesy towards his wife. In the days when this charming old man had been a charming young man, and a shining light of London society, might not Mamsie have had a good deal to forgive?

Generosity towards a frail husband was only equalled by tender patience towards a crippled daughter. For that poor Edith was a sore trial to normal patience, Winnie had early discovered. Shut out as she was from the Promised Land of Love a morbid curiosity touching all its details possessed her. Her life was spent, so to say, in peering through the bars of the forbidden paradise, and straining her eyes along its enticingly mysterious walks. This it was which turned Winnie into an object of inconveniently intense interest; the supposed

romance of her marriage having wildly inflamed an ill-balanced imagination. Hence the searching interrogatories which during these early weeks led, more than once, to the verge of a quarrel. Mark's first letter from India had been one of those occasions, in which Mamsie's intervention alone had preserved the peace.

"What does he say? How does he begin? Does he sign himself; 'your own Mark,' or, 'your adoring Mark,' or what?" she questioned insinuatingly. Then as Winnie, silently and with burning cheeks, perused the letter which the evening post had brought her, Edith, —being in a favourable position to do so—became as incapable of not peeping over her sister-in-law's shoulder as might have been any inquisitive child. As she did so her face fell.

"Only 'dear Winnie!'" she said in a disappointed voice. "I thought it would be 'my dear angel' at the very least."

Winnie turned with blazing eyes, hiding away the letter in her hand.

"How dare you?" she burst out in a voice which audibly shook; and would have said more only that Mamsie's hand was already upon her arm with a little half-warning, half-imploring pressure.

"That's a bad habit of Edith's," she pleaded, "but she is trying to cure herself of it, she really is. It comes from this that Mark's letters have always been common property until now. She has to get used to the idea, you see, that they have become private property."

Later on, when peace having been restored, Winnie had gained the solitude of her room, she took out the letter to read it through, shrinkingly and yet curiously.

Certainly there was not a word in it which Edith, or, for the matter of that, the world at large might not have seen. She could not help feeling grateful for the sober and reserved tone, which might have been that of a friend or a brother, chiefly anxious about her health. Not a single unwished for epithet, not the faintest hint as to future hopes. "Get well! get well, and I shall feel richly paid!" was the burden and upshot of both the things that were said and those that were not said. To receive letters like this need not be so very trying; but the real trial was to answer them. And the thing had to be done at once, too, since the mail went tomorrow. With a sort of desperate resolution Winnie sat down before the writing-table and drew a sheet of letter-paper towards her. There was nothing for it, of course, but to begin. "Dear Mark!" Yet it cost her a moment's hesitation to put it down, and, having done so, she sat and stared at the words for another moment of almost aghast astonishment. By this time she had got tolerably used to referring to him as "Mark," but it was the first time she had put it to paper, hitherto nothing but messages through Mamsie having passed.

And now for a beginning which should be neither too cold nor too hot, since to wound him was as far from her wish as to raise in him false hopes. The hitting off of the right tone under the very peculiar circumstances was a question for the nicest consideration. The health question seemed, on the whole, to be the most promising; having reached which conclusion Winnie seized her pen and plunged headlong *in medias res*:—



"MY DEAR MARK,

"I was very glad to get your letter." ('That is relatively true,' reflected Winnie, 'since another sort of letter might have been much worse to get.') "I hope you have not been worrying too much about my health. There is really no need. I knew I should get well as soon as I got to England, and although I can't pretend to be quite well yet, I feel another person already. I ate a whole chicken's wing to dinner yesterday, and I know I should be able to walk up and down stairs alone, only that they won't let me. The headaches are nearly gone, and I have gained a pound since I came."

'What else can I possibly tell him about myself?' reflected Winnie, pausing with her eyes upon the woodland view framed by the window. 'After all I can't give him the whole list of all the things I have eaten or tried to eat since I got here.'

She would have liked to cling a little longer to the safe soil of hygiene, but the subject seemed exhausted already. Nothing for it but to turn to another.

"I have no words to tell you of your parents' kindness towards me. Mamsie (you see I have already learned to call her so) makes me wonder how I could have got on for so long without a mother. I really don't deserve all the tenderness she pours out upon me. It makes me feel like an impostor."

'No, that won't do!' thought Winnie, arresting her pen, and feeling herself unaware landed upon dangerous ground. Very carefully she scratched out the last word and for "impostor" substituted "a hot-house plant which is being cultivated for a show." Then quickly passed on to Edith, whom she referred to as:—

"A poor, dear girl, whom I know I shall love very dearly when we have got to know each other thoroughly."

After this the beauties of Ditton itself and of the adjoining landscape came in conveniently for filling up a third page. But there remained a fourth to cover.

'What can I talk of safely?' she asked herself, taking up his letter again for renewed study. 'Oh, the tiger-cub! that will do exactly.' Quickly she perused the passage in which Mark spoke of the progress made in the training of "Parbutti" as he had christened the cub brought back from the jungle picnic. "She is beginning to know her name," he wrote; "and her master as well. Already at my voice she pricks her ears and soon she will come bounding to my feet."

"Don't be too hard upon Parbutti," Winnie had scribbled upon the last page. "Remember how bitter a thing slavery must be to a ruler of the jungle."

She paused again with dreamy eyes fixed upon the woodlands. A certain fellow-feeling for that captive tiger-cub was at work upon her. Was that "Durance Vile" in which she stood so very different from the fate of Parbutti? Did they not both owe their lives to the same man?

There was nothing more but the ending remaining, but that, perhaps, was the worst of all. Some word of gratitude seemed almost unavoidable, but must on no account be construable into a promise. How even come near the subject without touching tremendous issues? To say: "I am awfully obliged to you for saving my life, but mean to hold you to your pledges, all the same," seemed as inadmissible as: "I shall never forget what

you have done for me, and shall repay your generosity as best I can"—when the only repayment she could make was one which she could not for a moment seriously contemplate.

Hesitation ended by a hopelessly muddled phrase in which she chiefly admitted that she didn't know what to say, and begged him only not to mind what she did say. And below that the distressingly sober signature:—

“Yours very sincerely” (“affectionately” was hesitated over, but finally rejected as not strictly truthful)

“WINNIE.”

“Whew,” breathed Winnie when it was over at last, stretching her arms above her head. “And to think that I shall have to begin again every mail day.”

How could mail days help becoming one of the terrors of her life?

Meanwhile, despite such trials and others, strength was slowly returning. What medical science joined to the acme of comfort and to Mamsie's much exercised nursing powers could do was being done for Winnie, with the result that before she had been a month on English soil the delicate colour began to dawn again upon her newly rounded cheeks. Mrs. Athlick possessed the rare secret of watching over her patients without the so objectionable element of “fuss,” so that half of her vigilance actually escaped Winnie's notice. The other half was of a quality which more than once pushed her to protest, half remorsefully, against the trouble being taken.

“How can we do too much? Are you not Mark's

treasure?" were the words with which such protests were usually silenced.

The sound of them annoyed Winnie each time, yet to give them the lie was impossible. In a sense she *was* Mark's treasure, the mistake the whole family made was in supposing that he was likewise hers. Yet, however critically she turned over the matter in her mind there seemed no escape from leaving them in their delusion, since to destroy it would be likewise destroying all hopes of tardy happiness for these so sorely tried parents. Nothing for it, therefore, but to go on playing the farce in which, to her own consternation, she found herself cast for the chief part.

And it was not before the parents alone that the farce had to be kept up. Old family retainers, even stray villagers began to add their mites to Winnie's trials. On the very first drive she had taken by Mamsie's side, old Merrick, the head gamekeeper, had stopped the carriage almost by force, in order to have a look at "Master Mark's wife," and volubly to entertain her of the schoolboy feats of the present Major. On the strength of having taught him to shoot rabbits the white-haired Merrick seemed more than inclined to claim a fair share of the tiger-hunter's laurels for himself. At the gate, too, the whole lodge-keeper's family had been drawn up, curtsying with a persistency that caused Winnie's still rather frail brain almost to reel, and waiting with newly burnished faces to be introduced to "Mrs. Mark," and eagerly to drink in her reluctant replies to the mater-familias's searching interrogatory as to how "the Major" was looking precisely when she had said good-bye to him, whether he still cared for strawberries as much as

he used to, and, in particular, what exactly he had said about his next coming-home.

If it had not been for various compensations in the way of quaint old-world farm-houses with black beams decorating their red brick walls, and of village churches with squat, square towers smothered in ivy—exactly the sort of church usually seen on a Christmas card—that first drive would have been more torture than pleasure.

And it remained but a pattern of what was to come.

Never would Winnie have believed that any man's personality could so penetrate a spot of earth as that of the absent Major Athlick penetrated Ditton. Turn which way she might there was either Mark's portrait confronting her or the seal of his personality upon things as well as people.

"What's that wooden building with the Union Jack flying?" she had asked of Mrs. Athlick on the occasion of that first drive.

"It's the village shooting club, an idea of Mark's," said Mrs. Athlick with pardonable pride. "He called it into life after the Boer war. Some day when you are stronger I shall take you there and show you the club room—quite a sight in its way, with the number of horns and skins he has made them a present of."

Another time it was a one-legged man who had attracted her attention by the extraordinary flourish with which he doffed his hat to her.

"One of Mark's *protégés*—he has several," explained Mr. Athlick who to-day was in the carriage beside her. "Lost his leg in a shooting accident—gun exploded. Mark has supported him ever since—out of his pay. The poor wretch had been a sort of playfellow of his in

school-days, helped him to birdnest and tickle trout and so on; that's why he wouldn't leave it to me, but insists on its being a personal matter."

Impossible not to acknowledge the qualities of the man whom she was getting to know so much better at a distance than she had ever done in proximity. . . . Yet paradoxically enough each new proof of his being either a good man, a good brother, or merely a good fellow-creature, merely added to Winnie's irritation. That feeling of rebellion whose first faint movement she had felt during the homeward voyage, was growing with returning strength. The farce she found herself obliged to play was so contrary to her nature that she could not but resent the necessity. Even the symptoms of his care, of the constant turning of his thoughts towards her welfare, were an annoyance. They seemed like meshes in the net by which she felt herself enclosed. Everything and everybody seemed leagued in a conspiracy to drive her towards him. Quite enough to make her instinctively resist—since no situation could have been better calculated to awake her native obstinacy.

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## CHAPTER XV.

"FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE."

IN an atmosphere so charged with electricity as was Winnie's present mood, a chance spark may mean a real danger, and when one day, in the report of a fashionable shooting-party she read a name once dearly familiar and not heard for long, it seemed to Winnie herself as though that spark had been lit. The mere heading of the paragraph had caused her heart to jump into her mouth; for it was at Mosscliffe that the *battue* had taken place—Mosscliffe, which in the hands of the millionaire brewer who now possessed it, had risen—or sunk—to a gathering place of "smart" society, where pheasants apparently were slaughtered by the thousand. And among the principal slaughterers stood the name of "Mr. Julian Garvice," plainly and unmistakably printed. That he should have accepted such an invitation was indeed something of a shock to Winnie. But quickly the extenuating plea followed. So near a neighbour as his uncle, Sir Francis, was to Mosscliffe, how could he, if staying at Rollstone—have refused it? That he should have enjoyed himself was more difficult to believe. Must not every stone and every tree remind him of the past? And what would be his feelings when standing by the side of the foaming torrent in the gorge where he had

told her that he loved her and could not marry her? Was he aware of her disloyalty?—for there were moments in which her marriage to Athlick could not help appearing as a treachery towards Julian. It is true that he had not asked her to wait, but she had given him to understand that she would, and upon that assurance he was perhaps building air-castles—in fact, she was almost sure of the air-castles: for that true appreciation of her first lover which the morrow of her illness had brought her, had been but a lightning flash quickly faded.

Would she ever see him again?—came the next inevitable thought. She could not feel sure as to whether she more dreaded or desired it.

From that day on, the unrest of her mind had found a channel in which to run. As a refuge from the distasteful future, her thoughts turned obstinately back to the so far more romantic past. Even the English surroundings served to conjure up a picture to which tropical vegetation had formed no fitting frame. The consciousness that he was treading the same soil as herself began to stir vague speculations. The fact itself that her thoughts had no right to dwell upon him invested him with a new charm—that of the forbidden fruit.

Thus the Christmas days drew near, bearing concealed under their wreaths of holly something that resembled a crisis.

In this season of universal tightening of family bonds, the farce became more difficult to play than ever. As a matter of course it was assumed, during the inevitable Christmas-present discussions, that Winnie must be anxious to lessen Mark's feeling of exile by the very nature of



the gifts sent. It was Mr. Athlick who had the happiest idea.

"Get yourself photographed for him, of course," he triumphantly suggested. "Nothing else will convince him of the progress you have made. And you are ripe for the camera, my dear, I can assure you," added Mark's father with that fascinating smile which thirty years ago had worked such havoc.

"No, no," said Winnie quickly, though in truth she had nothing to fear from the camera now, for that dreadful little linen cap—having first given way to a dainty lace one—had been discarded long ago, and the sunny brown hair was almost long enough to be fashionably dressed.

"She doesn't want to prepare him," laughed Edith with her sly smile; "she wants to take him by surprise when he comes home, don't you, Winnie?"

"I just don't want to be photographed," said Winnie rather sharply.

This unshakable taking for granted that Mark must always and ever stand foremost in her thoughts was beginning to get upon her nerves.

"Don't worry her," put in Mamsie, quick to note the flush of irritation upon Winnie's cheek. "All the Christmas present he will want will be a letter."

"With the right things inside," grinned the irrepressible Edith.

So the time-honoured plum-pudding, hermetically packed, the sprig of holly and the other seasonable gifts went off without Winnie's photograph inside it. It crossed another packet on its way from India, containing a costly cashmere shawl for Mark's mother, a wonderful silken

scarf for Edith, and a beautiful sandal-wood bag for his father. For Winnie only a tiger-claw brooch set in silver. Edith, though delighted with her scarf, made a long face at sight of the brooch.

"Is that all he is sending you? I thought he was going to shower beautiful things upon you, as husbands in India always do in novels—an Indian necklace was the least I had expected—and now only a brooch?"

Even Mamsie looked a little astonished, but Winnie understood, and could not but appreciate the discretion which so studiously avoided anything which might be construed into a bribe. The claws were those of that tigress which she had seen in the jungle ravine—the mother of the captured cub—and drew their value, therefore, only from circumstances.

Christmas Day, being mild and still, was the first upon which Winnie was allowed to attend service in the little village church with the squat tower whose pillars were smothered in evergreen wreaths.

An English Christmas—what delight to the quondam exile! Tenderly the home atmosphere cast itself around her troubled spirit. Here, too, for the first time, she found herself in the family pew, surrounded by the tombs of past Athlicks, with the evidences of their stability and of their social importance visible on all sides. Straight opposite to her, almost staring her in the face, were the effigies of a certain Henry Athlick and of his wife Anne, stretched stiffly side by side in quaintly hewn stone, and bearing the date of 1622. Suddenly the thought came to her that in the natural course of things she would come to be buried here too, by Mark's side, she presumed, and probably described as his "faithful wife"

just as this Anne Athlick was. What a farce in death, to crown the farce in life! It was in the chapel of the Bombay hospital that the first act of that farce had been played. Mechanically she was already turning over the leaves of her prayer-book in search of the marriage service,

“. . . to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part . . .”

At the time itself the words had glided over her exhausted mind almost without impression, as a thing in a dream. Now, as with recovered faculties, she critically weighed them, she found herself trembling at their tremendous suggestion. Even to save her life how could she have undertaken such obligations? True, she had been dispensed from the fulfilment by the rightful claimant himself—but could that abrogate the actuality of the oath?

Rebelliously she closed her teeth together with the prayer-book.

That evening, at the family board, things began to grow critical.

Dessert was on the table and the room clear of servants when Mr. Athlick raised his glass.

“Mark’s health!” he said in visible emotion, “and may this be the last Christmas we pass without him!”

There were tears both in his eyes and in his voice, and the hand which held the champagne glass trembled visibly, for among the past failings of this high-bred epicure had been a certain indulgence in his cups, and Christmas dinners are all too likely occasions for ancient vices to stir in their graves.

"Of course it will be the last Christmas without him!" declared Edith when the health had been drunk. "Winnie will see to that, won't you, Winnie?"

"When he went back last June I had almost got him to promise that he would throw up his commission and take over the estate. I'm getting too old to manage things," went on the old gentleman in a tearfully aggrieved tone. "But lately he seems to have changed his mind for some reason I can't get at—talked in his very last letter of holding on till Colonel. I can't understand it at all, and I'm sure *you* can't?" he asked, turning his delicately moist gaze upon Winnie.

With a gulp Winnie swallowed the rest of her champagne as a pretext for silence.

"Colonel would mean at least four years more," mused Mamsie. Then irresistibly, "Ah, I can't wait so long! *We* can't wait: can we, Winnie?"

"Winnie wouldn't wait, she would go out to join him," put in Edith quickly.

"And her health? What are you thinking of, Edith? No, no, it's Mark who has got to come. You'll get him to come, won't you?" she pleaded, smiling across confidently at Winnie. "*Our* will isn't law, of course, but we know that yours is."

"But have I the right to make him give up his career?" asked Winnie, finding her voice at last, though imperfectly.

"He'll have to do so at any rate the day I am laid in the earth," observed the father, "and am I to have no son till then?"

Edith clapped her hands.

"I've got an idea! Let's send him a Round Robin

signed by us four and dated Christmas Day, asking him to come home as quickly as he can. He won't be able to resist that, surely!"

"What a baby you are, Edith!" came sharply from Winnie.

"I don't think the Round Robin will be wanted," smiled Mrs. Athlick.

Mr. Athlick laughed into his glass.

"No, no, of course it isn't wanted. A letter from Winnie will do it. This day year we shall be drinking Mark's health to his very face, and this day two years we shall be drinking the health of a younger Mark, or maybe of a John or Henry."

Edith, excited by the champagne, burst into a cackling laugh, and it was the sound of that laugh which, together with the full understanding of the words, drove the dark red blood into Winnie's cheeks.

"The future lies in God's hands," said Mrs. Athlick hastily. Then, with a critical look at her husband, she rose from her place at the table and observed that the coffee must be growing cold in the drawing-room.

An hour later Winnie, sitting alone before the log fire in the entrance hall, had fallen into a day-dream, far too gloomy for the season. The drawing-room alongside was deserted, the Athlicks having been called to the back-door by the appearance of some Christmas waits from the village. The menial portion of the household had streamed the same way, so that, for the time being, Winnie seemed to have the bulk of the big house to herself. The sound of a jovial chorus came to her faintly, muffled by intervening baize doors, while close at hand the seasoned wood cracked more audibly.

The disturbance awakened by the talk in the dining-room was still upon her. How much longer would it be possible to go on playing this comedy? The glimpse she had had to-day into the old people's minds showed her that at any moment the situation might become untenable. Those hopes for the future which they entertained—unavoidably—were never to be fulfilled, of course, but was it merciful, was it even right, to leave them in their delusion? And yet, where find the ruthlessness to tell this so cruelly tried mother to her face that she would never hold in her arms the coveted grandchild, for whose advent—as Winnie could not doubt—she daily prayed, the sight of whose baby face was to replace to her that of that other baby carried dead from the nursery, and of the son struck down in the flower of adolescence, and of the daughter faded away before her yearning eyes. This morning in church Winnie had seen their names engraved beside those of their ancestors, and had seen Mamsie's eyes resting upon them in a way not hard to construe.

Yes; the situation was growing untenable. But what way was there of ending it? For Mark to remain permanently absent from his home was an impossibility, as she could not but recognise. Without her leave he would not return, that she felt sure of. Some day she would have to give him that leave, if only to procure to these stricken parents the presence of their beloved son.

He would take no unfair advantage of the recall from exile—that also she knew. Yet what would this mean but a new and much more trying act of the farce—the comedy of conjugal affection having to be played under three pairs of affectionately observant eyes.

"I always said it was a ridiculous arrangement," mused Winnie with something like rage in her heart as brooding she bent over the stone hearth, her hands spread out, side by side, in guise of a fire screen to her glowing cheeks. "And he must have known it as well as I, ah, yes, of course he knew it!"

A fresh wave of angry colour flowed to her cheeks. That dull grudge towards Mark which for months had been smarting in her, grew suddenly acute. He would keep his word, of course, to the letter, would never force himself upon her, never compel her—but what need would he have to do so, knowing that circumstances would do so for him? that the moment of her surrender could only be a question of time? Looked at in this light, the generous offer made in the hospital gardens at Bombay sank to the level of a deliberate trap. And she was exactly in the mind to credit this baser version.

"But I will not—no, I will not, be entrapped!" thought Winnie, as instinctively she straightened herself upon her low seat.

As though in search of some issue from the maze, her eyes went round the big hall. Tiger skins on all sides and glaring tiger skulls, glinting arms and glistening armour, each one of them a reminder of the offending man. Here, amidst the trophies of his prowess and skill, it became more difficult than ever to shake off the impression of his personality—almost impossible not to feel like some small and helpless thing lying in the hollow of his hand.

With a shudder she turned back towards the fire. As once more she raised the shielding hands: her eyes fell straightway upon the gleam of gold encircling her

fourth finger now lit by the dancing flame. Often before it had made her think of a slave's fetters, but never so forcibly as to-day.

"Never!" she said aloud. "Never!"

Within the same moment, upon some unreasoning impulse, she had torn the wedding-ring from her finger and tossed it into the heart of the glowing coals.

Scarcely was it done than, ashamed already of her own foolishness, she had snatched up the tongs and was groping for the bit of gold. She had barely, with difficulty, got it between the tongs, when she almost dropped it again, startled by the bursting open of the baize door at the end of the hall.

"Oh, Winnie, *do* come to the back!" reached her in Edith's shrill tones. "Mamsie says it's quite warm enough for you if you take a shawl. They are singing so beautifully, and it's so amusing to see them dance. What are you doing with the tongs? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Winnie a little breathlessly and still upon her knees. "I was only trying——"

"Good gracious—your ring!" shrieked Edith as it dropped from the tongs to the hearthrug.

"Yes, it fell into the fire as I was bending over it, but I have got it out, you see."

"Into the fire? Good gracious! no wonder you look so upset—I declare you have grown quite pale. But it's not spoilt, is it?"

"I don't think so; but it's too hot to put on at once."

"Of course you must wait till it cools. But then you will come out with me, won't you? They are asking to see you."



"They must just do without me," said Winnie sullenly. "I don't want to come."

"Oh, Winnie, why not?"

"I've had enough of being exhibited as 'Mrs. Mark'!"

"Exhibited! How funny you are to-day, Winnie! Is it the accident with the ring that has put you into such a bad humour? Or is it the being away from Mark and knowing him alone in India? Of course I can understand that. But you must remember that by next Christmas—"

By way of comfort Edith, who had crouched down beside Winnie, now cast one of her long thin arms around her sister-in-law's neck. In the same moment it was vehemently shaken off.

"Oh, stop that! Stop that, unless you want me to go mad!" broke out Winnie, upon whom the unasked-for caress had produced the traditional effect of the one drop too much in a vessel full to the brim.

"Stop what?" asked Edith in wide-eyed consternation.

"All that talk about Mark and my supposed devotion to him, and my not being able to live without him, and so on. It's only you who suppose it—you—all of you, Mark himself knows better."

"But I don't understand," murmured Edith faintly.

"No, of course you don't—but you shall understand—at last—and high time too! It's not possible to go on this way. I suppose I'm too stupid to keep on acting a lie for ever. It isn't my fault that it began. I don't know what made you all jump to the conclusion that I must have married him out of pure affection when the naked truth is that I married him only for the sake of

getting back to England, sold my liberty for a passage home, if you like to put it that way. He had proposed to me before, and I had refused him. When he found me again in the Bombay Hospital I was dying, and he offered me my life in exchange for my consent, and I was mean enough to strike the bargain. It seemed inevitable, somehow. There's the matter in a nutshell for you!"

While the precipitate words came over her lips Winnie, somewhere in the background of her mind, was visited by the thought that this was not what she had meant to do, that so radical a clearing up of the situation had not lain at all in her intentions, but coupled with the conviction that she had no choice in the matter, that the thing was accomplishing itself—through the means of her person but independent of her will. Opposite to her was Edith's scared face, with eyes torn wide like those of a frightened child, almost grotesque against the background of black and yellow skins, and of other glassy eyes staring from the walls above fiercely bared teeth. From yet further back came the muffled sound of voices singing, and between them, as they knelt upon the hearthrug, lay the wedding-ring among a little heap of wood-ashes unheeded for the moment.

"Your brother knew what he was doing," went on Winnie irresistibly, "for I made no pretence to him. If he had not promised to let me live my own life, not even to come back to England without my consent, I never would have married him. And now you want to cheer me up by talking of his return! The very fear that haunts my dreams!"

"And you really never cared for him?" asked Edith in a terrified whisper.

"Never!" said Winnie, more vehemently than she was aware. Then, precipitately, perhaps with some idea of salving the sister's susceptibilities.

"I esteem him greatly, and perhaps if I had met him sooner it is possible that I might have returned his feelings, but he came too late, when my heart was already given away."

Through Edith's light coloured eyes there shot a gleam which was no longer pure scare, and which those who knew her best could easily have construed into an abrupt transition of interest. She had opened her lips for another question when a sound behind her caused Winnie to turn her head—then, suddenly sobered and covered with confusion, to scramble to her feet.

Both she and Edith had been too engrossed to hear the renewed opening of the baize door, or the approach of softly clad feet, so that the appearance of Mamsie standing immovable at only a few paces from the hearth-rug, came with something of the suddenness of a vision.

Upon Edith the effect was almost electrical.

"Mamsie!" she cried, springing to her feet in order to rush into her mother's arms. "Oh, Mamsie, listen to what she has been telling me! She doesn't care for Mark at all; we have all been mistaken. It is someone else she cares for. And she only married Mark in order to get back to England. And she doesn't want him to come! Oh, poor Mark! poor Mark! what will he do?"

The wild outcry ended with a burst of tears upon Mamsie's shoulder.

"I know—I know—I heard enough to understand,"

Mrs. Athlick was saying just audibly, with soothing little pats upon Edith's head. "Don't make yourself ill! I shall need you more than ever now, you know!"

There was so much anguish in the words as well as in the contracted face bending over Edith that Winnie almost reeled under the acuteness of the stab of remorse which went to the very bottom of her heart.

"I should not have said what I have said," she muttered with a deprecating glance.

Mrs. Athlick put up a small, plump, hand, smiling painfully.

"Not to-night, Winnie dear! you will tell me about it to-morrow. I do not think I can stand any more to-night and besides, I have to take this child to bed. Come Edith, I will take you up."

With her arm around the cripple's waist and another pathetic little smile in Winnie's direction, she turned and guided her charge towards the foot of the staircase.

Winnie watched the couple out of sight, then, still standing immovable lent ear for a further moment to Edith's hysterical sobs audible above. Then with a quick little sigh and a sudden sinking of her chin upon her breast, she stooped, and, picking up the ring from among the ashes, slipped it back upon her finger.

And in the distance the sound of a jolly Christmas ditty was dying away in the direction of the village.

Next morning, while Winnie, after an uneasy night, still lay in bed, drinking her early tea, there was a knock at the door and just as on the first day of her stay Mamsie appeared, mild and apologetic, though with a

new line, which seemed to have dug itself since yesterday, graven about her patient mouth.

"And now, if you have anything to tell me, I am ready to listen," was all she said as she sat down in a chair close beside the bed. "Perhaps it will be better for us both if there are no more pretences."

"Much better!" said Winnie, in a voice which shook pitifully, and then, taking courage from the extremity of her need, plunged headlong into the story of her marriage, keeping back nothing, not even her sentiments towards Julian; for she too felt that the time for pretences was over. A craving for clearness for the supreme relief of his burdenment, disburdenment at any price, was upon her. While she spoke, she scarcely dared to look at Mrs. Athlick's face, for fear lest the sight of it should paralyse her speech, yet was aware that she sat immovable, listening intently. The few questions which she put were spoken in a small, subdued voice.

When at last Winnie stopped breathless, her face dropped instinctively between her hands, while with beating heart she awaited the condemnation which must surely come.

The length of the silence which followed both surprised and alarmed her. She was just going to precipitate matters by a question when she felt the touch of soft plump fingers upon her own, and, looking up, saw Mamsie's face bending over her in tears indeed, but with the sunshine of an almost radiant smile breaking through the clouds.

"It is all right, my dear, believe me, it is all right!" were the unexpected words being murmured in her ear.

"I understand it all now, and of course, it feels like that to you, but, believe me, it is all right!"

"How can it be all right?" echoed Winnie, staring back aghast into the smiling face of the mother whose last remaining hope in life she had just been doing her best to destroy. Had the disappointment not possibly upset her reason?

"How can it be all right when I tell you that I do not love him? I suppose that when I consented I did not really believe that I should live. I wanted to die in England, that is all. And now that I have lived, after all, I don't know what to do with my life!"

"Yes, yes, it sounds hard. Last night it seemed to me hard too, but I have been thinking in the night—I had time for it—and I half guessed already how it had been. If you do not love him now it is only because you do not know him, also because you did not meet him first. But that will come—that will come!"

"What? You think I can change my feelings so easily?" asked Winnie with a fine indignation that was quite unconscious of its own comical side.

"You won't be able to help yourself, my dear. You have only got to know Mark better in order to be obliged to love him; it may be sooner or it may be later, but in the end my boy is bound to conquer. You will never be able to shut your heart against his great goodness. That's as inevitable as was the marriage itself. Yes, yes, it will all come right, believe me!"

Wide eyed, Winnie stared up into the face above her, to which the patient content was already returning. The little white pebble had passed through another

torrent, been hurled against another rock and shone all the smoother and all the whiter for the latest trial.

"Mamsie!" was all she managed to utter. "Mamsie!" before doing exactly what Edith had done last night—that is, beginning to sob upon the so pleasantly cushioned shoulder.

Upon which Mamsie did just what she had done last night, by dispensing little, soothing pats upon the down-cast head.

Through that head, meanwhile, a wild idea, born of extreme remorse, was shooting.

"Shall I send for him at once?" she asked between the gulps. "I'll do so if you want, just to show you how sorry I am, at least you will be able to see him again."

She felt very heroic as she said it, upborne by the consciousness of the hugeness of the atonement she was offering.

Yet Mamsie's quick and firm reply was a distinct relief.

"No, my dear! That will not do at all! You are not to send for him because *I*, because we want to see him, but only when you feel that you want to see him yourself. That time will come, never fear! Even at a distance, such love as his must work."

"Then, am I to do nothing at all?"

"Nothing, but leave matters to a wiser head than yours or mine. These things have a way of arranging themselves, if only they are left alone. All you have to think of is to get perfectly well, perfectly strong again. That was in the bargain, you know!"

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## CHAPTER XVI.

## MADAME TUSSAUD.

"OH, Winnie, I can't keep still any longer! *Do* tell me who it is, or at least what he is like!"

Winnie raised astonished eyes from her book, to find those of Edith fixed imploringly upon her face.

"What who is like, Edith?"

"*He*, of course; the man whom you said you cared for before marrying Mark. I suppose you care for him still? One can't change so quickly, can one? How dreadful it must be to have to give one's hand to one man while one's heart belongs to another! But it is very romantic too. I think I almost envy you for having so interesting an experience. Won't you tell me how it all came about?"

"No, most certainly I will not tell you," said Winnie, shutting up her book abruptly. "I am sorry I told you as much as I did, for I see you are, after all, but a child. You had better try and forget what I said."

"As if that were possible!" sighed Edith. "It has always been my wish to see a real romance, a real love-story close, since of course I shall never have one of my own. And now that one comes quite near to me you expect me to forget! I am dreadfully sorry, of course,



that it should be Mark who suffers by it, but that only makes it more painfully interesting, don't you see?"

"No, I don't see," said Winnie coldly, and rising as she spoke.

"Oh, are you going? You are not angry with me, are you? And please don't complain to Mamsie for she forbade me to bother you;—and I tried not to, only I couldn't help it."

"If you don't leave me alone I shall have to complain."

"No, no, I won't bother you! But still you might tell me whether he is good-looking? better looking than Mark, I suppose?"

"I will tell you nothing."

"Not even whether his hair is dark or fair?" asked Edith desolately—but already, with an exasperated bang, Winnie had closed the door behind her.

Edith looked after her, crestfallen, twisting her long arms around her thin knees.

Her sisterly sympathy with Mark's troubles was quite genuine of its kind, but, the first wave of it passed, had left behind it a burning curiosity regarding that "other one," who had usurped his place in Winnie's heart. In her anxiety to ascertain details regarding this unnamed hero, her brother's position ran danger of being lost sight of. Cowed by Winnie's threat she now held her tongue, indeed, but left her uneasily aware of a pair of observant eyes, following her most harmless movements, spying, no doubt, for symptoms of that supposed hopeless passion which had appealed so readily to an overstrained imagination.

For the rest, everything ran on in its habitual groove. Upon the emotions of that Christmas night a quiet that seemed like stagnation had descended upon Ditton. After that one talk by Winnie's bedside Mamsie returned no more to the critical subject, but went upon her way as though nothing particular had happened, with the patient content again settled upon her face, and only one deeper line about her mouth to accuse that evening's work. That Mark's father had been left in blissful ignorance of events was to be surmised from his unruffled suavity. Doubtless Mamsie had judged that the situation was one more easily grasped by women than by men. Yet in some way known to herself alone she seemed to have found means of conveying a hint—so at least was to be surmised from the fact that Winnie heard no further remarks of the class which had made the Christmas toast so unpalatable.

Thus the winter wore into spring, calm and eventless, unless the chronic fight going on at the bottom of Winnie's soul could range as an event. A hundred times—tempted by the thought of the mother's transfigured face—she had taken up her pen in order to write the summons to Mark, and a hundred times had laid it down again. On the hundred and first time she actually did put the summons to paper, though in a half guilty way,—behind Mamsie's back, so to say. Not that she actually meant to send the letter;—the thing was done principally in order to see what it looked like on paper, and the rehearsal carried down to the addressed and closed envelope. Then, while she was still hesitating as to whether or not it should remain but a rehearsal, an officious housemaid settled the matter by popping

the missive into the post-bag, just in time to catch the Indian mail.

Perhaps that meant Fate, thought Winnie when her first wrath against Betsie had cooled—for of course she felt quite sure now that she had never really meant to send the letter. And now she settled down in a sort of dull despair to wait for the consummation of events. That Mark would answer the summons in person as quickly as space and the limits of steam-power permitted she could not for a moment doubt. There remained nothing, therefore, but to calculate the day of the mail's arrival at Mangopore, and to arm herself for the cable which must immediately follow. At the highest calculation—since of course he would lay down his commission at once—she would have about two months' time to prepare herself for the *rôle* of victim which she must resign herself to play.

It was no relief, only a lengthening of the strain when the calculated period passed without bringing the expected cable. That meant, she supposed, that he was coming unannounced. Possibly he considered this more dramatic, but it was distinctly more trying. Another six weeks of weary waiting and of an expectation which she could not venture to share with anyone until it had become a certainty.

And at the end of the six weeks a surprise in the shape of a letter, which for fear of Edith's eyes, she preferred to open in the privacy of her room. The contents of the letter were almost as surprising as its appearance.

"MY DEAR WINNIE," Mark wrote, "I think I had

better not attempt to tell you what I felt upon reading your last just arrived. If I had followed my heart alone I should have packed up on the spot,—and that is what I was on the point of doing after a first perusal. Upon a second one, however, my head came into play,—and at my age one's head is apt to be pretty cool, you know. It is awfully good of you to give me leave to come back, and if I could believe that it was *you* who wanted me I should be at home by the time this is;—but if I have any gift at all for reading between the lines then it is my parents' desires alone which have forced the pen into your hand. In all your letter I cannot find one word which makes me believe in yours. Don't think that this wounds me—I had expected nothing else. It is what you yourself warned me of. You warned me too that I should regret my bargain, but this, so far, has not come true. So long as I get regular news of you and that news is as good as, thank heaven it has lately been, I still consider myself the luckiest fellow agoing.

“I think I can understand how you came to write that letter. My mother's face has worked upon your feelings, and perhaps they have, all of them, been airing their hopes. Of course this would affect you. I should have foreseen this,—but how prevent it? Now that you are strong again, would you like me to take another house for you perhaps in London—where you could live unmolested by their wishes? It would not be hard to find a pretext.”

The letter, which went on to indifferent subjects, ended with a postscript.

"P.S.—Of course, if by any chance I should be mistaken, and it is really *you* who want me back, then it would only require another line from you. But, unless you can assure me, upon your conscience, that that letter expressed your own wishes I shall not come. Your generosity touches me, believe me, but I never had any aptitude for taking boons."

For minutes after she had read the letter Winnie could not be sure whether she felt more relieved or more provoked by it. It was an unspeakable mercy, of course, to know that the chain which held her was not yet to be drawn tight, but, on the other hand, was it just not a little cool of Mark so decisively to put aside her spoken wish in favour of his own reading of it, and however correct that reading might be. Should he not rather have blindly flown to her side, without stopping to analyse the true motives of the summons? Surely this was an affair of the heart alone, and not of the head at all. A cool head, indeed! What right had he to so much sober coolness in an affair of this so anything but cool complexion? Possibly it meant that he was cooling down altogether, heart as well as head. Now that she came to think of it, that was the most likely explanation of all. His letter was so soberly written—all but the P.S. perhaps—even more soberly than usual. Winnie took it up again to peruse it more critically, and to discover what struck her as a new reserve in the carefully weighed expressions. True he called himself the luckiest fellow agoing, and seemed ready to sacrifice even his parents to her comfort and

convenience,—but that fact, being taken for granted by this time, made small impression.

Well, and supposing he was cooling—would not that be the solution of many difficulties? She supposed it would, but likewise it would be a mortification to her vanity, which she now discovered to have been far more flattered by so exceptional a devotion, than she was at all aware of. Decidedly there were annoying sides to the matter. It is never pleasant to have been uselessly generous. Was he alone to have the monopoly of magnanimity? Altogether the situation was just a little ridiculous. Winnie's own sense of humour made her appear to herself as a victim, having decked and crowned herself for the sacrifice, only to be met at the foot of the altar by the news that nobody thirsted for her blood. Nothing for it but to go home again, and taking off the garment donned with so heroic a gesture, fold it away neatly, and pack up the wreath safely against some possible future occasion. And, after that, to lay her hands in her lap,—for certainly she was not going to interfere with Fate a second time. Had not Mamsie herself warned her against such interference? “These things generally arrange themselves, if only they are left alone,” she had said. And although Winnie could not perceive any possible way by which the arrangement was to come about, she resolved to leave things alone.

Towards the end of April the pleasant monotony of life at Ditton was for the first time broken by the prospect of a London trip. Edith's periodical visit to her dentist was the unexhilarating starting-point of the excursion, but, grafted upon this dreary stem, various projects of such relative dissipation as shopping and theatres,

inevitably blossomed. Mamsie, laid up with the effects of a long influenza, could not risk the journey, but Mr. Athlick was more than ready to take her place.

"And Winnie had better come too, had she not?" he suggested, rubbing his beautiful white hands at the welcome prospect of the outing. "She'll be wanting to get new spring hats and frocks, won't you, my dear? You won't want Mark to find you turned into a country bumpkin, I wager! And she is quite strong enough for shopping by this time."

Edith clapped her hands, in her usual excited fashion.

"What a splendid idea! Oh, Winnie, *do* come! You will help me to choose my new hat and you will hold my hand while my tooth is getting stopped as Mamsie always does. You'll come, won't you?"

"Would you like to go, my dear?" asked Mrs. Athlick.

"Yes, I think I should," said Winnie after a moment's reflection.

London held for her no critical memories; it was neutral ground, so to say, whose emotions she need not fear. Its whirl would be, on the whole, preferable to the *tête-à-tête* with Mamsie, and to the unspoken things which in the enhanced solitude would lie between them.

So the thing came to be settled; and presently, just as apple and cherry-trees were bursting into blossom, and the borders growing gay with hyacinths and tulips—the execution followed. So blest were the famous—shire orchards that year that the train seemed to be speeding through a perfect sea of blossom, whose green waves crowned with white foam threatened to break against the windows through which Winnie caught flying

glimpses of cottage gardens all raked and ordered with that laborious neatness characteristic of the opening of the garden season, and so apt soon to be submerged by the riot of summer. An English spring once more! That at least was a good thing come to her—amongst other good and bad things—in the bargain struck last July in Bombay.

Once in London she discovered more of these good things; for none of her former flying visits to town had come near the luxury of this leisurely stay at a first-class hotel, with every wish fulfilled almost as soon as it was formed, Mr. Athlick always as ready to dispense enjoyment as to absorb it, being accustomed to do things in princely style. London was to Winnie a virtually unexplored country which she could not but enjoy examining under so safe and experienced a guidance. As for Edith, the sights and sounds of town never failed to go to her uncertainly balanced head with the rapidity of champagne. Once the shadow of the dentist lifted, her spirits rose to a pitch which made her not always quite easy to control. Cursed as she was by the typical cripple's love of finery, it always required Mamsie's soft persuasion to keep her from making a caricature of herself. Escaped from the maternal supervision she now precipitated herself into shops and made alarming selections among the monstrosities which a demented fashion was just then forcing upon its victims.

Winnie, conscious of her responsibilities in the matter, fought desperately, though mostly in vain.

"But that's not a hat at all," she insisted to Edith pirouetting before a glass, "that's a flower-pot gone crazy and the flowers outside instead of inside. You *can't*



show yourself in that at Ditton, the horses would all shy into the hedges and your father have ever so much damages to pay."

"I think it's a perfect dream. But perhaps this one would suit me better. That's not a flower-pot."

"No, but it's a cart-wheel; and when you have it on you would have to drive alone, since I don't think that even Mamsie would care to risk having her eyes put out with your hat pins!"

"This one seems to me to suit the young lady particularly well," put in the milliner's assistant with an assurance too brazen for Winnie to cope with. Upon which Edith broke into grateful smiles and on the spot decided for the "cart-wheel."

Shopping and theatres were agreeably varied by sight-seeing. During the whole of an exceptionally sunny week—the sunshine seemed somehow to belong to Mr. Athlick's very perfect arrangements and to have been ordered by him together with the rooms and the dinner—the party of three had a thoroughly good time of it. With each day Winnie felt her appetite for exploration growing. The Tower, the Galleries, Richmond, even the Zoo and Madame Tussaud's, she was ready for anything.

To this latter classical resort Edith never failed to pay a visit on each of her London trips. For her immature mind—as crippled in its way as was her body—the wax-figures held some irresistible attraction. Scandalised by Winnie's very imperfect acquaintance with this paradise of life-sized dolls, she burned to do her the honours of the place.

When the chosen day came, other engagements

shaped matters so that for the arrival in a body had to be substituted a meeting of the trio in the tea-room of the establishment.

"Be sure you don't look at the rooms without me," had been Edith's parting injunction. "I want to introduce you myself to my favourite kings and murderers. Father and I will be there by four sharp."

But appointments in London are apt to partake of the fate of sands in the sea—that of being submerged by its waves, and swept out of all calculation.

When Winnie had drunk two cups of very second-rate tea in virtual isolation, and had suffered sufficiently from the third-rate German band performing upon the premises, she began to think more lightly of Edith's injunctions. She would not be able to stand a single more tune out of the "Merry Widow" so she felt and she was actually growing curious for a nearer acquaintance with that immovable crowd in the medley of costumes. Since Edith had not kept her word, why should she keep hers?

Presently, catalogue in hand, she had begun her round a trifle shamefacedly at first, owing to the consciousness that the thing was a little beneath her dignity, the dignity of Mrs. Mark Athlick, after all, but soon compelled to confess that she was actually enjoying herself. She had not been at Madame Tussaud's since she was ten years old, and was rather shocked to discover what pleasure it gave her to trace her old acquaintances of then. The groups, in especial, had left upon her tender mind an impression which it was amusing to revive. The *Tableaux* of the unfortunate gambler ending in suicide had made her blood run cold then; and

though it did not run quite so cold now, there was a certain interest in finding him still lying in his gore beside the overturned card table, just as it was satisfactory to see General Gordon still standing, revolvers in hand, at the head of the staircase at Khartoum, having faced the ascending Arabs for all these years, steadfastly, and only grown a little paler owing to the effects of light upon even the best coloured wax.

She remembered another group with an elephant, ah, there it was, over there, described by the catalogue as "The tiger hunt". The sportsman in the howdah levelling his rifle at the striped beast which already clung to the maddened elephant's flank, had, in those distant days, seemed to Winnie to be almost as heroic a figure as Gordon.

It was before this group that she stood longest, perhaps because the palm-trees and the native mahout carried her thoughts back to India and to all that India had meant for her. The stripes upon the tiger's sides were faithful to nature, as she knew by her own experience in the ravine on the morning of her stroll in the jungle. And that sportsman in the howdah, was it only the sun helmet and the sunburn that were responsible for a certain resemblance to Mark? Tiger hunting was undoubtedly an anything but safe pastime; and Mark would go on tiger hunting as long as he was in India. It was she alone who held the power to recall him, and thus deliver his parents from one of their standing anxieties.

Impatiently she turned from the Indian group. Always and everywhere that importunate train of thought.

No escape from it, apparently, even at Madame Tussaud's!

Still busily studying her catalogue she crossed the threshold of another room. Here single figures stood and sat about in attitudes almost disconcertingly life-like. No fancy figures there, but a gallery of portraits.

"Miss Martha Morelli, author of 'The Joys of Beelzebub,' 'Eternal Rubbish,' etc.," she read alongside of one of the numbers applying to a young woman in a blue silk dress, bent double over a table, with a pen in her right hand, while her left, presumably under the stress of the agonies of composition, was buried in the depths of a dishevelled flaxen wig.

"If *that* is the way novels are written," reflected Winnie, "they're really not dear at six shillings apiece, whatever people may say. Is that another novelist over there, I wonder? More like a suffragette I should say. Let's see the number!"

Winnie, with aroused curiosity, was advancing towards a rigid figure standing very much at attention to the left of a distant door, straight opposite to an equally rigid policeman, with whom she seemed to be sharing the supervision of this particular entrance. To judge by the modernity of her attire, the female figure must be a quite recent addition to the establishment, yet upon her big and fleshless frame the tweed costume hung as upon a clothes rack, surmounted by a face whose age, owing to the muddiness of the complexion, was almost impossible to determine, and whose considerable surface was varied chiefly by the summits of two impressive cheek bones. With a gold-rimmed eyeglass held to a

pair of small, glittering eyes, this grenadier in petticoats seemed to be severely scrutinising every single individual passing in and out of the doorway alongside.

"Of course she must be a suffragette," thought Winnie gleefully, as she advanced towards the distant entrance "and the idea is that she is watching for Mr. Asquith in order to pounce upon him and carry him off to a subterranean dungeon. They seem to have some sense of humour here. And putting her opposite to the policeman, too, splendid! Let's see what the catalogue says! Oh dear me, what's that?"

For just then, to Winnie's astonishment, almost consternation, two long-legged chits in tartan skirts appeared from somewhere out of the crowd, ran straight up to the supposed suffragette, and clutching at her uncompromising skirts, exclaimed shrilly:

"He isn't anywhere, Mother! We can't find him anywhere!"

Upon which the female grenadier lowered her eyeglass and answered quite audibly and rather crossly:

"Then we must just look for him somewhere else!"

"Mercy! She's alive!" said Winnie to herself, as abruptly she checked her advance.

To see the suffragette move had given her what is popularly described as "a turn".

"Perhaps the policeman is alive too!" she thought, looking nervously towards the *vis-à-vis*. But the burly guardian of the law stood steadfast with no movement in a single muscle of his bland, waxen countenance. He at least was genuine.

"I'm sure she's a suffragette all the same," reflected Winnie, as, somewhat wrathfully, she went on her way,

“And her proper place would be the Chamber of Horrors.”

Discomfited, she mounted the next staircase she came to, and invaded a new set of rooms. Here a semi-royal, semi-heroic atmosphere reigned. Upon a raised platform a select company of crowned heads looked superciliously down upon both the animate and inanimate crowd, while in a railed-off space the heroes of the Russo-Japanese war stood in improbable looking proximity, elbowing each other in as friendly a manner as though not even the smallest political difference had ever existed between their respective countries. Unless reassured by the sight of costumes or uniforms, Winnie was aware of a slight uncertainty in her attitude towards the human forms around her. Her fear of repeating the mistake of a few minutes past was real enough to cause her to stare rather hard both at the genuine human beings and at the sham ones.

“No doubt about these, at any rate,—unmistakably sham,” she said to herself as she stopped before a group of early Victorian exquisites, with waists suggestive of whalebone and throats half throttled in muslin com-forters.

“They aren’t really worse than the present day ones,” the inner comment ran on, fed by the images of the various “young bloods” whom both the park and the streets had, within the last week, presented to her amused eyes. “The only difference is that these here are called fops and we call our ones dandies. They’re both of them tailor-made when you come to think of it. Pity they didn’t put up a rival group of moderns, and

get Poole to dress it up for them. Ah, there's one that would do as a model, ready made!"

With the thought, her eye had fallen upon a male figure, standing at half a dozen paces from her. Although only its back was for the present visible, there was no mistaking the cut of the coat nor even the quality of the gloves, which, owing to the fact that both hands reposed to the rearwards, leisurely drumming out a noiseless tune upon the perfect waist, were conspicuous. The wearer did not seem to be looking at the wax works but rather to be giving his attention to the crowd. His attitude, with legs planted slightly apart and hat pushed to the back partook of the resignation of one who waits for something which is pretty sure to come in time and whose advent therefore, there is no especial reason to hurry up.

"He would look perfect in a tailor's window," thought Winnie. "I wonder whether his waistcoat—"

But at that very moment the exquisite one, with an ill-concealed yawn, turned in her direction, affording her a full view, not only of the problematical waistcoat but of his face as well, and simultaneously rooting her to the spot, for the face was the face of Julian Garvice, last seen beside the torrent at Mosscliffe close upon three years ago.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## THE BURYING OF A CORPSE.

THE recognition being mutual and instantaneous left them standing opposite to each other almost as motionless as though they formed a part of Madame Tussaud's collection.

During the moment that passed before conventional considerations had begun to act upon their respective muscles, Winnie was chiefly possessed by astonishment, not so much at the meeting itself, as at the fact that this contingency had, during the past week, so little pre-occupied her. After all, London is the place for meetings of an even more unlikely sort than this one, would it not have been natural that she should have either trembled or rejoiced at the thought of this possibility? Yet she could not remember having done either. In general she could not remember having lately thought much of her erstwhile lover, perhaps because that charm of the forbidden fruit which had added such a glamour to his image had come to be sadly rubbed off by Edith's interference. The mere fact of the thing being approved of and encouraged by so irresponsible a person was enough to awaken Winnie's own misgivings. The more she heard of the romantic aspect of the case, the less did the romance strike her. In the



proportion as Edith had warmed to the idea she herself had cooled to it.

Nor could even the hero's own presence breathe warmth into what she had hesitated for so long to recognise as a corpse. If anything it helped to make the death-blow sure. As with eyes which three years had inevitably educated, she looked upon the hero of yore, she became in one moment miserably aware of wasted emotions, wasted anguish, wasted hopes. As surely as she knew that this was the first time she was seeing him rightly, with eyes unobscured by the fumes of passion, just as surely did she know that this was no hero, after all. There is scarcely any humiliation equal to the humiliation of having worshipped an unworthy idol, and of knowing it, and during that brief moment of immobility, while the thoughts lightning-like shot through her brain, Winnie tasted of that bitter but salutary drug.

"Fellow who fancies himself and his clothes considerably," a certain person had said of Julian on a certain occasion. How indignant the words had made her then! And how well they struck her as fitting now, almost as well as did that faultless suit upon the "tailor-made" man!

Yet despite the taste of the salutary drug old memories owing half their charm perhaps to associations with a cherished locality, could not but distil a certain illogical sweetness of their own, and to them was due the uncertain smile which wavered to her lips right above the more poignant considerations, somewhat as a flower may float on the top of a turbulent wave.

Upon his face meanwhile, the elegantly bored ex-

pression which he had turned, had quickly given way to the same mixture—of surprise, of pleasure, but also of confusion—the latter ingredient being even more conspicuous in his case than in hers. For a moment it almost seemed as though, succumbing to it, he was going to pass on with only a lifting of his shiny top hat, but in the next—possibly with the aid of the prop of curiosity—he had recovered himself. There was almost the old eagerness in his voice as he spoke.

“Winnie—Miss Mowbray, I mean, what luck to be sure! I didn’t know you were in England.”

“Miss Mowbray!” Was it possible he did not know of her marriage!

“So much the better!” thought Winnie quite illogically relieved. For, in spite of all the discoveries just made the moment of telling this man that she had taken advantage of the freedom left her, that she had failed to live up to the proud protestations made beside the Mosscliffe river, would remain a hard one. If it were possible to put it off, so much the better. Better still if it could be avoided altogether, leaving him to make the inevitable discovery through third persons and out of her presence. This was no place for a scene of even veiled reproaches; and he was looking so unmistakably pleased to see her that the reproaches, however unjustified, seemed by no means unlikely.

“I have been in England for more than eight months,” she answered as steadily as she could.

“And your brother?”

“Is out in India still. He is married, you know,” she added after a moment’s hesitation, due to the critical nature of this theme.

His surprise was reassuring.

"No, I didn't know. One does so lose sight of one's friends, does one not, with all that water between? of one's friends and of their doings," he added, with a quick and rather anxious side glance into Winnie's face.

They were now walking side by side down the length of the room, having turned as with one accord, mutually aware that this was a far less embarrassing arrangement than to face each other, eye in eye with not so much as a rag of a veil between.

"Yes, one does lose sight of one another. How have you been spending your time since, since Mosscliffe? Agreeably, I hope."

"No, she knows nothing," was the reflection which passed through Julian's mind just then.

"Oh, that's just as you take it," he said loud and rather hastily. Then by way of changing the theme: "So you didn't like India, it seems?"

"Not very much. At least my health did not like it. That is why I came back."

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with your health now," observed Julian, with another side glance this time of an admiring nature. 'Never thought that girl would turn into *that*,' he was meanwhile reflecting, *en connoisseur*, and with something of the old ardour looking out of the dark eyes.

"Oh, I am all right now," said Winnie a trifle stiffly, aware by experience of the length to which such ardour sometimes inclines to go. "Are you looking for anybody?" she added, as the ardent glance was followed close by an anxiously spying one, cast all around and even to the back.

"No, that is to say, yes. But there is no hurry. Just fancy our having met again, and here, of all places."

"By-the-bye," asked Winnie, struck by a new and astonishing aspect of the case, "what on earth can you be doing here? not looking at the figures, I suppose?"

"Not exactly, I,—that is to say," stammered Julian, obviously taken aback. "Well, for the matter of that, what are you doing here yourself?"

"I am a genuine sightseer; my catalogue says that, surely; but you have no catalogue?"

"No, I forgot to get one. Where did you say that you are staying?"

"I didn't say anything, but I am staying with relations."

"In London?"

"No, in the South of England."

"And you mean to stop, I hope?"

"It is very likely that I will stop."

"Ah, that's nice! there will be a chance of seeing you sometimes, won't there? It would be jolly for the sake of old times."

"Good Gracious!" thought Winnie, in growing distress, "he is going to begin to make love to me, and then I shall have to tell him the truth. I wonder if it will be much of a shock? After all, I am rather sorry for him. He must be feeling a good deal, for I never saw him so nervous before. I do hope to goodness we sha'n't run against Edith just now! She would be sure to guess something, so disturbed as he is!"

"Are *you* looking for anybody?" enquired Julian, as, in her turn, Winnie cast one of those circular, furtively spying looks around her.

"Yes. The fact is I have an appointment. It was in the tea-room that I was to meet my friends."

"This is the way to the tea-room. Shall I take you there?"

"N-not quite yet, I think," stammered Winnie, wondering how she could shake off her inconvenient admirer before bending back her steps to the selected trysting spot.

"Let us take a turn through this next room, it's a longer way to the tea-room. I have so many questions to ask. So India wasn't a success?"

"I have told you why I left India," said Winnie a trifle impatiently. "It isn't everyone who can stand the climate, you know. Let us not talk of India, please; rather of Mosscliffe; I also have questions to ask, you see. What is the dear old place looking like? You have seen it lately, have you not? I saw your name in the list of guests at a shooting party last November."

"Oh you did?" said Julian, quickly, in a tone of inexplicable consternation. The very mention of Mosscliffe had abruptly revived his initial flurry in an equally inexplicable manner. "And, and did you see anything else?"

"Anything else? You mean the number of pheasants bagged? I didn't see anything about that."

"Oh! I daresay you are not a great reader of newspapers?"

"No, I never was that. But about Mosscliffe; you haven't told me anything yet. Have those brewer people made the place very hideous? No, I suppose even they couldn't do that. But they are sure to have desecrated all my haunts, put ornamental bridges across the dear

river, and built Grecian temples on my favourite walks. They have, haven't they? Tell me the truth!"

"Well, a little, not exactly."

"They're horribly vulgar, I suppose? How could people called Hopkins help being vulgar?"

"They're very kind-hearted," observed Julian in a strangely strangled voice; "and,—and honest."

"That means that they don't put poisonous chemicals into their beer. Well, that's something, anyway. But I suppose their honesty hasn't prevented them turning the river into electricity for the lighting of the house?"

"The electric power *is* drawn from the river," admitted Julian. Then, with a somewhat sickly smile, coupled to a deprecating look out of the dark eyes:

"Let's not talk of Mosscliffe, please! I have the same objection to the subject as you have to that of India."

"Poor fellow!" thought Winnie, frankly compassionate. "The memories are too much for him evidently. I wish I could say something nice which would not be *too* nice, under the circumstances!"

She was just casting about in her mind for the "nice" thing to say, when, round a corner formed by a solid mass of waxen celebrities, the couple came plump upon Edith, clutching a catalogue and looking wildly about her from under the shadow of the newly-acquired "cart-wheel." Close behind her came Mr. Athlick, in the company of a second white-haired gentleman, a ——shire neighbour, whom having encountered in the street, he had carried off, *nolens volens*, as a slight mitigation of the Tussaud trial.

"Oh, Winnie! At last! I thought we should never

find you! Why didn't you stay in the tea-room? We're late, I know, but it really wasn't our fault—it was all because—”

Here the breathless Edith stopped short, having only just realised that her sister-in-law was not alone, and for a moment stood staring open-eyed and very nearly open-mouthed from Winnie to her good-looking companion.

“Shocking people for a tryst, aren't we?” observed Mr. Athlick, likewise turning an enquiring eye upon Julian, an inspection in which the second old gentleman unavoidably followed suit.

“It's a good thing, anyway,” observed this personage, whose turn of mind was of the facetious order, “that Mrs. Athlick has found a friend to amuse her meanwhile.”

Despite the disadvantage of having no eyes at the back of her head, Winnie was perfectly aware of the species of electric shock which passed over Julian, who had dropped discreetly to the rear. The murder was out then and no mistake. Nothing for it but to face the situation boldly. And perhaps better so.

With suddenly recovered composure though a slightly heightened colour she turned deliberately to her companion.

“Mr. Garvice,” she said a little loftily, “you will allow me to introduce you to Mr. Athlick, my father-in-law, this is Miss Athlick, my sister-in-law, that is, my husband's sister,” she insisted with superfluous distinctness, “and this Sir Robert Belton, one of our neighbours at Ditton. Mr. Garvice is an old acquaintance of Kerr's and mine,” she added by way of the explanation of

Julian's existence which she felt was expected of her, and speaking with an equanimity which surprised herself; "and he has been giving me news of my old home at Mosscliffe."

Despite her composure, she drew a deep breath when it was over and individual speech merged into general salutation. She had not yet found courage to look at Julian's face since the dealing of the blow, but was passingly annoyed by a look of very keen interest discerned upon that of Edith, whose eyes continued to study Julian with undisguised curiosity.

"Garvice?" Mr. Athlick was smoothly saying. "Maybe a nephew of my old acquaintance, Sir Charles? Since his death I have got quite out of touch with the family, but in old days I spent more than one week-end at Rollstone."

In a voice whose steadiness took her agreeably by surprise Winnie heard Julian confess to the supposed identity. When at last she dared look at his face she was more surprised still, for it was not by any means the face of a broken man, rather of one who has been abruptly relieved of some pressing anxiety, or at the very least, of some inconvenient burden. And not only his face, his whole demeanour partook of this suggestion. A moment ago he had seemed inclined directly to evaporate, whereas now, if symptoms spoke right, his desire was to be suffered a little longer, and in particular to secure a prolongation of the *tête-à-tête* so dramatically interrupted.

Nor was this hard to get, owing in great part to Edith's heart-whole sympathy with the supposed situation. Progress through the rooms being resumed, it



only required a little manœuvring to herd the two old gentlemen in front of her, leaving Winnie and Julian conveniently to the rear.

"I suppose it isn't quite fair upon Mark," she argued within herself as heroically she studied her catalogue, "but very likely this may be their last meeting. One must at least give them the chance of saying good-bye to each other. It's bad enough, at any rate, having to do so in a public place, when moonlight and balconies would be so much more appropriate."

It was neither of moonlight nor of balconies that Julian was thinking as, taking rapid advantage of the comparative privacy, he plunged in *medias res*.

His first move was a speech of warm, almost enthusiastic congratulations.

"If they come late, it is not my fault," he explained glibly, "you have kept your secret so well that, not being gifted with second-sight, I could have no suspicion."

"I never made a secret of it," said Winnie rather scornfully. "How could I, since it was no runaway marriage?"

"And yet you did not correct me when I addressed you as 'Miss Mowbray'?"

"Oh—that! That was only because it amused me to see you blunder."

"An unpardonable blunder, I confess. I can't understand yet how I came to miss the announcement."

"I don't even know whether it was put into the English papers. It—happened at Bombay."

"Athlick!" Garvice was saying with a pleased intonation of voice. "Whoever would have thought that? Well, I must say, you *have* done well for yourself.

Ditton is a splendid place, I believe. Really," and his tone sank suddenly to one of confidential and well-nigh tender playfulness, "when you come to look at it closely, it's to your humble servant you owe more than half of your good fortune. If you have any gratitude in your composition you ought to bless me on your knees every day for having been so steadfast—hard-hearted no doubt you thought it at the time—on a certain evening in the gorge at Mosscliffe, eh, Winnie? What would have become of us both if I had been soft-hearted that day? Oh, dreadful things, I can assure you!"

In a silence as profound as though her tongue had been paralysed Winnie walked on by the side of her old lover, doubtful all the while as to whether to trust her ears.

"I can assure you that I went through bad moments—quite as bad as any you have been through. I couldn't help fearing that I had spoilt your life. Thank heaven, it isn't so! Of course, we shall never forget those days, and each other, and all that sort of thing, but I *am* glad to see that you're one of the sensible sort after all—who don't let a good chance go when it comes. Allow me to say that you have acted as any rational person would."

"If you admire my actions so greatly, I wonder you don't follow my example," said Winnie, disdain restoring her power of speech.

His immediate answer was a laugh, of a slightly constrained and yet jaunty nature. Jaunty too was the gesture with which he now settled his already perfectly sitting necktie and superfluously pulled down his waistcoat,

"Funny you should say that, just as I was going to tell you. So you haven't really heard anything either? Fact is I *have* followed your example."

"You are married?" asked Winnie, with an unavoidable start.

"So I am—honour bright! Almost no choice in the matter," he went on in a hurry, "my uncle had turned so absolutely stiff that there was nothing for it but a wedding-ring. I was put before the alternative of that or of never crossing the threshold of Rollstone again, and of course never seeing another penny of my allowance."

"Well, I hope you have done well for yourself too—as well as I?" asked Winnie, scarcely trying to keep the scorn out of her voice.

"Oh, I have nothing to complain of," said Julian modestly. "Mr. Hopkins's manners are perhaps not all that I have been accustomed to—but——"

"Hopkins?"

This time Winnie was sure that she had not heard aright.

"Yes, Hopkins," repeated Julian with almost the same deliberation that she herself had displayed in the moment of presentation. "Ah yes, I know what you are thinking of! the associations of place. Those associations have something to answer for, I can tell you. It is scarcely too much to say that it was Mosscliffe that did for me. The old memories began by drawing me to the place, and once there and having discovered that Bella had conceived an attachment for me, I felt as though Fate had spoken, and struggled no further against its dictum."

Feeling rather as though she had received a blow

on the head Winnie walked on. Mosscliffe! Hopkins! Not difficult to understand now how Julian's name had come to be on the list of that shooting party. No doubt he had then been paying his court to "Bella"!

"Are you on your honeymoon, perhaps?" she asked, looking instinctively about her, as though in search of the missing wife.

The effect of this harmless question was to drown Julian's new-found equanimity in renewed embarrassment.

"Honeymoon? Ah, no, that was over long ago."

"*How* long ago?" queried Winnie, merciless and suspicious. "Longer ago than last year, for instance?"

Presently it came out, half sullenly, yet none the less undeniably that he had been married to the brewer's daughter for close upon two years, had led her to the altar within a year of the parting by the river side.

"Then it was you who gave the example, instead of only following it?" observed Winnie with a rather wicked looking smile. "I suppose . . ." and the smile grew wickeder . . . "that besides the gifts of fortune she is rich in those of person? I know you were always rather particular. Really, I am quite curious to see Mrs. Garvice. When are you going to introduce me to her? She doesn't happen to be here, does she?"

"Oh no, certainly not," he assured her with a somewhat suspicious precipitation. "Of course, I shall introduce her to you some day, but for the present I must be off. Fact is that I too have an appointment which I am late in keeping. Shall hope to see you again. You'll excuse me to your friends, will you not, but positively I have to run away!"

He had almost done so when the beautifully gloved

hand raised to the shiny hat dropped again to his side as though lifeless, to be immediately seized upon by a pair of immature but tenacious articles of the same description.

"Here he is, mother! We've got him at last!" crowed one of the same tartan-clad chits whose appearance had once before taken Winnie by surprise. Within the twinkling of an eye the second tartan imp had hold of the helpless Julian's second arm, while, looking over their heads, Winnie became aware of the person who had turned out *not* to be a waxen suffragette, bearing down straight upon them, her gold-rimmed eyeglass glued to her eyes.

It required a look back to Julian's face to let the awful truth burst full upon her, but that look was enough, with the blankness of the discovered criminal looking out of his eyes and a tartan child clinging to each of his arms, he was in no position to deny the identity of "Bella"!

But the two chits who called her "mother," and who were now apostrophising the unhappy man as "dad"?

Somewhere in the depths of Winnie's memory there stirred a recollection touching a widowed daughter of Mr. Hopkins who had come back to keep house for her widowed father.

Well, she had not kept it for long, not at Mosscliffe, at any rate.

"So these are your stepdaughters?" she asked with newborn suavity, though in truth she was struggling frantically with an inclination to hysterical laughter.

"Yes, my stepdaughters," confessed the miserable Julian, "and this—this is my wife."

"At last!" said Mrs. Garvice in the tone of a trumpet (a war-trumpet by preference, thought Winnie). "Where, in the name of all that is extraordinary, have you been hiding yourself all this time, Julian?"

As she stopped before the group she first looked severely at her husband and then—through the eyeglass, still more severely—at Winnie, very much as Miss Macdonald had looked at Bombay. This family likeness as well as the tartan frocks being easily explicable by the fact that Mr. Hopkins's native town was Glasgow.

"She isn't an advertisement for her father's beer," reflected Winnie, while a lame introduction was taking place. "Beer ought to make people fat and comfortable, and she isn't either. Poor Julian!"

"We brought the kids here because they like this sort of thing," he was vaguely explaining.

Mrs. Garvice smiled acidly, while lowering her glass.

"You mean that I brought them here and that you gave us the slip, which has made us so late that we shall need all our time to get ready for the dinner at the Browns. Come along, Julian! There positively isn't a moment to lose. I am sure Mrs. Athlick—that's the name, isn't it?—will excuse you."

"Yes, that's the name, and I will certainly excuse you, Mrs. Garvice," said Winnie, feeling herself altogether very much the mistress of the situation.

She felt so still as she stood looking after Julian being led away captive by the two tartan brats under the eye of their alarming mother, yet there was a curious smile upon her face which savoured not of amusement alone but also of a sort of contemptuous pity—possibly of regret for a lost ideal.

"Oh, Winnie, tell me—that is *he*, is it not? He is so ravishingly good-looking, I am sure it must be he!"

Winnie turned to find Edith, quivering at her side.

"No, that is not *he* at all," she answered with a decision, almost a vehemence, well calculated to extinguish even the most ardent curiosity.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## AN ORANGE-COLOURED ENVELOPE.

"OH, it has been lovely!" sighed Edith, more times than one out of the windows of the train in which the party of three was speeding back to ——shire, through the orchards now standing ankle-deep in the foam of their own blossoms.

Mr. Athlick, too, to judge from his pensive attitude, was living in pleasing reminiscences; and if anyone felt inclined to cavil at Edith's adjective it must have been Winnie about whose lips a certain scornful curve was still discernable. Certainly the *rencontre* of yesterday was not to be described as "lovely"!

The twilight of a fair spring evening wrapped the grey walls of Ditton as the family coach—to which, despite motor exhibitions and advertisements the Athlicks remained faithful—drew up before the house. No lamp had yet been lit in the big hall in which Mamsie awaited the travellers, so that, seen through the veil of dusk, there was nothing about her face immediately to arrest attention. Winnie, indeed, was vaguely aware of something amiss in the greeting, but that might be the fault of the influenza.

The plump little hand which Mr. Athlick with old-world courtesy had raised to his lips, was somewhat



hastily withdrawn, and Edith's arms, flung around her mother's neck, gently but decisively removed.

"Presently! You will tell me all about it presently," she murmured, cutting short the voluble narration already under way.

Then, turning to Winnie, she possessed herself of her hand.

"Come into my room," she said in her ear. "I have something to tell you."

Still holding her hand, and with the gentle compulsion which marked all her actions, she led Winnie off to her private sitting-room, whose door she shut almost in the face of the disappointed Edith.

Here a lamp was burning, by whose light Winnie could see the pallor of her mother-in-law's face and could read a new anguish in the blue eyes.

"Has anything happened?" she asked quickly.

For answer Mrs. Athlick took from her pocket an orange-coloured envelope, torn open.

"That is what has happened," she said, putting it into Winnie's hands. Then, in answer to the look of scare in her eyes:

"No, he is not dead. But read that message and then tell me——"

She sat down beside her writing-table alongside, breathing painfully.

With queerly awkward fingers Winnie unfolded the paper.

"From Mangopore," were the first words upon which her eyes fell, heading the cable message.

From that she glanced at the signature: "Creighton." That was Mark's Colonel, the commander of the Black

Dragoons. He had never written before, and here he was cabling! What could this mean?

Her eyes flew over the few lines.

"Athlick bad accident. Danger not imminent, but condition serious. Shall cable further news."

As the paper sank in her hands her eyes met those of the mother, watching her with an intensity which was almost oppressive.

"An accident?" she repeated blankly. "What sort of an accident? Why doesn't he say?"

"A shooting accident, very likely. He has been in the jungle again, you know, after those eternal tigers. I always knew this would come some day."

"Yes, I suppose that's it," said Winnie slowly.

Before her mind's eye, as she spoke, there had risen again the Indian group at Madame Tussaud's, with the man in the howdah levelling his gun at the striped beast. With a little shiver, as though of cold, she held the paper again to the light of the lamp, scanning the laconic message.

"Danger not imminent, but condition serious," she spelled out once more, while Mamsie watched her in an agony.

Twice Mrs. Athlick's lips moved and twice were closed up tight again. But in the end the question came out breathlessly.

"What are you going to do?"

Winnie straightened herself suddenly.

"There is only one thing to do. Of course I must go out to him at once."

Upon the mother's face the tension abruptly relaxed, yet a doubt still hovered over it like a cloud over a landscape. It was almost diffidently that she said:—

"It is true that it might look strange if you did not go. For the sake of appearances, if the sacrifice is not too great."

"I shall certainly go," said Winnie, shortly and a little harshly.

But immediately she looked at Mamsie again with deprecation in her eyes, and a little quaver came to her voice.

"I shall go, but do not hope too much. I promise to be a good nurse to him, but I cannot promise anything more."

"I would not have you promise anything more," said Mamsie gently. "I would only have you do what seems to you your duty. After all, by the time you get there, who knows——"

She stopped abruptly, with averted face.

In a moment Winnie's arms were round her.

"No, no! he is not going to die! not if I can prevent it! If human care will save him, he shall be saved, for your sake, Mamsie!"

"For *my* sake!" thought Mamsie, with as much bitterness as existed in her composition, while in silence she returned Winnie's kiss.

Within another minute the practical side of the case was under discussion. The P. and O. sailed in two days. There was not a moment to lose.

"And now I must break it to Edward. I did not want to tell him until I knew what you were going to do. It will be easier now."

Half an hour later Winnie, already busily overhauling the remains of her Indian wardrobe, was interrupted by the appearance of her father-in-law with all his London

gaiety and gallantry dropped from him, pitifully shaken, pitifully eager, unspeakably thankful to her for her quick resolve.

"You will bring him back to us, will you not?" he pleaded as he folded her within his trembling arms. "It is time he stopped racking our nerves with that life of danger."

"I will do all I can," said Winnie with a soothing pat to the wet cheek.

The door barely shut again, she plunged back into her preparations. She was glad of the want of leisure for reflection, glad too of the so clear and clean-cut necessity of the case. No reason here for any of those misgivings which had made these last months so perplexing. If ever a duty spoke imperiously, duty spoke here. Could she leave the man to whom she had been wedded "for better for worse, in health and in sickness," to struggle between life and death? Even common Christian charity spoke an emphatic No!

During the one day which intervened before her start the hush of apprehension reigned at Ditton, an apprehension mirrored upon the very faces of the servants who instinctively trod as noiselessly as though the sick man lay within those very walls. And instinctively, too, all eyes turned towards Winnie, with a sort of hope, and although reason might have told them that the fate of the beloved son and beloved master lay in other hands than hers.

The most trying of all was the attitude of Edith in whom the news of the accident had sufficed to turn her weather-cock sympathies violently back in Mark's direction. After the disappointment of hearing that the

beautiful young man with the silky moustache was *not* the Prince Charming she had imagined, her interest in the affair had abruptly dropped, and the wire from Mangapore had been its death-blow. It was almost wrathfully that she turned upon Winnie now.

"If you had been nicer to Mark he would have given up tiger shooting long ago," she said with an almost spiteful reproach. A remark to which Winnie found no answer to make.

On the whole, she was glad when she found herself installed on board the twin sister of that "Ganges" which had brought her home last August, with her maid beside her and her father-in-law upon the pier alternately waving a cambric handkerchief and applying it to his eyes.

"Bring him back! Bring him back!" had been the last words which the wind, blowing off land, had wafted to her ears.

The worst about the voyage was the tremendous opportunities for reflection which it afforded. During the long hours of leisure upon deck, impossible not to look apprehensively ahead to that which awaited her on the other side of the ocean. Sometimes she wondered whether the Colonel's message had been absolutely truthful, whether another might not be under way already which, coming a day earlier, would have made her voyage superfluous.

And supposing it were so?

Irresistibly she passed on to speculating upon her emotions, when faced by this startling contingency. It would mean liberty, of course, the cancelling of that one-sided pact, which she now recognised as fraudulent

—made in the hospital chapel. If she was not rejoicing at the prospect it could only be because the thought of Mamsie's convulsively contracted face interposed itself.

And if this alarm were groundless—if she found him convalescent?

To discover the answer to this was more puzzling still, so puzzling that she preferred to put it aside for further consideration. For the future she had no strength to spare. It would be enough to grapple with it when it had become the present. All she was subconsciously aware of was that certain obstacles which had formerly reared themselves upon her path of life now no longer obscured it. The chronological order of the two latest events: the visit to Madame Tussaud's and the arrival of Colonel Creighton's wife certainly did all honour to the power known as Providence.

When at length the dead palm-trees, the hovering vultures about "the Tower of Silence" grew into her ken, almost the last of Indian sights on which her eyes had rested in July last, and almost the first to greet her again, troublous memories well-nigh overcame her. Curiously she spied about her over the blue surface of the bay for the Gollaps' summer residence, seeing on all sides sights once familiar and yet half forgotten already.

The bustle of landing seemed familiar too in a way, and more so yet the stuffy train which, within twenty-four hours, was to land her at Mangopore, and round whose windows the syrup and sweetmeat sellers buzzed as persistently as they had done on a former occasion, and with only the difference that whereas then their sugary wares had melted with the heat, they now dripped with the damp of the season. Even the smells of yore

greeted her again, and upon the face of the landscape that well-known juxtaposition of seared foliage and new green which marks the transition of the Indian year.

It was only close to Mangopore that nervousness grew acute. To come unannounced had been her special wish, her stipulation, in fact, for fear of a counter-order as she said. Now she half regretted not having sent a wire from Bombay. How would Mark take this unheralded appearance? Supposing he was quite well again by this time, and did not require her? Or supposing the other contingency? Once more her brain began to work upon the weary round of surmises.

At the shabby little station the choice of conveyances was small. Winnie and her maid reached the entrance just in time to see the last of them drive off. Nothing for it but to despatch a coolie to the town for a gharry, thought Winnie, as, somewhat disconsolately, she looked about her from under the shelter of her dripping umbrella. Simultaneously, it collided with another of its species, equally dripping.

"Miss Mowbray! I mean Mrs. Athlick!"

At the sound of the words pronounced in accents of undisguised astonishment, Winnie turned her head to find herself face to face with Mr. Boxton.

"You here?"

"Yes. I landed yesterday. I started at once on hearing of the accident. Can you tell me how he—how my husband is? Worse or better? Quickly, please!"

"As quickly as you like. He's mending!"

"Oh! Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. But he's not mended yet, mind far

from it. I don't think Liddell will let him out of bed for another three weeks at least—it was something like a mauling that he got.”

“Ah, it *was* a tiger, then? We guessed so, though the Colonel's cable gave no clue. In the jungle, I suppose?”

“Not a bit of it—upon his own veranda. You remember that cub he brought back from the picnic?”

“Parbutti? Of course I do.”

“It was she who did it. Creighton had warned him a dozen times of the risk he was running, but he never was good at taking advice. Imagined he had tamed her. Fact is, that she used to let herself be made a footstool of and would push up against him to have her head scratched. But a tiger's stripes don't wash out any more than do a panther's spots, it seems, and one fine day she just turned upon him.”

“Was it very bad?” asked Winnie in a scared tone.

“Pretty much. Right arm and side both made a dreadful mess of, but he'll be able to use it again all right, Liddell says. The chief danger was the mortification, that and nerve shock. Plenty of fellows less roughly handled by a tiger have been known to die of pure nerve shock. But Liddell answered for Athlick's nerves from the first, and the mortification danger is well over by this time. Still, you will find plenty of occupation remaining. You have come to nurse him, I presume?”

“Of course I have come to nurse him,” said Winnie, a little defiantly. “Who else should do so if not I?”

“Nobody better than you, I am sure,” agreed Boxtton politely. “But we haven't been neglecting him meanwhile, you know. He's been famously looked after.”



"I should hope so," said Winnie, too flurried to notice the somewhat queer side-glance which accompanied Boxton's words.

"No doubt you have good nurses here?"

"Oh, first-class nurses!"

"Is he in the hospital or in his bungalow?"

"Bungalow. He declined to be moved."

"Can you procure me a gharry to take me there at once?"

Of course Boxton could and did in a miraculously short interval.

"He knows you are coming, I suppose?" he asked as he settled her in the gharry.

"No, he doesn't know."

"A surprise visit? That will make it all the more delightful. But you'll remember, won't you, that anything in the shape of agitation, or let us say, recrimination, has been strictly barred out by the medical authorities?"

"I haven't the slightest intention to recriminate about anything," said Winnie, opening her eyes in a somewhat haughty astonishment, and just as the driver, touching up his wretched horse, jerked her out of speaking distance.

"Whew!" observed Boxton to himself as his eyes twinkled after the departing cab. Then with an inward chuckle:—

"I'd give my second best polo pony, yes, my second best, to see them fighting it out between them."

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## CHAPTER XIX.

## THE REGIMENTAL BEAUTY.

MAJOR ATHLICK'S bungalow lay on a side of Mangopore little known to Winnie, the same side on which stood the cavalry barracks. Close to these latter she found herself in the embarrassing necessity of bowing to some former acquaintances, amongst others to Captain Nims, looking more dejected than ever, and becoming at the sight of her face, transformed in one moment into a monument of astonishment.

The small white house before which the driver presently stopped lay amidst its luxurious compound almost as an egg might lie in its nest. There was a bit of garden to traverse before reaching the veranda; and Winnie, having left her maid to settle with the driver, did so with an uncomfortably beating heart, overcome by a sudden access of shyness. The veranda was deserted, and several blinds down. But for the monotonous sound of a voice which seemed to be either reciting or reading aloud, so subdued as to be almost mistakable for the droning of a bumble-bee, the little white bungalow would have seemed sound asleep. That, and the drip of the rain from the eaves, was all that reached her strained ears. No sign of a bell beside the wide open door. Having hesitated for a moment Winnie crossed the threshold, leaving her wet umbrella upon the veranda.

Here also no sign of human life, but several grinning tiger-skulls confronting her with the plain message that she had come to the right place. To the right and left doorways draped with curtains. She paused for another moment, again lending ear. The human bumblebee had fallen silent, but, calculating her direction, Winnie decided for the right-hand door. Having crossed what appeared to be a smoking-room, she found herself before the first closed door she had yet encountered. The sick-room, as some instinct told her. Should she knock? No, that might awaken the patient if he were slumbering. Wait here until someone came along? Equally impossible, as she obscurely felt. Anything better than this prolonged strain. The impulse which stretched her hand towards the door-handle was one of those impulses which make short work of resistance. All that prudence could do was to prompt a cautious, well-nigh noiseless turning of the handle.

The room within was so carefully darkened that for a moment she distinguished nothing, then gradually made out the long white bed, and washhand-stand close by. It took another moment before, upon the pillow, she could distinguish a dark head, pressed deep into it, the face turned to the wall.

Then from beside the bed there rose quickly a tall figure in flowing white garments, and stood like a statue with its finger on its lips, while its other hand indicated the sleeping man in the bed.

Another step, and Winnie identified the statue! Mrs. Nims of the glorious brown eyes and the perfect proportions,—Mrs. Nims, the regimental beauty!

On Mrs. Nims' side, owing to eyes accustomed to

the darkness, the recognition had even been quicker. For the fragment of a second the statue had seemed to totter.

"You?" she asked, in hushed but penetrating tones.

"You?" repeated Winnie as frankly astounded.

But the regimental beauty was not wanting in presence of mind, a quality for which she had had exercise ere now. In one moment the statue stood firmly on its feet again, in another, very much "come alive," it had hurried Winnie out of the sick-room, and carefully closed the door in the rear. It was in the deserted smoking-room alongside that Mrs. Nims faced the intruder, with smiles on her lips, but something which could hardly be called welcome smouldering in her eyes.

"My dear Mrs. Athlick! *What* a surprise! What can this signify?"

"Nothing in the least out of the way, Mrs. Nims, only that upon receipt of the news of my husband's accident, I took the first Indian boat. Is that so very surprising?" asked Winnie, with a new coldness of tone which astonished herself far more than it did Mrs. Nims. To find the regimental beauty in possession was far less agreeable a surprise than she could ever have supposed.

"But how *did* you hear of the accident? He was so anxious not to alarm anybody—either you or his parents. He even managed to write a note, quite against doctor's orders, and making light of the whole business. But of course you never got that?"

"Of course not, since I sailed two days after receipt of Colonel Creighton's wire!"

"Ah! so it was the Colonel who did it!" breathed

Mrs. Nims with a light passing through her eyes which somehow did not portend well for the Colonel.

"And he has kept his own counsel too. What a sly old fox, to be sure!"

"I am very grateful to the fox, Mrs. Nims, since but for him I should, apparently, have been kept in the dark. How would *you* have liked it, supposing the accident had happened to Captain Nims, to have dust thrown in your eyes by cooked reports?"

"Oh, not at all, of course," murmured the Captain's wife, her brown eyes dropping for a moment, irresistibly, under the inquisitorial look of the hazel ones.

"It is not your coming I am reproaching you with—oh, not at all! but this sudden appearance—the agitation it may cause. Why did you not wire, at least to me, so that I should have had time to prepare him?"

"Why should I have wired to you?" asked Winnie bluntly. "I never even for a moment dreamed of finding you here."

"Not even though you knew that dear Major Athlick is my husband's most trusted comrade?" asked Mrs. Nims, with a shake of her dark head, half playful, half sorrowful. "Ah, it is evident that you have never lived in the regiment, and are unaware of the close bands which knit us all together. I always say that I have as many brothers as there are officers in the Black Dragoons."

"Yes, I have heard that said before," interpolated Winnie unheeded.

"And dear Major Athlick is one of them, of course. Could I leave him to the mercy of professionals? Of course I could not. It is natural that you should have

come, after Colonel Creighton's wire, but even if you hadn't come the dear Major would have been well looked after, believe me. I do not regret one of the nights I spent beside his fever-stricken bed, really I do not!" assured the regimental beauty fervently, and yet cautiously careful not to raise her voice beyond the measured tone dictated by the vicinity of the sick-room. "My humble efforts have been crowned, I—we have got him through the worst, thank Heavens! What remains is easy work. Just now I have been reading him to sleep, as you see," and she indicated the volume in her hand, a volume of Tennyson, in which her finger was still inserted in the thick of "The Idylls of the King." "The sound of my voice seems to soothe him."

"I am sure he will be extremely grateful to you," said Winnie in a tone quite as urgent in its way as was Mrs. Nims', and with the same careful hush upon it. "And as for myself I shall never be able to thank you enough for having so generously replaced me during these last weeks. I do hope your own health has not suffered? Positively you do look a little pale. Certainly it is high time that you should be relieved of your duties!"

"Oh, dear Mrs. Athlick, there is no hurry at all about that," assured Mrs. Nims with beautiful sweetness. "I am quite ready to give you any further help you may require. Of course there is the professional nurse too; but she is rather a dense person, apt to overlook little requirements. I fancy you will be wanting a few hints as to invalid habits, and if so ——"

"That's awfully good of you, really," beamed Winnie, with a sweetness which out-did Mrs. Nims' own; "but I

feel it would be wicked to take further advantage of your kindness. I think I shall manage quite well by myself —*not* being dense, you know. That is your hat on the table over there, is it not? If you put it on quickly you will still find my gharry at the door. It will be more convenient than walking. Philips," to the maid appearing in the doorway, "tell the man to wait for Mrs. Nims."

"You are quite sure you would not like to have me stop here until he awakes, and then prepare him for your coming?" asked Mrs. Nims, having in an eloquent silence fastened her hat before the glass.

"Quite sure," said Winnie. "Good-bye, and thank you *so* much again!"

"Please don't mention it!" murmured Mrs. Nims, as slowly and resignedly she trailed out on to the veranda.

Until the vehicle had driven away Winnie stood at the window. Then with eyes victoriously bright, turned to cast about her in the empty room such a glance as might be cast upon a vacated battle-field.

The brightness was still in her eyes, and the glow upon her cheeks, as, very softly she once more approached the door of the sick-room. Quiet as a mouse she crept up to the chair recently occupied by Mrs. Nims, and just as she was, with her hat and travelling-cloak still on, took place upon it.

Twenty minutes passed, twenty tense and indescribable minutes, during which the heart-beats which had begun by being so tumultuous as to make her fear for the patient's sleep, slowly calmed down, and slowly also mists—of various sorts—rolled away from before Winnie's eyes. She was able now quite clearly to see the features

of the sleeping man who had turned his head on the pillow, able to note the marks of physical suffering—and surely also of moral, upon the clean-cut features—the dreadful thinness of the sunburnt face. They were terribly full of thoughts those twenty minutes, thoughts of pity chiefly, but not quite unmixed with something that savoured both of resentment and of suspicion. After all, there was no denying that Mrs. Nims was *very* handsome. Was it possible that in her glorious brown eyes lay the key to that so astonishingly sober letter of Mark's which had exercised her mind last winter? Then suddenly, through the artificial dusk, she became aware of a pair of sleep-dazed eyes contemplating her from off the pillow with a look almost of fear. Once or twice they closed, to open again after a moment, and again to fix themselves upon her, alarmed and enquiring.

At last, half diffidently, she bent towards him. But immediately he shot out a gaunt hand towards her.

"Don't move!" he said in an urgent whisper. "Don't move, or the dream will go!"

Then she bent nearer to say:—

"I am no dream, Mark—I am myself,—Winnie, and I have come to take care of you."

First a light and then a shadow leaped into his eyes. The gaunt fingers touched hers tentatively, as though to gain assurance of the senses, yet even with assurance, a frown came.

"They made you come, of course? They sent you? That was what I was afraid of, and why I did not wire. And yet you found out? Was it Creighton?"

"Yes. And nobody made me come. Did you think I would stay away when I knew you ill, and alone?"



Mark's head turned uneasily on the pillow, while his eyes searched the shadows.

"As for being alone, that does not quite tally. That dreadful—I mean that charming woman is on the premises still, I suppose?"

"No, she is not."

"What have you done with her?"

"I recommended her to make use of my *gharry* for getting home!"

He laughed, a weak little invalid laugh which touched her more than anything had done yet. But all the same a shade of suspicion lurked. It was almost stiffly that she said:—

"Of course if you want her back again I can have her fetched. She is an excellent sick-nurse, so she says."

The gaunt hand snatched at hers in a gesture of unmistakable terror.

"Have her fetched? Good gracious, Winnie, you don't know what you are saying! That means more 'Idylls of the King'. *You* won't read Tennyson to me, will you? I never was good at poetry!"

"And I never was good at reading aloud," smiled Winnie, with the stiffness flown in a moment. "I suppose we shall just have to do with talking."

It was four weeks from that day that Dr. Liddell authorised the first move to the veranda.

Enscenced in a deep armchair Athlick allowed his eyes to roam over many objects grown almost unfamiliar. And while he looked at the newly flourishing creepers, at the freshly opened roses, Winnie was furtively examin-

ing his face, and wondering what remark he would make next. The four past weeks had been more eventful in their way, than all the rest of her life put together. That she, who last year, almost at this time, had been the weak, the dependant one of the two, should now find herself leaned upon by the giant of then, stirred within her springs until now hidden to herself. Not for a good deal would she have given up those hours of mingled anxiety and hopefulness, those thousand little services to render, each so gratefully if silently received. Yes, the growing intimacy of the sick-room had been sweet of its kind, but it could not last for ever, in this particular shape; and what was to come next?

That was the question she asked herself as she watched Mark's face. From a certain preoccupation in his gaze, she divined that he too was aware that this first outing marked a turning-point of some sort.

Yet the first remark he made sounded quite harmless.

"Parbutti must be in the Zoo by this time."

"Wretched thing!" said Winnie almost spitefully. "I hope she won't have too good a time of it there!"

She was aware that the would-be murderess had been shipped off almost on the morrow of her crime.

Mark laughed a little constrainedly.

"Why, what has become of your sympathy for her, Winnie? You used to beg me in your letters not to be too hard upon her."

"It's true," said Winnie reflectively. "I used to be dreadfully sorry for her, her lot struck me as hard. But now she just seems to me an ungrateful brute."

There fell another silence during which the shadow of preoccupation gathered more visibly in Athlick's eyes.

When at last he tried to speak he had to clear his throat twice before his voice would come right.

"It will soon be time, won't it, Winnie, for you to be following Parbutti's example?"

"By trying to murder you?" asked Winnie with a short, excited laugh.

"No, by sailing for England. The climate will never do you any good, you know, and I am getting on so famously now that I'm not risking anything by releasing you from your post. Liddell said so, when I asked him this morning."

"So *that* was why you closeted yourself with him?" said Winnie, with her chin upon her hands, and her eyes intensely exploring the depths of the garden.

"Yes, and he agrees with me that you would be far better at home than here."

Winnie, still studying the bushes, offered no remark.

"Shall I write and order a berth by next mail steamer?" asked Athlick, having cast an uneasy side-glance towards her, "or will you do it yourself?"

"Certainly not; and there is no use in your writing either, since I don't mean to go home."

The paled sunburn of his skin plainly showed the rise of dark blood.

"But Winnie——"

"That is to say, I don't mean to go home *alone*," she completed with a deliberation which put aside all suspicion of momentary impulse.

Then with sudden precipitation and a little catch in her breath,

"I promised Mamsie to bring you back with me, and I mean to keep my promise."

The man in the armchair made a movement towards her, then quickly drew back his hand, at the same time averting his shining eyes from her face, forcibly as it were.

"That is very good of you, Winnie," he said after a moment, and in a tone whose steadiness almost satisfied his own ear; "but I have told you once before that I have no talent for accepting sacrifices."

Then, she turned in her chair, abruptly relinquishing her study of the bushes.

"Oh, how slow you are, Mark!" she cried in something like exasperation: "Don't you understand yet that I want you to come?"

Presently, while her brown head still nestled against his shoulder, and his gaunt, convalescent arms held her close, Winnie uttered a subdued laugh.

"Mamsie always said that things would come right somehow; and they have!"



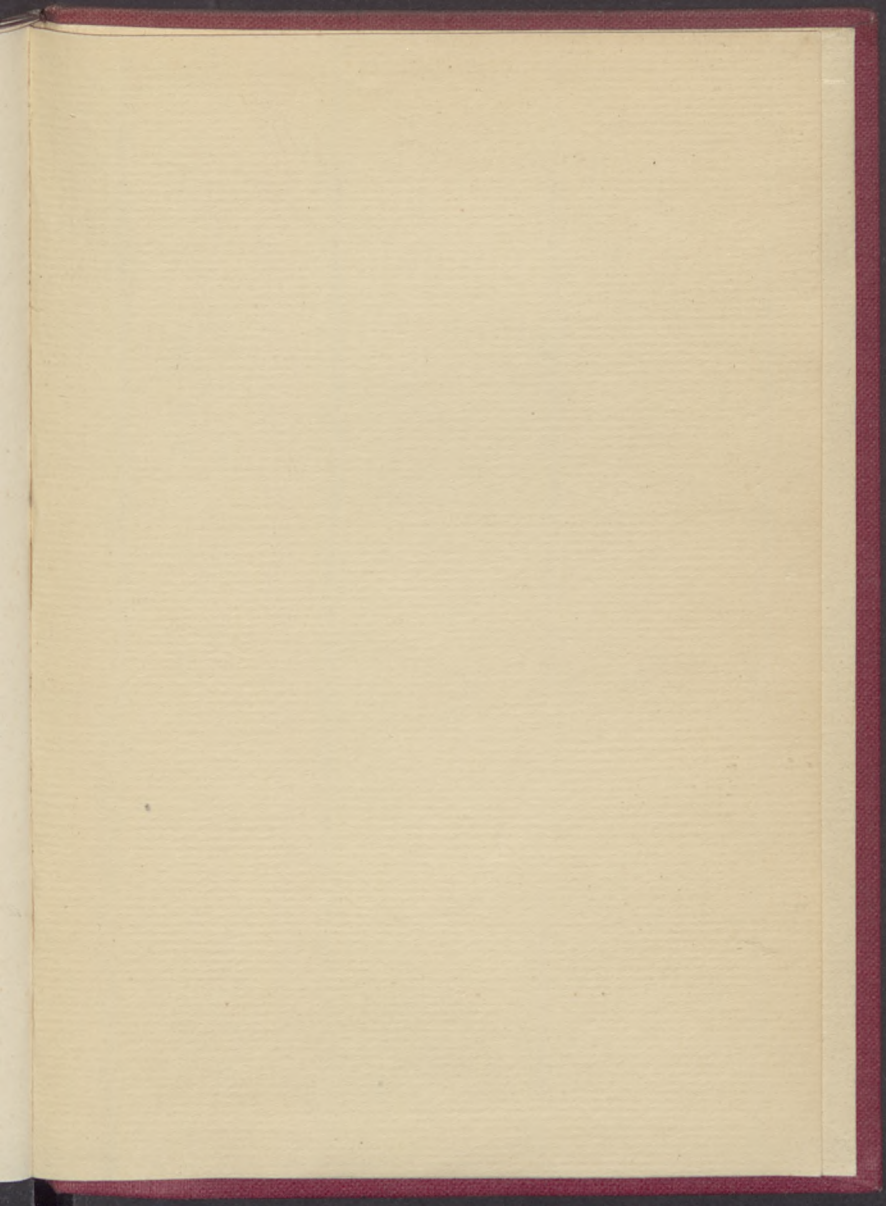
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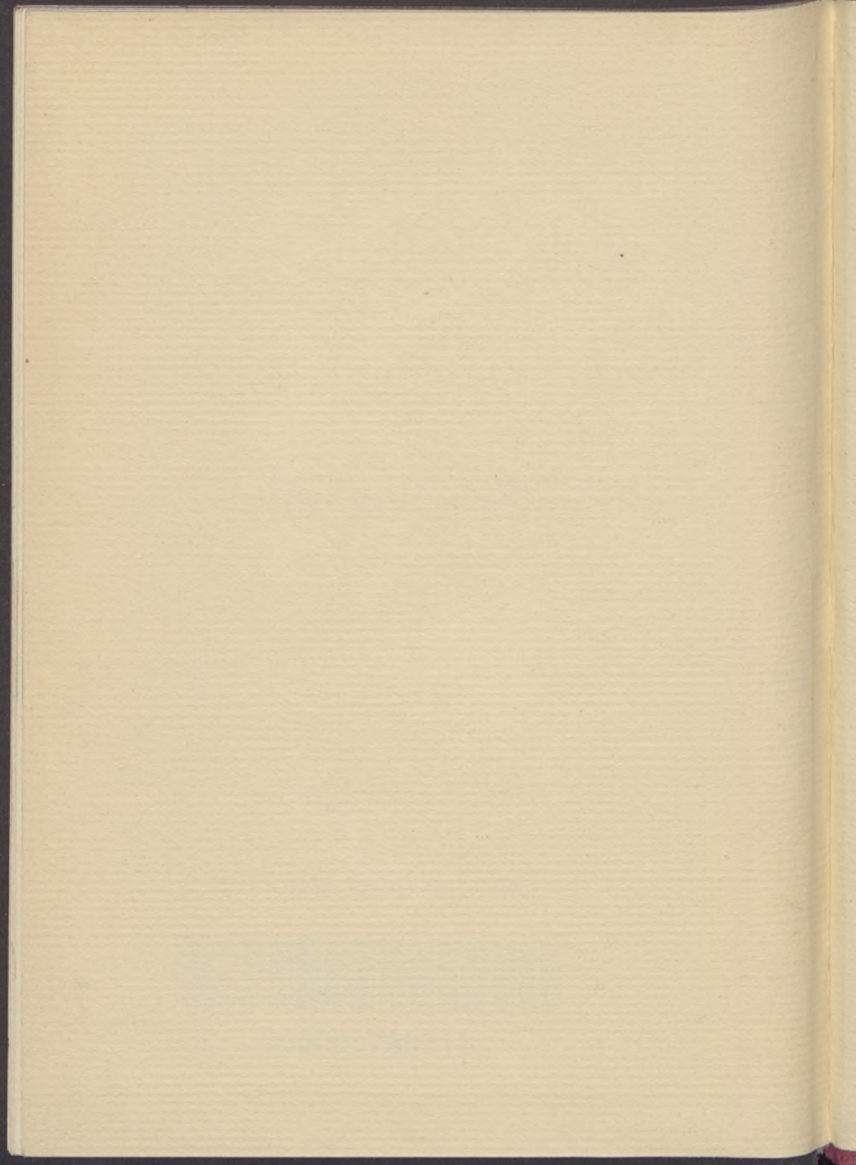
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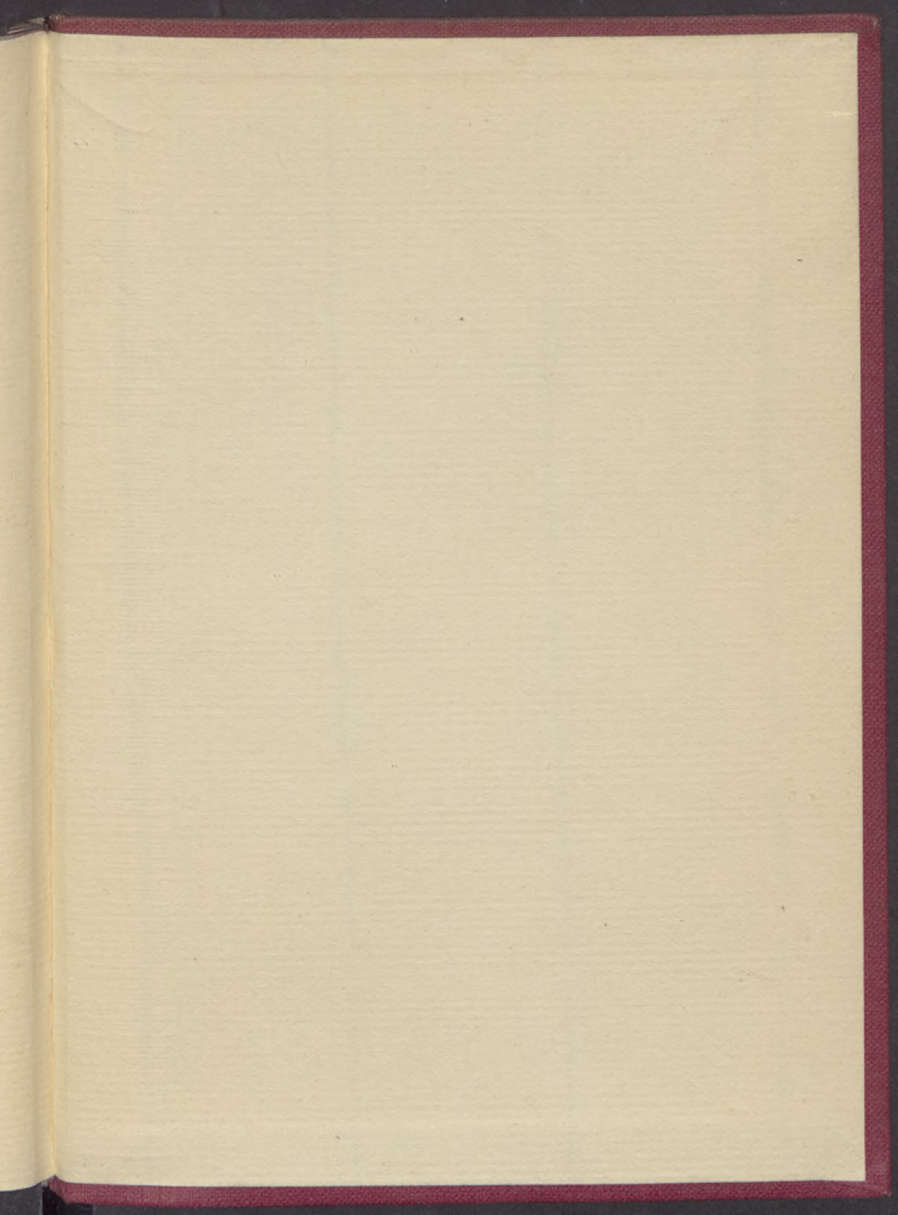
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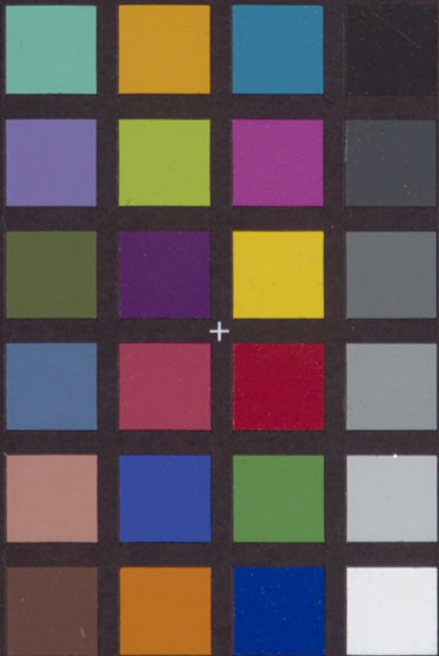






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